

EMMA MAGDOLNA ROZÁLIA MÁRIA JOZEFA BORBÁLA EMMUSKA ORCZY DE ORCI

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

THE LAUGHING CAVALIER

THE PROLOGUE

HAARLEM — MARCH 29TH, 1623

The day had been spring-like — even hot; a very unusual occurrence in Holland at this time of year.

Gilda Beresteyn had retired early to her room. She had dismissed Maria, whose chatterings grated upon her nerves, with the promise that she would call her later. Maria had arranged a tray of dainties on the table, a jug of milk, some fresh white bread and a little roast meat on a plate, for Gilda had eaten very little supper and it might happen that she would feel hungry later on.

It would have been useless to argue with the old woman about this matter. She considered Gilda's health to be under her own special charge, ever since good Mevrouw Beresteyn had placed her baby girl in Maria's strong, devoted arms ere she closed her eyes in the last long sleep.

Gilda Beresteyn, glad to be alone, threw open the casement of the window and peered out into the night.

The shadow of the terrible tragedy — the concluding acts of which were being enacted day by day in the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage — had even touched the distant city of Haarlem with its gloom. The eldest son of John of Barneveld was awaiting final trial and inevitable condemnation, his brother Stoutenburg was a fugitive, and their accomplices Korenwinder, van Dyk, the redoubtable Slatius and others, were giving away under torture the details of the aborted conspiracy against the life of Maurice of Nassau, Stadtholder of Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht and Overysse, Captain and Admiral-General of the State, Prince of Orange, and virtual ruler of Protestant and republican Netherlands.

Traitors all of them — would-be assassins — the Stadtholder whom they had planned to murder was showing them no mercy. As he had sent John of Barneveld to the scaffold to assuage his own thirst for supreme power and satisfy his own ambitions, so he was ready to send John of Barneveld's sons to death and John of Barneveld's widow to sorrow and loneliness.

The sons of John of Barneveld had planned to avenge their father's death by the committal of a cruel and dastardly murder: fate and the treachery of mercenary accomplices had intervened, and now Grøeneveld was on the eve of condemnation, and Stoutenburg was a wanderer on the face of the earth with a price put upon his head.

Gilda Beresteyn could not endure the thought of it all. All the memories of her childhood were linked with the Barnevelds. Stoutenburg had been her brother Nicolaes' most intimate friend, and had been the first man to whisper words of love in her ears, ere his boundless ambition and his unscrupulous egoism drove him into another more profitable marriage.

Gilda's face flamed up with shame even now at recollection of his treachery, and the deep humiliation which she had felt when she saw the first budding blossom of her girlish love so carelessly tossed aside by the man whom she had trusted.

A sense of oppression weighed her spirits down to-night. It almost seemed as if the tragedy which had encompassed the entire Barneveld family was even now hovering over the peaceful house of Mynheer Beresteyn, deputy burgomaster and chief civic magistrate of the town of Haarlem. The air itself felt heavy as if with the weight of impending doom.

The little city lay quiet and at peace; a soft breeze from the south lightly fanned the girl's cheeks. She leaned her elbows on the window-sill and rested her chin in her hands. The moon was not up and yet it was not dark; a mysterious light still lingered on the horizon far away where earth and sea met in a haze of purple and indigo.

From the little garden down below there rose the subtle fragrance of early spring — of wet earth and budding trees, and the dim veiled distance was full of strange sweet sounds, the call of night-birds, the shriek of sea-gulls astray from their usual haunts.

Gilda looked out and listened — unable to understand this vague sense of oppression and of foreboding: when she put her finger up to her eyes, she found them wet with tears.

Memories rose from out the past, sad phantoms that hovered in the scent of the spring. Gilda had never wholly forgotten the man who had once filled her heart with his personality, much less could she chase away his image from her mind now that a future of misery and disgrace was all that was left to him.

She did not know what had become of him, and dared not ask for news. Mynheer Beresteyn, loyal to the House of Nassau and to its prince, had cast out of his heart the sons of John of Barneveld whom he had once loved. Assassins and traitors, he would with his own lips have condemned them to the block, or denounced them to the vengeance of the Stadtholder for their treachery against him.

The feeling of uncertainty as to Stoutenburg's fate softened Gilda's heart toward him. She knew that he had become a wanderer on the face of the earth, Cain-like, homeless, friendless, practically kinless; she pitied him far more than she did Grøeneveld or the others who were looking death quite closely in the face.

She was infinitely sorry for him, for him and for his wife, for whose sake he had been false to his first love. The gentle murmur of the breeze, the distant call of the water-fowl, seemed to bring back to Gilda's ears those whisperings of ardent passion which had come from Stoutenburg's lips years ago. She had listened to them with joy then, with glowing eyes cast down and cheeks that flamed up at his words.

And as she listened to these dream-sounds others more concrete mingled with the mystic ones far away: the sound of stealthy footsteps upon the flagged path of the garden, and of a human being breathing and panting somewhere close by, still hidden by the gathering shadows of the night.

She held her breath to listen — not at all frightened, for the sound of those footsteps, the presence of that human creature close by, were in tune with her mood of expectancy of something that was foredoomed to come.

She leaned right out of the window. Her eyes, better accustomed to the dim evening light, perceived a human figure that crouched against the yew hedge, in the fantastic shadow cast by the quaintly shaped peacock at the corner close to the house.

"Gilda!" came the murmur again, more insistent this time.

"Who goes there?" she called in response: and it was an undefinable instinct stronger than her will that caused her to drop her own voice also to a whisper.

"A fugitive hunted to his death," came the response scarce louder than the breeze. "Give me shelter, Gilda — human bloodhounds are on my track."

Gilda's heart seemed to stop its beating; the human figure out there in the shadows had crept stealthily nearer. The window out of which she leaned was only a few feet from the ground; she stretched out her hand into the night.

"There is a projection in the wall just there," she whispered hurriedly, "and the ivy stems will help you.... Come!"

The fugitive grasped the hand that was stretched out to him in pitying helpfulness. With the aid of the projection in the wall and of the stems of the century-old ivy, he soon cleared the distance which separated him from the window-sill. The next moment he had jumped into the room.

Gilda in this impulsive act of mercy had not paused to consider either the risks or the cost. She had recognised the voice of the man whom she had once loved, that voice called to her out of the depths of boundless misery; it was the call of a man at bay, a human quarry hunted and exhausted, with the hunters close upon his heels. She could not have resisted that call even if she had allowed her reason to fight her instinct then.

But now that he stood before her in rough fisherman's clothes, stained and torn, his face covered with blood and grime, his eyes red and swollen, the breath coming in quick, short gasps through his blue, cracked lips, the first sense of fear at what she had done seized hold of her heart.

At first he took no notice of her, but threw himself into the nearest chair and passed his hands across his face and brow.

"My God," he murmured, "I thought they would have me to-night."

She stood in the middle of the room, feeling helpless and bewildered; she was full of pity for the man, for there is nothing more unutterably pathetic than the hunted human creature in its final stage of apathetic exhaustion, but she was just beginning to co-ordinate her thoughts and they for the moment were being invaded by fear.

She felt more than she saw, that presently he turned his hollow, purple-rimmed eyes upon her, and that in them there was a glow half of passionate will-power and half of anxious, agonizing doubt.

"Of what are you afraid, Gilda?" he asked suddenly, "surely not of me?"

"Not of you, my lord," she replied quietly, "only for you."

"I am a miserable outlaw now, Gilda," he rejoined bitterly, "four thousand golden guilders await any lout who chooses to sell me for a competence."

"I know that, my lord ... and marvel why you are here? I heard that you were safe — in Belgium."

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"I was safe there," he said, "but I could not rest. I came back a few days ago, thinking I could help my brother to escape. Bah!" he added roughly, "he is a snivelling coward...."

"Hush! for pity's sake," she exclaimed, "some one will hear you."

"Close that window and lock the door," he murmured hoarsely. "I am spent — and could not resist a child if it chose to drag me at this moment to the Stadtholder's spies."

Gilda obeyed him mechanically. First she closed the window; then she went to the door listening against the panel with all her senses on the alert. At the further end of the passage was the living-room where her father must still be sitting after his supper, poring over a book on horticulture, or mayhap attending to his tulip bulbs. If he knew that the would-be murderer of the Stadtholder, the prime mover and instigator of the dastardly plot was here in his house, in his daughter's chamber ... Gilda shuddered, half-fainting with terror, and her trembling fingers fumbled with the lock.

"Is Nicolaes home?" asked Stoutenburg, suddenly.

"Not just now," she replied, "but he, too, will be home anon.... My father is at home...."

"Ah!... Nicolaes is my friend ... I counted on seeing him here ... he would help me I know ... but your father, Gilda, would drag me to the gallows with his own hand if he knew that I am here."

"You must not count on Nicolaes either, my lord," she pleaded, "nor must you stay here a moment longer ... I heard my father's step in the passage already. He is sure to come and bid me good-night before he goes to bed...."

"I am spent, Gilda," he murmured, and indeed his breath came in such feeble gasps that he could scarce speak. "I have not touched food for two days. I landed at Scheveningen a week ago, and for five days have hung about the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage trying to get speech with my brother. I had gained the good will of an important official in the prison, but Grøeneveld is too much of a coward to make a fight for freedom. Then I was recognized by a group of workmen outside my dead father's house. I read recognition in their eyes — knowledge of me and knowledge of the money which that recognition might mean to them. They feigned indifference at first, but I had read their thoughts. They drew together to concert over their future actions and I took to my heels. It was yesterday at noon, and I have been running ever since, running, running, with but brief intervals to regain my breath and beg for a drink of water — when thirst became more unendurable than the thought of capture. I did not even know which way I was running till I saw the spires of Haarlem rising from out the evening haze; then I thought of you, Gilda, and of this house. You would not sell me, Gilda, for you are rich, and you loved me once," he added hoarsely, while his thin, grimy hands clutched the arms of the chair and he half-raised himself from his seat, as if ready to spring up and to start running again; running, running until he dropped.

But obviously his strength was exhausted, for the next moment he fell back against the cushions, the swollen lids fell upon the hollow eyes, the sunken cheeks and parched lips became ashen white.

"Water!" he murmured.

She ministered to him kindly and gently, first holding the water to his lips, then when he had quenched that raging thirst, she pulled the table up close to his chair, and gave him milk to drink and bread and meat to eat.

He seemed quite dazed, conscious only of bodily needs, for he ate and drank ravenously without thought at first of thanking her. Only when he had finished did he lean back once again against the cushions which her kindly hand had placed behind him, and he

murmured feebly like a tired but satisfied child:

"You are an angel of goodness, Gilda. Had you not helped me to-night, I should either have perished in a ditch, or fallen in the hands of the Stadtholder's minions."

Quickly she put a restraining hand on his shoulder. A firm step had echoed in the flagged corridor beyond the oaken door.

"My father!" she whispered.

In a moment the instinct for life and liberty was fully aroused in the fugitive; his apathy and exhaustion were forgotten; terror, mad, unreasoning terror, had once more taken possession of his mind.

"Hide me, Gilda," he entreated hoarsely, and his hands clutched wildly at her gown, "don't let him see me ... he would give me up ... he would give me up...."

"Hush, in the name of God," she commanded, "he will hear you if you speak."

Swiftly she blew out the candles, then with dilated anxious eyes searched the recesses of the room for a hiding-place — the cupboard which was too small — the wide hearth which was too exposed — the bed in the wall....

His knees had given way under him, and, as he clutched at her gown, he fell forward at her feet, and remained there crouching, trembling, his circled eyes trying to pierce the surrounding gloom, to locate the position of the door behind which lurked the most immediate danger.

"Hide me, Gilda," he murmured almost audibly under his breath, "for the love you bore me once."

"Gilda!" came in a loud, kindly voice from the other side of the door.

"Yes, father!"

"You are not yet abed, are you, my girl?"

"I have just blown out the candles, dear," she contrived to reply with a fairly steady voice.

"Why is your door locked?"

"I was a little nervous to-night, father dear. I don't know why."

"Well! open then! and say good-night."

"One moment, dear."

She was white to the lips, white as the gown which fell in straight heavy folds from her hips, and which Stoutenburg was still clutching with convulsive fingers. Alone her white figure detached itself from the darkness around. The wretched man as he looked up could see her small pale head, the stiff collar that rose above her shoulders, her embroidered corslet, and the row of pearls round her neck.

"Save me, Gilda," he repeated with the agony of despair, "do not let your father hand me over to the Stadtholder ... there will be no mercy for me, Gilda ... hide me ... for the love of God."

Noiselessly she glided across the room, dragging him after her by the hand. She pulled aside the bed-curtains, without a word pointed to the recess. The bed, built into the wall, was narrow but sure; it smelt sweetly of lavender; the hunted man, his very senses blurred by that overwhelming desire to save his life at any cost, accepted the shelter so innocently offered him. Gathering his long limbs together, he was soon hidden underneath the coverlet.

"Gilda!" came more insistently from behind the heavy door.

"One moment, father. I was fastening my gown."

"Don't trouble to do that. I only wished to say good-night."

She pulled the curtains together very carefully in front of the bed; she even took the precaution of taking off her stiff collar and embroidered corslet. Then she lighted one of the candles, and with it in her hand she went to the door.

Then she drew back the bolt.

"May I not come in?" said Mynheer Beresteyn gaily, for she remained standing on the threshold.

"Well no, father!" she replied, "my room is very untidy ... I was just getting into bed...."

"Just getting into bed," he retorted with a laugh, "why, child, you have not begun to undress."

"I wished to undress in the dark. My head aches terribly ... it must be the spring air ... Good-night, dear."

"Good-night, little one!" said Beresteyn, as he kissed his daughter tenderly. "Nicolaes has just come home," he added, "he wanted to see you too."

"Ask him to wait till to-morrow then. My head feels heavy. I can scarcely hold it up."

"You are not ill, little one?" asked the father anxiously.

"No, no ... only oppressed with this first hot breath of spring."

"Why is not Maria here to undress you? I'll send her."

"Not just now, father. She will come presently. Her chattering wearied me and I sent her away."

"Well! good-night again, my girl. God bless you. You will not see Nicolaes?"

"Not to-night, father. Tell him I am not well. Good-night."

Mynheer Beresteyn went away at last, not before Gilda feared that she must drop or faint under the stress of this nerve-racking situation.

Even now when at last she was alone, when once again she was able to close and bolt the door, she could scarcely stand. She leaned against the wall with eyes closed, and heart that beat so furiously and so fast that she thought she must choke.

The sound of her father's footsteps died away along the corridor. She heard him opening and shutting a door at the further end of the passage, where there were two or three living rooms and his own sleeping chamber. For awhile now the house was still, so still that she could almost hear those furious heart-beats beneath her gown. Then only did she dare to move. With noiseless steps she crossed the room to that recess in the wall hidden by the gay-flowered cotton curtains.

She paused close beside these.

"My lord!" she called softly.

No answer.

"My lord! my father has gone! you are in no danger for the moment!"

Still no answer, and as she paused, straining her ears to listen, she caught the sound of slow and regular breathing. Going back to the table she took up the candle, then with it in her hand she returned to the recess and gently drew aside the curtain. The light from the candle fell full upon Stoutenburg's face. Inexpressibly weary, exhausted both bodily and mentally, not even the imminence of present danger had succeeded in keeping him awake. The moment that he felt the downy pillow under his head, he had dropped off to sleep as peacefully as he used to do years ago before the shadow of premeditated crime had left its impress on his wan face.

Gilda looking down on him sought in vain in the harsh and haggard features, the traces of those boyish good looks which had fascinated her years ago; she tried in vain to read on those thin, set lips those words of passionate affection which had so readily flown from them then.

She put down the candle again and drew a chair close to the bed, then she sat down and waited.

And he slept on calmly, watched over by the woman whom he had so heartlessly betrayed. All love for him had died out in her heart ere this, but pity was there now, and she was thankful that it had been in her power to aid him at the moment of his most dire peril.

But that danger still existed of course. The household was still astir and the servants not yet all abed. Gilda could hear Jakob, the old henchman, making his rounds, seeing that all the lights were safely out, the bolts pushed home and chains securely fastened, and Maria might come back at any moment, wondering why her mistress had not yet sent for her. Nicolaes too was at home, and had already said that he wished to see his sister.

She tried to rouse the sleeping man, but he lay there like a log. She dared not speak loudly to him or to call his name, and all her efforts at shaking him by the shoulder failed to waken him.

Lonely and seriously frightened now Gilda fell on her knees beside the bed. Clasping her hands she tried to pray. Surely God could not leave a young girl in such terrible perplexity, when her only sin had been an act of mercy. The candle on the bureau close by burnt low in its socket and its flickering light outlined her delicate profile and the soft tendrils of hair that escaped from beneath her coif. Her eyes were closed in the endeavour to concentrate her thoughts, and time flew by swiftly while she tried to pray. She did not perceive that after awhile the Lord of Stoutenburg woke and that he remained for a long time in mute contemplation of the exquisite picture which she presented, clad all in white, with the string of pearls still round her throat, her hands clasped, her lips parted breathing a silent prayer.

"How beautiful you are, Gilda!" he murmured quite involuntarily at last.

Then — as suddenly startled and terrified — she tried to jump up quickly, away from him, he put out his hand and succeeded in capturing her wrists and thus holding her pinioned and still kneeling close beside him.

"An angel of goodness," he said, "and exquisitely beautiful."

At his words, at the renewed pressure of his hand upon her wrists she made a violent effort to recover her composure.

"I pray you, my lord, let go my hands. They were clasped in prayer for your safety. You slept so soundly that I feared I could not wake you in order to tell you that you must leave this house instantly."

"I will go, Gilda," he said quietly, making no attempt to move or to relax his hold on her, "for this brief interval of sleep, your kind ministrations and the food you gave me have already put new strength into me. And the sight of you kneeling and praying near me has put life into me again."

"Then, since you are better," she rejoined coldly, "I pray you rise, my lord, and make ready to go. The garden is quite lonely, the Oude Gracht at its furthest boundary is more lonely still. The hour is late and the city is asleep ... you would be quite safe now."

"Do not send me away yet, Gilda, just when a breath of happiness — the first I have tasted for four years — has been wafted from heaven upon me. May I not stay here awhile and live for a brief moment in a dream which is born of unforgettable memories?"

"It is not safe for you to stay here, my lord," she said coldly.

"My lord? You used to call me Willem once."

"That was long ago, my lord, ere you gave Walburg de Marnix the sole right to call you by tender names."

"She has deserted me, Gilda. Fled from me like a coward, leaving me to bear my misery alone."

"She shared your misery for four years, my lord; it was your disgrace that she could not endure."

"You knew then that she had left me?"

"My father had heard of it."

"Then you know that I am a free man again?"

"The law no doubt will soon make you so."

"The law has already freed me through Walburg's own act of desertion. You know our laws as well as I do, Gilda. If you have any doubt ask your own father whose business it is to administer them. Walburg de Marnix has set me free, free to begin a new life, free to follow at last the dictates of my heart."

"For the moment, my lord," she retorted coldly, "you are not free even to live your old life."

"I would not live it again, Gilda, now that I have seen you again. The past seems even now to be falling away from me. Dreams and memories are stronger than reality. And you, Gilda ... have you forgotten?"

"I have forgotten nothing, my lord."

"Our love — your vows — that day in June when you yielded your lips to my kiss?"

"Nor that dull autumnal day, my lord, when I heard from the lips of strangers that in order to further your own ambitious schemes you had cast me aside like a useless shoe, and had married another woman who was richer and of nobler birth than I."

She had at last succeeded in freeing herself from his grasp, and had risen to her feet, and retreated further and further away from him until she stood up now against the opposite wall, her slender, white form lost in the darkness, her whispered words only striking clearly on his ear.

He too rose from the bed and drew up his tall lean figure with a gesture still expressive of that ruthless ambition with which Gilda had taunted him.

"My marriage then was pure expediency, Gilda," he said with a shrug of the shoulders. "My father, whose differences with the Stadtholder were reaching their acutest stage, had need of the influence of Marnix de St. Aldegonde; my marriage with Walburg de Marnix was done in my father's interests and went sorely against my heart ... it is meet and natural that she herself should have severed a tie which was one only in name. A year hence from now, the law grants me freedom to contract a new marriage tie; my love for you, Gilda, is unchanged."

"And mine for you, my lord, is dead."

He gave a short, low laugh in which there rang a strange note of triumph.

"Dormant mayhap, Gilda," he said as he groped his way across the darkened room and tried to approach her. "Your ears have been poisoned by your father's hatred of me. Let me but hold you once more in my arms, let me but speak to you once again of the past, and you will forget all save your real love for me."

"All this is senseless talk, my lord," she said coldly, "your life at this moment hangs upon the finest thread that destiny can weave. Human bloodhounds you said were upon your track; they have not wholly lost the scent, remember."

Her self-possession acted like a fall of icy-cold water upon the ardour of his temper. Once more that hunted look came into his face; he cast furtive, frightened glances around him, peering into the gloom, as if enemies might be lurking in every dark recess.

"They shall not have me," he muttered through set teeth, "not to-night ... not now that life again holds out to me a cup brimful of happiness. I will go, Gilda, just as you command ... they shall not find me ... I have something to live for now ... you and revenge.... My father, my brother, my friends, I shall avenge them all — that treacherous Stadtholder shall not escape from my hatred the second time. Then will I have power, wealth, a great name to offer you. Gilda, you will remember me?"

"I will remember you, my lord, as one who has passed out of my life. My playmate of long ago, the man whom I once loved is dead to me. He who would stain his hands with blood is hateful in my sight. Go, go, my lord, I entreat you, ere you make my task of helping you to life and safety harder than I can bear."

She ran to the window and threw it open, then pointed out into the night.

"There lies your way, my lord. God only knows if I do right in not denouncing you even now to my father."

"You will not denounce me, Gilda," he said, drawing quite near to her, now that he could see her graceful figure silhouetted against the starlit sky, "you will not denounce me for unknown mayhap even to yourself, your love for me is far from dead. As for me I feel that I have never loved as I love you now. Your presence has intoxicated me, your nearness fills my brain as with a subtle, aromatic wine. All thought of my own danger fades before my longing to hold you just for one instant close to my heart, to press for one brief yet eternal second my lips against yours. Gilda, I love you!"

His arms quickly closed round her, she felt his hot breath against her cheek. For one moment did she close her eyes, for she felt sick and faint, but the staunch valour of that same Dutch blood which had striven and fought and endured and conquered throughout the ages past gave her just that courage, just that presence of mind which she needed.

"An you do not release me instantly," she said firmly, "I will rouse the house with one call."

Then, as his arms instinctively dropped away from her and he drew back with a muttered curse:

"Go!" she said, once more pointing toward the peaceful and distant horizon now wrapped in the veil of night. "Go! while I still have the strength to keep silent, save for a prayer for your safety."

Her attitude was so firm, her figure so rigid, that he knew that inevitably he must obey. His life was in danger, not hers; and she had of a truth but little to fear from him. He bowed his head in submission and humility, then he bent the knee and raising her gown to his lips he imprinted a kiss upon the hem. The next moment he had swung himself lightly upon the window sill, from whence he dropped softly upon the ground below.

For a few minutes longer she remained standing beside the open window, listening to his footfall on the flagged path. She could just distinguish his moving form from the surrounding gloom, as he crept along the shadows towards the boundary of the garden. Then as for one brief minute she saw his figure outlined above the garden wall, she closed the window very slowly and turned away from it.

The next moment she was lying in a swoon across the floor of her room.

THE ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I

NEW YEAR'S EVE

If the snow had come down again or the weather been colder, or wetter, or other than it was....

If one of the three men had been more thirsty, or the other more insistent....

If it had been any other day of the year, or any other hour of any other day....

If the three philosophers had taken their walk abroad in any other portion of the city of Haarlem....

If....

Nay! but there's no end to the Ifs which I might adduce in order to prove to you beyond a doubt that but for an extraordinary conglomeration of minor circumstances, the events which I am about to relate neither would nor could ever have taken place.

For indeed you must admit that had the snow come down again or the weather been colder, or wetter, the three philosophers would mayhap all have felt that priceless thirst and desire for comfort which the interior of a well-administered tavern doth so marvellously assuage. And had it been any other day of the year or any other hour of that same last day of the year 1623, those three philosophers would never have thought of wiling away the penultimate hour of the dying year by hanging round the Grootemarkt in order to see the respectable mynheer burghers and the mevrouws their wives, filing into the cathedral in a sober and orderly procession, with large silver-clasped Bibles under their arms, and that air of satisfied unctuousness upon their faces which is best suited to the solemn occasion of watch-night service, and the desire to put oneself right with Heaven before commencing a New Year of commercial and industrial activity.

And had those three philosophers not felt any desire to watch this same orderly procession they would probably have taken their walk abroad in another portion of the city from whence....

But now I am anticipating.

Events crowded in so thickly and so fast, during the last hour of the departing year, and the first of the newly-born one, that it were best mayhap to proceed with their relation in the order in which they occurred.

For look you, the links of a mighty chain had their origin on the steps of the Stadhuis, for it is at the foot of these that three men were standing precisely at the moment when the bell of the cathedral struck the penultimate hour of the last day of the year 1623.

Mynheer van der Meer, Burgomaster of Haarlem, was coming down those same steps in the company of Mynheer van Zilcken, Mynheer Beresteyn and other worthy gentlemen, all members of the town council and all noted for their fine collections of rare tulips, the finest in the whole of the province of Holland.

There was great rivalry between Mynheer van der Meer, Mynheer van Zilcken and Mynheer Beresteyn on the subject of their tulip bulbs, on which they expended thousands of florins every year. Some people held that the Burgomaster had exhibited finer specimens of "Semper Augustus" than any horticulturist in the land, while others thought that the "Schwarzer Kato" shown by Mynheer Beresteyn had been absolutely without a rival.

And as this group of noble councillors descended the steps of the Stadhuis, preparatory to joining their wives at home and thence escorting them to the watch-night service at the cathedral, their talk was of tulips and of tulip bulbs, of the specimens which they possessed and the prices which they had paid for these.

"Fourteen thousand florins did I pay for my 'Schwarzer Kato,'" said Mynheer Beresteyn complacently, "and now I would not sell it for twenty thousand."

"There's a man up at Overveen who has a new hybrid now, a sport of 'Schone Juffrouw' — the bulb has matured to perfection, he is putting it up for auction next week," said Mynheer van Zilcken.

"It will fetch in the open market sixteen thousand at least," commented Mynheer van der Meer sententiously.

"I would give that for it and more," rejoined the other, "if it is as perfect as the man declares it to be."

"Too late," now interposed Mynheer Beresteyn with a curt laugh, "I purchased the bulb from the man at Overveen this afternoon. He did not exaggerate its merits. I never saw a finer bulb."

"You bought it?" exclaimed the Burgomaster in tones that were anything but friendly toward his fellow councillor.

"This very afternoon," replied the other. "I have it in the inner pocket of my doublet at this moment."

And he pressed his hand to his side, making sure that the precious bulb still reposed next to his heart.

"I gave the lout fifteen thousand florins for it," he added airily, "he was glad not to take the risks of an auction, and I equally glad to steal a march on my friends."

The three men, who were leaning up against the wall of the Stadhuis, and who had overheard this conversation, declared subsequently that they learned then and there an entirely new and absolutely comprehensive string of oaths, the sound of which they had never even known of before, from the two solemn and sober town-councillors who found themselves balked of a coveted prize. But this I do not altogether believe; for the three eavesdroppers had already forgotten more about swearing than all the burghers of Haarlem put together had ever known.

In the meantime the town councillors had reached the foot of the steps: here they parted company and there was a marked coldness in the manner of some of them toward Mynheer Beresteyn, who still pressed his hand against his doublet, in the inner pocket of which reposed a bit of dormant vegetation for which he had that same afternoon paid no less a sum than fifteen thousand florins.

"There goes a lucky devil," said a mocking voice in tones wherein ripples of laughter struggled for ever for mastery. It came from one of the three men who had listened to the conversation between the town-councillors on the subject of tulips and of tulip bulbs.

"To think," he continued, "that I have never even seen as much as fifteen thousand florins all at once. By St. Bavon himself do I swear that for the mere handling of so much money I would be capable of the most heroic deeds ... such as killing my worst enemy ... or ... or ... knocking that obese and self-complacent councillor in the stomach."

"Say but the word, good Diogenes," said a gruff voice in response, "the lucky devil ye speak of need not remain long in possession of that bulb. He hath name Beresteyn.... I think I know whereabouts he lives ... the hour is late ... the fog fairly dense in the narrow streets of the city ... say but the word...."

"There is an honest man I wot of in Amsterdam," broke in a third voice, one which was curiously high-pitched and dulcet in its tones, "an honest dealer of Judaic faith, who would gladly give a couple of thousand for the bulb and ask no impertinent questions."

"Say but the word, Diogenes ..." reiterated the gruff voice solemnly.

"And the bulb is ours," concluded the third speaker in his quaint high-pitched voice.

"And three philosophers will begin the New Year with more money in their wallets than they would know what to do with," said he of the laughter-filled voice. "'Tis a sound scheme, O Pythagoras, and one that under certain circumstances would certainly commend itself to me. But just now...."

"Well?" queried the two voices — the gruff and the high-pitched — simultaneously, like a bassoon and a flute in harmony, "just now what?"

"Just now, worthy Socrates and wise Pythagoras, I have three whole florins in my wallet, and my most pressing creditor died a month ago — shot by a Spanish arquebuse at the storming of Breda — he fell like a hero — God rest his soul! But as to me I can afford a little while — at any rate for to-night — to act like a gentleman rather than a common thief."

"Bah!" came in muffled and gruff tones of disgust, "you might lend me those three florins— 'twere the act of a gentleman...."

"An act moreover which would effectually free me from further scruples, eh?" laughed the other gaily.

"The place is dull," interposed the flute-like tones, "'twill be duller still if unworthy scruples do cause us to act like gentlemen."

"Why! 'tis the very novelty of the game that will save our lives from dullness," said Diogenes lightly, "just let us pretend to be gentlemen for this one night. I assure you that good philosophers though ye both are, you will find zest in the entertainment."

It is doubtful whether this form of argument would have appealed to the two philosophers in question. The point was never settled, for at that precise moment Chance took it on herself to forge the second link in that remarkable chain of events which I have made it my duty to relate.

From across the Grootemarkt there, where stands the cathedral backed by a network of narrow streets, there came a series of ear-piercing shrieks, accompanied by threatening cries and occasional outbursts of rough, mocking laughter.

"A row," said Socrates laconically.

"A fight," suggested Pythagoras.

Diogenes said nothing. He was already half-way across the Markt. The others followed him as closely as they could. His figure which was unusually tall and broad loomed weirdly out of the darkness and out of the fog ahead of them, and his voice with that perpetual undertone of merriment rippling through it, called to them from time to time.

Now he stopped, waiting for his companions. The ear-piercing shrieks, the screams and mocking laughter came more distinctly to their ears, and from the several bye-streets that gave on the Market Place, people came hurrying along, attracted by the noise.

"Let us go round behind the Fleischmarkt," said Diogenes, as soon as his two friends had come within ear-shot of him, "and reach the rear of the cathedral that way. Unless I am greatly mistaken the seat of yonder quarrel is by a small postern gate which I spied awhile ago at the corner of Dam Straat and where methinks I saw a number of men and women furtively gaining admittance: they looked uncommonly like Papists and the postern gate not unlike a Romanist chapel door."

"Then there undoubtedly will be a row," said Socrates dryly.

"And we are no longer likely to find the place dull," concluded Pythagoras in a flute-like voice.

And the three men pulling their plumed hats well over their eyes, turned off without hesitation in the wake of their leader. They had by tacit understanding unsheathed their swords and were carrying them under the folds of their mantles. They walked in single file, for the street was very narrow, the gabled roofs almost meeting overhead at their apex, their firm footsteps made no sound on the thick carpet of snow. The street was quite deserted and the confused tumult in the Dam Straat only came now as a faint and distant echo. Thus walking with rapid strides the three men soon found themselves once more close to the cathedral: it loomed out of the fog on their left and the cries and the laughter on ahead sounded once more clear and shrill. The words "for the love of Christ!" could be easily distinguished; uttered pleadingly at intervals and by a woman's voice they sounded ominous, more especially as they were invariably followed by cries of "Spaniards! Spies! Papists!" And a renewal of loud and ribald laughter. The leader of the little party had paused once more, his long legs evidently carried him away faster than he intended: now he turned to his friends and pointed with his hand and sword on ahead. "Now, wise Pythagoras," he said, "wilt thou not have enjoyment and to spare this night? Thou didst shower curses on this fog-ridden country, and call it insufferably dull. Lo! what a pleasing picture doth present itself to our gaze." Whether the picture was pleasing or not depended entirely from the point of view of spectator or participant. Certes it was animated and moving and picturesque; and as three pairs of eyes beneath three broad-brimmed hats took in its several details, three muffled figures uttered three simultaneous gurgles of anticipated pleasure. In the fog that hung thickly in the narrow street it was at first difficult to distinguish exactly what was going on. Certain it is that a fairly dense crowd, which swelled visibly every moment as idlers joined in from many sides, had congregated at the corner of Dam Straat, there where a couple of resin torches fixed in iron brackets against a tall stuccoed wall, shed a flickering and elusive light on the forms and faces of a group of men in the forefront of the throng. The faces thus exposed to view appeared flushed and heated — either with wine or ebullient temper — whilst the upraised arms, the clenched fists and brandished staves showed a rampant desire to do mischief. There was a low postern gate in the wall just below the resin torches. The gate was open and in the darkness beyond vague, moving forms could be seen huddled together in what looked like a narrow, unlighted passage. It was from this huddled mass of humanity that the wails and calls for divine protection proceeded, whilst the laughter and the threats came from the crowd. From beneath three broad-brimmed hats there once more came three distinct chuckles of delight and three muffled figures hugged naked swords more tightly under their cloaks. From beneath three broad-brimmed hats there once more came three distinct chuckles of delight and three muffled figures hugged naked swords more tightly under their cloaks.

CHAPTER II

THE FRACAS BY THE POSTERN GATE

Thus am I proved right in saying that but for the conglomeration of minor circumstances within the past half hour, the great events which subsequently linked the fate of a penniless foreign adventurer with that of a highly honourable and highly esteemed family of Haarlem never would or could have occurred.

For had the three philosophers adhered to their usual custom of retiring to the warmth and comfort of the "Lame Cow," situate in the Kleine Hout Straat, as soon as the streets no longer presented an agreeable lolling place, they would never have known of the tumult that went on at this hour under the very shadow of the cathedral.

But seeing it all going on before them, what could they do but join in the fun?

The details of the picture which had the low postern gate for its central interest were gradually becoming more defined. Now the figure of a woman showed clearly under the flickering light of the resin torches, a woman with rough, dark hair that hung loosely round her face, and bare arms and legs, of which the flesh, blue with cold, gleamed weirdly against the dark oak panelling of the gate.

She was stooping forward, with arms outstretched and feet that vainly tried to keep a foothold of the ground which snow and frost had rendered slippery. The hands themselves were not visible, for one of them was lost in the shadows behind her and the other disappeared in the grip of six or eight rough hands.

Through the mist and in the darkness it was impossible to see whether the woman was young or old, handsome or ill-favoured, but her attitude was unmistakable. The men in the forefront of the crowd were trying to drag her away from the shelter of the gate to which she clung with desperate obstinacy.

Her repeated cries of "For the love of Christ!" only provoked loud and bibulous laughter. Obviously she was losing her hold of the ground, and was gradually being dragged out into the open.

"For the love of Christ, let me go, kind sirs!"

"Come out quietly then," retorted one of the men in front, "let's have a look at you."

"We only want to see the colour of your eyes," said another with mock gallantry.

"Are you Spanish spies or are you not, that's all that we want to know," added a third. "How many black-eyed wenches are there among ye? Papists we know you are."

"Papists! Spanish spies!" roared the crowd in unison.

"Shall we bait the Papists too, O Diogenes?" came in dulcet tones from out the shadow of the stuccoed wall.

"Bah! women and old men, and only twenty of these," said his companion with a laugh and a shrug of his broad shoulders, "whilst there are at least an hundred of the others."

"More amusing certainly," growled Socrates under the brim of his hat.

"For the love of Christ," wailed the woman piteously, as her bare feet buried in the snow finally slid away from the protecting threshold, and she appeared in the full light of the resin torches, with black unkempt hair, ragged shift and kirtle and a wild terror-stricken look in her black eyes.

"Black eyes! I guessed as much!" shouted one of the men excitedly. "Spaniards I tell you, friends! Spanish spies all of them! Out you come, wench! out you come!"

"Out you come!" yelled the crowd. "Papists! Spanish spies!"

The woman gave a scream of wild terror as half a dozen stones hurled from the rear of the crowd over the heads of the ringleaders came crashing against the wall and the gate all around her.

One of these stones was caught in mid air.

"I thank thee, friend," cried a loud, mocking voice that rang clearly above the din, "my nose was itching and thou didst strive to tickle it most effectually. Tell me does thine itch too? Here's a good cloth wherewith to wipe it."

And the stone was hurled back into the thick of the crowd by a sure and vigorous hand even whilst a prolonged and merry laugh echoed above the groans and curses of the throng.

For an instant after that the shouts and curses were still, the crowd — as is usual in such cases — pausing to see whence this unexpected diversion had come. But all that could be seen for the moment was a dark compact mass of plumed hats and mantles standing against the wall, and a triple glint as of steel peeping from out the shadows.

"By St. Bavon, the patron saint of this goodly city, but here's a feast for philosophers," said that same laughter-loving voice, "four worthy burghers grappling with a maid. Let go her arm I say or four pairs of hands will presently litter the corner of this street, and forty fingers be scattered amongst the refuse. Pythagoras, wilt take me at two guilders to three that I can cut off two of these ugly, red hands with one stroke of Bucephalus whilst Socrates and thou thyself wilt only account for one apiece?"

Whilst the merry voice went rippling on in pleasant mocking tones, the crowd had had ample time to recover itself and to shake off its surprise. The four stalwarts on in front swore a very comprehensive if heterogeneous oath. One of them did certainly let go the wench's arm somewhat hastily, but seeing that his companions had recovered courage and the use of their tongue, he swore once again and more loudly this time.

"By that same St. Bavon," he shouted, "who is this smeerlap whose interference I for one deeply resent. Come out, girl, and show thyself at once, we'll deal with thy protector later."

After which there were some lusty shouts of applause at this determined attitude, shouts that were interrupted by a dulcet high-pitched voice saying quietly:

"I take thee, friend Diogenes. Two guilders to three: do thou strike at the pair of hands nearest to thee and while I count three...."

From the torches up above there came a sharp glint of light as it struck three steel blades, that swung out into the open.

"One — two — —"

Four pairs of hands, which had been dragging on the woman's arm with such determined force, disappeared precipitately into the darkness, and thus suddenly released, the woman nearly fell backwards against the gate.

"Pity!" said the dulcet voice gently, "that bet will never be decided now."

An angry murmur of protest rose from the crowd. The four men who had been the leaders of the gang were pushed forward from the rear amidst shouts of derision and brandishing fists.

"Cowards! cowards! cowards! Jan Tiele, art not ashamed? Piet, go for them! There are only three! Cowards to let yourselves be bullied!"

The crowd pushed from behind. The street being narrow, it could only express its desire for a fight by murmurs and by shouts, it had no elbow-room for it, and could only urge those in the forefront to pick a quarrel with the interfering strangers.

"The blessing of God upon thee, stranger, and of the Holy Virgin...." came in still quivering accents from out the darkness of the passage.

"Let the Holy Virgin help thee to hold thy tongue," retorted he who had name Diogenes, "and do thou let my friend Socrates close this confounded door."

"Jan Tiele!" shouted someone in the crowd, "dost see what they are doing? the gate is being closed...."

"And bolted," said a flute-like voice.

"Stand aside, strangers!" yelled the crowd.

"We are not in your way," came in calm response.

The three muffled figures side by side in close if somewhat unnumerical battle array had taken their stand in front of the postern gate, the heavy bolts of which were heard falling into their sockets behind them with a loud clang. A quivering voice came at the last from behind the iron judas in the door.

"God will reward ye, strangers! we go pray for you to the Holy Virgin...."

"Nay!" rejoined Diogenes lightly, "twere wiser to pray for Jan Tiele, or for Piet or their mates — some of them will have need of prayers in about five minutes from now."

"Shame! cowards! plepshurk! At them Jan! Piet! Willem!" shouted the crowd lustily.

Once more stones were freely hurled followed by a regular fusillade of snowballs. One of these struck the crown of a plumed hat and knocked it off the wearer's head. A face, merry, a trifle fleshy perhaps, but with fine, straight brow, eyes that twinkled and mocked and a pair of full, joyous lips adorned by a fair upturned moustache, met the gaze of an hundred glowering eyes and towered half a head above the tallest man there.

As his hat fell to the ground, the man made a formal bow to the yelling and hooting crowd:

"Since one of you has been so kind as to lift my hat for me, allow me formally to present myself and my friends here. I am known to my compeers and to mine enemies as Diogenes," he said gravely, "a philosopher of whom mayhap ye have never heard. On my left stands Pythagoras, on my right Socrates. We are all at your service, including even my best friend who is slender and is made of steel and hath name Bucephalus — he tells me that within the next few minutes he means to become intimately acquainted with Dutch guts, unless ye disperse and go peaceably back to church and pray God to forgive ye this act of cowardice on New Year's eve!"

The answer was another volley of stones, one of which hit Socrates on the side of the head:

"With the next stone that is hurled," continued Diogenes calmly, "I will smash Jan Tiele's nose: and if more than one come within reach of my hand, then Willem's nose shall go as well."

The warning was disregarded: a shower of stones came crashing against the wall just above the postern gate.

"How badly these Dutchmen throw," growled Socrates in his gruff voice.

"This present from thy friends in the rear, Jan Tiele," rejoined Diogenes, as he seized that worthy by the collar and brandished a stone which he had caught in its flight. "'Tis they obviously who do not like the shape of thy nose, else they had not sent me the wherewithal to flatten it for thee."

"I'll do that, good Diogenes," said Pythagoras gently, as he took both the stone and the struggling Jan Tiele from his friend's grasp, "and Socrates will see to Willem at the same time. No trouble, I give thee my word — I like to do these kind of jobs for my friends."

An awful and prolonged howl from Jan Tiele and from Willem testified that the jobs had been well done.

"Papists! Spaniards! Spies!" roared the crowd, now goaded to fury.

"Bucephalus, I do humbly beg thy pardon," said Diogenes as he rested the point of his sword for one moment on the frozen ground, then raised it and touched it with his forehead and with his lips, "I apologize to thee for using thee against such rabble."

"More stones please," came in a shrill falsetto from Pythagoras, "here's Piet whose nose is itching fit to make him swear."

He was a great adept at catching missiles in mid-air. These now flew thick and fast, stones, short staves, heavy leather pouches as well as hard missiles made of frozen snow. But the throwers were hampered by one another: they had no elbow-room in this narrow street.

The missiles for the most part fell wide of the mark. Still! the numbers might tell in the end. Socrates' face was streaming with blood: a clump of mud and snow had extinguished one of the torches, and a moment ago a stone had caught Diogenes on the left shoulder.

The three men stood close together, sword in hand. To the excited gaze of the crowd they scarcely seemed to be using their swords or to heed those of their aggressors who came threateningly nigh. They stood quite quietly up against the wall hardly making a movement, their sword hand and wrist never appeared to stir, but many who had been in the forefront had retired howling and the snow all around was deeply stained with red: Jan Tiele and Willem had broken noses and Piet had lost one ear.

The three men were hatless and the faces of two of them were smeared with blood. The third — taller and broader than the others — stood between them, and with those that pressed him closely he bandied mocking words.

"Spaniards! Papists!" yelled the crowd.

"If I hear those words again," he retorted pleasantly, "I'll run three of you through on Bucephalus as on a spit, and leave you thus ready for roasting in hell. We are no Spaniards. My father was English and my friend Pythagoras here was born in a donkey shed,

whilst Socrates first saw the light of day in a travelling menagerie. So we are none of us Spaniards, and you can all disperse.”

“Papists!”

“And if I hear that again I’ll send the lot of you to hell.”

“Art thou Samson then, to think thyself so strong?” shouted a shrill voice close to him.

“Give me thy jawbone and I’ll prove thee that I am,” he retorted gaily.

“Spies!” they cried.

“Dondersteen!” he shouted in his turn, swearing lustily, “I am tired of this rabble. Disperse! disperse, I tell ye! Bucephalus my friend wilt have a taste of Dutch guts? Another ear? a nose or two? What, ye will not go?”

“Spaniards! Spies! Papists!”

The crowd was gathering unto itself a kind of fury that greatly resembled courage. Those that were behind pushed and those that were in front could no longer retreat. Blood had begun to flow more freely and the groans of the wounded had roused the bellicose instincts of those whose skin was still whole. One or two of the more venturesome had made close and gruesome acquaintance with the silent but swift Bucephalus, whilst from the market place in the rear the numbers of the crowd thus packed in this narrow street corner swelled dangerously. The new comers did not know what had happened before their arrival. They could not see over the heads of the crowd what was going on at this moment. So they pushed from behind and the three combatants with their backs against the wall had much difficulty in keeping a sufficiently wide circle around them to allow their swords free play.

Already Socrates, dizzy from the blood that was streaming down his sharp, hooked nose, had failed to keep three of his foremost assailants at bay: he had been forced to yield one step and then another, and the elbow of his sword arm was now right up against the wall. Pythagoras, too, was equally closely pressed, and Diogenes had just sent an over bold lout sprawling on the ground. The noise was deafening. Every one was shouting, many were screaming or groaning. The town guard, realizing at last that a tumult of more than usual consequence was going on in some portion of the city, had decided to go and interfere; their slow and weighty steps and the clang of their halberds could be heard from over the Grootemarkt during the rare moments when shouts and clamour subsided for a few seconds only to be upraised again with redoubled power.

Then suddenly cries of “Help!” were raised from the further end of Dam Straat, there where it debouches on the bank of the Spaarne. It was a woman’s voice that raised the cry, but men answered it with calls for the guard. The tumult in front of the postern gate now reached its climax, for the pressure from behind had become terrible, and men and women were being knocked down and trampled on. It seemed as if the narrow street could not hold another human soul, and yet apparently more and more were trying to squeeze into the restricted space. The trampled, frozen snow had become as slippery as a sheet of glass, and if the guard with their wonted ponderous clumsiness charged into the crowd with halberds now, then Heaven help the weak who could not elbow a way out for themselves; they would be sure to be trampled under foot.

Every one knew that on such occasions many a corpse littered the roads when finally the crowd disappeared. Those of sober sense realized all this, but they were but small units in this multitude heated with its own rage, and intoxicated with the first hope of victory. The three strangers who, bare-headed, still held their ground with their backs to the wall were obviously getting exhausted. But a little more determination — five minutes respite before the arrival of the guard, a few more stones skilfully hurled and the Papists, Spaniards or Spies — whatever they were — would have paid dearly for their impudent interference.

“Papists, have ye had enough?” yelled the crowd in chorus as a stone well thrown hit the sword arm of the tallest of the three men — he whose mocking voice had never ceased its incessant chatter.

“Not nearly enough,” he replied loudly, as he quietly transferred faithful Bucephalus from his right hand to his left.

“We are just beginning to enjoy ourselves,” came in dulcet tones from the small man beside him.

“At them! at them! Papists! Spies!”

Once more a volley of stones.

“Dondersteen! but methinks we might vary the entertainment,” cried Diogenes lustily.

Quicker than a flash of lightning he turned, and once more grasping Bucephalus in the partially disabled hand he tore with the other the resin torch out of its iron socket, and shouting to his two companions to hold their ground he, with the guttering lighted torch charged straight into the crowd.

A wild cry of terror was raised, which echoed and re-echoed from one end of the street to the other, reverberated against the cathedral walls, and caused all peaceable citizens who had found refuge in their homes to thank the Lord that they were safely within.

Diogenes, with fair hair fluttering over his brow, his twinkling eyes aglow with excitement, held the torch well in front of him, the sparks flew in all directions, the lustiest aggressors fled to right and left, shrieking with horror. Fire — that most invincible weapon — had accomplished what the finest steel never could have done; it sobered and terrified the crowd, scattered it like a flock of sheep, sent it running hither and thither, rendering it helpless by fear.

In the space of three minutes the circle round the three combatants was several metres wide, five minutes later the corner of the street was clear, except for the wounded who lay groaning on the ground and one or two hideous rags of flesh that lay scattered among heaps of stones, torn wallets, staves and broken sticks.

From the precincts of the Grootemarkt the town guard were heard using rough language, violent oaths and pikes and halberds against the stragglers that were only too eager now to go peaceably back to their homes. The fear of burnt doublets or kirtles had effectually sobered these over-flowing tempers. There had been enough Papist baiting to please the most inveterate seeker after excitement this night.

A few youths, who mayhap earlier in the evening had indulged too freely in the taverns of the Grootemarkt, were for resuming the fun after the panic had subsided. A score of them or so talked it over under the shadow of the cathedral, but a detachment of town guard spied their manoeuvres and turned them all back into the market-place.

The bell of the cathedral slowly struck the last hour of this memorable year; and through the open portals of the sacred edifice the cathedral choir was heard intoning the First Psalm.

Like frightened hens that have been scared, and now venture out again, the worthy burghers of Haarlem sallied out from the by-streets into the Grootemarkt, on their way to watch-night service: Mynheer the burgomaster, and mynheer the town advocate, and the mevrouws their wives, and the town councillors and the members of the shooting guilds, and the governors and governesses of the Alms-houses. With ponderous Bibles and prayer-books under their arms, and cloaks of fur closely wrapped round their shoulders, they once more filled the Grootemarkt with the atmosphere of their own solemnity. Their serving men carried the torches in front of them, waiting women helped the mevrouws in their unwieldy farthingales to walk on the slippery ground with becoming sobriety.

The cathedral bells sent forth a merry peal to greet the incoming year.

CHAPTER III

AN INTERLUDE

And at the corner of Dam Straat, where the low postern gate cuts into the tall stuccoed wall, there once more reigned silence as of the grave.

Those that were hurt and wounded had managed to crawl away, the town guard had made short work of it all; the laws against street brawling and noisy assemblies were over severe just now; it was best to hide a wound and go nurse it quietly at home. Fortunately the fog favoured the disturbers of the peace. Gradually they all contrived to sneak away, and later on in the night to sally forth again for watch-night revelries, looking for all the world as if nothing had happened.

"Tumult? Papist baiting? Was there really any Papist baiting this night? Ah! these foreign adventurers do fill our peaceful city with their noise."

In the Dam Straat the fog and the darkness reigned unchallenged. The second torch lay extinguished on the ground, trampled out under the heel of a heavy boot. And in the darkness three men were busy readjusting their mantles and trying to regain possession of their hats.

"A very unprofitable entertainment," growled Socrates.

"Total darkness, not a soul in sight, and cold! fit to chill the inner chambers of hell," assented Pythagoras.

"And no chance of adding anything to the stock of three guilders which must suffice us for to-night," concluded Diogenes airily. He was carefully wiping the shining blade of Bucephalus with the corner of Pythagoras' mantle.

"Verrek jezelf! and what the d ——— I?" queried the latter in a high falsetto.

"My mantle is almost new," said Diogenes reproachfully; "thou would'st not have me soil it so soon?"

"I have a hole in my head fit to bury those three guilders in," murmured Socrates, with a sigh.

"And I a blow in the stomach which has chilled me to the marrow," sighed Pythagoras.

"And I a bruised shoulder," laughed Diogenes, "which hath engendered an unquenchable thirst."

"I wouldn't sell my thirst for any money this night," assented Pythagoras.

"To the 'Lame Cow,' then, O Pythagoras, and I'll toss thee for the first drink of hot ale."

"Ugh! but my head feels mightily hot and thick," said Socrates, somewhat huskily.

"Surely thou canst walk as far as the 'Lame Cow'?" queried Pythagoras, anxiously.

"I doubt me," sighed the other.

"Ale!" whispered Diogenes, encouragingly; "warm, sparkling, spicy ale!"

"Hm! hm!" assented the wounded man feebly.

"Easy! easy, my friend," said Diogenes, for his brother philosopher had fallen heavily against him.

"What are we to do?" moaned Pythagoras, in his dulcet tones. "I have a thirst ... and we cannot leave this irresponsible fool to faint here in the fog."

"Hoist him up by the seat of his breeches, then on to my back," retorted Diogenes lightly. "The 'Lame Cow' is not far, and I too have a thirst."

Socrates would have protested. He did not relish the idea of being tossed about like a bale of goods on his friend's back. But he could only protest by word of mouth, to which the others paid no heed; and when he tried to struggle he rolled, dizzy and faint, almost to the ground.

"There's nothing for it," piped Pythagoras with consummate philosophy. "I couldn't carry him if I tried."

Diogenes bent his broad back and rested his hands on his thighs, getting as firm hold of the slippery ground as he could. Socrates for the moment was like a helpless log. There was much groping about in the darkness, a good deal of groaning, and a vast amount of swearing. Socrates had, fortunately, not fainted, and after a little while was able to settle down astride on his friend's back, his arms around the latter's neck, Pythagoras giving vigorous pushes from the rear.

When Diogenes, firmly grasping the wounded man's legs, was at last able to straighten himself out again, and did so to the accompaniment of a mighty groan and still more mighty oath, he found himself confronted by two lanterns which were held up within a few inches of his nose.

"Dondersteen!" he ejaculated loudly, and nearly dropped his half-conscious and swaying burden on the ground.

"What is it now, Jakob?" queried a woman's voice peremptorily.

"I cannot see clearly, lady," replied one of the lantern-bearers— "two men I think."

"Then do thy thoughts proclaim thee a liar, friend," said Diogenes lightly; "there are three men here at this lady's service, though one is sick, the other fat, and the third a mere beast of burden."

"Let me see them, Jakob," ordered the woman. "I believe they are the same three men who..."

The lantern-bearers made way for the lady, still holding the lanterns up so that the light fell fully on the quaint spectacle presented by the three philosophers. There was Socrates perched up aloft, his bird-like face smeared with blood, his eyes rolling in their effort to keep open, his thin back bent nearly double so that indeed he looked like a huge plucked crow the worse for a fight, and perched on an eminence where he felt none too secure. And below him his friend with broad shoulders bending under the burden, his plumed hat shading his brow, his merry, twinkling eyes fixed a little suspiciously on the four figures that loomed out of the fog in front of him, his mocking lips ready framed for a smile or an oath, his hands which supported the legs of poor wounded Socrates struggling visibly toward the hilt of his sword. And peeping round from behind him the short, rotund form of Pythagoras, crowned with a tall sugar-loaf hat which obviously had never belonged to him until now, for it perched somewhat insecurely above his flat, round face, with the small, upturned nose slightly tinged with pink and the tiny eyes, round and bright as new crowns.

Undoubtedly the sight was ludicrous in the extreme, and the woman who looked on it now burst into a merry peal of laughter.

"O Maria! dost see them?" she said, turning to her companion, an elderly woman in sober black gown and coif of tinsel lace. "Hast ever seen anything so quaint?"

She herself was young, and in the soft light of the two lanterns appeared to the three philosophers to be more than passing fair.

"Socrates, thou malapert," said Diogenes sternly, "take my hat off my head at once, and allow me to make obeisance to the lady, or I'll drop thee incontinently on thy back."

Then, as Socrates half mechanically lifted the plumed hat from his friend's head, the latter bowed as well as he could under the circumstances and said gallantly:

"Thy servants, lady, and eternally grateful are we for a sight of thee at this moment when the world appeared peculiarly fog-ridden and unpleasant. Having been the fortunate cause of thy merriment, might we now crave thy permission to continue our way. The weight of my friend up there is greater than his importance warrants, and I don't want to drop him ere we reach a haven of refuge, where our priceless thirst will soon, I hope, find solace."

The delicate face of the young girl had suddenly become more grave.

"Your pardon, gentle sirs," she said, with a pretty mixture of imperiousness and humility; "my levity was indeed misplaced. I know ye now for the same three brave fellows who were fighting a few moments ago against overwhelming odds, in order to protect a woman against a rowdy crowd. Oh, it was a valorous deed! My men and I were on our way to watch-night service, and saw it all from a distance. We dared not come nigh, the rabble looked so threatening. All I could do was to shout for help, and summon the town guard to your aid. It was you, was it not?" she added, regarding with great wondering blue eyes the three curious figures who stood somewhat sheepishly before her.

"Yes, fair lady," piped Pythagoras, in his neatest falsetto, "we were the three men who, in the face of well-nigh overwhelming odds, did save a defenceless woman from the insolent rabble. My friend who is perched up there was severely wounded in the fray, I myself received so violent a blow in the stomach that a raging thirst has since taken possession of my throat, and — —"

He stopped abruptly and murmured a comprehensive oath. He had just received a violent kick in the shins from Diogenes.

"What the h ——" he muttered.

But Diogenes paid no heed to him; looking on the dainty picture before him, with eyes that twinkled whilst they did not attempt to conceal the admiration which he felt, he said, with elaborate gallantry, which his position under the burden of Socrates' swaying figure rendered inexpressibly droll:

"For the help rendered to us all at the moment of distress, deign to accept, mejuffrouw, our humble thanks. For the rest, believe me, our deed was not one of valour, and such as it was it is wholly unworthy of the praise thou dost deign to bestow upon it. I would tell thee more," he added, whimsically, "only that my friend behind me is violently kicking the calves of my legs, which renders the elegant flow of language well nigh impossible. I stopped him talking just now — he retaliates ... it is but just."

"Gentle sir," said the girl, who obviously had much ado to preserve her gravity, "your modesty doth but equal your gallantry. This do I see quite plainly. But if at any time I can do aught to express in a more practical manner the real admiration which I feel for your worth I pray you command me. Alas! brave men are few these days! But my father's name is known throughout Holland; his wealth and influence are vast. I pray you tell me, can I do aught for you now?"

She spoke so artlessly and at the same time with such gentle dignity, it was small wonder that for the nonce even the most talkative of all philosophers was dumb, and that his habitual mocking banter failed to cross his lips. The girl was young and exquisitely pretty; the stiff, unwieldy costume of the time failed to conceal altogether the graceful slenderness of her figure, just as the prim coif of gold and silver tissue failed to hold the unruly golden curls in bondage. The light from the lanterns fell full on her face, and round her throat, beneath her fur-lined cloak, there was a glimmer of starched linen and lace, whilst gems in her ears and on her breast lent her an air of elegance and even of splendour.

Pythagoras in the rear heaved a deep sigh; he drew in his breath preparatory to a long and comprehensive oration. "Can I do aught for ye?" the lady had said: a lady who was rich and influential and willing. Ye thunders and lightnings! when but three guilders stood between three philosophers and absolute penury! Ye hails and storms! what an opportunity! He would have approached the lady, only Diogenes' wide shoulders blocked him out from her view.

"Can I do aught for you now?" she reiterated gently.

"Raise thy hand to my lips," said Diogenes lightly; "momentarily I have not the use of mine own."

She hesitated, but only for a brief moment, then did just what he asked. She held her hand to his lips, mayhap one second longer than was absolutely necessary, and her eyes, large, deep and shy, looked for that one second into a pair of merry, mocking ones. Then she sighed, whether with satisfaction or embarrassment I would not undertake to say, and asked with a gracious smile:

"And what is your next wish, gentle sir?"

"Thy leave to continue our journey to the 'Lame Cow,'" he replied airily; "my friend up there is getting damnably heavy."

She drew back, visibly surprised and hurt.

"I do not detain ye," she said curtly, and without another word she turned to her lantern-bearers and ordered them to precede her; she also called to her duenna to follow; but she did not bestow another look on the three men, nor did she acknowledge the respectful farewell which came from the lips of the beast of burden.

The next moment she had already crossed the road toward the cathedral, and she and her escort were swallowed up by the fog.

"Well, of all the d — d idiots that ever..." swore Pythagoras, in his shrillest tones.

Even Socrates pulled himself together in order to declare emphatically that Diogenes was a confounded fool.

"I pray thee raise thy hand to my lips," mimicked Pythagoras mockingly. "Verrek jezelf!" he muttered under his breath.

"If you do not hold your tongue, O wise Pythagoras," retorted Diogenes with all his wonted merriment, "I'll even have to drop Socrates on the top of you in order to break your head."

"But 'tis a fortune — the promise of a fortune which you let slip so stupidly."

"There is a certain wisdom even in stupidity sometimes, Pythagoras, as you will discover one day, when your nose is less red and your figure less fat. Remember that I have three guilders in my pocket, and that our thirst hath not grown less. Follow me now, we've talked enough for to-night." And he started walking down the street with long and rapid strides. Socrates up aloft swaying about like a dummy figure in carnival time, and Pythagoras — still muttering a series of diversified oaths — bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER IV

WATCH-NIGHT

And am I not proved fully justified in my statement that but for many seemingly paltry circumstances, the further events which I am about to place on record, and which have been of paramount importance to the history of no less than two great and worthy families, never would have shaped themselves as they did.

For who could assert that but for the presence of three philosophers on the Grootemarkt on the eve of the New Year, and their subsequent interference in the fray outside the Papist convent door in the Dam Straat, who could assert, I say, that but for these minor circumstances Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn would ever have condescended to exchange half a dozen words with three out-at-elbows, homeless, shiftless, foreign adventurers who happened to have drifted into Haarlem — the Lord only knew for what purpose and with what hopes.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn had been well and rigidly brought up; she was well educated, and possessed more knowledge than most young girls of her social standing or of her age. Mynheer Beresteyn, her father, was a gentleman of vast consideration in Haarlem, and as his two children had been motherless as soon as the younger one saw the light of day, he had been doubly careful in his endeavours that his daughter should in no way feel the lack of that tender supervision of which it had pleased God to deprive her.

Thus she had been taught early in life to keep herself aloof from all persons save those approved of by her father or her brother — a young man of sound understanding, some half dozen years older than herself. As for the strangers who for purposes of commerce or other less avowable motives filled the town of Haarlem with their foreign ways — which oft were immoral and seldom sedate — she had been strictly taught to hold these in abhorrence and never to approach such men either with word or gesture.

Was it likely, then, that she ever would have spoken to three thriftless knaves? — and this at a late hour of the night — but for the fact that she had witnessed their valour from a distance, and with queenly condescension hoped to reward them with a gracious word.

The kiss imprinted upon her hand by respectful, if somewhat bantering, lips had greatly pleased her: such she imagined would be the homage of a vassal proud to have attracted the notice of his lady paramount. The curtly expressed desire to quit her presence, in order to repair to a tavern, had roused her indignation and her contempt.

She was angered beyond what the circumstance warranted, and while the minister preached an admirable and learned watch-night sermon she felt her attention drifting away from the discourse and the solemnity of the occasion, whilst her wrath against a most unworthy object was taking the place of more pious and charitable feelings.

The preacher had taken for his text the sublime words from the New Testament: "The greatest of these is charity." He thought that the first day of the New Year was a splendid opportunity for the good inhabitants of Haarlem to cast off all gossiping and back-biting ways and to live from this day forth in greater amity and benevolence with one another. "Love thy neighbour as thyself," he adjured passionately, and the burghers, with their vrouws in their Sunday best, were smitten with remorse of past scandal-mongering, and vowed that in the future they would live in perfect accord and good-will.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, too, thought of all her friends and acquaintances with the kindest of feelings, and she had not a harsh thought for anyone in her heart ... not for anyone, at any rate, who was good and deserving.... As for that knavish malapert with the merry, twinkling eyes and the mocking smile, surely God would not desire her to be in charity with him; a more ungrateful, more impertinent wretch, she had never met, and it was quite consoling to think of all that Mynheer Beresteyn's influence could have done for those three ragamuffins, and how in the near future they must all suffer abominable discomfort, mayhap with shortage of food and drink, or absence of shelter, when no doubt one of them at least would remember with contrition the magnanimous offer of help made to him by gracious lips, and which he had so insolently refused.

So absorbed was Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn in these thoughts that she never even noticed that the watch-night service was over, and the minister already filing out with the clerk. The general exodus around her recalled her to herself and also to a sense of contrition for the absent way in which she had assisted at this solemn service.

She whispered to Maria to wait for her outside the church with the men.

"I must yet pray for a little while alone," she said. "I will join you at the north door in a quarter of an hour."

And she fell on her knees, and was soon absorbed in prayer.

Maria found the two serving men in the crowd, and transmitted to them her mistress's orders. The cathedral had been very full for the service, and the worshippers took a long time filing out; they lingered about in the aisles, exchanging bits of city gossip and wishing one another a happy New Year.

The verger had much ado to drive the goodly people out of the edifice, no sooner had he persuaded one group of chatters to continue their conversation on the Grootemarkt outside, than another batch seemed to loom out of the shadows, equally determined to conclude its gossip here in the warmth, before sallying forth once more into the foggy midnight air.

"I must close the cathedral for the night," the worthy man repeated piteously, "do you think that I don't want to get home and eat my watch-night supper at a reasonable hour. Move on there, my masters, move out please! My orders are to have the church closed before one o'clock."

He came on a group of men who sat together in the shadow of a heavy pillar close behind the pulpit.

"Now then, mynheers," he said, "'tis closing time."

But those that were there made no sign to obey.

"All right, Perk," said one of them in a whisper, "we are not going just yet."

"Aye, but ye are," retorted the verger gruffly, for he was cross now and wanting his supper, "what should I allow ye to stay for?"

"For the memory of Jan!" was the whispered response.

The verger's manner changed in an instant, the few words evidently bore some portentous meaning of which he held the key — and I doubt not but that the key was made of silver.

"All right, mynheers," he said softly, "the church will be clear in a few minutes now."

"Go round, Perk," said he who had first spoken, "and let us know when all is safe."

The verger touched his forelock and silently departed. Those that were there in the shadow by the great pillar remained in silence awaiting his return. The congregation was really dispersing now, the patter of leather shoes on the flagstones of the floor became gradually more faint; then it died out altogether. That portion of the Groote Kerk where is situated the magnificent carved pulpit was already quite dark and wholly deserted save for that group of silent, waiting figures that looked like shadows within the shadows.

Anon the verger returned. He had only been absent a few minutes.

"Quite safe now, mynheers," he said, "the last of them has just gone through the main door. I have locked all the doors save the West. If you want anything you will find me there. I can leave this one light for you, the others I must put out."

"Put them out, Perk, by all means," was the ready response. "We can find our way about in the dark."

The verger left them undisturbed; his shuffling steps were heard gliding along the flagstones until their murmur died away in the vastness of the sacred edifice.

The group of men who sat behind the pulpit against the heavy pillar, now drew their rush chairs closer to one another.

There were six of them altogether, and the light from the lamp above illumined their faces, which were stern looking, dark and of set determination. All six of them were young; only one amongst them might have been more than thirty years of age; that a great purpose brought them here to-night was obvious from their attitude, the low murmur of their voices, that air of mystery which hung round them, fostered by the dark cloaks which they held closely wrapped round their shoulders and the shadows from the pillar which they sought.

One of them appeared to be the centre of their interest, a man, lean and pallid-looking, with hollow purple-rimmed eyes, that spoke of night vigils or mayhap of unavowed, consuming thoughts. The mouth was hard and thin, and a febrile excitement caused his lips to quiver and his hand to shake.

The others hung upon his words.

"Tell us some of your adventures, Stoutenburg!" said one of them eagerly.

Stoutenburg laughed harshly and mirthlessly.

"They would take years in telling," he said, "mayhap one day I'll write them down. They would fill many a volume."

"Enough that you did contrive to escape," said another man, "and that you are back here amongst us once more."

"Yes! in order to avenge wrongs that are as countless by now as the grains of sand on the sea-shore," rejoined Stoutenburg earnestly.

"You know that you are not safe inside Holland," suggested he who had first spoken.

"Aye, my good Beresteyn, I know that well enough," said Stoutenburg with a long and bitter sigh. "Your own father would send me to the gallows if he had the chance, and you with me mayhap, for consorting with me."

"My father owes his position, his wealth, the prosperity of his enterprise to the Stadtholder," said Beresteyn, speaking with as much bitterness as his friend. "He looked upon the last conspiracy against the life of the Prince of Orange as a crime blacker than the blackest sin that ever deserved hell.... If he thought that I ... at the present moment...."

"Yes I know. But he has not the power to make you false to me, has he, Nicolaes?" asked Stoutenburg anxiously. "You are still at one with us?"

"With you to the death!" replied Beresteyn fervently, "so are we all."

"Aye! that we are," said the four others with one accord, whilst one of them added dryly:

"And determined not to fail like the last time by trusting those paid hirelings, who will take your money and betray you for more."

"Last February we were beset with bunglers and self-seekers," said Stoutenburg, "my own brother Grøeneveld was half-hearted in everything save the desire to make money. Slatius was a vindictive boor, van Dyk was a busy-body and Korenwinder a bloated fool. Well! they have paid their penalty. Heaven have their souls! But for God's sake let us do the work ourselves this time."

"They say that the Stadtholder is sick unto death," said one of the men sombrely. "Disease strikes with a surer hand sometimes than doth the poniard of an enemy."

"Bah! I have no time to waste waiting for his death," retorted Stoutenburg roughly, "there is an opportunity closer at hand and more swift than the weary watching for the slow ravages of disease. The Stadtholder comes to Amsterdam next week; the burghers of his beloved city have begged of him to be present at the consecration of the Western Kerk, built by Mynheer van Keyser, as well as at the opening of the East India Company's new hall. He plays up for popularity just now. The festivals in connection with the double event at Amsterdam have tempted him to undertake the long journey from the frontier, despite his failing health. His visit to this part of the country is a golden opportunity which I do not intend to miss."

"You will find it very difficult to get near the Stadtholder on such an occasion," remarked Beresteyn. "He no longer drives about unattended as he used to do."

"All the escort in the world will not save him from my revenge," said Stoutenburg firmly. "Our position now is stronger than it has ever been. I have adherents in every city of Holland and of Zealand, aye, and in the south too as far as Breda and in the east as far as Arnhem. I tell you, friends, that I have spread a net over this country out of which Maurice of Orange cannot escape. My organisation too is better than it was. I have spies within the camp at Sprang, a knot of determined men all along the line between Breda and Amsterdam, at Gouda, at Delft ... especially at Delft."

"Why specially there?" asked Beresteyn.

"Because I have it in my mind that mayhap we need not take the risks of accomplishing our coup in Amsterdam itself. As you say it might be very difficult and very dangerous to get at the Stadtholder on a public occasion.... But Delft is on the way.... Maurice of Orange is certain to halt at Delft, if only in order to make a pilgrimage to the spot where his father was murdered. He will, I am sure, sleep more than one night at the Prinsenhof.... And from Delft the way leads northwards past Ryswyk — Ryswyk close to which I have had my headquarters three weeks past — Ryswyk, my friends!" he continued, speaking very rapidly almost incoherently in his excitement, "where I have arms and ammunition, Ryswyk, which is the rallying point for all my friends ... the molens! you remember?... close to the wooden bridge which spans the Schie.... I have enough gunpowder stored at that molens to blow up twenty

wooden bridges ... and the Stadtholder with his escort must cross the wooden bridge which spans the Schie not far from the molens where I have my headquarters.... I have it all in my mind already.... I only wait to hear news of the actual day when the Stadtholder leaves his camp.... I can tell you more to-morrow, but in the meanwhile I want to know if there are a few men about here on whom I can rely at a moment's notice ... whom I can use as spies or messengers ... or even to lend me a hand at Ryswyk in case of need ... thirty or forty would be sufficient ... if they are good fighting men.... I said something about this in my message to you all."

"And I for one acted on your suggestion at once," said one of the others. "I have recruited ten stout fellows: Germans and Swiss, who know not a word of our language. I pay them well and they ask no questions. They will fight for you, spy for you, run for you, do anything you choose, and can betray nothing, since they know nothing. They are at your disposal at any moment."

"That is good, and I thank you, my dear Heemskerck."

"I have half a dozen peasants on my own estate on whom I can rely," said another of Stoutenburg's friends. "They are good fighters, hard-headed and ready to go through fire and water for me. They are as safe as foreign mercenaries, for they will do anything I tell them and will do it without asking the reason why."

"I have another eight or ten foreigners to offer you," said a third, "they come from a part of Britain called Scotland so I understand. I picked them up a week ago when they landed at Scheveningen and engaged them in my service then and there."

"And I can lay my hand at any moment on a dozen or so young apprentices in my father's factory," added a fourth, "they are always ready for a frolic or a fight and ready to follow me to hell if need be."

"You see that you can easily count on three dozen men," concluded Beresteyn.

"Three dozen men ready to hand," said Stoutenburg, "for our present needs they should indeed suffice. Knowing that I can reckon on them I can strike the decisive blow when and how I think it best. It is the blow that counts," he continued between set teeth, "after that everything is easy enough. The waverers hang back until success is assured. But our secret adherents in Holland can be counted by the score, in Zealand and Utrecht by the hundred. When Maurice of Orange has paid with his own blood the penalty which his crimes have incurred, when I can proclaim myself over his dead body Stadtholder of the Northern Provinces, Captain and Admiral General of the State, thousands will rally round us and flock to our banner. Thousands feel as we do, think as we do, and know what we know, that John of Barneveld will not rest in his grave till I, his last surviving son, have avenged him. Who made this Republic what she is? My father. Who gave the Stadtholder the might which he possesses? My father. My father whose name was revered and honoured throughout the length and breadth of Europe and whom an ingrate's hand hath branded with the mark of traitor. The Stadtholder brought my father to the scaffold, heaping upon him accusations of treachery which he himself must have known were groundless. When the Stadtholder sent John of Barneveld to the scaffold he committed a crime which can only be atoned for by his own blood. Last year we failed. The mercenaries whom we employed betrayed us. My brother, our friends went the way my father led, victims all of them of the rapacious ambition, the vengeful spite of the Stadtholder. But I escaped as by a miracle! — a miracle I say it was, my friends, a miracle wrought by the God of vengeance, who hath said: 'I will repay!' He hath also said that whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed! I am the instrument of his vengeance. Vengeance is mine! 'tis I who will repay!"

He had never raised his voice during this long peroration, but his diction had been none the less impressive because it was spoken under his breath. The others had listened in silence, awed, no doubt, by the bitter flood of hate which coursed through every vein of this man's body and poured in profusion from his lips. The death of father and brother and of many friends, countless wrongs, years of misery, loss of caste, of money and of home had numbed him against every feeling save that of revenge.

"This time I'll let no man do the work for me," he said after a moment's silence, "if you will all stand by me, I will smite the Stadtholder with mine own hand."

This time he had raised his voice, just enough to wake the echo that slept in the deserted edifice.

"Hush!" whispered one of his friends, "Hush! for God's sake!"

"Bah! the church is empty," retorted Stoutenburg, "and the verger too far away to hear. I'll say it again, and proclaim it loudly now in this very church before the altar of God: I will kill the Stadtholder with mine own hand!"

"Silence in the name of God!"

More than one muffled voice had uttered the warning and Beresteyn's hand fell heavily on Stoutenburg's arm.

"Hush, I say!" he whispered hoarsely, "there's something moving there in the darkness."

"A rat mayhap!" quoth Stoutenburg lightly.

"No, no ... listen!... some one moves ... some one has been there ... all along...."

"A spy!" murmured the others under their breath.

In a moment every man there had his hand on his sword: Stoutenburg and Beresteyn actually drew theirs. They did not speak to one another for they had caught one another's swift glance, and the glance had in it the forecast of a grim resolve.

Whoever it was who thus moved silently out of the shadows — spy or merely indiscreet listener — would pay with his life for the knowledge which he had obtained. These men here could no longer afford to take any risks. The words spoken by Stoutenburg and registered by them all could be made the stepping stones to the scaffold if strange ears had caught their purport.

They meant death to someone, either to the speakers or to the eavesdropper; and six men were determined that it should be the eavesdropper who must pay for his presence here.

They forced their eyes to penetrate the dense gloom which surrounded them, and one and all held their breath, like furtive animals that await their prey. They stood there silent and rigid, a tense look on every face; the one light fixed in the pillar above them played weirdly on their starched ruffs scarce whiter than the pallid hue of their cheeks.

Then suddenly a sound caught their ears, which caused each man to start and to look at his nearest companion with set inquiring eyes; it was the sound of a woman's skirt swishing against the stone-work of the floor. The seconds went by leaden-footed and full of portentous meaning. Each heart-beat beneath the vaulted roof of the cathedral to-night seemed like a knell from eternity.

How slow the darkness was in yielding up its secret!

At last as the conspirators gazed, they saw the form of a woman emerging out of the shadows. At first they could only see her starched kerchief and a glimmer of jewels beneath her cloak. Then gradually the figure — ghostlike in this dim light — came more

fully into view; the face of a woman, her lace coif, the gold embroidery of her stomacher all became detached one by one, but only for a few seconds, for the woman was walking rapidly, nor did she look to right or left, but glided along the floor like a vision — white, silent, swift — which might have been conjured up by a fevered brain.

“A ghost!” whispered one of the young men hoarsely.

“No. A woman,” said another, and the words came like a hissing sound through his teeth.

Beresteyn and Stoutenburg said nothing for a while. They looked silently on one another, the same burning anxiety glowing in their eyes, the same glance of mute despair passing from one to the other.

“Gilda!” murmured Stoutenburg at last.

The swish of the woman’s skirt had died away in the distance; not one of the men had attempted to follow her or to intercept her passage.

Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, no spy of course, just a chance eavesdropper! but possessed nevertheless now of a secret which meant death to them all!

“How much did she hear think you?” asked Stoutenburg at last.

He had replaced his sword in his scabbard with a gesture that expressed his own sense of fatality. He could not use his sword against a woman — even had that woman not been Gilda Beresteyn.

“She cannot have heard much,” said one of the others, “we spoke in whispers.”

“If she had heard anything she would have known that only the west door was to remain open. Yet she has made straight for the north portal,” suggested another.

“If she did not hear the verger speaking she could not have heard what we said,” argued a third somewhat lamely.

Every one of them had some suggestion to put forward, some surmise to express, some hope to urge. Only Beresteyn said nothing. He had stood by, fierce and silent ever since he had first recognized his sister; beneath his lowering brows the resolve had not died out of his eyes, and he still held his sword unsheathed in his hand.

Stoutenburg now appealed directly to him.

“What do you think of it, Beresteyn?” he asked.

“I think that my sister did hear something of our conversation,” he answered quietly.

“Great God!” ejaculated the others.

“But,” added Beresteyn slowly, “I pledge you mine oath that she will not betray us.”

“How will you make sure of that?” retorted Stoutenburg, not without a sneer.

“That is mine affair.”

“And ours too. We can do nothing, decide on nothing until we are sure.”

“Then I pray you wait for me here,” concluded Beresteyn. “I will bring you a surety before we part this night.”

“Let me go and speak to her,” urged Stoutenburg.

“No, no, ’tis best that I should go.”

Stoutenburg made a movement as if he would detain him, then seemed to think better of it, and finally let him go.

Beresteyn did not wait for further comment from his friends but quickly turned on his heel. The next moment he was speeding away across the vast edifice and his tall figure was soon swallowed up by the gloom.

CHAPTER V

BROTHER AND SISTER

The verger on guard at the west door had quietly dropped to sleep. He did not wake apparently when Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn slipped past him and out through the door.

Beresteyn followed close on his sister's heels. He touched her shoulder just as she stood outside the portal, wrapping her fur cloak more snugly over her shoulders and looking round her, anxious where to find her servants.

"'Tis late for you to be out this night, Gilda," he said, "and alone."

"I am only alone for the moment," she replied quietly. "Maria and Jakob and Piet are waiting for me at the north door. I did not know it would be closed."

"But why are you so late?"

"I stayed in church after the service."

"But why?" he insisted more impatiently.

"I could not pray during service," she said. "My thoughts wandered. I wanted to be alone for a few moments with God."

"Did you not know then that you were not alone?"

"No. Not at first."

"But ... afterwards...?"

"Your voice, Nicolaes, struck on my ear. I did not want to hear. I wanted to pray."

"Yet you listened?"

"No. I did not wish to listen."

"But you heard?"

She gave no actual reply, but he could see her profile straight and white, the curved lips firmly pressed together, the brow slightly puckered, and from the expression of her face and of her whole attitude, he knew that she had heard.

He drew in his breath, like one who has received a blow and has not yet realized how deeply it would hurt. His right hand which was resting on his hip tore at the cloth of his doublet, else mayhap it would already have wandered to the hilt of his sword.

He had expected it of course. Already when he saw Gilda gliding out of the shadows with that awed, tense expression on her face, he knew that she must have heard ... something at least ... something that had horrified her to the soul.

But now of course there was no longer any room for doubt. She had heard everything and the question was what that knowledge, lodged in her brain, might mean to him and to his friends.

Just for a moment the frozen, misty atmosphere took on a reddish hue, his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead.

He looked around him furtively, fearfully, wondering whence came that hideous, insinuating whisper which was freezing the marrow in his bones. No doubt that had she spoken then, had she reproached or adjured, he would have found it impossible to regain mastery over himself. But she looked so unimpassioned, so still, so detached, that self-control came back to him, and for the moment she was safe.

"Will you tell me what you did hear?" he asked after awhile, with seeming calm, though he felt as if his words must choke him, and her answer strike him dead.

"I heard," she said, speaking very slowly and very quietly, "that the Lord of Stoutenburg has returned, and is trying to drag you and others into iniquity to further his own ambitious schemes."

"You wrong him there, Gilda. The Lord of Stoutenburg has certain wrongs to avenge which cry aloud to Heaven."

"We will not argue about that, Nicolaes," she said coldly. "Murder is hideous, call it what you will. The brand of Cain doth defame a man and carries its curse with it. No man can justify so dastardly a crime. 'Tis sophistry to suggest it."

"Then in sending Barneveld to the scaffold did the Prince of Orange call that curse upon himself, a curse which — please the God of vengeance! — will come home to him now at last."

"'Tis not for you, Nicolaes, to condemn him, who has heaped favours, kindness, bounties upon our father and upon us. 'Tis not for you, the Stadtholder's debtor for everything you are, for everything that you possess, 'tis not for you to avenge Barneveld's wrongs."

"'Tis not for you, my sister," he retorted hotly, "to preach to me your elder brother. I alone am responsible for mine actions, and have no account to give to any one."

"You owe an account of your actions to your father and to me, Nicolaes, since your dishonour will fall upon us too."

"Take care, Gilda, take care!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "you speak of things which are beyond your ken, but in speaking them you presume on my forbearance ... and on your sex."

"There is no one in sight," she said calmly, "you may strike me without fear. One crime more or less on your conscience will soon cease to trouble you."

"Gilda!" he cried with sudden passionate reproach.

At this involuntary cry — in which the expression of latent affection for her struggled with that of his rage and of his burning anxiety — all her own tender feelings for him, her womanliness, her motherly instincts were re-awakened in an instant. They had only been dormant for awhile, because of her horror of what she had heard. And that horror of a monstrous deed, that sense of shame that he — her brother — should be so ready to acquiesce in a crime had momentarily silenced the call of sisterly love. But this love once re-awakened was strong enough to do battle in her heart on his behalf: the tense rigidity of her attitude relaxed, her mouth softened, her eyes filled with tears. The next moment she had turned fully to him and was looking pleadingly into his face.

"Little brother," she murmured gently, "tell me that it is not true. That it was all a hideous dream."

He looked down on her for a moment. It pleased him to think that her affection for him was still there, that at any rate his personal safety might prove a potent argument against the slightest thought of indiscretion on her part. She tried to read his thoughts, but everything was dark around them both, the outline of his brow and mouth alone stood clearly out from the gloom: the expression of his eyes she could not fathom. But womanlike she was ready to believe that he would relent. It is so difficult for a woman to imagine that one whom she loves is really prone to evil. She loved this brother dearly, and did not grasp the fact that he had reached a point in his life when a woman's pleading had not the power to turn him from his purpose. She did not know how deeply he had plunged into the slough of conspiracy, and that the excitement of it had fired his blood to the exclusion of righteousness and of loyalty. She hoped — in the simplicity of her heart — that he was only misled, that evil counsels had only temporarily prevailed. Like a true woman she still saw the child in this brother who had grown to manhood by her side.

Therefore she appealed and she pleaded, she murmured tender words and made fond suggestions, all the while that his heart was hard to everything except to the one purpose which she was trying to thwart.

Not unkindly but quite firmly he detached her clinging arms from round his neck.

"Let us call it a dream, little sister," he said firmly, "and do you try and forget it."

"That I cannot, Nicolaes," she replied, "unless you will promise me...."

"To betray my friends?" he sneered.

"I would not ask you to do that: but you can draw back ... it is not too late.... For our father's sake, and for mine, Nicolaes," she pleaded once more earnestly. "Oh think, little brother, think! It cannot be that you could countenance such a hideous crime, you who were always so loyal and so brave! I remember when you were quite a tiny boy what contempt you had for little Jakob Steyn because he told lies, and how you thrashed Frans van Overstein because he ill-treated a dog.... Little brother, when our father was ruined, penniless, after that awful siege of Haarlem, which is still a hideous memory to him, the Prince of Orange helped him with friendship and money to re-establish his commerce, he stood by him loyally, constantly, until more prosperous days dawned upon our house. Little brother, you have oft heard our father tell the tale, think ... oh, think of the blow you would be dealing him if you lent a hand to conspiracy against the Prince. Little brother, for our father's sake, for mine, do not let yourself be dragged into the toils of that treacherous Stoutenburg."

"You call him treacherous now, but you loved him once."

"It is because I loved him once," she rejoined earnestly, "that I call him treacherous now."

He made no comment on this, for he knew in his heart of hearts that what she said was true. He knew nothing of course of the events of that night in the early spring of the year when Gilda had sheltered and comforted the man who had so basely betrayed her; but for her ministration to him then, when exhausted and half-starved he sought shelter under her roof, in her very room — he would not have lived for this further plotting and this further infamy, nor yet to drag her brother down with him into the abyss of his own disgrace.

Of this nocturnal visit Gilda had never spoken to anyone, not even to Nicolaes who she knew was Stoutenburg's friend, least of all to her father, whose wrath would have fallen heavily on her had he known that she had harboured a traitor in his house.

"Stoutenburg lied to me, Nicolaes," she now said, seeing that still her brother remained silent and morose, "he lied to me when he stole my love, only to cast it away from him as soon as ambition called him from my side. And as he lied then, so will he lie to you, little brother, he will steal your allegiance, use you for his own ends and cast you ruthlessly from him if he find you no longer useful. Yes, I did love him once," she continued earnestly, "when he thought of staining his hands with murder my love finally turned to contempt. This new infamy which he plots hath filled the measure of my hate. Turn from him, little brother, I do entreat you with my whole soul. He has been false to his God, false to his prince, false to me! he will be false to you!"

"It is too late, Gilda," he retorted sombrely, "even if I were so minded, which please God! I am not."

"It is never too late to draw back from such an abyss of shame."

"Be silent, girl," he said more roughly, angered that he was making no headway against her obstinacy. "God-verdomme! but I am a fool indeed to stand and parley here with you, when grave affairs wait upon my time. You talk at random and of things you do not understand: I had no mind to argue this matter out with you."

"I do not detain you, Nicolaes," she said simply, with a sigh of bitter disappointment. "If you will but call Maria and the men who wait at the north door, I can easily relieve you of my presence."

"Yes, and you can go home to your pots and pans, to your sewing and your linen-chest, and remember to hold your tongue, as a woman should do, for if you breathe of what you have heard, if you betray Stoutenburg who is my friend, it is me — your only brother — whom you will be sending to the scaffold."

"I would not betray you, Nicolaes," she said.

"Or any of my friends?"

"Or any of your friends?"

"You swear it?" he urged.

"There is no need for an oath."

"Yes, there is a pressing need for an oath, Gilda," he retorted sternly. "My friends expect it of you, and you must pledge yourself to them, to forget all that you heard to-night and never to breathe of it to any living soul."

"I cannot swear," she replied, "to forget that which my memory will retain in spite of my will: nor would I wish to forget, because I mean to exert all the power I possess to dissuade you from this abominable crime, and because I mean to pray to God with all my might that He may prevent the crime from being committed."

"You may pray as much as you like," he said roughly, "but I'll not have you breathe a word of it to any living soul."

"My father has the right to know of the disgrace that threatens him."

"You would not tell him?" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"Not unless...."

"Unless what?"

"I cannot say. 'Tis all in God's hands and I do not know yet what my duty is. As you say I am only a woman, and my place is with my pots and pans, my sewing and my spindle. I have no right to have thoughts of mine own. Perhaps you are right, and in that case my father must indeed be the one to act. But this I do swear to you, Nicolaes, that before you stain your hand with the blood of one who, besides being your sovereign lord, is your father's benefactor and friend, I will implore God above, that my father and I may both die ere we see you and ourselves so disgraced."

Before he could detain her by word or gesture she had slipped past him and turned to walk quickly toward the façade of the cathedral. An outstanding piece of masonry soon hid her from his view. For the moment he had thoughts of following her. Nicolaes Beresteyn was not a man who liked being thwarted, least of all by a woman, and there was a sense of insecurity for him in what she had said at the last. His life and that of his friends lay in the hands of that young girl who had spoken some very hard words to him just now. He loved her as a brother should, and would not for his very life have seen her in any danger, but he had all a man's desire for mastery and hatred of dependence: she had angered and defied him, and yet remained in a sense his master.

He and his friends were dependent on her whim — he would not call it loyalty or sense of duty to be done — it was her whim that would hold the threads of a conspiracy which he firmly believed had the welfare of Holland and of religion for its object, and it was her whim that would hold the threat of the scaffold over himself and Stoutenburg and the others. The situation was intolerable.

He ground his heel upon the stone and muttered an oath under his breath. If only Gilda had been a man how simple would his course of action have been. A man can be coerced by physical means, but a woman ... and that woman his own sister!

It was hard for Nicolaes Beresteyn, to have to think the situation out calmly, dispassionately, to procrastinate, to let the matter rest at any rate until the next day. But this he knew that he must do. He felt that he had exhausted all the arguments, all the reasonings that were consistent with his own pride; and how could he hope to coerce her into oaths or promises of submission here in the open street and with Maria and Jakob and Piet close by — eavesdropping mayhap?

Gilda was obstinate and had always been allowed more latitude in the way of thinking things out for herself than was good for any woman; but Nicolaes knew that she would not take any momentous step in a hurry. She would turn the whole of the circumstances over in her mind and as she said do some praying too. What she would do afterwards he dared not even conjecture.

For the moment he was forced to leave her alone, and primarily he decided to let his friends know at once how the matter stood.

He found them waiting anxiously for his return. I doubt if they had spoken much during his absence. A chorus of laconic inquiry greeted him as soon as his firm step rang out upon the flagstones.

"Well?"

"She has heard everything," he said quietly, "but, she will not betray us. To this I pledge ye my word."

CHAPTER VI

THE COUNSELS OF PRUDENCE

Neither Stoutenburg nor any of the others had made reply to Beresteyn's firmly spoken oath. They were hard-headed Dutchmen, every one of them: men of action rather than men of words: for good or ill the rest of the world can judge them forever after by their deeds alone.

Therefore when the spectre of betrayal and of subsequent death appeared so suddenly before them they neither murmured nor protested. They could not in reason blame Beresteyn for his sister's presence in the cathedral this night, nor yet that her thoughts and feelings in the matter of the enmity between the Stadtholder and the Barneveld family did not coincide with their own.

Silently they walked across the vast and lonely cathedral and filed one by one out of the western door where Perk still held faithful watch. Stoutenburg, their leader, had his lodgings in a small house situate at the top of the Kleine Hout Straat, close to the well-known hostelry at the sign of the "Lame Cow." This latter was an hostelry of unimpeachable repute and thither did the six friends decide to go ere finally going home for the night.

It had been decided between them some time ago that those who were able to do so would show themselves in public as much as possible during the next few days, so as to ward off any suspicion of intrigue which their frequent consorting in secluded places might otherwise have aroused.

Out in the open they thought it best to disperse, electing to walk away two and two rather than in a compact group which might call forth the close attention of the night watchmen.

Stoutenburg linked his arm in that of Beresteyn.

"Let the others go on ahead," he said confidentially, "you and I, friend, must understand one another ere we part for this night."

Then as Beresteyn made no immediate reply, he continued calmly:

"This will mean hanging for the lot of us this time, Nicolaes!"

"I pray to God ..." exclaimed the other hoarsely.

"God will have nought to say in the matter, my friend," retorted Stoutenburg dryly, "'tis only the Stadtholder who will have his say, and do you think that he is like to pardon...."

"Gilda will never...."

"Oh, yes, she will," broke in Stoutenburg firmly; "be not deluded into thoughts of security. Gilda will think the whole of this matter over for four and twenty hours at the longest, after which, feeling herself in an impasse between her affection for you and her horror of me, she will think it her duty to tell your father all that she heard in the cathedral to-night."

"Even then," said Beresteyn, hotly, "my father would not send his only son to the gallows."

"Do you care to take that risk?" was the other man's calm retort.

"What can I do?"

"You must act decisively and at once, my friend," said Stoutenburg dryly, "an you do not desire to see your friends marched off to torture and the scaffold with yourself following in their wake."

"But how? how?" exclaimed Beresteyn.

His was by far the weaker nature of the two: easily led, easily swayed by a will stronger than his own. Stoutenburg wielded vast influence over him; he had drawn him into the net of his own ambitious schemes, and had by promises and cajolery won his entire allegiance. Now that destruction and death threatened Nicolaes through his own sister — whom he sincerely loved — he turned instinctively to Stoutenburg for help and for advice.

"It is quite simple," said the latter slowly. "Gilda must be temporarily made powerless to do us any harm."

"How?" reiterated Beresteyn helplessly.

"Surely you can think of some means yourself," retorted Stoutenburg somewhat impatiently. "Self-preservation is an efficient sharpener of wits as a rule, and your own life is in the hands of a woman now, my friend."

"You seem to forget that that woman is my sister. How can I conspire to do her bodily harm?"

"Who spake of bodily harm, you simpleton?" quoth Stoutenburg with a harsh laugh, "'tis you who seem to forget that if Gilda is your sister she is also the woman whom I love more than my life ... more than my ambition ... more even than my revenge...."

He paused a moment, for despite his usual self-control his passion at this moment threatened to master him. His voice rose harsh and quivering, and was like to attract the notice of passers-by. After a moment or two he conquered his emotion and said more calmly:

"Friend, we must think of our country and of our faith; we must think of the success of our schemes: and, though Gilda be dear to us both — infinitely dear to me — she must not be allowed to interfere with the great object which we hope to attain. Think out a way therefore of placing her in such a position that she cannot harm us: have her conveyed to some place where she can be kept a prisoner for a few days until I have accomplished what I have set out to do."

Then as Beresteyn said nothing, seeming to be absorbed in some new train of thought, Stoutenburg continued more persuasively:

"I would I could carry her away myself and hold her — a beloved prisoner — while others did my work for me. But that I cannot do: for 'twere playing the part of a coward and I have sworn before the altar of God that I would kill the Stadtholder with mine own hand. Nor would I have the courage so to offend her: for let me tell you this, Nicolaes, that soaring even above my most ambitious dreams, is the hope that when these have been realized, I may ask Gilda to share my triumph with me."

"Nor would I have the courage so to offend my sister ... my father," said Beresteyn. "You speak of carrying her off, and holding her a prisoner for eight days perhaps, or even a fortnight. How can I, her own brother, do that? 'Tis an outrage she would never forgive: my father would curse me ... disinherit me ... turn me out of house and home...."

"And will he not curse you now, when he knows — when to-morrow mayhap, Gilda will have told him that you, his son, have joined hands with the Lord of Stoutenburg in a conspiracy to murder the Prince of Orange — will he not disinherit you then? turn you

out of house and home?"

"Hold on for mercy's sake," exclaimed Beresteyn, who bewildered by the terrible alternative thus put ruthlessly before him, felt that he must collect his thoughts, and must — for the moment at any rate — put away from him the tempter who insinuated thoughts of cowardice into his brain.

"I'll say no more, then," said Stoutenburg quietly, "think it all over, Nicolaes. My life, your own, those of all our friends are entirely in your hands: the welfare of the State, the triumph of our faith depend on the means which you will devise for silencing Gilda for a few brief days."

After which there was silence between the two men. Beresteyn walked more rapidly along, his fur-lined cloak wrapped closely round him, his arms folded tightly across his chest and his hands clenched underneath his cloak. Stoutenburg on the other hand was also willing to let the matter drop and to allow the subtle poison which he had instilled into his friend's mind to ferment and bring forth such thoughts as would suit his own plans.

He knew how to gauge exactly the somewhat vacillating character of Nicolaes Beresteyn, and had carefully touched every string of that highly nervous organization till he left it quivering with horror at the present and deathly fear for the future.

Gilda was a terrible danger, of that there could be no doubt. Nicolaes had realized this to the full: the instinct of self-preservation was strong in him; he would think over Stoutenburg's bold suggestion and would find a way how to act on it. And at the bottom of his tortuous heart Stoutenburg already cherished the hope that this new complication which had dragged Gilda into the net of his own intrigues would also ultimately throw her — a willing victim — into his loving arms.

CHAPTER VII

THREE PHILOSOPHERS AND THEIR FRIENDS

Whereupon Chance forged yet another link in the chain of a man's destiny.

I pray you follow me now to the tapperij of the "Lame Cow." I had not asked you to accompany me thither were it not for the fact that the "Lame Cow" situate in the Kleine Hout Straat not far from the Cathedral, was a well-ordered and highly respectable tavern, where indeed the sober merry-makers of Haarlem as well as the gay and gilded youth of the city were wont to seek both pleasure and solace.

You all know the house with its flat façade of red brick, its small windows and tall, very tall gabled roof that ends in a point high up above the front door. The tapperij is on your left as you enter. It is wainscotted with oak which was already black with age in the year 1623; above the wainscot the walls are white-washed, and Mynheer Beek, the host of the "Lame Cow," who is a pious man, has hung the walls round with scriptural texts, appropriate to his establishment, such as: "Eat, drink and be merry!" and "Drink thy wine with a merry heart!"

From which I hope that I have convinced you that the "Lame Cow" was an eminently orderly place of conviviality, where worthy burghers of Haarlem could drink ale and hot posset in the company of mevrouws, their wives.

And it was to this highly praised and greatly respected establishment that three tired-out and very thirsty philosophers repaired this New Year's night, instead of attending the watch-night service at one of the churches.

Diogenes, feeling that three guilders still reposed safely in his wallet, declared his intention of continuing his career as a gentleman, and a gentleman of course could not resort to one of those low-class taverns which were usually good enough for foreign adventurers.

And thus did Fate have her will with him and brought him here this night.

Moreover the tap-room of the "Lame Cow" wore a very gay appearance always on New Year's night. It was noted for its clientèle on that occasion, for the good Rhenish wine which it dispensed, and for the gay sight engendered by the Sunday gowns of the burghers and their ladies who came here after service for a glass of wine and multifarious relish.

As the night was fine, despite the hard frost, Mynheer Beek expected to be unusually busy. Already he had arranged on the polished tables the rows of pewter platters heaped up with delicacies which he knew would be in great request when the guests would begin to arrive: smoked sausage garnished with horseradish, roasted liver and slabs of cheese.

The serving wenches with the sleeves of their linen shifts tucked well up above their round red arms, their stolid faces streaming with perspiration, were busy polishing tables that already were over-polished and making pewter mugs to shine that already shone with a dazzling radiance.

For the nonce the place was still empty and the philosophers when they entered were able to select the table at which they wished to sit — one near the hearth in which blazed gigantic logs, and at which they could stretch out their limbs with comfort.

At Diogenes' suggestion they all made hasty repairs to their disordered toilet, and re-adjusted the set of their collars and cuffs with the help of the small mirror that hung close by against the wall.

Three strange forms of a truth that were thus mirrored in turns.

Socrates with a hole in his head, now freshly bandaged with a bit of clean linen by the sympathetic hand of a serving maid: his hooked nose neatly washed till it shone like the pewter handle of a knife, his pointed cranium but sparsely furnished with lanky black hair peeping out above the bandage like a yellow wurzel in wrappings of paper. His arms and legs were unusually long and unusually thin, and he had long lean hands and long narrow feet, but his body was short and slightly bent forward as if under the weight of his head, which also was narrow and long. His neck was like that of a stork that has been half-plucked, it rose from out the centre of his ruffled collar with a curious undulating movement, which suggested that he could turn it right round and look at the middle of his own back. He wore a brown doublet of duffle and brown trunks and hose, and boots that appeared to be too big even for his huge feet.

Beside him Pythagoras looked like the full stop in a semi-colon, for he was but little over five feet in height and very fat. His doublet of thick green cloth had long ago burst its buttons across his protuberant chest. His face, which was round as a full moon, was highly coloured even to the tip of his small upturned nose, and his forehead, crowned by a thick mass of red-brown hair which fell in heavy and lanky waves down to his eyebrows, was always wet and shiny. He had a habit of standing with legs wide apart, his abdomen thrust forward and his small podgy hands resting upon it. His eyes were very small and blinked incessantly. Below his double chin he wore a huge bow of starched white linen, which at this moment was sadly crumpled and stained, and his collar which also had seen more prosperous days was held together by a piece of string.

Like his friend Socrates, his trunk and hose were of worsted, and he wore high leather boots which reached well above the knee and looked to have been intended for a much taller person. The hat, with the tall sugar-loaf crown, which he had picked up after the fray in the Dam Straat, was much too small for his big round head. He tried, before the mirror, to adjust it at a becoming angle.

In strange contrast to these two worthies was their friend whom they called Diogenes. He himself, had you questioned him ever so closely, could not have told you from what ancestry or what unknown parent had come to him that air of swagger and of assurance which his avowed penury had never the power to subdue. Tall above the average, powerfully built and solidly planted on firm limbs he looked what he easily might have been, a gentleman to the last inch of him. The brow was fine and broad, the nose sensitive and well shaped, the mouth a perfect expression of gentle irony. The soft brown hair, abundant and unruly, lent perhaps a certain air of untamed wildness to the face, whilst the upturned moustache and the tiny tuft below the upper lip accentuated the look of devil-may-care independence which was the chief characteristic of the mouth.

But the eyes were the most remarkable feature of all. They shone with an unconquerable merriment, they twinkled and sparkled, and smiled and mocked, they winked and they beckoned. They were eyes to which you were obliged to smile in response, eyes that made you laugh if you felt ever so sad, eyes that jested even before the mouth had spoken, and the mouth itself was permanently curved into a smile.

Unlike his two companions, Diogenes was dressed not only with scrupulous care but with a show of elegance. His doublet though well-worn was fashioned of fine black cloth, the slashed sleeves still showed the remnants of gold embroidery, whilst the lace of his pleated collar was of beautiful design.

Having completed their toilet the three friends sat at their table and sipped their ale and wine in comparative silence for a time. Socrates, weary with his wound, soon fell asleep with his arms stretched out before him and his head resting in the bend of his elbow.

Pythagoras too nodded in his chair; but Diogenes remained wide awake, and no doubt Mynheer Beek's wine gave him pleasing thoughts, for the merry look never fled from his eyes.

Half an hour later you would scarce have recognised the tapperij from its previous orderly silence, for at about one o'clock it began to fill very fast. Mynheer Beek's guests were arriving.

It was still bitterly cold and they all came into the warm room clapping their hands together and stamping the frozen snow off their feet, loudly demanding hot ale or mulled wine, to be supplemented later on by more substantial fare.

The two serving wenches were more busy, hotter and more profusely streaming with moisture than they had ever been before. It was "Käthi here!" and "Luise, why don't you hurry?" all over the tapperij now; and every moment the noise became louder and more cheery.

Every corner of the low, rafted room was filled to over-flowing with chairs and tables. People sat everywhere where a perch was to be found — on the corners of the tables and on the window sill and many sat on the floor who could not find room elsewhere. The women sat on the men's knees, and many of them had children in their arms as well. For indeed, on watch-night, room had to be found for every one who wanted to come in; no one who wanted to drink and to make merry must be left to wander out in the cold.

A veritable babel of tongues made the white-washed walls echo from end to end, for Haarlem now was a mightily prosperous city, and there were a great many foreign traders inside her walls, and some of these had thought to make merry this night in the famed tap-room of the "Lame Cow." French merchants with their silks, English ones with fine cloths and paper, then there were the Jew dealers from Frankfurt and Amsterdam, and the Walloon cattle drovers from Flanders.

Here and there the splendid uniform of a member of one of the shooting guilds struck a note of splendour among the drabs and russets of worsted doublets and the brilliant crimson or purple sashes gleamed in the feeble light of the tallow candles which spluttered and flickered in their sconces.

Then amongst them all were the foreign mercenaries, from Italy or Brabant or Germany, or from God knows where, loud of speech, aggressive in appearance, carrying swords and wearing spurs, filling the place with their swagger and their ribaldry.

They had come to the Netherlands at the expiration of the truce with Spain, offering to sell their sword and their skin to the highest bidder. They seemed all to be friends and boon companions together, called each other queer, fantastic names and shouted their rough jests to one another across the width of the room. Homeless, shiftless, thriftless, they knew no other names save those which chance or the coarse buffoonery of their friends had endowed them with. There was a man here to-night who was called Wry-face and another who went by the name of Gutter-rat. Not one amongst them mayhap could have told you who his father was or who his mother, nor where he himself had first seen the light of day; but they all knew of one another's career, of one another's prowess in the field at Prague or Ghent or Magdeburg, and they formed a band of brothers — offensive and defensive — which was the despair of the town-guard whenever the law had to be enforced against anyone of them.

It was at the hour when Mynheer Beek was beginning to hope that his guests would soon bethink themselves of returning home and leaving him to his own supper and bed, that a party of these worthies made noisy interruption into the room. They brought with them an atmosphere of boisterous gaiety with their clanking spurs and swords, their loud verbiage and burly personality.

"Hech da!" yelled one of these in a stentorian voice, "whom have we there, snug and cosy in the warmest corner of this hole but our three well-beloved philosophers. Diogenes, old compeer," he shouted still louder than before, "is there room in your tub for your friends?"

"Plenty round this table, O noble Gutter-rat," shouted Diogenes in joyful response, "but let me give you warning that space as well as common funds are running short, and that every newcomer who wants to sit must stand the others a draught of ale apiece; that is the price of a corner of this bench on which ye may sit if ye have a mind."

"Done with you," agreed all the newcomers lustily, and with scant ceremony they pushed their way through the closely packed throng.

They took no notice of the mutterings of more sober customers, angered at seeing their mantles crushed or feeling their toes trodden on. It suddenly seemed as if the whole place belonged to these men and that the peaceful burghers of the city were only here on suffrance.

The three philosophers had already called for some old Rhenish wine on draught. Käthi and Luise brought pewter jugs and more goblets along. Soon Gutter-rat and his friends were installed at the table, squeezed against one another on the narrow wooden benches. Pythagoras had already rolled off his corner seat and was sitting on the floor; Diogenes was perched on the corner of the table.

Socrates roused by the noise, opened a pair of heavy eyes and blinked round him in astonishment. Gutter-rat deposited his bulky form close beside him and brought his large and grimy hand down on the shoulder of the sleepy philosopher.

"Hello, wise Socrates," he cried in his rough, husky voice, "I hope you have been having pleasant dreams."

"No, I have not," growled Socrates laconically.

"Take no heed of him," laughed Diogenes, "he has a hole in his head through which his good temper has been oozing out bit by bit. And yet if you'll all believe me he has been reposing there so peacefully and snoring so lustily that I thought he must be dreaming of Heaven and the last trumpet call."

"I was dreaming of all the chances which Pythagoras and I have missed to-night owing to your d — d nonsense," said Socrates, who was more sulky now than he had been before he went to sleep.

Pythagoras uttered a prolonged sigh and gazed meditatively down into the depths of his mug of ale. Gutter-rat and the others looked inquiringly from one philosopher to the other.

"Diogenes been at his tricks again?" asked Gutter-rat.

Socrates and Pythagoras nodded in their gloomy response.

"Gallantry, eh? some beauteous damsel, to succour whom we throw our life, our best chances away?" continued the other with ironical sympathy, the while Diogenes' entire face was wreathed in one huge, all-embracing smile. Gutter-rat admonished him with solemn voice and uplifted finger.

"Conduct unworthy a philosopher," he said.

"If he had only injured himself," growled Socrates.

"And let us enjoy the gifts which a beneficent goddess was ready to pour into our lap," added Pythagoras dulcetly from the floor.

"Let's hear the story," concluded Gutter-rat.

The others clapped their mugs against the table-top and shouted: "The story! the story!" to the accompaniment of din that drowned all other noises in the room.

Pythagoras from his lowly position began his narrative in a faint, injured tone of voice. He related the incidents of this night from the moment when the chance of possessing oneself with but little trouble of a tulip bulb worth fifteen thousand florins was so airily flouted, down to the awful moment when a young and beauteous lady made offers of influence and of money which were equally airily refused.

Gutter-rat and the others listened attentively. They specially relished the exciting incidents connected with the affray in Dam Straat, the breaking of Jan Tiele's nose and the dispersal of the mob with the aid of a lighted torch.

"Bravo! splendid!" they shouted at intervals and loudly expressed their regret at having missed such furious fun.

Socrates threw in a word or two now and then, when Pythagoras did not fully explain his own valorous position in the fight, but Diogenes said nothing at all; he allowed his comrade to tell the tale his own way; the recollection of it seemed to afford him vast amusement for he hummed a lively tune to himself all the while.

Pythagoras now was mimicking his friend, throwing into this performance all the disgust which he felt.

"Raise thy hand to my lips, mejuffrouw," he said mincing his words, "momentarily I have not the use of mine own."

His round, beady eyes appealed to his listeners for sympathy, and there is no doubt that he got that in plenty. Gutter-rat more especially highly disapproved of the dénouement of what might have proved a lucrative adventure.

"The rich jongeijuffrouw might even have fallen in love with you," he said sternly to Diogenes, "and endowed you with her father's wealth and influence."

"That's just my complaint," said Pythagoras, "but no! what else do you think he said earlier in the evening?"

"Well?"

"To-night we'll behave like gentlemen," quoted the other with ever-growing disgust, "and not like common thieves."

"Why to-night?" queried Gutter-rat in amazement. "Why more especially to-night?"

Pythagoras and Socrates both shrugged their shoulders and suggested no explanation. After which there was more vigorous clapping of mugs against the table-top and Diogenes was loudly summoned to explain.

"Why to-night? why to-night?" was shouted at him from every side.

Diogenes' face became for one brief moment quite grave — quite grave be it said, but for his eyes which believe me could not have looked grave had they tried.

"Because," he said at last when the shouts around him had somewhat subsided, "I had three guilders in my wallet, because my night's lodging is assured for the next three nights and because my chief creditor has died like a hero. Therefore, O comrades all! I could afford the luxury."

"What luxury?" sneered Gutter-rat in disgust, "to refuse the patronage of an influential burgher of this city, backed by the enthusiasm of the beauteous damsel, his daughter?"

"To refuse all patronage, good comrade," assented Diogenes with emphasis.

"Bah! for twenty-four hours!..."

"Yes! for twenty-four hours, friend Gutter-rat, while those three florins last and I have a roof over my head for which I have already paid ... I can for those four and twenty hours afford the luxury of doing exactly and only what it pleases me to do."

He threw up his head and stretched out his massive limbs with a gesture of infinite satisfaction, his merry mocking glance sweeping over the company of watch-night revellers, out-at-elbows ragamuffins, and sober burghers with their respectable vrouws, all of whom were gaping on him open-mouthed.

"For four and twenty hours, my dear Gutter-rat," he continued after a long sigh of contentment, "that is during this day which has just dawned and the night which must inevitably follow it, I am going to give myself the luxury of speaking only when I choose and of being dumb if the fancy so takes me ... while my three florins last and I know that I need not sleep under the stars, I shall owe my fealty only to my whim — I shall dream when and what I like, sing what I like, walk in company or alone. For four and twenty hours I need not be the ivy that clings nor the hose that is ragged at the knee. I shall be at liberty to wear my sash awry, my shoes unbuckled, my hat tilted at an angle which pleases me best. Above all, O worthy rat of the gutter, I need not stoop for four and twenty hours one inch lower than I choose, or render aught to Cæsar for Cæsar will have rendered naught to me. On this the first day of the New Year there is no man or woman living who can dictate to me what I shall do, and to-night in the lodgings for which I have paid, when I am asleep I can dream that I am climbing up the heights toward a mountain top which mayhap doth not quite stretch as far as the clouds, but which I can reach alone. To-day and to-night I am a man and not a bit of ribbon that flutters at the breath of man or woman who has paid for the fluttering with patronage."

Gradually as he spoke and his fresh young voice, sonorous with enthusiasm rang clearly from end to end of the raftered room, conversation, laughter, bibulous songs were stilled and every one turned to look at the speaker, wondering who he could be. The good burghers of Haarlem had no liking for the foreign mercenaries for whom they professed vast contempt because of their calling, and because of the excesses which they committed at the storming of these very walls, which event was within the memory of most. Therefore, though they were attracted by the speaker, they were disgusted to find that he belonged to that rabble; but the women

thought that he was goodly to look upon, with those merry, twinkling eyes of his, and that atmosphere of light-heartedness and a gaiety which he diffused around him. Some of the men who were there and who professed knowledge in such matters, declared that this man's speech betrayed him for an Englishman.

"I like not the race," said a pompous man who sat with wife and kindred round a table loaded with good things. "I remember the English Leicester and his crowd, men of loose morals and doubtful piety; braggarts and roisterers we all thought them. This man is very like some of them in appearance."

"Thou speakest truly, O wise citizen of this worthy republic," said Diogenes, boldly answering the man's low-spoken words, "my father was one of the roisterers who came in English Leicester's train. An Englishman he, of loose morals and doubtful piety no doubt, but your sound Dutch example and my mother's Dutch blood — Heaven rest her soul — have both sobered me since then."

He looked round at the crowd of faces, all of which were now turned toward him, kindly faces and angry ones, contemptuous eyes and good-natured ones, and some that expressed both compassion and reproof.

"By the Lord," he said, and as he spoke he threw back his head and burst into a loud and prolonged fit of laughter, "but I have never in my life seen so many ugly faces before."

There was a murmur and many angry words among the assembly. One or two of the men half rose from their seats, scowling viciously and clenching their fists. Master Beek perspiring with anxiety saw these signs of a possible fray. The thought drove him well-nigh frantic. An affray in his establishment on New Year's morning! it was unthinkable! He rushed round to his customers with a veritable dictionary of soothing words upon his tongue.

"Gentlemen! gentlemen," he entreated, "I beg of you to calm yourselves.... I humbly beseech you to pay no heed to these men...."

"Plepshurk! Insolent rabble!" quoth a corpulent gentleman who was crimson with wrath.

"Yes, mynheer, yes, yes," stammered Beek meekly, "but they are foreigners ... they ... they do not understand our Dutch ways ... but they mean no harm ... they...."

Some of the younger men were not easily pacified.

"Throw them out, Beek," said one of them curtly.

"They make the place insufferable with their bragging and their insolence," muttered another.

Diogenes and his friends could not help but see these signs of latent storm, and Mynheer Beek's feeble efforts at pacifying his wrathful guests. Diogenes had laughed long and loudly, now he had to stop in order to wipe his eyes which were streaming; then quite casually he drew Bucephalus from its scabbard and thoughtfully examined its blade.

Almost simultaneously the fraternity of merry-makers at his table also showed a sudden desire to examine the blade of their swords and immediately half a dozen glints of steel caught the reflection of tallow candles.

I would not assert that order was restored because of these unconscious gestures on the part of the insolent rabble aforesaid, but certain it is that within the next few seconds decorum once more prevailed as if magic had called it forth.

Mynheer Beek heaved a sigh of relief.

"All that you said just now was well spoken, sir," broke in a firm voice which proceeded from a group of gentlemen who sat at a table next to the one occupied by the philosophers and their friends, "but 'twere interesting to hear what you propose doing on the second day of this New Year."

Diogenes was in no hurry to reply. The man who had just spoken sat directly behind him, and Bucephalus — so it seemed — still required his close attention. When he had once more replaced his faithful friend into its delicately wrought scabbard he turned leisurely round and from the elevated position which he still occupied on the corner of the table he faced his interlocutor.

"What I propose doing?" he quoth politely.

"Why yes. You said just now that for four and twenty hours you were free to dream and to act as you will, but how will it be to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, sir," rejoined Diogenes lightly, "I shall be as poor in pocket as the burghers of Haarlem are in wits, and then...."

"Yes? and then?"

"Why then, sir, I shall once more become an integral portion of that rabble to which you and your friends think no doubt that I rightly belong. I shall not have one silver coin in my wallet and in order to obtain a handful I shall be ready to sell my soul to the devil, my skin to the Stadtholder...."

"And your honour, sir?" queried the other with a sneer, "to whom will you sell that precious guerdon to-morrow?"

"To you, sir," retorted Diogenes promptly, "an you are short of the commodity."

An angry word rose to the other man's lips, but his eyes encountered those of his antagonist and something in the latter's look, something in the mocking eyes, the merry face, seemed to disarm him and to quench his wrath. He even laughed good-humouredly and said:

"Well spoken, sir. You had me fairly there with the point of your tongue. No doubt you are equally skilful with the point of your rapier...."

"It shall be at your service after to-morrow, sir," rejoined Diogenes lightly.

"You live by the profession of arms, sir? No offence, 'tis a noble calling, though none too lucrative I understand."

"My wits supply, sir, what my sword cannot always command."

"You are ambitious?"

"I told my friends just now wherein lay my ambition."

"Money — an independent competence ... so I understand. But surely at your age, and — if you will pardon mine outspokenness — with your looks, sir, women or mayhap one woman must play some part in your dreams of the future."

"Women, sir," retorted Diogenes dryly, "should never play a leading rôle in the comedy of a philosopher's life. As a means to an end — perhaps ... the final dénouement...."

"Always that one aim I see — a desire for complete independence which the possession of wealth alone can give."

"Always," replied the other curtly.

“And beyond that desire, what is your chief ambition, sir?”

“To be left alone when I have no mind to talk,” said Diogenes with a smile which was so pleasant, so merry, so full of self-deprecating irony that it tempered the incivility of his reply.

Again the other bit his lip, checking an angry word; for some unexplained reason he appeared determined not to quarrel with this insolent young knave. The others stared at their friend in utter astonishment.

“What fly hath bitten Beresteyn’s ear?” whispered one of them under his breath. “I have never known him so civil to a stranger or so unwilling to take offence.”

Certainly the other man’s good humour did not seem to have abated one jot; after an imperceptible moment’s pause, he rejoined with perfect suavity:

“You do not belie your name, sir, I heard your friends calling you Diogenes, and I feel proud that you should look on me as Alexander and call on me to stand out of your sunshine.”

“I crave your pardon, sir,” said Diogenes somewhat more seriously, “my incivility is unwarrantable in the face of your courtesy. No doubt it had its origin in the fact that like my namesake I happened to want nothing at the moment. To-morrow, sir, an you are minded to pay for my services, to ask for my sword, my soul or my wits, and in exchange will offer me the chance of winning a fortune or of marrying a wife who is both rich and comely, why sir, I shall be your man, and will e’en endeavour to satisfy you with the politeness of my speech and the promptness and efficiency of my deeds. To-morrow, sir, you and the devil will have an equal chance of purchasing my soul for a few thousand guilders, my wits for a paltry hundred, my skin for a good supper and a downy bed — to-morrow the desire will seize me once again to possess wealth at any cost, and my friends here will have no cause to complain of my playing a part which becomes a penniless wastrel like myself so ill — the part of a gentleman. Until then, sir, I bid you good-night. The hour is late and Mynheer Beek is desirous of closing this abode of pleasure. As for me, my lodgings being paid for I do not care to leave them unoccupied.”

Whereupon he rose and to Mynheer Beek — who came to him with that same ubiquitous smile which did duty for all the customers of the “Lame Cow” — he threw the three silver guilders which the latter demanded in payment for the wine and ale supplied to the honourable gentleman: then as he met the mocking glance of his former interlocutor he said with a recrudescence of gaiety:

“I still have my lodgings, gentle sir, and need not sell my soul or my skin until after I have felt a gnawing desire for breakfast.”

With a graceful flourish of his plumed hat he bowed to the assembled company and walked out of the tap-room of the “Lame Cow” with swagger that would have befitted the audience chamber of a king.

In his wake followed the band of his boon companions, they too strode out of the place with much jingle of steel and loud clatter of heavy boots and accoutrements. They laughed and talked loudly as they left and gesticulated with an air of independence which once more drew upon them the wrathful looks and contemptuous shrugs of the sober townsfolk.

Diogenes alone as he finally turned once again in the doorway encountered many a timid glance levelled at him that were soft and kindly. These glances came from the women, from the young and from the old, for women are strange creatures of whims and of fancies, and there was something in the swaggering insolence of that young malapert that made them think of breezy days upon the sea-shore, of the song of the soaring lark, of hyacinths in bloom and the young larches on the edge of the wood.

And I imagine that their sluggish Dutch blood yielded to these influences and was greatly stirred by memories of youth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LODGINGS WHICH WERE PAID FOR

And once again Chance set to with a will and forged yet another link in that mighty chain which she had in hand.

For was it not in the natural course of things that the three philosophers, weary and thirsty as they were, should go and seek solace and material comfort under the pleasing roof of the "Lame Cow" — which as I remarked before was reputed one of the best conducted hostelrys in Haarlem, and possessing a cellar full of wines and ales which had not its equal even in Amsterdam.

And was it not equally natural since the Lord of Stoutenburg lodged not far from that self-same hostelry — again I repeat one of the soberest in Haarlem — that his friends should choose to join him in the tap-room there ere parting from one another on this eventful night.

Stoutenburg and his family were but little known in these parts and the hue and cry after the escaped traitor had somewhat abated these few months past: moreover he was well disguised with beard and cloak and he kept a broad-brimmed hat pulled well down over his brow. On watch-night too, the burghers and their vrouws as well as the civic and military dignitaries of the town had plenty to do to think on their own enjoyment and the entertainment of their friends: they certes were not on the look-out for conspiracies and dangerous enemies within their gates.

Stoutenburg had sat well screened from general observation within a dark recess of the monumental fireplace. Nicolaes Beresteyn, the most intimate of all his friends, sat close to him, but neither of them spoke much. Beresteyn was exceptionally moody; he appeared absorbed in thought and hardly gave answer to those who attempted to draw him into conversation. Stoutenburg, on the other hand affected a kind of grim humour, and made repeated allusions to scaffold or gallows as if he had already wholly resigned himself to an inevitable fate.

The others sipped their mulled wine and tried to cheat themselves out of the burning anxiety which Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn's presence in the cathedral had awakened in their hearts. They had made great efforts not to seem pre-occupied and to be outwardly at least as gay as any of the other watch-night revellers in the room.

But with their thoughts fixed upon that vision of awhile ago — a woman appearing before them within twenty paces of the spot where death to the Stadtholder had just been loudly proclaimed amongst them — with that vision fixed upon their minds, they found light conversation and ordinary manner very difficult to keep up.

The peroration of the young adventurer had proved a welcome diversion: it had immediately aroused Stoutenburg's interest. He it was who first drew Beresteyn's attention to it, and he again who checked the angry words which more than once rose to his friend's lips at the insolent attitude affected by the knave.

And now when the latter finally swaggered out of the room it was Stoutenburg who made a sign to Beresteyn and then immediately rose to go.

Beresteyn paid his account and went out too, in the wake of his friend.

With the advent of the small morning hours the snow once more began to fall in large sparse flakes that lay thick and glistening where they fell. At the end of the Kleine Hout Straat where the two men presently found themselves, the feeble light of a street lamp glimmered through this white fluttering veil: with its help the group of foreign mercenaries could be dimly seen in the distance as they took leave of one another.

The tall form of Diogenes, crowned with his plumed hat, was easily distinguishable amongst them. He with his two special friends, fat Pythagoras and lean Socrates, remained standing for a few moments at the corner of the street after the others had departed: then only did the three of them turn and walk off in the direction of the Oude Gracht.

For some reason, as unexplainable as that which had guided their conduct at the "Lame Cow," Beresteyn and Stoutenburg, quite unconscious of the cold, elected to follow.

Was it not Chance that willed it so? Chance who was busy forging a chain and who had need of these two men's extraordinary interest in a nameless adventurer in order to make the links of that chain fit as neatly as she desired.

At the bottom of the Kleine Hout Straat, where it abuts on the Oude Gracht, the three philosophers had again paused, obviously this time in order to take leave of one another. The houses here were of a peculiarly woe-begone appearance, with tiny windows which could not possibly have allowed either air or light to penetrate within, and doors that were left ajar and were creaking on their hinges, showing occasional glimpses of dark unventilated passages beyond and of drifts of snow heaped up against the skirting of the worm-eaten, broken-down wooden floors. They were miserable lodging-houses of flimsy construction and low rentals, which the close proximity of the sluggish canal rendered undesirable.

The ground floor was in most instances occupied by squalid-looking shops, from which fetid odours emanated through the chinks and cracks of the walls. The upper rooms were let out as night-lodgings to those who were too poor to afford better quarters.

Diogenes with all his swagger and his airs of an out-at-elbows gentleman evidently was one of those, for he was now seen standing on the threshold of one of these dilapidated houses and his two friends were finally bidding him good-night.

By tacit consent Beresteyn and Stoutenburg drew back further into the shadow of the houses opposite. There appeared to be some understanding between these two men, an understanding anent a matter of supremely grave import, which caused them to stand here on the watch with feet buried in the snow that lay thick in the doorways, silently taking note of every word spoken and of every act that occurred on the other side of this evil-smelling street.

There seemed to be no need for speech between them; for the nonce each knew that the other's thoughts were running in the same groove as his own; and momentarily these thoughts were centred into a desire to ascertain definitely if it was the tallest and youngest of those three knaves over there who lodged in that particular house.

It was only when the fat man and the lean one had finally turned away and left their comrade on the doorstep that the watchers appeared satisfied and nodding silently to one another made ready to go home. They had turned their steps once more toward the more

salubrious and elegant quarter of the city, and had gone but a few steps in that direction when something occurred behind them which arrested their attention and caused them to look back once more.

The Something was a woman's cry, pitiful in the extreme: not an unusual sound in the streets of a prosperous city surely, and one which under ordinary circumstances would certainly not have aroused Stoutenburg's or Beresteyn's interest. But the circumstances were not ordinary; the cry came from the very spot where the two men had last seen the young stranger standing in the doorway of his lodgings and the appeal was obviously directed toward him.

"Kind sir," the woman was saying in a quavering voice, "half a guilder I entreat you for the love of Christ."

"Half a guilder, my good woman," Diogenes said in response, "'Tis a fortune to such as I. I have not a kreutzer left in my wallet, 'pon my honour!"

Whereupon the two men who watched this scene from the opposite side of the street saw that the woman fell on her knees, and that beside her there stood an old man who made ready to follow her example.

"It's no use wearing out your stockings on this snow-covered ground, my good girl," said Diogenes good-humouredly. "All the kneeling in the world will not put half a guilder into my pocket nor apparently into yours."

"And father and I must sleep under the canal bridge and it is so bitterly cold," the woman moaned more feebly.

"Distinctly an uncomfortable place whereat to spend a night," rejoined the philosopher, "I have slept there myself before now, so I know."

Seemingly he made an attempt to turn incontinently on his heel, for the woman put out her hands and held on to his cloak.

"Father is crippled with ague, kind sir, he will die if he sleeps out there to-night," she cried.

"I am afraid he will," said Diogenes blandly.

In the meanwhile, Pythagoras and Socrates, who evidently had not gone very far, returned in order to see what was going on, on their friend's doorstep. It was Pythagoras who first recognized the wench.

"Thunder and lightning," he exclaimed, "'tis the Papist!"

"Which Papist?" queried Diogenes.

"Yes, gentle sirs," said the woman piteously, "you rescued me nobly this evening from that awful, howling mob. My father and I were able to go to midnight mass in peace. May God reward you all. But," she added naïvely, "'twas no good preventing those horrid men from killing us, if we are to die from cold and hunger under the bridge of the canal."

All of which was not incomprehensible to the two men on the watch who had heard a graphic account of the affray in Dam Straat as it was told by Pythagoras in the tap-room of the "Lame Cow." And they both drew a little nearer so as not to lose a word of the scene which they were watching with ever growing interest. Neither of them attempted to interfere in it, however, though Beresteyn at any rate could have poured many a guilder in the hands of those two starving wretches, without being any the poorer himself and though he was in truth not a hard-hearted man.

"The wench is right," now said Diogenes firmly, "the life which we helped to save, we must not allow to be frittered away. I talked of stockings, girl," he added lightly, "but I see thy feet are bare.... Brrr! I freeze when I look at thee...."

"For a quarter guilder father and I could find a lodging...."

"But Dondersteen!" he exclaimed, "did I not tell thee that I have not one kreutzer in my wallet, and unless my friends can help thee...."

"Diogenes thou speakest trash," interposed Pythagoras softly.

"We must both starve of cold this night," moaned the woman in despair.

"Nay ye shall not!" said Diogenes with sudden decision. "There is a room in this very house which has been paid for three nights in advance. Go to it, wench, 'tis at the very top of the stairs, crawl thither as fast as thou canst, dragging thy ramshackle parent in thy wake. What ho there!" he shouted at the top of his ringing voice, "what ho my worthy landlord! What ho!"

And with his powerful fists he began pounding against the panels of the door which swung loosely under the heavy blows.

Stoutenburg and Beresteyn drew yet a little nearer: they were more deeply interested than ever in all that was going on outside this squalid lodging house.

The three philosophers were making a sufficiency of noise to wake half the street and within a very few minutes they succeeded in their purpose. Through one or two of the narrow frames overhead heads appeared enveloped in shawls or cloaks, and anon the landlord of the house came shuffling down the passage, carrying a lighted, guttering taper.

The two silent watchers could not see this man, but they could hear him grumbling and scolding audibly in short jerky sentences which he appeared to throw somewhat tentatively at his rowdy lodger.

"Late hour of the night," they heard him muttering. "New Year's morning.... Respectable house ... noise to attract the town guard...."

"Hadst thou turned out of thy bed sooner, O well-beloved lord of this abode of peace," said Diogenes cheerily, "there would have been less noise outside its portals. Had I not loved thee as I do, I would not have wakened thee from thy sleep, but would have acted in accordance with my rights and without bringing to thy ken a matter which would vastly have astonished thee in the morning."

The man continued to mutter, more impatiently this time:

"New Year's morning ... respectable citizen ... work to do in the morning ... undesirable lodgers...."

"All lodgers are desirable who pay for their lodging, O wise landlord," continued Diogenes imperturbably, "I have paid thee for mine, for three nights from this day and I herewith desire thee to place my palatial residence at the disposal of this jongeuffrouw and of mynheer her father."

The man's mutterings became still more distinct.

"Baggage ... how do I know?... not bound to receive them...."

"Nay! but thou art a liar, Master Landlord," quoth Diogenes still speaking quite pleasantly, "for the lodgings being mine, I have the right to receive in them anybody whom I choose. Therefore now do I give thee the option, either to show my guests straightway and with meticulous politeness into my room, or to taste the power and weight of my boot in the small of thy back and the hardness of my sword-hilt across thy shoulders."

This time the man's mutterings became inaudible. Nicolaes Beresteyn and Stoutenburg could only guess what was passing in the narrow corridor of the house opposite. The one moment there was a heart-rending howl, which suggested that the landlord's obduracy had lasted a few moments too long for the impatient temper of a philosopher; but the howl was not repeated and soon Diogenes' clear voice rang out lustily again:

"There! I knew that gentle persuasion would prevail. Dearly beloved landlord, now I pray thee guide the jongeuffrouw and mynheer her father to my sleeping chamber. It is at thy disposal, wench, for three nights," he added airily, "make the most of it; and if thou hast aught to complain of my friend the landlord, let me know. I am always to be found at certain hours of the day within the congenial four walls of the 'Lame Cow.' Good-night then and pleasant dreams."

What went on after that the watchers could, of course, not see. The wench and the old man had disappeared inside the house, where, if they had a spark of gratitude in them, they would undoubtedly be kneeling even now at the feet of their whimsical benefactor.

The next moment the interested spectators of this stirring little scene beheld the three philosophers once more standing together at the corner of the street under the feebly flickering lamp and the slowly falling snow; the door of the lodging-house had been slammed to behind them and the muffled heads had disappeared from out the framework of the windows above.

"And now, perhaps you will tell us what you are going to do," said Pythagoras in flute-like tones.

"There is not a bed vacant in the dormitory where I sleep," said Socrates.

"Nor would I desire to sleep in one of those kennels fit only for dogs which I cannot imagine how you both can stomach," quoth Diogenes lightly; "the close proximity of Pythagoras and yourself and of all those who are most like you in the world would chase pleasing sleep from mine eyelids. I prefer the Canal."

"You cannot sleep out of doors in this h ——— I of a cold night," growled Socrates.

"And I cannot go back to the 'Lame Cow' for I have not a kreutzer left in my wallet wherewith to pay for a sip."

"Then what the d ——— I are you going to do?" reiterated Pythagoras plaintively.

"I have a friend," said Diogenes after a slight pause.

"Hm?" was the somewhat dubious comment on this fairly simple statement.

"He will give me breakfast early in the morning."

"Hm!"

"'Tis but a few hours to spend in lonely communion with nature."

"Hm!"

"The cathedral clock has struck three, at seven my good Hals will ply me with hot ale and half his hunk of bread and cheese."

"Hals?" queried Socrates.

"Frans Hals," replied Diogenes; "he paints pictures and contrives to live on the proceeds. If his wife does not happen to throw me out, he will console me for the discomforts of this night."

"Bah!" ejaculated Pythagoras in disgust, "a painter of pictures!"

"And a brave man when he is sober."

"With a scold for a wife! Ugh! what about your playing the part of a gentleman now?"

"The play was short, O wise Pythagoras," retorted Diogenes with imperturbable good humour, "the curtain has already come down upon the last act. I am once more a knave, a merchant ready to flatter the customer who will buy his wares: Hech there, sir, my lord! what are your needs? My sword, my skin, they are yours to command! so many guilders, sir, and I will kill your enemy for you, fight your battles, abduct the wench that pleases you. So many guilders! and when they are safely in my pocket I can throw my glove in your face lest you think I have further need of your patronage."

"'Tis well to brag," muttered Pythagoras, "but you'll starve with cold this night."

"But at dawn I'll eat a hearty breakfast offered me by my friend Frans Hals for the privilege of painting my portrait."

"Doth he really paint thy portrait, O handsome Diogenes?" said Pythagoras unctuously.

"Aye! thou ugly old toad. He has begun a new one, for which I have promised to sit. I'll pay for the breakfast he gives me, by donning a gorgeous gold embroidered doubtlet which he once stole from somewhere, by putting my hand on my hip, tilting my hat at a becoming angle, and winking at him by the hour whilst he paints away."

"Hm! after a night of wandering by the canal in the fog and snow and sharing the meagre breakfast of a half-starved painter, methinks the portrait will be that of a knight of the rueful countenance."

"Indeed not, old compeer," said Diogenes with a hearty laugh, "it shall be the portrait of a Laughing Cavalier."

CHAPTER IX

THE PAINTER OF PICTURES

After this episode Chance had little to do with the further events of this veracious chronicle.

Men took their destiny in their own hands and laughed at Fate and at the links of the chain which she had been forging so carefully and so patiently ever since she began the business on the steps of the Stadhuis a few short hours ago.

Beresteyn and Stoutenburg walking home together in the small hours of New Year's morning spoke very little together at first. They strode along side by side, each buried in his own thoughts, and only a few curt remarks passed at intervals between them.

But something lay on the minds of both — something of which each desired to speak to the other, yet neither of them seemed willing to be the first to broach the absorbing topic.

It was Stoutenburg who at last broke the silence.

"A curious personality, that knave," he said carelessly after awhile, "an unscrupulous devil as daring as he is reckless of consequences I should say ... yet trustworthy withal ... what think you?"

"A curious personality as you say," replied Beresteyn vaguely.

"He might have been useful to us had we cared to pay for his services ... but now 'tis too late to think of further accomplices ... new men won or bought for our cause only mean more victims for the gallows."

"You take a gloomy view of the situation," said Beresteyn sombrely.

"No! only a fatalistic one. With our secret in a woman's keeping ... and that woman free and even anxious to impart it to one of my most bitter enemies ... I can see nought that can ward off the inevitable."

"Except...."

"Yes, of course," rejoined Stoutenburg earnestly, "if you, Nicolaes, are ready to make the sacrifice which alone could save us all."

"It is a sacrifice which will involve my honour, my sister's love for me, my father's trust...."

"If you act wisely and circumspectly, my friend," retorted Stoutenburg dryly, "neither your father nor Gilda herself need ever know that you had a share in ... in what you propose to do."

Beresteyn made no reply and he and his friend walked on in silence until they reached the small house close to the "Lame Cow" where Stoutenburg had his lodgings. Here they shook hands before parting and Stoutenburg held his friend's hand in his tightly grasped for a moment or two while he said earnestly:

"It is only for a few days, Nicolaes, a few days during which I swear to you that — though absent and engaged in the greatest task that any man can undertake on this earth — I swear to you that I will keep watch over Gilda and defend her honour with my life. If you will make the sacrifice for me and for our cause, Heaven and your country will reward you beyond your dreams. With the death of the Stadtholder my power in the Netherlands will be supreme, and herewith, with my hand in yours, I solemnly plight my troth to Gilda. She was the first woman I ever loved, and I have never ceased to love her. Now she fills my heart and soul even — at times — to the exclusion of my most ambitious hopes. Nicolaes — my friend — it is in your power to save my life as well as your own: an you will do it, there will be no bounds to my gratitude."

And Beresteyn replied calmly:

"The sacrifice which you ask of me I will make: I will take the risk for the sake of my country and of my faith. To-morrow at noon I will come to your lodgings and tell you in detail all the arrangements which I shall have made by then. I have no fear for Gilda. I believe that Heaven has guided my thoughts and footsteps to-night for the furtherance of our cause."

After which the two men took final leave of one another: Stoutenburg's tall lean form quickly disappeared under the doorway of the house, whilst Beresteyn walked rapidly away up the street.

Now it was close on ten o'clock of New Year's morning. Nicolaes Beresteyn had spent several hours in tossing restlessly under the warm eiderdown and between the fine linen sheets embroidered by his sister's deft hands. During these hours of sleeplessness a plan had matured in his mind which though it had finally issued from his own consciousness had really found its origin in the reckless brain of Willem van Stoutenburg.

Beresteyn now saw himself as the saviour of his friends and of their patriotic cause. He felt that in order to carry out the plan which he firmly believed that he himself had conceived, he was making a noble sacrifice for his country and for his faith, and he was proud to think that it lay in his power to offer the sacrifice. That this same sacrifice would have his own sister for victim, he cared seemingly very little. He was one of those men in whose hearts political aims outweigh every tender emotion, and he firmly believed that Gilda would be richly rewarded by the fulfilment of that solemn promise made by Stoutenburg.

Exquisite visions of satisfied ambition, of triumph and of glory chased away sleep: he saw his friend as supreme ruler of the State, with powers greater than the Princes of Orange had ever wielded: he saw Gilda — his sister — grateful to him for the part which he had played in re-uniting her to the man whom she had always loved, she too supreme in power as the proud wife of the new Stadtholder. And he saw himself as the Lord High Advocate of the Netherlands standing in the very shoes of that same John of Barneveld whose death he would have helped to avenge.

These and other thoughts had stirred Nicolaes Beresteyn's fancy while he lay awake during these the first hours of the New Year, and it was during those self-same hours that a nameless stranger whom his compeers called Diogenes had tramped up and down the snow-covered streets of Haarlem trying to keep himself warm.

I am very sorry to have to put it on record that during that time he swore more than once at his own softheartedness which had caused him to give up his hard but sheltered paillasse to a pair of Papists who were nothing to him and whom probably he would never see again.

"I begin to agree with that bloated puff-ball Pythagoras," he mused dejectedly once, when an icy wind, blowing straight from the North Sea, drove the falling snow into his boots, and under his collar, and up his sleeves, and nearly froze the marrow in his bones, "it is but sorry pleasure to play at being a gentleman. And I had not many hours of it either," he added ruefully.

Even the most leaden-footed hours do come to an end however. At one half after six Diogenes turned his steps toward the Peuselaarsteeg where dwelt his friend Frans Hals, the painter of pictures. Fortunately Mevrouw Hals was in a fairly good temper, the last portrait group of the officers of St. Joris' Shooting Guild had just been paid for, and there was practically a new commission to paint yet another group of these gentlemen.

And Mynheer van Zeller the deputy bailiff had brought the fancy picture too, for which that knave Diogenes had sat last year, so Mevrouw Hals was willing to provide the young man with a savoury and hot breakfast if he were willing once again to allow Frans to make a picture of his pleasant face.

Mevrouw Hals being in rare good humour, the breakfast was both substantial and savoury. Diogenes, who was starved with cold as well as with hunger, did great honour to all that was laid before him: he ate heartily while recounting his adventures of the past night to his friend.

"All that trouble for a Papist wench," said the painter as contemptuously as Pythagoras himself would have done, "and maybe a Spaniard too."

"Good-looking girl," quoth Diogenes dryly, "and would make you a good model, Frans. For a few kreutzers she'd be glad enough to do it."

"I'll have none of these vixens inside my house," interposed Mevrouw Hals decisively, "and don't you teach Frans any of your loose ways, my man."

Diogenes made no reply, he only winked at his friend. No doubt he thought that Hals no longer needed teaching.

The two men repaired to the studio, a huge bare room littered with canvases, but void of furniture, save for an earthenware stove in which fortunately a cheerful fire was blazing, a big easel roughly fashioned of deal, a platform for the model to stand on, and two or three rush-bottomed chairs: there was also a ramshackle dowry chest, black with age, which mayhap had once held the piles of homemade linen brought as a dowry by the first Mevrouw Hals: now it seemed to contain a heterogeneous collection of gaudy rags, together with a few fine articles of attire, richly embroidered relics of more prosperous days.

The artist went straight up to the chest and from out the litter he selected a bundle of clothes which he handed over to his friend.

"Slip into them as quickly as you can, old compeer," he said, "my fingers are itching to get to work."

And while he fixed the commenced picture on the easel and set out his palette, Diogenes threw off his shabby clothes and donned the gorgeous doublet and sash which the painter had given him.

CHAPTER X

THE LAUGHING CAVALIER

We all know every fold of that doubtlet now, with its magnificent sleeves, crimson-lined and richly embroidered, its slashings which afford peeps of snowy linen, and its accessories of exquisite lace; the immortal picture then painted by Frans Hals, and which he called the Laughing Cavalier, has put its every line on record for all times.

Diogenes wore it with delight. Its splendour suited his swaggering air to perfection: its fine black cloth, delicate lace and rich silk sash set off to perfection his well-proportioned massive figure.

A joy to the artist every bit of him, the tone, the pose, the line, the colour and that face full of life, of the joy of living, that merry twinkle in the eyes, that laugh that for ever hovers on the lips.

We all stand before it, marvelling at the artist's skill, for we know that the portrait is true to the life; we know that it is true, because we know the man; his whole character is there indelibly writ upon the canvas by the master-hand of a genius: — Diogenes the soldier of fortune is there, the man who bows to no will save to his own, too independent to bow to kindred or to power, the man who takes life as he finds it, but leavens it with his own gaiety and the priceless richness of his own humour: we know him for his light-hearted gaiety, we condone his swagger, we forgive his reckless disregard of all that makes for sobriety and respectability. The eyes twinkle at us, the mouth all but speaks, and we know and recognize every detail as true; only the fine, straight brow, the noble forehead, the delicate contour of the nose and jaw puzzle us at times, for those we cannot reconcile with the man's calling or with his namelessness, until we remember his boast in the tavern of the "Lame Cow" on New Year's morning: "My father was one of those who came in English Leicester's train."

So we see him now standing quite still, while the artist is absorbed in his work: his tall figure very erect, the head slightly thrown back, the well-shaped hand resting on the hip and veiled in folds of filmy lace. And so did Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn see him as he entered the artist's studio at ten o'clock of that same New Year's morning.

"A happy New Year to you, my good Hals," he said with easy condescension. "Vervloekte weather, eh — for the incoming year! there must be half a foot of snow in the by-streets by now."

With that same air of graciousness he acknowledged the artist's obsequious bow. His father Mynheer Councillor Beresteyn was an avowed patron of Frans Hals and the hour had not yet struck in civilized Europe when wealth would go hat in hand bowing to genius and soliciting its recognition. In this year of grace 1624 genius had still to hold the hat and to acknowledge if not to solicit the kindly favours of wealth.

Nicolaes Beresteyn did not know exactly how to greet the man with whom he had a few hours ago bandied arguments in the tap room of a tavern, and whom — to tell the truth — he had expressly come to find. The complaisant nod which he had bestowed on Frans Hals did not somehow seem appropriate for that swaggering young knight of industry, who looked down on him from the high eminence of the model's platform so that Nicolaes was obliged to look well up, if he wished to meet his glance at all.

It was the obscure soldier of fortune who relieved the pompous burgher of his embarrassment.

"Fate hath evidently not meant that we should remain strangers, sir," he said lightly, "this meeting after last night's pleasing amenities is indeed unexpected."

"And most welcome, sir, as far as I am concerned," rejoined Nicolaes pleasantly. "My name is Nicolaes Beresteyn and right glad am I to renew our acquaintance of last night. I had no idea that my friend Hals could command so perfect a model. No wonder that his pictures have become the talk of the town."

He turned back to Hals now with a resumption of his patronizing manner.

"I came to confirm my father's suggestion, my good Hals, that you should paint his portrait and at the price you named yourself. The officers of St. Joris' Guild are also desirous, as I understand, of possessing yet another group from your brush."

"I shall be honoured," said the artist simply.

"'Tis many an ugly face you'll have to paint within the next few months, my friend," added Diogenes lightly.

"My father is reckoned one of the handsomest men in Holland," retorted Beresteyn with becoming dignity.

"And the owner of the finest tulip bulbs in the land," said the other imperturbably. "I heard him tell last night that he had just given more florins for one bit of dried onion than I have ever fingered in the whole course of my life."

"Fortune, sir, has not dealt with you hitherto in accordance with your deserts."

"No! 'tis my sternest reproach against her."

"There is always a tide, sir, in a man's fortunes."

"Mine I feel, sir, is rising at your call."

There was a moment's pause now while the two men looked on one another eye to eye, appraising one another, each counting on his opponent's worth. Then Nicolaes suddenly turned back to Frans Hals.

"My good Hals," he said, "might I crave a favour from your friendship?"

"I am at your service, mynheer, now as always as you know," murmured the artist, who indeed was marvelling what favour so illustrious a gentleman could ask of a penniless painter of portraits.

"'Tis but a small matter to you," rejoined Nicolaes, "but it would be of great service to me. I desire to hold private conversation with this gentleman. Could I do so in your house without attracting anybody's attention?"

"Easily, sir. This room though none too comfortable is at your disposal. I have plenty of work to do in another part of my house. No one will come in here. You will be quite undisturbed."

"I am infinitely obliged to you. 'Tis but half-an-hour's privacy I desire ... providing this gentleman will grant me the interview."

"Like my friend Hals," rejoined Diogenes suavely, "I am, sir, at your service. The tides are rising around me, I feel them swelling even as I speak. I have an overwhelming desire to ride on the crest of the waves, rather than to duck under them against my will."

"I hope this intrusion will not retard your work too much, my good Hals," said Beresteyn with somewhat perfunctory solicitude when he saw that the artist finally put his brushes and palette on one side, and in an abstracted manner began to dust a couple of rickety chairs and then place them close to the stove.

"Oh!" interposed Diogenes airily, "the joy of being of service to so bountiful a patron will more than compensate Frans Hals for this interruption to his work. Am I not right, old friend?" he added with just a soupçon of seriousness in the mocking tones of his voice.

Hals murmured a few words under his breath which certainly seemed to satisfy Beresteyn for the latter made no further attempt at apology, and only watched with obvious impatience the artist's slow progress out of the room.

As soon as the heavy oaken door had fallen to behind the master of this house, Beresteyn turned with marked eagerness to Diogenes.

"Now, sir," he said, "will you accord me your close attention for a moment. On my honour it will be to your advantage so to do."

"And to your own, I take it, sir," rejoined Diogenes, as he stepped down from the elevated platform and sat himself astride one of the rickety chairs facing his interlocutor who had remained standing. "To your own too, sir, else you had not spent half an hour in that vervloekte weather last night pacing an insalubrious street in order to find out where I lodged."

Nicolaes bit his lip with vexation.

"You saw me?" he asked.

"I have eyes at the back of my head," replied the young man. "I knew that you followed me in company with a friend all the way from the door of the 'Lame Cow' and that you were not far off when I announced my intention of sleeping under the stars and asking my friend Frans Hals for some breakfast later on."

Beresteyn had quickly recovered his equanimity.

"I have no cause to deny it," he said.

"None," assented Diogenes.

"Something, sir, in your manner and your speech last night aroused my interest. Surely you would not take offence at that."

"Certainly not."

"And hearing you speak, a certain instinct prompted me to try and not lose sight of you if I could by some means ascertain where you lodged. My friend and I did follow you: I own it, and we witnessed a little scene which I confess did you infinite credit."

Diogenes merely bowed his head this time in acknowledgment.

"It showed, sir," resumed Nicolaes after a slight pause, "that you are chivalrous to a fault, brave and kindly: and these are just the three qualities which I — even like your illustrious namesake — have oft sought for in vain."

"Shall we add, also for the sake of truth, sir," said Diogenes pleasantly, "that I am obviously penniless, presumably unscrupulous and certainly daring, and that these are just the three qualities which you ... and your friend ... most require at the present moment in the man whom you wish to pay for certain services."

"You read my thoughts, sir."

"Have I not said that I have eyes at the back of my head?"

And Nicolaes Beresteyn wondered if that second pair of eyes were as merry and mocking and withal as inscrutable as those that met his now.

"Well," he said as if with suddenly conceived determination, "again I see no cause why I should deny it. Yes, sir, you have made a shrewd guess. I have need of your services, of your chivalry and of your valour and ... well, yes," he added after an instant's hesitation, "of your daring and your paucity of scruples too. As for your penury, why, sir, if you like, its pangs need worry you no longer."

"It all sounds very tempting, sir," said Diogenes with his most winning smile, "suppose now that we put preliminaries aside and proceed more directly with our business."

"As you will."

Nicolaes Beresteyn now took the other chair and brought it close to his interlocutor. Then he sat down and sinking his voice to a whisper he began:

"I will be as brief and to the point as I can, sir. There are secrets as you know the knowledge of which is oft-times dangerous. Such an one was spoken of in the cathedral last night after watch-night service by six men who hold their lives in their hands and are ready to sacrifice it for the good of their country and of their faith."

"In other words," interposed Diogenes with dry humour, "six men in the cathedral last night decided to murder some one for the good of this country and of their faith and for the complete satisfaction of the devil."

"'Tis false!" cried Beresteyn involuntarily.

"Be not angered, sir, I was merely guessing — and not guessing methinks very wide of the mark. I pray you proceed. You vastly interest me. We left then six men in the cathedral after watch-night service plotting for the welfare of Holland and the established Faith."

"Their lives, sir," resumed Beresteyn more calmly, "depend on the inviolability of their secret. You are good at guessing — will you guess what would happen to those six men if their conversation last night had been overheard and their secret betrayed?"

"The scaffold," said Diogenes laconically.

"And torture."

"Of course. Holland always has taken the lead in civilization of late."

"Torture and death, sir," reiterated Beresteyn vehemently. "There are six men in this city to-day whose lives are at the mercy of one woman."

"Oho! 'twas a woman then who surprised those six men in their endeavour to do good to Holland and to uphold the Faith."

"Rightly spoken, sir! To do good to Holland and to uphold the Faith! those are the two motives which guide six ardent patriots in their present actions and cause them to risk their lives and more, that they may bring about the sublime end. A woman has surprised their secret, a woman pure and good as the stars but a woman for all that, weak in matters of sentiment and like to be swayed by a

mistaken sense of what she would call her duty. A woman now, sir, holds the future happiness of Holland, the triumph of Faith and the lives of six stalwart patriots in the hollow of her hand."

"And 'tis with the lives of six stalwart patriots that we are most concerned at the moment, are we not?" asked Diogenes blandly.

"Put it as you will, sir. I cannot expect you — a stranger — to take the welfare of Holland and of her Faith so earnestly as we Dutchmen do. Our present concern is with the woman."

"Is she young?"

"Yes."

"Pretty?"

"What matter?"

"I don't know. The fact might influence mine actions. For of course you wish to put the woman out of the way."

"Only for a time and from my soul I wish her no harm. I only want to place her out of the reach of doing us all a grievous wrong. Already she has half threatened to speak of it all to my father. The idea of it is unthinkable. I want her out of the way for a few days, not more than ten days at most. I want her taken out of Haarlem, to a place of safety which I will point out to you anon, and under the care of faithful dependents who would see that not a hair on her head be injured. You see, sir, that what I would ask of you would call forth your chivalry and need not shame it; it would call forth your daring and your recklessness of consequences and if you will undertake to do me service in this, my gratitude and that of my friends as well as the sum of 2,000 guilders will be yours to command."

"About a tenth part of the money in fact which your father, sir, doth oft give for a bulb."

"Call it 3,000, sir," said Nicolaes Beresteyn, "we would still be your debtors."

"You are liberal, sir."

"It means my life and that of my friends, and most of us are rich."

"But the lady — I must know more about her. Ah sir! this is a hard matter for me — A lady — young — presumably fair — of a truth I care naught for women, but please God I have never hurt a woman yet."

"Who spoke of hurting her, man?" queried Nicolaes haughtily.

"This abduction — the State secret — the matter of life and death — the faithful dependent — how do I know, sir, that all this is true?"

"On the word of honour of a gentleman!" retorted Beresteyn hotly.

"A gentleman's honour is easily attenuated where a woman is concerned."

"The lady is my own sister, sir."

Diogenes gave a long, low whistle.

"Your sister!" he exclaimed.

"My only sister and one who is dearly loved. You see, sir, that her safety and her honour are dearer to me than mine own."

"Yet you propose entrusting both to me," said Diogenes with a mocking laugh, "to me, a nameless adventurer, a penniless wastrel whose trade lies in his sword and his wits."

"Which must prove to you, sir, firstly how true are my instincts, and secondly how hardly I am pressed. My instinct last night told me that in this transaction I could trust you. To-day I have realized more fully than I did last night that my sister is a deadly danger to many, to our country and to our Faith. She surprised a secret, the knowledge of which had she been a man would have meant death then and there in the chapel of the cathedral. Had it been a brother of mine instead of a sister who surprised our secret, my friends would have killed him without compunction and I would not have raised a finger to save him. Being a woman she cannot pay for her knowledge with her life; but her honour and her freedom are forfeit to me because I am a man and she a woman. I am strong and she is weak; she has threatened to betray me and my friends and I must protect them and our cause. I have decided to place her there where she cannot harm us, but some one must convey her thither, since I must not appear before her in this matter. Therefore hath my choice fallen on you, sir, for that mission, chiefly because of that instinct which last night told me that I could trust you. If my instinct should prove me wrong, I would kill you for having cheated me, but I would even then not regret what I had done."

He paused and for a moment looked straight into the laughter-loving face of the man in whose keeping he was ready to entrust with absolute callousness the safety and honour of one whom he should have protected with his life. The whole face, even now seemed still to laugh, the eyes twinkled, the mouth was curled in a smile.

The next moment the young adventurer had risen to his full height. He picked up his hat which lay on the platform close beside him and with it in his hand he made an elaborate and deep bow to Nicolaes Beresteyn.

"Sir?" queried the latter in astonishment.

"At your service, sir," said Diogenes gaily, "I am saluting a greater blackguard than I can ever hope to be myself."

"Insolent!" exclaimed Nicolaes hotly.

"Easy, easy, my good sir," interposed the other calmly, "it would not suit your purpose or mine that we should cut one another's throat. Let me tell you at once and for the appeasing of your anxiety and that of your friends that I will, for the sum of 4,000 guilders, take Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn from this city to any place you may choose to name. This should also ease your pride, for it will prove to you that I also am a consummate blackguard and that you therefore need not stand shamed before me. I have named a higher sum than the one which you have offered me, not with any desire to squeeze you, sir, but because obviously I cannot do this work single-handed. The high roads are not safe. I could not all alone protect the lady against the army of footpads that infest them, I shall have to engage and pay an escort for her all the way. But she shall reach the place to which you desire me to take her, to this I pledge you my word. Beyond that ... well! you have said it yourself, by her knowledge of your secret she has forfeited her own safety; you — her own brother — choose to entrust her to me. The rest lies between you and your honour."

An angry retort once more rose to Nicolaes Beresteyn's lips, but commonsense forced him to check it. The man was right in what he said. On the face of it his action in entrusting his own sister into the keeping of a knight of industry, a nameless wastrel whose very calling proclaimed him an unscrupulous adventurer, was the action of a coward and of a rogue. Any man with a spark of honour in him

— would condemn Nicolaes Beresteyn as a blackguard for this deed. Nevertheless there was undoubtedly something in the whole personality of this same adventurer that in a sense exonerated Nicolaes from the utter dishonour of his act.

On the surface the action was hideous, monstrous, and cowardly, but beneath that surface there was the undercurrent of trust in this one man, the firm belief born of nothing more substantial than an intuition that this man would in this matter play the part of a gentleman.

But it is not my business to excuse Nicolaes Beresteyn in this. What guided him solely in his present action was that primary instinct of self-preservation, that sense which animals have without the slightest knowledge or experience on their part and which has made men play at times the part of a hero and at others that of a knave. Stoutenburg who was always daring and always unscrupulous where his own ambitious schemes were at stake had by a careful hint shown him a way of effectually silencing Gilda during the next few days. Beresteyn's mind filled to over-flowing with a glowing desire for success and for life had readily worked upon the hint.

And he did honestly believe — as hundreds of misguided patriots have believed before and since — that Heaven was on his side of the political business and had expressly led along his path this one man of all others who would do what was asked of him and whom he could trust.

CHAPTER XI

THE BARGAIN

There had been silence in the great, bare work-room for some time, silence only broken by Beresteyn's restless pacing up and down the wooden floor. Diogenes had resumed his seat, his shrewd glance following every movement of the other man, every varied expression of his face.

At last Nicolaes came to a halt opposite to him.

"Am I to understand then, sir," he asked, looking Diogenes straight between the eyes and affecting not to note the mocking twinkle within them, "that you accept my proposition and that you are prepared to do me service?"

"Absolutely, sir," replied the other.

"Then shall we proceed with the details?"

"An it please you."

"You will agree to do me service for the sum of 4,000 guilders?"

"In gold."

"Of course. For this sum you will convey Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn out of Haarlem, conduct her with a suitable escort and in perfect safety to Rotterdam and there deliver her into the hands of Mynheer Ben Isaje — the banker — who does a vast amount of business for me and is entirely and most discreetly devoted to my interests. His place of business is situated on the Schiedamsche Straat and is a house well known to every one in Rotterdam seeing that Mynheer Ben Isaje is the richest money-lending Jew in the city."

"That is all fairly simple, sir," assented Diogenes.

"You will of course tender me your oath of secrecy."

"My word of honour, sir. If I break that I would be as likely to break an oath."

"Very well," said Beresteyn after a moment's hesitation during which he tried vainly to scrutinize a face which he had already learned was quite inscrutable. "Shall we arrange the mode of payment then?"

"If you please."

"How to obtain possession of the person of the jongejuffrouw is not my business to tell you. Let me but inform you that to-day being New Year's day she will surely go to evensong at the cathedral and that her way from our home thither will lead her along the bank of the Oude Gracht between the Zijl Straat where our house is situate and the Hout Straat which debouches on the Groote Markt. You know the bank of the Oude Gracht better than I do, sir, so I need not tell you that it is lonely, especially at the hour when evensong at the cathedral is over. The jongejuffrouw is always escorted in her walks by an elderly duenna whom you will of course take to Rotterdam, so that she may attend on my sister on the way, and by two serving men whose combined courage is not, of course, equal to your own. This point, therefore, I must leave you to arrange in accordance with your desire."

"I thank you, sir."

"In the same way it rests with you what arrangements you make for the journey itself; the providing of a suitable carriage and of an adequate escort I leave entirely in your hands."

"Again I thank you."

"I am only concerned with the matter itself, and with the payment which I make to you for your services. As for your route, you will leave Haarlem by the Holy Cross gate and proceed straight to Bennebroek, a matter of a league or so. There I will meet you at the half-way house which stands at the cross-roads where a signpost points the way to Leyden. The innkeeper there is a friend of mine, whose natural discretion has been well nurtured by frequent gifts from me. He hath name Praff, and will see to the comfort of my sister and of her duenna, while you and I settle the first instalment of our business, quite unbeknown to her. There, sir, having assured myself that my sister is safe and in your hands, I will give over to you the sum of 1,000 guilders, together with a letter writ by me to the banker Ben Isaje of Rotterdam. He knows Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn well by sight, and in my letter I will ask him, firstly, to ascertain from herself if she is well and safe, and secondly to see that she is at once conveyed, still under your escort, to his private residence which is situate some little distance out of the city between Schiedam and Overschie on the way to Delft, and lastly, to hand over to you the balance of 3,000 guilders still due then by me to you."

He paused a moment to draw breath after the lengthy peroration, then, as Diogenes made no comment, he said somewhat impatiently:

"I hope, sir, that all these arrangements meet with your approval!"

"They fill me with profound respect for you, sir, and admiration for your administrative capacities," replied Diogenes, with studied politeness.

"Indeed I do flatter myself ..." quoth the other.

"Not without reason, sir. The marvellous way in which you have provided for the safety of three-fourths of your money, and hardly at all for that of your sister, fills me with envy which I cannot control."

"Insolent..."

"No, no, my good sir," interposed Diogenes blandly, "we have already agreed that we are not going to quarrel, you and I ... we have too great a need for one another; for that 3,000 guilders — which, after deductions, will be my profit in this matter — means a fortune to a penniless adventurer, and you are shrewd enough to have gauged that fact, else you had not come to me with such a proposal. I will do you service, sir, for the 3,000 guilders which will enable me to live a life of independence in the future, and also for another reason, which I would not care to put into words, and which you, sir, would fail to understand. So let us say no more about all these matters. I agree to your proposals and you accept my services. To-night at ten o'clock I will meet you at the half-way house which stands in the hamlet of Bennebroek at the cross-roads where a signpost points the way to Leyden."

"To-night! That's brave!" exclaimed Beresteyn. "You read my thoughts, sir, even before I could tell you that delay in this affair would render it useless."

"To-night then, sir," said Diogenes in conclusion, "I pray you have no fear of failure. The jongeuffrouw will sleep at Leyden, or somewhere near there, this night. The city is distant but half-a-dozen leagues, and we can reach it easily by midnight. From thence in the morning we can continue our journey, and should be in sight of Rotterdam twenty-four hours later. For the rest, as you say, the manner of our journey doth not concern you. If the frost continues and we can travel by sledge all the way we could reach Rotterdam in two days; in any event, even if a thaw were to set in we should not be more than three days on the way."

He rose from his chair and stood now facing Beresteyn. His tall figure, stretched to its full height, seemed to tower above the other man, though the latter was certainly not short; but Diogenes looked massive — a young lion sniffing the scent of the desert. The mocking glance, the curve of gentle irony were still there in eyes and mouth, but the nostrils quivered with excitement, with the spirit of adventure which never slept so soundly but that it awakened at a word.

"And now, sir," he said, "there are two matters both of equal importance, which we must settle ere I can get to work."

"What may these be, sir?"

"Firstly the question of money. I have not the wherewithal to make preparations. I shall have to engage a sleigh for to-night, horses, an escort as far as Leyden. I shall have to make payments for promises of secrecy...."

"That is just, sir. Would 200 guilders meet this difficulty?"

"Five hundred would be safer," said Diogenes airily, "and you may deduct that sum from your first payment at Bennebroek."

Beresteyn did not choose to notice the impertinent tone which rang through the other man's speech. Without wasting further words, he took a purse from his wallet, and sitting down on one corner of the model's platform, he emptied the contents of the purse upon it.

He counted out five hundred guilders, partly in silver and partly in gold. These he replaced in the purse and then handed it over to Diogenes. The latter had not moved from his position during this time, standing as he did at some little distance so that Beresteyn had to get up in order to hand him the money. Diogenes acknowledged its receipt with a courteous bow.

"And what is the other matter, sir?" asked Nicolaes, after he had placed the rest of his money back into his wallet, "what is the other matter which we have failed to settle?"

"The jongeuffrouw, sir.... I am a comparative stranger in Haarlem.... I do not know the illustrious lady by sight."

"True, I had not thought of that. But this omission can very easily be remedied ... if you, sir, will kindly call our friend Hals; he has, an I mistake not, more than one sketch of my sister in his studio and a half-finished portrait of her as well."

"Then I pray you, sir," rejoined Diogenes airily, "do you go and acquaint our mutual friend of your desire to show me the half-finished portrait of the jongeuffrouw, for I must now exchange this gorgeous doublet of a prosperous cavalier for one more suited to this day's purpose."

And he immediately proceeded to undress without paying the slightest heed to Beresteyn's look of offended dignity.

It was no use being angry with this independent knave; Nicolaes Beresteyn had found that out by now, therefore he thought it best to appear indifferent to this new display of impudence and himself to go and seek out Frans Hals as if this had been his own intention all along.

Inwardly fuming but without uttering another word he turned on his heel and went out of the room, slamming the door to behind him.

CHAPTER XII

THE PORTRAIT

When Beresteyn returned to the studio in the company of Frans Hals they found Diogenes once more clad in his own well-fitting and serviceable doublet.

The artist looked bitterly disappointed at the sight, but naturally forbore to give vent to his feelings in the presence of his exalted patron.

Apparently he had been told what was required, for he went straight up to a large canvas which stood at the further end of the room with its face to the wall, and this he brought out now and placed upon the easel.

"It is an excellent likeness of my sister," said Nicolaes with his usual gracious condescension, to the artist, "and does your powers of faithful portraiture vast credit, my good Hals. I pray you, sir," he added calling to Diogenes, "come and look at it."

The latter came and stood in front of the easel and looked on the picture which was there exhibited for his gaze.

Among the hard lessons which varying Fortune teaches to those whom she most neglects, there is none so useful as self-control. Diogenes had learned that lesson early in his life, and his own good humour often had to act as a mask for deeper emotions. Now, when in the picture he recognized the woman who had spoken to him last night after the affray, in the Dam Straat, his face in no sense expressed surprise, it still smiled and mocked and twinkled, and neither of the two men who stood by guessed that he had seen the original of this dainty picture under peculiar circumstances not many hours before.

That portrait of Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn is one of the finest ever painted by Frans Hals, the intense naturalness of the pose is perfect, the sweet yet imperious expression of the face is most faithfully portrayed. Diogenes saw her now very much as he had seen her last night, for the artist had painted the young head against a dark background and it stood out delicate as a flower, right out of the canvas and in full light.

The mouth smiled as it had done last night when first she caught sight of the ludicrous apparition of one philosopher astride on the shoulders of the other, the eyes looked grave as they had done when she humbly, yet gracefully begged pardon for her levity. The chin was uplifted as it had been last night, when she made with haughty condescension her offers of patronage to the penniless adventurer, and there was the little hand soft and smooth as the petal of a rose which had rested for one moment against his lips.

And looking on the picture of this young girl, Diogenes remembered the words which her own brother had spoken to him only a few moments ago; "her honour and her safety are forfeit to me. I would kill you if you cheated me, but I would not even then regret what I had done."

The daughter of the rich city burgher was, of course, less than nothing to the nameless carver of his own fortunes; she was as far removed from his sphere of life as were the stars from the Zuyder Zee, nor did women as a sex play any serious part in his schemes for the future, but at the recollection of those callous and selfish words, Diogenes felt a wave of fury rushing through his blood; the same rage seized his temper now as when he saw a lout once plucking out the feathers of a song bird, and he fell on him with fists and stick and left him lying bruised and half-dead in a ditch.

But the hard lesson learned early in life stood him in good stead. He crossed his arms over his broad chest and anon his well-shaped hand went up to his moustache and it almost seemed as if the slender fingers smoothed away the traces of that wave of wrath which had swept over him so unaccountably just now, and only left upon his face those lines of mockery and of good-humour which a nature redolent of sunshine had rendered indelible.

"What think you of it, sir?" asked Beresteyn impatiently, seeing that Diogenes seemed inclined to linger over long in his contemplation of the picture.

"I think, sir," replied the other, "that the picture once seen would for ever be imprinted on the memory."

"Ah! it pleases me to hear you say that. I think too that it does our friend Hals here infinite credit. You must finish that picture soon, my good Frans. My father I know is prepared to pay you well for it."

Then he turned once more to Diogenes.

"I'll take my leave now, sir," he said, "and must thank you for so kindly listening to my proposals. Hals, I thank you for the hospitality of your house. We meet again soon I hope."

He took up his hat and almost in spite of himself he acknowledged Diogenes' parting bow with one equally courteous. Patron and employé stood henceforth on equal terms.

"And you desire to see me again to-day, sir," he said before finally taking his leave, "I shall be in the tapperij of the 'Lame Cow' between the hours of four and five and entirely at your service."

After that he walked out of the room escorted by Frans Hals, and Diogenes who had remained alone in the big, bare studio, stood in front of Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn's portrait and had another long look at it.

A whimsical smile sat round his lips even as they apostrophized the image that looked so gravely on him out of the canvas.

"You poor, young, delicate creature!" he murmured, "what of your imperious little ways now? your offers of condescension, your gracious wiping of your dainty shoes on the commoner herd of humanity? Your own brother has thrown you at the mercy of a rogue, eh? A rogue whose valour must needs be rewarded by money and patronage!... Will you recognise him to-night I wonder, as the rogue he really is? the rogue paid to do work that is too dirty for exalted gentlemen's hands to touch? How you will loathe him after to-night!"

He drew in his breath with a quaint little sigh that had a thought of sadness in it, and turned away from the picture just as Frans Hals re-entered the room.

"When this picture is finished," he said at once to his friend, "your name, my dear Hals, will ring throughout Europe."

"'Tis your picture I want to finish," said the other reproachfully, "I have such a fine chance of selling it the day after to-morrow."

"Why the day after to-morrow?"

"The Burgomaster, Mynheer van der Meer, comes to visit my studio. He liked the beginnings of the picture very much when he saw it, and told me then that he would come to look at it again and would probably buy it."

"I can be back here in less than a week. You can finish the picture then. The Burgomaster will wait."

The artist sighed a plaintive, uncomplaining little sigh and shrugged his shoulders with an air of hopelessness.

"You don't know what these people are," he said, "they will buy a picture when the fancy seizes them. A week later they will mayhap not even look at it. Besides which the Burgomaster goes to Amsterdam next week. He will visit Rembrandt's studio, and probably buy a picture there...."

His speech meandered on, dully and tonelessly, losing itself finally in incoherent mutterings. Diogenes looked on him with good-natured contempt.

"And you would lick the boots of such rabble," he said.

"I have a wife and a growing family," rejoined the artist, "we must all live."

"I don't see the necessity," quoth Diogenes lightly, "not at that price in any case. You must live of course, my dear Hals," he continued, "because you are a genius and help to fill this ugly grey world with your magnificent works, but why should your wife and family live at the expense of your manhood?"

Then seeing the look of horror which his tirade had called forth in the face of his friend, he said with more seriousness:

"Would the price of that picture be of such vital importance then?"

"It is not the money so much," rejoined Frans Hals, "though God knows that that too would be acceptable, but 'tis the glory of it to which I had aspired. This picture to hang in the Stanhuis, mayhap in the reception hall, has been my dream these weeks past; not only would all the wealthy burghers of Haarlem see it there, but all the civic dignitaries of other cities when they come here on a visit, aye! and the foreign ambassadors too, who often come to Haarlem. My fame then would indeed ring throughout Europe.... It is very hard that you should disappoint me so."

While he went on mumbling in his feeble querulous voice, Diogenes had been pacing up and down the floor apparently struggling with insistent thoughts. There was quite a suspicion of a frown upon his smooth brow, but he said nothing until his friend had finished speaking. Then he ceased his restless pacing and placed a hand upon Hals' shoulder.

"Look here, old friend," he said, "this will never do. It seems as if I, by leaving you in the lurch to-day, stood in the way of your advancement and of your fortune. That of course will never do," he reiterated earnestly. "You the friend, who, like last night, are always ready to give me food and shelter when I have been without a groat in my pocket. You who picked me up ten years ago a shoeless ragamuffin wandering homeless in the streets, and gave me a hot supper and a bed, knowing nothing about me save that I was starving ... for that was the beginning of our friendship was it not, old Frans?"

"Of course it was," assented the other, "but that was long ago. You have more than repaid me since then ... when you had the means ... and now there is the picture...."

"To repay a debt is not always to be rid of an obligation. How can I then leave you in the lurch now?"

"Why cannot you stay and sit for me to-day.... The light is fairly good...."

"I cannot stay now, dear old friend," said the other earnestly, "on my honour I would do my duty by you now if I only could. I have business of the utmost importance to transact to-day and must see to it forthwith."

"Then why not to-morrow?... I could work on the doublet and the lace collar to-day, by putting them on a dummy model.... All I want is a good long sitting from you for the head.... I could almost finish the picture to-morrow," he pleaded in his peevish, melancholy voice, "and the Burgomaster comes on the next day."

Diogenes was silent for awhile. Again that puzzled frown appeared between his brows. To-morrow he should be leaving Leyden on his way to Rotterdam; 1,000 guilders would be in his pocket, and 3,000 more would be waiting for him at the end of his journey.... To-morrow!...

Frans Hals' keen, restless eyes followed every varying expression in the face he knew so well.

"Why should you not give up your day to me to-morrow?" he murmured peevishly. "You have nothing to do."

"Why indeed not?" said the other with a sudden recrudescence of his usual gaiety. "I can do it, old compeer! Dondersteen, but I should be a smeerlap if I did not. Wait one moment.... Let me just think.... Yes! I have the way clear in my mind now.... I will be here as early as I was to-day."

"By half-past seven o'clock the light is tolerable," said the artist.

"By half-past seven then I shall have donned the doublet, and will not move off that platform unless you bid me, until the shadows have gathered in, in the wake of the setting sun. After that," he added with his accustomed merry laugh, "let Mynheer, the Burgomaster come, your picture shall not hang fire because of me."

"That's brave!" said Frans Hals more cheerily. "If you will come I can do it. You will see how advanced that sleeve and collar will be by half-past seven to-morrow."

His voice had quite a ring in it now; he fussed about in his studio, re-arranged the picture on the easel, and put aside the portrait of Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn; Diogenes watched him with amusement, but the frown had not quite disappeared from his brow. He had made two promises to-day, both of which he would have to fulfil at all costs. Just now, it was in a flash, that the thought came to him how he could help his friend and yet keep his word to Beresteyn. A quick plan had formed itself in his mind for accomplishing this — he saw in a mental vision the forced run on the ice back to Haarlem and back again in the wake of the sleigh. It could be done with much pluck and endurance and a small modicum of good luck, and already his mind was made up to it, whatever the cost in fatigue or privations might be.

But time was pressing now. After a renewed and most solemn promise he took leave of Frans Hals, who already was too deeply absorbed in work to take much notice of his friend. The glorious, self-centred selfishness of genius was in him. He cared absolutely nothing for any worry or trouble he might cause to the other man by his demand for that sitting on the morrow. The picture mattered — nothing else — and the artist never even asked his friend if he would suffer inconvenience or worse by sacrificing his day to it to-morrow.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SPANISH WENCH

An hour later in the tap-room of the "Lame Cow" Diogenes had finished explaining to his brother philosophers the work which he had in hand and for which he required their help. The explanation had begun with the words filled with portentous charm:

"There will be 500 guilders for each of you at the end of our journey."

And they knew from many and varied experiences of adventures undertaken in amicable trilogy that Diogenes would be as good as these words.

For the rest they did not greatly trouble themselves. There was a lady to be conveyed with respect and with safety, out of Haarlem and as far as Rotterdam, and it was in Rotterdam that the 500 guilders would reward each man for his obedience to orders, his circumspection at all times and his valour if necessity arose. From this hour onwards and throughout the journey friend Diogenes would provide for everything and see that his faithful compeers lacked in nothing. Temperance and sober conduct would be the order paramount, but with that exception the adventure promised to be as exciting as it was lucrative.

It was good to hear the guilders jingling in Diogenes' wallet, and though he was sparing of them in the matter of heady ale or strong wines, he scattered them liberally enough on smoked sausage, fried livers and the many other delicacies for which his brother philosophers had a fancy and for which the kitchen of the "Lame Cow" was famous.

When they had all eaten enough and made merry on a little good ale and the prospects of the adventure, they parted on the doorstep of the tavern, Diogenes to attend to business, the other two to see to the horses and the sleigh for this night. These were to be in readiness at the point where the street of the Holy Cross abuts on the left bank of the Oude Gracht. Three good saddle horses were wanted — thick-set Flanders mares, rough shod against the slippery roads; also a covered sledge, with two equally reliable horses harnessed there to and a coachman of sober appearance on the box. Socrates and Pythagoras were required to scour the city for these, and to bespeak them for seven o'clock this evening, Diogenes undertaking to make payment for them in advance. There were also some warm rugs and wraps to be bought, for the night would be bitterly cold and the lady not prepared mayhap with a cloak sufficiently heavy for a lengthy journey.

All these matters having been agreed upon, Socrates and Pythagoras started to walk toward the eastern portion of the city where several posting inns were situated and where they hoped to find the conveyance which they required as well as the necessary horses. Diogenes on the other hand turned his steps deliberately southwards.

After a few minutes brisk walking he found himself at the further end of the Kleine Hout Straat, there where stood the rickety, half-mildewed and wholly insalubrious house which had previously sheltered him. The door as usual was loose upon its hinges and swinging backwards and forwards in the draught with a squeaking, melancholy sound. Diogenes pushed it further open and went in. The same fetid smells, peculiar to all the houses in this quarter of the city, greeted his nostrils, and from the depths of the dark and dank passage a dog gave a perfunctory bark.

Without hesitation Diogenes now began the ascent of the creaking stairs, his heavy footfall echoing through the silent house. On one or two of the landings as he mounted he was greeted by pale, inquiring faces and round inquisitive eyes, whilst ghostlike forms emerged out of hidden burrows for a moment to look on the noisy visitor and then equally furtively vanished again.

On the topmost landing he halted; here a small skylight in the roof afforded a modicum of light. Two doors confronted him, he went up to one of them and knocked on it loudly with his fist.

Then he waited — not with great patience but with his ear glued to the door listening to the sounds within. It almost seemed as if the room beyond was the abode of the dead, for not a sound reached the listener's ear. He knocked again, more loudly this time and more insistently. Still no response. At the other door on the opposite side of the landing a female figure appeared wrapped in a worsted rag, and a head half hidden by a linen coif was thrust forward out of the darkness behind it.

"They's won't answer you," said the apparition curtly. "They are strangers ... only came last night, but all this morning when the landlord or his wife knocked at the door, they simply would not open it."

"But I am a friend," said Diogenes, "the best I fancy that these poor folk have."

"You used to lodge here until last night."

"Why yes. The lodgings are mine, I gave them up to these poor people who had nowhere else to go."

"They won't answer you," reiterated the female apparition dolefully and once more retired into its burrow.

The situation was becoming irritating. Diogenes put his mouth against the keyhole and shouted "What ho, there! Open!" as lustily as his powerful lungs would allow.

"Dondersteen!" he exclaimed, when even then he received no response.

But strange to relate no sooner was this expletive out of his mouth, than there came a cry like that of a frightened small animal, followed by a patter of naked feet upon a naked floor; the next moment the door was thrown invitingly open, and Diogenes was able to step across its thresh-hold.

"Dondersteen!" he ejaculated again, "hadst thou not opened, wench, I would within the next few seconds have battered in the door."

The woman stood looking at him with great, dark eyes in which joy, surprise and fear struggled for mastery. Her hair though still unruly was coiled around her head, her shift and kirtle were neatly fastened, but her legs and feet were bare and above the shift her neck and shoulders appeared colourless and attenuated. Eyes and hair were dark, and her skin had the olive tint of the south, but her lips at this moment looked bloodless, and there was the look of starvation in her wan face.

Diogenes walked past her into the inner room. The old man was lying on the bed, and on the coverlet close to him a much fingered prayer-book lay open. The woman slipped noiselessly past the visitor and quietly put the prayer-book away.

"You have come to tell us that we must go," she said in an undertone as she suddenly faced the newcomer.

"Indeed, that was not my purpose," he replied gaily, "I have come on the contrary to bring you good news, and it was foolish of you to keep me dangling on your doorstep for so long."

"The landlord hates us," she murmured, "because you forced him last night to take us in. He came thundering at the door early this morning, and threatened to eject us as vagabonds or to denounce us as Spanish spies. I would not open the door to him, and he shouted his threats at us through the keyhole. When you knocked just now I was frightened. I thought that he had come back."

Her voice was low and though she spoke Dutch fluently her throat had in it the guttural notes of her native land. A touch of the gipsy there must be in her, thought Diogenes as he looked with suddenly aroused interest on the woman before him, her dark skin, the long, supple limbs, the velvety eyes with their submissive, terrified look.

With embarrassed movements she offered the only chair in the room to her visitor, then cast shy, timorous glances on him as he refused to sit, preferring to lean his tall figure against the white-washed wall. She thought that never in her life had she seen any man so splendid and her look of bold admiration told him so without disguise.

"Well!" he said with his quaint smile, "I am not the landlord, nor yet an enemy. Art thou convinced of that?"

"Yes, I am!" she said with a little sigh, as she turned away from him in order to attend to the old man, who was moaning peevishly in bed.

"He has lost the use of speech," she said to Diogenes as soon as she had seen to the old man's wants, "and to-day he is so crippled that he can scarcely move. We ought never to have come to this horrible cold part of the country," she added with a sudden tone of fierce resentment. "I think that we shall both die of misery before we leave it again."

"Why did you come here then at all?" asked Diogenes.

"We wandered hither, because we heard that the people in this city were so rich. I was born not far from here, and so was my mother, but my father is a native of Spain. In France, in Brabant where we wandered before, we always earned a good living by begging at the church doors, but here the people are so hard...."

"You will have to wander back to Spain."

"Yes," she said sullenly, "as soon as I have earned a little money and father is able to move, neither of which seems very likely just now."

"Ah!" he said cheerily, "that is, wench, where I proclaim thee wrong! I do not know when thy father will be able to move, but I can tell thee at this very moment where and how thou canst earn fifty guilders which should take thee quite a long way toward Spain."

She looked up at him and once more that glance of joy and of surprise crept into her eyes which had seemed so full of vindictive anger just now. With the surprise and the joy there also mingled the admiration, the sense of well-being in his presence.

Already he had filled the bare, squalid room with his breezy personality, with his swagger and with his laughter; his ringing voice had roused the echoes that slept in the mouldy rafters and frightened the mice that dwelt in the wainscoting and now scampered hurriedly away.

"I," she said with obvious incredulity, "I to earn fifty guilders! I have not earned so much in any six months of my life."

"Perhaps not," he rejoined gaily. "But I can promise thee this; that the fifty guilders will be thine this evening, if thou wilt render me a simple service."

"Render thee a service," she said, and her low voice sounded quite cooing and gentle, "I would thank God on my knees if I could render thee a service. Didst thou not save my life...."

"By thy leave we'll not talk of that matter. 'Tis over and done with now. The service I would ask of thee, though 'tis simple enough to perform, I could not ask of anyone else but thee. An thou'lt do it, I shall be more than repaid."

"Name it, sir," she said simply.

"Dost know the bank of the Oude Gracht?" he asked.

"Well," she replied.

"Dost know the Oudenvrouwenhuis situated there?"

"Yes!"

"Next to its outer walls there is a narrow passage which leads to the Remonstrant Chapel of St. Pieter."

"There is, sir. I know it."

"This evening at seven o'clock then thou'lt take thy stand at the corner of this passage facing the Oude Gracht; and there thou wilt remain to ask alms from the passers-by. Thou'rt not afraid?"

"Afraid of what, sir?"

"The spot is lonely, the passage leads nowhere except to the chapel, which has been deserted these past five years."

"I am not afraid."

"That's brave! After evensong is over at the cathedral, one or two people will no doubt come thy way. Thou'lt beg them for alms in the usual way. But anon a lady will come accompanied by a duenna and preceded by two serving men carrying lanterns. From her thou must ask insistently, and tell her as sad a tale of woe as thou canst think on, keeping well within the narrow passage and inducing her to follow thee."

"How shall I know the lady? There may be others who go past that way, and who might also be escorted by a woman and two serving men."

"The men wear green and purple livery, with peaked green caps trimmed with fur. Thou canst not mistake them even in the dark, for the light of the lanterns which they carry will be upon them. But I will be in the passage close behind thee. When I see her coming I will warn thee."

"I understand," she said, nodding her head slowly once or twice as if she were brooding over what she thought. "But surely that is not all that I can do for thee."

"Indeed it is, and therefore none too difficult. Having drawn the lady into the shadow by thy talk, contrive to speak to her, telling her of thy troubles. If anything occurs after that to surprise or mayhap frighten thee, pay no heed to it, but take at once to thy heels and run straight home here, without looking to right or left. No one will molest thee, I give thee my word."

"I understand!" she reiterated once more.

"And wilt thou do as I ask?"

"Of course. My life is thine; thou didst save it twice. Thou hast but to command and I will obey."

"We'll call it that," he said lightly, "since it seems to please thee. To-night then at seven o'clock, I too, will be on the spot to place the fifty guilders in thy hand."

"Fifty guilders!" she exclaimed almost with ecstasy, and pressed her hands to her breast. "My father and I need not starve or be homeless the whole of this winter."

"Thou'lt make tracks for Spain very soon," he rejoined carelessly, for he had accomplished his business and was making ready to go.

She threw him a strange look, half defiant yet almost reproachful.

"Perhaps!" she said curtly.

He took leave of her in his usual pleasant, airy manner, smiling at her earnestness and at her looks that reminded him of a starving dog which he had once picked up in the streets of Prague and kept and fed for a time, until he found it a permanent home. When he gave the dog away to some kindly people who promised to be kind to it, it threw him, at parting, just such a look as dwelt in the dark depths of this girl's eyes now.

The old cripple on the bed had fallen into a torpor-like sleep. Diogenes cast a compassionate glance on him.

"Thou canst take him to better quarters in a day or two," he said, "and mayhap give him some good food.... Dondersteen!" he exclaimed suddenly, "what art doing, girl?"

She had stooped and kissed his hand. He drew it away almost roughly, but at the timid look of humble apology which she raised to him, he said gently:

"By St. Bavon thou'rt a funny child! Well? what is it now?" he asked, for she stood hesitating before him, with a question obviously hovering on her lips.

"I dare not," she murmured.

"Art afraid of me then?"

"A little."

"Yet there is something thou desirest to ask?"

"Yes."

"What is it? Quickly now, for I must be going."

She waited for a moment or two trying to gain courage, whilst he watched her, greatly amused.

"What is it?" he reiterated more impatiently.

Then a whispered murmur escaped her lips.

"The lady?"

"Yes. What of her?"

"Thou dost love her?" she stammered, "and wilt abduct her to-night because of thy love for her?"

For a second or two he looked on her in blank amazement, marvelling if he had entrusted this vital business to a semi-imbecile. Then seeing that indeed she appeared in deadly earnest, and that her great, inquiring but perfectly lucid eyes were fixed upon him with mute insistence, he threw back his head and laughed till the very rafters of the low room shook with the echo of his merriment.

"Dondersteen!" he said as soon as he felt that he could speak again, "but thou truly art a strange wench. Whatever did put that idea into thy head?"

"Thou dost propose to abduct her, I know that," she said more firmly. "I am no fool, and I understand I am to be the decoy. The dark passage, the lonely spot, thy presence there ... and then the occurrence, as thou saidst, that might surprise or frighten me.... I am no fool," she repeated sullenly, "I understand."

"Apparently," he retorted dryly.

"Thou dost love her?" she insisted.

"What is it to thee?"

"No matter; only tell me this, dost thou love her?"

"If I said 'yes,'" he asked with his whimsical smile, "wouldst refuse to help me?"

"Oh, no!"

"And if I said 'no'?"

"I should be glad," she said simply.

"Then we'll say 'no!'" he concluded lightly, "for I would like to see thee glad."

And he had his wish, for quite a joyous smile lit up her small, pinched face. She tripped quite briskly to the door and held it open for him.

"If thou desirest to speak with me again," she said, as he finally took his leave, "give four raps on the door at marked intervals. I would fly to open it then."

He thanked her and went down stairs, humming a lively tune and never once turning to look on her again. And yet she was leaning over the rickety banisters watching his slowly descending figure, until it disappeared in the gloom.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER EVENSONG

Jongeuffrouw Beresteyn had spent many hours in church this New Year's Day, 1624. In spite of the inclemency of the weather she had attended Morning Prayer and Holy Communion and now she was back again for Evensong.

The cathedral was not very full for it. Most people were making merry at home to celebrate the festival; so Gilda had a corner of the sacred building all to herself, where she could think matters over silently and with the help of prayer. The secret of which she had gained knowledge was weighing heavily on her soul; and heart-rending doubts had assailed her all night and throughout the day.

How could she know what was the right thing to do? — to allow a crime of which she had fore-knowledge, to be committed without raising a finger to prevent it? or to betray her own brother and his friends — a betrayal which would inevitably lead them to the scaffold?

Her father was of course her great refuge, and to-night through Evensong she prayed to God to guide her, as to whether she should tell everything to her father or not. She had warned Nicolaes that she might do so, and yet her very soul shrank from the act which to many would seem so like betrayal. Cornelius Beresteyn was a man of rigid principles and unyielding integrity. What he might do with the knowledge of the conspiracy in which his own son was taking a leading part, no one — not even his daughter — could foresee. In no case would she act hurriedly. She hoped against all hope that mayhap Nicolaes would see his own treachery in its true light and turn from it before it was too late, or that God would give her some unmistakable sign of what He willed her to do.

Perplexed and wretched she stayed long on her knees and left the church after every one else. The night was dark and though the snow had left off falling momentarily, the usual frosty mist hung over the city. Jongeuffrouw Beresteyn wrapped her fur-lined cloak closely round her shoulders and started on her homeward walk, with Maria by her side and Jakob and Piet on in front carrying their lanterns.

Her way took her firstly across the Groote Markt then down the Hout Straat until she reached the Oude Gracht. Here her two serving men kept quite close in front of her for the embankment was lonely and a well-known resort for evil doers who found refuge in the several dark passages that run at right angles from the canal and have no outlet at their further end.

Jongeuffrouw Beresteyn followed rapidly in the wake of her lantern bearers and keeping Maria — who was always timorous on dark nights and in lonely places — quite close to her elbow. Every footstep of the way was familiar to her. Now the ground was frozen hard and the covering of snow crisp beneath her feet as she walked, but in the autumn and the spring the mud here was ankle-deep, save on one or two rare spots in front of the better houses or public buildings where a few stones formed a piece of dry pavement. Such a spot was the front of the Oudenvrouwenhuis with its wide oaken gateway and high brick walls. The unmade road here was always swept neatly and tidily; during the rainy seasons the mud was washed carefully away and in the winter it was kept free from snow.

Beyond it was a narrow passage which led to the Chapel of St. Pieter, now disused since the Remonstrants had fallen into such bad odour after the death of Olden Barneveld and the treachery of his sons. The corner of this passage was a favourite haunt for beggars, but only for the humbler ones — since there is a hierarchy even amongst beggars, and the more prosperous ones, those known to the town-guard and the night-watchmen, flocked around the church porches. In this spot where there were but a few passers-by, only those poor wretches came who mayhap had something to hide from the watchful eyes of the guardians of this city, those who had been in prison or had deserted from the army, or were known to be rogues and thieves.

Gilda Beresteyn, who had a soft heart, always kept a few kreutzers in the palm of her hand ready to give to any of these poor outcasts who happened to beg for alms along the embankment, but she never liked to stop here in order to give those other alms, which she knew were oft more acceptable than money — the alms of kindly words.

To-night, however, she herself felt miserable and lonely and the voice that came to her out of the darkness of the narrow passage which leads to the Chapel of St. Pieter was peculiarly plaintive and sweet.

"For the love of Christ, gentle lady," murmured the voice softly.

Gilda stopped, ready with the kreutzers in her hand. But it was very dark just here and the snow appeared too deep to traverse; she could not see the melancholy speaker, though she knew of course that it was a woman.

"Bring the lantern a little nearer, Jakob," she said.

"Do not stop, meijuffrouw, to parley with any of these scamps," said Maria as she clung fearsomely to her mistress's cloak.

"For the love of Christ, gentle lady!" sighed the pitiable voice out of the darkness again.

Jakob brought the lantern nearer.

Some half a dozen steps up the passage a pathetic little figure appeared to view, the figure of a woman — a mere girl — with ragged shift and bare legs half buried in the depths of the snow.

Gilda without hesitation went up to her, money in hand, her own feet sinking in ankle deep into the cold, white carpet below. The girl retreated as the kind lady advanced, apparently scared by the two men who had paused one at each corner of the passage holding their lanterns well above their heads.

"Don't be frightened, girl," said Gilda Beresteyn gently, "here's a little money. You look so cold, poor child!"

The next moment a double cry behind her caused her to turn in a trice: she had only just time to take in the terrifying fact that Piet and Jakob had dropped their lanterns to the ground even as thick dark cloths were thrown over their heads — before she found herself firmly seized round the waist by a powerful arm whilst some kind of scarf was wound quickly round her face.

She had not the time to scream, the enveloping scarf smothered her cry even as it formed in her throat. The last thing of which she was clearly conscious was of a voice — which strangely enough sounded familiar — saying hurriedly:

"Here, take thy money, girl, and run home now as fast as thy feet will take thee."

After that, though she was never totally unconscious, she was only dimly aware of what happened to her. She certainly felt herself lifted off the ground and carried for some considerable distance. What seemed to her a long, long time afterwards she became aware

that she was lying on her back and that there was a smell of sweet hay and fresh straw around her. Close to her ear there was the sound of a woman moaning. The scarf still covered her face, but it had been loosened so that she could breathe, and presently when she opened her eyes, she found that the scarf only covered her mouth.

As she lay on her back she could see nothing above her. She was not cold for the straw around her formed a warm bed, and her cloak had been carefully arranged so as to cover her completely, whilst her feet were wrapped up snugly in a rug.

It was only when complete consciousness returned to her that she realized that she was lying in an object that moved: she became conscious of the jingling of harness and of occasional unpleasant jolting, whilst the darkness overhead was obviously caused by the roof of a vehicle.

She tried to raise herself on her elbow, but she discovered that loose, though quite efficient bonds held her pinioned down; her arms, however, were free and she put out her hand in the direction whence came the muffled sound of a woman moaning.

"Lord! God Almighty! Lord in Heaven!" and many more appeals of a like character escaped the lips of Gilda's companion in misfortune.

"Maria! Is it thou?" said Gilda in a whisper. Her hand went groping in the dark until it encountered firstly a cloak, then an arm and finally a head apparently also enveloped in a cloth.

"Lord God Almighty!" sighed the other woman feebly through the drapery. "Is it mejuffrouw?"

"Yes, Maria, it is I!" whispered Gilda, "whither are they taking us, thinkest thou?"

"To some lonely spot where they can conveniently murder us!" murmured Maria with a moan of anguish.

"But what became of Piet and Jakob?"

"Murdered probably. The cowards could not defend us."

Gilda strained her ears to listen. She hoped by certain sounds to make out at least in which direction she was being carried away. Above the rattle and jingle of the harness she could hear at times the measured tramp of horses trotting in the rear, and she thought at one time that the sleigh went over the wooden bridge on the Spaarne and then under the echoing portals of one of the city gates.

Her head after awhile began to ache terribly and her eyes felt as if they were seared with coal. Of course she lost all count of time: it seemed an eternity since she had spoken to the girl in the dark passage which leads to the chapel of St. Pieter.

Maria who lay beside her moaned incessantly for awhile like a fretful child, but presently she became silent.

Perhaps she had gone to sleep. The night air which found its way through the chinks of the hood came more keen and biting against Gilda's face. It cooled her eyes and eased the throbbing of her head. She felt very tired and as if her body had been bruised all over.

The noises around her became more monotonous, the tramping of the horses in the rear of the sleigh sounded muffled and subdued. Drowsiness overcame Gilda Beresteyn and she fell into a troubled, half-waking sleep.

CHAPTER XV

THE HALT AT BENNEBROCK

For a long time she had been half-awake, ever since the vehicle had stopped, which must have been ages and ages ago. She had lain in a kind of torpor, various sounds coming to her ear as through the veil of dreams: there was Maria snoring contentedly close by, and the horses champing their bits and pawing the hard-frozen ground, also there was the murmur of voices, subdued and muffled — but she could not distinguish words.

Not for a long time at any rate — an interminably long time!

Her body and limbs felt quite numb, pleasantly warm under the rugs and cloaks, only her face rejoiced in the cold blast that played around it and kept her forehead and eyes cool.

Once it seemed to her as if out of the darkness more than one pair of eyes were looking down on her, and she had the sense as of a warm rapid breath that mingled with the pure frosty air. After which some one murmured:

“She is still unconscious.”

“I think not,” was the whispered reply.

She lay quite still, in case those eyes came to look on her again. The murmuring voices sounded quite close to the sleigh now, and soon she found that by holding her breath, and straining her every listening faculty she could detach the words that struck her ear from all the other sounds around her.

Two men, she thought, were speaking, but their voices were never once raised above a whisper.

“You are satisfied?” she heard one of these saying quite distinctly.

“Entirely!” was the response.

“The letter to Ben Isaje?”

“I am not like to lose it.”

“Hush! I heard a sound from under the hood.”

“’Tis only the old woman snoring.”

“I wish you could have found a more comfortable sledge.”

“There was none to be had in Haarlem to-day. But we’ll easily get one in Leyden.”

In Leyden! Gilda’s numbed body quivered with horror. She was being taken to Leyden and further on still by sleigh! Her thoughts at present were still chaotic but gradually she was sorting them out, one or two becoming more clear, more insistent than the rest.

“I would like the jonge juffrouw to have something to eat and drink,” came once more in whispers from out the darkness. “I fear that she will be faint!”

“No! no!” came the prompt, peremptory reply, “it would be madness to let her realize so soon where she is. She knows this place well.”

A halt on the way to Leyden! and thence a further journey by sledge! Gilda’s thoughts were distinctly less chaotic already. She was beginning to marshal them up in her mind, together with her recollections of the events of the past twenty-four hours. The darkness around her, which was intense, and the numbness of her body all helped her to concentrate her faculties on these recollections first and on the obvious conclusions based upon her position at the present moment.

She was being silenced effectually because of the knowledge which she had gained in the cathedral last night. The Lord of Stoutenburg, frightened for his plans, was causing her to be put out of his way. Never for a moment did she suspect her own brother in this. It was that conscienceless, ambitious, treacherous Stoutenburg! at most her brother was blindly acquiescent in this infamy.

Gilda was not afraid. Not even when this conviction became fully matured in her mind. She was not afraid for herself, although for one brief moment the thought did cross her mind that mayhap she had only been taken out of Haarlem in order that her death might be more secretly encompassed.

But she was cast in a firmer mould than most women of her rank and wealth would be. She came of a race that had faced misery, death and torture for over a century for the sake of its own independence of life and of faith, and was ready to continue the struggle for another hundred years if need be for the same ideals, and making the same sacrifices in order to attain them. Gilda Beresteyn gave but little thought to her own safety. Life to her, if Stoutenburg’s dastardly conspiracy against the Stadtholder was successful and involved her own brother, would be of little value to her. Nicolaes’ act of treachery would break her father’s heart; what matter if she herself lived to witness all that misery or not.

No! it was her helplessness at this moment that caused her the most excruciating soul-agony. She had been trapped and was being cast aside like a noxious beast, that is in the way of men. Like a child that is unruly and has listened at the keyhole of the door, she was being punished and rendered harmless.

Indeed she had no fear for her safety; the few words which she had heard, the presence of Maria, all tended to point out that there would be no direct attempt against her life. It was only of that awful crime that she thought, that crime which she had so fondly hoped that she might yet frustrate: it was of the Stadtholder’s safety that she thought and of her brother’s sin.

She also thought of her poor father who, ignorant of the events which had brought about this infamous abduction, would be near killing himself with sorrow at the mysterious disappearance of his only daughter. Piet and Jakob would tell how they had been set on in the dark — footpads would be suspected, the countryside where they usually have their haunts would be scoured for them, but the high road leading to Leyden would never mayhap be watched, and certainly a sleigh under escort would never draw the attention of the guardians of the peace.

While these thoughts whirled wildly in her brain it seemed that preparations had been and were being made for departure. She heard some whispered words again:

“Where will you put up at Leyden?”

“At the ‘White Goat.’ I know the landlord well.”

“Will he be awake at so late an hour?”

“I will ride ahead and rouse his household. They shall be prepared for our coming.”

“But....”

“You seem to forget, sir,” came in somewhat louder tones, “that all the arrangements for this journey were to be left entirely to my discretion.”

For the moment Gilda could catch no further words distinctly: whether a quarrel had ensued or not she could not conjecture, but obviously the two speakers had gone some little distance away from the sledge. All that she could hear was — after a brief while of silence — a quaint muffled laugh which though it scarce was distinguishable from the murmur of the wind, so soft was it, nevertheless betrayed to her keenly sensitive ear an undercurrent of good-humoured irony.

Again there seemed something familiar to her in the sound.

After this there was renewed tramping of heavy feet on the snow-covered ground, the clang of bits and chains, the creaking of trace, the subdued call of encouragement to horses:

“Forward!” came a cheery voice from the rear.

Once more they were on the move; on the way to Leyden — distant six leagues from her home. Gilda could have cried out now in her misery. She pictured her father — broken-hearted all through the night, sending messengers hither and thither to the various gates of the city, unable no doubt to get satisfactory information at this late hour: she pictured Nicolaes feigning ignorance of the whole thing, making pretence of anxiety and grief. Torturing thoughts kept her awake, though her body was racked with fatigue. The night was bitterly cold, and the wind, now that they had reached open country, cut at times across her face like a knife.

The sledge glided along with great swiftness now, over the smooth, thick carpet of snow that covered the long, straight road. Gilda knew that the sea was not far off: but she also knew that every moment now she was being dragged further and further away from the chance of averting from her father and from her house the black catastrophe of disgrace which threatened them.

CHAPTER XVI

LEYDEN

It seemed that from some church tower far away a clock struck the hour of midnight when the sledge at last came to a halt.

Worn out with nerve-racking thoughts, as well as with the cruel monotony of the past four hours, Gilda felt her soul and body numb and lifeless as a stone. There was much running and shouting round the vehicle, of horses' hoofs resounding against rough cobblestones, of calls for ostler and landlord.

Then for awhile comparative quietude. Maria still snored unperturbed, and Gilda, wide-eyed and with beating heart, awaited further events. Firstly the hood of the sledge in which she lay was lifted off: she could hear the ropes and straps being undone, the tramp of feet all round her and an occasional volley of impatient oaths. Then out of the darkness a pleasant voice called her somewhat peremptorily by name.

"Mejuffrouw Beresteyn!"

She did not reply, but lay quite still, with wide-open eyes like a bird that has been tracked and knows that it is watched. Maria uttered a loud groan and tried to roll over on her side.

"Where have those murderers taken us to now?" she muttered through the veil that still enveloped her mouth.

The pleasant voice close to Gilda's ear, now called out more loudly:

"Here, Pythagoras, Socrates! lift the mevrouw out of the sleigh and carry her up to the room which the landlord hath prepared for the ladies."

Maria immediately gave vent to violent shrieks of protest.

"How dare ye touch me!" she screamed at the top of her voice, "ye murdering devils dare but lay a finger on a respectable woman and God will punish you with pestilence and dislocation and ..."

It must be presumed that neither Pythagoras nor Socrates were greatly upset by the mevrouw's curses, for Gilda, who was on the alert for every movement and for every sound, was well aware that Maria's highly respectable person was presently seized by firm hands, that the shawl round her face was pressed more tightly against her mouth — for her screams sounded more muffled — and that despite her struggles, her cries and her kicking she was lifted bodily out of the sledge.

When these disquieting sounds had died down the same pleasant voice broke in once again on Gilda's obstinate silence.

"Mejuffrouw Beresteyn!" it reiterated once again.

"Dondersteen! but 'tis no use lying mum there, and pretending to be asleep," it continued after awhile, since Gilda certainly had taken no notice of the call, "that old woman made enough noise to wake the dead."

Still not a sound from Gilda, who — more like a cowering bird than ever — was trying with widely-dilated eyes to pierce the darkness around her, in order to see something of the enemy. She saw the outline of a plumed hat like a patch of ink against the sky above, and also a pair of very broad shoulders that were stooping toward the floor of the sledge.

"Hey!" shouted the enemy with imperturbable cheerfulness, "leave that door wide open, I'll carry the jongejjuffrouw in myself. She seems to be unconscious."

The words roused Gilda out of her attitude of rigid silence, — the words which she looked on as an awful threat, and also the sensation that the loose bonds which had pinioned her down to the vehicle were being undone.

"I am not unconscious," she said aloud and quite calmly, "and was quite aware just now that you laid rough hands on a helpless woman. Since I am equally helpless and in your power I pray you to command what I must do."

"Come! that's brave! I knew that you could not be asleep," rejoined the enemy with inveterate good-humour, "but for the moment, mejuffrouw, I must ask you to descend from this sleigh. It has been a vastly uncomfortable vehicle for you to travel in, I fear me, but it was the best that we could get in Haarlem on New Year's day. An you will deign to enter this humble hostelry you will find the mevrouw there, a moderately good supper and something resembling a bed, all of which I am thinking will be highly acceptable to you."

While the enemy spoke, Gilda had a few seconds in which to reflect. Above all things she was a woman of sense and one who valued her own dignity; she knew quite well that the making of a scene outside an inn in a strange town and at this hour of the night could but result in a loss of that dignity which she so highly prized, seeing that she was entirely at the mercy of men who were not likely to yield either to her protests or to her appeals.

Therefore, when she felt that she was free to move, she made every effort to raise herself; uncomfortably these long hours of weary motionless lying on her back, had made her limbs so numb that they refused her service. She made one or two brave attempts to hide her helplessness, but when she wanted to draw up her knees, she nearly cried with the pain of trying to move them out of their cramped position.

"It were wiser methinks," quoth the enemy with a slight tone of mockery in his cheerful voice, "it were wiser to accept the help of my arms. They are strong, firm and not cramped. Try them, mejuffrouw, you will have no cause to regret it."

Quite involuntarily — for of a truth she shrank from the mere touch of this rascal who obviously was in the pay of Stoutenburg, and doing the latter's infamous work for him — quite involuntarily then, she placed her hand upon the arm which he had put out as a prop for her.

It was as firm as a rock. Leaning on it somewhat heavily she was able to struggle to her knees. This made her venturesome. She tried to stand up; but fatigue, the want of food, the excitement and anxiety which she had endured, combined with the fact that she had been in a recumbent position for many hours, caused her to turn desperately giddy. She swayed like a young sapling under the wind, and would have fallen but that the same strong arm firm as a rock was there to receive her ere she fell.

I suppose that dizziness deprived her of her full senses, else she would never have allowed that knave to lift her out of the sledge and then to carry her into a building, and up some narrow and very steep stairs. But this Diogenes did do, with but scant ceremony; he

thought her protests foolish, and her attempts at lofty disdain pitiable. She was after all but a poor, helpless scrap of humanity, so slight and frail that as he carried her into the house, there was grave danger of his crushing her into nothingness as she lay in his arms.

Despite her pride and her aloofness he found it in his heart to pity her just now. Had she been fully conscious she would have hated to see herself pillowed thus against the doublet of so contemptible a knave; and here she was absolutely handed over body and soul to a nameless stranger, who in her sight, was probably no better than a menial — and this by the cynical act of one who next to her father was her most natural protector.

Yes, indeed he did pity her, for she seemed to him more than ever like that poor little song-bird whom a lout had tortured for his own pleasure by plucking out its feathers one by one. It seemed monstrous that so delicate a creature should be the victim of men's intrigues and passions. Why! even! her breath had the subtle scent of tulips as it fanned his cheeks and nostrils when he stooped in order to look on her.

In the meanwhile he had been as good as his word. He had pushed on to Leyden in advance of the cortège, had roused the landlord of this hostelry and the serving wenches, and scattered money so freely that despite the lateness of the hour a large square room — the best in the house, and scrupulously clean as to the red-tiled floor and walnut furniture — was at once put at the disposal of the ladies of so noble a travelling company.

The maids were sent flying hither and thither, one into the kitchen to make ready some hot supper, the other to the linen press to find the finest set of bed linen all sweetly laid by in rosemary.

Diogenes, still carrying Gilda, pushed the heavy panelled door open with his foot, and without looking either to right or left of him made straight for the huge open hearth, wherein already logs of pinewood had been set ablaze, and beside which stood an armchair, covered with Utrecht velvet.

Into its inviting and capacious depths he deposited his inanimate burden, and only then did he become aware of two pairs of eyes, which were fixed upon him with very different expression. A buxom wench in ample wide kirtle of striped duff, had been busy when he entered in spreading clean linen sheets upon the narrow little bed built in the panelling of the room. From under her quaint winged cap of starched lace a pair of very round eyes, blue as the Ryn, peeped in naïve undisguised admiration on the intruder, whilst from beneath her disordered coif Maria threw glances of deadly fury upon him.

Could looks but kill, Maria certes would have annihilated the low rascal who had dared to lay hands upon the noble jongeuffrouw. But our friend Diogenes was not a man to be perturbed either by admiring or condemning looks. He picked up a footstool from under the table and put it under the jongeuffrouw's feet; then he looked about him for a pillow, and with scant ceremony took one straight out of the hands of the serving wench who was just shaking it up ready for the bed. His obvious intention was to place it behind the jongeuffrouw's head, but at this act of unforgivable presumption Maria's wrath cast aside all restraint. Like a veritable fury she strode up to the insolent rascal, and snatched the pillow from him, throwing on him such a look of angry contempt as should have sent him grovelling on his knees.

"Keep thy blood cool, mevrouw," he said with the best of humour, "thy looks have already made a weak-kneed coward of me."

With the dignity of an offended turkey hen, Maria arranged the pillow herself under her mistress's head, having previously shaken it and carefully dusted off the blemish caused upon its surface by contact with an unclean hand. As for the footstool, she would not even allow it to remain there where that same unclean hand had placed it; she kicked it aside with her foot and drew up her small, round stature in a comprehensive gesture of outraged pride.

Diogenes made her a low bow, sweeping the floor with his plumed hat. The serving wench had much ado to keep a serious countenance, so comical did the mevrouw look in her wrath, and so mirth-provoking the gentleman with his graceful airs and unruffled temper. Anon laughter tickled her so that she had to run quickly out of the room, in order to indulge in a fit of uncontrolled mirth, away from the reproving glances of mevrouw.

It was the pleasant sound of that merry laughter outside the door that caused the jongeuffrouw to come to herself and to open wide, wondering eyes. She looked around her, vaguely puzzled, taking in the details of the cosy room, the crackling fire, the polished table, the inviting bed that exhaled an odour of dried rosemary.

Then her glance fell on Diogenes, who was standing hat in hand in the centre of the room, with the light from the blazing logs playing upon his smiling face, and the immaculate whiteness of his collar.

She frowned. And he who stood there — carelessly expectant — could not help wondering whether with that swift contemptuous glance which she threw on him, she had already recognized him.

"Mejuffrouw," he said, thus checking with a loud word the angry exclamation which hovered on her lips, "if everything here is not entirely in accordance with your desires, I pray you but to command and it shall be remedied if human agency can but contrive to do so. As for me, I am entirely at your service — your major domo, your servant, your outrider, anything you like to name me. Send but for your servant if you have need of aught; supper will be brought up to you immediately, and in the meanwhile I beg leave to free you from my unwelcome company."

Already there was a goodly clatter of platters, and of crockery outside, and as the wench re-entered anon bearing a huge tray on which were set out several toothsome things, Diogenes contrived to make his exit without encountering further fusillades of angry glances.

He joined his friends in the tap-room downstairs, and as he was young, vigorous and hungry he set to with them and ate a hearty supper. But he spoke very little and the rough jests of his brother philosophers met with but little response from him.

CHAPTER XVII

AN UNDERSTANDING

At one hour after midnight the summons came.

Maria, majestic and unbending, sailed into the tap-room where Pythagoras and Socrates were already stretched out full-length upon a couple of benches fast asleep and Diogenes still struggling to keep awake.

"The noble Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn desires your presence," she said addressing the latter with lofty dignity.

At once he rose to his feet, and followed Maria up the stairs and into the lady's room. From this room an inner door gave on another smaller alcove-like chamber, wherein a bed had been prepared for Maria.

Gilda somewhat curtly ordered her to retire.

"I will call you, Maria," she said, "when I have need of you."

Diogenes with elaborate courtesy threw the inner door open, and stood beside it plumed hat in hand while the mevrouw sailed past him, with arms folded across her ample bosom, and one of those dignified glances in her round eyes that should have annihilated this impious malapert, whose face — despite its airs of deference, was wreathed in an obviously ironical smile.

It was only when the heavy oaken door had fallen to behind her duenna that Gilda with an imperious little gesture called Diogenes before her.

He advanced hat in hand as was his wont, his magnificent figure very erect, his head with its wealth of untamed curls slightly bent. But he looked on her boldly with those laughter-filled, twinkling eyes of his and since he was young and neither ascetic nor yet a misanthrope, we may take it that he had some considerable pleasure in the contemplation of the dainty picture which she presented against the background of dull gold velvet: her small head propped against the cushions, and feathery curls escaping from under her coif and casting pearly, transparent shadows upon the ivory whiteness of her brow. Her two hands were resting each on an arm of the chair, and looked more delicate than ever now in the soft light of the tallow candles that burned feebly in the pewter candelabra upon the table.

Diogenes for the moment envied his friend Frans Hals for the power which the painter of pictures has of placing so dainty an image on record for all time. His look of bold admiration, however, caused Gilda's glance to harden, and she drew herself up in her chair in an attitude more indicative of her rank and station and of her consciousness of his inferiority.

But not with a single look or smile did she betray whether she had recognized him or not.

"Your name?" she asked curtly.

His smile broadened — self-deprecatingly this time.

"They call me Diogenes," he replied.

"A strange name," she commented, "but 'tis of no consequence."

"Of none whatever," he rejoined, "I had not ventured to pronounce it, only that you deigned to ask."

Again she frowned: the tone of gentle mockery had struck unpleasantly on her ear and she did not like that look of self-satisfied independence which sat on him as if to the manner born, when he was only an abject menial, paid to do dirty work for his betters.

"I have sent for you, sir," she resumed after a slight pause, "because I wished to demand of you an explanation of your infamous conduct. Roguery and vagabondage are severely punished by our laws, and you have brought your neck uncommonly near the gallows by your act of highway robbery. Do you hear me?" she asked more peremptorily, seeing that he made no attempt at a reply.

"I hear you, mejuffrouw."

"And what is your explanation?"

"That is my trouble, mejuffrouw. I have none to offer."

"Do you refuse then to tell me what your purpose is in thus defying the laws of the land and risking the gallows by laying hands upon me and upon my waiting woman in the open streets, and by taking me away by brute force from my home?"

"My purpose, mejuffrouw, is to convey you safely as far as Rotterdam, where I will hand you over into the worthy keeping of a gentleman who will relieve me of further responsibility with regard to your precious person."

"In Rotterdam?" she exclaimed, "what should I do in Rotterdam?"

"Nothing, I imagine," replied Diogenes dryly, "for you would not remain there longer than is necessary. I am the bearer of written orders to that same gentleman in Rotterdam that he shall himself conduct you under suitable escort — of which I no doubt will still form an integral part — to his private residence, which I am told is situate outside the city and on the road to Delft."

"A likely story indeed!" she rejoined vehemently, "I'll not believe it! Common theft and robbery are your purpose, nothing less, else you had not stolen my purse from me nor the jewels which I wore."

"I had to take your purse and your jewels from you, mejuffrouw," he said with perfect equanimity, "else you might have used them for the purpose of slipping through my fingers. Wenches at wayside inns are easily amenable to bribes, so are the male servants at city hostleries. But your purse and the trinkets which you wore are safely stowed away in my wallet. I shall have the honour of returning them to you when we arrive in Rotterdam."

"Of returning them to me," she said with a contemptuous laugh, "do knaves like you ever return stolen property?"

"Seldom, I admit," he replied still with unruffled good-humour. "Nevertheless an exception hath often proved a rule. Your purse and trinkets are here," he added.

And from his wallet he took out a small leather purse and some loose jewellery which he showed to her.

"And," he added ere he once more replaced them in his wallet, "I will guard them most carefully until I can return them to you in Rotterdam, after which time 'twill be some one else's business to see that you do not slip through his fingers."

"And you expect me to believe such a senseless tale," she rejoined contemptuously.

"There are many things in this world and the next, mejuffrouw," he said lightly, "that are true though some of us believe them not."

"Nay! but this I do believe on the evidence of mine own eyes — that you stole my money and my jewels and have no intention of returning them to me."

"Your opinion of me, mejuffrouw, is already so low that it matters little surely if you think me a common thief as well."

"My opinion of you, sir, is based upon your actions."

"And these I own stand in formidable array against me."

She bit her lip in vexation and her slender fingers began to beat a tattoo on the arm of her chair. This man's placidity and inveterate good-humour were getting on her nerves. It is hard when one means to wound, to find the surest arrows falling wide of the mark. But now she waited for a moment or two lest her irritation betrayed itself in the quiver of her voice; and it was only when she felt quite sure that it would sound as trenchant and hard as she intended that it should, that she said abruptly:

"Who is paying you, sir, for this infamy?"

"One apparently who can afford the luxury," he replied airily.

"You will not tell me?"

"Do you think, mejuffrouw, that I could?"

"I may guess."

"It should not be difficult," he assented.

"And you, sir," she continued more vehemently, "are one of the many tools which the Lord of Stoutenburg doth use to gain his own political ends."

"The Lord of Stoutenburg?"

It was impossible for Gilda Beresteyn to gauge exactly whether the astonishment expressed in that young villain's exclamation was real or feigned. Certainly his mobile face was a picture of puzzlement, but this may have been caused only by his wondering how she could so easily have guessed the name of his employer. For as to this she was never for a moment in doubt. It was easy enough for her to piece together the series of events which had followed her parting from her brother at the cathedral door. Stoutenburg, burning with anxiety and glowing with his ardent desire for vengeance against the Stadtholder, had feared that she — Gilda — would betray the secret which she held, and he had paid this knave to take her out of the way. Stoutenburg and his gang! it could be no one else! she dared not think that her own brother would have a share in so dastardly an outrage. It was Stoutenburg of course! and this smiling knave knew it well! aye! even though he murmured again and this time to the accompaniment of smothered oaths:

"Stoutenburg? Bedonderd!"

"Aye!" she said loftily, "you see that I am not deceived! 'tis the Lord of Stoutenburg who gave you money to play this trick on me. He paid you! paid you, I say, and you, a man who should be fighting for your country, were over ready to make war upon a woman. Shame on you! shame I say! 'tis a deed that should cause you to blush, if indeed you have a spark of honesty in you, which of a truth I do gravely doubt."

She had worked herself up into an outburst of indignation and flung insult upon insult on him in the vague hope indeed of waking some slumbering remnant of shame in his heart, and mayhap ruffling that imperturbable air of contentment of his, and that impudent look of swagger most unbecoming in a menial.

But by naming Stoutenburg, she had certainly brought to light many things which Diogenes had only vaguely suspected. His mind — keen and shrewd despite his follies — recalled his interview with Nicolaes Beresteyn in the studio of Frans Hals; all the details of that interview seemed suddenly to have gained significance as well as lucidity. The lofty talk anent the future of Holland and the welfare of the Faith was easily understandable in this new light which the name of Stoutenburg had cast upon it. Stoutenburg and the welfare of Holland! a secret the possession of which meant death to six selfless patriots or the forfeiture mayhap of her good name and her honour to this defenceless girl! Stoutenburg at the bottom of it all! Diogenes could have laughed aloud with triumph so clear now was the whole scheme to him! There was no one living who did not think that at some time or other Stoutenburg meant to come back and make yet one more attempt to wipe a blood-stain from the annals of his country by one equally foul.

One of Barneveld's sons had already paid for such an attempt with his life; the other had escaped only in order to intrigue again, to plot again, and again to fail. And this poor girl had by a fortuitous mishap overheard the discussion of the guilty secret. Stoutenburg had come back and meant to kill the Stadtholder: Nicolaes Beresteyn was his accomplice and had callously sacrificed his innocent sister to the success of his friend's schemes.

If out of this network of intrigues a sensible philosopher did not succeed in consolidating his independence with the aid of a substantial fortune, then he was neither so keen nor so daring as his friends and he himself supposed!

And Gilda wondered what went on in his mind for those twinkling eyes of his never betrayed any deeper thought: but she noticed with great mortification that the insults which she had heaped upon him so freely had not shamed him at all, for the good-humoured smile was not effaced from his lips, rather did the shapely hand wander up to the moustache in order to give it — she thought — a more provoking curl.

"I still await your answer," she said haughtily, seeing that his prolonged silence savoured of impertinence.

"I humbly crave your pardon, mejuffrouw," he said pleasantly, "I was absorbed in wonderment."

"You marvelled, sir, how easily I saw behind your schemes, and saw the hand which drove you in harness?"

"Your pardon, mejuffrouw. I was pondering on your own words. You deigned to say just now that I — a man should be fighting for my country."

"And you are worthy, sir, to be called a man."

"Quite so," he said whimsically. "But even if I did lay claim to the title, mejuffrouw, how could I fight for my country when my country doth not happen to be at war just now."

"Your country? What pray might your country be? Not that this concerns me in the least," she added hastily.

"Of course not," he rejoined blandly.

"What is your country, sir?"

"England."

"I do not like the English."

"Nor do I, mejuffrouw. But I was unfortunately not consulted as to my choice of a fatherland: nor doth it change the fact that King James of England is at peace just now with all the world."

"So you preferred to earn a dishonest living by abducting innocent women, to further the intrigues of your paymaster."

"It is a harsh exposition," he said blandly, "of an otherwise obvious fact."

"And you are not ashamed."

"Not more than is necessary for my comfort."

"And cannot I move you, sir," she said with sudden warmth, "cannot an appeal to you from my lips rouse a feeling of manhood within you. My father is a rich man," she continued eagerly, "he hath it in his power to reward those who do him service; he can do so far more effectually than the Lord of Stoutenburg. Sir! I would not think of making an appeal to your heart! no doubt long ago you have taught it to remain cold to the prayers of a woman in distress: but surely you will listen to the call of your own self-interest. My father must be nigh heart-broken by now. The hours have sped away and he knows not where to find me."

"No! I have taken very good care of that, mejuffrouw. We are at Leyden now, but we left Haarlem through the Groningen gate. We travelled North first, then East, then only South.... Mynheer Beresteyn would require a divining rod wherewith to find you now."

It seemed unnecessary cruelty to tell her that, when already despair had seized on her heart, but she would not let this abominable rogue see how deeply she was hurt. She feigned not to have noticed the purport of his words and continued with the same insistent eagerness:

"Torn with anxiety, sir, he will be ready with a rich reward for one who would bring his only daughter safely home to him. I know not what the Lord of Stoutenburg hath promised you for doing his abominable work for him, but this I do assure you that my father will double and treble whatever sum you choose to name. Take me back to him, sir, now, this night, and to-morrow morning you could count yourself one of the rich men of Haarlem."

But Diogenes with half-closed eyes and gentle smile slowly shook his head.

"Were I to present myself before Mynheer Beresteyn to-night, he would summon the town guard and I should count myself as good as hanged to-morrow."

"Do you measure other men's treachery then by your own?"

"I measure other men's wrath by mine, mejuffrouw — and if a rogue had stolen my daughter, I should not rest until I had seen him hanged."

"I pledge you my word — —" she began hotly.

"And I mine, mejuffrouw," he broke in a little more firmly than he had spoken hitherto, "that I will place you safely and I pray God in good health, into the care of a certain gentleman in Rotterdam. To this is my word of honour pledged and even such a mean vagabond as I is bound by a given word."

To this she made no reply. Perhaps she felt that in his last words there lurked a determination which it were useless to combat. Her pride too was up in arms. How could she plead further to this rascal who met the most earnest appeal with a pert jest? who mocked at her distress, and was impervious alike to prayers and to insults?

"I see," she said coldly, "that I do but waste my time in calling on your honour to forego this infamous trickery. Where there is no chivalry, there can be neither honour nor pity. I am in your hands, helpless because I am a woman. If it is the will of God that I should so remain, I cannot combat brute force with my feeble strength. No doubt He knows best! and also I believe doth oft give the devil power to triumph in the sight of men. After this night, sir, I will no longer defame my lips by speaking to you. If you have a spark of compassion left in your heart for one who hath never wronged you, I but ask you to relieve me of your presence as much as you can during the weary hours of this miserable journey."

"Have I your leave to go at once?" he said with unalterable cheerfulness and made haste to reach the door.

"Only one moment more must I detain you," she rejoined haughtily. "I wish you to understand that from this hour forth until such time as it pleaseth God to free me from this humiliating position, I will follow your commands to the best of my ability; not because I recognize your right to dictate them but because I am helpless to oppose you. If I and my waiting woman obey your orders meekly, if we rise when so ordered, are ready to start on the way whenever so compelled, get in or out of the vehicle at the first word from you, can we at least rest assured that we shall be spared further outrage?"

"Do you mean, mejuffrouw, that I must no longer attempt to lift you out of a coach or to carry you up to your chamber, even if as to-night you are faint and but half-conscious?" he asked with whimsical earnestness.

"I desire, sir, that you and those who help you in this shameful work, do in future spare me and my woman the insult of laying hands upon our persons."

He gave a long, low whistle.

"Dondersteen," he exclaimed flippantly, "I had no thought that so much hatred and malice could lurk in the frail body of a woman ... 'tis true," he added with a shrug of the shoulders, "that a rogue such as I must of necessity know very little of the workings of a noble lady's mind."

"Had you known aught of mine, sir," she retorted coldly, "you would have understood that it is neither hatred nor malice which I feel for you and for those who are paying you to do this infamy ... what I feel is only contempt."

"Is that all?" he queried blandly. "Ah, well, mejuffrouw, then am I all the more indebted to you for the great honour which you have done me this hour past."

"Honour? I do not understand. It was not in my mind to do you honour."

"I am sure not. You did it quite unconsciously and the honour was enhanced thereby. You honoured me, mejuffrouw," he said while a tone of earnestness crept into his merry voice, "by trusting me — the common thief, the cut-throat, the hired brigand, alone in your presence for a whole hour, while the entire household here was abed and your duenna snoring contentedly in a room with locked door close by. During that hour your tongue did not spare my temper for one moment. For this recognition of manly forbearance and chivalry — even though you choose to deny their existence — do I humbly thank you. Despite — or perhaps because of your harsh estimate of me — you made me feel to-night almost a gentleman." With his habitual elegance of gesture he swept her a deep bow, then without another word or look, and with firm, ringing steps he walked quickly out of the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE START

Once the door safely closed behind him, he heaved a deep sigh as if of intense relief and he passed his hand quickly across his brow.

“By St. Bavon,” he murmured, “my friend Diogenes, thou hast had to face unpleasantness before now — those arquebusiers at Magdeburg were difficult to withstand, those murderous blackguards in the forests of Prague nearly had thy skin, but verdommt be thou, if thou hast had to hold thy temper in bounds like this before. Dondersteen! how I could have crushed that sharp-tongued young vixen till she cried for mercy ... or silenced those venomous lips with a kiss!... I was sore tempted indeed to give her real cause for calling me a knave....”

In the tap-room downstairs he found Pythagoras and Socrates curled up on the floor in front of the hearth. They were fast asleep, and Diogenes did not attempt to wake them. He had given them their orders for the next day earlier in the evening and with the promise of 500 golden guilders to be won by implicit obedience the two worthies were not like to disobey.

He himself had his promise to his friend Hals to redeem ... the flight along the frozen waterways back to Haarlem, a few hours spent in the studio in the Peuselaarsteeg, then the return flight to rejoin his compeers and the jongejuffrouw at the little hamlet of Houdekerk off the main road; thither he had ordered them to proceed in the early morning there to lie perdu until his return. Houdekerk lay to the east of Leyden and so well off the beaten track that the little party would be safely hidden there during the day; — he intended to be with them again well before midnight of the next day. For the nonce he collected a few necessary provisions which he had ordered to be ready for him — a half bottle of wine, some meat and bread, then he made his way out of the little hostelry and across the courtyard to the stables where the horses had been put up. The night was singularly clear: the waning moon after she had emerged from a bank of low-lying clouds, lit up the surrounding landscape with a radiance that was intensely blue.

Groping his way about in the stables Diogenes found his saddle which he himself had lifted off his horse, and from out the holster he drew a pair of skates. With these hanging by their straps upon his arm, he left the building behind him and turned to walk in the direction of the river.

The little city lay quite peaceful and still under the weird brilliancy of the moon which threw many-hued reflections on the snow-covered surfaces of roofs and tall gables. It was piercingly cold, the silver ribbon of the Rhyn wound its graceful course westward to the North Sea and from beyond its opposite bank a biting wind swept across the dykes and over the flat country around, chasing myriads of crisp snowflakes from their rest and driving them in wanton frolic round and round into little whirlpools of mist that glistened like the facets of diamonds.

Diogenes had walked briskly along; the skates upon his arm clicked at every one of his movements with a pleasing metallic sound. He chose a convenient spot on the river bank whereon to squat on the ground, and fastened on his skates.

After which he rose and for a moment stood looking straight out northwards before him. But a few leagues — half a dozen at most — lay between him and Haarlem. The Rhyn as well as the innumerable small polders and lakes had left — after the autumn floods — their usual trail of narrow waterways behind them which, frozen over now, joining, intersecting and rejoining again formed a perfect, uninterrupted road from hence to the northern cities. It had been along these frozen ways that the daring and patriotic citizens of Leyden had half a century ago kept up communication with the outer world during the memorable siege which had lasted throughout the winter, and it was by their help that they were able to defy the mighty investing Spanish army by getting provisions into the beleaguered city.

A young adventurer stood here now calmly measuring in his mind the distance which he would have to traverse in the teeth of a piercing gale and at dead of night in order to satisfy the ambition of a friend. It was not the first time in his hazardous career that he had undertaken such a journey. He was accustomed to take all risks in life with indifference and good humour, the only thing that mattered was the ultimate end: an exciting experience to go through, a goodly competence to earn, a promise to fulfil.

Up above, the waning moon seemed to smile upon his enterprise; she lay radiant and serene on her star-studded canopy of mysterious ethereal indigo. Diogenes looked back on the little hostelry, which lay some little distance up the street at right angles to the river bank. Was it his fancy or one of those many mysterious reflections thrown by the moon? but it certainly seemed to him as if a light still burned in one of the upper windows.

The unpleasant interview with the jongejuffrouw had evidently not weighed his spirits down, for to that distant light he now sent a loud and merry farewell.

Then deliberately facing the bitter blast he struck out boldly along the ice and started on his way.

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE KINGDOM OF THE NIGHT

Heigh-ho! for that run along the ice — a matter of half a dozen leagues or so — at dead of night with a keen north-easterly wind whipping up the blood, and motion — smooth gliding motion — to cause it to glow in every vein.

Heigh-ho! for the joy of living, for the joy in the white, ice-covered world, the joy in the night, and in the moon, and in those distant lights of Leyden which gradually recede and diminish — tiny atoms now in the infinite and mysterious distance!

What ho! a dark and heavy bank of clouds! whence come ye, ye disturbers of the moon's serenity? Nay! but we are in a hurry, the wind drives us at breathless speed, we cannot stay to explain whence we have come.

Moon, kind moon, come out again! ah, there she is, pallid through the frosty mist, blinking at this white world scarce less brilliant than she.

On, on! silently and swiftly, in the stillness of the night, the cruel skates make deep gashes on the smooth skin of the ice, long even strokes now, for the Meer is smooth and straight, and the moon — kind moon! — marks an even silvery track, there where the capricious wind has swept it free of snow.

Hat in hand, for the wind is cool and good, and tames the hot young blood which a woman's biting tongue has whipped into passion.

"The young vixen," shouts a laughing voice through the night, "was she aware of her danger? how I could have tamed her, and cowed her and terrified her! Did she play a cat and mouse game with me I wonder.... Dondersteen! if I thought that...."

But why think of a vixen now, of blue eyes and biting tongues, when the night with unerring hand clothes the landscape with glory. One word to the north-east wind and he sweeps the track quite clear and causes myriads of diamonds to fly aimlessly about, ere they settle like tiny butterflies on tortuous twigs, and rough blades of coarse grass. One call to the moon and she partially hides her face, painting the haze around her to a blood-red hue; now a touch of blue upon the ice, further a streak of emerald, and then the tender mauves of the regal mantle of frost.

Then the thousand sounds that rise all around: the thousand sounds which all united make one vast, comprehensive silence: the sighing of the wind in the bare poplar trees, the rattle of the tiny dead twigs and moaning of the branches; from far away the dull and ceaseless rumble which speaks of a restless sea, and now and again the loud and melancholy boom of the ice, yielding to the restless movements of the water beneath.

The sounds which make up silence — silence and loneliness, nature's perfect repose under its downy blanket of snow, the vast embrace of the night stretching out into infinity in monotonous flatnesses far away, to the mysterious mists which lie beyond the horizon.

Oh! for the joy of it all! the beauty of the night, the wind and the frost! and the many landmarks which loom out of the darkness one by one, to guide that flying figure on its way; the square tower of old Katwyk-binnen church, the group of pollard willows at the corner of Veenenburg Polder, the derelict boats on the bank of the Haarlemer Meer, and always from the left that pungent smell of the sea, the brine and the peculiar odour which emanates from the dykes close by, from the wet clay and rotting branches of willows that protect man against the encroachment of the ocean.

On, on, thou sole inhabitant of this kingdom of the night! fly on thy wings of metal — hour after hour — midnight — one — two — three — where are the hours now? There are no hours in the kingdom of the night! On, on, for the moon's course is swift and this will be a neck to neck race. Ah! the wicked one! down she goes, lower and lower in her career, and there is a thick veil of mist on the horizon in the west! Moon! art not afraid? the mists will smother thee! Tarry yet awhile! tarry ere thou layest down on the cold, soft bed! thy light! give it yet awhile! — two hours! one hour until thou hast outlined with silver the openwork tower of Haarlem's Groote Kirk.

On, on, for a brief hour longer how can one pause even to eat or drink? there is no hunger in the kingdom of night, no thirst, no fatigue! and this is a neck to neck race with the moon.

Ah Dondersteen! but thou art beaten, fair moon! Let the mists embrace thee now! sink! fall! die as thou list, there is the tower of St. Bavon! and we defy the darkness now!

Here it comes creeping like a furtive and stealthy creature wiping out with thick black cloth here a star and there the tip of a tall poplar tree, there a shrub, there a clump of grass! Take care, traveller, take care! that was not just the shadow from the bank, it was a bunch of reeds that entangle the feet and bring the skater down on to his face and will drag him, if he be not swift and alert, right under, into the water under the ice.

Take care! there is danger everywhere now in this inky blackness! danger on the ice, and upon the bank, danger in the shadows that are less dark than the night!

Darker and darker still, until it seemed as if the night's brush could not hold a more dense hue. The night — angered that she hath been so long defied — has overtaken the flying skater at last. She grips him, she holds him, he dare not advance, he will not retreat. Haarlem is there not one whole league away and he cannot move from where he is, in the midst of the Meer, on her icy bosom, with shadows as tangible as human bodies hemming him in on every side.

Haarlem is there! the last kiss of the moon before she fell into that bed of mist, was for St. Bavon's tower, which then seemed so near. Since then the night had wiped out the tower, and the pointed gables which cluster around, and the solitary skater is a prisoner in the fastnesses of the night.

CHAPTER XX

BACK AGAIN IN HAARLEM

They were terribly weary hours, these last two which the soldier of fortune, the hardened campaigner had to kill before the first streak of pallid, silvery dawn would break over the horizon beyond the Zuyder Zee.

Until then it meant the keeping on the move, ceaselessly, aimlessly, in order to prevent the frost from biting the face and limbs, it meant wearily waiting in incessant, nerve-racking movement for every quarter of an hour tolled by the unseen cathedral clock; it meant counting these and the intervening minutes which crawled along on the leaden stilts of time, until the head began to buzz and the brain to ache with the intensity of monotony and of fatigue. It meant the steeling of iron nerves, the bracing of hardy sinews, the keeping the mind clear and the body warm.

Two hours to kill under the perpetual lash of a tearing north wind, gliding up and down a half league of frozen way so as not to lose the track in the darkness and with a shroud of inky blackness to envelop everything around!

The hardened campaigner stood the test as only a man of abnormal physique and body trained to privations could have stood it. As soon as the thin grey light began to spread over the sky and picked out a few stunted snow-covered trees, one by one, he once more started on his way.

He had less than a league to cover now, and when at last the cathedral tower boomed out the hour of seven he was squatting on the back of the Oude Gracht in Haarlem, and with numbed fingers and many an oath was struggling with the straps of his skates.

A quarter of an hour later he was installed in his friend's studio in front of a comfortable fire and with a mug of hot ale in front of him.

"I didn't think that you really meant to come," Frans Hals had said when he admitted him into his house in response to his peremptory ring.

"I mean to have some breakfast now at any rate, my friend," was the tired wayfarer's only comment.

The artist was too excited and too eager to get to work to question his sitter further. I doubt if in Diogenes' face or in his whole person there were many visible traces of the fatigues of the night.

"What news in Haarlem?" he asked after the first draught of hot ale had put fresh life into his veins.

"Why? where have you been that you've not heard?" queried Hals indifferently.

"Away on urgent business affairs," replied the other lightly; "and what is the news?"

"That the daughter of Cornelius Beresteyn, the rich grain merchant and deputy burgomaster of this city, was abducted last night by brigands and hath not to my knowledge been found yet."

Diogenes gave a long, low whistle of well-feigned astonishment.

"The fact doth not speak much for the guardians of the city," he remarked dryly.

"The outrage was very cleverly carried out, so I've heard said; and it was not until close upon midnight that the scouts sent out by Mynheer Beresteyn in every direction came back with the report that the brigands left the city by the Groningen gate and were no doubt well on their way north by then."

"And what was done after that?"

"I have not heard yet," replied Hals. "It is still early. When the serving woman comes she will tell us the latest news. I am afraid I can't get to work until the light improves. Are you hungry? Shall I get you something more solid to eat?"

"Well, old friend," rejoined the other gaily, "since you are so hospitable...."

By eight o'clock he was once more ensconced on the sitter's platform, dressed in a gorgeous doublet and sash, hat on head and hand on hip, smiling at his friend's delight and eagerness in his work.

Hals in the meanwhile had heard further news of the great event which apparently was already the talk of Haarlem even at this early hour of the day.

"There seems no doubt," he said, "that the outrage is the work of those vervloekte sea-wolves. They have carried Gilda Beresteyn away in the hope of extorting a huge ransom out of her father."

"I hope," said Diogenes unctuously, "that he can afford to pay it."

"He is passing rich," replied the artist with a sigh. "A great patron of the arts ... it was his son you saw here yesterday, and the portrait which I then showed you was that of the unfortunate young lady who has been so cruelly abducted."

"Indeed," remarked Diogenes ostentatiously smothering a yawn as if the matter was not quite so interesting to him — a stranger to Haarlem — as it was to his friend.

"The whole city is in a tumult," continued Hals, who was busily working on his picture all the while that he talked, "and Mynheer Beresteyn and his son Nicolaes are raising a private company of Waardgelders to pursue the brigands. One guilder a day do they offer to these volunteers and Nicholaes Beresteyn will himself command the expedition."

"Against the sea-wolves?" queried the other blandly.

"In person. Think of it, man! The girl is his own sister."

"It is unthinkable," agreed Diogenes solemnly.

All of which was, of course, vastly interesting to him, since what he heard to-day would be a splendid guidance for him as to his future progress southwards to Rotterdam. Nicolaes Beresteyn leading an expedition of raw recruits in the pursuit of his sister was a subject humorous enough to delight the young adventurer's sense of fun; moreover it was passing lucky that suspicion had at once fallen on the sea-wolves — a notorious band of ocean pirates whose acts of pillage and abduction had long since roused the ire of all northern cities that suffered from their impudent depredations. Diogenes congratulated himself on the happy inspiration which had caused him to go out of Haarlem by its north gate and to have progressed toward Groningen for a quarter of an hour or so, leaving traces behind him which Nicolaes Beresteyn would no doubt know how to interpret in favour of the "sea-wolves" theory. He could also

afford to think with equanimity now of Pythagoras and Socrates in charge of the jongeuffrouw lying comfortably perdu at a wayside inn, situated fully thirteen leagues to the south of the nearest inland lair, which was known to be the halting place of the notorious sea-robbers.

Indeed, his act of friendship in devoting his day to the interests of Frans Hals had already obtained its reward, for he had gathered valuable information, and his journey to Rotterdam would in consequence be vastly more easy to plan.

No wonder that Frans Hals as he worked on the picture felt he had never had such a sitter before; the thoughts within redolent of fun, of amusement at the situation, of eagerness for the continuation of the adventure seemed to bubble and to sparkle out of the eyes, the lines of quiet humour, of gentle irony appeared ever mobile, ever quivering around the mouth.

For many hours that day hardly a word passed between the two men while the masterpiece was in progress, which was destined to astonish and delight the whole world for centuries to come. They hardly paused a quarter of an hour during the day to snatch a morsel of food; Hals, imbued with the spirit of genius, begrudged every minute not spent in work and Diogenes, having given his time to his friend, was prepared that the gift should be a full measure.

Only at four o'clock when daylight faded, and the twilight began to merge the gorgeous figure of the sitter into one dull, grey harmony, did the artist at last throw down brushes and palette with a sigh of infinite satisfaction.

"It is good," he said, as with eyes half-closed he took a final survey of his sitter and compared the living model with his own immortal work.

"Have you had enough of me?" asked Diogenes.

"No. Not half enough. I would like to make a fresh start on a new portrait of you at once. I would try one of those effects of light of which Rembrandt thinks that he hath the monopoly, but which I would show him how to treat without so much artificiality."

He continued talking of technicalities, rambling on in his usual fretful, impatient way, while Diogenes stretched out his cramped limbs, and rubbed his tired eyes.

"Can I undress now?"

"Yes. The light has quite gone," said the artist with a sigh.

Diogenes stood for a long time in contemplation of the masterpiece, even as the shadows of evening crept slowly into every corner of the studio and cast their gloom over the gorgeous canvas in its magnificent scheme of colour.

"Am I really as good looking as that?" he asked with one of his most winning laughs.

"Good looking? I don't know," replied Hals, "you are the best sitter I have ever had. To-day has been one of perfect, unalloyed enjoyment to me."

All his vulgar, mean little ways had vanished, his obsequiousness, that shifty look of indecision in the eyes which proclaimed a growing vice. His entire face flowed with the enthusiasm of a creator who has had to strain every nerve to accomplish his work, but having accomplished it, is entirely satisfied with it. He could not tear himself away from the picture, but stood looking at it long after the gloom had obliterated all but its most striking lights.

Then only did he realise that he was both hungry and weary.

"Will you come with me to the 'Lame Cow,'" he said to his friend, "we can eat and drink there and hear all the latest news. I want to see Cornelius Beresteyn if I can; he must be deeply stricken with grief and will have need of the sympathy of all his well-wishers. What say you? Shall we get supper at the 'Lame Cow'?"

To which proposition Diogenes readily agreed. It pleased his spirit of adventure to risk a chance encounter in the popular tavern with Nicolaes Beresteyn or the Lord of Stoutenburg, both of whom must think him at this moment several leagues away in the direction of Rotterdam. Neither of these gentlemen would venture to question him in a public place; moreover it had been agreed from the first that he was to be given an absolutely free hand with regard to his plans for conducting the jongeuffrouw to her ultimate destination.

Altogether the afternoon and evening promised to be more amusing than Diogenes had anticipated.

CHAPTER XXI

A GRIEF-STRICKEN FATHER

Frans Hals had not been guilty of exaggeration when he said that the whole city was in a turmoil about the abduction of Gilda Beresteyn by that impudent gang of ocean-robbers who called themselves the sea-wolves.

On this subject there were no two opinions. The sea-wolves had done this deed as they had done others of a like nature before. The abduction of children of rich parents was one of their most frequent crimes: and many a wealthy burgher had had to pay half his fortune away in ransom for his child. The fact that a covered sledge escorted by three riders who were swathed in heavy mantles had been seen to go out of the city by the northern gate at seven o'clock last evening, was held to be sufficient proof that the unfortunate jongejufrouw was being conveyed straightway to the coast where the pirates had their own lairs and defied every effort which had hitherto been made for their capture.

On this the 2nd day of January, 1624 — rather less than twenty-four hours after the abduction of Gilda Beresteyn, the tapperij of the "Lame Cow" presented an appearance which was almost as animated as that which had graced it on New Year's night. Everyone who took an interest in the terrible event went to the "Lame Cow" in the hope of finding another better informed than himself.

Men and women sat round the tables or leaned against the bars discussing the situation: every one, of course, had a theory to put forward, or a suggestion to offer.

"'Tis time the old law for the raising of a corps of Waardgelders by the city were put into force once more," said Mynheer van der Meer the burgomaster, whose words carried weight. "What can a city do for the preservation of law and order if it has not the power to levy its own military guard?"

"My opinion is," said Mynheer van Zeller, who was treasurer of the Oudemannenhuis and a personage of vast importance, "that we in this city ought to close out gates against all this foreign rabble who infest us with their noise and their loose ways. Had there not been such a crowd of them here for the New Year you may depend on it that Jongejufrouw Beresteyn would not have had to suffer this dastardly abomination."

Others on the other hand thought that the foreign mercenaries now within the city could be utilised for the purpose of an expedition against the sea-wolves.

"They are very daring and capable fighters," suggested Mynheer van Beerenbrock — a meek, timid but vastly corpulent gentleman of great consideration on the town council, "and more able to grapple with desperate brigands than were a levy of raw recruits from among our young townsfolk."

"Set a rogue to fight a rogue, say I," assented another pompous burgher.

Cornelius Beresteyn sat at a table with his son and surrounded by his most influential friends. Those who knew him well declared that he had aged ten years in the past few hours. His devotion to his daughter was well known and it was pitiable to see the furrows in his cheeks wet with continuously falling tears. He sat huddled up within himself, his elbows resting on the table, his head often buried in his hands when emotion mastered him, and he felt unable to restrain his tears. He looked like a man absolutely dazed with the immensity of his grief, as if some one had dealt him a violent blow on the head which had half-addled his brain.

Throughout the day his house had been positively invaded by the frequent callers who, under a desire to express their sympathy, merely hid their eagerness to learn fresh details of the outrage. Cornelius Beresteyn, harassed by this well-meaning and very noisy crowd and feeling numb in mind and weary in body, had been too feeble to withstand the urgent entreaties of his friends who had insisted on dragging him to the "Lame Cow," where the whole situation — which had become of almost national importance — could be fully and comprehensively discussed.

"You want to get your daughter back, do you not, old friend?" urged Mynheer van der Meer the burgomaster.

"Of course," assented Beresteyn feebly.

"And you want to get her back as quickly as possible," added the pompous treasurer of the Oudemannenhuis.

"As quickly as possible," reiterated Beresteyn vaguely.

"Very well then," concluded the burgomaster, in tones of triumph which suggested that he had gained a great victory over the obstinate will of his friend, "what you must do, my good Beresteyn, is to attend an informal council which I have convened for this afternoon at the 'Lame Cow' and whereat we will listen to all the propositions put forward by our fellow-townsmen for the speedy capture of those vervloekte brigands and the liberation of your beloved daughter."

In the meanwhile an untoward accident had momentarily arrested the progress of the original band of volunteers who, under the leadership of Nicolaes Beresteyn, had started quite early in the morning on the Groningen route in pursuit of the sea-wolves. Nicolaes, namely, on remounting his horse after a brief halt at Bloemendal, had slipped on the snow covered ground; his horse jumped aside and reared and, in so doing, seriously wrenched Nicolaes' right arm, almost dislocating his shoulder and causing him thereby such excruciating pain that he nearly fainted on the spot.

Further progress on horseback became an impossibility for him, and two of the volunteers had much difficulty in conveying him back to Haarlem, where, however, he displayed the utmost fortitude by refusing to waste his time in being examined and tended by the bone-setter, and declaring that since he could not take an active part in the campaign against the vervloekte malefactors he would give every moment of his time and every faculty he possessed for the organisation of an effective corps of soldiery capable of undertaking a successful punitive expedition.

He joined his father in the tap-room of the "Lame Cow," and though he was obviously in great pain with his arm and shoulder which he had hastily and perfunctorily tied up with his sash, he was untiring in his suggestions, his advice, his offers of money and of well-considered plans.

Unbeknown to anyone save to him, the Lord of Stoutenburg sat in a dark recess of the tapperij deeply interested in all that was going on. He knew, of course, every detail of the plot which Nicolaes Beresteyn had hatched at his instigation and — hidden as he was

in his obscure corner — it pleased his masterful mind to think that the tangled skein of this affair which these solemn and pompous burghers were trying to unravel had been originally embroiled by himself.

He listened contemptuously and in silence to the wild and oft senseless talk which went on around him; but when he caught sight of Diogenes swaggering into the room in the wake of the painter Frans Hals he very nearly betrayed himself.

Nicolaes Beresteyn too was dumbfounded. For the moment he literally gasped with astonishment, and was quite thankful that his supposedly dislocated shoulder furnished a good pretext for the string of oaths which he uttered. But Diogenes, sublimely indifferent to the astonishment of his patron, took a seat beside his friend at one of the vacant tables and ordered a substantial supper with a bottle of very choice wine wherewith to wash it down, all of which he evidently meant to pay for with Nicolaes' money. The latter could do nothing but sit by in grim silence while the man whom he had paid to do him service ate and drank heartily, cracked jokes and behaved for all the world as if he were a burgher of leisure plentifully supplied with money.

Time was going on: the subject of the expedition against the sea-wolves had been fully discussed and certain resolutions arrived at, which only lacked the assent of the burgomaster sitting in council and of Cornelius Beresteyn — the party chiefly interested in the affair — in order to take effect on the morrow.

Gradually the tap-room became less and less full: one by one the eager and inquisitive townsfolk departed in order to impart what news they had gleaned to their expectant families at home.

Nicolaes Beresteyn, inwardly fuming and fretting with rage, had been quite unable to stay on quietly while Diogenes sat not twenty paces away from him, wasting his patron's time and money and apparently in the best of humours, for his infectious laugh rang from end to end of the raftered room; he had soon assembled a small crowd of boon-companions round his table, whom he treated to merry jests as well as to Mynheer Beek's most excellent wine; but when he leaned forward bumper in hand and actually had the audacity loudly to pledge the noble Beresteyn family and to wish the heroic Nicolaes speedy mending of his broken bones, the latter rose with a muttered curse and, having taken a curt farewell from his friends, he strode glowering out of the room.

The Lord of Stoutenburg — as unobtrusive and silent as was his wont — rose quietly a few minutes later and followed in the wake of his friend.

CHAPTER XXII

A DOUBLE PLEDGE

Cornelius Beresteyn had now only a few of his most intimate friends beside him, and when Frans Hals had finished his supper he ventured to approach the rich patron of arts and to present his own most respectful expressions of sympathy.

Softened by grief the old man was more than usually gracious to the artist.

"'Tis a bitter blow, my good Hals," he said dully.

"Please God, those devils have only an eye on your money, mynheer," said the artist consolingly. "They will look on the jongejuffrouw as a valuable hostage and treat her with the utmost deference in the hopes of getting a heavy ransom from you."

"May you be speaking truly," sighed Cornelius with a disconsolate shake of the head, "but think what she must be suffering now, while she is uncertain of her own fate, poor child!"

"Alas!"

"This delay is killing me, Hals," continued the old man, who in the midst of his more pompous friends seemed instinctively drawn to the simple nature of this humble painter of pictures. "The burgomaster means well but his methods are slow and ponderous. All my servants and dependents have joined the first expedition toward Groningen, but God knows how they will get on, now that Nicolaes no longer leads them. They have had no training in such matters, and will hardly know how to proceed."

"You really want some one who is daring and capable, mynheer, some one who will be as wary as those vervloekte sea-wolves and beat them at their own game. 'Tis not so much the numbers that you want as the one brain to direct and to act."

"True! true, my good Hals! But our best men are all at the war fighting for our religious and political liberties, while we — the older citizens of our beloved country with our wives and our daughters — are left a prey to the tyranny of malefactors and of pirates. The burgomaster hopes to raise an efficient corps of volunteers by to-morrow ... but I doubt me if he will succeed.... I have sent for help, I have spared no money to obtain assistance ... but I am an old man myself, and my son alas! has been rendered helpless at the outset, through no fault of his own...."

"But surely there are young men left in Haarlem whom wanton mischief such as this would cause to boil with indignation."

"There are few young men left in Haarlem, my friend," rejoined Beresteyn sadly, "the Stadtholder hath claimed the best of them. Those who are left behind are too much engrossed in their own affairs to care greatly about the grief of an old man, or a wrong done to an innocent girl."

"I'll not believe it," said Hals hotly.

"Alas, 'tis only too true! Men nowadays — those at any rate who are left in our cities — no longer possess that spirit of chivalry or of adventure which caused our forebears to give their life's blood for justice and for liberty."

"You wrong them, mynheer," protested the artist.

"I think not. Think on it, Hals. You know Haarlem well; you know most people who live in the city. Can you name me one man who would stand up before me to-day and say boldly: 'Mynheer, you have lost your daughter: evil-doers have taken her from her home. Here am I ready to do you service, and by God do I swear that I will bring your daughter back to you!' So would our fathers have spoken, my good Hals, before commerce and prosperity had dulled the edge of reckless gallantry. By God! they were fine men in those days — we are mere pompous, obese, self-satisfied shopkeepers now."

There was a great deal of bitter truth in what Cornelius Beresteyn had said: Hals — the artist — who had listened to the complacent talk that had filled this room awhile ago — who knew of the commercial transactions that nowadays went by the name of art-patronage — he knew that the old man was not far wrong in his estimate of his fellow-countrymen in these recent prosperous times.

It was the impulsive, artistic nature in him which caused him to see what he merely imagined — chivalry, romance, primeval notions of bravery and of honour.

He looked round the room — now almost deserted — somewhat at a loss for words that would soothe Beresteyn's bitter spirit of resentment, and casually his glance fell on the broad figure of his friend Diogenes, who, leaning back in his chair, his plumed hat tilted rakishly across his brow, had listened to the conversation between the two men with an expression of infinite amusement literally dancing in his eyes. And it was that same artistic, impulsive nature which caused Frans Hals then to exclaim suddenly:

"Well, mynheer! since you call upon me and on my knowledge of this city, I can give you answer forthwith. Yes! I do know a man, now in Haarlem, who hath no thought of commerce or affairs, who possesses that spirit of chivalry which you say is dead among the men of Holland. He would stand up boldly before you, hat in hand and say to you: 'Mynheer, I am ready to do you service, and by God do I swear that I will bring your daughter back to you, safe and in good health!' I know such a man, mynheer!"

"Bah! you talk at random, my good Hals!" said Beresteyn with a shrug of the shoulders.

"May I not present him to you, mynheer?"

"Present him? Whom?... What nonsense is this?" asked the old man, more dazed and bewildered than before by the artist's voluble talk. "Whom do you wish to present to me?"

"The man who I firmly believe would out of pure chivalry and the sheer love of adventure do more toward bringing the jongejuffrouw speedily back to you than all the burgomaster's levies of guards and punitive expeditions."

"You don't mean that, Hals?— 'twere a cruel jest to raise without due cause the hopes of a grief-stricken old man."

"'Tis no jest, mynheer!" said the artist, "there sits the man!"

And with a theatrical gesture — for Mynheer Hals had drunk some very good wine after having worked at high pressure all day, and his excitement had gained the better of him — he pointed to Diogenes, who had heard every word spoken by his friend, and at this dénouement burst into a long, delighted, ringing laugh.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, "your Olympian sense of humour is even greater than your might."

At an urgent appeal from Hals he rose and, hat in hand, did indeed approach Mynheer Beresteyn, looking every inch of him a perfect embodiment of that spirit of adventure which was threatening to be wafted away from these too prosperous shores. His tall figure looked of heroic proportions in this low room and by contrast with the small, somewhat obese burghers who still sat close to Cornelius, having listened in silence to the latter's colloquy with the artist. His bright eyes twinkled, his moustache bristled, his lips quivered with the enjoyment of the situation. The grace and elegance of his movements, born of conscious strength, added dignity to his whole personality.

"My friend hath name Diogenes," said Frans Hals, whose romantic disposition revelled in this presentation, "but there's little of the philosopher about him. He is a man of action, an invincible swordsman, a — —"

"Dondersteen, my good Hals!" ejaculated Diogenes gaily, "you'll shame me before these gentlemen."

"There's naught to be ashamed of, sir, in the eulogy of a friend," said Cornelius Beresteyn with quiet dignity, "and 'tis a pleasure to an old man like me to look on one so well favoured as yourself. Ah, sir! 'tis but sorrow that I shall know in future.... My daughter ... you have heard...?"

"I know the trouble that weighs on your soul, mynheer," replied Diogenes simply.

"You have heard then what your friend says of you?" continued the old man, whose tear-dimmed eyes gleamed with the new-born flicker of hope. "Our good Hals is enthusiastic, romantic ... mayhap he hath exaggerated ... hath in fact been mistaken...."

It was sadly pathetic to see the unfortunate father so obviously hovering 'twixt hope and fear, his hands trembled, there was an appeal in his broken voice, an appeal that he should not be deceived, that he should not be thrown back from the giddy heights of hope to the former deep abyss of despair.

"My daughter, sir ..." he murmured feebly, "she is all the world to me ... her mother died when she was a baby ... she is all the world to me ... they have taken her from me ... she is so young, sir ... so beautiful ... she is all the world to me ... I would give half my fortune to have her back safely in my arms...."

There was silence in the quaint old-world place after that — silence only broken by the suppressed sobs of the unfortunate man who had lost his only daughter. The others sat round the table, saying no word, for the pathos evoked by Beresteyn's grief was too great for words. Hals' eyes were fixed on his friend, and he tried in vain to read and understand the enigmatical smile which hovered in every line of that mobile face. The stillness only lasted a few seconds: the next moment Diogenes' ringing voice had once more set every lurking echo dancing from rafter to rafter.

"Mynheer!" he said loudly, "you have lost your daughter. Here am I to do you service, and by God I swear that I will bring your daughter safely back to you."

Frans Hals heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction. Cornelius Beresteyn, overcome by emotion, could not at first utter a word. He put out his hand, groping for that of the man who had fanned the flames of hope into living activity.

Diogenes, solemnly trying to look grave and earnest, took the hand thus loyally offered to him. He could have laughed aloud at the absurdity of the present situation. He — pledged by solemn word of honour to convey Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn to Rotterdam and there to place her into the custody of Ben Isaje, merchant of that city, he — carrying inside his doublet an order to Ben Isaje to pay him 3,000 guilders, he — known to the jongejuffrouw as the author of the outrage against her person, he was here solemnly pledging himself to restore her safely into her father's arms. How this was to be fulfilled, how he would contrive to earn that comfortable half of a rich Haarlem merchant's fortune, he had — we may take it — at the present moment, not the remotest idea: for indeed, the conveying of the jongejuffrouw back to Haarlem would be no difficult matter, once his promise to Nicolaes Beresteyn had been redeemed. The question merely was how to do this without being denounced by the lady herself as an impudent and double-dealing knave, which forsooth she already held him to be.

Cornelius and his friends, however, gave him no time now for further reflection. All the thinking out would have to be done presently — no doubt on the way between Haarlem and Houdekerk, and probably in a mist of driving snow — for the nonce he had to stand under the fire of unstinted eulogy hurled at him from every side.

"Well spoken, young man!"

"'Tis gallant bearing forsooth!"

"Chivalry, indeed, is not yet dead in Holland."

"Are you a Dutchman, sir?"

To this direct query he gave reply:

"My father was one of those who came in English Leicester's train, whose home was among the fogs of England and under the shadow of her white, mysterious cliffs. My mother was Dutch and he broke her heart...."

"Not an unusual story, alas, these times!" quoth a sober mynheer with a sigh. "I know of more than one case like your own, sir. Those English adventurers were well favoured and smooth tongued, and when they gaily returned to their sea-girt island they left a long trail behind them of broken hearts — of sorrowing women and forsaken children."

"My mother, sir, was a saint," rejoined Diogenes earnestly, "my father married her in Amsterdam when she was only eighteen. She was his wife, yet he left her homeless and his son fatherless."

"But if he saw you, sir, as you are," said Cornelius Beresteyn kindly, "he would surely make amends."

"But he shall not see me, sir," retorted Diogenes lightly, "for I hate him so, because of the wrong he did to my mother and to me. He shall never even hear of me unless I succeed in carving mine own independent fortune, or contrive to die like a gentleman."

"Both of which, sir, you will surely do," now interposed Beresteyn with solemn conviction. "Your acts and words do proclaim you a gentleman, and therefore you will die one day, just as you have lived. In the meanwhile, I am as good as my word. My daughter's safety, her life and her honour are worth a fortune to me. I am reputed a wealthy man. My business is vast, and I have one million guilders lying at interest in the hands of Mynheer Bergansius the world-famed jeweller of Amsterdam. One-half that money, sir, shall be yours together with my boundless gratitude, if you deliver my daughter out of the hands of the malefactors who have seized her person and bring her back safe and sound to me."

"If life is granted me, sir," rejoined Diogenes imperturbably, without a blush or a tremor, "I will find your daughter and bring her safely to you as speedily as God will allow me."

"But you cannot do this alone, sir ..." urged Cornelius, on whom doubt and fear had not yet lost their hold. "How will you set to work?"

"That, mynheer, is my secret," rejoined Diogenes placidly, "and the discussion of my plans might jeopardise their success."

"True, sir; but remember that the anxiety which I suffer now will be increased day by day, until it brings me on the threshold of the grave."

"I will remember that, mynheer, and will act as promptly as may be; but the malefactors have twenty-four hours start of me. I may have to journey far ere I come upon their track."

"But you will have companions with you, sir? Friends who will help and stand by you. Those sea-wolves are notorious for their daring and their cruelty ... they may be more numerous too than you think...."

"The harder the task, mynheer," said Diogenes with his enigmatical smile, "the greater will be my satisfaction if I succeed in fulfilling it."

"But though you will own to no kindred, surely you have friends?" insisted Beresteyn.

"Two faithful allies, and my sword, the most faithful of them all," replied the other.

"You will let me furnish you with money in advance, I hope."

"Not till I have earned it, mynheer."

"You are proud, sir, as well as chivalrous," retorted Cornelius.

"I pray you praise me not, mynheer. Greed after money is my sole motive in undertaking this affair."

"This I'll not believe," concluded Beresteyn as he now rose to go. "Let me tell you, sir, that by your words, your very presence, you have put new life, new hope into me. Something tells me that I can trust you ... something tells me that you will succeed.... Without kith or kindred, sir, a man may rise to fortune by his valour: 'tis writ in your face that you are such an one. With half a million guilders so earned a man can aspire to the fairest in the land," he added not without significance, "and there is no father who would not be proud to own such a son."

He then shook Diogenes warmly by the hand. He was a different man to the poor grief-stricken rag of humanity who had entered this tavern a few hours ago. His friends also shook the young man by the hand and said a great many more gracious and complimentary words to him which he accepted in grave silence, his merry eyes twinkling with the humour of it all.

The worthy burghers filed out of the tap-room one by one, in the wake of Cornelius. It was bitterly cold and the snow was again falling: they wrapped their fur-lined mantles closely round them ere going out of the warm room, but their hats they kept in their hands until the last, and were loth to turn their backs on Diogenes as they went. They felt as if they were leaving the presence of some great personage.

It was only when the heavy oaken door had fallen to for the last time behind the pompous soberly-clad figures of the mynheers and Diogenes found himself alone in the tapperij with his friend Frans Hals that he at last gave vent to that overpowering sense of merriment which had all along threatened to break its bonds. He sank into the nearest chair:

"Dondersteen! Dondersteen!" he exclaimed between the several outbursts of irrepressible laughter which shook his powerful frame and brought the tears to his eyes, "Gods in Olympia! have you ever seen the like? Verrek jezelf, my good Hals, you should go straight to Paradise when you die for having brought about this heaven-born situation. Dondersteen! Dondersteen! I had promised myself two or three hours' sleep, but we must have a bottle of Beek's famous wine on this first!"

And Frans Hals could not for the life of him understand what there was in this fine situation that should so arouse Diogenes' mirth.

But then Diogenes had always been an irresponsible creature, who was wont to laugh even at the most serious crisis of his life.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SPY FROM THE CAMP

“Come to my lodgings, Nicolaes. I have good news for you, and you do no good by cooling your temper here in the open.”

Stoutenburg, coming out of his lodgings half an hour later to look for his friend, had found Beresteyn in the Hout Straat walking up and down like a caged beast in a fury.

“The vervloekte Keerl! the plepshurk! the smeerlap!” he ejaculated between his clenched teeth. “I’ll not rest till I have struck him in the face first and killed him after!”

But he allowed Stoutenburg to lead him down the street to the narrow gabled house where he lodged. Neither of them spoke, however; fury apparently beset them both equally, the kind of fury which is dumb, and all the more fierce because it finds no outlet in words.

Stoutenburg led the way up the wooden stairs to a small room at the back of the house. There was no light visible anywhere inside the building, and Nicolaes, not knowing his way about, stumbled upwards in the dark keeping close to the heels of his friend. The latter had pushed open the door of his room. Here a tallow candle placed in a pewter sconce upon a table shed a feeble, flickering light around. The room by this scanty glimmer looked to be poorly but cleanly furnished; there was a curtained bed in the panelling of the wall, and a table in the middle of the room with a few chairs placed in a circle round it.

On one of these sat a man who appeared to be in the last stages of weariness. His elbows rested on the table and his head was buried in his folded arms. His clothes looked damp and travel-stained; an empty mug of ale and a couple of empty plates stood in front of him, beside a cap made of fur and a pair of skates.

At the sound made by the opening of the door and the entrance of the two men, he raised his head and seeing the Lord of Stoutenburg he quickly jumped to his feet.

“Sit down, Jan,” said Stoutenburg curtly, “you must be dog-tired. Have you had enough to eat and drink?”

“I thank you, my lord, I have eaten my fill,” replied Jan, “and I am not so tired now that I have had some rest.”

“Sit down,” reiterated Stoutenburg peremptorily, “and you too, my good Nicolaes,” he added as he offered a chair to his friend. “Let me just tell you the news which Jan has brought, and which should make you forget even your present just wrath, so glorious, so important is it.”

He went up to a cabinet which stood in one corner of the room, and from it took a bottle and three pewter mugs. These he placed on the table and filled the mugs with wine. Then he drew another chair close to the table and sat down.

“Jan,” he resumed, turning to Beresteyn, “left the Stadtholder’s camp at Sprang four days ago. He has travelled the whole way along the frozen rivers and waterways only halting for the nights. The news which he brings carries for the bearer of such splendid tidings its own glorious reward; Jan, I must tell you, is with us heart and soul and hates the Stadtholder as much as I do. Is that not so, Jan?”

“My father was hanged two years ago,” replied Jan simply, “because he spoke disparaging words of the Stadtholder. Those words were called treason, and my father was condemned to the gallows merely for speaking them.”

Stoutenburg laughed, his usual harsh, mirthless laugh.

“Yes! that is the way justice is now administered in the free and independent United Provinces,” he said roughly; “down on your knees, ye lumbering Dutchmen! lick the dust off the boots of His Magnificence Maurice of Nassau Prince of Orange! kiss his hand, do his bidding! give forth fulsome praise of his deeds!... How long, O God? how long?” he concluded with a bitter sigh.

“Only for a few more days, my lord,” said Jan firmly. “The Stadtholder left his camp the same day as I did. But he travels slowly, in his sledge, surrounded by a bodyguard of an hundred picked men. He is sick and must travel slowly. Yesterday he had only reached Dordrecht, to-day — if my information is correct — he should sleep at Ijsselmunde. But to-morrow he will be at Delft where he will spend two days at the Prinsenhof.”

“At Delft!” exclaimed Stoutenburg as he brought his clenched fist down upon the table. “Thank God! I have got him at last.”

He leaned across nearer still to Nicolaes and in his excitement clutched his friend’s wrists with nervy trembling fingers, digging his nails into the other man’s flesh till Beresteyn could have screamed with pain.

“From Delft,” he murmured hoarsely, “the only way northwards is along the left bank of the Schie, the river itself is choked with ice-floes which renders it impassable. Just before Ryswyk the road crosses to the right bank of the river over a wooden bridge which we all know well. Half a league to the south of the bridge is the molens which has been my headquarters ever since I landed at Scheveningen three weeks ago; there I have my stores and my ammunition. Do you see it all, friend?” he queried whilst a feverish light glowed in his eyes. “Is it not God who hath delivered the tyrant into my hands at last? I start for Ryswyk to-night with you to help me, Nicolaes, with van Does and all my friends who will rally round me, with the thirty or forty men whom they have recruited for placing at my disposal. The molens to the south of the wooden bridge which spans the Schie is our rallying point. In the night before the Stadtholder starts on his way from Delft we make our final preparations. I have enough gunpowder stowed away at the mill to blow up the bridge. We’ll dispose it in its place during that night. Then you Nicolaes shall fire the powder at the moment when the Stadtholder’s escort is half way across the bridge.... In the confusion and panic caused by the explosion and the collapse of the bridge our men can easily overpower the Prince’s bodyguard — whilst I, dagger in hand, do fulfil the oath which I swore before the altar of God, to kill the Stadtholder with mine own hand.”

Gradually as he spoke his voice became more hoarse and more choked with passion; his excitement gained upon his hearers until both Nicolaes Beresteyn his friend and Jan the paid spy and messenger felt their blood tingling within their veins, their throats parched, their eyes burning as if they had been seared with living fire. The tallow-candle flickered in its socket, a thin draught from the flimsily constructed window blew its flame hither and thither, so that it lit up fitfully the faces of those three men drawn closely together now in a bond of ambition and of hate.

“’Tis splendidly thought out,” said Beresteyn at last with a sigh of satisfaction. “I do not see how the plan can fail.”

“Fail?” exclaimed Stoutenburg with a triumphant laugh, “of course it cannot fail! There are practically no risks even. The place is lonely, the molens a splendid rallying point. We can all reach it by different routes and assemble there to-morrow eve or early the next day. That would give us another day and night at least to complete our preparations. I have forty barrels of gunpowder stowed away at the mill, I have new pattern muskets, cullivers, swords and pistols ... gifts to me from the Archduchess Isabella ... enough for our coup.... Fail? How can we fail when everything has been planned, everything thought out? and when God has so clearly shown that He is on our side?”

Jan said nothing for the moment; he lowered his eyes not caring just then to encounter those of his leader, for the remembrance had suddenly flashed through his mind of that other day — not so far distant yet — when everything too had been planned, everything thought out and failure had brought about untold misery and a rich harvest for the scaffold.

Beresteyn too was silent now. Something of his friend’s enthusiasm was also coursing through his veins, but with him it was only the enthusiasm of ambition, of discontent, of a passion for intrigue, for plots and conspiracies, for tearing down one form of government in order to make room for another — but his enthusiasm was not kept at fever-heat by that all-powerful fire of hate which made Stoutenburg forget everything save his desire for revenge.

The latter had pushed his chair impatiently aside and now was pacing up and down the narrow room like some caged feline creature waiting for its meal. Beresteyn’s silence seemed to irritate him for he threw from time to time quick, furtive glances on his friend.

“Nicolaes, why don’t you speak?” he said with sudden impatience.

“I was thinking of Gilda,” replied the other dully.

“Gilda? Why of her?”

“That knave has betrayed me I am sure. He has hidden her away somewhere, not meaning to stick to his bargain with me, and then has come back to Haarlem in order to see if he can extort a large ransom for her from my father.”

“Bah! He wouldn’t dare...!”

“Then why is he here?” exclaimed Beresteyn hotly. “Gilda should be in his charge! If he is here, where is Gilda?”

“Good God, man!” ejaculated Stoutenburg, pausing in his restless walk and looking somewhat dazed on his friend, as if he were just waking from some feverish sleep. “Good God! you do not think that...”

“That her life is in danger from that knave?” rejoined Beresteyn quietly. “Well, no! I do not think that.... I do not know what to think ... but there is a hint of danger in that rascal’s presence here in Haarlem to-day.”

He rose and mechanically re-adjusted his cloak and looked round for his hat.

“What are you going to do?” asked Stoutenburg.

“Find the knave,” retorted the other, “and wring his neck if he does not give some satisfactory account of Gilda.”

“No! no! you must not do that ... not in a public place at any rate ... the rascal would betray you if you quarrelled with him ... or worse still you would betray yourself. Think what it would mean to us now — at this moment — if it were known that you had a hand in the abduction of your sister ... if she were traced and found! think what that would mean — denunciation — failure — the scaffold for us all!”

“Must I leave her then at the mercy of a man who is proved to be both a liar and a cheat?”

“No! you shall not do that. Let me try and get speech with him. He does not know me; and I think that I could find out what double game he is playing and where our own danger lies. Let me try and find him.”

“How can you do that?”

“You remember the incident on New Year’s Eve, when you and I traced that cursed adventurer to his own doorstep?”

“Yes!”

“Then you remember the Spanish wench and the old cripple to whom our man relinquished his lodgings on that night.”

“Certainly I do.”

“Well! yesterday when the hour came for the rascal to seize Gilda, I could not rest in this room. I wanted to see, to know what was going on. Gilda means so much to me, that remorse I think played havoc with my prudence then and I went out into the Groote Markt to watch her come out of church. I followed her at a little distance and saw her walking rapidly along the bank of the Oude Gracht. She was accosted by a woman who spoke to her from out the depths of the narrow passage which leads to the disused chapel of St. Pieter. Gilda was quickly captured by the brute whom you had paid to do this monstrous deed, and I stood by like an abject coward, not raising a hand to save her from this cruel outrage.”

He paused a moment and passed his hand across his brow as if to chase away the bitter and insistent recollection of that crime of which he had been the chief instigator.

“Why do you tell me all that?” queried Beresteyn sombrely. “What I did, I did for you and for the triumph of your cause.”

“I know, I know,” replied Stoutenburg with a sigh, “may Heaven reward you for the sacrifice. But I merely acted for mine own selfish ends, for my ambition and my revenge. I love Gilda beyond all else on earth, yet I saw her sacrificed for me and did not raise a finger to save her.”

“It is too late for remorse,” retorted Beresteyn roughly, “if Gilda had been free to speak of what she heard in the cathedral on New Year’s Eve, you and I to-day would have had to flee the country as you fled from it once before, branded as traitors, re-captured mayhap, dragged before the tribunal of a man who has already shown that he knows no mercy. Gilda’s freedom would have meant for you, for me, for Heemskerk, van Does and all the others, torture first and a traitor’s death at the last.”

“You need not remind me of that,” rejoined Stoutenburg more calmly. “Gilda has been sacrificed for me and by God I will requite her for all that she has endured! My life, my love are hers and as soon as the law sets me free to marry she will have a proud position higher than that of any other woman in the land.”

“For the moment she is at the mercy of that blackguard....”

“And I tell you that I can find out where she is.”

“How?”

"The woman who accosted Gilda last night, who acted for the knave as a decoy, was the Spanish wench whom he had befriended the night before."

"You saw her?"

"Quite distinctly. She passed close to me when she ran off after having done her work. No doubt she is that rascal's sweetheart and will know of his movements and of his plans. Money or threats should help me to extract something from her."

"But where can you find her?"

"At the same lodgings where she has been these two nights, I feel sure."

"It is worth trying," mused Beresteyn.

"And in the meanwhile we must not lose sight of our knave. Jan, my good man, that shall be your work. Mynheer Beresteyn will be good enough to go with you as far as the tapperij of the 'Lame Cow,' and there point out to you a man whom it will be your duty to follow step by step this evening until you find out where he intends to pitch his tent for the night. You understand?"

"Yes, my lord," said Jan, smothering as best he could an involuntary sigh of weariness.

"It is all for the ultimate triumph of our revenge, good Jan," quoth Stoutenburg significantly, "the work of watching which you will do this night is at least as important as that which you have so bravely accomplished these past four days. The question is, have you strength left to do it?"

Indeed the question seemed unnecessary now. At the word "revenge" Jan had already straightened out his long, lean figure and though traces of fatigue might still linger in his drawn face, it was obvious that the spirit within was prepared to fight all bodily weaknesses.

"There is enough strength in me, my lord," he said simply, "to do your bidding now as always for the welfare of Holland and the triumph of our faith."

After which Stoutenburg put out the light, and with a final curt word to Jan and an appeal to Beresteyn he led the way out of the room, down the stairs and finally into the street.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BIRTH OF HATE

Here the three men parted; Beresteyn and Jan to go to the "Lame Cow" where the latter was to begin his work of keeping track of Diogenes, and Stoutenburg to find his way to that squalid lodging house which was situate at the bottom of the Kleine Hout Straat where it abuts on the Oude Gracht.

It had been somewhat impulsively that he had suggested to Beresteyn that he would endeavour to obtain some information from the Spanish wench as to Diogenes' plans and movements and the whereabouts of Gilda, and now that he was alone with more sober thoughts he realised that the suggestion had not been over-backed by reason. Still as Beresteyn had said: there could be no harm in seeking out the girl. Stoutenburg was quite satisfied in his mind that she must be the rascal's sweetheart, else she had not lent him an helping hand in the abduction of Gilda, and since he himself was well supplied with money through the generosity of his rich friends in Haarlem, he had no doubt that if the wench knew anything at all about the rogue, she could easily be threatened first, then bribed and cajoled into telling all that she knew.

Luck in this chose to favour the Lord of Stoutenburg, for the girl was on the doorstep when he finally reached the house where two nights ago a young soldier of fortune had so generously given up his lodgings to a miserable pair of beggars. He had just been vaguely wondering how best he could — without endangering his own safety — obtain information as to which particular warren in the house she and her father inhabited, when he saw her standing under the lintel of the door, her meagre figure faintly lit up by the glimmer of a street-lamp fixed in the wall just above her head.

"I would have speech with thee," he said in his usual peremptory manner as soon as he had approached her, "show me the way to thy room."

Then as, like a frightened rabbit, she made ready to run away to her burrow as quickly as she could, he seized hold of her arm and reiterated roughly:

"I would have speech of thee, dost hear? Show me the way to thy room at once. Thy safety and that of thy father depend on thy obedience. There is close search in the city just now for Spanish spies."

The girl's pale cheeks took on a more ashen hue, her lips parted with a quickly smothered cry of terror. She knew — as did every stranger in these Dutch cities just now — that the words "Spanish spy" had a magical effect on the placid tempers of their inhabitants, and that many a harmless foreign wayfarer had suffered imprisonment, aye and torture too, on the mere suspicion of being a "Spanish spy."

"I have nothing to fear," she murmured under her breath.

"Perhaps not," he rejoined, "but the man who shelters and protects thee is under suspicion of abetting Spanish spies. For his sake 'twere wiser if thou didst obey me."

Stoutenburg had every reason to congratulate himself on his shrewd guess, for at his words all resistance on the girl's part vanished, and though she began to tremble in every limb and even for a moment seemed ready to swoon, she murmured words which if incoherent certainly sounded submissive, and then silently led the way upstairs. He followed her closely, stumbling behind her in the dark, and as he mounted the rickety steps he was rapidly rehearsing in his mind what he would say to the wench.

That the girl was that abominable villain's sweetheart he was not for a moment in doubt, her submission just now, at the mere hint of the fellow's danger, showed the depth of her love for him. Stoutenburg felt therefore that his success in obtaining what information he wanted would depend only on how much she knew. In any case she must be amenable to a bribe for she seemed wretchedly poor; even in that brief glimpse which he had had of her by the dim light of the street-door lamp, he could not help but see how ragged was her kirtle and how pinched and wan her face.

On the landing she paused and taking a key from between the folds of her shift she opened the door of her lodging and humbly begged the gracious mynheer to enter. A tallow candle placed upon a chair threw its feeble light upon the squalid abode, the white-washed walls, the primitive bedstead in the corner made up of deal planks and covered with a paillasse and a thin blanket. From beneath that same blanket came the gentle and fretful moanings of the old cripple.

But Stoutenburg was far too deeply engrossed in his own affairs to take much note of his surroundings; as soon as the girl had closed the door behind her, he called her roughly to him and she — frightened and obedient — came forward without a word, standing now before him, with hanging arms and bowed head, whilst a slight shiver shook her girlish form from time to time.

He dragged a chair out to the middle of the room and sat himself astride upon it, his arms resting across the back, his booted and spurred feet thrust out in front of him, whilst his hollow, purple-rimmed eyes with their feverish glow of ever-present inward excitement were fixed upon the girl.

"I must tell thee, wench," he began abruptly, "that I mean to be thy friend. No harm shall come to thee if thou wilt answer truthfully certain questions which I would ask of thee."

Then as she appeared too frightened to reply and only cast a furtive, timorous glance on him, he continued after a slight pause:

"The man who protected thee against the rabble the other night, and who gave thee shelter afterwards, the man in whose bed thy crippled father lies at this moment — he is thy sweetheart, is he not?"

"What is that to you?" she retorted sullenly.

"Nothing in itself," he said quietly. "I merely spoke of it to show thee how much I know. Let me tell thee at once that I was in the tavern with him on New Year's Eve when his boon-companions told the tale of how he had protected thee against a crowd; and that I was in this very street not twenty paces away when in response to thy appeal he gave up his room and his bed to thee, and for thy sake paced the streets for several hours in the middle of the night and in weather that must have frozen the marrow in his bones."

"Well? What of that?" said the girl simply. "He is kind and good, and hath that pity for the poor and homeless which would grace many a noble gentleman."

"No doubt," he retorted dryly, "but a man will not do all that for a wench, save in expectation of adequate payment for his trouble and discomfort."

"What is that to you?" she reiterated, with the same sullen earnestness.

"Thou art in love with that fine gallant, eh, my girl?" he continued with a harsh, flippant laugh, "and art not prepared to own to it. Well! I'll not press thee for a confession. I am quite satisfied with thine evasive answers. Let me but tell thee this; that the man whom thou lovest is in deadly danger of his life."

"Great God, have pity on him!" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"In a spirit of wanton mischief — for he is not so faithful to thee as thou wouldst wish — he has abducted a lady from this city, as thou well knowest, since thou didst lend him thy help in the committal of this crime. Thou seest," he added roughly, "that denials on thy part were worse than useless, since I know everything. The lady's father is an important magistrate in this city, he has moved every process of the law so that he may mete out an exemplary punishment to the blackguard who has dared to filch his daughter. Hanging will be the most merciful ending to thy lover's life, but Mynheer Beresteyn talks of the rack, of quartering and of the stake, and he is a man of boundless influence in the administration of the law."

"Lord, have mercy upon us," once again murmured the wretched girl whose cheeks now looked grey and shrunken; her lips were white and quivering and her eyes with dilated pupils were fixed in horror on the harbinger of this terrible news.

"He will have none on thy sweetheart, I'll warrant thee unless...."

He paused significantly, measuring the effect of his words and of that dramatic pause upon the tense sensibilities of the girl.

"Unless ... what?" came almost as a dying murmur from her parched throat.

"Unless thou wilt lend a hand to save him."

"I?" she exclaimed pathetically, "I would give my hand ... my tongue ... my sight ... my life to save him."

"Come!" he said, "that's brave! but it will not be necessary to make quite so violent a sacrifice. I have great power too in this city and great influence over the bereaved father," he continued, lying unblushingly, "I know that if I can restore his daughter to him within the next four and twenty hours, I could prevail upon him to give up pursuit of the villain who abducted her, and to let him go free."

But these words were not yet fully out of his mouth, before she had fallen on her knees before him, clasping her thin hands together and raising up to his hard face large, dark eyes that were brimful of tears.

"Will you do that then, O my gracious lord," she pleaded. "Oh! God will reward you if you will do this."

"How can I, thou crazy wench," he retorted, "how can I restore the damsel to her sorrowing father when I do not know where she is?"

"But — —"

"It is from thee I want to hear where the lady is."

"From me?"

"Why yes! of course! Thou art in the confidence of thy lover, and knowest where he keeps the lady hidden. Tell me where she is, and I will pledge thee my word that thou and he will have nothing more to fear."

"He is not my lover," she murmured dully, "nor am I in his confidence."

She was still on her knees, but had fallen back on her heels, with arms hanging limp and helpless by her side. Hope so suddenly arisen had equally quickly died out of her heart, and her pinched face expressed in every line the despair and misery which had come in its wake.

"Come!" he cried harshly, "play no tricks with me, wench. Thou didst own to being the rascal's sweetheart."

"I owned to my love for him," she said simply, "not to his love for me."

"I told thee that he will hang or burn unless thou art willing to help him."

"And I told thee, gracious sir, that I would give my life for him."

"Which is quite unnecessary. All I want is the knowledge of where he keeps the lady whom he has outraged."

"I cannot help you, mynheer, in that."

"Thou wilt not!" he cried.

"I cannot," she reiterated gently. "I do not know where she is."

"Will fifty guilders help thy memory?" he sneered.

"Fifty guilders would mean ease and comfort to my father and to me for many months to come. I would do much for fifty guilders but I cannot tell that which I do not know."

"An hundred guilders, girl, and the safety of thy lover. Will that not tempt thee?"

"Indeed, indeed, gracious sir," she moaned piteously, "I swear to you that I do not know."

"Then dost perjure thyself and wilt rue it, wench," he exclaimed as he jumped to his feet, and with a loud curse kicked the chair away from him.

The Lord of Stoutenburg was not a man who had been taught to curb his temper; he had always given way to his passions, allowing them as the years went on to master every tender feeling within him; for years now he had sacrificed everything to them, to his ambition, to his revenge, to his loves and hates. Now that this fool of a girl tried to thwart him as he thought, he allowed his fury against her full rein, to the exclusion of reason, of prudence, or ordinary instincts of chivalry. He stooped over her like a great, gaunt bird of prey and his thin claw-like hand fastened itself on her thin shoulder.

"Thou liest, girl," he said hoarsely, "or art playing with me? Money thou shalt have. Name thy price. I'll pay thee all that thou wouldst ask. I'll not believe that thou dost not know! Think of thy lover under torture, on the rack, burnt at the stake. Hast ever seen a man after he has been broken on the wheel? his limbs torn from their sockets, his chest sunken under the weights — and the stake? hast seen a heretic burnt alive...?"

She gave a loud scream of agony: her hands went up to her ears, her eyes stared out of her head like those of one in a frenzy of terror.

"Pity! pity! my lord, have pity! I swear that I do not know."

“Verdomme!” he cried out in the madness of his rage as with a cruel twist of his hand he threw the wretched girl off her balance and sent her half-fainting, cowering on the floor.

“Verdommt be thou, plepshurk,” came in a ringing voice from behind him.

The next moment he felt as if two grapnels made of steel had fastened themselves on his shoulders and as if a weight of irresistible power was pressing him down, down on to his knees. His legs shook under him, his bones seemed literally to be cracking beneath that iron grip, and he had not the power to turn round in order to see who his assailant was. The attack had taken him wholly by surprise and it was only when his knees finally gave way under him, and he too was down on the ground, licking the dust of the floor — as he had forced the wretched girl to do — that he had a moment’s respite from that cruel pressure and was able to turn in the direction whence it had come.

Diogenes with those wide shoulders of his squared out to their full breadth, legs apart and arms crossed over his mighty chest was standing over him, his eyes aflame and his moustache bristling till it stood out like the tusks of a boar.

“Dondersteen!” he exclaimed as he watched the other man’s long, lean figure thus sprawling on the ground, “this is a pretty pass to which to bring this highly civilized and cultured country. Men are beginning to browbeat and strike the women now! Dondersteen!”

Stoutenburg, whose vocabulary of oaths was at least as comprehensive as that of any foreign adventurer, had — to its accompaniment — struggled at last to his feet.

“You ...” he began as soon as he had partially recovered his breath. But Diogenes putting up his hand hastily interrupted him:

“Do not speak just now, mynheer,” he said with his wonted good-humour. “Were you to speak now, I feel that your words would not be characterized by that dignity and courtesy which one would expect from so noble a gentleman.”

“Smeerlap!” began Stoutenburg once more.

“There now,” rejoined the other with imperturbable bonhomie, “what did I tell you? Believe me, sir, ’tis much the best to be silent if pleasant words fail to reach one’s lips.”

“A truce on this nonsense,” quoth Stoutenburg hotly, “you took me unawares — like a coward...”

“Well said, mynheer! Like a coward — that is just how I took you — in the act of striking a miserable atom of humanity — who is as defenceless as a sparrow.”

“’Tis ludicrous indeed to see a man of your calling posing as the protector of women,” retorted Stoutenburg with a sneer. “But enough of this. You find me unarmed at this moment, else you had already paid for this impudent interference.”

“I thank you, sir,” said Diogenes as he swept the Lord of Stoutenburg a deep, ironical bow, “I thank you for thus momentarily withholding chastisement from my unworthiness. When may I have the honour of calling on your Magnificence in order that you might mete unto me the punishment which I have so amply deserved?”

“That chastisement will lose nothing by waiting, since indeed your insolence passes belief,” quoth Stoutenburg hotly. “Now go!” he added, choosing not to notice the wilfully impertinent attitude of the other man, “leave me alone with this wench. My business is with her.”

“So is mine, gracious lord,” rejoined Diogenes with a bland smile, “else I were not here. This room is mine — perhaps your Magnificence did not know that — you would not like surely to remain my guest a moment longer than you need.”

“Of a truth I knew that the baggage was your sweetheart — else I had not come at all.”

“Leave off insulting the girl, man,” said Diogenes whose moustache bristled again, a sure sign that his temper was on the boil, “she has told you the truth, she knows nothing of the whereabouts of the noble lady who has disappeared from Haarlem. An you desire information on that point you had best get it elsewhere.”

But Stoutenburg had in the meanwhile succeeded in recovering — at any rate partially — his presence of mind. All his life he had been accustomed to treat these foreign adventurers with the contempt which they deserved. In the days of John of Barneveld’s high position in the State, his sons would never have dreamed of parleying with the knaves, and if — which God forbid! — one of them had dared then to lay hands on any member of the High Advocate’s family, hanging would certainly have been the inevitable punishment of such insolence.

Something of that old haughtiness and pride of caste crept into the attitude of the Lord of Stoutenburg now, and prudence also suggested that he should feign to ignore the rough usage which he had received at the hands of this contemptible rascal. Though he was by no means unarmed — for he never went abroad these days without a poniard in his belt — he had, of a truth, no mind to engage in a brawl with this young Hercules whose profession was that of arms and who might consequently get easily the better of him.

He made every effort therefore to remain calm and to look as dignified as his disordered toilet would allow.

“You heard what I said to this girl?” he queried, speaking carelessly.

“You screamed loudly enough,” replied Diogenes lightly. “I heard you through the closed door. I confess that I listened for quite a long while: your conversation greatly interested me. I only interfered when I thought it necessary.”

“So then I need not repeat what I said,” quoth the other lightly. “Hanging for you, my man, unless you tell me where you have hidden Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn.”

“I? What have I to do with that noble lady, pray?”

“It is futile to bandy words with me. I know every circumstance of the disappearance of the lady, and could denounce you to the authorities within half an hour, and see you hanged for the outrage before sunrise.”

“Then I do wonder,” said Diogenes suavely, “that your Magnificence doth not do this, for of a truth you must hate me fairly thoroughly by now.”

“Hate you, man? I’d gladly see you hang, or better still broken on the wheel. But I must know from you first where you have hidden the Jongejuffrouw.”

“If I am to hang anyway, sir, why should I trouble to tell you?”

“The lady is my affianced wife,” said Stoutenburg haughtily, “I have every right to demand an explanation from you, why you are here when by the terms of your contract with my friend Nicolaes Beresteyn you should at this moment be on your way to Rotterdam,

escorting the jongejuffrouw to the house of Ben Isaje, the banker.... You see that I am well informed," he added impatiently, seeing that Diogenes had become suddenly silent, and that a curious shadow had spread over his persistently smiling face.

"So well informed, sir," rejoined the latter after a slight pause, and speaking more seriously than he had done hitherto, "so well informed that I marvel you do not know that by the terms of that same contract I pledged my word to convey the jongejuffrouw safely to a certain spot and with all possible speed, but that further actions on my part were to remain for mine own guidance. I also pledged my word of honour that I would remain silent about all these matters."

"Bah!" broke in Stoutenburg roughly, "knaves like you have no honour to pledge."

"No doubt, sir, you are the best judge of what a knave would do."

"Insolent ... do you dare...?"

"If you like it better, sir, I'll say that I have parleyed long enough with you to suit my temper. This room is mine," he added, speaking every whit as haughtily as did the other man. "I have business with this wench, and came here, desirous to speak with her alone, so I pray you go! this roof is too lowly to shelter the Lord of Stoutenburg."

At mention of his name Stoutenburg's sunken cheeks took on the colour of lead, and with a swift, instinctive gesture, his hand flew to the hilt of the dagger under his doublet. During this hot and brief quarrel with this man, the thought had never entered his mind that his identity might be known to his antagonist, that he — a fugitive from justice and with a heavy price still upon his head — was even now at the mercy of this contemptible adventurer whom he had learnt to hate as he had never hated a single human soul before now.

Prudence, however, was quick enough to warn him not to betray himself completely. The knave obviously suspected his identity — how he did that, Stoutenburg could not conjecture, but after all he might only have drawn a bow at a venture: it was important above all not to let him see that that bow had struck home. Therefore after the first instant of terror and surprise he resumed as best he could his former haughty attitude, and said with well-feigned carelessness:

"The Lord of Stoutenburg? Do you expect his visit then? What have you to do with him? 'Tis dangerous, you know, to court his friendship just now."

"I do not court his friendship, sir," replied Diogenes with his gently ironical smile; "the Lord of Stoutenburg hath many enemies these days; and, methinks, that if it came to a question of hanging he would stand at least as good a chance of the gallows as I."

"No doubt, an you knew how to lay hands on him; you would be over ready to denounce him to the Stadtholder for the sake of the blood-money which you would receive for this act."

"Well played, my lord," retorted Diogenes with a ringing laugh. "Dondersteen! but you apparently think me a fool as well as a knave. Lay my hands on the Lord of Stoutenburg did you say? By St. Bavon, have I not done so already? aye! and made him lick the dust, too, at my feet? I could sell him to the Stadtholder without further trouble — denounce him even now to the authorities only that I do not happen to be a vendor of swine-flesh — or else...."

A double cry interrupted the flow of Diogenes' wrathful eloquence: a cry of rage from Stoutenburg and one of terror from the girl, who all this while — not understanding the cause and purport of the quarrel between the two men — had been cowering in a remote corner of the room anxious only to avoid observation, fearful lest she should be seen.

But now she suddenly ran forward, swift as a deer, unerring as a cat, and the next moment she had thrown herself on the upraised arm of Stoutenburg in whose hand gleamed the sharp steel of his dagger.

"Murder!" she cried in a frenzy of borrow. "Save thyself! he will murder thee!"

Diogenes, as was his wont, threw back his head and sent his merry laugh echoing through the tumble-down house from floor to floor, until, in response to that light-heartedness which had burst forth in such a ringing laugh, pallid faces were lifted wearily from toil, and around thin, pinched lips the reflex of a smile came creeping over the furrows caused by starvation and misery.

"Let go his arm, wench," he cried gaily; "he'll not hurt me, never fear. Hatred has drawn a film over his eyes and caused his hand to tremble. Put back your poniard, my lord," he added lightly, "the penniless adventurer and paid hireling is unworthy of your steel. Keep it whetted for your own defence and for the protection of the gracious lady who has plighted her troth to you."

"Name her not, man!" cried Stoutenburg, whose arm had dropped by his side, but whose voice was still hoarse with the passion of hate which now consumed him.

"Is her name polluted through passing my lips? Yet is she under my protection, placed there by those who should have guarded her honour with their life."

"Touch my future wife but with the tips of thy fingers, plepshurk, and I'll hang thee on the nearest tree with mine own hands."

"Wait to threaten, my lord, until you have the power: until then go your way. I — the miserable rascal whom you abhor, the knave whom you despise — do give you your life and your freedom which, as you well know, I hold at this moment in the hollow of my hand. But remember that I give it you only because to my mind one innocent woman has already suffered quite enough because of you, without having to mourn the man whom she loves and being widowed ere she is a wife. Because of that you may go out of this room a free man — free to pursue your tortuous aims and your ambitious scheme. They are naught to me and I know nothing about them. But this I do know — that a woman has been placed in my charge by one who should deem her honour more sacred than his own; in this infamy I now see that you too, my lord, have had a hand. The lady, you say, is your future wife, yet you placed her under my care — a knave, a rascal — miserable plepshurk was the last epithet which you applied to me — you! who also should have guarded her good name with your very life. To suit your own ends, you entrusted her to me! Well! to suit mine own I'll not let you approach her, until — having accomplished the errand for which I am being paid — I will myself escort the lady back to her father. To this am I also pledged! and both these pledges do I mean to fulfil and you, my lord, do but waste your time in arguing with me."

The Lord of Stoutenburg had not attempted to interrupt Diogenes in his long peroration. All the thoughts of hatred and revenge that sprang in his mind with every word which this man uttered, he apparently thought wisest to conceal for the moment.

Now that Diogenes, after he had finished speaking, turned unceremoniously on his heel and left Stoutenburg standing in the middle of the room, the latter hesitated for a few minutes longer. Angry and contemptuous words were all ready to his lips, but Diogenes was paying no heed to him; he had drawn the girl with him to the bedside of the cripple, and there began talking quietly in whispers to her. Stoutenburg saw that he gave the wench some money.

Smothering a final, comprehensive oath the noble lord went quietly out of the room.

“How that man doth hate thee,” whispered the girl in awe-struck tones, as soon as she saw that the door had closed behind him. “And I hate him, too,” she added, as she clenched her thin hands, “he is cruel, coarse and evil.”

“Cruel, coarse and evil?” said Diogenes with a shrug of his wide shoulders, “and yet there is a delicate, innocent girl who loves him well enough to forget all his crimes and to plight her troth to him. Women are strange creatures, wench— ’tis a wise philosopher who steers widely clear of their path.”

CHAPTER XXV

AN ARRANT KNAVE

In the street below, not far from the house which he had just quitted, Stoutenburg came on Nicolaes and Jan ensconced in the dark against a wall. Beresteyn quickly explained to his friend the reason of his presence here.

"I came with Jan," he said, "because I wished to speak with you without delay."

"Come as far as the cathedral then," said Stoutenburg curtly. "I feel that in this vervloekte street the walls and windows are full of ears and prying eyes. Jan," he added, turning to the other man, "you must remain here and on no account lose sight of that rascal when he leaves this house. Follow him in and out of Haarlem, and if you do not see me again to-night, join me at Ryswyk as soon as you can, and come there prepared with full knowledge of his plans."

Leaving Jan in observation the two men made their way now in the direction of the Groote Markt. It was still very cold, even though there was a slight suspicion in the air of a coming change in the weather: a scent as of the south wind blowing from over the estuaries, while the snow beneath the feet had lost something of its crispness and purity. The thaw had not yet set in, but it was coquetting with the frost, challenging it to a passage of arms, wherein either combatant might completely succumb.

As Stoutenburg had surmised the porch of the cathedral was lonely and deserted, even the beggars had all gone home for the night. A tiny lamp fixed into the panelling of the wall flickered dimly in the draught. Stoutenburg sat down on the wooden bench — dark and polished with age, which ran alongside one of the walls, and with a brusque and febrile gesture drew his friend down beside him.

"Well?" he asked in that nervous, jerky way of his, "What is it?"

"Something that wilt horrify you, just as it did me," replied Beresteyn, who spoke breathlessly as if under stress of grave excitement. "When I parted from you awhile ago, I did what you asked me to do. I posted Jan outside the door of the tapperij after I had pointed out our rogue to him through the glass door. Imagine my astonishment when I saw that at that moment our rascal was in close conversation with my father."

"With your father?"

"With my father," reiterated Beresteyn. "That fool, Hals, was with him, and there were another half dozen busy-bodies sitting round the table. Our man was evidently the centre of interest; I could not then hear what was said, but at one moment I saw that my father shook him cordially by the hand."

"Vervloekte Keerl!" exclaimed Stoutenburg.

"I didn't know at first what to do. I didn't want to go into the tapperij and to show myself just then, but at all costs I wished to know what my father and that arrant rascal had to say to one another. So, bidding Jan on no account to lose sight of the man, I made my way round to the service door behind the bar, and there bribed one of the wenches to let me stand under the lintel and to remain on the watch. It was quite dark where I stood and I had a good view of the tapperij without fear of being seen, and as my father and that cursed adventurer were speaking loudly enough I could hear all that they said."

"Well?" queried Stoutenburg impatiently.

"Well, my friend," quoth Beresteyn with slow emphasis, "that vervloekte scoundrel was making a promise to my father to bring Gilda safely back to Haarlem, and my father was promising him a fortune as his reward."

"I am not surprised," remarked Stoutenburg calmly.

"But...."

"That man, my friend, is the most astute blackguard I have ever come across in the whole course of my life. His English blood I imagine hath made him into a thorough-going rogue. He has played you false — always did mean to play you false if it suited his purpose! By God, Nicolaes! what fools we were to trust one of these foreign adventurers. They'll do anything for money, and this man instead of being — as we thought — an exception to the rule, is a worse scoundrel than any of his compeers. He has simply taken Gilda a little way out of Haarlem, and then came back here to see what bargain he could strike with your father for her return."

"Gilda is some way out of Haarlem," rejoined Beresteyn thoughtfully. "Jan and I heard that knave talking to his friend Hals later on. Hals was asking him to sup and sleep at his house. But he declined the proffered bed, though he accepted the supper: 'I have a journey before me this night,' he said, 'and must leave the city at moonrise.' It seemed to me that he meant to travel far."

"She may be still at Bennebroek, or mayhap at Leyden — he could not have taken her further than that in the time. Anyhow it would be quite easy for him to go back to her during the night, and bring her into Haarlem to-morrow. Friend!" he added earnestly, "the situation is intolerable — unthinkable! After all that we have done, the risks which we have taken, Gilda's return now — a certain denunciation from her — and failure and death once more stare us in the face, and this time more insistently."

"It is unthinkable, as you say," cried Beresteyn vehemently, "but the situation is not so hopeless as you seem to think. I can go at once to my father and denounce the rogue to him. I can tell him that I have reason to believe that the man to whom he has just promised a fortune for the return of Gilda is the very man who hath abducted her."

"Impossible," said Stoutenburg calmly.

"Why?"

"Your father would have the man arrested, he would be searched, and papers and letters writ by you to Ben Isaje of Rotterdam will be found in his possession. These papers would proclaim you the prime mover in the outrage against your sister."

"True! I had not thought of that. But, instead of going to my father, I could denounce the rascal to the city magistrate on suspicion of having abducted my sister. Van der Meer would give me the command of the town guard sent out to arrest him, I could search him myself and take possession of all his papers ere I bring him before the magistrate."

"Bah! the magistracy of Haarlem moves with ponderous slowness. While that oaf, Van der Meer, makes preparations for sending out the town guard, our rogue will slip through our fingers, and mayhap be back in Haarlem with Gilda ere we find him again."

"Let me have Jan and one or two of Heemskerk's mercenaries," urged Beresteyn, "we could seize him and his papers to-night as soon as he leaves the city gates."

"Then, out of revenge," said Stoutenburg, "he will refuse to tell us what he hath done with Gilda."

"Bah!" retorted Beresteyn cynically, "here in Haarlem we can always apply torture."

"Then, if he speaks, Gilda can be back here in time to denounce us all. No, no, my friend," continued Stoutenburg firmly, "let us own at once that by trusting that scoundrel we have run our heads into a noose out of which only our wits can extricate us. We must meet cunning with cunning, treachery if need be with treachery. Gilda — of course — must not remain at the mercy of brigands, but she must not be given her freedom to do us the harm which she hath already threatened. Remember this, Nicolaes," he added, placing his hand upon his friend's shoulder and forcing him to look straight into his own feverishly glowing eyes, "remember that, when all these troubles are over, Gilda will become my wife. The devotion of my entire life shall then compensate her for the slight wrong which fate compels us to do her at this moment. Will you remember that, my friend?"

"I do remember it," replied the other, "but...."

"And will you try and trust me as you would yourself?"

"I do trust you, Willem, as I would trust myself; only tell me what you want to do."

"I want to bring that knave to the gallows without compromising you and the success of our cause," said Stoutenburg firmly.

"But how can you do it?"

"That I do not know yet; I have only vague thoughts in my mind. But hate, remember, is a hard and very efficient task-master, and I hate that man, Nicolaes, almost as much as I hate the Prince of Orange. But 'tis the Prince's death which I want first; because of this my hatred of the rascal must lie dormant just a few days. But it shall lose nothing by waiting, and already I see before me visions of an exemplary revenge which shall satisfy you and gratify my hate."

"Can I help you in any way?"

"Not at present; I have no definite plans just now. All I know is that we must possess ourselves of the rascal's person as well as of Gilda without the risk of compromising ourselves. In this, of course, we have now Jan's valuable help; he is a splendid leader and entirely trustworthy where the cause of his own hatred against the Prince is served."

"And, of course, you have the thirty or forty men — mercenaries and louts — whom Heemskerk, van Does and the others have been recruiting for you."

"Exactly. I can easily detail half a dozen of them to follow Jan. That is our first move, my good Beresteyn," he added emphatically, "to gain possession of Gilda, and to capture the rascal. Only tell me this, what are the papers now in that knave's possession which might compromise you if they were found?"

"I had to write a letter to Ben Isaje, telling him to convince himself that Gilda was safe and in good health, ere he paid the rascal a sum of 3,000 guilders. This letter is writ in mine own hand and signed with my name. Then there is a formal order to Ben Isaje to pay over the money, but that was writ in the usual way by the public scrivener and is signed with the cypher which I always use in all monetary transactions with the Jew. He keeps these formal documents in his archives and all his clients use a cypher in the same way."

"How is that formal order worded?"

"As far as I remember it runs thus: 'In consideration of valuable services rendered to me by the bearer of this note, I desire you to pay him the sum of 3,000 guilders out of my monies which lie with you at interest.' The cypher signature consists of the words 'Schwarzer Kato' surmounted by a triangle."

"And is that cypher known to anyone save to Ben Isaje?"

"Alas! it is known to my father. We both use it for private business transactions."

"But to Gilda?" insisted Stoutenburg. "Would Gilda know it if she saw it?"

"She could not be certain of it ... though, of course, she might guess. 'Schwarzer Kato' is the name of a tulip raised by my father, and the triangle is a sign used sometimes by our house in business. But it would be mere conjecture on her part."

"Then everything will still be for the best, never fear, my good Beresteyn," exclaimed Stoutenburg, whose hard, cruel face was glowing with excitement. "Chance indeed has been on our side throughout this business. An you will trust me to finish it now; you'll have no cause for anxiety or regrets. Come! let us find Jan at once! I have a few orders to give him, and then mean to be on my way to Ryswyk to-night."

He rose to his feet and now the glitter in his hollow eyes appeared almost inhuman. He was a man whose whole soul fed upon hatred, upon vengeance planned and accomplished, upon desire for supreme power; and at this moment his scheme for murdering the Stadtholder was backed by one for obtaining possession of the woman he loved, and being revenged on the man who had insulted and jeered at him.

Beresteyn, always ready to accept the leadership of his friend, followed him in silence down the street. After awhile they once more came upon Jan, who apparently had never moved all this while from his post of observation.

"Well?" asked Stoutenburg in a scarce audible whisper, "has he not gone yet?"

"Not yet," replied Jan.

Stoutenburg cast a quick, almost furtive glance in the direction of the house where he had experienced such dire humiliation a brief half hour ago. A curious whistling sound escaped through his clenched teeth, a sound such as many a wild beast makes when expectant of prey. Then he drew Jan further away from the house, fearful lest his words were wafted toward it on the wind.

"Keep him in sight, Jan," he commanded, "until he goes to the house of Mynheer Hals in the Peuselaarsteg, whither he means to go for supper. There you may safely leave him for an hour, and go directly to the house of my Lord of Heemskerk whom you know. Ask him for half a dozen of his foreign mercenaries; tell him they are for my immediate service. These men will then help you to keep our knave in sight. He will leave Haarlem at moonrise, and you must never lose his track for a moment. Presently he should be escorting a lady in the direction of Rotterdam. If he does this — if he travel south toward that city, do not molest him, only keep him in sight, and the moment he arrives at Rotterdam come and report to me at Ryswyk. But," he added more emphatically, "if at any time it appears to

you that he is turning back with the lady toward Haarlem come upon him at once with your men and seize him together with any companions he may have with him. You understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord. While he travels southwards with the lady, we are only to keep him in sight; when he and the lady arrive at Rotterdam we must report to you at Ryswyk, but the moment he turns back toward Haarlem we are to fall on him and seize him and his companions."

"The lady you will treat with the utmost respect," resumed Stoutenburg with an approving nod, "the rascal and his companions you may mishandle as much as you like, without, however, doing them mortal injury. But, having taken the whole party prisoner, you will forthwith convey them to the molens at Ryswyk, where you will find me. Now is all that clear?"

"Nothing could be clearer, my lord," repeated Jan firmly. "We follow him while he travels south, but seize him with his company and the lady if he turn back toward Haarlem. Nothing could be easier."

"You will not let him slip through your fingers, Jan?" said Stoutenburg earnestly.

Jan laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You said that this work would help to forward our cause," he said simply. "I ask no questions. I believe you and obey."

"That's brave! And you will take great care of the lady, when she falls into your hands?"

"I understand that she is my lord's future lady," rejoined Jan, with the same calm simplicity which makes the perfect soldier and the perfect servant, and which promised obedience without murmur and without question.

"Yes, Jan. The lady is my future wife," said Stoutenburg. "Treat her as such. As for the man ... I want him alive ... do not kill him, Jan, even if he provoke you. And he will do that by his insolence, I know."

"My lord shall have his enemy alive," said Jan, "a helpless prisoner ... but alive."

"Then good luck to you, Jan," concluded Stoutenburg with a sigh of satisfaction. "I am well pleased with you. In the near future I shall be happy to remember that the high offices of State and those around my person must be filled by those who have well deserved of them."

He put out his thin, nervy hand and Jan fell on one knee in order to kiss it with fervour and respect. The son of John of Barneveld could still count on the loyalty of a few who believed in him, and who looked on his crimes as a necessary means to a glorious end.

A few moments later Beresteyn and Stoutenburg had disappeared in the darkness of the narrow street, and Jan remained alone at his post of observation.

CHAPTER XXVI

BACK TO HOUDEKERK

And now back once more in the kingdom of the night and of the frost, of the darkness and of silence, back along the ice ways on a swift and uninterrupted flight.

The moon is less kind now, fitful and coy; she will not peep out from behind the banks of clouds save at rare intervals; and the clouds are heavy; great billows, clumsy in shape as if weighted with lead; the moon plays a restless game of hide and seek amongst them for the bewilderment of the skater, to whom last night she was so kind.

They come tumbling in more and more thickly from the south — those clouds — driven more furiously by the gusty wind. Brother north-easter has gone to rest, it is the turn of the south wind now — not the soft south wind of summer, but a turbulent and arrogant fellow who bellows as loudly as he can, and who means to have a frolic in this world of ice and snow from which his colder brethren have exiled him until now.

Straight at the head of the skater, it expended the brunt of its fury, sending his hat flying in one direction and in wanton delight leading him into a mad chase after it; then when once more he was on his way — hat in hand this time — it tore with impish glee at his hair, impeded his movements, blew doublet and sash awry.

What a chase! what a fight! what a run! But Dondersteen! we do defy thee, O frolicsome south wind! aye, and the darkness too! Back to Houdekerk, the first stage on the road to fortune.

It is not nearly so cold now that brother north-easter has yielded to his madcap brother from the south! gusty and rough and a hand-to-hand fight for progress all the time, with tears running down the cheeks, and breath coming in gasps from the chest! It is not so cold, and the ice is less crisp, its smooth skin is furrowed and wrinkled, soft and woolly beneath the touch of the steel blades; but the snow still lies thickly upon the low-lying ground, and holds in its luminous embrace all the reflections which the capricious moon will lend it.

For the first half hour, while the moon was still very brilliant and the night air very still, it seemed to Diogenes as if the loneliness around him was only fictitious, as if somewhere — far away mayhap — men moved in the same way as he did, swiftly and silently over the surface of the ice. It seemed to him in fact that he was being followed.

He tried to make sure of this, straining his ears to listen, and now and then he caught very distinctly the sound of the metallic click of several pairs of skates. His senses, trained to over-acuteness through years of hard fighting and of campaigning, could not easily be deceived; and presently there was no doubt in his mind that Nicolaes Beresteyn or the Lord of Stoutenburg had set spies upon his track.

This knowledge caused him only to set his teeth, and to strike out more vigorously and more rapidly than before; those who followed him were fairly numerous — over half a dozen he reckoned — the only chance of evading them was, therefore, in flight. He took to noting the rolling banks of cloud with a more satisfied eye, and when, after the first hour or so, the light of the waning moon became more dim and even at times disappeared completely, he took the first opportunity that presented itself of making a détour over a backwater of the Meer, which he knew must bewilder his pursuers.

Whether the pursuit was continued after that, he could not say. His eyes trying to pierce the gloom could tell him nothing; but there were many intricate little by-ways just south of the Meer over backwaters and natural canals, which he knew well, and over these he started on an eccentric and puzzling career which was bound to baffle the spies on his track.

Whenever he spoke subsequently of the many adventures which befell him during the first days of this memorable New Year, he never was very explicit on the subject of this night's run back to Houdekerk.

As soon as he had rid himself — as he thought — of his pursuers, he allowed his mind to become more and more absorbed in the great problem which confronted him since he had pledged his word to Mynheer Beresteyn to bring the jongejuffrouw safely back to him.

He now moved more mechanically over the iceways, taking no account of time or space or distance, only noting with the mere eye of instinct the various landmarks which loomed up from time to time out of the fast gathering darkness.

This coming darkness he welcomed, for he knew his way well, and it would prove his staunch ally against pursuit. For the rest he was conscious neither of cold, of hunger nor of fatigue. Pleasant thoughts helped to cheer his spirits and to give strength to his limbs. His brief visit to Haarlem had indeed been fruitful of experiences. A problem confronted him which he had made up his mind to solve during his progress across the ice in the night. How to keep his word to Nicolaes Beresteyn, and yet bring the jongejuffrouw safely back to her father.

She would not, of course, willingly follow him, and his would once again be the uncongenial task of carrying her off by force if he was to succeed in his new venture.

A fortune if he brought her back! That sounded simple enough, and the thought of it caused the philosopher's blood to tingle with delight.

A fortune if he brought her back! It would have to be done after he had handed her over into the care of Mynheer Ben Isaje at Rotterdam. He was pledged to do that, but once this was accomplished — his word to Nicolaes Beresteyn would be redeemed.

A fortune if he brought her back! And when he had brought her back she would tell of his share in her abduction, and instead of the fortune mayhap the gallows would be meted out to him.

'Twas a puzzle, a hard nut for a philosopher to crack. It would be the work of an adventurer, of a man accustomed to take every risk on the mere chance of success.

But Gilda's image never left him for one moment while his thoughts were busy with that difficult problem. For the first time now he realized the utter pathos of her helplessness. The proud little vixen, as he had dubbed her a while ago, was after all but a poor defenceless girl tossed hither and thither just to suit the ambitions of men. Did she really love that unscrupulous and cruel Stoutenburg, he wondered. Surely she must love him, for she did not look the kind of woman who would plight her troth against her will. She loved

him and would marry him, her small white hand, which had the subtle fragrance of tulips, would be placed in one which was deeply stained with blood.

Poor young vixen, with the sharp tongue that knew how to hurt and the blue eyes that could probe a wound like steel! It was strange to think that their soft glances were reserved for a man whose heart was more filled with hate for men than with love for one woman.

"If I loved you, little vixen," he once murmured apostrophizing the elusive vision which lightened the darkness around him, "if I loved you, I would break my word to that dastard who is your brother ... I would not take you to Rotterdam to further his ambition, but I would carry you off to please myself. I would take you to some distant land, mayhap to my unknown father's home in England, where the sounds of strife and hatred amongst men would only come as a faint and intangible echo. I would take you to where roses bloom in profusion, and where in the spring the petals of apple-blossoms would cover you like a mantle of fragrant snow. There I would teach that sharp tongue of yours to murmur words of tenderness and those perfect blue eyes to close in the ecstasy of a kiss. But," he added with his habitual light-hearted laugh, "I do not love you, little vixen, for heigh-ho! if I did 'twere hard for my peace of mind."

When Diogenes neared the town of Leyden he heard its church clocks ring out the hour of three. Close by the city walls he took off his skates, preferring to walk the short league which lay between him and Houdekerk.

He was more tired than he cared to own even to himself, and the last tramp along the road was inexpressibly wearisome. But he had seen or heard nothing more of his pursuers; he was quite convinced that they had lost track of him some hours ago. The south wind blew in heavy gusts from over the marshlands far away, and the half-melted snow clung sticky and dank against the soles and heels of his boots. A smell of dampness in the air proclaimed the coming triumph of the thaw. The roads, thought Diogenes, would be heavy on the morrow, impassable mayhap to a sledge, and the jongejuffrouw would have to travel in great discomfort in a jolting vehicle.

At last in the near distance a number of tiny lights proclaimed the presence of a group of windmills. It was in one of these that Pythagoras and Socrates had been ordered to ask for shelter — in the fifth one down the road, which stood somewhat isolated from the others; even now its long, weird arms showed like heavy lines of ink upon the black background of the sky.

Diogenes almost fell up against the door; he could hardly stand. But the miller was on the look-out for him, having slept only with half an eye, waiting for the stranger whose emissaries had already paid him well. He carried a lanthorn and a bunch of keys; his thin, sharp head was surmounted with a cotton nightcap and his feet were encased in thick woollen hose.

It took him some time to undo the many heavy bolts which protected the molens against the unwelcome visits of night marauders, and before he pushed back the final one, he peered through a tiny judas in the door and in a querulous voice asked the belated traveller's name.

"Never mind my name," quoth Diogenes impatiently, "and open thy door, miller, ere I break it in. I am as tired as a nag, as thirsty as a dog and as hungry as a cat. The jongejuffrouw is I trust safe: I am her major domo and faithful servant, so open quickly, or thy shoulder will have to smart for the delay."

I have Diogenes' own assurance that the miller was thereupon both obedient and prompt. He — like all his compeers in the neighborhood — found but scanty living in the grinding of corn for the neighbouring peasantry, there was too much competition nowadays and work had not multiplied in proportion. Optimists said that in a few years time the paralysing effects of the constant struggle against Spain would begin to wear off, that the tilling of the soil would once more become a profitable occupation and that the molens which now stood idle through many days in the year would once more become a vast storehouse of revenue for those who had continued to work them.

But in the meanwhile the millers and their families were oft on the verge of starvation, and some of them eked out a precarious livelihood by taking in wayfarers who were on their way to and from the cities and had sundry reasons — into which it was best not to inquire — for preferring to sleep and eat at one of these out-of-the-way places rather than in one of the city hostleries.

Diogenes had made previous acquaintance with his present landlord; he knew him to be a man of discretion and of boundless cupidity, two very useful qualities when there is a secret to be kept and plenty of money wherewith to guard it.

Therefore did Diogenes order his companions to convey the jongejuffrouw to the molens of Mynheer Patz, and there to keep guard over her until his own return.

Patz looked well after his belated guest's material comfort. There was some bread and cheese and a large mug of ale waiting for him in the wheel-house and a clean straw paillasse in a corner. The place smelt sweetly of freshly ground corn, of flour and of dry barley and maize, and a thin white coating of flour — soft to the touch as velvet — lay over everything.

Diogenes ate and drank and asked news of the jongejuffrouw. She was well but seemed over sad, the miller explained; but his wife had prepared a comfortable bed for her in the room next to the tiny kitchen. It was quite warm there and Mevrouw Patz had spread her one pair of linen sheets over the bed. The jongejuffrouw's serving woman was asleep on the kitchen floor; she declared herself greatly ill-used, and had gone to sleep vowing that she was so uncomfortable she would never be able to close an eye.

As for the two varlets who had accompanied the noble lady, they were stretched out on a freshly made bed of straw in the weighing-room.

Patz and his wife seemed to have felt great sympathy for the jongejuffrouw, and Diogenes had reason to congratulate himself that she was moneyless, else she would have found it easy enough to bribe the over-willing pair into helping her to regain her home.

He dreamt of her all night; her voice rang in his ear right through the sougning of the wind which beat against the ill-fitting windows of the wheel-house. Alternately in his dream she reviled him, pleaded with him, heaped insults upon him, but he was securely bound and gagged and could not reply to her insults or repulse her pleadings. He made frantic efforts to tear the gag from his mouth, for he wished to tell her that he had not lost his heart to her and cared nothing for the misery which she felt.

CHAPTER XXVII

THENCE TO ROTTERDAM

He only caught sight of the jongeuffrouw later on in the morning when she came out of the molens and stepped into the sledge which stood waiting for her at the door.

The thaw had not been sufficiently heavy, nor had it lasted a sufficient number of hours to make a deep impression on the thick covering of snow which still lay over the roads. The best and quickest mode of travelling — at any rate for the next few hours — would still be by sledge, the intervening half-dozen leagues that lay between Houdekerk and Rotterdam could be easily covered in the day provided an early start was made and no long halts allowed for meals.

Diogenes had made arrangements for the start to be made by seven o'clock. A dull light of pale rosy grey hung over the snow-covered landscape, and far away on the horizon line that same rose-grey light was just assuming a more brilliant hue. He sent Mevrouw Patz up to the jongeuffrouw to acquaint her with the plans for the day, and to beg her to give these her approval.

Mevrouw Patz returned with the message that the jongeuffrouw was ready to start at any hour which Mynheer would command and was otherwise prepared to obey him in all things.

So Diogenes, standing well out of sight, watched Gilda as she came out of the door of the molens and remained for one moment quite still, waiting for the sledge to draw up. She looked fragile this morning, he thought, and her face looked tiny and very pale within the soft frame of the fur hood which covered her head. For a second or two it seemed to him as if she was looking round somewhat anxiously, with a frown upon her smooth forehead — puzzled and almost frightened — as if she expected and at the same time feared to see some one or something.

The next second the cloud appeared to lift from her face and Diogenes even thought — but in this he may have been mistaken — that a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

After that she stepped into the sledge, closely followed by Maria.

Pythagoras and Socrates had been well drilled in their duties toward the jongeuffrouw and Diogenes noted with satisfaction that his brother philosophers did their best to make the lady as comfortable as possible with a pillow or two bought at Leyden the day previously and the warm rugs from Haarlem which they wrapped carefully round her feet. Maria, dignified and unbending, did her best to prevent those rascals from doing their duty in this manner, but soon her own wants got the better of her pride, and shivering with cold she was glad enough to allow Pythagoras to roll a thick horse-cloth about her knees.

A few moments later a start was made to the accompaniment of lusty cheering from the miller and his wife, both of whom were pleasant — even obsequious to the last.

The stolid peasant who held the reins urged his horses on to a brisk trot as soon as they had reached the flat open road. The three philosophers rode at some little distance behind the sledge, ready only to push forward if some marauder or footpad showed signs of molesting the sledge.

Diogenes caught only a few brief glimpses of the jongeuffrouw during the day; once at Zegwaard where there was a halt for dinner, then at Zevenhuisen and Hillegersberg where horses and men were ready for a rest. But she never seemed to see him, passing quickly in and out of the small huts or cottages to which Pythagoras or Socrates escorted her from a respectful distance. She never spoke to either of these worthies on those occasions, nor did she question any orders for halting or re-starting.

To those who attended on her, however, at the halting places, to the cottagers or millers who brought her milk and bread to eat she was graciousness itself, and whenever it was time to go, Diogenes before leaving had invariably to listen to the loud praises of the beautiful jongeuffrouw with the sweet, sad face.

As to his own existence, she seemed hardly aware of it; at Zevenhuisen, when she went back to the sledge, Diogenes was not very far from where she passed. Moreover he was quite sure that she had seen him, for her head was turned straight in the direction where he stood, hat in hand, waiting to see her comfortably settled in the sledge, before remounting. It was in the early part of the afternoon and once more bitterly cold — no doubt she felt the return of the frost, for she seemed to give a little shiver and pulled the hood more closely over her face.

The roads had been very heavy earlier in the day with their carpet of partially melted snow, but now this surface had frozen once more and the track was slippery like glass under the sledge, but terribly trying for the horses.

Progress was necessarily slow and wearisome both to man and beast, and the shades of evening were beginning to gather in very fast when at last the wooden spire of Rotterdam's Groote Kerk emerged out of the frozen mist.

Diogenes — as he had done before at Leyden and at Zegwaard — pushed on ahead now; he wanted to reach the house of Ben Isaje in advance of the jongeuffrouw and prepare the Hebraic gentleman against her coming. The little town with its intricate network of narrow streets intersected by canals did not seem imposing to the eye. Diogenes marvelled with what thoughts the jongeuffrouw would survey it — wondering no doubt if it would prove the end of her journey or merely a halt on the way to some other place more distant still from her home.

Ben Isaje appeared to be a person of some consequence in Rotterdam, for the moment he questioned a passer-by as to where the Jewish Mynheer resided, there were plenty of willing tongues ready to give him information.

Having followed accurately the instructions which were given to him, Diogenes found himself presently at the top of a street which was so narrow that he reckoned if he stretched out his legs, his feet would be knocking against opposite walls. Anyhow, it looked almost impassable for a rider. He peered down it somewhat dubiously. It was very badly lighted; two feeble lamps alone glimmered at either end of it, and not a soul was in sight.

Close to where his horse was standing at the corner of that same street the word "Tapperij" writ in bold letters and well lit by a lamp placed conveniently above it, invited the tired wayfarer to enter. This philosopher was not the man to refuse so insinuating an

invitation. He dismounted and leaving his horse in charge of an ostler, he entered the tap-room of the tiny hostel and, being both tired and thirsty, he refreshed himself with a draught of good Rhyn wine.

After which he collected more information about the house of Mynheer Ben Isaje. It was situate about midway down that narrow street round the corner, and was easily distinguishable through its crooked and woe-begone appearance, and the closely shuttered projecting window on the ground floor.

A very few minutes later Diogenes had identified the house from the several descriptions which had been given him. Ben Isaje's abode proved to be a tiny shop with a tall pointed gable sitting above it like a sugar-loaf hat. Its low casement window was securely barred with stout wooden shutters, held in place by thick iron bars. The upper part of the house looked to be at perpetual enmity with the lower, for it did not sit straight, or even securely above the humble ground floor below. The upper floor moreover projected a good three feet over the front door and the shop window, whilst the single gable sat askew over the lot.

From the house itself — as Diogenes stood somewhat doubtfully before it — there came the pungent odour of fried onions, and from the one next door an equally insistent one of damp leather. The philosopher thought that it was high time to swear, and this he did lustily, anathematizing in one comprehensive oath every dirty Hebrew and every insalubrious Dutch city that he had ever come across.

After which he examined the abode of Mynheer Ben Isaje more closely. In the pointed gable, just under the roof, a tiny window with a light behind it seemed to be blinking out of the darkness like the single eye of some inebriate loafer. Seeing that the small casement was partially open and concluding that some one at any rate must be making use of that light up there, Diogenes at last made up his mind to knock at the door; and as there was no knocker and he never carried a riding whip he gave the substantial oak panel a vigorous kick with his boot.

Whereupon the light up above immediately went out, just as if the one-eyed inebriate had dropped off to sleep.

This sudden extinguishing of the light, however, only served to prove to Diogenes that some one was up and astir inside the house, so without more ado he proceeded to pound more forcibly against the door with his foot, to shout at the top of his voice, and generally to make a rousing noise — an art of which he was past master.

Soon he heard a soft grating behind the judas, and he felt — more than he saw — that a pair of eyes were peering at him from within.

"Open, Mynheer Ben Isaje," he cried loudly and peremptorily, "ere I rouse this entire evil-smelling neighbourhood with my calls. Open I tell you ere I break in your door first and your nose — which I suspect to be over long and over ruddy — afterwards."

"'Tis too late to transact business now," came in a feeble high-pitched voice from behind the narrow judas, "too late and too dark. The shop is closed."

"'Tis not with your shop that I have to do, master," quoth Diogenes impatiently, "but with yourself, if indeed you are Mynheer Ben Isaje, as I gravely suspect that you are."

"What do you want with Ben Isaje?" queried the timorous voice, "he hath gone home for the night. His house is situate...."

"His house shall be verdommt if you parley any longer behind that grating, man; aye and this shop too, for if you do not open that door immediately I will break the windows, for my business brooks no delay, and I must needs get into this house as best I can."

But despite his threat, no attempt was made to draw the bolts from within, whereupon Diogenes, whose stock of patience was never inexhaustible, and who moreover wished to give value to his threats, took a step backwards and then with a sudden spring threw his whole weight against the oak door; a proceeding which caused the tumble-down house to shake upon its foundations.

The next moment the timorous voice was once more raised behind the judas:

"Kindly have patience, gentle sir. I was even now about to open."

Diogenes heard the drawing of more than one heavy bolt, then the grinding of a key in the lock; after which the door was partially opened, and a thin face with hooked nose and sunken cheeks appeared in the aperture.

To imagine that any man could hold a door against Diogenes when he desired to pass through it was to be totally unacquainted with that philosopher. He certainly would have smashed in the door of Ben Isaje's abode with his powerful shoulders had it been kept persistently closed against him; but as it was, he only gave it a push with his knee, flinging it wide open thereby, and then stepped coolly into the narrow ill-lighted passage.

There was a blank wall each side of him, and a door lower down on the left; straight ahead a narrow ladder-like staircase was half lost in the gloom.

The anxious janitor had hastily retreated down the dark passage at sight of the towering figure which now confronted him, and in his fright he must have dropped the lanthorn which apparently he had been carrying. There it lay on the floor, fortunately still alight, so Diogenes picked it up and holding it high above his head he took a closer survey of the man.

"You are Ben Isaje," he said calmly, as he held the light close to the man's face and then let it travel over his spare and shrinking form; "your dress and nose do proclaim your race. Then pray tell me what was the use of making such a to-do, seeing that I had business with you and therefore meant to come in.... Now take this lanthorn and lock your front door again, after which you had best conduct me to a room where I can talk privately with you."

No doubt there was something in the stranger's face and attitude which re-assured the Jew, for after a few more seconds of anxious hesitancy, he did take the lanthorn from Diogenes' hand and then shuffled back to the street door which he once more carefully barred and bolted.

After which with the aid of one of the many large keys which hung by a steel chain in a bunch from his waist, he unlocked the door in the passage and standing a little to one side he bade his belated guest walk in.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CHECK

The room into which Diogenes now stepped looked at first sight to be almost devoid of furniture: it was only when the Jew had entered and placed the lanthorn down upon a wooden table at one end of the room that the philosopher realized where he was.

The dark low walls showed themselves lined with solid oak chests and presses, each with massive hinges and locks, rusty and covered with dust, but firm enough to withstand for many an hour the depredations of thieves. Ben Isaje was obviously a jeweller by trade and this was the shop where he kept his precious goods: no wonder then that he looked with obvious fear on his belated visitor with the powerful shoulders and vigorous limbs, seeing that to all appearances he was at the moment alone in the house.

Like all jewellers settled in the Dutch cities at this time Ben Isaje carried on a number of other trades — some of which were perhaps not altogether avowable. He acted as banker and moneylender, and general go-between in financial transactions, some of which had political aims. Discretion was of necessity his chief stock-in-trade, and his small cargo of scruples he had thrown overboard long ago.

He was as ready now to finance a conspiracy against the Stadtholder as against the Archduchess or Don John, provided he saw huge monetary profits in the deal, and received bribes with a calm conscience both from Maurice of Nassau and the Lord of Stoutenburg. But once he was liberally paid he would hold to his bond: it was only by keeping the good graces of all political parties that he remained free from molestation.

Diogenes had known exactly what to expect when Nicolaes Beresteyn gave him the letter and bond to present to Ben Isaje; he was, therefore, not surprised in the least when he saw before him the true type of financial agent whom already he had met more than once in his life before.

Ben Isaje, who was the depositary of vast sums of money placed in his house by clients of substance and of note, wore a long, greasy kaftan of black cloth, which was worn thread-bare at the elbows and the knees, and the shop wherein he transacted business both for governments and private individuals which oft times involved several million guilders, had only a few very rickety chairs, one or two tables blackened with dirt and age, and a piece of tattered carpet in one corner as sole expressions of comfort.

But all these facts were of course none of Diogenes' business. At his host's invitation he had sat down on one of the rickety chairs and then proceeded to extract some papers from out the inner lining of his doublet.

"It would save time," he began dryly, and seeing that the man still eyed him with suspicion, "if you would cease to deny that you are Ben Isaje, jeweller of Rotterdam. I have here some papers which I must deliver into the said Ben Isaje's own hands: they are writ by Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn of Haarlem and do explain the purport of my visit here."

"From Nicolaes Beresteyn," quoth the other with an obvious sigh of relief. "Why did you not name him before, sir? I am always at Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn's commands. Indeed my name is Ben Isaje. An you have cause to doubt it, sir..."

"Dondersteen! but I never did doubt it, man, from the moment I saw the end of your hooked nose through the aperture of your door. So no more talk now, I pray you. Time is getting on. Here is the letter which Mynheer Beresteyn bade me present to you."

He handed over the letter to Ben Isaje which was writ in Beresteyn's own hand and duly signed with his own name. The Jew took it from him and drawing a chair close to the light on the table he unfolded the paper and began to read.

Diogenes the while examined him attentively. He was the man who after this night would have charge of Gilda, at the bidding of her own brother; he — Diogenes — would after this night become a free agent, his pledge to Beresteyn would be redeemed and he would be free — in an hour's time mayhap — to work for his own ends — to restore the jongeuffrouw to her sorrowing father, by taking her by force from this old Jew's keeping and returning with utmost speed and in utmost secrecy the very way he had just come. A fortune of 500,000 guilders awaited him in Haarlem, provided he could cajole or threaten Gilda in keeping his share of her original abduction a secret for all times.

How this could be done he had not yet thought on; but that it could be done he had no manner of doubt. An interview with the lady either this night or on the morrow, a promise to take her back to her father at once if she swore a solemn oath never to betray him, and he might be back in Leyden with her to-morrow eve and in possession of a fortune the following day.

No wonder then, that with these happy thoughts whirling in his head, he could scarcely restrain his temper while Ben Isaje read the long letter through, and then re-read it again a second time.

"Have you not finished, sir?" he exclaimed at last with marked impatience, "meseems the letter is explicit enough."

"Quite explicit, sir, I thank you," replied Ben Isaje, as he slowly folded up the letter and slipped it into the pocket of his kaftan. "I am to assure myself that the Jongeuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn, who is in your charge, is safe and well and hath no grave complaints to make against you, beyond that you did seize her by force in the streets of Haarlem. After which I am to see that she is conveyed with respect and safety to my own private house which is situate outside this city, or to any other place which I might think fitting, and there to keep her in comfort until such time as Mynheer Beresteyn desires. All that is quite clearly set forth in the letter, sir, and also that in payment for your services you are to receive the sum of 3,000 guilders which I am to give you in exchange for the formal bond which you will duly present."

The Jew spoke very deliberately — too deliberately, in fact, for Diogenes' endurance. Now he broke in impatiently.

"Is that all that is set forth in the letter?"

The Jew smiled somewhat sardonically.

"Not quite all," he said, "there is, of course, question in it of payment to myself."

"And certain conditions too, I imagine, attached to such payment. I know that Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn is prudent beyond his years."

"There is but one condition, sir, which enjoins me to keep a watchful eye on the jongeuffrouw once she is under my roof: to set a watch over her and her movements, and never, if possible, to let her out of my sight; he suggests that she might at any time make an

attempt at escape, which he strictly commands me to frustrate, and in point of fact he desires me to look upon his sister as a prisoner of war not even to be let out on parole."

Diogenes' low, prolonged whistle was his only comment on what he had just heard.

"Mynheer Beresteyn also suggests to me, sir," continued the Jew with marked affability, "the advisability of keeping a watchful eye over you until such time as the jongejuffrouw is safely housed under my roof."

"You will find that injunction somewhat more difficult to follow, my friend, than you imagine," retorted Diogenes with a ringing laugh, "an you'll take my advice you will have extra watchmen posted outside your door."

"I have valuable things as well as monies stored in this house, sir," rejoined the Jew simply. "I have a picked guard of ten men sleeping here every night, and two watchmen outside my door until dawn."

Once more a long, low whistle escaped from the philosopher's lips.

"You are careful, my friend!" he said lightly.

"One has to be careful, sir, against thieves and house-breakers."

"And will your picked guard of ten men escort the jongejuffrouw to your private house this night?"

But the other slowly shook his head in response.

"The lady and her escort," he said "must, I fear me, accept the hospitality of this hovel for to-night."

"But...."

"My wife is away, sir, visiting her father in Dordrecht. She will only be home to-morrow. In the meanwhile my house is empty, and I am spending my nights here as well as my days."

"But...."

"It will not be a great hardship for the jongejuffrouw, sir," broke in the Jew again, "she will be made as comfortable for the night as maybe — she and her attendant too. I have a serving woman here who will see to the beds and the supper. Then to-morrow I can send a messenger to my private house to prepare my wife the moment she arrives, against the coming of the jongejuffrouw. 'Tis situate but half a league from here, and she would then be sure of a welcome equal to her worth."

Then as Diogenes was silent — since he felt perplexed and anxious at this unlooked-for turn of events and this first check to his plans — Ben Isaje continued with even greater affability than heretofore:

"Indeed, sir, and is it not better for the lady's own comfort? She will be over-fatigued when she arrives, and delighted — I know — at finding a nice bed and supper ready for her. Is it not all for the best?" he reiterated pleasantly.

But Diogenes was not satisfied. He did not like the idea of losing sight of Gilda altogether, quite so soon.

"I do not care to leave the jongejuffrouw," he said, "until I see her safely on her way to your house."

"Nor need you leave her, sir. There is a small room at the back of this shop, to which you are heartily welcome for the night. It is usually occupied by some of my guard, but they can dispose themselves in other rooms in the house. They are sturdy fellows, sir, and well-armed," continued the Jew, not without significance, "and I trust that they will not disturb you with their noise. Otherwise, sir, you are most welcome to sleep and sup under this roof."

Diogenes murmured vague thanks. Indeed, he was not a little troubled in his mind. The plans which he had formed for the second abduction of Gilda would prove more difficult of execution than he had supposed. The Jew had more than the customary prudence of his race, and Beresteyn had made that prudence and the measures which it suggested a condition of payment.

Between the prudence of Beresteyn and that of Ben Isaje, it was difficult to see how an adventurous plan could succeed. Three philosophers against a picked guard of ten men, with two more to keep watch outside the door, did not seem a promising venture. But Diogenes would not have been the happy-go-lucky soldier of fortune that he was, had he paused for long at this juncture in order to brood over likely failure, or had he not been willing to allow Chance a goodly share in the working out of his destiny.

It certainly was useless to argue any of these matters further with Ben Isaje; fate had willed it that the philosopher should spend this night under the same roof as the jongejuffrouw with a watch of twelve picked men — not counting the Jew himself — set over him, and to rebel against that fate now were puerile and useless.

So he murmured more audible thanks for the proffered hospitality, and put on as good-humoured an air over the matter as he could.

From the distance now there came the sound of jingling bells and the clatter of horses' hoofs upon the cobble-stones of the streets.

"'Tis the jongejuffrouw," exclaimed Diogenes, springing to his feet.

"The sledge cannot turn into this narrow way," rejoined Ben Isaje, "will you go meet the lady, sir, at the top of the street where she must needs dismount, and escort her hither, while I go to give orders to the serving woman. Your men," he added, as Diogenes at once rose and went to the door, "and the horses can put up at the hostelry close by where no doubt they have halted even now."

But already Diogenes was half way down the passage; soon he was at the front door fumbling in the dark for the heavy bolts. Ben Isaje followed him more deliberately, lantern in hand. He unlocked the door, and the next moment Diogenes was once more out in the street, walking rapidly in the direction whence came the occasional pleasing sound of the tinkling of sleigh-bells.

CHAPTER XXIX

CHECK AGAIN

Though the jongeuffrouw seemed inexpressibly tired and weak, her attitude toward Diogenes lost nothing of its cold aloofness. She was peeping out under the hood of the sledge when he approached it, and at sight of him she immediately drew in her head.

"Will you deign to descend, mejuffrouw," he said with that slight tone of good-humoured mockery in his voice which had the power to irritate her. "Mynheer Ben Isaje, whose hospitality you will enjoy this night, lives some way up this narrow, insalubrious street, and he has bidden me to escort you to his house."

Silently, and with a great show of passive obedience, Gilda made ready to step out of the sledge.

"Come, Maria," she said curtly.

"The road is very slippery, mejuffrouw," he added warningly, "will you not permit me — for your own convenience' sake — to carry you as far as Ben Isaje's door?"

"It would not be for my convenience, sir," she retorted haughtily, "an you are so chivalrously inclined perhaps you would kindly convey my waiting woman thither in your arms."

"At your service, mejuffrouw," he said with imperturbable good temper.

And without more ado, despite her screams and her struggles, he seized Maria round her ample waist and round her struggling knees at the moment that she was stepping out of the sledge in the wake of her mistress.

The lamp outside the hostel at the corner illumined for a moment Gilda's pale, wearied face, and Diogenes saw that she was trying her best to suppress an insistent outburst of laughter.

"Hey there!" he shouted, "Pythagoras, Socrates, follow the jongeuffrouw at a respectful distance and see that no harm come to her while I lead the way with this featherweight in my arms."

Nor did he deposit Maria to the ground until he reached the door of Ben Isaje's house; here, when the mevrouw began to belabour him with her tongue and with her fists, he turned appealingly to Gilda:

"Mejuffrouw," he said merrily, "is this abuse not unmerited? I did but obey your behests and see how I must suffer for mine obedience."

But Gilda vouchsafed him no reply, and in the darkness he could not see if her face looked angered or smiling.

Ben Isaje, hearing the noise that went on outside his house, had already hastened to open the door. He welcomed the jongeuffrouw with obsequious bows. Behind him in the dark passage stood a lean and towzled-looking serving woman of uncertain years who was as obsequious as her master. When Gilda, confused and wearied, and mayhap not a little tired, advanced timorously into the narrow passage, the woman rushed up to her, and almost kneeling on the floor in the lowliness of her attitude, she kissed the jongeuffrouw's hand.

Diogenes saw nothing more of Gilda and Maria after that. They vanished into the gloom up the ladder-like staircase, preceded by the towzled but amiable woman, who by her talk and clumsy attempts at service had already earned Maria's fulsome contempt.

"You, too, must be hungry, sir," murmured a smooth affable voice close to Diogenes' elbow. "There is a bite and a drink ready for you; will you sup, sir, ere you go to bed?"

Before, however, following Ben Isaje into the shop Diogenes exchanged a few words with his brother philosophers, who, impassive and unquestioning, had escorted the jongeuffrouw to the door, and now stood there awaiting further orders. Diogenes suggested their getting supper and a bed in the hostelry at the top of the street in company with their driver; the horses too should all be stabled there.

"I am going to spend the night under this tumble-down roof," he said, "but remember to sleep with one eye open and be prepared for a summons from me at any hour of the night or morning. Until that comes, however, do not leave the hostel. Care well for the horses, we may have need of them to-morrow. Good-night! pleasant dreams! Do not forget that to-morrow five hundred guilders will fill each of your pockets. In the meanwhile here is the wherewithal to pay for bed and supper."

He gave them some money and then watched the two quaint figures, the long one and the round one, until they were merged in the blackness of the narrow street. Then he went within. Ben Isaje once more closed and bolted the front door and the two men then went together into the shop.

Here an appetizing supper had been laid ready upon the table and a couple of tallow candles burned in pewter sconces.

Ben Isaje at once invited his guest to eat and drink.

"Not before we have settled our business together, master," said the latter as he dragged a chair towards him, and sitting astride upon it, with his shapely legs thrust well out before him, he once more drew a paper from out the lining of his doublet.

"You are satisfied," he resumed after a slight pause, "that the lady whom I have had the honour of bringing into your house is indeed the Jongeuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn, sister of your client Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn of Haarlem?"

"I am quite satisfied on that point," replied the Jew, whose thin, bent form under the rigid folds of the black kaftan looked curiously weird in the feeble yellow light. His face was narrow and also waxlike in hue and the flickering candle-light threw quaint, distorted shadows around his long hooked nose.

"Then," said Diogenes blandly while he held out a folded paper to Ben Isaje, "here is the bond signed by Mynheer Beresteyn wherein he orders you to pay me the sum of 3,000 guilders in consideration of the services which I have rendered him."

But Ben Isaje did not take the paper thus held out to him.

"It is too late," he said quietly, "to transact business to-night."

"Too late!" exclaimed Diogenes with a blunt oath. "What in thunder do you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that you must try and curb your natural impatience until to-morrow."

"But I will not curb mine impatience another moment, plepshurk," cried the philosopher in a rage, "I have fulfilled my share of a bargain, 'tis only a verdommte Keerl who would shirk paying his own share on the nail."

“Nor would Mynheer Beresteyn desire me to shirk his responsibilities, I assure you,” rejoined the Jew suavely, “and believe me, sir, that you will not lose one grote by waiting until the morrow. Let a good supper and a comfortable bed freely offered you atone for this unimportant delay. You still hold Mynheer Beresteyn’s bond: to-morrow at the first business hour you shall be paid.”

“But why any delay at all?” thundered Diogenes, who indeed disliked this way of doing business. “Why not pay me the money now? — at once, I will gladly forego the supper and sit all night upon your doorstep, but have my money in my pocket.”

“Unfortunately, sir,” said Ben Isaje with imperturbable amiability, “I am quite helpless in the matter. I am not the sole master of this business, my wife’s brother shares my profits and my obligations. Neither of us is at liberty to pay out a large sum of money, save in the presence of the other.”

“You and your partner know how to trust one another,” said Diogenes with a laugh.

The Jew made no comment on this, only shrugged his shoulders in that calm manner peculiar to his race, which suggests the Oriental resignation to compelling fate.

Diogenes — inwardly fuming — thought over the matter very quietly for a few moments: it was obviously as useless to argue this matter out with Ben Isaje, as it had been to combat his dictum anent the jongejuffrouw spending the night under his roof, and as usual the wholesome lesson of life which the philosopher had learnt so thoroughly during his adventurous career stood him in good stead now: the lesson was the one which taught him never to waste time, temper or words over a purposeless argument.

That one shrug of Isaje’s shoulders had told him with dumb eloquence that no amount of persuasion on his part would cause the banker to swerve from his determination. The money would be forthcoming on the morrow but not before, and there were ten picked men somewhere in the house at the present moment to prevent Diogenes from settling this matter in a primitive and efficient way by using his fists.

So in this instance too — disappointed though he was — he quickly regained his good humour. After all, the Jew was right: a night’s delay would not spell a loss, and was well compensated for by a good supper and cosy bed.

With his habitual light-hearted laugh and careless shrug of the shoulders, he folded the paper up again and once more slipped it carefully into the inner lining of his doublet.

“You are right, sir,” he said, “‘twere foolish to allow choler to spoil the appetite. I am as hungry as the dog of a Spaniard. By your leave I’ll test the strength of your ale and to-morrow ere I leave your house you shall pay me over the money in the presence of your trusting brother-in-law. Until then the bond remains with me, and I hold myself responsible for the safety of the jongejuffrouw. So I pray you be not surprised if I forbid her removal from this house until I have exchanged this bond for the sum of 3,000 guilders.”

After which he drew his chair close to the table, and fell to all its good cheer with a hearty will. Ben Isaje, hospitable and affable to the last, waited on him with his own hands.

CHAPTER XXX

A NOCTURNE

It was only natural that, though tired as he was and enjoying an unusually contented mind, Diogenes was nevertheless unable to get to sleep.

He had had a very good supper and had parted at an early hour from his host. Ben Isaje had been amiable even deferential to the last, and indeed there had been nothing in the Jew's demeanour to arouse misgivings in the most suspicious mind.

The lean and towzled serving woman had prepared a clean and comfortable bed in the narrow alcove within the wall panelling of the small room which adjoined the shop, but though the weary philosopher wooed sleep with utmost persistence, it resolutely refused to be lured to his pillow. At first the arrival of the night watchmen had kept him awake: for they made their entrance with much jangling of swords and loud and lusty talk. There was apparently a good solid partition between his room and the shop because as soon as the watchmen were settled at their post their voices only reached Diogenes' ear like a muffled murmur.

A door gave from this room on the passage and this he had carefully locked; but it hung loosely on its hinges and the slightest noise in the house — a heavy footfall overhead or in the shop — would cause it to rattle with a weird, intermittent sound which sent sleep flying baffled away.

There were thoughts too which crowded in upon him — pleasant thoughts as well as others that were a trifle sad — the immediate future with its promise of a possible fortune loomed brightly enough, but the means to that happy end was vaguely disturbing the light-hearted equanimity of this soldier of fortune accustomed hitherto to grip Chance by the hair whenever she rushed past him in her mad, whirling career, and without heeding those who stood in his way.

But suddenly the whole thing seemed different, and Diogenes himself could not have told you why it was so. Thoughts of the future and of the promises which it held disturbed when they should have elated him: there was a feeling in him which he could not analyse, a feeling wherein a strange, sweet compassion seemed to form the main ingredient. The philosopher who had hitherto viewed life through the rosy glasses of unalterable good-humour, who had smiled at luck and ill-luck, laughed at misfortune and at hope, suddenly felt that there was something in life which could not be dismissed light-heartedly, something which really counted, though it was so intangible and so elusive that even now he could not give it a name.

The adventurer, who had slept soundly and dreamlessly in camp and on the field, in the streets of a sacked town or the still smouldering battlements of a fortress, could find no rest in the comfortable bed so carefully prepared for him in the house of Ben Isaje the Jew. The murmur of voices from the shop, low and monotonous, irritated his nerves, the rattling of the door upon its hinges drove him well-nigh distracted.

He heard every noise in the house as they died out one by one; the voice of the serving woman bidding the *jongejuffrouw* "good-night," the shuffling footsteps of the old Jew, the heavy tread of Maria overhead, and another, light and swift which — strangely enough — disturbed him more completely than the louder sounds had done.

At last he could stand his present state no longer, he felt an unpleasant tingling to the very tips of his fingers and the very roots of his hair; it seemed to him as if soft noiseless steps wandered aimlessly outside his door; furtive tiny animals with feet of velvet must have run down the stairs and then halted, breathless and terrified, on the other side of those rattling wooden panels.

He sat up in bed and groping for his tinder he struck a light; then he listened again. Not a sound now stirred inside the house, only the wind soughed through the loose tiles of the roof and found out the chinks and cracks of the ill-fitting window, through which it blew with a sharp, whistling sound. From the shop there came the faint murmur of some of the watchmen snoring at their post.

Beyond that, nothing. And yet Diogenes, whose keen ear was trained to catch the flutter of every twig, the movement of every beast, could have sworn that someone was awake at this moment, in this house besides himself — someone who breathed and trembled on the other side of the door.

Without a moment's hesitation he slipped on his clothes as quickly as he could, then he pulled the curtains across in front of the alcove and paused for one second longer in order to listen.

He had certainly not been mistaken. Through the stillness of the house he heard the sougning of the wind, the snoring of the watchmen, and that faint, palpitating sound outside in the passage — that sound which was as the breathing of some living, frightened thing.

Then he walked as noiselessly as he could up to the door, and with a sudden simultaneous turn of key and handle he opened it suddenly.

It opened outwards, and the passage beyond was pitch dark, but there in front of him now, white as a ghost, white as the garment which she wore, white as the marble statue of the Madonna which he had seen in the cathedral at Prague, stood the *jongejuffrouw*.

The candle which she carried flickered in the draught, and thus flickering it lit up her large blue eyes which she kept fixed upon him with an expression half defiant yet wholly terrified.

Frankly he thought at first that this was an apparition, a vivid embodiment of the fevered fancies which had been haunting him. No wonder therefore that he made no movement toward her, or expressed the slightest astonishment at seeing her there, all alone, in the middle of the night, not five paces away from him.

Thus they stood looking at one another for some time in absolute silence; she obviously very frightened, hesitating betwixt audacity and immediate flight, and he puzzled and with a vague sense of unreality upon him, a sense as of a dream which yet had in it the pulsating vividness of life.

She was the first to break this silence which was beginning to be oppressive. Gilda Beresteyn was not a timid woman nor was hers a character which ever vacillated once her mind was made up. The step which she had taken this night — daring and unconventional as it was — had been well thought out: deliberately and seriously she had weighed every danger, every risk which she ran, even those

which in her pure-minded innocence she was not able fully to appreciate. Now though she was scared momentarily, she had no thought of turning back.

The old stiff-necked haughtiness of her race did not desert her for a moment, even though she was obviously at a disadvantage in this instance, and had come here as a suppliant.

"I wished to speak with you, sir," she said, and her voice had scarce a tremor in it, "my woman was too timorous to come down and summon you to my presence, as I had ordered her to do; so I was forced to come myself."

Though she looked very helpless, very childlike in her innocence, she had contrived to speak to him like a princess addressing a menial, holding her tiny head very high and making visible efforts to still the quivering of her lips.

There was something so quaint in this proud attitude of hers under the present circumstances, that despite its pathos Diogenes' keen sense of humour was not proof against it, and that accustomed merry smile of his crept slowly over every line of his face.

"I am ever at your service, mejuffrouw," he said as gravely as he could, "your major domo, your valet ... I always await your commands."

"Then I pray you take this candle," she said coldly, "and stand aside that I may enter. What I have to say cannot be told in this passage."

He took the candle from her, since she held it out to him, and then stepped aside just as she had commanded, keeping the door wide open for her to pass through into the room. She was holding herself very erect, and with perfect self-possession she now selected a chair whereon to sit. She wore the same white gown which she had on when first he laid hands on her in the streets of Haarlem, and the fur cloak wherein she had wrapped herself had partially slid from her shoulders.

Having sat down, close to the table, with one white arm resting upon it, she beckoned peremptorily to him to close the door and to put the candle down; all of which he did quite mechanically, for the feeling had come back to him that the white figure before him was only a vision — or mayhap a dream — from which, however, he hoped not to awaken too soon.

"At your command, mejuffrouw," was all that he said, and he remained standing quite close to the door, with half the width of the room between himself and her.

But to himself he murmured under his breath:

"St. Bavon and the Holy Virgin, do ye both stand by me now!"

"I do not know, sir," she began after awhile, "if my coming here at this hour doth greatly surprise you, but in truth the matter which brings me is so grave that I cannot give a thought to your feelings or to mine own."

"And mine, mejuffrouw, are of such little consequence," he said good-humouredly seeing that she appeared to wait for a reply, "that it were a pity you should waste precious time in considering them."

"Nor have I come to talk of feelings, sir. My purpose is of deadly earnestness. I have come to propose a bargain for your acceptance."

"A bargain?"

"Yes. A bargain," she reiterated. "One I hope and think that you will find it worth while to accept."

"Then may I crave the honour of hearing the nature of that bargain, mejuffrouw?" he asked pleasantly.

She did not give him an immediate reply but remained quite still and silent for a minute or even two, looking with wide-open inquiring eyes on the tall figure of the man who had — to her mind — done her such an infinite wrong. She noted and acknowledged quite dispassionately the air of splendour which became him so well — splendour of physique, of youth and of strength, and those laughing eyes that questioned and that mocked, the lips that always smiled and the straight brow with its noble sweep which hid the true secret of his personality. And once again — as on that evening at Leyden — she fell almost to hating him, angered that such a man should be nothing better than a knave, a mercenary rogue paid to lend a hand in unavowable deeds.

He stood her scrutiny as best he could, answering her look of haughty condescension with one of humble deference; but the smile of gentle irony never left his lips and tempered the humility of his attitude.

"You have owned to me, sir," resumed Gilda Beresteyn at last, "that you have been paid for the infamous work which you are doing now; for laying hands on me in the streets of Haarlem and for keeping me a prisoner at the good will of your employer. To own to such a trade, sir, is to admit oneself somewhat below the level of honest men. Is that not so?"

"Below the level of most men, mejuffrouw, I admit," he replied imperturbably.

"Had it not been for that admission on your part, I would never have thought of coming to you with a proposal which...."

"Which you never would have put before an honest man," he broke in with perfect equanimity, seeing that she hesitated.

"You anticipate my thought, sir: and I am glad to find that you will make my errand even easier than I had hoped. Briefly then let me tell you — as I told you at Leyden — that I know who your paymaster is. A man has thought fit to perpetrate a crime against me, for a reason which no doubt he deemed expedient and which probably he has not imparted to you. Reasons and causes I imagine, sir, are no concern of yours. You take payment for your deeds and do not inquire into motives. Is that not so?"

This time Diogenes only made a slight bow in acknowledgment of her question. He was smiling to himself more grimly than was his wont, for he had before him the recollection of the Lord of Stoutenburg — cruel, coarse, and evil, bullying and striking a woman — and of Nicolaes Beresteyn — callous and cynical, bartering his sister's honour and safety to ensure his own. To the one she had plighted her troth, the other was her natural protector, dear to her through those sweet bonds of childhood which bind brother and sister in such close affection. Yet both are selfish, unscrupulous rogues, thought the philosopher, though both very dear to her, and both honest men in her sight.

"That being so, sir," she resumed once more, "meseems that you should be equally ready to do me service and to ask me no questions, provided that I pay you well."

"That, mejuffrouw," he said quietly, "would depend on the nature of the service."

"It is quite simple, sir. Let me explain. While my woman and I were having supper upstairs, the wench who served us fell to gossiping, telling us the various news of the day which have filtered through into Rotterdam. Among other less important matters, sir, she told us that the Prince of Orange had left his camp at Sprang in order to journey northwards to Amsterdam. Yesterday he and his

escort of one hundred men-at-arms passed close to this city; they were making for Delft where the Prince means to spend a day or two before proceeding further on his journey. He sleeps at the Prinzenhof in Delft this night."

"Yes, mejuffrouw?" he said, for suddenly her manner had changed; something of its coolness had gone from it, even if the pride was still there. While she spoke a warm tinge of pink flooded her cheeks; she was leaning forward, her eyes bright and glowing were fixed upon him with a look of eagerness and almost of appeal, and her lips were moist and trembling, whilst the words which she wished to speak seemed to be dying in her throat.

"What hath the progress of the Prince of Orange to do with your most humble and most obedient servant?" he asked again.

"I must speak with the Prince of Orange, sir," she said while her voice now soft and mellow fell almost like a prayer on his ear. "I must go to him to Delft not later than to-morrow. Oh! you will not refuse me this ... you cannot ... I..."

She had clasped her hands together, her eyes were wet with tears, and as she pleaded, she bent forward so low in her chair, that it seemed for a moment as if her knees would touch the ground. In the flickering candle-light she looked divinely pretty thus, with all the cold air of pride gone from her childlike face. A gentle draught stirred the fair curls round her head, the fur cloak had completely slipped down from her shoulders and her white dress gave her more than ever the air of that Madonna carved in marble which he had seen once in the cathedral at Prague.

The philosopher passed a decidedly shaking hand across his forehead: the room was beginning to whirl round him, the floor to give way under his feet. He fell to thinking that the mild ale offered to him by Ben Isaje had been more heady than he had thought.

"St. Bavon," he murmured to himself, "where in Heaven's name are ye now? I asked you to stand by me."

It was one of those moments — perfect in themselves — when a man can forget everything that pertains to the outer world, when neither self-interest nor ordinary prudence will count, when he is ready to jeopardize his life, his career, his future, his very soul for the ecstasy which lies in the one heaven-born minute. Thus it was with this philosopher, this man of the moment, the adventurer, the soldier of fortune; the world which he had meant to conquer, the fortune which he had vowed to win seemed to slip absolutely away from him. This dream — for it was after all only a dream, it was just too beautiful to be reality — the continuance of this dream seemed to him to be all that mattered, this girl — proud and pleading — a Madonna, a saint, a child of innocence, was the only perfect, desirable entity in this universe.

"St. Bavon, you rogue! you are playing me false!" he murmured, as the last vestige of self-control and of prudence threatened to fall away from him.

"Madonna," he said as with a quick movement he came forward and bent the knee before her, "I entreat you to believe that whatever lies in my power to do in your service, that will I gladly do. How can I refuse," he added whilst that immutable smile, gentle, humorous, faintly ironical, once more lit up his face as he looked straight into hers, "how can I refuse to obey since you deign to plead to me with those lips? how can I withstand your appeal when it speaks to me through your eyes?"

"You will let me do what I ask?" she exclaimed with a little cry of joy, for his attitude was very humble and his voice yielding and kind; he was kneeling at some little distance from her, which was quite becoming in a mercenary knave.

"If it be in my power, Madonna!" he said simply.

"Then will I pay you well," she continued eagerly. "I have thought it all out. I am rich you know, and my bond is as good as that of any man. Do you but bring me inkhorn and paper, I will give you a bond for 4,000 guilders on Mynheer Ben Isaje himself, he hath monies of mine own in trust and at interest. But if 4,000 guilders are not enough, I pray you name your price; it shall be what you ask."

"What do you desire me to do, Madonna?"

"I desire you to escort me to Delft so that I may speak with the Prince of Orange."

"The Prince of Orange is well guarded. No stranger is allowed to enter his presence."

"I am not a stranger to him. My father is his friend; a word from me to him, a ring of mine sent in with a request for an audience and he will not refuse."

"And having entered the presence of the Stadtholder, mejuffrouw, what do you propose to say to him?"

"That, sir, is naught to you," she retorted coldly.

"I pray you forgive me," he said, still humbly kneeling, "but you have deigned to ask my help, and I'll not give it unless you will tell me what your purpose is."

"You would not dare..."

"To make conditions for my services?" he said speaking always with utmost deference, "this do I dare, mejuffrouw, and my condition is for your acceptance or refusal — as you command."

"I did not ask for your help, sir," she said curtly. "I offered to pay you for certain services which I desire you to render me."

Already her look of pleading had gone. She had straightened herself up, prouder and more disdainful than before. He dared to make conditions! he! the mercenary creature whom anyone could buy body and soul for money, who took payment for doing such work as would soil an honest man's hands! It was monstrous! impossible, unthinkable. She thought that her ears had deceived her or that mayhap he had misunderstood.

In a moment at her words, at the scornful glance which accompanied them, he had risen to his feet. The subtle moment had gone by; the air was no longer oppressive, and the ground felt quite steady under him. Calm, smiling, good-tempered, he straightened out his massive figure as if to prepare himself for those shafts which her cruel little tongue knew so well how to deal.

And inwardly he offered up a thanksgiving to St. Bavon for this cold douche upon his flaming temper.

"I did not misunderstand you, mejuffrouw," he said lightly, "and I am ready to do you service — under a certain condition."

She bit her lip with vexation. The miserable wretch was obviously not satisfied with the amount which she had named as payment for his services, and he played some weak part of chivalry and of honour in order to make his work appear more difficult, and to extract a more substantial reward from her. She tried to put into the glance which she now threw on him all the contempt which she felt and which truly nauseated her at this moment. Unfortunately she had need of him, she could not start for Delft alone, marauders and footpads would stop her ever reaching that city. Could she have gone alone she were not here now craving the help of a man whom she despised.

"Meseems," she said coldly after a slight pause, "that you do wilfully misunderstand our mutual positions. I am not asking you to do anything which could offend your strangely susceptible honour, whose vagaries, I own, I am unable to follow. Will 10,000 guilders satisfy your erratic conscience? or did you receive more than that for laying hands on two helpless women and dragging one — who has never done you any wrong — to a depth of shame and sorrow which you cannot possibly fathom?"

"My conscience, mejuffrouw," he replied, seemingly quite unperturbed at her contemptuous glance and insulting speech, "is, as you say, somewhat erratic. For the moment it refuses to consider the possibility of escorting you to Delft unless I know what it is that you desire to say to the Prince of Orange."

"If it is a question of price...."

"It is not a question of price, mejuffrouw," he broke in firmly, "let us, an you will allow it, call it a question of mine erratic conscience."

"I am rich, sir ... my private fortune...."

"Do not name it, mejuffrouw," he said jovially, "the sound of it would stagger a poor man who has to scrape up a living as best he can."

"Forty thousand guilders, sir," she said pleading once more eagerly, "an you will take me to Delft to-morrow."

"Were it ten hundred thousand, mejuffrouw, I would not do it unless I knew what you wished to say to the Stadtholder."

"Sir, can I not move you," she implored, "this means more to me than I can hope to tell you." Once again her pride had given way before this new and awful fear that her errand would be in vain, that she had come here as a suppliant before this rogue, that she had humbled her dignity, entreated him, almost knelt to him, and that he, for some base reason which she could not understand, meant to give himself the satisfaction of refusing the fortune which she did promise him.

"Can I not move you," she reiterated, appealing yet more earnestly, for, womanlike, she could not forget that moment awhile ago, when he had knelt instinctively before her, when the irony had gone from his smile, and the laughter in his mocking eyes had yielded to an inward glow.

He shook his head, but remained unmoved.

"I cannot tell you, sir," she urged plaintively, "what I would say to the Prince."

"Is it so deadly a secret then?" he asked.

"Call it that, an you will."

"A secret that concerns his life?"

"That I did not say."

"No. It was a guess. A right one methinks."

"Then if you think so, sir, why not let me go to him?"

"So that you may warn him?"

"You were merely guessing, sir...."

"That you may tell him not to continue his journey," he insisted, speaking less restrainedly now, as he leaned forward closer to her, her fair curls almost brushing against his cheek as they fluttered in the draught.

"I did not say so," she murmured.

"Because there is a trap laid for him ... a trap of which you know...."

"No, no!" she cried involuntarily.

"A trap into which he may fall ... unknowingly ... on his way to the north."

"You say so, sir," she moaned, "not I...."

"Assassins are on his track ... an attempt will be made against his life ... the murderers lie in wait for him ... even now ... and you, mejuffrouw, who know who those murderers are...."

A cry of anguish rose to her lips.

"No, no, no," she cried, "it is false ... you are only guessing ... remember that I have told you nothing."

But already the tense expression on his face had gone. He drew himself up to his full height once more and heaved a deep breath which sounded like a sigh of satisfaction.

"Yet in your candour, mejuffrouw, you have told me much," he said quietly, "confirmed much that I only vaguely guessed. The Stadtholder's life is in peril and you hold in your feeble little hands the threads of the conspiracy which threatens him ... is that not why you are here, mejuffrouw ... a prisoner, as you say, at the good-will of my employer? I am only guessing, remember, but on your face, meseems that I can read that I do guess aright."

"Then you will do what I ask?" she exclaimed with a happy little gasp of renewed hope.

"That, mejuffrouw, is I fear me impossible," he said quietly.

"Impossible? But — just now...."

"Just now," he rejoined with affected carelessness, "I said, mejuffrouw, that I would on no account escort you to Delft without knowing what your purpose is with the Prince of Orange. Even now I do not know, I merely guessed."

"But," she entreated, "if I do own that you have guessed aright — partly at any rate — if I do tell you that the Stadtholder's life might be imperilled if I did not give him a timely word of warning, if...."

"Even if you told me all that, mejuffrouw," he broke in lightly, "if you did bring your pride down so far as to trust a miserable knave with a secret which he might sell for money on the morrow — even then, I fear me, I could not do what you ask."

"But why not?" she insisted, her voice choking in her throat in the agony of terrible doubt and fear.

"Because the man of whom you spoke just now, the man whom you love, mejuffrouw, has been more far-seeing, more prudent than you or I. He hath put it out of my power to render you this service."

"How?"

"By warning Mynheer Ben Isaje against any attempt at escape on your part, against any attempt at betrayal on mine. Mynheer Ben Isaje is prepared: he hath a guard of ten picked men on the watch, and two more men outside his door. If you tried to leave this house

with me without his consent he would prevent you, and I am no match alas! for twelve men.”

“Why should he guard me so?”

“Because he will not be paid if he keep not watch over you.”

“But I’ll swear to return straightway from Delft. I’ll only speak with the Prince and return immediately.... Money! always money!” she cried with sudden vehemence, “a great man’s life, the honour of a house, the salvation of the land, are these all to be sacrificed because of the greed and cupidity of men?”

“Shall I call Mynheer Ben Isaje?” asked Diogenes placidly, “mayhap, mejuffrouw, that you could persuade him more easily than me!”

But at this she rose to her feet as suddenly as if she had been stung: the colour in her cheeks deepened, the tears were dry in her eyes.

“You,” she exclaimed, and there was a world of bitter contempt in the tone of her voice, “persuade you who have tricked and fooled me, even while I began to believe in you? You, who for the past half hour have tried to filch a secret from me bit by bit! with lying words you led me into telling you even more than I should! and I, poor fool I thought that I had touched your heart, or that at least there was some spark of loyalty in you which mayhap prompted you to guess that the Prince was in danger. Fool that I was! miserable, wretched fool! to think for a moment that you would lend a hand in aught that was noble and chivalrous! I would I had the power to raise the blush of shame in your cheeks, but alas! the shame is only for me, who trusting in your false promises and your lies have allowed my tongue to speak words which I would give my life now to unsay — for me who thought that there was in you one feeble spark of pity or of honour. Fool! fool that I was! when I forgot for one brief moment that it was your greed and cupidity that were the props without which this whole edifice of infamy had tottered long ago; persuade you to do a selfish deed! you the abductor of women, the paid varlet and mercenary rogue who will thief and outrage and murder for money!”

She sank back in her chair and, resting her arms upon the table, she buried her face in them, for she had given way at last to a passionate fit of weeping. The disappointment was greater than she could bear after the load of sorrow which had been laid on her these past few days.

When she heard through the chatterings of a servant that the Stadtholder was at Delft this very night, the memory of every word which she had heard in the cathedral on New Year’s Eve came back to her with renewed vividness. Delft! she remembered that name so well and Ryswyk close by, the only possible way for a northward journey! Then the molens which Stoutenburg had said were his headquarters, where he stored arms and ammunition and enough gunpowder to blow up the wooden bridge which spans the Schie and over which the Stadtholder and his bodyguard must pass.

Every word that Stoutenburg and her brother and the others had spoken that night, rang now in her ears like a knell: Delft, Ryswyk, the molens, the wooden bridge! Delft, Ryswyk, the molens, the wooden bridge! Delft....

Delft was quite near, less than four leagues away ... the Stadtholder was there now ... he could be warned before it was too late ... and she could warn him without compromising her brother and his friends.... Then it was that she remembered that in the room below there slept a knave who would do anything for gold.

Thus she had run down to him full of eagerness and full of hope. And now he had refused to help her, and worse still had guessed at a secret which, if he bartered or sold it, meant death to her brother and his friends.

Contempt and hate had broken down her spirit. Smothering both, she was even now ready to fall on her knees, to plead with him, to pray, to implore ... if only that could have moved him ... if only it meant safety for the Stadtholder, and not merely a useless loss of pride and of dignity.

Anger and misery and utter hopelessness! they were causing her tears, and she hated this man who had her in his power and mocked her in her misery: and there was the awful thought that the Stadtholder was so near — less than four leagues away! Why! had she been free she could have run all the way to him — that hideous crime, that appalling tragedy in which her brother would bear a hand, could be averted even now if she were free! Oh! the misery of it! the awful, wretched helplessness! in a few days — hours mayhap — the Stadtholder would be walking straight into the trap which his murderers had set for him ... the broken bridge! the explosion! the assassin at the carriage door! She saw it all as in a vision of the future, and her brother in the midst of it all with hands deeply stained in blood.

And she could avert it all — the crime, the sorrow, the awful, hideous shame if only she were free.

She looked up at last, ashamed of her tears, ashamed that a rogue should have seen how keenly she suffered.

She looked up and turned to him once more. The flickering light of the candles fell full upon his splendid figure and upon his face: it was the colour of ashes, and there was no trace of his wonted smile around his lips: the eyes too looked sunken and their light was hid beneath the drooping lids. Her shafts which she had aimed with such deadly precision had gone home at last: in the bitterness of her heart she apparently had found words which had cut him like a lash.

Satisfied at least in this she rose to go.

“There is nothing more to say,” she said as calmly as she could, trying to still the quivering of her lips: “as you say, Mynheer Ben Isaje has carefully taken the measure of your valour and it cannot come up to a dozen picked men, even though life and honour, country and faith might demand at least an effort on their behalf. I pray you open the door. I would — for mine own sake as well as your own — that I had not thought of breaking in on your rest.”

Without a word he went to the door, and had his hand on the latch ready to obey her, when something in his placid attitude irritated her beyond endurance. Woman-like she was not yet satisfied: perhaps a thought of remorse at her cruelty fretted her, perhaps she pitied him in that he was so base.

Be that as it may, she spoke to him again:

“Have you nothing then to say?” she asked.

“What can I say, mejuffrouw?” he queried in reply, as the ghost of his wonted smile crept swiftly back into his pale face.

“Methought no man would care to be called a coward by a woman, and remain silent under the taunt.”

"You forget, mejuffrouw," he retorted, "that I am so much less than a man ... a menial, a rogue, a vagabond — so base that not even the slightest fear of me did creep into your heart ... you came to me, here, alone at dead of night with an appeal upon your lips, yet you were not afraid, then you struck me in the face like you would a dog with a whip, and you were no more afraid of me than of the dog whom you had thrashed. So base am I then that words of mine are not worthy of your ear. Whatever I said, I could not persuade you that for one man to measure his strength against twelve others were not an act of valour, but one of senseless foolishness. I might tell you that bravery lies oft in prudence but seldom in foolhardiness, but this I know you are not in a mood now to believe. I might even tell you," he continued with a slight return to his wonted light-hearted carelessness, "I might tell you that certain acts of bravery cannot be accomplished without the intervention of protecting saints, and that I have found St. Bavon an admirable saint to implore in such cases, but this I fear me you are not like to understand. So you see, mejuffrouw, that whatever I said I could not prove to you that I am less of a blackguard than I seem."

"You could at least prove it to this extent," she retorted, "by keeping silence over what you may have guessed."

"You mean that I must not sell the secret which you so nearly betrayed ... have no fear, mejuffrouw, my knowledge of it is so scanty that the Stadtholder would not give me five guilders for it."

"Will you swear...."

"Such a miserable cur as I am, mejuffrouw," he said lightly, "is surely an oath-breaker as well as a liar and a thief — what were the good of swearing?... But I'll swear an you wish ..." he added gaily.

"Surely you ..." she began.

But with a quick gesture he interrupted her.

"Dondersteen, mejuffrouw," he said more firmly than he had yet spoken before, "if beauty in you is tempered with pity, I entreat you to spare me now: even knaves remember become men sometimes and my patron Saint Bavon threatens to leave me in the lurch."

He held open the door for her to pass through, and gravely held out one of the pewter candles to her. She could not help but take it, though indeed she felt that the last word between that rogue and herself had not by any means been spoken yet. But she hardly looked at him as she sailed past him out of the room, her heavy skirt trailing behind her with a soft hissing sound.

As soon as she heard the door shut to behind her, she ran up the stairs back to her own room with all speed, like a frightened hare.

Had she remained in the passage one instant longer she would have heard a sound which would have terrified her; it was the sound of a prolonged and ringing laugh which roused the echoes of this sleeping house, but which had neither mirth nor joy in its tone, and had she then peeped through a keyhole she would have seen a strange sight. A man who in the flickering candle-light looked tall and massive as a giant took up one of the wooden chairs in the room, and after holding it out at arm's length for a few seconds, he proceeded to smash it viciously bit by bit until it lay a mass of broken débris at his feet.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE MOLENS

Less than half a league to the southeast of Ryswyk — there where the Schie makes a sharp curve up toward the north — there is a solitary windmill — strange in this, that it has no companions near it, but stands quite alone with its adjoining miller's hut nestling close up against it like a tiny chick beside the mother hen, and dominates the mud flats and lean pastures which lie for many leagues around.

On this day which was the fourth of the New Year, these mud flats and the pasture land lay under a carpet of half-melted snow and ice which seemed to render the landscape more weird and desolate, and the molens itself more deserted and solitary. Yet less than half a league away the pointed gables and wooden spires of Ryswyk break the monotony of the horizon line and suggest the life and movement pertaining to a city, however small. But life and movement never seem to penetrate as far as this molens; they spread their way out toward 'S Graven Hage and the sea.

Nature herself hath decreed that the molens shall remain solitary and cut off from the busy world, for day after day and night after night throughout the year a mist rises from the mud flats around and envelops the molens as in a shroud. In winter the mist is frosty, in summer at times it is faintly tinged with gold, but it is always there and through it the rest of the living world — Ryswyk and 'S Graven Hage and Delft further away only appear as visions on the other side of a veil.

Just opposite the molens, some two hundred paces away to the east, the waters of the Schie rush with unwonted swiftness round the curve; so swiftly in fact that the ice hardly ever forms a thick crust over them, and this portion of an otherwise excellent waterway is — in the winter — impracticable for sleighs.

Beyond this bend in the river, however, less than half a league away, there is a wooden bridge, wide and strongly built, across which it is quite easy for men and beasts to pass who have come from the south and desire to rejoin the great highway which leads from Delft to Leyden.

In the morning of that same fourth day in the New Year, two men sat together in what was once the weighing-room of the molens; their fur coats were wrapped closely round their shoulders, for a keen north-westerly wind had found its way through the chinks and cracks of tumble-down doors and ill-fitting window frames.

Though a soft powdery veil — smooth as velvet to the touch and made up of flour and fine dust-lay over everything, and the dry, sweet smell of corn still hung in the close atmosphere, there was little else in this room now that suggested the peaceful use for which it had been originally intended.

The big weighing machines had been pushed into corners, and all round the sloping walls swords, cullivers and muskets were piled in orderly array, also a row of iron boxes standing a foot or so apart from one another and away from any other objects in the room.

The silence which reigned over the surrounding landscape did not find its kingdom inside this building, for a perpetual hum, a persistent buzzing noise as of bees in their hives, filtrated through the floor and the low ceiling of this room. Men moved and talked and laughed inside the molens, but the movement and the laughter were subdued as if muffled in that same mantle of mist which covered the outside world.

The two men in the weighing-room were sitting at a table on which were scattered papers, inkhorns and pens, a sword, a couple of pistols and two or three pairs of skates. One of them was leaning forward and talking eagerly:

"I think you can rest satisfied, my good Stoutenburg," he said, "our preparations leave nothing to be desired. I have just seen Jan, and together we have despatched the man Lucas van Sparendam to Delft. He is the finest spy in the country, and can ferret out a plan or sift a rumour quicker than any man I know. He will remain at Delft and keep the Prinzenhof under observation: and will only leave the city if anything untoward should happen, and then he will come straight here and report to us. He is a splendid runner, and can easily cover the distance between Delft and this molens in an hour. That is satisfactory is it not?"

"Quite," replied Stoutenburg curtly.

"Our arrangements here on the other hand are equally perfect," resumed Beresteyn eagerly, "we have kept the whole thing in our own hands ... Heemskerk and I will be at our posts ready to fire the gunpowder at the exact moment when the advance guard of the Prince's escort will have gone over the bridge ... you, dagger in hand, will be prepared to make a dash for the carriage itself ... our men will attack the scattered and confused guard at a word from van Does.... What could be more simple, more perfect than that? Yourself, Heemskerk, van Does and I ... all of one mind ... all equally true, silent and determined.... You seem so restless and anxious.... Frankly I do not understand you."

"It is not of our preparations or of our arrangements that I am thinking, Nicolaes," said Stoutenburg sombrely, "these have been thought out well enough. Nothing but superhuman intervention or treachery can save the Stadtholder — of that am I convinced. Neither God nor the devil care to interfere in men's affairs — we need not therefore fear superhuman intervention. But 'tis the thought of treachery that haunts me."

"Bah!" quoth Beresteyn with a shrug of the shoulders, "you have made a nightmare of that thought. Treachery? there is no fear of treachery. Yourself, van Does, Heemskerk and I are the only ones who know anything at this moment of our plans for to-morrow. Do you suspect van Does of treachery, or Heemskerk, or me?"

"I was not thinking of Heemskerk or of van Does," rejoined Stoutenburg, "and even our men will know nothing of the attack until the last moment. Danger, friend, doth not lie in or around the molens; it lurks at Rotterdam and hath name Gilda."

"Gilda! What can you fear from Gilda now?"

"Everything. Have you never thought on it, friend? Jan, remember, lost track of that knave soon after he left Haarlem. At first he struck across the waterways in a southerly direction and for awhile Jan and the others were able to keep him in sight. But soon darkness settled in and along many intricate backwaters our rogue was able to give them the slip."

"I know that," rejoined Beresteyn somewhat impatiently. "I was here in the early morning when Jan reported to you. He also told you that he and his men pushed on as far as Leyden that night and regained the road to Rotterdam the following day. At Zegwaard and again at Zevenhuizen they ascertained that a party consisting of two women in a sledge and an escort of three cavaliers had halted for refreshments at those places and then continued their journey southwards. Since then Jan has found out definitely that Gilda and her escort arrived early last night at the house of Ben Isaje of Rotterdam, and he came straight on here to report to you. Frankly I see nothing in all this to cause you so much anxiety."

"You think then that everything is for the best?" asked Stoutenburg grimly, "you did not begin to wonder how it was that — as Jan ascertained at Zegwaard and at Zevenhuizen — Gilda continued her journey without any protest. According to the people whom Jan questioned she looked sad certainly, but she was always willing to restart on her way. What do you make of that, my friend?"

Once more Beresteyn shrugged his shoulders.

"Gilda is proud," he said. "She hath resigned herself to her fate."

Stoutenburg laughed aloud.

"How little you — her own brother — know her," he retorted. "Gilda resigned? Gilda content to let events shape themselves — such events as those which she heard us planning in the Groote Kerk on New Year's Eve? Why, my friend, Gilda will never be resigned, she will never be content until she hath moved earth and heaven to save the Stadtholder from my avenging hand!"

"But what can she do now? Ben Isaje is honest in business matters. It would not pay him to play his customers false. And I have promised him two thousand guilders if he keeps her safely as a prisoner of war, not even to be let out on parole. Ben Isaje would not betray me. He is too shrewd for that."

"That may be true of Ben Isaje himself; but what of his wife? his sons or daughters if he have any? his serving wenches, his apprentices and his men? How do you know that they are not amenable to promises of heavy bribes?"

"But even then..."

"Do you not think that at Rotterdam every one by now knows the Prince's movements? He passed within half a league of the town yesterday; there is not a serving wench in that city at this moment who does not know that Maurice of Nassau slept at Delft last night and will start northwards to-morrow."

"And what of that?" queried Beresteyn, trying to keep up a semblance of that carelessness which he was far from feeling now.

"Do you believe then that Gilda will stay quietly in the house of Ben Isaje, knowing that the Prince is within four leagues of her door?... knowing that he will start northwards to-morrow ... knowing that my headquarters are here — close to Ryswyk ... knowing in fact all that she knows?"

"I had not thought on all that," murmured Beresteyn under his breath.

"And there is another danger too, friend, greater perhaps than any other," continued Stoutenburg vehemently.

"Good G — d, Stoutenburg, what do you mean?"

"That cursed foreign adventurer —"

"What about him?"

"Have you then never thought of him as being amenable to a bribe from Gilda."

"In Heaven's name, man, do not think of such awful eventualities!"

"But we must think of them, my good Beresteyn. Events are shaping themselves differently to what we expected. We must make preparations for our safety accordingly, and above all realise the fact that Gilda will move heaven and earth to thwart us in our plans."

"But she can do nothing," persisted Beresteyn sullenly, "without betraying me. In Haarlem it was different. She might have spoken to my father of what she knew, but she would not do so to a stranger, knowing that with one word she can send me first and all of you afterwards to the scaffold."

Stoutenburg with an exclamation of angry impatience brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table.

"Are you a child, Beresteyn," he cried hotly, "or are you wilfully blind to your danger and to mine? I tell you that Gilda will never allow me to kill the Prince of Orange without raising a finger to save him."

"But what can I do?"

"Send for Gilda at once, to-night," urged Stoutenburg, "convey her under escort hither ... in all deference ... in all honour ... she would be here under her brother's care."

"A woman in this place at such a moment," cried Beresteyn; "you are mad, Stoutenburg."

"I shall go mad if she is not here," rejoined the other more calmly, "the fear has entered into my soul, Nicolaes, that Gilda will yet betray us at the eleventh hour. That fear is an obsession ... call it premonition if you will, but it unmans me, friend."

Beresteyn was silent now. He drew his cloak closer round his shoulders, for suddenly he felt a chill which seemed to have crept into his bones.

"But it is impractical, man," he persisted with a kind of sullen despair. "Gilda and another woman here ... to-morrow ... when not half a league away..."

"Justice will be meted out to a tyrant and an assassin," broke in Stoutenburg quietly. "Gilda is not a woman as other women are, though in her soul now she may be shrinking at the thought of this summary justice, she will be strong and brave when the hour comes. In any case," he added roughly, "we can keep her closely guarded, and in the miller's hut, with the miller and his wife to look after her, she will be as safe and as comfortable as circumstances will allow. We should have her then under our own eyes and know that she cannot betray us."

As usual Beresteyn was already yielding to the stronger will, the more powerful personality of his friend. His association with Stoutenburg had gradually blunted his finer feelings; like a fly that is entangled in the web of a spider, he tried to fight against the network of intrigue and of cowardice which hemmed him in more and more closely with every step that he took along the path of crime. He was filled with remorse at thought of the wrong which he had done to Gilda, but he was no longer his own master. He was being carried away by the tide of intrigue and by the fear of discovery, away from his better self.

"You should have thought on all that sooner, Stoutenburg," he said in final, feeble protest, "we need never have sent Gilda to Rotterdam in the company of a foreign adventurer of whom we knew nothing."

"At the time it seemed simple enough," quoth Stoutenburg impatiently, "you suggested the house of Ben Isaje the banker and it seemed an excellent plan. I did not think of distance then, and it is only since we arrived at Ryswyk that I realized how near all these places are to one another, and how easy it would be for Gilda to betray us even now."

Beresteyn was silent after that. It was easy to see that his friend's restless anxiety was eating into his own soul. Stoutenburg watched him with those hollow glowing eyes of his that seemed to send a magnetic current of strong will-power into the weaker vessel.

"Well! perhaps you are right," said Beresteyn at last, "perhaps you are right. After all," he added half to himself, "perhaps I shall feel easier in my conscience when I have Gilda near me and feel that I can at least watch over her."

Stoutenburg, having gained his point, jumped to his feet and drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"That's bravely said," he exclaimed. "Will you go yourself at once to Rotterdam? with two or three of our most trusted men you could bring Gilda here with absolute safety; you only need to make a slight détour when you near Delft so as to avoid the city. You could be here by six o'clock this evening at the latest, and Jan in the meanwhile with a contingent of our stalwarts shall try and find that abominable plepshurk again and bring him here too without delay."

"No, no," said Beresteyn quickly, "I'll not go myself. I could not bear to meet Gilda just yet. I will not have her think that I had a hand in her abduction and my presence might arouse her suspicions."

Stoutenburg laughed unconcernedly.

"You would rather that she thought I had instigated the deed. Well!" he added with a careless shrug, "my shoulders are broad enough to bear the brunt of her wrath if she does. An you will not go yourself we will give full instructions to Jan. He shall bring Gilda and her woman hither with due respect and despatch, and lay the knave by the heels at the same time. Ten or a dozen of our men or even more can easily be spared to-day, there is really nothing for them to do, and they are best out of mischief by being kept busy. Now while I go to give Jan his instructions do you write a letter to Ben Isaje, telling him that it is your wish that Gilda should accompany the bearer of your sign-manual."

"But...."

"Tush, man!" exclaimed Stoutenburg impatiently, while a tone of contempt rang through his harsh voice, "you can so word the letter that even if it were found it need not compromise you in any way. You might just have discovered that your sister was in the hands of brigands, and be sending an escort to rescue her; Gilda will be grateful to you then and ready to believe in you. Write what you like, but for God's sake write quickly. Every moment's delay drives me well-nigh distraught."

With jerky, feverish movements he pushed paper and inkhorn nearer to Beresteyn, who hesitated no longer and at once began to write. Stoutenburg went to the door and loudly called for Jan.

Ten minutes later the letter was written, folded and delivered into Jan's keeping, who was standing at attention and recapitulating the orders which had been given him.

"I take a dozen men with me," he said slowly, "and we follow the course of the Schie as far as Rotterdam. Fortunately it is passable practically the whole of the way."

Stoutenburg nodded in approval.

"I present this letter to Mynheer Ben Isaje, the banker," continued Jan, "and ask him at once to apprise the jongejuffrouw that she deign to accompany us."

"Yes. That is right," quoth Stoutenburg, "but remember that I want you above all things to find that foreigner again. You said that he was sleeping last night in Mynheer Ben Isaje's house."

"So I understood, my lord."

"Well! you must move heaven and earth to find him, Jan. I want him here — a prisoner — remember! Do not let him slip through your fingers this time. It might mean life or death to us all. By fair means or foul you must lay him by the heels."

"It should not be difficult, my lord," assented Jan quietly. "I will pick my men, and I have no doubt that we shall come across the foreigner somewhere in the neighbourhood. He cannot have gone far, and even if he left the city we will easily come on his track."

"That's brave, Jan. Then come straight back here; two or three of your men can in the meanwhile escort the jongejuffrouw, who will travel by sledge. You must avoid Delft of course, and make a détour there."

"I had best get horses at Rotterdam, my lord; the sledge can follow the left bank of the Schie all the way, which will be the best means of avoiding Delft."

"And remember," concluded Stoutenburg in his most peremptory manner, "that you must all be back here before ten o'clock to-night. The jongejuffrouw first and you with the foreigner later. It is not much more than eight o'clock now; you have the whole day before you. Let the sledge pull up outside the miller's hut, everything will be ready there by then for the jongejuffrouw's reception; and let your watchwords be 'Silence, discretion, speed!' — you understand?"

"I understand, my lord," replied Jan simply as he gave a military salute, then quietly turned on his heel and went out of the room. The two friends were once more alone, straining their ears to catch every sound which came to them now from below. Muffled and enveloped in the mist, the voice of Jan giving brief words of command could be distinctly heard, also the metallic click of skates and the tramping of heavily-booted feet upon the ground. But ten minutes later all these sounds had died away. Jan and his men had gone to fetch Gilda — the poor little pawn moved hither and thither by the ruthless and ambitious hands of men. Beresteyn had buried his head in his hands, in a sudden fit of overpowering remorse. Stoutenburg looked on him silently for awhile, his haggard face appeared drawn and sunken in the pale grey light which found its way through the tiny window up above. Passion greater than that which broke down the spirit of his friend, was tearing at his heart-strings; ambition fought with love, and remorse with determination. But through it all the image of Gilda flitted before his burning eyes across this dimly-lighted room, reproachful and sweet and tantalizingly beautiful. The desire to have her near him in the greatest hour of his life on the morrow, had been the true mainspring which had prompted him to urge Beresteyn to send for her. It seemed to him that Gilda's presence would bring him luck in his dark undertaking so heavily fraught with crime, and with a careless shrug of the shoulders he was ready to dismiss all thoughts of the wrong which he had done her, in favour of his hopes, his desire, his certainty that a glorious future in his arms would compensate her for all that he had caused her to endure.

CHAPTER XXXII

A RUN THROUGH THE NIGHT

That same morning of this fourth day of the New Year found Gilda Beresteyn sitting silent and thoughtful in the tiny room which had been placed at her disposal in the house of Mynheer Ben Isaje, the banker.

A few hours ago she had come back to it, running like some frightened animal who had just escaped an awful — but unknown — danger, and had thrown herself down on the narrow bed in the alcove in an agony of soul far more difficult to bear than any sorrow which had assailed her during the last few days.

A great, a vivid ray of hope had pierced the darkness of her misery, it had flickered low at first, then had glowed with wonderful intensity, flickered again and finally died down as hope itself fell dying once more in the arms of despair.

The disappointment which she had endured then amounted almost to physical pain; her heart ached and beat intolerably and with that disappointment was coupled a sense of hatred and of humiliation, different to any suffering she had ever had to bear before.

A man could have helped her and had refused: he could have helped her to avert a crime more hideous than any that had ever blackened the pages of this country's history. With that one man's help she could have stopped that crime from being committed and he had refused ... nay more! he had first dragged her secret from her, word by word, luring her into thoughts of security with the hope that he dangled before her.

He knew everything now: she had practically admitted everything save the identity of those whose crime she wished to avert. But even that identity would be easy for the man to guess. Stoutenburg, of course, had paid him to lay hands on her ... but her brother Nicolaes was Stoutenburg's friend and ally, and his life and that of his friends were now in the hands of that rogue, who might betray them with the knowledge which he had filched from her.

No wonder that hour after hour she lay prostrate on the bed, while these dark thoughts hammered away in her brain. The Prince of Orange walking unknowingly straight to his death, or Nicolaes — her brother — and his friends betrayed to the vengeance of that Prince. Ghosts of those who had already died — victims to that same merciless vengeance — flitted in the darkness before her feverish fancy: John of Barneveld, the Lord of Groeneveld, the sorrowing widows and fatherless children ... and in their trail the ghost of the great Stadtholder, William the Silent murdered — as his son would be — at Delft, close to Ryswyk and the molens, where even now Nicolaes her brother was learning the final lesson of infamy.

When in the late morning Maria came into the room to bring her mistress some warm milk and bread, and to minister to her comforts, she found her dearly loved jongejuffrouw wide-eyed and feverish.

But not a word could she get out of Gilda while she dressed her hair, except an assurance that their troubles — as far as Maria could gauge them — would soon be over now, and that in twenty-four hours mayhap they would be escorted back to Haarlem.

"When, I trust, that I shall have the joy of seeing three impudent knaves swing on gibbets in the market place," quoth Maria decisively, "and one of them — the most impudent of the lot — drawn and quartered, or burnt at the stake!" she added with savage insistence.

When Gilda was ready dressed, she asked for leave to speak with Mynheer Ben Isaje. The Jew, obsequious and affable, received her with utmost deference, and in a few words put the situation before her. Mevrouw Isaje, he said, was from home: he had not been apprised of the jongejuffrouw's coming, or his wife would have been ready to receive her at his private house, which was situated but half a league out of Rotterdam. But Mevrouw Isaje would return from the visit which she had been paying to her father in the course of the afternoon, until that hour Mynheer Ben Isaje begged that the jongejuffrouw would look upon this miserable hovel as her property and would give what orders she desired for the furtherance of her comfort. In the afternoon, he concluded, an escort would once more be ready to convey the jongejuffrouw to that same private house of his, where there was a nice garden and a fine view over the Schie instead of the confined outlook on squalid houses opposite, which was quite unworthy of the jongejuffrouw's glance.

Gilda did not attempt to stay the flow of Ben Isaje's eloquence: she thanked him graciously for everything that he had already done for her comfort.

Maria — more loquacious, and bubbling over with indignation — asked him when this outrageous confinement of her person and that of her exalted mistress at the hands of brigands would cease, and if Mynheer Ben Isaje was aware that such confinement against the jongejuffrouw's will would inevitably entail the punishment of hanging.

But thereupon Mynheer Ben Isaje merely rubbed his thin hands together and became as evasive first and then as mute as only those of his race can contrive to be.

Then Gilda — making an effort to speak unconcernedly — asked him what had become of the men who had brought her hither from Haarlem.

"They spent half the night eating and drinking at the tavern, mejuffrouw," said the Jew blandly.

"Ah!" rejoined Gilda quietly, "methought one of them had found hospitality under your roof."

"So he had, mejuffrouw. But this morning when I called him — for I had some business to transact with him — I found his room already empty. No doubt he had gone to join his companions at the tavern. But the rascal's movements need not disturb the jongejuffrouw for one moment. After to-day she need never set eyes on him again."

"Save when he is hanging on a gibbet in the Groote Markt," broke in Maria viciously. "I for one never go to see such sights, but when that rascal hangs it shall be a holiday for me to go and get a last look at him."

Later on in the day, Ben Isaje, more affable and obsequious than he had ever been, came to announce to the jongejuffrouw that her sledge was awaiting her at the top of the street.

Silently and resignedly as had been her wont these past two days Gilda Beresteyn, wrapping her cloak and hood closely round her, followed Mynheer Ben Isaje out of the house. Maria walked immediately behind her, muttering imprecations against brigands, and

threatening dire punishments against every Jew.

Though it was only three o'clock in the afternoon, it was already quite dark in this narrow street, where tall gables almost touched one another at the top: only from the tiny latticed windows feeble patches of yellow light glimmered weirdly through the fog.

The sledge was waiting at the top of the street, as Mynheer Ben Isaje had said. Gilda shuddered as soon as she caught sight of it again; it represented so much that was vivid and tangible of her present anxiety and sorrow. It stood upon an open market-place, with the driver sitting up at his post and three horses harnessed thereto. The small tavern was at the corner on the left, and as Gilda walked rapidly up to the sledge, she saw two of the men who had been escorting her hitherto, the thin man with the abnormally long legs, and the fat one with the red nose and round eyes: but of the third tall, splendid figure she did not catch one glimpse.

The two men nudged one another as she passed, and whispered excitedly to one another, but she could not hear what they said, and the next moment she found herself being handed into the vehicle by Ben Isaje, who thereupon took humble leave of her.

"You are not coming with us, mynheer?" she asked in astonishment.

"Not ... not just yet, mejuffrouw," murmured the Jew somewhat incoherently, "it is too early yet in the afternoon ... er ... for me to ... to leave my business.... I have the honour to bid the jonge juffrouw 'Godspeed.'"

"But," said Gilda, who suddenly disliked Ben Isaje's manner, yet could not have told you why, "the mevrouw — your wife — she is ready to receive me?"

"Of a truth — certainly," replied the man. Gilda would have given much to question him further. She was quite sure that there was something strange in his manner, something that she mistrusted; but just as she was about to speak again, there was a sudden command of "Forward!" the driver cracked his whip, the harness jingled, the sledge gave a big lurch forward and the next moment Gilda found herself once more being rushed at great speed through the cold night air.

She could not see much round her, for the fog out in the open seemed even more dense than it was inside the city and the darkness of the night crept swiftly through the fog. All that she knew for certain was that the city was very soon left behind, that the driver was urging his horses on to unusual speed, and that she must be travelling along a river bank, because when the harness rattled and jingled less loudly than usual, she could hear distinctly the clink of metal skates upon the ice, as wayfarers no doubt were passing to and fro.

Solitary as she was — for Maria and her eternal grumbings were poor company — she fell to thinking again over the future, as she had done not only last night but through the past few interminable days; it almost seemed as if she had never, never thought of anything else, as if those same few days stretched out far away behind her into dim and nebulous infinity.

During those days she had alternately hoped and feared and been disappointed only to hope again: but the disappointment of last night was undoubtedly the most bitter that she had yet experienced. So bitter had it been that for a time — after its intense poignancy had gone — her faculties and power of thinking had become numbed, and now — very gradually, unknown at first even to herself, hope shook itself free from the grip of disappointment and peeped up at her out of the abyss of her despair.

Did that unscrupulous knave really have the last word in the matter? had his caprice the power to order the destiny of this land and the welfare of its faith?

Bah! the very thought was monstrous and impossible. Was the life of the Prince of Orange to be sacrificed because a rascal would not help her to give him that word of warning which might save him even now at the eleventh hour?

No! Gilda Beresteyn refused to believe that God — who had helped the armies of the Netherlands throughout their struggle against the might of Spain — would allow a rogue to have so much power. After all, she was not going to be shut up in prison! she was going to the house of ordinary, respectable burghers; true, they were of alien and of despised faith, but they were well-to-do, had a family, serving women and men.

Surely among these there would be one who — amenable to cajoleries or to promises — would prove to be the instrument sent by God to save the Stadtholder from an assassin's dagger!

Gilda Beresteyn, wrapped in this new train of thought, lost count of time, of distance and of cold: she lived during one whole hour in the happiness of this newly-risen hope, making plans, conjecturing, rehearsing over in her mind what she would say, how she would probe the loyalty, the kindness of those who would be around her to-night.

Delft was so near! and after all even Maria might be bribed to forget her fears and her grievances and to become that priceless instrument of salvation of which Gilda dreamed as the sledge flew swiftly along through the night.

It was Maria who roused her suddenly out of these happy fancies. Maria who said plaintively:

"Shall we never get to that verdommte house. The Jew said that it was only situate half a league from Rotterdam."

"We must be close to it," murmured Gilda.

"Close to it!" retorted Maria, "we seem to be burning the ground under the horses' hoofs — we have left Rotterdam behind us this hour past.... It is the longest half league that I have ever known."

"Peep out under the hood, Maria. Cannot you see where we are?"

Maria peeped out as she was bid.

"I can see the lights of a city far away on our right," she said. "From the direction in which we have been going and the ground which we have covered I should guess that city to be Delft."

"Delft!" exclaimed Gilda, smothering a louder scream. The driver had just pulled up his horses, allowing them to go at a walk so as to restore their wind and ease them for awhile. Gilda tried her best to peer through the darkness. All that she could see were those lights far away on the right which proclaimed the distant city. A chill struck suddenly to her heart. Ben Isaje had lied! Why? She was not being taken to his house which was situate half a league outside Rotterdam ... then whither was she being taken? What new misery, what new outrage awaited her now? The lights of the distant city receded further and further away from her view, the driver once more put his horses at a trot, the sledge moved along more smoothly now: it seemed as if it were going over the surface of the river. Delft was being left behind, and the sledge was following the course of the Schie ... on toward Ryswyk.... The minutes sped on, another quarter of an hour, another half hour, another hour in this dread suspense. The driver was urging his horses unmercifully: he gave them but little rest. It was only when for a few brief moments he put them at walking pace, that Gilda heard — all around her as it seemed — that metallic click of skates which told her that the sledge was surrounded by men who were there to watch over her and see that she did not escape.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CAPTIVE LION

Beresteyn was sitting at the table in the weighing-room of the molens: his elbows rested on the table, and his right hand supported his head; in the feeble light of the lanthorn placed quite close to him, his face looked sullen and dark, and his eyes, overshadowed by his frowning brows, were fixed with restless eagerness upon the narrow door.

Stoutenburg, with hands crossed over his chest, with head bare and collar impatiently torn away from round his neck, was pacing up and down the long, low room like a caged beast of prey.

"Enter!" he shouted impatiently in response to a loud knock on the door. Then as Jan entered, and having saluted, remained standing by the door, he paused in his feverish walk, and asked in a curiously hoarse voice, choked with anxiety:

"Is everything all right, Jan?"

"Everything, my lord."

"The jongejuffrouw?..."

"In the hut, my lord. There is a good fire there and the woman is preparing some hot supper for the lady."

"How does she seem?"

"She stepped very quietly out of the sledge, my lord, the moment I told her that we had arrived. She asked no questions, and walked straight into the hut. Meseemed that the jongejuffrouw knew exactly where she was."

"The woman will look after her comforts well?"

"Oh, yes, my lord, though she is only a rough peasant, she will try and do her best, and the jongejuffrouw has her own waiting woman with her as well."

"And the horses?"

"In the shed behind the hut."

"Look after them well, Jan: we may want to use them again to-morrow."

"They shall be well looked after, my lord."

"And you have placed the sentry outside the hut?"

"Two men in the front and two in the rear, as you have commanded, my lord."

Stoutenburg drew a deep breath of satisfaction: but anxiety seemed to have exhausted him, for now that his questions had been clearly answered, he sank into a chair.

"All well, Nicolaes," he said more calmly as he placed a re-assuring hand upon his friend's shoulder.

But Nicolaes groaned aloud.

"Would to God," he said, "that all were well!"

Smothering an impatient retort Stoutenburg once more turned to Jan.

"And what news of the foreigner?" he queried eagerly.

"We have got him, my lord," replied Jan.

"By G — d!" exclaimed Stoutenburg, "how did you do it?"

His excitement was at fever pitch now. He was leaning forward, and his attitude was one of burning expectancy. His hollow eyes were fixed upon Jan's lips as if they would extract from them the glad news which they held. Whatever weakness there was in Stoutenburg's nature, one thing in him was strong — and that was hatred. He could hate with an intensity of passion worthy of a fine cause. He hated the Stadtholder first, and secondly the nameless adventurer who had humiliated him and forced him to lick the dust: wounded in his vanity and in his arrogance he was consumed with an inordinate desire for revenge. The hope that this revenge was now at last in sight — that the man whom he hated so desperately was now in his power — almost caused the light of mania to dance in his glowing eyes.

"How did you do it, Jan?" he reiterated hoarsely.

"It was not far from the molens," said Jan simply, "until then he gave us the slip, though we spied him just outside Delft on our way to Rotterdam this morning. My impression is that he went back to Rotterdam then, and that he followed the jongejuffrouw's sledge practically all the way. Close to the molens he was forced to draw a little nearer as it was getting very dark and probably he did not know his way about. I am convinced that he wished to ascertain exactly whither we were taking the jongejuffrouw. At any rate, I and some of our fellows who had lagged in the rear caught sight of him then...."

"And you seized him?" cried Stoutenburg with exultant joy.

"He was alone, my lord," replied Jan with a placid smile, "and there were seven of us at the time. Two or three of the men, though, are even now nursing unpleasant wounds. I myself fared rather badly with a bruised head and half-broken collar-bone.... The man is a demon for fighting, but there were seven of us."

"Well done, Jan!" cried Beresteyn now, for Stoutenburg had become speechless with the delight of this glorious news; "and what did you do with the rogue?"

"We tied him securely with ropes and dragged him along with us. Oh! we made certain of him, my lord, you may be sure of that. And now I and another man have taken him down into the basement below and we have fastened him to one of the beams, where I imagine the north-west wind will soon cool his temper."

"Aye, that it will!" quoth Stoutenburg lustily. "Take the lanthorn, Jan, and let us to him at once. Beresteyn, friend, will you come too? Your hand like mine must be itching to get at the villain's face."

The two men took good care to wrap their cloaks well round their shoulders and to pull their fur caps closely round their ears. Thus muffled up against the bitterness of the night, they went out of the molens, followed by Jan, who carried the lanthorn.

Outside the door, steep, ladder-like steps led to the ground. The place referred to by Jan as “the basement” was in reality the skeleton foundations on which the molens rested. These were made up of huge beams — green and slimy with age, and driven deep down into the muddy flat below. Ten feet up above, the floor of the molens sat towering aloft. Darkness like pitch reigned on this spot, but as Jan swung his lanthorn along, the solid beams detached themselves one by one out of the gloom, their ice-covered surface reflected the yellow artificial light, and huge icicles of weird and fantastic shapes like giant arms and fingers stretched out hung down from the transverse bars and from the wooden framework of the molens above.

To one of the upright beams a man was securely fastened with ropes wound round about his body. His powerful muscles were straining against the cords which tied his arms behind his back. A compassionate hand had put his broad-brimmed hat upon his head, to protect his ears and nose against the frost, but his mighty chest was bare, for doublet and shirt had been torn in the reckless fight which preceded final capture.

Jan held up the lanthorn and pointed out to my lord the prisoner whom he was so proud to have captured. The light fell upon the pinioned figure, splendid in its air of rebellious helplessness. Here was a man, momentarily conquered it is true, but obviously not vanquished, and though the ropes now cut into his body, though the biting wind lashed his bare chest, and dark stains showed upon his shirt, the spirit within was as free and untrammelled as ever — the spirit of independence and of adventure which is willing to accept the knockdown blows of fate as readily and cheerfully as her favours.

Despite the torn shirt and the ragged doublet there was yet an air of swagger about the whole person of the man, swagger that became almost insolent as the Lord of Stoutenburg approached. He threw back his head and looked his sworn enemy straight in the face, his eyes were laughing still, and a smile of cool irony played round his lips.

“Well done, Jan!” quoth Stoutenburg with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

He was standing with arms akimbo and legs wide apart, enjoying to the full the intense delight of gazing for awhile in silence on his discomfited enemy.

“Ah! but it is good,” he said at last, “to look upon a helpless rogue.”

“’Tis a sight then,” retorted the prisoner lightly, “which your Magnificence hath often provided for your friends and your adherents.”

“Bah!” rejoined Stoutenburg, who was determined to curb his temper if he could, “your insolence now, my man, hath not the power to anger me. It strikes me as ludicrous — even pathetic in its senselessness. An I were in your unpleasant position, I would try by submission to earn a slight measure of leniency from my betters.”

“No doubt you would, my lord,” quoth Diogenes dryly, “but you see I have up to now not yet come across my betters. When I do, I may take your advice.”

“Verdommte Keer! What say you, Beresteyn,” added Stoutenburg turning to his friend, “shall we leave him here to-night to cool his impudence, we can always hang him to-morrow.”

Beresteyn made no immediate reply, his face was pale and haggard, and his glance — shifty and furtive — seemed to avoid that of the prisoner.

“You must see that the fellow is well guarded, Jan,” resumed Stoutenburg curtly, “give him some food, but on no account allow him the slightest freedom.”

“My letters to Ben Isaje,” murmured Beresteyn, as Stoutenburg already turned to go. “Hath he perchance got them by him still?”

“The letters! yes! I have forgotten!” said the other. “Search him, Jan!” he commanded.

Jan put down the lanthorn and then proceeded to lay rough hands upon the captive philosopher; he had a heavy score to pay off against him — an aching collar-bone and a bruised head, and the weight of a powerful fist to avenge. He was not like to be gentle in his task. He tore at the prisoner’s doublet and in his search for a hidden pocket he disclosed an ugly wound which had lacerated the shoulder.

“Some of us took off our skates,” he remarked casually, “and brought him down with them. The blades were full sharp, and we swung them by their straps; they made excellent weapons thus; the fellow should have more than one wound about him.”

“Three, my good Jan, to be quite accurate,” said Diogenes calmly, “but all endurable. I had ten about me outside Prague once, but the fellows there were fighting better than you, and in a worthier cause.”

Jan’s rough hands continued their exhaustive search; a quickly smothered groan from the prisoner caused Stoutenburg to laugh.

“That sound,” he said, “was music to mine ear.”

Jan now drew a small leather wallet and a parchment roll both from the wide flap of the prisoner’s boot. Stoutenburg pounced upon the wallet, and Beresteyn with eager anxiety tore the parchment out of Jan’s hand.

“It is the formal order to Ben Isaje,” he said, “to pay over the money to this knave. Is there anything else, Jan?” he continued excitedly, “a thinner paper? — shaped like a letter?”

“Nothing else, mynheer,” replied Jan.

“Did you then deliver my letter to Ben Isaje, fellow?” queried Beresteyn of the prisoner.

“My friend Jan should be able to tell you that,” he replied, “hath he not been searching the very folds of my skin.”

In the meanwhile Stoutenburg had been examining the contents of the wallet.

“Jewellery belonging to the jongeuffrouw,” he said dryly, “which this rogue hath stolen from her. Will you take charge of them, Nicolaes? And here,” he added, counting out a few pieces of gold and silver, “is some of your own money.”

He made as if he would return this to Beresteyn, then a new idea seemed to strike him, for he put all the money back into the wallet and said to Jan:

“Put this wallet back where you found it, Jan, and, Nicolaes,” he added turning back to his friend, “will you allow me to look at that bond?”

While Jan obeyed and replaced the wallet in the flap of the prisoner’s boot, Beresteyn handed the parchment to Stoutenburg. The latter then ordered Jan to hold up the lanthorn so that by its light he might read the writing.

This he did, twice over, with utmost attention; after which he tore off very carefully a narrow strip from the top of the document.

"Now," he said quietly, "this paper, wherever found, cannot compromise you in any way, Nicolaes. The name of Ben Isaje who alone could trace the cypher signature back to you, we will scatter to the winds."

And he tore the narrow strip which he had severed from the document into infinitesimal fragments, which he then allowed the wind to snatch out of his hand and to whirl about and away into space. But the document itself he folded up with ostentatious care.

"What do you want with that?" asked Beresteyn anxiously.

"I don't know yet, but it might be very useful," replied the other. "So many things may occur within the next few days that such an ambiguously worded document might prove of the utmost value."

"But ... the signature ..." urged Beresteyn, "my father..."

"The signature, you told me, friend, is one that you use in the ordinary way of business whilst the wording of the document in itself cannot compromise you in any way; it is merely a promise to pay for services rendered. Leave this document in my keeping; believe me, it is quite safe with me and might yet be of incalculable value to us. One never knows."

"No! one never does know," broke in the prisoner airily, "for of a truth when there's murder to be done, pillage or outrage, the Lord of Stoutenburg never knows what other infamy may come to his hand."

"Insolent knave!" exclaimed Stoutenburg hoarsely, as with a cry of unbridled fury he suddenly raised his arm and with the parchment roll which he held, he struck the prisoner savagely in the face.

"Take care, Stoutenburg," ejaculated Beresteyn almost involuntarily.

"Take care of what," retorted the other with a harsh laugh, "the fellow is helpless, thank God! and I would gladly break my riding whip across his impudent face."

He was livid and shaking with fury. Beresteyn — honestly fearing that in his blind rage he would compromise his dignity before his subordinates — dragged him by the arm away from the presence of this man whom he appeared to hate with such passionate intensity.

Stoutenburg, obdurate at first, almost drunk with his own fury, tried to free himself from his friend's grasp. He wanted to lash the man he hated once more in the face, to gloat for awhile longer on the sight of his enemy now completely in his power. But all around in the gloom he perceived figures that moved; the soldiers and mercenaries placed at his disposal by his friends were here in numbers: some of them had been put on guard over the prisoner by Jan, and others had joined them, attracted by loud voices.

Stoutenburg had just enough presence of mind left in him to realize that the brutal striking of a defenceless prisoner would probably horrify these men, who were fighters and not bullies, and might even cause them to turn from their allegiance to him.

So with desperate effort he pulled himself together and contrived to give with outward calm some final orders to Jan.

"See that the ropes are securely fastened, Jan," he said, "leave half a dozen men on guard, then follow me."

But to Beresteyn, who had at last succeeded in dragging him away from this spot, he said loudly:

"You do not know, Nicolaes, what a joy it is to me to be even with that fellow at last."

A prolonged laugh, that had a note of triumph in it, gave answer to this taunt, whilst a clear voice shouted lustily:

"Nay! we never can be quite even, my lord; since you were not trussed like a capon when I forced you to lick the dust."

CHAPTER XXXIV

PROTESTATIONS

Half-an-hour later, the Lord of Stoutenburg was in Gilda's presence. He was glad enough that Nicolaes Beresteyn — afraid to meet his sister — had refused to accompany him. He, too, felt nervous and anxious at thought of meeting her face to face at last. He had not spoken to her since that day in March when he was a miserable fugitive — in a far worse plight than was the wounded man tied with cords to a beam. He had been a hunted creature then, every man's hand raised against him, his life at the mercy of any passer-by, and she had given him shelter freely and fearlessly — shelter and kind words — and her ministrations had brought him luck, for he succeeded in reaching the coast after he parted from her, and finding shelter once more in a foreign land.

Since then her image had filled his dreams by night and his thoughts by day. His earlier love for her, smothered by ambition, rose up at once more strong, more insistent than before; it became during all these months of renewed intrigues and plots the one ennobling trait in his tortuous character. His love for Gilda was in itself not a selfish feeling; neither ambition nor the mere gratification of obstinate desire entered in its composition. He loved Gilda for herself alone, with all the adoration which a pious man would have given to his God, and while one moment of his life was occupied in planning a ruthless and dastardly murder, the other was filled with hopes of a happier future, with Gilda beside him as his idolized wife. But though his love was in itself pure and selfless, he remained true to his unscrupulous nature in the means which he adopted in order to win the object of his love.

Even now, when he entered her presence in the miserable peasant's hut where he chose to hold her a prisoner, he felt no remorse at the recollection of what she must have suffered in the past few days; his one thought was — now that he had her completely under his control — how he could best plead his cause first, or succeed in coercing her will if she proved unkind.

She received him quite calmly, and even with a gracious nod of the head, and he thought that he had never seen her look more beautiful than she did now, in her straight white gown, with that sweet, sad face of hers framed by a wealth of golden curls. In this squalid setting of white-washed walls and rafters blackened with age, she looked indeed — he thought — like one of those fairy princesses held prisoner by a wicked ogre — of whom he used to read long ago when he was a child, before sin and treachery and that insatiable longing for revenge had wholly darkened his soul.

With bare head and back bent nearly double in the depth of his homage he approached his divinity.

"It is gracious of you, mejuffrouw, to receive me," he said forcing his harsh voice to tones of gentleness.

"I had not the power to refuse, my lord," she replied quietly, "seeing that I am in your hands and entirely at your commands."

"I entreat you do not say that," he rejoined eagerly, "there is no one here who has the right to command save yourself. 'Tis I am in your hands and your most humble slave."

"A truce to this farce, my lord," she retorted impatiently. "I were not here if you happened to be my slave, and took commands from me."

"'Tis true mayhap that you would not be here, now, mejuffrouw," he said blandly, "but I could only act for the best, and as speedily as I could. The moment I heard that you were in the hands of brigands I moved heaven and earth to find out where you were. I only heard this morning that you were in Rotterdam..."

"You heard that I was in the hands of brigands," she murmured, almost gasping with astonishment, "you heard this morning that I was in Rotterdam...?"

"I sent spies and messengers in every direction the moment I heard of the abominable outrage against your person," he continued with well-feigned vehemence. "I cannot even begin to tell you what I endured these past three days, until at last, by dint of ruse and force, I was able to circumvent the villains who held you captive, and convey you hither in safety and profound respect until such time as I can find a suitable escort to take you back to your father."

"If what you say is true, my lord, you could lend me an escort at once, that I might return to my dear father forthwith. Truly he must have broken his heart by now, weeping for me."

"Have I not said that I am your slave?" he rejoined gently, "an you desire to return to Haarlem immediately, I will see about an escort for you as quickly as may be. The hour is late now," he added hypocritically, "but a man can do much when his heart's desire lies in doing the behests of a woman whom he worships."

Though she frowned at these last words of his, she leaned forward eagerly to him.

"You will let me go ... at once ... to-night?"

"At once if it lies in my power," he replied unblushingly, "but I fear me that you will have to wait a few hours; the night is as dark as pitch. It were impossible to make a start in it. To-morrow, however..."

"To-morrow?" she cried anxiously, "'Tis to-night that I wish to go."

"The way to Haarlem is long ..." he murmured.

"'Tis not to Haarlem, my lord, but to Delft that I long to go."

"To Delft?" he exclaimed with a perfect show of astonishment.

She bit her lip and for the moment remained silent. It had, indeed, been worse than folly to imagine that he — of all men in the world — would help her to go to Delft. But he had been so gentle, so kind, apparently so ready to do all that she asked, that for the moment she forgot that he and he alone was the mover of that hideous conspiracy to murder which she still prayed to God that she might avert.

"I had forgotten, my lord," she said, as tears threatened to choke her voice, "I had forgotten."

"Forgotten? What?" he asked blankly.

"That you are not like to escort me to Delft."

"Why not to Delft, an you wish to go there?"

"But ..." she murmured, "the Stadtholder..."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "now I understand. You are thinking of what you overheard in the cathedral of Haarlem."

"Indeed, how could I forget it?"

"Easily now, Gilda," he replied with solemn earnestness. "The plans which my friends and I formed on that night have been abandoned."

"Abandoned?"

"Yes! Your brother was greatly impressed by all that you said to him. He persuaded us all to think more lengthily over the matter. Then came the news of the outrage upon your person, and all thoughts of my ambition and of my revenge faded before this calamity, and I have devoted every hour of mine existence since then to find you and to restore you to your home."

Bewildered, wide-eyed, Gilda listened to him. In all her life hitherto, she had never come into contact with lying and with deceit: she had never seen a man lying unblushingly, calmly, not showing signs of confusion or of fear. Therefore, the thought that this man could be talking so calmly, so simply, so logically, and yet be trying to deceive her, never for one moment entered her head. The events of the past few days crowded in upon her brain in such a maddening array, that, as she sat here now, face to face with the man whom she had been so ready to suspect, she could not disentangle from those events one single fact that could justify her suspicions.

Even looking back upon the conversation which she had had with that impudent rogue in Leyden and again last night, she distinctly remembered now that he had never really said a single thing that implicated the Lord of Stoutenburg or anyone else in this villainy.

She certainly was bewildered and very puzzled now: joy at the thought that after all the Stadtholder was safe, joy that her brother's hand would not be stained with murder, or his honour with treachery, mingled with a vague sense of mistrust which she was powerless to combat, yet felt ashamed to admit.

"Then, my lord," she murmured at last, "do you really tell me that the outrage of which I have been the victim was merely planned by villains, for mercenary motives?"

"What else could have prompted it?" he asked blandly.

"Neither you ... nor ... nor any of your friends had a hand in it?" she insisted.

"I?" he exclaimed with a look of profound horror. "I?... to do you such a wrong! For what purpose, ye gods?"

"To ... to keep me out of the way..."

"I understand," he said simply. "And you, Gilda, believed this of me?"

"I believed it," she replied calmly.

"You did not realize then that I would give every drop of my blood to save you one instant's pain?"

"I did not realize," she said more coldly, "that you would give up your ambition for any woman or for anything."

"You do not believe then, that I love you?"

"Speak not of love, my lord," she retorted, "it is a sacred thing. And you methinks do not know what love is."

"Indeed you are right, Gilda," he said, "I do not know what is the love of ordinary men. But if to love you, Gilda, means that every thought, every hope, every prayer is centred upon you, if it means that neither sleep nor work, nor danger can for one single instant chase your image from my soul, if to love you means that my very sinews ache with the longing to hold you in my arms, and that every moment which keeps me from your side is torture worse than hell; if love means all that, Gilda, then do I know to mine own hurt what love is."

"And in your ambition, my lord, you allowed that love to be smothered," she retorted calmly. "It is too late now to speak of it again, to any woman save to Walburg de Marnix."

"I'll speak of it to you, Gilda, while the breath in my body lasts. Walburg de Marnix is no longer my wife. The law of our country has already set me free."

"The law of God binds you to her. I pray you speak no more of such things to me."

"You are hard and cruel, Gilda."

"I no longer love you."

"You will love again," he retorted confidently, "in the meanwhile have I regained your trust?"

"Not even that, wholly," she replied.

"Let me at least do one thing in my own justification," he pleaded. "Allow me to prove to you now and at once that — great though my love is for you, and maddening my desire to have you near me — I could not be guilty of such an outrage, as I know that in your heart you do accuse me of."

"I did accuse you of it, my lord, I own. But how can you prove me wrong now and at once?"

"By bringing before you the only guilty person in this network of infamy," he replied hotly.

"You know him then?"

"For these three days now I and my faithful servants have tracked him. I have him here now a prisoner at last. His presence before you will prove to you that I at least bore no share in the hideous transaction."

"Of whom do you speak, my lord?" she asked.

"Of the man who dared to lay hands upon you in Haarlem..."

"He is here — now?" she exclaimed.

"A helpless prisoner in my hands," he replied, "to-morrow summary justice shall be meted out to him, and he will receive the punishment which his infamy deserves."

"But he did not act on his own initiative," she said eagerly, "another man more powerful, richer than he prompted him — paid him — tempted him..."

Stoutenburg made a gesture of infinite contempt.

"So, no doubt, he has told you, Gilda. Men of his stamp are always cowards at heart, even though they have a certain brutish instinct for fighting — mostly in self-defence. He tried to palliate his guilt before you by involving me in its responsibility."

"You," she whispered under her breath, "or one of your friends."

"You mean your brother Nicolaes," he rejoined quietly. "Ah! the man is even a more arrant knave than I thought. So! he has tried to fasten the responsibility for this outrage against your person, firstly on me who worship the very ground you walk on, secondly on the brother whom you love?"

"No, no," she protested eagerly, "I did not say that. It was I who...."

"Who thought so ill of me," broke in Stoutenburg with gentle reproach, "of me and of Nicolaes. You questioned the rogue, and he did not deny it, nay more he enlarged upon the idea, which would place all the profits of this abominable transaction in his hands and yet exonerate him from guilt. But you shall question him yourself, Gilda. By his looks, by his answers, by his attitude you will be able to judge if I or Nicolaes — or any of our friends, have paid him to lay hands upon you. Remember however," he added significantly, "that such a low-born knave will always lie to save his skin, so this do I entreat of you on my knees: judge by his looks more than by his words, and demand a proof of what he asserts."

"I will judge, my lord, as I think best," she retorted coldly. "And now, I pray you, send for the man. I would like to hear what he has to say."

Stoutenburg immediately turned to obey: there was a guard outside the door, and it was easy to send one of the men with orders to Jan to bring the prisoner hither.

Within himself he was frankly taken aback at Gilda's ready acquiescence — nay obvious desire to parley with the foreigner. A sharp pang of jealousy had shot through his heart when he saw her glowing eyes, her eagerness to defend the knave. The instinct that guided his fierce love for Gilda, had quickly warned him that here was a danger of which he had never even dreamed.

Women were easily swayed, he thought, by a smooth tongue and a grand manner, both of which — Stoutenburg was bound to admit — the rogue possessed in no scanty measure. Fortunately the mischief — if indeed mischief there was — had only just begun: and of a truth reason itself argued that Gilda must loathe and despise the villain who had wronged her so deeply: moreover Stoutenburg had every hope that the coming interview if carefully conducted would open Gilda's eyes more fully still to the true character of the foreign mercenary with the unctuous tongue and the chivalrous ways.

In any case the Lord of Stoutenburg himself had nothing to fear from that interview, and he felt that his own clever words had already shaken the foundations of Gilda's mistrust of him. Mayhap in desiring to parley with the knave, she only wished to set her mind at rest finally on these matters, and also with regard to her own brother's guilt. Stoutenburg with an inward grim smile of coming triumph passed his hand over his doublet where — in an inner pocket — reposed the parchment roll which was the last proof of Beresteyn's connivance.

Gilda did not know the cypher-signature, and the knave would have some difficulty in proving his assertion, if indeed, he dared to name Nicolaes at all: whilst if he chose to play the chivalrous part before Gilda, then the anonymous document would indeed prove of incalculable value. In any case the complete humiliation of the knave who had succeeded in gaining Gilda's interest, if nothing more, was Stoutenburg's chief aim when he suggested the interview, and the document with the enigmatical signature could easily become a powerful weapon wherewith to make that humiliation more complete.

And thus musing, speculating, scheming, the Lord of Stoutenburg sent Jan over to the molens with orders to bring the prisoner under a strong guard to the jongejuffrouw's presence, whilst Gilda, silent and absorbed, sat on in the tiny room of the miller's hut.

In spite of her loyalty, her love for her brother, in spite of Stoutenburg's smooth assertions, a burning anxiety gnawed at her heart — she felt wretchedly, miserably lonely, with a sense of treachery encompassing her all round.

But there was a strange glow upon her face, which of a truth anxiety could not have brought about; rather must it have been inward anger, which assailed her whenever thoughts of the rogue whom she so hated intruded themselves upon her brain.

No doubt too, the heat of the fire helped to enhance that delicate glow which lent so much additional beauty to her face and such additional brilliance to her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE WITNESS FOR THE DEFENCE

The Lord of Stoutenburg was the first to enter: behind him came Jan, and finally a group of soldiers above whose heads towered another broad white brow, surmounted by a wealth of unruly brown hair which now clung matted against the moist forehead.

At a word of command from Stoutenburg, Jan and the other soldiers departed, leaving him and the prisoner only before Gilda Beresteyn.

The man had told her on that first night at Leyden that his name was Diogenes — a name highly honoured in the history of philosophy. Well! — philosophy apparently was standing him in good stead, for truly it must be responsible for the happy way in which he seemed to be bearing his present unhappy condition.

They had tied his arms behind his back and put a pinion through them, his clothes were torn, his massive chest was bare, his shirt bore ugly, dark stains upon it, but his face was just the same, that merry laughing face with the twinkling eyes, and the gentle irony that lurked round the lines of the sensitive mouth: at any rate when Gilda — overcome with pity — looked up with sweet compassion on him, she saw that same curious, immutable smile that seemed even now to mock and to challenge.

"This is the man, mejuffrouw," began Stoutenburg after awhile, "who on New Year's day at Haarlem dared to lay hands upon your person. Do you recognize him?"

"I do recognize him," replied Gilda coldly.

"I imagine," continued Stoutenburg, "that he hath tried to palliate his own villainies by telling you that he was merely a paid agent in that abominable outrage."

"I do not think," she retorted still quite coldly, "that this ... this ... person told me that he was being paid for that ugly deed: though when I did accuse him of it he did not deny it."

"Do you hear, fellow?" asked Stoutenburg, turning sharply to Diogenes, "it is time that all this lying should cease. By your calumnies and evil insinuations you have added to the load of crimes which already have earned for you exemplary punishment; by those same lies you have caused the jongejuffrouw an infinity of pain, over and above the horror which she has endured through your cowardly attack upon her. Therefore I have thought it best to send for you now so that in her exalted presence at least you may desist from further lying and that you may be shamed into acknowledging the truth. Do you hear, fellow?" he reiterated more harshly as Diogenes stood there, seemingly not even hearing what the Lord of Stoutenburg said, for his eyes in which a quaint light of humour danced were fixed upon Gilda's hands that lay clasped upon her lap.

The look in the man's face, the soft pallor on the girl's cheek, exasperated Stoutenburg's jealous temper beyond his power of control.

"Do you hear?" he shouted once more, and with a sudden grip of the hand he pulled the prisoner roughly round by the shoulder. That shoulder had been torn open with a blow dealt by a massive steel blade which had lacerated it to the bone; even a philosopher's endurance was not proof against this sudden rending of an already painful wound. Diogenes' pale face became the colour of lead: the tiny room began dancing an irresponsible saraband before his eyes, he felt himself swaying, for the ground was giving way under him, when a cry, gentle and compassionate, reached his fading senses, and a perfume of exquisite sweetness came to his nostrils, even as his pinioned arms felt just enough support to enable him to steady himself.

"Gilda," broke in Stoutenburg's harsh voice upon this intangible dream, "I entreat you not to demean yourself by ministering to that rogue."

"My poor ministry was for a wounded man, my lord," she retorted curtly.

Then she turned once more to the prisoner.

"You are hurt, sir," she asked as she let her tender blue eyes rest with kind pity upon him.

"Hurt, mejuffrouw?" he replied with a laugh, which despite himself had but little merriment in it. "Ask his Magnificence there, he will tell you that such knaves as I have bones and sinews as tough as their skins. Of a truth I am not hurt, mejuffrouw ... only overcome with the humour of this situation. The Lord of Stoutenburg indignant and reproachful at thought that another man is proficient in the art of lying."

"By heaven," cried Stoutenburg who was white with fury. "Insolent varlet, take...."

He had seized the first object that lay close to his hand, the heavy iron tool used for raking the fire out of the huge earthenware stove; this he raised above his head; the lust to kill glowed out of his eyes, which had become bloodshot, whilst a thin red foam gathered at the corners of his mouth. The next moment the life of a philosopher and weaver of dreams would have been very abruptly ended, had not a woman's feeble hand held up the crashing blow.

"Hatred, my lord, an you will," said Gilda with perfect sangfroid as she stood between the man who had so deeply wronged her and the upraised arm of his deadly enemy, "hatred and fair fight, but not outrage, I pray you."

Stoutenburg, smothering a curse, threw the weapon away from him: it fell with a terrific crash upon the wooden floor. Gilda, white and trembling now after the agonizing excitement of the past awful moment, had sunk half-swooning back against a chair. Stoutenburg fell on one knee and humbly raised her gown to his lips.

"Your pardon, Madonna," he whispered, "the sight of your exquisite hands in contact with that infamous blackguard made me mad. I was almost ready to cheat the gallows of their prey. I gratefully thank you in that you saved me from the indignity of staining my hand with a vile creature's blood."

Quietly and dispassionately Gilda drew her skirts away from him.

"An you have recovered your temper, my lord," she said coldly, "I pray you ask the prisoner those questions which you desired to put to him. I am satisfied that he is your enemy, and if he were not bound, pinioned and wounded he would probably not have need of a woman's hand to protect him."

Stoutenburg rose to his feet. He was angered with himself for allowing his hatred and his rage to get the better of his prudence, and tried to atone for his exhibition of incontinent rage by a great show of dignity and of reserve.

"I must ask you again, fellow — and for the last time," he said slowly turning once more to Diogenes, "if you have realized how infamous have been your insinuations against mine honour, and that of others whom the jongeuffrouw holds in high regard? Your calumnies have caused her infinite sorrow more bitter for her to bear than the dastardly crime which you did commit against her person. Have you realized this, and are you prepared to make amends for your crime and to mitigate somewhat the grave punishment which you have deserved by speaking the plain truth before the jongeuffrouw now?"

"And what plain truth doth the jongeuffrouw desire to hear?" asked Diogenes with equal calm.

Stoutenburg would have replied, but Gilda broke in quietly:

"Your crime against me, sir, I would readily forgive, had I but the assurance that no one in whom I trusted, no one whom I loved had a hand in instigating it."

The ghost of his merry smile — never very distant — spread over the philosopher's pale face.

"Will you deign to allow me, mejuffrouw," he said, "at any rate to tell you one certain, unvarnished truth, which mayhap you will not even care to believe, and that is that I would give my life — the few chances, that is, that I still have of it — to obliterate from your mind the memory of the past few days."

"That you cannot do, sir," she rejoined, "but you would greatly ease the load of sorrow which you have helped to lay upon me, if you gave me the assurance which I ask."

The prisoner did not reply immediately, and for one brief moment there was absolute silence in this tiny room, a silence so tense and so vivid that an eternity of joy and sorrow, of hope and of fear seemed to pass over the life of these three human creatures here. All three had eyes and ears only for one another: the world with its grave events, its intrigues and its wars fell quite away from them: they were the only people existing — each for the other — for this one brief instant that passed by.

The fire crackled in the huge hearth, and slowly the burning wood ashes fell with a soft swishing sound one by one. But outside all was still: not a sound of the busy life around the molens, of conspiracies and call to arms, penetrated the dense veil of fog which lay upon the low-lying land.

At last the prisoner spoke.

"Tis easily done, mejuffrouw," he said, and all at once his whole face lit up with that light-hearted gaiety, that keen sense of humour which would no doubt follow him to the grave, "that assurance I can easily give you. I was the sole criminal in the hideous outrage which brought so much sorrow upon you. Had I the least hope that God would hear the prayer of so despicable a villain as I am I would beg of Him to grant you oblivion of my deed. As for me," he added and now real laughter was dancing in his eyes: they mocked and challenged and called back the joy of life, "as for me, I am impenitent. I would not forget one minute of the last four days."

"To-morrow then you can take the remembrance with you to the gallows," said Stoutenburg sullenly.

Though a sense of intense relief pervaded him now, since by his assertions Diogenes had completely vindicated him as well as Nicolaes in Gilda's sight, his dark face showed no signs of brightening. That fierce jealousy of this nameless adventurer which had assailed him awhile ago was gnawing at his heart more insistently than before; he could not combat it, even though reason itself argued that jealousy of so mean a knave was unworthy, and that Gilda's compassion was only the same that she would have extended to any dog that had been hurt.

Even now — reason still argued — was it not natural that she should plead for the villain just as any tender-natured woman would plead even for a thief. Women hate the thought of violent death, only an amazon would desire to mete out death to any enemy: Gilda was warm-hearted, impulsive, the ugly word "gallows" grated no doubt unpleasantly on her ear. But even so, and despite the dictates of reason, Stoutenburg's jealousy and hatred were up in arms the moment she turned pleading eyes upon him.

"My lord," she said gently, "I pray you to remember that by this open confession this ... this gentleman has caused me infinite happiness. I cannot tell you what misery my own suspicions have caused me these past two days. They were harder to bear than any humiliation or sorrow which I had to endure."

"This varlet's lies confirmed you in your suspicions, Gilda," retorted Stoutenburg roughly, "and his confession — practically at the foot of the gallows — is but a tardy one."

"Do not speak so cruelly, my lord," she pleaded, "you say that ... that you have some regard for me ... let not therefore my prayer fall unheeded on your ear...."

"Your prayer, Gilda?"

"My prayer that you deal nobly with an enemy, whose wrongs to me I am ready to forgive...."

"By St. Bavon, mejuffrouw," here interposed the prisoner firmly, "an mine ears do not deceive me you are even now pleading for my life with the Lord of Stoutenburg."

"Indeed, sir, I do plead for it with my whole heart," she said earnestly.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, "and ye do not interfere!"

"My lord!" urged Gilda gently, "for my sake...."

Her words, her look, the tears that despite her will had struggled to her eyes, scattered to the winds Stoutenburg's reasoning powers. He felt now that nothing while this man lived would ever still that newly-risen passion of jealousy. He longed for and desired this man's death more even than that of the Prince of Orange. His honour had been luckily white-washed before Gilda by this very man whom he hated. He had a feeling that within the last half-hour he had made enormous strides in her regard. Already he persuaded himself that she was looking on him more kindly, as if remorse at her unjust suspicions of him had touched her soul on his behalf.

Everything now would depend on how best he could seem noble and generous in her sight; but he was more determined than ever that his enemy should stand disgraced before her first and die on the gallows on the morrow.

Then it was that putting up his hand to the region of his heart, which indeed was beating furiously, it encountered the roll of parchment which lay in the inner pocket of his doublet. Fate, chance, his own foresight, were indeed making the way easy for him, and

quicker than lightning his tortuous brain had already formed a plan upon which he promptly acted now.

"Gilda," he said quietly, "though God knows how ready I am to do you service in all things, this is a case where weakness on my part would be almost criminal, for indeed it would be to a hardened and abandoned criminal that I should be extending that mercy for which you plead."

"Indeed, my lord," she retorted coldly, "though only a woman, I too can judge if a man is an abandoned criminal or merely a misguided human creature who doth deserve mercy since his confession was quite open and frank."

"Commonsense did prompt him no doubt to this half-confession," said Stoutenburg dryly, "or a wise instinct to win leniency by his conduct, seeing that he had no proofs wherewith to substantiate his former lies. Am I not right, fellow?" he added once more turning to the prisoner, "though you were forced to own that you alone are responsible for the outrage against the jongeuffrouw, you have not told her yet that you are also a forger and a thief."

Diogenes looked on him for a moment or two in silence, just long enough to force Stoutenburg's shifty eyes to drop with a sudden and involuntary sense of shame, then he rejoined with his usual good-humoured flippancy:

"It was a detail which had quite escaped my memory. No doubt your Magnificence is fully prepared to rectify the omission."

"Indeed I wish that I could have spared you this additional disgrace," retorted Stoutenburg, whose sense of shame had indeed been only momentary, "seeing that anyhow you must hang to-morrow. But," he added once more to the jongeuffrouw, "I could not bear you to think, Gilda, that I could refuse you anything which it is in my power to grant you. Before you plead for this scoundrel again, you ought to know that he has tried by every means in his power — by lying and by forgery — to fasten the origin of all this infamy upon your brother."

"Upon Nicolaes," she cried, "I'll not believe it. A moment ago he did vindicate him freely."

"Only because I had at last taken away from him the proofs which he had forged."

"The proofs? what do you mean, my lord?"

"When my men captured this fellow last night, they found upon him a paper — a bond which is an impudent forgery — purported to have been written by Nicolaes and which promised payment to this knave for laying hands upon you in Haarlem."

"A bond?" she murmured, "signed by Nicolaes?"

"I say it again, 'tis an impudent forgery," declared Stoutenburg hotly, "we — all of us who have seen it and who know Nicolaes' signature could see at a glance that this one was counterfeit. Yet the fellow used it, he obtained money on the strength of it, for beside the jewelry which he had filched from you, we found several hundred guilders upon his person. Liar, forger, thief!" he cried, "in Holland such men are broken on the wheel. Hanging is thought merciful for such damnable scum as they!"

And from out the pocket of his doublet he drew the paper which had been writ by the public scrivener and was signed with Nicolaes' cypher signature: he handed it to Gilda, even whilst the prisoner, throwing back his head, sent one of his heartiest laughs echoing through the raftered room.

"Well played, my lord!" he said gaily, "nay! but by the devils whom you serve so well, you do indeed deserve to win."

In the meanwhile Gilda, wide-eyed and horrified, not knowing what to think, nor yet what to believe, scarcely dared to touch the infamous document whose very presence in her lap seemed a pollution. She noticed that some portion of the paper had been torn off, but the wording of the main portion of the writing was quite clear as was the signature "Schwarzer Kato" with the triangle above it. On this she looked now with a curious mixture of loathing and of fear. Schwarzer Kato was the name of the tulip which her father had raised and named: the triangle was a mark which the house of Beresteyn oft used in business.

"O God, have mercy upon me!" she murmured inwardly, "what does all this treachery mean?"

She looked up from one man to the other. The Lord of Stoutenburg, dark and sullen, was watching her with restless eyes; the prisoner was smiling, gently, almost self-deprecatingly she thought, and as he met her frightened glance it seemed as if in his merry eyes there crept a look of sadness — even of pity.

"What does all this treachery mean?" she murmured again with pathetic helplessness, and this time just above her breath.

"It means," said Stoutenburg roughly, "that at last you must be convinced that this man on whom you have wasted your kindly pity is utterly unworthy of it. That bond was never written by your brother, it was never signed by him. But we found it on this villain's person; he has been trading on it, obtaining money on the strength of his forgery. He has confessed to you that he had no accomplice, no paymaster in his infamies, then ask him whence came this bond in his possession, whence the money which we found upon him. Ask him to deny the fact that less than twenty-four hours after he had laid hands on you, he was back again in Haarlem, bargaining with your poor, stricken father to bring you back to him."

He ceased speaking, almost choked now by his own eloquence, and the rapidity with which the lying words escaped his lips. And Gilda slowly turned her head toward the prisoner, and met that subtly-ironical, good-humoured glance again.

"Is this all true, sir?" she asked.

"What, mejuffrouw?" he retorted.

"That this bond promising you payment for the cruel outrage upon me is a forgery?"

"His Magnificence says so, mejuffrouw," he replied quietly, "surely you know best if you can believe him."

"But this is not my brother's signature?" she asked: and she herself was not aware what an infinity of pleading there was in her voice.

"No!" he replied emphatically, "it is not your brother's signature."

"Then it's a forgery?"

"We will leave it at that, mejuffrouw," he said, "that it is a forgery."

A sigh, hoarse and passionate in its expression of infinite relief, escaped the Lord of Stoutenburg's lips. Though he knew that the man in any case could have no proof if he accused Nicolaes, yet there was great satisfaction in this unqualified confession. Slowly the prisoner turned his head and looked upon his triumphant enemy, and it was the man with the pinioned arms, with the tattered clothes and the stained shirt who seemed to tower in pride, in swagger and in defiance while the other looked just what he was — a craven and miserable cur.

Once more there was silence in the low-raftered room. From Gilda's eyes the tears fell slowly one by one. She could not have told you herself why she was crying at this moment. Her brother's image stood out clearly before her wholly vindicated of treachery, and a scoundrel had been brought to his knees, self-confessed as a liar, a forger and a thief; the Lord of Stoutenburg was proved to have been faithful and true, and yet Gilda felt such a pain in her heart that she thought it must break.

The Lord of Stoutenburg at last broke the silence which had become oppressive.

"Are you satisfied, Gilda?" he asked tenderly.

"I feel happier," she replied softly, "than I have felt these four days past, at thought that my own brother at least — nor you, my lord — had a hand in all this treachery."

She would not look again on the prisoner, even though she felt more than she saw, that a distinctly humorous twinkle had once more crept into his eyes. It seemed however, as if she wished to say something else, something kind and compassionate, but Stoutenburg broke in impatiently:

"May I dismiss the fellow now?" he asked. "Jan is waiting for orders outside."

"Then I pray you call to Jan," she rejoined stiffly.

"The rogue is securely pinioned," he added even as he turned toward the door. "I pray you have no fear of him."

"I have no fear," she said simply.

Stoutenburg strode out of the room and anon his harsh voice was heard calling to Jan.

For a moment then Gilda was alone — for the third time now — with the man whom she had hated more than she had ever hated a human creature before. She remembered how last night and again at Leyden she had been conscious of an overpowering desire to wound him with hard and bitter words. But now she no longer felt that desire, since Fate had hurt him more cruelly than she had wished to do. He was standing there now before her, in all the glory of his magnificent physique, yet infinitely shamed and disgraced, self-confessed of every mean and horrible crime that has ever degraded manhood.

Yet in spite of this shame he still looked splendid and untamed: though his arms were bound to a pinion behind his back, his broad chest was not sunken, and he held himself very erect with that leonine head of his thrown well back and a smile of defiance, almost of triumph, sat upon every line of his face.

Anon she met his eyes; their glance compelled and held her own. There was nothing but kindly humour within their depths. Humour, ye gods! whence came the humour of the situation! Here was a man condemned to death by an implacable enemy who was not like to show any mercy, and Gilda herself — remembering all his crimes — could no longer bring herself to ask for mercy for him, and yet the man seemed only to mock, to smile at fate, to take his present desperate position as lightly and as airily as another would take a pleasing turn of fortune's wheel.

Conscious at last that his look of unconquerable good-humour was working upon her nerves, Gilda forced herself to break the spell of numbness which had so unaccountably fallen upon her.

"I should like to say to you, sir," she murmured, "how deeply I regret the many harsh words I spoke to you at Leyden and ... and also last night ... believe me there was no feeling in me of cruelty toward you when I spoke them."

"Indeed, mejuffrouw," he rejoined placidly, whilst the gentle mockery in his glance became more accentuated, "indeed I am sure that your harshness towards me was only dictated by your kindness. Believe me," he added lightly, "your words that evening at Leyden, and again last night were most excellent discipline for my temper: for this do I thank you! they have helped me to bear subsequent events with greater equanimity."

She bit her lip, feeling vexed at his flippancy. A man on the point of death should take the last hours of his life more seriously.

"It grieved me to see," she resumed somewhat more stiffly, "that one who could on occasions be so brave, should on others stoop to such infamous tricks."

"Man is ever a creature of opportunity, mejuffrouw," he said imperturbably.

"But I remembered you — you see — on New Year's Eve in the Dam Straat when you held up a mob to protect an unfortunate girl; oh! it was bravely done!"

"Yet believe me, mejuffrouw," he said with a whimsical smile, "that though I own appearances somewhat belie me, I have done better since."

"I wish I could believe you, sir. But since then ... oh! think of my horror when I recognized you the next day — at Leyden — after your cowardly attack upon me."

"Indeed I have thought of it already, mejuffrouw. Dondersteen! I must have appeared a coward before you then!"

He gave a careless shrug of the shoulders, and very quaintly did that carelessness sit on him now that he was pinioned, wounded and in a relentless enemy's hands.

"Perhaps I am a coward," he added with a strange little sigh, "you think so; the Lord of Stoutenburg declares that I am a miserable cur. Does man ever know himself? I for one have never been worth the study."

"Nay, sir, there you do wrong yourself," she said gently, "I cannot rightly gauge what temptations did beset you when you lay hands upon a defenceless woman, or when you forged my brother's name ... for this you did do, did you not?" she asked insistently.

"Have I not confessed to it?" he retorted quietly.

"Alas! And for these crimes must I despise you," she added quaintly. "But since then my mind hath been greatly troubled. Something tells me — and would to God I saw it all more clearly — that much that you so bravely endure just now, is somehow because of me. Am I wrong?"

He laughed, a dry, gentle, self-mocking laugh.

"That I have endured much because of you, mejuffrouw," he said gaily, "I'll not deny; my worthy patron St. Bavon being singularly slack in his protection of me on two or three memorable occasions; but this does not refer to my present state, which has come about because half a dozen men fell upon me when I was unarmed and pounded at me with heavy steel skates, which they swung by their straps. The skates were good weapons, I must own, and have caused one or two light wounds which are but scraps of evil fortune that a

nameless adventurer like myself must take along with kindlier favours. So I pray you, mejuffrouw, have no further thought of my unpleasant bodily condition. I have been through worse plights than this before, and if to-morrow I must hang....”

“No, no!” she interrupted with a cry of horror, “that cannot and must not be.”

“Indeed it can and must, mejuffrouw. Ask the Lord of Stoutenburg what his intentions are.”

“Oh! but I can plead with him,” she declared. “He hath told me things to-day which have made me very happy. My heart is full of forgiveness for you, who have wronged me so, and I would feel happy in pleading for you.”

Something that she said appeared to tickle his fancy, for at her words he threw his head right back and laughed immoderately, loudly and long.

“Ye gods!” he cried, while she — a little frightened and puzzled — looked wide-eyed upon him— “let me hear those words ringing in mine ears when the rope is round my neck. The Lord of Stoutenburg hath the power to make a woman happy! the words he speaks are joy unto her heart! Oh! ye gods, let me remember this and laugh at it until I die!”

His somewhat wild laugh had not ceased to echo in the low-raftered room nor had Gilda time to recover her composure, before the door was thrown violently open and the Lord of Stoutenburg re-entered, followed by Jan and a group of men.

He threw a quick, suspicious glance on Gilda and on Diogenes, the latter answered him with one of good-humoured irony, but Gilda — pale and silent — turned her head away.

Stoutenburg then pointed to Diogenes.

“Here is your prisoner,” he said to Jan, “take him back to the place from whence you brought him. Guard him well, Jan, for to-morrow he must hang and remember that your life shall pay for his if he escapes.”

Jan thereupon gave a brief word of command, the men ranged themselves around the prisoner, whose massive figure was thus completely hidden from Gilda’s view; only — towering above the heads of the soldiers — the wide sweep of the brow caught a glimmer of light from the flickering lamp overhead.

Soon the order was given. The small knot of men turned and slowly filed out. The Lord of Stoutenburg was the last to leave. He bowed nearly to the ground when he finally left Gilda’s presence.

And she remained alone, sitting by the fire, and staring into the smouldering ashes. She had heard news to-night that flooded her soul with happiness. Her brother whom she loved was innocent of crime, and God Himself had interfered. He had touched the heart of the Lord of Stoutenburg and stopped the infamous plot against the Stadtholder’s life. Yet Gilda’s heart was unaccountably heavy, and as she sat on, staring into the fire, heavy tears fell unheeded from her eyes.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BROTHER PHILOSOPHERS

And now for the clang of arms, the movement, the bustle, the excitement of combat! There are swords to polish, pistols to clean, cullivers to see to! Something is in the air! We have not been brought hither all the way to this God-forsaken and fog-ridden spot in order to stare on a tumble-down molens, or watch a solitary prisoner ere he hang.

Jan knows of course, and Jan is eager and alert, febrile in his movements, there is a glow in his hollow eyes. And Jan always looks like that when fighting is in the air, when he sniffs the scent of blood and hears the resonance of metal against metal. Jan knows of course. He has no thought of sleep, all night he wanders up and down the improvised camp. No fires allowed and it is pitch dark, but an occasional glimmer from a lantern lights up compact groups of men lying prone upon the frozen ground, wrapped in thick coats, or huddled up with knees to chin trying to keep warm.

A few lanterns are allowed, far into the interior of that weird forest of beams under the molens where slender protection against a bitter north-westerly wind can alone be found.

Shoulder to shoulder, getting warmth one from the other, we are all too excited to sleep. Something is in the air, some fighting to be done, and yet there are only thirty or forty of us at most: but swords and cullivers have been given out, and half the night through my lord and his friends, served only by Jan, have been carrying heavy loads from the molens out toward the Schie and the wooden bridge that spans it.

Silently, always coming away with those heavy loads from the molens, and walking with them away into the gloom, always returning empty-handed, and served only by Jan. Bah, we are no cullions! 'tis not mighty difficult to guess. And by the saints! why all this mystery? Some of us are paid to fight, what care we how we do it? in the open with muskets or crossbows, or in the dark, with a sudden blow which no man knows from whence it comes.

All night we sit and wait, and all night we are under the eye of Jan. He serves his lord and helps him to carry those heavy boxes from the molens to some unknown place by the Schie, but he is always there when you least expect him, watching to see that all is well, that there is not too much noise, that no one has been tempted to light a fire, that we do not quarrel too hotly among ourselves.

He keeps a watchful eye too, upon the prisoner: poor beggar! with a broken shoulder and a torn hip, and some other wounds too, about his body. A good fighter no doubt! but there were seven against him, and that was a good idea to swing heavy skates by their straps and to bring him down with them. His head was too high, else a blow from those sharp blades might have ended his life more kindly than the Lord of Stoutenburg hath planned to do.

A merry devil too! full of quaint jokes and tales of gay adventure! By Gad! a real soldier of fortune! devil-may-care! eat and drink and make merry for to-morrow we may die. Jan has ordered him to be kept tied to a beam! God-verdomme! but 'tis hard on a wounded man, but he seems tougher than the beams, and laughter in his throat quickly smothers groans.

Tied to a beam, he is excellent company! Ye gods, how his hands itch to grip his sword. Piet the Red over there! let him feel the metal against his palms, 'twill ease his temper for sure! Jan is too severe: but 'tis my lord's rage that was unbridled. Ugh! to strike a prisoner in the face. 'Twas a dirty trick and many saw it.

Heigh-ho, but what matter! To-morrow we fight, to-morrow he hangs! What of that? To-morrow most of us mayhap will be lying stark and stiff upon the frozen ground, staring up at next night's moon, with eyes that no longer see! A rope round the neck, a hole in the side, a cracked skull! what matters which mode Dame Death will choose for our ultimate end. But 'tis a pity about the prisoner! A true fighter if there was one, a stoic and a philosopher. "The Cavalier" we pretty soon call him.

"What ho!" he shouts, "call me the Laughing Cavalier!"

Poor devil! he tries not to show his hurts. He suffers much what with that damnable wind and those ropes that cut into his tough sinews, but he smiles at every twinge of pain: smiles and laughs and cracks the broadest jokes that have e'er made these worm-eaten beams ring with their echo.

The Laughing Cavalier in sooth!

There! now we can ease him somewhat. Jan's back is turned: we dare not touch the ropes, but a cloak put between his back and the beam, and another just against his head.

Is that not better, old compeer?

Aye! but is it not good to be a villain and a rogue and herd with other villains and other rogues who are so infinitely more kind and gentle than all those noble lords?

Diogenes — his head propped against the rude cushion placed there by the hand of some rough Samaritan — has fallen into a fitful doze.

Whispers around him wake him with a start. Ye gods! was there ever so black a night? The whispers become more eager, more insistent.

"Let us but speak with him. We'll do no harm!"

St. Bavon tell us how those two scarecrows have got here! For they are here in the flesh, both of them, Diogenes would have spotted his brother philosophers through darkness darker than the blackest hell. Pythagoras rolling in fat and Socrates lean and hungry-looking, peering like a huge gaunt bird through the gloom. Someone is holding up a lantern and Pythagoras' tip-tilted nose shines with a ruddy glow.

"But how did you get here, you old mushroom-face?" asks one of the men.

"We had business with him at Rotterdam," quoth Socrates with one of his choicest oaths and nodding in the direction of the prisoner. "All day we have wondered what has become of him."

"Then in the afternoon," breaks in Pythagoras, to the accompaniment of a rival set of expletives, "we saw him trussed like a fowl and tied into a sledge drawn by a single horse, which started in the wake of a larger one wherein sat a lovely jongeuffrouw."

"Then what did you do?" queries some one.

"Do?" exclaimed the philosophers simultaneously and in a tone of deep disgust.

"Followed on his trail as best we could," rejoins Socrates simply, "borrowed some skates, ran down the Schie in the wake of the two sledges and their escort."

"And after that?"

"After that we traced him to this solitary God-forsaken hole, but presently we saw that this molens was not so deserted as it seemed, so we hung about until now ... then we ventured nearer ... and here we are."

Here they were of course, but how was it possible to contravene the orders of Jan? What could these scarecrows have to say to the Laughing Cavalier?

"Just to ask him if there's anything we can do," murmurs Socrates persuasively. "He's like to hang to-morrow, you said, well! grant something then to a dying man."

Grave heads shake in the gloom.

"Our orders are strict...."

"'Tis a matter of life and death it seems...."

"Bah!" quoth Pythagoras more insinuatingly still, "we are two to your thirty! What have ye all to fear?"

"Here! tie my hands behind my back," suggests Socrates. "I only want to speak with him. How could we help him to escape?"

"We would not think of such a thing," murmurs Pythagoras piously.

Anxious glances meet one another in consultation. More than one kindly heart beats beneath these ragged doublets. Bah! the man is to hang to-morrow, why not give pleasure to a dying man?

If indeed it be pleasure to look on such hideous scarecrows a few hours before death.

Jan is not here. He is with my lord, helping with those heavy boxes.

"Five minutes, you old mushroom-face," suggests he who has been left in charge.

And all the others nod approval.

But they will take no risks about the prisoner. Pleasure and five minutes' conversation with his friends, yes! but no attempt at escape. So the men make a wide circle sitting out of ear-shot, but shoulder to shoulder the thirty of them who happen to be awake. In the centre of the circle is the Laughing Cavalier tied to a beam, trussed like a fowl since he is to hang on the morrow.

Close beside his feet is the lanthorn so that he may have a last look at his friends, and some few paces away his naked sword which Jan took from him when the men brought him down.

He has listened to the whispered conversation — he knows that his brother philosophers are here. May the God of rogues and villains bless them for their loyalty.

"And now St. Bavon show me the best way to make use of them!"

There is still something to be done, which hath been left undone, a word hath been given and that pledge must be fulfilled, and the promised fortune still awaits him who will bring the jongeuffrouw safely to her father!

"My God, if it were not for that broken shoulder and that torn hip! ... there are many hours yet before the morrow."

"Old compeer!" came in a hoarse whisper close to his ear, "how did you come to such a pass?"

"They came and took the jongeuffrouw away from Rotterdam," he replied also speaking in a whisper. "I had just returned from Delft, where I had business to transact and I recognized Jan beside the sledge into which the jongeuffrouw was stepping even then. He had ten or a dozen men with him. I felt that they meant mischief — but I had to follow ... I had to find out whither they were taking her...."

"Verdommt!" growled Socrates under his breath. "Why did you not take us along?"

"I meant to come back for you, as soon as I knew ... but in the dark ... and from behind, seven of these fellows fell upon me ... they used their skates like javelins ... mine were still on my feet ... I had only Bucephalus.... A blow from one of the heaviest blades cracked my shoulder, another caught me on the hip. There were seven of them," he reiterated with a careless laugh, "it was only a question of time, they were bound to bring me down in the end."

"But who has done this?" queried Pythagoras with an oath.

"A lucky rogue on whom God hath chosen to smile. But," he added more seriously and sinking his voice to the lowest possible whisper, "never mind about the past. Let us think of the future, old compeers."

"We are ready," they replied simultaneously.

"A knife?" he murmured, "can you cut these confounded ropes?"

"They took everything from us," growled Socrates, "ere they let us approach you."

"Try with your hands to loosen the knots."

"What ho! you brigands, what are you doing there?"

In a moment the circle around broke up. A crowd of angry faces were gathered closely round the philosophers, and more than one pair of rough hands were laid upon their shoulders.

"Play fair, you two!" cried Piet the Red, who was in command, "or we'll tie you both to the nearest beams and await my lord's commands."

"Easy, easy, friend," quoth Diogenes with a pleasant laugh, "my nose was itching and my compeer held on to my arm while he tried to reach my nose in order to scratch it."

"Then if it itch again," retorted the man with an equally jovial laugh, "call for my services, friend. And now, you two scarecrows! the five minutes are over. Jan will be here in a moment."

But they formed up the circle once more, kind and compassionate. Jan was not yet here, and the rogues had had a warning: they were not like to be at their tricks again.

"Never mind about me," whispered Diogenes hurriedly as Pythagoras and Socrates, baffled and furious, were giving forth samples of their choicest vocabularies. "You see that Chance alone can favour me as she choose, if not ... 'tis no matter. What you can do for

me is far more important than cheating the gallows of my carcase.”

“What is it?” they asked simply.

“The jongeuffrouw,” he said, “you know where she is?”

“In the hut — close by,” replied Socrates, “we saw the sledge draw up there....”

“But the house is well guarded,” murmured Pythagoras.

“Nor would I ask you to run your heads in the same noose wherein mine will swing to-morrow. But keep the hut well in sight. At any hour — any moment now there may be a call of *saue qui peut*. Every man for himself and the greatest luck to the swiftest runner.”

“But why?”

“Never mind why. It is sure to happen. Any minute you may hear the cry ... confusion, terror ... a scramble and a rush for the open.”

“And our opportunity,” came in a hoarse whisper from Socrates. “I think that I begin to understand.”

“We lie low for the present and when *saue qui peut* is called we come straight back here and free you ... in the confusion they will have forgotten you.”

“If the confusion occurs in time,” quoth Diogenes with his habitual carelessness, “you may still find me here trussed like a fowl to this verdommte beam. But I have an idea that the Lord of Stoutenburg will presently be consumed with impatience to see me hang ... he has just finished some important work by the bridge on the Schie ... he won’t be able to sleep and the devil will be suggesting some mischief for his idle hands to do. There will be many hours to kill before daylight, one of them might be well employed in hanging me.”

“Then we’ll not leave you an instant,” asserted Pythagoras firmly.

“What can you do, you two old scarecrows, against the Lord of Stoutenburg who has thirty men here paid to do his bidding?”

“We are not going to lie low and play the part of cowards while you are being slaughtered.”

“You will do just what I ask, faithful old compeers,” rejoined Diogenes more earnestly than was his wont. “You will lie very low and take the greatest possible care not to run your heads into the same rope wherein mayhap mine will dangle presently. Nor will you be playing the part of cowards, for you have not yet learned the A B C of that part, and you will remember that on your safety and freedom of action lies my one chance, not so much of life as of saving my last shred of honour.”

“What do you mean?”

“The jongeuffrouw—” he whispered, “I swore to bring her back to her father and I must cheat a rascal of his victory. In the confusion — at dawn to-morrow — think above all of the jongeuffrouw.... In the confusion you can overpower the guard — rush the miller’s hut where she is ... carry her off ... the horses are in the shed behind the hut ... you may not have time to think of me.”

“But....”

“Silence — they listen....”

“One of us with the jongeuffrouw — the other to help you — —”

“Silence ... I may be a dead man by then — the jongeuffrouw remember — make for Ryswyk with her first of all — thence straight to Haarlem — to her father — you can do it easily. A fortune awaits you if you bring her safely to him. Fulfil my pledge, old compeers, if I am not alive to do it myself. I don’t ask you to swear — I know you’ll do it — and if I must to the gallows first I’ll do so with a cry of triumph.”

“But you....”

“Silence!” he murmured again peremptorily, but more hoarsely this time for fatigue and loss of blood and tense excitement are telling upon his iron physique at last — he is well-nigh spent and scarce able to speak. “Silence — I can hear Jan’s footsteps. Here! quick! inside my boot ... a wallet? Have you got it?” he added with a brief return to his habitual gaiety as he felt Socrates’ long fingers groping against his shins, and presently beheld his wallet in his compeer’s hand. “You will find money in there — enough for the journey. Now quick into the night, you two — disappear for the nonce, and anon when *saue qui peut* rings in the air — to-night or at dawn or whenever this may be, remember the jongeuffrouw first of all and when you are ready give the cry we all know so well — the cry of the fox when it lures its prey. If I am not dangling on a gibbet by then, I shall understand. But quick now! — Jan comes! — Disappear I say!...”

Quietly and swiftly Socrates slipped the wallet with some of the money back into his friend’s boot, the rest he hid inside his own doublet.

Strange that between these men there was no need of oaths. Pythagoras and Socrates had said nothing: silent and furtive they disappeared into the darkness. Diogenes’ head sank down upon his breast with a last sigh of satisfaction. He knew that his compeers would do what he had asked. Jan’s footsteps rang on the hard-frozen ground — silently the living circle had parted and the philosophers were swallowed up by the gloom.

Jan looks suspiciously at the groups of men who now stand desultorily around.

“Who was standing beside the prisoner just now?” he asks curtly.

“When, captain?” queries one of the men blandly.

“A moment ago. I was descending the steps. The lanthorn was close to the prisoner; I saw two forms — that looked unfamiliar to me — close to him.”

“Oh!” rejoined Piet the Red unblushingly, “it must have been my back that you saw, captain. Willem and I were looking to see that the ropes had not given way. The prisoner is so restless....”

Jan — not altogether re-assured — goes up to the prisoner. He raises the lanthorn and has a good and comprehensive look at all the ropes. Then he examines the man’s face.

“What ho!” he cries, “a bottle of spiced wine from my wallet. The prisoner has fainted.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

DAWN

What a commotion when dawn breaks at last; it comes grey, dull, leaden, scarce lighter than the night, the haze more dense, the frost more biting. But it does break at last after that interminable night of excitement and sleeplessness and preparations for the morrow.

Jan has never closed an eye, he has scarcely rested even, pacing up and down, in and out of those gargantuan beams, with the molens and its secrets towering above his head. Nor I imagine did those noble lords and mynheers up there sleep much during this night; but they were tired and lay like logs upon straw paillasses, living over again the past few hours, the carrying of heavy iron boxes one by one from the molens to the wooden bridge, the unloading there, the unpacking in the darkness, and the disposal of the death-dealing powder, black and evil smelling, which will put an end with its one mighty crash — to tyranny and the Stadtholder's life.

Tired they are but too excited to sleep: the last few hours are like a vivid dream; the preparation of the tinder, the arrangements, the position to be taken up by Beresteyn and Heemskerk, the two chosen lieutenants who will send the wooden bridge over the Schie flying in splinters into the air.

Van Does too has his work cut out. General in command of the forces — foreign mercenaries and louts from the country — he has Jan for able captain. The mercenaries and the louts know nothing yet of what will happen to-morrow — when once the dawn has broken — but they are well prepared; like beasts of the desert they can scent blood in the air; look at them polishing up their swords and cleaning their cullivers! they know that to-morrow they will fight, even though to-night they have had no orders save to see that one prisoner tied with ropes to a beam and fainting with exposure and loss of blood does not contrive to escape.

But the Lord of Stoutenburg is more wakeful than all. Like a caged beast of prey he paces up and down the low, narrow weighing-room of the molens, his hands tightly clenched behind his back, his head bare, his cloak cast aside despite the bitter coldness of the night.

Restless and like a beast of prey; his nostrils quiver with the lust of hate and revenge that seethes within his soul. Two men doth he hate with a consuming passion of hatred, the Stadtholder Prince of Orange, sovereign ruler of half the Netherlands, and a penniless adventurer whose very name is unknown.

Both these men are now in the power of the Lord of Stoutenburg. The bridge is prepared, the powder laid, to-morrow justice will be meted out to the tyrant; God alone could save him now, and God, of a surety, must be on the side of a just revenge. The other man is helpless and a prisoner; despite his swagger and his insolence, justice shall be meted out to him too; God alone could save him, and God, of a surety, could not be on the side of an impudent rogue.

These thoughts, which were as satisfying to the Lord of Stoutenburg as food placed at an unattainable distance is to a starving beast, kept him awake and pacing up and down the room after he had finished his work under the bridge.

He could not sleep for thinking of the prisoner, of the man's insolence, of the humiliation and contempt wherewith every glance he had brought shame to his cheeks. The Lord of Stoutenburg could not sleep also for thinking of Gilda, and the tender, pitying eyes wherewith she regarded the prisoner, the gentle tone of her voice when she spoke to him, even after proof had been placed before her that the man was a forger and a thief.

The Lord of Stoutenburg could not sleep and all the demons of jealousy, of hatred and of revenge were chasing him up and down the room and whispering suggestions of mischief to be wrought, of a crime to be easily committed.

"While that man lives," whispered the demon of hate in his ear, "thou wilt not know a moment's rest. To-morrow when thy hand should be steady when it wields the dagger against the Stadtholder, it will tremble and falter, for thoughts of that man will unsettle thy nerves and cause the blood to tingle in thy veins."

"While that man lives," whispered the demon of revenge, "thou wilt not know a moment's rest. Thou wilt think of him and of his death, rather than of thy vengeance against the Stadtholder."

"While that man lives," whispered the demon of jealousy more insistently than did the other evil spirits, "Gilda will not cease to think of him, she will plead for him, she will try mayhap to save him and then — —"

And the Lord of Stoutenburg groaned aloud in the silence of the night, and paused in his restless walk. He drew a chair close to the table, and sat down; then resting his elbows upon the table, he buried his head in his hands, and remained thus motionless but breathing heavily like one whose soul is fighting a losing battle.

The minutes sped on. He had no means of gauging the time. It was just night, black impenetrable night. From down below came the murmur of all the bustle that was going on, the clang of arms, the measured footsteps which told of other alert human creatures who were waiting in excitement and tense expectancy for that dawn which still was far distant.

The minutes sped on, on the leaden feet of time. How long the Lord of Stoutenburg had sat thus, silent and absorbed, he could not afterwards have said. Perhaps after all he had fallen asleep, overcome with fatigue and with the constant sleeplessness of the past few days. But anon he was wide awake, slightly shivering with the cold. The tallow candle was spluttering, almost dying out. With a steady hand the Lord of Stoutenburg snuffed the smouldering wick, the candle flickered up again. Then he rose and quietly walked across the room. He pulled open the door and loudly called for Jan.

A few minutes later Jan was at the door, silent, sullen, obedient as usual.

"My lord called?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Stoutenburg, "what hour is it?"

"Somewhere near six I should say, my lord. I heard the tower-clock at Ryswyk strike five some time ago."

"How long is it before the dawn?"

"Two hours, my lord."

"Time to put up a gibbet, Jan? and to hang a man?"

"Plenty of time for that, my lord," replied Jan quietly.

"Then see to it, Jan, as speedily as you can. I feel that that man down below is our evil genius. While he lives Chance will be against us, of that I am as convinced as I am of the justice of our cause. If that man lives, Jan, the Stadtholder will escape us; I feel it in my bones: something must have told me this in the night — it is a premonition that comes from above."

"Then the man must not live, my lord," said Jan coldly.

"You recognize that too, Jan, do you not?" rejoined Stoutenburg eagerly. "I am compelled in this — I won't say against my will, but compelled by a higher, a supernatural power. You, too, believe in the supernatural, do you not, my faithful Jan?"

"I believe, my lord, first and foremost in the justice of our cause. I hate the Stadtholder and would see him dead. Nothing in the world must place that great aim of ours in jeopardy."

Stoutenburg drew a deep breath of satisfaction.

"Then see to the gibbet, my good Jan," he said in a firm almost lusty voice, "have it erected on the further side of the molens so that the jongeuffrouw's eyes are not scandalized by the sight. When everything is ready come and let me know, and guard him well until then, Jan, guard him with your very life; I want to see him hang, remember that! Come and tell me when the gallows are ready and I'll go to see him hang ... I want to see him hang...."

And Jan without another word salutes the Lord of Stoutenburg and then goes out.

And thus it is that a quarter of an hour later the silence of the night is broken by loud and vigorous hammering. Jan sees to it all and a gibbet is not difficult to erect.

Then men grumble of course; they are soldiers and not executioners, and their hearts for the most have gone out to that merry compeer — the Laughing Cavalier — with his quaint jokes and his cheerful laugh. He has been sleeping soundly too for several hours, but now he is awake. Jan has told him that his last hour has come: time to put up a gibbet with a few stiff planks taken from the store-room of the molens and a length of rope.

He looks round him quite carelessly. Bah! death has no terrors for such a splendid soldier as he is. How many times hath he faced death ere this? — why he was at Prague and at Madgeburg where few escaped with their lives. He bears many a fine scar on that broad chest of his and none upon his back. A splendid fighter, if ever there was one!

But hanging? Bah!

The men murmur audibly as plank upon plank is nailed. Jan directs operations whilst Piet the Red keeps guard over the prisoner. Two or three of the country louts know something of carpentering. They do the work under Jan's watchful eye. They grumble but they work, for no one has been paid yet, and if you rebel you are like to be shot, and in any case you lose your pay.

And Diogenes leaning up against the beam watches with lazy quaintly smiling eyes the preparations that are going on not a hundred paces away from him. After a while the darkness all around is beginning to yield to the slow insistence of dawn. It rises slowly behind the veils of mist which still envelop the distant East. Gradually an impalpable greyness creeps around the molens, objects begin to detach themselves one by one out of the gloom, the moving figures of the mercenaries, the piles of arms heaped up here and there out of the damp, the massive beams slimy and green which support the molens, and a little further on the tall erection with a projecting arm round which great activity reigns.

Diogenes watches it all with those same lazy eyes, and that same good-humoured smile lingering round his lips. That tall erection over there which still looks ghostlike through the mist is for him. The game of life is done and he has lost. Death is there at the end of the projecting arm on which even now Jan is fixing a rope.

"Death in itself matters but little," mused the philosopher with his gently ironical smile. "I would have chosen another mode than hanging ... but after all 'tis swift and sure; and of course now she will never know."

Know what, O philosopher? What is it that she — Gilda — with the fair curls and the blue eyes, the proud firm mouth and round chin — what is it that she will never know?

She will never know that a nameless, penniless soldier of fortune has loved her with every beat of his heart, every thought of his brain, with every sinew and every aspiration. She will never know that just in order to remain near her, when she was dragged away out of Rotterdam he affronted deliberately the trap into which he fell. She will never know that for her dear sake, he has borne humiliation against which every nerve of his splendid nature did inwardly rebel, owing to guilt and shame lest her blue eyes shed tears for a brother's sin. She will never know that the warning to the Stadtholder came from him, and that he was neither a forger nor a thief, only just a soldier of fortune with a contempt for death, and an unspoken adoration for the one woman who seemed to him as distant from him as the stars.

But there were no vain regrets in him now; no regret of life, for this he always held in his own hand ready to toss it away for a fancy of an ideal — no regret of the might-have-been because he was a philosopher, and the very moment that love for the unattainable was born in his heart he had already realized that love to him could only mean a memory.

Therefore when he watched the preparations out there in the mist, and heard the heavy blows upon the wooden planks and the murmurs of his sympathizers at their work, he only smiled gently, self-deprecatingly, but always good-humouredly.

If the Lord of Stoutenburg only knew how little he really cared.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE HOUR

A curiously timid voice roused the philosopher from his dreams.

"Is there aught I can do for you, sir? Alas! my friend the Lord Stoutenburg is deeply angered against you. I could do nothing with him on your behalf."

Diogenes turned his head in the direction whence had come the voice. He saw Nicolaes Beresteyn standing there in the cold grey mist, with his fur cloak wrapped closely up to his chin, and his face showing above the cloak, white and drawn.

The situation was not likely to escape Diogenes' irrepressible sense of humour.

"Mynheer Beresteyn," he exclaimed; "Dondersteen! what brings your Mightiness here at this hour? A man on the point of death, sir, has no call for so pitiable a sight as is your face just now."

"I heard from my Lord Stoutenburg what happened in the hut last night," said Beresteyn in a faltering voice, and determined not to heed the other's bantering tone. "You exonerated me before my sister ... sir, this was a noble act ... I would wish to thank you...."

"And do so with quaking voice and shaking knees," quoth Diogenes with unalterable good-humour, through which there pierced however an obvious undercurrent of contempt. "Ye gods!" he added with a quaint sigh, "these men have not even the courage of their infamy!"

The words, the tone, the shrug of the shoulders which accompanied these, stung Nicolaes Beresteyn's dormant dignity to the quick.

"I do not wonder," he said more firmly, "that you feel bitter contempt for me now. Your generosity for which I did not crave hath placed me momentarily at a disadvantage before you. Yet believe me I would not be outdone by you in generosity; were it not for my allegiance to the Lord Stoutenburg I would go straight to my sister now and confess my guilt to her.... You believe me I trust," he added, seeing that Diogenes' merry eyes were fixed mockingly upon him, "did fate allow it I would gladly change places with you even now."

"I am about to hang, sir," quoth Diogenes lightly.

"Alas!"

"And you are forced, you say, to play a craven's part; believe me, sir, I would not change places with you for a kingdom."

"I do believe you, sir," rejoined Beresteyn earnestly, "yet I would have you think of me as something less of a coward than I seem. Were I to make full confession to my sister now, I should break her heart — but it would not save your neck from the gallows."

"And a rogue's neck, sir, is of such infinitely less value than a good woman's heart. So I pray you say no more about it. Death and I are old acquaintances, oft hath he nodded to me en passant, we are about to become closer friends, that is all."

"Some day my sister shall know, sir, all that you have done for her and for me."

The ghost of a shadow passed over the Laughing Cavalier's face.

"That, sir, I think had best remain 'twixt you and me for all times. But this I would have you know, that when I accepted the ignoble bargain which you proposed to me in my friend Hals' studio, I did so because I thought that the jongeuffrouw would be safer in my charge than in yours!"

Beresteyn was about to retort more hotly when Jan, closely followed by half a dozen men, came with swift, firm footsteps up to the prisoner. He saluted Beresteyn deferentially as was his wont.

"Your pardon, mynheer," he said, "my lord hath ordered that the prisoner be forthwith led to execution."

Nicolaes' pale face became the colour of lead.

"One moment, Jan," he said, "one moment. I must speak with my lord ... I...."

"My lord is with the jongeuffrouw," said Jan curtly, "shall I send to tell him that you desire to speak with him?"

"No — no — that is I ... I ..." stammered Nicolaes who, indeed, was fighting a cruel battle with his own weakness, his own cowardice now. It was that weakness which had brought him to the abject pass in which he now stood, face to face with the man he had affected to despise, and who was about to die, laden with the crimes which he Nicolaes had been the first to commit.

Stoutenburg's influence over him had been paramount, through it he had lost all sense of justice, of honour and of loyalty; banded with murderers he had ceased to recognize the very existence of honesty, and now he was in such a plight morally, that though he knew himself to be playing an ignoble rôle, he did not see the way to throw up the part and to take up that of an honest man. One word from him to Gilda, his frank confession of his own guilt, and she would so know how to plead for the condemned man that Stoutenburg would not dare to proceed with this monstrous act.

But that word he had not the courage to speak.

With dull eyes and in sullen silence he watched Piet the Red untying under Jan's orders the ropes which held the prisoner to the beam, and then securing others to keep his arms pinioned behind his back. The mist now was of a faint silvery grey, and the objects around had that mysterious hushed air which the dawn alone can lend. The men, attracted by the sight of a fellow creature in his last living moments, had gathered together in close knots of threes and fours. They stood by, glowering and sombre, and had not Jan turned a wilfully deaf ear to their murmurings he would have heard many an ugly word spoken under their breath.

These were of course troublous and fighting times, when every man's hand was against some other, when every able-bodied man was firstly a soldier and then only a peaceable citizen. Nor was the present situation an uncommon one: the men could not know what the prisoner had done to deserve this summary punishment. He might have been a spy — an informer — or merely a prisoner of war. It was no soldier's place to interfere, only to obey orders and to ask no questions.

But they gave to the splendid personality of the condemned man the tribute of respectful silence. Whilst Jan secured the slender white hands of the prisoner, and generally made those awful preparations which even so simple a death as hanging doth demand, jests and oaths were stilled one by one among these rough fighting men, not one head but was uncovered, not a back that was not

straightened, not an attitude that was not one of deference and attention. Instinct — that unerring instinct of the soldier — had told them that here was no scamp getting his just reward, but a brave man going with a careless smile to his death.

“Has mynheer finished with the prisoner,” asked Jan when he saw that Piet had finished his task and that the prisoner was ready to be led away. “Is there aught your greatness would still desire to say to him?”

“Only this,” said Beresteyn firmly, “that were his hands free I would ask leave to grasp them.”

A look of kindly amusement fell from the prisoner’s eyes upon the pale face of the young man.

“I have never known you, sir, save by a quaint nick-name,” continued Beresteyn earnestly, “but surely you have kith and kin somewhere. Have you no father or mother living whom you will leave to mourn?”

The prisoner made no immediate reply, the smile of kindly amusement still lingered round his lips, but presently with an instinctive gesture of pride, he threw back his head and looked around him, as one who has nothing to fear and but little to regret. He met the sympathetic glance cast on him by the man who had done him — was still doing him — an infinite wrong, and all round those of his mute and humble friends who seemed to be listening eagerly now for the answer which he would give to Mynheer. Then with a quick sweep his eyes suddenly rested on the wooden erection beyond the molens that loomed out so tragically through the mist, pointing with its one weird arm to some infinite distance far away.

Something in the gentle pathos of this humble deference that encompassed him, something mayhap in the solemnity of that ghostly arm suddenly seemed to melt the thin crust of his habitual flippancy. He looked back on Beresteyn and said softly:

“I have a friend, Frans Hals — the painter of pictures — tell him when next you see him that I am glad his portrait of me is finished, and that I asked God to bless him for all his goodness has meant to me in the past.”

“But your father, sir,” urged Beresteyn, “your kindred....”

“My father, sir,” replied Diogenes curtly, “would not care to hear that his son had died upon the gallows.”

Beresteyn would have spoken again but Jan interposes once more, humbly but firmly.

“My lord’s orders,” he now says briefly, “and time presses, mynheer.”

Beresteyn stands back, smothering a sigh. Jan on ahead, then Piet the Red and the six soldiers with the prisoner between them. A few steps only divide them from the gruesome erection that looms more solidly now out of the mist. Beresteyn, wrapping his head up in his cloak to shut out sound and sight, walks rapidly away in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER XXXIX

“SAUVE QUI PEUT”

Then it is that, out of the thickness of the fog a figure suddenly emerges running and panting: a man has fallen up against the group of soldiers who have just halted beside the gibbet.

“It is Lucas of Sparendam come back from Delft,” they cry as soon as they recognize the stained face, wet with the frost and the mist.

Already Jan — who with Piet’s help was busy with the rope — has heard the name. His wan, thin face has become the colour of ashes.

“Lucas of Sparendam back from Delft,” he murmurs, “the Lord save us all!”

Lucas of Sparendam was sent yesterday to Delft by the Lord of Stoutenburg to spy and to find out all that was going on inside the Prinzenhof where slept the Stadtholder and his bodyguard of one hundred men-at-arms: and now he has come back running and panting: his clothes torn, his face haggard and spent. He has run all the way from Delft — a matter of a league and a half! Why should a man half kill himself by endeavouring to cover a league and a half in one hour?

“A drop of hot wine for Lucas,” cries one of the soldiers. “He is faint.”

The other men — there are close on forty all told — crowd round the gibbet now, those in charge of the prisoner have much ado to keep the space clear. They don’t say anything just yet, but there is a strange, restless look in their eyes and their lips tremble with all the unspoken questions. Only two men remain calm and silent, Jan has never ceased in his task of adjusting the ropes, and the prisoner stands quite still, bound with cords, and neither looking on Lucas nor yet on the gibbet above him. His eyes are half closed and there is a strained look on his merry face as if he were trying to listen to something that was too far off to hear.

But one man in the meanwhile is ready with the bottle of spiced wine, the best cordial there is for a fainting man. The others make way for him so that he can minister to Lucas. And Lucas drinks the wine eagerly, then he opens his eyes.

“We are betrayed,” he murmurs.

“Great God!” exclaims Jan dully.

“Betrayed!”

“What does it mean?”

No one heeds the prisoner now. They all crowd around Lucas. Jan calls out his orders in vain: Piet the Red alone listens to what he says, the others all want to know what Lucas means. They had been in the thick of a plot of course, they all knew that: a guet-apens had been prepared by the Lord of Stoutenburg for the Stadtholder whom he hates. The heavy boxes of course — gunpowder ... to blow up the wooden bridge when the Stadtholder and his escort are half way across!

Of course they had all guessed it, thought on it all through the night while they polished the arms — the swords and the pistols and the cullivers — which had been served out to them. They had guessed of course — the foreign mercenaries who were always in the thick of every conspiracy and well paid for being so — they had been the first to guess and they had told the country louts who only grinned enjoying the prospect of the fun.

But now they were betrayed. Lucas of Sparendam had come back with the news, and even Jan stopped in his hideous task in order to listen to what he had to say.

“It all happened yesterday,” quoth Lucas as soon as he had recovered his breath, “the rumour began in the lower quarters of the town. Nobody knows who began it. Some say that a foreigner came into the city in the early morning and sat down at one of the taverns to eat and drink with the Prince’s soldiers.”

“A foreigner?”

Jan turns to look on the prisoner and encounters his mocking glance. Smothering a curse he resumes his task of adjusting the rope upon the gibbet, but his fingers are unsteady and his work doth not progress.

“Yes, a foreigner,” continued Lucas volubly, “though it all has remained very mysterious. The Prince’s soldiers spoke of it amongst themselves ... the foreigner had said something about a guet-apens, a plot against the Stadtholder’s life on his way to the North ... then one of the officers heard the rumour and carried it to one of his superiors.... By the evening it had reached the Stadtholder’s ears.”

“Then what happened?” they all asked eagerly.

“Nothing for some hours,” replied Lucas, “but I know that spies were sent round in every direction, and that by midnight there was general talk in the city that the Stadtholder would not continue his journey to the North. When the captain of the guard came to him for orders the Prince said curtly: ‘We do not start to-morrow!’ As soon as I heard of this I made preparations. It was then an hour after midnight. I was still alert and listening: all around me — as I made ready to leave the city — I heard rumours among the soldiers and spies of the Stadtholder, of their knowledge of a lonely spot — a deserted molens — near Ryswyk where they declared many men did lately congregate. I heard too that soon after dawn the Prince’s guard would make straight for the molens, so I put on my snow shoes and started to run, despite the darkness and the fog, for we are all betrayed and the Stadtholder’s soldiers will be on us in a trice.”

Hardly are the words out of Lucas Sparendam’s mouth than the commotion begins, the disbanding; there is a roar and a bustle and a buzz: metal clashing, men rushing, cries of “we are betrayed! *saue qui peut!*”

At first there is a general stampede for the places where the arms are kept — the muskets, the swords and cullivers — but these are thrown down almost as soon as they are picked up. They are no use now and worse than useless in a flight. But pistols are useful, in case of pursuit. “Quick, turn, fire!... so where are the pistols?... Jan, where are those pistols?”

There are not enough to go round: about a dozen were served out last night, and there are forty pairs of hands determined to possess one at least. So they begin to fight for them, tearing one another to pieces, shouting execrations, beating round with bare fists, since the other arms have already been laid down.

Now the confusion becomes worse than any that might reign among a herd of animals who are ready to rend one another: they tear the clothes off one another's back, the skin off one another's face: fear — hideous, overwhelming, abject fear, has made wild beasts of these men. The mist envelops them, it is barely light in this basement beneath the molens: lanthorns have long ago been kicked into extinction. The hot breath of forty panting throats mingles with the mist, and the heat of human bodies fever-heated with passion, fights against the strength of the frost. The frozen ground yields under the feet, clots of mud are thrown up by the stampede, from the beams up aloft the heavy icicles melt and drip monotonously, incessantly down upon those faces, red and perspiring in an agony of demented fear.

Jan and Piet the Red stand alone beside the prisoner: a sense of duty, of decency hath kept their blood cool. Until they are relieved from their post of guarding this man by orders from their lord, they will not move. Let the others rage and scream and tumble over one another, there must be at least a few soldiers among this rabble.

And the prisoner looks on all this confusion with eyes that dance and sparkle with the excitement of what is yet to come. Torn rags and broken accoutrements soon lie in a litter in the mud, trampled in by forty pairs of feet. There is not one face now that is not streaked with blood, not one throat that is not hoarse with terror — the terror of the unknown.

In vain Jan from his post beside the prisoner shouts, harangues, appeals, threatens! A fight? yes! defeat? why not? but betrayal!... no, no, let's away. The Stadtholder is fiercer than any Inquisitor of Spain ... his cruelty last February almost turned the nation against him. But now — this second conspiracy — Stoutenburg again! what hope for his followers?

The horrors of last February perpetrated in the Gevangen Poort of 'S Graven Hage still cause many a rough cheek to blanch at their recollection. Men had gone mad who had heard the cries which pierced those stone walls then. One executioner had thrown down his bloody tools and fled from the place like one possessed! Van Dyk and Korenwinder, Slatius and the rest had been in hell ere a merciful death at last released them from the barbaric cruelty of the Prince of Orange.

"No, no! such a fate cannot be risked. We are betrayed! let us fly!"

Suddenly one man starts to run.

"I am for the coast!" he shouts, and incontinently takes to his heels.

"Sauve qui peut!"

Like irresponsible creatures they throw down the very weapons for which they have been fighting. The one man has given the signal for the run. Everything now is thrown aside, there is no thought save for flight.

A splashing of the mud, a general shout, a scramble, a clatter — they run — they run — crying to those who are behind to follow and run too.

In five minutes the dark basement is clear of noise — a litter of broken arms lies in one heap close by, others are scattered all over the ground in the mud, together with torn clothing, rags of leather and of cloth and great red pools that mingle with the melted ice.

The mist surrounds it all, this abandoned battle field wherein fear was the victor over man. The swiftly flying figures are soon swallowed up by the grey wall which lies dense and heavy over the lowland around; for a time they appear like ghosts with blurred outlines of torn doublets and scraps of felt hats placed awry; then the outline gets more dim as they run, and the kindly mist hides them from view.

Under the molens all is silent now. Jan and Piet the Red guard the prisoner alone. The gallows are ready or nearly so, but there is no one to send to the Lord of Stoutenburg to tell him this — as he hath commanded — so that he may see this man hang whom he hates. And it would not be safe to leave the prisoner unguarded. Only from time to time Jan looks to see that the ropes still hold fast, but for the most part his eyes are fixed upon the mist on his left, for that way lies Delft, and from thence will loom out by and by the avenging hordes sent by the Prince of Orange.

Now that all those panting, perspiring human creatures have gone, the frost is more bitter, more biting than before; but neither Piet nor Jan seem to heed it, though their flesh is blue with the cold. Overhead there is a tramp of feet; the noble mynheers must have heard the confusion, they must have seen the flight; they are even now preparing to do in a slightly more dignified way what the foreign mercenaries and the louts from the country have done so incontinently.

The prisoner, hearing this tramp of feet over his head, looks more alertly around him. He sees that Jan and Piet have remained on guard even whilst the others have fled. He also sees the pile of heaped-up arms, the broken metal, the rags and the mud, and through the interstices of the wooden steps the booted feet of the mynheers running helter-skelter down; and a mad, merry laugh — that holds a world of joy in its rippling tones — breaks from his lips.

The next moment from far away comes a weird cry through the mist. A fox on the alert tries to lure his prey with that quaint cry of his, which appeals to the young birds and encourages them to come. What should a fox be doing on these ice-covered tracks? he must have strayed from very far, from over the moor mayhap beyond Gonda; hunger no doubt hath made a wanderer of him, an exile from his home.

Jan listens — greatly astonished — what should a fox be doing here? Piet is impassive, he knows nothing of the habits of foxes; sea-wolves are more familiar to him. With his eyes Jan instinctively questions the prisoner:

"What should a fox be doing here on these ice-bound flats?" he mutely asks.

But the prisoner apparently cares nothing about the marvels of nature, cares nothing about exiled foxes. His head is erect, his eyes dance with glee, a happy smile lights up his entire face.

Jan remembered that the others last night had called the wounded man the Laughing Cavalier. A Cavalier he looked, every inch of him; the ropes mattered nothing, nor the torn clothing; proud, triumphant, happy, he was laughing with all the light-hearted gaiety which pertains to youth.

The Laughing Cavalier forsooth. Lucky devil! if he can laugh! Jan sighed and marvelled when the Lord of Stoutenburg would relieve him from his post.

CHAPTER XL

THE LOSER PAYS

Nicolaes Beresteyn had not gone far when Lucas of Sparendam came running with the news. He heard it all, he saw the confusion, the first signs of *sauve qui peut*.

At first he was like one paralyzed with horror and with fear; he could not move, his limbs refused him service. Then he thought of his friends — some up in the molens, others at various posts on the road and by the bridge — they might not hear the confusion and the tumult, they might not see the coming *sauve qui peut*; they might not hear that the Stadtholder's spies are on the alert, and that his bodyguard might be here at any time.

Just then the disbanding began. Nicolaes Beresteyn pushed his way through the fighting, quarrelling crowd to where Lucas of Sparendam, still exhausted and weak, was leaning up against a beam.

"Their lordships up in the molens," he said in a voice still choked with fear, "and the Lord of Stoutenburg in the hut with the jongejuffrouw.... Come and tell them at once all that you know."

And he dragged Lucas of Sparendam in his wake.

The Lord of Stoutenburg was at Gilda's feet when Beresteyn ran in with Lucas to tell him the news.

After he had given Jan the orders to prepare the gallows for the summary execution of the prisoner he had resumed his wild, restless pacing up and down the room. There was no remorse in him for his inhuman and cowardly act, but his nerves were all on the jar, and that perpetual hammering which went on in the distance drove him to frantic exasperation.

A picture of the happenings in the basement down below would obtrude itself upon his mental vision; he saw the prisoner — careless, contemptuous, ready for death; Jan sullen but obedient; the men murmuring and disaffected. He felt as if the hammering was now directed against his own head, he could have screamed aloud with the agony of this weary, expectant hour.

Then he thought of Gilda. Slowly the dawn was breaking, the hammering had ceased momentarily; silence reigned in the basement after the turbulence of the past hour. The Lord of Stoutenburg did not dare conjecture what this silence meant.

The thought of Gilda became more insistent. He snatched up a cloak and wrapping it closely round him, he ran out into the mist. Quickly descending the steps, he at once turned his back on the basement where the last act of the supreme tragedy would be enacted presently. He felt like a man pursued, with the angel of Nemesis close to his heels, hour-glass in hand to mark the hour of retribution.

He hoped to find rest and peace beside Gilda; he would not tell her that he had condemned the man to death. Let her forget him peaceably and naturally; the events of to-day would surely obliterate other matters from her mind. What was the life of a foreign vagabond beside the destinies of Holland which an avenging God would help to settle to-day?

The Lord of Stoutenburg had walked rapidly to the hut where he hoped to find Gilda ready to receive him. He knocked at the door and Maria opened it to him. To his infinite relief she told him that the jongejuffrouw had broken her fast and would gladly speak with him.

Gilda, he thought, looked very pale and fragile in the dim light of two or three tallow candles placed in sconces about the room. There were dark circles round her eyes, and a pathetic trembling of her lips proclaimed the near presence of tears.

But there was an atmosphere of peace in the tiny room, with its humble little bits of furniture and the huge earthenware stove from which the pleasing glow of a wood fire emanated and shed a cheerful radiance around.

The Lord of Stoutenburg felt that here in Gilda's presence he could forget his ambitions and his crimes, the man whom he was so foully putting to death, his jealousies and even his revenge.

He drew a low chair close to her and half-sitting, half-kneeling, began speaking to her as gently, as simply as his harsh voice and impatient temperament would allow. He spoke mostly about the future, only touching very casually on the pain which she had caused him by her unjust suspicions of him.

Gilda listened to him in silence for awhile. She was collecting all her will-power, all her strength of purpose for the task which lay before her — the task of softening a hardened and treacherous heart, of rousing in it a spark of chivalry and of honour so that it showed mercy there where it now threatened injustice, cruelty and almost inhuman cowardice.

A brave man's life was in the hands of this man, who professed love for her; and though Gilda rejected that love with contempt, she meant, womanlike, to use that love as a mainspring for the softened mood which she wished to call forth.

The first thought that had broken in upon her after a brief and troubled sleep was that a brave young life would be sacrificed to-day to gratify the petty spite of a fiend. She had been persuaded yesterday that the man who — though helpless and pinioned — stood before her in all the splendour of manhood and of a magnificent personality was nothing but a common criminal — a liar, a forger and a thief.

Though this thought should have made her contented, since by bringing guilt home to a man who was nothing to her, it exonerated her brother whom she loved, she had felt all night, right through the disturbing dreams which had floated through her consciousness, a leaden weight sitting upon her heart, like the sense of the committal of some great and irreparable wrong. Indeed, she felt that if here in this very place which he had filled last night with his exuberant vitality, she had to think of him as silent and cold for all eternity, such a thought would drive her mad.

The Lord of Stoutenburg's honeyed words fell unheeded on her ear; his presence near her filled her with horror; she only kept up a semblance of interest in him, because he held the fate of another man in the hollow of his hand.

She was preparing in her mind what she was going to say to him, she rehearsed the words which were most likely to appeal to his callous nature. Already she was nerving herself for the supreme effort of pleading for a brave man's life when suddenly the tramping of heavy feet outside the hut, confused shouts and clang of arms, caused Stoutenburg to jump to his feet.

The door was torn open, and Nicolaes Beresteyn stood for a moment on the threshold, pale, speechless, with body trembling and moisture thick upon his brow. Lucas of Sparendam was close behind him equally pale and still.

At first sight of her brother Gilda had uttered a little cry of joy; but that cry soon died upon her lips. Beresteyn had scarcely looked on her, his glance at once had found that of Stoutenburg, and the two men seemed to understand one another.

"We are betrayed?" cried Stoutenburg hoarsely.

Beresteyn nodded in reply.

"How?"

Lucas of Sparendam in short jerky sentences retold once more the tale of all that had happened at Delft: the Prince of Orange warned, the spies which he had sent broadcast, the bodyguard which even now was on its way.

"They know of this place," murmured Beresteyn between quivering lips, "they might be here at any moment."

Through the open door there came the noise of the men fighting, the cries of rage and of fear, the clatter of metal and the tramping of many feet.

"They are scared and half mad," said Lucas of Sparendam, "in five minutes the *sauve qui peut* will commence."

"We are quite near the coast," said Stoutenburg with outward calm, though his voice was choked and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, "go you and tell the others, Beresteyn," he added, turning to his friend, "then collect all our papers that are in the molens. Thank God there are only a few that might compromise us at all. Heemskerck and van Does will help you, they are not like to be seized with panic. We can then make quietly for Scheveningen, where the boats are ready. There is a sledge here and a pair of horses which I shall need; but it is less than a league to Scheveningen, and you can all walk it easily. Tell the others not to lose time and I will follow with the sledge as soon as may be. There is no cause for a panic and we can all save ourselves."

Beresteyn made ready to go. He took less pains than Stoutenburg to conceal his terror and his knees frankly shook under him. At the door he paused. He had suddenly remembered Gilda.

She had risen from her chair and stood now like a statue carved in stone, white to the lips, wide-eyed, her whole expression one of infinite horror.

It had all been lies then, all that Stoutenburg had told her yesterday! He had concealed the monstrous truth, lying to her with every word he uttered. Now he stood there pale and trembling, the traitor who in his turn has been betrayed. Fear and blind rage were fighting their last deathly battle in his soul. The edifice of his treachery was crumbling around him; God's hand — through an unknown channel — had set the limit to his crimes. Twice a traitor, he had twice failed. Already he could see the disbanding of his mercenary troops, the beginning of that mad, wild flight to the coast, and down the steps of the molens his friends too were running helter-skelter, without thought of anything save of their own safety.

It would be so immeasurably horrible to fall into the Stadtholder's hands.

And Gilda, pale and silent, stood between the two men who had lied to her, outraged her to the end. Nicolaes was a traitor after all; he had cast the eternal shroud of shame over the honour and peace of his house. An God did not help him now, his death would complete that shame.

She tried to hold his glance, but he would not look at her; she felt that his wrath of her almost bordered on hatred because he believed that she had betrayed them all. His eyes were fixed upon his leader and friend, and all the anxiety which he felt was for that one man.

"You must not delay, Nicolaes," said Stoutenburg curtly, "go, warn the others and tell them to make for Scheveningen. But do you wait for me — we'll follow anon in the sledge and, of course, Gilda comes with us."

And Beresteyn said firmly:

"Of course, Gilda comes with us."

She was not afraid, even when he said this, even when his fierce glance rested upon her, and she was too proud to make an appeal to him. It was her turn now to avert her glance from him; to the bottom of her soul she loathed his cowardice, and the contempt with which she regarded him now was almost cruel in its intensity.

He went out of the room followed by Lucas of Sparendam, and now she was once more alone with the Lord of Stoutenburg.

"Gilda," he cried with a fierce oath, "when did you do this?"

"It was not I, my lord," she replied calmly, "you and Nicolaes did all that lay in your power to render me helpless in this. God knows I would not have betrayed you ... it is His hand that hath pointed the way to one who was more brave than I."

"'Tis false," he exclaimed violently, "no one knew of our plans save those who now must flee because like us they have been betrayed. No sane man would wilfully put his head in the halter; and there are no informers amongst us."

"You need not believe me, my lord," she rejoined coldly, "an you do not wish. But remember that I have never learnt the art of lying, nor could I be the Judas to betray my own brother. Therefore do I pledge you my word that I had no share in this decree of God."

"If not yourself," he retorted, "you spoke of it to some one ... who went to the Stadtholder ... and warned him! to some one ... some one who.... Ah!" he cried suddenly with a loud and ghoulish scream wherein rage, horror and fear and a kind of savage triumph too rang out, "I see that I have guessed aright. You did speak of what you knew ... to the miserable knave whom Nicolaes paid to outrage you ... and you offered him money to betray your own brother."

"It is false!"

"It is true — I can read it in your face. That man went to Delft yesterday — he was captured by Jan on his way back to Rotterdam. He had fulfilled your errand and warned the Prince of Orange and delivered me and all my friends into hands that never have known mercy."

He was blind with passion now and looked on her with bloodshot eyes that threatened to kill. But Gilda was not cast in the same mould as was this traitor.

Baffled in his crime, fear had completely unmanned him, but with every cry of rage uttered by Stoutenburg she became more calm and less afraid.

"Once more, my lord," she said quietly in the brief interval of Stoutenburg's ravings and while he was forced to draw breath, "do I pledge my word to you that I had no hand in saving the Stadtholder's life. That God chose for this another instrument than I, I do thank Him on my knees."

While she spoke Stoutenburg had made a quick effort to regain some semblance of composure, and now he contrived to say quite calmly and with an evil sneer upon his face:

"That instrument of God is an I mistake not tied to a post with ropes like an ox ready for the butcher's hand. Though I have but sorry chances of escape myself and every minute hath become precious, I can at least spend five in making sure that his fate at any rate be sorrier than mine."

Her face became if possible even paler than before.

"What do you mean to do?" she murmured.

"The man who has betrayed me to the Prince of Orange is the same man who laid hands upon you in Haarlem — is that not so?"

"I cannot say," she said firmly.

"The same man who was here in this room yesterday, bound and pinioned before you?" he insisted.

"I do not know."

"Will you swear then that you never spoke to him of the Prince of Orange, and of our plans?"

"Not of your plans ..." she protested calmly.

"You see that you cannot deny it, Gilda," he continued with that same unnatural calm which seemed to her far more horrible than his rage had been before. "Willingly or unwittingly you let that man know what you overheard in the Groote Kerk on New Year's Eve. Then you bribed him into warning the Prince of Orange, since you could not do it yourself."

"It is false," she reiterated wildly.

Once more that evil sneer distorted his pale face.

"Well!" he said, "whether you bribed him or not matters to me but little. I do believe that willingly you would not have betrayed Nicolaes or me or any of our friends to the Stadtholder, knowing what he is. But you wanted to cross our plans, you wanted to warn the Stadtholder of his danger, and you — not God — chose that man for your instrument."

"It is not true — I deny it," she repeated fearlessly.

"You may deny it with words, Gilda, but your whole attitude proclaims the truth. Thank God!" he cried with a note of savage triumph in his voice, "that man is still a helpless prisoner in my hands."

"What do you mean?" she murmured.

"I mean that it is good to hold the life of one's deadliest enemy in the hollow of one's hand."

"But you would not slay a defenceless prisoner," she cried.

He laughed, a bitter, harsh, unnatural laugh.

"Slay him," he cried, "aye that I will, if it is not already done. Did you hear the hammering and the knocking awhile ago? It was Jan making ready the gibbet. And now — though the men have run away like so many verdomme cowards, I know that Jan at any rate has remained faithful to his post. The gibbet is still there, and Jan and I and Nicolaes, we have three pairs of hands between us, strong enough to make an enemy swing twixt earth and heaven, and three pairs of eyes wherewith to see an informer perish upon the gallows."

But already she had interrupted him with a loud cry of overwhelming horror.

"Are you a fiend to think of such a thing?"

"No," he replied, "only a man who has a wrong to avenge."

"The wrong was in your treachery," she retorted, even while indignation nearly choked the words in her throat, "no honest man could refuse to warn another that a murderous trap had been laid for him."

"Possibly. But through that warning given by a man whom I hate, my life is practically at an end."

"Life can only be ended by death," she pleaded, "and yours is in no danger yet. In a couple of hours as you say you will have reached the coast. No doubt you have taken full measures for your safety. The Stadtholder is sick. He hath scarce a few months to live; when he dies everything will be forgotten, you can return and begin your life anew. Oh! you will thank God then on your knees, that this last hideous crime doth not weigh upon your soul."

"A wrong unavenged would weigh my soul down with bitterness," he said sombrely. "My life is done, Gilda. Ambition, hope, success, everything that I care for has gone from me. Nicolaes may begin his life anew; he is young and his soul is not like mine consumed with ambition and with hatred. But for that one man, I were to-day Stadtholder of half our provinces and sole ruler of our United Netherlands, instead of which from this hour forth I shall be a fugitive, a pariah, an exile. All this do I owe to one man," he added fiercely, "and I take my revenge, that is all."

He made a feint as if ready to go. But Gilda with a moan of anguish had already held him back. Despite the loathing which the slightest contact with such a fiend caused her, she clung with both her hands to his arm.

"My lord!" she entreated, "in the name of your dear mother, in the name of all that is yet good and pure and noble in you, do not allow this monstrous crime to add to the heavy load of sin which rests upon your soul. God is just," she added earnestly, "God will punish us all if such an infamy is done now at this supreme hour when our destinies are being weighed in the balance."

But he looked down on her suddenly, with an evil leer which sent a chill right through her to her heart.

"Are you pleading for a man who mayhap hath sent your brother to the scaffold?" he asked.

His glance now was so dark and so cruel, the suspicion which lurked in it was so clear, that for the moment Gilda was overawed by this passion of hate and jealousy which she was unable to fathom. The quick hot blood of indignation rushed to her pale cheeks.

"It was of Nicolaes that I was thinking," she said proudly, "if that man dies now, I feel that such a dastardly crime would remain a lasting stain upon the honour of our house."

"The crime is on you, Gilda," he retorted, "in that you did betray us all. Willingly or unwittingly, you did deliver me into the hands of my most bitter enemy. But I pray you, plead no more for a knave whom you surely must hate even more bitterly than I do hate him. The time goes by, and every wasted minute becomes dangerous now. I pray you make yourself ready to depart."

She had not given up all thoughts of pleading yet; though she knew that for the moment she had failed, there floated vaguely at the back of her mind a dim hope that God would not abandon her in this her bitterest need. He had helped her in her direst trouble; He had

averted the hideous treachery which threatened to stain her father's honoured name and her own with a hideous mark of shame; surely He would not allow this last most terrible crime to be committed.

No doubt that vague frame of mind, born of intense bodily and mental fatigue, betrayed itself in the absent expression in her eyes, for Stoutenburg reiterated impatiently:

"I can give you a quarter of an hour wherein to make ready."

"A quarter of an hour," she murmured vaguely, "to make ready?... for what?"

"For immediate departure with me and your brother for Belgium."

Still she did not understand. A deep frown of puzzlement appeared between her brows.

"Departure? — with you? — what do you mean, my lord?" she asked.

"I mean," he replied roughly, "that out of the wreckage of all my ambitions, my desires and my hopes I will at least save something that will compensate me for all that I have lost. You said just now that life could only end in death. Well! next to mine ambition and my desire for vengeance, you, Gilda, as you know, do fill my entire soul. With you beside me I may try to begin life anew. I leave for the coast in less than half an hour; Nicolaes will be with us and he will care for you. But I will not go without you, so you must come with us."

"Never!" she said firmly.

But Stoutenburg only laughed with careless mockery.

"Who will protect you?" he said, "when I take you in my arms and carry you to the sledge, which in a quarter of an hour will be ready for you? Who will protect you when I carry you in my arms from the sledge to the boat which awaits us at Scheveningen?"

"Nicolaes," she rejoined calmly, "is my brother — he would not permit such an outrage."

An ironical smile curled the corners of his cruel lips. "Do you really think, Gilda," he said, "that Nicolaes will run counter to my will? I have but to persuade him that your presence in Holland will be a perpetual menace to our safety. Besides, you heard what he said just now; that you, of course, would come with us."

"My dead body you can take with you," she retorted, "but I — alive — will never follow you."

"Then 'tis your dead body I'll take, Gilda," he said with a sneer, "I will be here to fetch you in a quarter of an hour, so I pray you make ready while I go to deal with that meddlesome instrument of God."

She was spent now, and had no strength for more; a great numbness, an overpowering fatigue seemed to creep into her limbs. She even allowed him to take her hand and to raise it to his lips, for she was quite powerless to resist him; only when she felt those burning lips against her flesh a shudder of infinite loathing went right through her body.

Soon he turned on his heel and strode out of the room. She heard the thin wooden door fall to with a bang behind him; but she could no longer see, a kind of darkness had fallen over her eyes, a darkness, in which only one figure appeared clearly — the figure of a man upon a gibbet. All else was blackness around her, impenetrable blackness, almost tangible in its intensity, and out of the blackness which seemed like that of a dungeon there came cries as of human creatures in hell.

"Lord have mercy upon him!" her lips, cold and white, murmured vaguely and insistently, "Lord have mercy upon him! Lord have mercy upon us all!"

CHAPTER XLI

“VENGEANCE IS MINE”

It was like a man possessed of devils that the Lord of Stoutenburg ran out through the mist toward the molens.

The grey light of this winter's morning had only vaguely pierced the surrounding gloom, and the basement beneath the molens still looked impenetrably dark. Dark and silent! the soldier — foreign mercenaries and louts — had vanished in the fog, arms hastily thrown down littered the mud-covered ground, swords, pistols, muskets, torn clothing, here and there a neck-cloth, a steel bonnet, a bright coloured sash. Stoutenburg saw it all, right through the gloom, and he ground his teeth together to smother a cry of agonised impotence.

Only now and then a ghostly form flitted swift and silent among the intricate maze of beams, a laggard left behind in the general scramble for safety, or a human scavenger on the prowl for loot. Now and then a groan or a curse came from out the darkness, and a weird, shapeless, moving thing would crawl along in the mud like some creeping reptile seeking its lair. But Stoutenburg looked neither to right nor left. He paid no heed to these swiftly fleeting ghostlike forms. He knew well enough that he would find silence here, that three dozen men — cowards and mercenaries all — had been scattered like locusts before a gale. Overhead he heard the tramping of feet, his friends — Beresteyn, Heemskerk, van Does — were making ready for flight. His one scheme of vengeance — that for which he had thirsted and plotted and sinned — had come to nought, but he had yet another in his mind — one which, if successful, would give him no small measure of satisfaction for the failure of the other.

And ahead the outline of the hastily improvised gallows detached itself out of the misty shroud, and from the Lord of Stoutenburg's throat there came a fierce cry of joy which surely must have delighted all the demons in hell.

He hurried on, covering with swift eager steps the short distance that separated him from the gibbet.

He called loudly to Jan, for it seemed to him as if the place was unaccountably deserted. He could not see Jan nor yet the prisoner, and surely Piet the Red had not proved a coward.

The solid beams above and around him threw back his call in reverberating echoes. He called again, and from far away a mocking laugh seemed alone to answer him.

Like a frightened beast now he bounded forward. There were the gallows not five paces away from him; the planks hastily hammered together awhile ago were creaking weirdly, buffeted by the wind, and up aloft the rope was swinging, beating itself with a dull, eerie sound against the wood.

The Lord of Stoutenburg — dazed and stupefied — looked on this desolate picture like a man in a dream.

“My lord!”

The voice came feebly from somewhere close by.

“My lord! for pity's sake!”

It was Jan's voice of course. The Lord of Stoutenburg turned mechanically in the direction from whence it came. Not far from where he was standing he saw Jan lying on the ground against a beam, with a scarf wound loosely round his mouth and his arms held with a cord behind his back. Stoutenburg unwound the scarf and untied the cord, then he murmured dully:

“Jan? What does this mean?”

“The men all threw down their arms, my lord,” said Jan as soon as he had struggled to his feet, “they ran like cowards when Lucas of Sparendam brought the news.”

“I knew that,” said Stoutenburg hoarsely, “curse them all for their miserable cowardice. But the prisoner, man, the prisoner? What have you done with him? Did I not order you to guard him with your life?”

“Then is mine own life forfeit, my lord,” said Jan simply, “for I did fail in guarding the prisoner.”

A violent oath broke from Stoutenburg's trembling lips. He raised his clenched fist, ready to strike in his blind, unreasoning fury the one man who had remained faithful to him to the last.

Jan slowly bent the knee.

“Kill me, my lord,” he said calmly, “I could not guard the prisoner.”

Stoutenburg was silent for a moment, then his upraised arm fell nervelessly by his side.

“How did it happen?” he asked.

“I scarce can tell you, my lord,” replied Jan, “the attack on us was so quick and sudden. Piet and I did remain at our post, but in the rush and the panic we presently were left alone beside the prisoner. Two men — who were his friends — must have been on the watch for this opportunity, they fell on us from behind and caught us unawares. We called in vain for assistance; it was a case of *saue qui peut* and every one for himself, in a trice the cords that bound the prisoner were cut, and three men had very quickly the best of us. Piet, though wounded in the leg, contrived to escape, but it almost seemed as if those three demons were determined to spare me. Though by God,” added Jan fervently, “I would gladly have died rather than have seen all this shame! When they had brought me down they wound a scarf round my mouth and left me here tied to a beam, while they disappeared in the fog.”

Stoutenburg made no comment on this brief narrative, even the power of cursing seemed to have deserted him. He left Jan kneeling there on the frozen ground, and without a word he turned on his heel and made his way once more between the beams under the molens back toward the hut.

Vengeance indeed had eluded his grasp. The two men whom on earth he hated most had remained triumphant while he himself had been brought down to the lowest depths of loneliness and misery. Friendless, kinless now, life indeed, as he had told Gilda, was at an end for him. Baffled vengeance would henceforth make him a perpetual exile and a fugitive with every man's hand raised against him, a price once more upon his head.

The world doth at times allow a man to fail in the task of his life, it will forgive that one failure and allow the man to try again. But a second failure is unforgivable, men turn away from the blunderer in contempt. Who would risk life, honour and liberty in a cause that

has twice failed?

Stoutenburg knew this. He knew that within the next hour his friends would already have practically deserted him. Panic-stricken now they would accompany him as far as the coast, they would avail themselves of all the measures which he had devised for their mutual safety, but in their innermost hearts they would already have detached themselves from his future ill-fortunes; and anon, in a few months mayhap, when the Stadtholder had succumbed to the disease which was threatening his life, they would all return to their homes and to their kindred and forget this brief episode wherein their leader's future had been so completely and so irretrievably wrecked.

They would forget, only he — Stoutenburg — would remain the pariah, the exile, that carries the brand of traitor for ever upon the pages of his life.

And now the hut is once more in sight, and for one brief instant an inward light flickers up in Stoutenburg's dulled eyes. Gilda is there, Gilda whom he loves, and whose presence in the sorrow-laden years that are to come would be a perpetual compensation for all the humiliation and all the shame which he had endured.

To-day mayhap she would follow him unwillingly, but Stoutenburg's passion was proof against her coldness. He felt that he could conquer her, that he could win her love, when once he had her all to himself in a distant land, when she — kinless too and forlorn — would naturally turn to him for protection and for love. He had little doubt that he would succeed, and vaguely in his mind there rose the pale ray of hope that her love would then bring him luck, or at any rate put renewed energy in him to begin his life anew.

CHAPTER XLII

THE FIGHT IN THE DOORWAY

It seemed to Stoutenburg that from the back of the hut there came the sound of bustle and activity: he thought that mayhap Beresteyn had had the good idea of making the sledge ready for departure, and he called out loudly to his friend.

It was a mocking voice, however, that rose in response:

“Was your Magnificence perchance looking for me?”

Out of the mist which still hung round the small building Diogenes’ tall figure suddenly loomed before the Lord of Stoutenburg. He was standing in the doorway of the hut, with his back to it; one hand — the right one — was thrust inside his doublet, the left was on the hilt of his sword; his battered hat was tilted rakishly above his brow and he was regarding his approaching enemy with a look of keen amusement and of scorn.

At first Stoutenburg thought that his fevered fancy was playing his eyes a weird and elusive trick, then as the reality of what he saw fully burst upon his senses he uttered a loud and hoarse cry like a savage beast that has been wounded.

“Plepshurk! smeerlap!” he cried fiercely.

“Rogue! Villain! Menial! Varlet! and all that you care to name me, my lord!” quoth the philosopher lightly, “and entirely at your service.”

“Jan!” cried Stoutenburg, “Jan! In the name of hell where are you?”

“Not very far, my lord,” rejoined the other. “Jan is a brave soldier but he was no match for three philosophers, even though one of them at first was trussed like a fowl. Jan stuck to his post, my lord, remember that,” he added more seriously, “even when all your other followers and friends were scattered to the winds like a crowd of mice at the approach of a cat. We did not hurt Jan because he is a brave soldier, but we tied him down lest he ran to get assistance whilst assistance was still available.”

“You insolent knave....”

“You speak rightly, my lord: I am an insolent knave, and do so rejoice in mine insolence that I stayed behind here — while my brother philosophers accomplish the task which I have put upon them — on purpose to exercise some of that insolence upon you, and to see what power a man hath to curb his temper and to look pleasant, whilst an insolent knave doth tell him to his face that he is an abject and degraded cur.”

“Then by Heaven, you abominable plepshurk,” cried Stoutenburg white with passion, “since you stayed here to parley with me, I can still give you so complete a retort that your final insolence will have to be spoken in hell. But let me pass now. I have business inside the hut.”

“I know you have, my lord,” rejoined Diogenes coolly, “but I am afraid that your business will have to wait until two philosophers named respectively Pythagoras and Socrates have had time to finish theirs.”

“What do you mean? Let me pass, I tell you, or....”

“Or the wrath of your Magnificence will once more be upon mine unworthy head. Dondersteen! what have I not suffered already from that all-powerful wrath!”

“You should have been hanged ere this....”

“It is an omission, my lord, which I fear we must now leave to the future to rectify.”

“Stand aside, man,” cried Stoutenburg, who was hoarse with passion.

“No! not just yet!” was the other’s calm reply.

“Stand aside!” reiterated Stoutenburg wildly.

He drew his sword and made a quick thrust at his enemy; he remembered the man’s wounded shoulder and saw that his right hand was temporarily disabled.

“Ah, my lord!” quoth Diogenes lightly, as with his left he drew Bucephalus out of its scabbard, “you had forgotten or perhaps you never knew that during your follower’s scramble for safety my sword remained unheeded in an easily accessible spot, and also that it is as much at home in my left hand as in my right.”

Like a bull goaded to fury Stoutenburg made a second and more vigorous thrust at his opponent. But Diogenes was already on guard: calm, very quiet in his movements in the manner of the perfect swordsman. Stoutenburg, hot with rage, impetuous and clumsy, was at once at a disadvantage whilst this foreign adventurer, entirely self-possessed and good-humoured, had the art of the sword at his finger-tips — the art of perfect self-control, the art of not rushing to the attack, the supreme art of waiting for an opportunity.

No feint or thrust at first, only on guard, quietly on guard, and Bucephalus seemed to be infinitely multiplied at times so quickly did the bright steel flash out in the grey light and then subside again.

Stoutenburg was at once conscious of his own disadvantage. He was no match for this brilliant sword play; his opponent did indeed appear to be only playing with him, but Stoutenburg felt all the time that the abominable knave might disarm him at any moment if he were so minded.

Nor could he see very clearly: the passionate blood in him had rushed to his head and was beating furiously in his temples, whilst the other man with the additional advantage of a good position against the wall, kept up a perfect fusillade of good-humoured comments.

“Well attacked, my lord!” he cried gaily, “Dondersteen! were I as fat as your Magnificence supposes, your sword would ere now have made a hole in my side. Pity I am not broader, is it not? or more in the way of your sword. There,” he added as with a quick and sudden turn of the wrist he knocked his opponent’s weapon out of his hand, “allow me to return you this most useful sword.”

He had already stooped and picked up Stoutenburg’s sword, and now was holding it with slender finger tips by the point of its blade, and smiling, urbane and mocking, he held it out at arm’s length, bowing the while with courtly, ironical grace.

"Shall we call Jan, my lord," he said airily, "or one of your friends to aid you? Some of them I noticed just now seemed somewhat in a hurry to quit this hospitable molens, but mayhap one or two are still lingering behind."

Stoutenburg, blind with rage, had snatched his sword back out of the scoffer's hand. He knew that the man was only playing with him, only keeping him busy here to prevent his going to Gilda. This thought threw him into a frenzy of excitement and not heeding the other's jeers he cried out at the top of his voice:

"Jan! Jan! Nicolaes! What-ho!"

And the other man putting his hand up to his mouth also shouted lustily:

"Jan! Nicolaes! What ho!"

Had Stoutenburg been less blind and deaf to aught save to his own hatred and his own fury, he would have heard not many paces away, the sound of horses' hoofs upon the hard ground, the champing of bits, the jingle of harness. But of this he did not think, not just yet. His thoughts were only of Gilda, and that man was holding the door of the hut because he meant to dispute with him the possession of Gilda. He cast aside all sense of pride and shame. He was no match with a foreign mercenary, whose profession was that of arms; there was no disgrace in his want of skill. But he would not yield the ground to this adventurer who meant to snatch Gilda away from him. After all the man had a wounded shoulder and a lacerated hip; with the aid of Jan and of Nicolaes he could soon be rendered helpless.

New hope rose in the Lord of Stoutenburg's heart, giving vigour to his arm. Now he heard the sound of running footsteps behind him; Jan was coming to his aid and there were others; Nicolaes no doubt and Heemskerk.

"My lord! my lord!" cried Jan, horrified at what he saw. He had heard the clang of steel against steel and had caught up the first sword that came to his hand. His calls and those of Stoutenburg as well as the more lusty ones of Diogenes reached the ears of Beresteyn, who with his friend Heemskerk was making a final survey of the molens, to search for compromising papers that might have been left about. They too heard the cries and the clash of steel; they ran down the steps of the molens, only to meet Jan who was hurrying toward the hut with all his might.

"I think my lord is being attacked," shouted Jan as he flew past, "and the jongeuffrouw is still in the hut."

These last words dissipated Nicolaes Beresteyn's sudden thoughts of cowardice. He too snatched up a sword and followed by Heemskerk he ran in Jan's wake.

The stranger, so lately a prisoner condemned to hang, was in the doorway of the hut, with his back to it, his sword in his left hand keeping my Lord of Stoutenburg at arm's length. Jan, Nicolaes and Heemskerk were on him in a trice.

"Two, three, how many of you?" queried Diogenes with a laugh, as with smart riposte he met the three blades which suddenly flashed out against him. "Ah, Mynheer Beresteyn, my good Jan, I little thought that I would see you again."

"Let me pass, man," cried Beresteyn, "I must to my sister."

"Not yet, friend," he replied, "till I know what your intentions are."

For one instant Beresteyn appeared to hesitate. The kindly sentiment which had prompted him awhile ago to speak sympathetic words to a condemned man who had taken so much guilt upon his shoulders, still fought in his heart against his hatred for the man himself. Since that tragic moment at the foot of the gallows which had softened his mood, Beresteyn had learnt that it was this man who had betrayed him and his friends to the Stadtholder, and guessed that it was Gilda who had instigated or bribed him into that betrayal. And now the present position seemed to bring vividly before his mind the picture of that afternoon in the "Lame Cow" at Haarlem, when the knave whom he had paid to keep Gilda safely out of the way was bargaining with his father to bring her back to him.

All the hatred of the past few days — momentarily lulled in the face of a tragedy — rose up once more with renewed intensity in his heart. Here was the man who had betrayed him, and who, triumphant, was about to take Gilda back to Haarlem and receive a fortune for his reward.

While Heemskerk, doubtful and hesitating, marvelled if 'twere wise to take up Stoutenburg's private quarrels rather than follow his other friends to Scheveningen where safety lay, Jan and Beresteyn vigorously aided by Stoutenburg made a concerted attack upon the knave.

But it seemed as easy for Bucephalus to deal with three blades as with one: now it appeared to have three tongues of pale grey flame that flashed hither and thither; — backwards, forwards, left, right, above, below, parry, riposte, an occasional thrust, and always quietly on guard.

Diogenes was in his greatest humour laughing and shouting with glee. To anyone less blind with excitement than were these men it would soon have been clear that he was shouting for the sole purpose of making a noise, a noise louder than the hammerings, the jinglings, the knocking that was going on at the back of the hut.

To right and left of the front of the small building a high wooden paling ran for a distance of an hundred paces or so enclosing a rough yard with a shed in the rear. It was impossible to see over the palings what was going on behind them and so loudly did the philosopher shout and laugh, and so vigorously did steel strike against steel that it was equally impossible to perceive the sounds that came from there.

But suddenly Stoutenburg was on the alert: something had caught his ear, a sound that rose above the din that was going on in the doorway ... a woman's piercing shriek. Even the clang of steel could not drown it, nor the lusty shouts of the fighting philosopher.

For a second he strained his ear to listen. It seemed as if invisible hands were suddenly tearing down the wooden palisade that hid the rear of the small building from his view; before his mental vision a whole picture rose to sight. A window at the back of the hut broken in, Gilda carried away by the friends of this accursed adventurer — Jan had said that two came to his aid at the foot of the gallows — Maria screaming, the sledge in wait, the horses ready to start.

"My God, I had not thought of that," he cried, "Jan! Nicolaes! in Heaven's name! Gilda! After me! quick!"

And then he starts to run, skirting the palisade in the direction whence come now quite distinctly that ceaseless rattle, that jingle and stamping of the ground which proclaims the presence of horses on the point of departure.

"Jan, in Heaven's name, follow me!" cries Stoutenburg, pausing one instant ere he rounds the corner of the palisade. "Nicolaes, leave that abominable knave! Gilda, I tell you! Gilda! They are carrying her away!"

Jan already has obeyed, grasping his sword he does not pause to think. My lord has called and 'tis my lord whom he follows. He runs after Stoutenburg as fast as his tired limbs will allow. Heemskerck, forgetting his own fears in the excitement of this hand-to-hand combat, follows in their wake.

Nicolaes, too, at Stoutenburg's call, is ready to follow him.

He turns to run when a grasp of iron falls upon his arm, holding it like a vice. He could have screamed with the pain, and the sword which he held falls out of his nerveless fingers. The next moment he feels himself dragged by that same iron grasp through the open door into the hut, and hears the door slammed to and locked behind him.

"Your pardon if I have been rough, mynheer," said Diogenes' pleasant voice, "but there was no time to argue outside that door and you seemed in such a mighty hurry to run straight into that yawning abyss of disgrace."

The grasp upon his arm had not relaxed, but it no longer hurt. Yet it was so firm and so absolute that Nicolaes felt powerless to wrench himself away.

"Let me go!" he cried hoarsely.

"Not just yet, mynheer," rejoined Diogenes coolly, "not while this hot temper is upon you. Let the Lord of Stoutenburg and our friend Jan fight to their heart's content with a fat philosopher who is well able to hold his own against them, while the other who is lean and a moderately good coachman sees that a pair of horses do not rear and bolt during the fray."

"Let me go, man, I tell you," cried Beresteyn who was making frantic efforts to free himself from that slender white grapnel which held his arm as in a vice.

"One moment longer, mynheer, and you shall go. The horses of which I speak are harnessed to a sledge wherein is the jongejuffrouw your sister."

"Yes! verdommte Keer! let me get to her or..."

"As soon as the fat philosopher has disposed of the Lord of Stoutenburg and of Jan he too will jump into the sledge and a minute later will be speeding on its way to Haarlem."

"And there will be three of us left here to hang you to that same gallows on which you should have dangled an hour ago," exclaimed Beresteyn savagely.

"Possibly," retorted Diogenes dryly, "but even so your sister will be on the way to Haarlem rather than to exile — whither the Lord of Stoutenburg and you — her brother — would drag her."

"And what is it to you, you abominable plepshurk, whither I go with my sister and my friend?"

"Only this, mynheer, that yesterday in this very room I proclaimed myself a forger, a liar and a thief before the jongejuffrouw in order that her love for her only brother should not receive a mortal wound. At that moment I did greatly care for that lie," he added with his wonted flippancy, "but time hath lent it enchantment: It is on the whole one of the finest lies I ever told in my life; moreover it carried conviction; the jongejuffrouw was deceived. Now I will not see that pet lie of mine made fruitless by the abominable action which you have in contemplation."

Beresteyn made no immediate reply. Easily swayed as he always was by a character stronger than his own, the words spoken by the man whom he had always affected to despise, could not fail to move him. He knew that that same abominable action of which he was being accused had indeed been contemplated not only by Stoutenburg but also by himself. It had only required one word from Stoutenburg — "Gilda of course comes with us" — one hint that her presence in Holland would be a perpetual menace to his personal safety, and he had been not only willing but fully prepared to put this final outrage upon the woman whom he should have protected with his life.

Therefore now he dared not meet the eager, questioning glance of this adventurer, in whose merry eyes the look of irrepressible laughter was momentary veiled by one of anxiety. He looked around him restlessly, shiftily; his wandering glance fell on the narrow inner door which stood open, and he caught a glimpse of a smaller room beyond, with a window at the further end of it. That window had been broken in from without, the narrow frame torn out of its socket and the mullion wrenched out of its groove.

Through the wide breach thus made in the lath and mud walls of the hut, Beresteyn suddenly saw the horses and the sledge out there in the open. The fight of awhile ago by the front door had now been transferred to this spot. A short fat man with his back to the rear of the sledge was holding the Lord Stoutenburg and Heemskerck at a couple of arm's lengths with the point of his sword. Jan was apparently not yet on the scene.

Another man, lean and tall, was on the box of the sledge, trying with all his might to hold a pair of horses in, who frightened by the clang of steel against steel, by the movement and the shouting, were threatening to plunge and rear at any moment.

Diogenes laughed aloud.

"My friend Pythagoras seems somewhat hard pressed," he said, "and those horses might complicate the situation at any moment. I must to them now, mynheer. Tell me then quickly which you mean to do; behave like an honest man or like a cur?"

"What right have you to dictate to me?" said Beresteyn sullenly. "I have no account to give to you of mine own actions."

"None I admit," rejoined the philosopher placidly, "but let me put the situation a little more clearly before you. On the one hand you must own that I could at this moment with very little trouble and hardly any scruples render you physically helpless first, then lock you up in this room, and go and join my friends outside. On the other hand you could leave this room sound in body and at heart an honest man, jump into the sledge beside your sister and convey her yourself safely back to the home from whence you — her own brother — should never have allowed her to be taken."

"I cannot do it," retorted Beresteyn moodily, "I could not meet my father face to face after what has happened."

"Think you Gilda would tell him that his only son has played the part of traitor?"

"She loathes and despises me."

"She has a horror of that treacherous plot. But the plot has come to naught; and she will consider that you are punished enough for it already, and feel happy that you are free from Stoutenburg's clutches."

"I cannot leave Stoutenburg now, and she must go with him. She hates me for the outrage which was committed against her."

"She does not know your share in it," said Diogenes quickly, "have I not told you that I lied admirably? She believes me to be the only culprit and to have forged your name to hide mine own infamy."

A hot flush rose to Beresteyn's pale cheeks.

"I cannot bear to profit by your generosity," he said dully.

"Pshaw man!" rejoined the other not without a tone of bitterness, "what matters what my reputation is in her sight? She despises me so utterly already that a few sins more or less cannot lower me further in her sight."

"No! no! I cannot do it," persisted Beresteyn. "Go to your friends, man," he added fiercely, "the fat one is getting sorely pressed, the other cannot cope with the horses much longer! go to their aid! and kill me if you are so minded. Indeed I no longer care, and in any case I could not survive all this shame."

"Die by all means when and where you list," said Diogenes placidly, "but 'tis your place first of all to take your sister now under your own protection, to keep her in the knowledge that whatever sins you may have committed you were at least true and loyal to herself. By Heaven man, hath she not suffered enough already in her person, in her pride, above all in her affections? Your loyalty to her at this moment would be ample compensation for all that she hath suffered. Be an honest man and take her to her home."

"How can I? I have no home: and she is a menace to us all...."

"I am a menace to you, you weak-hearted craven," cried Diogenes whose moustache bristled with fury now, "for by Heaven I swear that you shall not leave this place with a whole skin save to do an honest man's act of reparation."

And as if to give greater emphasis to his words Diogenes gave the other man's arm a vigorous wrench which caused Beresteyn to groan and curse with pain.

"I may have to hurt you worse than this presently," said the philosopher imperturbably as he dragged Beresteyn — who by now felt dizzy and helpless — to the nearest chair and deposited him there. "Were you not her brother, I believe I should crack your obstinate skull; as it is ... I will leave you here to take counsel with reason and honesty until I have finally disposed of my Lord of Stoutenburg."

He ran quickly to the outer door, pushed the bolts home, gave the key an extra turn and then pulled it out of the lock and threw it out of the window. Beresteyn — somewhat stunned with emotion, a little faint with that vigorous wrench on his arm, and prostrate with the fatigue and excitement of the past two days — made no attempt to stop him. No doubt he realized that any such attempt would indeed be useless: there was so much vitality, so much strength in the man that his tall stature appeared to Nicolaes now of giant-like proportions, and his powers to savour of the supernatural.

He watched him with dull, tired eyes, as he finally went out of the room through the inner door; no doubt that this too he locked behind him. Beresteyn did not know; he half lay, half sat in the chair like a log, the sound of the fight outside, of the shouts that greeted Diogenes' arrival, of the latter's merry laughter that went echoing through the mist, only reached his dull perceptions like a far-off dream.

But in his mind he saw it all: the walls of the hut were transparent before his mental vision, he saw now the unequal fight; a perfect swordsman against Stoutenburg's unreasoning attacks and Heemskerk's want of skill. Jan too will have joined them by now, but he was loutish and clumsy. The issue would have been a foregone conclusion even without the aid of the fat knave who had held his own already for nearly ten minutes. Yet, though his thoughts were not by any means all clear upon the subject, Beresteyn made no attempt to go to his own friend's assistance. Vaguely some pleasing visions began to float through space around him. It seemed as if the magic personality of a nameless adventurer still filled this narrow room with its vitality, with its joy and with its laughter. The optimistic breeziness which emanated from the man himself had lingered here after he was gone. His cheerful words still hung and reverberated upon the cold, wintry air.

"After all, why not?" mused Beresteyn.

Gilda knew of his share in the conspiracy against the Stadtholder of course. But that conspiracy had now aborted; Gilda would never betray her brother's share in it either to the Stadtholder's vengeance or to her father's wrath.

And she had been made to believe that he was not the mover in the outrage against her person.

"Then — why not?"

She had been forcibly dragged out of this hut: she knew that Stoutenburg meant to take her away with him into exile; even if she had been only partially conscious since she was taken to the sledge, she would know that a desperate fight had been going on around her. Then if he, Nicolaes, now appeared upon the scene — if he took charge of her and of the sledge, and with the help of one or other of those knaves outside sped away with her north to Haarlem, would she not be confirmed in her belief in his loyalty, would he not play a heroic rôle, make her happy and himself free?

"Then — why not?"

All the papers relating to the aborted conspiracy which might have compromised him he had upon his person even now. He and Heemskerk had themselves collected them in the weighing-room of the molens after Lucas of Sparendam had brought his terrible news.

"Then — why not?"

He rose briskly from his chair. The outer door of the hut was locked — he crossed to the inner door. That was just on the latch and he threw it open. Before him now was the broken window frame through which peeped the dull grey light of this misty winter's morning. Out in the open through the filmy veil of the fog he could see the final phases of an unequal fight. Stoutenburg and Heemskerk were both disarmed and Jan had just appeared upon the scene. More far-seeing than were the Lord of Stoutenburg and Mynheer Heemskerk, he had very quickly realized that sword in hand no one was a match for this foreigner and his invincible blade. When the fighting was transferred from the doorway of the hut to the open road-way in the rear, he had at first followed in the wake of his chief, then he had doubled back, swiftly running to the molens, and in the basement from out the scattered litter of arms hastily thrown down, he had quickly picked up a couple of pistols, found some ammunition, quietly loaded the weapons and with them in his hand started to run back to the hut.

All this had taken some few minutes while Pythagoras had borne the brunt of a vigorous attack from the Lord of Stoutenburg and Mynheer Heemskerk, whilst Diogenes parleyed with Beresteyn inside the hut.

Beresteyn saw the whole picture before him. He had thrown open the door, and looked through the broken window at the precise moment when the Lord of Stoutenburg's sword flew out of his hand. Then it was that Jan came running along, shouting to my lord. Stoutenburg turned quickly, saw his faithful lieutenant and caught sight of the pistols which he held. The next second he had snatched one out of Jan's hand, and the pale ray of a wintry sun penetrating through the mist found its reflection in a couple of steel barrels pointed straight at a laughing philosopher.

Beresteyn from within felt indeed as if his heart stood still for that one brief, palpitating second. Was Fate after all taking the decision for the future — Gilda's and his — out of his hands into her own? Would a bullet end that vigorous life and still that merry laugh and that biting tongue for ever, and leave Nicolaes to be swayed once more by the dark schemes and arbitrary will of his friend Stoutenburg?

Fate was ready, calmly spinning the threads of human destinies. But there are some men in the world who have the power and the skill to take their destinies in their own hands. The philosopher and weaver of dreams, the merry Laughing Cavalier was one of these.

What the Lord of Stoutenburg had seen that he perceived equally quickly; he, too, had caught sight of Jan, and of the two steel barrels simultaneously levelled at him; he too, realized that the most skilled swordsman is but a sorry match against a pair of bullets.

But while Beresteyn held his breath and Stoutenburg tried to steady the trembling of his hand, he raised Bucephalus above his head and with a wild shout pointed toward the southern horizon far away.

"The Stadtholder's guard!" he cried lustily, "they are on us! *Sauve qui peut!*"

Three cries of mad terror rent the air, there was a double detonation, a great deal of smoke. The horses in the sledge reared and plunged wildly, forcing those who were nearest to the vehicle to beat a precipitate retreat.

"At the horses' heads, you wooden-headed bladder," shouted Diogenes lustily. Pythagoras did his best to obey, while Socrates was nearly dragged off the box by the frightened horses. Heemskerk had already incontinently taken to his heels. Jan had dropped his weapon which Diogenes at once picked up. The Lord of Stoutenburg was preparing to fire again.

"*Sauve qui peut*, my lord!" cried Diogenes, "before I change my mind and put a hole through your heel, which will prevent your running away fast enough to escape the Stadtholder's wrath."

There was another detonation. The horses reared and plunged again. When Beresteyn once more obtained a clear view of the picture, he saw the Lord of Stoutenburg stretched out on his back upon the ground in a position that was anything but dignified and certainly very perilous, for Diogenes towering above him was holding him by both feet. The tall soldierly figure of the foreigner stood out clearly silhouetted against the grey, misty light: his head with its wealth of unruly brown curls was thrown back with a gesture that almost suggested boyish delight in some impish mischief, whilst his infectious laugh echoed and re-echoed against the walls of the molens and of the hut.

Jan was on his hands and knees crawling toward those two men — the conqueror and the conquered — with no doubt a vague idea that he might even now render assistance to my lord.

"Here, Pythagoras, old fat head," cried Diogenes gaily, "see that our friend here does not interfere with me: and that he hath not a concealed poniard somewhere about his person, then collect all pistols and swords that are lying about, well out of harm's way. In the meanwhile what am I to do with his Magnificence? he is kicking like a vicious colt and that shoulder of mine is beginning to sting like fury."

"Kill me, man, kill me!" cried Stoutenburg savagely, "curse you, why don't you end this farce?"

"Because, my lord," said Diogenes more seriously than was his wont, "the purest and most exquisite woman on God's earth did once deign to bestow the priceless jewel of her love upon you. Did she know of your present plight, she would even now be pleading for you: therefore," he added more flippantly, "I am going to give myself the satisfaction of making you a present of the last miserable shred of existence which you will drag on from this hour forth in wretchedness and exile to the end of your days. Take your life and freedom, my lord," he continued in response to the invectives which Stoutenburg muttered savagely under his breath, "take it at the hands of the miserable plepshurk whom you so despise. It is better methinks to do this rather than fall into the hands of the Stadtholder, whose mercy for a fallen enemy would be equal to your own."

Then he shouted to Pythagoras.

"Here, old compeer! search his Magnificence for concealed weapons, and then make ready to go. We have wasted too much time already."

Despite Stoutenburg's struggles and curses Pythagoras obeyed his brother philosopher to the letter. His lordship and Jan were both effectually disarmed now. Then only did Diogenes allow Stoutenburg to struggle to his feet. He had his sword in his left hand and Pythagoras stood beside him. Jan found his master's hat and cloak and helped him on with them, and then he said quietly:

"The minutes are precious, my lord, 'tis a brief run to Ryswyk: my Lord of Heemskerk has gone and Mynheer Beresteyn has disappeared. Here we can do nothing more."

"Nothing, my good Jan," said Diogenes more seriously, "you are a brave soldier and a faithful servant. Take his Magnificence away to safety. You have well deserved your own."

Stoutenburg gave a last cry of rage and of despair. For a moment it seemed as if his blind fury would still conquer reason and prudence and that he meant once more to make an attack upon his victorious enemy, but something in the latter's look of almost insolent triumph recalled him to the peril of his own situation: he passed his hand once or twice over his brow, like a man who is dazed and only just returning to consciousness, then he called loudly to Jan to follow him, and walked rapidly away northwards through the fog.

Beresteyn went up to the broken window and watched him till he was out of sight, then he looked on Diogenes. That philosopher also watched the retreating figure of the Lord of Stoutenburg until the fog swallowed it up, then he turned to his friend.

"Pythagoras, old compeer," he said with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "what would you take to be walking at this moment in that man's shoes?"

"I wouldn't do it, friend," rejoined Pythagoras placidly, "for the possession of a running river of home-brewed ale. And I am mightily dry at the present moment."

"Jump up then on the box beside Socrates, you old wine-tub, and get to Leyden as quickly as these horses will take you. A halt at Voorburg will refresh you all."

"But you?" queried Socrates from his post of vantage.

"I shall make my way to Ryswyk first and get a horse there. I shall follow you at a distance, and probably overtake you before you get to Leyden. But you will not see me after this ... unless there is trouble, which is not likely."

"But the jongeuffrouw?" persisted Socrates.

"Hush! I shall never really lose sight of you and the sledge. But you must serve her as best you can. Someone will be with her who will know how to take care of her."

"Who?"

"Her own brother of course, Mynheer Beresteyn. Over the sill, mynheer!" he now shouted, calling to Nicolaes who still stood undecided, shamed, hesitating in the broken framework of the window, "over the sill, 'tis only three feet from the ground, and horses and men are quite ready for you."

He gave a lusty cheer of satisfaction as Beresteyn, throwing all final cowardly hesitations to the wind, suddenly made up his mind to take the one wise and prudent course. He swung himself through the window, and in a few moments was standing by Diogenes' side.

"Let me at least tell you, sir ..." he began earnestly.

"Hush! — tell me nothing now ..." broke in the other man quickly, "the jongeuffrouw might hear."

"But I must thank you — —"

"If you say another word," said Diogenes, sinking his voice to a whisper, "I'll order Socrates to drive on and leave you standing here."

"But...."

"Into the sledge, man, in Heaven's name. The jongeuffrouw is unconscious, her woman daft with fear. When the lady regains consciousness let her brother's face be the first sight to comfort her. Into the sledge, man," he added impatiently, "or by Heaven I'll give the order to start."

And without more ado, he hustled Nicolaes into the sledge. The latter bewildered, really not clear with himself as to what he ought to do, peeped tentatively beneath the cover of the vehicle. He saw his sister lying there prone upon the wooden floor of the sledge, her head rested against a bundle of rugs hastily put together for her comfort. Maria was squatting beside her, her head and ears muffled in a cloak, her hands up to her eyes; she was moaning incoherently to herself.

Gilda's eyes were closed, and her face looked very pale: Beresteyn's heart ached at the pitiful sight. She looked so wan and so forlorn that a sharp pang of remorse for all his cruelty to her shot right through his dormant sensibilities.

There was just room for him under the low cover of the sledge; he hesitated no longer now, he felt indeed as if nothing would tear him away from Gilda's side until she was safely home again in their father's arms.

A peremptory order: "En avant," struck upon his ear, a shout from the driver to his horses, the harness rattled, the sledge creaked upon its framework and then slowly began to move: Beresteyn lifted the flap of the hood at the rear of the vehicle and looked out for the last time upon the molens and the hut, where such a tragic act in his life's drama had just been enacted.

He saw Diogenes still standing there, waving his hat in farewell: for a few moments longer his splendid figure stood out clearly against the flat grey landscape beyond, then slowly the veil of mist began to envelop him, at first only blurring the outline of his mantle or his sash, then it grew more dense and the sledge moved away more rapidly.

The next moment the Laughing Cavalier had disappeared from view.

CHAPTER XLIII

LEYDEN ONCE MORE

After that Gilda had lived as in a dream: only vaguely conscious that good horses and a smoothly gliding vehicle were conveying her back to her home. Of this fact she was sure Nicolaes was sitting quite close under the hood of the sledge and when first she became fully aware of the reality of his presence, he had raised her hand to his lips and had said in response to a mute appeal from her eyes:

“We are going home.”

After that a quiet sense of utter weariness pervaded her being, and she fell into a troubled sleep. She did not heed what went on around her, she only knew that once or twice during the day there was a halt for food and drink.

The nearness of her brother, his gentleness toward her, gave her a sense of well-being, even though her heart felt heavy with a great sorrow which made the whole future appear before her like an interminable vista of blank and grey dullness.

It was at her suggestion that arrangements were made for an all night halt at Leyden, which city they reached in the early part of the afternoon. She begged Nicolaes that they might put up at the hostelry of the “White Goat” on the further side of the town, and that from thence a messenger might be sent to her father, asking him to come and meet her there on the morrow.

Though Nicolaes was not a little astonished at this suggestion of Gilda’s — seeing that surely she must be longing to be home again and that Haarlem could easily have been reached before night — he did not wish to run counter to her will. True enough, he dreaded the meeting with his father, but he knew that it had to come, and felt that, whatever might be the future consequences of it all — he could not possibly bear alone the burden of remorse and of shame which assailed him every time he encountered Gilda’s tear-stained eyes, and saw how wearied and listless she looked.

So he called a halt at the “White Goat” and as soon as he saw his sister safely installed, with everything ordered for her comfort, and a tasteful supper prepared, he sent a messenger on horseback at once to Haarlem to his father.

Gilda had deliberately chosen to spend the night at the hostelry of the “White Goat” because she felt that in that quaint old building with its wide oak staircase — over which she had been carried five days ago, dizzy and half fainting — the blackened rafters would mayhap still echo with the sound of a merry laughter which she would never hear again.

But when the sledge finally turned in under the low gateway and drew up in the small courtyard of the inn — when with wearied feet and shaking knees she walked up those oaken stairs, it seemed to her that the vivid memories which the whole place recalled were far harder to bear than those more intangible ones which — waking and sleeping — had tortured her up to now.

The bedroom too, with the smaller one leading out of it, was the same in which she had slept. As the obsequious waiting-wench threw open the door for the noble *jongeuffrouw* to pass through she saw before her the wide open hearth with its crackling fire, the high-backed chair wherein she had sat, the very footstool which he had put to her feet.

It seemed to her at first as if she could not enter, as if his splendid figure would suddenly emerge out of the semi-darkness to confront her with his mocking eyes and his smiling face. She seemed to see him everywhere, and she had to close her eyes to chase away that all too insistent vision.

The waiting-wench did not help matters either, for she asked persistently and shyly about the handsome *mynheer* who had such an irresistible fund of laughter in him. Maria too, in her mutterings and grumblings, contrived — most unwittingly, since she adored Gilda — to inflict a series of tiny pin-pricks on an already suffering heart.

Tired in body and in mind, Gilda could not sleep that night. She was living over again every second of the past five days: the interview with that strangely winning person — a stranger still to her then — here in this room! how she had hated him at first! how she had tried to shame and wound him with her words, trying all the while to steel her heart against that irresistible gaiety and good humour which shone from him like a radiance: then that second interview in Rotterdam! did she still hate him then? and if not when was hatred first changed into the love which now so completely filled her soul?

Looking back on those days, she could not tell. All that she knew was that when he was brought before her helpless and pinioned she already loved him, and that since that moment love had grown and strengthened until her whole heart was given to that same nameless soldier of fortune whom she had first despised.

To live over again those few brief days which seemed now like an eternity was a sweet, sad pleasure which Gilda could endure, but what became intolerable in the darkness and in the silence of the night was the remembrance of the immediate past.

Clearly cut out before her mental vision were the pictures of her life this morning in the hut beside the molens: and indeed, it was a lifetime that had gone by in those few hours.

Firstly Stoutenburg’s visit in the early morning, his smooth words and careless chatter! she, poor fool! under the belief all the time that the treacherous plot had been abandoned, and that she would forthwith be conveyed back to her father. Her thoughts of pleading for the condemned man’s life: then the tramping of feet, the cries of terror, her brother’s appearance bringing the awful news of betrayal. She lived over again those moments of supreme horror when she realized how Stoutenburg had deceived her, and that Nicolaes himself was but a traitor and a miserable liar.

She knew then that it was the adventurer, the penniless soldier of fortune whom she had tried to hate and to despise, who had quietly gone to warn the Stadtholder, and that his action had been the direct working of God’s will in a brave and loyal soul: she knew also by a mysterious intuition which no good woman has ever been able to resist, that the man who had stood before her — self-convicted and self-confessed — had accepted that humiliation to save her the pain of fearing and despising her own brother.

The visions now became more dim and blurred. She remembered Stoutenburg’s fury, his hideous threats of vengeance on the man who had thrown himself across his treacherous path. She remembered pleading to that monster, weeping, clinging to his arm in a passionate appeal. She remembered the soul agony which she felt when she realized that that appeal had been in vain.

Then she had stood for a moment silent and alone in the hut. Stoutenburg had left her in order to accomplish that hideous act of revenge.

After that she remembered nothing clearly. She could only have been half-conscious and all round her there was a confusion of sounds, of shouts and clash of arms: she thought that she was being lifted out of the chair into which she had fallen in a partial swoon, that she heard Maria's cries of terror, and that she felt the cold damp morning air striking upon her face.

Presently she knew that Nicolaes was beside her, and that she was being taken home. All else was a blank or a dream.

Now she was tossing restlessly upon the lavender-scented bed in this hostelry so full of memories. Her temples were throbbing, her eyes felt like pieces of glowing charcoal in her head. The blackness around her weighed upon her soul until she felt that she could not breathe.

Outside the silence of the night was being gravely disturbed: there was the sound of horses' hoofs upon the cobble-stones of the yard, the creaking of a vehicle brought to a standstill, the usual shouts for grooms and ostlers. A late arrival had filled the tranquil inn with its bustle and its noise.

Then once again all was still, and Gilda turned her aching head upon the pillow. Though the room was not hot, and the atmosphere outside heavy with frost, she felt positively stifled.

After a while this feeling of oppression became intolerable, she rose, and in the darkness she groped for her fur-lined cloak which she wrapped closely around her. Then she found her way across to the window and drew aside the curtain. No light penetrated through the latticed panes: the waning moon which four nights ago had been at times so marvellously brilliant, had not yet risen above the horizon line. As Gilda's fingers fumbled for the window-latch she heard a distant church clock strike the midnight hour.

She threw open the casement. The sill was low and she leaned out peering up and down the narrow street. It was entirely deserted and pitch dark save where on the wall opposite the light from a window immediately below her threw its feeble reflection. Vaguely she wondered who was astir in the small hostelry. No doubt it was the tap-room which was there below her, still lighted up, and apparently with its small casement also thrown open, like the one out of which she was leaning.

For now, when the reverberating echo of the chiming clock had entirely died away, she was conscious of a vague murmur of voices coming up from below, confused at first and undistinguishable, but presently she heard a click as if the casement had been pushed further open or mayhap a curtain pulled aside, for after that the sound of the voices became more distinct and clear.

With beating heart and straining ears Gilda leaned as far out of the window as she could, listening intently: she had recognized her father's voice, and he was speaking so strangely that even as she listened she felt all the blood tingling in her veins.

"My son, sir," he was saying, "had, I am glad to say, sufficient pride and manhood in him not to bear the full weight of your generosity any longer. He sent a special messenger on horseback out to me this afternoon. As soon as I knew that my daughter was here I came as fast as a sleigh and the three best horses in my stables could bring me. I had no thought, of course, of seeing you here."

"I had no thought that you should see me, sir," said a voice which by its vibrating tones had the power of sending the hot blood rushing to the listener's neck and cheeks. "Had I not entered the yard just as your sledge turned in under the gateway, you had not been offended by mine unworthy presence."

"I would in that case have searched the length and breadth of this land to find you, sir," rejoined Cornelius Beresteyn earnestly, "for half an hour later my son had told me the whole circumstances of his association with you."

"An association of which Mynheer Nicolaes will never be over-proud, I'll warrant," came in slightly less flippant accents than usual from the foreigner. "Do I not stand self-confessed as a liar, a forger and abductor of helpless women? A fine record forsooth: and ere he ordered me to be hanged my Lord of Stoutenburg did loudly proclaim me as such before his friends and before his followers."

"His friends, sir, are the sons of my friends. I will loudly proclaim you what you truly are: a brave man, a loyal soldier, a noble gentleman! Nicolaes has told me every phase of his association with you, from his shameful proposal to you in regard to his own sister, down to this moment when you still desired that Gilda and I should remain in ignorance of his guilt."

"What is the good, mynheer, of raking up all this past?" said the philosopher lightly, "I would that Mynheer Nicolaes had known how to hold his tongue."

"Thank God that he did not," retorted Cornelius Beresteyn hotly, "had he done so I stood in peril of failing — for the first time in my life — in an important business obligation."

"Not towards me, mynheer, at any rate."

"Yes, sir, towards you," affirmed Beresteyn decisively. "I promised you five hundred thousand guilders if you brought my daughter safely back to me. I know from mine own son, sir, that I owe her safety to no one but to you."

"Ours was an ignoble bargain, mynheer," said Diogenes with his wonted gaiety, and though she could not see him, Gilda could picture his face now alive with merriment and suppressed laughter. "The humour of the situation appealed to me — it proved irresistible — but the bargain in no way binds you seeing that it was I who had been impious enough to lay hands upon your daughter."

"At my son's suggestion I know," rejoined Beresteyn quietly, "and from your subsequent acts, sir, I must infer that you only did it because you felt that she was safer under your charge than at the mercy of her own brother and his friends.... Nay! do not protest," he added earnestly, "Nicolaes, as you see, is of the same opinion."

"May Heaven reward you, sir, for that kindly thought of me," said Diogenes more seriously, "it will cheer me in the future, when I and all my doings will have faded from your ken."

"You are not leaving Holland, sir?"

"Not just now, mynheer, while there is so much fighting to be done. The Stadtholder hath need of soldiers...."

"And he will, sir, find none better than you throughout the world. And with a goodly fortune to help you...."

"Speak not of that, mynheer," he said firmly, "I could not take your money. If I did I should never know a happy hour again."

"Oh!"

"I am quite serious, sir, though indeed you might not think that I can ever be serious. For six days now I have had a paymaster: Mynheer Nicolaes' money has burned a hole in my good humour, it has scorched my hands, wounded my shoulder and lacerated my hip, it has brought on me all the unpleasant sensations which I have so carefully avoided hitherto, remorse, humiliation, and one or two other sensations which will never leave me until my death. It changed temporarily the shiftless, penniless soldier of fortune into a responsible human being, with obligations and duties. I had to order horses, bespeak lodgings, keep accounts. Ye gods, it made a slave

of me! Keep your money, sir, it is more fit for you to handle than for me. Let me go back to my shiftlessness, my penury, my freedom, eat my fill to-day, starve to-morrow, and one day look up at the stars from the lowly earth, with a kindly bullet in my chest that does not mean to blunder. And if in the days to come your thoughts ever do revert to me, I pray you think of me as happy or nearly so, owning no master save my whim, bending my back to none, keeping my hat on my head when I choose, and ending my days in a ditch or in a palace, the carver of mine own destiny, the sole arbiter of my will. And now I pray you seek that rest of which you must be sorely in need. I start at daybreak to-morrow: mayhap we shall never meet again, save in Heaven, if indeed, there be room there for such a thriftless adventurer as I."

"But whither do you mean to go, sir?"

"To the mountains of the moon, sir," rejoined the philosopher lightly, "or along the milky way to the land of the Might-Have-Been."

"Before we part, sir, may I shake you by the hand?"

There was silence down below after that. Gilda listened in vain, no further words reached her ears just then. She tiptoed as quietly as she could across the room, finding her way with difficulty in the dark. At last her fumbling fingers encountered the latch of the door of the inner room where Maria lay snoring lustily.

It took Gilda some little time to wake the old woman, but at last she succeeded, and then ordered her, very peremptorily, to strike a light.

"Are you ill, mejuffrouw?" queried Maria anxiously even though she was but half awake.

"No," replied Gilda curtly, "but I want my dress — quick now," she added, for Maria showed signs of desiring to protest.

The jongejuffrouw was in one of those former imperious moods of hers when she exacted implicit obedience from her servants. Alas! the last few days had seen that mood submerged into an ocean of sorrow and humiliation, and Maria — though angered at having been wakened out of a first sleep — was very glad to see her darling looking so alert and so brisk.

Indeed — the light being very dim — Maria could not see the brilliant glow that lit up the jongejuffrouw's cheeks as with somewhat febrile gestures she put on her dress and smoothed her hair.

"Now put on your dress too, Maria," she said when she was ready, "and tell my father, who is either in the tap-room down below or hath already retired to his room, that I desire to speak with him."

And Maria, bewildered and flustered, had no option but to obey.

CHAPTER XLIV

BLAKE OF BLAKENEY

While Maria completed a hasty toilet, Gilda's instinct had drawn her back once more to the open window. The light from the room below was still reflected on the opposite wall, and from the tap-room the buzz of voices had not altogether ceased.

Cornelius Beresteyn was speaking now:

"Indeed," he said, "it will be the one consolation left to me, since you do reject my friendship, sir."

"Not your friendship, sir — only your money," interposed Diogenes.

"Well! you do speak of lifelong parting. But your two friends have indeed deserved well of me. Without their help no doubt you, sir, first and then my dearly loved daughter would have fallen victims to that infamous Stoutenburg. Will a present of twenty thousand guilders each gratify them, do you think?"

A ringing laugh roused the echoes of the sleeping hostelry.

"Twenty thousand guilders! ye gods!" exclaimed Diogenes merrily. "Pythagoras, dost hear, old bladder-face? Socrates, my robin, dost realize it? Twenty thousand guilders each in your pockets, old compeers. Lord! how drunk you will both be to-morrow."

Out of the confused hubbub that ensued Gilda could disentangle nothing definite; there was a good deal of shouting and clapping of pewter mugs against a table, and through it all that irresponsible, infectious laughter which — strangely enough — had to Gilda's ears at this moment a curious tone, almost of bitterness, as if its merriment was only forced.

Then when the outburst of gaiety had somewhat subsided she once more heard her father's voice. Maria was dressed by this time, and now at a word from Gilda was ready to go downstairs and to deliver the jongejuffrouw's message to her father.

"You spoke so lightly just now, sir, of dying in a ditch or palace," Cornelius Beresteyn was saying, "but you did tell me that day in Haarlem that you had kith and kindred in England. Where is that father of whom you spoke, and your mother who is a saint? Your irresponsible vagabondage will leave her in perpetual loneliness."

"My mother is dead, sir," said Diogenes quietly, "my father broke her heart."

"Even then he hath a right to know that his son is a brave and loyal gentleman."

"He will only know that when his son is dead."

"That was a cruel dictum, sir."

"Not so cruel as that which left my mother to starve in the streets of Haarlem."

"Aye! ten thousand times more cruel, since your dear mother, sir, had not to bear the awful burden of lifelong remorse."

"Bah!" rejoined the philosopher with a careless shrug of the shoulders, "a man seldom feels remorse for wrongs committed against a woman."

"But he doth for those committed against his flesh and blood — his son — —"

"I have no means of finding out, sir, if my father hath or hath not remorse for his wilful desertion of wife and child — England is a far-off country — I would not care to undertake so unprofitable a pilgrimage."

"Then why not let me do so, sir?" queried Cornelius Beresteyn calmly.

"You?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Why should you trouble, mynheer, to seek out the father of such a vagabond as I?"

"Because I would like to give a man — an old man your father must be now — the happiness of calling you his son. You say he lives in England. I often go to England on business. Will you not at least tell me your father's name?"

"I have no cause to conceal it, mynheer," rejoined Diogenes carelessly. "In England they call him Blake of Blakeney; his home is in Sussex and I believe that it is a stately home."

"But I know the Squire of Blakeney well," said Cornelius Beresteyn eagerly, "my bankers at Amsterdam also do business for him. I know that just now he is in Antwerp on a mission from King James of England to the Archduchess. He hath oft told Mynheer Beuselaar, our mutual banker, that he was moving heaven and earth to find the son whom he had lost."

"Heaven and earth take a good deal of moving," quoth Diogenes lightly, "once a wife and son have been forsaken and left to starve in a foreign land. Mine English father wedded my mother in the church of St. Pieter at Haarlem. My friend Frans Hals — God bless him — knew my mother and cared for me after she died. He has all the papers in his charge relating to the marriage. It has long ago been arranged between us that if I die with ordinary worthiness, he will seek out my father in England and tell him that mayhap — after all — even though I have been a vagabond all my life — I have never done anything that should cause him to blush for his son."

Apparently at this juncture, Maria must have knocked at the door of the tapperij, for Gilda, whose heart was beating more furiously than ever, heard presently the well-known firm footsteps of her father as he rapidly ascended the stairs.

Two minutes later Gilda lay against her father's heart, and her hand resting in his she told him from beginning to end everything that she had suffered from the moment when after watch-night service in the Grootte Kerk she first became aware of the murmur of voices, to that when she first realized that the man whom she should have hated, the knave whom she should have despised, filled her heart and soul to the exclusion of all other happiness in the world, and that he was about to pass out of her life for ever.

It took a long time to tell — for she had suffered more, felt more, lived more in the past five days than would fill an ordinary life — nor did she disguise anything from her father, not even the conversation which she had had at Rotterdam in the dead of night with the man who had remained nameless until now, and in consequence of which he had gone at once to warn the Stadtholder and had thus averted the hideous conspiracy which would have darkened for ever the destinies of many Dutch homes.

Of Nicolaes she did not speak; she knew that he had confessed his guilt to his father, who would know how to forgive in the fullness of time.

When she had finished speaking her father said somewhat roughly:

“But for that vervloekte adventurer down there, you would never have suffered, Gilda, as you did. Nicolaes....”

“Nicolaes, father dear,” she broke in quietly, “is very dear to us both. I think that his momentary weakness will endear him to us even more. But he was a tool in the hands of that unscrupulous Stoutenburg — and but for that nameless and penniless soldier whose hand you were proud to grasp just now, I would not be here in your arms at this moment.”

“Ah!” said Cornelius Beresteyn dryly, “is this the way that the wind blows, my girl? Did you not know then that the rascal — the day after he dared to lay hands upon you — was back again in Haarlem bargaining with me to restore you to my arms in exchange for a fortune?”

“And two days later, father dear,” she retorted, “he endured insults, injuries, cruelties from Stoutenburg, rather than betray Nicolaes’ guilt before me.”

“Hm!” murmured Cornelius, and there was a humorous twinkle in his eyes as he looked down upon his daughter’s bowed head.

“And but for that same rascal, father,” she continued softly, “you would at this moment be mourning a dead daughter and Holland a hideous act of treachery.”

“Hush, my dear!” cried the old man impulsively, as he put his kind protecting arms round the child whom he loved so dearly.

“I would never have followed the Lord of Stoutenburg while I lived,” she said simply.

“Please God,” he said earnestly, “I would sooner have seen you in the crypt beside your mother.”

“Then, father, hath not the rascal you speak of deserved well of us? Can we not guess that even originally he took me away from Haarlem, only because he knew that if he refused the bargain, proposed to him by mine own brother, Stoutenburg would have found some other means of ensuring my silence.”

“You are a good advocate, my girl,” rejoined Cornelius with a sly wink which brought the colour rushing up to Gilda’s cheeks. “I think, by your leave, I’ll go and shake that vervloekte Keerl once more by the hand.... And ... shall I tell him that you bear him no ill-will?” he added roguishly.

“Yes, father dear, tell him that,” she said gently.

“Then will you go to bed, dear?” he asked, “you are overwrought and tired.”

“I will sit by the window quietly for a quarter of an hour,” she said, “after that I promise you that I will go peaceably to bed.”

He kissed her tenderly, for she was very dear to him, but being a man of vast understanding and profound knowledge of men and things, the humorous twinkle did not altogether fade from his eyes as he finally bade his daughter “Good night,” and then quietly went out of the room.

CHAPTER XLV

THE END

Diogenes sat beside the window in the tapperij listening with half an ear to the sounds in and about the hostelry which were dying out one by one. At first there had been a footfall in the room overhead which had seemed to him the sweetest music that man could hear. It had paced somewhat restlessly up and down and to the Laughing Cavalier, the gay and irresponsible soldier of fortune, it had seemed as if every creaking of a loose board beneath the featherweight of that footfall found its echo in his heart.

But anon Mynheer Cornelius Beresteyn was called away and then all was still in the room upstairs, and Diogenes burying his head in his hands evoked the picture of that room as he had seen it five days ago. The proud jongeuffrouw in her high-backed chair, looking on him with blue eyes which she vainly tried to render hard through their exquisite expression of appealing, childlike gentleness: and he groaned aloud with the misery of the inevitable which with stern finger bade him go and leave behind him all the illusions, all the dreams which he had dared to weave.

Had she not told him that she despised him, that his existence was as naught to her, that she looked on him as a menial and a knave, somewhat below the faithful henchmen who were in her father's service? Ye gods! he had endured much in his life of privations, of physical and mental pain, but was there aught on earth or in the outermost pits of hell to be compared with the agony of this ending to a dream.

The serving-wench came in just then. She scarcely dared approach the mynheer with the merry voice and the laughter-filled eyes who now looked so inexpressibly sad.

Yet she had a message for him. Mynheer Cornelius Beresteyn, she said, desired to speak with him once more. The wench had murmured the words shyly, for her heart was aching for the handsome soldier and the tears were very near her eyes. But hearing the message he had jumped up with alacrity and was immediately ready to follow her.

Mynheer Beresteyn had a room on the upper floor, she explained, as she led the way upstairs. The old man was standing on the narrow landing and as soon as Diogenes appeared upon the stairs, he said simply:

"There was something I did forget to say to you downstairs; may I trouble you, sir, to come into my room for a moment."

He threw open one of the doors that gave on the landing and politely stood aside that his visitor might pass through. Diogenes entered the room: he heard the door being closed behind him, and thought that Mynheer Beresteyn had followed him in.

The room was very dimly lighted by a couple of tallow candles that flickered in their sconces, and at first he could not see into the dark recesses of the room. But presently something moved, something ethereal and intangible, white and exquisite. It stirred from out the depths of the huge high-backed chair, and from out the gloom there came a little cry of surprise and of joy which was as the call of bird or angel.

He did not dare to move, he scarcely dared to breathe. He looked round for Mynheer Beresteyn who had disappeared.

Surely this could be only a dream. Nothing real on earth could be so exquisite as that subtle vision which he had of her now, sitting in the high-backed chair, leaning slightly forward toward him. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the gloom: he could see her quite distinctly now, her fair curls round her perfect head, her red lips parted, her eyes fixed upon him with a look which he dared not interpret.

All around him was the silence and the darkness of the night, and he was alone with her just as he had been in this very room five days ago and then again at Rotterdam.

"St. Bavon, you rogue!" he murmured, "where are you? How dare you leave me in the lurch like this?"

Then — how it all happened he could not himself have told you — he suddenly found himself at her feet, kneeling beside the high-backed chair; his arms were round her shoulders and he could feel the exquisite perfume of her breath upon his cheek.

"St. Bavon," he cried exultingly to himself, "go away, you rogue! there's no need for your admonitions now."

Mynheer Beresteyn tiptoed quietly into the room. The roguish smile still played around his lips. He came up close to the high-backed chair and placed his hand upon his daughter's head.

Diogenes looked up, and met the kindly eyes of the old man fixed with calm earnestness upon him.

"Mynheer," he said, and laughter which contained a world of happiness as well as of joy danced and sparkled in every line of his face, "just now I refused one half of your fortune! But 'tis your greatest treasure I claim from you now."

"Nay! you rascal," rejoined Beresteyn, as he lifted his daughter's chin gently with one finger and looked into her deep blue eyes which were brimful of happiness, "methinks that that treasure is yours already!"

"Go back, good St. Bavon," cried the Laughing Cavalier in an ecstasy of joy, "your heaven — you rogue — is not more perfect than this."

THE 1ST SIR PERCY

CHAPTER I. A NIGHT ON THE VELUWE

1

A moonless night upon the sandy waste — the sky a canopy of stars, twinkling with super-radiance through the frosty atmosphere; the gently undulating ground like a billowy sea of silence and desolation, with scarce a stain upon the smooth surface of the snow; the mantle of night enveloping every landmark upon the horizon beyond the hills in folds of deep, dark indigo, levelling every chance hillock and clump of rough shrub or grass, obliterating road and wayside ditch, which in the broad light of day would have marred the perfect evenness of the wintry pall.

It was a bitterly cold night of mid-March in that cruel winter of 1624, which lent so efficient a hand to the ghouls of war and of disease in taking toll of human lives.

Not a sound broke the hushed majesty of this forgotten corner of God's earth, save perhaps at intervals the distant, melancholy call of the curlew, or from time to time the sigh of a straying breeze, which came lingering and plaintive from across the Zuyder Zee. Then for awhile countless particles of snow, fanned by unseen breaths, would arise from their rest, whirl and dance a mad fandango in the air, gyrate and skip in a glistening whirlpool lit by mysterious rays of steel-blue light, and then sink back again, like tired butterflies, to sleep once more upon the illimitable bosom of the wild. After which Silence and Lifelessness would resume their ghostlike sway.

To right and left, and north and south, not half a dozen leagues away, humanity teemed and fought, toiled and suffered, unfurled the banner of Liberty, laid down life and wealth in the cause of Freedom, conquered and was down-trodden and conquered again; men died that their children might live, women wept and lovers sighed. But here, beneath that canopy dotted with myriads of glittering worlds, intransmutable and sempiternal, the cries of battle and quarrels of men, the wail of widows and the laughter of children appeared futile and remote.

2

But to an eye trained to the dreary monotony of winter upon the Veluwe, there were a few faint indications of the tracks, which here and there intersect the arid waste and link up the hamlets and cities which lie along its boundaries. There were lines — mere shadows upon the even sheet of snow — and tiny white hillocks that suggested a bordering of rough scrub along the edges of the roads.

That same trained eye could then proceed to trace those shadowy lines along their erratic way 'twixt Amersfoort and the Neder Rhyn, or else from Barneveld as far as Apeldoorn, or yet again 'twixt Utrecht and Ede, and thence as far as the IJssel, from the further shores of which the armies of the Archduchess, under the command of Count Henri de Berg, were even then threatening Gelderland.

It was upon this last, scarcely visible track that a horse and rider came slowly ambling along in the small hours of the morning, on this bitterly cold night in March. The rider had much ado to keep a tight hold on the reins with one hand, whilst striving to keep his mantle closely fastened round his shoulders with the other.

The horse, only half-trusting his master, suspicious and with nerves a-quiver, ready to shy and swerve at every shadow that loomed out of the darkness, or at every unexpected sound that disturbed the silence of the night, would more than once have thrown his rider but for the latter's firm hand upon the curb.

The rider's keen eyes were searching the gloom around him. From time to time a forcible ejaculation, indicative of impatience or anxiety, escaped his lips, numb with cold, and with unconsidered vehemence he would dig his spurs into his horse's flanks, with the result that a fierce and prolonged struggle 'twixt man and beast would ensue, and, until the quivering animal was brought back to comparative quietude again, much time was spent in curses and recriminations.

Anon the rider pulled up sharply at the top of the rising ground, looked round and about him, muttered a few more emphatic 'Dondersteens' and 'verdommts.'

Then he veered his mount right round and started to go back down hill again — still at foot-pace — spied a side-track on his right, turned to follow it for a while, came to a halt again, and flung his head back in a futile endeavor to study the stars, about which he knew nothing.

Then he shook his head dolefully; the time had gone by for cursing — praying would have been more useful, had he known how to set about it — for in truth he had lost his way upon this arid waste, and the only prospect before him was that of spending the night in the saddle, vainly trying by persistent movement to keep the frost out of his limbs.

For the nonce, he had no idea in which direction lay Amersfoort, which happened to be his objective. Apparently he had taken the wrong road when first he came out of Ede, and might now be tending toward the Rhyn, or have left both Barneveld and even Assel considerably behind.

The unfortunate wayfarer did not of a surety know which to rail most bitterly against: his want of accurate knowledge as to the disposal of the stars upon a moonless firmament, so that he could not have told you, gaze on them how he might, which way lay the Zuyder Zee, the IJssel, or the Rhyn; or that last mug of steaming ale of which he had partaken ere he finally turned his back on the hospitable doors of the "Crow's Nest" at Ede.

It was that very mug of the delicious spiced liquor — and even in this hour of acute misery, the poor man contrived to smack his half-frozen lips in retrospective enjoyment — which had somehow obscured his vision when first he found himself outside the city gates, confronted by the verfloekte waste, through which even a cat could not have picked its way on a night like this.

And now, here he was, hopelessly stranded, without drink or shelter, upon the most desolate portion of the Veluwe. In no direction could the lights of any habitation be seen.

"Dondersteen!" he muttered to himself finally, in despair. "But I must get somewhere in time, if I keep following my nose long enough!"

In truth, no more lonely spot could be imagined in a civilized land than that wherein the stranded traveler now found himself. Even by day the horizon seems limitless, with neither tower nor city nor homestead in sight. By night the silence is so absolute that imagination will conjure up strange and impossible sounds, such as that of the earth whistling through space, or of ceaseless rolls of drums and trappings of myriads of feet thousands of leagues away.

Strangely enough, however, once upon a time, in the far long ago and the early days of windmills, a hermit-miller — he must have been a hermit in very truth — did build one here upon the highest point of the Veluwe, close to the junction of the road which runs eastward from Amersfoort and Barneveld, with the one which tends southward from Assel, and distant from each a quarter of a league or so. Why that windmill was erected just there, far from the home of any peasant or farmer who might desire to have his corn ground, or who that hermit-miller was who dwelt in it before flocks of wild geese alone made it their trysting-place, it were impossible to say.

No trace of it remains these days, nor were there any traces of it left a year after the events which this veracious chronicle will presently unfold, for reasons which will soon appear obvious to anyone who reads. But there it stood in this year of grace 1624, on that cold night in March, when a solitary horseman lost his way upon the Veluwe, with serious consequences, not only to himself, but to no less a person than Maurice, Prince of Nassau, Stadtholder of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and mayhap to the entire future history of that sorely tried country.

On a winter's night such as this, the mill looked peculiarly weird and ghost-like looming out of the darkness against the background of a star-studded firmament, and rising, sombre and dense, from out the carpet of glabrous snow, majestic in its isolation, towering above the immensity of the waste, its domed roof decked in virgin white like the mother-bosom of the wild. Built of weather-worn timber throughout, it had a fenced-in platform supported by heavy rafters all around it, like a girdle, at a height of twenty feet and more from the ground: and the gaunt, skeleton wings were stretched out to the skies, scarred, broken, and motionless, as if in piteous appeal for protection against the disfiguring ravages of time.

There were two small windows close under the roof on the south side of the building, and a large, narrow one midway up the same side. The disposal of these windows, taken in conjunction with the door down below, was so quaint that, viewed from a certain angle, they looked for all the world like the eyes, nose, and pursed-up mouth of a gargantuan, grinning face.

If a stranger travelling through Gelderland these days had thought it fit to inquire from a native whether that particular molen upon the Veluwe was doing work or was inhabited, he would of a certainty have been told that the only possible inhabitants of the molen were gnomes and sprites, and that if any corn was ground there it could only be in order to bake bread for the devil's dinner.

The mill was disused and uninhabited, had been for many years — a quarter of a century or more probably — so any and every native of Gelderland and Utrecht would have emphatically averred. Nevertheless, on this same memorable night in March, 1624, there were evident signs of life — human life — about that solitary and archaic molen on the Veluwe. Tiny slits of light showed clearly from certain angles through the chinks of the wooden structure; there were vague sounds of life and movement in and about the place; the weather-worn boards creaked and the timber groaned under more tangible pressure than that of the winds. Nay, what's more two horses were tethered down below, under the shelter afforded by the overhanging platform. These horses were saddled; they had nosebags attached to their bridles, and blankets thrown across their withers; all of which signs denoted clearly, methinks, that for once the mill was inhabited by something more material than ghosts.

More ponderous, too, than ghoulish footsteps were the sounds of slow pacing up and down the floor of the millhouse, and of two voices, now raised to loud argument, now sunk to a mere cautious whisper.

Two men were, in effect, inside the millhouse at this hour. One of them — tall, lean, dark in well-worn, almost ragged, black doublet and cloak, his feet and legs encased in huge boots of untanned leather which reached midway up his long thighs, his black bonnet pushed back from his tall, narrow forehead and grizzled hair — was sitting upon the steps of the steep, ladder-like stairs which led to the floor above; the other — shorter, substantially, even richly clad, and wearing a plumed hat and fur-lined cloak, was the one who paced up and down the dust-covered floor. He was younger than his friend, had fair, curly hair, and a silken, fair moustache, which hid the somewhat weak lines of his mouth.

An old, battered lanthorn, hanging to a nail in the wall, threw a weird, flickering light upon the scene, vaguely illumined the gaunt figure of the man upon the steps, his large hooked nose and ill-shaven chin, and long thin hands that looked like the talons of some bird of prey.

"You cannot stay on here forever, my good Stoutenburg," the younger of the two men said, with some impatience. "Sooner or later you will be discovered, and—"

He paused, and the other gave a grim laugh.

"And there is a price of two thousand guilders upon my head, you mean, my dear Heemskerk?" he said dryly.

"Well, I did mean that," rejoined Heemskerk, with a shrug of the shoulders. "The people round about here are very poor. They might hold your father's memory in veneration, but there is not one who would not sell you to the Stadtholder if he found you out."

Again Stoutenburg laughed. He seemed addicted to the habit of this mirthless, almost impish laugh.

"I was not under the impression, believe me, my friend," he said, "that Christian charity or loyalty to my father's memory would actuate a worthy Dutch peasant into respecting my sanctuary. But I am not satisfied with what I have learned. I must know more. I have promised De Berg," he concluded firmly.

"And De Berg counts on you," Heemskerk rejoined. "But," he added, with a shrug of the shoulders, "you know what he is. One of those men who, so long as they gain their ambitious ends, count every life cheap but their own."

"Well," answered Stoutenburg, "'tis not I, in truth, who would place a high price on mine."

"Easy, easy, my good man," quoth the other, with a smile. "Hath it, perchance, not occurred to you that your obstinacy in leading this owl-like life here is putting a severe strain on the devotion of your friends?"

"I make no appeal to the devotion of my friends," answered Stoutenburg curtly. "They had best leave me alone."

"We cannot leave you to suffer cold and hunger, mayhap to perish of want in this God-forsaken eyrie."

"I'm not starving," was Stoutenburg's ungracious answer to the young man's kindly solicitude; "and have plenty of inner fire to keep me warm."

He paused, and a dark scowl contracted his gaunt features, gave him an expression that in the dim and flickering light appeared almost diabolical.

"I know," said Heemskerk, with a comprehending nod. "Still those thoughts of revenge?"

"Always!" replied the other, with sombre calm.

"Twice you have failed."

"The third time I shall succeed," Stoutenburg affirmed with fierce emphasis. "Maurice of Nassau sent my father to the scaffold — my father, to whom he owed everything: money, power, success. The day that Olden Barneveldt died at the hands of that accursed ingrate I, his son, swore that the Stadtholder should perish by mine. As you say, I have twice failed in my attempt."

"My brother Groeneveld has gone the way of my father. I am an outlaw with a price upon my head, and my poor mother has three of us to weep for now, instead of one. But I have not forgotten mine oath, nor yet my revenge. I'll be even with Maurice of Nassau yet. All this fighting is but foolery. He is firmly established as Stadtholder of the United Provinces — the sort of man who sees others die for him. He may lose a town here, gain a city there, but he is the sovereign lord of an independent State, and his sacred person is better guarded than was that of his worthier father."

"But it is his life that I want," Stoutenburg went on fiercely, and his thin, claw-like hand clutched in imaginary dagger and struck out through the air as if against the breast of the hated foe. "For this I'll scheme and strive. Nay, I'll never rest until I have him at my mercy as Gerard in his day held William the Silent at his."

"Bah!" exclaimed Heemskerk hotly. "You would not emulate that abominable assassin!"

"Why not call me a justiciary?" Stoutenburg retorted dryly. "The Archduchess would load me with gifts. Spain would proclaim me a hero. Assassin or executioner — it only depends on the political point of view. But doubt me not for a single instant, Heemskerk. Maurice of Nassau will die by my hand."

"That is why you intend to remain here?"

"Yes. Until I have found out his every future plan."

"But how can you do it? You dare not show yourself abroad."

"That is my business," replied Stoutenburg quietly, "and my secret."

"I respect your secret," answered Heemskerk, with a shrug of the shoulders. "It was only my anxiety for your personal safety and for your comfort that brought me hither to-night."

"And De Berg's desire to learn what I have spied," Stoutenburg retorted, with a sneer.

"De Berg is ready to cross the IJssel, and Isembourg to start from Kleve. De Berg proposes to attack Arnheim. He wishes to know what forces are inside the city and how they are disposed, and if the Stadtholder hath an army wherewith to come to their relief or to offer us battle, with any chance of success."

"You can tell De Berg to send you or another back to me here when the crescent moon is forty-eight hours older. I shall have all the information then that he wants."

"That will be good news for him and for Isembourg. There has been too much time wasted as it is."

"Time has not been wasted. The frosts have in the meanwhile made the Veluwe a perfect track for men and cannon."

"For Nassau's men and Nassau's cannon, as well as for our own," Heemskerk rejoined dryly.

"A week hence, if all's well, Maurice of Nassau will be too sick to lead his armies across the Veluwe or elsewhere," said Stoutenburg quietly, and looked up with such a strange, fanatical glitter in his deep-sunk eyes that the younger man gave an involuntary gasp of horror.

"You mean—" he ejaculated under his breath; and instinctively drawing back some paces away from his friend, stared at him with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

"I mean," Stoutenburg went on slowly and deliberately, "that De Berg had best wait patiently a little while longer. Maurice of Nassau will be a dying man ere long."

His harsh voice, sunk to a strange, impressive whisper, died away in a long-drawn-out sigh, half of impatience, wholly of satisfaction. Heemskerk remained for a moment or two absolutely motionless, still staring at the man before him as if the latter were some kind of malevolent and fiend-like wraith, conjured up by devilish magic to scare the souls of men. Nor did Stoutenburg add anything to his last cold-blooded pronouncement. He seemed to be deriving a grim satisfaction in watching the play of horror and of fear upon Heemskerk's usually placid features.

Thus for a space of a few moments the old molen appeared to sink back to its habitual ghost-haunted silence, whilst the hovering spirits of Revenge and Hate called up by the sorcery of a man's evil passions held undisputed sway.

"You mean—" reiterated Heemskerk after awhile, vaguely, stupidly, babbling like a child.

"I mean," Stoutenburg gave impatient answer, "that you should know me well enough by now, my good Heemskerk, to realize that I am no swearer of futile oaths. Last year, when I was over in Madrid, I cultivated the friendship of one Francis Borgia. You have heard of him, no doubt; they call him the Prince of Poets over there. He is a direct descendant of the illustrious Cesare, and I soon discovered that most of the secrets possessed by his far-famed ancestor were known to my friend the poet."

"Poisons!" Heemskerk murmured, under his breath.

"Poisons!" the other assented dryly. "And other things."

With finger and thumb of his right hand, he extracted a couple of tiny packets from a secret pocket of his doublet, toyed with them for awhile, undid the packets and gazed meditatively on their contents. Then he called to his friend. "They'll not hurt you," he said

sardonically. "Look at this powder, now. Is it not innocent in appearance? Yet it is of incalculable value to the man who doth not happen to possess a straight eye or a steady hand with firearms. For add but a pinch of it to the charge in your pistol, then aim at your enemy's head, and if you miss killing him, or if he hold you at his mercy, you very soon have him at yours. The fumes from the detonation will cause instant and total blindness."

Despite his horror of the whole thing, Heemskerk had instinctively drawn nearer to his friend. Now, at these words, he stepped back again quickly, as if he had trodden upon an adder. Stoutenburg, with his wonted cynicism, only shrugged his shoulders.

"Have I not said that it would not hurt you?" he said, with a sneer. "In itself it is harmless enough, and only attains its useful properties when fired in connection with gunpowder. But when used as I have explained it to you, it is deadly and unerring. I saw it at work once or twice in Spain. The Prince of Poets prides himself on its invention. He gave me some of the precious powder, and I was glad of it. It may prove useful one day."

He carefully closed the first packet and slipped it back into the secret receptacle of his doublet; then he fell to contemplating the contents of the second packet — half a dozen tiny pillules, which he kept rolling about in the palm of his hand.

"These," he mused, "are of more proved value for my purpose. Have not De Berg," he added, with a sardonic grin, as he looked once more on his friend, "and the Archduchess, too, heard it noised abroad that Maurice of Nassau hath of late suffered from a mysterious complaint which already threatens to cut him off in his prime, and which up to now hath baffled those learned leeches who were brought over specially from England to look after the health of the exalted patient? Have not you and your friends, my good Heemskerk, heard the rumour too?"

The young man nodded in reply. His parched tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth; he could not utter a word. Stoutenburg laughed.

"Ah!" he said, with a nod of understanding. "I see that the tale did reach your ears. You understand, therefore, that I must remain here for awhile longer."

And with absolute calm and a perfectly steady hand, he folded up the pillules in the paper screw and put them back in his pocket.

"I could not leave my work unfinished," he said simply.

"But how—" Heemskerk contrived to stammer at last; and his voice to his own ears sounded hoarse and toneless, like a voice out of the grave.

"How do I contrive to convey these pillules into the Stadtholder's stomach?" retorted Stoutenburg, with a coarse chuckle. "Well, my friend, that is still my secret. But De Berg and the others must trust me a while longer — trust me and then thank me when the time comes. The Stadtholder once out of the way, the resistance of the United Provinces must of itself collapse like a house of cards. There need be no more bloodshed after that — no more sanguinary conflicts. Indeed, I shall be acclaimed as a public benefactor — when I succeed."

"Then — then you are determined to — to remain here?" Heemskerk murmured, feeling all the while that anything he said was futile and irrelevant.

But how can a man speak when he is confronted with a hideous spectre that mocks him, even whilst it terrifies?

"I shall remain here for the present," Stoutenburg replied, with perfect coolness.

"I — I'd best go, then," the other suggested vaguely.

"You had best wait until the daylight. 'Tis easy to lose one's way on the Veluwe."

The young man waited for a moment, irresolute. Clearly he was longing to get away, to put behind him this ghoulish-infested molen, with its presiding genii of hatred and of crime. Nay, men like Heemskerk, cultivated and gently nurtured, understood the former easily enough. Men and women knew how to hate fiercely these days, and there were few sensations more thoroughly satisfying than that of holding an enemy at the sword's point.

But poison! The slow, insidious weapon that worked like a reptile, stealthily and in the dark! Bah! Heemskerk felt a dizziness overcome him; sheer physical nausea threatened to rob him of his faculties.

But there was undoubted danger in venturing out on the arid wild, in the darkness and with nought but instinct and a few half-obliterated footmarks to guide one along the track. The young man went to the door and pulled it open. A gust of ice-laden air blew into the great, empty place, and almost knocked the old lanthorn off its peg. Heemskerk stepped out into the night. He felt literally frightened, and, like a nervous child, had the sensation of someone or something standing close behind him and on the point of putting a spectral hand upon his shoulder.

But Stoutenburg had remained sitting on the steps, apparently quite unmoved. No doubt he was accustomed to look his abominable project straight in the face. He even shrugged his shoulders in derision when he caught sight of Heemskerk's white face and horror-filled eyes.

"You cannot start while this blind man's holiday lasts," he said lightly. "Can I induce you to partake of some of the refreshment you were good enough to bring for me?"

But Heemskerk gave him no answer. He was trying to make up his mind what to do; and Stoutenburg, with another careless laugh, rose from his seat and strode across the great barn-like space. There, in a remote corner, where sacks of uncrushed grain were wont to be stacked, stood a basket containing a few simple provisions; a hunk of stale bread, a piece of cheese and two or three bottles of wine. Stoutenburg stooped and picked one of these up. He was whistling a careless tune. Then suddenly he paused, his long back still bent, his arm with the hand that held the bottle resting across his knee, his face, alert and hawk-like, turned in an instant toward the door.

"What was that?" he queried hurriedly.

Heemskerk, just as swiftly, had already stepped back into the barn and closed the door again noiselessly.

"Useless!" commented Stoutenburg curtly. "The horses are outside."

"Where is Jan?" he added after an imperceptible pause, during which Heemskerk felt as if his very heart-beats had become audible.

"On the watch, outside," replied the young man.

Even whilst he spoke the door was cautiously opened from the outside, and a grizzled head wrapped in a fur bonnet was thrust in through the orifice.

"What is it, Jan?" the two men queried simultaneously.

"A man and horse," Jan replied in a rapid whisper.

"Coming from over Amersfoort way. He must have caught sight of the molen, for he has left the track and is heading straight for us."

"Some wretched traveler lost on this God-forsaken waste," Stoutenburg said, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "I have seen them come this way before."

"But not at this hour of the night?" murmured Heemskerk.

"Mostly at night. It is easier to follow the track by day."

"What shall we do?"

"Nothing. Let the man come. We'll soon see if he is dangerous. Are we not three to one?"

The taunt struck home. Heemskerk looked abashed. Jan remained standing in the doorway, waiting for further orders. Stoutenburg went on quietly collecting the scanty provisions. He found a couple of mugs, and with a perfectly steady hand filled the first one and then the other with the wine.

"Drink this Heemskerk," he said lightly; and held out the two mugs at arm's length. "It will calm your nerves. You too, Jan."

Jan took the mug and drank with avidity, but Heemskerk appeared to hesitate.

"Afraid of the poison?" Stoutenburg queried with a sneer. Then, as the other, half-ashamed, took the mug and drank at a draught, he added coolly: "You need not be afraid. I could not afford to waste such precious stuff on you."

Then he turned to Jan.

"Remain outside," he commanded; "well wrapped in your blanket, and when the traveler hails you pretend to be wakened from pleasant dreams. Then leave the rest to chance."

Jan at once obeyed. He went out of the molen, closing the door carefully behind him.

Five minutes later, the hapless traveler had put his horse to a trot. He had perceived the molen looming at the top of the rising ground, dense and dark against the sky, and looking upon it as a veritable God-sent haven of refuge for wearied tramps, was making good haste to reach it, fearing lest he himself dropped from sheer exhaustion out of his saddle ere he came to his happy goal.

That terrible contingency, however, did not occur, and presently he was able to draw rein and to drop gently if somewhat painfully to the ground without further mishap. Then he looked about him. The mill in truth appeared to be uninhabited, which was a vast pity, seeing that a glass of spiced ale would — but no matter, 'twas best not to dwell on such blissful thoughts! A roof over one's head for the night was the most urgent need.

He led his horse by the bridle, and tethered him to a heavy, supporting rafter under the overhanging platform; was on the point of ministering to the poor, half-frozen beast, when his ear caught a sound which caused him instantly to pause first and then start on a tour around the molen. He had not far to go. The very next moment he came upon a couple of horses tethered like his own, and upon Jan, who was snoring lustily, curled up in a horse-blanket in the angle of the porch.

To hail the sleeper with lusty shouts at first, and then with a vigorous kick, was but the work of a few seconds; after which Jan's snores were merged in a series of comprehensive curses against the disturber of his happy dreams.

"Dondersteen!" he murmured, still apparently half asleep. "And who is this verfloekte plepshurk who ventures a weary traveler from his sleep?"

"Another weary traveler, verfloekte plepshurk yourself," the other cried aloud. Nor were it possible to render with any degree of accuracy the language which he subsequently used when Jan persistently refused to move.

"Then, dondersteen," retorted Jan thickly, "do as I do — wrap yourself up in a blanket and go to sleep."

"Not until I have discovered how it comes that one wearied traveler happens to be abroad with two equally wearied and saddled horses. And I am not mistaken, plepshurk, thou art but a varlet left on guard outside, whilst thy master feasts and sleeps within."

Whereupon, without further parley, he strode across Jan's outstretched body and, with a vigorous kick of his heavy boot, thrust open the door which gave on the interior of the mill.

Here he paused, just beneath the lintel, took off his hat, and stood at respectful attention; for he had realized at once that he was in the presence of his betters — of two gentlemen, in fact, one of whom had a mug of wine in his hand and the other a bottle. These were the two points which, as it were, jumped most directly to the eye of the weary, frozen, and thirsty traveler: two gentlemen who haply were now satiated, and would spare a drop even to a humble varlet if he stood before them in his full, pitiable plight.

"Who are you man? And what do you want?" one of these gentlemen queried peremptorily. It was the one who had a bottle of wine — a whole bottle — in his hand; but he looked peculiarly stern and forbidding, with his close-cropped, grizzled head and hard, bird-like features.

"Only a poor tramp, my lord," replied the unfortunate wayfarer, in high-pitched, flute-like tones, "who hath lost his way, and has been wandering on this verdommte plain since midnight."

"What do you want?" reiterated Stoutenburg sternly.

"Only shelter for the rest of the night, my lord, and — and — a little drink — a very little drink — for I am mightily weary, and my throat is dry as tinder."

"What is your name?"

At this very simple question the man's round, florid face with the tiny, upturned nose, slightly tinged with pink, and the small, round eyes, bright and shiny like new crowns, took on an expression of comical puzzlement. He scratched his head, pursed up his lips, emitted a prolonged and dubious whistle.

"I haven't a name, so please your lordship," he said, after a while. "That is, not a name such as other people have. I have a name, in truth, a name by which I am known to my friends; a name—"

"Thy name, plepshurk," command Stoutenburg roughly, "ere I throw thee out again into the night."

"So please your lordship," replied the man, "I am called Pythagoras — a name which I believe belongs by right to a philosopher of ancient times, but to which I will always answer, so please your High and Mightiness."

But this time his High and Mightiness did not break in upon the worthy philosopher's volubility. Indeed, at the sound of that highly ludicrous name — ludicrous, that is, when applied to its present bearer — he had deliberately put mug and bottle down, and then become strangely self-absorbed, even whilst his friend had given an involuntary start.

"H'm! Pythagoras!" his lordship resumed, after a while. "Have I ever seen thine ugly face before?"

"Not to my knowledge, my lord," replied the other, marvelling when it would please these noble gentlemen to give him something wherewith to moisten his gullet.

"Ah! Methought I had once met another who bore an equally strange name. Was it Demosthenes, or Euripides, or—"

"Diogenes, no doubt, my lord," replied the thirsty philosopher glibly. "The most gallant gentleman in the whole wide world, one who honours me with his friendship, was pleased at one time to answer to that name."

Now, when Pythagoras made his announcement he felt quite sure that lavish hospitality would promptly follow. These gentlemen had no doubt heard of Diogenes, his comrade in arms, the faithful and gallant friend for whom he — Pythagoras — would go through fire and water and the driest of deserts. They would immediately accord a welcome to one who had declared himself honoured by the friendship of so noble a cavalier. Great was the unfortunate man's disappointment, therefore, when his glib speech was received in absolute silence; and he himself was still left standing upon the lintel of the door, with an icy cold draught playing upon him from behind.

It was only after a considerable time that my lord deigned to resume his questionings again.

"Where dost come from, fellow?" he asked.

"From Ede, so please your lordship," Pythagoras replied dolefully, "where I partook—"

"And whither art going?" Stoutenburg broke in curtly.

"I was going to Amersfoort, my lord, when I lost my way."

"To Amersfoort?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Mynheer Beresteyn hath a house at Amersfoort," Stoutenburg said, as if to himself.

"It was to Mynheer Beresteyn's house that I was bound, my lord, when I unfortunately lost my way."

"Ah!" commented my lord dryly. "Thou was on thy way to the house of Mynheer Beresteyn in Amersfoort?"

"Yes, my lord."

"With a message?"

"No, my lord. Not with a message; I was just going there for the wedding."

"The wedding?" ejaculated Stoutenburg, and it seemed to Pythagoras as if my lord's haggard face took on suddenly an almost cadaverous hue. "Whose wedding fellow?" he added more calmly.

"That of my friend Diogenes, so please your lordship, with the Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn, he—"

"Take care, man, take care!" came with an involuntary call of alarm from Heemskerk; for Stoutenburg, uttering a hoarse cry like that of a wounded beast, had raised his arm and now strode on the unfortunate philosopher with clenched fist and a look in his hollow eyes which boded no good to the harbinger of those simple tidings.

At sound of his friend's voice, Stoutenburg dropped his arm. He turned on his heel, ashamed no doubt that this stranger-varlet should see his face distorted as it was with passion.

This paroxysm of uncontrolled fury did not, however, last longer than a moment or two; the next instant the lord of Stoutenburg, outwardly calm and cynical as before had resumed his haughty questionings, looked the awe-struck philosopher up and down; and he, somewhat scared by the danger which he only appeared to have escaped through the timely intervention of the other gentleman, was marvelling indeed if he had better not take to his heels at once and run, and trust his safety and his life to the inhospitable wild, rather than in the company of this irascible noble lord.

I think, if fact, that he would have fled the very next moment, but that my lord with one word kept him rooted to the spot.

"So," resumed Stoutenburg coolly after awhile, "thou, fellow, art a bidden guest at the marriage feast, which it seems is to be solemnized 'twixt the Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn and another plepshurk as low as thyself. Truly doth democracy tread hard on the heels of such tyranny as the United Provinces have witnessed of late. Dost owe allegiance, sirrah, to the Stadtholder?"

"Where Diogenes leads, my lord," replied Pythagoras, with a degree of earnestness which sat whimsically upon his rotund person, "there do Socrates and I follow unquestioningly."

"Which means that ye are three rascals, ready to sell your skins to the highest bidder. Were ye not in the pay of the lord of Stoutenburg during the last conspiracy against the Stadtholder's life?"

"We may have been, your honour," the man replied naively; "although, to my knowledge, I have never set eyes on the lord of Stoutenburg."

"Twere lucky for thee knave, if thou didst," rejoined Stoutenburg with a harsh laugh, "for there's a price of two thousand guilders upon his head, and I doubt not but thy scurrilous friend Diogenes would add another two thousand to that guerdon."

Then, as Pythagoras, almost dropping with fatigue, was swaying upon his short, fat legs, he jerked his thumb in the direction where the tantalizing bottles and mugs were faintly discernible in the gloom. My lord continued curtly:

"There! Drink thy fill! Amersfoort is not far. My man will put thee on thy way when thou hast quenched thy thirst!"

Quench his thirst! Where was that cellar which could have worked this magic trick? In the corner to which my lord was pointing so casually there was but one bottle, which my lord had put down a while ago, and that, after all, was only half full.

Still, half a bottle of wine was better than no wine at all, and my lord, having granted his gracious leave, took no more notice of the philosopher and his unquenchable thirst, turned to his friend, and together the two gentlemen retired to a distant corner of the place and there whispered eagerly with one another.

Pythagoras tiptoed up to the spot where unexpected bliss awaited him. There was another bottle of wine there beside the half-empty one — a bottle that was full up to the neck, and the shape of which proclaimed that it came from Spain. Good, strong, heady Spanish wine!

And my lord had said "Drink thy fill!" Pythagoras did not hesitate, save for one brief second, while he marvelled whether he had accidentally wandered into Elysian fields, or whether he was only dreaming. Then he poured out for himself a mugful of wine.

Twenty minutes later, the last drop of the second bottle of strong, heady Spanish wine had trickled down the worthy Pythagoras' throat. He was in a state of perfect bliss, babbling words of supreme contentment, and seeing pleasing visions of gorgeous feasts in the murky angles of the old millhouse.

"'Tis time the plepshurk got to horse," Stoutenburg said at last.

He strode across to where Pythagoras, leaning against the raftered wall, his round head on one side, his sugar-loaf hat set at the back of his head, was gazing dreamily into his empty mug.

"To horse, fellow!" he commanded curtly. "'Tis but a league to Amersfoort, and thy friend will be waiting thee."

The old instinct of deference and good behaviour before a noble lord lent some semblance of steadiness to Pythagoras' legs. He struggled to his feet, vainly endeavored to keep an upright and dignified position — an attempt which, however, proved utterly futile.

Whereupon my lord called peremptorily to Jan, who appeared so suddenly in the doorway that, to Pythagoras' blurred vision, it seemed as if he had been put there by some kind of witchery. He approached his master, and there ensued a brief, whispered colloquy between those two — a colloquy in which Heemskerk took no part. After which, the lord of Stoutenburg said aloud:

"Set this worthy fellow on his horse, my good Jan, and put him on the track which leads to Amersfoort. He has had a rest and a good warm drink. He is not like to lose his way again."

Vaguely Pythagoras felt that he wished to protest. He did not want to be set on his horse, nor yet to go to Amersfoort just yet. The wedding was not until the morrow — no, the day after the morrow — and for the nonce he wanted to sleep. Yes, sleep! Curled up in a blanket in any corner big enough and warm enough to shelter a dog.

Sleep! That was what he wanted; for he was so confoundedly sleepy, and this *verfloekte* darkness interfered with his eyes so that he could not see very clearly in front of him. All this he explained with grave deliberation to Jan, who had him tightly by the elbow and was leading him with absolutely irresistible firmness out through the door into the white, inhospitable open.

"I don't want to get to horse," the philosopher babbled thickly. "I want to curl up in a blanket and I want to go to sleep."

But, despite his protestations, he found himself presently in the saddle. How he got up there, he certainly could not have told you. Instinct, however, kept him there. Never could it be said that Pythagoras had tumbled off a horse. Anon he felt that the horse was moving, and that the air around him was bitterly cold.

The dull, even carpet of snow dazzled him, though it was pitch dark now both overhead and down below; of darkness that enveloped one like a mantle, and which felt as if it could have been cut through with a knife.

The horse went on at a steady trot, and another was trotting by its side, bearing a cavalier who wore a fur bonnet. Pythagoras vaguely imagined that this must be Jan. He owed Jan a grudge for taking him away from that hospitable molen, where half-bottles of wine were magically transformed into large ones, filled to overflowing with delicious liquor.

Presently Pythagoras began to feel cold again after the blissful warmth produced by that super-excellent Spanish wine.

"Is it far to Amersfoort?" he queried drowsily from time to time.

But he never seemed to get a reply. It appeared to him as if he had been hours in the saddle since last he felt comfortable and warm over in that hospitable molen. And he was very sleepy. His head felt heavy and his eyes would not keep open as hours and hours went by and the cold grew more and more intense.

"Is it far to Amersfoort?" he questioned whenever his head rolled forward with a jerk that roused him to momentary consciousness.

"Less than half a league now," Jan replied presently, and brought his own horse to a halt. "Follow the track before you and it will lead you straight to the city gates."

Pythagoras opened his eyes very wide. Straightway in front of him he perceived one or two tiny lights, which were too low down on the horizon for stars. The road, too, on which he found himself appeared straighter and more defined than those upon that *verfloekte* waste.

"Are those the lights of Amersfoort?" he murmured vaguely, and pointed in as straight a direction as his numbed arm would allow.

He expected an answer from Jan but there came none. The darkness appeared to have swallowed up horse and rider. Anyway, they had disappeared. Good old Jan! Pythagoras would have liked to thank him for his company, even though he did owe him a grudge for taking him away from the molen where there had been such wonderful —

The horse followed the track for a minute or two longer Pythagoras, left to his own devices, tried to keep awake. Suddenly the sharp report of a pistol rent the silence of the night. It was immediately followed by another.

Pythagoras felt a strange, sinking sensation in his stomach, a dizzy feeling in his head, a feeling which was no longer blissful like the one he had experienced after the third mugful of Spanish wine. A moment later, he fell forward on his horse's neck, then rolled out of the saddle down upon the bed of snow.

And at this spot, where the poor philosopher lay, the white pall which covered the Veluwe was dyed with a dark crimson stain.

A grey, dull light suffused the sky in the East when Jan once more knocked at the door of the old molen.

Stoutenburg's voice bade him enter.

"All well?" my lord queried, at sight of his faithful servant.

"All quiet, my lord," replied Jan. "That windbag, I'll warrant, will tell no tales."

"How far did you take him?"

"Nearly as far as Lang Soeren. I had to keep a track for fear of losing my way. But he lies eight leagues from Amersfoort now and six from Ede. His friends, I imagine, won't look for him thus far."

"And his horse?"

"It did not follow me. No doubt it will get picked up by some one in the morning."

Heemskerk shivered. It was certainly very cold inside this great, barn-like place at this hour just before sunrise; and the passing wayfarer had consumed the last measure of wine. The young man looked grimy, too, and untidy, covered with dust from the floor, where he had lain stretched out for the past three hours, trying to get a wink of sleep; whilst Stoutenburg, restless and alert, had kept his ears open and his nerves on the stretch for the first sound of Jan's return.

"You have been a long time getting to Lang Soeren and back," the latter remarked further to Jan.

"I was guiding a drunken man on a wearied horse," the man replied curtly. "And I myself had been in the saddle all day."

"Then get another hour's rest now," Stoutenburg rejoined. "You will accompany my lord of Heemskerk back to Doesburg as soon as the sun is up."

Jan made no reply. He was accustomed to curt commands and to unquestioning obedience. Tired, saddle-sore and wearied, he would be ready to ride again, go anywhere until he dropped. So he turned on his heel and went out into the cold once more, in order to snatch that brief hour's rest which had been graciously accorded him.

Heemskerk gave an impatient sigh.

"I would the dawn were quicker in coming!" he murmured under his breath.

"The atmosphere of the Veluwe is getting oppressive for your fastidious taste," Stoutenburg retorted with a sneer. Then, as his friend made no other comment, he continued lightly: "Dead men tell no tales. I could not risk that blabbering fool going back to Amersfoort and speaking of what he saw. Even your unwonted squeamishness, my good Heemskerk, would grant me that."

"Or, rather," rejoined the other, almost involuntarily, "did not the unfortunate man suffer for being the messenger of evil tidings?"

Stoutenburg shrugged his shoulders with an assumption of indifference. "Perhaps," he said. "Though I doubt if the news was wholly unexpected. Yet I would have deemed Gilda Beresteyn too proud to wed that plepshurk."

"A man with a future," Heemskerk rejoined. "He is credited with having saved the Stadtholder's life, when the lord of Stoutenburg planned to blow up the bridge under his passage."

"And Beresteyn is grateful to him too," added Stoutenburg with a sarcastic curl of his thin lips, "for having rescued the fair Gilda from the lord of Stoutenburg's fierce clutches. But Nicolaes might have told me that his sister was getting married."

"Nicolaes?" ejaculated Heemskerk, with obvious surprise. "You have seen Nicolaes Beresteyn, then of late?"

For the space of a few seconds — less perhaps — Stoutenburg appeared confused, and the look which he cast on his friend was both furtive and searching. The next moment, however, he had recovered his usual cool placidity.

"You mistook me, my friend," he said blandly. "I did not say that I had seen Nicolaes Beresteyn of late. I have not seen him, in fact, since the day of our unfortunate aborted conspiracy. Rumor reached me that he himself was about to wed the worthy daughter of some prosperous burgher. I merely wondered how the same rumor made no mention of the other prospective bride."

Once again the conversation flagged. Heemskerk regarded his friend with an anxious expression in his pale wearied face. He knew how passionately, if somewhat intermittently, Stoutenburg had loved Gilda Beresteyn. He knew of the original girl and boy affection between them, and of the man's base betrayal of the girl's trust. Stoutenburg had thrown over the humbler burgher's daughter in order to wed Walburg de Marnix, whom he promptly neglected, and who had since set him legally free. Heemskerk knew, too, how Stoutenburg's passion for the beautiful Gilda Beresteyn had since then burst into a consuming flame, and how the obscure soldier of fortune who went by the nick-name of Diogenes had indeed snatched the fair prize from his grasp.

Nigh on three months had gone by since then. Stoutenburg was still nurturing thoughts of vengeance and of crime, not only against the Stadtholder, but also against the girl who had scorned him. Well, this in truth was none of his friend's business. Hideous as was the premeditated coup against Maurice of Nassau, it would undoubtedly, if successful, help the cause of Spain in the Netherlands, and Heemskerk himself was that unnatural monster — a man who would rather see his country ruled by a stranger than by those of her sons whose political or religious views differed from his own.

Thus, when an hour later he took leave of Stoutenburg, he did so almost with cordiality, did not hesitate to grasp the hand of a man whom he knew to be a scheming and relentless murderer.

"One of us will come out to wait on you in two days' time," he said at the last. "I go back to camp satisfied that you are not so lonely as you seem, and that there is some one who sees to it that you do not fare so ill even in this desolation. May I say this to De Berg?"

"If you like," Stoutenburg replied. "Anyway, you may assure him, and through him the Archduchess, that Maurice of Nassau will be in his grave before I, his judge and executioner, perish of hunger or of cold."

He accompanied his friend to the door, and stood there while the latter and Jan were getting to horse. Then, as they went out into the open, he waved them a last adieu. On the far distant east, the pale, wintry sun had tinged the mist with a delicate lemon gold. The vast immensity of the waste lay stretched out as if limitless before him. As far as the eye could see not a tower or column of smoke broke the even monotony of the undulating ground. The shadow of the great molen with its gaunt, maimed wings lay, like patches of vivid blue upon the vast and glistening pall of snow.

The two riders put their horses to a trot. Soon they appeared like mere black specks upon a background of golden haze, whilst in their wake, upon the scarce visible track, the traces of their horses' hoofs, in stains of darker blue upon the virgin white, were infinitely multiplied.

Stoutenburg watched them until the mist-laden distance had completely hidden them from his view. Then, with a sigh of relief, he went within.

CHAPTER II. THE DOUBLE WEDDING

1

It was one of those days when earth and heaven alike appear to smile. A day almost warm, certainly genial; for the wind had dropped, the sky was of a vivid blue, and the sun had a genuine feeling of warmth in its kiss. From the overhanging eaves the snow dropped down in soft, moist lumps, stained by the thaw, and the quay, where a goodly crowd had collected, was quickly transformed under foot into a sea of mud.

It almost seemed as if the little town was out on a holiday. People came and went, dressed in gay attire, stood about all along the bank of the river, staring up at the stately gabled house which looked so wonderfully gay with its decorations of flags and valuable tapestries and stuffs hanging from the numerous windows.

That house on the quay — and it was the finest house in the town — was indeed the centre of attraction. It was from there that the air of holiday-making emanated, and certainly from there that the gay sounds of music and revelry came wafted on the crisp, wintry air.

Mynheer Beresteyn had come to his house in Amersfoort, of which city he was chief civic magistrate, in order to celebrate the double wedding. No wonder such an event was made an excuse for a holiday. Burgomaster Beresteyn never did things by halves, and his hospitality was certain to be lavish. Already doles and largesse had been poured out at the porch of St. Maria Kerk; a crowd of beggars more or less indigent, crippled, sick, or merely greedy, had assembled there very early in the morning. Whoever was there was sure to get something. And there was plenty to see besides: the brides and bridegrooms and the wedding party; and of course His Highness the Stadtholder was a sight in himself. He did not often go abroad these days, for his health was no longer as good as it was. He had aged considerably, looked moody and ailing for the most part. There had been sinister rumours, too. The widowed Archduchess Isabella, Mistress of Flanders and Brabant, hated him because he held the United Provinces of the Netherlands free from the bondage of Spain. And in Spain the arts of poison and of secret assassination were carried on with as much perfection as they had ever been in Italy in the days of the Borgias.

However, all such dark thoughts must be put away for the day. This is a festive occasion for Amersfoort, when every anxiety for the fate of the poor fatherland — ever threatened and ever sore-pressed — must be laid to rest. Let the brides and bridegrooms see naught but merry faces — happy auguries of the auspicious days to come.

Here they come — the entire wedding party — walking down the narrow streets from the quay to the St. Maria Kerk. Every one is walking, even the Stadtholder. He is conspicuous by his great height, and the richness of his attire: embroidered doublet, slashed sleeves, priceless lace. His face looks thin and drawn, but he has lost nothing of his martial bearing, nor have his eyes lost their eagle glance. He had come over the previous afternoon from Utrecht, where he was in camp, and had deigned to grace Mynheer Beresteyn's house by sleeping under its roof. It was understood that he would return to Utrecht after the banquet which was to follow the religious ceremony, and he, too, for this one day was obviously making a valiant attempt to cast off the load of anxiety attendant upon ceaseless campaigning. In truth, the Archduchess Isabella, not content with the fairest provinces of Belgium, with Flanders, Brabant, and the Hainault, which her father, King Philip of Spain, had ceded to her absolutely, was even now striving to force some of the United Provinces back under the domination of Spain.

Small wonder then that the Stadtholder, wearied and sick, the shadow of his former self, was no longer sure of a whole-hearted welcome when he showed himself abroad. Nor had the people forgiven him the judicial murder of Olden Barneveldt — the trusted councillor in the past, afterwards the bitter opponent of his master's ambitions — of his severity towards Barneveldt's sons. His relentless severity toward those who offended him, his reckless ambition and stern disciplinarianism, had made him an object of terror rather than of affection. Nevertheless, he still stood for the upholder of the liberties of the United Provinces, the finest captain of his age, who by his endurance, his military skill, and his unswerving patriotism, kept his country's frontiers free from the incursions of the most powerful armies of the time. He still stood as the man who had swept the sacred soil of the Netherlands free from Spanish foes and Spanish tyranny, who had amplified and consolidated the work of his father and firmly established the independence of the Republic. Because of what he had done in the past, men like Mynheer Beresteyn and those of his kind still looked upon him with grave respect, as the chosen of God, the prophet sent to them from Heaven to keep the horrors of a new Spanish invasion away from their land.

And when Maurice of Nassau came to a small city like Amersfoort, as he had done today, he was received with veneration, if not with the old cheers and acclamations. His arbitrary temper was momentarily forgotten, his restless ambition condoned, in the joy of beholding the man who had fought for them, never spared himself until he had won for them all those civil and religious liberties which they prized above all the treasures of the earth.

All heads, then, were bowed in respectful silence as he walked by, with the brides one on each side of him. But the loving glances of the crowd, the jokes and whispered words of cheer and greeting, were reserved for Mynheer Beresteyn and for his family.

2

Two brides, and both comely! Jongejuffrouw Katharina van den Poele, the only child of the wealthy shipowner, member of the Dutch East India Company, a solid burgher both physically and financially, and one of the props of his country's overseas commerce. His daughter, in rich brocade, with stiff stomacher that vainly strove to compress her ample proportions, splashed through the mud on her high pattens beside the Stadtholder, her heavily be-ringed hands clinging to the folds of her gown, so as to save them from being soiled. Stolid and complacent, she heard with a satisfied smile the many compliments that rose from out the crowd on her dazzling complexion, her smoothly brushed hair and magnificent jewelry. The fair Katharina beamed with good-nature and looked the picture of

happiness, despite the fact that her bridegroom, who walked immediately behind her, appeared somewhat moody, considering the occasion.

Nicolaes Beresteyn, the Burgomaster's only son, had in truth, no reason for surliness. His bride excited universal admiration, his own private fortune would be more than doubled by the dowry which the good Kaatje brought him along with her plump person, and all the disagreements between himself and his father, all the treachery and the deceit of the past three months, had been amply forgiven. It was all the more strange, therefore, that on this day his face alone should appear as a reflection of the Stadtholder's silent mood, and more than one comment was made thereon as he passed.

Of the other bride and bridegroom it is perhaps more difficult to speak. We all know the beautiful picture of Gilda Beresteyn which Frans Hals made of her some three months previously. That incomparable master of portraiture has rendered that indescribable air of force, coupled with extreme youthfulness, which was her greatest charm. Often she hath been called *etherial*, yet I do not see how that description could apply to one who was so essentially alive as Gilda Beresteyn. Her blue eyes always sparkled with vitality, and whenever she was moved — which was often enough — they became as dark as sloes. Probably the word came to be applied to her because there was always a little something mysterious about her — an enigmatic little smile, which suggested merriment that came from within rather than in response to an outside joke. Many have remarked that her smile was the gentle reflex of her lover's sparkling gaiety.

Him — that ardent lover, sobered bridegroom now — you cannot forget, not whilst Frans Hals' immortal work, whom he hath called "*The Laughing Cavalier*," depicts him in all its irrepressible joyousness, and gladdens the eye with its exhilaration and its magnificent *gaite de coeur* — a veritable *nepenthe* for jaded seek-sorrows.

For once in his life, as he walks gravely behind his bride, there is a look of seriousness not unmixed with impatience in his laughing eyes. A frown, too, between his brows. The crowd have at once taken him to its heart — especially the women. Those who have no sons wish for one at once, who would grow up just like him: tall and stately as a young sapling, with an air of breeding seldom seen in the sons of the Low Countries, and wearing his magnificent bridal attire as if he had never worn leather jerkin or worsted doublet in his life. The women admire the richly wrought doublet, the priceless lace at neck and wrists, the plumed hat that frames a face alike youthful and determined. But everyone marvels why a bridegroom should go to church in high riding-boots and spurred at this hour. Many whispered comments are exchanged as he goes by.

"A stranger, so they say."

"Though he has fought in the Netherlands."

"Ah, but he really comes from England."

"A romantic story. Never knew his father until recently."

Some said the bridegroom's name was really Blakeney, and that his father was a very rich and very great gentleman over in England. But there were others who remembered him well when he was just a penniless soldier of fortune who went by the name of Diogenes. No one knew him then by any other, and no one but Frans Hals, the painter over in Haarlem, knew whence he had come and what was his parentage. In those days his merry laughter would rouse the echoes of the old city where he and his two boon companions — such a quaint pair of loons! — were wont to dwell in the intervals of selling their swords to the highest bidders.

Ay, Jongejuffrouw Beresteyn's stranger bridegroom had fought in France and in Flanders, in Groningen and Brabant and 'twas said that recently he had saved the life of the Stadtholder at great risk of his own. Many more tales were whispered about him, which would take too long to relate, while the crowd stood agape all down the quay and up the Korte Gracht as far as the St. Maria Kerk.

3

Indeed, Mynheer Beresteyn had not done things by halves. He had chosen that the happy double event should take place at the old house at Amersfoort, where his children had been born, and where he had spent the few happy years of his married life, rather than at Haarlem, which was his business and official residence. He wished, for the occasion, to be just a happy father rather than the distinguished functionary, the head of the Guild of Armourers, one of the most important burghers of the Province, and second only in the council chamber to the Stadtholder.

The religious ceremony was over by noon. It was now mid-afternoon, and the wedding guests had assembled in the stately home on the quay for a gargantuan feast. The Stadtholder sat at a magnificently decked-out table at the far end of the panelled room, on a raised dais surmounted by a canopy of Flemish tapestry, all specially erected for the occasion. Around this privileged board sat the wedding party; Mynheer Beresteyn, grave and sedate, a man who had seen much of life, had suffered a great deal, and even now scarcely dared to give his sense of joy full play. He gazed from time to time on his daughter with something of anxiety as well as of pride. Then the worthy shipowner, member of the Dutch East India Company, and mejuorffluw, his wife — the father and mother of Nicolaes Beresteyn's bride, pompous and fleshy, and with an air of prosperous complacency about their persons which contrasted strangely with Mynheer Beresteyn's anxious earnestness. Finally, the two bridal couples, of whom more anon.

In the body of the nobly proportioned banquetting-hall, a vast concourse of guests had assembled around two huge tables, which were decked out with costly linen and plate, and literally groaned under the succulent dishes which serving-men repeatedly placed there for the delectation of the merry party. Roast capons and geese, fish from the Rhyn and from the sea, pasties made up of oysters and quails, and, above all, a constant supply of delicious Rhine or Spanish wines, according as the guests desired light or heady liquor.

A perpetual buzz of talk, intermingled with many an outburst of hilarity and an occasional song, filled the somewhat stuffy air of the room to the exclusion of any individual sound.

The ladies plied their fans vigorously, and some of the men, warmed by good cheer, had thrown their padded doublets open and loosened their leather belts. The brides-elect sat one on each side of the Stadtholder; a strange contrast, in truth. Kaatje van den Poele, just a young edition of her mother, her well-rounded figure already showing signs of the inevitable coming stoutness, comely to look at, with succulent cheeks shining like rosy apples, her face with the wide-open, prominent eyes, beaming with good-nature and the vigorous application of cold water. Well-mannered, too, for she never spoke unless spoken to, but sat munching her food with naive

delight, and whenever her somewhat moody bridegroom hazarded a laboured compliment or joke, she broke into a pleasant giggle, jerked her elbow at him, and muttered a "Fie, Klaas!" which put an end to further conversation.

Gilda Beresteyn, who sat at the Stadtholder's right hand, was silent, too; demure, not a little prim, but with her, even the most casual observer became conscious that beneath the formal demeanor there ran an undercurrent of emotional and pulsating life. The terrible experience which she had gone through a few brief months ago had given to her deep blue eyes a glance that was vividly passionate, yet withal responseful, and with a curiously childlike expression of trust within its depth.

The stiff bridal robes which convention decreed that she should wear gave her an air of dignity, even whilst it enhanced the youthfulness of her personality. There was all the roundness in her figure which is the attribute of her race; yet, despite her plump shoulders and full throat, her little round face and firm bosom, there remained something ethereal about her, a spirituality and a strength which inspired reverence, even whilst her beauty provoked admiring glances.

"Your Highness is not eating," she remarked timidly.

"My head aches," Maurice of Nassau replied moodily. "I cannot eat. I think I must be over-tired," he went on more pleasantly as he met the girl's kind blue eyes fixed searchingly upon him. "A little fresh air will do me good. Don't disturb any one," he continued hastily, as he rose to his feet and turned to go to the nearest open window.

Beresteyn quickly followed him. The prince looked faint and ill, and had to lean on his host's arm as he tottered towards the window. The little incident was noticed by a few. It caused consternation and the exchange of portentful glances.

A grave-looking man in sober black velvet doublet and sable hose quickly rose from the table and joined the Stadtholder and Mynheer Beresteyn at the window. He was the English physician especially brought across to watch over the health of the illustrious sufferer.

Gilda turned to her neighbour. Her eyes had suddenly filled with tears, but when she met his glance the ghost of a smile immediately crept around her mouth.

"It seems almost wicked," she said simply "to be so happy now."

Unseen by the rest of the company, the man next to her took her tiny hand and raised it to his lips.

"At times, even to-day," she went on softly, "it all seems like a dream. Your wooing, my dear lord, hath been so tempestuous. Less than three months ago I did not know of your existence—"

"My wooing hath been over-slow for my taste!" he broke in with a short, impatient sigh. "Three months, you say? And for me you are still a shadow, an exquisite sprite that eludes me behind an impenetrable, a damnable wall of conventions, even though my very sinews ache with longing to hold you in mine arms for ever and for aye!"

He looked her straight between the eyes, so straight and with such a tantalizing glance that a hot blush rose swiftly to her cheeks; whereupon he laughed again — a merry, a careless, infectious laugh it was — and squeezed her hand so tightly that he made her gasp.

"You are always ready to laugh, my lord," she murmured reproachfully.

"Always," he riposted. "And now, how can I help it? I must laugh, or else curse with impatience. It is scarce three o'clock now, and not before many hours can we be free of this chattering throng."

Then, as she remained silent, with eyes cast down now and the warm flush still lingering in her cheeks, he went on, with brusque impatience, his voice sunk to a quick, penetrating whisper:

"If anything should part me from you now, ma donna, I verily believe that I should kill someone or myself!"

He paused, almost disconcerted. It had never been his wont to talk of his feelings. The transient sentiments that in the past had grazed his senses, without touching his heart, had only led him to careless protestations, forgotten as soon as made. He himself marvelled at the depth of his love for this exquisite creature who had so suddenly come into his life, bringing with her a fragrance of youth and of purity, and withal of fervid passion, such as he had never dreamed of through the many vicissitudes of his adventurous life.

Still she did not speak, and he was content to look on her, satisfied that she was in truth too completely happy at this hour to give vent to her feelings in so many words. He loved to watch the play of emotions in her tell-tale face, the pursed-up little mouth, so ready to smile, and those violet-tinted eyes, now and then raised to him in perfect trust and abandonment of self, then veiled once more demurely under his provoking glance.

He loved to tease her, for then she blushed, and her long lashes drew a delicately pencilled shadow upon her cheeks. He loved to say things that frightened her, for then she would look up with a quick, inquiring glance, search his own with a palpitating expression that quickly melted again into one of bliss.

"You look so demure, ma donna," he exclaimed whimsically, "that I vow I'll create a scandal — leap across the table and kiss Kaatje, for instance — just to see if it would make you laugh!"

"Do not make fun of Kaatje, my lord," Gilda admonished. "She hath more depth of feeling than you give her credit for."

"I do not doubt her depth of feeling, dear heart," he retorted with mock earnestness. "But, oh, good St. Bavon help me! Have you ever seen so solid a yokemate, or," he added, and pointed to Nicolaes Beresteyn, who sat moody and sullen, toying with his food, beside his equally silent bride, "so ardent a bridegroom? Verily, the dear lady reminds me of those succulent fish pasties they make over in England, white and stodgy, and rather heavy on the stomach, but, oh, so splendidly nourishing!"

"Fie! Now you are mocking again."

"How can I help it, dear heart, when you persist in looking so solemn — so solemn, that, in the midst of all this hilarity, I am forcibly reminded of all the rude things you said to me that night at the inn in Leyden, and I am left to marvel how you ever came to change your opinion of me?"

"I changed my opinion of you," she rejoined earnestly, "when I learned how you were ready to give your life to save the Stadtholder from those abominable murderers; and almost lost it," she added under her breath, "to save my brother Nicolaes from the consequence of his own treachery."

"Hush! That is all over and done with now, ma donna," he retorted lightly. "Nicolaes has become a sober burgher, devoted to his solid Kaatje and to the cause of the Netherlands; and I have sold my liberty to the fairest tyrant that ever enslaved a man's soul."

"Do you regret it," she queried shyly, "already?"

"Already!" he assented gravely. "I am kicking against my bonds, longing for that freedom which in the past kept my stomach empty and my head erect."

"Will you never be serious?" she retorted.

"Never, while I live. My journey to England killed my only attempt at sobriety, for there I found that the stock to which I belonged was both irreproachable and grave, had been so all the while that I, the most recent scion of so noble a race, was roaming about the world, the most shiftless and thriftless vagabond it had ever seen. But in England" — he sighed and raised his eyes and hands in mock solemnity — "in England the climate is so atrocious that the people become grim-visaged and square-toed through constantly watching the rain coming down. Or else," he added, with another suppressed ripple of that infectious laugh of his, "the climate in England has become so atrocious because there are so many square-toed folk about. I was such a very little while in England," he concluded with utmost gravity, "I had not time to make up my mind which way it went."

"Methinks you told me," she rejoined, "that your home in England is beautiful and stately."

"It is both, dear heart," he replied more seriously; "and I shall learn to love it when you have dwelt therein. I should love it even now if it had ever been hallowed by the presence of my mother."

"She never went there?"

"No, never. My father came to Holland in Leicester's train. He married my mother in Haarlem, then deserted her and left her there to starve. My friend Frans Hals cared for me after she died. That is the whole of her history. It does not make for deep, filial affection, does it?"

"But you have seen your father now. Affection will come in time."

"Yes; I have seen him, thanks to your father, who brought us together. I have seen my home in Sussex, where one day, please God, you'll reign as its mistress."

"I, the wife of an English lord!" she sighed. "I can scarcely credit it."

"Nor can I, dear heart," he answered lightly; "for that you'll never be. Let me try and explain to you just how it all is, for, in truth, English honours are hard to understand. My father is an English gentleman with no handle to his name. Blake of Blakeney they call him over there; and I am his only son. It seems that he rendered signal services to his king of late, who thereupon desired to confer upon him one of those honours which we over here find it so difficult to apprise. My father, however, either because he is advanced in years or because he desired to show me some singular mark of favour, petitioned King James to bestow the proposed honour upon his only son. Thus am I Sir Percy Blakeney, it seems, without any merit on my part. Funny is it not? And I who, for years, was known by no name save Diogenes, one of three vagabonds, with perhaps more wits, but certainly no more worth, than my two compeers!"

"Then I should call you Sir Percy?" she concluded. "Yet I cannot get used to the name."

"You might even call me Percy," he suggested; "for thus was I baptized at my dear mother's wish. Though, in truth, I had forgotten it until my father insisted on it that I could not be called Diogenes by mine own servants, and that he himself could not present me to his Majesty the King of England under so fanciful a name."

"I like best to think of you as Diogenes," she murmured softly. "Thus I knew you first, and your brother philosophers, Socrates and Pythagoras — such a quaint trio, and all of you so unsuited to your names! I wish," she added with a sigh, "that they were here now."

"And they should be here," he assented. "I am deeply anxious. But Pythagoras—"

He broke off abruptly. Mynheer Beresteyn's voice called to him from the recess by the open window.

"A goblet of wine!" Mynheer commanded; "for his Highness."

Diogenes was about to comply with the order, but Nicolaes forestalled him. Already he had poured out the wine.

"Let me take it," he said curtly, took up the goblet and went with it to the window. He offered it to the Stadtholder, who drank greedily.

It was but a brief incident. Nicolaes had remained beside the prince while the latter drank; then he returned, with the empty goblet in his hand, to take his place once more beside his stolid and solid bride.

"You were speaking of Pythagoras, sir," Gilda rejoined, as soon as Diogenes was once more seated beside her. "I never know which is which of the two dear souls. Is Pythagoras the lean one with the deep, bass voice?"

"No. He is the fat one, with the round, red nose," Diogenes replied gravely. "He was at Ede the night before last, and was seen there, at the tavern of the Crow's Nest, somewhere after midnight, imbibing copious draughts of hot, spiced ale. After that all traces of him have vanished. But he must have started to join me here, as this had been pre-arranged, and I fear me that he lost his way on that verfloekte waste. I have sent Socrates, my lean comrade — to look for poor Pythagoras upon the Veluwe. They should be here, in truth, and—"

But the next word died in his throat. He jumped to his feet.

"The Stadtholder!" he exclaimed. "He hath fainted."

Indeed, there was quite a commotion now in the window recess, where Prince Maurice had remained all this while by the open casement, inhaling the fresh, keen air. The English physician stood beside him, and Mynheer Beresteyn was gazing with anxious eyes on the master to whom, in spite of all, he had remained so splendidly loyal. The dizziness had apparently come on quite suddenly, while the Stadtholder was acknowledging the acclamations of the crowd who had seen and cheered him. He tottered and would have fallen but for the physician's supporting arm.

Not many of the guests had noticed the incident. They were for the most part too much absorbed in their enjoyment of the feast to pay attention to what went on in other parts of the room. But Diogenes had seen it and was already over by the window; and Nicolaes Beresteyn, too, had jumped to his feet. He looked wide-eyed and scared, even whilst the stolid Kaatje, flushed with good cheer, remained perfectly unconcerned, munching some sweetmeats which seemed to delight her palate.

The Stadtholder, however, had quickly recovered. The faintness passed off as suddenly as it came, but it left the illustrious guest more silent and moody than before. His face had become of a yellowish pallor, and his eyes looked sunken as if consumed with fever. But he chose to return to his seat under the dais, and this time he called to Diogenes to give him the support of his arm.

“’Twas scarce worth while, eh, my friend,” he said bitterly, “to risk your precious young life in order to save this precarious one. Had Stoutenburg’s bomb done the assassin’s work, it would only have anticipated events by less than three months.”

“Your Highness is over-tired,” Diogenes rejoined simply. “Complete rest in the midst of your friends would fight this insidious sickness far better than the wisest of physicians.”

“What do you mean?” the Stadtholder immediately retorted, his keen, hawk-like glance searching the soldier’s smiling face. “Why should you say ‘in the midst of your friends?’” he went on huskily. “You don’t mean — ?”

“What, your Highness?”

“I mean — you said it so strangely — as if—”

“I, your Highness?” Diogenes queried, not a little surprised at the Stadtholder’s febrile agitation.

“I myself have oft wondered—”

Maurice of Nassau paused abruptly, rested his elbows on the table, and for a moment or two remained quite still, his forehead buried in his hands. Gilda gazed on him wide-eyed and tearful; even Kaatje ceased to munch. It seemed terrible to be so great a man, wielding such power, commanding such obedience, and to be reduced to a mere babbling sufferer, fearing phantoms and eagerly glean any words of comfort that might come from loyal lips.

Diogenes had remained silent, too; his eyes, usually so full of light-heartedness and merriment, had a strange, searching glitter in them now. A minute or two later the prince had pulled himself together, tried to look unconcerned, and assumed a geniality which obviously he was far from feeling. But it was to Diogenes that he spoke once more.

“Anyhow, I could not rest yet awhile, my friend,” he said with a sigh; “whilst the Archduchess threatens Gelderland, the De Berg is making ready to cross the IJssel.”

“Your Highness’s armies under your Highness’s command,” rejoined the soldier firmly, “can drive the Archduchess’s hosts out of Gelderland, and send Henri de Berg back across the IJssel. Maurice of Nassau is still the finest commander in Europe, even—”

He paused, and the Stadtholder broke in bitterly:

“Even though he is a dying man, you mean.”

“No!” here broke in Gilda, with glowing fervour. “I swear that nothing was further from my lord’s thoughts. Sir,” she added, and turned boldly to her lover, “you spoke with such confidence just now. A toast, I pray you, so that we may all join in expressions of loyalty to our guest and sovereign lord, the Stadtholder!”

She poured a goblet full of wine. Diogenes gave her a quick glance of approval. Then he picked up the goblet, stood upon his seat, and placed one foot on the table.

“Long life to your Highness!” he cried aloud. “May it please God to punish your enemies and to give victory unto your cause!”

Then, holding the goblet aloft, he called at the top of his voice:

“Maurice of Nassau and the cause of Liberty!”

Every one rose, and a rousing cheer went echoing round the room. It was heard and taken up lustily by the crowd outside, until the very walls of the ancient city echoed the loyal toast, from the grim towers of Koppel Poort to the Vrouwetoren of St. Maria Kerk; from gateway to gateway, and rampart to rampart. And the bells of St. Joris and St. Maria took up the joyful call and sent peal after peal of bells resounding gleefully through the keen, wintry air.

“Maurice of Nassau!” rang the chimes. “Nassau and liberty!”

5

But after this manifestation of joy and enthusiasm, comparative silence fell upon the wedding assembly. None but those who had partaken over freely of Mynheer Beresteyn’s good cheer could fail to see that the Stadtholder felt ill, and only kept up a semblance of gaiety by a mighty effort of his iron will. Thereafter, conversation became subdued. People talked in whispers, an atmosphere of constraint born of anxiety reigned there where light-hearted gaiety had a while ago held undisputed sway. The host himself did his best to revive the temper of his guests. Serving-men and maids were ordered to go around more briskly with the wine. One or two of the younger men hazarded the traditional jokes which usually obtained at wedding feasts; but those who laughed did so shamefacedly. It seemed as if a vague terror held erstwhile chattering tongues in check.

The Stadtholder, leaning back against the cushions of his chair, spoke very little. His long, nervy fingers played incessantly with crumbs and pellets of bread. He looked impatient and ill at ease, like a man who wants to get away yet fears to offend his host. He had kept Diogenes by his side this time, and Beresteyn was able to snatch a few last words with his daughter. Once she was married, her husband would take her to his home in England one day, and the thought of parting from the child he loved was weighing the father’s spirit down.

“’Tis the first time,” he said sadly, “that you will pass out of my keeping. You were the precious heritage bequeathed to me your dead mother. Now ’tis to a stranger that I am entrusting my priceless treasure.”

“A stranger, father,” riposted Gilda quietly, “who hath proved himself worthy of the truth. And when we do go to England,” she went on gaily, “there will only be a narrow strip of water between us, and that is easily crossed.”

Beresteyn gave a quickly smothered sigh. He looked across at the stranger to whom, as he said, he was about to hand over the most precious gift he possessed. Handsome he was, that erstwhile penniless soldier of fortune; handsome and brave, frank and loyal, and with that saving grace of light-hearted gaiety in him which had helped him through the past terrible crisis in his life, and brought him to the safe haven of a stately home in England and wealthy father, eager to make amends for the wrongs committed long ago.

But still a stranger for all that, a man who had seen more of the seamy side of the world, who had struggled more, suffered more — ay, perhaps sinned more — than those of his rank in life usually did at his age. Something of that rough-and-tumble life of the soldier

of fortune, without home or kindred, who sells his sword to the highest bidder, and knows no master save his own will, must have left its mark upon the temperament of the man. Despite the humorous twinkle in the eyes, the bantering curl on the lip, the man's face bore the impress of the devil-may-care existence that takes no heed of the morrow. And at times, when it was in repose, there was a strangely grim look in it of determination as well as of turbulent passions, not always held in check.

Beresteyn sighed with inward apprehension. His well-ordered mind, the mind of a Dutch middle-class burgher, precise and unemotional, could not quite fathom that of the Anglo-Saxon — the most romantic and the most calculating, and the most impulsive and the most studied, the most sensuous and most self-repressed temperament that ever set the rest of the world wondering. He could see the reckless scapegrace, the thoughtless adventurer, fuming and fretting under the restraint put upon him by the cut-and-dried conventions attendant upon these wedding ceremonies could watch him literally writhing under the knowing looks and time-honoured innuendos which custom deemed allowable on these occasions. His hands indeed must be itching to come in contact with the cheeks of mocking friends and smug relatives, all eager to give advice or to chaff the young bride, until the hot blood rushed to her cheeks and tears of annoyance gather in her eyes.

The whole atmosphere of noise and drinking — ay, of good-humour and complacency — did, in truth, grate upon Diogenes' nerves. He had not lied to Gilda nor yet exaggerated his sentiments when he said that his sinews ached with longing to seize her and carry her away into solitude and quiet, where nought would come to disturb their love-dream; away upon his horse, her soft arms encircling his neck her head resting on his shoulder, her dear face turned up to his gaze, with those heavenly eyes closed in rapture; the delicate mouth slightly parted, showing a vision of tiny teeth, a tear mayhap trembling on her lashes, a soft blush mantling on her cheek. Away! Across the ocean to that stately home in England, where the spring air was soft with the scent of violets and of fruit blossom, and where beside the river the reeds murmured a soft accompaniment to songs of passion and hymns of love. Away from all save the shrine which he had set up for her in his heart; from all save the haven of his arms.

To feel that, and then be forced to sit and discuss plans for the undoing of the Spanish commander or for the relief of Arnheim, was, in fact, more than Diogenes' restive temperament could stand. His attention began to wander, his answers became evasive; so much so that, after a while, the Stadtholder, eyeing him closely, remarked with the pale ghost of a smile:

"'Tis no use fretting and fuming, my friend. Your English blood is too mutinous for this sober country and its multitude of stodgy conventions. One of these demands that your bride shall sit here till the last of the guests has departed, and only a few fussy and interfering old tantes are left to unrobe her and commiserate with her over her future lot — a slave to a bullying husband, a handmaid to her exacting lord. Every middle-aged frump in the Netherlands hath some story to tell that will bring tears to a young bride's eyes or a blush to her cheeks."

"Please God," Diogenes ejaculated fervently. "Gilda will be spared that."

"Impossible, you rogue!" the Stadtholder retorted, amused despite his moodiness by the soldier's fretful temper. "The conventions —"

"Verfloekt will be the conventions as far as we are concerned," Diogenes rejoined hotly. "And if your Highness would but help—" he added impulsively.

"I? What can I do?"

"Give the signal for dispersal," Diogenes entreated; "and graciously promise to forgive me if, for the first time in my life, I act with disrespect toward your Highness."

"But, man, how will that help you?" the Stadtholder demurred.

"I must get away from all this wearying bombast, this jabbering and scraping and all these puppy-tricks!" Diogenes exclaimed with comical fierceness. "I must get away ere my wife becomes a doll and a puppet, tossed into my arms by a lot of irresponsible monkeys! If I have to stay here much longer, your Highness," he added earnestly "I vow that I shall flee from it all, leave an angel to weep for my abominable desertion of what I hold more priceless than all the world, and an outraged father to curse the day when so reckless and adventurer crossed his daughter's path. But stand this any longer I cannot!" he concluded, and, with a quick sweep of the arm, he pointed to the chattering, buzzing crowd below. "And if your Highness will not help me—"

"Who said I would not help you, you hotheaded rashling?" the Stadtholder broke in composedly. "You know very well that I can refuse you nothing, not even the furtherance of one of your madcap schemes. And as for disrespect — why, as you say, in the midst of so much bowing and scraping some of us are eager for disrespect as an aging spinster for amorous overtures. By way of a change, you know."

He spoke quite simply and with an undercurrent of genuine sympathy in his tone, as a man towards his friend. Something of the old Maurice of Nassau seemed for the moment to have swept aside the arbitrary tyrant whom men had learned to hate as well as to obey. Diogenes' irascible mood melted suddenly in the sunshine of the Stadtholder's indulgent smile, the mocking glance faded out of his eyes, and he said with unwonted earnestness:

"No wonder that men have gone to death or to glory under your leadership."

"Would you follow me again if I called?" the prince retorted.

"Your Highness hath no need of me. The United Provinces are free, her burghers are free men. 'Tis time to sheathe the sword, and a man might be allowed, methinks, to dream of happiness."

"Is your happiness bound up with the mad scheme for which you want my help?"

"Ay, my dear lord!" Diogenes replied. "And, secure in your gracious promise, I swear that naught can keep me from the scheme now save mine own demise."

"There are more arbitrary things than death, my friend," the Stadtholder mused.

"Possibly, your Highness," the soldier answered lightly; "but not for me to-night."

More than one chronicler of the time hath averred that Maurice of Nassau had in truth a soft corner in his heart for the man who had saved him from the bomb prepared by the Lord of Stoutenburg, and would yield to the "Laughing Cavalier" when others, less privileged, were made to feel the weight of his arbitrary temper. Be that as it may, he certainly on this occasion was as good as his word. Wearied with all these endless ceremonials, he was no doubt glad enough to take his departure, and anon he gave the signal for a general breaking up of the party by rising, and, in a loud voice, thanking Mynheer Beresteyn for his lavish hospitality.

"An you will pardon this abrupt departure," he concluded with unwonted graciousness, "I would fain get to horse. By starting within the hour, I could reach Utrecht before dark."

All the guests had risen, too, and there was the usual hubbub and noise attendant on the dispersal of so large a party. That Stadtholder stepped down from the dais, Mynheer Beresteyn and the English physician remaining by his side, while the bridal party brought up the rear. Room was made for his Highness to walk down the room, the men standing bareheaded and the women curtsying as he passed. But he did not speak to any one, only nodded perfunctorily to those whom he knew personally. Obviously he felt ill and tired, and his moodiness was, for the most part, commented on with sympathy.

The brides and bridegrooms, on the other hand, had to withstand a veritable fusillade of banter, which Nicolaes Beresteyn received sulkily, and the solid Kaatje with much complacency. Indeed, this bride was willing enough to be chaffed, had even a saucy reply handy when she was teased, and ogled her friends slyly as she went by. But Gilda remained silent and demure. I don't think that she heard a word that was said. She literally seemed to glide across the room like the veritable sprite her ardent lover had called her. Her tiny hand, white and slightly fluttering, rested on his arm, lost in the richly embroidered folds of his magnificent doublet. She was not fully conscious of her actions, moved along as in a dream, without the exertion of her will. She was wont to speak afterwards of this brief progress of hers through the crowded room with the chattering throng of friends all around, as a walk through air. Nothing seemed to her to exist. There was no room, no crowd, no noise. She alone existed, and ethereally. Her lover was there, however, and she was fully conscious of his will. She knew that anon she would be a captive in his arms, to be dealt with by him as he liked; and this caused her to feel that fearful and yet wholly content.

He, Diogenes, on the other hand, was the picture of fretful impatience, squeezing his soft felt hat in his hand as if it were the throat of some deadly enemy. He never once looked at his bride; probably if he had he would have lost the last shred of self-control, would have seized her in his arms and carried her away then and there, regardless of the respect due to the Stadtholder and to his host.

But the trial, though severe to any ebullient temper, was not of long duration. Anon the Stadtholder was in the hall, booted once more and spurred, and surrounded by his equerries and by the bridal party.

His bodyguard encumbered the hall, their steel bonnets and short breastplates reflecting the wintry light which came, many-hued, through the tall, stained glass windows. In the rear the wedding guests were crowding forward to catch a last glimpse of the Stadtholder, and of the pageant of his departure. The great hall door had been thrown open, and through it, framed in the richness of the heavy oaken jambs, a picture appeared, gay, animated, brilliant, such as the small city had never before seen.

There was the holiday throng, moving ceaselessly in an ever flowing and glittering stream. The women in huge, winged hoods and short kirtles, the men in fur bonnets and sleeved coats, were strolling up and down the quay. There were the inevitable musicians with pipes, viols, and sackbuts, pushing their way through the dense mass of people, with a retinue behind them of young people and old, and of children, all stepping it to the measure of the tune. There was the swarthy foreigner with his monkey dressed out in gaily coloured rags, and the hawker with his tray full of bright handkerchiefs, of glass beads, chains, and amulets, crying out his wares. It was, in fact, a holiday crowd, drawn thither by Mynheer Beresteyn's largesse; the shopkeepers with their wives, who had been induced to shut down shop for the afternoon, as if some official function had been in progress; the apprentices getting in everybody's way, hilarious and full of mischief, trying to steal the hawkers' wares, or to play impish pranks on their employers; servant maids and sober apothecaries, out-at-elbow scribes and stolid rustics, together with the rag and tag of soldiery, the paid mercenaries of Maurice of Nassau's army, in their showy doublets and plumed bonnets, elbowing their way through with the air of masters.

And all this brilliant gathering was lit by a pale, wintry sun: and with the sleepy waters of the Eem, and the frowning towers of the Koppel-poort forming just the right natural-tinted background to the scene.

"Make way there!" the prince's herald shouted, whilst another rang a fanfare upon the trumpet. "Make way for his High and Mightiness, Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, Stadtholder of the United Provinces of Holland, Friesland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Over Yssel, and Groningen! Make way!"

The equerries were bringing the prince's charger, the pikemen followed in gorgeous padded trunks and slashed hose. To the noise of the moving throng, the chatter and the laughter, the scraping of viols and piping of sackbuts, was now added the din of champing horses, rattle of bits and chains, the shouts of the men who were bringing the horses along. The crowd receded, leaving an open space in front of the house, where mounted men assembled so quickly that they seemed as if they had risen out of the ground.

The Stadtholder was taking final leave of his host listening with what patience he could master to lengthy, loyal speeches from the more important guests, and from the other bride and bridegroom. He had — deliberately methinks — turned his back on Diogenes, who, strangely enough, was booted and spurred too, had his sword buckled to his belt, and carried a dark cloak on his arm, presenting not at all the picture of a bridegroom in holiday attire.

And it all happened so quickly that neither the guests within, nor the soldiers, nor the crowd outside, had time to realize it or to take it in. No one understood, in fact, what was happening, save perhaps the Stadtholder, who guessed; and he engaged the sober fathers near him in earnest conversation.

A mounted equerry, dressed in rough leather jerkin and leading another horse by the bridle, had taken up his stand in the forefront of the crowd. Now at a signal unheard by all save him, he jumped out of the saddle and stood beside the stirrup leathers of the second charger. At that same instant Diogenes, with movements quick as lightning, had thrown the cloak, which he was carrying round Gilda's shoulders, and before she could utter a scream or even a gasp, he had stooped and picked her up in his arms as if she were a weightless doll.

Another second and he was outside the door, at the top of the steps which led down to the quay. For an instant he stood there, his keen eyes sweeping over the picture before him. Like a young lion that hath been caged and now scents liberty once more, he inhaled

the biting air; a superb figure, with head tossed back, eyes and lips laughing with the joy of deliverance, the inert figure of the girl lying in his arms.

He felt her clinging more closely to him, and revelled in that intoxicating sense of power when the one woman yields who holds a world of happiness in her tiny hand. He felt the tightening of her hold, watched the look of contentment stealing over her face, saw her eyes close, her lips smile, and knew that they were ready for a kiss.

Then he caught sight of his horse, and of the man in the leather jerkin. He signalled to him to bring the horses near. The crowd understood his meaning and set up a ringing cheer. Many things had been seen in Dutch cities before, but never so romantic an abduction as this. The bridegroom carrying off his bride in the face of scandalized and protesting wedding guests! The Stadtholder even was seen to laugh. He could be seen in the background, reassuring the horrified guests, and trying by kind words and pressure of hand to appease Mynheer Beresteyn's agonized surprise.

"I knew of his mad project, and I must say I approved," the prince whispered to the agitated father. "He is taking her to Rotterdam to-night. Let the child be, Mynheer; she is safe enough in his arms."

Beresteyn was one of those men who throughout his life had always known how to accept the inevitable. Perhaps in his heart he knew that the Stadtholder was right.

"Give them your blessing, Mynheer," Maurice of Nassau urged. "English gentleman or soldier of fortune, the man is a man and deserves it. Your daughter loves him. Let them be."

Diogenes had encountered Beresteyn's reproachful glance. He did not move from where he stood, only his arms closed tighter still around Gilda's motionless form. It was an instinctive challenge to the father — almost a defiance. What he had would hold, in spite of all.

Beresteyn hesitated for the mere fraction of a second longer; then he, too, stepped out through the door and approached the man and his burden. He said nothing, but, in the face of the crowd, he stooped and pressed his lips against his daughter's forehead. Then Mynheer Beresteyn murmured something which sounded like a blessing, and added solemnly:

"May God's wrath descend upon you, my lord, if you ever cause her unhappiness."

"Amen to that!" responded Diogenes lightly. "She and I, Mynheer, will dream together for awhile in England, but I'll bring her back to you when our orchards are gay with apple-blossom and there is a taste of summer in the air."

He bowed his head to receive the father's blessing. The crowd cheered again; sackbuts and viols set up a lively tune. At every window of the house, along the quay eager faces were peering out, gazing on the moving spectacle. In the doorway of Mynheer Beresteyn's house the Stadtholder remained to watch. For the moment he seemed better and brighter, more like his former self. The rest of the bridal party was still in the hall, but the wedding guests had gone back into the banqueting-room, whence they could see through the open windows what was going on.

7

Then it was that suddenly a curious spectacle presented itself to view. It was, in truth, so curious an one that those of the crowd who were in the rear withdrew their consideration from the romantic scene before them in order to concentrate it on those two strange-looking cavaliers who had just emerged from under the Koppel-port, and were slowly forging their way through the throng.

It was the ringing shout, reiterated twice in succession by one of these cavaliers, that had at first arrested the attention of the crowd, and had even caused Diogenes to pause in the very act of starting for his sentimental adventure. To him the voice that uttered such peremptory clamour was familiar enough, but what in St. Bavon's name did it all mean?

"Hola! you verdommte plepshurk!" came for the third time from the strange cavalier. "Make way there! We are for the house of Mynheer Beresteyn, where we are bidden as his guests."

A loud burst of hilarity greeted this announcement, and a mocking voice retorted lustily:

"Hey! Make way there for the honoured guests of Mynheer Beresteyn!"

In truth, it was small wonder that the aspect of these two cavaliers caused such wild jollity amongst the people, who at this precise moment were overready for laughter. One of them, as lean as a gatepost, sat high on his horse with long shanks covered in high leathern boots. A tall sugar-loaf hat sat precariously upon his head, and his hatchet face, with the hooked, prominent nose and sharp, unshaved chin, looked blue with the cold.

Behind him on a pillion rode — or rather clung — his companion, a short man as rotund as the other was lean, with round face which no doubt had once been of a healthy ruddy tint, but was now streaked and blotched with pallor. He, too, wore a sugar-loaf hat, but it had slid down to the back of his head, and was held in place by a piece of black tape, which he had in his mouth like a horse has its bit. He was holding on very tightly with his short, fat arms to his companion's body, and his feet were tied together with thick cord beneath the horse's belly. His doublet and hose were smeared with mud and stained with blood, and altogether he presented a pitiable spectacle, more especially when he rolled his small, beady eyes and looked with a scared expression on the hilarious apprentices who were dancing and screaming around him.

But the other appeared quite indifferent to the jeers and mockeries of the crowd. He passed majestically through the gateway of the Koppel-poort that spans the river, not unlike the figure of that legendary knight of the rueful countenance of whom the SeÖor Cervantes had been writing of late.

Diogenes had remained on the top of the steps, perfectly still. His keen eyes, frowning now under the straight, square brow, watched the slow progress of those two quaint figures. Who will ever attempt to explain the subtle workings of that mysterious force which men term Intuition? Whence does it come? Where does it dwell? How doth it come knocking at a man's heart with cold, hard knuckles that bruise and freeze? Diogenes felt that sudden call. Gilda was still lying snugly in his arms; she had seen nothing. But he had become suspicious now, mistrustful of that Fate which had but a moment ago smiled so encouragingly upon him. All his exhilaration fell away from him like a discarded mantle, leaving him chilled to the soul and inert, and with the premonition of something evil looming from afar on the horizon of his Destiny.

The two quaint companions came nearer. Soon Diogenes could read every line upon the familiar countenances. He and those men had fought side by side, shoulder to shoulder, had bled together, suffered together, starved and triumphed together. There was but little the one thought that the others could not know. Even now, on Socrates; lean, lantern-jawed face Diogenes read plainly the message of some tragedy as yet uncomprehended by the other, but which Pythagoras' sorry plight had more than suggested. It was a deeper thing than Intuition; it was Knowledge. Knowledge that the hour of happiness had gone by, the hour of security and of repose, and that the relentless finger of Fate pointed once more to paths beset with sorrow and with thorns, to the path of an adventurer and of a soldier of fortune, rather than to the easy existence of a wealthy gentleman.

As Socrates swung himself wearily out of the saddle, Diogenes' piercing glance darted a mute, quick query toward his friend. The other replied by a mere nod of the head. They knew; they understood one another. Put into plain language, question and answer might have been put thus:

"Are we to go on the warpath again, old compeer?"

"So it seems. There's fighting to be done. Will you be in it, too?"

And Diogenes gave that quick impatient sigh which was so characteristic of him, and very slowly, very gently, as if she were a sheaf of flowers, he allowed his beloved to glide out of his arms.

CHAPTER III. THE GREAT INTERRUPTION

1

The next moment Diogenes was down on the quay, in time to help Socrates to lift his brother philosopher off the pillion.

Gilda, a little scared at first, not understanding, looked wonderingly around her, blinking in the glare, until she encountered her father's troubled glance.

"What is it?" she murmured, half-stupidly.

He tried to explain, pointed to the group down below, the funny, fat man in obvious pain and distress, being lifted off the horse and received in those same strong arms which had sheltered her — Gilda — but a moment ago.

The Stadtholder, too, was curious, asked many questions, and had to be waited on deferentially with replies and explanations, which were still of necessity very vague.

"Attend to his Highness, father," Gilda said more firmly. "I can look to myself now."

She felt a little strange, a little humiliated perhaps, standing here alone, as if abandoned by the very man who but a moment ago had seemed ready to defy every convention for her sake. Just now she had been the centre of attraction, the pivot round which revolved excitement, curiosity, interest. Even the Stadtholder had, for the space of those few minutes, forgotten his cares and his responsibilities in order to think of her and to plead with her father for her freedom and her happiness. Now she was all alone, seemed so for the moment, while her father and Mynheer van den Poele and the older men crowded around his Highness, and every one had their eyes fixed on the curious spectacle below.

But that sense of isolation and of disappointment was only transient. Gilda Beresteyn had recently gone through experiences far more bitter than this — experiences that had taught her to think and to act quickly and on her own initiative. She saw her lover remounting the steps now. He was carrying his friend in his arms as if the latter had been a child, his other compeer following ruefully. The rowdy 'prentices had been silenced; two or three kindly pairs of hands had proved ready to assist and to care for the horse, which looked spent. The holiday crowd was silent and sympathetic. Every one felt that in this sudden interruption of the gay and romantic adventure there lurked a something mysterious which might very well prove to be a tragedy.

It was Gilda who led the way into the house, calling Maria to open a guest-chamber forthwith, one where the bed was spread with freshly-aired linen. The English physician, at a word from the Stadtholder, was ready to minister to the sick man, and Mynheer Beresteyn himself showed the young soldier and his burden up the stairs, while the crowd of wedding guests and of the prince's bodyguard made way for them to pass through the hall.

What had been such a merry and excited throng earlier in the day was now more than ever subdued. The happenings in the house of Mynheer Beresteyn, which should have been at this hour solely centred around the Stadtholder and the wedding party, were strange enough indeed to call forth whispered comments and subdued murmurings in secluded corners. To begin with, the Stadtholder had put off his departure for an hour and more, and this apparently at the instance of Diogenes, who had begged for the assistance of the prince's English physician to minister to his friend.

People marvelled why the town leech should not have been called in. Why should a strange plepshurk's sickness interfere with his Highness's movements? Also the Stadtholder appeared agitated and fretful since Diogenes had had a word with him. Maurice of Nassau, acquiescing with unwonted readiness both in his physician remaining to look after the sick man and in the postponement of his own departure, had since then retired to a small private room on a floor above, in the company of Mynheer Beresteyn and several of the more important guests. The others were left to conjecture and to gossip, which they did freely, whilst Gilda was no longer to be seen, and the worthy Kaatje was left pouting and desolate beside her morose bridegroom. Nicolaes Beresteyn, indeed, appeared more moody than any one, although the interruption could not in itself have interfered with his new domestic arrangements. At first he had thought of following his father and Stadtholder into the private chamber upstairs, but to this Mynheer Beresteyn had demurred.

"Your place, my son," he said, with a gently mocking smile, "is beside your Kaatje. His Highness will understand."

And when Nicolaes, trying to insist, followed his father up the stairs to the very threshold of the council room, Mynheer quite firmly and unceremoniously closed the door in his face.

2

Up in the guest-chamber, Diogenes was watching over his sick friend. The first moment that he was alone with his two old compeers, he had turned to Socrates and queried anxiously:

"What is it? What hath happened?"

"He'll tell you when he can speak," the other replied. "We found him lying in the snow outside Lang Soeren with two bullet-wounds in his back, after we had searched the whole *verfloekte Veluwe* for him all day. We took him into Lang Soeren, where there was a leech, who extracted the one bullet that had lodged under his shoulder blade; the other had only passed through the flesh along his ribs, where it made a clean hole but could not otherwise be found."

"Well, yes — and—" Diogenes went on impatiently, for the other was somewhat slow of speech.

"The leech," Socrates rejoined unperturbed, "said that the patient must lie still for a few days because of the fever; but what must this fool do but shout and rave the moment he is conscious that he must to Amersfoort to see you at once. And so loudly did he shout and so wildly did he rave, that the leech himself got scared and ran away. Whereupon I set the bladder-bellied loon upon the pillion behind me and brought him hither, thinking the ride would do him less harm than all that wild screeching and waving of arms. And here we are!" Socrates concluded blandly, and threw himself into the nearest chair; for he, too, apparently was exhausted with the fatigue of his perilous journey across the waste.

Just then the leech returned, and nothing more could be said. The sick man groaned a good deal under the physician's hands, and Socrates presently dropped off to sleep.

The noise in the street below had somewhat abated, but there was still the monotonous hubbub attendant on a huge crowd on the move. Diogenes went to the window and gazed out upon the throng. Even now the wintry sun was sinking slowly down in the west in a haze of purple and rose, licking the towers of St. Maria and Joris with glistening tongues of fire, and tinting the snow-covered roofs and gables with a rosy hue. The sluggish waters of the Eem appeared like liquid flame.

For a few minutes the Koppel-poort, the bridges, the bastions, the helmets and breastplates of the prince's guard threw back a thousand rays of multi-coloured lights. For a brief instant the earth glowed and blushed under this last kiss of her setting lord. Then all became sombre and dreary, as if a veil had been drawn over the light that illuminated the little city, leaving but the grey shadows visible, and the sadness of evening and the expectance of a long winter's night.

Diogenes gave a moody sigh. His fiery temper chafed under this delay. Not for a moment would he have thought of leaving his sick comrade until he had been reassured as to his fate; but if everything had happened as he had planned and wished, he would be half-way to Utrecht by now, galloping adown the lonely roads with a delicious burden upon his saddle-bow, and feeling the cold wintry wind whistling past his ears as he put the leagues behind him.

He turned away from the window, and tiptoed out of the room. The groans of the sick man, the measured movements of the leech, the snoring of Socrates, were grating on his nerves. Closing the door softly behind him, he strode down the gallery which ran in front of him along the entire width of the house. Up and down once or twice. The movement did him good, and he liked the solitude. The house was still full of a chattering throng; he could hear the murmur of conversation rising from below. Once he peeped over the carved balustrade of the gallery and down into the hall. The prince's bodyguard was still there, and two or three equerries. The clank of their spurs resounded up the stairs as they moved about on the flag-covered floor.

3

When Diogenes resumed his pacing up and down, he suddenly became aware of the soft and distant sound of a woman's voice, singing to the accompaniment of a quaint-toned virginal. He paused and listened. The voice was Gilda's, and the sentimental ditty which she sang had just that melancholy strain in it which is to be found in the songs of all nations that are foredoomed to suffer and to fight. Chiding himself for a fool, Diogenes, nevertheless, felt for a moment or two quite unable to move. It seemed as if Gilda's song — he could not catch the words — was tearing at his heart even whilst it reduced him to a state of silent ecstasy. Much against his will he felt the hot tears welling to his eyes. With his wonted impatience he swept them away with the back of his hand.

"Curse me for a snivelling blockhead!" he muttered; and strode resolutely in the direction whence had come the sweet sad sound.

Then it was that he noticed that one of the doors which gave on the gallery was ajar. It was through this that the intoxicating sound had come to his ears. After an instant's hesitation he pushed the door open. It gave on a small panelled room with deep-embursed window, through which the grey evening light came in, shyly peeping. On the window-ledge a couple of pots of early tulips flaunted their crude colours against the neutral-tinted background, whilst on the shelves in a corner of the room gleamed the vivid blue of bright-patterned china plates. But the flowers and the china and the grey evening light were but momentary impressions, which did not fix themselves upon the man's consciousness. All that he retained clearly was the vision of Gilda sitting at the instrument, her delicate hands resting upon the keys. She had ceased to play, and was looking straight out before her, and Diogenes could see her piquant profile silhouetted against the pale, slivery light. She had changed her stiff bridal robes for a plain gown of dark-coloured worsted, relieved only by dainty cuffs and collar of filmy Flemish lace.

At the sound of her husband's footsteps she turned to look on him, and her whole face became wreathed in smiles. He was still booted and spurred, ready for the journey, with his long, heavy sword buckled to his belt; but he had put hat and mantle aside. The moment he came in Gilda put a finger to her lips.

"Sh-sh-sh!" she whispered. "If you make no noise they'll not know you are here."

She pointed across the room to where a heavy tapestry apparently masked another door.

"The Stadtholder is in there," she added naively, "with father and Mynheer van den Poele and a number of other grave seigneurs. Kaatje is weeping and complaining somewhere down in mejuffrouw van den Poele's arms. So I sat down to the virginal and left the door open, so that you might hear me sing; for if you heard I thought you would surely come. I was lonely," she added simply, "and waiting for you."

Quite enough in truth to make a man who is dizzy with love ten thousand times more dizzy still. And Diogenes was desperately in love, more so indeed than he had ever thought himself capable of being. He quietly unbuckled his sword, which clanged against the floor when he moved, and deposited in cautiously and noiselessly in an angle of the room. Then he tiptoed across to the virginal and knelt beside his beloved.

For a moment or two he rested his head against her cool white hands.

"To think," he murmured, with a sigh of infinite longing, "that we might be half-way to Rotterdam by now! But I could not leave my old Pythagoras till I knew that he was in no danger."

"What saith the physician, my lord?" she asked.

"I am waiting now for his final verdict. But he gives me every hope. In an hour I shall know."

He paused, trying to read the varying play of emotions upon her face. From the other side of the tapestry came the low sound of subdued murmurings.

"It would not be too late," he went on, slightly hesitating, taking her hands in his and forcing her glance to meet his. "You knew I meant to take you to England — to carry you away — to-night?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I knew," she replied. "And I was glad to go."

"Will you be afraid to come presently?" he urged, his voice quivering with excitement. "In the dark — I know the road well. We could make Rotterdam by midnight — and set sail for England To-morrow as I had prearranged—"

"Just as you wish, my dear lord," she assented simply.

"I could not wait, ma donna! I had planned it all — to ride with you Rotterdam to-night — and then to-morrow on the seas — with you — and England in sight, I could not wait!" he reiterated, almost pathetically, so great was his impatience.

"I am ready to start when you will, my lord," she said again, with a smile.

"And you'll not be afraid?" he insisted. "It will be dark — and cold. We could not reach Rotterdam before midnight."

"How should I be afraid of the darkness or of anything," she retorted, "when I am with you. And how should I be cold, when I am nestling in your arms?"

He had his arms round her in an instant. He would have kissed her if he dared. But with the kiss all restraint would of a surety have vanished, as doth the snow in the warm embrace of the sun. He would have seized her then and there once more and carried her away. And this time no consideration on earth would have stayed him. With a muttered exclamation, he jumped to his feet and passed his slender hand across his forehead.

"Good St. Bavon!" he murmured whimsically. "Why are you so unkind to me to-night?"

And she, a little disappointed because, in truth, she had been ready for the kiss, rejoined with a quaint little pout:

"You are always appealing to St. Bavon, my dear lord! Why is that?"

"Because," he replied very seriously, "St. Bavon is the patron saint of all men that are weak."

She fixed great, wondering eyes on him. The reply was ambiguous; she did not quite understand the drift of it.

"But you, my lord, are so strong," she objected.

It was perhaps too dark for her to see the expression in his face; but even so she felt herself unaccountably blushing under that gaze which she could not clearly see. Whereupon he uttered an ejaculation which sounded almost as if he were angered, and abruptly, without any warning, he turned on his heel and went out of the room, leaving Gilda alone once more beside the virginal.

But she no longer felt the desire to sing. The happiness which filled her entire soul was too complete even for song.

4

One of the equerries had awhile ago found his way to the guest-chamber where the sick man was lying, and had informed Diogenes that the Stadtholder was now ready to start on his way, but desired his presence that he might take his leave. Then it was that Diogenes sent an urgent message to his Highness, entreating him to remain but a little while longer. The sick man was better, would soon wake out of a refreshing sleep. Diogenes would then question him. Poor old Pythagoras had something to say, something that the Stadtholder himself must hear. Of this Diogenes was absolutely convinced.

"I know it," the young soldier asserted earnestly. "I seem to feel it in my bones."

Whereupon the Stadtholder had decided to wait, and Diogenes, after his brief glimpse of Gilda, felt easier in his mind, less impatient. Already he chided himself for his gloomy forebodings. Since his beloved was ready to entrust herself to him, the journey to England would only be put off by a few hours. What need to repine? Joy would be none the less sweet for this brief delay.

A quarter of an hour later Pythagoras was awake the physician out of the room, and Diogenes was sitting on the edge of the bed holding his faithful comrade's hand, and trying to disentangle some measure of coherence out of the other's tangled narrative, whilst Socrates stood by making an occasional comment or just giving an expressive grunt from time to time. It took both time and patience, neither of which commodities did Diogenes possess in super-abundance; but after the first few moments of listening to the rambling of the sick man, he became very still and attentive. The busy house, the noisy guests, the waiting Stadtholder down below, all slipped out from his ken. Holding his comrade's hand, he was with him on the snow-clad Veluwe, and had found his way with him into the lonely mill.

"It was the Lord of Stoutenburg," Pythagoras averred, with as much strength as he could command. "I'd stake my life on't! I knew him at once. How could I ever forget his ugly countenance, after all he made you suffer?"

"Well — and?" queried Diogenes eagerly.

"I knew the other man too, but could not be sure of his name. He was one of those who was with Stoutenburg that day at Ryswick, when you so cleverly put a spoke in their abominable wheel. I knew them both, I tell you!" the sick man insisted feverishly; "but I had the good sense not to betray what I knew."

"But Stoutenburg did not know you?" Diogenes insisted.

"Yes, he did," the other replied, sagely nodding his head. "That is why he ordered his menial to put a bullet into my back. The two noble gentlemen questioned me first," he went on more coherently; "then they plied me with wine. They wanted to make me drunk so as to murder me at their leisure."

"They little know they, eh, thou bottomless barrel?" Diogenes broke in with a laugh. "The cask hath not been fashioned yet that would contain enough liquor even to quench thy thirst, what?"

"They plied me with wine," Pythagoras reiterated gravely; "and then I pretended to get very drunk. For I soon remarked that the more drunk they thought I was, the more freely they talked."

"Well, and what did they say?"

"They talked of De Berg crossing the IJssel with ten thousand men between Doesburg and Bronchorst; and of Isembourg coming up from Kleve at the same time. I make no doubt that the design is to seize Arnheim and Nijmegen. They talked a deal about Arnheim, which they thought was scantily garrisoned and could easily be taken by surprise and made to surrender. Having got these two cities, the plan is to march across the Veluwe and offer battle to the Stadtholder with a force vastly superior to his, if in the meanwhile—"

He paused. It seemed as if his voice, hoarse with fatigue, was refusing him service. Diogenes reached for the potion which stood on a small table beside the bed. The sick man made a wry face.

"Physic?" he ejaculated reproachfully. "From you, old compeer? Times were when—"

"There will be a time now," retorted the other gruffly, "when you'll sink back into a raging fever, and will be babbling bibulous nonsense if you don't do as you are told."

"I'll sink into a raging fever now," the sick man retorted fretfully, "if I have not something potable to drink ere long."

"You'll drink this physic now, old compeer," Diogenes insisted, and held the mug to his friend's parched lips, forcing him to drink. "Then I'll see what can be done for you later on."

He schooled himself to patience and gentleness. At all costs Pythagoras must complete his narrative. There was just something more that he wished to say, apparently — something fateful and of deadly import, but which for some obscure reason he found difficult to put into words.

"Now then, old friend, make an effort!" Diogenes urged insistently. "There is still something on your mind. What is it?"

Pythagoras' round, beady eyes were rolling in their sockets. He looked scared, like one who has gazed on what is preternatural and weird.

"Stoutenburg has a project," he resumed after a while, and sank his spent voice to the merest whisper. "Listen, my compeer; for the very walls have ears. Bend yours to me. There! That's better," he added, as Diogenes bent his long back until his ear was almost on a level with the sick man's lips. "Stoutenburg hath a project, I tell you. A damnable project, akin to the one which you caused to abort three months ago."

"Assassination?" Diogenes queried curtly.

The sick man nodded.

"Do you know the details?"

"Alas, no! But it is aimed at the Stadtholder. What form it is to take I know not, and they had evidently talked it all over before. It seemed almost as if the other man — Stoutenburg's friend — was horrified at the project. He tried to argue once or twice, and once I heard him say quite distinctly: 'Not that, Stoutenburg! Let us fight him like men; even kill him, like men kill one another. But not like that.' But my Lord Stoutenburg only laughed."

Diogenes was silent. He was deep in thought.

"You had no other indication?" he asked reflectively.

"No," Pythagoras replied. "All I saw was that my lord kept the finger and thumb of his right hand in a hidden pocket of his doublet, and once he said: 'The Prince of Poets' taught me to manufacture them; and I supply them to him you know of, wherever he can find an opportunity to come out here to me. He uses them at his discretion. But we can judge by results! And then he laughed because his friend appeared to shudder. I was puzzled," the sick man went on wearily, "because of it all; and I marvelled who the Prince of Poets might be, for I am no scholar and I thought that perhaps—"

"You are quite sure Stoutenburg said 'Prince of Poets'?" Diogenes insisted, frowning. "Your ears must have been buzzing by then."

"I am quite sure," Pythagoras asserted. "But I could not see what he had in his hand."

Diogenes said nothing more, and silence fell upon the stately chamber, the sombre panelling and heavy tapestries of which effectually deadened every sound that came from the outside. Only the monumental clock up against the wall ticked in a loud monotone. The sick man, wearied with so much talking, fell back against the pillows. The shades of evening were quickly gathering in now; the corners of the room were indistinguishable in the gloom. Only the bed-clothes still gleamed white in the uncertain light. From the distant tower of St. Maria Kerk a bell chimed the hour of seven. A few minutes went by. Anon there came a scratching at the door.

In response to Diogenes' loud "Enter!" the physician came in, preceded by a serving-man carrying two lighted candles in massive silver sconces.

"His Highness cannot wait any longer," the physician said, as soon as he had perceived Diogenes, still sitting pensive on the edge of the bed. "And as I have no anxiety about the patient now, I will, by your leave, place him in your hands."

Diogenes appeared to wake as if out of a dream. He rose and looked about him somewhat vaguely. The physician thought he must have been asleep.

"Will you pay your respects to his Highness?" the latter said. "I think he desires to see you."

Just for a moment Diogenes remained quite still. The physician had approached the sick man, and was surveying him with critical but obviously reassured attention. Socrates was again snoring somewhere in a far corner of the room, and the serving-man, having placed the candles on the table, stood waiting at the door.

"Yes. I'll to his Highness," Diogenes said abruptly; and, beckoning to the serving-man to precede him, he strode out of the room.

Outside on the landing he paused. Then, with a characteristic, impulsive gesture, he suddenly beat his forehead with the palm of his hand.

"The Prince of Poets, of course!" he murmured under his breath. "Francis Borgia, the true descendant of his infamous ancestors! Poison! And a slow one at that! Oh, the miserable assassins! Please God, this knowledge hath not come too late!" he added with earnest fervor.

A quarter of an hour later the Stadtholder was in possession of all the facts as they had been revealed to Diogenes by his comrade in arms.

"I seem fated," he said to Diogenes kindly, yet not without a measure of bitterness, "to owe my safety to you and your brother philosophers."

He was discussing De Berg's surprise plans on Arnheim and Nijmegen. Of that abominable crime, hatched with the chance aid of a poison-mongering Borgia, Diogenes had not as yet spoken one word. Accustomed to swift decisions and prompt action, he had already made up his mind that he would speak of it first to the English physician, whose business it would be to see to it that the insidious poison no longer reached the prince's lips, at the same time enjoining the strictest secrecy in the matter; for it would only be by rigid circumspection and ceaseless watching that the assassin's accomplice could be brought to justice.

Mynheer Beresteyn and some of his older friends were in the room with his Highness. They all put their grave heads together, for there was no doubt that the Archduchess's advisers had planned an invasion of the United Provinces on a grand scale.

"Arnheim is insufficiently defended, of that there's no doubt," the Stadtholder said. "It was my intention to reinforce all the frontier cities, and to keep their garrisons up to the requisite numbers. If I only had the strength—"

He paused. The feeling of physical weakness consequent on disease caused him endless and acute bitterness.

"It is not too late to send troops to Arnheim and to Nijmegen," Diogenes broke in, in his usual abrupt manner. "Three thousand in one city, four thousand in the other would be sufficient, if your Highness can act quickly."

"I cannot detach seven or eight thousand troops from my forces at the present moment," the prince rejoined. "If Spinola were to attack from the south I am only just strong enough to defend myself as it is."

"Marquet is in Overijssel, I believe," urged the soldier. "He hath three or four thousand troops. Let him push on to Arnheim to reinforce the garrison."

"And De Keyser is at Wageningen," the prince broke in, fired, despite himself, by the other's enthusiasm. "He hath three thousand mercenaries from Switzerland and Germany."

"Excellent fighters and well-seasoned," Diogenes asserted. "And trained under Maurice of Nassau, the first captain of this or any epoch!"

"Ay!" sighed Maurice wearily. "But time is against us. Marquet is at Vorden—"

"But Arnheim and Nijmegen can hold out for awhile," Diogenes argued forcefully.

"And would hold out to the last man," Mynheer Beresteyn added, "if they knew that succor would come in due course."

"Tis only uncertainty that paralyses the endurance of a garrison," Diogenes went on with firm emphasis. "Send to Arnheim and to Nijmegen, your Highness! Bid them hold out against any attack until you come with ten thousand troops to their aid. In the meanwhile, send orders to Marquet and to De Keyser to advance forthwith with reinforcements for these two garrisons. Then raise your standard once more in Friesland, Drenthe, and Groningen. I'll warrant you will have twenty thousand men there ready to fight once more for liberty and for you!"

His sonorous voice rang clear and metallic in the small, panelled room. His enthusiasm appeared almost like a living thing, a tangible force that touched the hearts and minds of all the solemn burghers here, causing their eyes to glow and their fists, not yet wholly unskilled in the use of the sword, to clench with inward excitement. The Stadtholder looked up at him with undisguised admiration.

"Is it the English blood in you, man," he said with a smile, "that makes you valorous in war and wise in counsel?"

Diogenes shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I fought for your Highness before now," he rejoined, with a quaint, self-deprecating laugh, "when I had nothing to lose save my skin, and still less to gain. The English blood in me dearly loves a fight, and all doth hate the Spaniard and all his tyrannies."

"Then I can reckon on you?" the prince riposted quickly.

"On me, your Highness?" the other exclaimed.

"On you, of course. With your mother's blood in your veins, the United Provinces have a double claim on you. You have fought for us before, as you say, unknown to us then, an obscure soldier of fortune with nothing to lose and but little to gain. Join us now, man, in the field and under the council tent. Get to horse to-night. You will find Marquet at Vorden, on his way south from Overijssel. Tell him to push on at once to Arnheim with all the troops he hath at his command. From thence I would bid you go straightway to De Keyser, who is at Wageningen, and order him to reinforce Nijmegen forthwith with three thousand men, if we have them. Tell both Marquet and De Keyser to fight and hold the towns. I'll to their aid as soon as may be. Then, man, join my brother Frederick, and help him to raise my standard in Gelderland and in Overijssel, and rally ten thousand men to our cause. I feel that success will attend our arms if we keep you by our side."

Maurice of Nassau had spoken with more vigor and verve than he had shown for the past three months. Indeed, his deeply anxious friends could not help but feel that the old fighting spirit of this peerless commander had not wholly been undermined by disease. Five pairs of eager eyes had scanned his features while he spoke; five hearts beat in response to his enthusiasm. Now, when he had finished speaking, Mynheer Beresteyn and the others turned their expectant gaze upon the stranger who had been so signally honoured; but he looked uncertain, gravely perturbed. In the flickering light of the wax candles his face appeared haggard and drawn, and a set line had crept around his ever-laughing lips.

"You seem to hesitate, my friend," the Stadtholder remarked, with that tone of bitterness which had become habitual to him. "Methought you said that the English blood in you dearly loved a fight. But in truth, I had forgotten! You have other claims upon you now — one, at least, which is paramount. An easy, untroubled life awaits you. No wonder you hesitate to embark on so perilous an adventure!" Then, as if loth to give up the thought that was foremost in his mind, he added, with persuasive insistence; "If you followed me, you'd have everything to gain — nothing to lose save a sentimental pastime."

Just then Diogenes caught Mynheer Beresteyn's eyes fixed steadily upon him. The old man who knew well enough what was going on in that wayward, turbulent mind — the doubts, the fears, the hideous, horrible disappointment.

Nothing to lose! Ye gods, at the hour when a whole life's happiness not only beckoned insistently, but was actually there to hand, like a bunch of ripe and luscious fruit, ready to drop into a yearning hand! Here was the end of a vagabond life, here was love and home and peace, and all to be given up as soon as found to the equally insistent call of honour and of duty!

The others did not speak; perhaps they, too, understood. Men in those days were used to stern sacrifices. They and there forebears had given up their all so that their children's children might live in freedom and security. They only marvelled if this stranger, with the combative English blood in him, would give up what was so infinitely dear to him — the exquisite wife to whom he had plighted his troth but a few hours ago — and if he would fight for them again as he had done in the past.

The Stadtholder remained moody and silent, and the close atmosphere of the heavily curtained room seemed to become suddenly still, hushed, as if expectant of the grave decision to come. The wax candles burned quite steadily, with just a tiny fillet of smoke rising up towards the low-raftered ceiling, almost like the incense of silent prayer rising unwaveringly to God.

To many the silence appeared absolute, but not to the man who stood in the midst of them all beside a table littered with papers and documents, his slender hand — the hand of an idealist, rendered firm and hard by action — resting lightly upon the board. A tense look in his eyes. Through the silence he could hear his beloved in the little room behind the heavy tapestry. He could hear the soft, insidious sound of the quaint-toned virginal, and her voice, tender and melancholy as the call of the bird to its mate, humming the sweet refrain gently under her breath, with every note she seemed to tear at his heart with an unendurable regret for what might have been.

Oh, it had been such a perfect dream! Gilda and that stately home over in England, and the ride through the night in pursuit of happiness which had proved as elusive as Fata Morgana, as unreal as the phantoms born in the mind of a rhapsodist.

Then the silence did, indeed, become absolute, even to him. Gilda had ceased her song. Only his straining ears caught the sound of her footsteps as she rose from the virginal, then moved swiftly about the room.

“Well,” the Stadtholder reiterated, after awhile, “which is it to me, my friend? I start for Utrecht within the hour and if we are to save Arnheim and Nijmegen, you should be on your way to Vorden with the necessary moneys and my written orders to-night. Of course, I cannot compel you,” he added simply “The decision rests with you, and if you—”

The words died on his lips, and in an instant all eyes were turned to that end of the room where a heavy portiere divided it from the room beyond. A faint rustling sound had come from there, then the grating of metal rings upon the cornice-pole that held the tapestry. The next moment Gilda appeared in the doorway, shadowy, wraith-like in her sombre gown that melted into the gloom. Just her small, white face and delicate hands stood out against the murky background, and the gossamer lace at her throat and wrists.

For a moment she stood there, one hand still holding back the heavy portiere, quite still, taking in the company at a glance. A sigh of longing and of renunciation came from an overburdened heart, and was wafted up to the foot of Him who knows all and understands all. Then Gilda allowed the tapestry to fall together behind her, and she came quickly forward. In the other hand she was holding, firmly clasped, her husband’s heavy sword.

She came close to him, and then said simply, with an ingenuous smile: “I thought you might wonder where you had left it. It was in the other room. You will be wanting it, my dear lord, if you start for Vorden within the hour.”

With deft fingers she buckled the sword to his belt. This, in truth, was her decision, and she had acted with scarce a moment’s hesitation, even whilst he marvelled how he could set to work to break her heart by leaving her this night.

Now, when their glances met, they understood one another. The power that lay within both their souls had met and, as it were, clasped hands. They accepted one another’s sacrifice. Hers, mayhap, was the more complete of the two, because for her his absence would mean weary waiting, the dull heartache so terrible to bear.

For the man, the wrench would be eased by action, danger and hard fighting; for her there would be nothing to do but wait. But she acquiesced. No one had seen the struggle which it had cost her, over there in the little room, all alone with only the dumb virginal and the dying light to see the tears of rebellion and of agony which for one brief moment — for her an eternity — had seared her eyes. By the time the full meaning of what she had overheard from the other side of the portiere had entered into her brain, she had recovered full outward calm, and had brought him his sword in token of her resolve.

Gilda Beresteyn came of a race that had learned to fight even from its infancy. She had handled her father’s sword at an age when little maids are content with playthings. Now, when she made the buckles of her husband’s sword secure, she met his glance with perfect serenity, and said simply and calmly:

“You will find me, as before, in the other room. I will be waiting there to bid you farewell.”

Then she glided out of the room, wraith-like, ethereal, as she had come. And Diogenes woke as if out of a trance.

The Stadtholder jumped to his feet. “Then you’re with us?” he exclaimed.

“If your Highness hath need of me,” the soldier replied.

“Have I not said so?” the prince retorted. “Henceforth, Sir Percy Blakeney — for that is your name, is it not? — accompanies us as our Master of the Camp wherever we go!”

“Nay,” the other replied quite firmly and without even a sigh of regret this time, “my name is Diogenes, as it hath always been. It is the nameless and homeless adventurer, the son of the poor Dutch tramp, who once again places his sword at your Highness’s disposal. Sir Percy Blakeney was only a myth, a shade that hath already been exorcized by the magic of your Highness’s call, in the name of our faith and of liberty.”

“Frankly, man,” the Stadtholder retorted with a smile, “I could not picture you in the character of a placid and uxorious country gentleman, watching with unruffled complacence the life and death struggles of your friends.”

“I should have waxed obese, your Highness,” Diogenes assented whimsically; “and the horror of it would have sent me to my grave.”

“Then, you inveterate mocker, are you ready to start?”

“Booted and spurred, your Highness, and a sword on my hip,” replied the other lightly. “And my horse hath been waiting for me these two hours past.”

Already Maurice of Nassau was on his feet. He took the sacrifice, the self-denial, as a matter of course; was unaware of it, probably. Every other thought was completely merged in that of the coming struggle — De Berg crossing the IJssel, Spinola threatening from the south, and victory beckoning once more.

The burghers crowded round him, speaking words of loyalty and of encouragement. He responded with somewhat curt farewells. His thoughts were no longer here; they were across the Veluwe with Marquet and De Keysere; inside Arnheim and Nijmegen.

He kept Diogenes by his side, wrote out his orders in sign-manual, discussed plans, possibilities with the man in whose luck and resource he had unbounded belief.

It took time to get everything ready. There was the financial question, too, for some of the troops were mercenaries, who would be demanding their pay ere they engaged to start on a fresh expedition. For this the aid of the loyal burghers had again to be requisitioned. Arrangements had to be made for credits at Zutphen and Arnheim.

This part of the great adventure the Stadtholder was willing to leave in the hands of Mynheer Beresteyn and his friends. Money to him was dross, save as a means of gaining his great ends. For the nonce he was in a hurry to get away, to get back to his camp at

Utrecht, and to make ready for the coming fight.

Then at last there came a moment when everything appeared settled. The messenger had his sealed orders, and the credit notes and the read money upon his person. The Stadtholder was back in the hall with his equerries around him, ready for departure, giving brief, decisive orders such as soldiers love to hear.

But Diogenes did not follow him immediately, and Mynheer Beresteyn remained behind with him. He was the only one who really understood what the once careless and thoughtless adventurer felt at this moment, in face of the inevitable farewell. It was an understanding born in a staunch heart that had known both love and sorrow.

Beresteyn had idolized his young wife, who had died leaving her baby-girl in his arms. That deep affection the lonely widower had thereupon transferred to his motherless daughter, had cherished and guarded her as his most precious treasure, and had only consented to relinquish her into the guardianship of another because he knew that the other was worthy of the trust.

He knew also what hungering passion means; he knew the bitterness of parting and of a burning disappointment with the prospect of loneliness through the vista of years. But, with that infinite tact which is the attribute of a self-less heart, he offered no words of consolation or even of comment.

"I will leave you to bid farewell to Gilda alone," was all that he said.

Diogenes nodded in assent. The most terrible moment of this terrible hour was yet to come, for Gilda, having precipitated his decision, was now waiting for the last kiss.

6

She was, in truth, waiting for him, submissive and composed. What she had done, when she with her own act had mutely bidden him to go, that she did not regret. She had done it not so much perhaps from a sense of duty or of patriotism, but rather because she knew that this course was the only one that he would never rue.

Hers was that perfect love that dwells on the other's happiness, and not on its own. She knew that, though for the time being he would find bliss and oblivion in her arms, he would soon repine in inactivity whilst others fought for that which he held sublime.

So now, when he pushed aside the tapestry and once more stood before her, with the lovelight in his eyes obscured by the shadow of this coming parting, she met him without a tear. The next moment he had her in his arms, and his hand rested lightly across her eyes, lest they should perceived that his were full of tears.

For a long while he could not speak; then he drew her closer to him and pressed his lips against hers, drinking in all the joy and rapture which he might never taste again.

"What is it that hath happened, my lord?" she murmured. "I could not hear everything, and did not wish to be caught prying. All that I heard was that the Stadtholder needed you, and that in your heart you knew that your place, whilst there was danger to our land, was by his side, and not by mine."

"Your father will explain more fully, my beloved," he replied. "You are right. The Stadtholder hath need of every willing sword. This unfortunate land is gravely threatened. The Archduchess is throwing the full force of her armies against the Netherlands. His Highness thinks that I might help to save the United Provinces from becoming once more the vassals of Spain. As you say, my place is on this soil where I and my mother were born. I should be a coward indeed were I to turn my back now on this land when danger is so grave. So I am going, my beloved," he continued simply.

"To-night I go to Vorden on his Highness's business, thence on to Wageningen. I shall go, taking your dear image in my heart, and with your exquisite face before me always. For I love you with every fibre of my being, every bone in my body and with every beat of my heart. Try not to weep, my dear. I shall return one day soon to take you in my arms, as I shall clasp your spirit only until then. I shall return, doubt it not. Such love as ours was not created to remain unfulfilled. Whatever may happen, believe and trust in me, as I shall believe in you, and keep the remembrance of me in your heart without sadness and without regret."

He spoke chiefly because he dared not trust to the insidiousness of silence. He knew that she wept for the first time because of him. Yet how could it be otherwise? And sorrow made her sacred. When, overcome with grief, she lay half-swooning in his arms, he picked her up quite tenderly and laid her back against the cushions of the chair. Then, as she sat there, pale and wan-looking in the uncertain light of the wax candles, with those exquisite hands of hers lying motionless in her lap, he knelt down before her.

For a second or two he rested his head against those soft white palms, fragrant as the petals of a lily. Then he rose, and, without looking at her again, he walked firmly out of the room.

CHAPTER IV. ADDER'S FORK

1

Nicolaes Beresteyn accompanied his brother-in-law during the first part of the journey. He had insisted on this, despite Diogenes' preference for solitude. There was not much comradeship lost between the two men. Though the events of that memorable New Years Day, distant less than three months, were ostensibly consigned to oblivion, nevertheless, the bitter humiliation which Nicolaes had suffered at the hands of the then nameless soldier of fortune still rankled in his heart. Since then so many things had come to light which, to an impartial observer, more than explained Gilda Beresteyn's love for the stranger, and Mynheer her father's acquiescence in an union based on respect for so brave a man.

But Nicolaes had held aloof from the intimacy, and soon his own courtship of the wealthy Kaatje gave him every reason for withdrawing more and more from his own family circle. But to-night, after the tempestuous close of what should have been a merely conventional day, he sought Diogenes' company in a way he had never done before.

"Like you," he said, "I am wearied and sick with all this mummery. A couple of hours on the Veluwe will set me more in tune with life."

Diogenes chaffed him not a little.

"The lovely Kaatje will pout," he suggested, "and rightly, too. You have no excuse for absenting yourself from her side at this hour."

"I'll come with you as far as Barneveld," Nicolaes insisted. "A matter of less than a couple of hours' ride. It will do me good. And Kaatje is still closeted with her garrulous mother."

"You think it will do her good to be kept waiting," Diogenes retorted with good-natured sarcasm. "Well, come, if you have a mind. But I'll not have your company further than Barneveld. I am used to the Veluwe, and intend taking a short cut over the upland, through which I would not care to take a companion less well acquainted with the waste than I."

Thus it was decided. Already the Stadtholder had gone with his numerous retinue, with his bodyguard and his pike-men and with his equeries, and those of the wedding-party who had come in his train from Utrecht, friends of Mynheer Beresteyn, who had ridden over for the most part with wife or daughter pillioned behind them, and all glad to avail themselves of the protection of his Highness's escort against highway marauders, none too scarce in these parts. Torch-bearers and linkmen completed the imposing cavalcade, for the night would be moonless, and the tracks across the moorland none too clearly defined.

Diogenes had waited with what patience he could muster until the last of the numerous train had defiled under the Koppel-poort. Then he, too, got to horse. Despite Socrates' many protestations, he was not allowed to accompany him.

"You must look after Pythagoras," was Diogenes' final word on the subject.

"'Tis the first time," the other answered moodily, "that you go on such an adventure without us. Take care, comrade! The Veluwe is wide and lonely. That swag-bellied oaf up there hath cause to rue his solitary wanderings on that verfloekte waste."

"I'll be careful, old compeer," Diogenes retorted with a smile. "But mine errand is not one on which I desire to draw unnecessary attention, and I can remain best unperceived if I am alone. 'Tis no adventure I am embarking on this night. Only a simple errand as far as Vorden, a matter of ten leagues at most."

"And the whole of the verdommte Veluwe to traverse at dead of night!" the other muttered sullenly.

"I know every corner of it," Diogenes rejoined impatiently. "And it will not be the first time that I travel on it alone."

Thus Socrates was left grumbling, and anon Diogenes, accompanied by Nicolaes Beresteyn, started on his way.

2

At first the two men spoke little. The air was still cold and very humid, and the thaw was persisting. The horses stepped out briskly on the soft, sandy earth.

The distance between Amersfoort and Barneveld is but a couple of leagues. Within the hour the lights of the little city could be seen gleaming ahead. After a while Nicolaes Beresteyn became more loquacious, talked quite freely of the past.

"My father no longer trusts me," he said, with ill-concealed bitterness. "Did you see how he shut me out of the council-chamber?"

"Yet the Stadtholder himself told you everything that occurred subsequently," Diogenes retorted kindly, "including his own plans and mine errand at this hour. I think that your conscience troubles you unnecessarily, and you see a deliberate intention in every simple act."

"And if he did, you could scarce blame him. 'Tis only in the future you can prove your true worth. And methinks," he added, more seriously than he was usually wont to speak, "that you will have occasion to do this very soon."

"In the meanwhile, here's Barneveld ahead of us," Nicolaes rejoined, with a quick, indefinable sigh, and giving a sudden turn to the conversation. "I'll see you across the city, then return to the bosom of my family, there to live in uxorious idleness, whilst you, a stranger, are entrusted with the destinies of our land. A poor outlook for a man who is young and a patriot, you'll own."

To this Diogenes thought it best to make no reply. He knew well enough that the mistrust of which Nicolaes accused his father was a very real thing, and that it was indeed only time that would soften the proud burgher's heart toward his only son. It was not likely that one who but a brief while ago had conspired against the Stadtholder's life with that abominable Stoutenburg could be admitted readily into the councils of the very man whom he had plotted to assassinate. With every desire to forgive, it was but natural that Mynheer Beresteyn should fail entirely to forget.

No more, however, was said upon the subject now, and Nicolaes soon relapsed into that sullen mood which had of late become habitual to him. Thus Diogenes was glad enough to be rid of his company. At Barneveld he obtained a fresh horse, left his own in charge of a man known to him, with orders to ride it quietly on the morrow as far as Wageningen, where he himself would pick it up a couple of days later. His journey would now lie due east to Zutphen. There he meant to make a halt of a few hours, and thence proceed

to Vorden, where Marquet was in camp, with four thousand seasoned troops, trained under Mansfeld, and rested now since the campaign in Groningen.

The Stadtholder's orders were that the general proceed, at once to Arnheim, ere the forces of the Archduchess had time to cross the Ijssel, and to cut off all access to so important a city.

From Vorden to Wageningen, which lies due south from Barneveld, the journey would be a long one, and, with De Berg's army so near, might even prove perilous. But De Keyser was at Wageningen, with three thousand troops and some artillery. His help would be of immense service to Nijmegen if the latter city, too, were to be attacked.

"How will you journey from Vorden to Wageningen?" Nicolaes asked Diogenes in the end. "You will have to avoid the Ijssel."

"I'll cut across to Lang Soeren," the other replied; "and thence go to Ede."

"There's scarce a track on the Veluwe just there," the other urged.

"Such as there is, I know," Diogenes retorted curtly. "And I must trust to luck."

They had brought their horses to a halt about a quarter of a league outside Barneveld, where the two men decided to part. The stretch of the great waste, with its undulating, barren hills, and narrow, scarce visible tracks, lay straight out before them. Diogenes was sniffing the frosty air out toward the east, where lay Vorden, and whence there came to his nostrils the sharp tang of the breeze, that cut like a knife. The thaw which had held sway in the cities and on the low-lying lands had been vanquished ere it reached the arid upland. The snow upon the Veluwe lay as even and as pure as before. Above, a canopy of stars seemed but a diamond-studded veil of mysterious indigo, stretched over a world of light, which it failed altogether to dim. The silence and desolation were absolute; but not so the darkness. To the keen eye of the adventurer, accustomed to loneliness, the vast stretches of open country and limitless horizons, there was no such thing as absolute darkness. He could perceive the slightest accidental upon the smooth carpet of snow, noted every tiny mound that marked a clump of rough shrub or grass, and every footmark of beast or bird, mere flecks of blue upon the virgin pall.

"Such track as there is, I know," he had carelessly asserted awhile ago, in response to a warning from Nicolaes. And now, without an instant's hesitation, and tossing to the other a last curt word of farewell, he gave his horse a slight taste of the spur, and soon became a mere speck upon the illimitable waste.

3

It was close on midnight when, weary, saddle-sore, his boots covered in half-melted snow, Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn demanded admittance into his native city.

At first the guard at the Koppel-poort, roused from his slumbers, refused to recognize in the belated traveler the bridegroom of a few hours ago. Had anyone ever heard, I ask you, of a bridegroom absenting himself on the very night of his nuptial until so late an hour? And then returning in a mood that was so irascible and inconsequent that the sergeant in command of the gate was on the point of ordering his detention in the guard-room, pending investigation and the orders of the burgomaster, whose decision on such points was final? But since the burgomaster, whose decision on such points was final? But since the burgomaster happened to be Mynheer Beresteyn, and as the weary and pugnacious traveler did, in truth, appear to be his only son — why, it was perhaps best on the whole to take the matter as a joke, and not to say too much about it. The sergeant did, indeed, as Nicolaes was finally allowed to ride over the bridge, essay one or two of the most time-honoured witticisms at the expense of the belated bridegroom; but Mynheer Nicolaes was clearly in no mood for chaff, and when he had passed by, the sergeant and one or two of the men, who had witnessed his strangely sullen mood, shook their heads in ominous prognostication of sundry matrimonial difficulties to come.

The house on the quay, plainly visible from the Koppel-poort, was dark enough to suggest that every one of its inmates was already abed. Nicolaes, however, did not ride up to the front door; but, after he had crossed the bridge, he went straight on through one or two narrow streets which lay at the back of his home until he reached the corner of the Korte Gracht, which, again, abuts on the quay. Thus he had gone round in a semicircle, in obvious avoidance of the paternal house, and now he brought his horse to a halt outside a tall and narrow door which was surmounted by a lanthorn let into the wall. A painted sign which hung from an iron bracket above the door indicated to the passing wayfarer that the place was one where rider and horse could find food and shelter.

Nicolaes dismounted, and going up to the door, he knocked against it with the point of his foot. This he had to do several times before the welcome sound of someone moving inside the house came to his ear. A moment or two later the door was opened cautiously. A man appeared on the threshold, wrapped in a night-robe and still wearing a night-bonnet on his head.

"Is that you, mynheer?" he queried drowsily.

"Who else should it be, you loon?" Nicolaes replied irritably. "Here's your horse," he added, and without waiting for further commend or protest from the unfortunate landlord thus roused from his slumbers, he proceeded to tether the animal by the reins to one of the iron rings in the wall.

"It is so late, mynheer," the man protested dolefully; and so cold. Will you not take the horse round to the stable yourself? It is but a step to the right, and there's the gate—"

"It is late, as you say, and cold," Nicolaes retorted curtly. "And when I paid you so liberally for the horse, I did not bargain to take service with you as ostler in the middle of the night."

"But, mynheer—" urged the landlord, still protesting.

But Nicolaes did not listen. In faith, he had ceased to hear, for already he was striding rapidly down the Korte Gracht, and the next moment was back on the quay. A few steps brought him to the door of his father's house. Here he paused for a moment ere he mounted the stone steps that led up to the massive front door, stamped his feet so as to shake the melted snow from his boots, and with a few quick touches tried to re-establish some semblance of order in his clothes. Indeed, when presently he rapped vigorously with the iron knocker against the door, he looked no longer like a wearied and querulous traveler, but rather like a man just returned from a short and pleasant ride.

To his astonishment it was Maria, his sister Gilda's faithful tire-woman, who opened the door for him. She anticipated his very first query by a curt:

"Everyone is abed. The jongejuffrouw alone chose to wait for you, and I could not let her wait alone."

Nicolaes uttered an angry exclamation.

"Tell my sister to go to bed, too," he commanded briefly. "I'll go to my rooms at once, as it is so late."

Maria made no audible reply. She mumbled something about "Shameful conduct!" and "Wedding-night!" But Nicolaes paid no heed, strode quickly across the hall, and ran swiftly up the stairs.

But on the landing he came abruptly to a halt. He had almost fallen against his sister Gilda, who stood there waiting for him.

Behind her, a little way down the passage, a door stood ajar, and through it there came a narrow fillet of light. At sight of him, and before he could utter a sound, she put a finger to her lip, then let the way along the passage. The door which stood ajar was the one which gave on her own room. She went in, and he followed her, his heart beating with something like shame or fear.

"Hush!" she whispered, and gently closed the door behind him. "Make no noise!" Kaatje has at last sobbed herself to sleep. She hath been put to bed in her mother's room. "'Twere a shame to disturb her." Then, as Nicolaes muttered something that sounded very like a curse, the girl added reproachfully: "Poor Kaatje! You have shown very little ardour toward her, Klaas."

"I lost my way in the dark," he answered. "I had no thought it could be so late."

Just then the tower clock of St. Maria Kerk chimed the midnight hour.

Gilda hazarded timidly: "You should not have thought of accompanying my lord. He was ready to start out alone; and your place, Klaas, was beside your wife!"

"Are you going to lecture me about my duty, Gilda?" he said irritably. "You must not think that because—"

"I think nothing," she broke in simply, "save that Kaatje wept when the evening wore on and you did not return; and that the more she wept the greater was our father's anger against you."

"He knew that I meant to accompany your husband a part of the way," Nicolaes retorted. "In truth, had he done me the justice to read my thoughts, he himself would have bade me go."

"It was kind of you," she rejoined somewhat coolly, to be concerned as to my lord's safety. But I can assure you—"

"'Twas not concern for his safety," he broke in gruffly, "that caused me to accompany him to-night."

"What then?"

But he gave no reply, but his lip turned away from her, with the air of one who fears that he hath said too much and cares not to be questioned again.

"I'd best go now," he said abruptly.

He looked around for his gloves, which he had thrown down upon the table. His manner seemed so strange that Gilda was suddenly conscious of a nameless kind of fear; the sort of premonition that comes to highly sensitive natures, at times when hitherto unsuspected danger suddenly looms upon the cloudless sky of life. She forced him to return her searching glance.

"You are hiding something from me, Klaas," she said determinedly. "What is it?"

"I?" he riposted, feigning surprise. "Hiding something? Why should I have something to hide?"

"That I know not," she replied. "But there was some hidden meaning in your words just now when you said that 'twas not concern for my lord's safety that caused you to accompany him this night. What, then, was it?" she insisted, seeing that he remained silent, even though he met her gaze with a look that appeared both fearful and pitying.

She had her back to the door now, looked like some timid creature brought to bay by a cruel and hitherto unsuspected enemy.

"You must not ask me for my meaning, Gilda," Nicolaes said at last. "There are things which concern men only, and with which women should have no part."

His tone of ill-concealed compassion stung her like a cut from a whip across the face.

"There is nothing that concerns my lord," she retorted proudly, "in which he would not desire me to bear my part."

"Then let him tell you himself."

"What?"

She threw the question at him like a challenge, stepped up to him and seized him by the wrist — no longer a timid creature at bay. But a strong, determined woman, who feels in some mysterious way that the man whom she loves is being attacked, and who is prepared, with every known and unknown weapon almighty love can suggest, to defend him, his life or his honour, or both.

"You are not going out of this room, Klaas, until you have explained!" she said with unquestionable determination. "What is it that my lord should tell me himself?"

"Why he, newly wed and a stranger, was so determined on this, his wedding night, to carry the Stadtholder's message across the Veluwe."

Nicolaes spoke abruptly, almost fiercely now, as if wearied of this wrangling, and burdened with a secret he could no longer hold. But she did not at first understand his meaning.

"I do not understand what you mean," she murmured vaguely, a perplexed frown between her eyes.

"There were plenty there eager and willing to go," Nicolaes went on roughly. "Nay, the errand was not in itself perilous. Speed was required, yes; and a sound knowledge of the country. But a dozen men at least who were in this house to-day know the Veluwe as well as this stranger, and any good horse would cover the ground fast enough. But he wanted to go — he, this man whom none of us know, who was married this day, and whose bride had the first call on his attention. He insisted with the Stadtholder, and he went — And I went with him; would have gone all the way if he had not forced me to go back. Why did he wish to go, Gilda? Why did he leave you deliberately this night? Think! Think! And why did he insist on going alone, with not even one of those besotted boon companions of his to share in his adventure? A message to Marquet — my God!" he added with a sneer. "A message to the Archduchess, more like, to cross the Ijssel ere it be too late!"

"You devil!"

She hissed out the words through set lips and teeth clenched in an access of fierce and overwhelming passion. And before he could recover himself, before he could guess her purpose, she had seized his heavy, leathern gloves, which were lying on the table, and struck him with them full in the face. He staggered, and put his hand up to his eyes.

“Go!” she commanded briefly.

He tried to laugh the situation off, said almost flippantly:

“I’ll punish you for this, you young vixen!”

But she did not move, and her glance seemed to freeze the words upon his lips.

“Go!” she commanded once more.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I understand your indignation, Gilda. Nay, I honour it. But remember my warning! Your stranger lord,” he went on with slow and deliberate emphasis, “will be returning anon to the Stadtholder’s camp, a courted and honoured man; but ’tis the armies of the Archduchess who will have crossed the Ijssel by then, whilst the orders to Marquet will have reached that commander too late.”

Then he turned on his heel and went out of the room, and anon Gilda heard his footstep resounding along the passage. She listened until she heard the opening and closing of a distant door, after which she sighed and murmured, “Poor Kaatje!” That was all; but there was a world of meaning in the sorrowful compassion wherewith she said those words.

Then she raised her left hand, round the third finger of which glittered a plain gold ring. The ring she pressed long and lingeringly against her lips, and in her heart she prayed, “God guard you, my dear lord!”

CHAPTER V. A RACE FOR LIFE

1

As for Diogenes, he reached Zutphen in the small hours of the morning, and after a few hours' rest pushed on to Vorden at dawn. He himself would have deprecated any suggestion of making of this journey across the Veluwe a romantic adventure. The upland, under its covering of snow, held neither terrors nor secrets for him. The wind, the stars, an unerring instinct and sound knowledge of the scarce visible tracks, guided him across the arid waste. A real child of the open, he had less difficulty in finding his way across such a God-forsaken wild than he would through the intricate streets of a city.

Messire Marquet, encamped outside Vorden, welcomed the Stadtholder's messenger effusively. His troops, for the most part composed of mercenaries from Germany, were getting restive in idleness; once or twice they had used threats when demanding their pay. Diogenes, bringing both money and the prospect of a fight, was doubly welcome. His stay at the camp was brief. By late morning he was once more on his way, with the intention of re-crossing the IJssel at Dieren and of reaching Wageningen before dark. He had but half a dozen leagues to cover, and eight hours of daylight wherein to do it. Weather, too, and circumstances favored him. The thaw, which had been so completely vanquished upon the upland, had remained sole monarch in the plain. The air was mild and intensely humid. A dense sea-fog lay over the river and the surrounding marshes. The numerous little tributaries of the IJssel and the intervening canals and ditches were already free from ice, and as Diogenes put his horse to an easy gallop in the direction of the river, the animal sank fetlock deep in mud.

The road was solitary, and, as far as the eye could reach through the mist, seemed entirely deserted. The countryside here had the desolate appearance peculiar to districts that have been fought over. The few thatched cottages, which from time to time loomed out of the mist, still bore the marks of passing fire and sword; the trees were truncated and sparse, the marshland was riddled with the scars of ceaseless tramping of men, of wagons, and of beasts. The inevitable windmills, gaunt-looking and ghost-like through the humid atmosphere, appeared neglected and forlorn.

But the solitary rider had no eyes for landscape just now. He could have wished for a clearer day, for it was impossible even for his keen eyes to see what was going on behind that impenetrable wall of fog. If Pythagoras' ears had not played him false, De Berg was there, not very far away, waiting to cross the IJssel when opportunity arose.

Thanks to that faithful hypertrophied loon, the ambitious designs of the Archduchess could still be frustrated. De Berg's armies were still on the right bank of the IJssel, and if Marquet got his men on the move by midday, as he had promised he would do, the crossing of the enemy troops would become difficult, mayhap impossible.

These were pleasing thoughts for the man on whose speed and resource these important plans depended. All that he chafed against was the imperative slowness of his progress, as the mist enveloped him more closely the nearer he got to the river. But withal it protected him, too, hid him mayhap from the prying eyes of vedettes on the watch. Already, judging by certain landmarks that met him on the way, Brummen was half a league behind him on his right, Hengles far away on the left, and Dieren not more than another league on ahead. For the last quarter of an hour he had heard from time to time the heavy booming sound, akin to the reverberation of distant cannonade, which came from the breaking and cracking of the ice as it drifted downstream. He put his horse to slow trot, as he pried through the mist for the first indication of a short cut he knew of, which would take him to the river bank in less than half an hour.

2

The next moment he had spied the narrow track and set his horse to follow it; when suddenly, out of the mist, there came a loud report, and Diogenes heard the whistle of a bullet close to his ear. It almost grazed his shoulder. Without an instant's pause, without turning to look whence had come this unexpected greeting, he set spurs to his horse and galloped at breakneck speed toward the river. Over fields and ditches; no thought of prudence now, only of speed! Mud and water flew out in all directions under the horse's frantic gallopade, the plucky beast sinking at times almost to his knees in the marshy ground. A few minutes later — five, perhaps — Diogenes heard the sound of many hoofs behind him, obviously in pursuit. He turned to look this time, and through the mist vaguely discerned some three or four cavaliers, who were distant from him then less than two hundred yards. So far, so good! The IJssel was close by now, and if, when he reached the banks, he turned off in the direction of the stream, he could easily reach the ford on this side of Brummen and get across — on foot, if need be, if his horse proved an obstacle to rapid progress.

A few more minutes now and the river was in sight, with, far away on the opposite bank, Brummen, nestling at the foot of the rising ground, the gate of the Veluwe. With renewed vigor the rider sped along, his blood whipped up by the chase, his whole body exhilarated by this sensation of danger and of one of those sportive races for life for which three months of idleness and luxury had given him a hitherto unsuspected longing.

Ah, there was the shore at last, the group of three windmills close to the bank, an unmistakable landmark. Here, too, within two hundred paces on ahead, was the ford, which no amount of drifting ice would cause the daring adventurer to miss. Already he was within a few yards of the low-lying bank, searching the approach to the ford with eyes now doubly keen, when, with staggering suddenness, another cavalier appeared, straight in front of him this time, and barring the way to the river-brink.

No time to note his face; just a second wherein to decide what had best be done, not only to save his own life, but also the message which he must carry to Wageningen, at whatever cost. Then the cavalier turned for one brief second in his saddle, to call to some companions as yet unseen. A brief second, did I say? 'Twas but a fraction. The next moment Diogenes had whipped out a pistol from his saddlebow, and with a steady hand fired at his foe. The cavalier reeled in his saddle and fell, just as half a dozen others issued with a shout from out the mist, and those in pursuit put fresh spurs to their mounts.

It had been madness to attempt the ford now. The young soldier, sore-pressed, might in truth have sold his life dearly, but with it, too, he would have sold Nijmegen and the possible success of the Stadtholder's plans. Ofttimes before, in the course of his adventurous

life, he had been in as tight a place, where life and death hung quite evenly in the scales of Fate; but never before had he been quite so anxious to flee. He could not trust the valor of his sword, his own well-nigh unexampled skill in a fight against odds that would have made the bravest pause. No! It meant running away, away as fast as his horse would take him, and faster if the poor brute gave out. A short gallop along the bank, the cavalier behind him warming to the pursuit; keeping closer and closer to the low-lying bank, till the horse began to flounder in what was sheer morass.

The ford now lay well behind him. The waters of the Ijssel, tossed for awhile upon the shallows, flowed with increased swiftness here. Huge ice-blocks floated seaward upon the heaving bosom of the stream. The foremost of the pursuing cavaliers was then less than fifty yards behind, and more than one bullet had whizzed past the fleeing rider, one of them piercing his hat, the other grazing his thigh, but none doing him serious injury. Already the rallying cry of the pursuers had turned to one of triumph as the distance lessened between them and their quarry, when, with a sudden jerk of the reins, Diogenes plunged headlong into the river.

The Ijssel at this point is close on a quarter of a mile wide, her current is no longer sluggish, whilst the drifting ice-blocks constitute a peril which had to be boldly faced. But the mist, which hung thickly over the river, was the daring adventurer's most faithful ally.

Strangely enough, Diogenes' first thought, when his horse, finally losing its foothold upon the rapidly shelving bank, started to swim, was of Gilda, and of that ride which he had promised himself, with her dear arms clinging around him, her fair hair, tossed by the wind, brushing against his face. It was one of those sweet, sad visions which some mocking sprite seems to conjure up at moments such as this when life — ay, and honour too! — are trembling in the balance. Sad and swift! It vanished almost as quickly as it came, giving place to thoughts of De Keysere, still unsuspecting at Wageningen, and of Marquet, who haply had already started. Was there a trap waiting for him, too? Was this just an outpost of De Berg's armies; and had they indeed been mysteriously warned by traitor or spy, as Diogenes more than half suspected?

But what was the use of speculating? Indeed, every conjecture was futile, for this now was a supreme struggle — a tussle with Death, who was watching, uncertain whence and how he would strike. For the moment the adventurer was at grips with the flood and with the ice, guiding his horse as best he could toward mid-stream, where the current kept the threatening floes at bay. His pursuers had come to a halt upon the bank. Indeed, not one of them had the mind to follow his quarry on this perilous adventure. They stood there, some half-dozen of them, holding council, their eyes peering through the mist in search of the one black speck — horse and rider — now appearing clearly silhouetted against the silvery water, now vanishing again under cover of the floes. Then one of them raised his musket and took steady aim at the valiant swimmer, who had succeeded at last in reaching mid-stream.

The bullet whizzed through the mist. Diogenes' horse, hit through the neck, plunged and reared, pawed the waters wildly for a moment, then gave that heart-rending scream which is so harrowing to the ears of all animal-lovers. But already the rider had his feet clear of the stirrups, and as the waters finally swept over the head of the stricken beast, he slid out of the saddle and struck out for the opposite shore.

CHAPTER VI. A NEST OF SCORPIONS

1

Of the extraordinary events which threatened to make March 21, 1624, one of the most momentous dates in the history of the Netherlands we have not much in the way of detail. The broad facts we know chiefly through Van Aitzema's ponderous and minute "Saken v. Staet," whilst De Voocht was, of course, a friend of the Beresteyn family, and, as I understand it, was present in the house at Amersfoort when the terrible catastrophe was so auspiciously and mysteriously averted.

The one thing, however, which neither he nor Van Aitzema have made quite clear is the motive which prompted the Stadtholder to go to Amersfoort in person. He had quite a number of knights and gentlemen around him whom he could have fully trusted to take even so portentous a message and such explicit orders as he desired to send. De Voocht, indeed, suggests that it was Nicolaes Beresteyn who persuaded him, urging the obstinacy of his father, the burgomaster, and of the burghers of the city, who had steadily opposed the Stadtholder's wishes when he — Nicolaes — had been sent to convey them.

Nicolaes Beresteyn had joined his sovereign lord at the camp at Utrecht a couple of days after his wedding. Wearied of sentimental dalliance with the stolid Kaatje, he was glad enough that his duty demanded his presence in camp rather than in the vicinity of his young wife's apron-strings.

It was but natural that, when the Stadtholder desired to send orders to Amersfoort, he should do so through the intermediary of Nicolaes. But on that day, which was March 20, the young man returned, vowing that these were not being obeyed; not a matter of disloyalty, of course, just of tenacity. Civic dignitaries, conscious of their worth and of the sacrifices they had made in the common cause, were wont to wax obstinate where the affairs of their own cities were concerned. But, on the other hand, resistance to his will had invariably the effect of rousing the Stadtholder's arbitrary temper to a point of unreasoning anger. Olden Barneveldt had expiated his contumacy on the scaffold, and I doubt not that, when Nicolaes returned from Amersfoort that evening and delivered his report, the fate of even so trusted a councillor as Mynheer Beresteyn hung for awhile in the balance.

That the matter was one of supreme importance it were impossible to doubt. Maurice of Nassau would not lightly have left his camp at Utrecht that day. The forces of the Archduchess Isabella, who, under the leadership of De Berg and of Isembourg, were threatening Gelderland from two sides, had succeeded on the one part in crossing the IJssel. His own army was threatened by that of Spinola from the south. On the other hand, the messenger whom he had sent across the Veluwe to urge Marquet and De Keyser to concentrate inside Arnhem and Nijmegen had not yet returned. Nevertheless, he chose, by this suddenly planned excursion to Amersfoort, to expose his valuable person to serious danger; a fact which subsequent events proved only too conclusively.

Nicolaes Beresteyn was sent back at dawn the following morning to warn the burgomaster of the Stadtholder's coming, and enjoining the strictest secrecy. The young man was under orders to say nothing beyond that fact. When closely questioned, however, by his father and also by others, he did admit that fugitives from Ede had succeeded in reaching the camp.

Fugitives from Ede? What did that mean? Why should there be fugitives from Ede, when the armies of the Archduchess were so many leagues away?

Nicolaes Beresteyn shrugged his shoulders. "The Stadtholder will explain," was all that he said.

He appeared impatient and consequential, made them all feel that he could say more if he cared. He had been kept out of the prince's councils while he was under the paternal room, but now he had gained a place in the camp which had always been his by right. These solemn burghers — important enough within the purlieu of their own city — had become insignificant, mere civilians, now that the fate of the country rested upon those who were young enough to bear arms.

Nicolaes tried to meet his sister's glance.

Her indifference toward him galled his sense of importance, and he wished her to know that he neither repented nor was ashamed of what he had said the other night. Anon, when he had succeeded in forcing her eyes to meet his, he gave her a look charged with a mocking challenge. Up to this hour, she had said nothing to her father; now Nicolaes appeared to dare her to speak. But his sneers had not the power to disturb her sublime trust in the man she loved. That some mystery did cling to his journey across the Veluwe she could no longer doubt; but her fears upon the subject dwelt solely on any personal danger that might have overtaken him.

As for her father and his friends, they had apparently decided to possess their souls in patience. There was, indeed, nothing to do but to wait the Stadtholder's arrival, and in the meanwhile to try and hold those fears in check which had been aroused by the ominous words, "Fugitives from Ede."

2

The Stadtholder arrived in the course of the morning. Mynheer Beresteyn did not receive him on the doorstep, as he would have done had the visit been an open one. As it was, the passers-by on the busy quay did not bestow more than a passing glance on the plainly clad cavalier who swung himself out of the saddle outside the burgomaster's house. A message from the camp, probably, they thought. Mynheer Nicolaes had been backward and forward from Utrecht several times these past two or three days. The burgomaster awaited his exalted guest in the hall. His attitude and the expression of his face were alike pregnant with eager questionings. The Stadtholder gave curt acknowledgement to the greetings of Mynheer Beresteyn, of his family, and of his friends, and then strode deliberately into the banquetting-hall.

It looked vast and deserted at this early hour of a winter's morning. Nothing of the animation, the riotous gaiety of that day, less than a week ago, seemed to linger in its sombre, panelled walls. The dais upon which the brides and bridegrooms and the wedding party had sat, and which had crowned so brilliant a spectacle, had been removed, and the magnificent gold and silver plate, the fine linens and priceless crystals been carefully stowed away. Serving-men and sweepers were busy airing and dusting the room when the door was

thrown open, and His Highness came in, ushered in by his host. They fled at sight of these great gentlemen, like so many rabbits into carefully hidden burrows.

The Stadtholder went up to the long centre table and faced Mynheer Beresteyn and those who had come in with him — the members of his family and half a dozen burghers, men of importance in the little city. Every one could see that His Highness's anger was bitter against them all. "And so, mynheer," he began curtly, and in tones of marked irritation, and addressing himself more particularly to the burgomaster, "you have thought fit to defy my orders."

"Your Highness!" protested Mynheer Beresteyn.

"Yet they were clear enough," the Stadtholder went on, not heeding the interruption. "Or did your son Nicolaes fail to explain?"

"He told us, your Highness, that it was feared the armies of the Archduchess had crossed the IJssel—"

"The armies of the Archduchess crossed the IJssel three days ago," Maurice of Nassau broke in impatiently. "Since then they have overrun Gelderland and occupied Ede, putting that city to fire and sword."

There came a sound like the catching of breath, the rise of a gasp of horror and anguish in every one's throat. But it was quickly suppressed, and His Highness was listened to in silence until the end. Even now, when he paused, no one spoke. All eyes were cast to the ground in self-centered meditation. The whole thing had come as a thunderbolt out of a cloudless sky. Ede had always seemed so safe, so remote. A little city which led nowhere save to the Zuyder Zee, and in the very heart of the United Provinces. What could be the motive of the Archduchess's commanders to adventure thus far into a country which was so universally hostile to them, even to the most miserable peasant, who would pollute every well and stream rather than see the enemy overrun the land?

But all these men — ay, and the women, too — had seen so much, suffered so much; fire and sword were such familiar dangers before their eyes, that for them the time had gone when sighs and lamentations would ease their overburdened hearts. They had learned to receive every fresh blow from God's hands in silence, but with determination to fight on, to fight again and to the death once more, if need be, for their liberties, their rights, and the welfare of their children. It was indeed Mynheer Beresteyn who took the next words out of the Stadtholder's mouth.

"Then Amersfoort, too, is threatened?" he said simply.

The prince nodded.

"Think you," he retorted, "that I would have ordered the evacuation of the town had there not been imperative necessity for such a course? Now, you may pray God that your wilful disobedience hath not placed your city in jeopardy."

"'Twas but yesterday we had the order," one of the burghers urged. "And—"

"'Twas yesterday it should have been obeyed," the Stadtholder broke in roughly. "You would then have saved me a perilous journey, for the country already is infested with spies and vedettes, outposts of the Spanish armies."

"We are all ready to guard your Highness with our lives," the burgomaster said quietly.

"'Tis your wits I want, mynheer," the prince riposted dryly, "not your blood. Indeed, I do fear that Amersfoort is threatened, though I know not if De Berg will spend his forces on you, or, rather, concentrate them on Arnheim. But you must be prepared," he added with stern emphasis.

"You are not in a position to defend yourselves, and I cannot detach any of my troops to come to your assistance if you are attacked. Therefore, my orders were: 'Evacuate the town.' You, mynheer burgomaster, must issue your proclamation at once. Let every one go who can, taking women and children with them. Those who remain do so at their risk. Some of you can go north to Amsterdam, others west to Utrecht. Let De Berg find an empty shell when he comes."

3

Only those who had ever had the sorry task of abandoning a home in the face of an advancing enemy can have any conception of what this peremptory order meant to these burghers — fathers of families for the most part, who after the terrible privations which they had suffered for over half a century, had begun but a few years ago to reconstitute their country and their homes, to resume their interrupted industries, their commerce, their splendid art, to re-establish the wealth and power which had been their birthright, and which the tyranny of a bigoted and jealous overlord had wilfully wrested from them.

Now it meant laying aside spindles and looms once again, lathes, chisels, or books, in order to buckle on swords which threatened to rust in their scabbards, and to don steel helmets. It meant leaving the women to weep, the children fatherless.

Anxious eyes searched the Stadtholder's drawn, moody face; more than one mind reverted to memories of this peerless and fearless commander, the hero of Turnhout and Ostend. Would he have spoken in those days of "evacuation" and of "helplessness"? Would he have dreaded Spinola or the hosts of the Archduchess?

Ah, that subtle, insidious disease had indeed done its work! What mysterious poison was it that had shaken this great man's nerve, made him gloomy and fretful, weakened that indomitable will which had once made the tyrant of Madrid quake for the future of his kingdom?

"De Berg would not dare—" one of the burghers hazarded timidly.

"He may not," His Highness answered. "In which case it might be safe for you all to return to your homes a few days hence. But some of those who fled from Ede believe that De Berg intends to detach some of his troops and with them push on as far as the Zuyder Zee, leaving it to others to join Isembourg, who is coming up from Kleve, and with his help capture Nijmegen first and then Arnheim."

"Marquet by now," observed Beresteyn, "must be well on the way to Arnheim, and De Keysere close to Nijmegen. They can intercept Isembourg and cut him off from Ede and De Berg. Your Highness's messenger—"

"Our messenger," the prince broke in curtly, "failed to deliver our messages. Marquet is not on his way to Arnheim, and De Keysere was still at Wageningen when the first fugitives from Ede ran terror-stricken into our camp."

The words were scarce out of his mouth when the sound of a low, quickly suppressed cry came from the rear of the little group that had gathered around His Highness. Few heard it, or guessed whence it had come. Only Mynheer Beresteyn, turning swiftly, caught his daughter's eyes fixed with a set expression upon him. With an almost imperceptible glance he beckoned to her, and she pushed her way

through to his side, and slid her cold little hand into his firm grasp. Encouraged by her father's nearness, it was Gilda who uttered the word of protest which had risen to more than one pair of lips.

"Impossible, your Highness!" she said resolutely.

"Impossible!" Maurice of Nassau retorted curtly. "Why impossible, mejuffrouw?"

"Because my lord is a brave man, as full of resource as he is of courage. He undertook to deliver your Highness's commands to Messire Marquet and Mynheer de Keysere. He is not a man to fail."

She looked brave and determined, without a trace of self-consciousness, even though the rigid education meted out to girls in these times forbade their raising a voice in the councils of their lords. But in this case she had been voicing what was in more than one mind, and when she looked around her with a kind of timid defiance, she only encountered kindly glances.

Her father pressed her hand in tender encouragement. The Stadtholder himself appeared gracious and indulgent. It was only her brother's gaze that was unendurable, for it was charged with sarcasm, not unmingled with malevolence. Did Nicolaes hate her, then? A sickening sense of horror filled the poor girl's soul at the thought. Klaas, her little brother, whom she had loved and mothered, though he was her elder.

Oftimes had she stood between his childish peccadillos and his father's wrath. And now — she could not even bear to meet his glance. She knew that he triumphed, and that he rejoiced in his triumph, even though he must know that she was wounded to the quick. His warning was ringing in her ear, his warning which had, in truth, proved prophetic: "The orders to Marquet will reach that commander too late!"

As in a dream, she listened to the Stadtholder's words. The whole situation appeared unreal — impossible.

"Your defense of your husband," the prince was saying, "does you honour, mejuffrouw. But this is not a time for sentiment, but for facts. And these it is our duty to face. We placed our every hope on Marquet's co-operation, but Arnheim and Nijmegen are in peril at this hour because certain messages which I sent failed to reach their destination. We have not the leisure to discuss the causes of this failure; rather must we take immediate measures for the safety of our subjects here."

Gilda perforce had to remain silent. To the others, in fact, the matter was only important, in so far that the messenger's failure to arrive had placed Arnheim and Nijmegen in jeopardy. What cared they for her heart-breaking anxiety on account of her beloved?

She looked up at her father, because from him she could always expect sympathy. But he, too, was over-preoccupied just now; patted her hand gently, then let it go, absorbed as he was in listening to the Stadtholder's orders for the speedy evacuation of Amersfoort.

She turned away with a bitter sigh, all the more resolutely suppressed as her brother's mocking glance followed her every movement. The men now were in close conference, the Stadtholder sitting at the table, the burgomaster beside him, with pen and ink, drafting the necessary proclamation, the others grouped around, discussing and tendering advice. Every one was busy, every one had something to think about.

Gilda, heavy-hearted, took the opportunity of slipping unseen out of the room.

4

What prompted her to run up to the very top of the house, like some stricken bird seeking an eyrie, she could not herself have told you. There is such a thing as instinct, and instinct takes innumerable forms according to the most pressing needs of the heart. For the moment, Gilda's most pressing need was a sight of her beloved. Quite apart from the importance of his presence now with news from the threatened cities, she longed to see him, to feel his arms round her, to warm her starved soul in the sunshine of his love and his never absent smile. This longing it was that drove her up to the attic chambers, under the apex of the roof; for these chambers had tiny dormer windows which commanded extensive views of the countryside far beyond the ramparts and beyond the Eem.

Gilda wandered into one of the attic chambers and threw open the narrow casements that gave on the back of the house. Leaning against the window frame, she looked out over the river and beyond it into the mist-laden distance. The sharp, humid air did her good, with its savour of the sea and the tang of spring already lurking in the atmosphere. The sea-fog which had hung over the country for some days still made a dense white veil that enveloped all the life that lay beyond the ramparts, and gave to the little city a strange air of isolation, as if the very world ended on the other side of its walls. From where Gilda stood, high above a forest of roofs and gables, she could see the picturesque fortifications, the monumental gates and turrets, and the Joris Poort and Nieuwpoort, which spanned the Eem on this side. Far away on her right was Utrecht; on her left Barneveld, beyond which stretched the arid upland which held in its cruel breast the secret of her husband's fate.

The girl felt inexpressibly alone, weighted with that sense of forlornness from which only the young are wont to suffer. With the years there comes a more complete self-sufficiency, a greater desire for solitude. Gregariousness is essentially the attribute of youth. And Gilda had no one in whom she could confide. Her father, in truth, had been all to her that a mother might have been; but just now the girl was pining for one of her own sex, for some one who would not be busy with many things, with politics and wars and dissensions, but whose breast would be warm and soft to pillow a head that was weary.

The tears gathered in Gilda's eyes and fell unheeded down her cheeks. It seemed to her as if every moment now she must see a rider galloping swiftly toward her as if she must hear that merry laugh ringing right across the marshland. But all that she saw was the sleepy little city, stretching out before her until it seemed to melt and merge in the arms of the mist; the network of narrow streets, the crow's foot gables, the dormer windows and ornamental corbellings; and, above everything, the tower of St. Maria and St. Joris, with quaint market-place alive with people that looked like ants, fussy and minute.

Even as she gazed, wide-eyed and tearful, the bell of St. Maria began to toll. The slow monotonous reverberation seemed in itself a presage of evil. From the height, Gilda could see the human ants pause awhile in their activities. Their very attitude, the grouping of individual figures, a kind of arrested action in the entire life of the town, proclaiming brooding terror. A moment or two later the sharp clang of the town-crier's bell mingled with the majestic booming, and people started to run toward the market-place from every direction.

Gilda watched this gathering, could see the narrow streets waxing dark with moving forms. She saw the casements thrown open one by one, heads and shoulders filling the dark squares of the window frames. And down below, the arrival of the town-crier, with his halberd and his bell, a crowd of diminutive ant-like forms pressed round his heels. A grey picture, yet all alive with movement, like unto one over which an impatient artist has hastily passed an obliterating brush; the outlines blurred, the colours dull and hazy in the humid atmosphere. It all seemed so dreamlike, so remote. Only a week ago life had appeared so exquisitely gay and so easy! An ardent lover, a happy future, home, adventure! Everything was tumbling out fulsomely from the Cornucopia of Fate. And now all the tragedy represented by those running people below; the enemy at the gates; the abandoned homes; the devastated city; crying children and starving women — a whole herd of fugitives wandering over the desolate marshland, seeking shelters in cities already over-filled, asking for food where so little was to be had.

It was cruel! Oh, horribly cruel! And awful to see the children dancing around the town-crier, teasing by pulling at his doublet or trying to steal his bell. The crowd in the market-place had become very dense, and still people came running out of the side streets. The steps of St. Maria Kerk were black with the moving throng, and Gilda thought with added heartache of that same crowd, five short days ago, rallying for a holiday, cheering her and her handsome lover, wishing her joy and prosperity in the endless days to come.

Soon the city appeared weltering in confusion. The town-crier continued to ply his bell, and to call the proclamation ordered by the burgomaster. He went on so that every citizen in turn might hear, and now the crowd no longer tended all one way. Some had heard and were hurrying home to consult with their families, to make arrangements either for speedy departure or for weathering the terrible alternative of an invading army. Others lingered in groups on the market-place or at street corners, discussing or lamenting, according to their temperament, pausing to ask friends what they would do or what they thought of the terrible situation.

Gilda, up at the attic casement, could almost guess by the attitude, the gestures of the scared human ants, just how unsteady had become their mental balance. It was all so unexpected, and there was nothing that anyone could do to help in this terrible emergency. The Stadtholder was going back to camp. He had declared that he could not help. Threatened from every side, he could not spare his forces to come to the aid of so small a place as Amersfoort. And he — the stranger with the happy smile and the gay, inconsequent temper — who had been sent across the Veluwe to obtain succour — had failed to return. There was no garrison at Amersfoort, so there was nothing for it but to flee.

5

At what precise moment Gilda became aware of the solitary rider galloping *tete baissee* toward the city, it were impossible to say. He came out of the mist from the direction of Utrecht, and Gilda saw him long before the sentry at the Joris Poort challenged him. Apparently he had papers and all necessities in order, for he was admitted without demur; and at the sight Gilda turned away from her point of vantage, ran across the attic chamber and down the stairs. It was such a very short distance between the Joris Poort and the front door of the burgomaster's house, and she wanted so much to be the first to welcome him.

It was then half an hour before noon. The city by this time was in the throes of a complete upheaval. The noise in the streets had become incessant and deafening. Church bells tolling, town-criers bawling, the clang of the halberds of the city guards mingling with the rattle of cart-wheels upon the cobble-stones, with the tramping of hundreds of feet and stamping of innumerable horses' hoofs. The air was resonant with shrieks and cries, with the grating and jarring of metal, with peal of bells and the hubbub of a throng on the move. Gilda, when she reached the foot of the stairs, found herself facing the wide-open doorway, and through it saw the quay alive with people running, with horses and driven cattle, with crowds scrambling into the boats down below, with carts and dogs and children and barrows piled up with furniture and luggage hastily tied together.

The confusion bewildered her. Determined not to allow futile terror to overmaster her, she, nevertheless, felt within her whole being the sense of an impending catastrophe. She could not approach the door, because the crowd was swarming up the stone steps, and her father's serving-men, armed with stout sticks and cudgels, had much ado to keep some of the more venturesome or more terrified among that throng from invading the house.

How that solitary rider whom she had spied in the distance would succeed in forging his way through the dense mass of surging humanity, she could not imagine; and yet through all the turmoil, the din, the terror she was more conscious of his nearness than of any other sensation. The longing to see him was, in a certain sort of way, appeased. She knew that he lived and that time alone stood between her present and past longing and the bliss of nestling once more in his arms.

Oh, the crowd! It was rapidly becoming unmanageable. The serving-men plied their cudgels in vain. There were men and women there stronger and bolder than others who were determined to have a word with the burgomaster.

"I am Mynheer Beresteyn's friend!" was shouted authoritatively to the helpless guardians of their master's privacy. Or, "You know me, Anton? Make way for me there. I must speak with the burgomaster!"

"The burgomaster is busy!" the serving-men bawled out until they were hoarse. "No one can be admitted!"

But it was difficult for any man to raise a stick against well-known burghers of the city, friends and acquaintances who had supped here in the house at Mynheer's own table; and the pressure became more and more difficult to withstand every moment. Some of the people had actually pushed their way into the hall, making it impossible for Gilda to get near the door; and the longing was irresistible to be close at hand when he dismounted, so that her smile might be the first to greet him as he ran up the steps. She pictured it all — his coming, his appearance, the way he would look about him, knowing that she must be near.

Then all at once something awful happened. Gilda, from where she stood, could neither see nor hear what it was; and yet she knew, just from looking at the crowd, that something more immediately terrifying had turned this seething mass of humanity into a horde of scared beasts. Their movements suddenly became more swift; it seemed as if some fearsome goad had been applied to the entire population of the city, and the desire, to get away, to run, to flee had become more insistent.

Those who had swarmed up the steps of the burgomaster's house ran down again. They had no longer the desire to speak with anyone, or to appeal to the servants to let them pass. They only wanted to run like the others, the few more grave ones gathering their scattered families around them like a mother hen does her chicks.

And, oh, the awful din! It had intensified a thousand-fold, and seemed all of a sudden like hell let loose. So many people shrieked, the women and the children for the most part. And the boatmen down on the water, plying for hire their small craft, already dangerously overloaded with fugitives and their goods. But now everyone on the quay appeared obsessed with the desire to get into the boats. There was scrambling and fighting upon the quay, shrieks of terror followed by ominous splashes in the murky waters. Gilda closed her eyes, not daring to look.

And still the clang of the church bells tolling and the hideous cacophony of a whole population stampeding in a mad panic.

The hall, the doorway, the outside steps were now deserted. Life and movement and din were all out on the quay and in the streets around. The serving-men even had thrown down their sticks and cudgels. Some of them had disappeared altogether, others stood in groups, skulking and wide-eyed. Gilda tried to frame a query. Her pale, anxious face no doubt expressed the words which her lips could not utter, for one of the men in the hall replied in a husky whisper:

"The Spaniards! They are on us!"

She wanted to ask more, for at first it did not seem as if this were fresh news. The Spaniards were at Ede, the town was being evacuated because of them. What had occurred to turn an ordered evacuation into so redoubtable a stampede?

And still no sign of my lord.

6

Then suddenly the doors of the banqueting-hall were thrown open, and the burgomaster appeared. Had Gilda doubted for a moment that something catastrophic had actually happened, she would have felt her doubts swept aside by the mere aspect of her father. He, usually so grave, so dignified, was trembling like a reed, his hair was dishevelled, his cheeks of a grey, ashen colour. The word "Gilda" was actually on his lips when he stepped across the threshold, and quite a change came over him the moment he caught sight of his daughter. Before he could call to her she was already by his side, and in an instant he had her by the hand and dragged her with him back into the banqueting-hall.

"What has happened?" she asked, in truth more bewildered than frightened.

"The Spaniards!" her father replied briefly. "They are on us."

"Yes," she ventured, frowning; "but—"

"Not three leagues away," he broke in curtly. "Their vanguard will be here by nightfall."

She looked round her, puzzled to see them all so calm in contrast to the uproar and the confusion without. The Stadtholder was sitting beside the table, his head resting on his hand. He looked woefully ill. Nicolaes Beresteyn was beside him, whispering earnestly.

"What are you going to do, father dear?" Gilda asked in a hurried whisper.

"My fellow-burghers and I are remaining at our posts," Beresteyn replied quietly. "We must do what we can to save our city, and our presence may do some good."

"And Nicolaes?" she asked again.

"Nicolaes has his horse ready. He will take you to Utrecht in His Highness's train." Then, as Gilda made no comment on this, only gave his hand a closer pressure, he added tentatively: "Unless you would prefer to go with Mynheer van den Poele and his family. He is taking Kaatje and her mother to Amsterdam."

"I would prefer to remain with you," she said simply.

"Impossible, my dear child!" he retorted.

"My place is here," she continued firmly, "and I'll not go. Oh, can't you understand?" she pleaded, with a break in her voice. "If you sent me away, I should go mad or die!"

"But, Gilda—" the poor man protested.

"My lord is here," Gilda suddenly broke in more calmly.

"My lord? What do you mean?"

"I saw him awhile ago. I was up in the attic-chamber, he came through the Joris Poort."

"Your eyes deceived you. He would be here by now."

"He should be here," she asserted. "I cannot understand what has happened. Perhaps the crowd—"

"Your eyes deceived you," he reiterated, but more doubtfully this time. Then, as just at that moment the Stadtholder and caught his eye, Beresteyn called to him, "My daughter says that my lord has returned."

"Impossible!" burst forth impulsively from Nicolaes.

"Why should it be impossible?" Gilda retorted quickly, and fixed coldly challenging eyes upon her brother. "Why should you say that it is impossible?" she insisted, seeing that Nicolaes now looked shamefaced and confused. "What do you know about my lord?"

"Nothing, nothing!" Nicolaes stammered. "I did not mean that, of course; it only seems so strange—" And he added roughly, "Then why is he not here?"

"The crowd is very dense about the streets," one of the burghers suggested. "My lord, mayhap hath found it difficult to push his way through."

"Why should he be coming to Amersfoort?" mused Mynheer Beresteyn.

"He came from the direction of Utrecht," Gilda replied. "Some one at the camp must have told him that His Highness was here."

"No one knew I was coming hither," the Stadtholder broke in impatiently.

"My sister more like hath been troubled with visions," Nicolaes rejoined with a sneer. "Nor have we the time," he added, "to wait on my lord's pleasure. If your Highness is ready, we should be getting to horse."

"But surely," Gilda protested with pitiful earnestness, "your Highness will wait to see your messenger. He must be bringing news from Messire Marquet. He—"

"Yes," the Stadtholder broke in decisively, "I'll see him. Let some one go out into the streets at once and find the man. Tell him that we are waiting—"

"He knows his way about the town," Nicolaes interposed, with an ill-concealed note of spite in his voice. "Why should he need a pilot?"

There was a moment's silence. Every one looked nervy and worried. Then the Stadtholder turned once more to the burgomaster, and queried abruptly:

"Are those two companions of my lord's still in your house, mynheer? Can you not send one of them?"

The suggestion met with universal approval. And Mynheer Beresteyn himself urged the advisability of finding my lord's friends immediately. He took his daughter's hand. It was cold as ice, and quivered like a wounded bird in his warm grasp. He patted it gently, reassuringly. Her wild eyes frightened him. He knew what she suffered, and in his heart condemned his son for those insinuations against the absent. But this was not a moment for delicacy or for scruples. The hour was a portentous one, and fraught with peril for a nation and its chief. The individual matters so little at such times. The feelings, the sufferings, the broken heart of one woman or one man — how futile do they seem when a whole country is writhing in the throes of her death agony?

"Go, my dear child," Beresteyn admonished firmly. "Obey His Highness's commands. Find my lord's friends and tell them to go at once, and return hither with my lord. Go," he added; and whispered gently in Gilda's ear, as he led her, reluctant yet obedient, to the door, "Leave your husband's honour in my hands."

She gave him a grateful look, and he gave her hand a last reassuring pressure. Then he let her go from him, only urging her to hurry back.

It must not be supposed for a moment that he did not feel for her in her anxiety and her misery. But the man in question was a stranger — an Englishman, what? — and Mynheer Beresteyn was above all a patriot, a man who had suffered acutely for his country, had sacrificed his all for her, and was ready to do it again whenever she called to him. The Stadtholder stood for the safety and the integrity of the United Provinces; he was the champion and upholder of her civil and religious liberties. His personal safety stood, in the minds of Beresteyn and his fellow burghers, above every consideration on earth.

Gilda knew this, and though she trusted her father implicitly, she knew that her beloved would be ruthlessly sacrificed, even by him, if, through misadventure or any other simple circumstance entirely beyond his control, he happened to have failed in the enterprise which had been entrusted to him. Nicolaes, of course, was an avowed enemy. Why? Gilda could not conjecture. Was it jealousy, or petty spite only? If so, what advantage could he reap from the humiliation of one who already was a member of his own family? But she felt herself encompassed with enemies. No one had attempted to defend my lord's honour when it was so ruthlessly impugned save her father, and he was too absorbed, too much centered in thoughts of his country's peril, to do real battle for the absent.

It was with a heavy heart that she turned to go up the stairs in search of the two men who alone were ready to go through fire in the defense of their friend. A melancholy smile hovered round Gilda's lips. She felt that with those two quaint creatures she had more in common at this hour than with her father, whom she idolized. In those too poor caitiffs she had all that her heart had been hungering for: simple hearts that understood her sorrow, loyal souls that never wavered. For evil or for good, through death-peril or through seeming dishonour, their friend whom they revered could count upon their devotion. And as Gilda went wearily up the stairs, her mind conjured up the picture of those two ludicrous vagabonds, with their whimsical saws and rough codes of honour, and she suddenly felt less lonely and less sad.

7

Great was her disappointment, therefore, when she reached the guest-chamber, which they still occupied, to find that it was empty. The whole house was by this time in a hopeless state of turmoil and confusion. Serving-men and maids rushed aimlessly hither and thither, up and down the stairs, along the passages, in and out of the rooms; or stood about in groups, whispering or cowering in corners. Some of them had already fled; the few who remained looked like so many scared chickens, fussy and inconsequent, — the maids, with kirtles awry and hair unkempt, the men striving to look brave and determined, putting on the air of masters, and adding to the maids' distress by their aimless, hectoring ways.

There was nothing in the house now left of that orderly management which is the pride of every self-respecting housewife. Doors stood open, displaying the untidiness of the rooms; there was noise and bustle everywhere, calls of distress and loud admonitions. From no one could Gilda learn what she desired to know. She was forced to seek out Maria, her special tiring-woman, who, it was to be hoped, had some semblance of reason left in her. Maria, however, had no love for the two rascals, who were treated in the house as if they were princes, and knew nothing of the respect due to their betters. She replied to her young mistress's inquiries by shrugging her shoulders and calling heaven to witness her ignorance of the whereabouts of those abominable louts.

"Spoilt, they have been," the old woman asserted sententiously. "Shamefully spoilt. They have neither order nor decency, nor the slightest regard for the wishes of their betters—"

"But, Maria, whither have the two good fellows gone?" Gilda broke in impatiently.

"Gone? Whither have they gone?" Maria ejaculated, in pious ignorance of such probable wickedness. "Nay, that ye cannot expect any self-respecting woman to know. They have gone, the miserable roysterers! Went but an hour ago, without saying by your leave. This much I do know. And my firm belief is that they were naught but a pair of Spanish spies, come to hand us all, body and soul, to —"

"Maria, I forbid thee to talk such rubbish!" Gilda exclaimed wrathfully.

And, indeed, her anger and her white and worried look did effectually silence the garrulous woman's tongue.

Even the waiting-maids! Even these ignorant fools! Gilda could have screamed with the horror of it all, as if she had suddenly landed in a nest of scorpions and their poison encompassed her everywhere. This story of spies! God in Heaven, how had it come about? Whose was the insidious tongue that had perverted her brother Nicolaes first, and then every trimmer and rogue in the house? Gilda felt as if it might ease her heart to run around with a whip, and lash all these base detractors into acknowledgment of their infamy. But she forced herself to patience.

A vague instinct had already whispered to her that she must not go back to the banqueting-hall with the news that my lord's friends had gone, and that no one had any knowledge of their whereabouts. She felt that if she did that, her brother's sneers would become unendurable, and that she might then be led to retort with accusations against her only brother which she would afterwards forever regret.

So she waited for awhile, curtly bade Maria to be gone, and to leave her in peace. She wanted to think, to put a curb on her fears and her just wrath against this unseen army of calumniators; for wrath and fear are both evil counsellors. And above all, she wanted to see her beloved.

He was in the town. She knew it as absolutely as that she was alive. Were her eyes likely to be deceived? Even now, when she closed her eyes, she could see him, as she had done but a few minutes ago, walking his horse through the Joris Poort, his plumed hat shading the upper part of his face. She could see him, with just that slight stoop of his broad shoulders which denoted almost unendurable fatigue. She had noted this at the moment, with a pang of anxiety, and then forgotten it all in the joy of seeing him again. She remembered it all now. Oh, how could they think that she could be deceived?

Just for a second or two she had the mind to run back to the casement in the attic-chamber and see if she could not from thence spy him again. But surely this would be futile. He must have reached the quay by now, would be at the front door, with no one to welcome him. In truth, the longing to see him had become sheer physical pain.

So Gilda once more made her way down into the hall.

CHAPTER VII. A SUBTLE TRAITOR

1

Down below, in the banqueting-hall, Gilda's departure had at first been followed by a general feeling of obsession, which caused the grave men here assembled to remain silent for awhile and pondering. There was no lack of sympathy, I repeat; not even on the part of the Stadtholder, whose heart and feelings were never wholly atrophied. But there had sprung up in the minds of these grave burghers an unreasoning feeling of suspicion toward the man whom they had trusted implicitly such a brief while ago.

Terror at the imminence of their danger, the appearance of the dreaded foe almost at their very gates, had in a measure — as terror always will — blurred the clearness of their vision, and to a certain extent warped their judgements. The man now appeared before them as a stranger, therefore a person to be feared, even despised to the extent of attributing the blackest possible treachery to him. They forgot that the closest possible ties of blood and of tradition bound the English gentleman to the service of the Prince of Orange. Sir Percy Blakeney now, and Diogenes the soldier of fortune of awhile ago, were one and the same. But no longer so to them. The adder's fork had bitten into their soul and left its insidious poison of suspicion and of misbelief.

So none of them spoke, hardly dared to look on Mynheer Beresteyn, who, they felt, was not altogether with them in their distrust. The Stadtholder had lapsed into one of his surly moods. His lean, brown hands were drumming a devil's tattoo upon the table.

Then suddenly Nicolaes broke into a harsh and mirthless laugh.

"It would all be a farce," he exclaimed with bitter malice, "if it did not threaten to become so tragic." Then he turned to the Stadtholder, and his manner became once more grave and earnest. "Your Highness, I entreat," he said soberly, "deign to come away with me at once, ere you fall into some trap set by those abominable spies—"

"Nicolaes," his father broke in sternly, "I forbid you to make these base insinuations against your sister's husband."

"I'll be silent if you command me," Nicolaes rejoined quietly. "But methinks that his Highness's life is too precious for sentimental quibbles. Nay," he went on vehemently, and like one who is forced into speech against his will, "I have warned Gilda of this before. While were all waiting here calmly, trusting to that stranger who came, God knows whence, he was warning De Berg to effect a quick crossing."

"It is false!" protested the burgomaster hotly.

"Then, I pray you," Nicolaes insisted hotly, "tell me how it is that De Berg did forestall his Highness's plans? Who was in the council-chamber when the plans were formulated save yourselves? Who knew of the orders to Marquet? Marquet hath not gone to relieve Arnheim, and the armies of the Archduchess are at our gates!"

He paused, and a murmur of assent went round the room, and when Mynheer Beresteyn once more raised his voice in protest, saying firmly: "I'll not believe it! Let us wait at least until we've heard what news my lord hath brought!" No one spoke in response, and even the Stadtholder shrugged his shoulders, as if the matter of a man's honour or dishonour had no interest for him.

"Your Highness," Nicolaes went on with passionate earnestness, "let me beg of you on my knees to think of your noble father, of the trap into which he fell, and of his assassin, Gerard — a stranger, too—"

"But this man saved my life once!" the Stadtholder said, with an outburst of generous feeling in favour of the man to whom, in truth, he owed so much.

"He hated Stoutenburg then, your Highness," Nicolaes retorted, and boldly looked his father in the face — his father who knew his own share in that hideous conspiracy three months ago. "He loved my sister Gilda. It suited his purpose then to use his sword in your Highness's service. But remember, he is only a soldier of fortune after all. Have we not all of us heard him say a hundred times that he had lived hitherto by selling his sword to the highest bidder?"

This time his tirade was greeted by a distinct murmur of approval. Only the burgomaster raised his voice admonishingly once more.

"Take care, Nicolaes!" he exclaimed. "Take care!"

"Take care of what?" the young man retorted with all his wonted arrogance, and challenged his father with a look.

"Would you give your only son away," that look appeared to say, "in order to justify a stranger?"

Then, as indeed Mynheer Beresteyn remained silent, not exactly giving up the contention, but forced into passive acquiescence by the weight of public opinion and that inalienable feeling of family and kindred which makes most men or women defend their own against any stranger, Nicolaes continued, with magnificent assumption of patriotic fervor:

"Have we the right hazard so precious a thing as his Highness's life for the sake of sparing my sister's feelings?"

In this sentiment every one was ready to concur. They did not actually condemn the stranger; they were not prepared to call him a traitor and a potential assassin, or to believe one half of Nicolaes Beresteyn's insinuations. They merely put him aside, out of their minds, as not entering into their present schemes. And even the burgomaster could not gainsay the fact that his son was right.

The most urgent thing at the present juncture was to get the Stadtholder safely back to his camp at Utrecht. Every minute spent in this garrisonless city was fraught with danger for the most precious life in the United Provinces.

"Where is his Highness's horse?" he asked.

"Just outside," Nicolaes replied glibly; "in charge of a man I know. Mine is ready too. Indeed, we should get to horse at once."

The Stadtholder did not demur.

"Have the horses brought to," he said quickly. "I'll be with you in a trice."

2

Nicolaes hurried out of the room, his Highness remaining behind for a moment or two, in order to give his final instructions, a last admonition or two to the burghers.

"Do not resist," he said earnestly. "You have not the means to do aught but to resign yourselves to the inevitable. As soon as I can, I will come to your relief. In the meanwhile, conciliate De Berg by every means in your power. He is not a harsh man, and the Archduchess has learnt a salutary lesson from the discomfiture of Alva. She knows by now that we are a stiff-necked race, whom it is easier to cajole than to coerce. If only you will be patient! Can you reckon on your citizens not to do anything rash or foolish that might bring reprisals upon your heads?"

"Yes," the burgomaster replied. "I think we can rely on them for that. When your Highness has gone we'll assemble on the market place, and I will speak to them. We'll do our best to stay the present panic and bring some semblance of order into the town."

Their hearts were heavy. 'Twas no use trying to minimize the deadly peril which confronted them. There was a century of oppression, of ravage, and pillage, and bloodshed to the credit of the Spanish armies. It was difficult to imagine that the spirit of an entire nation should have changed suddenly into something more tolerant and less cruel.

However, for the moment, there was nothing more to be said, and alas! it was not as if the whole terrible situation was a novel one. They had all been through it before, at Leyden and Bergen-op-Zoom, at Haarlem and Delft, when they were weeping their land free from the foreign tyrant; and it was useless at this hour to add to the Stadtholder's difficulties by futile lamentations. All the more as Nicolaes had now returned with the welcome news that the horses were there, and everything ready for his Highness's departure. He appeared more excited than before, anxious to get away as quickly as may be.

"There is a rumour in the town," he said, "that Spanish vedettes have been spied less than a league away."

"And have you heard any rumour as to the arrival of our Diogenes?" the Stadtholder asked casually.

Nicolaes hesitated a moment ere he replied: "I have heard nothing definite."

3

A minute later the Stadtholder was in the hall. The doors were open and the horses down below in the charge of an equerry.

Nicolaes, half way down the outside stone steps, looked the picture of fretful impatience. With a dark frown upon his brow, he was scanning the crowd, and now and again a curse broke through his set lips when he saw the Stadtholder still delayed by futile leave-takings.

"In the name of heaven, let us to horse!" he exclaimed almost savagely.

Just at that moment his Highness was taking a kindly farewell of Gilda.

"I wish, mejuffrouw," he was saying, "that you had thought of taking shelter in our camp."

Gilda forced herself to listen to him, her lips tried to frame the respectful words which convention demanded. But her eyes she could not control, nor yet her thoughts, and they were fixed upon the crowd down below, just as were those of her brother Nicolaes. She thought that every moment she must catch sight of that plumed hat, towering above the throng, of those sturdy shoulders, forging their way to her. But all that she saw was the surging mass of people. A medley of colour. Horses, carts, the masts of ships. People running. And children. Numberless children, in arms or on their tiny feet; the sweet, heavy burdens that made the present disaster more utterly catastrophic.

Then suddenly she gave a loud cry.

"My lord!" she called, at the top of her voice. Then something appeared to break in her throat, and it was with a heart-rending sob that she murmured almost inaudibly: "Thank God! It is my lord!"

The Stadtholder turned, was across the hall and out in the open in a trice.

"Where?" he demanded.

She ran after him, seized his surcoat with a trembling hand, and with the other pointed in the direction of the Koppel-poort.

"A plumed hat!" she murmured vaguely, for her teeth were chattering so that she could scarcely speak. "All broken and battered with wind and weather — a torn jerkin — a mud-stained cloak. He is leading his horse. He has a three days' growth of beard on his chin, and looks spent with fatigue. There! Do you not see him?"

But Nicolaes already had interposed.

"To horse, your Highness!" he cried.

He would have given worlds for the privilege to seize the Stadtholder then and there by the arm, and to drag him down the steps and set him on his horse before the meeting which he dreaded could take place. But Maurice of Nassau, torn between his desire to get out of the threatened city as quickly as possible and his wish to speak with the messenger whom an inalienable instinct assured him that he could trust, was lingering on the steps trying in his turn to catch sight of Diogenes.

"Beware of the assassin's dagger, your Highness!" Nicolaes whispered hoarsely in his ear. "In this crowd who can tell? Who knows what deathly trap is being laid for you?"

"Not by that man, I'll swear!" the Stadtholder affirmed.

"Nay, if he is loyal he can follow you to the camp and report to you there. But for God's sake remember your father and the miscreant Gerard. There too, a crowd; the hustling, the hurry! In the name of your country, come away!"

There was no denying the prudence of this advice. Another instant's hesitation, the obstinacy of an arbitrary temperament that abhors being dictated to, the Stadtholder was ready to go. Gilda, on the top of the steps, was more like a stone statue of expectancy than like a living woman. Nay, all that she had alive in her were just her eyes, and they had spied her beloved. He was then by the Koppel-poort, some hundred yards or more on the other side of the quay, with a seething mass of panic-stricken humanity between him and the steps of Mynheer Berestejn's house.

He had dismounted and was leading his horse. The poor beast, spent with fatigue, looked ready to drop, and, indeed, appeared too dazed to pick his own way through the crowd. As it was, he was more than a handful for his equally wearied master, whose difficulties were increased a hundredfold by the number of small children who were for ever getting in the way of the horse's legs, and were in constant danger of being kicked or trampled on.

But Gilda never lost sight of him now that she had seen him. With every beat of her heart she was measuring the footsteps that separated him from the Stadtholder. And the more Nicolaes fretted to hurry his Highness away, the more she longed and yearned for the quick approach of her beloved.

4

Amongst all those here present, Gilda was the only one who scented some unseen danger for them all in Nicolaes' strangely feverish haste. What the others took for zeal, she knew by instinct was naught but treachery. What form this would take she could not guess; but this she knew, that for some motive as sinister as it was unexplainable, Nicolaes did not wish the Stadtholder and his messenger to meet. That same motive had caused him to utter all those venomous accusations against her husband, and was even now wearing him into a state of fretfulness which bordered on dementia.

"My lord!" she cried out to her beloved at one time; and felt that even through all the din and clatter her voice had reached his ear, for he raised his head, and it even seemed to her as if his eyes met hers above the intervening crowd and as if the supernal longing for him which was in her heart had drawn him with its mystic power over every obtruding obstacle.

For, indeed, the next moment he was right at the foot of the steps, not five paces from the Stadtholder.

Nicolaes spied him in a moment, and a loud curse broke from his lips.

"That skulking assassin!" he cried; and with a magnificent gesture covered the Stadtholder with his body. "To horse, your Highness, and leave me to deal with him!"

Maurice of Nassau, indeed was one of the bravest men of his time, but the word "assassin" was bound to ring unpleasantly in the ears of a man whose father had met his death at a murderer's hand. Half-ashamed of his fears, he nevertheless did take advantage of Nicolaes' theatrical attitude to slip behind him and mount his horse as quickly as he could. But with his foot already in the stirrup compunction appeared to seize him. Wishing to palliate the gross insult which was being hurled at the man who had once saved his life at imminent peril of his own, he now turned and called to him in gracious, matter-of-fact tones:

"Why, man, what made you tarry so long? Come with us to Utrecht now. We can no longer wait."

With this he swung himself in the saddle.

"Not another step man, at your peril!"

This came from Nicolaes Beresteyn, who was still standing in a dramatic pose between Diogenes and the Stadtholder, with his cloak wrapped around his arm.

"Stand back, you fool!!" retorted the other loudly, and would have pushed past him, when suddenly Nicolaes disengaged his arm from his cloak wrapped around his arm.

For one fraction of a second the gleam of steel flashed in the humid air; then, without a word of warning, swift as a hawk descending on his prey, he struck at Diogenes with all his might.

It had all happened in a very few brief seconds. Diogenes, spent with fatigue, or actually struck, staggered and half fell against the bottom step. But Gilda, with a loud cry, was already by his side, and as Nicolaes raised his arm to strike once again, she was on him like some lithe pantheress.

She seized his wrist, and gave it such a violent twist that he uttered a cry of pain, and the dagger fell with a clatter to the ground. After which everything became a blur. She heard her brother's loudly triumphant shout:

"His Highness's life was threatened. Mine was but an act of justice!" even as he in his turn swung himself into the saddle.

5

The Stadtholder looked dazed. It had all happened so quickly that he had not the time to visualize it all. De Voocht, who was in the hall of the burgomaster's house from the moment when the Stadtholder bade farewell to Gilda until that when he dug his spurs into his horse and scattered the crowd in every direction, tells us in his "Brieven" — the one which is dated March 21, 1626 — that the incidents followed on one another with such astounding rapidity that it was impossible for any one to interfere.

All that he remembers very clearly is seeing his Highness getting to horse, then the flash of steel in the air and Nicolaes Beresteyn's arm upraised ready to strike. He could not see if any one had fallen. The next moment he heard Gilda's heart-piercing shriek, and saw her running down the stone steps — almost flying, like a bird.

Mynheer Beresteyn followed his daughter as rapidly as he could. He reached the foot of the steps just as his son put his horse to a walk in the wake of his Highness. He was wont to say afterwards that at the moment his mind was an absolute blank. He had heard his daughter's cry and seen Nicolaes strike; but he had not actually seen Diogenes. Now he was just in time to see his son's final dramatic gesture and to hear his parting words:

"There, father," Nicolaes shouted to him, and pointed to the ground, "is the pistol which the miscreant pointed at the Stadtholder when I struck him down like a dog!"

The people down on the quay had hardly perceived anything. They were too deeply engrossed in their own troubles and deadly peril.

When the horses reared under the spur they scattered like so many hens out of the way of immediate danger; but a second or two later they were once more surging everywhere, intent only on the business of getting away.

Gilda, at the foot of the steps, saw and heard nothing more. The sudden access of almost manlike strength wherewith she had fallen on her brother and wrenched the murderous dagger from his grasp had as suddenly fallen from her again. Her knees were shaking; she was almost ready to swoon.

She put out her arms and encountered those of her father, which gave her support. Her brother's voice, exultant and cruel, reached her ears as through a veil.

"My lord!" she murmured, in a pitiful appeal.

She did not know how severely he had been struck; indeed, she had not seen him fall. Her instinct had been to rush on Nicolaes first and to disarm him. In this she succeeded. Then only did she turn to her beloved.

But the crowd, cruelly indifferent, was all around like a surging sea. They pushed and they jostled; they shouted and filled the air with a medley of sounds. Some actually laughed. She saw some comely faces and ugly ones; some that wept and others that grinned. It seemed to her even for a moment that she caught sight of a round red face and of lean and lanky Socrates. She tried to call to him, to beg him to explain. She turned to her father, asking him if in truth she was going mad.

For she called in vain to her beloved. He was no longer here.

CHAPTER VIII. DEVIL'S-WRIT

1

When Diogenes, taken wholly unawares by Nicolaes' treacherous blow, had momentarily lost his balance, he would have been in a precarious position indeed had not his faithful friends been close at hand at the moment.

It is difficult to surmise how terribly anxious the two philosophers had been these past few days. Indeed, their anxiety had proved more than a counterpart to that felt by Gilda, and had, with its simple-hearted sympathy, expressed in language more whimsical than choice, been intensely comforting to her.

Both these worthies had been inured to blows and hurts from the time when as mere lads, they first learned to handle a sword, and Pythagoras' wound, which would have laid an ordinary man low for a fortnight, was, after four days, already on the mend. To keep a man of that type in bed, or even within four walls, when he began to feel better was more than any one could do. And when he understood that Diogenes had been absent four days on an errand for the Stadtholder, that the jongejuffrouw was devoured with anxiety on his behalf, and that that spindle-legged gossoon Socrates was spending most of the day and one half of the night on horseback, patrolling the ramparts watching for the comrade's return; when he understood all that, I say, it was not likely that he — Pythagoras — an able-bodied man and a doughty horseman at that, would be content to lie abed and be physicked by any grovelling leech.

Thus the pair of them were providentially on the watch on that memorable March 21, and they both saw their comrade-in-arms enter the city by the Joris Poort. They followed him as best they could through the crowd, cursing and pushing their way, knowing well that Diogenes' objective could be none other than a certain house they wot of on the quay, where a lovely jongejuffrouw was waiting in tears for her beloved.

Remember that to these two caitiffs the fact that the Spaniards were said to be at the very gates of Amersfoort was but a mere incident. With their comrade within the city, they feared nothing, were prepared for anything. They had been in far worse plights than this many a time in their career, the three of them, and had been none the worse for it in the end.

Of course, now matters had become more complicated through the jongejuffrouw. She had become the first consideration, and though it was impossible not to swear at Diogenes for thus having laid this burden on them all, it was equally impossible to shirk its responsibilities.

The jongejuffrouw above all. That had become the moral code of these two philosophers, and with those confounded Spaniards likely to descend on this town — why, the jongejuffrouw must be got out of it as soon as may be! No wonder that Diogenes had turned up just in the nick of time! Something evidently was in the wind, and it behooved for comrades-in-arms to be there, ready to help as occasion arose.

A simple code enough, you'll admit; worthy of simple, unsophisticated hearts. Socrates, being the more able-bodied of the two, then took command, dismounted, and left his lubberly compeer in charge of the horses at a comparatively secluded corner of the market-place.

"If you can get hold of one more horse," he said airily, "one that is well-saddled and looks sprightly and fresh, do not let your super-sensitive honesty stand in your way. Diogenes' mount looked absolutely spent, and I'm sure he'll need another."

With which parting admonition he turned on his heel and made his way toward the quay.

2

Thus it was that Socrates happened to be on the spot, or very near it, when Diogenes was struck by the hand of a traitor, and, wearied, sick, and faint, lost his footing and fell for a moment helpless against the steps, whilst Nicolaes Beresteyn dug his spurs into his horse's sides and urged the Stadtholder to immediate haste.

A second or two later these two were lost to sight in the crowd. It was Socrates who received his half-swooning friend in his arms, and who dragged him incontinently into the recess formed by the side of the stone steps and the wall of the burgomaster's house.

By great good fortune, the dagger-thrust aimed by the abominable miscreant had lost most of its virulence in the thick folds of Diogenes' cloak. The result was just a flesh wound in the neck, nothing that would cause so hardened a soldier more than slight discomfort. His scarf, tied tightly around his shoulders by Socrates' rough, but experienced hands, was all that was needed for the moment. It had only been fatigue, and perhaps the unexpectedness of the onslaught, that had brought him to his knees for that brief second, and rendered him momentarily helpless. Time enough, by mischance for Nicolaes to drag the Stadtholder finally out of sight.

But by the time Diogenes' faithful comrade had found shelter for him in the angle of the wall the feeling of sickness had passed away.

"The Stadtholder," he queried abruptly, "where is he?"

"Gone!" Socrates grunted through clenched teeth. "Gone, together with that spawn of the devil who—"

"After him!" Diogenes commanded, speaking once more with that perfect quietude which is the attribute of men of action at moments of acute peril. "Get me a horse, man! Mine is spent."

"In the market-place," Socrates responded laconically. "Pythagoras is in charge. You can have the beast, and we'll follow." Then he added, under his breath: "And the jongejuffrouw? She was so anxious—"

Diogenes made no reply, gave one look up at the house which contained all that for him was dearest on God's earth. But he did not sigh. I think the longing and the disappointment were too keen even for that. The next moment he had already started to push his way through the throng along the quay, and thence into Vriese Straat in the direction of the market-place, closely followed by his long-legged familiar.

As soon as the Groote Market lay open before him, his sharp eyes searched the crowd for a sight of the Stadtholder's plumed bonnet. Soon he spied his Highness right across the place, with Nicolaes riding close to his stirrup.

The two horsemen were then tending toward Joris Laan, which leads straight to the poort.

At that end of the market the crowd was much less dense, and Joris Laan beyond appeared practically deserted. It was, you must remember, from that side that the enemy would descend upon the city when he came, and the moving throng, if viewed from a height, would now have looked like a column of smoke when it is all blown one way by the wind. Already the Stadtholder and Nicolaes had been free to put their horses to a trot. Another moment and they would be galloping down Joris Laan, which is but three hundred yards from the poort.

"Oh, God, grant me wings!" Diogenes muttered, between his teeth.

"What are you going to do?" Socrates asked.

"Prevent the Stadtholder from falling into an abominable trap, if I can," the other replied briefly.

Socrates pointed to the distant corner of the markt, where Pythagoras could be dimly perceived waiting patiently beside three horses.

"I see the ruffian has stolen a horse," he said. "So long as it is a fresh one—"

"I shall need it," Diogenes remarked simply.

"I told him only to get the best, but you can't trust that loon since good fortune hath made him honest."

The next few seconds brought them to the spot. Pythagoras hailed them with delight. He was getting tired of waiting. Three horses, obviously fresh and furnished with excellent saddlery, were here ready. Even Socrates had a word of praise for his fat compeer's choice.

"Where did you get him from?" he queried, indicating the mount which Diogenes had without demur selected for himself.

Pythagoras shrugged his shoulder. What did it matter who had been made the poorer by a good horse? Enough that it was here now, ready to do service to the finest horseman in the Netherlands. Already Diogenes had swung himself into the saddle, and now he turned his horse toward Nieuwpoort.

"Where do we go?" the others cried.

"After me!" he shouted in reply.

3

Nose to heels, the three riders thundered through the city. It was deserted at this end of it, remember. Thank God for that! And now for a host of guardian angels to the rescue! Down the Oude Straat they galloped, their horses' hoofs raising myriads of sparks from the uneven cobblestones. "God grant me wings!" the leader had cried ere he set spurs to his horse, and the others followed without an instant's thought as to the whither or the wherefore. "After me!" he had called; and they who had fought beside him so often, who had bled with him, suffered with him, triumphed at times, been merry always, were well content to follow him now and forget everything in the exhilaration of this chase.

A chase it was! They could not doubt it, even though they seemed at this moment to be speeding in the opposite direction to that pursued by the Stadtholder and Nicolaes Beresteyn. But they well knew their friend's way, when he let his mount have free rein and threw up his head with that air of intense vitality which in him was at its height when life and death were having a tussle somewhere at the end of a ride.

Down the Oude Straat, which presently abuts on the ramparts. Then another two hundred yards to Nieuwpoort. No one in sight now. This part of the city looks like one of the dead. Doors open wide, litter of every sort encumbering the road. The din from afar, even the ceaseless tolling of St. Maria bell, seem like dream-sounds, ghost-like and unreal. Now the poort. Still no one insight. No guard. No sentry. The gate left open. Here two or three halberds hastily thrown down in some hurried flight. There a culverin, forlorn looking, gaping wide-mouthed, like some huge toad yawning, as if astonished or wearied to find itself deserted. Then again, a pile of muskets. It must have been a sudden panic that drove the guard from their post. But, thank God, the gate!

Diogenes is already through; after him his two compeers. A quarter of a league further on they suddenly draw rein. The horses rear, snorting and tossing, panting with the excitement and fretted with the curb. The riders blink for a second or two in the glare. The white mist is positively blinding here, where its sovereignty is unfettered. Just a clump of trees, way out on the right, here and there a hut with thatched roof and a piece of low fencing, or the gaunt arms of a windmill stretched with eerie stillness to the silvery sky. And above it all the mist — a pale shroud that envelopes everything.

To the east and the south the arid upland plunges head-long through it into infinity, cloaks within its stern bosom the secrets of the lurking enemy — the armies of De Berg, the Spanish outposts, the ambuscades. To the west Utrecht, unseen — and just now two tiny specks speeding along its road — the Stadtholder and Nicolaes Beresteyn. They came out into the open through Joris Poort, and are now some four hundred yards or less from the spot where three panting but exhilarated philosophers were now filling their lungs with the crisp, humid air.

They looked neither to right nor left. The Stadtholder, easily recognizable by his plumed bonnet, rides a length or less in advance of his companion. The fog has not yet swallowed them up. Diogenes takes all this in. A simple enough picture — the sea-fog and two riders speeding towards Utrecht. But a swift intaking of his breath, a tight closing of his firm lips, indicate to the others that all is not as simple as it seems.

4

Then a very curious thing happened. At first it seemed nothing. But to the watchers outside Nieuwpoort it had the same effect as a flash of lightning would have in an apparently cloudless sky. It began with Nicolaes Beresteyn drawing his horse close up to the Stadtholder, on his Highness's right. Then for another few seconds the two riders went along side by side, like one black speck now,

still quite distinguishable through the fog. Socrates and Pythagoras had their eyes on Diogenes. But Diogenes did not move. He was frowning, and his face had a set and tense expression. He had his horse tightly on the curb, and appeared almost wilfully to fret the animal, who was pawing the wet, sandy ground and covering itself with lather — a picture of tearing impatience.

“What do we do now?” Pythagoras exclaimed at last, unable, just like the horse, to contain his excitement.

“Wait,” Diogenes replied curtly. “All may be well after all.”

“In which case?” queried Socrates.

“Nothing!”

A groan of disappointment rose to a couple of parched throats; but it was never uttered. What went on in the mist on the road to Utrecht, four hundred yards away, had stifled it at birth.

The Stadtholder’s horse had become restive. A simple matter enough; but in this case unexplainable, because Maurice of Nassau was a splendid horseman. He could easily have quietened the animal if there had not been something abnormal in its sudden antics. It reared and tossed for no apparent reason, would have thrown a less experienced rider.

“The brute is being teased with a goad,” Pythagoras remarked sententiously.

That was clear enough. Even in the distance, and experienced eye could have perceived that the horse became more and more unmanageable every moment, and the Stadtholder’s seat more and more precarious. Then suddenly there came the sharp report of a pistol. The horse, goaded to madness, took the bit between its teeth, and with a final plunge bolted across country, away from that strident noise, which, twice repeated at intervals, had turned its fretfulness into blind panic.

It was at the first report that Socrates and Pythagoras again glanced at their leader. A gurgle of delight escaped them when they caught his eye. They had received their orders. The next moment all three had dug their spurs in their horses’ flanks and were galloping over sand and ditch.

Diogenes’ horse, given free rein at last, after the maddening curb of awhile ago, was soon half a dozen lengths ahead of the others, tearing along with all its might at right angles to the direction in which the Stadtholder’s panic-stricken animal was rushing like one possessed. That direction was Ede.

5

In truth, the low-lying land veiled in sea-fog must at that moment have presented a very curious spectacle. Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, the hope and pride of the Netherlands, helpless upon a horse that was running away with him straight in the direction of the nearest Spanish outposts.

Three soldiers of fortune, strangers, in the land hastening to intercept him, and a couple of hundred yards or so behind the Stadtholder, Nicolaes Beresteyn, puzzled and terror-filled at this unexpected check to his manoeuvre, pushing along for dear life.

It had been such a splendid scheme, evolved over there in the lonely mill on the Veluwe, between a reprobate and a traitor. The Spaniards on the watch. The Stadtholder helpless, whilst his mount carried him headlong into their hands. What a triumph for Stoutenburg, who had planned it all, and for Nicolaes Beresteyn, the worker of the infamous plot! The Stadtholder prisoner in the hands of the Archduchess! His life the price of the subjection of the Netherlands!

And all to be frustrated by a foolish mischance! Three riders intent upon intercepting that runaway horse! Who in thunder were they? The mist, remember, would have blurred Nicolaes’ vision. His thoughts were not just then on the man whom he hated. They were fixed upon the possibility — remote, alas! — of convincing the Stadtholder after this that the goaded horse had been the victim of a series of accidents.

Even at this moment the foremost of the three riders had overtaken the runaway. He galloped for a length or two beside it, then, with a dexterous and unerring grip, he seized the panic-stricken animal by the bridle. A few seconds of desperate struggle ‘twixt man and beast. Then man remained the conqueror. The horse, panting, quivering in every limb, covered in sweat and foam, was finally brought to a standstill, and the Stadtholder in an instant had his feet clear of the stirrups and swung himself out of the saddle.

6

Then, and then only, did Nicolaes Beresteyn recognize the man who for the second time had frustrated his nefarious plans — the man whom, because of his easy triumphs, the humiliation which he had inflicted upon him, because of his careless gaiety and his very joy of life, he hated with a curious, sinister intensity.

A ferocious imprecation rose to his lips. For awhile everything became a blank. The present, the future, even the past. Everything became chaos in his mind, he could no longer think. All that he had planned became a blur, as if the sea-fog had enveloped his senses as well as the entire landscape.

But this confused mental state only lasted a very little while — a few seconds perhaps. Slowly, while he gazed on that distant group of men and horses, his perceptions became clearer once more. And even before the imprecation had died on his lips it gave place to a smile of triumph. Nicolaes Beresteyn had remembered that his Majesty the devil might well be trusted to care for his own. Had he not served the hell-born liege lord well?

For the nonce he brought his horse to a halt. It would be worse than folly to go on. With recognition of those three horsemen over there had also come the certainty that he was now irretrievably unmasked. The Stadtholder, his father, his sister, even his young wife, would turn from him in horror, as from a traitor and an outcast — a pariah, marked with the brand of Cain.

No! Henceforth, for good or for evil, his fortunes must be linked openly with Stoutenburg — with the man who wielded such a strange cabalistic power over him that he (Nicolaes) — rich, newly wed, in a highly enviable worldly position — had been ready to sacrifice his all in his cause, and to throw in the last shred of his honour into the bargain. In Stoutenburg’s cause — ay, and in order to be revenged on the man who had never wronged him save in his conceit — that most vulnerable spot in the moral armour of such contemptible rogues as was Nicolaes Beresteyn.

The spot where he had brought his horse to a halt was immediately behind a low, deserted hut, which concealed him from view. Here he dismounted and, throwing the reins over his arm, advanced cautiously to a point of vantage at the angle of the little building, whence he could see what those four men were doing over there but himself remain unseen.

They, too, had dismounted, and were obviously intent on examining the Stadtholder's horse. A sinister scowl spread over Nicolaes Berestejn's face. There was still a chance, then, of putting a bullet in one or other of those two men — the hated enemy or the Stadtholder. Nicolaes pondered; the scowl on his face became almost satanic in its expression of cruelty. Awhile ago, he had replaced his pistol in the holster, after it had served its nefarious purpose. Now he took it out again and examined it thoroughly.

It had one more charge in it, the devilish charge invented by the Borgias, the secret of which one of that infamous race had confided to Stoutenburg. The fumes from the powder when it struck the eyes must cause irretrievable blindness. Indeed, it had proved its worth already.

Nicolaes, from his hiding-place, could see those four men quite clearly. The Stadtholder, Diogenes, the two caitiffs, all standing round the one horse. Then Diogenes took something out of his belt. He raised his arm, and the next moment a sharp report rang through the mistladen air. The poor animal rolled over instantly into the mud.

The scowl on Nicolaes' face now gave place once more to a smile of triumph — more sinister than the frown. With the gesture of a conqueror, he clutched the pistol more firmly. The potent fumes had, in truth, wrought their fiendish work on the innocent beast. Diogenes had just put it out of its misery, and his two familiars were preparing to mount one of the horses, whilst he and the Stadtholder had the other two by the reins.

Why not?

The miscreant was sure enough of his aim, and the others would be unprepared. He was sure, too, of the swiftness of his horse, and the Spanish outposts were less than a quarter of a league away, whilst within half that distance Stoutenburg was on the watch with a vedette, waiting to capture the Stadtholder on his runaway horse as it had been prearranged.

Once there he — Nicolaes — would be amongst friends.

Then, why not?

Already the riders had put their horses to a trot. Diogenes and the Stadtholder on ahead, the two loons some few lengths in their rear. In less than three minutes they would be within range of Nicolaes' pistol and its blinding fumes. And Diogenes was riding on the side nearest to his enemy.

Nicolaes Berestejn grasped his weapon more firmly. He realized with infinite satisfaction that his arm was perfectly steady. Indeed, he had never felt so absolutely calm. The measured tramp of the horses keyed him up to a point of unswerving determination. He raised his arm. The horses were galloping now. They would pass like a flash within twenty paces of him.

The next moment the sharp report of the pistol rang stridently through the mist. There was a burst, a flash, a column of smoke. Nicolaes jumped into the saddle and set spurs to his horse. The other riders went galloping on for a few seconds — not more. Then one of them swayed in his saddle. Nicolaes then was a couple of hundred yards away.

"You are hit, man!" the Stadtholder exclaimed. "That abominable assassin—"

But the words died in his throat. The reins had slipped out of Diogenes' grasp, and he rolled down into the mud.

A sudden jerk brought the Stadtholder's horse to a halt. He swung himself out of the saddle, ran quickly to his companion.

"You are hit, man!" he reiterated; this time with an unexplainable feeling of dread.

The other seemed so still, and yet his clothes and the soft earth around him showed no stains of blood.

Pythagoras now was also on the spot. He had slid off the horse as soon as the infamous assassin had started to ride away. Socrates was trying to give chase. Even now two pistol-shots rang out in quick succession right across the moorland. But the hell-hound was well mounted, and the avenging bullets failed to reach their mark. All this the Stadtholder took in with a rapid glance, even whilst Pythagoras, round-eyed and scared, was striving with gentle means to raise the strangely inert figure.

"He hath swooned," the Stadtholder suggested.

The stricken man had one arm across his face. His head had fallen from his head, leaving the fine, square brow free and the crisp hair weighted by the sweat of some secret agony. The mouth, too, was visible, and the chin, with its four days' growth of beard, the mouth that was always ready with a smile. It was set now in an awesome contraction of pain, and, withal, that terrible immobility.

Now Socrates was arriving. A moment or two later he, too, had dismounted, cursing lustily that he had failed to hit the hell-hound. A mute query, an equally mute reply, was all that passed between him and Pythagoras.

Then the stricken man stirred as if suddenly roused to consciousness.

"Are you hit, man?" the Stadtholder queried again.

"No — no!" he replied quickly. "Only a little dazed. That is all."

He raised himself to a sitting posture, helping himself up with his hands, which sank squelching into the mud; whereat he gave a short laugh, which somehow went a cold shiver down the listener's spines.

"Where is my hat?" he asked. "Pythagoras, you lazy loon, get me my hat."

He must indeed have been still dazed, for when his friend picked up the hat and gave it to him, his hand shot out for it quite wide of the mark. He gave another laugh, short and toneless as before, and set the hat on his head, pulling down well over his eyes.

"I had a mugful of hot ale at Amersfoort before starting," he said. "It must have got into my head."

He made no attempt to get to his feet, but just sat there, with his two slender hands all covered with mud, tightly clasped between his knees.

"Can you get to horse?" his Highness queried at last.

"No," Diogenes replied, "not just yet, an' it please you, I verily think that I would roll out of my saddle again, which would, in truth, be a disgusting spectacle."

"But we cannot leave you here, man," the Stadtholder rejoined, with a slight tone of impatience. "And why not, I pray you?" he retorted. "Your Highness must get to Utrecht as quickly as may be. A half-drunken lout like me would only be a hindrance."

His voice was thick now and halting, in very truth like that of a man who had been drinking heavily. He rested his elbows on his knees and held his chin between his mud-stained hands.

"Socrates, you lumpish vagabond," he exclaimed all of a sudden, "don't stand gaping at me like that! Bring forth his Highness's horse at once, and see that you accompany him to Utrecht without further mishap, or 'tis with us you'll have to deal on your return!"

"But you, man!" the Stadtholder exclaimed once more.

He felt helpless and strangely disturbed in his mind, not understanding what all this meant; why this man, usually so alert, so keen, so full of vigour, appeared for the moment akin to a babbling imbecile.

"I'll have a good sleep inside that hut, so please you," the other replied more glibly. "These two ruffians will find me here after they have seen your gracious Highness safely inside your camp."

Then, as the Stadtholder still appeared to hesitate, and neither of the others seemed to move, Diogenes added, with an almost desperate note of entreaty:

"To horse, your Highness, I beg! Every second is precious. Heaven knows what further devilry lies in wait for you, if you linger here."

"Or for you, man," the Stadtholder murmured involuntarily.

"Nay, not for me!" the other retorted quickly. "The Archduchess and her gang of vultures fly after higher game than a drunken wayfarer lost on the flats. To horse, I entreat!"

And once more he pressed his hands together, and so tightly that the knuckles shone like polished ivory, even through their covering of mud.

The Stadtholder then gave a sign to the two men. It was obviously futile to continue arguing here with a man who refused to move. He himself had very rightly said that every second was precious. And every second, too, was fraught with danger. Already his Highness had well-nigh been the victim of a diabolical ambushade, might even at this hour have been a prisoner in the hands of the enemy, a hostage of incalculable value, even if his life had been spared, but for the audacious and timely interference of this man, who now appeared almost like one partially bereft of reason.

"We'll see you safely inside the hut, at any rate," was his Highness's last word.

"And I'll not move," Diogenes retorted with a kind of savage obstinacy, "until the mist has swallowed up your gracious Highness on the road to Utrecht."

After that there was nothing more to be said. And we may take it that the Stadtholder got to horse with unaccountable reluctance. Something in that solitary figure sitting there, with the plumed hat tilted over his eyes and the slender, mud-stained hands tightly locked together, gave him a strange feeling of nameless dismay, like a premonition of some obscure catastrophic tragedy.

But his time and his safety did not belong to himself alone. They were the inalienable property of a threatened country, that would be grasping in her death-throes if she were deprived of him at this hour of renewed and deadly danger. So he gathered the reins in his hands and set spurs to his horse, and once he had started he did not look behind him, lest his emotion get the better of his judgement.

The two gossoons immediately followed in his wake. This they did because the friend they had always been wont to obey had thus commanded, and his seeming helplessness rendered his orders doubly imperative at this hour. They rode a length or two behind the Stadtholder, who presently put his horse to a gallop. Utrecht now was only a couple of leagues away.

The three horsemen galloped on for a quarter of a league or less at the same even, rapid pace. Then Pythagoras slackened speed. The others did not even turn to look at him, he seemed to have done it by tacit unspoken consent. The Stadtholder and Socrates sped on in the direction of Utrecht and Pythagoras turned his horse's head round toward the direction whence he had come.

The afternoon lay heavy and silent upon the plain. There was as yet no sign of the approach of the enemy from the south, and the low-lying land appeared momentarily hushed under its veil of mist, as if conscious of the guilty secret enshrined within its bosom. The fog, indeed, had thickened perceptibly. It lay like a wall around that lonely figure, still sitting there on the soft earth, with its head buried in its hands.

Far away, the gaunt-looking carcase of the dead horse appeared as the only witness of a hideous deed as yet un-recorded. Each a blurred and uncertain mass — the dead horse and the lonely figure, equally motionless, equally pathetic — were now the sole occupants of the vast and silent immensity.

Not far away, in the little town of Amersfoort, humanity, panic-stricken and terrorized, filled the air with clamour and with wails. Here, beneath the ghostly shroud of humid atmosphere, everything was stilled as if in ghoulish expectancy of something mysterious, indiscernible which was still to come. It was like the arrested breath before the tearing cry, the hush which precedes a storm.

Overhead, a flight of rooks sent their melancholy cawing through the air.

When Pythagoras was within fifty yards of his friend he dismounted, and, leading his horse by the bridle, he walked toward him. When he was quite near Diogenes put out a hand to him.

"I knew you would come back, you fat-witted nonny," he said simply.

"Socrates had to go on with the Stadtholder," the other remarked, "or he'd be here, too." Then he added tentatively: "Will you lean on my arm?"

"Yes, I'll have to do that now, old crony, shall I not?" Diogenes replied. "That devil," he murmured under his breath, "has blinded me!"

CHAPTER IX. MALA FIDES

1

Nicolaes Beresteyn, riding like one possessed had reached Stoutenburg's encampment one hour before nightfall. He brought the news of the failure of his plan for the capture of the Stadtholder, spoke with many a muttered oath of the Englishman and his two familiars, and of how they had interposed just in the nick of time to stop the runaway horse.

"But for that cursed rogue!" he exclaimed savagely, "Maurice of Nassau would now be a prisoner in our hands. We would be holding him to ransom, earning gratitude, honours, wealth at the hands of the Archduchess. Whereas — now—"

But there was solace to the bitterness of this disappointment. The blinding powder, invented by the infamous Borgia, had done its work. The abominable rogue, the nameless adventurer, who had twice succeeded in thwarting the best-laid schemes of his lordship of Stoutenburg, had paid the full penalty for his audacity and his arrogant interference.

Blind, helpless, broken, an object now of contemptuous pity rather than of hate, he was henceforth powerless to wreak further mischief.

"Just before I put my horse to a swift gallop," Nicolaes Beresteyn had concluded, "I saw him sway in the saddle and roll down into the mud. One of the vagabonds tried to chase me; but my horse bore me well and I was soon out of his reach."

That news did, indeed compensate Stoutenburg for all the humiliation which he had endured at the hands of his successful rival in the past. A rival no longer; for the Laughing Cavalier, blind and helpless, was not like ever to return to claim his young wealthy wife and to burden her with his misery. This last tribute to the man's pluck and virility Stoutenburg paid him unconsciously. He could not visualize that splendid creature, so full of life and gaiety, and conscious of might strength, groping his way back to the side of the woman whom he had dazzled by his power.

"He would sooner die in a ditch," he muttered to himself, under his breath, "than excite her pity!"

"Then the field is clear for me!" he added exultantly; and fell to discussing with Nicolaes his chances of regaining Gilda's affections. "Do you think she ever cared for the rogue?" he queried, with a strange quiver of emotion in his harsh voice.

Nicolaes was doubtful. He himself had never been in love. He liked his young wife well enough; she was comely and rich. But love? No, he could not say.

"She'll not know what has become of him," Stoutenburg said, striving to allay his own doubts. "And women very quickly forget."

He sighed, proud of his own manly passion that had survived so many vicissitudes, and was linked to such a tenacious memory.

"We must not let her know," Nicolaes insisted.

Stoutenburg gave a short, sardonic laugh. "Are you afraid she might kill you if she did?" he queried.

Then, as the other made no reply, but stood there brooding, his soul a prey to a sudden horror, which was not unlike a vague pang of remorse, Stoutenburg concluded cynically:

"I'll give the order that every blind beggar found wandering around the city be forthwith hanged on the nearest tree. Will that allay your fears?"

Thereafter he paid no further heed to Nicolaes, whom, in his heart, he despised for a waverer and a weakling; but he gave orders to his master of the camp to make an immediate start for Amersfoort.

2

Amersfoort had, in the meanwhile, so De Voocht avers, become wonderfully calm. Those whose nerves would not stand the strain of seeing the hated tyrants once more within the gates of their peace-loving little city, those who had no responsibilities, and those who had families, fled at the first rumour of the enemy's approach. Indeed, for many hours the streets and open places, the quays and the sleepy, sluggish river, had on the first day been nothing short of a pandemonium. Then everything gradually became hushed and tranquil. Those who were panic-stricken had all gone by nightfall; those who remained knew the risk they were taking, and sat in their homes, waiting and pondering. Amersfoort that evening might have been a city of the dead.

Darkness set in early, and the sea-fog thickened at sundown. Some wiseacres said that the Spaniards would not come until the next day. They proved to be right. The dawn had hardly spread o'er the whole of the eastern sky on the morning of the twenty-second, when the master of the enemy's camp was heard outside the ramparts, demanding the surrender of the city.

The summons was received in absolute silence. The gates were open, and the mercenaries marched in. In battle array, with banners flying, with pikemen, halberdiers and arquebusiers; with fifes and drums and a trainload of wagons and horses, and the usual rabble of beggarly camp followers, they descended on the city like locusts; and soon every tavern was filled to overflowing with loud-voiced, swarthy, ill-mannered soldiery, and all the streets and places encumbered with their carts and their horses and their trappings.

They built a bonfire in the middle of the market-place, and all around it a crowd of out-at-elbows ruffians, men, women, and children, filled the air with their shrieks and their bibulous songs. Some four thousand troops altogether, so De Voocht states, spread themselves out over the orderly, prosperous town, invaded the houses, broke open the cellars and storehouses, made the day hideous with their noise and their roistering.

As many as could found shelter in the deserted homes of the burghers; others used the stately kerks as stabling for their horses and camping ground for themselves. The inhabitants offered no resistance. A century of unspeakable tyranny ere they had gained their freedom had taught them the stern lesson of submitting to the inevitable. The Stadtholder had ordered them to submit. Until he could come to their rescue they must swallow the bitter cup of resignation to the dregs. It could not be for long. He who before now had swept the Spanish hordes off the sacred soil of the United Provinces could do so again. It was only a case for a little patience. And patience was a virtue which these grave sons of a fighting race knew how to practise to its utmost limit.

And so the burghers of Amersfoort who had remained in the city in order to watch over its fate and over their property submitted without murmur to the arrogant demands of the invaders. Their wives ministered in proud silence to the wants of the insolent rabble. They saw their dower-chests ransacked, their effects destroyed or stolen, their provisions wasted and consumed. They waited hand and foot, like serving wenches, upon their tyrants; for, indeed, it had been the proletariat who had been the first to flee.

They even succeeded in keeping back their tears when they saw their husbands — the more noted burghers of the town — dragged as hostages before the commander of the invading troops, who had taken up his quarters in the burgomaster's house.

That commander was the Lord of Stoutenburg. In high favour with the Archduchess now, he had desired leave to carry through this expedition to Amersfoort. Private grudge against the man who had robbed him of Gilda, or lust for revenge against the Stadtholder for the execution of Olden Barneveldt, who can tell? Who can read the inner workings of a tortuous brain, or appraise the passions of an embittered heart?

Attended by all the sinister paraphernalia which he now affected, the Lord of Stoutenburg entered Amersfoort in the late afternoon as a conqueror, his eyes glowing with the sense of triumph over a successful rival and of power over a disdainful woman. The worthy citizens of the little town gazed with astonishment and dread upon his sable banner, brodered in silver with a skull and crossbones — the emblem of his relentlessness, now that the day of reckoning had come.

He rode through the city, hardly noticing its silent death-like appearance. Not one glance did he bestow on the closed shutters to the right or left of him. His eyes were fixed upon the tall pinnaced roof of the burgomaster's house, silhouetted against the western sky, the stately abode on the quay where, in the days long since gone by, he had been received as an honoured guest. Since then what a world of sorrow, of passion, of endless misery had been his lot! It seemed as if, on the day when he became false to Gilda Beresteyn in order to wed the rich and influential daughter of Marnix de St. Aldegonde, fickle fortune had finally turned her back on him. His father and brother ended their days of the scaffold; his wife, abandoned by him and broken-hearted; he himself a fugitive with a price upon his head, a potential assassin, and that vilest thing on earth, a man who sells his country to her enemies.

No wonder that, at a comparatively early age, the Lord of Stoutenburg looked a careworn and wearied man. The lines on his face were deep and harsh, his hair was turning grey at the temples. Only the fire in his deepset eyes was fierce and strong, for it was fed with the fire of an ever-enduring passion — hatred. Hatred of the Stadtholder; hatred of the nameless adventurer who had thwarted him at every turn; hatred of the woman who had shut him out wholly from her heart.

But now the hour of triumph had come. For it had schemed and lied and striven and never once given way to despair. It had come, crowned with immeasurable success. The Stadtholder — thanks to the subtle poison of an infamous Borgia, administered by a black-hearted assassin — was nothing but a physical wreck; whilst those who had brought him — Stoutenburg — to his knees three short months ago were at his mercy at last. A longing as cruel as it was vengeful had possession of his soul whenever he thought of these two facts.

His schemes were not yet mature, and he had not yet arrived at any definite conclusion as to how he would reach the ultimate goal of his desires; but this he did know — that the Stadtholder was too sick to put up a fight for Amersfoort, and that Gilda and her stranger lover were definitely parted, and both of them entirely in his power. Their fate was as absolutely in his hands as his had once been in theirs. And the Lord of Stoutenburg, with his eyes raised to the pinnaced roof of the house that sheltered the woman whom he still loved with such passionate ardour, felt that for the first time for this man a year he might count himself as almost happy.

3

Nicolaes Beresteyn was among the last to enter his native city. He did so as a shameless traitor, a dishonoured gambler who had staked his all upon a hellish die. Indeed now he seemed like a man possessed, careless of his crime, exulting in it even. The vague fear of meeting his father and Gilda eye to eye seemed somehow to add zest to his adventure. He did not know how much they knew, or what they guessed, but felt a strange thrill within his tortuous soul at the thought of standing up before them as their master, of defying them and deriding their reproaches.

His young wife he knew to be away. Her father had started off for Amsterdam with his family and his servants at the first rumour of the enemy's approach. In any case she was his. She and her wealth and Mynheer van den Poele's influence and business connexions. He — Nicolaes — who had always been second in his father's affections always subservient to Gilda and to Gilda's interests, and who since that affair in January had been treated like a skulking schoolboy in the paternal home, would now rule there as a conqueror, a protector on whose magnanimity the comfort of the entire household would depend.

These and other thoughts — memories, self-pity, rage, too, and hatred, and imputations against fate — coursed through his mind as he rode into his native city at the head of the rearguard of Stoutenburg's troops. He drew rein outside his father's house. Not the slightest stirring of his dormant conscience troubled him as he ran swiftly up the familiar stone steps.

With the heavy basket-hilt of his rapier he rapped vigorously against the stout oak panels of the door, demanding admittance in the name of the Archduchess Isabella, Sovereign Liege Lady of the Netherlands. At once the doors flew open, as if moved by a spring. Two elderly serving-men stood alone in the hall, silent and respectful.

At the sight of their young master they both made a movement as if to run to him, deluded for the moment into hopes of salvation, relief from this awful horror of imminent invasion. But he paid no heed to them. His very look chilled them and froze the words of welcome upon their lips, as he strode quickly past them into the hall.

The shades of evening were now rapidly drawing in. Except for the two serving-men, the house appeared deserted. In perfect order, but strangely still and absolutely dark. As he looked about him, Nicolaes felt as if he were in a vault. A cold shiver ran down his spine. Curtly he bade the men bring lighted candles into the banqueting-hall.

Here, too, silence and darkness reigned. In the huge monumental hearth a few dying embers were still smouldering, casting a warm glow upon the red tiles, and flicking the knobs and excrescences of the brass tools with minute crimson sparks.

Nicolaes felt his nerves tingling. He groped his way to one of the windows, and with an impatient hand tore at the casement. Stoutenburg's troops were now swarming everywhere. The quay was alive with movement. Some of the soldiers were bivouacking

against the house, had build up a fire, the ruddy glow of which, together with the flicker of resin torches, threw a weird and uncertain light into the room. Nicolaes felt his teeth chattering with cold. His hands were like fire. Could it be that he was afraid — afraid that in a moment or two he would hear familiar footsteps coming down the stairs, that in a moment or two he would have to face the outraged father, come to curse his traitor son?

Bah! This was sheer cowardice! But a brief while ago he had exulted in his treachery, gloried in his callous disregard of his monstrous crime. How it seemed to him that a pair of sightless yet still mocking eyes glared at him from out the gloom. With a shudder and a quickly smothered cry of horror, Nicolaes buried his face in his hands.

The next moment the two serving-men came in, carrying lighted candles in heavy silver candelabra. These they set upon the table; and one of them, kneeling beside the hearth, plied the huge bellows, coaxing the dying embers into flame. After which they stood respectfully by, awaiting further commands. Obviously they had had their orders — absolute obedience and all those outward forms of respect which they were able to accord. Nicolaes looked at them with a fierce, defying glance. He knew them both well. Greybeards in the service of his father, they had seen the young master grow up from cradle to this hour when he stood, a rebel and a skunk, on the paternal hearth.

But they did not flinch under his glance. They knew that they had been specially chosen for the unpleasant task of waiting upon the enemy commanders because their tempers had no longer the ebullience of youth, and they might be trusted to remain calm in the face of arrogance or even of savagery — even in the face of Mynheer Nicolaes, the child they had loved, the youth they had admired, now a branded traitor, who had come like a thief in the night to barter his honour for a crown of shame.

4

A certain commotion outside on the quay proclaimed the fact that the commander of the troops, the Lord of Stoutenburg, had entered the town at the head of his bodyguard, and followed by his master of the camp and his equerries.

He, too, made straight for the burgomaster's house, brought his horse to a halt at the foot of the stone steps. With a curt nod, Nicolaes bade the old crones to run to the front door and receive his Magnificence. In this, as in everything else, the men obeyed at once and in silence.

But already Stoutenburg, preceded by his equerries and his torchbearers, had stepped across the threshold. He knew his way well about the house. As boys, he and his brother Groeneveld had played their games in and around the intricate passages and stairs. As a young man he had sat in the deep window embrasures, holding Gilda's hand, taking delight in terrifying her with his impetuous love, and forcing her consent to his suit by his masterful wooing. A world of memories, grave and gay, swept over him as he entered the banqueting-hall, where, but for his many misfortunes — as he callously called his crimes — he would one day have sat at the bridegroom's table beside Gilda, his plighted wife.

Both he and Nicolaes felt unaccountably relieved at meeting one another here. For both of them, no doubt, the silence and gloom of this memory-haunted house would in the long run have proved unendurable.

"I did not know that I should meet you here," Stoutenburg exclaimed, as he grasped his friend by the hand.

"I thought it would be best," Nicolaes replied curtly.

But this warm greeting from the infamous arch-traitor, in the presence of the two loyal old servants, brought a hot flush to the young man's brow. The last faint warning from his drugged conscience, mayhap. But the feeling of shame faded away as swiftly as it had come, and the next moment he was standing by, impassive and seemingly unconcerned, while the Lord of Stoutenburg gave his orders to the men.

These orders were to prepare the necessary beds for my lord and for Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn, also for the equerries, and proper accommodation for my lord's bodyguard, which consisted of twenty musketeers with their captain. Moreover, to provide supper for his Magnificence and mynheer in the banqueting-hall, and for the rest of the company in some other suitable room, without delay.

The two old crones took the orders in silence, bowed, and prepared to leave the room.

"Stay," my lord commanded. "Where is the burgomaster?"

"In his private apartments, so please you," one of the men replied.

"And his daughter?"

"The jongejuffrouw is with Mynheer the Burgomaster."

"Tell them both I want them to sup here with me and Mynheer Nicolaes."

Again the men bowed with the same silent dignity. It was impossible to gather from their stolid, mask-like faces what their thoughts might be at this hour. When they had gone, Stoutenburg peremptorily dismissed his equerries.

"If you have anything to complain of in this house," he said curtly, "come and report to me at once. To-morrow we leave at dawn."

Both the equerries gave a gasp of astonishment.

"To-morrow?" one of them murmured, apparently quite taken aback by this order.

"At dawn," Stoutenburg reiterated briefly.

This was enough. Neither did the equerries venture on further remarks. They had served for some time now under his Magnificence, knew his obstinacy and the irrevocableness of his decisions when once he had spoken.

"No further commands until then, my lord?" was all that the spokesman said.

"None for you," Stoutenburg replied curtly. "But tell Jan that the moment — the moment, you understand — that the burgomaster enters this room, he is to be prevented from doing any mischief. If he carries a weapon, he must at once be disarmed; if he resists, there should be a length of rope handy wherewith to tie his hands behind his back. But otherwise I'll not have him hurt. Understand?"

"Perfectly, my lord," the equerry gave answer. "'Tis simple enough."

5

Now the two friends — brothers in crime — were alone in the vast, panelled hall.

Nicolaes had said nothing, made no movement of indignation or protest, when the other delivered his monstrous and treacherous commands against the personal liberty of the burgomaster. He had sat sullen and glowering, his head resting against his hand.

Stoutenburg looked down on him for a moment or two, his deep-set eyes full of that contempt which he felt for this weak-kneed and conscience-plagued waverer. Then he curtly advised him to leave the room.

"You might not think it seemly," he remarked with a sneer, "to be present when I take certain preventive measures against your father. These measures are necessary, else I would not take them. You would not have him spitting some of our men, or mayhap do himself or Gilda some injury, would you?"

"I was not complaining," Nicolaes retorted dryly.

Indeed, he obeyed readily enough. Now that the time had come to meet his father, he shrank from the ordeal with horror. It would have come, of course; but, like all weak natures, Nicolaes was always on the side of procrastination. He rose without another word, and, avoiding the main door of the banqueting-hall, he went out by the back one, which gave on a narrow antechamber and thence on the service staircase.

"I'll remain in the ante-chamber," he said. "Call me when you wish."

Stoutenburg shrugged his shoulders. He was glad to remain alone for awhile — alone with that wealth of memories which would not be chased away. Memories of childhood, of adolescence, of youth untainted with crime; of love, before greed and ambition had caused him to betray so basely the girl who had believed in him.

"If Gilda had remained true to me," he sighed, with almost cynical inconsequence, exacting fidelity where he had given none. "If she had stuck to me that night in Haarlem everything would have been different."

He went up to the open window, and, leaning his arm against the mullion, he gazed upon the busy scene below. The current of cold, humid air appeared to do him good. His arquebusiers and pikemen, bivouacking round the spluttering fires, striving to keep the damp air out of their stiffening limbs; the shouts, the songs, the peremptory calls; the shrieks of frightened women and children; the loud Spanish oaths; the medley of curses in every tongue — all this confused din pertaining to strife seemed to work like a tonic upon his brooding spirit. A blind beggar soliciting alms among the soldiery chased all softer thoughts away.

"Hey, there!" he shouted fiercely, to one of the soldiers who happened just then to have caught his eye, "Have I not given orders that every blind beggar lurking around the city be hung to the nearest tree?"

The men laughed. A monstrously tyrannical order such as that suited their present mood.

"But this one was inside the city, so please your Magnificence," one of them protested with a cynical laugh, "when we arrived."

"All the more reason why he should be hung forthwith!" Stoutenburg riposted savagely in reply.

A loud guffaw greeted this inhuman order. His Magnificence was loudly cheered, his health drunk in deep goblets of stolen wine. Then a search was made for the blind beggar. But he, luckily for himself, had in the meanwhile taken to his heels.

6

The next moment a slight noise behind him caused the Lord of Stoutenburg to turn on his heel. The door had been thrown open, and the burgomaster, having his daughter on his arm, stood upon the threshold. He was dressed in his robes of office, with black cloak and velvet bonnet; but he wore a steel gorget round his neck and rapier by his side.

At the sight of his arch enemy, he had paused under the lintel, and the ashen pallor of his cheeks became more marked. But he had no time to move, for in an instant Jan and three or four men were all around him.

At this treacherous onslaught a fierce oath escaped Beresteyn's lips. In an instant his sword was out of its scabbard, he himself at bay, covering Gilda with his body, and facing the men who had thus scurrilously rushed on him out of the gloom.

But obviously resistance was futile. Already he was surrounded and disarmed, Gilda torn forcibly away from him, thrust into a corner, whilst he himself was rendered helpless, even though he fought and struggled magnificently. The whole unequal combat had only lasted a few seconds; and now the grand old man stood like a fettered lion, glowering and defiant, his hands tied behind his back with a length of rope, against which he was straining with all his might.

One of the most disloyal pitfalls ever devised against an unsuspecting civilian — and he the chief dignitary of a peace-loving city. Stoutenburg watched the scene with an evil glitter in his restless eyes. Shame and compunction did, in truth, bear no part in his emotions at this moment. He was exulting in the thought of his vile stratagem, pleased that he had thought of enticing Gilda hither by summoning her father at the same time. It was amusing to watch them both — the burgomaster still dignified, despite his helplessness, and Gilda beautiful in her indignation. By St. Bavon, the girl was lovely, and still desirable. And thank Beelzebub and all the powers of darkness who lent their aid in placing so exquisite a prize in the hands of the conqueror.

Stoutenburg could have laughed aloud with glee. As it was, he made an effort to appear both masterful and indifferent. He knew that he could take his time, that any scheme which he might formulate for his own advancement and the satisfaction of his every ambition was now certain of success. The future was entirely his, to plan and mould at will.

So now he deliberately turned back to the window, closed it with a hand that had not the slightest tremor in it. Then he returned to the centre of the room, sat down beside the table, and took on a cool and judicial air. All his movements were consciously slow. He looked at the burgomaster and at Gilda with ostentatious irony, remained silent for awhile as if in pleasant contemplation of their helplessness. "You are in suspense," his silence seemed to express. "You know that your fate is in my hands. But I can afford to wait, to take mine ease. I am lord of the future, and you are little better than my slaves."

"Was it not foolishness to resist, mynheer?" he said at last, in a tone of gentle mockery. "Bloodshed, eh? In truth, the role of fire-eater ill becomes your dignity and your years."

"Spare me your insults, my lord," Beresteyn retorted, with calm dignity. "What is your pleasure with my daughter and with me?"

"I will tell you anon," Stoutenburg replied coolly, "when you are more composed."

"I am ready now to hear your commands."

“Quite submissive, eh?” the other retorted with a sneer.
 “No; only helpless, and justly indignant at this abominable outrage.”
 “Also surprised — what? — at seeing me here to-night?”
 “In truth, my lord, I had not expected to see the son of Olden Barneveldt at the head of enemy troops.”
 “Or your son in his train, eh?”
 The burgomaster winced at the taunt. But he rejoined quite simply:
 “If what rumour says is true, my lord, then I have no son.”
 “If,” Stoutenburg retorted dryly, “rumour told you that Nicolaes Beresteyn hath returned to his allegiance, then the jade did not lie. Your son, mynheer, hath shown you which way loyalty lies. Not in the service of a rebel prince, but in that of Archduchess Isabella, our Sovereign Liege.”
 He paused, as if expecting some word of reply from the burgomaster; but as the latter remained silent, he went on more lightly:
 “But enough of this. Whether you, Mynheer Beresteyn, and your son do make up your differences presently is no concern of mine. You will see him anon, no doubt, and can then discuss your family affairs at your leisure. For the nonce, I do desire to know whether your city intends to be submissive. I have exercised great leniency up to this hour; but you must remember that I am equally ready to punish at the slightest sign of contumely or of resistance to my commands.”
 “For the leniency to which the Lord of Stoutenburg lays claim,” Beresteyn rejoined with perfect dignity, “in that, up to this hour he has not murdered our peaceful citizens, burned down our houses, or violated our homes, we tender him our thanks. As for the future, the treacherous pitfall into which I have fallen, and the unwarrantable treatment that is meted out to me, will mayhap prove to my unfortunate fellow-citizens that resistance to overwhelming force is worse than useless.”
 “Excellent sentiments, mynheer!” Stoutenburg retorted. “Dictated, I make no doubt, by one who knows the usages of war.”
 “We do all of us,” the burgomaster gave quiet answer, “obey the behests of our Stadtholder, our Sovereign Liege.”
 “The rebel prince, mynheer, who, by commanding you to submit, hath for once gauged rightly the temper of the Sovereign whom he hath outraged. Will you tell me, I pray you,” Stoutenburg added, with a sardonic grin, “whether the jongeuffrouw your daughter is equally prepared to obey Maurice of Nassau’s behests and submit to my commands?”
 At this cruel thrust an almost imperceptible change came over the burgomaster’s calm, dignified countenance; and even this change was scarce noticeable in the uncertain, flickering light of the wax candles. Perhaps he had realized, for the first time, the full horror of his position, the full treachery of the snare which had been laid for him, and which left him, pinioned and helpless, at the mercy of an unscrupulous and cowardly enemy. Not only him, but also his daughter.
 A groan like that of a wounded beast escaped his lips, and his powerful arms and shoulders strained at the cords that fettered him. Nevertheless, after a very brief moment of silence he rejoined with perfect outward calm:
 “My daughter, my lord, was under my protection until vile treachery rendered me helpless. Now that her father can no longer watch over her, she is under the protection of every man of honour.”
 “That is excellently said, mynheer,” Stoutenburg replied. “And in a few words you have put the whole situation tersely and clearly. You have orders from the Stadtholder to obey my commands; therefore I do but make matters easier for you by having you removed to your apartments, instead of merely commanding you to return thither — an order which, if you were free, you might have been inclined to disobey.”
 “A truce on your taunts, my lord!” broke in the burgomaster firmly. “What is your pleasure with us?”
 “Just what I have had the honour to tell you,” Stoutenburg replied coolly. “That you return forthwith to your apartments.”
 “But my daughter, my lord?”
 “She sups here, with her brother Nicolaes and with me.”
 “’Tis only my dead body you’ll drag away from here,” the burgomaster rejoined quietly.
 Once more Stoutenburg broke into that harsh, mirthless laugh which had become habitual to him and which seemed to find its well-spring in the bitterness of his soul.
 “Fine heroics, mynheer!” he said derisively. “But useless, I fear me, and quite unnecessary. Were I to assure you that your daughter hath ceased to rouse the slightest passion in my heart or to stir my senses in any way, you would mayhap not credit me. Yet such is the case. The jongeuffrouw, I’ll have you believe, will be as safe with me as would the ugliest old hag out of the street.”
 “Nevertheless, my lord,” Beresteyn rejoined with calm dignity, “whilst I live I remain by my daughter’s side.”
 Stoutenburg shrugged his shoulders.
 “Jan,” he called, “take mynheer the burgomaster back to his apartments. I have no further use for him.”

Mynheer Beresteyn was still a comparatively young and vigorous man. In his day, he had been counted one of the finest soldiers in the armies of the Prince of Orange, and had accomplished prodigies of skill and valour at Turnhout and Ostend. The feeling that at this moment, when he would have given his life to protect his daughter, he was absolutely helpless, was undoubtedly the most cruel blow he had ever had to endure at the hands of Fate. His eyes, pathetic in their mute appeal for forgiveness, sought those of Gilda. She had remained perfectly still all this while, silent in the dark corner whither Jan and the soldiers had thrust her at their first onslaught on the burgomaster. But she had watched the whole scene with ever-increasing horror, not at thought of herself, of her own danger, only of her father and all that he must be suffering. Now her one idea was to reassure him, to ease the burden of sorrow and of wrath which his own impotence must have laid upon his brave soul.

Before any of the men could stop her, she had evaded them. Swift and furtive as a tiny lizard, she had wormed her way between them to her father’s side. Now she had her arms round his neck, her head against his breast.

“Do not be anxious because of me, father dear,” she whispered under her breath. “God hath us all in His keeping. Have no fear for me.”

A deep groan escaped the old man's breast. His eyes, fierce and indignant, rested with an expression of withering contempt upon his enemy.

"Jan," Stoutenburg broke in harshly, "didst not hear my commands?"

Four pairs of hands immediately closed upon the burgomaster. He, like a creature at bay, started to struggle.

"Some one knock that old fool on the head!" his lordship shouted with a fierce oath.

And Jan raised his fist, overwilling to obey. But, with a loud cry of indignation, Gilda had already interposed. She seized the man's wrist with her own small hands and turned flaming eyes upon Stoutenburg.

"Violence is unnecessary, my lord," she said, vainly striving to speak coolly and firmly. "My father will go quietly, and I will remain here to listen to what you have to say."

"Bravely spoken!" Stoutenburg rejoined with a sneer. "And you, Mynheer Beresteyn, would do well to learn wisdom at so fair a source. You and your precious daughter will come to no harm if you behave like reasonable beings. There is such a thing," he added cynically, "as submitting to the inevitable."

"Do not trust him, Gilda," the old man cried. "False to his country, false to his wife and kindred, every word which he utters is a lie or a blasphemy."

"Enough of this wrangle," Stoutenburg exclaimed, wrathful and hoarse. "Jan, take that ranting dotard away!"

Then it was that, just before the men had time to close in all round the burgomaster, Gilda, placing one small, white hand upon her father's arm, pointed with the other to the door at the far end of the room. Instinctively the old man's glance turned in that direction. The door was open, and Nicolaes stood upon the threshold. He had heard his father's voice, Stoutenburg's brutal commands, his sister's cry of indignation.

"Nicolaes is here, father dear," Gilda said simply. "God knows that he is naught but an abominable traitor, yet methinks that even he hath not fallen so low as to see his own sister harmed before his eyes."

At sight of his son an indefinable look had spread over the burgomaster's face. It seemed as if an invisible and ghostly hand had drawn a filmy grey veil all over it. And a strange hissing sound — the intaking of a laboured sigh — burst through his tightly set lips.

"Go!" he cried to his son, in a dull, toneless voice, which nevertheless could be heard, clear and distinct as a bell, from end to end of the vast hall. "A father's curse is potent yet, remember!"

Nicolaes broke into a forced and defiant laugh, tried to assume a jaunty, careless air, which ill agreed with his pallid face and wild, scared eyes. But, before he could speak, Jan and the soldiers had finally seized the burgomaster and forcefully dragged him out of the room.

CHAPTER X. A PRINCE OF DARKNESS

1

Gilda had seen her father dragged away from her side without a tear. Whatever tremor of apprehension made her heart quiver after she had seen the last of him, she would not allow these two men to see.

She was not afraid. When a woman has suffered as Gilda had suffered during these past two days, there is no longer in her any room for fear. Not for physical fear, at any rate. All her thoughts, her hopes, her anxieties were concentrated on the probable fate of her beloved. That unerring instinct which comes to human beings when they are within measurable distance of some acute, unknown danger amounts at times to second sight. This was the case with Gilda. With the eyes of her soul she could see and read something of what went on in her enemy's tortuous brain. She could see that he knew something about her beloved, and that he meant to use that knowledge for his own abominable ends. What these were she could not divine. Prescience did not go quite so far. But it had served her in this, that when her father was taken away she had just sufficient time and strength of will to brace herself up for the ordeal which was to come.

It is always remarkable when a woman, young and brought up in comparative seclusion and ignorance, is able to face moral danger with perfect calm and cool understanding. It was doubly remarkable in the case of a young girl like Gilda. She was only just twenty, had been the idol of her father; motherless, she had no counsels from those of her own sex, and there are always certain receptacles in a woman's soul which she will never reveal to the most loving, most indulgent father.

Three months ago, this same absolutely innocent, unsophisticated girl had suddenly been confronted with the vehement, turbulent passions of men. She had seen them in turmoil all round her — love, hatred, vengeance, treachery — she herself practically the pivot around which they raged. Out of the deadly strife she had emerged pure, happy in the arms of the man whom her wondrous adventures as much as his brilliant personality had taught her to love.

Since then her life had been peaceful and happy. She had allowed herself to be worshipped by that strangely captivating lover of hers, whose passionately wilful temperament, tempered by that persistent, sunny gaiety she had up to now only half understood. He made her laugh always made her taste a strange and exquisite bliss when he held her in his arms. But withal she had up till now kept an indulgent smile in reserve for his outbursts of vehemence, for his wayward, oftentimes irascible moods, his tearing impatience when she was away from him. Her love for him in the past had been almost motherly in its tenderness.

Somehow, with his absence, with the danger which threatened him, all that had become changed, intensified. The tenderness was still in her heart for him, an exquisite tenderness which caused her sheer physical ache now, when her mind conjured up that brief vision which she had had of him yesterday morning, wearied, with shoulders bent, his face haggard above a three-day's growth of beard, his eyes red-rimmed and sunken. But with that tenderness there was mingled at this hour a feeling which was akin to fierceness — the primeval desire of the woman to defend and protect her beloved — that same tearing impatience with Fate, of which he had been wont to suffer, for keeping him away from her sheltering arms.

Oh, she understood his vehemence now! No longer could she smile at his fretfulness. She, too, was a prey at this hour to a wildly emotional mood, tempest-tossed and spirit-stirring; her very soul crying out for him. And she hated — ay, hated with an intensity which she herself scarcely could apprise — this man whom she knew to be his deadly enemy.

2

"Sit down, sister; you are overwrought."

Nicolaes' cool, casual words brought her straightway back to reality. Quietly, mechanically she took the seat which he was offering — a high-backed, velvet-covered chair — the one in which the Stadtholder had sat at her wedding feast. She closed her eyes, and sat for a moment or two quite still. Visions of joy and of happiness must not obtrude their softly insidious presence beside the stern demands of the moment. Stoutenburg brought a footstool, and placed it to her feet. She felt him near her, but would not look on him, and he remained for awhile on his knees close beside her, she unable to move away from him.

"How beautiful you are!" he murmured, under his breath.

Her hand was resting on the arm of her chair. She felt his lips upon it, and quickly drew it back, wiping it against her gown as if a slimy worm had left its trail upon her fingers. Seeing which, he broke into a savage curse and jumped to his feet.

"I thank you for the reminder, mejuffrouw," he said coldly.

After which he sat down once more beside the long centre table, at some little distance from her, but so that the light from the candles fell upon her dainty figure, graceful and dignified against the background of the velvet-covered chair, the while his own face remained in shadow. Nicolaes, nervous and restless, was pacing up and down the room.

3

"Allow me, mejuffrouw," Stoutenburg began coolly after awhile, "to tender you my sincere regrets for the violence to which necessity alone compelled me to subject the burgomaster; a worthy man, for whom, believe me, I entertain naught but sincere regard."

"I pray you, my lord," she retorted with complete self-possession, "to spare me this mockery. Had you not determined to put an insult on me, an insult which, apparently, you dared not formulate in the presence of my father. You had not, of a certainty subjected him to such an outrage."

"You misunderstand my motives, mejuffrouw. There was, and is, no intention on my part to insult you. Surely, as you yourself very rightly said just now, your brother's presence is sufficient guarantee for that."

"I said that, in order to quieten my father's fears. The treacherous snare which you laid for him, my lord, is proof enough of your cowardly intentions."

"You do yourself no good, mejuffrouw," rejoined the lord of Stoutenburg harshly, "by acrimony or defiance. I had to lure your father hither, else he would not have allowed you to come. Violence to you — though you may not believe it — would be repellent to me. But, having got you both here, I had to rid myself of him, using what violence was necessary."

"And why, I pray you, had you, as you say, to rid yourself of my father? Were you afraid of him?"

"No," he replied; "but I am compelled to put certain matters before you for your consideration, and did not desire that you should be influenced by him."

A quick sigh of satisfaction — or was it excitement? — escaped her breast. Fretful of all these preliminaries, which she felt were but the opening gambits of his dangerous game, she was thankful that, at last, he was coming to the point.

"Let us begin, mejuffrouw," Stoutenburg resumed, after a moment's deliberation, "by assuring you that the whereabouts of that gallant stranger who goes by the name of Diogenes are known to me and to your brother Nicolaes. To no one else."

He watched her keenly while he spoke. Shading his eyes with his hand, he took in every transient line of her face, noted the pallor of her cheeks, the pathetic droop of the mouth. But he was forced to own that at that curt announcement, wherewith he had intended to startle and to hurt, not the slightest change came over her. She still sat there, cool and impassive, her head resting against the velvet cushion of the chair, the flickering light of the candle playing with the loose tendrils of her golden hair. Her eyes he could not see, for they were downcast, veiled by the delicate, blue-veined lids; but of a surety, not the slightest quiver marred the perfect stillness of her lips.

In truth, she had expected some such statement from that execrable traitor. Her intuition had not erred when it told her that, in some subtle, devilish way, he would use the absence of her beloved as a tool wherewith to gain what he had in view. Now what she realized most vividly was that she must not let him see that she was afraid. Not even let him guess if she were hurt. She must keep up a semblance of callousness before her enemy for as long as she could. With her self-control, she would lose her most efficacious weapon. Therefore, for the next minute or two, she dared not trust herself to speak, lest her voice, that one uncontrollable thing, betrayed her.

"I await your answer, mejuffrouw," Stoutenburg resumed impatiently, after awhile.

"You have asked me no question, my lord," she rejoined simply. "Only stated a fact. I but wait to hear your further pleasure."

"My pleasure, fair one," he went on lightly, "is only to prove to you that I, as ever before, am not only your humble slave but also your sincere friend."

"A difficult task, my lord. But let me see, without further preamble, I pray you, how you intend to set about it."

"By trying to temper your sorrow with my heartfelt sympathy," he murmured softly.

"My sorrow?"

"I am forced to impart sad news to you, alas!"

"My husband is dead?" The cry broke from her heart, and this time she was unable to check it. Will and pride had been easy enough at first. Oh, how easy! But not now. Not in the face of this! She would have given worlds to appear calm, incredulous. But how could she? How could she, when such a torturing vision had been conjured up before her eyes?

For a moment it seemed as if reason itself began to totter. She looked on the man before her, and he appeared like a ghoulish fiend, with grinning jaws and sinister eyes, the play of light behind him making his face appear black and hideous. She put her hands up to her face, closed her eyes, and, oh, Heaven, how she prayed for strength!

None indeed but an implacable enemy, a jealous suitor, could have seen such soul-agony without relenting. But Stoutenburg was one of those hard natures which found grim pleasure in wounding and torturing. His love for Gilda, intensely passionate but never tender, was nothing now but fierce desire for mastership of her and vengeance upon his successful rival. The girl's involuntary cry of misery had been as balm to his evil soul. Now her hands dropped once more on her lap. She looked at him straight between the eyes, her own still a little wild, lit by a feverish brightness.

"You have killed him," she said huskily. "Is that it? Answer me! You have killed him?"

He put up his hand, smiling, as if to soothe a crying child.

"Nay! On my honour!" he replied quietly. "I have not seen that gallant adventurer these three months past."

"Well, then?"

"Ask your brother Nicolaes, fair one. He saw him but a few hours ago."

"Ay, yesterday," she retorted. "When he tried to assassinate him. I saw the murderous hand uplifted; I saw it all I tell you! And in my heart I cursed my only brother for the vile traitor that he is. But, thank Heaven, my lord was only hurt. I believe—"

She paused, put her hand up to her throat. The glance in Stoutenburg's eyes gave her a feeling as if she were about to choke.

"You are quite right, mejuffrouw," he broke in drily, "in believing that the intrepid Englishman who, for reasons best known to himself, hath chosen to meddle in the affairs of this country — that he, I say, was only hurt when your brother interposed yesterday betwixt him and the Stadtholder. The two ragamuffins who usually hang around him did probably save him from further punishment at the moment. But not altogether. Nicolaes will tell you that, half an hour later, that same intrepid and meddlesome English gentleman did once more try to interfere in the affairs of our Sovereign Liege the Archduchess Isabella. This time with serious consequences to himself."

"My brother Nicolaes," she murmured, more quietly this time, "hath killed my husband?"

"No, no!" here broke in Nicolaes at last. "The whole thing, I vow, was the result of an accident."

"What whole thing?" she reiterated slowly. "I pray you to be more explicit. What hath happened to my husband?"

"The explosion of a pistol," Nicolaes stammered, shamed out of his defiance at seeing his sister's misery, yet angered with himself for this weakness. "He is not dead, I swear!"

"Maimed?" she asked.

"Blind," Nicolaes replied, "but otherwise well. I swear it!" he protested, shutting his ears to Stoutenburg's scornful laugh, his eyes to the other's sardonic grin, his miserably weak nature swaying like a pendulum 'twixt his ambition, his hatred of the once brilliant

soldier of fortune, and his dormant tenderness for the sweet and innocent sister to whom his treacherous hand had dealt such a devilish blow.

There was silence in the room now. Gilda had uttered no cry when that same blow fell on her like a crash. It had seemed to snap the very threads that held her to life. One sigh, and one only, came through her lips, like the dying call of a wounded bird. All feeling, all emotion, seemed suddenly to have died out of her, leaving her absolutely numb, scarcely conscious, with wide, unseeing eyes staring straight out before her, striving to visualize that splendid creature, that embodiment of gaiety, of laughter, of careless insouciance, stricken with impotence; those merry, twinkling eyes sightless. The horror of it was so appalling that it placed her for the moment beyond the power of suffering. She was not a human being now at all; she had no soul, no body, no life. Her senses had ceased to be. She neither saw nor heard nor felt. She was just a thing, a block of insentient stone into which life would presently begin to trickle slowly, bringing with it a misery such as could not be endured even by lost souls in hell.

How the time went by she did not know.

Just before this awful thing had happened she had chanced to look at the clock. It was then five minutes to eight. But all this was in the past. She no longer heard the ticking of the clock, nor her enemy's laboured breathing, nor Nicolaes' shuffling footsteps at the far end of the room. Fortunately, she could not see the triumph, the ominous sparkle, which glittered in Stoutenburg's eyes. He knew well enough what she suffered, or would be suffering anon when consciousness would return. Knew and revelled in it. He was like those inquisitors, the unclean spirits that waited on Spanish tyranny, who found their delight in watching the agony of their victims on the rack; who treasured every groan, exulted over every cry, wrung by unendurable bodily pain. Only with him it was the moral agony of those whom he desired to master that caused him infinite bliss. His stygian nature attained a demoniacal satisfaction out of the mental torture which he was able to inflict.

It is an undoubted fact that even the closest scrutiny of contemporary chronicles has failed to bring to light a single redeeming feature in this man's character, and all that the most staunch supporters of the Barneveldt family can bring forward in mitigation of Stoutenburg's crimes is the fact that his whole soul had been warped by the judicial murder of his father and of his elder brother, by his own consequent sufferings and those of his unfortunate mother.

4

"You will, I hope, mejuffrouw, give me the credit of having tried to break this sad news to you as gently as I could."

The words, spoken in smooth, silky tones were the first sounds that reached Gilda's returning perceptions. What had occurred in between she had not the vaguest idea. She certainly was still sitting in the same chair, with that sinister creature facing her, and her brother Nicolaes skulking somewhere in the gloom. The fire was still cracking in the hearth, the clock still ticking with insentient monotony. A tiny fillet of air caused the candle-light to flicker, and sent a thin streak of smoke upwards in an ever-widening spiral.

That streak of smoke was the first thing that Gilda saw. It arrested her eyes, brought her back slowly to consciousness. Then came Stoutenburg's hypocritical tirade. Her senses were returning one by one. She even glanced up at the clock. It marked three minutes before eight. Only two minutes had gone by. One hundred and twenty seconds. And they appeared longer than the most phantasmagoric conception of eternity. Two minutes! And she realized that she was alive, that she could feel, and that her beloved was sightless. Was it at all strange that, with return to pulsating life, there should arise within her that indestructible attribute of every human heart — a faint germ of hope?

When first the awful truth was put before her by her bitterest foe, she had not been conscious of the slightest feeling of doubt. Nicolaes' stammering protests, his obvious desire to minimise his own share of responsibility, had all helped to confirm the revelation of a hideous crime.

"He is not dead, I swear!" and "He is not otherwise hurt!" which broke from the dastard's quaking lips at the moment, had left no room for doubt or hope. At least, so she thought. And even now that faint ray of light in the utter blackness of her misery was too elusive to be of any comfort. But it helped her to collect herself, to look those two craven miscreants in the face. Nicolaes obviously dared not meet her glance, but Stoutenburg kept his eyes fixed upon her, and the look of triumph in them whipped up her dormant pride.

And now, when his double-tongued Pharisaism reached her ear, she swallowed her dread, bade horror be stilled. She knew that he was about to place an "either — or" before her which would demand her full understanding, and all the strength of mind and body that she could command. The fate of her beloved was about to be dangled before her, and she would be made to choose — what?

"You began, my lord," she said, with something of her former assurance — and God alone knew what it cost her to speak — "by saying that you desired to place certain matters before me for my consideration. I have not yet heard, remember, what those matters are."

"True — true!" he rejoined, with hypocritical unction. "But I felt it my duty — my sad duty, I may say —"

"A truce on this hollow mockery!" she riposted. "I pray you, come to the point."

"The point is, fair one, that both Nicolaes and I desire to compass your welfare," he retorted blandly.

"This you can do best at this hour, my lord, by allowing me to return to the privacy of mine apartments."

"So you shall, myn engel — so you shall," he rejoined suavely. "You will need time to prepare for departure."

She frowned, puzzled this time.

"For departure?" she asked, a little bewildered.

"I leave this town to-morrow at the head of my troops."

"Thank God for that!" she rejoined earnestly.

"And you, mejuffrouw," he added curtly, "will accompany us."

"I?" she asked, not altogether understanding, the frown more deeply marked between her brows.

"Methought I spoke clearly," he went on, in his habitual harsh, peremptory tone. "I only came to this town in order to fetch you, myn engel. To-morrow we go away together."

“The folly of human grandeur hath clouded your brain, my lord!” she said coldly.

“In what way?” he queried, still perfectly bland and mild.

“You know well that I would sooner die than follow you.”

“I know well that most women are over-ready with heroics. But,” he added, with a shrug of the shoulders, “these tantrums usually leave me cold. You are an intelligent woman, mejuffrouw, and you have seen your valiant father resign himself to the inevitable.”

“I pray you waste no words, my lord,” she rejoined coolly. “Three months ago, when at Ryswick, your crimes found you out, and you strove to involve me in your own disgrace and ruin, I gave you mine answer — the same that I do now. My dead body you can take with you, but I, alive, will never follow you!”

“’Twas different then,” he retorted, with a cynical smile. “You had a fortune-hunting adventurer to hand who was determined to see that your father’s shekels did not lightly escape his grasp. To-day—”

“To-day,” she retorted, and rose to her feet, fronted him now, superb with indignation, “he is sightless, absent, impotent, you would say, to protect me against your villainy! You miserable, slinking cur!”

Stoutenburg’s harsh, forced laugh broke in upon her wrath.

“Ah!” he exclaimed lightly. “You little spit-fire! In very truth, I like you better in that mood. Heroics do not become you, myn schat, and they are so unnecessary. Did you perchance imagine that it was love for you that hath influenced my decision to take you away from here?”

“I pray God, my lord, that I be not polluted by as much as a thought from you!”

“Your prayers have been granted, fair one,” he retorted with a sneer. “’Tis but seldom I think of you now, save as an exquisite little termagant whom it will amuse me to tame. But this is by the way. That pleasure will lose nothing by procrastination. You know me well enough by now to realise that I am not likely to be lenient with you after your vixenish treatment of me. For the nonce, I pray you to keep a civil tongue in your head,” he added roughly. “On your conduct at this hour will depend your future comfort. Nicolaes will not always be skulking in dark corners, ready to interfere if my manner become too rough.”

“He is here now,” she said boldly, “and if there is a spark of honour left in him he will conduct me to my rooms!”

With this she turned and walked steadily across the room. Even so his harsh laugh accompanied her as far as the door. When her hand was upon the knob, he called lightly after her:

“The moment you step cross the threshold, myn schat, Jan will bring you back here — in his arms!”

5

Instinctively she paused, realizing that the warning had come just in time — that the next moment, in very truth, she would be in the hands of those vile traitors who were there ready to obey their master’s every command. She paused, too, in order to murmur a quick prayer for Divine guidance, seeing that human protection was denied her at this hour. What could she do? She was like a bird caught in a snare from which there seemed to be no issue. Stoutenburg’s sneering laugh rang in her ear. He was beside her now, took her hand from the knob and held it for a moment forcibly in his. His glance, charged with cruel mockery, took in every line of her pallid face.

“Heroics again, fair one!” he said, with an impish grin. “Must I assure you once more that you are perfectly safe with me? See, if you were in danger from me, would not your brother interfere? Bah! Nicolaes knows well enough that passion doth not enter into my schemes at this hour. My plans are too vast to be swayed by your frowns or your smiles. I have entered this city as a conqueror. As a conqueror I shall go out of it to-morrow, and you will come with me. I shall go hence because I choose, and for reasons which I will presently make clear to you.

“But you shall come with me. When you are with me in my camp, I may honour you as my future wife, or cast you from me as I would a beggar. That will depend on my mood, and upon your temper. Nicolaes will not be there to run counter to my will. Therefore, understand me, my pretty fire-eater, that from this hour forth you are as absolutely my property as my dogs are, my horse, or the boots which I wear. I am the master here,” he concluded with strangely sinister calm, “And my will alone is law.”

“A law unto yourself,” she retorted, faced him with absolute composure, neither defiant nor afraid, her nerves quiescent, her voice perfectly steady, “and mayhap unto your cringing sycophants. But above your will, my lord, is that of God; and neither death nor life are your slaves.”

“Ay! But methinks they are, myn engel,” he answered drily. “Yours in any case.”

“No human being, my lord, can lose the freedom to die.”

“You think not?” he sneered. “Well, we shall see.”

He let go her hand, then quietly turned and walked to the window, threw open the casement once more, then beckoned to her. Strangely stirred, she followed, moved almost mechanically by something she could not resist.

At a sign from him she looked out upon the busy scene on the quay below — the enemy soldiers in possession, their bivouac fires, their comings and goings, the unfortunate citizens running hither and thither at their bidding, fetching and carrying, hustled, pushed, beaten, ordered about with rough words or the persuasive prod of pike or musket. A scene, alas, which already as a child had been familiar to her. A peaceable town in the hands of ruthless soldiery; the women fleeing from threatened insults, children clinging to their mother’s skirts, men standing by, grim and silent, not daring to protest lest mere resentment brought horrible reprisals upon the city.

Gilda looked out for awhile in silence, her heart aching with the misery which she beheld, yet could not palliate. Then she turned coldly inquiring eyes on the prime mover of it all.

“I have seen a reign of terror such as this before, my lord,” she said. “I was at Leyden, as you well know, and I have not forgotten.”

“A reign of terror, you call it, mejuffrouw?” he retorted coolly. “Nay, you exaggerate. What is this brief occupation? To-morrow we go, remember. Is there a single house demolished at this hour, a single citizen murdered? You are too young to recollect Malines of Ghent, the reign of Alva over these recalcitrant countries. I have been lenient so far. I have spared fire and sword. Amersfoort still stands. It will stand to-morrow, even after my soldiers have gone,” he went on speaking very slowly, “if—”

“If what, my Lord?” she asked, for he had paused.

The moment had come, then, the supreme hour when that dreaded “either — or” would be put before her. Even now he went on with that same sinister quietude which seemed like the voice of some relentless judge, sent by the King of Darkness to sway her destiny.

“If,” Stoutenburg concluded drily, “you mejuffrouw, will accompany me. Oh,” he added quickly, seeing that at once she had resumed that air of defiance which irritated even whilst it amused him. “I do not mean as an unwilling slave, pinioned to my chariot-wheel or strapped into a saddle, nor yet as a picturesque corpse, with flowing hair and lilies ‘twixt your lifeless hands. No, no, fair one! I offer you the safety of your native city, the immunity of your fellow-citizens, in exchange for a perfectly willing surrender of your live person into my charge.”

She looked on him for awhile, mute with horror, then murmured slowly:

“Are you a devil, that you should propose such an execrable bargain?”

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“I am what you and my native land have made me,” he replied. “As to that, the Stadtholder never offered to bargain with me for my father’s life.”

“Who but a prince of darkness would dream of doing so?” she retorted.

“Call me that, an you wish, fair one,” he put in lightly; “and come back to the point.”

“And the point is, my Lord?”

“That I will respect this city if you come to-morrow, willing and submissive, with me.”

“That, never!” she affirmed hotly.

“In that case,” he riposted coldly, “my soldiers will have a free hand ere they quit the town, to sack it at their pleasure. Pillage, arson, will be rewarded; looting will be deemed a virtue, as will murder and outrage. Even your father—”

“Enough, my lord!” she exclaimed, with passionate indignation. “Tell me, I pray, which of the unclean spirits of Avernus did suggest this infamy to you?” Then, as he met her burning glance with another careless shrug and a mocking laugh, she turned to Nicolaes, and cried out to him, almost with entreaty: “Klaas! You at least are not a party to such hideous villainy!”

But he, sullen and shamefaced, only threw her an angry look.

“You make it very difficult for us, Gilda,” he said moodily, “by your stupid obstinacy.”

“Obstinacy?” she retorted, puzzled at the word. Then reiterated it once or twice. “Obstinacy — obstinacy? My God, hath the boy gone mad?”

“What else is it but obstinacy?” he rejoined vehemently. “You know that, despite all he says, Stoutenburg hath never ceased to love you. And now that he is master here you are lucky indeed to have him as a suitor. He means well by you, by us all, else I were not here. Think what it would mean to me, to father, to everyone of us, if you were Stoutenburg’s wife. But you jeopardize my future and the welfare of us all by those foolish tantrums.”

She gazed on him in utter horror — on this brother whom she loved; could scarcely believe her ears that it was he — really he — who was uttering such odious words. She felt her gorge rising at this callous avowal of a wanton and insulting treachery. And he, feeling the contempt which flashed on him from her glowing eyes, avoided her glance, tried to shift his ground, to argue his point with the sophistry peculiar to a traitor, and sank more deeply every moment into the mire of dishonour.

“It is time you realized, Gilda,” he said, “that our unfortunate country must sooner or later return to her true allegiance. The Stadtholder is sick. His arbitrary temper hath alienated some of his staunchest friends. The Netherlands are the unalienable property of Spain; though two rebel princes have striven to wrest them from their rightful master, the might of Spain was sure to be felt in the end. ’Twas folly ever to imagine that this so-called Dutch Republic would ever abide; and the hour, though tardy, has struck at last when such senseless dreams must come to an end.”

“Well spoken, friend Nicolaes!” Stoutenburg put in lustily. “In verity, our Liege Lady the Archduchess Isabella, whom may God protect, could with difficulty find a more eloquent champion.”

“Or our noble land so vile a traitor!” Gilda murmured, burning now with shame. “Thank Heaven, Nicolaes, that our poor father is not here, for the disgrace of it all would have struck him dead at your feet. Would to God,” she murmured under her breath, “that it killed me now!”

“An undutiful prayer, myn engel,” Stoutenburg rejoined, “seeing that its fulfilment would mean that Amersfoort and her citizens would be wiped off the face of the earth.”

This time he spoke quite quietly, without any apparent threat, only with determination, like one who knows that he is master and hath full powers to see his will obeyed. She looked at him keenly for a moment or two, wondering if she could make him flinch, if she could by word or prayer shake him in that devilish purpose which in truth must have found birth through the whisperings of uncanny fiends.

Gilda gazed critically at his lean, hard face with the sunken, restless eyes that spoke so eloquently of disappointed hopes and frustrated ambitions; the mouth, thin-lipped and set; the unshaven chin; the hollow temples and grizzled hair. She took in every line of his tall, gaunt figure; the shoulders already bent, the hands fidgety and claw-like; the torn doublet and shabby boots, all proclaiming the down-at-heel adventurer who has staked his all — honour, happiness, eternity — for ambition; has staked all he possessed and played a losing game.

But for pity or compunction Gilda sought in vain. The glance which after awhile was raised to hers revealed nothing but unholy triumph and a cruel, callous mockery. In truth, that glance had told her that she could expect neither justice nor mercy from him, and had spared her the humiliation of a desperate and futile appeal.

A low moan escaped her lips. She tottered slightly, and felt her knees giving way under her.

Vaguely she put out her hand, fearing that she might fall. Even so, she swayed backwards, feeling giddy and sick. But the dread of losing consciousness before this man whom she loathed and despised kept up both her courage and her endurance. She felt the panelling of the window-embrasure behind her, and leaned against it for support.

Stoutenburg had made no effort to come to her assistance, neither had Nicolaes. Probably both of them knew that she would never allow either of them to touch her. But Stoutenburg's mocking glance had pursued her all through her valiant fight against threatening unconsciousness. Now that she leaned against the framework of the window, pale and wraith-like, only her delicate profile vaguely distinguishable in the semi-gloom, her lips parted as if to drink in the cold evening air, she looked so exquisite, so desirable, that he allowed his admiration of her to override every other thought.

"You are lovely, myn schat," he said quietly. "Exquisite and worthy to be a queen. And, by Heaven," he exclaimed with sudden passion, "you'll yet live to bless this hour when I broke your obstinacy. Hand in hand, myn engel, you and I, we'll be masters of this beautiful land. I feel that I could do great things if I had you by my side. Listen, Gilda," he went on eagerly, thinking that because she remained silent and motionless she had given up the fight, and was at last resigned to the inevitable—"listen, my beautiful little vixen! The Archduchess will wish to reward me for this; the capture of Amersfoort is no small matter, and I have further projects in mind. In the meanwhile, De Berg hath already hinted that she might re-establish the republic under the suzerainty of Spain, and appoint me as her Stadtholder. Think, myn Geliefde: think what a vista of glorious, satisfied ambition lies before us both! Nay, before us all. Your father, chief pensionary; Nicolaes, general of our armies; your family raised above every one in the land. You'll thank me, I say; thank me on your knees for my constancy and for my unwavering loyalty to you. And even to-night, presently, when you are quite calm and at rest, you'll pray to your God, I vow, for His blessing upon your humble and devoted slave."

He bent the knee when he said this, still scornful even in this affectation of humility, and raised the hem of her gown to his lips. She did not look down on him, nor did she snatch her skirts out of his hand. She just stared straight out before her, and said slowly, with great deliberation:

"To-night — presently — when I am at rest — I will pray God to kill you ere you put your monstrous threat into execution."

With a light laugh he jumped to his feet.

"Still the shrewish little vixen, what?" he said carelessly. "Yet, see what a good dog I am. I'll not bear resentment, and you shall have the comfort of your father's company at the little supper party which I have prepared. Only the four of us, you and the burgomaster, and Nicolaes and I; and we can discuss the arrangements for our forthcoming wedding, which shall be magnificent, I promise you. But be sure of this, fair one," he went on harshly, drew up his gaunt figure to its full height, "that what I've said I've said. To-morrow at sunrise I go hence, and you come with me, able-bodied and willing, to a place which I have in mind. But this city will be the hostage for your good behaviour. My soldiers remain here under the command of one Jan, who obeys all my behests implicitly and without question, because he hates the Stadtholder as much as I do, and hath a father's murder to avenge against that tyrant, just as I have. Jan will stay in Amersfoort until I bid him go. But at one word from me, this city will be reduced to ashes, and not one man, woman or child shall live to tell the tale of how the jongejuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn set her senseless obstinacy above the lives of thousands."

"Think not that I'll relent," he concluded, and once more turned to the open window, gazed down upon the unfortunate city which he had marked as the means to his fiendish ends. His restless eyes roamed over the busy scene; his soldiers, his — the executioners who would carry out his will! Never had he been so powerful; never had his ambition been so near its goal! It had all come together — the humiliation of the Stadtholder, his own success in this daring enterprise, Gilda entirely at his mercy! Success had crowned all his nefarious schemes at last. "Nothing will change me from my purpose," he said, with all the harsh determination which characterized his every action—"nothing! Neither your tears nor your frowns nor your prayers. There is no one, understand me, no one who can stand between me and my resolve."

"No one but God," she murmured under her breath. "Oh, God, protect me now! My God, save me from this!"

Dizzy, moving like a sleep-walker, she tried to hold herself erect, tried to move from the window, and from the propinquity of that execrable miscreant.

"Have I your permission to go now?" she murmured faintly.

"Yes," he replied; "to your father. I'll order Jan to release our worthy burgomaster, and you and he can pray for my demise at your leisure. Whether you confide in him or not is no concern of mine. I would have you remember that my promise to respect this city and her inhabitants only holds good if you, of your own free will, come with me to-morrow. Amersfoort shall live if you come willingly. You are the best judge whether your father would be the happier for this knowledge. Methinks it would be kinder to let him think that you come to-morrow as my willing bride. But that is for you to decide. I want him here anon to give his blessing upon our future union in the presence of your brother Nicolaes. I wish the bond to be made irrevocable as soon as may be. If you or your father break it afterwards, it will be the worse for Amersfoort. Try and believe that the alternative is one of complete indifference to me. I have everything in the world now that I could possibly wish for. My ambition is completely satisfied. To have you as my wife would only be the pandering to a caprice. And now you may go, myn schat," he concluded. "The destinies of your native city are in your dainty hands."

He watched her progress across the room with a sarcastic grin. But in his heart he was conscious of a bitter disappointment. Unheard by her, he muttered under his breath:

"If only she would care, how different everything might be!"

Aloud he called to Nicolaes: "Escort your sister, man, into the presence of the burgomaster! And see that Jan and a chosen few form a guard of honour on the passage of the future Lady of Stoutenburg."

Nicolaes hastened to obey. Gilda tried to check him with a brief. "I thank you; I would prefer to go alone!"

But already he had thrown open the door, and anon his husky voice could be heard giving orders to Jan.

Gilda, at the last, turned once more to look on her enemy. He caught her eye, bowed very low, his hand almost touching the ground ere he brought it with a sweeping flourish back to his breast, in the most approved fashion lately brought in from France.

"In half an hour supper will be served," he said. "I await the honour of the burgomaster's company and of your own!"

And he remained in an attitude of perfect deference whilst she passed silently out of the room.

CHAPTER XI. THE DANGER-SPOKE

1

Gilda had refused her brother's escort, preferring to follow Jan; and Nicolaes, half indifferent, half ashamed, watched her progress up the stairs, and when she had disappeared in the gloom of the corridor above, he went back to his friend.

The two old serving-men were now busy in the banqueting-hall, bringing in the supper. They set the table with silver and crystal goblets, with jugs of Spanish and Rhenish wines, and dishes of cooked meats. They came and went about their business expeditiously and silently, brought in two more heavy candelabra with a dozen or more lighted candles in their sconces, so that the vast room was brilliantly lit. They threw fresh logs upon the fire, so that the whole place looked cosy and inviting.

Stoutenburg had once more taken up his stand beside the open window. Leaning his arm against the mullion, he rested his head upon it. Bitterness and rage had brought hot tears to his eyes. Somehow it seemed to him as if in the overflowing cup of his triumph something had turned to gall. Gilda eluded him. He could not understand her. The experience which he had of women had taught him that these beautiful and shallow creatures, soulless for the most part and heartless, were easily to be cajoled with soft words and bribed with wealth and promises. Yet he had dangled before Gilda's eyes such a vision of glory and exalted position as should have captured, quite unconditionally, the citadel of her affections, and she had remained indifferent to it all.

He had owned himself still in love with her, and she had remained quite callous to his ardour. He had tried indifference, and had only been paid back in his own coin. To a man of Stoutenburg's intensely egotistical temperament, there could only be one explanation to this seeming coldness. The wench's senses — it could be nothing more — were still under the thrall of that miserable adventurer who, thank Beelzebub and his horde, had at last been rendered powerless to wreak further mischief. There could be, he argued to himself, no aversion in her heart for one who was so ready to share prosperity, power, and honour with her, to forgive and forget all that was past, to raise her from comparative obscurity to the most exalted state that had ever dazzled a woman's fancy and stormed the inmost recesses of her soul.

She was still infatuated with the varlet, and that was all. A wholly ununderstandable fact. Stoutenburg never could imagine how she had ever looked with favour on such an adventurer, whose English parentage and reputed wealth were, to say the least, problematical. Beresteyn had been a fool to allow his only daughter to bestow her beauty and her riches on a stranger, about whom in truth he knew less than nothing. The girl, bewitched by the rascallion, had cajoled her father and obtained his consent. Now she was still under the spell of a handsome presence, a resonant voice, a provoking eye. It was, it could be, nothing more than that. When once she understood what she had gained, how utterly inglorious that once brilliant soldier of fortune had become, she would descend from her high attitude of disdain and kiss the hand which she now spurned.

But, in anticipation of that happy hour, the Lord of Stoutenburg felt moody and discontented.

2

Nicolaes' voice, close to his elbow, roused him from his gloomy meditations.

"You must be indulgent, my friend," he was saying in a smooth conciliatory voice. "Gilda had always a wilful temper."

"And a tenacious one," Stoutenburg retorted. "She is still in love with that rogue."

"Bah!" the other rejoined, with a note of spite in his tone. "It is mere infatuation! A woman's whimsey for a good-looking face and a pair of broad shoulders! She should have seen the scrubby rascal as I last caught sight of him — grimy, unshaven, broken. No woman's fancy would survive such a spectacle!"

Then, as Stoutenburg, still unconsoled, continued to stare through the open window, muttering disjointed phrases through obstinately set lips, he went on quite gaily:

"You are not the first by any means, my friend, whose tempestuous wooing hath brought a woman, loving and repentant, to heel. When I was over in England with my father, half a dozen years ago, we saw there a play upon the stage. It had been writ by some low-born mountebank, one William Shakespeare. The name of the play was 'The Taming of the Shrew.' Therein, too, a woman of choleric temper did during several scenes defy the man who wooed her. In the end he conquered; she became his wife, and as tender and submissive an one as e'er you'd wish to see. But, by St. Bavon, how she stormed at first! How she professed to hate him! I was forcibly reminded of that play when I saw Gilda defying you awhile ago; and I could have wished that you had displayed the same good-humour over the wrangle as did the gallant Petruchio — the hero of the piece."

Stoutenburg was interested.

"How did he succeed in the end?" he queried. "Your Petruchio, I mean."

"He starved the ranting virago into submission," Nicolaes replied, with an easy laugh. "Gave her nothing to eat for a day and a night; swore at her lackeys; beat her waiting-maids. She was disdainful at first, then terrified. Finally, she admired him, because he had mastered her."

"A good moral, friend Nicolaes!"

"Ay! One you would do well to follow. Women reserve their disdain for weaklings, and their love for their masters."

"And think you that Gilda—"

"Gilda, my friend, is but a woman after all. Have no fear, she'll be your willing slave in a week."

Stoutenburg's eyes glittered at the thought.

"A week is a long time to wait," he murmured. "I wish that now—"

He paused. Something that was happening down below on the quay had attracted his attention — unusual merriment, loud laughter, the strains of a bibulous song. For a minute or two his keen eyes searched the gloom for the cause of all this hilarity. He leaned far out the window, called peremptorily to a group of soldiers who were squatting around their bivouac fire.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Peter! Willem! — whatever your confounded names may be! What is that rascallion doing over there?"
"Making us all laugh, so please your lordship," one of the soldiers gave reply; "by the drollest stories and quips any of us have ever heard."

"Where does he come from?"

"From nowhere, apparently," the man averred. "He just fell among us. The man is blind, so please you," he added after a moment's hesitation.

Stoutenburg swore.

"How many times must I give orders," he demanded roughly, "that every blind beggar who comes prowling round the camps be hanged to the nearest post?"

"We did intend to hang him," the soldier replied coolly; "but when first he came along he was so nimble that, ere we could capture him, he gave us the slip."

"Well," Stoutenburg rejoined harshly, "it is not too late. You have him now."

"So we have, Magnificence," the man replied, hesitated for a second or two, then added: "But he is so amusing, and he seems a gentleman of quality, too proud for the hangman's rope."

"Too proud is he?" his lordship retorted with a sneer. "A gentleman of quality, and amusing to boot? Well, let us see how his humour will accommodate itself to the gallows. Here, let me have a look at the loon."

There was much hustling down below after this; shouting and prolonged laughter; a confused din, through which it was impossible to distinguish individual sounds. Stoutenburg's nerves were tingling. He was quite sure by now that he had recognised that irrepressible merry voice. A gentleman of quality! Blind! Amusing! But, if Nicolaes' report of yesterday's events were true, the man was hopelessly stricken. And what could induce him to put his head in the jackal's mouth, to affront his triumphing enemy, when he himself was so utterly helpless and abject?

Not long was the Lord of Stoutenburg left in suspense. Even whilst he gazed down upon the merry, excited throng, he was able to distinguish in the midst of them all a pair of broad shoulders that could only belong to one man. The soldiers, laughing, thoroughly enjoying the frolic, were jostling him not a little for the sheer pleasure of measuring their valour against so hefty a fellow. And he, despite his blindness, gave as good as he got; fought valiantly with fist and boot and gave his tormentors many a hard knock, until, with a loud shout of glee, some of the men succeeded in seizing hold of him, and hoisted him up on their shoulders and brought him into the circle of light formed by the resin torches.

A double cry came in response — one of amazement from Stoutenburg and one of horror from Nicolaes. But neither of them spoke. Stoutenburg's lips were tightly set; a puzzled frown appeared between his brows. In truth, for once in the course of his devilish career, he was completely taken aback and uncertain what to do. The man whom he saw there before him, in ragged clothes, unshaved and grimy, blinking with sightless eyes, was the man whom he detested above every other thing or creature on earth — the reckless soldier of fortune of the past, for awhile the proud and successful rival; now just a wreck of humanity, broken, ay, and degraded, and henceforth an object of pity rather than a menace to his rival's plans. His doublet was in rags, his plumed hat battered, his toes shone through the holes in his boots. The upper part of his face was swathed in a soiled linen bandage. This had, no doubt, been originally intended to shield the stricken eyes; but it had slipped, and those same eyes, with their horrible fixed look, glittered with unearthly weirdness in the flickering light.

"Salute his Magnificence, the lord and master of Amersfoort and of all that in it lies!" one of the soldiers shouted gaily.

And the blind man forthwith made a gesture of obeisance swept with a wide flourish his battered plumed hat from off his head.

"To his Magnificence!" he called out in response. "Though mine eyes cannot see him, my voice is raised in praise of his nobility and his valour. May the recording angels give him his full deserts."

3

The feeling of sheer horror which had caused Nicolaes to utter a sudden cry was, in truth, fully justified.

"It can't be!" he murmured, appalled at what he saw.

Stoutenburg answered with a hoarse laugh. "Nay, by Satan and all his myrmidons it is!"

Already he was leaning out of the window, giving quick orders to the men down below to bring that drunken vagabond forthwith into his presence. After which he turned once more to his friend.

"We'll soon see," he said, "if it is true, or if our eyes have played us both an elusive trick. Yet, methinks," he added thoughtfully, "that the pigwidgeon who of late hath taken my destiny in hand is apparently intent on doing me a good turn."

"In what way?" the other asked.

"By throwing my enemy across my path," Stoutenburg replied drily.

"You'll hang him of course?" Nicolaes rejoined.

"Yes; I'll hang him!" Stoutenburg retorted, with a snarl. "But I must make use of him first."

"Make use of him? How?"

"That I do not know as yet. But inspiration will come, never you fear, my friend. All that I want is a leverage for bringing the Stadtholder to his knees and for winning Gilda's love."

"Then, in Heaven's name, man," Nicolaes rejoined earnestly, "begin by ridding yourself of the only danger-spoke in your wheel!"

"Danger-spoke?" Stoutenburg exclaimed, threw back his head and laughed. "Would you really call that miserable oaf a serious bar to mine ambition or a possible rival in your sister's regard?"

And, with outstretched hand he pointed to the door.

There, under the lintel — pushed on by Jan and two or three men who, powerfully built though they were, looked like pigmies beside the stricken giant, drunk as an owl, his hat awry above that hideous bandage, dirty, unkempt, and ragged — appeared the man who had once been the brilliant inspiration of Franz Hals' immortal "Laughing Cavalier."

At sight of him Nicolaes Beresteyn gave a loud groan and collapsed into a chair; burying his face in his hand. He was ever a coward, even in villainy; and when the man whom he had once hated so bitterly, and whom his craven hand had struck in such a dastardly manner, lurched into the room, and as he fell against the table uttered an inane and bibulous laugh, his nerve completely forsook him.

At a peremptory sign from Stoutenburg, Jan closed the doors which gave on the hall; but he and two of the men remained at attention inside the room.

The blind man groped with his hands till they found a chair, into which he sank, with powerful limbs outstretched, snorting like a dog just come out of the water. With an awkward gesture he pushed his hat from off his head, and in so doing he dislodged the grimy bandage so that it sat like a scullion's cap across his white forehead.

Stoutenburg watched him with an expression of cruel satisfaction. It is not often given to a man to have an enemy and a rival so completely in his power, and the exultation in Stoutenburg's heart was so great that he was content to savour it in silence for awhile. Nicolaes was beyond the power of speech, and so the silence for a moment or two remained absolute.

Then the blind man suddenly sat up, craning his neck and rolling his sightless eyes.

"I wonder where the devil I am!" he murmured through set lips. He appeared to listen intently; no doubt caught the sound of life around him, for he added quickly: "Is anybody here?"

"I am here," Stoutenburg replied curtly. "Do you know whom I am, sirrah?"

"In truth, I do not," Diogenes replied. "But by your accent I would judge you to be a man who at this moment is mightily afraid."

"Afraid?" Stoutenburg retorted, with a loud laugh. "I, afraid of a helpless vagabond who has been fool enough to run his head into a noose which I had not even thought of preparing for him?"

"Yet you are afraid my lord," the other rejoined quietly, "else you would not have ordered your bodyguard to watch over your precious person whilst you parleyed with a blind man."

"My bodyguard is only waiting for final orders to take you to the gallows," Stoutenburg rejoined roughly. "You may as well know now as later that it is my intention to hang you."

"As well now as later," the blind man assented, with easy philosophy. "I understand that for the nonce, whoever you Magnificence may be, you are master in Amersfoort. As such, you have a right to hang anyone you choose. Me or another. What matters? I was very nearly hung once, you must know, by the Lord of Stoutenburg. I did not mind much then; I'd mind it still less now. People talk of a hereafter. Well, whatever it is, it must be a better world than this, so I would just as soon as not, go and find out for myself."

He struggled to his feet, still groping with his hands for support, found the edge of the table and leaned up against it.

"Let's to the hangman, my lord," he said thickly. "If I'm to hang, I prefer it to be done at once. And if we tarry too long I might get sober ere I embark on the last adventure. But," he added, and once more appeared to search the room with eyes that could not see, "there's someone else here besides your lordship. Who is it?"

"My friend and yours," Stoutenburg replied. "Mynheer Nicolaes Beresteyn."

There was a second or two of silence. Nicolaes made as if he would speak, but Stoutenburg quickly put a finger up to his lips, enjoining him to remain still. The blind man passed his trembling hand once or twice in front of his eyes as if to draw aside an unseen veil that hid the outer world from his gaze.

"Ah!" he murmured contentedly. "My friend Klaas! He is here too, is he? That is indeed good news. For Nicolaes was ever my friend. That time three months ago — or was it three years, or three centuries? I really have lost count — that time that the Lord of Stoutenburg was on the point of hanging me, Klaas would have interposed on my behalf, only something went wrong with his heart at the moment, or his nerves, I forget which."

"Twere no use to rely on mynheer's interference this time," Stoutenburg put in drily. "There is but one person in the world now who can save you from the gallows."

"You mean the Lord of Stoutenburg himself?" the blind man queried blandly.

"Nay! He is determined to hang you. But there is another."

"Then I pray your lordship to tell me who that other is," Diogenes replied.

"You might find one, sirrah, in the jongeuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn, the Lord of Stoutenburg's promised wife."

Diogenes made no reply to this. He was facing the table now, still clinging to it with one hand, whilst the other wandered over the objects on the table. Suddenly they encountered a crystal jug which was full of wine. An expression of serene beatitude overspread his face. He raised the goblet to his lips, but ere he drank he said carelessly:

"Ah, the jongeuffrouw Beresteyn is the promised wife of the Lord of Stoutenburg?"

"My promised wife!" Stoutenburg put in roughly. "Methought you would ere this have recognized the man whom you tried to rob of all that he held most precious."

"Your lordship must forgive me," the blind man rejoined drily. "But some unknown miscreant — whom may the gods punish — interfered with me yesterday forenoon, when I was trying to render assistance to my friend Klaas. In the scuffle that ensued, I received a cloud of stinking fumes in the face, which has totally robbed me of sight."

As he spoke he raised his eyes, blinking in that pathetic and inconsequent manner peculiar to the blind. Nicolaes gave an audible groan. He could not bear to look on those sightless orbs, which in the flickering light of the wax candles appeared weird and unearthly.

"Oh," Stoutenburg put in carelessly, "is that how the — er — accident occurred?"

"So, please your lordship, yes," Diogenes replied. "And I was left stranded on the moor, since those two unreclaimed varlets, Pythagoras and Socrates by name, did effectually ride off in the wake of the Stadtholder, leaving me in the lurch. A pitiable plight, your lordship will admit."

"So pitiable," the other retorted with a sneer, "that you thought to improve your condition by bearding the Lord of Stoutenburg in his lair."

"I did not know your lordship was in Amersfoort," Diogenes replied imperturbably. "I thought — I hoped—"

He paused, and Stoutenburg tried in vain to read what went on behind that seemingly unclouded brow. The blind man appeared serene, detached, perfectly good-humoured. His slender hand, which looked hard beneath its coating of grime, was closed lovingly around the crystal jug. Stoutenburg vaguely wondered how far the man was really drunk, or whether his misfortune had slightly addled his brain. So much unconcern in the face of an imminent and shameful death gave an uncanny air to the whole appearance of the man. Even now, with a gently apologetic smile, he raised the jug once more to his lips. Stoutenburg placed a peremptory hand upon his arm.

"Put that down, man," he said harshly. "You are drunk enough as it is, and you'll have need of all your wits to-night."

"There you are wrong my lord," Diogenes retorted, and quietly transferred the jug to his other hand. "A man, meseems, needs no wits to hang gracefully. And I feel that I could do that best if I might quench my thirst ere I met my friend the hangman."

"You may not meet him at all."

"But just now you said—"

"That it was my intention to hang you," Stoutenburg assented. "So it is. But I am in rare good humour to-night, and—"

"So it seems, my lord," the blind man put in carelessly. "So it seems."

He appeared to be swaying on his feet, and to have some difficulty in retaining his balance. He still clung to the edge of the table with one hand. In the other he had the jug full of wine.

"The jongeuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn," Stoutenburg went on, "will sup with me this night to celebrate our betrothal. The fulfillment of this, my great desire, hath caused me to feel lenient toward mine enemies."

"Have I not always asserted," Diogenes broke in with comical solemnity— "always ass-asserted that your lordship was a noble and true gentleman?"

"Women, we know," his lordship continued, ignoring the interruption, "are wont to be tenderhearted where their — their former swains are concerned. And I feel that if the jongeuffrouw herself did make appeal to me on your behalf, I would relent towards you."

"B-b-but would that not be an awkward — a very awkward decision for your lordship?" Diogenes riposted, turning round vacant eyes on Stoutenburg.

"Awkward? How so?"

"If I do not hang, the jongeuffrouw, 'stead of being my widow, would still be my wife. And the laws of this country—"

"I have no concern with the laws of this country," Stoutenburg rejoined drily, "in which, anyhow, you are an alien. As soon as the Archduchess our Liege Lady is once more mistress here, we shall again be at war with England."

"Poor England!"

Diogenes sighed, and solemnly wiped a tear from his blinking eyes.

"And every English plepshurk will be kicked out of the country. But that is neither here nor there."

"Neither here nor there," the other assented, with owlsh gravity. "But before England is s-sh-s-swept off the map, my lordship, what will happen?"

"My marriage to the jongeuffrouw," Stoutenburg replied curtly. "She hath consented to be my wife, and my wife she will be as soon as I have mind to take her. So you may drink to our union, sirrah. I'll e'en pledge you in a cup."

He poured himself out a goblet of wine, laughing to himself at his own ingenuity. That was the way to treat the smeerlap. Make him feel what a pitiable, abject knave he was! Then show him up before Gilda, just as he was — drunk, ragged, unkempt, an object of derision in his misfortune rather than of pity.

"Nay," the rascal objected, his speech waxing thicker and his hand more unsteady, "I cannot pledge you, my lord, in drinking to your union with my own wife, unless — unless my friend Klaas will drink to that union, too. Mine own brother by the law, you see, my lord, and—"

"Mynheer Nicolaes will indeed drink to his sister's happy union with me," Stoutenburg retorted, with a sneer. "His presence here is a witness to my good intentions toward the wench. So you may drink, sirrah. The jongeuffrouw herself is overwilling to submit to my pleasure—"

But the imperious words were smothered in his throat, giving place to a fierce exclamation of choler. The blind man had at his invitation raised the jug of wine to his lips, but in the act his feet apparently slipped away from under him. The jug flew out of his hand, would have caught the Lord of Stoutenburg on the head had he not ducked just in time. But even so his Magnificence was hit on the shoulder by the heavy crystal vessel, and splashed from head to foot with the wine, whilst Diogenes collapsed on the floor with a shamed and bibulous laugh.

A string of savage oaths and tempestuous abuse poured from Stoutenburg's lips, which were in truth livid with rage. Already Jan had rushed to his assistance, snatched up a serviette from the table, and soon contrived to wipe his lordship's doublet clean.

The blind man in the meanwhile did his best to hoist himself up on his feet once more, clung to the edge of the table; but the sight of him released the last floodgate of Stoutenburg's tempestuous wrath. He turned with a vicious snarl upon the unfortunate man, and it would indeed have fared ill with the defenceless creature, for the Lord of Stoutenburg was not wont to measure his blows by the helplessness of his victims, had not a sudden exclamation from Nicolaes stayed the hand that was raised to strike.

"Gilda!" the young man cried impulsively.

Stoutenburg's arm dropped to his side. He turned toward the door. Gilda had just entered with her father, and was coming slowly down the room.

CHAPTER XII. TEARS, SIGHS, HEARTS

1

Gilda caught sight of her beloved the moment she entered. To say that their eyes met would indeed be folly. Certain it is, however, that the blind man turned his sightless gaze in her direction. She only gave a gasp, pressed her hands to her heart as if the pain there was unendurable, and at the moment even the beauty of her face was marred by the look of soul-racking misery in her eyes and the quivering lines around her mouth.

The next moment, even while Jan and the soldiers retired, closing the doors behind them, she was in her husband's arms. Ay, even though Stoutenburg tried to intercept her. She did not hear his mocking laugh, or her brother's vigorous protest, nor yet her father's cry of horror. She just clung to him who, blind, fallen, degraded as you will, was still the beloved of her heart, the man to whom she had dedicated her soul.

She swallowed her tears, too proud to allow those who had wrought his ruin to see how mortally she was hurt.

She passed her delicate hands, fragrant as the petals of flowers, over his grimy face, those poor, stricken eyes, the noble brow so deeply furrowed with pain. She murmured words of endearment and of tenderness such as a mother might find to soothe the trouble of a suffering child. All in a moment. Stoutenburg had not even the time to interfere, to utter the savage oaths which rose from his vengeful heart at sight of the loving pity which this beautiful woman lavished on so contemptible an object.

Nor had the blind man time to encircle that exquisite form in his trembling arms. He had put them out at first, with a pathetic gesture of infinite longing. It was just a flash, a vision of his past self, an oblivion of the hideous, appalling present. Her arms at that moment were round his neck, her head against his breast, her soft, fair hair against his lips.

2

Then something happened. A magnetic current seemed to pass through the air. Diogenes freed himself with a sudden jerk from Gilda's clinging arms, staggered back against the table, swaying on his feet and uttering an inane laugh; whilst she, left standing alone, turned wide, bewildered eyes on her brother Nicolaes, who happened to be close to her at the moment. I think that she was near to unconsciousness then, and that she would have fallen, but that the burgomaster stepped quickly to her side and put his arms round her.

"May God punish you," he muttered between his teeth, and turned to Stoutenburg, who had watched the whole scene with a sinister scowl, "for this wanton and unnecessary cruelty!"

"You wrong me, mynheer," Stoutenburg retorted, with a shrug "I but tried to make your daughter's decision easier for her."

Then, as the burgomaster made no reply, but, with grim, set look on his face, drew his daughter gently down to the nearest chair, Stoutenburg went on lightly, speaking directly to Gilda:

"In the course of my travels, meijuffrouw, I came across a wise philosopher in Italy. He was a man whom an adverse fate had robbed of most things that he held precious; but he told me that he had quite succeeded in conquering adversity by the following means. He would gaze dispassionately on the objects of his past desires, see their defects, appraise them at their just value, and in every case he found that their loss was not so irreparable as he had originally believed."

"A fine moral lesson, my lord," the burgomaster interposed, seeing that Gilda either would not or could not speak as yet. "But I do not see its point."

"'Tis a simple one, mynheer," Stoutenburg retorted coldly. "I pray you, look on the man to whom, as you had your way, you would even now link your daughter."

Instinctively Beresteyn turned his lowering gaze in the direction to which his lordship now pointed with a persuasive gesture. Diogenes was standing beside the table, his powerful frame drawn up to its full height, his sightless eyes blinking and gleaming with weird inconsequence in the flickering light of the candles. His hands were clasped behind his back, and on his face there was a curious expression which the burgomaster was not shrewd enough to define — one of self-deprecation, yet withal of introspection and of detachment, as if the helpless body alone were present and the mind had gone a-roaming in the land of dreams. The burgomaster tried manfully to conceal the look of half-contemptuous pity which, much against his will, had crept into his eyes.

"The man," he rejoined calmly, "is what Fate and a dastard's hand have made him, my lord. Many a fine work of God hath been marred by an evildoer's action."

"That is as may be mynheer," Stoutenburg riposted coolly. "But 'tis of the present and of the future you have to think now — not of the past."

"Even so, my lord, I would sooner see my daughter in the arms of the stricken lion than in those of a wily jackal."

"Am I the wily jackal?" Stoutenburg put in, with a sneer. Then, as the burgomaster made no reply, he added tersely: "I see that the jongeijuffrouw hath told you—"

"Everything," Beresteyn assented calmly.

"And that I await your blessing on our union?"

"My blessing you cannot have, my lord, as you well know," the burgomaster retorted firmly. "'Twas blasphemy to invoke the name of God on such an unholy alliance. My daughter is the lawfully wedded wife of an English gentleman, Sir Percy Blakeney by name, and until the law of this country doth sever those bonds she cannot wed another."

Stoutenburg gave a strident laugh.

"That is, indeed, unfortunate for the English gentleman with the high-sounding name," he said, with a sneer, "whom I gravely suspect of being naught but the common varlet whom we all know so well in Haarlem. But, gentleman or churl," he added, with a cynical shrug, "'tis all one to me. He hangs to-morrow, unless—"

A loud cry of burning indignation escaped the burgomaster's lips.

"You would not further provoke the wrath of God," he exclaimed, "by this foul and cowardly crime!"

"And why not, I pray you?" the other coolly retorted. "Nor do I think that the Almighty would greatly care what happened to this drunken knave. The refuse of human kind, the halt, the lame, and the blind, are best out of the way."

"A man, my lord," the burgomaster protested, "Who when he had you in his power, generously spared your life!"

"The more fool he!" Stoutenburg riposted drily. "'Tis my turn now. He hangs to-morrow, unless, indeed—"

"Unless, what, my lord?"

"Unless," Stoutenburg went on, with an evil leer, "my future wife will deign to plead with me for him — with a kiss."

A groan like that of a wounded beast broke from the burgomaster's heavy heart. For a moment a light that was almost murderous gleamed in his eyes. His fists were clenched; he murmured a dark threat against the man who goaded him wellnigh to madness. Then, suddenly, he met Stoutenburg's mocking glance fixed upon him, and a huge sob rose in his throat, almost choking him. Gilda, with a pitiful moan, had hidden her face against her father's sleeve.

"'Tis but anticipating the happy time by a few hours," Stoutenburg went on, with calm cynicism. "But I have a fancy to hold my future wife in my arms now — at this moment — and to grant her in exchange for her first willing kiss the life of a miserable wretch whose life or death are, in truth, of no account to me."

He took a step or two forward in the direction where Gilda sat, clinging with desperate misery to her father. Then, as the burgomaster, superb with indignation, grand in his dignity, instinctively interposed his burly figure between his daughter and the man whom she loathed, Stoutenburg added, with well-assumed carelessness:

"If the jongeuffrouw prefers to put off the happy moment until we are alone in my camp to-morrow, we'll say no more about it. Let the rogue hang; I care not!"

"My lord," — the burgomaster spoke once more in a vigorous protest, which, alas, he knew to be futile — "what you suggest is monstrous, inhuman! God will never permit—"

"I pray you, mynheer," Stoutenburg broke in fiercely, "let us leave the Almighty out of our affairs. I have read my Bible as assiduously as you when I was younger, and in it I learned that God hath enjoined all wives to submit themselves to their husbands. A kiss from my betrothed, a word or gentle pleading, are little enough to ask in exchange for an act of clemency. And you, Heer Burgomaster, do but stiffen my will by your interference. Will you, at least, let the jongeuffrouw decide on the matter for herself, and, in her interests and your own, give to all that she does your unqualified consent!"

"My consent you'll never wring from me, as you well know, my lord. I and my daughter are powerless to withstand your might, but if we bend to the yoke it is because it hath pleased God that we should wear it, not because we submit with a free will. By exulting in such a monstrous crime you do but add to the loathing which we both feel for you—"

"Silence!" Stoutenburg broke in fiercely. "Silence, you dolt! What good, think you, you do yourself or your daughter by provoking me beyond endurance? She knows my decision, and so, methinks, do you. If the jongeuffrouw feels such unqualified hatred for me, let her return to your protecting arms and leave Amersfoort to its fate. As for that sightless varlet, let him hang, I say! I am a fool, indeed to listen to your gibberish! Jan!" he called, and strode to the door with a great show of determination, staking his all now on this card which he had decided to play.

But the card was a winning one, as well he knew. Already Gilda, as if moved by an unseen voice, had jumped to her feet and intercepted him ere he reached the door. Her whole appearance had changed — the expression of her eyes, her tone, her gestures.

"My father is overwrought, my lord," she said firmly. "He hath already promised me that he would offer no opposition to my wishes."

She looked him straight in the eyes, and he returned her gaze, his restless eyes seeming to search her very soul. She had, in truth, changed most markedly. She was, of course, afraid — afraid for that miserable plepshurk's life. But the change was something more than that — at least, Stoutenburg chose to think so. There was something in her glance at this moment that he did not quite understand, that he did not dare understand. A wavering — almost he would have called it a softness, had he dared. He came nearer to her, and, though at first she drew back from him, she presently held her ground, still gazing on him like a bird when it is fascinated and cannot move.

Now he was quite sure that her blue eyes looked less hard, and certainly her mouth was less tightly set. Her lips were slightly parted, and her breath came quick and panting. Ah, women were queer creatures! Had Nicolaes been right when he quoted the English play? Gilda had certainly begun by falling against that contemptible rascal's breast, but since then? Had her wayward fancy been repelled by that whole air of physical degradation which emanated from the once brilliant cavalier, or had it been merely dazzled by visions of power and of wealth, which had their embodiment in him who was her future lord?

He himself could not say. All that he knew, all that he felt of a certainty now, was that he held more than one winning card in this gamble for possession of an exquisite and desirable woman. Still holding her gaze, he took her hands. She did not resist, did not attempt to draw away from him, and he murmured softly:

"What are your wishes, myn engel?"

"To submit to your will, my lord," she replied firmly.

"At last!" he exclaimed, on a note of triumph, drew her still closer to him. "A kiss, fair one, to clinch this bargain, which hath made me the happiest of men!"

He had lost his head for the moment. Satisfaction, and an almost feverish sense of exultation, had turned his blood to liquid fire. All that he saw was this lovely woman, whom he had nearly conquered. Nearly, but not quite. At his desire for a kiss he felt that she stiffened. She closed her eyes, and even her lips became bloodless. She appeared on the verge of a swoon. Bah! Even this phase would pass away. Nicolaes was right. Women reserved their contempt for weaklings. In the end 'twas the master whom they adored.

"A kiss, fair one!" he called again. "And the rogue shall live or hang according as your lips are sweet or bitter!"

He was on the point of snatching that kiss at last, when suddenly there came so violent a crash that the whole room shook with the concussion, and even the windows rattled in their frames. The blind man, more unsteady than ever on his feet, had tried to get hold of a

chair, lost his balance in the act, and, in the endeavour to save himself from falling, had lurched so clumsily against the table that it overturned, and all the objects upon it — silver, crystal, china dishes, and candelabra — fell with a deafening clatter on the floor.

Stoutenburg, uttering one of his favourite oaths, had instinctively turned to see whence had come this terrific noise. In turning, his hold on Gilda's wrists had slightly relaxed; sufficiently, at any rate, to enable her to free herself from his grasp and to seek shelter once more beside her father. Diogenes alone had remained unruffled through the commotion. Indeed, he appeared wholly unconscious that he had brought it about. He had collapsed amidst the litter, and now sprawled on the floor, surrounded by a medley of broken glass, guttering candles, hot food and liquor, convulsed with laughter, whist his huge, dark eyes, with the dilated pupils and pale, narrow circles of blue light, looked strangely ghostlike in the gloom.

"Who in thunder," he muttered inarticulately, "is making this confounded din?"

3

At the noise, too, the men had come running in from the hall. The sound had been akin to the detonation of a dozen pistols, and they had rushed along, prepared for a fight. With the fall of the candelabra, the vast banqueting hall had suddenly been plunged into semi-darkness. Only a couple of wax candles in tall sconces, which had originally set on the sideboard, vaguely illumined the disorderly scene.

Diogenes, with his infectious laugh, did in truth succeed in warding off the punishment which his Magnificence already held in preparation for him. As it was, Stoutenburg caught sight of Gilda's look of anxiety, and this at once put him into a rare good humour. He had had his wish. Gilda had been almost kind, had practically yielded to him in the presence of the man whom he desired to humiliate and to wound, as he himself had been humiliated and wounded in the past.

Whether the blind man's keen sense of hearing had taken in every detail of the scene, it was of course impossible to say. But one thing he must have heard — the brief soliloquy at the door, when Gilda, in response to his ardent query. "What are your wishes, myn engel?" had replied quite firmly: "To submit to your will, my lord!" That moment must, in truth, have been more galling and more bitter to the once gallant Laughing Cavalier than the rattle of the rope upon the gallows, or the first consciousness that he was irremediably blind.

Indeed, Stoutenburg had had something more than his wish. To make a martyr of the rogue, he would have told you, was not part of his desire. All that he wanted was to obliterate the man's former brilliant personality from Gilda's mind; that he should henceforth dwell in her memory as she last saw him, abject in his obvious impotence, owing his life to the woman whom he had wooed and conquered in the past with the high hand of a reckless adventurer. After that, the rogue might hang or perish in a ditch: his lordship did not care. What happened to blind men in these days of fighting when none but the best men had a chance to live at all, he had never troubled his head to inquire. At any rate, he knew that a sightless lion was less harmful than a keen-eyed mouse. Ah, in truth he had had more than his wish and satisfied now as to the present and the future, the thought that the moment had come to let well alone, and to remove from Gilda's sight the spectacle which, by some subtle reaction, might turn her heart back to pity for the knave. He gave Jan a significant nod.

But Gilda, whose glowing eyes had watched his every movement, was quick to interpose.

"My lord," she cried in protest, "I hold you to your bargain!"

"Have no fear, myn chat," he answered suavely. "I will not repudiate it. The fellow's life is safe enough whilst you and the Heer Burgomaster honour me by supping with me. After that, the decision rests with you. As I said just now, he shall live or hang according as your lips are sweet or bitter. For the nonce, I am wearied and hungry. We'll sup first, so please you."

And Gilda had to stand by whilst she saw her husband dragged away from her presence. He offered no resistance; indeed, accepted the situation with that good-humoured philosophy which was so characteristic of him. But, oh, if she could have conveyed to him by a look all the tenderness, the sorrow, the despair, that was torturing her heart! If she could have run to him just once more, to whisper into his ear those burning words of love which would have eased his pain and hers!

If she could have defied that abominable tyrant who gloated over her misery, and, hand in hand with her beloved, have met death by his side, with his arms around her, her spirit wedded to his, ere they appeared together before the judgement seat of God!

But, as that arrogant despot had reminded her, she had even lost the freedom to die. The destinies of her native city were in her hands. Unless she bowed her willing neck to his will, Amersfoort and all its citizens would be wiped off the face of the earth. And as she watched the chosen of her heart led like a captive lion to humiliation if not to death those monstrous words rang in her ears, that surely must provoke the wrath of God.

Therefore, she watched his departure dry-eyed and motionless. Ay! envying him in her heart, that he, at least, was not called upon to make such an appalling sacrifice as lay now before her. She had indeed come to that sublimity of human suffering that she almost wished to see those dear, sightless eyes closed in their last long sleep, rather than that he should be forced to endure what to him would be ten thousand times worse than death — her submission to that miscreant — her willing union; and he, ignorant of how the tyrant had wrung this submission from her.

CHAPTER XIII. THE STYGIAN CREEK

1

The Lord of Stoutenburg was conscious of a great feeling of relief when the blind man was finally removed from his presence. While the latter stood there, even in the abjectness of his plight, Stoutenburg felt that he was a living menace to the success of all his well-thought-out schemes. He kept his eyes fixed on Gilda with a warning look, that should be a reminder to her of the immutability of his resolve. He tried, in a manner, to surround her with a compelling fluid that would engulf her resistance and leave her weak and passive to his will.

There was of necessity a vast amount of confusion and din ere order was restored among the debris; and conversation was impossible in the midst of the clatter that was going on — men coming and going, the rattle of silver and glass. Gilda, the while, sat quite still, her blue eyes fixed with strange intensity on the door through which her beloved had disappeared. Her father stood beside her, holding her hand, and she rested her cheek against his.

The burgomaster, throughout the last scene, had not once looked at Diogenes. A dark, puzzled frown lingered between his brows whilst he stared moodily into the fire. He absolutely ignored the presence of his son, putting into practice his stern dictum that henceforth he had no son, whilst Nicolaes, who was becoming inured to his shameful position, put on a careless and jaunty air, spoke with easy familiarity to Stoutenburg, and peremptorily to the men.

Then at last the table was once more set, the candles relit, and the board again spread for supper. Stoutenburg, with an elegant flourish, invited his guests to sit, offered his arm to Gilda to lead her to the table. She, moved by a pathetic desire to conciliate him, a forlorn hope that a great show of submission on her part would soften his cruel heart and lighten the fate of her beloved, placed her hand upon his sleeve, and when she met his admiring glance a slight flush drove the pallor from her cheeks.

“You are adorable, myn geloof!” he murmured.

He appeared highly elated, sat at the head of the table, with Gilda on his right and the burgomaster on his left, whilst Nicolaes sat beside his sister.

The two old crones served the supper, coming and going with a noiselessness and precision acquired in long service in the well-conducted house of the burgomaster. They knew the use of the two pronged silver utensils which Mynheer Beresteyn had acquired of late direct from France, where they were used at the table of gentlemen of quality for conveying food to the mouth. They knew how to remove each service from the centre of the table without unduly disturbing the guests, and how to replace one cloth with another the moment it became soiled with sauce or wine.

Jan stood at the Lord of Stoutenburg’s elbow and served him personally and with his own hands. Every dish, before it was handed to his lordship, was placed in front of the burgomaster, who was curtly bidden to taste of it. His Magnificence, adept in the poisoner’s art, was taking no risks himself.

The cook had done his best, and the supper was, I believe, excellent. The Oille, the most succulent of dishes, made up of quails, capons, and ducks and other tasty meats, was a marvel of gastronomic art, and so were the tureens of beef with cucumber and the breast of veal larded and garnished with hard-boiled eggs. In truth it was all a terrible waste, and sad to see such excellent fare laid before guests who hardly would touch a morsel. Gilda could not eat, her throat seemed to close up every time she tried to swallow. Indeed, she had to appeal to the very last shred of her pride to keep up a semblance of dignity before her enemy. The burgomaster, too, flushed with shame at the indignity put upon him, did no more than taste of the dishes as they were put before him by the surly Jan.

The Lord of Stoutenburg, on the other hand, put up a great show of hilarity, talked much and drank deeply, discussed in a loud, arrogant voice with Nicolaes the Archduchess’s plans for the subduing of the Netherlands. And Nicolaes, after he had imbibed two or three bumpers of heady Spanish wine, felt more assured, returned Gilda’s reproachful glances with indifference, and his father’s contempt with defiance.

2

What Gilda suffered it were a vain attempt to describe. How she contrived to remain at the table; to appear indifferent almost gay; to glance up now and again at a persuasive challenge from Stoutenburg, will for ever remain her secret. She never spoke of that hour, of that hateful, harrowing supper, like an odious nightmare, which was wont in after years to sent a shudder of horror right through her whenever she recalled it.

The burgomaster remained at first obstinately silent, whilst the Lord of Stoutenburg talked with studied insolence of the future of the Netherlands. The happy times would now come back, the traitor vowed, when the United Provinces, dissolved into feeble and separate entities, without form or governance, would once more return to their allegiance and bow the knee before the might of Spain; when the wholesome rule of another Alva would teach these stiffnecked and presumptuous burghers that comfort and a measure of welfare could only be obtained by unconditional surrender and submission to a high, unconquerable Power.

“Freedom! Liberty!” he sneered. “Ancient Charters! Bah! Empty, swaggering words, I say, which their masters will soon force them to swallow. Then will follow an era more suited to all this beggarly Dutch rabble, one that will teach them a lesson which will at last stick in their memories. The hangman, that’s what they want! The stake! The rack! Our glorious Inquisition, and the relentlessness which, alas, for the nonce hath lain buried with our immortal Alva!”

He drank a loyal toast to the coming new era, to the Archduchess, to King Philip IV, who in his glorious reign would see Spain once more unconquered, the Netherlands subdued, England punished at last. Nicolaes joined him with many a lustful shout, whilst the burgomaster sat with set lips, his eyes glowing with suppressed indignation. Once or twice it seemed as if his stern self-control would give way, as if his burning wrath would betray him into words and deeds that might cause abysmal misery to hundreds of innocent people whilst not serving in any way the cause which he would have given his life to uphold.

Indeed, in the book of heroic deeds of which God's angel hath a record, none stand out more brilliantly than the endurance of the Burgomaster of Amersfoort and of his daughter on this memorable occasion. Nor is there in the whole valorous history of the Netherlands a more glorious page than that which tells of the sacrifice made by father and daughter in order to save the city which they loved from threatened annihilation.

But like all things, good and evil, the trial came to an end at last. The Lord of Stoutenburg gave the signal, and the burgomaster and Gilda rose from the table both, in truth, with a deep sigh of thankfulness.

Stoutenburg remained deferential until the end — deferential, that is, with an undercurrent of mockery, which he took no pains to conceal. His bow, as he finally took leave of his guests, bidding the burgomaster a simple farewell and Gilda au revoir until the dawn on the morrow, was so obviously ironical that Beresteyn was goaded into an indignant tirade, which he regretted almost as soon as he had uttered it.

"Let him who stands," he said firmly, and with all of his wonted dignity, "take heed lest he fall. The Netherlands are not conquered yet, my lord, because your mercenary troops have succeeded, for the time being, in overrunning one of her provinces. Ede may have fallen. Amersfoort may for the moment, be under your heel—"

"Arnheim and Nijmegen may have capitulated by now," Stoutenburg broke in derisively. "Sold to De Berg, like Amersfoort and Ede, by the craven smeerlap to whom you have given your daughter."

"Even that may have happened," the burgomaster riposted hotly, "if so be the will of God. But we are a race of fighters. We have beaten and humiliated the Spaniard and driven him from off our land before now. And Maurice of Nassau, the finest captain of the age, is unconquered still!"

"Mightily sick, so I'm told," the other put in carelessly. "He was over-ready, methinks, to abandon Amersfoort to its fate."

"Only to punish you more effectually in the end. Take heed, my lord, take heed! The multiplicity of your crimes will find you out soon enough."

"Sblood!" retorted Stoutenburg, unperturbed; "but you forget, mynheer burgomaster, that, whate'er betide me, your daughter's fate is henceforth linked to mine own."

Then it was that Beresteyn repented of his outburst, for indeed he had gained nothing by it, and Stoutenburg had used the one argument which was bound to silence him. What, in truth, was the use of wrangling? Dignity was sure to suffer, and that mocking recreant would only feel that his triumph was more complete.

Even now he only laughed, pointed with an ironical flourish of his arm to the widely open doors, through which in the dimly lighted hall, a group of men could be perceived, sitting or standing around the centre table, with Diogenes standing in their midst, his fair head crowned by the hideous bandage, and his broad shoulders towering above the puny, swarthy Spanish soldiery. He had a mug of ale in his hand, and holding it aloft he was singing a ribald song, the refrain of which was taken up by the men. In the vague and flickering light of resin torches, his sightless orbs looked spectral, like those of a wraith.

"You should be grateful to me, mynheer," Stoutenburg added with a sneer, "for freeing your daughter from such a yoke."

He returned to Gilda, took her unresisting hand and raised it to his lips. Above it, he was watching her face. She was looking beyond him, straight at the blind man; and though Stoutenburg at that moment would have bartered much for the knowledge of what was in her thoughts, he could not define the expression of her eyes. At one time he thought that they had softened, that the fulfilment of all his hopes was hanging once more in the balance. It seemed for the moment as if she would snatch away her hand and seek shelter, as she had done before, against the heart of her beloved; that right through that outer husk of misery and degradation she saw something that puzzled her rather than repelled. A question seemed to be hovering on her lips. A question of a protest. Or was it a mute appeal for forgiveness?

Stoutenburg could not tell. But he felt that for a space of a few seconds the whole edifice of his desires was tottering, that Fate might, after all, still be holding a thunderbolt in store for him, which would hurl him down from the pinnacle of this momentary triumph. Gilda — as a woman — was still unconquered. Neither her heart nor her soul would ever be his. Somehow it was the glance wherewith she regarded the blind man that told the Lord of Stoutenburg this one unalterable fact.

The sortilege which he had tried to evoke, by letting her look on the pitiful wreck who had once been her lover, had fallen short in its potent charm. His own brilliant prospects, his masterful personality, ay, his well-assumed indifference, had all failed to cast their spells over her. Unlike the valiant Petruchio of the English play, he had not yet succeeded in taming this beautiful shrew. In the past she had resisted his blandishments; if she succumbed at all, it would be beneath the weight of his tyranny.

Well, so be it! Nicolaes, no doubt, had been right when he said that women reserved their disdain for weaklings. It was the man of iron who won a woman's love. The thought sent a fierce glow of hatred coursing through his blood. Mythical and fatalistic as he was, he believed that his lucky star would only begin to rise when he had succeeded in winning Gilda for his own. He had deemed women an easy conquest in the past. This one could not resist him for long. Even men were wont to come readily under his way — witness Nicolaes Beresteyn, who was as wax in his hands. In the past, he had delighted in wielding a kind of cabalistic power, which he undoubtedly possessed, over many a weak or shifty character. His mother even was wont to call him a magician, and stood not a little in awe of the dark-visaged, headstrong child, and later on of the despotic, lawless youth, who had set the crown on her manifold sorrows by his callousness and his crimes.

That power had been on the wane of late. But it was not — could not — be gone from him forever. Nicolaes was still his sycophant. Jan and his kind were willing to go to death for him. His own brain had devised a means for bringing that obstinate burgomaster and the beautiful Gilda to their knees. Then, of a surety, in the Cornucopia of Fate there was something more comforting, more desirable, than a thunderbolt!

Was he not a man the master of his destiny?

Bah! What was a woman's love, after all? Why not let her go — be content with worldly triumphs? The sacking of Amersfoort, which would yield him wealth and treasure; the gratitude of the Archduchess: a high — if not the highest — position in the reconquered provinces! Why not be content with those? And Stoutenburg groaned like a baffled tiger, because in his heart of hearts he knew these things would not content him in the end. He wanted Gilda! Gilda, of the blue eyes and the golden hair, the demure glance and fragrant hands. His desire for her was in his bones, and he felt that he would indeed go raving mad if he lost her after this — if that beggarly drunkard, unwashed, dishonoured, and stricken with blindness, triumphed through his very abasement and the magnitude of his misfortune.

"This, at any rate, I can avert!" he murmured under his breath. And somehow the thought eased the racking jealousy that was torturing him — jealousy of such an abject thing. He waited until Gilda had passed out of the room, and when she was standing in the hall, so obviously bidding a last farewell in her heart to the man she loved so well, he called peremptorily to Jan:

"Take the varlet," he commanded roughly, "and hang him on the Koppel-poort!"

At the word Gilda turned on him like an infuriated tigress. Pushing past her father, past the men, who recoiled from her as if from a madwoman, she was back beside the execrable despot who thus put the crown on his hideous cruelties.

"Your bargain, my lord!" she cried hoarsely. "You dare not — you dare not—"

"My bargain, fair one?" Stoutenburg retorted coolly. "Nay, you were so averse to fulfilling your share of it, that I have repented me of proposing it. The varlet hangs. That is my last word."

His last word! And Jan so ready to obey! The men were already closing in around her beloved; less than a minute later they had his hands securely pinioned behind his back. Can you wonder that she lost her head, that she fought to free herself from her father's arms, and, throwing reserve, dignity to the winds, threw herself at the feet of that inhuman monster and pleaded with him as no woman on earth had, mayhap, ever pleaded before?

We do not like to think of that exquisite, refined woman kneeling before such an abominable dastard. Yet she did it! Words of appeal, of entreaty, poured from her quivering lips. She raised her tear-stained face to his, embraced his knees with her arms. She forgot the men that stood by, puzzled and vaguely awed — Jan resolute, her father torn to the heart. She forgot everything save that there was a chance — a remote chance — of softening a cruel heart, and she could not — no, could not! — see the man she loved dragged to shameful death before her eyes.

She promised — oh, she promised all that she had to give!

"I'll be your willing slave, my lord, in all things," she pleaded, her voice broken and hoarse. "Your loving wife, as you desire. A kiss from me? Take it, an you will. I'll not resist! Nay, I'll return it from my heart, in exchange for your clemency."

Then it was that the burgomaster succeeded at last in tearing her away from her humiliating position. He dragged her to her feet, drew her to his breast, tried by words and admonition to revive in her her sense of dignity and her self-control. Only with one word did he, in his turn, condescend to plead.

"An you have a spark of humanity left in you, my lord," he said loudly, "order your executioners to be quick about their business."

For the Lord of Stoutenburg had, with a refinement of cruelty almost unbelievable, were it not a matter of history, stayed Jan from executing his inhuman order.

"Wait!" his glittering eyes appeared to say to the sycophant henchman who hung upon his looks. "Let me enjoy this feast until I am satiated."

Then, when Gilda lay at last, half-swooning in the shelter of her father's arms, he said coolly:

"Have I not said, fair one, that if you deigned to plead the rascal should not hang? See! The potency of your charm upon my sensitive heart! The man who hath always been my most bitter enemy, and whom at last I have within my power, shall live because your fair arms did encircle my knees, and because of your free will you offered me a kiss. Mynheer Burgomaster," he added, with easy condescension, "I pray you lead your daughter to her room. She is over-wrought and hath need of rest. Go in peace, I pray you. That drunken varlet is safe now in my hands."

The burgomaster could not trust himself to reply. Only his loving hands wandered with a gentle, soothing gesture over his beloved daughter's hair, whilst he murmured soft, endearing words in her ear. Gradually she became more calm, was able to gather her wits together, to realize what she had done and all that she had sacrificed, probably in vain. Stoutenburg had spoken soft words, but how could she trust him, who had ever proved himself a liar and a cheat? She was indeed like a miserable, captive bird, held, maimed and bruised, in a cruel trap set by vengeful and cunning hands. It seemed almost incredible why she should be made to suffer so.

What had she done? In what horrible way had she sinned before God, that His hand should lie so heavily upon her? Even her sacrifice — sublime and selfless — failed to give her the consolation of duty nobly accomplished. Everything before her was dreary and dark. Life itself was nought but torture. The few days — hours — that must intervene until she knew that Amersfoort was safe confronted her like the dark passage into Gehenna. Beyond them lay death at last, and she, a young girl scarce out of adolescence, hitherto rich, beautiful, adulated, was left to long for that happy release from misery with an intensity of longing akin to the sighing of souls in torment.

CHAPTER XIV. TREACHERY

1

Throughout this harrowing scene the blind man had stood by, pinioned, helpless, almost lifeless in his immobility. The only sign of life in him seemed to be in those weird, sightless orbs, in which the flickering light of the resin torches appeared to draw shafts of an unearthly glow. He was pinioned and could not move. Half a dozen soldiers had closed in around him. Whether he heard all that went on, many who were there at the time declared it to be doubtful. But, even if he heard, what could he have done? He could not even put his hands up to his ears to shut out that awful sound of his beloved wife's hoarse, spent voice pleading desperately for him.

One of the men who was on guard over him told De Voocht afterwards that he could hear the tough sinews cracking against the bonds that held the giant captive, and that great drops of sweat appeared upon the fine, wide brow. When Gilda, leaning heavily upon her father's arm, finally mounted the stairs which led up to her room, the blind man turned his head in that direction. But the jongeuffrouw went on with head bent and did not glance down in response.

All this we know from De Voocht, who speaks of it in his "Brieven." But he was not himself present on the scene and hath it only from hearsay. He questioned several of the men subsequently as he came in contact with them, and, of course, the burgomaster's testimony was the most clear and the most detailed. Mynheer Beresteyn admitted that, throughout that awful, ne'er-to-be-forgotten evening, he could not understand the blind man's attitude, was literally tortured with doubts of him. Was he, in truth, the craven wretch which he appeared to be — the miserable traitor who had sold the Stadtholder's original plans to De Berg, betrayed Marquet and De Keysere, and hopelessly jeopardized the whole of Gelderland, if not the entire future of the Netherlands? If so, he was well-deserving of the gallows, which would not fail to be his lot.

But was he? Was he?

The face, of course, out of which the light of the eyes had vanished, was inscrutable. The mouth, remember, was partially hidden by the three days' growth of beard, and grime and fatigue had further obliterated all other marks of expression. Of course, the man must have suffered tortures of humiliation and rage, which would effectually deaden all physical pain. But at the time he seemed not to suffer. Indeed, at one moment it almost seemed if he were asleep, with sightless eyes wide open, and standing on his feet.

2

After Gilda and her father had disappeared on the floor above, the Lord of Stoutenburg, like a wild and caged beast awaiting satisfaction, began pacing up and down the long banquetting-hall. The doors leading into it from the hall had been left wide open, and the men could see his lordship in his restless wanderings, his heavy boots ringing against the reed-covered floor. He held his arms folded across his chest, and was gnawing — yes, gnawing — his knuckles in the excess of his excitement and his choler.

Then he called Jan, and parleyed with him for awhile, consulted Mynheer Nicolaes, who was more taciturn and gloomy than ever before.

The soldiers knew what was coming. They had witnessed the scene between the jongeuffrouw and his Magnificence and some of them who had wives and sweethearts of their own, had felt uncomfortable lumps, at the time, in their throats. Others, who had sons, fell to wishing that their offsprings might be as finely built, as powerful as that poor, blind, intoxicated wretch who, in truth, now had no use for his magnificent muscles.

But what would you? These were troublous times. Life was cheap — counted for nothing in sight of such great gentlemen as was the Lord of Stoutenburg. The varlet, it seems, had offended his lordship awhile ago. Jan knew the story, and was very bitter about it, too. Well, no man could expected to be treated with gentleness by a great lord whom he had been fool enough to offend. The blind rascallion would hang, of that there could be no doubt. The jongeuffrouw had been pacified with soft words and vague promises, but the rascal would hang. Any man there would have bet his shirt on the issue. You had only to look at his lordship. A more determined, more terrifying look it were impossible to meet. Even Jan looked a little scared. When his Magnificence looked like that it boded no good to any one. All the rancour, the gall, that had accumulated in his heart against everything that pertained to the United Provinces and to their Stadtholder would effectively smother the slightest stirring of conscience or pity. Perhaps, when the jongeuffrouw knelt at his feet, he had thought of his mother, who, equally distraught and equally humiliated, had knelt in vain at the Stadtholder's feet, pleading for the life of her sons. Oh, yes, all that had made the Lord of Stoutenburg terribly hard and callous.

But the men were sorry for the blind vagabond, for all that. He had had nothing to do with the feuds between the Stadtholder and the sons of Olden Barneveldt. He had done nothing, seemingly, save to win the love of the beautiful lady whom his Magnificence had marked for his own. He was brave, too. You could not help admiring him as he stood between you and your comrades, his head thrown back, a splendid type of virility and manhood. Half-seas over he may have been. His misfortunes were, in truth, enough to make any man take a drink; but you could not help but see that there was an air of spirituality about the forehead and the sensitive nostrils which redeemed the face from any suggestion of sensuality. And now and again a quaint smile would play round the corners of his mouth, and the whole wan face would light up as if with a sudden whimsical thought.

Then all at once he threw back his head and yawned.

Such a droll fellow! Yawning on the brink of eternity! It was, in truth, a pity he should hang!

3

Yes, the blind man yawned, loudly and long, like one who is ready for bed. And the harmless sound completed Stoutenburg's exasperation. He once more gave the harsh word of command:

"Take the varlet out and hang him!"

Obviously this time it would be irrevocable. There was no one here to plead, and there was Jan, stolid and grim as was his wont, already at attention under the lintel — a veritable tower of strength in support of his chief's decisions.

Jan was not in the habit of arguing with his lordship. This, or any other order, was as one to him. As for the blind vagabond — well, Jan was as eager as his Magnificence to get the noose around the rascal's throat. There were plenty of old scores to settle between them — the humiliation of three months ago, which had sent Stoutenburg, disgraced and a fugitive, out of the land, had hit Jan severely, too.

And that never-to-be-forgotten discomfiture was entirely due to this miserable caitiff, who, indeed would get naught but his deserts.

The task, in truth, was a congenial one to Jan. A blind man was easy enough to deal with, and this one offered but little resistance. He had been half-asleep, it seems, and only woke to find himself on the brink of eternity. Even so, his good-humour did not forsake him.

"Odd's fish!" he exclaimed when, roughly shaken from his somnolence, he found himself in the hands of the soldiery. "I had forgotten this hanging business. You might have left a man to finish his dreams in peace."

He appeared dazed, and his speech was thick. He had been drinking heavily all the evening, and, save for an odd moment or so of lucid interval, he had been hopelessly fuddled all along. And he was merry in his cups; laughter came readily to his lips; he was full of quips and sallies, too, which kept the men in rare good-humour. In truth, the fellow would joke and sing apparently until the hangman's rope smothered all laughter in his throat.

But he had an unquenchable thirst; entreated the men to bring him a jug of wine.

"Spanish wine," he pleaded. "I dote on Spanish wine, but had so little of it to drink in my day. That villainous rascal Pythagoras — some of you must have known the pot-bellied loon — would always seize all there was to get. He and Socrates. Two scurvy runagates who should hang 'stead o' me. Give me a mug of wine, for mercy's sake!"

The men had none to give, and the matter was referred to Jan.

"Not another drop!" Jan declared with unanswerable finality. "The knave is quite drunk enough as it is."

"Ah!" the blind man protested with ludicrous vehemence. "But there thou'rt wrong, worthy Jan. No man is ever — is ever drunk enough. He may be top-heavy, he may be as drunk as a lord, or as fuddled as David's sow. He may be fuzzy, fou, or merely sottish; but sufficiently drunk? No!"

A shout of laughter from the men greeted this solemn pronouncement. Jan shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Well, that is as may be!" he rejoined gruffly. "But not another drop to drink wilt thou get from me."

"Oh, Jan," the poor man protested, with a pitiable note of appeal, "my good Jan, think on it! I am about to hang! Wouldst refuse the last request of a dying man?"

"Thou'rt about to hang," Jan assented, unmoved. "Therefore, 'twere a pity to waste good liquor on thee."

"I'll pay the well, my good Jan," Diogenes put in, with a knowing wink of his sightless eyes.

"Pay me?" Jan retorted, with a grim laugh. "'Tis not much there's left in thy pockets, I'm thinking."

"No," the blind man agreed, nodding gravely. "These good men here did, in truth — empty my pockets effectually awhile ago. 'Twas not with coin I meant to repay thee, good Jan—"

"With what, then?"

"Information, Jan!" the blind man replied, sinking his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Information for the like of which his Lordship of Stoutenburg would give his ears."

Jan laughed derisively. The men laughed openly. They thought this but another excellent joke on the part of the droll fellow.

"Bah!" Jan said, with a shrug of the shoulder. "How should a varlet like thee know aught of which his lordship hath not full cognisance already?"

"His lordship," the other riposted quickly, even whilst a look of impish cunning overspread his face— "his lordship never was in the confidence of the Stadtholder. I was!"

"What hath the Stadtholder to do with the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" the blind man replied airily. "Thou art obstinate, my good Jan, and 'tis not I who would force thee to share a secret for the possession of which, let me assure thee, his lordship would repay me not only with a tankard of his best wine, but with my life! Ay, and with a yearly pension of one thousand guilders to boot."

These last few words he had spoken quite slowly and with grave deliberation, his head nodding sagely while he spoke. The look of cunning in those spectral orbs had lent to his pale, wan face an air of elfin ghoulishness. He was swaying on his feet, and now and again the men had to hold him up, for he was on the very point of measuring his length on the hall floor.

Jan did not know what to make of it all. Obviously the man was drunk. But not so drunk that he did not know what he was talking about. And the air of cunning suggested that there was something alive in the fuddled brain. Jan looked across the hall in the direction of the banqueting-room.

The doors were wide open, and he could see that his lordship, who at first had paced up and down the long room like a caged beast, had paused quite close to the door, then advanced on tip-toe out into the hall, where he had remained for the last minute or two, intent and still, with eager, probing glance fixed upon the blind man. Now, when Jan questioned him with a look, he gave his faithful henchman a scarce perceptible sign, which the latter was quick enough to interpret correctly.

"Thou dost set my mouth to water," he said to the blind man, with well-assumed carelessness, "By all this talk of yearly pensions and of guilders. I am a poor man, and not so young as I was. A thousand guilders a year would keep me in comfort for the rest of my life."

"Yet art so obstinate," Diogenes riposted with a quaint, inane laugh, "as to deny me a tankard of Spanish wine, which might put thee in possession of my secret — a secret, good Jan, worth yearly pensions and more to his lordship."

"How do I know thou'rt not a consummate liar?" Jan protested gruffly.

"I am!" the other riposted, wholly unruffled. "I am! Lying hath been my chief trade ever since I was breeched. Had I not lied to the Stadtholder he would not have entrusted his secrets to me, and I could not have bartered those secrets for a tankard of good Spanish wine."

“Thy vaunted secrets may not be worth a tankard of wine.”
 “They are, friend Jan, they are! Try them and see.”
 “Well, let’s hear them and, if they are worth it, I’ll pay thee with a tankard of his lordship’s best Oporto.”
 But the blind man shook his head with owlish solemnity.
 “And then sell them to his lordship,” he retorted, “for pensions and what not, whilst thine own hand, mayhap, puts the rope around my neck. No, no, my good Jan, say no more about it. I’d as lief see his lordship and thee falling into the Stadtholder’s carefully laid trap, and getting murdered in your beds, even while I am on my journey to kingdom come.”
 “Who is going to murder us?” Jan queried, frowning and puzzled, trying to get his cue once more from his master. “And how?”
 “I’ll not tell thee,” the blind man replied, with a quick turn to that obstinacy which so oft pertains to the drunkard, “not if thou wert to plunge me in a bath of best Oporto.”
 Some of the men began to murmur.
 “We might all share?” one or two of them suggested.
 “Let’s hear what it is,” others declared.
 “I’ll tell thee, knave, what I’ll do,” Jan rejoined decisively. “I’ll bring thee a tankard of Oporto to loosen thy tongue. Then, if thy secret is indeed as important as thou dost pretend, I’ll see that the hangman is cheated of thy carcass.”
 For awhile the blind man pondered.
 “Loosen my hands then, friend Jan,” he said, “for, in truth, I am trussed like a fowl; then let’s feel the handle of that tankard. After that we’ll talk.”

4

The soldiers sat around the table, watching the blind man with grave attention. At a sign from Jan they soon loosened his bonds. There was something magnetic in the air just then, something that sent sensitive nerves aquiver, and of which these rough fellow were only vaguely conscious. They could not look on that drunken loon without laughing. He was more comical than ever now, with that air of bland beatitude upon his face as his slender fingers closed around the handle of the tankard which Jan had just placed in his hand.

“I would sell my soul for a butt of this nectar,” he said; and drank in the odour of the wine with every sign of delight, even before he raised the tankard to his lips.

The Lord of Stoutenburg watched the blind man, too. A deep furrow between his brows testified to the earnest concentration of his thoughts. The man knew something, or thought he knew, of that his lordship could not be in doubt. The question was, was that knowledge of such importance as the miserable wretch averred, or was he merely, like any rogue who sees the rope dangling before his eyes, trying to gain a respite, by proposing vain bargains or selling secrets that had only found birth in his own fuddled brain. Stoutenburg, remember, was no psychologist. Indeed, psychology did not exist as a science in these days when men were over-busy with fighting, and had no time or desire to probe into the inner workings of one another’s soul.

On the other hand, here was a man, thus his lordship argued to himself, who might know something of the Stadtholder’s plans. He was wont, before he rolled so rapidly down the hill of manhood and repute, to be an intimate of Maurice of Nassau. He might, as lately as yesterday, have been initiated into the great soldier’s plans for repelling this sudden invasion of the land which he had thought secure. The Stadtholder, in truth, was not the man to abandon all efforts at resistance just because his original plans had failed.

True, the attempt to rescue Arnheim and Nijmegen had ended in smoke. Marquet and De Keyser were, thanks to timely warning, being held up somewhere by the armies of Isembourg and De Berg. But Maurice of Nassau would not of a certainty, thus lightly abandon all hopes of saving Gelderland. He must have formulated a project, and Stoutenburg, who was no fool, was far from underestimating the infinite brain power and resourcefulness of that peerless commander. Whether he had communicated that project to this besotted oaf was another matter.

Stoutenburg searched the blind man’s face with an intent glance that seemed to probe the innermost thoughts behind that fine, wide brow. For the moment, the face told him nothing. It was just vacant, the sightless eyes shone with delight, and the tankard raised to the lips effectually hid all expression around the mouth.

Well, there was not much harm done, the waste of a few moments, if the information proved futile. Jan was ready with the rope, if the whole thing proved to be a mere trick for putting off the fateful hour. As the Lord of Stoutenburg gazed on the blind man, trying vainly to curb his burning impatience, he instinctively thought of Gilda. Gilda, and his hopeless wooing of her, her coldness toward him and her passionate adherence to this miserable caitiff, who, in truth, had thrown dust in her eyes by an outward show of physical courage and a mock display of spurious chivalry.

What if the varlet had been initiated in the Stadtholder’s projects? What if he betrayed them now — sold them in exchange for his own worthless life, and stood revealed, before all the world, as an abject coward, as base as any Judas who would sell his master for thirty pieces of silver? The thought turned the miscreant giddy, so dazzling did this issue appear before his mental vision. What a revelation for a fond and loyal woman, who had placed so worthless an object on a pinnacle of valour! What a disillusionment! She had staunchly believed in his integrity up to now. But after this?

In truth, what more can a man desire than to see the honour of a rival smirched in the eyes of a woman who spurns him? That was the main thought that coursed through Stoutenburg’s brain, driving before it all obstinacy and choler, ay, even soothing his exacerbated nerves.

He gave a sign to Jan.

“Bring that varlet here to me,” he commanded. “I’ll speak to him myself.”

The sound of his voice chased the look of beatitude from the blind man’s face, which took on an expression of bewildered surprise.

“I had no thought his lordship was here,” he said, with a self-conscious, inane laugh.

The men were murmuring audibly. Some of them had seen visions of good reward, shared amongst them all, after the blind man had been made to speak. But Jan paid no heed to their discontent. In a trice he had seen the blind man secure once more, with arms tied as

before behind his back. Diogenes had uttered a loud cry of protest when the empty tankard was torn out of his hand.

"Jan," he shouted, in a thick, hoarse voice, "if thou'rt a knave and dost not keep faith with me, the devil himself will run away with thee."

"His Magnificence will hear what thou hast to say," Jan retorted gruffly. "After that, we'll see."

He led the prisoner through into the banqueting-hall, and despite the men's murmurings, he closed the door upon them. He sat the blind man down in a chair, opposite his lordship. The poor loon had begun to whimper softly, just like a child, and continued to appeal pitifully to Jan.

"If his lordship is satisfied," he murmured confidently, "you'll see to it, Jan, that I do not hang."

"Jan has his orders!" his lordship put in roughly. "But take heed, sirrah! If your information is worth having, you may go to hell your own way; I care nought! But remember," he added, with slow and stern emphasis, "if you trick me in this, 'twil not be the rope for you at dawn — but the stake!"

Diogenes gave a quick shudder.

"By the lord," he said blandly, "how very unpleasant! But I am a man of my word. Jan put good wine into me. He shall be paid for it. And I'll tell you what the Stadtholder hath planned for the defeat of the Lord of Stoutenburg."

"Well," his lordship retorted curtly. "I wait!"

There was silence for a moment whilst the blind man apparently collected his thoughts. He sat, trussed and helpless in the chair, with his head thrown back, and the full light of the candles playing upon his pale face — the latter still vacant and with a childish expression of excitement about those weird, dark orbs. The Lord of Stoutenburg, master of the situation, sat in a high-backed chair opposite him, his chin resting in his hand, his eyes, glowering and fierce, searching that strange, mysterious face before him. Strange and mysterious, in truth, with those sightless eyes, that glittered uncannily whenever the flickering candle-light caught the abnormally dilated pupils, and those quivering lips which every moment broke into a whimsical and inane smile.

"Jan, my friend," the blind man asked after a while, "art here?"

"Ay!" Jan replied gruffly. "I'm here right enough to see that thou'rt up to no mischief."

"How can I be that, worthy Jan?" the other retorted blandly, "since thou hast again trussed me like a capon?"

"Well, the sooner thou hast satisfied his lordship," Jan rejoined with stolid indifference, "the sooner thou wilt be free—"

"To go to hell mine own way!" Diogenes put in with a hiccup. "So his lordship hath pledged his word. Let all those who are my friends bear witness that his lordship did pledge his word."

He paused, and once again a look of impish cunning over-spread his face. He seemed to be preparing for a fateful moment which literally would mean life or death for him. An exclamation of angry impatience from Stoutenburg recalled him to himself.

"I am ready," he protested with eager servility, "to do his lordship's pleasure."

"Then speak, man!" Stoutenburg retorted savagely, "ere I wring the words from thee with torture!"

"I was only thinking how to put the matter clearly," Diogenes protested blandly. "The Stadtholder only outlined his plan to me. There was so little time. My friend Klaas will remember that after his Highness's horse bolted across the moor I was able to stop it—"

"Yes — curse your interference!" Stoutenburg muttered between his teeth.

"Amen to that!" the blind man assented. "But for it, I should still have the privilege of beholding your lordship's pleasing countenance. But at the moment I had no thought save to stop a runaway horse. The Stadtholder was mightily excited, scented that a trap had been laid for him. My friend Klaas again will remember that, after his Highness dismounted he stopped to parley with me upon the moor."

Nicolaes nodded.

"Then it was," Diogenes went on, "that he told what he meant to do. I was, of course, to bear my part in the new project, which was to make a feint upon Ede—"

"A feint upon Ede?"

"Ay! A surprise attack, which would keep De Berg, who is in Ede, busy whilst the Stadtholder—"

"Bah!" Stoutenburg broke in contemptuously, "De Berg is too wary to be caught by a feint."

"So he is, my lord, so he is!" Diogenes rejoined with solemn gravity. "But if I were to tell you that the surprise attack is to be made in full force, and that the weight will fall on the south side of the town, what then?"

"I do not see with what object."

"Yet you, my lord, would know the Stadtholder's tactics of old. You fought under his banner — once."

"Before he murdered my father, yes!" Stoutenburg broke in impatiently. He did not relish this allusion to his former fighting days, before black treachery had made him betray the ruler he once served. "But what of that?"

"For then your lordship would remember," the blind man went on placidly, "that the Stadtholder's favorite plan was always to draw the enemy away by a ruse from his own chief point of attack."

"But where would the chief point of attack be in this case?" Stoutenburg queried with a frown.

"At a certain molen your lordship wot of on the Veluwe."

"Impossible!"

"Oh, impossible? Your lordship is pleased to jest. Some days ago, spies came into Utrecht with the information that the Lord of Stoutenburg had his camp at an old molen, which stands disused and isolated on the highest point of the Veluwe, somewhere between Apeldoorn and Barneveld."

"My camp? Bah! The mill was only a halting place—"

"The spies averred, my lord," the blind man broke in blandly, "that vast stores of arms and ammunition are accumulated in that halting-place. And that the attack on Amersfoort was planned within its rickety walls."

Then, as the Lord of Stoutenburg made no comment on this — indeed, he had cast a rapid, significant glance on Nicolaes, who throughout this colloquy had appeared as keen, as interested, as his friend — the blind man went on slowly:

"The Stadtholder's objective is the molen on the Veluwe."

"What? From Ede!" Nicolaes exclaimed.

"No, no! Have I not said that the attack on Ede would be a feint? It will be the Stadtholder himself who, with a comparatively small force, will push on toward Barneveld and the molen, and at once cut off all communication between Ede and Amersfoort."

"I understand," Stoutenburg rejoined, with a grave nod. "But if it is a small force we can easily—"

"You can now," Diogenes assented coolly, "since you are warned."

"Quite right! Eh, friend Nicolaes?" his lordship retorted, and strove to let his harsh voice express a world of withering contempt. "If all this is not a trick you varlet hath served us well. What say you? Shall we let him go to hell his own way, and save the hangman a deal of pother?"

"If it all prove true," Nicolaes put in cautiously. "But what proof have we?"

"None, in truth. Nor would I let this craven vagabond out of Jan's sight until we do make sure that he hath not lied. But there'll be no harm in being prepared. Here, sirrah!" his lordship continued, once more addressing the blind man. "With how strong a force doth the Stadtholder propose to cut us off from Ede?"

But, during this brief colloquy between the two friends, the blind man had begun to nod. His head fell forward on his chest, the heavy lids veiled the stricken eyes, and anon a peaceable snore came through the partially open mouth. Stoutenburg swore, as was his wont, the moment his choler was roused, and Jan shook the prisoner roughly by the shoulder.

"Eh? Eh? What?" the latter queried, blinked his sightless eyes, and turned a pale and startled face vaguely from side to side. "What is it? Where's that confounded — ?"

"Answer his lordship's question!" Jan commanded briefly.

"Question? What question? Your lordship must forgive me. I am so fatigued, and that tankard of—"

"I asked thee, knave," Stoutenburg broke in impatiently, "with how strong a force the Stadtholder proposed to cut us off from Ede?"

"Call it four thousand, my lord," the blind man babbled, "and let me go to sleep."

"You shall sleep till Judgement Day when I've done with you, sirrah! Will the Stadtholder lead that force in person?"

The blind man winked and blinked, tried to collect his thoughts, which apparently had all wandered off toward the Land of Nod. Then he said:

"The plan was to leave the bulk of that force to menace Amersfoort. But the Stadtholder himself meant to push on as far as the molen, with but a few hundred of his picked men. He thought to seize the stores of arms and ammunition there and then to await the coming of the Lord of Stoutenburg, who, driven out of Amersfoort and cut off from Ede, would make of necessity for his headquarters."

"Ah!"

The exclamation, deep and prolonged, came from three pairs of lips. Stoutenburg, Nicolaes and Jan looked at one another, and there was triumph and satisfaction depicted in their glance. The same thought had occurred simultaneously to these three traitors; the Stadtholder, with a comparatively small force, pushing on to the lonely molen on the Veluwe, not knowing that some of De Berg's troops were holding the IJssel beyond.

He would be caught like a rat in a trap; and the question was whether it would not be better to allow him to carry out his plan, not to oppose him on his way, to let him reach the molen and then close in behind him, so that he would have but two alternatives before him — to surrender in the molen or to turn his small force in the direction of the Zuider Zee, and therein seek a watery grave.

5

"I must have a little time to think," Stoutenburg muttered to himself, after a while.

The blind man had apparently dropped off to sleep again. His head had once more fallen forward on his chest. Jan was prepared to give him another rude awakening, but his lordship stopped him with a sign.

"Let the muckworm sleep," he said. "I must think out the whole position. If what the knave says is true—"

"I am inclined to believe it true," Nicolaes interposed. "The man is too fuddled to have invented so circumstantial a story. And I have it in my mind," he added reflectively, "that when the Stadtholder visited Amersfoort yesterday he said something to my father about devising a plan later on if the city were seriously threatened."

"Then, by Satan! all would be well indeed!" And Stoutenburg drew up his gaunt figure to its full height, looked every inch a conqueror, with heel set upon the neck of his foes. Jan alone looked dubious.

"I wouldn't trust the rogue," he said grimly.

"Would you hang him now?" Stoutenburg retorted.

"No; I would wait to make sure. Let him sleep awhile now. When he wakes out of his booze, he might be able to give us further details."

"In the meanwhile," his lordship rejoined, "keep the men under arms, Jan. I have not yet thought the matter over; but this I know — that I'll start for the molen with a few hundred musketeers and pikemen as soon as I am sure that this rascallion hath not spun a tissue of lies. Do you send out spies at once in every direction, with orders to bring back information immediately. We must hear if an attack hath indeed been made on Ede, and if the Stadtholder is moving out of Utrecht. Have you some men you can trust?"

"Oh, yes, so please your lordship," Jan replied. "I can send Piet Walleren in the direction of Ede, and I myself will push on toward Utrecht. We'd both be back long before dawn."

"And 'tis not you who could be noused, eh, good Jan?" his lordship was pleased to say.

"If we have been tricked by this tosspot," Jan riposted gruffly, "I'll see him burnt alive, and 'tis mine own hand will set the brand to the stake."

He paused, and drew in his breath with a shudder; for he had turned to look on the blind man whom he was threatening with so dire a fate and whom he had thought asleep, and encountered those sightless orbs fixed upon him as if they could see something through and beyond him, some ghoul or spectre lurking in a distant corner of the room. So uncanny and terrifying did the rascal look, indeed,

that instinctively Jan, who believed neither in God nor the devil, remembered his mother's early teachings, and made sundry and vague signs of the Cross upon his breast, with a view to exorcising those evil spirits which must be somewhere lurking about, unseen by all save by the man who had lost his sight.

"What is it now?" Stoutenburg queried with a scowl.

The blind man indeed appeared to be listening — listening so intently, with head now craned forward and eyes fixed into vacancy — that instinctively the three recreants listened too. To what, they could not have told. Through the open casement the sound of life — camp life, of sentries' challenging call, of bivouac fires, and rowdy soldiery — came in as before. A little less roisterous, perhaps, seeing that most of the men, tired after long days of marching and hours of carousing, had settled themselves down to sleep.

Inside the room, the monumental clock up against the wall ticked off each succeeding second with tranquil monotony. It was now close upon midnight. Nothing had happened. Nothing could have happened, to disturb the wonted tenor of the life of an army in temporary occupation of an unresisting city. Nothing, in fact, unless that blind tatter-demalion over there had indeed spoken the truth.

And still he listened. A vague anxiety seemed to have completely banished sleep, even momentarily to have dissipated the potent effect of that excellent Oporto; and on his face there was that strained look peculiar to those who have been robbed of one sense and are at pains to exert the others to their utmost power. It seemed as if his sightless orbs must pierce some hidden veil which kept vital secrets hidden from ordinary human gaze. And these three men — traitors all — whose craven hearts, weighted with crime, were sensitive to every uncanny spell, felt their own senses unaccountably thrilled by that motionless, stony image of a man whose very soul appeared on the alert, and in whom life itself, was as it were, momentarily arrested.

The spell continued for a moment or two. A minute, perhaps, went by; then, with an impatient curse, Stoutenburg jumped to his feet, strode rapidly to the window, and, leaning out far over the sill, he listened.

Indeed, at first it was naught but the habitual confused sounds that reach his ear. But as he, in his turn, strained every sense to hear, something unusual seemed to mingle with the other sounds. A murmuring. Strange voices. A few isolated words that rose above the others, louder than the sentries' call; also a patter of feet, like men running and a clang of arms that at this hour should have been stilled.

The Lord of Stoutenburg could not have told you then why those sounds should have suddenly filled his mind with foreboding — why, indeed, he heard them at all. Beneath the window, ranged against the wall, the men of his picked company were sleeping peacefully. Their bivouac fire fed by those on guard, shed a pleasant glow over the familiar scene. Beyond its ruddy gleam everything looked by contrast impenetrably dark. The river beyond it, nothing; only blackness — a blackness that could be felt. The lights of the city had long since been extinguished, only one tiny glimmer, which came from a small oil-lamp, showed above the Koppel-poort.

But that confused sound, that murmuring, came from the rear of the burgomaster's house, from the direction of the Market Place, where the bulk of his lordship's army was encamped.

"What in thunder does it mean?" Stoutenburg muttered.

Nicolaes came and joined him by the window. He, too, strained his ears to hear, feeling his nerves vaguely stirred by a kind of superstitious dread. But Stoutenburg turned to the blind man, and tried to read an answer in the latter's white, set face.

Jan shook Diogenes fiercely by the shoulder.

"Dost hear, knave?" he said harshly. "What does it all mean?"

"What does what mean, worthy Jan?" the blind man queried blandly.

"Thou art listening for something. What is it? His lordship desires to know."

"Canst thou hear anything, friend Jan?" the other riposted serenely.

"Only the usual sounds. What should I hear?"

"The armies of the Stadtholder on the move."

An exclamation of incredulity broke from Stoutenburg's lips. Nevertheless, he turned imperatively to Jan.

"Go or send at once into the town," he commanded. "Let us hear if anything has happened."

In a moment Jan was out of the room; and soon his gruff voice could be heard from outside, questioning and giving orders. He had gone himself to see what was amiss.

And Stoutenburg, half incredulous, yet labouring under strong excitement, once more approached the window and, leaning far out into the night, set his ears to listen.

His senses, too, were keyed up now, detached as they were from everything else except just what went on outside. The subdued murmurings reached his perceptions independently of every other sound. A hum of voices, and through it that of Jan, questioning and commanding; and others that talked agitatedly, with many interruptions.

After awhile he felt that he could stand the strain no longer. Very obviously something had happened, something was being discussed out on the Market Place, and there was a kind of buzzing in the air, as if around the hive of bees that have been disturbed by a company of robber-wasps. And to him — Stoutenburg — for whom that buzzing might mean the first step toward the pinnacle of his desires, the turning point of his destiny, beyond which lay power, dominion, ambition satisfied, and passion satiated, every moment of suspense and silence became positive torture. A primeval, savage instinct would, but for the presence of Nicolaes, have driven him to seizing the helpless prisoner by the throat, and thus to ease the tension on his nerves and still the wild hammering of blood on his temples.

But Nicolaes did, as it happened, exercise in this instance a restraining influence on his friend; quite unknowingly, of course, as his was the weaker nature. But the last half hour had wrought a marked change in Stoutenburg — a subtle one, which he himself could not have defined. Before then, he had been striving for great things — for revenge, for power, for the satisfaction of his passions. But now he felt that he had attained all that, and more. Obviously his stricken enemy had not lied. The Stadtholder was about to fall into a trap which was easy enough to set. The once brilliant Laughing Cavalier had sunk to a state of moral and physical degradation from which he could never now recover. And Gilda! Gilda had but to realize the slough of turpitude into which her former lover had sunk to turn gratefully and with a sigh of infinite relief to the man who had freed her from such a yoke.

In truth, Stoutenburg felt that he no longer needed to climb. He had reached the summit. The summit of ambition, of power, of sentimental satisfaction. He was a conqueror now; master in the land of his birth; the future Stadtholder of the United Province, wedded to the richest heiress in the Netherlands; happy, feared, and obeyed.

That was his position now, and that was the cause of the subtle change in him — a change which forced him to keep his savage instincts in check before his servile friend; forced to try and appear before others as above petty passions; a justiciary and not a terrorist.

6

The minutes sped by, leaden-footed for the impatience of these two men. Nicolaes and Stoutenburg, each trying to appear calm, hardly dared to speak with one another lest their speech betrayed the exacerbation of their nerves.

It was Nicolaes' turn now to pace up and down the room, to halt beside the window and peer out into the darkness in search of Jan's familiar figure. Stoutenburg had once more taken a seat on the highbacked chair, striving to look dignified and detached. His arm was thrown over the table, and with his sharply pointed nails he was drumming a devil's tattoo on the board.

Alone, the blind man appeared perfectly serene. After that brief moment of comparative lucidity, he had relapsed into somnolence. Occasional loud snores testified that he was once more wandering in the Elysian fields of unconsciousness.

Half an hour after midnight Jan returned.

"There is no doubt about it," were the first words he spoke. "An attack on Ede appears to be in progress, and the Stadtholder left his camp at Utrecht a couple of hours ago with a force of four thousand men."

He was out of breath, having run, he said, all the way from the Joris Poort, where he had gleaned the latest information.

"Who brought the news?" his lordship asked.

"No one seems to know, my lord," Jan replied. "But every one in the town has it. The rumour hath spread like wildfire. It started at opposite quarters of the city. The Nieuw Poort had it that a surprise attack had been delivered on Ede earlier in the evening, and the Joris Poort that the Stadtholder and his force are on the move. The captains at the gates had heard the news from runners who had come direct from Utrecht and from Ede."

"Where are those runners now?"

"In both cases the captains sent them back for further information. The fellows were willing enough to go, for a consideration; but the business has become a dangerous one, for the roads to Utrecht and Ede, they averred are already full of the Stadtholder's vedettes."

"Bah!" Stoutenburg ejaculated contemptuously. "A device for extorting money!"

"Probably," Jan riposted dryly. "But the money will be well spent if we get the information. The men are not to be paid until they return. And if they do not return—" Jan shrugged his shoulders. If the spies did not return, it would go to prove that the Stadtholder's vedettes were not asleep.

"I sent Piet Wallerin and one or two others out, too," he added, "with orders to push on both roads as far as possible, and bring back any information they can obtain — the sooner the better."

"They have not yet returned?" Stoutenburg asked.

"Oh, no! They have only been gone half an hour."

"Is the night very dark?"

"Very dark, my lord."

"Piet may never get back."

"In that case we shall know that the Stadtholder's vanguard has sighted him," Jan rejoined coolly. "Nothing else would keep Piet from getting back."

Stoutenburg nodded approval.

"You think, then, that this varlet here spoke the truth?"

"I have no longer any doubt of it, my lord," Jan gave reply. "Though I did not actually speak with the men who seem originally to have brought the news, the captains at the Poorts had no doubt whatever as to its authenticity. But we shall know for certain before dawn. Piet and the others will have returned by then — or not, as the case may be. But we shall know."

"And, of course, we are prepared?"

"To do just what your lordship commands. The men will be under arms within the next two hours, and I can seek the Master of the Camp, and send him at once to your lordship for instructions."

"Mine instructions are simple enough, good Jan; and thou canst convey them to the Master of the Camp thyself. They are, to remain quiescent, under arms but asleep. To surrender the town if it be attacked—"

"To surrender?" Jan protested with a frown.

"We must throw dust in the Stadtholder's eyes," Stoutenburg riposted. "Give the idea that we are feeble and unprepared, and that I have fled out of Amersfoort. The surrender of the city and its occupation will keep the main force busy, whilst Maurice of Nassau, anxious to possess himself of our person, will push on as far as the molen, where I, in the meanwhile, will be waiting for him."

His voice rang with a note of excitement and of triumph.

"With the Stadtholder a prisoner in my hands," he exclaimed, "I can command the surrender of all his forces. And then the whole of the Netherlands will be at my feet!"

Never, in his wildest dreams had he hoped for this. Fate, in very truth, had tired of smiting him, had an overfull cornucopia for him now and was showering down treasures upon him, one by one.

7

It was Nicolaes who first remembered the blind man.

During the last momentous half-hour he had been totally forgotten. Stoutenburg during that time had been in close confabulation with Jan, discussing plans, making arrangements for the morrow's momentous expedition. Neither of them seemed to feel the slightest fatigue. They were men of iron, whom their passions kept alive. But Nicolaes was a man of straw. He had been racked by one emotion after the other all day, and now he was so tired that he could hardly stand. He envied the blind man every time that a lusty snore escaped the latter's lips, and tried to keep himself awake by going to the fire from time to time and throwing a log or two upon it. But he stood in too great an awe of his friend to dare own to fatigue when the future of his native land was under discussion.

It was really in order to divert Stoutenburg's attention from these interminable discussions on what to do and what not to do on the morrow, that presently, during a pause, he pointed to Diogenes.

"What is to happen to this drunken loon?" he asked abruptly.

Stoutenburg grinned maliciously.

"Have no fear, friend Nicolaes," he said. "The fate of our valued informer will be my special care. I have not forgotten him. Jan knows. While you were nodding, he and I arranged it all. You did not hear?"

Nicolaes shook his head.

"No," he said. "What did you decide?"

"You shall see, my good Klaas," Stoutenburg replied with grim satisfaction. "I doubt not but what you'll be pleased. And since we have now finished the discussion of our plans, Jan will at once go and bid the Heer Burgomaster rise from his bed and attend upon our pleasure."

"My father?" Nicolaes exclaimed in surprise. "Why? What hath he—"

"You will see, my good Klaas," the other broke in quietly. "You will see. I think that you will be satisfied."

Jan, at his word, had already gone. Nicolaes, really puzzled, tried to ask questions, but Stoutenburg was obviously determined to keep the secret of his intentions awhile longer to himself.

It was long past one o'clock now, and bitterly cold. Even the huge blazing logs in the monumental hearth failed to keep the large room at a pleasing temperature. Nicolaes, shivering and yawning, crouched beside the blaze, knocked his half-frozen hands one against the other. He would at this moment have bartered most of his ambitions for the immediate prospect of a good bed. But Stoutenburg was as wide awake as ever, and evidently some kind of inward fever kept the cold out of his bones.

After Jan's departure he resumed that restless pacing of his up and down the long room. Up and down, until Nicolaes, exasperated beyond endurance, could have screamed with choler.

Less than a quarter of an hour later, the burgomaster arrived, ushered in by Jan. He had apparently not taken off his clothes since he had been upstairs. It was indeed more than likely that he had spent the time in prayer, for Mynheer Beresteyn was a pious man, and the will of God in fortune or adversity was a very real thing to him. With the same dignified submission which he had displayed throughout, he had immediately followed Jan when curtly ordered to do so. But he came down to face the arrogant tyrant for the third time to-night with as heavy a heart as before, not knowing what fresh indignity, what new cruel measure, would be put upon him. Grace or clemency he knew that he could not expect.

The look of malignant triumph wherewith Stoutenburg greeted him appeared to justify his worst forebodings. The presence, too, of Diogenes, fettered and asleep, filled his anxious heart with additional dread. As he stepped out into the room he took no notice of his son, but only strove to face his arch-enemy with as serene a countenance as he could command.

"Your lordship desired that I should come," he said quietly. "What is your lordship's pleasure?"

But Stoutenburg was all suavity. A kind of feline gentleness was in his tone as he replied:

"Firstly, to beg your forgiveness, mynheer, for having disturbed you again — and at this hour. But will you not sit? Jan," he commanded, "draw a chair nearer to the hearth for the Heer Burgomaster."

"I was not asleep, my lord," Beresteyn rejoined coldly. "And by your leave, will take your commands standing."

"Oh, commands, mynheer!" Stoutenburg rejoined blandly. "'Tis no commands I would venture to give you. It was my duty — my painful duty — not to keep you in ignorance of certain matters which have just come to my knowledge, and which will have a momentous bearing upon all my future plans. Will you not sit?" he added, with insidious urbanity. "No? Ah, well, just as you wish. But you will forgive me if I—"

He sat down in his favourite chair, with his back to the table and the candle-light and facing the fire, which threw ruddy gleams on his gaunt face and grizzled hair. His deepset eyes were inscrutable in the shadow, but they were fixed upon the burgomaster who stood before him dignified and calm, half-turned away from the pitiful spectacle which the blind man presented in somnolent helplessness.

"Since last I had the pleasure of addressing you, mynheer," Stoutenburg began slowly, after awhile, "it hath come to my knowledge that the Stadtholder, far from abandoning all hope of reconquering Gelderland from our advancing forces, did in truth not only devise a plan whereby he intended to deliver Ede and Amersfoort from our hands, but his far-reaching project also embraced the possibility of seizing my person, and once for all ridding himself of an enemy — a justiciary, shall we say? — who is becoming might inconvenient."

"A project, my lord," the burgomaster riposted earnestly, "which I pray God may fully succeed."

Stoutenburg gave a derisive laugh.

"So it would have done, mynheer," he said with a sardonic grin. "It would have succeeded admirably, and by this hour to-morrow I should no doubt be dangling on a gibbet, for Maurice of Nassau hath sworn that he would treat me as a knave and as a traitor unworthy of the scaffold."

"And the world would have been rid of a murderous miscreant," the burgomaster put in coldly, "had God so willed it."

"Ah, but God — your God, mynheer," Stoutenburg retorted with a sneer, "did not will it, it seems. And forewarned is forearmed, you know."

Instinctively, as the full meaning of Stoutenburg's words reached his perceptions the Burgomaster's eyes had sought those of his son, whilst a ghastly pallor overspread his face even to his lips.

"The Stadtholder's schemes have been revealed to you," he murmured slowly. "By whom?"

Then, as Stoutenburg made no reply, only regarded him with a mocking and quizzical gaze, he added more vehemently:

"Who is the craven informer who hath sold his master to you?"

"What would you do to him if you knew?" Stoutenburg retorted coolly.

"Slay him with mine own hand," the burgomaster replied calmly, "were he my only son!"

"'Twas not I!" Nicolaes cried involuntarily.

Stoutenburg appeared vastly amused.

"No," he said. "It was not your son Klaas, whose merits, by the way, you have not yet learned to appreciate. Nicolaes hath rendered me and the Archduchess immense services, which I hope soon to repay adequately. But," he added with mocking emphasis, "the most signal service of all, which will deliver the Stadtholder into my hands and re-establish thereby the dominion of Spain over the Netherlands, was rendered to me by the varlet whom, but for me, you would have acclaimed as your son."

And with a wide flourish of the arm, Stoutenburg turned in his chair and pointed to Diogenes, who, sublimely unconscious of what went on around him, was even in the act of emitting a loud and prolonged snore. Instinctively the burgomaster looked at him, his glance, vague and puzzled, wandered over the powerful figure of the blind man, the nodding head, the pinioned shoulders, and from him back to Stoutenburg, who continued to regard him — Beresteyn — with a malicious leer.

"I fear me," the latter murmured after awhile, "That your lordship will think me over-dull; but — I don't quite understand—"

"Yet, 'tis simple enough," Stoutenburg rejoined; rose from his chair, and approached the burgomaster, as he spoke with a sudden fierce tone of triumph. "This miserable cur on whom Gilda once bestowed her love, seeing the gallows dangling before his bleary eyes, hath sold me the secrets which the Stadtholder did entrust him — sold the to me in exchange for his worthless life! I entered into a bargain with him, and I will keep my pledge. In very truth, he hath saved my life by his revelations, and jeopardized that of the Stadtholder — my most bitter enemy. Maurice of Nassau had thought to trap me in the lonely molen on the Veluwe which is my secret camp. Now 'tis I who will close the trap on him there, and hold his life, his honour, these provinces, at my mercy. And all," he concluded with a ringing shout, "thanks to the brilliant adventurer, the chosen of Gilda's heart, her English milor, mynheer! — the gay and dashing Laughing Cavalier!"

He had the satisfaction of seeing that the blow had gone home. The burgomaster literally staggered under it, as if he had actually been struck in the face with a whip. Certain it is that he stepped back and clutched the table for support with one hand, whilst he passed the other once or twice across his brow.

"My God!" he murmured under his breath.

Stoutenburg laughed as a demon might, when gazing on a tortured soul. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went on airily:

"You are surprised, mynheer Burgomaster? Frankly, I was not. You believed this fortune-hunter's tales of noble parentage and English ancestry. I did not. You doubted his treachery when he went on a message to Marquet, and sold that message to de Berg. I knew it to be a fact. My love for Gilda made me clear-sighted, whilst yours left you blind. Now you see him at last in his true colours — base, servile, without honour and without faith. You are bewildered, incredulous, mayhap? Ask Jan. He was here and heard him. Ask my captains at the gate, my master of the camp. The Stadtholder is heading straight for the trap which he had set up for me, because the cullion who sits there did sell his one-time master to me."

The burgomaster, overcome with horror and with shame, had sunk into a chair and buried his face in his hands. The echo of Stoutenburg's rasping voice seemed to linger in the noble panelled hall, its mocking accents to be still tearing at the stricken father's aching heart, still deriding his overwhelming sorrow. Gilda! His proud, loving, loyal Gilda! If she were to know! A great sob, manfully repressed, broke from his throat and threatened to choke him.

And for the first time in this day of crime and of treachery, Nicolaes felt a twinge of remorse knocking at the gates of his heart. He could not bear to look on his father's grief, and not feel the vague stirrings of an affection which had once been genuine, even though it was dormant now. His father had been perhaps more just toward him than indulgent. Gilda had been the apple of his eyes, and he — Nicolaes — had been brought up in that stern school of self-sacrifice and self-repression which had made heroes of those of his race in their stubborn and glorious fight for liberty.

No doubt it was that rigid bringing-up which had primarily driven an ambitious and discontented youth like Nicolaes into the insidious net spread out for him by the wily Stoutenburg. Smarting under the discipline imposed upon his self-indulgence by the burgomaster, he had lent a willing ear to the treacherous promises of his masterful friend, who held out dazzling visions before him of independence and of aggrandisement. Even at this moment Nicolaes felt no remorse for his treachery to his country and kindred. He was only sentimentally sorry to see his father so utterly broken down by sorrow.

And then there was Gilda. Already, when Stoutenburg had placed that cruel "either — or" before her, Nicolaes had felt an uncomfortable pain in his heart at the sight of her misery. Stoutenburg would have called it weakness, and despised him for it. But Stoutenburg's was an entirely warped and evil nature, which revelled in crime and cruelty as a solace to past humiliation and disappointment, whereas Nicolaes was just a craven time-server, who had not altogether succeeded in freeing himself from past teachings and past sentiments.

And Gilda's pale, tear-stained face seemed to stare at him through the gloom, reproachful and threatening, whilst his father's heartrending sob tore at his vitals and shook him to the soul with a kind of superstitious awe. The commandment of Heaven, not wholly forgotten, not absolutely ignored, seemed to ring the death-knell of all that he had striven for, as if the Great Judge of All had already weighed his deeds in the balance, and decreed that his punishment be swift and sure.

But Stoutenburg, in this the hour of his greatest triumph, had none of these weaknesses. Nor indeed did he care whether the burgomaster was stricken with sorrow or no. What he did do now was to go up to Jan, and from the latter's belt take out a pistol. This he examined carefully, then he put it down upon the table close to where the burgomaster was sitting.

A quarter of an hour later the stately house on the quay appeared wrapped in the mantle of sleep. The soldiers, wearied and discontented, had after a good deal of murmuring, finally settled down to rest. They had collected what clothes, blankets, curtains even that they could lay their hands on, and wrapped up in these, they had curled themselves up upon the floor.

We may take it, however, as a certainty that Jan remained wide awake, with one ear on that door which gave on the banqueting hall, and which he, at the command of his master, had carefully closed behind him.

Upstairs, Nicolaes had thrown himself like an insentient and wearied mass upon his own bed in the room wherein he had slept as a child, as an adolescent, as a youth, now as a black-hearted traitor, haunted by memories and the ghoulish shadows, of his crime. He could not endure the darkness, so left a couple of wax candles burning in their sconces. Whether he actually fell asleep or no, he could not afterward have told you. Certain it is that he was not fully awake, but rather on that threshold of dreams which for those that are happy is akin to the very gate of paradise, but unto souls that are laden with crime is like the antechamber of hell. Half consciously Nicolaes could hear Stoutenburg pacing up and down an adjoining room, restless and fretful, like some untamed beast on the prowl.

Then suddenly the sharp report of a pistol rang through the silence of the night. Nicolaes jumped from his bed, with a feeling of sheer physical nausea, which turned him dizzy and faint. Stoutenburg had paused abruptly in his febrile wanderings. To the listener it almost seemed as if he could hear his friend's laboured breathing, the indrawing of a sigh that spoke of torturing suspense.

A few minutes went by, and then a heavy step was heard ascending the stairs, after that, the closing and shutting of a door. Then nothing more.

In that heavy step, Nicolaes had recognized his father's. Even now he could hear the burgomaster moving about in his room close by, which had always been his. Gilda's was further along, down the passage. Everything now seemed so still. Just for awhile, after the burgomaster had gone upstairs, Nicolaes had heard the soldiers moving down below. Rudely awakened from their sleep, they had done a good deal of muttering. Voices could be heard, and then a rattle, like the shaking of a door. But apparently the men had been quickly reassured by Jan.

The silence acted as a further irritant on Nicolaes' nerves. Taking up a candle, he went out of the room in search of Stoutenburg. Outside on the landing he came upon Jan, who was on the same errand bent.

"What has happened?" the young man queried hoarsely.

Jan shook his head. "Which is His Lordship's room?" was all that he said.

Nicolaes led the way, and Jan followed. They found Stoutenburg standing in the middle of the room which he had selected for his own use. He was still fully dressed, had not even taken off his boots. Apparently he was waiting for news, but otherwise he seemed quite calm.

"Well?" he queried curtly, as soon as he caught sight of Jan.

"We cannot get into the room," Jan replied. "After we heard the shot fired, we saw the burgomaster come out of it; but he locked the door and, with the key in his hand he walked steadily up the stairs."

"How did he look?"

"Like a man who had seen a ghost."

"Well?" Stoutenburg queried again, impatiently. "What did you do after that?"

"I tried the door, of course. It is a stout piece of oak, and I had no orders to break it down. It would take a heavy joist, and the men are already grumbling—"

"Yes!" Stoutenburg put in curtly. "But the windows?"

"I thought of them, and myself went round to look. Of course we could climb up to them, but they appeared to be barred and shuttered."

"So much the better!" his lordship retorted with a note of grim spite in his rasping voice. "Let the varlet's carcase rot where it is. Why should we trouble? Go back to bed, Nicolaes," he added after a slight pause. "And you too, Jan. As for me, I feel that I could sleep peacefully at last!"

He threw himself on the bed with a long sigh of satisfaction, and when spoken to again by one of the others, he curtly ordered them to leave him in peace. So Jan did leave him, and went back to his men. But Nicolaes, terrified of solitude, which he felt would for him be peopled with ghouls, elected to find what rest he could in an armchair beside his friend. And a few minutes later the house was once more wrapped in the mantle of sleep.

CHAPTER XV. THE MOLEN ON THE VELUWE

1

Again it is to de Voocht's highly interesting and reliable "Brieven" that we like to turn for an account of the Lord of Stoutenburg's departure out of Amersfoort. It occurred at dawn of a raw, dull March morning, and was effected with all the furtiveness, the silence, usually pertaining to a surprise attack.

The soldiers bivouacking inside that part of the city knew nothing of the whole affair. But few of them did as much as turn in their sleep when his lordship rode through the Koppel-poort, together with four companies of cavaliers. Jan was an adept at arranging these expeditions, and the Lord of Stoutenburg had made a specialty of marauding excursions ever since he had started on his career of treachery against his own country.

His standard-bearer preceded the companies, carrying the sable standard embroidered in silver, with the skull and cross-bones, which his lordship had permanently adopted as his device. But they went without drums or pipes, and with as little clatter as may be, choosing the unpaved streets whereon the mud lay thick and effectually deadened the sound of horses' hoofs.

A litter taken from the burgomaster's coach-house and borne by two strong Flemish horses, bore the jongeuffrouw Gilda Beresteyn in the train of her future lord. She had offered no resistance, no protest of any kind, when finally ordered by her brother to make herself ready. She had spent the greater part of the night in meditation and in prayer. Her father, hearing her move about in her room, had come to her in the small hours of the morning and had sat with her for some time. Nicolaes, wakeful and restless, had wandered out into the corridor on which gave most of the sleeping rooms, and had heard the subdued murmurings of the burgomaster's voice, and occasionally that of his sister. What they said he could not hear, but he was able subsequently to assure Stoutenburg that the burgomaster's tone was distinctly one of admonition, and Gilda's one of patience and resignation.

Just before dawn, one of the old serving men, who had remained on watch in the house all through the night, brought her some warm milk and bread, which she swallowed eagerly. The burgomaster was with her then. But later on, when the Lord of Stoutenburg desired her presence in the living room, she went to him alone.

That room was the one where, a little more than a week ago, the Stadtholder had held council with the burgomaster and his friends, on the day of her wedding. Her wedding! And she had sat in the little room next to it and played on the virginal so as to attract her beloved to her side. Then had come the hour of parting, and she had with her own hands taken his sword to him and buckled it to his side, and bade him go wither honour and duty beckoned.

My God, what memories!

But she met Stoutenburg's mocking glance with truly remarkable serenity. She felt neither faint nor weak. Her communion with God, her interview with her father had given her all the strength she needed, not to let her enemies see what she suffered or if she were afraid. And when Stoutenburg with callous irony reminded her of his decision, she answered quite calmly:

"I am ready to do your wish, my lord."

"And you'll not regret it, Gilda," he vowed with sudden earnestness; and his sunken eyes lighted up with a kind of fierce ardour which sent a cold shudder coursing down her spine. "By Heaven! you'll not regret it! You shall be the greatest lady in Europe, the most admired, the most beloved. Aye! With you beside me, I feel that I shall have the power to create a throne, a kingdom, for us both. Queen of the Netherlands, myn engel! What say you to this goal? And I your king—"

He paused and closely scrutinized her face, marvelled what she knew of that drunken oaf, once her lover, who now lay dead in the room below, slain by the avenging hand of an outraged father and an indignant patriot. But she looked so serene that he came to the conclusion that she knew nothing. The burgomaster had apparently desired to spare her for the moment this additional horror and shame.

Well no doubt it was all for the best. She was ready to come with him, and that, after all, was the principal thing. In any event she knew the alternative.

"Jan remains here," he said, "in command of the troops. He will not leave until I send him word."

Until then, Amersfoort and the lives of all its citizens were in jeopardy. The quick, scared look in her eyes, when he reminded her of this, was sufficient to assure him that she fully grasped the position. Of the Stadtholder's plans, as betrayed by the informer, she knew, of course, nothing. Better so, he thought. The whole thing, when accomplished, when he — Stoutenburg — was made master of Gelderland, the Stadtholder a prisoner in his hands, the United Provinces ready to submit to him, would be a revelation to her — a revelation which would make her, he doubted not, a proud and happy woman, rather than a mere obedient slave.

2

In the meanwhile, he had strictly enjoined Jan to leave the banqueting hall undisturbed.

"Let the locked door and close shutters guard the grim secret within," he said decisively. "Apparently the Heer Burgomaster intends for the nonce to hold his tongue."

In the hurry and excitement of the departure, the soldiers, who in the night had been roused by the pistol shot, forgot that unimportant event. Certain it is that not one of them did more than cursorily wonder what it had been about. Then, as no one gave reply, the matter was soon allowed to fall into oblivion. At one moment, Stoutenburg who was standing in the hall waiting for Gilda, felt tempted to go and have a last look on his dead enemy; but the key was not in the lock and he would not send to the burgomaster for it.

It was better so.

Just then Gilda came down the stairs. She was accompanied by her old waiting woman, Maria, and was wrapped in fur cloak and hood ready for the journey. Apparently she had taken final leave of her father, and had quite resigned herself to parting from him.

"The burgomaster is well, I trust, this morning?" Stoutenburg asked with great urbanity, as soon as he had formally greeted her.

"I thank you, my lord," she replied coolly. "My father is as well as I can desire."

The litter was her own. Oft had she travelled in it between Haarlem and Amersfoort, when the weather was too rough for riding. Those had been happy journeys to and fro, for both homes were dear to her. Both now had become hallowed through the presence in them of her beloved. To Stoutenburg, who watched her keenly while she crossed the hall, it seemed as if once she glanced round in the direction of the banqueting room, and craned her neck as if trying to catch whatever faint sound might be coming from there. She appeared to shiver, and drew her fur cloak closer round her shoulders, her lips moved slightly as if murmuring. Stoutenburg thought that she was bidding a last farewell to the man who she could not bring herself to forget or to despise and an acute feeling of unbridled jealousy shot through him like a poisoned dart — jealousy even of the dead.

3

A mounted scout led the way, to clear the road of encumbrance that might retard progress. After him came the standard-bearer. Twelve Spanish halberdiers followed, the shafts of their halberts swathed in black velvet, behind them one hundred cavaliers, who were armed with muskets, and a hundred more carrying lances. Then came the litter, which was covered in leather with richly stamped leather curtains, at the sides, the shafts, front and back, supported by heavy Flemish horses, which were sumptuously caparisoned and plumed. The Lord of Stoutenburg rode on one side of the litter and Nicolaes on the other, and behind it came two more companies of musketeers and lancers.

The way lay through the Koppel-poort and then straight across the Veluwe, on the road which runs to the north of Amersfoort, thus avoiding any possible encounter with the Stadtholder's vedettes. Stoutenburg's intention was to await Maurice of Nassau's coming at the molen, not to offer him battle in the open.

The road was lonely at this early hour, and a cutting wind blew across from the Zuider Zee, chasing the morning mist before it. Already on the horizon above the undulating tableland, the pale wintry sun tinged that mist with gold. Stoutenburg's keen hawklike eyes searched the distance before him as he rode.

A little after seven o'clock, Barneveld was reached, and a brief halt called outside the city whilst the scouts went in, in search of provisions. The inhabitants, scared by the advent of these strangers, submitted to being fleeced of their goods, not daring to resist. Though closely questioned, they had but little information to impart. They had, in truth, heard that Ede was in the hands of the Spaniards and that Amersfoort had shared the like fate. Runners had brought the news, which was authentic, together with many wild rumours that had terrorized the credulous and paved the way for Stoutenburg's arrival. His sable standard, with its grim device, completed the subjugation of the worthy burghers of Barneveld, who, with no garrison to protect them, thought it wisest to obey the behests of His Magnificence with a show of goodwill, rather than see their little city pillaged or their citizens dragged as captives in the train of the conqueror.

Gilda did not leave her litter during the halt. Maria, who had been riding on a pillion behind one of the equeries, who she roundly trounced and anathematized all the way, came and waited on her mistress. But Stoutenburg and Nicolaes kept with unwonted discretion, or mayhap indifference, out of her way.

The halt, in truth, lasted less than a couple of hours. By nine o'clock the troop was once more on the way, and an hour later on the high upland, out toward the east, the lonely molen loomed, portentous and weird, out of the mist.

4

The spies of the Stadtholder, who had, according to Diogenes' statement, spoken of the molen as Stoutenburg's camp, where he had secreted great stores of arms and ammunition, had in truth been either deceived or deceivers.

The molen was lonely and uninhabited, as it had always been. No sign of life appeared around it, or sign of the recent breaking of a camp. True, here and there upon the scrub in the open, the scorched rough grass or a heap of ashes, indicated that a fire had been lit there at one time; whilst under the overhanging platform, the trampled earth converted into mud, and certain debris of straw and fodder, accused the recent presence of horses and of men.

But only a few. As to whether the stores of arms and ammunition were indeed concealed inside the mill-house itself, it was impossible to say from the mere aspect of the tumble-down building. Whatever secret the molen contained, it had succeeded in guarding inviolate up to this hour.

Standing as it did upon a high point of the arid upland, the molen dominated the Veluwe. Toward the west, whence the Stadtholder would come, a gentle, undulating slope led down to Barneveld and Ede, Amersfoort and Utrecht; but in the rear of the building toward the east, the ground fell away more abruptly, down to a narrow gorge below.

It was in this gorge, secluded from the prying eyes of possible vedettes, that Stoutenburg had put up his camp ere he embarked upon his fateful expedition to Amersfoort, and it was here that he disposed the bulk of his troop: horses, men and baggage, under the command of Nicolaes Beresteijn; whilst he himself, with a bodyguard of fifty picked men, took up his quarters in the molen.

The plan of action was simple enough. The fifty men would remain concealed in and about the building, until the Stadtholder thinking the place deserted, walked straight into the trap that had been laid for him. Then, at the first musket shot, the men from the camp below were to rush up the sloping ground with a great clatter and much shouting and battle cry.

The Stadtholder's troops wholly unprepared for the attack would be thrown into dire confusion, and in the panic that would inevitably ensue, the rout would be complete. Stoutenburg himself would see to it that the Stadtholder did not escape.

"Welcome home, myn engel!" had been his semi-ironical, wholly triumphant greeting to Gilda when her litter came to a halt and he dismounted in order to conduct her into the molen.

She gave him no answer, but allowed her hand to rest in his and walked beside him with a firm step through the narrow door which gave on the interior of the mill-house. She looked about her with inquiring eyes that had not a vestige of terror in them. Almost, it

seemed, at one moment as if she smiled.

Did her memory conjure back just then the vision of that other molen, the one at Ryswick, where so much had happened three short months ago, and where this arrogant tyrant had played such a sorry role? Perhaps. Certain it is that she turned to him without any defiance, almost with a gentle air of appeal.

"I am very tired," she said, with a weary little sigh, "and would be grateful for a little privacy, if your lordship would allow my tire-woman to attend on me."

"Your wishes are my laws, myn schat," he replied airily. "I entreat you to look on this somewhat dilapidated building only as a temporary halt, where nothing, alas! can be done for your comfort. I trust you will not suffer from the cold, but absolute privacy you shall have. The loft up those narrow steps is entirely at your disposal, and your woman shall come to you immediately."

Indeed, he called at once through the door, and a moment or two later Maria appeared, reduced to silence for the nonce by a wholesome fear. Stoutenburg, in the meanwhile, still with that same ironical gallantry, had conducted Gilda to the narrow, ladder-like steps which led up to the loft. He stood at the foot, watching her serene and leisurely progress.

"How wise you are, mejuffrouw," he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "And withal how desirable!"

She turned for a second, then, and looked down on him. But her eyes were quite inscrutable. Never had he desired her so much as now. With the gloomy background of those rickety walls behind her, she looked like an exquisite fairy; her dainty head wrapped in a hood, through which her small, oval face appeared, slightly rose-tinted, like a piece of delicate china.

The huge fur coat concealed the lines of her graceful figure, but one perfect hand rested upon the rail, and the other peeped out like a flower between the folds of her cloak. He all but lost his head when he gazed on her, and met those blue eyes that still held a mystery for him. But, with Stoutenburg, ambition and selfishness always waged successful warfare even against passion, and at this hour his entire destiny was hanging in the balance.

The look wherewith he regarded her was that of a conqueror rather than a lover. The title of the English play had come swiftly through his mind: "The Taming of the Shrew." In truth, Nicolaes had been right. Women have no use for weaklings. It is their master whom they worship.

Just one word of warning did he give her ere she finally passed out of his sight.

"There will be noise of fighting anon, myn engel," he said carelessly. "Nothing that need alarm you. An encounter with vedettes probably. A few musket shots. You will not be afraid?"

"No," she replied simply. "I will not be afraid."

"You will be safe here with me until we can continue our journey east or south. It will depend on what progress de Berg has been able to make."

She gave a slight nod of understanding.

"I shall be ready," she said.

Encouraged by her gentleness, he went on more warmly:

"And at the hour when we leave here together, myn schat, a runner will speed to Amersfoort with order to Jan to evacuate the city. The burgomaster will be in a position to announce to his fellow-citizens that they have nothing to fear from a chivalrous enemy, who will respect person and property, and who will go out of the gates of Amersfoort as empty-handed as he came."

Whereupon he made her a low and respectful bow, stood aside to allow the serving woman to follow her mistress. Gilda had acknowledge his last pompous tirade with a faintly murmured, "I thank you, my lord." Then she went quickly up the steps and finally passed out of his sight on the floor above.

Just for a little while he remained quite still, listening to her footsteps overhead. His lean, sharp-featured face expressed nothing but contentment now. Success — complete, absolute — was his at last! Less than a fortnight ago, he was nothing but a disappointed vagrant, without home, kindred, or prospects; scorned by the woman he loved; despised by a successful rival; an outcast from the land of his birth.

To-day, his rival was dead — an object of contempt, not even of pity, for every honest man; while Gilda, like a ripe and luscious fruit, was ready to fall into his arms. And he had his foot firmly planted on the steps of a throne.

And now the midday hour had gone by, and silence, absolute, reigned in and around the molen. Stoutenburg had spend some time talking to the captain in command of his guard, had himself seen to it that the men were well concealed in the rear of the molen. The horses had been sent down to the camp so as to preclude any possibility of an alarm being given before the apportioned time. Two men were stationed on the platform to keep a look-out upon the distance, where anon the Stadtholder and his troop would appear.

Indeed, everything was ordained and arranged with perfect precision in anticipation of the great coup which was destined to deliver Maurice of Nassau into the hands of his enemy. Everything! — provided that blind informer who lay dead in the banqueting hall of the stately house at Amersfoort had not lied from first to last.

But even if he had lied, even if the Stadtholder had not planned this expedition, or, having planned it, had abandoned it or given up the thought of leading it in person — even so, Stoutenburg was prepared to be satisfied. Already his busy brain was full of plans, which he would put into execution if the present one did not yield him the supreme prize. Gilda was his now, whatever happened. Gilda, and her wealth, and the influence of the Burgomaster Beresteyn, henceforth irrevocably tied to the chariot wheel of his son-in-law. A vista of riches, of honours, of power, was stretched out before the longing gaze of this restless and ambitious self-seeker.

For the nonce, he could afford to wait, even though the hours crept by leaden-footed, and the look-out men up on the platform had nothing as yet to report. The soldiers outside, wrapped up in horse-blankets, squatted against the walls of the dilapidated building, trying to get shelter from the cutting north wind. They had their provisions for the day requisitioned at Barneveld; but these they soon consumed for want of something better to do. The cold was bitter, and anon an icy drizzle began to fall.

Stoutenburg, inside the mill-house, had started on that restless pacing up and down which was so characteristic of him. He had ordered the best of the provisions to be taken up to the jongeuffrouw and her maid. He himself had eaten and had drunk, and now he had nothing to do but wait. And think. Anon he got tired of both, and when he heard the women moving about overhead, he suddenly paused in his fretful wanderings, pondered for a moment or two, and then went resolutely up the stairs.

Gilda was sitting on a pile of sacking; her hands lay idly in her lap. With a curt word of command, Stoutenburg ordered the waiting woman to go below.

Then he approached Gilda, and half-kneeling, half-reclining by her side, he tried to take her hand. But she evaded him, hid her hands underneath her cloak. This apparently vastly amused his lordship, for he laughed good-humouredly, and said, with an ardent look of passionate admiration:

"That is where you are so desirable, myn engel. Never twice the same. Awhile ago you seemed as yielding as a dove; now once more I see the young vixen peeping at me through those wonderful blue eyes. Well!" he added with a sigh of contentment, "I will not complain. Life by your side, myn geliefde, will never be dull. The zest of taming a beautiful shrew must ever be a manly sport."

Then, as she made no sign either of defiance or comprehension, but sat with eyes strained and neck craned forward, almost as if she were listening, he raised himself and sat down upon the sacking close beside her. She puzzled him now, as she always did; and that puzzlement added zest to his wooing.

"I was waxing so dejected down below," he said, and leaned forward, his lips almost touching the hood that kept her ears concealed. "Little did I guess that so much delight lay ready to my hand. Time is a hard task-master to me just now, and I have not the leisure to make as ardent love to you as I would wish. But I have the time to gratify a fancy, and this I will do. My fancy is to have three kisses from your sweet lips on mine. Three, and no more, and on the lips, myn schat."

In an instant his arms were round her. But equally suddenly she had evaded him. She jumped up and ran, as swift as a hare, to the farther end of the loft, where she remained ensconced behind a transverse beam, her arms round it for support, her face, white and set, only vaguely discernible in the gloom.

The dim afternoon light which came but shyly peeping in through two small windows high up in the walls, failed to reach this angle of the loft where Gilda had found shelter. With this dim background behind her, she appeared like some elusive spectre, an apparition, without form or substance, her face and hands alone visible.

When she escaped him, Stoutenburg had cursed, as was his wont, then struggled to his feet and tried to carry off the situation with an affected laugh. But somehow the girls' face, there in the semi-darkness, gave him an unpleasant, eerie sensation. He did not follow her, but paused in the centre of the loft, laughter dying upon his lips.

"Am I to remind you again, you little termagant," he said, with a great show of bluster, "that Jan is still at Amersfoort, and that I may yet send a runner to him if I have a mind, ordering that by nightfall that accursed city be ablaze?"

He was looking straight at her while he spoke. And she returned his glance, but gave him no reply. Just for the space of a few seconds an extraordinary stillness appeared to have descended upon the molen. Up here, in the loft, nothing stirred, nothing was heard above that silence save the patter of the rain upon the roof overhead against the tiny window panes. For a few seconds, whilst Stoutenburg stood like a beast of prey about to spring, and Gilda, still and silent, like a bird on the alert.

And suddenly, even as he gazed, the man's expression slowly underwent a change. First the arrogance died out of it, the forced irony. Every line became set, then rigid, and more and more ashen in hue, until the whole face appeared like a death-mask, colourless and transparent as wax, the jaw dropping, the lips parted as for a cry that would not come. And the sunken eyes opened wider and wider, and wider still as they gazed, not on Gilda any longer, but into the darkness behind her, whilst the whole aspect of the man was like a living statue of horror and of a nameless fear.

Then suddenly, right through the silence and above the weird patter of the rain, there rang a sound which roused the very echoes that lay dormant among the ancient rafters. So strange a sound was it that when it reached his ear, Stoutenburg lost his balance and swayed on his feet like a drunken man; so strange that Gilda, her nerves giving way for the first time under the terrible strain which she had undergone, buried her face against her arms, whilst a loud sob broke from her throat. Yet the sound in itself was neither a terrifying nor a tragic one. It was just the sound of a prolonged and loud peal of laughter.

"By my halidame!" a merry voice swore lustily. "But meseems that your lordship had no thought of seeing me here!"

Just for a few seconds, superstitious fear held the miscreant gripped by the throat. A few seconds? To him to Gilda, they seemed an eternity. Then a hoarse whisper escaped him.

"Spectre or demon, which are you?"

"Both, you devil!" the mocking voice gave reply. "And I would send you down to hell and shoot you like a dog where you stand, but for the noise which would bring your men about mine ears."

"To hell yourself, you infamous plepshurk!" Stoutenburg cried, strove to shake off with a mighty effort the superstitious dread that made a weakling of him. He fumbled for his sword, succeeded in drawing it from its scabbard, and cursed himself for being without a pistol in his belt.

"Where you came from, I know not," he went on in a husky whisper. "But be you wraith or demon, you—"

He seemed to speak involuntarily, as if sheer terror was forcing the words through his bloodless lips. Suddenly he uttered a hoarse cry:

"A moi! Somebody there! A moi!"

But the walls of the old molen were thick, and his voice, spent and still half-choked with the horror of that spectral apparition, refused him effective service. It failed to carry far enough. The tiny windows were impracticable; the soldiers were outside at the rear of the building, out of earshot; and down below there was only the old waiting woman.

"That smeerlap!" he cried, half to himself. "Either a wraith or blind. In either case—"

And, sword in hand, he rushed upon his mocking enemy. A blind man! Bah! What had he to fear? The rogue had in truth thrust Guild behind him. He stood there, with one of those short English daggers in his hand, which had of late put the fine Toledo blades to shame. But a blind man, for all that! How he had escaped out of Amersfoort, and by whose connivance Stoutenburg had not time to think. But the man was blind. Every phase of last evening's interview with him — the vacant eyes, the awkward movements — stood out clearly before his lordship's mental vision, and testified to that one fact; the man was blind and helpless.

Crouching like a feline creature upon his haunches, Stoutenburg was ready for a spring. His every movement became lithe and silent as that of a snake. He had marked out to himself just how and where he would strike. He only waited until those eyes — those awful eyes — ceased to look on him. But their glance never wavered. They followed his every step. They mocked and derided and threatened withal! By Satan and all his hordes! those stricken orbs could see!

At what precise moment that conviction entered Stoutenburg's tortured brain, he could not himself have told you. But suddenly it was there. And in an instant his nerve completely forsook him. An icy sweat broke all over his body. His head swam, his knees gave way under him, the sword dropped out of his nerveless hand. Then, with a quick hoarse cry, he turned to flee. His foot was on the top step of the ladder which led to the room below. A prolonged, mocking laugh behind him seemed to lend him wings. But freedom — aye, and more! — beckoned from below. There was only an old woman there, and his soldiers were outside. Ye gods! He was a fool to fear!

He flew down the few steps, nearly fell headlong in the act, for his nerves were playing him an unpleasant trick, and the afternoon light was growing dim. At first, when he reached the place below, he saw nothing. Nothing save the welcome door, straight before him which led straight to freedom from this paralysing obsession. With one bound he had covered half the intervening space, when suddenly he paused, and an awful curse rose to his lips. There, in the recess of the doorway, two men were squatting on their heels, intent upon a game of hazard. One of these men was long and lean, the other round as a curled-up hedge-hog. They did no more than glance over their shoulder when His Magnificence the Lord of Stoutenburg came staggering down the steps.

"Five and four," the lean vagabond was saying. "How many does that make?"

"Eight, you loon!" the other replied. "My turn now."

They continued their game, regardless of his lordship who stood there rooted to the spot, trembling in every limb, his body covered with sweat, feeling like an animal that sees a trap slowly closing in upon him.

The situation was indeed one to send a man out of his senses. Stoutenburg, for one brief instant, felt that he was going mad. He looked from the door to the steps, and back again to the door, marvelling which way lay his one chance of escape. If he shouted, would he be heard? Could his men get to him before those two ruffians fell to and murdered him? Dared he make a dash for the door? Or — It was unthinkable that he — Stoutenburg — should be standing here, at the mercy of three villains, utterly powerless, when outside, not fifty paces away, the other side of those walls, fifty men at arms were there, set to guard his person.

And suddenly fear fell away from him. The trembling of his limbs ceased, his vision became clear, his mind alert. Even around his quaking lips there came the ghost of a smile.

His senses, keyed up by the imminence of his danger, had seized upon a sound which came from outside, faint as yet, but very obviously drawing nearer. In the semi-darkness and with his head buzzing and his nerves tingling, he could not distinguish either the quality of the sound nor yet the exact direction whence it came. But whatever it was — even if it was not all that he hoped — the sound was bound to set his soldiers on the alert; and if he could only temporize with those ruffians for a minute or two, the very next would see the captain of his guard rushing in to report what was happening: That Stadtholder sighted, the signal given, Nicolaes Beresteyn coming swiftly to the rescue.

Therefore, in the face of his own imminent peril, the Lord of Stoutenburg no longer felt afraid, only tensely vitally expectant. The two caitiffs, on the other hand appeared to have heard nothing. At any rate, they went on with their game, and the flute-like, high-pitched tones of the fat loon alternated with the deep base of his companion:

"Three and two make five!"

"No, four, you varlet!"

"Six!"

"Blank, by Beelzebub! My luck is dead out to-day."

And the sound drew nearer. There was no mistaking it. Men running. The clatter of arms. Horses, too. A pawing, and a champing, and a general hubbub, which those two ruffians could not fail to hear. Nor did any sound come down from the loft. Yet Gilda was there with the miserable plepshurk who, whatever else happened, would inevitably stand before her now as an informer and a cheat. This, at any rate, was a fact. The man had betrayed his master in order to save his miserable life, and the burgomaster had connived at his escape through an access of doltish weakness. But the fact remained. The Stadtholder was approaching. The next few minutes — seconds, perhaps — would see the final triumphant issue of this terrible adventure.

Stoutenburg, like a feline at bay, waited.

Then, all at once, a musket shot rang through the air, then another, and yet another; and all at once the whole air around was alive with sounds. The clang of arms; the lusty battle cries. Men out there had come to grips. In the drenching rain they were at one another's throats.

The two caitiffs quietly put aside their dice and rose to their feet. They stood with their backs to the door, their eyes fixed upon his lordship.

"Stand aside, you dolts!" Stoutenburg cried aloud; for he thought that he read murder in those two pairs of eyes, and he had need of all his nerves to assure himself that all was well, that, though his captain had not come to him for a reason which no doubt was sound, his soldiers were at grips with the Stadtholder's vanguard, and Nicolaes was already half-way up the slope.

But he, Stoutenburg, was unarmed, and could not push past those two assassins who were guarding the door. He bethought himself of his sword, which lay on the floor of the loft. He turned with a sudden impulse to get hold of it at all costs, and was met at the very foot of the steps by the man who had baffled him at every turn.

Diogenes, sword in hand, did not even pause to look on his impotent enemy. With one spring, he was across the floor and out by the door, which one of the ruffians immediately closed behind him.

It had all happened swifter even than thought. Stoutenburg, trapped, helpless, more bewildered in truth than terrified, still believed in a happy issue to his present desperate position. The thought came to him that he might purchase his safety from those potential murderers.

“Ten thousand guilders,” he called out wildly, “if you will let me pass!”

But the fat runnion merely turned to the lean one, and the look of understanding which passed between them sent an icy shudder down his lordship’s spine. He knew that from these two he could expect no mercy. A hoarse cry of horror escaped his lips as he saw that each held a dagger in one hand.

Then began that awful chase when man becomes a hunted beast — that grim game of hide-and-seek, with the last issue never once in doubt. The Lord of Stoutenburg trapped between these narrow walls, ran round and round like a mouse in a cage; now seeking refuge behind a girder, now leaping over an intervening obstacle, now crouching, panting and bathed in sweat, under cover of the gloom. And no one spoke; no one called. Neither the hunted nor the hunters. It seemed as if a conspiracy of silence existed between them; or else that the nearness of death had put a seal on all their lips.

Out there the clang of battle appeared more remote. Nothing seemed to occur in the immediate approach of the molen. It all came from afar, resounding across the Veluwe, above the patter of the rain and the souging of the wind, through the rafters of the old mill. Drumming and thumping, the angle of armour, the clang of pike and lance, of metal; the loud report of musket shot, the strident grating of chains and wheels. But all far away, not here. Not outside the molen, but down there in the gorge, where Nicolaes had been encamped. My heavens, what did it mean?

Already the trapped creature was getting exhausted. Once or twice he had come down on his knees. His eyes were growing dim. His breath came and went with a wheezing sound from his breast. It was not just two murderous brigands who were pursuing him, but Nemesis herself, with sword of retribution drawn, in her hand an hour-glass, the sands of which were running low.

All at once the miscreant found himself at the foot of the steps, and, blindly stumbling, he ran up to the loft — instinctively, without set purpose save that of warding off, if only for a minute, the inevitable end.

7

Gilda was standing at the top of the steps with neck craned forward, her hands held tightly to her breast, her whole attitude one of nameless horror. She had been listening to the multifarious sounds which came from outside, and the natural, womanly fear for the safety of her beloved had been her one dominant emotion.

She had heard nothing else for a time, until suddenly she caught one or two stray sounds of that grim and furtive fight for life which was going on down below. She had reached the top of the steps, and tried to peer through the gloom to ascertain whose were those stealthy, swift footfalls so like those of a hunted beast, and whose the heavy, lumbering tread that spoke of stern and unwavering pursuit. At first she could see nothing, and the very silence which lay like a pall upon the grim scene below struck her with a sense of paralysing dread.

Then she caught sight first of one figure, then of another, as they crossed her line of vision. She could distinguish nothing very clearly — just those slowly moving figures — and for a moment or two felt herself unable to move. Then she heard the laboured breathing of a man, a groan as of a soul tortured with fear, and the next instant the Lord of Stoutenburg appeared, stumbling up the narrow steps.

At sight of her he fell like an inert thing with a husky cry at her feet. His arms encircled her knees; his head fell against her gown.

“Gilda, save me!” he whispered hoarsely. “For the love of Heaven! They’ll murder me! Save me, for pity’s sake! Gilda!”

He sobbed and cried like a child, abject in his terror, loathsome in his craven cowardice. Gilda could not stir. He held her with his arms as in a vise. She would have given worlds for the physical strength to wrench her gown out of his clutch, to flee from the hated sight of him who had planned to do her beloved such an irreparable injury. Oh, she hated him! She hated him worse, perhaps, than she had ever done before, now that he clung like a miserable dastard to her for mercy.

“Leave the poltroon to us, mejuffrouw,” a gentle, flute-like tone broke in on the miscreant’s ravings.

“Now then, take your punishment like a man!” a gruff voice added sternly.

And two familiar faces emerged out of the gloom, immediately below where Gilda was standing, imprisoned by those cringing arms. The man, in truth, had not even the primeval pluck of a savage. He was beaten, and he knew it. What had happened out there on the Veluwe, how completely he had been tricked by the Englishman he did not know as yet. But he was afraid to die, and shrank neither from humiliation nor contempt in order to save his own worthless life from the wreck of all his ambitions.

At the sound of those two voices, which in truth were like a death-knell in his ears, he jumped to his feet; but he did not loosen his hold on Gilda. Swift as thought he had found refuge behind her, and held her by the arms in front of him like a shield.

Historians have always spoken of the Lord of Stoutenburg as extraordinarily nimble in mind and body. That nimbleness in truth, stood him in good stead now; or whilst Socrates and Pythagoras, clumsy in their movements, lumbering and hampered by their respect for the person of the jonge juffrouw, reached the loft, and then for one instant hesitated how best to proceed in their grim task without offending the ears and eyes of the great lady, Stoutenburg had with one bound slipped from behind her down the steps and was across the floor of the molen and out the door before the two worthies had had time to utter the comprehensive curse which, at this unexpected manoeuvre on the part of their quarry, had risen to their lips.

“We had promised Diogenes not to allow the blackguard to escape!” Pythagoras exclaimed ruefully.

And both started in hot pursuit, whilst Gilda, seeking shelter in a dark angle of the loft, fell, sobbing with excitement and only half-conscious, upon a pile of sacking.

CHAPTER XVI. THE FINAL ISSUE

1

Pythagoras and Socrates failed to find the trail of the miscreant, who had vanished under cover of the night. We know that Stoutenburg did succeed, in fact, in reaching de Berg's encampment, half-starved and wearied, but safe. How he did it, no one will ever know. His career of crime had received a mighty check and the marauding expeditions which he undertook subsequently against his own country were of a futile and desultory nature. History ceases to trouble herself about him after that abortive incursion into Gelderland.

How that incursion was frustrated by the gallant Englishman, known to fame as the first Sir Percy Blakeney, but to his intimates as Diogenes, the erstwhile penniless soldier of fortune, we know chiefly through van Aitzema's *Saken von Staet*. The worthy chronicler enlarges upon the Englishman's adventure — he always calls him "the Englishman" — from the time when a week and more ago, he took leave of Nicolaes Beresteyn outside Barneveld to that when he reached Amersfoort, just in time to avert a terrible catastrophe.

The author of *Saken v. Staet* tells of the ambuscade on the shores of the IJssel, "the Englishman's swim for life through the drifting flocs." On reaching the opposite bank, it seems that he was so spent and more than half frozen, that he lay half unconscious on the bank for awhile. Presently, however, alive to the danger of possible further ambuscades, he re-started on his way, found a deserted hut close by, and crawled in there for shelter. As soon as darkness had set in he started back for Zutphen, there to warn Marquet not to proceed. The whole of the Stadtholder's plans had obviously been revealed to de Berg by some traitor — whose identity Diogenes then could not fail but guess — and it would have been sheer madness to attempt to cross the IJssel now at any of the points originally intended.

To reach Zutphen at this juncture meant for the undaunted adventurer two leagues and more to traverse, and with clothes frozen hard to the skin. But he did reach Zutphen in time, and with the assistance of Marquet, then evolved the plan of an advance into Gelderland by effecting the crossing of the IJssel as far north as Apeldoorn, and then striking across the Veluwe either to Amersfoort or to Ede, threatening de Berg's advance, and possibly effecting a junction with the Stadtholder's main army.

After this understanding with Marquet, Diogenes then proceeded to Arnheim, where the garrison could now only be warned to hold the city at all costs until assistance could be sent.

In the meantime, de Berg's troops were swarming everywhere. The Englishman could only proceed by night, had to hide by day on the Veluwe as best he could. Hence much delay. More than once he was on the point of capture, but succeeded eventually in reaching Arnheim.

Here he saw Coorne, who was in command of the small garrison, assured him of coming relief, and made him swear not to surrender the city, since the Stadtholder would soon be on his way with strong reinforcements. Thence to Nijmegen on the same errand. A more easy journey this, seeing that Isembourg had not begun his advance from Kleve. After that, De Keyser and Wageningen.

Van Aitzema says that it was between Nijmegen and Wageningen that "the Englishman," lurking in a thicket of scrub, overheard some talk of how the Stadtholder was to be waylaid and captured on his return to camp from Amersfoort. This fact the chronicler must have learned at first hand. By this time the forces of de Berg were spreading over Gelderland. "The Englishman" gathered that the Archduchess's plans were to leave Isembourg's army to deal with Arnheim and Nijmegen for the present, whilst de Berg was to march on Ede, and, if possible, push on as far as Amersfoort. But as to how the coup against the Stadtholder was to be effected, he could not ascertain. At the time he did not know that his Highness intended to visit Amersfoort again. But for him, that little city where Gilda dwelt was just now the hub of the universe, and thank Heaven his errand was now accomplished, all his Highness's orders executed, and he was free to go to his young wife as fast as his own endurance and Spanish vedettes would allow.

This meant another tramp across open country, which by this time was overrun with enemy troops. Fugitives from Ede were everywhere to be seen. "The Spaniards. They are on us!" rang from end to end of the invaded province, and the echo of that dismal cry must by now have been rolling even as far as Utrecht.

It meant also seeking cover against enemy surprise parties, who threw the daring adventurer more than once out of his course, so that we hear of him once as far south as Rhenen, and then as far east as Doorn. It meant hiding amongst the reeds in the half-frozen marshes, swimming the Rhyn at one point, the Eem at another; it meant days without food and nights without rest. It meant all that, and more in pluck and endurance and determination, to which three qualities in "the Englishman" the worthy chronicler, though ever chary of words, pays ungrudging tribute.

He reached Amersfoort, as we know, just in time to see the Stadtholder leave the city in the company of the traitor, Nicolaes Beresteyn, and, struck by that same treacherous hand, fell, helpless for a moment, at the very threshold of the burgomaster's house.

After which began the martyrdom which had ended in such perfect triumph and happiness.

The daring adventurer, left lonely and stricken upon the moorland, did in truth go through an agony of misery and humiliation such as seldom falls to the lot of any man. Indeed, what he did suffer throughout that terrible day, whilst he believed himself to irretrievably blinded, was never known to any one save to the two faithful friends who watched lovingly over him. Socrates, after he had accompanied the Stadtholder, returned to sit and watch with Pythagoras beside the man to whom they both clung with such whole-hearted devotion.

2

It was not until late in the night that a faint glimmer of light, coming from the fire which the two caitiffs had managed to kindle as the night was bitterly cold, reached the young soldier's aching limbs, and seemed to him like a tiny beacon of hope in the blackness of his misery. By the time that the grey dawn broke over the moorland, he had realized that the injury which he had thought irremediable, had only been transient, and that every hour now brought an improvement in his power of vision.

Whereupon, three heads were put together to devise a means for using the Englishman's supposed blindness to the best advantage. One wise head and two loyal ones, not one of them even remotely acquainted with fear, what finer combination could be found for the eventful undoing of a pack of traitors?

Ede was in the hands of the Spaniards, Amersfoort on the point of sharing the like fate. These facts were sufficiently confirmed by the stray fugitives who wandered homeless and distracted across the moorland, and were in turn interrogated by the three conspirators.

With the woman he loved inside the invaded city, and with that recreant Stoutenburg in command of the enemy troops there, Diogenes' first thought was to get into Amersfoort himself at all risks and costs. As for the plan for freeing the town and punishing the miscreants, it was simple enough. To collect a small troop of ruffians from amongst the fugitives on the moorlands and place these under the command of Socrates, was the first move. The second was to send Pythagoras with an urgent message to Marquet to hurry eastward with his army from Apeldoorn, to the relief of Amersfoort, taking on his way the lonely molen on the Veluwe, where an important detachment of enemy troops might be expected to encamp.

The one thing with which Diogenes was, most fortunately amply provided, was money; money which he had by him when first he started out of Amersfoort on the Stadtholder's errand; money which was needful now to enable Socrates to recruit his small army of ne'er-do-wells and to assist Pythagoras on his embassy to Marquet.

Thereafter Diogenes, feigning blindness and worse, made his way into the presence of the Lord of Stoutenburg, who held Gilda at his mercy and the whole city to ransom for her obedience.

To dangle before the miscreant's eyes the prospect of capturing the Stadtholder's person, and thus make himself master of the Netherlands, was the pivot around which the whole plan revolved. The bait could not fail to attract the ambitious cupidity of the traitor, and verisimilitude was given to the story by Socrates' band of ruffians, whose orders were to spread the news of the Stadtholder's advance both on Ede and Amersfoort, and to silence effectually any emissaries of Stoutenburg's who might be sent out to ascertain the truth of these rumours.

We may take it that Socrates and his little troop saw to it that none of these emissaries did return to Amersfoort for the Lord of Stoutenburg marched out of the city at dawn, with his sinister banner flying, with his musketeers, pikemen and lancers, and with Gilda Beresteyn a virtual prisoner in his train.

That the daring adventurer risked an ignominious death by this carefully laid plan cannot be denied; but he was one of those men who had gambled with life and death since he was a child, who was accustomed to stake his all upon the spin of a coin; and, anyhow, if he failed, death would have been thrice welcome, as the only escape out of untold misery and sorrow.

Chance favoured him in this, that at the last he was left face to face with the burgomaster, to whom he immediately confided everything, and who enabled him to escape out of the house by the service staircase, and thence into the streets, where no one knew him and where he remained all night, effectually concealed as a unit in the midst of the crowd. He actually went out of Amersfoort in the train of Stoutenburg; and whilst his lordship's troops made a long halt at Barneveld, "the Englishman" continued his way unmolested across the Veluwe to the lonely molen, which was to witness his success and happiness, or the final annihilation of all that made life possible.

3

All this and more, in the matter of detail, hath the meticulous chronicler of the time put conscientiously on record. We must assume that he was able to verify all his facts at source, chiefly through the garrulous offices of "the Englishman's" two well-known familiars.

What, however, will for ever remain unrecorded, save in the book of heroic deeds, is a woman's perfect loyalty. During those hours and days, full of horror and of dread, Gilda never once wavered in her belief in the man she loved. From the moment when Nicolaes tried to poison her mind against him, and through all the vicissitudes which placed her face to face with what was a mere semblance of her beloved, she had never doubted him, when even the Stadtholder seemed to doubt.

She knew him to be playing a dangerous game — but a game for all that — when first she beheld him, sightless and abject, in the presence of their mutual enemy, and had rested for one brief second against his breast. That his eyes, still dazed by the poisonous fumes, could vaguely discern her face, even though they could not read the expression thereon, she did not know. The fear that he was irremediably blind was the most cruel of all the tortures which she had undergone that night.

When her father came to her in the small hours of the morning to tell her that all was well with the beloved of her heart, but that he would have all the need of all her courage and of all her determination to help him to complete his self-imposed task, she realized for the first time how near to actual death the torturing fear had brought her. But from that time forth, she never lost her presence of mind. With marvellous courage she gripped the whole situation and played her role unswervingly until the end.

Everything depended on whether Marquet reached the molen before the Lord of Stoutenburg, or his captains suspected that anything was wrong. True, Pythagoras had brought back the news that he had met the loyal commander at Apeldoorn, and that the latter, despite the fact that he and his troops intend to take there a well-earned rest, had immediately given the order to march. But, even so, the future of the Netherlands and of her Stadtholder, as well as the fate of the gallant Englishman and his beloved wife, lay in the hands of God.

One hour before dusk Marquet's vedettes first came in contact with the outposts of Beresteyn's encampment in the gorge below the molen. There was a brief struggle, fierce on both sides, until the main body of Marquet's army, four thousand strong, appeared on the eastern heights above the gorge.

Whilst the Lord of Stoutenburg ran round and round the narrow space wherein he was a hunted prisoner, trying to escape that shameful death which threatened him at the hand of two humble justiciaries, his few hundred men were falling like butchered beasts beneath the pike-thrusts and musket shots of Marquet's trained troops.

Nicolaes Beresteyn was the first to fall.

It was better so. Dishonour so complete could be only wiped out by death.

When, a day or two later, after Marquet had driven the Spaniards out of Amersfoort, the burgomaster heard the news of the death of his only son. He murmured an humble and broken-hearted: "Thank God!"

CHAPTER XVII. THE ONLY WORLD

1

Out there, in the lonely molen on the Veluwe, Gilda had remained for a while, half numb with nerve strain, suffering from the reaction after the terrible excitement of the past few hours. Presently her old serving-woman came to her, still raging with choler at the outrage committed against her person by those two abominable rascallions.

With great volubility, she explained to her mistress that they had fallen on her unawares when first she had been sent down-stairs by his lordship — whom may God punish! — The had bound and gagged her, and then told her quite cheerfully that this was an act of friendship on their part, to save her from a worse fate and from the temptation of talking when she should remain silent.

She had been thrust into a dark angle of the mill-house, from whence she could see absolutely nothing, and where she had lain all this while, entirely helpless, hearing that awful din which had been going on outside, expecting to be murdered in cold blood at any moment, and tortured with fear as to what was happening to her mistress. Only a few moments ago, the two ruffians had reappeared, running helter-skelter down the steps and thence out through the door into the open. Fortunately, one of them, conscience-stricken no doubt, had thought, before fleeing, to release her from her bonds.

Maria was stupid, uncomprehending and garrulous; but she was loyal, and had a warm and ample bosom, whereon a tired and aching head could find a little rest.

Gilda, her body still shaken by hysterical sobs, her teeth chattering, her senses reeling with the horror of all that she had gone through, found some measure of comfort in the old woman's ministrations. A mugful of wine, left over from the midday meal, helped her to regain command over her nerves. Holding her young mistress in her arms, Maria, crooning like a mother over her baby, rocked the half-inert young form into some semblance of sleep.

2

And here Diogenes found her a couple of hours later, curled up like a tired child in the arms of the old woman.

He came up on tiptoe, carrying a lanthorn, for now it was quite dark. This he placed on the floor, and then, with infinite caution, he slid into Maria's place and took the beloved form into his own strong arms.

She scarcely moved, just opened her eyes for a second or two, and then nestled closer against his shoulder, with a little sigh, half of weariness, but wholly of content.

She was just dead-tired after all she had gone through, and now she slept just like a baby in his arms; whilst he was as happy as it is possible for any human being to be, for she was safe and well, and nothing could part her from him now. He was satisfied to watch her as she slept, her dear face against his breast, her soft breath coming and going with perfect evenness through her parted lips.

Once he stooped and kissed her, and then she woke, put her arms around his neck, and both forgot for the time being that there was another world save that of Love.

THE SCARLET PIMPRANEL

CHAPTER I PARIS: SEPTEMBER, 1792

A surging, seething, murmuring crowd of beings that are human only in name, for to the eye and ear they seem naught but savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and of hate. The hour, some little time before sunset, and the place, the West Barricade, at the very spot where, a decade later, a proud tyrant raised an undying monument to the nation's glory and his own vanity.

During the greater part of the day the guillotine had been kept busy at its ghastly work: all that France had boasted of in the past centuries, of ancient names, and blue blood, had paid toll to her desire for liberty and for fraternity. The carnage had only ceased at this late hour of the day because there were other more interesting sights for the people to witness, a little while before the final closing of the barricades for the night.

And so the crowd rushed away from the Place de la Greve and made for the various barricades in order to watch this interesting and amusing sight.

It was to be seen every day, for those aristos were such fools! They were traitors to the people of course, all of them, men, women, and children, who happened to be descendants of the great men who since the Crusades had made the glory of France: her old NOBLESSE. Their ancestors had oppressed the people, had crushed them under the scarlet heels of their dainty buckled shoes, and now the people had become the rulers of France and crushed their former masters — not beneath their heel, for they went shoeless mostly in these days — but a more effectual weight, the knife of the guillotine.

And daily, hourly, the hideous instrument of torture claimed its many victims — old men, young women, tiny children until the day when it would finally demand the head of a King and of a beautiful young Queen.

But this was as it should be: were not the people now the rulers of France? Every aristocrat was a traitor, as his ancestors had been before him: for two hundred years now the people had sweated, and toiled, and starved, to keep a lustful court in lavish extravagance; now the descendants of those who had helped to make those courts brilliant had to hide for their lives — to fly, if they wished to avoid the tardy vengeance of the people.

And they did try to hide, and tried to fly: that was just the fun of the whole thing. Every afternoon before the gates closed and the market carts went out in procession by the various barricades, some fool of an aristo endeavoured to evade the clutches of the Committee of Public Safety. In various disguises, under various pretexts, they tried to slip through the barriers, which were so well guarded by citizen soldiers of the Republic. Men in women's clothes, women in male attire, children disguised in beggars' rags: there were some of all sorts: CI-DEVANT counts, marquises, even dukes, who wanted to fly from France, reach England or some other equally accursed country, and there try to rouse foreign feelings against the glorious Revolution, or to raise an army in order to liberate the wretched prisoners in the Temple, who had once called themselves sovereigns of France.

But they were nearly always caught at the barricades, Sergeant Bibot especially at the West Gate had a wonderful nose for scenting an aristo in the most perfect disguise. Then, of course, the fun began. Bibot would look at his prey as a cat looks upon the mouse, play with him, sometimes for quite a quarter of an hour, pretend to be hoodwinked by the disguise, by the wigs and other bits of theatrical make-up which hid the identity of a CI-DEVANT noble marquise or count.

Oh! Bibot had a keen sense of humour, and it was well worth hanging round that West Barricade, in order to see him catch an aristo in the very act of trying to flee from the vengeance of the people.

Sometimes Bibot would let his prey actually out by the gates, allowing him to think for the space of two minutes at least that he really had escaped out of Paris, and might even manage to reach the coast of England in safety, but Bibot would let the unfortunate wretch walk about ten metres towards the open country, then he would send two men after him and bring him back, stripped of his disguise.

Oh! that was extremely funny, for as often as not the fugitive would prove to be a woman, some proud marchioness, who looked terribly comical when she found herself in Bibot's clutches after all, and knew that a summary trial would await her the next day and after that, the fond embrace of Madame la Guillotine.

No wonder that on this fine afternoon in September the crowd round Bibot's gate was eager and excited. The lust of blood grows with its satisfaction, there is no satiety: the crowd had seen a hundred noble heads fall beneath the guillotine to-day, it wanted to make sure that it would see another hundred fall on the morrow.

Bibot was sitting on an overturned and empty cask close by the gate of the barricade; a small detachment of citizen soldiers was under his command. The work had been very hot lately. Those cursed aristos were becoming terrified and tried their hardest to slip out of Paris: men, women and children, whose ancestors, even in remote ages, had served those traitorous Bourbons, were all traitors themselves and right food for the guillotine. Every day Bibot had had the satisfaction of unmasking some fugitive royalists and sending them back to be tried by the Committee of Public Safety, presided over by that good patriot, Citizen Fouquier-Tinville.

Robespierre and Danton both had commended Bibot for his zeal and Bibot was proud of the fact that he on his own initiative had sent at least fifty aristos to the guillotine.

But to-day all the sergeants in command at the various barricades had had special orders. Recently a very great number of aristos had succeeded in escaping out of France and in reaching England safely. There were curious rumours about these escapes; they had become very frequent and singularly daring; the people's minds were becoming strangely excited about it all. Sergeant GrosPierre had been sent to the guillotine for allowing a whole family of aristos to slip out of the North Gate under his very nose.

It was asserted that these escapes were organised by a band of Englishmen, whose daring seemed to be unparalleled, and who, from sheer desire to meddle in what did not concern them, spent their spare time in snatching away lawful victims destined for Madame la Guillotine. These rumours soon grew in extravagance; there was no doubt that this band of meddling Englishmen did exist; moreover, they seemed to be under the leadership of a man whose pluck and audacity were almost fabulous. Strange stories were afloat of how he and those aristos whom he rescued became suddenly invisible as they reached the barricades and escaped out of the gates by sheer supernatural agency.

No one had seen these mysterious Englishmen; as for their leader, he was never spoken of, save with a superstitious shudder. Citoyen Fouquier-Tinville would in the course of the day receive a scrap of paper from some mysterious source; sometimes he would find it in the pocket of his coat, at others it would be handed to him by someone in the crowd, whilst he was on his way to the sitting of the Committee of Public Safety. The paper always contained a brief notice that the band of meddlesome Englishmen were at work, and it was always signed with a device drawn in red — a little star-shaped flower, which we in England call the Scarlet Pimpernel. Within a few hours of the receipt of this impudent notice, the citoyens of the Committee of Public Safety would hear that so many royalists and aristocrats had succeeded in reaching the coast, and were on their way to England and safety.

The guards at the gates had been doubled, the sergeants in command had been threatened with death, whilst liberal rewards were offered for the capture of these daring and impudent Englishmen. There was a sum of five thousand francs promised to the man who laid hands on the mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel.

Everyone felt that Bibot would be that man, and Bibot allowed that belief to take firm root in everybody's mind; and so, day after day, people came to watch him at the West Gate, so as to be present when he laid hands on any fugitive aristo who perhaps might be accompanied by that mysterious Englishman.

"Bah!" he said to his trusted corporal, "Citoyen GrosPierre was a fool! Had it been me now, at that North Gate last week . . ."

Citoyen Bibot spat on the ground to express his contempt for his comrade's stupidity.

"How did it happen, citoyen?" asked the corporal.

"GrosPierre was at the gate, keeping good watch," began Bibot, pompously, as the crowd closed in round him, listening eagerly to his narrative. "We've all heard of this meddlesome Englishman, this accursed Scarlet Pimpernel. He won't get through MY gate, MORBLEU! unless he be the devil himself. But GrosPierre was a fool. The market carts were going through the gates; there was one laden with casks, and driven by an old man, with a boy beside him. GrosPierre was a bit drunk, but he thought himself very clever; he looked into the casks — most of them, at least — and saw they were empty, and let the cart go through."

A murmur of wrath and contempt went round the group of ill-clad wretches, who crowded round Citoyen Bibot.

"Half an hour later," continued the sergeant, "up comes a captain of the guard with a squad of some dozen soldiers with him. 'Has a cart gone through?' he asks of GrosPierre, breathlessly. 'Yes,' says GrosPierre, 'not half an hour ago.' 'And you have let them escape,' shouts the captain furiously. 'You'll go to the guillotine for this, citoyen sergeant! that cart held concealed the CI-DEVANT Duc de Chalis and all his family!' 'What!' thunders GrosPierre, aghast. 'Aye! and the driver was none other than that cursed Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

A howl of execration greeted this tale. Citoyen GrosPierre had paid for his blunder on the guillotine, but what a fool! oh! what a fool!

Bibot was laughing so much at his own tale that it was some time before he could continue.

"'After them, my men,' shouts the captain," he said after a while, "'remember the reward; after them, they cannot have gone far!' And with that he rushes through the gate followed by his dozen soldiers."

"But it was too late!" shouted the crowd, excitedly.

"They never got them!"

"Curse that GrosPierre for his folly!"

"He deserved his fate!"

"Fancy not examining those casks properly!"

But these sallies seemed to amuse Citoyen Bibot exceedingly; he laughed until his sides ached, and the tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Nay, nay!" he said at last, "those aristos weren't in the cart; the driver was not the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"What?"

"No! The captain of the guard was that damned Englishman in disguise, and everyone of his soldiers aristos!"

The crowd this time said nothing: the story certainly savoured of the supernatural, and though the Republic had abolished God, it had not quite succeeded in killing the fear of the supernatural in the hearts of the people. Truly that Englishman must be the devil himself.

The sun was sinking low down in the west. Bibot prepared himself to close the gates.

"EN AVANT the carts," he said.

Some dozen covered carts were drawn up in a row, ready to leave town, in order to fetch the produce from the country close by, for market the next morning. They were mostly well known to Bibot, as they went through his gate twice every day on their way to and from the town. He spoke to one or two of their drivers — mostly women — and was at great pains to examine the inside of the carts.

"You never know," he would say, "and I'm not going to be caught like that fool GrosPierre."

The women who drove the carts usually spent their day on the Place de la Greve, beneath the platform of the guillotine, knitting and gossiping, whilst they watched the rows of tumbrils arriving with the victims the Reign of Terror claimed every day. It was great fun to see the aristos arriving for the reception of Madame la Guillotine, and the places close by the platform were very much sought after. Bibot, during the day, had been on duty on the Place. He recognized most of the old hats, "tricotteuses," as they were called, who sat there and knitted, whilst head after head fell beneath the knife, and they themselves got quite bespattered with the blood of those cursed aristos.

"He! la mere!" said Bibot to one of these horrible hags, "what have you got there?"

He had seen her earlier in the day, with her knitting and the whip of her cart close beside her. Now she had fastened a row of curly locks to the whip handle, all colours, from gold to silver, fair to dark, and she stroked them with her huge, bony fingers as she laughed at Bibot.

"I made friends with Madame Guillotine's lover," she said with a coarse laugh, "he cut these off for me from the heads as they rolled down. He has promised me some more to-morrow, but I don't know if I shall be at my usual place."

"Ah! how is that, la mere?" asked Bibot, who, hardened soldier that he was, could not help shuddering at the awful loathsomeness of this semblance of a woman, with her ghastly trophy on the handle of her whip.

"My grandson has got the small-pox," she said with a jerk of her thumb towards the inside of her cart, "some say it's the plague! If it is, I sha'n't be allowed to come into Paris to-morrow." At the first mention of the word small-pox, Bibot had stepped hastily backwards, and when the old hag spoke of the plague, he retreated from her as fast as he could.

"Curse you!" he muttered, whilst the whole crowd hastily avoided the cart, leaving it standing all alone in the midst of the place.

The old hag laughed.

"Curse you, citoyen, for being a coward," she said. "Bah! what a man to be afraid of sickness."

"MORBLEU! the plague!"

Everyone was awe-struck and silent, filled with horror for the loathsome malady, the one thing which still had the power to arouse terror and disgust in these savage, brutalised creatures.

"Get out with you and with your plague-stricken brood!" shouted Bibot, hoarsely.

And with another rough laugh and coarse jest, the old hag whipped up her lean nag and drove her cart out of the gate.

This incident had spoilt the afternoon. The people were terrified of these two horrible curses, the two maladies which nothing could cure, and which were the precursors of an awful and lonely death. They hung about the barricades, silent and sullen for a while, eyeing one another suspiciously, avoiding each other as if by instinct, lest the plague lurked already in their midst. Presently, as in the case of Grosperre, a captain of the guard appeared suddenly. But he was known to Bibot, and there was no fear of his turning out to be a sly Englishman in disguise.

"A cart, . . ." he shouted breathlessly, even before he had reached the gates.

"What cart?" asked Bibot, roughly.

"Driven by an old hag. . . . A covered cart . . ."

"There were a dozen . . ."

"An old hag who said her son had the plague?"

"Yes . . ."

"You have not let them go?"

"MORBLEU!" said Bibot, whose purple cheeks had suddenly become white with fear.

"The cart contained the CI-DEVANT Comtesse de Tournay and her two children, all of them traitors and condemned to death."

"And their driver?" muttered Bibot, as a superstitious shudder ran down his spine.

"SACRE TONNERRE," said the captain, "but it is feared that it was that accursed Englishman himself — the Scarlet Pimpernel."

CHAPTER II DOVER: "THE FISHERMAN'S REST"

In the kitchen Sally was extremely busy — saucepans and frying-pans were standing in rows on the gigantic hearth, the huge stock-pot stood in a corner, and the jack turned with slow deliberation, and presented alternately to the glow every side of a noble sirloin of beef. The two little kitchen-maids bustled around, eager to help, hot and panting, with cotton sleeves well tucked up above the dimpled elbows, and giggling over some private jokes of their own, whenever Miss Sally's back was turned for a moment. And old Jemima, stolid in temper and solid in bulk, kept up a long and subdued grumble, while she stirred the stock-pot methodically over the fire.

"What ho! Sally!" came in cheerful if none too melodious accents from the coffee-room close by.

"Lud bless my soul!" exclaimed Sally, with a good-humoured laugh, "what be they all wanting now, I wonder!"

"Beer, of course," grumbled Jemima, "you don't 'xpect Jimmy Pitkin to 'ave done with one tankard, do ye?"

"Mr. 'Arry, 'e looked uncommon thirsty too," simpered Martha, one of the little kitchen-maids; and her beady black eyes twinkled as they met those of her companion, whereupon both started on a round of short and suppressed giggles.

Sally looked cross for a moment, and thoughtfully rubbed her hands against her shapely hips; her palms were itching, evidently, to come in contact with Martha's rosy cheeks — but inherent good-humour prevailed, and with a pout and a shrug of the shoulders, she turned her attention to the fried potatoes.

"What ho, Sally! hey, Sally!"

And a chorus of pewter mugs, tapped with impatient hands against the oak tables of the coffee-room, accompanied the shouts for mine host's buxom daughter.

"Sally!" shouted a more persistent voice, "are ye goin' to be all night with that there beer?"

"I do think father might get the beer for them," muttered Sally, as Jemima, stolidly and without further comment, took a couple of foam-crowned jugs from the shelf, and began filling a number of pewter tankards with some of that home-brewed ale for which "The Fisherman's Rest" had been famous since that days of King Charles. "'E knows 'ow busy we are in 'ere."

"Your father is too busy discussing politics with Mr. 'Empseed to worry 'isself about you and the kitchen," grumbled Jemima under her breath.

Sally had gone to the small mirror which hung in a corner of the kitchen, and was hastily smoothing her hair and setting her frilled cap at its most becoming angle over her dark curls; then she took up the tankards by their handles, three in each strong, brown hand, and laughing, grumbling, blushing, carried them through into the coffee room.

There, there was certainly no sign of that bustle and activity which kept four women busy and hot in the glowing kitchen beyond.

The coffee-room of "The Fisherman's Rest" is a show place now at the beginning of the twentieth century. At the end of the eighteenth, in the year of grace 1792, it had not yet gained the notoriety and importance which a hundred additional years and the craze of the age have since bestowed upon it. Yet it was an old place, even then, for the oak rafters and beams were already black with age — as were the panelled seats, with their tall backs, and the long polished tables between, on which innumerable pewter tankards had left fantastic patterns of many-sized rings. In the leaded window, high up, a row of pots of scarlet geraniums and blue larkspur gave the bright note of colour against the dull background of the oak.

That Mr. Jellyband, landlord of "The Fisherman's Rest" at Dover, was a prosperous man, was of course clear to the most casual observer. The pewter on the fine old dressers, the brass above the gigantic hearth, shone like silver and gold — the red-tiled floor was as brilliant as the scarlet geranium on the window sill — this meant that his servants were good and plentiful, that the custom was constant, and of that order which necessitated the keeping up of the coffee-room to a high standard of elegance and order.

As Sally came in, laughing through her frowns, and displaying a row of dazzling white teeth, she was greeted with shouts and chorus of applause.

"Why, here's Sally! What ho, Sally! Hurrah for pretty Sally!"

"I thought you'd grown deaf in that kitchen of yours," muttered Jimmy Pitkin, as he passed the back of his hand across his very dry lips.

"All ri'! all ri'!" laughed Sally, as she deposited the freshly-filled tankards upon the tables, "why, what a 'urry to be sure! And is your gran'mother a-dyin' an' you wantin' to see the pore soul afore she'm gone! I never see'd such a mighty rushin'" A chorus of good-humoured laughter greeted this witticism, which gave the company there present food for many jokes, for some considerable time. Sally now seemed in less of a hurry to get back to her pots and pans. A young man with fair curly hair, and eager, bright blue eyes, was engaging most of her attention and the whole of her time, whilst broad witticisms anent Jimmy Pitkin's fictitious grandmother flew from mouth to mouth, mixed with heavy puffs of pungent tobacco smoke.

Facing the hearth, his legs wide apart, a long clay pipe in his mouth, stood mine host himself, worthy Mr. Jellyband, landlord of "The Fisherman's Rest," as his father had before him, aye, and his grandfather and great-grandfather too, for that matter. Portly in build, jovial in countenance and somewhat bald of pate, Mr. Jellyband was indeed a typical rural John Bull of those days — the days when our prejudiced insularity was at its height, when to an Englishman, be he lord, yeoman, or peasant, the whole of the continent of Europe was a den of immorality and the rest of the world an unexploited land of savages and cannibals.

There he stood, mine worthy host, firm and well set up on his limbs, smoking his long churchwarden and caring nothing for nobody at home, and despising everybody abroad. He wore the typical scarlet waistcoat, with shiny brass buttons, the corduroy breeches, and grey worsted stockings and smart buckled shoes, that characterised every self-respecting innkeeper in Great Britain in these days — and while pretty, motherless Sally had need of four pairs of brown hands to do all the work that fell on her shapely shoulders, worthy Jellyband discussed the affairs of nations with his most privileged guests.

The coffee-room indeed, lighted by two well-polished lamps, which hung from the rafted ceiling, looked cheerful and cosy in the extreme. Through the dense clouds of tobacco smoke that hung about in every corner, the faces of Mr. Jellyband's customers appeared red and pleasant to look at, and on good terms with themselves, their host and all the world; from every side of the room loud guffaws

accompanied pleasant, if not highly intellectual, conversation — while Sally's repeated giggles testified to the good use Mr. Harry Waite was making of the short time she seemed inclined to spare him.

They were mostly fisher-folk who patronised Mr. Jellyband's coffee-room, but fishermen are known to be very thirsty people; the salt which they breathe in, when they are on the sea, accounts for their parched throats when on shore, but "The Fisherman's Rest" was something more than a rendezvous for these humble folk. The London and Dover coach started from the hostel daily, and passengers who had come across the Channel, and those who started for the "grand tour," all became acquainted with Mr. Jellyband, his French wines and his home-brewed ales.

It was towards the close of September, 1792, and the weather which had been brilliant and hot throughout the month had suddenly broken up; for two days torrents of rain had deluged the south of England, doing its level best to ruin what chances the apples and pears and late plums had of becoming really fine, self-respecting fruit. Even now it was beating against the leaded windows, and tumbling down the chimney, making the cheerful wood fire sizzle in the hearth.

"Lud! did you ever see such a wet September, Mr. Jellyband?" asked Mr. Hempseed.

He sat in one of the seats inside the hearth, did Mr. Hempseed, for he was an authority and important personage not only at "The Fisherman's Rest," where Mr. Jellyband always made a special selection of him as a foil for political arguments, but throughout the neighborhood, where his learning and notably his knowledge of the Scriptures was held in the most profound awe and respect. With one hand buried in the capacious pockets of his corduroys underneath his elaborately-worked, well-worn smock, the other holding his long clay pipe, Mr. Hempseed sat there looking dejectedly across the room at the rivulets of moisture which trickled down the window panes.

"No," replied Mr. Jellyband, sententiously, "I dunno, Mr. 'Empseed, as I ever did. An' I've been in these parts nigh on sixty years."

"Aye! you wouldn't recollect the first three years of them sixty, Mr. Jellyband," quietly interposed Mr. Hempseed. "I dunno as I ever see'd an infant take much note of the weather, leastways not in these parts, an' I've lived 'ere nigh on seventy-five years, Mr. Jellyband."

The superiority of this wisdom was so incontestable that for the moment Mr. Jellyband was not ready with his usual flow of argument.

"It do seem more like April than September, don't it?" continued Mr. Hempseed, dolefully, as a shower of raindrops fell with a sizzle upon the fire.

"Aye! that it do," assented the worthy host, "but then what can you 'xpect, Mr. 'Empseed, I says, with sich a government as we've got?"

Mr. Hempseed shook his head with an infinity of wisdom, tempered by deeply-rooted mistrust of the British climate and the British Government.

"I don't 'xpect nothing, Mr. Jellyband," he said. "Pore folks like us is of no account up there in Lunnon, I knows that, and it's not often as I do complain. But when it comes to sich wet weather in September, and all me fruit a-rottin' and a-dying' like the 'Guptian mother's first born, and doin' no more good than they did, pore dears, save a lot more Jews, pedlars and sich, with their oranges and sich like foreign ungodly fruit, which nobody'd buy if English apples and pears was nicely swelled. As the Scriptures say—"

"That's quite right, Mr. 'Empseed," retorted Jellyband, "and as I says, what can you 'xpect? There's all them Frenchy devils over the Channel yonder a-murderin' their king and nobility, and Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox and Mr. Burke a-fightin' and a-wranglin' between them, if we Englishmen should 'low them to go on in their ungodly way. 'Let 'em murder!' says Mr. Pitt. 'Stop 'em!' says Mr. Burke."

"And let 'em murder, says I, and be demmed to 'em," said Mr. Hempseed, emphatically, for he had but little liking for his friend Jellyband's political arguments, wherein he always got out of his depth, and had but little chance for displaying those pearls of wisdom which had earned for him so high a reputation in the neighbourhood and so many free tankards of ale at "The Fisherman's Rest."

"Let 'em murder," he repeated again, "but don't lets 'ave sich rain in September, for that is agin the law and the Scriptures which says—"

"Lud! Mr. 'Arry, 'ow you made me jump!"

It was unfortunate for Sally and her flirtation that this remark of hers should have occurred at the precise moment when Mr. Hempseed was collecting his breath, in order to deliver himself one of those Scriptural utterances which made him famous, for it brought down upon her pretty head the full flood of her father's wrath.

"Now then, Sally, me girl, now then!" he said, trying to force a frown upon his good-humoured face, "stop that fooling with them young jackanapes and get on with the work."

"The work's gettin' on all ri', father."

But Mr. Jellyband was peremptory. He had other views for his buxom daughter, his only child, who would in God's good time become the owner of "The Fisherman's Rest," than to see her married to one of these young fellows who earned but a precarious livelihood with their net.

"Did ye hear me speak, me girl?" he said in that quiet tone, which no one inside the inn dared to disobey. "Get on with my Lord Tony's supper, for, if it ain't the best we can do, and 'e not satisfied, see what you'll get, that's all."

Reluctantly Sally obeyed.

"Is you 'xpecting special guests then to-night, Mr. Jellyband?" asked Jimmy Pitkin, in a loyal attempt to divert his host's attention from the circumstances connected with Sally's exit from the room.

"Aye! that I be," replied Jellyband, "friends of my Lord Tony hisself. Dukes and duchesses from over the water yonder, whom the young lord and his friend, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, and other young noblemen have helped out of the clutches of them murderin' devils."

But this was too much for Mr. Hempseed's querulous philosophy.

"Lud!" he said, "what do they do that for, I wonder? I don't 'old not with interferin' in other folks' ways. As the Scriptures say—"

"Maybe, Mr. 'Empseed," interrupted Jellyband, with biting sarcasm, "as you're a personal friend of Mr. Pitt, and as you says along with Mr. Fox: 'Let 'em murder!' says you."

"Pardon me, Mr. Jellyband," feebly protested Mr. Hempseed, "I dunno as I ever did."

But Mr. Jellyband had at last succeeded in getting upon his favourite hobby-horse, and had no intention of dismounting in any hurry. "Or maybe you've made friends with some of them French chaps 'oo they do say have come over here o' purpose to make us Englishmen agree with their murderin' ways."

"I dunno what you mean, Mr. Jellyband," suggested Mr. Hempseed, "all I know is—"

"All I know is," loudly asserted mine host, "that there was my friend Peppercorn, 'oo owns the 'Blue-Faced Boar,' an' as true and loyal an Englishman as you'd see in the land. And now look at 'im!— 'E made friends with some o' them frog-eaters, 'obnobbed with them just as if they was Englishmen, and not just a lot of immoral, Godforsaking furrin' spies. Well! and what happened? Peppercorn 'e now ups and talks of revolutions, and liberty, and down with the aristocrats, just like Mr. 'Empseed over 'ere!"

"Pardon me, Mr. Jellyband," again interposed Mr. Hempseed feebly, "I dunno as I ever did—"

Mr. Jellyband had appealed to the company in general, who were listening awe-struck and open-mouthed at the recital of Mr. Peppercorn's defalcations. At one table two customers — gentlemen apparently by their clothes — had pushed aside their half-finished game of dominoes, and had been listening for some time, and evidently with much amusement at Mr. Jellyband's international opinions. One of them now, with a quiet, sarcastic smile still lurking round the corners of his mobile mouth, turned towards the centre of the room where Mr. Jellyband was standing.

"You seem to think, mine honest friend," he said quietly, "that these Frenchmen, — spies I think you called them — are mighty clever fellows to have made mincemeat so to speak of your friend Mr. Peppercorn's opinions. How did they accomplish that now, think you?"

"Lud! sir, I suppose they talked 'im over. Those Frenchies, I've 'eard it said, 'ave got the gift of gab — and Mr. 'Empseed 'ere will tell you 'ow it is that they just twist some people round their little finger like."

"Indeed, and is that so, Mr. Hempseed?" inquired the stranger politely.

"Nay, sir!" replied Mr. Hempseed, much irritated, "I dunno as I can give you the information you require."

"Faith, then," said the stranger, "let us hope, my worthy host, that these clever spies will not succeed in upsetting your extremely loyal opinions."

But this was too much for Mr. Jellyband's pleasant equanimity. He burst into an uproarious fit of laughter, which was soon echoed by those who happened to be in his debt.

"Hahaha! hohoho! hehehe!" He laughed in every key, did my worthy host, and laughed until his sides ached, and his eyes streamed. "At me! hark at that! Did ye 'ear 'im say that they'd be upsettin' my opinions? — Eh? — Lud love you, sir, but you do say some queer things."

"Well, Mr. Jellyband," said Mr. Hempseed, sententiously, "you know what the Scriptures say: 'Let 'im 'oo stands take 'eed lest 'e fall.'"

"But then hark'ee Mr. 'Empseed," retorted Jellyband, still holding his sides with laughter, "the Scriptures didn't know me. Why, I wouldn't so much as drink a glass of ale with one o' them murderin' Frenchmen, and nothin' 'd make me change my opinions. Why! I've 'eard it said that them frog-eaters can't even speak the King's English, so, of course, if any of 'em tried to speak their God-forsaken lingo to me, why, I should spot them directly, see! — and forewarned is forearmed, as the saying goes."

"Aye! my honest friend," assented the stranger cheerfully, "I see that you are much too sharp, and a match for any twenty Frenchmen, and here's to your very good health, my worthy host, if you'll do me the honour to finish this bottle of mine with me."

"I am sure you're very polite, sir," said Mr. Jellyband, wiping his eyes which were still streaming with the abundance of his laughter, "and I don't mind if I do."

The stranger poured out a couple of tankards full of wine, and having offered one to mine host, he took the other himself.

"Loyal Englishmen as we all are," he said, whilst the same humorous smile played round the corners of his thin lips — "loyal as we are, we must admit that this at least is one good thing which comes to us from France."

"Aye! we'll none of us deny that, sir," assented mine host.

"And here's to the best landlord in England, our worthy host, Mr. Jellyband," said the stranger in a loud tone of voice.

"Hi, hip, hurrah!" retorted the whole company present. Then there was a loud clapping of hands, and mugs and tankards made a rattling music upon the tables to the accompaniment of loud laughter at nothing in particular, and of Mr. Jellyband's muttered exclamations:

"Just fancy ME bein' talked over by any God-forsaken furriner! — What? — Lud love you, sir, but you do say some queer things."

To which obvious fact the stranger heartily assented. It was certainly a preposterous suggestion that anyone could ever upset Mr. Jellyband's firmly-rooted opinions anent the utter worthlessness of the inhabitants of the whole continent of Europe.

CHAPTER III THE REFUGEES

Feeling in every part of England certainly ran very high at this time against the French and their doings. Smugglers and legitimate traders between the French and the English coasts brought snatches of news from over the water, which made every honest Englishman's blood boil, and made him long to have "a good go" at those murderers, who had imprisoned their king and all his family, subjected the queen and the royal children to every species of indignity, and were even now loudly demanding the blood of the whole Bourbon family and of every one of its adherents.

The execution of the Princesse de Lamballe, Marie Antoinette's young and charming friend, had filled every one in England with unspeakable horror, the daily execution of scores of royalists of good family, whose only sin was their aristocratic name, seemed to cry for vengeance to the whole of civilised Europe.

Yet, with all that, no one dared to interfere. Burke had exhausted all his eloquence in trying to induce the British Government to fight the revolutionary government of France, but Mr. Pitt, with characteristic prudence, did not feel that this country was fit yet to embark on another arduous and costly war. It was for Austria to take the initiative; Austria, whose fairest daughter was even now a dethroned queen, imprisoned and insulted by a howling mob; surely 'twas not — so argued Mr. Fox — for the whole of England to take up arms, because one set of Frenchmen chose to murder another.

As for Mr. Jellyband and his fellow John Bulls, though they looked upon all foreigners with withering contempt, they were royalist and anti-revolutionists to a man, and at this present moment were furious with Pitt for his caution and moderation, although they naturally understood nothing of the diplomatic reasons which guided that great man's policy.

By now Sally came running back, very excited and very eager. The joyous company in the coffee-room had heard nothing of the noise outside, but she had spied a dripping horse and rider who had stopped at the door of "The Fisherman's Rest," and while the stable boy ran forward to take charge of the horse, pretty Miss Sally went to the front door to greet the welcome visitor. "I think I see'd my Lord Antony's horse out in the yard, father," she said, as she ran across the coffee-room.

But already the door had been thrown open from outside, and the next moment an arm, covered in drab cloth and dripping with the heavy rain, was round pretty Sally's waist, while a hearty voice echoed along the polished rafters of the coffee-room.

"Aye, and bless your brown eyes for being so sharp, my pretty Sally," said the man who had just entered, whilst worthy Mr. Jellyband came bustling forward, eager, alert and fussy, as became the advent of one of the most favoured guests of his hostel.

"Lud, I protest, Sally," added Lord Antony, as he deposited a kiss on Miss Sally's blooming cheeks, "but you are growing prettier and prettier every time I see you — and my honest friend, Jellyband here, have hard work to keep the fellows off that slim waist of yours. What say you, Mr. Waite?"

Mr. Waite — torn between his respect for my lord and his dislike of that particular type of joke — only replied with a doubtful grunt.

Lord Antony Dewhurst, one of the sons of the Duke of Exeter, was in those days a very perfect type of a young English gentleman — tall, well set-up, broad of shoulders and merry of face, his laughter rang loudly wherever he went. A good sportsman, a lively companion, a courteous, well-bred man of the world, with not too much brains to spoil his temper, he was a universal favourite in London drawing-rooms or in the coffee-rooms of village inns. At "The Fisherman's Rest" everyone knew him — for he was fond of a trip across to France, and always spent a night under worthy Mr. Jellyband's roof on his way there or back.

He nodded to Waite, Pitkin and the others as he at last released Sally's waist, and crossed over to the hearth to warm and dry himself: as he did so, he cast a quick, somewhat suspicious glance at the two strangers, who had quietly resumed their game of dominoes, and for a moment a look of deep earnestness, even of anxiety, clouded his jovial young face.

But only for a moment; the next he turned to Mr. Hempseed, who was respectfully touching his forelock.

"Well, Mr. Hempseed, and how is the fruit?"

"Badly, my lord, badly," replied Mr. Hempseed, dolefully, "but what can you 'xpect with this 'ere government favourin' them rascals over in France, who would murder their king and all their nobility."

"Odd's life!" retorted Lord Antony; "so they would, honest Hempseed, — at least those they can get hold of, worse luck! But we have got some friends coming here to-night, who at any rate have evaded their clutches."

It almost seemed, when the young man said these words, as if he threw a defiant look towards the quiet strangers in the corner.

"Thanks to you, my lord, and to your friends, so I've heard it said," said Mr. Jellyband.

But in a moment Lord Antony's hand fell warningly on mine host's arm.

"Hush!" he said peremptorily, and instinctively once again looked towards the strangers.

"Oh! Lud love you, they are all right, my lord," retorted Jellyband; "don't you be afraid. I wouldn't have spoken, only I knew we were among friends. That gentleman over there is as true and loyal a subject of King George as you are yourself, my lord saving your presence. He is but lately arrived in Dover, and is setting down in business in these parts."

"In business? Faith, then, it must be as an undertaker, for I vow I never beheld a more rueful countenance."

"Nay, my lord, I believe that the gentleman is a widower, which no doubt would account for the melancholy of his bearing — but he is a friend, nevertheless, I'll vouch for that — and you will own, my lord, that who should judge of a face better than the landlord of a popular inn—"

"Oh, that's all right, then, if we are among friends," said Lord Antony, who evidently did not care to discuss the subject with his host. "But, tell me, you have no one else staying here, have you?"

"No one, my lord, and no one coming, either, leastways—"

"Leastways?"

"No one your lordship would object to, I know."

"Who is it?"

"Well, my lord, Sir Percy Blakeney and his lady will be here presently, but they ain't a-goin' to stay—"

"Lady Blakeney?" queried Lord Antony, in some astonishment.

"Aye, my lord. Sir Percy's skipper was here just now. He says that my lady's brother is crossing over to France to-day in the DAY DREAM, which is Sir Percy's yacht, and Sir Percy and my lady will come with him as far as here to see the last of him. It don't put you out, do it, my lord?"

"No, no, it doesn't put me out, friend; nothing will put me out, unless that supper is not the very best which Miss Sally can cook, and which has ever been served in 'The Fisherman's Rest.'"

"You need have no fear of that, my lord," said Sally, who all this while had been busy setting the table for supper. And very gay and inviting it looked, with a large bunch of brilliantly coloured dahlias in the centre, and the bright pewter goblets and blue china about.

"How many shall I lay for, my lord?"

"Five places, pretty Sally, but let the supper be enough for ten at least — our friends will be tired, and, I hope, hungry. As for me, I vow I could demolish a baron of beef to-night."

"Here they are, I do believe," said Sally excitedly, as a distant clatter of horses and wheels could now be distinctly heard, drawing rapidly nearer.

There was a general commotion in the coffee-room. Everyone was curious to see my Lord Antony's swell friends from over the water. Miss Sally cast one or two quick glances at the little bit of mirror which hung on the wall, and worthy Mr. Jellyband bustled out in order to give the first welcome himself to his distinguished guests. Only the two strangers in the corner did not participate in the general excitement. They were calmly finishing their game of dominoes, and did not even look once towards the door.

"Straight ahead, Comtesse, the door on your right," said a pleasant voice outside.

"Aye! there they are, all right enough," said Lord Antony, joyfully; "off with you, my pretty Sally, and see how quick you can dish up the soup."

The door was thrown wide open, and, preceded by Mr. Jellyband, who was profuse in his bows and welcomes, a party of four — two ladies and two gentlemen — entered the coffee-room.

"Welcome! Welcome to old England!" said Lord Antony, effusively, as he came eagerly forward with both hands outstretched towards the newcomers.

"Ah, you are Lord Antony Dewhurst, I think," said one of the ladies, speaking with a strong foreign accent.

"At your service, Madame," he replied, as he ceremoniously kissed the hands of both the ladies, then turned to the men and shook them both warmly by the hand.

Sally was already helping the ladies to take off their travelling cloaks, and both turned, with a shiver, towards the brightly-blazing hearth.

There was a general movement among the company in the coffee-room. Sally had bustled off to her kitchen whilst Jellyband, still profuse with his respectful salutations, arranged one or two chairs around the fire. Mr. Hempseed, touching his forelock, was quietly vacating the seat in the hearth. Everyone was staring curiously, yet deferentially, at the foreigners.

"Ah, Messieurs! what can I say?" said the elder of the two ladies, as she stretched a pair of fine, aristocratic hands to the warmth of the blaze, and looked with unspeakable gratitude first at Lord Antony, then at one of the young men who had accompanied her party, and who was busy divesting himself of his heavy, caped coat.

"Only that you are glad to be in England, Comtesse," replied Lord Antony, "and that you have not suffered too much from your trying voyage."

"Indeed, indeed, we are glad to be in England," she said, while her eyes filled with tears, "and we have already forgotten all that we have suffered."

Her voice was musical and low, and there was a great deal of calm dignity and of many sufferings nobly endured marked in the handsome, aristocratic face, with its wealth of snowy-white hair dressed high above the forehead, after the fashion of the times.

"I hope my friend, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, proved an entertaining travelling companion, madame?"

"Ah, indeed, Sir Andrew was kindness itself. How could my children and I ever show enough gratitude to you all, Messieurs?"

Her companion, a dainty, girlish figure, childlike and pathetic in its look of fatigue and of sorrow, had said nothing as yet, but her eyes, large, brown, and full of tears, looked up from the fire and sought those of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, who had drawn near to the hearth and to her; then, as they met his, which were fixed with unconcealed admiration upon the sweet face before him, a thought of warmer colour rushed up to her pale cheeks.

"So this is England," she said, as she looked round with childlike curiosity at the great hearth, the oak rafters, and the yokels with their elaborate smocks and jovial, rubicund, British countenances.

"A bit of it, Mademoiselle," replied Sir Andrew, smiling, "but all of it, at your service."

The young girl blushed again, but this time a bright smile, fleet and sweet, illumined her dainty face. She said nothing, and Sir Andrew too was silent, yet those two young people understood one another, as young people have a way of doing all the world over, and have done since the world began.

"But, I say, supper!" here broke in Lord Antony's jovial voice, "supper, honest Jellyband. Where is that pretty wench of yours and the dish of soup? Zooks, man, while you stand there gaping at the ladies, they will faint with hunger."

"One moment! one moment, my lord," said Jellyband, as he threw open the door that led to the kitchen and shouted lustily: "Sally! Hey, Sally there, are ye ready, my girl?"

Sally was ready, and the next moment she appeared in the doorway carrying a gigantic tureen, from which rose a cloud of steam and an abundance of savoury odour.

"Odd's life, supper at last!" ejaculated Lord Antony, merrily, as he gallantly offered his arm to the Comtesse.

"May I have the honour?" he added ceremoniously, as he led her towards the supper table.

There was a general bustle in the coffee-room: Mr. Hempseed and most of the yokels and fisher-folk had gone to make way for "the quality," and to finish smoking their pipes elsewhere. Only the two strangers stayed on, quietly and unconcernedly playing their game

of dominoes and sipping their wine; whilst at another table Harry Waite, who was fast losing his temper, watched pretty Sally bustling round the table.

She looked a very dainty picture of English rural life, and no wonder that the susceptible young Frenchman could scarce take his eyes off her pretty face. The Vicomte de Tournay was scarce nineteen, a beardless boy, on whom terrible tragedies which were being enacted in his own country had made but little impression. He was elegantly and even foppishly dressed, and once safely landed in England he was evidently ready to forget the horrors of the Revolution in the delights of English life.

"Pardi, if zis is England," he said as he continued to ogle Sally with marked satisfaction, "I am of it satisfied."

It would be impossible at this point to record the exact exclamation which escaped through Mr. Harry Waite's clenched teeth. Only respect for "the quality," and notably for my Lord Antony, kept his marked disapproval of the young foreigner in check.

"Nay, but this IS England, you abandoned young reprobate," interposed Lord Antony with a laugh, "and do not, I pray, bring your loose foreign ways into this most moral country."

Lord Antony had already sat down at the head of the table with the Comtesse on his right. Jellyband was bustling round, filling glasses and putting chairs straight. Sally waited, ready to hand round the soup. Mr. Harry Waite's friends had at last succeeded in taking him out of the room, for his temper was growing more and more violent under the Vicomte's obvious admiration for Sally.

"Suzanne," came in stern, commanding accents from the rigid Comtesse.

Suzanne blushed again; she had lost count of time and of place whilst she had stood beside the fire, allowing the handsome young Englishman's eyes to dwell upon her sweet face, and his hand, as if unconsciously, to rest upon hers. Her mother's voice brought her back to reality once more, and with a submissive "Yes, Mama," she took her place at the supper table.

CHAPTER IV THE LEAGUE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

They all looked a merry, even a happy party, as they sat round the table; Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst, two typical good-looking, well-born and well-bred Englishmen of that year of grace 1792, and the aristocratic French comtesse with her two children, who had just escaped from such dire perils, and found a safe retreat at last on the shores of protecting England.

In the corner the two strangers had apparently finished their game; one of them arose, and standing with his back to the merry company at the table, he adjusted with much deliberation his large triple caped coat. As he did so, he gave one quick glance all around him. Everyone was busy laughing and chatting, and he murmured the words "All safe!": his companion then, with the alertness borne of long practice, slipped on to his knees in a moment, and the next had crept noiselessly under the oak bench. The stranger then, with a loud "Good-night," quietly walked out of the coffee-room.

Not one of those at the supper table had noticed this curious and silent manoeuvre, but when the stranger finally closed the door of the coffee-room behind him, they all instinctively sighed a sigh of relief.

"Alone, at last!" said Lord Antony, jovially.

Then the young Vicomte de Tournay rose, glass in hand, and with the graceful affection peculiar to the times, he raised it aloft, and said in broken English, —

"To His Majesty George Three of England. God bless him for his hospitality to us all, poor exiles from France."

"His Majesty the King!" echoed Lord Antony and Sir Andrew as they drank loyally to the toast.

"To His Majesty King Louis of France," added Sir Andrew, with solemnity. "May God protect him, and give him victory over his enemies."

Everyone rose and drank this toast in silence. The fate of the unfortunate King of France, then a prisoner of his own people, seemed to cast a gloom even over Mr. Jellyband's pleasant countenance.

"And to M. le Comte de Tournay de Basserive," said Lord Antony, merrily. "May we welcome him in England before many days are over."

"Ah, Monsieur," said the Comtesse, as with a slightly trembling hand she conveyed her glass to her lips, "I scarcely dare to hope."

But already Lord Antony had served out the soup, and for the next few moments all conversation ceased, while Jellyband and Sally handed round the plates and everyone began to eat.

"Faith, Madame!" said Lord Antony, after a while, "mine was no idle toast; seeing yourself, Mademoiselle Suzanne and my friend the Vicomte safely in England now, surely you must feel reassured as to the fate of Monsieur le Comte."

"Ah, Monsieur," replied the Comtesse, with a heavy sigh, "I trust in God — I can but pray — and hope . . ."

"Aye, Madame!" here interposed Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, "trust in God by all means, but believe also a little in your English friends, who have sworn to bring the Count safely across the Channel, even as they have brought you to-day."

"Indeed, indeed, Monsieur," she replied, "I have the fullest confidence in you and your friends. Your fame, I assure you, has spread throughout the whole of France. The way some of my own friends have escaped from the clutches of that awful revolutionary tribunal was nothing short of a miracle — and all done by you and your friends—"

"We were but the hands, Madame la Comtesse . . ."

"But my husband, Monsieur," said the Comtesse, whilst unshed tears seemed to veil her voice, "he is in such deadly peril — I would never have left him, only . . . there were my children . . . I was torn between my duty to him, and to them. They refused to go without me . . . and you and your friends assured me so solemnly that my husband would be safe. But, oh! now that I am here — amongst you all — in this beautiful, free England — I think of him, flying for his life, hunted like a poor beast . . . in such peril . . . Ah! I should not have left him . . . I should not have left him! . . ."

The poor woman had completely broken down; fatigue, sorrow and emotion had overmastered her rigid, aristocratic bearing. She was crying gently to herself, whilst Suzanne ran up to her and tried to kiss away her tears.

Lord Antony and Sir Andrew had said nothing to interrupt the Comtesse whilst she was speaking. There was no doubt that they felt deeply for her; their very silence testified to that — but in every century, and ever since England has been what it is, an Englishman has always felt somewhat ashamed of his own emotion and of his own sympathy. And so the two young men said nothing, and busied themselves in trying to hide their feelings, only succeeding in looking immeasurably sheepish.

"As for me, Monsieur," said Suzanne, suddenly, as she looked through a wealth of brown curls across at Sir Andrew, "I trust you absolutely, and I KNOW that you will bring my dear father safely to England, just as you brought us to-day."

This was said with so much confidence, such unuttered hope and belief, that it seemed as if by magic to dry the mother's eyes, and to bring a smile upon everybody's lips.

"Nay! You shame me, Mademoiselle," replied Sir Andrew; "though my life is at your service, I have been but a humble tool in the hands of our great leader, who organised and effected your escape."

He had spoken with so much warmth and vehemence that Suzanne's eyes fastened upon him in undisguised wonder.

"Your leader, Monsieur?" said the Comtesse, eagerly. "Ah! of course, you must have a leader. And I did not think of that before! But tell me where is he? I must go to him at once, and I and my children must throw ourselves at his feet, and thank him for all that he has done for us."

"Alas, Madame!" said Lord Antony, "that is impossible."

"Impossible? — Why?"

"Because the Scarlet Pimpernel works in the dark, and his identity is only known under the solemn oath of secrecy to his immediate followers."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel?" said Suzanne, with a merry laugh. "Why! what a droll name! What is the Scarlet Pimpernel, Monsieur?"

She looked at Sir Andrew with eager curiosity. The young man's face had become almost transfigured. His eyes shone with enthusiasm; hero-worship, love, admiration for his leader seemed literally to glow upon his face. "The Scarlet Pimpernel,

Mademoiselle," he said at last "is the name of a humble English wayside flower; but it is also the name chosen to hide the identity of the best and bravest man in all the world, so that he may better succeed in accomplishing the noble task he has set himself to do."

"Ah, yes," here interposed the young Vicomte, "I have heard speak of this Scarlet Pimpernel. A little flower — red? — yes! They say in Paris that every time a royalist escapes to England that devil, Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, receives a paper with that little flower designated in red upon it. . . . Yes?"

"Yes, that is so," assented Lord Antony.

"Then he will have received one such paper to-day?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Oh! I wonder what he will say!" said Suzanne, merrily. "I have heard that the picture of that little red flower is the only thing that frightens him."

"Faith, then," said Sir Andrew, "he will have many more opportunities of studying the shape of that small scarlet flower."

"Ah, monsieur," sighed the Comtesse, "it all sounds like a romance, and I cannot understand it all."

"Why should you try, Madame?"

"But, tell me, why should your leader — why should you all — spend your money and risk your lives — for it is your lives you risk, Messieurs, when you set foot in France — and all for us French men and women, who are nothing to you?"

"Sport, Madame la Comtesse, sport," asserted Lord Antony, with his jovial, loud and pleasant voice; "we are a nation of sportsmen, you know, and just now it is the fashion to pull the hare from between the teeth of the hound."

"Ah, no, no, not sport only, Monsieur . . . you have a more noble motive, I am sure for the good work you do."

"Faith, Madame, I would like you to find it then . . . as for me, I vow, I love the game, for this is the finest sport I have yet encountered. — Hair-breath escapes . . . the devil's own risks! — Tally ho! — and away we go!"

But the Comtesse shook her head, still incredulously. To her it seemed preposterous that these young men and their great leader, all of them rich, probably wellborn, and young, should for no other motive than sport, run the terrible risks, which she knew they were constantly doing. Their nationality, once they had set foot in France, would be no safeguard to them. Anyone found harbouring or assisting suspected royalists would be ruthlessly condemned and summarily executed, whatever his nationality might be. And this band of young Englishmen had, to her own knowledge, bearded the implacable and bloodthirsty tribunal of the Revolution, within the very walls of Paris itself, and had snatched away condemned victims, almost from the very foot of the guillotine. With a shudder, she recalled the events of the last few days, her escape from Paris with her two children, all three of them hidden beneath the hood of a rickety cart, and lying amidst a heap of turnips and cabbages, not daring to breathe, whilst the mob howled, "A la lanterne les aristos!" at the awful West Barricade.

It had all occurred in such a miraculous way; she and her husband had understood that they had been placed on the list of "suspected persons," which meant that their trial and death were but a matter of days — of hours, perhaps.

Then came the hope of salvation; the mysterious epistle, signed with the enigmatical scarlet device; the clear, peremptory directions; the parting from the Comte de Tournay, which had torn the poor wife's heart in two; the hope of reunion; the flight with her two children; the covered cart; that awful hag driving it, who looked like some horrible evil demon, with the ghastly trophy on her whip handle!

The Comtesse looked round at the quaint, old-fashioned English inn, the peace of this land of civil and religious liberty, and she closed her eyes to shut out the haunting vision of that West Barricade, and of the mob retreating panic-stricken when the old hag spoke of the plague.

Every moment under that cart she expected recognition, arrest, herself and her children tried and condemned, and these young Englishmen, under the guidance of their brave and mysterious leader, had risked their lives to save them all, as they had already saved scores of other innocent people.

And all only for sport? Impossible! Suzanne's eyes as she sought those of Sir Andrew plainly told him that she thought that HE at any rate rescued his fellowmen from terrible and unmerited death, through a higher and nobler motive than his friend would have her believe.

"How many are there in your brave league, Monsieur?" she asked timidly.

"Twenty all told, Mademoiselle," he replied, "one to command, and nineteen to obey. All of us Englishmen, and all pledged to the same cause — to obey our leader and to rescue the innocent."

"May God protect you all, Messieurs," said the Comtesse, fervently.

"He had done that so far, Madame."

"It is wonderful to me, wonderful! — That you should all be so brave, so devoted to your fellowmen — yet you are English! — and in France treachery is rife — all in the name of liberty and fraternity."

"The women even, in France, have been more bitter against us aristocrats than the men," said the Vicomte, with a sigh.

"Ah, yes," added the Comtesse, while a look of haughty disdain and intense bitterness shot through her melancholy eyes, "There was that woman, Marguerite St. Just for instance. She denounced the Marquis de St. Cyr and all his family to the awful tribunal of the Terror."

"Marguerite St. Just?" said Lord Antony, as he shot a quick and apprehensive glance across at Sir Andrew.

"Marguerite St. Just? — Surely . . ."

"Yes!" replied the Comtesse, "surely you know her. She was a leading actress of the Comedie Francaise, and she married an Englishman lately. You must know her—"

"Know her?" said Lord Antony. "Know Lady Blakeney — the most fashionable woman in London — the wife of the richest man in England? Of course, we all know Lady Blakeney."

"She was a school-fellow of mine at the convent in Paris," interposed Suzanne, "and we came over to England together to learn your language. I was very fond of Marguerite, and I cannot believe that she ever did anything so wicked."

"It certainly seems incredible," said Sir Andrew. "You say that she actually denounced the Marquis de St. Cyr? Why should she have done such a thing? Surely there must be some mistake—"

"No mistake is possible, Monsieur," rejoined the Comtesse, coldly. "Marguerite St. Just's brother is a noted republican. There was some talk of a family feud between him and my cousin, the Marquis de St. Cyr. The St. Justs are quite plebeian, and the republican government employs many spies. I assure you there is no mistake. . . . You had not heard this story?"

"Faith, Madame, I did hear some vague rumours of it, but in England no one would credit it. . . . Sir Percy Blakeney, her husband, is a very wealthy man, of high social position, the intimate friend of the Prince of Wales . . . and Lady Blakeney leads both fashion and society in London."

"That may be, Monsieur, and we shall, of course, lead a very quiet life in England, but I pray God that while I remain in this beautiful country, I may never meet Marguerite St. Just."

The proverbial wet-blanket seemed to have fallen over the merry little company gathered round the table. Suzanne looked sad and silent; Sir Andrew fidgeted uneasily with his fork, whilst the Comtesse, encased in the plate-armour of her aristocratic prejudices, sat, rigid and unbending, in her straight-backed chair. As for Lord Antony, he looked extremely uncomfortable, and glanced once or twice apprehensively towards Jellyband, who looked just as uncomfortable as himself.

"At what time do you expect Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney?" he contrived to whisper unobserved, to mine host.

"Any moment, my lord," whispered Jellyband in reply.

Even as he spoke, a distant clatter was heard of an approaching coach; louder and louder it grew, one or two shouts became distinguishable, then the rattle of horses' hoofs on the uneven cobble stones, and the next moment a stable boy had thrown open the coffee-room door and rushed in excitedly.

"Sir Percy Blakeney and my lady," he shouted at the top of his voice, "they're just arriving."

And with more shouting, jingling of harness, and iron hoofs upon the stones, a magnificent coach, drawn by four superb bays, had halted outside the porch of "The Fisherman's Rest."

CHAPTER V MARGUERITE

In a moment the pleasant oak-raftered coffee-room of the inn became the scene of hopeless confusion and discomfort. At the first announcement made by the stable boy, Lord Antony, with a fashionable oath, had jumped up from his seat and was now giving many and confused directions to poor bewildered Jellyband, who seemed at his wits' end what to do.

"For goodness' sake, man," admonished his lordship, "try to keep Lady Blakeney talking outside for a moment while the ladies withdraw. Zounds!" he added, with another more emphatic oath, "this is most unfortunate."

"Quick Sally! the candles!" shouted Jellyband, as hopping about from one leg to another, he ran hither and thither, adding to the general discomfort of everybody.

The Comtesse, too, had risen to her feet: rigid and erect, trying to hide her excitement beneath more becoming SANG-FROID, she repeated mechanically, —

"I will not see her! — I will not see her!"

Outside, the excitement attendant upon the arrival of very important guests grew apace.

"Good-day, Sir Percy! — Good-day to your ladyship! Your servant, Sir Percy!" — was heard in one long, continued chorus, with alternate more feeble tones of — "Remember the poor blind man! of your charity, lady and gentleman!"

Then suddenly a singularly sweet voice was heard through all the din.

"Let the poor man be — and give him some supper at my expense."

The voice was low and musical, with a slight sing-song in it, and a faint SOUPCON of foreign intonation in the pronunciation of the consonants.

Everyone in the coffee-room heard it and paused instinctively, listening to it for a moment. Sally was holding the candles by the opposite door, which led to the bedrooms upstairs, and the Comtesse was in the act of beating a hasty retreat before that enemy who owned such a sweet musical voice; Suzanne reluctantly was preparing to follow her mother, while casting regretful glances towards the door, where she hoped still to see her dearly-beloved, erstwhile school-fellow.

Then Jellyband threw open the door, still stupidly and blindly hoping to avert the catastrophe, which he felt was in the air, and the same low, musical voice said, with a merry laugh and mock consternation, —

"B-r-r-r! I am as wet as a herring! DIEU! has anyone ever seen such a contemptible climate?"

"Suzanne, come with me at once — I wish it," said the Comtesse, peremptorily.

"Oh! Mama!" pleaded Suzanne.

"My lady . . . er . . . h'm! . . . my lady! . . ." came in feeble accents from Jellyband, who stood clumsily trying to bar the way.

"PARDIEU, my good man," said Lady Blakeney, with some impatience, "what are you standing in my way for, dancing about like a turkey with a sore foot? Let me get to the fire, I am perished with the cold."

And the next moment Lady Blakeney, gently pushing mine host on one side, had swept into the coffee-room.

There are many portraits and miniatures extant of Marguerite St. Just — Lady Blakeney as she was then — but it is doubtful if any of these really do her singular beauty justice. Tall, above the average, with magnificent presence and regal figure, it is small wonder that even the Comtesse paused for a moment in involuntary admiration before turning her back on so fascinating an apparition.

Marguerite Blakeney was then scarcely five-and-twenty, and her beauty was at its most dazzling stage. The large hat, with its undulating and waving plumes, threw a soft shadow across the classic brow with the aureole of auburn hair — free at the moment from any powder; the sweet, almost childlike mouth, the straight chiselled nose, round chin, and delicate throat, all seemed set off by the picturesque costume of the period. The rich blue velvet robe moulded in its every line the graceful contour of the figure, whilst one tiny hand held, with a dignity all its own, the tall stick adorned with a large bunch of ribbons which fashionable ladies of the period had taken to carrying recently.

With a quick glance all around the room, Marguerite Blakeney had taken stock of every one there. She nodded pleasantly to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, whilst extending a hand to Lord Antony.

"Hello! my Lord Tony, why — what are YOU doing here in Dover?" she said merrily.

Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned and faced the Comtesse and Suzanne. Her whole face lighted up with additional brightness, as she stretched out both arms towards the young girl.

"Why! if that isn't my little Suzanne over there. PARDIEU, little citizeness, how came you to be in England? And Madame too?"

She went up effusive to them both, with not a single touch of embarrassment in her manner or in her smile. Lord Tony and Sir Andrew watched the little scene with eager apprehension. English though they were, they had often been in France, and had mixed sufficiently with the French to realise the unbending hauteur, the bitter hatred with which the old NOBLESSE of France viewed all those who had helped to contribute to their downfall. Armand St. Just, the brother of beautiful Lady Blakeney — though known to hold moderate and conciliatory views — was an ardent republican; his feud with the ancient family of St. Cyr — the rights and wrongs of which no outsider ever knew — had culminated in the downfall, the almost total extinction of the latter. In France, St. Just and his party had triumphed, and here in England, face to face with these three refugees driven from their country, flying for their lives, bereft of all which centuries of luxury had given them, there stood a fair scion of those same republican families which had hurled down a throne, and uprooted an aristocracy whose origin was lost in the dim and distant vista of bygone centuries.

She stood there before them, in all the unconscious insolence of beauty, and stretched out her dainty hand to them, as if she would, by that one act, bridge over the conflict and bloodshed of the past decade.

"Suzanne, I forbid you to speak to that woman," said the Comtesse, sternly, as she placed a restraining hand upon her daughter's arm.

She had spoken in English, so that all might hear and understand; the two young English gentlemen, as well as the common innkeeper and his daughter. The latter literally gasped with horror at this foreign insolence, this impudence before her ladyship — who was English, now that she was Sir Percy's wife, and a friend of the Princess of Wales to boot.

As for Lord Antony and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, their very hearts seemed to stand still with horror at this gratuitous insult. One of them uttered an exclamation of appeal, the other one of warning, and instinctively both glanced hurriedly towards the door, whence a slow, drawly, not unpleasant voice had already been heard.

Alone among those present Marguerite Blakeney and the Comtesse de Tournay had remained seemingly unmoved. The latter, rigid, erect and defiant, with one hand still upon her daughter's arm, seemed the very personification of unbending pride. For the moment Marguerite's sweet face had become as white as the soft fichu which swathed her throat, and a very keen observer might have noted that the hand which held the tall, beribboned stick was clenched, and trembled somewhat.

But this was only momentary; the next instant the delicate eyebrows were raised slightly, the lips curved sarcastically upwards, the clear blue eyes looked straight at the rigid Comtesse, and with a slight shrug of the shoulders —

"Hoity-toity, citizeness," she said gaily, "what fly stings you, pray?"

"We are in England now, Madame," rejoined the Comtesse, coldly, "and I am at liberty to forbid my daughter to touch your hand in friendship. Come, Suzanne."

She beckoned to her daughter, and without another look at Marguerite Blakeney, but with a deep, old-fashioned curtsy to the two young men, she sailed majestically out of the room.

There was silence in the old inn parlour for a moment, as the rustle of the Comtesse's skirts died away down the passage. Marguerite, rigid as a statue followed with hard, set eyes the upright figure, as it disappeared through the doorway — but as little Suzanne, humble and obedient, was about to follow her mother, the hard, set expression suddenly vanished, and a wistful, almost pathetic and childlike look stole into Lady Blakeney's eyes.

Little Suzanne caught that look; the child's sweet nature went out to the beautiful woman, scarcely older than herself; filial obedience vanished before girlish sympathy; at the door she turned, ran back to Marguerite, and putting her arms round her, kissed her effusively; then only did she follow her mother, Sally bringing up the rear, with a final curtsy to my lady.

Suzanne's sweet and dainty impulse had relieved the unpleasant tension. Sir Andrew's eyes followed the pretty little figure, until it had quite disappeared, then they met Lady Blakeney's with unassumed merriment.

Marguerite, with dainty affection, had kissed her hand to the ladies, as they disappeared through the door, then a humorous smile began hovering round the corners of her mouth.

"So that's it, is it?" she said gaily. "La! Sir Andrew, did you ever see such an unpleasant person? I hope when I grow old I sha'n't look like that."

She gathered up her skirts and assuming a majestic gait, stalked towards the fireplace.

"Suzanne," she said, mimicking the Comtesse's voice, "I forbid you to speak to that woman!"

The laugh which accompanied this sally sounded perhaps a trifle forced and hard, but neither Sir Andrew nor Lord Tony were very keen observers. The mimicry was so perfect, the tone of the voice so accurately reproduced, that both the young men joined in a hearty cheerful "Bravo!"

"Ah! Lady Blakeney!" added Lord Tony, "how they must miss you at the Comedie Francaise, and how the Parisians must hate Sir Percy for having taken you away."

"Lud, man," rejoined Marguerite, with a shrug of her graceful shoulders, "'tis impossible to hate Sir Percy for anything; his witty sallies would disarm even Madame la Comtesse herself."

The young Vicomte, who had not elected to follow his mother in her dignified exit, now made a step forward, ready to champion the Comtesse should Lady Blakeney aim any further shafts at her. But before he could utter a preliminary word of protest, a pleasant though distinctly inane laugh, was heard from outside, and the next moment an unusually tall and very richly dressed figure appeared in the doorway.

CHAPTER VI AN EXQUISITE OF '92

Sir Percy Blakeney, as the chronicles of the time inform us, was in this year of grace 1792, still a year or two on the right side of thirty. Tall, above the average, even for an Englishman, broad-shouldered and massively built, he would have been called unusually good-looking, but for a certain lazy expression in his deep-set blue eyes, and that perpetual inane laugh which seemed to disfigure his strong, clearly-cut mouth.

It was nearly a year ago now that Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., one of the richest men in England, leader of all the fashions, and intimate friend of the Prince of Wales, had astonished fashionable society in London and Bath by bringing home, from one of his journeys abroad, a beautiful, fascinating, clever, French wife. He, the sleepest, dullest, most British Britisher that had ever set a pretty woman yawning, had secured a brilliant matrimonial prize for which, as all chroniclers aver, there had been many competitors.

Marguerite St. Just had first made her DEBUT in artistic Parisian circles, at the very moment when the greatest social upheaval the world has ever known was taking place within its very walls. Scarcely eighteen, lavishly gifted with beauty and talent, chaperoned only by a young and devoted brother, she had soon gathered round her, in her charming apartment in the Rue Richelieu, a coterie which was as brilliant as it was exclusive — exclusive, that is to say, only from one point of view. Marguerite St. Just was from principle and by conviction a republican — equality of birth was her motto — inequality of fortune was in her eyes a mere untoward accident, but the only inequality she admitted was that of talent. “Money and titles may be hereditary,” she would say, “but brains are not,” and thus her charming salon was reserved for originality and intellect, for brilliance and wit, for clever men and talented women, and the entrance into it was soon looked upon in the world of intellect — which even in those days and in those troublous times found its pivot in Paris — as the seal to an artistic career.

Clever men, distinguished men, and even men of exalted station formed a perpetual and brilliant court round the fascinating young actress of the Comedie Francaise, and she glided through republican, revolutionary, bloodthirsty Paris like a shining comet with a trail behind her of all that was most distinguished, most interesting, in intellectual Europe.

Then the climax came. Some smiled indulgently and called it an artistic eccentricity, others looked upon it as a wise provision, in view of the many events which were crowding thick and fast in Paris just then, but to all, the real motive of that climax remained a puzzle and a mystery. Anyway, Marguerite St. Just married Sir Percy Blakeney one fine day, just like that, without any warning to her friends, without a SOIREE DE CONTRAT or DINER DE FIANCAILLES or other appurtenances of a fashionable French wedding.

How that stupid, dull Englishman ever came to be admitted within the intellectual circle which revolved round “the cleverest woman in Europe,” as her friends unanimously called her, no one ventured to guess — golden key is said to open every door, asserted the more malignantly inclined.

Enough, she married him, and “the cleverest woman in Europe” had linked her fate to that “demmed idiot” Blakeney, and not even her most intimate friends could assign to this strange step any other motive than that of supreme eccentricity. Those friends who knew, laughed to scorn the idea that Marguerite St. Just had married a fool for the sake of the worldly advantages with which he might endow her. They knew, as a matter of fact, that Marguerite St. Just cared nothing about money, and still less about a title; moreover, there were at least half a dozen other men in the cosmopolitan world equally well-born, if not so wealthy as Blakeney, who would have been only too happy to give Marguerite St. Just any position she might choose to covet.

As for Sir Percy himself, he was universally voted to be totally unqualified for the onerous post he had taken upon himself. His chief qualifications for it seemed to consist in his blind adoration for her, his great wealth and the high favour in which he stood at the English court; but London society thought that, taking into consideration his own intellectual limitations, it would have been wiser on his part had he bestowed those worldly advantages upon a less brilliant and witty wife.

Although lately he had been so prominent a figure in fashionable English society, he had spent most of his early life abroad. His father, the late Sir Algernon Blakeney, had had the terrible misfortune of seeing an idolized young wife become hopelessly insane after two years of happy married life. Percy had just been born when the late Lady Blakeney fell prey to the terrible malady which in those days was looked upon as hopelessly incurable and nothing short of a curse of God upon the entire family. Sir Algernon took his afflicted young wife abroad, and there presumably Percy was educated, and grew up between an imbecile mother and a distracted father, until he attained his majority. The death of his parents following close upon one another left him a free man, and as Sir Algernon had led a forcibly simple and retired life, the large Blakeney fortune had increased tenfold.

Sir Percy Blakeney had travelled a great deal abroad, before he brought home his beautiful, young, French wife. The fashionable circles of the time were ready to receive them both with open arms; Sir Percy was rich, his wife was accomplished, the Prince of Wales took a very great liking to them both. Within six months they were the acknowledged leaders of fashion and of style. Sir Percy's coats were the talk of the town, his inanities were quoted, his foolish laugh copied by the gilded youth at Almack's or the Mall. Everyone knew that he was hopelessly stupid, but then that was scarcely to be wondered at, seeing that all the Blakeney's for generations had been notoriously dull, and that his mother died an imbecile.

Thus society accepted him, petted him, made much of him, since his horses were the finest in the country, his FETES and wines the most sought after. As for his marriage with “the cleverest woman in Europe,” well! the inevitable came with sure and rapid footsteps. No one pitied him, since his fate was of his own making. There were plenty of young ladies in England, of high birth and good looks, who would have been quite willing to help him to spend the Blakeney fortune, whilst smiling indulgently at his inanities and his good-humoured foolishness. Moreover, Sir Percy got no pity, because he seemed to require none — he seemed very proud of his clever wife, and to care little that she took no pains to disguise that good-natured contempt which she evidently felt for him, and that she even amused herself by sharpening her ready wits at his expense.

But then Blakeney was really too stupid to notice the ridicule with which his wife covered him, and if his matrimonial relations with the fascinating Parisienne had not turned out all that his hopes and his dog-like devotion for her had pictured, society could never do more than vaguely guess at it.

In his beautiful house at Richmond he played second fiddle to his clever wife with imperturbable BONHOMIE; he lavished jewels and luxuries of all kinds upon her, which she took with inimitable grace, dispensing the hospitality of his superb mansion with the same graciousness with which she had welcomed the intellectual coterie of Paris.

Physically, Sir Percy Blakeney was undeniably handsome — always excepting the lazy, bored look which was habitual to him. He was always irreproachable dressed, and wore the exaggerated “Incroyable” fashions, which had just crept across from Paris to England, with the perfect good taste innate in an English gentleman. On this special afternoon in September, in spite of the long journey by coach, in spite of rain and mud, his coat set irreproachably across his fine shoulders, his hands looked almost femininely white, as they emerged through billowy frills of finest Mechline lace: the extravagantly short-waisted satin coat, wide-lapelled waistcoat, and tight-fitting striped breeches, set off his massive figure to perfection, and in repose one might have admired so fine a specimen of English manhood, until the foppish ways, the affected movements, the perpetual inane laugh, brought one’s admiration of Sir Percy Blakeney to an abrupt close.

He had lolled into the old-fashioned inn parlour, shaking the wet off his fine overcoat; then putting up a gold-rimmed eye-glass to his lazy blue eye, he surveyed the company, upon whom an embarrassed silence had suddenly fallen.

“How do, Tony? How do, Ffoulkes?” he said, recognizing the two young men and shaking them by the hand. “Zounds, my dear fellow,” he added, smothering a slight yawn, “did you ever see such a beastly day? Demmed climate this.”

With a quaint little laugh, half of embarrassment and half of sarcasm, Marguerite had turned towards her husband, and was surveying him from head to foot, with an amused little twinkle in her merry blue eyes.

“La!” said Sir Percy, after a moment or two’s silence, as no one offered any comment, “how sheepish you all look . . . What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing, Sir Percy,” replied Marguerite, with a certain amount of gaiety, which, however, sounded somewhat forced, “nothing to disturb your equanimity — only an insult to your wife.”

The laugh which accompanied this remark was evidently intended to reassure Sir Percy as to the gravity of the incident. It apparently succeeded in that, for echoing the laugh, he rejoined placidly —

“La, m’dear! you don’t say so. Begad! who was the bold man who dared to tackle you — eh?”

Lord Tony tried to interpose, but had no time to do so, for the young Vicomte had already quickly stepped forward.

“Monsieur,” he said, prefixing his little speech with an elaborate bow, and speaking in broken English, “my mother, the Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive, has offended Madame, who, I see, is your wife. I cannot ask your pardon for my mother; what she does is right in my eyes. But I am ready to offer you the usual reparation between men of honour.”

The young man drew up his slim stature to its full height and looked very enthusiastic, very proud, and very hot as he gazed at six foot odd of gorgeousness, as represented by Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart.

“Lud, Sir Andrew,” said Marguerite, with one of her merry infectious laughs, “look on that pretty picture — the English turkey and the French bantam.”

The simile was quite perfect, and the English turkey looked down with complete bewilderment upon the dainty little French bantam, which hovered quite threateningly around him.

“La! sir,” said Sir Percy at last, putting up his eye glass and surveying the young Frenchman with undisguised wonderment, “where, in the cuckoo’s name, did you learn to speak English?”

“Monsieur!” protested the Vicomte, somewhat abashed at the way his warlike attitude had been taken by the ponderous-looking Englishman.

“I protest ’tis marvellous!” continued Sir Percy, imperturbably, “demmed marvellous! Don’t you think so, Tony — eh? I vow I can’t speak the French lingo like that. What?”

“Nay, I’ll vouch for that!” rejoined Marguerite, “Sir Percy has a British accent you could cut with a knife.”

“Monsieur,” interposed the Vicomte earnestly, and in still more broken English, “I fear you have not understand. I offer you the only posseeble reparation among gentlemen.”

“What the devil is that?” asked Sir Percy, blandly.

“My sword, Monsieur,” replied the Vicomte, who, though still bewildered, was beginning to lose his temper.

“You are a sportsman, Lord Tony,” said Marguerite, merrily; “ten to one on the little bantam.”

But Sir Percy was staring sleepily at the Vicomte for a moment or two, through his partly closed heavy lids, then he smothered another yawn, stretched his long limbs, and turned leisurely away.

“Lud love you, sir,” he muttered good-humouredly, “demmit, young man, what’s the good of your sword to me?”

What the Vicomte thought and felt at that moment, when that long-limbed Englishman treated him with such marked insolence, might fill volumes of sound reflections. . . . What he said resolved itself into a single articulate word, for all the others were choked in his throat by his surging wrath —

“A duel, Monsieur,” he stammered.

Once more Blakeney turned, and from his high altitude looked down on the choleric little man before him; but not even for a second did he seem to lose his own imperturbable good-humour. He laughed his own pleasant and inane laugh, and burying his slender, long hands into the capacious pockets of his overcoat, he said leisurely— “a bloodthirsty young ruffian, Do you want to make a hole in a law-abiding man? . . . As for me, sir, I never fight duels,” he added, as he placidly sat down and stretched his long, lazy legs out before him. “Demmed uncomfortable things, duels, ain’t they, Tony?”

Now the Vicomte had no doubt vaguely heard that in England the fashion of duelling amongst gentlemen had been surpressed by the law with a very stern hand; still to him, a Frenchman, whose notions of bravery and honour were based upon a code that had centuries of tradition to back it, the spectacle of a gentleman actually refusing to fight a duel was a little short of an enormity. In his mind he vaguely pondered whether he should strike that long-legged Englishman in the face and call him a coward, or whether such conduct in a lady’s presence might be deemed ungentlemanly, when Marguerite happily interposed.

“I pray you, Lord Tony,” she said in that gentle, sweet, musical voice of hers, “I pray you play the peacemaker. The child is bursting with rage, and,” she added with a SOUPCON of dry sarcasm, “might do Sir Percy an injury.” She laughed a mocking little laugh,

which, however, did not in the least disturb her husband's placid equanimity. "The British turkey has had the day," she said. "Sir Percy would provoke all the saints in the calendar and keep his temper the while."

But already Blakeney, good-humoured as ever, had joined in the laugh against himself.

"Demmed smart that now, wasn't it?" he said, turning pleasantly to the Vicomte. "Clever woman my wife, sir. . . . You will find THAT out if you live long enough in England."

"Sir Percy is right, Vicomte," here interposed Lord Antony, laying a friendly hand on the young Frenchman's shoulder. "It would hardly be fitting that you should commence your career in England by provoking him to a duel."

For a moment longer the Vicomte hesitated, then with a slight shrug of the shoulders directed against the extraordinary code of honour prevailing in this fog-ridden island, he said with becoming dignity, —

"Ah, well! if Monsieur is satisfied, I have no griefs. You mi'lor', are our protector. If I have done wrong, I withdraw myself."

"Aye, do!" rejoined Blakeney, with a long sigh of satisfaction, "withdraw yourself over there. Demmed excitable little puppy," he added under his breath, "Faith, Ffoulkes, if that's a specimen of the goods you and your friends bring over from France, my advice to you is, drop 'em 'mid Channel, my friend, or I shall have to see old Pitt about it, get him to clap on a prohibitive tariff, and put you in the stocks an you smuggle."

"La, Sir Percy, your chivalry misguides you," said Marguerite, coquettishly, "you forget that you yourself have imported one bundle of goods from France."

Blakeney slowly rose to his feet, and, making a deep and elaborate bow before his wife, he said with consummate gallantry, —

"I had the pick of the market, Madame, and my taste is unerring."

"More so than your chivalry, I fear," she retorted sarcastically.

"Odd's life, m'dear! be reasonable! Do you think I am going to allow my body to be made a pincushion of, by every little frog-eater who don't like the shape of your nose?"

"Lud, Sir Percy!" laughed Lady Blakeney as she bobbed him a quaint and pretty curtsey, "you need not be afraid! 'Tis not the MEN who dislike the shape of my nose."

"Afraid be demmed! Do you impugn my bravery, Madame? I don't patronise the ring for nothing, do I, Tony? I've put up the fists with Red Sam before now, and — and he didn't get it all his own way either—"

"S'faith, Sir Percy," said Marguerite, with a long and merry laugh, that went echoing along the old oak rafters of the parlour, "I would I had seen you then . . . ha! ha! ha! ha! — you must have looked a pretty picture . . . and . . . and to be afraid of a little French boy . . . ha! ha! . . . ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha! ha! he! he! he!" echoed Sir Percy, good-humouredly. "La, Madame, you honour me! Zooks! Ffoulkes, mark ye that! I have made my wife laugh! — The cleverest woman in Europe! . . . Odd's fish, we must have a bowl on that!" and he tapped vigorously on the table near him. "Hey! Jelly! Quick, man! Here, Jelly!"

Harmony was once more restored. Mr. Jellyband, with a mighty effort, recovered himself from the many emotions he had experienced within the last half hour. "A bowl of punch, Jelly, hot and strong, eh?" said Sir Percy. "The wits that have just made a clever woman laugh must be whetted! Ha! ha! ha! Hasten, my good Jelly!"

"Nay, there is no time, Sir Percy," interposed Marguerite. "The skipper will be here directly and my brother must get on board, or the DAY DREAM will miss the tide."

"Time, m'dear? There is plenty of time for any gentleman to get drunk and get on board before the turn of the tide."

"I think, your ladyship," said Jellyband, respectfully, "that the young gentleman is coming along now with Sir Percy's skipper."

"That's right," said Blakeney, "then Armand can join us in the merry bowl. Think you, Tony," he added, turning towards the Vicomte, "that the jackanapes of yours will join us in a glass? Tell him that we drink in token of reconciliation."

"In fact you are all such merry company," said Marguerite, "that I trust you will forgive me if I bid my brother good-bye in another room."

It would have been bad form to protest. Both Lord Antony and Sir Andrew felt that Lady Blakeney could not altogether be in tune with them at the moment. Her love for her brother, Armand St. Just, was deep and touching in the extreme. He had just spent a few weeks with her in her English home, and was going back to serve his country, at the moment when death was the usual reward for the most enduring devotion.

Sir Percy also made no attempt to detain his wife. With that perfect, somewhat affected gallantry which characterised his every movement, he opened the coffee-room door for her, and made her the most approved and elaborate bow, which the fashion of the time dictated, as she sailed out of the room without bestowing on him more than a passing, slightly contemptuous glance. Only Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, whose every thought since he had met Suzanne de Tournay seemed keener, more gentle, more innately sympathetic, noted the curious look of intense longing, of deep and hopeless passion, with which the inane and flippant Sir Percy followed the retreating figure of his brilliant wife.

CHAPTER VII THE SECRET ORCHARD

Once outside the noisy coffee-room, alone in the dimly-lighted passage, Marguerite Blakeney seemed to breathe more freely. She heaved a deep sigh, like one who had long been oppressed with the heavy weight of constant self-control, and she allowed a few tears to fall unheeded down her cheeks.

Outside the rain had ceased, and through the swiftly passing clouds, the pale rays of an after-storm sun shone upon the beautiful white coast of Kent and the quaint, irregular houses that clustered round the Admiralty Pier. Marguerite Blakeney stepped on to the porch and looked out to sea. Silhouetted against the ever-changing sky, a graceful schooner, with white sails set, was gently dancing in the breeze. The DAY DREAM it was, Sir Percy Blakeney's yacht, which was ready to take Armand St. Just back to France into the very midst of that seething, bloody Revolution which was overthrowing a monarchy, attacking a religion, destroying a society, in order to try and rebuild upon the ashes of tradition a new Utopia, of which a few men dreamed, but which none had the power to establish.

In the distance two figures were approaching "The Fisherman's Rest": one, an oldish man, with a curious fringe of grey hairs round a rotund and massive chin, and who walked with that peculiar rolling gait which invariably betrays the seafaring man: the other, a young, slight figure, neatly and becomingly dressed in a dark, many caped overcoat; he was clean-shaved, and his dark hair was taken well back over a clear and noble forehead.

"Armand!" said Marguerite Blakeney, as soon as she saw him approaching from the distance, and a happy smile shone on her sweet face, even through the tears.

A minute or two later brother and sister were locked in each other's arms, while the old skipper stood respectfully on one side.

"How much time have we got, Briggs?" asked Lady Blakeney, "before M. St. Just need go on board?"

"We ought to weigh anchor before half an hour, your ladyship," replied the old man, pulling at his grey forelock.

Linking her arm in his, Marguerite led her brother towards the cliffs.

"Half an hour," she said, looking wistfully out to sea, "half an hour more and you'll be far from me, Armand! Oh! I can't believe that you are going, dear! These last few days — whilst Percy has been away, and I've had you all to myself, have slipped by like a dream."

"I am not going far, sweet one," said the young man gently, "a narrow channel to cross — a few miles of road — I can soon come back."

"Nay, 'tis not the distance, Armand — but that awful Paris . . . just now . . ."

They had reached the edge of the cliff. The gentle sea-breeze blew Marguerite's hair about her face, and sent the ends of her soft lace fichu waving round her, like a white and supple snake. She tried to pierce the distance far away, beyond which lay the shores of France: that relentless and stern France which was exacting her pound of flesh, the blood-tax from the noblest of her sons.

"Our own beautiful country, Marguerite," said Armand, who seemed to have divined her thoughts.

"They are going too far, Armand," she said vehemently. "You are a republican, so am I . . . we have the same thoughts, the same enthusiasm for liberty and equality . . . but even YOU must think that they are going too far . . ."

"Hush!" — said Armand, instinctively, as he threw a quick, apprehensive glance around him.

"Ah! you see: you don't think yourself that it is safe even to speak of these things — here in England!" She clung to him suddenly with strong, almost motherly, passion: "Don't go, Armand!" she begged; "don't go back! What should I do if . . . if . . . if . . ."

Her voice was choked in sobs, her eyes, tender, blue and loving, gazed appealingly at the young man, who in his turn looked steadfastly into hers.

"You would in any case be my own brave sister," he said gently, "who would remember that, when France is in peril, it is not for her sons to turn their backs on her."

Even as he spoke, that sweet childlike smile crept back into her face, pathetic in the extreme, for it seemed drowned in tears.

"Oh! Armand!" she said quaintly, "I sometimes wish you had not so many lofty virtues. . . . I assure you little sins are far less dangerous and uncomfortable. But you WILL be prudent?" she added earnestly.

"As far as possible . . . I promise you."

"Remember, dear, I have only you . . . to . . . to care for me. . . ."

"Nay, sweet one, you have other interests now. Percy cares for you . . ."

A look of strange wistfulness crept into her eyes as she murmured, —

"He did . . . once . . ."

"But surely . . ."

"There, there, dear, don't distress yourself on my account. Percy is very good . . ."

"Nay!" he interrupted energetically, "I will distress myself on your account, my Margot. Listen, dear, I have not spoken of these things to you before; something always seemed to stop me when I wished to question you. But, somehow, I feel as if I could not go away and leave you now without asking you one question. . . . You need not answer it if you do not wish," he added, as he noted a sudden hard look, almost of apprehension, darting through her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked simply.

"Does Sir Percy Blakeney know that . . . I mean, does he know the part you played in the arrest of the Marquis de St. Cyr?"

She laughed — a mirthless, bitter, contemptuous laugh, which was like a jarring chord in the music of her voice.

"That I denounced the Marquis de St. Cyr, you mean, to the tribunal that ultimately sent him and all his family to the guillotine? Yes, he does know. . . . I told him after I married him. . . ."

"You told him all the circumstances — which so completely exonerated you from any blame?"

"It was too late to talk of 'circumstances'; he heard the story from other sources; my confession came too tardily, it seems. I could no longer plead extenuating circumstances: I could not demean myself by trying to explain—"

"And?"

"And now I have the satisfaction, Armand, of knowing that the biggest fool in England has the most complete contempt for his wife."

She spoke with vehement bitterness this time, and Armand St. Just, who loved her so dearly, felt that he had placed a somewhat clumsy finger upon an aching wound.

"But Sir Percy loved you, Margot," he repeated gently.

"Loved me? — Well, Armand, I thought at one time that he did, or I should not have married him. I daresay," she added, speaking very rapidly, as if she were about to lay down a heavy burden, which had oppressed her for months, "I daresay that even you thought — as everybody else did — that I married Sir Percy because of his wealth — but I assure you, dear, that it was not so. He seemed to worship me with a curious intensity of concentrated passion, which went straight to my heart. I had never loved any one before, as you know, and I was four-and-twenty then — so I naturally thought that it was not in my nature to love. But it has always seemed to me that it MUST be HEAVENLY to be loved blindly, passionately, wholly . . . worshipped, in fact — and the very fact that Percy was slow and stupid was an attraction for me, as I thought he would love me all the more. A clever man would naturally have other interests, an ambitious man other hopes. . . . I thought that a fool would worship, and think of nothing else. And I was ready to respond, Armand; I would have allowed myself to be worshipped, and given infinite tenderness in return. . . ."

She sighed — and there was a world of disillusionment in that sigh. Armand St. Just had allowed her to speak on without interruption: he listened to her, whilst allowing his own thoughts to run riot. It was terrible to see a young and beautiful woman — a girl in all but name — still standing almost at the threshold of her life, yet bereft of hope, bereft of all those golden and fantastic dreams, which should have made her youth one long, perpetual holiday.

Yet perhaps — though he loved his sister dearly — perhaps he understood: he had studied men in many countries, men of all ages, men of every grade of social and intellectual status, and inwardly he understood what Marguerite had left unsaid. Granted that Percy Blakeney was dull-witted, but in his slow-going mind, there would still be room for that ineradicable pride of a descendant of a long line of English gentlemen. A Blakeney had died on Bosworth field, another had sacrificed life and fortune for the sake of a treacherous Stuart: and that same pride — foolish and prejudiced as the republican Armand would call it — must have been stung to the quick on hearing of the sin which lay at Lady Blakeney's door. She had been young, misguided, ill-advised perhaps. Armand knew that: her impulses and imprudence, knew it still better; but Blakeney was slow-witted, he would not listen to "circumstances," he only clung to facts, and these had shown him Lady Blakeney denouncing a fellow man to a tribunal that knew no pardon: and the contempt he would feel for the deed she had done, however unwittingly, would kill that same love in him, in which sympathy and intellectuality could never have a part.

Yet even now, his own sister puzzled him. Life and love have such strange vagaries. Could it be that with the waning of her husband's love, Marguerite's heart had awakened with love for him? Strange extremes meet in love's pathway: this woman, who had had half intellectual Europe at her feet, might perhaps have set her affections on a fool. Marguerite was gazing out towards the sunset. Armand could not see her face, but presently it seemed to him that something which glittered for a moment in the golden evening light, fell from her eyes onto her dainty fichu of lace.

But he could not broach that subject with her. He knew her strange, passionate nature so well, and knew that reserve which lurked behind her frank, open ways. They had always been together, these two, for their parents had died when Armand was still a youth, and Marguerite but a child. He, some eight years her senior, had watched over her until her marriage; had chaperoned her during those brilliant years spent in the flat of the Rue de Richelieu, and had seen her enter upon this new life of hers, here in England, with much sorrow and some foreboding.

This was his first visit to England since her marriage, and the few months of separation had already seemed to have built up a slight, thin partition between brother and sister; the same deep, intense love was still there, on both sides, but each now seemed to have a secret orchard, into which the other dared not penetrate.

There was much Armand St. Just could not tell his sister; the political aspect of the revolution in France was changing almost every day; she might not understand how his own views and sympathies might become modified, even as the excesses, committed by those who had been his friends, grew in horror and in intensity. And Marguerite could not speak to her brother about the secrets of her heart; she hardly understood them herself, she only knew that, in the midst of luxury, she felt lonely and unhappy.

And now Armand was going away; she feared for his safety, she longed for his presence. She would not spoil these last few sadly-sweet moments by speaking about herself. She led him gently along the cliffs, then down to the beach; their arms linked in one another's, they had still so much to say that lay just outside that secret orchard of theirs.

CHAPTER VIII THE ACCREDITED AGENT

The afternoon was rapidly drawing to a close; and a long, chilly English summer's evening was throwing a misty pall over the green Kentish landscape.

The DAY DREAM had set sail, and Marguerite Blakeney stood alone on the edge of the cliff over an hour, watching those white sails, which bore so swiftly away from her the only being who really cared for her, whom she dared to love, whom she knew she could trust.

Some little distance away to her left the lights from the coffee-room of "The Fisherman's Rest" glittered yellow in the gathering mist; from time to time it seemed to her aching nerves as if she could catch from thence the sound of merry-making and of jovial talk, or even that perpetual, senseless laugh of her husband's, which grated continually upon her sensitive ears.

Sir Percy had had the delicacy to leave her severely alone. She supposed that, in his own stupid, good-natured way, he may have understood that she would wish to remain alone, while those white sails disappeared into the vague horizon, so many miles away. He, whose notions of propriety and decorum were supersensitive, had not suggested even that an attendant should remain within call. Marguerite was grateful to her husband for all this; she always tried to be grateful to him for his thoughtfulness, which was constant, and for his generosity, which really was boundless. She tried even at times to curb the sarcastic, bitter thoughts of him, which made her — in spite of herself — say cruel, insulting things, which she vaguely hoped would wound him.

Yes! she often wished to wound him, to make him feel that she too held him in contempt, that she too had forgotten that she had almost loved him. Loved that inane fop! whose thoughts seemed unable to soar beyond the tying of a cravat or the new cut of a coat. Bah! And yet! . . . vague memories, that were sweet and ardent and attuned to this calm summer's evening, came wafted back to her memory, on the invisible wings of the light sea-breeze: the tie when first he worshipped her; he seemed so devoted — a very slave — and there was a certain latent intensity in that love which had fascinated her.

Then suddenly that love, that devotion, which throughout his courtship she had looked upon as the slavish fidelity of a dog, seemed to vanish completely. Twenty-four hours after the simple little ceremony at old St. Roch, she had told him the story of how, inadvertently, she had spoken of certain matters connected with the Marquis de St. Cyr before some men — her friends — who had used this information against the unfortunate Marquis, and sent him and his family to the guillotine.

She hated the Marquis. Years ago, Armand, her dear brother, loved Angele de St. Cyr, but St. Just was a plebeian, and the Marquis full of the pride and arrogant prejudices of his caste. One day Armand, the respectful, timid lover, ventured on sending a small poem — enthusiastic, ardent, passionate — to the idol of his dreams. The next night he was waylaid just outside Paris by the valets of Marquis de St. Cyr, and ignominiously thrashed — thrashed like a dog within an inch of his life — because he had dared to raise his eyes to the daughter of the aristocrat. The incident was one which, in those days, some two years before the great Revolution, was of almost daily occurrence in France; incidents of that type, in fact, led to bloody reprisals, which a few years later sent most of those haughty heads to the guillotine.

Marguerite remembered it all: what her brother must have suffered in his manhood and his pride must have been appalling; what she suffered through him and with him she never attempted even to analyse.

Then the day of retribution came. St. Cyr and his kin had found their masters, in those same plebeians whom they had despised. Armand and Marguerite, both intellectual, thinking beings, adopted with the enthusiasm of their years the Utopian doctrines of the Revolution, while the Marquis de St. Cyr and his family fought inch by inch for the retention of those privileges which had placed them socially above their fellow-men. Marguerite, impulsive, thoughtless, not calculating the purport of her words, still smarting under the terrible insult her brother had suffered at the Marquis' hands, happened to hear — amongst her own coterie — that the St. Cyrs were in treasonable correspondence with Austria, hoping to obtain the Emperor's support to quell the growing revolution in their own country.

In those days one denunciation was sufficient: Marguerite's few thoughtless words anent the Marquis de St. Cyr bore fruit within twenty-four hours. He was arrested. His papers were searched: letters from the Austrian Emperor, promising to send troops against the Paris populace, were found in his desk. He was arraigned for treason against the nation, and sent to the guillotine, whilst his family, his wife and his sons, shared in this awful fate.

Marguerite, horrified at the terrible consequences of her own thoughtlessness, was powerless to save the Marquis: his own coterie, the leaders of the revolutionary movement, all proclaimed her as a heroine: and when she married Sir Percy Blakeney, she did not perhaps altogether realise how severely he would look upon the sin, which she had so inadvertently committed, and which still lay heavily upon her soul. She made full confession of it to her husband, trusting his blind love for her, her boundless power over him, to soon make him forget what might have sounded unpleasant to an English ear.

Certainly at the moment he seemed to take it very quietly; hardly, in fact, did he appear to understand the meaning of all she said; but what was more certain still, was that never after that could she detect the slightest sign of that love, which she once believed had been wholly hers. Now they had drifted quite apart, and Sir Percy seemed to have laid aside his love for her, as he would an ill-fitting glove. She tried to rouse him by sharpening her ready wit against his dull intellect; endeavouring to excite his jealousy, if she could not rouse his love; tried to goad him to self-assertion, but all in vain. He remained the same, always passive, drawling, sleepy, always courteous, invariably a gentleman: she had all that the world and a wealthy husband can give to a pretty woman, yet on this beautiful summer's evening, with the white sails of the DAY DREAM finally hidden by the evening shadows, she felt more lonely than that poor tramp who plodded his way wearily along the rugged cliffs.

With another heavy sigh, Marguerite Blakeney turned her back upon the sea and cliffs, and walked slowly back towards "The Fisherman's Rest." As she drew near, the sound of revelry, of gay, jovial laughter, grew louder and more distinct. She could distinguish Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' pleasant voice, Lord Tony's boisterous guffaws, her husband's occasional, drawly, sleepy comments; then realising the loneliness of the road and the fast gathering gloom round her, she quickened her steps . . . the next moment she perceived

a stranger coming rapidly towards her. Marguerite did not look up: she was not the least nervous, and "The Fisherman's Rest" was now well within call.

The stranger paused when he saw Marguerite coming quickly towards him, and just as she was about to slip past him, he said very quietly:

"Citoyenne St. Just."

Marguerite uttered a little cry of astonishment, at thus hearing her own familiar maiden name uttered so close to her. She looked up at the stranger, and this time, with a cry of unfeigned pleasure, she put out both her hands effusively towards him.

"Chauvelin!" she exclaimed.

"Himself, citoyenne, at your service," said the stranger, gallantly kissing the tips of her fingers.

Marguerite said nothing for a moment or two, as she surveyed with obvious delight the not very prepossessing little figure before her. Chauvelin was then nearer forty than thirty — a clever, shrewd-looking personality, with a curious fox-like expression in the deep, sunken eyes. He was the same stranger who an hour or two previously had joined Mr. Jellyband in a friendly glass of wine.

"Chauvelin . . . my friend . . ." said Marguerite, with a pretty little sigh of satisfaction. "I am mightily pleased to see you."

No doubt poor Marguerite St. Just, lonely in the midst of her grandeur, and of her starchy friends, was happy to see a face that brought back memories of that happy time in Paris, when she reigned — a queen — over the intellectual coterie of the Rue de Richelieu. She did not notice the sarcastic little smile, however, that hovered round the thin lips of Chauvelin.

"But tell me," she added merrily, "what in the world, or whom in the world, are you doing here in England?"

"I might return the subtle compliment, fair lady," he said. "What of yourself?"

"Oh, I?" she said, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Je m'ennuie, mon ami, that is all."

They had reached the porch of "The Fisherman's Rest," but Marguerite seemed loth to go within. The evening air was lovely after the storm, and she had found a friend who exhaled the breath of Paris, who knew Armand well, who could talk of all the merry, brilliant friends whom she had left behind. So she lingered on under the pretty porch, while through the gaily-lighted dormer-window of the coffee-room sounds of laughter, of calls for "Sally" and for beer, of tapping of mugs, and clinking of dice, mingled with Sir Percy Blakeney's inane and mirthless laugh. Chauvelin stood beside her, his shrewd, pale, yellow eyes fixed on the pretty face, which looked so sweet and childlike in this soft English summer twilight.

"You surprise me, citoyenne," he said quietly, as he took a pinch of snuff.

"Do I now?" she retorted gaily. "Faith, my little Chauvelin, I should have thought that, with your penetration, you would have guessed that an atmosphere composed of fogs and virtues would never suit Marguerite St. Just."

"Dear me! is it as bad as that?" he asked, in mock consternation.

"Quite," she retorted, "and worse."

"Strange! Now, I thought that a pretty woman would have found English country life peculiarly attractive."

"Yes! so did I," she said with a sigh. "Pretty women," she added meditatively, "ought to have a good time in England, since all the pleasant things are forbidden them — the very things they do every day."

"Quite so!"

"You'll hardly believe it, my little Chauvelin," she said earnestly, "but I often pass a whole day — a whole day — without encountering a single temptation."

"No wonder," retorted Chauvelin, gallantly, "that the cleverest woman in Europe is troubled with ENNUI."

She laughed one of her melodious, rippling, childlike laughs.

"It must be pretty bad, mustn't it?" she asked archly, "or I should not have been so pleased to see you."

"And this within a year of a romantic love match . . . that's just the difficulty . . ."

"Ah! . . . that idyllic folly," said Chauvelin, with quiet sarcasm, "did not then survive the lapse of . . . weeks?"

"Idyllic follies never last, my little Chauvelin . . . They come upon us like the measles . . . and are as easily cured."

Chauvelin took another pinch of snuff: he seemed very much addicted to that pernicious habit, so prevalent in those days; perhaps, too, he found the taking of snuff a convenient veil for disguising the quick, shrewd glances with which he strove to read the very souls of those with whom he came in contact.

"No wonder," he repeated, with the same gallantry, "that the most active brain in Europe is troubled with ENNUI."

"I was in hopes that you had a prescription against the malady, my little Chauvelin."

"How can I hope to succeed in that which Sir Percy Blakeney has failed to accomplish?"

"Shall we leave Sir Percy out of the question for the present, my dear friend?" she said drily.

"Ah! my dear lady, pardon me, but that is just what we cannot very well do," said Chauvelin, whilst once again his eyes, keen as those of a fox on the alert, darted a quick glance at Marguerite. "I have a most perfect prescription against the worst form of ENNUI, which I would have been happy to submit to you, but—"

"But what?"

"There IS Sir Percy."

"What has he to do with it?"

"Quite a good deal, I am afraid. The prescription I would offer, fair lady, is called by a very plebeian name: Work!"

"Work?"

Chauvelin looked at Marguerite long and scrutinisingly. It seemed as if those keen, pale eyes of his were reading every one of her thoughts. They were alone together; the evening air was quite still, and their soft whispers were drowned in the noise which came from the coffee-room. Still, Chauvelin took a step or two from under the porch, looked quickly and keenly all round him, then seeing that indeed no one was within earshot, he once more came back close to Marguerite.

"Will you render France a small service, citoyenne?" he asked, with a sudden change of manner, which lent his thin, fox-like face a singular earnestness.

"La, man!" she replied flippantly, "how serious you look all of a sudden. . . . Indeed I do not know if I WOULD render France a small service — at any rate, it depends upon the kind of service she — or you — want."

"Have you ever heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Citoyenne St. Just?" asked Chauvelin, abruptly.

"Heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel?" she retorted with a long and merry laugh, "Faith man! we talk of nothing else. . . . We have hats 'a la Scarlet Pimpernel'; our horses are called 'Scarlet Pimpernel'; at the Prince of Wales' supper party the other night we had a 'souffle a la Scarlet Pimpernel.' . . . Lud!" she added gaily, "the other day I ordered at my milliner's a blue dress trimmed with green, and bless me, if she did not call that 'a la Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

Chauvelin had not moved while she prattled merrily along; he did not even attempt to stop her when her musical voice and her childlike laugh went echoing through the still evening air. But he remained serious and earnest whilst she laughed, and his voice, clear, incisive, and hard, was not raised above his breath as he said, —

"Then, as you have heard of that enigmatical personage, citoyenne, you must also have guessed, and know, that the man who hides his identity under that strange pseudonym, is the most bitter enemy of our republic, of France . . . of men like Armand St. Just."

"La!" she said, with a quaint little sigh, "I dare swear he is. . . . France has many bitter enemies these days."

"But you, citoyenne, are a daughter of France, and should be ready to help her in a moment of deadly peril."

"My brother Armand devotes his life to France," she retorted proudly; "as for me, I can do nothing . . . here in England. . . ."

"Yes, you . . ." he urged still more earnestly, whilst his thin fox-like face seemed suddenly to have grown impressive and full of dignity, "here, in England, citoyenne . . . you alone can help us. . . . Listen! — I have been sent over here by the Republican Government as its representative: I present my credentials to Mr. Pitt in London to-morrow. One of my duties here is to find out all about this League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, which has become a standing menace to France, since it is pledged to help our cursed aristocrats — traitors to their country, and enemies of the people — to escape from the just punishment which they deserve. You know as well as I do, citoyenne, that once they are over here, those French EMIGRES try to rouse public feeling against the Republic . . . They are ready to join issue with any enemy bold enough to attack France . . . Now, within the last month scores of these EMIGRES, some only suspected of treason, others actually condemned by the Tribunal of Public Safety, have succeeded in crossing the Channel. Their escape in each instance was planned, organized and effected by this society of young English jackanapes, headed by a man whose brain seems as resourceful as his identity is mysterious. All the most strenuous efforts on the part of my spies have failed to discover who he is; whilst the others are the hands, he is the head, who beneath this strange anonymity calmly works at the destruction of France. I mean to strike at that head, and for this I want your help — through him afterwards I can reach the rest of the gang: he is a young buck in English society, of that I feel sure. Find that man for me, citoyenne!" he urged, "find him for France."

Marguerite had listened to Chauvelin's impassioned speech without uttering a word, scarce making a movement, hardly daring to breathe. She had told him before that this mysterious hero of romance was the talk of the smart set to which she belonged; already, before this, her heart and her imagination had been stirred by the thought of the brave man, who, unknown to fame, had rescued hundreds of lives from a terrible, often an unmerciful fate. She had but little real sympathy with those haughty French aristocrats, insolent in their pride of caste, of whom the Comtesse de Tournay de Basserville was so typical an example; but republican and liberal-minded though she was from principle, she hated and loathed the methods which the young Republic had chosen for establishing itself. She had not been in Paris for some months; the horrors and bloodshed of the Reign of Terror, culminating in the September massacres, had only come across the Channel to her as a faint echo. Robespierre, Danton, Marat, she had not known in their new guise of bloody judiciaries, merciless wielders of the guillotine. Her very soul recoiled in horror from these excesses, to which she feared her brother Armand — moderate republican as he was — might become one day the holocaust.

Then, when first she heard of this band of young English enthusiasts, who, for sheer love of their fellowmen, dragged women and children, old and young men, from a horrible death, her heart had glowed with pride for them, and now, as Chauvelin spoke, her very soul went out to the gallant and mysterious leader of the reckless little band, who risked his life daily, who gave it freely and without ostentation, for the sake of humanity.

Her eyes were moist when Chauvelin had finished speaking, the lace at her bosom rose and fell with her quick, excited breathing; she no longer heard the noise of drinking from the inn, she did not heed her husband's voice or his inane laugh, her thoughts had gone wandering in search of the mysterious hero! Ah! there was a man she might have loved, had he come her way: everything in him appealed to her romantic imagination; his personality, his strength, his bravery, the loyalty of those who served under him in that same noble cause, and, above all, that anonymity which crowned him, as if with a halo of romantic glory.

"Find him for France, citoyenne!"

Chauvelin's voice close to her ear roused her from her dreams. The mysterious hero had vanished, and, not twenty yards away from her, a man was drinking and laughing, to whom she had sworn faith and loyalty.

"La! man," she said with a return of her assumed flippancy, "you are astonishing. Where in the world am I to look for him?"

"You go everywhere, citoyenne," whispered Chauvelin, insinuatingly, "Lady Blakeney is the pivot of social London, so I am told . . . you see everything, you HEAR everything."

"Easy, my friend," retorted Marguerite, drawing herself up to her full height and looking down, with a slight thought of contempt on the small, thin figure before her. "Easy! you seem to forget that there are six feet of Sir Percy Blakeney, and a long line of ancestors to stand between Lady Blakeney and such a thing as you propose."

"For the sake of France, citoyenne!" reiterated Chauvelin, earnestly.

"Tush, man, you talk nonsense anyway; for even if you did know who this Scarlet Pimpernel is, you could do nothing to him — an Englishman!"

"I'd take my chance of that," said Chauvelin, with a dry, rasping little laugh. "At any rate we could send him to the guillotine first to cool his ardour, then, when there is a diplomatic fuss about it, we can apologise — humbly — to the British Government, and, if necessary, pay compensation to the bereaved family."

"What you propose is horrible, Chauvelin," she said, drawing away from him as from some noisome insect. "Whoever the man may be, he is brave and noble, and never — do you hear me? — never would I lend a hand to such villainy."

“You prefer to be insulted by every French aristocrat who comes to this country?”

Chauvelin had taken sure aim when he shot this tiny shaft. Marguerite’s fresh young cheeks became a touch more pale and she bit her under lip, for she would not let him see that the shaft had struck home.

“That is beside the question,” she said at last with indifference. “I can defend myself, but I refuse to do any dirty work for you — or for France. You have other means at your disposal; you must use them, my friend.”

And without another look at Chauvelin, Marguerite Blakeney turned her back on him and walked straight into the inn.

“That is not your last word, citoyenne,” said Chauvelin, as a flood of light from the passage illumined her elegant, richly-clad figure, “we meet in London, I hope!”

“We meet in London,” she said, speaking over her shoulder at him, “but that is my last word.”

She threw open the coffee-room door and disappeared from his view, but he remained under the porch for a moment or two, taking a pinch of snuff. He had received a rebuke and a snub, but his shrewd, fox-like face looked neither abashed nor disappointed; on the contrary, a curious smile, half sarcastic and wholly satisfied, played around the corners of his thin lips.

CHAPTER IX THE OUTRAGE

A beautiful starlit night had followed on the day of incessant rain: a cool, balmy, late summer's night, essentially English in its suggestion of moisture and scent of wet earth and dripping leaves.

The magnificent coach, drawn by four of the finest thoroughbreds in England, had driven off along the London road, with Sir Percy Blakeney on the box, holding the reins in his slender feminine hands, and beside him Lady Blakeney wrapped in costly furs. A fifty-mile drive on a starlit summer's night! Marguerite had hailed the notion of it with delight. . . . Sir Percy was an enthusiastic whip; his four thoroughbreds, which had been sent down to Dover a couple of days before, were just sufficiently fresh and restive to add zest to the expedition and Marguerite revelled in anticipation of the few hours of solitude, with the soft night breeze fanning her cheeks, her thoughts wandering, whither away? She knew from old experience that Sir Percy would speak little, if at all: he had often driven her on his beautiful coach for hours at night, from point to point, without making more than one or two casual remarks upon the weather or the state of the roads. He was very fond of driving by night, and she had very quickly adopted his fancy: as she sat next to him hour after hour, admiring the dexterous, certain way in which he handled the reins, she often wondered what went on in that slow-going head of his. He never told her, and she had never cared to ask.

At "The Fisherman's Rest" Mr. Jellyband was going the round, putting out the lights. His bar customers had all gone, but upstairs in the snug little bedrooms, Mr. Jellyband had quite a few important guests: the Comtesse de Tournay, with Suzannne, and the Vicomte, and there were two more bedrooms ready for Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst, if the two young men should elect to honour the ancient hostelry and stay the night.

For the moment these two young gallants were comfortably installed in the coffee-room, before the huge log-fire, which, in spite of the mildness of the evening, had been allowed to burn merrily.

"I say, Jelly, has everyone gone?" asked Lord Tony, as the worthy landlord still busied himself clearing away glasses and mugs.

"Everyone, as you see, my lord."

"And all your servants gone to bed?"

"All except the boy on duty in the bar, and," added Mr. Jellyband with a laugh, "I expect he'll be asleep afore long, the rascal."

"Then we can talk here undisturbed for half an hour?"

"At your service, my lord. . . . I'll leave your candles on the dresser . . . and your rooms are quite ready . . . I sleep at the top of the house myself, but if your lordship'll only call loudly enough, I daresay I shall hear."

"All right, Jelly . . . and . . . I say, put the lamp out — the fire'll give us all the light we need — and we don't want to attract the passer-by."

"Al ri', my lord."

Mr. Jellyband did as he was bid — he turned out the quaint old lamp that hung from the raftered ceiling and blew out all the candles.

"Let's have a bottle of wine, Jelly," suggested Sir Andrew.

"Al ri', sir!"

Jellyband went off to fetch the wine. The room now was quite dark, save for the circle of ruddy and fitful light formed by the brightly blazing logs in the hearth.

"Is that all, gentlemen?" asked Jellyband, as he returned with a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses, which he placed on the table.

"That'll do nicely, thanks, Jelly!" said Lord Tony.

"Good-night, my lord! Good-night, sir!"

"Good-night, Jelly!"

The two young men listened, whilst the heavy tread of Mr. Jellyband was heard echoing along the passage and staircase. Presently even that sound died out, and the whole of "The Fisherman's Rest" seemed wrapt in sleep, save the two young men drinking in silence beside the hearth.

For a while no sound was heard, even in the coffee-room, save the ticking of the old grandfather's clock and the crackling of the burning wood.

"All right again this time, Ffoulkes?" asked Lord Antony at last.

Sir Andrew had been dreaming evidently, gazing into the fire, and seeing therein, no doubt, a pretty, piquant face, with large brown eyes and a wealth of dark curls round a childish forehead.

"Yes!" he said, still musing, "all right!"

"No hitch?"

"None."

Lord Antony laughed pleasantly as he poured himself out another glass of wine.

"I need not ask, I suppose, whether you found the journey pleasant this time?"

"No, friend, you need not ask," replied Sir Andrew, gaily. "It was all right."

"Then here's to her very good health," said jovial Lord Tony. "She's a bonnie lass, though she IS a French one. And here's to your courtship — may it flourish and prosper exceedingly."

He drained his glass to the last drop, then joined his friend beside the hearth.

"Well! you'll be doing the journey next, Tony, I expect," said Sir Andrew, rousing himself from his meditations, "you and Hastings, certainly; and I hope you may have as pleasant a task as I had, and as charming a travelling companion. You have no idea, Tony. . . ."

"No! I haven't," interrupted his friend pleasantly, "but I'll take your word for it. And now," he added, whilst a sudden earnestness crept over his jovial young face, "how about business?" The two young men drew their chairs closer together, and instinctively, though they were alone, their voices sank to a whisper.

"I saw the Scarlet Pimpernel alone, for a few moments in Calais," said Sir Andrew, "a day or two ago. He crossed over to England two days before we did. He had escorted the party all the way from Paris, dressed — you'll never credit it! — as an old market woman,

and driving — until they were safely out of the city — the covered cart, under which the Comtesse de Tournay, Mlle. Suzanne, and the Vicomte lay concealed among the turnips and cabbages. They, themselves, of course, never suspected who their driver was. He drove them right through a line of soldiery and a yelling mob, who were screaming, 'A bas les aristos!' But the market cart got through along with some others, and the Scarlet Pimpernel, in shawl, petticoat and hood, yelled 'A bas les aristos!' louder than anybody. Faith!" added the young man, as his eyes glowed with enthusiasm for the beloved leader, "that man's a marvel! His cheek is preposterous, I vow! — and that's what carries him through."

Lord Antony, whose vocabulary was more limited than that of his friend, could only find an oath or two with which to show his admiration for his leader.

"He wants you and Hastings to meet him at Calais," said Sir Andrew, more quietly, "on the 2nd of next month. Let me see! that will be next Wednesday."

"Yes."

"It is, of course, the case of the Comte de Tournay, this time; a dangerous task, for the Comte, whose escape from his chateau, after he had been declared a 'suspect' by the Committee of Public Safety, was a masterpiece of the Scarlet Pimpernel's ingenuity, is now under sentence of death. It will be rare sport to get HIM out of France, and you will have a narrow escape, if you get through at all. St. Just has actually gone to meet him — of course, no one suspects St. Just as yet; but after that . . . to get them both out of the country! I' faith, 'twill be a tough job, and tax even the ingenuity of our chief. I hope I may yet have orders to be of the party."

"Have you any special instructions for me?"

"Yes! rather more precise ones than usual. It appears that the Republican Government have sent an accredited agent over to England, a man named Chauvelin, who is said to be terribly bitter against our league, and determined to discover the identity of our leader, so that he may have him kidnapped, the next time he attempts to set foot in France. This Chauvelin has brought a whole army of spies with him, and until the chief has sampled the lot, he thinks we should meet as seldom as possible on the business of the league, and on no account should talk to each other in public places for a time. When he wants to speak to us, he will contrive to let us know."

The two young men were both bending over the fire for the blaze had died down, and only a red glow from the dying embers cast a lurid light on a narrow semicircle in front of the hearth. The rest of the room lay buried in complete gloom; Sir Andrew had taken a pocket-book from his pocket, and drawn therefrom a paper, which he unfolded, and together they tried to read it by the dim red firelight. So intent were they upon this, so wrapt up in the cause, the business they had so much at heart, so precious was this document which came from the very hand of their adored leader, that they had eyes and ears only for that. They lost count of the sounds around them, of the dropping of the crisp ash from the grate, of the monotonous ticking of the clock, of the soft, almost imperceptible rustle of something on the floor close beside them. A figure had emerged from under one of the benches; with snake-like, noiseless movements it crept closer and closer to the two young men, not breathing, only gliding along the floor, in the inky blackness of the room.

"You are to read these instructions and commit them to memory," said Sir Andrew, "then destroy them."

He was about to replace the letter-case into his pocket, when a tiny slip of paper fluttered from it and fell on to the floor. Lord Antony stooped and picked it up.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Sir Andrew.

"It dropped out of your pocket just now. It certainly does not seem to be with the other paper."

"Strange! — I wonder when it got there? It is from the chief," he added, glancing at the paper.

Both stooped to try and decipher this last tiny scrap of paper on which a few words had been hastily scrawled, when suddenly a slight noise attracted their attention, which seemed to come from the passage beyond.

"What's that?" said both instinctively. Lord Antony crossed the room towards the door, which he threw open quickly and suddenly; at that very moment he received a stunning blow between the eyes, which threw him back violently into the room. Simultaneously the crouching, snake-like figure in the gloom had jumped up and hurled itself from behind upon the unsuspecting Sir Andrew, felling him to the ground.

All this occurred within the short space of two or three seconds, and before either Lord Antony or Sir Andrew had time or chance to utter a cry or to make the faintest struggle. They were each seized by two men, a muffler was quickly tied round the mouth of each, and they were pinioned to one another back to back, their arms, hands, and legs securely fastened.

One man had in the meanwhile quietly shut the door; he wore a mask and now stood motionless while the others completed their work.

"All safe, citizen!" said one of the men, as he took a final survey of the bonds which secured the two young men.

"Good!" replied the man at the door; "now search their pockets and give me all the papers you find."

This was promptly and quietly done. The masked man having taken possession of all the papers, listened for a moment or two if there were any sound within "The Fisherman's Rest." Evidently satisfied that this dastardly outrage had remained unheard, he once more opened the door and pointed peremptorily down the passage. The four men lifted Sir Andrew and Lord Antony from the ground, and as quietly, as noiselessly as they had come, they bore the two pinioned young gallants out of the inn and along the Dover Road into the gloom beyond.

In the coffee-room the masked leader of this daring attempt was quickly glancing through the stolen papers.

"Not a bad day's work on the whole," he muttered, as he quietly took off his mask, and his pale, fox-like eyes glittered in the red glow of the fire. "Not a bad day's work."

He opened one or two letters from Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' pocket-book, noted the tiny scrap of paper which the two young men had only just had time to read; but one letter specially, signed Armand St. Just, seemed to give him strange satisfaction.

"Armand St. Just a traitor after all," he murmured. "Now, fair Marguerite Blakeney," he added viciously between his clenched teeth, "I think that you will help me to find the Scarlet Pimpernel."

CHAPTER X IN THE OPERA BOX

It was one of the gala nights at Covent Garden Theatre, the first of the autumn season in this memorable year of grace 1792.

The house was packed, both in the smart orchestra boxes and in the pit, as well as in the more plebeian balconies and galleries above. Gluck's ORPHEUS made a strong appeal to the more intellectual portions of the house, whilst the fashionable women, the gaily-dressed and brilliant throng, spoke to the eye of those who cared but little for this "latest importation from Germany."

Selina Storace had been duly applauded after her grand ARIA by her numerous admirers; Benjamin Incledon, the acknowledged favourite of the ladies, had received special gracious recognition from the royal box; and now the curtain came down after the glorious finale to the second act, and the audience, which had hung spell-bound on the magic strains of the great maestro, seemed collectively to breathe a long sigh of satisfaction, previous to letting loose its hundreds of waggish and frivolous tongues. In the smart orchestra boxes many well-known faces were to be seen. Mr. Pitt, overweighted with cares of state, was finding brief relaxation in to-night's musical treat; the Prince of Wales, jovial, rotund, somewhat coarse and commonplace in appearance, moved about from box to box, spending brief quarters of an hour with those of his more intimate friends.

In Lord Grenville's box, too, a curious, interesting personality attracted everyone's attention; a thin, small figure with shrewd, sarcastic face and deep-set eyes, attentive to the music, keenly critical of the audience, dressed in immaculate black, with dark hair free from any powder. Lord Grenville — Foreign Secretary of State — paid him marked, though frigid deference.

Here and there, dotted about among distinctly English types of beauty, one or two foreign faces stood out in marked contrast: the haughty aristocratic cast of countenance of the many French royalist EMIGRES who, persecuted by the relentless, revolutionary faction of their country, had found a peaceful refuge in England. On these faces sorrow and care were deeply writ; the women especially paid but little heed, either to the music or to the brilliant audience; no doubt their thoughts were far away with husband, brother, son maybe, still in peril, or lately succumbed to a cruel fate.

Among these the Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive, but lately arrived from France, was a most conspicuous figure: dressed in deep, heavy black silk, with only a white lace kerchief to relieve the aspect of mourning about her person, she sat beside Lady Portarles, who was vainly trying by witty sallies and somewhat broad jokes, to bring a smile to the Comtesse's sad mouth. Behind her sat little Suzanne and the Vicomte, both silent and somewhat shy among so many strangers. Suzanne's eyes seemed wistful; when she first entered the crowded house, she had looked eagerly all around, scanning every face, scrutinised every box. Evidently the one face she wished to see was not there, for she settled herself quietly behind her mother, listened apathetically to the music, and took no further interest in the audience itself.

"Ah, Lord Grenville," said Lady Portarles, as following a discreet knock, the clever, interesting head of the Secretary of State appeared in the doorway of the box, "you could not arrive more *A PROPOS*. Here is Madame la Comtesse de Tournay positively dying to hear the latest news from France."

The distinguished diplomat had come forward and was shaking hands with the ladies.

"Alas!" he said sadly, "it is of the very worst. The massacres continue; Paris literally reeks with blood; and the guillotine claims a hundred victims a day."

Pale and fearful, the Comtesse was leaning back in her chair, listening horror-struck to this brief and graphic account of what went on in her own misguided country.

"Ah, monsieur!" she said in broken English, "it is dreadful to hear all that — and my poor husband still in that awful country. It is terrible for me to be sitting here, in a theatre, all safe and in peace, whilst he is in such peril."

"Lud, Madame!" said honest, bluff Lady Portarles, "your sitting in a convent won't make your husband safe, and you have your children to consider: they are too young to be dosed with anxiety and premature mourning."

The Comtesse smiled through her tears at the vehemence of her friend. Lady Portarles, whose voice and manner would not have misfitted a jockey, had a heart of gold, and hid the most genuine sympathy and most gentle kindness, beneath the somewhat coarse manners affected by some ladies at that time.

"Besides which, Madame," added Lord Grenville, "did you not tell me yesterday that the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had pledged their honour to bring M. le Comte safely across the Channel?"

"Ah, yes!" replied the Comtesse, "and that is my only hope. I saw Lord Hastings yesterday . . . he reassured me again."

"Then I am sure you need have no fear. What the league have sworn, that they surely will accomplish. Ah!" added the old diplomat with a sigh, "if I were but a few years younger . . ."

"La, man!" interrupted honest Lady Portarles, "you are still young enough to turn your back on that French scarecrow that sits enthroned in your box to-night."

"I wish I could . . . but your ladyship must remember that in serving our country we must put prejudices aside. M. Chauvelin is the accredited agent of his Government . . ."

"Odd's fish, man!" she retorted, "you don't call those bloodthirsty ruffians over there a government, do you?"

"It has not been thought advisable as yet," said the Minister, guardedly, "for England to break off diplomatic relations with France, and we cannot therefore refuse to receive with courtesy the agent she wishes to send to us."

"Diplomatic relations be demmed, my lord! That sly little fox over there is nothing but a spy, I'll warrant, and you'll find — an I'm much mistaken, that he'll concern himself little with such diplomacy, beyond trying to do mischief to royalist refugees — to our heroic Scarlet Pimpernel and to the members of that brave little league."

"I am sure," said the Comtesse, pursing up her thin lips, "that if this Chauvelin wishes to do us mischief, he will find a faithful ally in Lady Blakeney."

"Bless the woman!" ejaculated Lady Portarles, "did ever anyone see such perversity? My Lord Grenville, you have the gift of gab, will you please explain to Madame la Comtesse that she is acting like a fool. In your position here in England, Madame," she added, turning a wrathful and resolute face towards the Comtesse, "you cannot afford to put on the hoity-toity airs you French aristocrats are

so fond of. Lady Blakeney may or may not be in sympathy with those Ruffians in France; she may or may not have had anything to do with the arrest and condemnation of St. Cyr, or whatever the man's name is, but she is the leader of fashion in this country; Sir Percy Blakeney has more money than any half-dozen other men put together, he is hand and glove with royalty, and your trying to snub Lady Blakeney will not harm her, but will make you look a fool. Isn't that so, my Lord?"

But what Lord Grenville thought of this matter, or to what reflections this comely tirade of Lady Portarles' led the Comtesse de Tournay, remained unspoken, for the curtain had just risen on the third act of ORPHEUS, and admonishments to silence came from every part of the house.

Lord Grenville took a hasty farewell of the ladies and slipped back into his box, where M. Chauvelin had sat through this ENTR'ACTE, with his eternal snuff-box in his hand, and with his keen pale eyes intently fixed upon a box opposite him, where, with much frou-frou of silken skirts, much laughter and general stir of curiosity amongst the audience, Marguerite Blakeney had just entered, accompanied by her husband, and looking divinely pretty beneath the wealth of her golden, reddish curls, slightly besprinkled with powder, and tied back at the nape of her graceful neck with a gigantic black bow. Always dressed in the very latest vagary of fashion, Marguerite alone among the ladies that night had discarded the crossover fichu and broad-lapelled over-dress, which had been in fashion for the last two or three years. She wore the short-waisted classical-shaped gown, which so soon was to become the approved mode in every country in Europe. It suited her graceful, regal figure to perfection, composed as it was of shimmering stuff which seemed a mass of rich gold embroidery.

As she entered, she leant for a moment out of the box, taking stock of all those present whom she knew. Many bowed to her as she did so, and from the royal box there came also a quick and gracious salute.

Chauvelin watched her intently all through the commencement of the third act, as she sat enthralled with the music, her exquisite little hand toying with a small jewelled fan, her regal head, her throat, arms and neck covered with magnificent diamonds and rare gems, the gift of the adoring husband who sprawled leisurely by her side.

Marguerite was passionately fond of music. ORPHEUS charmed her to-night. The very joy of living was writ plainly upon the sweet young face, it sparkled out of the merry blue eyes and lit up the smile that lurked around the lips. She was after all but five-and-twenty, in the hey day of youth, the darling of a brilliant throng, adored, FETED, petted, cherished. Two days ago the DAY DREAM had returned from Calais, bringing her news that her idolised brother had safely landed, that he thought of her, and would be prudent for her sake.

What wonder for the moment, and listening to Gluck's impassioned strains, that she forgot her disillusionments, forgot her vanished love-dreams, forgot even the lazy, good-humoured nonentity who had made up for his lack of spiritual attainments by lavishing worldly advantages upon her.

He had stayed beside her in the box just as long as convention demanded, making way for His Royal Highness, and for the host of admirers who in a continued procession came to pay homage to the queen of fashion. Sir Percy had strolled away, to talk to more congenial friends probably. Marguerite did not even wonder whither he had gone — she cared so little; she had had a little court round her, composed of the JEUNESSE DOREE of London, and had just dismissed them all, wishing to be alone with Gluck for a brief while.

A discreet knock at the door roused her from her enjoyment.

"Come in," she said with some impatience, without turning to look at the intruder.

Chauvelin, waiting for his opportunity, noted that she was alone, and now, without pausing for that impatient "Come in," he quietly slipped into the box, and the next moment was standing behind Marguerite's chair.

"A word with you, citoyenne," he said quietly.

Marguerite turned quickly, in alarm, which was not altogether feigned.

"Lud, man! you frightened me," she said with a forced little laugh, "your presence is entirely inopportune. I want to listen to Gluck, and have no mind for talking."

"But this is my only opportunity," he said, as quietly, and without waiting for permission, he drew a chair close behind her — so close that he could whisper in her ear, without disturbing the audience, and without being seen, in the dark background of the box. "This is my only opportunity," he repeated, as she vouchsafed him no reply, "Lady Blakeney is always so surrounded, so FETED by her court, that a mere old friend has but very little chance."

"Faith, man!" she said impatiently, "you must seek for another opportunity then. I am going to Lord Grenville's ball to-night after the opera. So are you, probably. I'll give you five minutes then. . . ."

"Three minutes in the privacy of this box are quite sufficient for me," he rejoined placidly, "and I think that you will be wise to listen to me, Citoyenne St. Just."

Marguerite instinctively shivered. Chauvelin had not raised his voice above a whisper; he was now quietly taking a pinch of snuff, yet there was something in his attitude, something in those pale, foxy eyes, which seemed to freeze the blood in her veins, as would the sight of some deadly hitherto unguessed peril. "Is that a threat, citizen?" she asked at last.

"Nay, fair lady," he said gallantly, "only an arrow shot into the air."

He paused a moment, like a cat which sees a mouse running heedlessly by, ready to spring, yet waiting with that feline sense of enjoyment of mischief about to be done. Then he said quietly —

"Your brother, St. Just, is in peril."

Not a muscle moved in the beautiful face before him. He could only see it in profile, for Marguerite seemed to be watching the stage intently, but Chauvelin was a keen observer; he noticed the sudden rigidity of the eyes, the hardening of the mouth, the sharp, almost paralysed tension of the beautiful, graceful figure.

"Lud, then," she said with affected merriment, "since 'tis one of your imaginary plots, you'd best go back to your own seat and leave me enjoy the music."

And with her hand she began to beat time nervously against the cushion of the box. Selina Storace was singing the "Che faro" to an audience that hung spellbound upon the prima donna's lips. Chauvelin did not move from his seat; he quietly watched that tiny nervous

hand, the only indication that his shaft had indeed struck home.

"Well?" she said suddenly and irrelevantly, and with the same feigned unconcern.

"Well, citoyenne?" he rejoined placidly.

"About my brother?"

"I have news of him for you which, I think, will interest you, but first let me explain. . . . May I?"

The question was unnecessary. He felt, though Marguerite still held her head steadily averted from him, that her every nerve was strained to hear what he had to say.

"The other day, citoyenne," he said, "I asked for your help. . . . France needed it, and I thought I could rely on you, but you gave me your answer. . . . Since then the exigencies of my own affairs and your own social duties have kept us apart . . . although many things have happened. . . ."

"To the point, I pray you, citoyen," she said lightly; "the music is entrancing, and the audience will get impatient of your talk."

"One moment, citoyenne. The day on which I had the honour of meeting you at Dover, and less than an hour after I had your final answer, I obtained possession of some papers, which revealed another of those subtle schemes for the escape of a batch of French aristocrats — that traitor de Tournay amongst others — all organized by that arch-meddler, the Scarlet Pimpernel. Some of the threads, too, of this mysterious organization have come into my hands, but not all, and I want you — nay! you MUST help me to gather them together."

Marguerite seemed to have listened to him with marked impatience; she now shrugged her shoulders and said gaily —

"Bah! man. Have I not already told you that I care nought about your schemes or about the Scarlet Pimpernel. And had you not spoken about my brother. . . ."

"A little patience, I entreat, citoyenne," he continued imperturbably. "Two gentlemen, Lord Antony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes were at 'The Fisherman's Rest' at Dover that same night."

"I know. I saw them there."

"They were already known to my spies as members of that accursed league. It was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes who escorted the Comtesse de Tournay and her children across the Channel. When the two young men were alone, my spies forced their way into the coffee-room of the inn, gagged and pinioned the two gallants, seized their papers, and brought them to me."

In a moment she had guessed the danger. Papers? . . . Had Armand been imprudent? . . . The very thought struck her with nameless terror. Still she would not let this man see that she feared; she laughed gaily and lightly.

"Faith! and your impudence passes belief," she said merrily. "Robbery and violence! — in England! — in a crowded inn! Your men might have been caught in the act!"

"What if they had? They are children of France, and have been trained by your humble servant. Had they been caught they would have gone to jail, or even to the gallows, without a word of protest or indiscretion; at any rate it was well worth the risk. A crowded inn is safer for these little operations than you think, and my men have experience."

"Well? And those papers?" she asked carelessly.

"Unfortunately, though they have given me cognisance of certain names . . . certain movements . . . enough, I think, to thwart their projected COUP for the moment, it would only be for the moment, and still leaves me in ignorance of the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"La! my friend," she said, with the same assumed flippancy of manner, "then you are where you were before, aren't you? and you can let me enjoy the last strophe of the ARIA. Faith!" she added, ostentatiously smothering an imaginary yawn, "had you not spoken about my brother. . . ."

"I am coming to him now, citoyenne. Among the papers there was a letter to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, written by your brother, St. Just."

"Well? And?"

"That letter shows him to be not only in sympathy with the enemies of France, but actually a helper, if not a member, of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

The blow had been struck at last. All along, Marguerite had been expecting it; she would not show fear, she was determined to seem unconcerned, flippant even. She wished, when the shock came, to be prepared for it, to have all her wits about her — those wits which had been nicknamed the keenest in Europe. Even now she did not flinch. She knew that Chauvelin had spoken the truth; the man was too earnest, too blindly devoted to the misguided cause he had at heart, too proud of his countrymen, of those makers of revolutions, to stoop to low, purposeless falsehoods.

That letter of Armand's — foolish, imprudent Armand — was in Chauvelin's hands. Marguerite knew that as if she had seen the letter with her own eyes; and Chauvelin would hold that letter for purposes of his own, until it suited him to destroy it or to make use of it against Armand. All that she knew, and yet she continued to laugh more gaily, more loudly than she had done before.

"La, man!" she said, speaking over her shoulder and looking him full and squarely in the face, "did I not say it was some imaginary plot. . . . Armand in league with that enigmatic Scarlet Pimpernel! . . . Armand busy helping those French aristocrats whom he despises! . . . Faith, the tale does infinite credit to your imagination!"

"Let me make my point clear, citoyenne," said Chauvelin, with the same unruffled calm, "I must assure you that St. Just is compromised beyond the slightest hope of pardon."

Inside the orchestra box all was silent for a moment or two. Marguerite sat, straight upright, rigid and inert, trying to think, trying to face the situation, to realise what had best be done.

In the house Storace had finished the ARIA, and was even now bowing in her classic garb, but in approved eighteenth-century fashion, to the enthusiastic audience, who cheered her to the echo.

"Chauvelin," said Marguerite Blakeney at last, quietly, and without that touch of bravado which had characterised her attitude all along, "Chauvelin, my friend, shall we try to understand one another. It seems that my wits have become rusty by contact with this damp climate. Now, tell me, you are very anxious to discover the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, isn't that so?"

"France's most bitter enemy, citoyenne . . . all the more dangerous, as he works in the dark."

"All the more noble, you mean. . . . Well! — and you would now force me to do some spying work for you in exchange for my brother Armand's safety? — Is that it?"

"Fie! two very ugly words, fair lady," protested Chauvelin, urbanely. "There can be no question of force, and the service which I would ask of you, in the name of France, could never be called by the shocking name of spying."

"At any rate, that is what it is called over here," she said drily. "That is your intention, is it not?"

"My intention is, that you yourself win the free pardon for Armand St. Just by doing me a small service."

"What is it?"

"Only watch for me to-night, Citoyenne St. Just," he said eagerly. "Listen: among the papers which were found about the person of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes there was a tiny note. See!" he added, taking a tiny scrap of paper from his pocket-book and handing it to her.

It was the same scrap of paper which, four days ago, the two young men had been in the act of reading, at the very moment when they were attacked by Chauvelin's minions. Marguerite took it mechanically and stooped to read it. There were only two lines, written in a distorted, evidently disguised, handwriting; she read them half aloud —

"Remember we must not meet more often than is strictly necessary. You have all instructions for the 2nd. If you wish to speak to me again, I shall be at G.'s ball."

"What does it mean?" she asked.

"Look again, citoyenne, and you will understand."

"There is a device here in the corner, a small red flower . . ."

"Yes."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel," she said eagerly, "and G.'s ball means Grenville's ball. . . . He will be at my Lord Grenville's ball to-night."

"That is how I interpret the note, citoyenne," concluded Chauvelin, blandly. "Lord Antony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, after they were pinioned and searched by my spies, were carried by my orders to a lonely house in the Dover Road, which I had rented for the purpose: there they remained close prisoners until this morning. But having found this tiny scrap of paper, my intention was that they should be in London, in time to attend my Lord Grenville's ball. You see, do you not? that they must have a great deal to say to their chief . . . and thus they will have an opportunity of speaking to him to-night, just as he directed them to do. Therefore, this morning, those two young gallants found every bar and bolt open in that lonely house on the Dover Road, their jailers disappeared, and two good horses standing ready saddled and tethered in the yard. I have not seen them yet, but I think we may safely conclude that they did not draw rein until they reached London. Now you see how simple it all is, citoyenne!"

"It does seem simple, doesn't it?" she said, with a final bitter attempt at flippancy, "when you want to kill a chicken . . . you take hold of it . . . then you wring its neck . . . it's only the chicken who does not find it quite so simple. Now you hold a knife at my throat, and a hostage for my obedience. . . . You find it simple. . . . I don't."

"Nay, citoyenne, I offer you a chance of saving the brother you love from the consequences of his own folly."

Marguerite's face softened, her eyes at last grew moist, as she murmured, half to herself:

"The only being in the world who has loved me truly and constantly . . . But what do you want me to do, Chauvelin?" she said, with a world of despair in her tear-choked voice. "In my present position, it is well-nigh impossible!"

"Nay, citoyenne," he said drily and relentlessly, not heeding that despairing, childlike appeal, which might have melted a heart of stone, "as Lady Blakeney, no one suspects you, and with your help to-night I may — who knows? — succeed in finally establishing the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. . . . You are going to the ball anon. . . . Watch for me there, citoyenne, watch and listen. . . . You can tell me if you hear a chance word or whisper. . . . You can note everyone to whom Sir Andrew Ffoulkes or Lord Antony Dewhurst will speak. You are absolutely beyond suspicion now. The Scarlet Pimpernel will be at Lord Grenville's ball to-night. Find out who he is, and I will pledge the word of France that your brother shall be safe."

Chauvelin was putting the knife to her throat. Marguerite felt herself entangled in one of those webs, from which she could hope for no escape. A precious hostage was being held for her obedience: for she knew that this man would never make an empty threat. No doubt Armand was already signalled to the Committee of Public Safety as one of the "suspect"; he would not be allowed to leave France again, and would be ruthlessly struck, if she refused to obey Chauvelin. For a moment — woman-like — she still hoped to temporise. She held out her hand to this man, whom she now feared and hated.

"If I promise to help you in this matter, Chauvelin," she said pleasantly, "will you give me that letter of St. Just's?"

"If you render me useful service to-night, citoyenne," he replied with a sarcastic smile, "I will give you that letter . . . to-morrow."

"You do not trust me?"

"I trust you absolutely, dear lady, but St. Just's life is forfeit to his country . . . it rests with you to redeem it."

"I may be powerless to help you," she pleaded, "were I ever so willing."

"That would be terrible indeed," he said quietly, "for you . . . and for St. Just."

Marguerite shuddered. She felt that from this man she could expect no mercy. All-powerful, he held the beloved life in the hollow of his hand. She knew him too well not to know that, if he failed in gaining his own ends, he would be pitiless.

She felt cold in spite of the oppressive air of opera-house. The heart-appealing strains of the music seemed to reach her, as from a distant land. She drew her costly lace scarf up around her shoulders, and sat silently watching the brilliant scene, as if in a dream.

For a moment her thoughts wandered away from the loved one who was in danger, to that other man who also had a claim on her confidence and her affection. She felt lonely, frightened for Armand's sake; she longed to seek comfort and advice from someone who would know how to help and console. Sir Percy Blakeney had loved her once; he was her husband; why should she stand alone through this terrible ordeal? He had very little brains, it is true, but he had plenty of muscle: surely, if she provided the thought, and he the manly energy and pluck, together they could outwit the astute diplomatist, and save the hostage from his vengeful hands, without imperilling the life of the noble leader of that gallant little band of heroes. Sir Percy knew St. Just well — he seemed attached to him — she was sure that he could help.

Chauvelin was taking no further heed of her. He had said his cruel "Either — or—" and left her to decide. He, in his turn now, appeared to be absorbed in the sour-stirring melodies of ORPHEUS, and was beating time to the music with his sharp, ferret-like head.

A discreet rap at the door roused Marguerite from her thoughts. It was Sir Percy Blakeney, tall, sleepy, good-humoured, and wearing that half-shy, half-inane smile, which just now seemed to irritate her every nerve.

"Er . . . your chair is outside . . . m'dear," he said, with his most exasperating drawl, "I suppose you will want to go to that demmed ball . . . Excuse me — er — Monsieur Chauvelin — I had not observed you. . . ."

He extended two slender, white fingers toward Chauvelin, who had risen when Sir Percy entered the box.

"Are you coming, m'dear?"

"Hush! Sh! Sh!" came in angry remonstrance from different parts of the house. "Demmed impudence," commented Sir Percy with a good-natured smile.

Marguerite sighed impatiently. Her last hope seemed suddenly to have vanished away. She wrapped her cloak round her and without looking at her husband:

"I am ready to go," she said, taking his arm. At the door of the box she turned and looked straight at Chauvelin, who, with his CHAPEAU-BRAS under his arm, and a curious smile round his thin lips, was preparing to follow the strangely ill-assorted couple.

"It is only AU REVOIR, Chauvelin," she said pleasantly, "we shall meet at my Lord Grenville's ball, anon."

And in her eyes the astute Frenchman, read, no doubt, something which caused him profound satisfaction, for, with a sarcastic smile, he took a delicate pinch of snuff, then, having dusted his dainty lace jabot, he rubbed his thin, bony hands contentedly together.

CHAPTER XI LORD GRENVILLE'S BALL

The historic ball given by the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs — Lord Grenville — was the most brilliant function of the year. Though the autumn season had only just begun, everybody who was anybody had contrived to be in London in time to be present there, and to shine at this ball, to the best of his or her respective ability.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had promised to be present. He was coming on presently from the opera. Lord Grenville himself had listened to the two first acts of *ORPHEUS*, before preparing to receive his guests. At ten o'clock — an unusually late hour in those days — the grand rooms of the Foreign Office, exquisitely decorated with exotic palms and flowers, were filled to overflowing. One room had been set apart for dancing, and the dainty strains of the minuet made a soft accompaniment to the gay chatter, the merry laughter of the numerous and brilliant company.

In a smaller chamber, facing the top of the fine stairway, the distinguished host stood ready to receive his guests. Distinguished men, beautiful women, notabilities from every European country had already filed past him, had exchanged the elaborate bows and curtsies with him, which the extravagant fashion of the time demanded, and then, laughing and talking, had dispersed in the ball, reception, and card rooms beyond.

Not far from Lord Grenville's elbow, leaning against one of the console tables, Chauvelin, in his irreproachable black costume, was taking a quiet survey of the brilliant throng. He noted that Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney had not yet arrived, and his keen, pale eyes glanced quickly towards the door every time a new-comer appeared.

He stood somewhat isolated: the envoy of the Revolutionary Government of France was not likely to be very popular in England, at a time when the news of the awful September massacres, and of the Reign of Terror and Anarchy, had just begun to filtrate across the Channel.

In his official capacity he had been received courteously by his English colleagues: Mr. Pitt had shaken him by the hand; Lord Grenville had entertained him more than once; but the more intimate circles of London society ignored him altogether; the women openly turned their backs upon him; the men who held no official position refused to shake his hand.

But Chauvelin was not the man to trouble himself about these social amenities, which he called mere incidents in his diplomatic career. He was blindly enthusiastic for the revolutionary cause, he despised all social inequalities, and he had a burning love for his own country: these three sentiments made him supremely indifferent to the snubs he received in this fog-ridden, loyalist, old-fashioned England.

But, above all, Chauvelin had a purpose at heart. He firmly believed that the French aristocrat was the most bitter enemy of France; he would have wished to see every one of them annihilated: he was one of those who, during this awful Reign of Terror, had been the first to utter the historic and ferocious desire "that aristocrats might have but one head between them, so that it might be cut off with a single stroke of the guillotine." And thus he looked upon every French aristocrat, who had succeeded in escaping from France, as so much prey of which the guillotine had been unwarrantably cheated. There is no doubt that those royalist *EMIGRES*, once they had managed to cross the frontier, did their very best to stir up foreign indignation against France. Plots without end were hatched in England, in Belgium, in Holland, to try and induce some great power to send troops into revolutionary Paris, to free King Louis, and to summarily hang the bloodthirsty leaders of that monster republic.

Small wonder, therefore, that the romantic and mysterious personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel was a source of bitter hatred to Chauvelin. He and the few young jackanapes under his command, well furnished with money, armed with boundless daring, and acute cunning, had succeeded in rescuing hundreds of aristocrats from France. Nine-tenths of the *EMIGRES*, who were *FETED* at the English court, owed their safety to that man and to his league.

Chauvelin had sworn to his colleagues in Paris that he would discover the identity of that meddling Englishman, entice him over to France, and then . . . Chauvelin drew a deep breath of satisfaction at the very thought of seeing that enigmatic head falling under the knife of the guillotine, as easily as that of any other man.

Suddenly there was a great stir on the handsome staircase, all conversation stopped for a moment as the majordomo's voice outside announced, —

"His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and suite, Sir Percy Blakeney, Lady Blakeney."

Lord Grenville went quickly to the door to receive his exalted guest.

The Prince of Wales, dressed in a magnificent court suit of salmon-coloured velvet richly embroidered with gold, entered with Marguerite Blakeney on his arm; and on his left Sir Percy, in gorgeous shimmering cream satin, cut in the extravagant "Incroyable" style, his fair hair free from powder, priceless lace at his neck and wrists, and the flat *CHAPEAU-BRAS* under his arm.

After the few conventional words of deferential greeting, Lord Grenville said to his royal guest, —

"Will your Highness permit me to introduce M. Chauvelin, the accredited agent of the French Government?"

Chauvelin, immediately the Prince entered, had stepped forward, expecting this introduction. He bowed very low, whilst the Prince returned his salute with a curt nod of the head.

"Monsieur," said His Royal Highness coldly, "we will try to forget the government that sent you, and look upon you merely as our guest — a private gentleman from France. As such you are welcome, Monsieur."

"Monseigneur," rejoined Chauvelin, bowing once again. "Madame," he added, bowing ceremoniously before Marguerite.

"Ah! my little Chauvelin!" she said with unconcerned gaiety, and extending her tiny hand to him. "Monsieur and I are old friends, your Royal Highness."

"Ah, then," said the Prince, this time very graciously, "you are doubly welcome, Monsieur."

"There is someone else I would crave permission to present to your Royal Highness," here interposed Lord Grenville.

"Ah! who is it?" asked the Prince.

"Madame la Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive and her family, who have but recently come from France."

"By all means! — They are among the lucky ones then!"

Lord Grenville turned in search of the Comtesse, who sat at the further end of the room.

"Lud love me!" whispered his Royal Highness to Marguerite, as soon as he had caught sight of the rigid figure of the old lady; "Lud love me! she looks very virtuous and very melancholy."

"Faith, your Royal Highness," she rejoined with a smile, "virtue is like precious odours, most fragrant when it is crushed."

"Virtue, alas!" sighed the Prince, "is mostly unbecoming to your charming sex, Madame."

"Madame la Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive," said Lord Grenville, introducing the lady.

"This is a pleasure, Madame; my royal father, as you know, is ever glad to welcome those of your compatriots whom France has driven from her shores."

"Your Royal Highness is ever gracious," replied the Comtesse with becoming dignity. Then, indicating her daughter, who stood timidly by her side: "My daughter Suzanne, Monseigneur," she said.

"Ah! charming! — charming!" said the Prince, "and now allow me, Comtesse, to introduce you, Lady Blakeney, who honours us with her friendship. You and she will have much to say to one another, I vow. Every compatriot of Lady Blakeney's is doubly welcome for her sake . . . her friends are our friends . . . her enemies, the enemies of England."

Marguerite's blue eyes had twinkled with merriment at this gracious speech from her exalted friend. The Comtesse de Tournay, who lately had so flagrantly insulted her, was here receiving a public lesson, at which Marguerite could not help but rejoice. But the Comtesse, for whom respect of royalty amounted almost to a religion, was too well-schooled in courtly etiquette to show the slightest sign of embarrassment, as the two ladies curtsied ceremoniously to one another.

"His Royal Highness is ever gracious, Madame," said Marguerite, demurely, and with a wealth of mischief in her twinkling blue eyes, "but there is no need for his kind of mediation. . . . Your amiable reception of me at our last meeting still dwells pleasantly in my memory."

"We poor exiles, Madame," rejoined the Comtesse, frigidly, "show our gratitude to England by devotion to the wishes of Monseigneur."

"Madame!" said Marguerite, with another ceremonious curtsy.

"Madame," responded the Comtesse with equal dignity.

The Prince in the meanwhile was saying a few gracious words to the young Vicomte.

"I am happy to know you, Monsieur le Vicomte," he said. "I knew your father well when he was ambassador in London."

"Ah, Monseigneur!" replied the Vicomte, "I was a leetle boy then . . . and now I owe the honour of this meeting to our protector, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Hush!" said the Prince, earnestly and quickly, as he indicated Chauvelin, who had stood a little on one side throughout the whole of this little scene, watching Marguerite and the Comtesse with an amused, sarcastic little smile around his thin lips.

"Nay, Monseigneur," he said now, as if in direct response to the Prince's challenge, "pray do not check this gentleman's display of gratitude; the name of that interesting red flower is well known to me — and to France."

The Prince looked at him keenly for a moment or two.

"Faith, then, Monsieur," he said, "perhaps you know more about our national hero than we do ourselves . . . perchance you know who he is. . . . Seel!" he added, turning to the groups round the room, "the ladies hang upon your lips . . . you would render yourself popular among the fair sex if you were to gratify their curiosity."

"Ah, Monseigneur," said Chauvelin, significantly, "rumour has it in France that your Highness could — an you would — give the truest account of that enigmatical wayside flower."

He looked quickly and keenly at Marguerite as he spoke; but she betrayed no emotion, and her eyes met his quite fearlessly.

"Nay, man," replied the Prince, "my lips are sealed! and the members of the league jealously guard the secret of their chief . . . so his fair adorers have to be content with worshipping a shadow. Here in England, Monsieur," he added, with wonderful charm and dignity, "we but name the Scarlet Pimpernel, and every fair cheek is suffused with a blush of enthusiasm. None have seen him save his faithful lieutenants. We know not if he be tall or short, fair or dark, handsome or ill-formed; but we know that he is the bravest gentleman in all the world, and we all feel a little proud, Monsieur, when we remember that he is an Englishman."

"Ah, Monsieur Chauvelin," added Marguerite, looking almost with defiance across at the placid, sphinx-like face of the Frenchman, "His Royal Highness should add that we ladies think of him as of a hero of old . . . we worship him . . . we wear his badge . . . we tremble for him when he is in danger, and exult with him in the hour of his victory."

Chauvelin did no more than bow placidly both to the Prince and to Marguerite; he felt that both speeches were intended — each in their way — to convey contempt or defiance. The pleasure-loving, idle Prince he despised: the beautiful woman, who in her golden hair wore a spray of small red flowers composed of rubies and diamonds — her he held in the hollow of his hand: he could afford to remain silent and to wait events.

A long, jovial, inane laugh broke the sudden silence which had fallen over everyone. "And we poor husbands," came in slow, affected accents from gorgeous Sir Percy, "we have to stand by . . . while they worship a demmed shadow."

Everyone laughed — the Prince more loudly than anyone. The tension of subdued excitement was relieved, and the next moment everyone was laughing and chatting merrily as the gay crowd broke up and dispersed in the adjoining rooms.

CHAPTER XII THE SCRAP OF PAPER

Marguerite suffered intensely. Though she laughed and chatted, though she was more admired, more surrounded, more FETED than any woman there, she felt like one condemned to death, living her last day upon this earth.

Her nerves were in a state of painful tension, which had increased a hundredfold during that brief hour which she had spent in her husband's company, between the opera and the ball. The short ray of hope — that she might find in this good-natured, lazy individual a valuable friend and adviser — had vanished as quickly as it had come, the moment she found herself alone with him. The same feeling of good-humoured contempt which one feels for an animal or a faithful servant, made her turn away with a smile from the man who should have been her moral support in this heart-rending crisis through which she was passing: who should have been her cool-headed adviser, when feminine sympathy and sentiment tossed her hither and thither, between her love for her brother, who was far away and in mortal peril, and horror of the awful service which Chauvelin had exacted from her, in exchange for Armand's safety.

There he stood, the moral support, the cool-headed adviser, surrounded by a crowd of brainless, empty-headed young fops, who were even now repeating from mouth to mouth, and with every sign of the keenest enjoyment, a doggerel quatrain which he had just given forth. Everywhere the absurd, silly words met her: people seemed to have little else to speak about, even the Prince had asked her, with a little laugh, whether she appreciated her husband's latest poetic efforts.

"All done in the tying of a cravat," Sir Percy had declared to his clique of admirers.

"We seek him here, we seek him there,

Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.

Is he in heaven? — Is he in hell?

That demmed, elusive Pimpernel!"

Sir Percy's BON MOT had gone the round of the brilliant reception-rooms. The Prince was enchanted. He vowed that life without Blakeney would be but a dreary desert. Then, taking him by the arm, had led him to the card-room, and engaged him in a long game of hazard.

Sir Percy, whose chief interest in most social gatherings seemed to centre round the card-table, usually allowed his wife to flirt, dance, to amuse or bore herself as much as she liked. And to-night, having delivered himself of his BON MOT, he had left Marguerite surrounded by a crowd of admirers of all ages, all anxious and willing to help her to forget that somewhere in the spacious reception rooms, there was a long, lazy being who had been fool enough to suppose that the cleverest woman in Europe would settle down to the prosaic bonds of English matrimony.

Her still overwrought nerves, her excitement and agitation, lent beautiful Marguerite Blakeney much additional charm: escorted by a veritable bevy of men of all ages and of most nationalities, she called forth many exclamations of admiration from everyone as she passed.

She would not allow herself any more time to think. Her early, somewhat Bohemian training had made her something of a fatalist. She felt that events would shape themselves, that the directing of them was not in her hands. From Chauvelin she knew that she could expect no mercy. He had set a price on Armand's head, and left it to her to pay or not, as she chose.

Later on in the evening she caught sight of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst, who seemingly had just arrived. She noticed at once that Sir Andrew immediately made for little Suzanne de Tournay, and that the two young people soon managed to isolate themselves in one of the deep embrasures of the mullioned windows, there to carry on a long conversation, which seemed very earnest and very pleasant on both sides.

Both the young men looked a little haggard and anxious, but otherwise they were irreproachably dressed, and there was not the slightest sign, about their courtly demeanour, of the terrible catastrophe, which they must have felt hovering round them and round their chief.

That the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had no intention of abandoning its cause, she had gathered through little Suzanne herself, who spoke openly of the assurance she and her mother had had that the Comte de Tournay would be rescued from France by the league, within the next few days. Vaguely she began to wonder, as she looked at the brilliant and fashionable in the gaily-lighted ball-room, which of these worldly men round her was the mysterious "Scarlet Pimpernel," who held the threads of such daring plots, and the fate of valuable lives in his hands.

A burning curiosity seized her to know him: although for months she had heard of him and had accepted his anonymity, as everyone else in society had done; but now she longed to know — quite impersonally, quite apart from Armand, and oh! quite apart from Chauvelin — only for her own sake, for the sake of the enthusiastic admiration she had always bestowed on his bravery and cunning.

He was at the ball, of course, somewhere, since Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst were here, evidently expecting to meet their chief — and perhaps to get a fresh MOT D'ORDRE from him.

Marguerite looked round at everyone, at the aristocratic high-typed Norman faces, the squarely-built, fair-haired Saxon, the more gentle, humorous caste of the Celt, wondering which of these betrayed the power, the energy, the cunning which had imposed its will and its leadership upon a number of high-born English gentlemen, among whom rumour asserted was His Royal Highness himself.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes? Surely not, with his gentle blue eyes, which were looking so tenderly and longingly after little Suzanne, who was being led away from the pleasant TETE-A-TETE by her stern mother. Marguerite watched him across the room, as he finally turned away with a sigh, and seemed to stand, aimless and lonely, now that Suzanne's dainty little figure had disappeared in the crowd.

She watched him as he strolled towards the doorway, which led to a small boudoir beyond, then paused and leaned against the framework of it, looking still anxiously all round him.

Marguerite contrived for the moment to evade her present attentive cavalier, and she skirted the fashionable crowd, drawing nearer to the doorway, against which Sir Andrew was leaning. Why she wished to get closer to him, she could not have said: perhaps she was impelled by an all-powerful fatality, which so often seems to rule the destinies of men.

Suddenly she stopped: her very heart seemed to stand still, her eyes, large and excited, flashed for a moment towards that doorway, then as quickly were turned away again. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was still in the same listless position by the door, but Marguerite had distinctly seen that Lord Hastings — a young buck, a friend of her husband's and one of the Prince's set — had, as he quickly brushed past him, slipped something into his hand.

For one moment longer — oh! it was the merest flash — Marguerite paused: the next she had, with admirably played unconcern, resumed her walk across the room — but this time more quickly towards that doorway whence Sir Andrew had now disappeared.

All this, from the moment that Marguerite had caught sight of Sir Andrew leaning against the doorway, until she followed him into the little boudoir beyond, had occurred in less than a minute. Fate is usually swift when she deals a blow.

Now Lady Blakeney had suddenly ceased to exist. It was Marguerite St. Just who was there only: Marguerite St. Just who had passed her childhood, her early youth, in the protecting arms of her brother Armand. She had forgotten everything else — her rank, her dignity, her secret enthusiasms — everything save that Armand stood in peril of his life, and that there, not twenty feet away from her, in the small boudoir which was quite deserted, in the very hands of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, might be the talisman which would save her brother's life.

Barely another thirty seconds had elapsed between the moment when Lord Hastings slipped the mysterious "something" into Sir Andrew's hand, and the one when she, in her turn, reached the deserted boudoir. Sir Andrew was standing with his back to her and close to a table upon which stood a massive silver candelabra. A slip of paper was in his hand, and he was in the very act of perusing its contents.

Unperceived, her soft clinging robe making not the slightest sound upon the heavy carpet, not daring to breathe until she had accomplished her purpose, Marguerite slipped close behind him. . . . At that moment he looked round and saw her; she uttered a groan, passed her hand across her forehead, and murmured faintly:

"The heat in the room was terrible . . . I felt so faint . . . Ah! . . ."

She tottered almost as if she would fall, and Sir Andrew, quickly recovering himself, and crumpling in his hand the tiny note he had been reading, was only apparently, just in time to support her.

"You are ill, Lady Blakeney?" he asked with much concern, "Let me . . ."

"No, no, nothing—" she interrupted quickly. "A chair — quick."

She sank into a chair close to the table, and throwing back her head, closing her eyes.

"There!" she murmured, still faintly; "the giddiness is passing off. . . . Do not heed me, Sir Andrew; I assure you I already feel better."

At moments like these there is no doubt — and psychologists actually assert it — that there is in us a sense which has absolutely nothing to do with the other five: it is not that we see, it is not that we hear or touch, yet we seem to do all three at once. Marguerite sat there with her eyes apparently closed. Sir Andrew was immediately behind her, and on her right was the table with the five-armed candelabra upon it. Before her mental vision there was absolutely nothing but Armand's face. Armand, whose life was in the most imminent danger, and who seemed to be looking at her from a background upon which were dimly painted the seething crowd of Paris, the bare walls of the Tribunal of Public Safety, with Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, demanding Armand's life in the name of the people of France, and the lurid guillotine with its stained knife waiting for another victim . . . Armand! . . .

For one moment there was dead silence in the little boudoir. Beyond, from the brilliant ball-room, the sweet notes of the gavotte, the frou-frou of rich dresses, the talk and laughter of a large and merry crowd, came as a strange, weird accompaniment to the drama which was being enacted here. Sir Andrew had not uttered another word. Then it was that that extra sense became potent in Marguerite Blakeney. She could not see, for her two eyes were closed, she could not hear, for the noise from the ball-room drowned the soft rustle of that momentous scrap of paper; nevertheless she knew — as if she had both seen and heard — that Sir Andrew was even now holding the paper to the flame of one of the candles.

At the exact moment that it began to catch fire, she opened her eyes, raised her hand and, with two dainty fingers, had taken the burning scrap of paper from the young man's hand. Then she blew out the flame, and held the paper to her nostril with perfect unconcern.

"How thoughtful of you, Sir Andrew," she said gaily, "surely 'twas your grandmother who taught you that the smell of burnt paper was a sovereign remedy against giddiness."

She sighed with satisfaction, holding the paper tightly between her jewelled fingers; that talisman which perhaps would save her brother Armand's life. Sir Andrew was staring at her, too dazed for the moment to realize what had actually happened; he had been taken so completely by surprise, that he seemed quite unable to grasp the fact that the slip of paper, which she held in her dainty hand, was one perhaps on which the life of his comrade might depend.

Marguerite burst into a long, merry peal of laughter.

"Why do you stare at me like that?" she said playfully. "I assure you I feel much better; your remedy has proved most effectual. This room is most delightfully cool," she added, with the same perfect composure, "and the sound of the gavotte from the ball-room is fascinating and soothing."

She was prattling on in the most unconcerned and pleasant way, whilst Sir Andrew, in an agony of mind, was racking his brains as to the quickest method he could employ to get that bit of paper out of that beautiful woman's hand. Instinctively, vague and tumultuous thoughts rushed through his mind: he suddenly remembered her nationality, and worst of all, recollected that horrible tale anent the Marquis de St. Cyr, which in England no one had credited, for the sake of Sir Percy, as well as for her own.

"What? Still dreaming and staring?" she said, with a merry laugh, "you are most ungallant, Sir Andrew; and now I come to think of it, you seemed more startled than pleased when you saw me just now. I do believe, after all, that it was not concern for my health, nor yet a remedy taught you by your grandmother that caused you to burn this tiny scrap of paper. . . . I vow it must have been your lady love's last cruel epistle you were trying to destroy. Now confess!" she added, playfully holding up the scrap of paper, "does this contain her final CONGE, or a last appeal to kiss and make friends?"

"Whichever it is, Lady Blakeney," said Sir Andrew, who was gradually recovering his self-possession, "this little note is undoubtedly mine, and . . ." Not caring whether his action was one that would be styled ill-bred towards a lady, the young man had made a bold dash for the note; but Marguerite's thoughts flew quicker than his own; her actions under pressure of this intense excitement, were swifter and more sure. She was tall and strong; she took a quick step backwards and knocked over the small Sheraton table which was already top-heavy, and which fell down with a crash, together with the massive candelabra upon it.

She gave a quick cry of alarm:

"The candles, Sir Andrew — quick!"

There was not much damage done; one or two of the candles had blown out as the candelabra fell; others had merely sent some grease upon the valuable carpet; one had ignited the paper shade over it. Sir Andrew quickly and dexterously put out the flames and replaced the candelabra upon the table; but this had taken him a few seconds to do, and those seconds had been all that Marguerite needed to cast a quick glance at the paper, and to note its contents — a dozen words in the same distorted handwriting she had seen before, and bearing the same device — a star-shaped flower drawn in red ink.

When Sir Andrew once more looked at her, he only saw upon her face alarm at the untoward accident and relief at its happy issue; whilst the tiny and momentous note had apparently fluttered to the ground. Eagerly the young man picked it up, and his face looked much relieved, as his fingers closed tightly over it.

"For shame, Sir Andrew," she said, shaking her head with a playful sigh, "making havoc in the heart of some impressionable duchess, whilst conquering the affections of my sweet little Suzanne. Well, well! I do believe it was Cupid himself who stood by you, and threatened the entire Foreign Office with destruction by fire, just on purpose to make me drop love's message, before it had been polluted by my indiscreet eyes. To think that, a moment longer, and I might have known the secrets of an erring duchess."

"You will forgive me, Lady Blakeney," said Sir Andrew, now as calm as she was herself, "if I resume the interesting occupation which you have interrupted?"

"By all means, Sir Andrew! How should I venture to thwart the love-god again? Perhaps he would mete out some terrible chastisement against my presumption. Burn your love-token, by all means!"

Sir Andrew had already twisted the paper into a long spill, and was once again holding it to the flame of the candle, which had remained alight. He did not notice the strange smile on the face of his fair VIS-A-VIS, so intent was he on the work of destruction; perhaps, had he done so, the look of relief would have faded from his face. He watched the fateful note, as it curled under the flame. Soon the last fragment fell on the floor, and he placed his heel upon the ashes.

"And now, Sir Andrew," said Marguerite Blakeney, with the pretty nonchalance peculiar to herself, and with the most winning of smiles, "will you venture to excite the jealousy of your fair lady by asking me to dance the minuet?"

CHAPTER XIII EITHER — OR?

The few words which Marguerite Blakeney had managed to read on the half-scorched piece of paper, seemed literally to be the words of Fate. "Start myself tomorrow. . . ." This she had read quite distinctly; then came a blur caused by the smoke of the candle, which obliterated the next few words; but, right at the bottom, there was another sentence, like letters of fire, before her mental vision, "If you wish to speak to me again I shall be in the supper-room at one o'clock precisely." The whole was signed with the hastily-scrawled little device — a tiny star-shaped flower, which had become so familiar to her.

One o'clock precisely! It was now close upon eleven, the last minuet was being danced, with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and beautiful Lady Blakeney leading the couples, through its delicate and intricate figures.

Close upon eleven! the hands of the handsome Louis XV. clock upon its ormolu bracket seemed to move along with maddening rapidity. Two hours more, and her fate and that of Armand would be sealed. In two hours she must make up her mind whether she will keep the knowledge so cunningly gained to herself, and leave her brother to his fate, or whether she will wilfully betray a brave man, whose life was devoted to his fellow-men, who was noble, generous, and above all, unsuspecting. It seemed a horrible thing to do. But then, there was Armand! Armand, too, was noble and brave, Armand, too, was unsuspecting. And Armand loved her, would have willingly trusted his life in her hands, and now, when she could save him from death, she hesitated. Oh! it was monstrous; her brother's kind, gentle face, so full of love for her, seemed to be looking reproachfully at her. "You might have saved me, Margot!" he seemed to say to her, "and you chose the life of a stranger, a man you do not know, whom you have never seen, and preferred that he should be safe, whilst you sent me to the guillotine!"

All these conflicting thoughts raged through Marguerite's brain, while, with a smile upon her lips, she glided through the graceful mazes of the minuet. She noted — with that acute sense of hers — that she had succeeded in completely allaying Sir Andrew's fears. Her self-control had been absolutely perfect — she was a finer actress at this moment, and throughout the whole of this minuet, than she had ever been upon the boards of the Comedie Francaise; but then, a beloved brother's life had not depended upon her histrionic powers.

She was too clever to overdo her part, and made no further allusions to the supposed BILLET DOUX, which had caused Sir Andrew Ffoulkes such an agonising five minutes. She watched his anxiety melting away under her sunny smile, and soon perceived that, whatever doubt may have crossed his mind at the moment, she had, by the time the last bars of the minuet had been played, succeeded in completely dispelling it; he never realised in what a fever of excitement she was, what effort it cost her to keep up a constant ripple of BANAL conversation.

When the minuet was over, she asked Sir Andrew to take her into the next room.

"I have promised to go down to supper with His Royal Highness," she said, "but before we part, tell me . . . am I forgiven?"

"Forgiven?"

"Yes! Confess, I gave you a fright just now. . . . But remember, I am not an English woman, and I do not look upon the exchanging of BILLET DOUX as a crime, and I vow I'll not tell my little Suzanne. But now, tell me, shall I welcome you at my water-party on Wednesday?"

"I am not sure, Lady Blakeney," he replied evasively. "I may have to leave London to-morrow."

"I would not do that, if I were you," she said earnestly; then seeing the anxious look reappearing in his eyes, she added gaily; "No one can throw a ball better than you can, Sir Andrew, we should so miss you on the bowling-green."

He had led her across the room, to one beyond, where already His Royal Highness was waiting for the beautiful Lady Blakeney.

"Madame, supper awaits us," said the Prince, offering his arm to Marguerite, "and I am full of hope. The goddess Fortune has frowned so persistently on me at hazard, that I look with confidence for the smiles of the goddess of Beauty."

"Your Highness has been unfortunate at the card tables?" asked Marguerite, as she took the Prince's arm.

"Aye! most unfortunate. Blakeney, not content with being the richest among my father's subjects, has also the most outrageous luck. By the way, where is that inimitable wit? I vow, Madam, that this life would be but a dreary desert without your smiles and his sallies."

CHAPTER XIV ONE O'CLOCK PRECISELY!

Supper had been extremely gay. All those present declared that never had Lady Blakeney been more adorable, nor that "demmed idiot" Sir Percy more amusing.

His Royal Highness had laughed until the tears streamed down his cheeks at Blakeney's foolish yet funny repartees. His doggerel verse, "We seek him here, we seek him there," etc., was sung to the tune of "Ho! Merry Britons!" and to the accompaniment of glasses knocked loudly against the table. Lord Grenville, moreover, had a most perfect cook — some wags asserted that he was a scion of the old French NOBLESSE, who having lost his fortune, had come to seek it in the CUISINE of the Foreign Office.

Marguerite Blakeney was in her most brilliant mood, and surely not a soul in that crowded supper-room had even an inkling of the terrible struggle which was raging within her heart.

The clock was ticking so mercilessly on. It was long past midnight, and even the Prince of Wales was thinking of leaving the supper-table. Within the next half-hour the destinies of two brave men would be pitted against one another — the dearly-beloved brother and he, the unknown hero.

Marguerite had not tried to see Chauvelin during this last hour; she knew that his keen, fox-like eyes would terrify her at once, and incline the balance of her decision towards Armand. Whilst she did not see him, there still lingered in her heart of hearts a vague, undefined hope that "something" would occur, something big, enormous, epoch-making, which would shift from her young, weak shoulders this terrible burden of responsibility, of having to choose between two such cruel alternatives.

But the minutes ticked on with that dull monotony which they invariably seem to assume when our very nerves ache with their incessant ticking.

After supper, dancing was resumed. His Royal Highness had left, and there was general talk of departing among the older guests; the young were indefatigable and had started on a new gavotte, which would fill the next quarter of an hour.

Marguerite did not feel equal to another dance; there is a limit to the most enduring of self-control. Escorted by a Cabinet Minister, she had once more found her way to the tiny boudoir, still the most deserted among all the rooms. She knew that Chauvelin must be lying in wait for her somewhere, ready to seize the first possible opportunity for a TETE-A-TETE. His eyes had met hers for a moment after the 'fore-supper minuet, and she knew that the keen diplomat, with those searching pale eyes of his, had divined that her work was accomplished.

Fate had willed it so. Marguerite, torn by the most terrible conflict heart of woman can ever know, had resigned herself to its decrees. But Armand must be saved at any cost; he, first of all, for he was her brother, had been mother, father, friend to her ever since she, a tiny babe, had lost both her parents. To think of Armand dying a traitor's death on the guillotine was too horrible even to dwell upon — impossible in fact. That could never be, never. . . . As for the stranger, the hero . . . well! there, let Fate decide. Marguerite would redeem her brother's life at the hands of the relentless enemy, then let that cunning Scarlet Pimpernel extricate himself after that.

Perhaps — vaguely — Marguerite hoped that the daring plotter, who for so many months had baffled an army of spies, would still manage to evade Chauvelin and remain immune to the end.

She thought of all this, as she sat listening to the witty discourse of the Cabinet Minister, who, no doubt, felt that he had found in Lady Blakeney a most perfect listener. Suddenly she saw the keen, fox-like face of Chauvelin peeping through the curtained doorway.

"Lord Fancourt," she said to the Minister, "will you do me a service?"

"I am entirely at your ladyship's service," he replied gallantly.

"Will you see if my husband is still in the card-room? And if he is, will you tell him that I am very tired, and would be glad to go home soon."

The commands of a beautiful woman are binding on all mankind, even on Cabinet Ministers. Lord Fancourt prepared to obey instantly.

"I do not like to leave your ladyship alone," he said.

"Never fear. I shall be quite safe here — and, I think, undisturbed . . . but I am really tired. You know Sir Percy will drive back to Richmond. It is a long way, and we shall not — an we do not hurry — get home before daybreak."

Lord Fancourt had perforce to go.

The moment he had disappeared, Chauvelin slipped into the room, and the next instant stood calm and impassive by her side.

"You have news for me?" he said.

An icy mantle seemed to have suddenly settled round Marguerite's shoulders; though her cheeks glowed with fire, she felt chilled and numbed. Oh, Armand! will you ever know the terrible sacrifice of pride, of dignity, of womanliness a devoted sister is making for your sake?

"Nothing of importance," she said, staring mechanically before her, "but it might prove a clue. I contrived — no matter how — to detect Sir Andrew Ffoulkes in the very act of burning a paper at one of these candles, in this very room. That paper I succeeded in holding between my fingers for the space of two minutes, and to cast my eyes on it for that of ten seconds."

"Time enough to learn its contents?" asked Chauvelin, quietly.

She nodded. Then continued in the same even, mechanical tone of voice —

"In the corner of the paper there was the usual rough device of a small star-shaped flower. Above it I read two lines, everything else was scorched and blackened by the flame."

"And what were the two lines?"

Her throat seemed suddenly to have contracted. For an instant she felt that she could not speak the words, which might send a brave man to his death.

"It is lucky that the whole paper was not burned," added Chauvelin, with dry sarcasm, "for it might have fared ill with Armand St. Just. What were the two lines citoyenne?"

"One was, 'I start myself to-morrow,'" she said quietly, "the other— 'If you wish to speak to me, I shall be in the supper-room at one o'clock precisely.'"

Chauvelin looked up at the clock just above the mantelpiece.

"Then I have plenty of time," he said placidly.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

She was pale as a statue, her hands were icy cold, her head and heart throbbed with the awful strain upon her nerves. Oh, this was cruel! cruel! What had she done to have deserved all this? Her choice was made: had she done a vile action or one that was sublime? The recording angel, who writes in the book of gold, alone could give an answer.

"What are you going to do?" she repeated mechanically.

"Oh, nothing for the present. After that it will depend."

"On what?"

"On whom I shall see in the supper-room at one o'clock precisely."

"You will see the Scarlet Pimpernel, of course. But you do not know him."

"No. But I shall presently."

"Sir Andrew will have warned him."

"I think not. When you parted from him after the minuet he stood and watched you, for a moment or two, with a look which gave me to understand that something had happened between you. It was only natural, was it not? that I should make a shrewd guess as to the nature of that 'something.' I thereupon engaged the young man in a long and animated conversation — we discussed Herr Gluck's singular success in London — until a lady claimed his arm for supper."

"Since then?"

"I did not lose sight of him through supper. When we all came upstairs again, Lady Portarles buttonholed him and started on the subject of pretty Mlle. Suzanne de Tournay. I knew he would not move until Lady Portarles had exhausted on the subject, which will not be for another quarter of an hour at least, and it is five minutes to one now."

He was preparing to go, and went up to the doorway where, drawing aside the curtain, he stood for a moment pointing out to Marguerite the distant figure of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes in close conversation with Lady Portarles.

"I think," he said, with a triumphant smile, "that I may safely expect to find the person I seek in the dining-room, fair lady."

"There may be more than one."

"Whoever is there, as the clock strikes one, will be shadowed by one of my men; of these, one, or perhaps two, or even three, will leave for France to-morrow. ONE of these will be the 'Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

"Yes? — And?"

"I also, fair lady, will leave for France to-morrow. The papers found at Dover upon the person of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes speak of the neighborhood of Calais, of an inn which I know well, called 'Le Chat Gris,' of a lonely place somewhere on the coast — the Pere Blanchard's hut — which I must endeavor to find. All these places are given as the point where this meddling Englishman has bidden the traitor de Tournay and others to meet his emissaries. But it seems that he has decided not to send his emissaries, that 'he will start himself to-morrow.' Now, one of these persons whom I shall see anon in the supper-room, will be journeying to Calais, and I shall follow that person, until I have tracked him to where those fugitive aristocrats await him; for that person, fair lady, will be the man whom I have sought for, for nearly a year, the man whose energies has outdone me, whose ingenuity has baffled me, whose audacity has set me wondering — yes! me! — who have seen a trick or two in my time — the mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel."

"And Armand?" she pleaded.

"Have I ever broken my word? I promise you that the day the Scarlet Pimpernel and I start for France, I will send you that imprudent letter of his by special courier. More than that, I will pledge you the word of France, that the day I lay hands on that meddling Englishman, St. Just will be here in England, safe in the arms of his charming sister."

And with a deep and elaborate bow and another look at the clock, Chauvelin glided out of the room.

It seemed to Marguerite that through all the noise, all the din of music, dancing, and laughter, she could hear his cat-like tread, gliding through the vast reception-rooms; that she could hear him go down the massive staircase, reach the dining-room and open the door. Fate HAD decided, had made her speak, had made her do a vile and abominable thing, for the sake of the brother she loved. She lay back in her chair, passive and still, seeing the figure of her relentless enemy ever present before her aching eyes.

When Chauvelin reached the supper-room it was quite deserted. It had that woebegone, forsaken, tawdry appearance, which reminds one so much of a ball-dress, the morning after.

Half-empty glasses littered the table, unfolded napkins lay about, the chairs — turned towards one another in groups of twos and threes — very close to one another — in the far corners of the room, which spoke of recent whispered flirtations, over cold game-pie and champagne; there were sets of three and four chairs, that recalled pleasant, animated discussions over the latest scandal; there were chairs straight up in a row that still looked starchy, critical, acid, like antiquated dowagers; there were a few isolated, single chairs, close to the table, that spoke of gourmands intent on the most RECHERCHE dishes, and others overturned on the floor, that spoke volumes on the subject of my Lord Grenville's cellars.

It was a ghostlike replica, in fact, of that fashionable gathering upstairs; a ghost that haunts every house where balls and good suppers are given; a picture drawn with white chalk on grey cardboard, dull and colourless, now that the bright silk dresses and gorgeously embroidered coats were no longer there to fill in the foreground, and now that the candles flickered sleepily in their sockets.

Chauvelin smiled benignly, and rubbing his long, thin hands together, he looked round the deserted supper-room, whence even the last flunkey had retired in order to join his friends in the hall below. All was silence in the dimly-lighted room, whilst the sound of the gavotte, the hum of distant talk and laughter, and the rumble of an occasional coach outside, only seemed to reach this palace of the Sleeping Beauty as the murmur of some flitting spooks far away.

It all looked so peaceful, so luxurious, and so still, that the keenest observer — a veritable prophet — could never have guessed that, at this present moment, that deserted supper-room was nothing but a trap laid for the capture of the most cunning and audacious plotter those stirring times had ever seen.

Chauvelin pondered and tried to peer into the immediate future. What would this man be like, whom he and the leaders of the whole revolution had sworn to bring to his death? Everything about him was weird and mysterious; his personality, which he so cunningly concealed, the power he wielded over nineteen English gentlemen who seemed to obey his every command blindly and enthusiastically, the passionate love and submission he had roused in his little trained band, and, above all, his marvellous audacity, the boundless impudence which had caused him to beard his most implacable enemies, within the very walls of Paris.

No wonder that in France the SOBRIQUET of the mysterious Englishman roused in the people a superstitious shudder. Chauvelin himself as he gazed round the deserted room, where presently the weird hero would appear, felt a strange feeling of awe creeping all down his spine.

But his plans were well laid. He felt sure that the Scarlet Pimpernel had not been warned, and felt equally sure that Marguerite Blakeney had not played him false. If she had . . . a cruel look, that would have made her shudder, gleamed in Chauvelin's keen, pale eyes. If she had played him a trick, Armand St. Just would suffer the extreme penalty.

But no, no! of course she had not played him false!

Fortunately the supper-room was deserted: this would make Chauvelin's task all the easier, when presently that unsuspecting enigma would enter it alone. No one was here now save Chauvelin himself.

Stay! as he surveyed with a satisfied smile the solitude of the room, the cunning agent of the French Government became aware of the peaceful, monotonous breathing of some one of my Lord Grenville's guests, who, no doubt, had supped both wisely and well, and was enjoying a quiet sleep, away from the din of the dancing above.

Chauvelin looked round once more, and there in the corner of a sofa, in the dark angle of the room, his mouth open, his eyes shut, the sweet sounds of peaceful slumbers proceeding from his nostrils, reclined the gorgeously-apparelled, long-limbed husband of the cleverest woman in Europe.

Chauvelin looked at him as he lay there, placid, unconscious, at peace with all the world and himself, after the best of suppers, and a smile, that was almost one of pity, softened for a moment the hard lines of the Frenchman's face and the sarcastic twinkle of his pale eyes.

Evidently the slumberer, deep in dreamless sleep, would not interfere with Chauvelin's trap for catching that cunning Scarlet Pimpernel. Again he rubbed his hands together, and, following the example of Sir Percy Blakeney, he too, stretched himself out in the corner of another sofa, shut his eyes, opened his mouth, gave forth sounds of peaceful breathing, and . . . waited!

CHAPTER XV DOUBT

Marguerite Blakeney had watched the slight sable-clad figure of Chauvelin, as he worked his way through the ball-room. Then perforce she had had to wait, while her nerves tingled with excitement.

Listlessly she sat in the small, still deserted boudoir, looking out through the curtained doorway on the dancing couples beyond: looking at them, yet seeing nothing, hearing the music, yet conscious of naught save a feeling of expectancy, of anxious, weary waiting.

Her mind conjured up before her the vision of what was, perhaps at this very moment, passing downstairs. The half-deserted dining-room, the fateful hour — Chauvelin on the watch! — then, precise to the moment, the entrance of a man, he, the Scarlet Pimpernel, the mysterious leader, who to Marguerite had become almost unreal, so strange, so weird was this hidden identity.

She wished she were in the supper-room, too, at this moment, watching him as he entered; she knew that her woman's penetration would at once recognise in the stranger's face — whoever he might be — that strong individuality which belongs to a leader of men — to a hero: to the mighty, high-soaring eagle, whose daring wings were becoming entangled in the ferret's trap.

Woman-like, she thought of him with unmixed sadness; the irony of that fate seemed so cruel which allowed the fearless lion to succumb to the gnawing of a rat! Ah! had Armand's life not been at stake! . . .

"Faith! your ladyship must have thought me very remiss," said a voice suddenly, close to her elbow. "I had a deal of difficulty in delivering your message, for I could not find Blakeney anywhere at first . . ."

Marguerite had forgotten all about her husband and her message to him; his very name, as spoken by Lord Fancourt, sounded strange and unfamiliar to her, so completely had she in the last five minutes lived her old life in the Rue de Richelieu again, with Armand always near her to love and protect her, to guard her from the many subtle intrigues which were forever raging in Paris in those days.

"I did find him at last," continued Lord Fancourt, "and gave him your message. He said that he would give orders at once for the horses to be put to."

"Ah!" she said, still very absently, "you found my husband, and gave him my message?"

"Yes; he was in the dining-room fast asleep. I could not manage to wake him up at first."

"Thank you very much," she said mechanically, trying to collect her thoughts.

"Will your ladyship honour me with the CONTREDANSE until your coach is ready?" asked Lord Fancourt.

"No, I thank you, my lord, but — and you will forgive me — I really am too tired, and the heat in the ball-room has become oppressive."

"The conservatory is deliciously cool; let me take you there, and then get you something. You seem ailing, Lady Blakeney."

"I am only very tired," she repeated wearily, as she allowed Lord Fancourt to lead her, where subdued lights and green plants lent coolness to the air. He got her a chair, into which she sank. This long interval of waiting was intolerable. Why did not Chauvelin come and tell her the result of his watch?

Lord Fancourt was very attentive. She scarcely heard what he said, and suddenly startled him by asking abruptly, —

"Lord Fancourt, did you perceive who was in the dining-room just now besides Sir Percy Blakeney?"

"Only the agent of the French government, M. Chauvelin, equally fast asleep in another corner," he said. "Why does your ladyship ask?"

"I know not . . . I . . . Did you notice the time when you were there?"

"It must have been about five or ten minutes past one. . . . I wonder what your ladyship is thinking about," he added, for evidently the fair lady's thoughts were very far away, and she had not been listening to his intellectual conversation.

But indeed her thoughts were not very far away: only one storey below, in this same house, in the dining-room where sat Chauvelin still on the watch. Had he failed? For one instant that possibility rose before as a hope — the hope that the Scarlet Pimpernel had been warned by Sir Andrew, and that Chauvelin's trap had failed to catch his bird; but that hope soon gave way to fear. Had he failed? But then — Armand!

Lord Fancourt had given up talking since he found that he had no listener. He wanted an opportunity for slipping away; for sitting opposite to a lady, however fair, who is evidently not heeding the most vigorous efforts made for her entertainment, is not exhilarating, even to a Cabinet Minister.

"Shall I find out if your ladyship's coach is ready," he said at last, tentatively.

"Oh, thank you . . . thank you . . . if you would be so kind . . . I fear I am but sorry company . . . but I am really tired . . . and, perhaps, would be best alone."

But Lord Fancourt went, and still Chauvelin did not come. Oh! what had happened? She felt Armand's fate trembling in the balance . . . she feared — now with a deadly fear that Chauvelin HAD failed, and that the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel had proved elusive once more; then she knew that she need hope for no pity, no mercy, from him.

He had pronounced his "Either — or—" and nothing less would content him: he was very spiteful, and would affect the belief that she had wilfully misled him, and having failed to trap the eagle once again, his revengeful mind would be content with the humble prey — Armand!

Yet she had done her best; had strained every nerve for Armand's sake. She could not bear to think that all had failed. She could not sit still; she wanted to go and hear the worst at once; she wondered even that Chauvelin had not come yet, to vent his wrath and satire upon her.

Lord Grenville himself came presently to tell her that her coach was ready, and that Sir Percy was already waiting for her — ribbons in hand. Marguerite said "Farewell" to her distinguished host; many of her friends stopped her, as she crossed the rooms, to talk to her, and exchange pleasant AU REVOIRS.

The Minister only took final leave of beautiful Lady Blakeney on the top of the stairs; below, on the landing, a veritable army of gallant gentlemen were waiting to bid "Good-bye" to the queen of beauty and fashion, whilst outside, under the massive portico, Sir Percy's magnificent bays were impatient pawing the ground.

At the top of the stairs, just after she had taken final leave of her host, she suddenly saw Chauvelin; he was coming up the stairs slowly, and rubbing his thin hands very softly together.

There was a curious look on his mobile face, partly amused and wholly puzzled, as his keen eyes met Marguerite's they became strangely sarcastic.

"M. Chauvelin," she said, as he stopped on the top of the stairs, bowing elaborately before her, "my coach is outside; may I claim your arm?"

As gallant as ever, he offered her his arm and led her downstairs. The crowd was very great, some of the Minister's guests were departing, others were leaning against the banisters watching the throng as it filed up and down the wide staircase.

"Chauvelin," she said at last desperately, "I must know what has happened."

"What has happened, dear lady?" he said, with affected surprise. "Where? When?"

"You are torturing me, Chauvelin. I have helped you to-night . . . surely I have the right to know. What happened in the dining-room at one o'clock just now?"

She spoke in a whisper, trusting that in the general hubbub of the crowd her words would remain unheeded by all, save the man at her side.

"Quiet and peace reigned supreme, fair lady; at that hour I was asleep in one corner of one sofa and Sir Percy Blakeney in another."

"Nobody came into the room at all?"

"Nobody."

"Then we have failed, you and I?"

"Yes! we have failed — perhaps . . ."

"But Armand?" she pleaded.

"Ah! Armand St. Just's chances hang on a thread . . . pray heaven, dear lady, that that thread may not snap."

"Chauvelin, I worked for you, sincerely, earnestly . . . remember . . ."

"I remember my promise," he said quietly. "The day that the Scarlet Pimpernel and I meet on French soil, St. Just will be in the arms of his charming sister."

"Which means that a brave man's blood will be on my hands," she said, with a shudder.

"His blood, or that of your brother. Surely at the present moment you must hope, as I do, that the enigmatical Scarlet Pimpernel will start for Calais to-day—"

"I am only conscious of one hope, citoyen."

"And that is?"

"That Satan, your master, will have need of you elsewhere, before the sun rises to-day."

"You flatter me, citoyenne."

She had detained him for a while, mid-way down the stairs, trying to get at the thoughts which lay beyond that thin, fox-like mask. But Chauvelin remained urbane, sarcastic, mysterious; not a line betrayed to the poor, anxious woman whether she need fear or whether she dared to hope.

Downstairs on the landing she was soon surrounded. Lady Blakeney never stepped from any house into her coach, without an escort of fluttering human moths around the dazzling light of her beauty. But before she finally turned away from Chauvelin, she held out a tiny hand to him, with that pretty gesture of childish appeal which was essentially her own. "Give me some hope, my little Chauvelin," she pleaded.

With perfect gallantry he bowed over that tiny hand, which looked so dainty and white through the delicately transparent black lace mitten, and kissing the tips of the rosy fingers: —

"Pray heaven that the thread may not snap," he repeated, with his enigmatic smile.

And stepping aside, he allowed the moths to flutter more closely round the candle, and the brilliant throng of the JEUNESSE DOREE, eagerly attentive to Lady Blakeney's every movement, hid the keen, fox-like face from her view.

CHAPTER XVI RICHMOND

A few minutes later she was sitting, wrapped in cosy furs, near Sir Percy Blakeney on the box-seat of his magnificent coach, and the four splendid bays had thundered down the quiet street.

The night was warm in spite of the gentle breeze which fanned Marguerite's burning cheeks. Soon London houses were left behind, and rattling over old Hammersmith Bridge, Sir Percy was driving his bays rapidly towards Richmond.

The river wound in and out in its pretty delicate curves, looking like a silver serpent beneath the glittering rays of the moon. Long shadows from overhanging trees spread occasional deep palls right across the road. The bays were rushing along at breakneck speed, held but slightly back by Sir Percy's strong, unerring hands.

These nightly drives after balls and suppers in London were a source of perpetual delight to Marguerite, and she appreciated her husband's eccentricity keenly, which caused him to adopt this mode of taking her home every night, to their beautiful home by the river, instead of living in a stuffy London house. He loved driving his spirited horses along the lonely, moonlit roads, and she loved to sit on the box-seat, with the soft air of an English late summer's night fanning her face after the hot atmosphere of a ball or supper-party. The drive was not a long one — less than an hour, sometimes, when the bays were very fresh, and Sir Percy gave them full rein.

To-night he seemed to have a very devil in his fingers, and the coach seemed to fly along the road, beside the river. As usual, he did not speak to her, but stared straight in front of him, the ribbons seeming to lie quite loosely in his slender, white hands. Marguerite looked at him tentatively once or twice; she could see his handsome profile, and one lazy eye, with its straight fine brow and drooping heavy lid.

The face in the moonlight looked singularly earnest, and recalled to Marguerite's aching heart those happy days of courtship, before he had become the lazy nincompoop, the effete fop, whose life seemed spent in card and supper rooms.

But now, in the moonlight, she could not catch the expression of the lazy blue eyes; she could only see the outline of the firm chin, the corner of the strong mouth, the well-cut massive shape of the forehead; truly, nature had meant well by Sir Percy; his faults must all be laid at the door of that poor, half-crazy mother, and of the distracted heart-broken father, neither of whom had cared for the young life which was sprouting up between them, and which, perhaps, their very carelessness was already beginning to wreck.

Marguerite suddenly felt intense sympathy for her husband. The moral crisis she had just gone through made her feel indulgent towards the faults, the delinquencies, of others.

How thoroughly a human being can be buffeted and overmastered by Fate, had been borne in upon her with appalling force. Had anyone told her a week ago that she would stoop to spy upon her friends, that she would betray a brave and unsuspecting man into the hands of a relentless enemy, she would have laughed the idea to scorn.

Yet she had done these things; anon, perhaps the death of that brave man would be at her door, just as two years ago the Marquis de St. Cyr had perished through a thoughtless words of hers; but in that case she was morally innocent — she had meant no serious harm — fate merely had stepped in. But this time she had done a thing that obviously was base, had done it deliberately, for a motive which, perhaps, high moralists would not even appreciate.

As she felt her husband's strong arm beside her, she also felt how much more he would dislike and despise her, if he knew of this night's work. Thus human beings judge of one another, with but little reason, and no charity. She despised her husband for his inanities and vulgar, unintellectual occupations; and he, she felt, would despise her still worse, because she had not been strong enough to do right for right's sake, and to sacrifice her brother to the dictates of her conscience.

Buried in her thoughts, Marguerite had found this hour in the breezy summer night all too brief; and it was with a feeling of keen disappointment, that she suddenly realised that the bays had turned into the massive gates of her beautiful English home.

Sir Percy Blakeney's house on the river has become a historic one: palatial in its dimensions, it stands in the midst of exquisitely laid-out gardens, with a picturesque terrace and frontage to the river. Built in Tudor days, the old red brick of the walls looks eminently picturesque in the midst of a bower of green, the beautiful lawn, with its old sun-dial, adding the true note of harmony to its foregrounds, and now, on this warm early autumn night, the leaves slightly turned to russets and gold, the old garden looked singularly poetic and peaceful in the moonlight.

With unerring precision, Sir Percy had brought the four bays to a standstill immediately in front of the fine Elizabethan entrance hall; in spite of the late hour, an army of grooms seemed to have emerged from the very ground, as the coach had thundered up, and were standing respectfully round.

Sir Percy jumped down quickly, then helped Marguerite to alight. She lingered outside a moment, whilst he gave a few orders to one of his men. She skirted the house, and stepped on to the lawn, looking out dreamily into the silvery landscape. Nature seemed exquisitely at peace, in comparison with the tumultuous emotions she had gone through: she could faintly hear the ripple of the river and the occasional soft and ghostlike fall of a dead leaf from a tree.

All else was quiet round her. She had heard the horses prancing as they were being led away to their distant stables, the hurrying of servant's feet as they had all gone within to rest: the house also was quite still. In two separate suites of apartments, just above the magnificent reception-rooms, lights were still burning, they were her rooms, and his, well divided from each other by the whole width of the house, as far apart as their own lives had become. Involuntarily she sighed — at that moment she could really not have told why.

She was suffering from unconquerable heartache. Deeply and achingly she was sorry for herself. Never had she felt so pitifully lonely, so bitterly in want of comfort and of sympathy. With another sigh she turned away from the river towards the house, vaguely wondering if, after such a night, she could ever find rest and sleep.

Suddenly, before she reached the terrace, she heard a firm step upon the crisp gravel, and the next moment her husband's figure emerged out of the shadow. He too, had skirted the house, and was wandering along the lawn, towards the river. He still wore his heavy driving coat with the numerous lapels and collars he himself had set in fashion, but he had thrown it well back, burying his hands as was his wont, in the deep pockets of his satin breeches: the gorgeous white costume he had worn at Lord Grenville's ball, with its jabot of priceless lace, looked strangely ghostly against the dark background of the house.

He apparently did not notice her, for, after a few moments pause, he presently turned back towards the house, and walked straight up to the terrace.

"Sir Percy!"

He already had one foot on the lowest of the terrace steps, but at her voice he started, and paused, then looked searchingly into the shadows whence she had called to him.

She came forward quickly into the moonlight, and, as soon as he saw her, he said, with that air of consummate gallantry he always wore when speaking to her, —

"At your service, Madame!" But his foot was still on the step, and in his whole attitude there was a remote suggestion, distinctly visible to her, that he wished to go, and had no desire for a midnight interview.

"The air is deliciously cool," she said, "the moonlight peaceful and poetic, and the garden inviting. Will you not stay in it awhile; the hour is not yet late, or is my company so distasteful to you, that you are in a hurry to rid yourself of it?"

"Nay, Madame," he rejoined placidly, "but 'tis on the other foot the shoe happens to be, and I'll warrant you'll find the midnight air more poetic without my company: no doubt the sooner I remove the obstruction the better your ladyship will like it."

He turned once more to go.

"I protest you mistake me, Sir Percy," she said hurriedly, and drawing a little closer to him; "the estrangement, which alas! has arisen between us, was none of my making, remember."

"Begad! you must pardon me there, Madame!" he protested coldly, "my memory was always of the shortest."

He looked her straight in the eyes, with that lazy nonchalance which had become second nature to him. She returned his gaze for a moment, then her eyes softened, as she came up quite close to him, to the foot of the terrace steps.

"Of the shortest, Sir Percy! Faith! how it must have altered! Was it three years ago or four that you saw me for one hour in Paris, on your way to the East? When you came back two years later you had not forgotten me."

She looked divinely pretty as she stood there in the moonlight, with the fur-cloak sliding off her beautiful shoulders, the gold embroidery on her dress shimmering around her, her childlike blue eyes turned up fully at him.

He stood for a moment, rigid and still, but for the clenching of his hand against the stone balustrade of the terrace.

"You desired my presence, Madame," he said frigidly. "I take it that it was not with the view to indulging in tender reminiscences."

His voice certainly was cold and uncompromising: his attitude before her, stiff and unbending. Womanly decorum would have suggested Marguerite should return coldness for coldness, and should sweep past him without another word, only with a curt nod of her head: but womanly instinct suggested that she should remain — that keen instinct, which makes a beautiful woman conscious of her powers long to bring to her knees the one man who pays her no homage. She stretched out her hand to him.

"Nay, Sir Percy, why not? the present is not so glorious but that I should not wish to dwell a little in the past."

He bent his tall figure, and taking hold of the extreme tip of the fingers which she still held out to him, he kissed them ceremoniously.

"I faith, Madame," he said, "then you will pardon me, if my dull wits cannot accompany you there."

Once again he attempted to go, once more her voice, sweet, childlike, almost tender, called him back.

"Sir Percy."

"Your servant, Madame."

"Is it possible that love can die?" she said with sudden, unreasoning vehemence. "Methought that the passion which you once felt for me would outlast the span of human life. Is there nothing left of that love, Percy . . . which might help you . . . to bridge over that sad estrangement?"

His massive figure seemed, while she spoke thus to him, to stiffen still more, the strong mouth hardened, a look of relentless obstinacy crept into the habitually lazy blue eyes.

"With what object, I pray you, Madame?" he asked coldly.

"I do not understand you."

"Yet 'tis simple enough," he said with sudden bitterness, which seemed literally to surge through his words, though he was making visible efforts to suppress it, "I humbly put the question to you, for my slow wits are unable to grasp the cause of this, your ladyship's sudden new mood. Is it that you have the taste to renew the devilish sport which you played so successfully last year? Do you wish to see me once more a love-sick suppliant at your feet, so that you might again have the pleasure of kicking me aside, like a troublesome lap-dog?"

She had succeeded in rousing him for the moment: and again she looked straight at him, for it was thus she remembered him a year ago.

"Percy! I entreat you!" she whispered, "can we not bury the past?"

"Pardon me, Madame, but I understood you to say that your desire was to dwell in it."

"Nay! I spoke not of THAT past, Percy!" she said, while a tone of tenderness crept into her voice. "Rather did I speak of a time when you loved me still! and I . . . oh! I was vain and frivolous; your wealth and position allured me: I married you, hoping in my heart that your great love for me would beget in me a love for you . . . but, alas! . . ."

The moon had sunk low down behind a bank of clouds. In the east a soft grey light was beginning to chase away the heavy mantle of the night. He could only see her graceful outline now, the small queenly head, with its wealth of reddish golden curls, and the glittering gems forming the small, star-shaped, red flower which she wore as a diadem in her hair.

"Twenty-four hours after our marriage, Madame, the Marquis de St. Cyr and all his family perished on the guillotine, and the popular rumour reached me that it was the wife of Sir Percy Blakeney who helped to send them there."

"Nay! I myself told you the truth of that odious tale."

"Not till after it had been recounted to me by strangers, with all its horrible details."

"And you believed them then and there," she said with great vehemence, "without a proof or question — you believed that I, whom you vowed you loved more than life, whom you professed you worshipped, that I could do a thing so base as these STRANGERS

chose to recount. You thought I meant to deceive you about it all — that I ought to have spoken before I married you: yet, had you listened, I would have told you that up to the very morning on which St. Cyr went to the guillotine, I was straining every nerve, using every influence I possessed, to save him and his family. But my pride sealed my lips, when your love seemed to perish, as if under the knife of that same guillotine. Yet I would have told you how I was duped! Aye! I, whom that same popular rumour had endowed with the sharpest wits in France! I was tricked into doing this thing, by men who knew how to play upon my love for an only brother, and my desire for revenge. Was it unnatural?"

Her voice became choked with tears. She paused for a moment or two, trying to regain some sort of composure. She looked appealingly at him, almost as if he were her judge. He had allowed her to speak on in her own vehement, impassioned way, offering no comment, no word of sympathy: and now, while she paused, trying to swallow down the hot tears that gushed to her eyes, he waited, impassive and still. The dim, grey light of early dawn seemed to make his tall form look taller and more rigid. The lazy, good-natured face looked strangely altered. Marguerite, excited, as she was, could see that the eyes were no longer languid, the mouth no longer good-humoured and inane. A curious look of intense passion seemed to glow from beneath his drooping lids, the mouth was tightly closed, the lips compressed, as if the will alone held that surging passion in check.

Marguerite Blakeney was, above all, a woman, with all a woman's fascinating foibles, all a woman's most lovable sins. She knew in a moment that for the past few months she had been mistaken: that this man who stood here before her, cold as a statue, when her musical voice struck upon his ear, loved her, as he had loved her a year ago: that his passion might have been dormant, but that it was there, as strong, as intense, as overwhelming, as when first her lips met his in one long, maddening kiss. Pride had kept him from her, and, woman-like, she meant to win back that conquest which had been hers before. Suddenly it seemed to her that the only happiness life could ever hold for her again would be in feeling that man's kiss once more upon her lips.

"Listen to the tale, Sir Percy," she said, and her voice was low, sweet, infinitely tender. "Armand was all in all to me! We had no parents, and brought one another up. He was my little father, and I, his tiny mother; we loved one another so. Then one day — do you mind me, Sir Percy? the Marquis de St. Cyr had my brother Armand thrashed — thrashed by his lacqueys — that brother whom I loved better than all the world! And his offence? That he, a plebeian, had dared to love the daughter of the aristocrat; for that he was waylaid and thrashed . . . thrashed like a dog within an inch of his life! Oh, how I suffered! his humiliation had eaten into my very soul! When the opportunity occurred, and I was able to take my revenge, I took it. But I only thought to bring that proud marquis to trouble and humiliation. He plotted with Austria against his own country. Chance gave me knowledge of this; I spoke of it, but I did not know — how could I guess? — they trapped and duped me. When I realised what I had done, it was too late."

"It is perhaps a little difficult, Madame," said Sir Percy, after a moment of silence between them, "to go back over the past. I have confessed to you that my memory is short, but the thought certainly lingered in my mind that, at the time of the Marquis' death, I entreated you for an explanation of those same noisome popular rumours. If that same memory does not, even now, play me a trick, I fancy that you refused me ALL explanation then, and demanded of my love a humiliating allegiance it was not prepared to give."

"I wished to test your love for me, and it did not bear the test. You used to tell me that you drew the very breath of life but for me, and for love of me."

"And to probe that love, you demanded that I should forfeit mine honour," he said, whilst gradually his impassiveness seemed to leave him, his rigidity to relax; "that I should accept without murmur or question, as a dumb and submissive slave, every action of my mistress. My heart overflowing with love and passion, I ASKED for no explanation — I WAITED for one, not doubting — only hoping. Had you spoken but one word, from you I would have accepted any explanation and believed it. But you left me without a word, beyond a bald confession of the actual horrible facts; proudly you returned to your brother's house, and left me alone . . . for weeks . . . not knowing, now, in whom to believe, since the shrine, which contained my one illusion, lay shattered to earth at my feet."

She need not complain now that he was cold and impassive; his very voice shook with an intensity of passion, which he was making superhuman efforts to keep in check.

"Aye! the madness of my pride!" she said sadly. "Hardly had I gone, already I had repented. But when I returned, I found you, oh, so altered! wearing already that mask of somnolent indifference which you have never laid aside until . . . until now."

She was so close to him that her soft, loose hair was wafted against his cheek; her eyes, glowing with tears, maddened him, the music in her voice sent fire through his veins. But he would not yield to the magic charm of this woman whom he had so deeply loved, and at whose hands his pride had suffered so bitterly. He closed his eyes to shut out the dainty vision of that sweet face, of that snow-white neck and graceful figure, round which the faint rosy light of dawn was just beginning to hover playfully.

"Nay, Madame, it is no mask," he said icily; "I swore to you . . . once, that my life was yours. For months now it has been your plaything . . . it has served its purpose."

But now she knew that the very coldness was a mask. The trouble, the sorrow she had gone through last night, suddenly came back into her mind, but no longer with bitterness, rather with a feeling that this man who loved her, would help her bear the burden.

"Sir Percy," she said impulsively, "Heaven knows you have been at pains to make the task, which I had set to myself, difficult to accomplish. You spoke of my mood just now; well! we will call it that, if you will. I wished to speak to you . . . because . . . because I was in trouble . . . and had need . . . of your sympathy."

"It is yours to command, Madame."

"How cold you are!" she sighed. "Faith! I can scarce believe that but a few months ago one tear in my eye had set you well-nigh crazy. Now I come to you . . . with a half-broken heart . . . and . . . and . . ."

"I pray you, Madame," he said, whilst his voice shook almost as much as hers, "in what way can I serve you?"

"Percy! — Armand is in deadly danger. A letter of his . . . rash, impetuous, as were all his actions, and written to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, has fallen into the hands of a fanatic. Armand is hopelessly compromised . . . to-morrow, perhaps he will be arrested . . . after that the guillotine . . . unless . . . oh! it is horrible!" . . . she said, with a sudden wail of anguish, as all the events of the past night came rushing back to her mind, "horrible! . . . and you do not understand . . . you cannot . . . and I have no one to whom I can turn . . . for help . . . or even for sympathy . . ."

Tears now refused to be held back. All her trouble, her struggles, the awful uncertainty of Armand's fate overwhelmed her. She tottered, ready to fall, and leaning against the stone balustrade, she buried her face in her hands and sobbed bitterly.

At first mention of Armand St. Just's name and of the peril in which he stood, Sir Percy's face had become a shade more pale; and the look of determination and obstinacy appeared more marked than ever between his eyes. However, he said nothing for the moment, but watched her, as her delicate frame was shaken with sobs, watched her until unconsciously his face softened, and what looked almost like tears seemed to glisten in his eyes.

"And so," he said with bitter sarcasm, "the murderous dog of the revolution is turning upon the very hands that fed it? . . . Begad, Madame," he added very gently, as Marguerite continued to sob hysterically, "will you dry your tears? . . . I never could bear to see a pretty woman cry, and I . . ."

Instinctively, with sudden overmastering passion at the sight of her helplessness and of her grief, he stretched out his arms, and the next, would have seized her and held her to him, protected from every evil with his very life, his very heart's blood. . . . But pride had the better of it in this struggle once again; he restrained himself with a tremendous effort of will, and said coldly, though still very gently, —

"Will you not turn to me, Madame, and tell me in what way I may have the honour to serve you?"

She made a violent effort to control herself, and turning her tear-stained face to him, she once more held out her hand, which he kissed with the same punctilious gallantry; but Marguerite's fingers, this time, lingered in his hand for a second or two longer than was absolutely necessary, and this was because she had felt that his hand trembled perceptibly and was burning hot, whilst his lips felt as cold as marble.

"Can you do aught for Armand?" she said sweetly and simply. "You have so much influence at court . . . so many friends . . ."

"Nay, Madame, should you not seek the influence of your French friend, M. Chauvelin? His extends, if I mistake not, even as far as the Republican Government of France."

"I cannot ask him, Percy. . . . Oh! I wish I dared to tell you . . . but . . . but . . . he has put a price on my brother's head, which . . ."

She would have given worlds if she had felt the courage then to tell him everything . . . all she had done that night — how she had suffered and how her hand had been forced. But she dared not give way to that impulse . . . not now, when she was just beginning to feel that he still loved her, when she hoped that she could win him back. She dared not make another confession to him. After all, he might not understand; he might not sympathise with her struggles and temptation. His love still dormant might sleep the sleep of death.

Perhaps he divined what was passing in her mind. His whole attitude was one of intense longing — a veritable prayer for that confidence, which her foolish pride withheld from him. When she remained silent he sighed, and said with marked coldness —

"Faith, Madame, since it distresses you, we will not speak of it. . . . As for Armand, I pray you have no fear. I pledge you my word that he shall be safe. Now, have I your permission to go? The hour is getting late, and . . ."

"You will at least accept my gratitude?" she said, as she drew quite close to him, and speaking with real tenderness.

With a quick, almost involuntary effort he would have taken her then in his arms, for her eyes were swimming in tears, which he longed to kiss away; but she had lured him once, just like this, then cast him aside like an ill-fitting glove. He thought this was but a mood, a caprice, and he was too proud to lend himself to it once again.

"It is too soon, Madame!" he said quietly; "I have done nothing as yet. The hour is late, and you must be fatigued. Your women will be waiting for you upstairs."

He stood aside to allow her to pass. She sighed, a quick sigh of disappointment. His pride and her beauty had been in direct conflict, and his pride had remained the conqueror. Perhaps, after all, she had been deceived just now; what she took to be the light of love in his eyes might only have been the passion of pride or, who knows, of hatred instead of love. She stood looking at him for a moment or two longer. He was again as rigid, as impassive, as before. Pride had conquered, and he cared naught for her. The grey light of dawn was gradually yielding to the rosy light of the rising sun. Birds began to twitter; Nature awakened, smiling in happy response to the warmth of this glorious October morning. Only between these two hearts there lay a strong, impassable barrier, built up of pride on both sides, which neither of them cared to be the first to demolish.

He had bent his tall figure in a low ceremonious bow, as she finally, with another bitter little sigh, began to mount the terrace steps.

The long train of her gold-embroidered gown swept the dead leaves off the steps, making a faint harmonious sh — sh — sh as she glided up, with one hand resting on the balustrade, the rosy light of dawn making an aureole of gold round her hair, and causing the rubies on her head and arms to sparkle. She reached the tall glass doors which led into the house. Before entering, she paused once again to look at him, hoping against hope to see his arms stretched out to her, and to hear his voice calling her back. But he had not moved; his massive figure looked the very personification of unbending pride, of fierce obstinacy.

Hot tears again surged to her eyes, as she would not let him see them, she turned quickly within, and ran as fast as she could up to her own rooms.

Had she but turned back then, and looked out once more on to the rose-lit garden, she would have seen that which would have made her own sufferings seem but light and easy to bear — a strong man, overwhelmed with his own passion and his own despair. Pride had given way at last, obstinacy was gone: the will was powerless. He was but a man madly, blindly, passionately in love, and as soon as her light footsteps had died away within the house, he knelt down upon the terrace steps, and in the very madness of his love he kissed one by one the places where her small foot had trodden, and the stone balustrade there, where her tiny hand had rested last.

CHAPTER XVII FAREWELL

When Marguerite reached her room, she found her maid terribly anxious about her.

"Your ladyship will be so tired," said the poor woman, whose own eyes were half closed with sleep. "It is past five o'clock."

"Ah, yes, Louise, I daresay I shall be tired presently," said Marguerite, kindly; "but you are very tired now, so go to bed at once. I'll get into bed alone."

"But, my lady . . ."

"Now, don't argue, Louise, but go to bed. Give me a wrap, and leave me alone."

Louise was only too glad to obey. She took off her mistress's gorgeous ball-dress, and wrapped her up in a soft billowy gown.

"Does your ladyship wish for anything else?" she asked, when that was done.

"No, nothing more. Put out the lights as you go out."

"Yes, my lady. Good-night, my lady."

"Good-night, Louise."

When the maid was gone, Marguerite drew aside the curtains and threw open the windows. The garden and the river beyond were flooded with rosy light. Far away to the east, the rays of the rising sun had changed the rose into vivid gold. The lawn was deserted now, and Marguerite looked down upon the terrace where she had stood a few moments ago trying in vain to win back a man's love, which once had been so wholly hers.

It was strange that through all her troubles, all her anxiety for Armand, she was mostly conscious at the present moment of a keen and bitter heartache.

Her very limbs seemed to ache with longing for the love of a man who had spurned her, who had resisted her tenderness, remained cold to her appeals, and had not responded to the glow of passion, which had caused her to feel and hope that those happy olden days in Paris were not all dead and forgotten.

How strange it all was! She loved him still. And now that she looked back upon the last few months of misunderstandings and of loneliness, she realised that she had never ceased to love him; that deep down in her heart she had always vaguely felt that his foolish inanities, his empty laugh, his lazy nonchalance were nothing but a mask; that the real man, strong, passionate, wilful, was there still — the man she had loved, whose intensity had fascinated her, whose personality attracted her, since she always felt that behind his apparently slow wits there was a certain something, which he kept hidden from all the world, and most especially from her.

A woman's heart is such a complex problem — the owner thereof is often most incompetent to find the solution of this puzzle.

Did Marguerite Blakeney, "the cleverest woman in Europe," really love a fool? Was it love that she had felt for him a year ago when she married him? Was it love she felt for him now that she realised that he still loved her, but that he would not become her slave, her passionate, ardent lover once again? Nay! Marguerite herself could not have told that. Not at this moment at any rate; perhaps her pride had sealed her mind against a better understanding of her own heart. But this she did know — that she meant to capture that obstinate heart back again. That she would conquer once more . . . and then, that she would never lose him . . . She would keep him, keep his love, deserve it, and cherish it; for this much was certain, that there was no longer any happiness possible for her without that one man's love.

Thus the most contradictory thoughts and emotions rushed madly through her mind. Absorbed in them, she had allowed time to slip by; perhaps, tired out with long excitement, she had actually closed her eyes and sunk into a troubled sleep, wherein quickly fleeting dreams seemed but the continuation of her anxious thoughts — when suddenly she was roused, from dream or meditation, by the noise of footsteps outside her door.

Nervously she jumped up and listened; the house itself was as still as ever; the footsteps had retreated. Through her wide-open window the brilliant rays of the morning sun were flooding her room with light. She looked up at the clock; it was half-past six — too early for any of the household to be already astir.

She certainly must have dropped asleep, quite unconsciously. The noise of the footsteps, also of hushed subdued voices had awakened her — what could they be?

Gently, on tip-toe, she crossed the room and opened the door to listen; not a sound — that peculiar stillness of the early morning when sleep with all mankind is at its heaviest. But the noise had made her nervous, and when, suddenly, at her feet, on the very doorstep, she saw something white lying there — a letter evidently — she hardly dared touch it. It seemed so ghostlike. It certainly was not there when she came upstairs; had Louise dropped it? or was some tantalising spook at play, showing her fairy letters where none existed?

At last she stooped to pick it up, and, amazed, puzzled beyond measure, she saw that the letter was addressed to herself in her husband's large, businesslike-looking hand. What could he have to say to her, in the middle of the night, which could not be put off until the morning?

She tore open the envelope and read: —

"A most unforeseen circumstance forces me to leave for the North immediately, so I beg your ladyship's pardon if I do not avail myself of the honour of bidding you good-bye. My business may keep me employed for about a week, so I shall not have the privilege of being present at your ladyship's water-party on Wednesday. I remain your ladyship's most humble and most obedient servant, PERCY BLAKENEY."

Marguerite must suddenly have been imbued with her husband's slowness of intellect, for she had perforce to read the few simple lines over and over again, before she could fully grasp their meaning.

She stood on the landing, turning over and over in her hand this curt and mysterious epistle, her mind a blank, her nerves strained with agitation and a presentiment she could not very well have explained.

Sir Percy owned considerable property in the North, certainly, and he had often before gone there alone and stayed away a week at a time; but it seemed so very strange that circumstances should have arisen between five and six o'clock in the morning that compelled

him to start in this extreme hurry.

Vainly she tried to shake off an unaccustomed feeling of nervousness: she was trembling from head to foot. A wild, unconquerable desire seized her to see her husband again, at once, if only he had not already started.

Forgetting the fact that she was only very lightly clad in a morning wrap, and that her hair lay loosely about her shoulders, she flew down the stairs, right through the hall towards the front door.

It was as usual barred and bolted, for the indoor servants were not yet up; but her keen ears had detected the sound of voices and the pawing of a horse's hoof against the flag-stones.

With nervous, trembling fingers Marguerite undid the bolts one by one, bruising her hands, hurting her nails, for the locks were heavy and stiff. But she did not care; her whole frame shook with anxiety at the very thought that she might be too late; that he might have gone without her seeing him and bidding him "God-speed!"

At last, she had turned the key and thrown open the door. Her ears had not deceived her. A groom was standing close by holding a couple of horses; one of these was Sultan, Sir Percy's favourite and swiftest horse, saddled ready for a journey.

The next moment Sir Percy himself appeared round the further corner of the house and came quickly towards the horses. He had changed his gorgeous ball costume, but was as usual irreproachably and richly apparelled in a suit of fine cloth, with lace jabot and ruffles, high top-boots, and riding breeches.

Marguerite went forward a few steps. He looked up and saw her. A slight frown appeared between his eyes.

"You are going?" she said quickly and feverishly. "Whither?"

"As I have had the honour of informing your ladyship, urgent, most unexpected business calls me to the North this morning," he said, in his usual cold, drawly manner.

"But . . . your guests to-morrow . . ."

"I have prayed your ladyship to offer my humble excuses to His Royal Highness. You are such a perfect hostess, I do not think I shall be missed."

"But surely you might have waited for your journey . . . until after our water-party . . ." she said, still speaking quickly and nervously. "Surely this business is not so urgent . . . and you said nothing about it — just now."

"My business, as I had the honour to tell you, Madame, is as unexpected as it is urgent. . . . May I therefore crave your permission to go. . . . Can I do aught for you in town? . . . on my way back?"

"No . . . no . . . thanks . . . nothing . . . But you will be back soon?"

"Very soon."

"Before the end of the week?"

"I cannot say."

He was evidently trying to get away, whilst she was straining every nerve to keep him back for a moment or two.

"Percy," she said, "will you not tell me why you go to-day? Surely I, as your wife, have the right to know. You have NOT been called away to the North. I know it. There were no letters, no couriers from there before we left for the opera last night, and nothing was waiting for you when we returned from the ball. . . . You are NOT going to the North, I feel convinced. . . . There is some mystery . . . and . . ."

"Nay, there is no mystery, Madame," he replied, with a slight tone of impatience. "My business has to do with Armand . . . there! Now, have I your leave to depart?"

"With Armand? . . . But you will run no danger?"

"Danger? I? . . . Nay, Madame, your solicitude does me honour. As you say, I have some influence; my intention is to exert it before it be too late."

"Will you allow me to thank you at least?"

"Nay, Madame," he said coldly, "there is no need for that. My life is at your service, and I am already more than repaid."

"And mine will be at yours, Sir Percy, if you will but accept it, in exchange for what you do for Armand," she said, as, impulsively, she stretched out both her hands to him. "There! I will not detain you . . . my thoughts go with you . . . Farewell! . . ."

How lovely she looked in this morning sunlight, with her ardent hair streaming around her shoulders. He bowed very low and kissed her hand; she felt the burning kiss and her heart thrilled with joy and hope.

"You will come back?" she said tenderly.

"Very soon!" he replied, looking longingly into her blue eyes.

"And . . . you will remember? . . ." she asked as her eyes, in response to his look, gave him an infinity of promise.

"I will always remember, Madame, that you have honoured me by commanding my services."

The words were cold and formal, but they did not chill her this time. Her woman's heart had read his, beneath the impassive mask his pride still forced him to wear.

He bowed to her again, then begged her leave to depart. She stood on one side whilst he jumped on to Sultan's back, then, as he galloped out of the gates, she waved him a final "Adieu."

A bend in the road soon hid him from view; his confidential groom had some difficulty in keeping pace with him, for Sultan flew along in response to his master's excited mood. Marguerite, with a sigh that was almost a happy one, turned and went within. She went back to her room, for suddenly, like a tired child, she felt quite sleepy.

Her heart seemed all at once to be in complete peace, and, though it still ached with undefined longing, a vague and delicious hope soothed it as with a balm.

She felt no longer anxious about Armand. The man who had just ridden away, bent on helping her brother, inspired her with complete confidence in his strength and in his power. She marvelled at herself for having ever looked upon him as an inane fool; of course, THAT was a mask worn to hide the bitter wound she had dealt to his faith and to his love. His passion would have overmastered him, and he would not let her see how much he still cared and how deeply he suffered.

But now all would be well: she would crush her own pride, humble it before him, tell him everything, trust him in everything; and those happy days would come back, when they used to wander off together in the forests of Fontainebleau, when they spoke little — for he was always a silent man — but when she felt that against that strong heart she would always find rest and happiness.

The more she thought of the events of the past night, the less fear had she of Chauvelin and his schemes. He had failed to discover the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, of that she felt sure. Both Lord Fancourt and Chauvelin himself had assured her that no one had been in the dining-room at one o'clock except the Frenchman himself and Percy — Yes! — Percy! she might have asked him, had she thought of it! Anyway, she had no fears that the unknown and brave hero would fall in Chauvelin's trap; his death at any rate would not be at her door.

Armand certainly was still in danger, but Percy had pledged his word that Armand would be safe, and somehow, as Marguerite had seen him riding away, the possibility that he could fail in whatever he undertook never even remotely crossed her mind. When Armand was safely over in England she would not allow him to go back to France.

She felt almost happy now, and, drawing the curtains closely together again to shut out the piercing sun, she went to bed at last, laid her head upon the pillow, and, like a wearied child, soon fell into a peaceful and dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII THE MYSTERIOUS DEVICE

The day was well advanced when Marguerite woke, refreshed by her long sleep. Louise had brought her some fresh milk and a dish of fruit, and she partook of this frugal breakfast with hearty appetite.

Thoughts crowded thick and fast in her mind as she munched her grapes; most of them went galloping away after the tall, erect figure of her husband, whom she had watched riding out of sight more than five hours ago.

In answer to her eager inquiries, Louise brought back the news that the groom had come home with Sultan, having left Sir Percy in London. The groom thought that his master was about to get on board his schooner, which was lying off just below London Bridge. Sir Percy had ridden thus far, had then met Briggs, the skipper of the *DAY DREAM*, and had sent the groom back to Richmond with Sultan and the empty saddle.

This news puzzled Marguerite more than ever. Where could Sir Percy be going just now in the *DAY DREAM*? On Armand's behalf, he had said. Well! Sir Percy had influential friends everywhere. Perhaps he was going to Greenwich, or . . . but Marguerite ceased to conjecture; all would be explained anon: he said that he would come back, and that he would remember. A long, idle day lay before Marguerite. She was expecting a visit of her old school-fellow, little Suzanne de Tournay. With all the merry mischief at her command, she had tendered her request for Suzanne's company to the Comtesse in the Presence of the Prince of Wales last night. His Royal Highness had loudly applauded the notion, and declared that he would give himself the pleasure of calling on the two ladies in the course of the afternoon. The Comtesse had not dared to refuse, and then and there was entrapped into a promise to send little Suzanne to spend a long and happy day at Richmond with her friend.

Marguerite expected her eagerly; she longed for a chat about old school-days with the child; she felt that she would prefer Suzanne's company to that of anyone else, and together they would roam through the fine old garden and rich deer park, or stroll along the river.

But Suzanne had not come yet, and Marguerite being dressed, prepared to go downstairs. She looked quite a girl this morning in her simple muslin frock, with a broad blue sash round her slim waist, and the dainty cross-over fichu into which, at her bosom, she had fastened a few late crimson roses.

She crossed the landing outside her own suite of apartments, and stood still for a moment at the head of the fine oak staircase, which led to the lower floor. On her left were her husband's apartments, a suite of rooms which she practically never entered.

They consisted of bedroom, dressing and reception room, and at the extreme end of the landing, of a small study, which, when Sir Percy did not use it, was always kept locked. His own special and confidential valet, Frank, had charge of this room. No one was ever allowed to go inside. My lady had never cared to do so, and the other servants, had, of course, not dared to break this hard-and-fast rule.

Marguerite had often, with that good-natured contempt which she had recently adopted towards her husband, chaffed him about this secrecy which surrounded his private study. Laughingly she had always declared that he strictly excluded all prying eyes from his sanctum for fear they should detect how very little "study" went on within its four walls: a comfortable arm-chair for Sir Percy's sweet slumbers was, no doubt, its most conspicuous piece of furniture.

Marguerite thought of all this on this bright October morning as she glanced along the corridor. Frank was evidently busy with his master's rooms, for most of the doors stood open, that of the study amongst the others.

A sudden burning, childish curiosity seized her to have a peep at Sir Percy's sanctum. This restriction, of course, did not apply to her, and Frank would, of course, not dare to oppose her. Still, she hoped that the valet would be busy in one of the other rooms, that she might have that one quick peep in secret, and unmolested.

Gently, on tip-toe, she crossed the landing and, like Blue Beard's wife, trembling half with excitement and wonder, she paused a moment on the threshold, strangely perturbed and irresolute.

The door was ajar, and she could not see anything within. She pushed it open tentatively: there was no sound: Frank was evidently not there, and she walked boldly in.

At once she was struck by the severe simplicity of everything around her: the dark and heavy hangings, the massive oak furniture, the one or two maps on the wall, in no way recalled to her mind the lazy man about town, the lover of race-courses, the dandified leader of fashion, that was the outward representation of Sir Percy Blakeney.

There was no sign here, at any rate, of hurried departure. Everything was in its place, not a scrap of paper littered the floor, not a cupboard or drawer was left open. The curtains were drawn aside, and through the open window the fresh morning air was streaming in.

Facing the window, and well into the centre of the room, stood a ponderous business-like desk, which looked as if it had seen much service. On the wall to the left of the desk, reaching almost from floor to ceiling, was a large full-length portrait of a woman, magnificently framed, exquisitely painted, and signed with the name of Boucher. It was Percy's mother.

Marguerite knew very little about her, except that she had died abroad, ailing in body as well as in mind, while Percy was still a lad. She must have been a very beautiful woman once, when Boucher painted her, and as Marguerite looked at the portrait, she could not but be struck by the extraordinary resemblance which must have existed between mother and son. There was the same low, square forehead, crowned with thick, fair hair, smooth and heavy; the same deep-set, somewhat lazy blue eyes beneath firmly marked, straight brows; and in those eyes there was the same intensity behind that apparent laziness, the same latent passion which used to light up Percy's face in the olden days before his marriage, and which Marguerite had again noted, last night at dawn, when she had come quite close to him, and had allowed a note of tenderness to creep into her voice.

Marguerite studied the portrait, for it interested her: after that she turned and looked again at the ponderous desk. It was covered with a mass of papers, all neatly tied and docketed, which looked like accounts and receipts arrayed with perfect method. It had never before struck Marguerite — nor had she, alas! found it worth while to inquire — as to how Sir Percy, whom all the world had credited with a total lack of brains, administered the vast fortune which his father had left him.

Since she had entered this neat, orderly room, she had been taken so much by surprise, that this obvious proof of her husband's strong business capacities did not cause her more than a passing thought of wonder. But it also strengthened her in the now certain knowledge that, with his worldly inanities, his foppish ways, and foolish talk, he was not only wearing a mask, but was playing a deliberate and studied part.

Marguerite wondered again. Why should he take all this trouble? Why should he — who was obviously a serious, earnest man — wish to appear before his fellow-men as an empty-headed nincompoop?

He may have wished to hide his love for a wife who held him in contempt . . . but surely such an object could have been gained at less sacrifice, and with far less trouble than constant incessant acting of an unnatural part.

She looked round her quite aimlessly now: she was horribly puzzled, and a nameless dread, before all this strange, unaccountable mystery, had begun to seize upon her. She felt cold and uncomfortable suddenly in this severe and dark room. There were no pictures on the wall, save the fine Boucher portrait, only a couple of maps, both of parts of France, one of the North coast and the other of the environs of Paris. What did Sir Percy want with those, she wondered.

Her head began to ache, she turned away from this strange Blue Beard's chamber, which she had entered, and which she did not understand. She did not wish Frank to find her here, and with a fast look round, she once more turned to the door. As she did so, her foot knocked against a small object, which had apparently been lying close to the desk, on the carpet, and which now went rolling, right across the room.

She stooped to pick it up. It was a solid gold ring, with a flat shield, on which was engraved a small device.

Marguerite turned it over in her fingers, and then studied the engraving on the shield. It represented a small star-shaped flower, of a shape she had seen so distinctly twice before: once at the opera, and once at Lord Grenville's ball.

CHAPTER XIX THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

At what particular moment the strange doubt first crept into Marguerite's mind, she could not herself have said. With the ring tightly clutched in her hand, she had run out of the room, down the stairs, and out into the garden, where, in complete seclusion, alone with the flowers, and the river and the birds, she could look again at the ring, and study that device more closely.

Stupidly, senselessly, now, sitting beneath the shade of an overhanging sycamore, she was looking at the plain gold shield, with the star-shaped little flower engraved upon it.

Bah! It was ridiculous! she was dreaming! her nerves were overwrought, and she saw signs and mysteries in the most trivial coincidences. Had not everybody about town recently made a point of affecting the device of that mysterious and heroic Scarlet Pimpernel?

Did she herself wear it embroidered on her gowns? set in gems and enamel in her hair? What was there strange in the fact that Sir Percy should have chosen to use the device as a seal-ring? He might easily have done that . . . yes . . . quite easily . . . and . . . besides . . . what connection could there be between her exquisite dandy of a husband, with his fine clothes and refined, lazy ways, and the daring plotter who rescued French victims from beneath the very eyes of the leaders of a bloodthirsty revolution?

Her thoughts were in a whirl — her mind a blank . . . She did not see anything that was going on around her, and was quite startled when a fresh young voice called to her across the garden.

"CHERIE! — CHERIE! where are you?" and little Suzanne, fresh as a rosebud, with eyes dancing with glee, and brown curls fluttering in the soft morning breeze, came running across the lawn.

"They told me you were in the garden," she went on prattling merrily, and throwing herself with a pretty, girlish impulse into Marguerite's arms, "so I ran out to give you a surprise. You did not expect me quite so soon, did you, my darling little Margot CHERIE?"

Marguerite, who had hastily concealed the ring in the folds of her kerchief, tried to respond gaily and unconcernedly to the young girl's impulsiveness.

"Indeed, sweet one," she said with a smile, "it is delightful to have you all to myself, and for a nice whole long day. . . . You won't be bored?"

"Oh! bored! Margot, how CAN you say such a wicked thing. Why! when we were in the dear old convent together, we were always happy when we were allowed to be alone together."

"And to talk secrets."

The two young girls had linked their arms in one another's and began wandering round the garden.

"Oh! how lovely your home is, Margot, darling," said little Suzanne, enthusiastically, "and how happy you must be!"

"Aye, indeed! I ought to be happy — oughtn't I, sweet one?" said Marguerite, with a wistful little sigh.

"How sadly you say it, CHERIE. . . . Ah, well, I suppose now that you are a married woman you won't care to talk secrets with me any longer. Oh! what lots and lots of secrets we used to have at school! Do you remember? — some we did not even confide to Sister Theresa of the Holy Angels — though she was such a dear."

"And now you have one all-important secret, eh, little one?" said Marguerite, merrily, "which you are forthwith going to confide in me. Nay, you need not blush, CHERIE." she added, as she saw Suzanne's pretty little face crimson with blushes. "Faith, there's naught to be ashamed of! He is a noble and true man, and one to be proud of as a lover, and . . . as a husband."

"Indeed, CHERIE, I am not ashamed," rejoined Suzanne, softly; "and it makes me very, very proud to hear you speak so well of him. I think maman will consent," she added thoughtfully, "and I shall be — oh! so happy — but, of course, nothing is to be thought of until papa is safe. . . ."

Marguerite started. Suzanne's father! the Comte de Tournay! — one of those whose life would be jeopardised if Chauvelin succeeded in establishing the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

She had understood all along from the Comtesse, and also from one or two of the members of the league, that their mysterious leader had pledged his honour to bring the fugitive Comte de Tournay safely out of France. Whilst little Suzanne — unconscious of all — save her own all-important little secret, went prattling on, Marguerite's thoughts went back to the events of the past night.

Armand's peril, Chauvelin's threat, his cruel "Either — or—" which she had accepted.

And then her own work in the matter, which should have culminated at one o'clock in Lord Grenville's dining-room, when the relentless agent of the French Government would finally learn who was this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, who so openly defied an army of spies and placed himself so boldly, and for mere sport, on the side of the enemies of France.

Since then she had heard nothing from Chauvelin. She had concluded that he had failed, and yet, she had not felt anxious about Armand, because her husband had promised her that Armand would be safe.

But now, suddenly, as Suzanne prattled merrily along, an awful horror came upon her for what she had done. Chauvelin had told her nothing, it was true; but she remembered how sarcastic and evil he looked when she took final leave of him after the ball. Had he discovered something then? Had he already laid his plans for catching the daring plotter, red-handed, in France, and sending him to the guillotine without compunction or delay?

Marguerite turned sick with horror, and her hand convulsively clutched the ring in her dress.

"You are not listening, CHERIE," said Suzanne, reproachfully, as she paused in her long, highly interesting narrative.

"Yes, yes, darling — indeed I am," said Marguerite with an effort, forcing herself to smile. "I love to hear you talking . . . and your happiness makes me so very glad. . . . Have no fear, we will manage to propitiate maman. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes is a noble English gentleman; he has money and position, the Comtesse will not refuse her consent. . . . But . . . now, little one . . . tell me . . . what is the latest news about your father?"

"Oh!" said Suzanne with mad glee, "the best we could possibly hear. My Lord Hastings came to see maman early this morning. He said that all is now well with dear papa, and we may safely expect him here in England in less than four days."

"Yes," said Marguerite, whose glowing eyes were fastened on Suzanne's lips, as she continued merrily:

"Oh, we have no fear now! You don't know, CHERIE, that that great and noble Scarlet Pimpernel himself has gone to save papa. He has gone, CHERIE . . . actually gone . . ." added Suzanne excitedly, "he was in London this morning; he will be in Calais, perhaps, tomorrow . . . where he will meet papa . . . and then . . . and then . . ."

The blow had fallen. She had expected it all along, though she had tried for the last half-hour to delude herself and to cheat her fears. He had gone to Calais, had been in London this morning . . . he . . . the Scarlet Pimpernel . . . Percy Blakeney . . . her husband . . . whom she had betrayed last night to Chauvelin.

Percy . . . Percy . . . her husband . . . the Scarlet Pimpernel . . . Oh! how could she have been so blind? She understood it all now — all at once . . . that part he played — the mask he wore . . . in order to throw dust in everybody's eyes.

And all for the sheer sport and devilry of course! — saving men, women and children from death, as other men destroy and kill animals for the excitement, the love of the thing. The idle, rich man wanted some aim in life — he, and the few young bucks he enrolled under his banner, had amused themselves for months in risking their lives for the sake of an innocent few.

Perhaps he had meant to tell her when they were first married; and then the story of the Marquis de St. Cyr had come to his ears, and he had suddenly turned from her, thinking, no doubt, that she might someday betray him and his comrades, who had sworn to follow him; and so he had tricked her, as he tricked all others, whilst hundreds now owed their lives to him, and many families owed him both life and happiness.

The mask of an inane fop had been a good one, and the part consummately well played. No wonder that Chauvelin's spies had failed to detect, in the apparently brainless nincompoop, the man whose reckless daring and resourceful ingenuity had baffled the keenest French spies, both in France and in England. Even last night when Chauvelin went to Lord Grenville's dining-room to seek that daring Scarlet Pimpernel, he only saw that inane Sir Percy Blakeney fast asleep in a corner of the sofa.

Had his astute mind guessed the secret, then? Here lay the whole awful, horrible, amazing puzzle. In betraying a nameless stranger to his fate in order to save her brother, had Marguerite Blakeney sent her husband to his death?

No! no! no! a thousand times no! Surely Fate could not deal a blow like that: Nature itself would rise in revolt: her hand, when it held that tiny scrap of paper last night, would have surely have been struck numb ere it committed a deed so appalling and so terrible.

"But what is it, CHERIE?" said little Suzanne, now genuinely alarmed, for Marguerite's colour had become dull and ashen. "Are you ill, Marguerite? What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing, child," she murmured, as in a dream. "Wait a moment . . . let me think . . . think! . . . You said . . . the Scarlet Pimpernel had gone today . . .?"

"Marguerite, CHERIE, what is it? You frighten me. . . ."

"It is nothing, child, I tell you . . . nothing . . . I must be alone a minute — and — dear one . . . I may have to curtail our time together to-day. . . . I may have to go away — you'll understand?"

"I understand that something has happened, CHERIE, and that you want to be alone. I won't be a hindrance to you. Don't think of me. My maid, Lucile, has not yet gone . . . we will go back together . . . don't think of me."

She threw her arms impulsively round Marguerite. Child as she was, she felt the poignancy of her friend's grief, and with the infinite tact of her girlish tenderness, she did not try to pry into it, but was ready to efface herself.

She kissed Marguerite again and again, then walked sadly back across the lawn. Marguerite did not move, she remained there, thinking . . . wondering what was to be done.

Just as little Suzanne was about to mount the terrace steps, a groom came running round the house towards his mistress. He carried a sealed letter in his hand. Suzanne instinctively turned back; her heart told her that here perhaps was further ill news for her friend, and she felt that poor Margot was not in a fit state to bear any more.

The groom stood respectfully beside his mistress, then he handed her the sealed letter.

"What is that?" asked Marguerite.

"Just come by runner, my lady."

Marguerite took the letter mechanically, and turned it over in her trembling fingers.

"Who sent it?" she said.

"The runner said, my lady," replied the groom, "that his orders were to deliver this, and that your ladyship would understand from whom it came."

Marguerite tore open the envelope. Already her instinct told her what it contained, and her eyes only glanced at it mechanically.

It was a letter by Armand St. Just to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes — the letter which Chauvelin's spies had stolen at "The Fisherman's Rest," and which Chauvelin had held as a rod over her to enforce her obedience.

Now he had kept his word — he had sent her back St. Just's compromising letter . . . for he was on the track of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Marguerite's senses reeled, her very soul seemed to be leaving her body; she tottered, and would have fallen but for Suzanne's arm round her waist. With superhuman effort she regained control over herself — there was yet much to be done.

"Bring that runner here to me," she said to the servant, with much calm. "He has not gone?"

"No, my lady."

The groom went, and Marguerite turned to Suzanne.

"And you, child, run within. Tell Lucile to get ready. I fear that I must send you home, child. And — stay, tell one of the maids to prepare a travelling dress and cloak for me."

Suzanne made no reply. She kissed Marguerite tenderly and obeyed without a word; the child was overawed by the terrible, nameless misery in her friend's face.

A minute later the groom returned, followed by the runner who had brought the letter.

"Who gave you this packet?" asked Marguerite.

"A gentleman, my lady," replied the man, "at 'The Rose and Thistle' inn opposite Charing Cross. He said you would understand."

"At 'The Rose and Thistle'? What was he doing?"

"He was waiting for the coach, your ladyship, which he had ordered."

"The coach?"

"Yes, my lady. A special coach he had ordered. I understood from his man that he was posting straight to Dover."

"That's enough. You may go." Then she turned to the groom: "My coach and the four swiftest horses in the stables, to be ready at once."

The groom and runner both went quickly off to obey. Marguerite remained standing for a moment on the lawn quite alone. Her graceful figure was as rigid as a statue, her eyes were fixed, her hands were tightly clasped across her breast; her lips moved as they murmured with pathetic heart-breaking persistence, —

"What's to be done? What's to be done? Where to find him? — Oh, God! grant me light."

But this was not the moment for remorse and despair. She had done — unwittingly — an awful and terrible thing — the very worst crime, in her eyes, that woman ever committed — she saw it in all its horror. Her very blindness in not having guessed her husband's secret seemed now to her another deadly sin. She ought to have known! she ought to have known!

How could she imagine that a man who could love with so much intensity as Percy Blakeney had loved her from the first — how could such a man be the brainless idiot he chose to appear? She, at least, ought to have known that he was wearing a mask, and having found that out, she should have torn it from his face, whenever they were alone together.

Her love for him had been paltry and weak, easily crushed by her own pride; and she, too, had worn a mask in assuming a contempt for him, whilst, as a matter of fact, she completely misunderstood him.

But there was no time now to go over the past. By her own blindness she had sinned; now she must repay, not by empty remorse, but by prompt and useful action.

Percy had started for Calais, utterly unconscious of the fact that his most relentless enemy was on his heels. He had set sail early that morning from London Bridge. Provided he had a favourable wind, he would no doubt be in France within twenty-four hours; no doubt he had reckoned on the wind and chosen this route.

Chauvelin, on the other hand, would post to Dover, charter a vessel there, and undoubtedly reach Calais much about the same time. Once in Calais, Percy would meet all those who were eagerly waiting for the noble and brave Scarlet Pimpernel, who had come to rescue them from horrible and unmerited death. With Chauvelin's eyes now fixed upon his every movement, Percy would thus not only be endangering his own life, but that of Suzanne's father, the old Comte de Tournay, and of those other fugitives who were waiting for him and trusting in him. There was also Armand, who had gone to meet de Tournay, secure in the knowledge that the Scarlet Pimpernel was watching over his safety.

All these lives and that of her husband, lay in Marguerite's hands; these she must save, if human pluck and ingenuity were equal to the task.

Unfortunately, she could not do all this quite alone. Once in Calais she would not know where to find her husband, whilst Chauvelin, in stealing the papers at Dover, had obtained the whole itinerary. Above every thing, she wished to warn Percy.

She knew enough about him by now to understand that he would never abandon those who trusted in him, that he would not turn his back from danger, and leave the Comte de Tournay to fall into the bloodthirsty hands that knew of no mercy. But if he were warned, he might form new plans, be more wary, more prudent. Unconsciously, he might fall into a cunning trap, but — once warned — he might yet succeed.

And if he failed — if indeed Fate, and Chauvelin, with all the resources at his command, proved too strong for the daring plotter after all — then at least she would be there by his side, to comfort, love and cherish, to cheat death perhaps at the last by making it seem sweet, if they died both together, locked in each other's arms, with the supreme happiness of knowing that passion had responded to passion, and that all misunderstandings were at an end.

Her whole body stiffened as with a great and firm resolution. This she meant to do, if God gave her wits and strength. Her eyes lost their fixed look; they glowed with inward fire at the thought of meeting him again so soon, in the very midst of most deadly perils; they sparkled with the joy of sharing these dangers with him — of helping him perhaps — of being with him at the last — if she failed.

The childlike sweet face had become hard and set, the curved mouth was closed tightly over her clenched teeth. She meant to do or die, with him and for his sake. A frown, which spoke of an iron will and unbending resolution, appeared between the two straight brows; already her plans were formed. She would go and find Sir Andrew Ffoulkes first; he was Percy's best friend, and Marguerite remembered, with a thrill, with what blind enthusiasm the young man always spoke of his mysterious leader.

He would help her where she needed help; her coach was ready. A change of raiment, and a farewell to little Suzanne, and she could be on her way.

Without haste, but without hesitation, she walked quietly into the house.

CHAPTER XX THE FRIEND

Less than half an hour later, Marguerite, buried in thoughts, sat inside her coach, which was bearing her swiftly to London.

She had taken an affectionate farewell of little Suzanne, and seen the child safely started with her maid, and in her own coach, back to town. She had sent one courier with a respectful letter of excuse to His Royal Highness, begging for a postponement of the august visit on account of pressing and urgent business, and another on ahead to bespeak a fresh relay of horses at Faversham.

Then she had changed her muslin frock for a dark travelling costume and mantle, had provided herself with money — which her husband's lavishness always placed fully at her disposal — and had started on her way.

She did not attempt to delude herself with any vain and futile hopes; the safety of her brother Armand was to have been conditional on the imminent capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. As Chauvelin had sent her back Armand's compromising letter, there was no doubt that he was quite satisfied in his own mind that Percy Blakeney was the man whose death he had sworn to bring about.

No! there was no room for any fond delusions! Percy, the husband whom she loved with all the ardour which her admiration for his bravery had kindled, was in immediate, deadly peril, through her hand. She had betrayed him to his enemy — unwittingly 'tis true — but she HAD betrayed him, and if Chauvelin succeeded in trapping him, who so far was unaware of his danger, then his death would be at her door. His death! when with her very heart's blood, she would have defended him and given willingly her life for his.

She had ordered her coach to drive her to the "Crown" inn; once there, she told her coachman to give the horses food and rest. Then she ordered a chair, and had herself carried to the house in Pall Mall where Sir Andrew Ffoulkes lived.

Among all Percy's friends who were enrolled under his daring banner, she felt that she would prefer to confide in Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. He had always been her friend, and now his love for little Suzanne had brought him closer to her still. Had he been away from home, gone on the mad errand with Percy, perhaps, then she would have called on Lord Hastings or Lord Tony — for she wanted the help of one of these young men, or she would indeed be powerless to save her husband.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, however, was at home, and his servant introduced her ladyship immediately. She went upstairs to the young man's comfortable bachelor's chambers, and was shown into a small, though luxuriously furnished, dining-room. A moment or two later Sir Andrew himself appeared.

He had evidently been much startled when he heard who his lady visitor was, for he looked anxiously — even suspiciously — at Marguerite, whilst performing the elaborate bows before her, which the rigid etiquette of the time demanded.

Marguerite had laid aside every vestige of nervousness; she was perfectly calm, and having returned the young man's elaborate salute, she began very calmly, —

"Sir Andrew, I have no desire to waste valuable time in much talk. You must take certain things I am going to tell you for granted. These will be of no importance. What is important is that your leader and comrade, the Scarlet Pimpernel . . . my husband . . . Percy Blakeney . . . is in deadly peril."

Had she the remotest doubt of the correctness of her deductions, she would have had them confirmed now, for Sir Andrew, completely taken by surprise, had grown very pale, and was quite incapable of making the slightest attempt at clever parrying.

"No matter how I know this, Sir Andrew," she continued quietly, "thank God that I do, and that perhaps it is not too late to save him. Unfortunately, I cannot do this quite alone, and therefore have come to you for help."

"Lady Blakeney," said the young man, trying to recover himself, "I . . ."

"Will you hear me first?" she interrupted. "This is how the matter stands. When the agent of the French Government stole your papers that night in Dover, he found amongst them certain plans, which you or your leader meant to carry out for the rescue of the Comte de Tournay and others. The Scarlet Pimpernel — Percy, my husband — has gone on this errand himself to-day. Chauvelin knows that the Scarlet Pimpernel and Percy Blakeney are one and the same person. He will follow him to Calais, and there will lay hands on him. You know as well as I do the fate that awaits him at the hands of the Revolutionary Government of France. No interference from England — from King George himself — would save him. Robespierre and his gang would see to it that the interference came too late. But not only that, the much-trusted leader will also have been unconsciously the means of revealing the hiding-place of the Comte de Tournay and of all those who, even now, are placing their hopes in him."

She had spoken quietly, dispassionately, and with firm, unbending resolution. Her purpose was to make that young man trust and help her, for she could do nothing without him.

"I do not understand," he repeated, trying to gain time, to think what was best to be done.

"Aye! but I think you do, Sir Andrew. You must know that I am speaking the truth. Look these facts straight in the face. Percy has sailed for Calais, I presume for some lonely part of the coast, and Chauvelin is on his track. HE has posted for Dover, and will cross the Channel probably to-night. What do you think will happen?"

The young man was silent.

"Percy will arrive at his destination: unconscious of being followed he will seek out de Tournay and the others — among these is Armand St. Just my brother — he will seek them out, one after another, probably, not knowing that the sharpest eyes in the world are watching his every movement. When he has thus unconsciously betrayed those who blindly trust in him, when nothing can be gained from him, and he is ready to come back to England, with those whom he has gone so bravely to save, the doors of the trap will close upon him, and he will be sent to end his noble life upon the guillotine."

Still Sir Andrew was silent.

"You do not trust me," she said passionately. "Oh God! cannot you see that I am in deadly earnest? Man, man," she added, while, with her tiny hands she seized the young man suddenly by the shoulders, forcing him to look straight at her, "tell me, do I look like that vilest thing on earth — a woman who would betray her own husband?"

"God forbid, Lady Blakeney," said the young man at last, "that I should attribute such evil motives to you, but . . ."

"But what? . . . tell me. . . . Quick, man! . . . the very seconds are precious!"

"Will you tell me," he asked resolutely, and looking searchingly into her blue eyes, "whose hand helped to guide M. Chauvelin to the knowledge which you say he possesses?"

"Mine," she said quietly, "I own it — I will not lie to you, for I wish you to trust me absolutely. But I had no idea — how COULD I have? — of the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel . . . and my brother's safety was to be my prize if I succeeded."

"In helping Chauvelin to track the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

She nodded.

"It is no use telling you how he forced my hand. Armand is more than a brother to me, and . . . and . . . how COULD I guess? . . . But we waste time, Sir Andrew . . . every second is precious . . . in the name of God! . . . my husband is in peril . . . your friend! — your comrade! — Help me to save him."

Sir Andrew felt his position to be a very awkward one. The oath he had taken before his leader and comrade was one of obedience and secrecy; and yet the beautiful woman, who was asking him to trust her, was undoubtedly in earnest; his friend and leader was equally undoubtedly in imminent danger and . . .

"Lady Blakeney," he said at last, "God knows you have perplexed me, so that I do not know which way my duty lies. Tell me what you wish me to do. There are nineteen of us ready to lay down our lives for the Scarlet Pimpernel if he is in danger."

"There is no need for lives just now, my friend," she said drily; "my wits and four swift horses will serve the necessary purpose. But I must know where to find him. See," she added, while her eyes filled with tears, "I have humbled myself before you, I have owned my fault to you; shall I also confess my weakness? — My husband and I have been estranged, because he did not trust me, and because I was too blind to understand. You must confess that the bandage which he put over my eyes was a very thick one. Is it small wonder that I did not see through it? But last night, after I led him unwittingly into such deadly peril, it suddenly fell from my eyes. If you will not help me, Sir Andrew, I would still strive to save my husband. I would still exert every faculty I possess for his sake; but I might be powerless, for I might arrive too late, and nothing would be left for you but lifelong remorse, and . . . and . . . for me, a broken heart."

"But, Lady Blakeney," said the young man, touched by the gentle earnestness of this exquisitely beautiful woman, "do you know that what you propose doing is man's work? — you cannot possibly journey to Calais alone. You would be running the greatest possible risks to yourself, and your chances of finding your husband now — were I to direct you ever so carefully — are infinitely remote."

"Oh, I hope there are risks!" she murmured softly, "I hope there are dangers, too! — I have so much to atone for. But I fear you are mistaken. Chauvelin's eyes are fixed upon you all, he will scarce notice me. Quick, Sir Andrew! — the coach is ready, and there is not a moment to be lost. . . . I MUST get to him! I MUST!" she repeated with almost savage energy, "to warn him that that man is on his track. . . . Can't you see — can't you see, that I MUST get to him . . . even . . . even if it be too late to save him . . . at least . . . to be by his side . . . at the least."

"Faith, Madame, you must command me. Gladly would I or any of my comrades lay down our lives for your husband. If you WILL go yourself. . . ."

"Nay, friend, do you not see that I would go mad if I let you go without me?" She stretched out her hand to him. "You WILL trust me?"

"I await your orders," he said simply.

"Listen, then. My coach is ready to take me to Dover. Do you follow me, as swiftly as horses will take you. We meet at nightfall at 'The Fisherman's Rest.' Chauvelin would avoid it, as he is known there, and I think it would be the safest. I will gladly accept your escort to Calais . . . as you say, I might miss Sir Percy were you to direct me ever so carefully. We'll charter a schooner at Dover and cross over during the night. Disguised, if you will agree to it, as my lacquey, you will, I think, escape detection."

"I am entirely at your service, Madame," rejoined the young man earnestly. "I trust to God that you will sight the DAY DREAM before we reach Calais. With Chauvelin at his heels, every step the Scarlet Pimpernel takes on French soil is fraught with danger."

"God grant it, Sir Andrew. But now, farewell. We meet to-night at Dover! It will be a race between Chauvelin and me across the Channel to-night — and the prize — the life of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

He kissed her hand, and then escorted her to her chair. A quarter of an hour later she was back at the "Crown" inn, where her coach and horses were ready and waiting for her. The next moment they thundered along the London streets, and then straight on to the Dover road at maddening speed.

She had no time for despair now. She was up and doing and had no leisure to think. With Sir Andrew Ffoulkes as her companion and ally, hope had once again revived in her heart.

God would be merciful. He would not allow so appalling a crime to be committed, as the death of a brave man, through the hand of a woman who loved him, and worshipped him, and who would gladly have died for his sake.

Marguerite's thoughts flew back to him, the mysterious hero, whom she had always unconsciously loved, when his identity was still unknown to her. Laughingly, in the olden days, she used to call him the shadowy king of her heart, and now she had suddenly found that this enigmatic personality whom she had worshipped, and the man who loved her so passionately, were one and the same: what wonder that one or two happier visions began to force their way before her mind. She vaguely wondered what she would say to him when first they would stand face to face.

She had had so many anxieties, so much excitement during the past few hours, that she allowed herself the luxury of nursing these few more hopeful, brighter thoughts. Gradually the rumble of the coach wheels, with its incessant monotony, acted soothingly on her nerves: her eyes, aching with fatigue and many shed and unshed tears, closed involuntarily, and she fell into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER XXI SUSPENSE

It was late into the night when she at last reached "The Fisherman's Rest." She had done the whole journey in less than eight hours, thanks to innumerable changes of horses at the various coaching stations, for which she always paid lavishly, thus obtaining the very best and swiftest that could be had.

Her coachman, too, had been indefatigable; the promise of special and rich reward had no doubt helped to keep him up, and he had literally burned the ground beneath his mistress' coach wheels.

The arrival of Lady Blakeney in the middle of the night caused a considerable flutter at "The Fisherman's Rest." Sally jumped hastily out of bed, and Mr. Jellyband was at great pains how to make his important guest comfortable.

Both of these good folk were far too well drilled in the manners appertaining to innkeepers, to exhibit the slightest surprise at Lady Blakeney's arrival, alone, at this extraordinary hour. No doubt they thought all the more, but Marguerite was far too absorbed in the importance — the deadly earnestness — of her journey, to stop and ponder over trifles of that sort.

The coffee-room — the scene lately of the dastardly outrage on two English gentlemen — was quite deserted. Mr. Jellyband hastily relit the lamp, rekindled a cheerful bit of fire in the great hearth, and then wheeled a comfortable chair by it, into which Marguerite gratefully sank.

"Will your ladyship stay the night?" asked pretty Miss Sally, who was already busy laying a snow-white cloth on the table, preparatory to providing a simple supper for her ladyship.

"No! not the whole night," replied Marguerite. "At any rate, I shall not want any room but this, if I can have it to myself for an hour or two."

"It is at your ladyship's service," said honest Jellyband, whose rubicund face was set in its tightest folds, lest it should betray before "the quality" that boundless astonishment which the very worthy fellow had begun to feel.

"I shall be crossing over at the first turn of the tide," said Marguerite, "and in the first schooner I can get. But my coachman and men will stay the night, and probably several days longer, so I hope you will make them comfortable."

"Yes, my lady; I'll look after them. Shall Sally bring your ladyship some supper?"

"Yes, please. Put something cold on the table, and as soon as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes comes, show him in here."

"Yes, my lady."

Honest Jellyband's face now expressed distress in spite of himself. He had great regard for Sir Percy Blakeney, and did not like to see his lady running away with young Sir Andrew. Of course, it was no business of his, and Mr. Jellyband was no gossip. Still, in his heart, he recollected that her ladyship was after all only one of them "furriners"; what wonder that she was immoral like the rest of them?

"Don't sit up, honest Jellyband," continued Marguerite kindly, "nor you either, Mistress Sally. Sir Andrew may be late."

Jellyband was only too willing that Sally should go to bed. He was beginning not to like these goings-on at all. Still, Lady Blakeney would pay handsomely for the accommodation, and it certainly was no business of his.

Sally arranged a simple supper of cold meat, wine, and fruit on the table, then with a respectful curtsy, she retired, wondering in her little mind why her ladyship looked so serious, when she was about to elope with her gallant.

Then commenced a period of weary waiting for Marguerite. She knew that Sir Andrew — who would have to provide himself with clothes befitting a lacquey — could not possibly reach Dover for at least a couple of hours. He was a splendid horseman of course, and would make light in such an emergency of the seventy odd miles between London and Dover. He would, too, literally burn the ground beneath his horse's hoofs, but he might not always get very good remounts, and in any case, he could not have started from London until at least an hour after she did.

She had seen nothing of Chauvelin on the road. Her coachman, whom she questioned, had not seen anyone answering the description his mistress gave him of the wizened figure of the little Frenchman.

Evidently, therefore, he had been ahead of her all the time. She had not dared to question the people at the various inns, where they had stopped to change horses. She feared that Chauvelin had spies all along the route, who might overhear her questions, then outdistance her and warn her enemy of her approach.

Now she wondered at what inn he might be stopping, or whether he had had the good luck of chartering a vessel already, and was now himself on the way to France. That thought gripped her at the heart as with an iron vice. If indeed she should not be too late already!

The loneliness of the room overwhelmed her; everything within was so horribly still; the ticking of the grandfather's clock — dreadfully slow and measured — was the only sound which broke this awful loneliness.

Marguerite had need of all her energy, all her steadfastness of purpose, to keep up her courage through this weary midnight waiting.

Everyone else in the house but herself must have been asleep. She had heard Sally go upstairs. Mr. Jellyband had gone to see to her coachman and men, and then had returned and taken up a position under the porch outside, just where Marguerite had first met Chauvelin about a week ago. He evidently meant to wait up for Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, but was soon overcome by sweet slumbers, for presently — in addition to the slow ticking of the clock — Marguerite could hear the monotonous and dulcet tones of the worthy fellow's breathing.

For some time now, she had realised that the beautiful warm October's day, so happily begun, had turned into a rough and cold night. She had felt very chilly, and was glad of the cheerful blaze in the hearth: but gradually, as time wore on, the weather became more rough, and the sound of the great breakers against the Admiralty Pier, though some distance from the inn, came to her as the noise of muffled thunder.

The wind was becoming boisterous, rattling the leaded windows and the massive doors of the old-fashioned house: it shook the trees outside and roared down the vast chimney. Marguerite wondered if the wind would be favourable for her journey. She had no fear of the storm, and would have braved worse risks sooner than delay the crossing by an hour.

A sudden commotion outside roused her from her meditations. Evidently it was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, just arrived in mad haste, for she heard his horse's hoofs thundering on the flag-stones outside, then Mr. Jellyband's sleepy, yet cheerful tones bidding him welcome.

For a moment, then, the awkwardness of her position struck Marguerite; alone at this hour, in a place where she was well known, and having made an assignation with a young cavalier equally well known, and who arrived in disguise! What food for gossip to those mischievously inclined.

The idea struck Marguerite chiefly from its humorous side: there was such quaint contrast between the seriousness of her errand, and the construction which would naturally be put on her actions by honest Mr. Jellyband, that, for the first time since many hours, a little smile began playing round the corners of her childlike mouth, and when, presently, Sir Andrew, almost unrecognisable in his lacquey-like garb, entered the coffee-room, she was able to greet him with quite a merry laugh.

"Faith! Monsieur, my lacquey," she said, "I am satisfied with your appearance!"

Mr. Jellyband had followed Sir Andrew, looking strangely perplexed. The young gallant's disguise had confirmed his worst suspicions. Without a smile upon his jovial face, he drew the cork from the bottle of wine, set the chairs ready, and prepared to wait.

"Thanks, honest friend," said Marguerite, who was still smiling at the thought of what the worthy fellow must be thinking at that very moment, "we shall require nothing more; and here's for all the trouble you have been put to on our account."

She handed two or three gold pieces to Jellyband, who took them respectfully, and with becoming gratitude.

"Stay, Lady Blakeney," interposed Sir Andrew, as Jellyband was about to retire, "I am afraid we shall require something more of my friend Jelly's hospitality. I am sorry to say we cannot cross over to-night."

"Not cross over to-night?" she repeated in amazement. "But we must, Sir Andrew, we must! There can be no question of cannot, and whatever it may cost, we must get a vessel to-night."

But the young man shook his head sadly.

"I am afraid it is not a question of cost, Lady Blakeney. There is a nasty storm blowing from France, the wind is dead against us, we cannot possibly sail until it has changed."

Marguerite became deadly pale. She had not foreseen this. Nature herself was playing her a horrible, cruel trick. Percy was in danger, and she could not go to him, because the wind happened to blow from the coast of France.

"But we must go! — we must!" she repeated with strange, persistent energy, "you know, we must go! — can't you find a way?"

"I have been down to the shore already," he said, "and had a talk to one or two skippers. It is quite impossible to set sail to-night, so every sailor assured me. No one," he added, looking significantly at Marguerite, "NO ONE could possibly put out of Dover to-night."

Marguerite at once understood what he meant. NO ONE included Chauvelin as well as herself. She nodded pleasantly to Jellyband.

"Well, then, I must resign myself," she said to him. "Have you a room for me?"

"Oh, yes, your ladyship. A nice, bright, airy room. I'll see to it at once. . . . And there is another one for Sir Andrew — both quite ready."

"That's brave now, mine honest Jelly," said Sir Andrew, gaily, and clapping his worth host vigorously on the back. "You unlock both those rooms, and leave our candles here on the dresser. I vow you are dead with sleep, and her ladyship must have some supper before she retires. There, have no fear, friend of the rueful countenance, her ladyship's visit, though at this unusual hour, is a great honour to thy house, and Sir Percy Blakeney will reward thee doubly, if thou seest well to her privacy and comfort."

Sir Andrew had no doubt guessed the many conflicting doubts and fears which raged in honest Jellyband's head; and, as he was a gallant gentleman, he tried by this brave hint to allay some of the worthy innkeeper's suspicions. He had the satisfaction of seeing that he had partially succeeded. Jellyband's rubicund countenance brightened somewhat, at the mention of Sir Percy's name.

"I'll go and see to it at once, sir," he said with alacrity, and with less frigidity in his manner. "Has her ladyship everything she wants for supper?"

"Everything, thanks, honest friend, and as I am famished and dead with fatigue, I pray you see to the rooms."

"Now tell me," she said eagerly, as soon as Jellyband had gone from the room, "tell me all your news."

"There is nothing else much to tell you, Lady Blakeney," replied the young man. "The storm makes it quite impossible for any vessel to put out of Dover this tide. But, what seems to you at first a terrible calamity is really a blessing in disguise. If we cannot cross over to France to-night, Chauvelin is in the same quandary.

"He may have left before the storm broke out."

"God grant he may," said Sir Andrew, merrily, "for very likely then he'll have been driven out of his course! Who knows? He may now even be lying at the bottom of the sea, for there is a furious storm raging, and it will fare ill with all small craft which happen to be out. But I fear me we cannot build our hopes upon the shipwreck of that cunning devil, and of all his murderous plans. The sailors I spoke to, all assured me that no schooner had put out of Dover for several hours: on the other hand, I ascertained that a stranger had arrived by coach this afternoon, and had, like myself, made some inquiries about crossing over to France.

"Then Chauvelin is still in Dover?"

"Undoubtedly. Shall I go waylay him and run my sword through him? That were indeed the quickest way out of the difficulty."

"Nay! Sir Andrew, do not jest! Alas! I have often since last night caught myself wishing for that fiend's death. But what you suggest is impossible! The laws of this country do not permit of murder! It is only in our beautiful France that wholesale slaughter is done lawfully, in the name of Liberty and of brotherly love."

Sir Andrew had persuaded her to sit down to the table, to partake of some supper and to drink a little wine. This enforced rest of at least twelve hours, until the next tide, was sure to be terribly difficult to bear in the state of intense excitement in which she was. Obedient in these small matters like a child, Marguerite tried to eat and drink.

Sir Andrew, with that profound sympathy born in all those who are in love, made her almost happy by talking to her about her husband. He recounted to her some of the daring escapes the brave Scarlet Pimpernel had contrived for the poor French fugitives, whom a relentless and bloody revolution was driving out of their country. He made her eyes glow with enthusiasm by telling her of his bravery, his ingenuity, his resourcefulness, when it meant snatching the lives of men, women, and even children from beneath the very edge of that murderous, ever-ready guillotine.

He even made her smile quite merrily by telling her of the Scarlet Pimpernel's quaint and many disguises, through which he had baffled the strictest watch set against him at the barricades of Paris. This last time, the escape of the Comtesse de Tournay and her children had been a veritable masterpiece — Blakeney disguised as a hideous old market-woman, in filthy cap and straggling grey locks, was a sight fit to make the gods laugh.

Marguerite laughed heartily as Sir Andrew tried to describe Blakeney's appearance, whose gravest difficulty always consisted in his great height, which in France made disguise doubly difficult.

Thus an hour wore on. There were many more to spend in enforced inactivity in Dover. Marguerite rose from the table with an impatient sigh. She looked forward with dread to the night in the bed upstairs, with terribly anxious thoughts to keep her company, and the howling of the storm to help chase sleep away.

She wondered where Percy was now. The DAY DREAM was a strong, well-built sea-going yacht. Sir Andrew had expressed the opinion that no doubt she had got in the lee of the wind before the storm broke out, or else perhaps had not ventured into the open at all, but was lying quietly at Gravesend.

Briggs was an expert skipper, and Sir Percy handled a schooner as well as any master mariner. There was no danger for them from the storm.

It was long past midnight when at last Marguerite retired to rest. As she had feared, sleep sedulously avoided her eyes. Her thoughts were of the blackest during these long, weary hours, whilst that incessant storm raged which was keeping her away from Percy. The sound of the distant breakers made her heart ache with melancholy. She was in the mood when the sea has a saddening effect upon the nerves. It is only when we are very happy, that we can bear to gaze merrily upon the vast and limitless expanse of water, rolling on and on with such persistent, irritating monotony, to the accompaniment of our thoughts, whether grave or gay. When they are gay, the waves echo their gaiety; but when they are sad, then every breaker, as it rolls, seems to bring additional sadness, and to speak to us of hopelessness and of the pettiness of all our joys.

CHAPTER XXII CALAIS

The weariest nights, the longest days, sooner or later must perforce come to an end.

Marguerite had spent over fifteen hours in such acute mental torture as well-nigh drove her crazy. After a sleepless night, she rose early, wild with excitement, dying to start on her journey, terrified lest further obstacles lay in her way. She rose before anyone else in the house was astir, so frightened was she, lest she should miss the one golden opportunity of making a start.

When she came downstairs, she found Sir Andrew Ffoulkes sitting in the coffee-room. He had been out half an hour earlier, and had gone to the Admiralty Pier, only to find that neither the French packet nor any privately chartered vessel could put out of Dover yet. The storm was then at its fullest, and the tide was on the turn. If the wind did not abate or change, they would perforce have to wait another ten or twelve hours until the next tide, before a start could be made. And the storm had not abated, the wind had not changed, and the tide was rapidly drawing out.

Marguerite felt the sickness of despair when she heard this melancholy news. Only the most firm resolution kept her from totally breaking down, and thus adding to the young man's anxiety, which evidently had become very keen.

Though he tried to hide it, Marguerite could see that Sir Andrew was just as anxious as she was to reach his comrade and friend. This enforced inactivity was terrible to them both.

How they spent that wearisome day at Dover, Marguerite could never afterwards say. She was in terror of showing herself, lest Chauvelin's spies happened to be about, so she had a private sitting-room, and she and Sir Andrew sat there hour after hour, trying to take, at long intervals, some perfunctory meals, which little Sally would bring them, with nothing to do but to think, to conjecture, and only occasionally to hope.

The storm had abated just too late; the tide was by then too far out to allow a vessel to put off to sea. The wind had changed, and was settling down to a comfortable north-westerly breeze — a veritable godsend for a speedy passage across to France.

And there those two waited, wondering if the hour would ever come when they could finally make a start. There had been one happy interval in this long weary day, and that was when Sir Andrew went down once again to the pier, and presently came back to tell Marguerite that he had chartered a quick schooner, whose skipper was ready to put to sea the moment the tide was favourable.

From that moment the hours seemed less wearisome; there was less hopelessness in the waiting; and at last, at five o'clock in the afternoon, Marguerite, closely veiled and followed by Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, who, in the guise of her lacquey, was carrying a number of impedimenta, found her way down to the pier.

Once on board, the keen, fresh sea-air revived her, the breeze was just strong enough to nicely swell the sails of the FOAM CREST, as she cut her way merrily towards the open.

The sunset was glorious after the storm, and Marguerite, as she watched the white cliffs of Dover gradually disappearing from view, felt more at peace and once more almost hopeful.

Sir Andrew was full of kind attentions, and she felt how lucky she had been to have him by her side in this, her great trouble.

Gradually the grey coast of France began to emerge from the fast-gathering evening mists. One or two lights could be seen flickering, and the spires of several churches to rise out of the surrounding haze.

Half an hour later Marguerite had landed upon French shore. She was back in that country where at this very moment men slaughtered their fellow-creatures by the hundreds, and sent innocent women and children in thousands to the block.

The very aspect of the country and its people, even in this remote sea-coast town, spoke of that seething revolution, three hundred miles away, in beautiful Paris, now rendered hideous by the constant flow of the blood of her noblest sons, by the wailing of the widows, and the cries of fatherless children.

The men all wore red caps — in various stages of cleanliness — but all with the tricolor cockade pinned on the left-side. Marguerite noticed with a shudder that, instead of the laughing, merry countenance habitual to her own countrymen, their faces now invariably wore a look of sly distrust.

Every man nowadays was a spy upon his fellows: the most innocent word uttered in jest might at any time be brought up as a proof of aristocratic tendencies, or of treachery against the people. Even the women went about with a curious look of fear and of hate lurking in their brown eyes; and all watched Marguerite as she stepped on shore, followed by Sir Andrew, and murmured as she passed along: "SACRES ARISTOS!" or else "SACRES ANGLAIS!"

Otherwise their presence excited no further comment. Calais, even in those days, was in constant business communication with England, and English merchants were often seen on this coast. It was well known that in view of the heavy duties in England, a vast deal of French wines and brandies were smuggled across. This pleased the French BOURGEOIS immensely; he liked to see the English Government and the English king, both of whom he hated, cheated out of their revenues; and an English smuggler was always a welcome guest at the tumble-down taverns of Calais and Boulogne.

So, perhaps, as Sir Andrew gradually directed Marguerite through the tortuous streets of Calais, many of the population, who turned with an oath to look at the strangers clad in English fashion, thought that they were bent on purchasing dutiable articles for their own fog-ridden country, and gave them no more than a passing thought.

Marguerite, however, wondered how her husband's tall, massive figure could have passed through Calais unobserved: she marvelled what disguise he assumed to do his noble work, without exciting too much attention.

Without exchanging more than a few words, Sir Andrew was leading her right across the town, to the other side from that where they had landed, and the way towards Cap Gris Nez. The streets were narrow, tortuous, and mostly evil-smelling, with a mixture of stale fish and damp cellar odours. There had been heavy rain here during the storm last night, and sometimes Marguerite sank ankle-deep in the mud, for the roads were not lighted save by the occasional glimmer from a lamp inside a house.

But she did not heed any of these petty discomforts: "We may meet Blakeney at the 'Chat Gris,'" Sir Andrew had said, when they landed, and she was walking as if on a carpet of rose-leaves, for she was going to meet him almost at once.

At last they reached their destination. Sir Andrew evidently knew the road, for he had walked unerringly in the dark, and had not asked his way from anyone. It was too dark then for Marguerite to notice the outside aspect of this house. The "Chat Gris," as Sir Andrew had called it, was evidently a small wayside inn on the outskirts of Calais, and on the way to Gris Nez. It lay some little distance from the coast, for the sound of the sea seemed to come from afar.

Sir Andrew knocked at the door with the knob of his cane, and from within Marguerite heard a sort of grunt and the muttering of a number of oaths. Sir Andrew knocked again, this time more peremptorily: more oaths were heard, and then shuffling steps seemed to draw near the door. Presently this was thrown open, and Marguerite found herself on the threshold of the most dilapidated, most squalid room she had ever seen in all her life.

The paper, such as it was, was hanging from the walls in strips; there did not seem to be a single piece of furniture in the room that could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, be called "whole." Most of the chairs had broken backs, others had no seats to them, one corner of the table was propped up with a bundle of faggots, there where the fourth leg had been broken.

In one corner of the room there was a huge hearth, over which hung a stock-pot, with a not altogether unpalatable odour of hot soup emanating therefrom. On one side of the room, high up in the wall, there was a species of loft, before which hung a tattered blue-and-white checked curtain. A rickety set of steps led up to this loft.

On the great bare walls, with their colourless paper, all stained with varied filth, there were chalked up at intervals in great bold characters, the words: "Liberte — Egalite — Fraternite."

The whole of this sordid abode was dimly lighted by an evil-smelling oil-lamp, which hung from the rickety rafters of the ceiling. It all looked so horribly squalid, so dirty and uninviting, that Marguerite hardly dared to cross the threshold.

Sir Andrew, however, had stepped unhesitatingly forward.

"English travellers, citizen!" he said boldly, and speaking in French.

The individual who had come to the door in response to Sir Andrew's knock, and who, presumably, was the owner of this squalid abode, was an elderly, heavily built peasant, dressed in a dirty blue blouse, heavy sabots, from which wisps of straw protruded all round, shabby blue trousers, and the inevitable red cap with the tricolour cockade, that proclaimed his momentary political views. He carried a short wooden pipe, from which the odour of rank tobacco emanated. He looked with some suspicion and a great deal of contempt at the two travellers, muttering "SACRRRES ANGLAIS!" and spat upon the ground to further show his independence of spirit, but, nevertheless, he stood aside to let them enter, no doubt well aware that these same SACCRRES ANGLAIS always had well-filled purses.

"Oh, lud!" said Marguerite, as she advanced into the room, holding her handkerchief to her dainty nose, "what a dreadful hole! Are you sure this is the place?"

"Aye! 'tis the place, sure enough," replied the young man as, with his lace-edged, fashionable handkerchief, he dusted a chair for Marguerite to sit on; "but I vow I never saw a more villainous hole."

"Faith!" she said, looking round with some curiosity and a great deal of horror at the dilapidated walls, the broken chairs, the rickety table, "it certainly does not look inviting."

The landlord of the "Chat Gris" — by name, Brogard — had taken no further notice of his guests; he concluded that presently they would order supper, and in the meanwhile it was not for a free citizen to show deference, or even courtesy, to anyone, however smartly they might be dressed.

By the hearth sat a huddled-up figure clad, seemingly, mostly in rags: that figure was apparently a woman, although even that would have been hard to distinguish, except for the cap, which had once been white, and for what looked like the semblance of a petticoat. She was sitting mumbling to herself, and from time to time stirring the brew in her stock-pot.

"Hey, my friend!" said Sir Andrew at last, "we should like some supper. . . . The citizenne there," he added, "is concocting some delicious soup, I'll warrant, and my mistress has not tasted food for several hours."

It took Brogard some few minutes to consider the question. A free citizen does not respond too readily to the wishes of those who happen to require something of him.

"SACRRRES ARISTOS!" he murmured, and once more spat upon the ground.

Then he went very slowly up to a dresser which stood in a corner of the room; from this he took an old pewter soup-tureen and slowly, and without a word, he handed it to his better-half, who, in the same silence, began filling the tureen with the soup out of her stock-pot.

Marguerite had watched all these preparations with absolute horror; were it not for the earnestness of her purpose, she would incontinently have fled from this abode of dirt and evil smells.

"Faith! our host and hostess are not cheerful people," said Sir Andrew, seeing the look of horror on Marguerite's face. "I would I could offer you a more hearty and more appetising meal . . . but I think you will find the soup eatable and the wine good; these people wallow in dirt, but live well as a rule."

"Nay! I pray you, Sir Andrew," she said gently, "be not anxious about me. My mind is scarce inclined to dwell on thoughts of supper."

Brogard was slowly pursuing his gruesome preparations; he had placed a couple of spoons, also two glasses on the table, both of which Sir Andrew took the precaution of wiping carefully.

Brogard had also produced a bottle of wine and some bread, and Marguerite made an effort to draw her chair to the table and to make some pretence at eating. Sir Andrew, as befitting his ROLE of lacquey, stood behind her chair.

"Nay, Madame, I pray you," he said, seeing that Marguerite seemed quite unable to eat, "I beg of you to try and swallow some food — remember you have need of all your strength."

The soup certainly was not bad; it smelt and tasted good. Marguerite might have enjoyed it, but for the horrible surroundings. She broke the bread, however, and drank some of the wine.

"Nay, Sir Andrew," she said, "I do not like to see you standing. You have need of food just as much as I have. This creature will only think that I am an eccentric Englishwoman eloping with her lacquey, if you'll sit down and partake of this semblance of supper

beside me.”

Indeed, Brogard having placed what was strictly necessary upon the table, seemed not to trouble himself any further about his guests. The Mere Brogard had quietly shuffled out of the room, and the man stood and lounged about, smoking his evil-smelling pipe, sometimes under Marguerite’s very nose, as any free-born citizen who was anybody’s equal should do.

“Confound the brute!” said Sir Andrew, with native British wrath, as Brogard leant up against the table, smoking and looking down superciliously at these two SACRRRES ANGLAIS.

“In Heaven’s name, man,” admonished Marguerite, hurriedly, seeing that Sir Andrew, with British-born instinct, was ominously clenching his fist, “remember that you are in France, and that in this year of grace this is the temper of the people.”

“I’d like to scrag the brute!” muttered Sir Andrew, savagely.

He had taken Marguerite’s advice and sat next to her at table, and they were both making noble efforts to deceive one another, by pretending to eat and drink.

“I pray you,” said Marguerite, “keep the creature in a good temper, so that he may answer the questions we must put to him.”

“I’ll do my best, but, begad! I’d sooner scrag him than question him. Hey! my friend,” he said pleasantly in French, and tapping Brogard lightly on the shoulder, “do you see many of our quality along these parts? Many English travellers, I mean?”

Brogard looked round at him, over his near shoulder, puffed away at his pipe for a moment or two as he was in no hurry, then muttered, —

“Heu! — sometimes!”

“Ah!” said Sir Andrew, carelessly, “English travellers always know where they can get good wine, eh! my friend? — Now, tell me, my lady was desiring to know if by any chance you happen to have seen a great friend of hers, an English gentleman, who often comes to Calais on business; he is tall, and recently was on his way to Paris — my lady hoped to have met him in Calais.”

Marguerite tried not to look at Brogard, lest she should betray before him the burning anxiety with which she waited for his reply. But a free-born French citizen is never in any hurry to answer questions: Brogard took his time, then he said very slowly, —

“Tall Englishman? — To-day! — Yes.”

“Yes, to-day,” muttered Brogard, sullenly. Then he quietly took Sir Andrew’s hat from a chair close by, put it on his own head, tugged at his dirty blouse, and generally tried to express in pantomime that the individual in question wore very fine clothes. “SACRRE ARISTO!” he muttered, “that tall Englishman!”

Marguerite could scarce repress a scream.

“It’s Sir Percy right enough,” she murmured, “and not even in disguise!”

She smiled, in the midst of all her anxiety and through her gathering tears, at the thought of “the ruling passion strong in death”; of Percy running into the wildest, maddest dangers, with the latest-cut coat upon his back, and the laces of his jabot unruffled.

“Oh! the foolhardiness of it!” she sighed. “Quick, Sir Andrew! ask the man when he went.”

“Ah yes, my friend,” said Sir Andrew, addressing Brogard, with the same assumption of carelessness, “my lord always wears beautiful clothes; the tall Englishman you saw, was certainly my lady’s friend. And he has gone, you say?”

“He went . . . yes . . . but he’s coming back . . . here — he ordered supper . . .”

Sir Andrew put his hand with a quick gesture of warning upon Marguerite’s arm; it came none too soon, for the next moment her wild, mad joy would have betrayed her. He was safe and well, was coming back here presently, she would see him in a few moments perhaps. . . . Oh! the wildness of her joy seemed almost more than she could bear.

“Here!” she said to Brogard, who seemed suddenly to have been transformed in her eyes into some heaven-born messenger of bliss. “Here! — did you say the English gentleman was coming back here?”

The heaven-born messenger of bliss spat upon the floor, to express his contempt for all and sundry ARISTOS, who chose to haunt the “Chat Gris.”

“Heu!” he muttered, “he ordered supper — he will come back . . . SACRRE ANGLAIS!” he added, by way of protest against all this fuss for a mere Englishman.

“But where is he now? — Do you know?” she asked eagerly, placing her dainty white hand upon the dirty sleeve of his blue blouse.

“He went to get a horse and cart,” said Brogard, laconically, as with a surly gesture, he shook off from his arm that pretty hand which princes had been proud to kiss.

“At what time did he go?”

But Brogard had evidently had enough of these questionings. He did not think that it was fitting for a citizen — who was the equal of anybody — to be thus catechised by these SACRRRES ARISTOS, even though they were rich English ones. It was distinctly more fitting to his newborn dignity to be as rude as possible; it was a sure sign of servility to meekly reply to civil questions.

“I don’t know,” he said surlily. “I have said enough, VOYONS, LES ARISTOS! . . . He came to-day. He ordered supper. He went out. — He’ll come back. VOILA!”

And with this parting assertion of his rights as a citizen and a free man, to be as rude as he well pleased, Brogard shuffled out of the room, banging the door after him.

CHAPTER XXIII HOPE

"Faith, Madame!" said Sir Andrew, seeing that Marguerite seemed desirous to call her surly host back again, "I think we'd better leave him alone. We shall not get anything more out of him, and we might arouse his suspicions. One never knows what spies may be lurking around these God-forsaken places."

"What care I?" she replied lightly, "now I know that my husband is safe, and that I shall see him almost directly!"

"Hush!" he said in genuine alarm, for she had talked quite loudly, in the fulness of her glee, "the very walls have ears in France, these days."

He rose quickly from the table, and walked round the bare, squalid room, listening attentively at the door, through which Brogard has just disappeared, and whence only muttered oaths and shuffling footsteps could be heard. He also ran up the rickety steps that led to the attic, to assure himself that there were no spies of Chauvelin's about the place.

"Are we alone, Monsieur, my lacquey?" said Marguerite, gaily, as the young man once more sat down beside her. "May we talk?"

"As cautiously as possible!" he entreated.

"Faith, man! but you wear a glum face! As for me, I could dance with joy! Surely there is no longer any cause for fear. Our boat is on the beach, the FOAM CREST not two miles out at sea, and my husband will be here, under this very roof, within the next half hour perhaps. Sure! there is naught to hinder us. Chauvelin and his gang have not yet arrived."

"Nay, madam! that I fear we do not know."

"What do you mean?"

"He was at Dover at the same time that we were."

"Held up by the same storm, which kept us from starting."

"Exactly. But — I did not speak of it before, for I feared to alarm you — I saw him on the beach not five minutes before we embarked. At least, I swore to myself at the time that it was himself; he was disguised as a CURE, so that Satan, his own guardian, would scarce have known him. But I heard him then, bargaining for a vessel to take him swiftly to Calais; and he must have set sail less than an hour after we did."

Marguerite's face had quickly lost its look of joy. The terrible danger in which Percy stood, now that he was actually on French soil, became suddenly and horribly clear to her. Chauvelin was close upon his heels; here in Calais, the astute diplomatist was all-powerful; a word from him and Percy could be tracked and arrested and . . .

Every drop of blood seemed to freeze in her veins; not even during the moments of her wildest anguish in England had she so completely realised the imminence of the peril in which her husband stood. Chauvelin had sworn to bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to the guillotine, and now the daring plotter, whose anonymity hitherto had been his safeguard, stood revealed through her own hand, to his most bitter, most relentless enemy.

Chauvelin — when he waylaid Lord Tony and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes in the coffee-room of "The Fisherman's Rest" — had obtained possession of all the plans of this latest expedition. Armand St. Just, the Comte de Tournay and other fugitive royalists were to have met the Scarlet Pimpernel — or rather, as it had been originally arranged, two of his emissaries — on this day, the 2nd of October, at a place evidently known to the league, and vaguely alluded to as the "Pere Blanchard's hut."

Armand, whose connection with the Scarlet Pimpernel and disavowal of the brutal policy of the Reign of Terror was still unknown to his countryman, had left England a little more than a week ago, carrying with him the necessary instructions, which would enable him to meet the other fugitives and to convey them to this place of safety.

This much Marguerite had fully understood from the first, and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had confirmed her surmises. She knew, too, that when Sir Percy realized that his own plans and his directions to his lieutenants had been stolen by Chauvelin, it was too late to communicate with Armand, or to send fresh instructions to the fugitives.

They would, of necessity, be at the appointed time and place, not knowing how grave was the danger which now awaited their brave rescuer.

Blakeney, who as usual had planned and organized the whole expedition, would not allow any of his younger comrades to run the risk of almost certain capture. Hence his hurried note to them at Lord Grenville's ball — "Start myself to-morrow — alone."

And now with his identity known to his most bitter enemy, his every step would be dogged, the moment he set foot in France. He would be tracked by Chauvelin's emissaries, followed until he reached that mysterious hut where the fugitives were waiting for him, and there the trap would be closed on him and on them.

There was but one hour — the hour's start which Marguerite and Sir Andrew had of their enemy — in which to warn Percy of the imminence of his danger, and to persuade him to give up the foolhardy expedition, which could only end in his own death.

But there WAS that one hour.

"Chauvelin knows of this inn, from the papers he stole," said Sir Andrew, earnestly, "and on landing will make straight for it."

"He has not landed yet," she said, "we have an hour's start on him, and Percy will be here directly. We shall be mid-Channel ere Chauvelin has realised that we have slipped through his fingers."

She spoke excitedly and eagerly, wishing to infuse into her young friend some of that buoyant hope which still clung to her heart. But he shook his head sadly.

"Silent again, Sir Andrew?" she said with some impatience. "Why do you shake your head and look so glum?"

"Faith, Madame," he replied, "'tis only because in making your rose-coloured plans, you are forgetting the most important factor."

"What in the world do you mean? — I am forgetting nothing. . . . What factor do you mean?" she added with more impatience.

"It stands six foot odd high," replied Sir Andrew, quietly, "and hath name Percy Blakeney."

"I don't understand," she murmured.

"Do you think that Blakeney would leave Calais without having accomplished what he set out to do?"

"You mean . . . ?"

"There's the old Comte de Tournay . . ."

"The Comte . . . ?" she murmured.

"And St. Just . . . and others . . ."

"My brother!" she said with a heart-broken sob of anguish. "Heaven help me, but I fear I had forgotten."

"Fugitives as they are, these men at this moment await with perfect confidence and unshaken faith the arrival of the Scarlet Pimpernel, who has pledged his honour to take them safely across the Channel."

Indeed, she had forgotten! With the sublime selfishness of a woman who loves with her whole heart, she had in the last twenty-four hours had no thought save for him. His precious, noble life, his danger — he, the loved one, the brave hero, he alone dwelt in her mind.

"My brother!" she murmured, as one by one the heavy tears gathered in her eyes, as memory came back to her of Armand, the companion and darling of her childhood, the man for whom she had committed the deadly sin, which had so hopelessly imperilled her brave husband's life.

"Sir Percy Blakeney would not be the trusted, honoured leader of a score of English gentlemen," said Sir Andrew, proudly, "if he abandoned those who placed their trust in him. As for breaking his word, the very thought is preposterous!"

There was silence for a moment or two. Marguerite had buried her face in her hands, and was letting the tears slowly trickle through her trembling fingers. The young man said nothing; his heart ached for this beautiful woman in her awful grief. All along he had felt the terrible IMPASSE in which her own rash act had plunged them all. He knew his friend and leader so well, with his reckless daring, his mad bravery, his worship of his own word of honour. Sir Andrew knew that Blakeney would brave any danger, run the wildest risks sooner than break it, and with Chauvelin at his very heels, would make a final attempt, however desperate, to rescue those who trusted in him.

"Faith, Sir Andrew," said Marguerite at last, making brave efforts to dry her tears, "you are right, and I would not now shame myself by trying to dissuade him from doing his duty. As you say, I should plead in vain. God grant him strength and ability," she added fervently and resolutely, "to outwit his pursuers. He will not refuse to take you with him, perhaps, when he starts on his noble work; between you, you will have cunning as well as valour! God guard you both! In the meanwhile I think we should lose no time. I still believe that his safety depends upon his knowing that Chauvelin is on his track."

"Undoubtedly. He has wonderful resources at his command. As soon as he is aware of his danger he will exercise more caution: his ingenuity is a veritable miracle."

"Then, what say you to a voyage of reconnaissance in the village whilst I wait here against his coming! — You might come across Percy's track and thus save valuable time. If you find him, tell him to beware! — his bitterest enemy is on his heels!"

"But this is such a villainous hole for you to wait in."

"Nay, that I do not mind! — But you might ask our surly host if he could let me wait in another room, where I could be safer from the prying eyes of any chance traveller. Offer him some ready money, so that he should not fail to give me word the moment the tall Englishman returns."

She spoke quite calmly, even cheerfully now, thinking out her plans, ready for the worst if need be; she would show no more weakness, she would prove herself worthy of him, who was about to give his life for the sake of his fellow-men.

Sir Andrew obeyed her without further comment. Instinctively he felt that hers now was the stronger mind; he was willing to give himself over to her guidance, to become the hand, whilst she was the directing hand.

He went to the door of the inner room, through which Brogard and his wife had disappeared before, and knocked; as usual, he was answered by a salvo of muttered oaths.

"Hey! friend Brogard!" said the man peremptorily, "my lady friend would wish to rest here awhile. Could you give her the use of another room? She would wish to be alone."

He took some money out of his pocket, and allowed it to jingle significantly in his hand. Brogard had opened the door, and listened, with his usual surly apathy, to the young man's request. At the sight of the gold, however, his lazy attitude relaxed slightly; he took his pipe from his mouth and shuffled into the room.

He then pointed over his shoulder at the attic up in the wall.

"She can wait up there!" he said with a grunt. "It's comfortable, and I have no other room."

"Nothing could be better," said Marguerite in English; she at once realised the advantages such a position hidden from view would give her. "Give him the money, Sir Andrew; I shall be quite happy up there, and can see everything without being seen."

She nodded to Brogard, who condescended to go up to the attic, and to shake up the straw that lay on the floor.

"May I entreat you, madam, to do nothing rash," said Sir Andrew, as Marguerite prepared in her turn to ascend the rickety flight of steps. "Remember this place is infested with spies. Do not, I beg of you, reveal yourself to Sir Percy, unless you are absolutely certain that you are alone with him."

Even as he spoke, he felt how unnecessary was this caution: Marguerite was as calm, as clear-headed as any man. There was no fear of her doing anything that was rash.

"Nay," she said with a slight attempt at cheerfulness, "that I can faithfully promise you. I would not jeopardise my husband's life, nor yet his plans, by speaking to him before strangers. Have no fear, I will watch my opportunity, and serve him in the manner I think he needs it most."

Brogard had come down the steps again, and Marguerite was ready to go up to her safe retreat.

"I dare not kiss your hand, madam," said Sir Andrew, as she began to mount the steps, "since I am your lacquey, but I pray you be of good cheer. If I do not come across Blakeney in half an hour, I shall return, expecting to find him here."

"Yes, that will be best. We can afford to wait for half an hour. Chauvelin cannot possibly be here before that. God grant that either you or I may have seen Percy by then. Good luck to you, friend! Have no fear for me."

Lightly she mounted the rickety wooden steps that led to the attic. Brogard was taking no further heed of her. She could make herself comfortable there or not as she chose. Sir Andrew watched her until she had reached the curtains across, and the young man noted that she was singularly well placed there, for seeing and hearing, whilst remaining unobserved.

He had paid Brogard well; the surly old innkeeper would have no object in betraying her. Then Sir Andrew prepared to go. At the door he turned once again and looked up at the loft. Through the ragged curtains Marguerite's sweet face was peeping down at him, and the young man rejoiced to see that it looked serene, and even gently smiling. With a final nod of farewell to her, he walked out into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV THE DEATH-TRAP

The next quarter of an hour went by swiftly and noiselessly. In the room downstairs, Brogard had for a while busied himself with clearing the table, and re-arranging it for another guest.

It was because she watched these preparations that Marguerite found the time slipping by more pleasantly. It was for Percy that this semblance of supper was being got ready. Evidently Brogard had a certain amount of respect for the tall Englishman, as he seemed to take some trouble in making the place look a trifle less uninviting than it had done before.

He even produced, from some hidden recess in the old dresser, what actually looked like a table-cloth; and when he spread it out, and saw it was full of holes, he shook his head dubiously for a while, then was at much pains so to spread it over the table as to hide most of its blemishes.

Then he got out a serviette, also old and ragged, but possessing some measure of cleanliness, and with this he carefully wiped the glasses, spoons and plates, which he put on the table.

Marguerite could not help smiling to herself as she watched all these preparations, which Brogard accomplished to an accompaniment of muttered oaths. Clearly the great height and bulk of the Englishman, or perhaps the weight of his fist, had overawed this free-born citizen of France, or he would never have been at such trouble for any SACRRE ARISTO.

When the table was set — such as it was — Brogard surveyed it with evident satisfaction. He then dusted one of the chairs with the corner of his blouse, gave a stir to the stock-pot, threw a fresh bundle of faggots on to the fire, and slouched out of the room.

Marguerite was left alone with her reflections. She had spread her travelling cloak over the straw, and was sitting fairly comfortably, as the straw was fresh, and the evil odours from below came up to her only in a modified form.

But, momentarily, she was almost happy; happy because, when she peeped through the tattered curtains, she could see a rickety chair, a torn table-cloth, a glass, a plate and a spoon; that was all. But those mute and ugly things seemed to say to her that they were waiting for Percy; that soon, very soon, he would be here, that the squalid room being still empty, they would be alone together.

That thought was so heavenly, that Marguerite closed her eyes in order to shut out everything but that. In a few minutes she would be alone with him; she would run down the ladder, and let him see her; then he would take her in his arms, and she would let him see that, after that, she would gladly die for him, and with him, for earth could hold no greater happiness than that.

And then what would happen? She could not even remotely conjecture. She knew, of course, that Sir Andrew was right, that Percy would do everything he had set out to accomplish; that she — now she was here — could do nothing, beyond warning him to be cautious, since Chauvelin himself was on his track. After having cautioned him, she would perforce have to see him go off upon the terrible and daring mission; she could not even with a word or look, attempt to keep him back. She would have to obey, whatever he told her to do, even perhaps have to efface herself, and wait, in indescribable agony, whilst he, perhaps, went to his death.

But even that seemed less terrible to bear than the thought that he should never know how much she loved him — that at any rate would be spared her; the squalid room itself, which seemed to be waiting for him, told her that he would be here soon.

Suddenly her over-sensitive ears caught the sound of distant footsteps drawing near; her heart gave a wild leap of joy! Was it Percy at last? No! the step did not seem quite as long, nor quite as firm as his; she also thought that she could hear two distinct sets of footsteps. Yes! that was it! two men were coming this way. Two strangers perhaps, to get a drink, or . . .

But she had not time to conjecture, for presently there was a peremptory call at the door, and the next moment it was violently open from the outside, whilst a rough, commanding voice shouted, —

“Hey! Citoyen Brogard! Hola!”

Marguerite could not see the newcomers, but, through a hole in one of the curtains, she could observe one portion of the room below.

She heard Brogard’s shuffling footsteps, as he came out of the inner room, muttering his usual string of oaths. On seeing the strangers, however, he paused in the middle of the room, well within range of Marguerite’s vision, looked at them, with even more withering contempt than he had bestowed upon his former guests, and muttered, “SACRRREE SOUTANE!”

Marguerite’s heart seemed all at once to stop beating; her eyes, large and dilated, had fastened on one of the newcomers, who, at this point, had taken a quick step forward towards Brogard. He was dressed in the soutane, broad-brimmed hat and buckled shoes habitual to the French CURE, but as he stood opposite the innkeeper, he threw open his soutane for a moment, displaying the tri-colour scarf of officialism, which sight immediately had the effect of transforming Brogard’s attitude of contempt, into one of cringing obsequiousness.

It was the sight of this French CURE, which seemed to freeze the very blood in Marguerite’s veins. She could not see his face, which was shaded by his broad-brimmed hat, but she recognized the thin, bony hands, the slight stoop, the whole gait of the man! It was Chauvelin!

The horror of the situation struck her as with a physical blow; the awful disappointment, the dread of what was to come, made her very senses reel, and she needed almost superhuman effort, not to fall senseless beneath it all.

“A plate of soup and a bottle of wine,” said Chauvelin imperiously to Brogard, “then clear out of here — understand? I want to be alone.”

Silently, and without any muttering this time, Brogard obeyed. Chauvelin sat down at the table, which had been prepared for the tall Englishman, and the innkeeper busied himself obsequiously round him, dishing up the soup and pouring out the wine. The man who had entered with Chauvelin and whom Marguerite could not see, stood waiting close by the door.

At a brusque sign from Chauvelin, Brogard had hurried back to the inner room, and the former now beckoned to the man who had accompanied him.

In him Marguerite at once recognised Desgas, Chauvelin’s secretary and confidential factotum, whom she had often seen in Paris, in days gone by. He crossed the room, and for a moment or two listened attentively at the Brogards’ door. “Not listening?” asked Chauvelin, curtly.

"No, citoyen."

For a moment Marguerite dreaded lest Chauvelin should order Desgas to search the place; what would happen if she were to be discovered, she hardly dared to imagine. Fortunately, however, Chauvelin seemed more impatient to talk to his secretary than afraid of spies, for he called Desgas quickly back to his side.

"The English schooner?" he asked.

"She was lost sight of at sundown, citoyen," replied Desgas, "but was then making west, towards Cap Gris Nez."

"Ah! — good! —" muttered Chauvelin, "and now, about Captain Jutley? — what did he say?"

"He assured me that all the orders you sent him last week have been implicitly obeyed. All the roads which converge to this place have been patrolled night and day ever since: and the beach and cliffs have been most rigorously searched and guarded."

"Does he know where this 'Pere Blanchard's' hut is?"

"No, citoyen, nobody seems to know of it by that name. There are any amount of fisherman's huts all along the course . . . but . . ."

"That'll do. Now about tonight?" interrupted Chauvelin, impatiently.

"The roads and the beach are patrolled as usual, citoyen, and Captain Jutley awaits further orders."

"Go back to him at once, then. Tell him to send reinforcements to the various patrols; and especially to those along the beach — you understand?"

Chauvelin spoke curtly and to the point, and every word he uttered struck at Marguerite's heart like the death-knell of her fondest hopes.

"The men," he continued, "are to keep the sharpest possible look-out for any stranger who may be walking, riding, or driving, along the road or the beach, more especially for a tall stranger, whom I need not describe further, as probably he will be disguised; but he cannot very well conceal his height, except by stooping. You understand?"

"Perfectly, citoyen," replied Desgas.

"As soon as any of the men have sighted a stranger, two of them are to keep him in view. The man who loses sight of the tall stranger, after he is once seen, will pay for his negligence with his life; but one man is to ride straight back here and report to me. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely clear, citoyen."

"Very well, then. Go and see Jutley at once. See the reinforcements start off for the patrol duty, then ask the captain to let you have a half-a-dozen more men and bring them here with you. You can be back in ten minutes. Go—"

Desgas saluted and went to the door.

As Marguerite, sick with horror, listened to Chauvelin's directions to his underling, the whole of the plan for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel became appallingly clear to her. Chauvelin wished that the fugitives should be left in false security waiting in their hidden retreat until Percy joined them. Then the daring plotter was to be surrounded and caught red-handed, in the very act of aiding and abetting royalists, who were traitors to the republic. Thus, if his capture were noised abroad, even the British Government could not legally protest in his favour; having plotted with the enemies of the French Government, France had the right to put him to death.

Escape for him and them would be impossible. All the roads patrolled and watched, the trap well set, the net, wide at present, but drawing together tighter and tighter, until it closed upon the daring plotter, whose superhuman cunning even could not rescue him from its meshes now.

Desgas was about to go, but Chauvelin once more called him back. Marguerite vaguely wondered what further devilish plans he could have formed, in order to entrap one brave man, alone, against two-score of others. She looked at him as he turned to speak to Desgas; she could just see his face beneath the broad-brimmed, CURE'S hat. There was at that moment so much deadly hatred, such fiendish malice in the thin face and pale, small eyes, that Marguerite's last hope died in her heart, for she felt that from this man she could expect no mercy.

"I had forgotten," repeated Chauvelin, with a weird chuckle, as he rubbed his bony, talon-like hands one against the other, with a gesture of fiendish satisfaction. "The tall stranger may show fight. In any case no shooting, remember, except as a last resort. I want that tall stranger alive . . . if possible."

He laughed, as Dante has told us that the devils laugh at the sight of the torture of the damned. Marguerite had thought that by now she had lived through the whole gamut of horror and anguish that human heart could bear; yet now, when Desgas left the house, and she remained alone in this lonely, squalid room, with that fiend for company, she felt as if all that she had suffered was nothing compared with this. He continued to laugh and chuckle to himself for awhile, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of his triumph.

His plans were well laid, and he might well triumph! Not a loophole was left, through which the bravest, the most cunning man might escape. Every road guarded, every corner watched, and in that lonely hut somewhere on the coast, a small band of fugitives waiting for their rescuer, and leading him to his death — nay! to worse than death. That fiend there, in a holy man's garb, was too much of a devil to allow a brave man to die the quick, sudden death of a soldier at the post of duty.

He, above all, longed to have the cunning enemy, who had so long baffled him, helpless in his power; he wished to gloat over him, to enjoy his downfall, to inflict upon him what moral and mental torture a deadly hatred alone can devise. The brave eagle, captured, and with noble wings clipped, was doomed to endure the gnawing of the rat. And she, his wife, who loved him, and who had brought him to this, could do nothing to help him.

Nothing, save to hope for death by his side, and for one brief moment in which to tell him that her love — whole, true and passionate — was entirely his.

Chauvelin was now sitting close to the table; he had taken off his hat, and Marguerite could just see the outline of his thin profile and pointed chin, as he bent over his meagre supper. He was evidently quite contented, and awaited events with perfect calm; he even seemed to enjoy Brogard's unsavoury fare. Marguerite wondered how so much hatred could lurk in one human being against another.

Suddenly, as she watched Chauvelin, a sound caught her ear, which turned her very heart to stone. And yet that sound was not calculated to inspire anyone with horror, for it was merely the cheerful sound of a gay, fresh voice singing lustily, "God save the King!"

CHAPTER XXV THE EAGLE AND THE FOX

Marguerite's breath stopped short; she seemed to feel her very life standing still momentarily whilst she listened to that voice and to that song. In the singer she had recognised her husband. Chauvelin, too, had heard it, for he darted a quick glance towards the door, then hurriedly took up his broad-brimmed hat and clapped it over his head.

The voice drew nearer; for one brief second the wild desire seized Marguerite to rush down the steps and fly across the room, to stop that song at any cost, to beg the cheerful singer to fly — fly for his life, before it be too late. She checked the impulse just in time. Chauvelin would stop her before she reached the door, and, moreover, she had no idea if he had any soldiers posted within his call. Her impetuous act might prove the death-signal of the man she would have died to save.

"Long to reign over us, God save the King!"

sang the voice more lustily than ever. The next moment the door was thrown open and there was dead silence for a second or so.

Marguerite could not see the door; she held her breath, trying to imagine what was happening.

Percy Blakeney on entering had, of course, at once caught sight of the CURE at the table; his hesitation lasted less than five seconds, the next moment, Marguerite saw his tall figure crossing the room, whilst he called in a loud, cheerful voice, —

"Hello, there! no one about? Where's that fool Brogard?"

He wore the magnificent coat and riding-suit which he had on when Marguerite last saw him at Richmond, so many hours ago. As usual, his get-up was absolutely irreproachable, the fine Mechlin lace at his neck and wrists were immaculate and white, his fair hair was carefully brushed, and he carried his eyeglass with his usual affected gesture. In fact, at this moment, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., might have been on his way to a garden-party at the Prince of Wales', instead of deliberately, cold-bloodedly running his head in a trap, set for him by his deadliest enemy.

He stood for a moment in the middle of the room, whilst Marguerite, absolutely paralysed with horror, seemed unable even to breathe.

Every moment she expected that Chauvelin would give a signal, that the place would fill with soldiers, that she would rush down and help Percy to sell his life dearly. As he stood there, suavely unconscious, she very nearly screamed out to him, —

"Fly, Percy! — 'tis your deadly enemy! — fly before it be too late!"

But she had not time even to do that, for the next moment Blakeney quietly walked to the table, and, jovially clapped the CURE on the back, said in his own drawly, affected way, —

"Odds's fish! . . . er . . . M. Chauvelin. . . . I vow I never thought of meeting you here."

Chauvelin, who had been in the very act of conveying soup to his mouth, fairly choked. His thin face became absolutely purple, and a violent fit of coughing saved this cunning representative of France from betraying the most boundless surprise he had ever experienced. There was no doubt that this bold move on the part of the enemy had been wholly unexpected, as far as he was concerned: and the daring impudence of it completely nonplussed him for the moment.

Obviously he had not taken the precaution of having the inn surrounded with soldiers. Blakeney had evidently guessed that much, and no doubt his resourceful brain had already formed some plan by which he could turn this unexpected interview to account.

Marguerite up in the loft had not moved. She had made a solemn promise to Sir Andrew not to speak to her husband before strangers, and she had sufficient self-control not to throw herself unreasoningly and impulsively across his plans. To sit still and watch these two men together was a terrible trial of fortitude. Marguerite had heard Chauvelin give the orders for the patrolling of all the roads. She knew that if Percy now left the "Chat Gris" — in whatever direction he happened to go — he could not go far without being sighted by some of Captain Jutley's men on patrol. On the other hand, if he stayed, then Desgas would have time to come back with the dozen men Chauvelin had specially ordered.

The trap was closing in, and Marguerite could do nothing but watch and wonder. The two men looked such a strange contrast, and of the two it was Chauvelin who exhibited a slight touch of fear. Marguerite knew him well enough to guess what was passing in his mind. He had no fear for his own person, although he certainly was alone in a lonely inn with a man who was powerfully built, and who was daring and reckless beyond the bounds of probability. She knew that Chauvelin would willingly have braved perilous encounters for the sake of the cause he had at heart, but what he did fear was that this impudent Englishman would, by knocking him down, double his own chances of escape; his underlings might not succeed so well in capturing the Scarlet Pimpernel, when not directed by the cunning hand and the shrewd brain, which had deadly hate for an incentive.

Evidently, however, the representative of the French Government had nothing to fear for the moment, at the hands of his powerful adversary. Blakeney, with his most inane laugh and pleasant good-nature, was solemnly patting him on the back.

"I am so demmed sorry . . ." he was saying cheerfully, "so very sorry . . . I seem to have upset you . . . eating soup, too . . . nasty, awkward thing, soup . . . er . . . Begad! — a friend of mine died once . . . er . . . choked . . . just like you . . . with a spoonful of soup."

And he smiled shyly, good-humouredly, down at Chauvelin.

"Odd's life!" he continued, as soon as the latter had somewhat recovered himself, "beastly hole this . . . ain't it now? La! you don't mind?" he added, apologetically, as he sat down on a chair close to the table and drew the soup tureen towards him. "That fool Brogard seems to be asleep or something."

There was a second plate on the table, and he calmly helped himself to soup, then poured himself out a glass of wine.

For a moment Marguerite wondered what Chauvelin would do. His disguise was so good that perhaps he meant, on recovering himself, to deny his identity: but Chauvelin was too astute to make such an obviously false and childish move, and already he too had stretched out his hand and said pleasantly, —

"I am indeed charmed to see you Sir Percy. You must excuse me — h'm — I thought you the other side of the Channel. Sudden surprise almost took my breath away."

"La!" said Sir Percy, with a good-humoured grin, "it did that quite, didn't it — er — M. — er — Chaubertin?"

"Pardon me — Chauvelin."

"I beg pardon — a thousand times. Yes — Chauvelin of course. . . . Er . . . I never could cotton to foreign names. . . ."

He was calmly eating his soup, laughing with pleasant good-humour, as if he had come all the way to Calais for the express purpose of enjoying supper at this filthy inn, in the company of his arch-enemy.

For the moment Marguerite wondered why Percy did not knock the little Frenchman down then and there — and no doubt something of the sort must have darted through his mind, for every now and then his lazy eyes seemed to flash ominously, as they rested on the slight figure of Chauvelin, who had now quite recovered himself and was also calmly eating his soup.

But the keen brain, which had planned and carried through so many daring plots, was too far-seeing to take unnecessary risks. This place, after all, might be infested with spies; the innkeeper might be in Chauvelin's pay. One call on Chauvelin's part might bring twenty men about Blakeney's ears for aught he knew, and he might be caught and trapped before he could help, or, at least, warn the fugitives. This he would not risk; he meant to help the others, to get THEM safely away; for he had pledged his word to them, and his word he WOULD keep. And whilst he ate and chatted, he thought and planned, whilst, up in the loft, the poor, anxious woman racked her brain as to what she should do, and endured agonies of longing to rush down to him, yet not daring to move for fear of upsetting his plans.

"I didn't know," Blakeney was saying jovially, "that you . . . er . . . were in holy orders."

"I . . . er . . . hem . . ." stammered Chauvelin. The calm impudence of his antagonist had evidently thrown him off his usual balance.

"But, la! I should have known you anywhere," continued Sir Percy, placidly, as he poured himself out another glass of wine, "although the wig and hat have changed you a bit."

"Do you think so?"

"Lud! they alter a man so . . . but . . . begad! I hope you don't mind my having made the remark? . . . Demmed bad form making remarks. . . . I hope you don't mind?"

"No, no, not at all — hem! I hope Lady Blakeney is well," said Chauvelin, hurriedly changing the topic of conversation.

Blakeney, with much deliberation, finished his plate of soup, drank his glass of wine, and, momentarily, it seemed to Marguerite as if he glanced all round the room. "Quite well, thank you," he said at last, drily. There was a pause, during which Marguerite could watch these two antagonists who, evidently in their minds, were measuring themselves against one another. She could see Percy almost full face where he sat at the table not ten yards from where she herself was crouching, puzzled, not knowing what to do, or what she should think. She had quite controlled her impulse now of rushing down and disclosing herself to her husband. A man capable of acting a part, in the way he was doing at the present moment, did not need a woman's word to warn him to be cautious.

Marguerite indulged in the luxury, dear to every tender woman's heart, of looking at the man she loved. She looked through the tattered curtain, across at the handsome face of her husband, in whose lazy blue eyes, and behind whose inane smile, she could now so plainly see the strength, energy, and resourcefulness which had caused the Scarlet Pimpernel to be revered and trusted by his followers. "There are nineteen of us ready to lay down our lives for your husband, Lady Blakeney," Sir Andrew had said to her; and as she looked at the forehead, low, but square and broad, the eyes, blue, yet deep-set and intense, the whole aspect of the man, of indomitable energy, hiding, behind a perfectly acted comedy, his almost superhuman strength of will and marvellous ingenuity, she understood the fascination which he exercised over his followers, for had he not also cast his spells over her heart and her imagination?

Chauvelin, who was trying to conceal his impatience beneath his usual urbane manner, took a quick look at his watch. Desgas should not be long: another two or three minutes, and this impudent Englishman would be secure in the keeping of half a dozen of Captain Jutley's most trusted men.

"You are on your way to Paris, Sir Percy?" he asked carelessly.

"Odd's life, no," replied Blakeney, with a laugh. "Only as far as Lille — not Paris for me . . . beastly uncomfortable place Paris, just now . . . eh, Monsieur Chaubertin . . . beg pardon . . . Chauvelin!"

"Not for an English gentleman like yourself, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin, sarcastically, "who takes no interest in the conflict that is raging there."

"La! you see it's no business of mine, and our demmed government is all on your side of the business. Old Pitt daren't say 'Bo' to a goose. You are in a hurry, sir," he added, as Chauvelin once again took out his watch; "an appointment, perhaps. . . . I pray you take no heed of me. . . . My time's my own."

He rose from the table and dragged a chair to the hearth. Once more Marguerite was terribly tempted to go to him, for time was getting on; Desgas might be back at any moment with his men. Percy did not know that and . . . oh! how horrible it all was — and how helpless she felt.

"I am in no hurry," continued Percy, pleasantly, "but, la! I don't want to spend any more time than I can help in this God-forsaken hole! But, begad! sir," he added, as Chauvelin had surreptitiously looked at his watch for the third time, "that watch of yours won't go any faster for all the looking you give it. You are expecting a friend, maybe?"

"Aye — a friend!"

"Not a lady — I trust, Monsieur l'Abbe," laughed Blakeney; "surely the holy church does not allow? . . . eh? . . . what! But, I say, come by the fire . . . it's getting demmed cold."

He kicked the fire with the heel of his boot, making the logs blaze in the old hearth. He seemed in no hurry to go, and apparently was quite unconscious of his immediate danger. He dragged another chair to the fire, and Chauvelin, whose impatience was by now quite beyond control, sat down beside the hearth, in such a way as to command a view of the door. Desgas had been gone nearly a quarter of an hour. It was quite plain to Marguerite's aching senses that as soon as he arrived, Chauvelin would abandon all his other plans with regard to the fugitives, and capture this impudent Scarlet Pimpernel at once.

"Hey, M. Chauvelin," the latter was saying airily, "tell me, I pray you, is your friend pretty? Demmed smart these little French women sometimes — what? But I protest I need not ask," he added, as he carelessly strode back towards the supper-table. "In matters of taste the Church has never been backward. . . . Eh?"

But Chauvelin was not listening. His every faculty was now concentrated on that door through which presently Desgas would enter. Marguerite's thoughts, too, were centred there, for her ears had suddenly caught, through the stillness of the night, the sound of

numerous and measured treads some distance away.

It was Desgas and his men. Another three minutes and they would be here! Another three minutes and the awful thing would have occurred: the brave eagle would have fallen in the ferret's trap! She would have moved now and screamed, but she dared not; for whilst she heard the soldiers approaching, she was looking at Percy and watching his every movement. He was standing by the table whereon the remnants of the supper, plates, glasses, spoons, salt and pepper-pots were scattered pell-mell. His back was turned to Chauvelin and he was still prattling along in his own affected and inane way, but from his pocket he had taken his snuff-box, and quickly and suddenly he emptied the contents of the pepper-pot into it.

Then he again turned with an inane laugh to Chauvelin, —

“Eh? Did you speak, sir?”

Chauvelin had been too intent on listening to the sound of those approaching footsteps, to notice what his cunning adversary had been doing. He now pulled himself together, trying to look unconcerned in the very midst of his anticipated triumph. “No,” he said presently, “that is — as you were saying, Sir Percy — ?”

“I was saying,” said Blakeney, going up to Chauvelin, by the fire, “that the Jew in Piccadilly has sold me better snuff this time than I have ever tasted. Will you honour me, Monsieur l’Abbe?”

He stood close to Chauvelin in his own careless, DEBONNAIRE way, holding out his snuff-box to his arch-enemy.

Chauvelin, who, as he told Marguerite once, had seen a trick or two in his day, had never dreamed of this one. With one ear fixed on those fast-approaching footsteps, one eye turned to that door where Desgas and his men would presently appear, lulled into false security by the impudent Englishman's airy manner, he never even remotely guessed the trick which was being played upon him.

He took a pinch of snuff.

Only he, who has ever by accident sniffed vigorously a dose of pepper, can have the faintest conception of the hopeless condition in which such a sniff would reduce any human being.

Chauvelin felt as if his head would burst — sneeze after sneeze seemed nearly to choke him; he was blind, deaf, and dumb for the moment, and during that moment Blakeney quietly, without the slightest haste, took up his hat, took some money out of his pocket, which he left on the table, then calmly stalked out of the room!

CHAPTER XXVI THE JEW

It took Marguerite some time to collect her scattered senses; the whole of this last short episode had taken place in less than a minute, and Desgas and the soldiers were still about two hundred yards away from the "Chat Gris."

When she realised what had happened, a curious mixture of joy and wonder filled her heart. It all was so neat, so ingenious. Chauvelin was still absolutely helpless, far more so than he could even have been under a blow from the fist, for now he could neither see, nor hear, nor speak, whilst his cunning adversary had quietly slipped through his fingers.

Blakeney was gone, obviously to try and join the fugitives at the Pere Blanchard's hut. For the moment, true, Chauvelin was helpless; for the moment the daring Scarlet Pimpernel had not been caught by Desgas and his men. But all the roads and the beach were patrolled. Every place was watched, and every stranger kept in sight. How far could Percy go, thus arrayed in his gorgeous clothes, without being sighted and followed? Now she blamed herself terribly for not having gone down to him sooner, and given him that word of warning and of love which, perhaps, after all, he needed. He could not know of the orders which Chauvelin had given for his capture, and even now, perhaps . . .

But before all these horrible thoughts had taken concrete form in her brain, she heard the grounding of arms outside, close to the door, and Desgas' voice shouting "Halt!" to his men.

Chauvelin had partially recovered; his sneezing had become less violent, and he had struggled to his feet. He managed to reach the door just as Desgas' knock was heard on the outside.

Chauvelin threw open the door, and before his secretary could say a word, he had managed to stammer between two sneezes —

"The tall stranger — quick! — did any of you see him?"

"Where, citizen?" asked Desgas, in surprise.

"Here, man! through that door! not five minutes ago."

"We saw nothing, citizen! The moon is not yet up, and . . ."

"And you are just five minutes too late, my friend," said Chauvelin, with concentrated fury.

"Citoyen . . . I . . ."

"You did what I ordered you to do," said Chauvelin, with impatience. "I know that, but you were a precious long time about it. Fortunately, there's not much harm done, or it had fared ill with you, Citoyen Desgas."

Desgas turned a little pale. There was so much rage and hatred in his superior's whole attitude.

"The tall stranger, citizen—" he stammered.

"Was here, in this room, five minutes ago, having supper at that table. Damn his impudence! For obvious reasons, I dared not tackle him alone. Brogard is too big a fool, and that cursed Englishman appears to have the strength of a bullock, and so he slipped away under your very nose."

"He cannot go far without being sighted, citizen."

"Ah?"

"Captain Jutley sent forty men as reinforcements for the patrol duty: twenty went down to the beach. He again assured me that the watch had been constant all day, and that no stranger could possibly get to the beach, or reach a boat, without being sighted."

"That's good. — Do the men know their work?"

"They have had very clear orders, citizen: and I myself spoke to those who were about to start. They are to shadow — as secretly as possible — any stranger they may see, especially if he be tall, or stoop as if he would disguise his height."

"In no case to detain such a person, of course," said Chauvelin, eagerly. "That impudent Scarlet Pimpernel would slip through clumsy fingers. We must let him get to the Pere Blanchard's hut now; there surround and capture him."

"The men understand that, citizen, and also that, as soon as a tall stranger has been sighted, he must be shadowed, whilst one man is to turn straight back and report to you."

"That is right," said Chauvelin, rubbing his hands, well pleased.

"I have further news for you, citizen."

"What is it?"

"A tall Englishman had a long conversation about three-quarters of an hour ago with a Jew, Reuben by name, who lives not ten paces from here."

"Yes — and?" queried Chauvelin, impatiently.

"The conversation was all about a horse and cart, which the tall Englishman wished to hire, and which was to have been ready for him by eleven o'clock."

"It is past that now. Where does that Reuben live?"

"A few minutes' walk from this door."

"Send one of the men to find out if the stranger has driven off in Reuben's cart."

"Yes, citizen."

Desgas went to give the necessary orders to one of the men. Not a word of this conversation between him and Chauvelin had escaped Marguerite, and every word they had spoken seemed to strike at her heart, with terrible hopelessness and dark foreboding.

She had come all this way, and with such high hopes and firm determination to help her husband, and so far she had been able to do nothing, but to watch, with a heart breaking with anguish, the meshes of the deadly net closing round the daring Scarlet Pimpernel.

He could not now advance many steps, without spying eyes to track and denounce him. Her own helplessness struck her with the terrible sense of utter disappointment. The possibility of being the slightest use to her husband had become almost NIL, and her only hope rested in being allowed to share his fate, whatever it might ultimately be.

For the moment, even her chance of ever seeing the man she loved again, had become a remote one. Still, she was determined to keep a close watch over his enemy, and a vague hope filled her heart, that whilst she kept Chauvelin in sight, Percy's fate might still be

hanging in the balance.

Desgas left Chauvelin moodily pacing up and down the room, whilst he himself waited outside for the return of the man whom he had sent in search of Reuben. Thus several minutes went by. Chauvelin was evidently devoured with impatience. Apparently he trusted no one: this last trick played upon him by the daring Scarlet Pimpernel had made him suddenly doubtful of success, unless he himself was there to watch, direct and superintend the capture of this impudent Englishman.

About five minutes later, Desgas returned, followed by an elderly Jew, in a dirty, threadbare gaberdine, worn greasy across the shoulders. His red hair, which he wore after the fashion of the Polish Jews, with the corkscrew curls each side of his face, was plentifully sprinkled with grey — a general coating of grime, about his cheeks and his chin, gave him a peculiarly dirty and loathsome appearance. He had the habitual stoop, those of his race affected in mock humility in past centuries, before the dawn of equality and freedom in matters of faith, and he walked behind Desgas with the peculiar shuffling gait which has remained the characteristic of the Jew trader in continental Europe to this day.

Chauvelin, who had all the Frenchman's prejudice against the despised race, motioned to the fellow to keep at a respectful distance. The group of the three men were standing just underneath the hanging oil-lamp, and Marguerite had a clear view of them all.

"Is this the man?" asked Chauvelin.

"No, citoyen," replied Desgas, "Reuben could not be found, so presumably his cart has gone with the stranger; but this man here seems to know something, which he is willing to sell for a consideration."

"Ah!" said Chauvelin, turning away with disgust from the loathsome specimen of humanity before him.

The Jew, with characteristic patience, stood humbly on one side, leaning on the knotted staff, his greasy, broad-brimmed hat casting a deep shadow over his grimy face, waiting for the noble Excellency to deign to put some questions to him.

"The citoyen tells me," said Chauvelin peremptorily to him, "that you know something of my friend, the tall Englishman, whom I desire to meet . . . MORBLEU! keep your distance, man," he added hurriedly, as the Jew took a quick and eager step forward.

"Yes, your Excellency," replied the Jew, who spoke the language with that peculiar lisp which denotes Eastern origin, "I and Reuben Goldstein met a tall Englishman, on the road, close by here this evening."

"Did you speak to him?"

"He spoke to us, your Excellency. He wanted to know if he could hire a horse and cart to go down along the St. Martin road, to a place he wanted to reach to-night."

"What did you say?"

"I did not say anything," said the Jew in an injured tone, "Reuben Goldstein, that accursed traitor, that son of Belial . . ."

"Cut that short, man," interrupted Chauvelin, roughly, "and go on with your story."

"He took the words out of my mouth, your Excellency: when I was about to offer the wealthy Englishman my horse and cart, to take him wheresoever he chose, Reuben had already spoken, and offered his half-starved nag, and his broken-down cart."

"And what did the Englishman do?"

"He listened to Reuben Goldstein, your Excellency, and put his hand in his pocket then and there, and took out a handful of gold, which he showed to that descendant of Beelzebub, telling him that all that would be his, if the horse and cart were ready for him by eleven o'clock."

"And, of course, the horse and cart were ready?"

"Well! they were ready for him in a manner, so to speak, your Excellency. Reuben's nag was lame as usual; she refused to budge at first. It was only after a time and with plenty of kicks, that she at last could be made to move," said the Jew with a malicious chuckle.

"Then they started?"

"Yes, they started about five minutes ago. I was disgusted with that stranger's folly. An Englishman too! — He ought to have known Reuben's nag was not fit to drive."

"But if he had no choice?"

"No choice, your Excellency?" protested the Jew, in a rasping voice, "did I not repeat to him a dozen times, that my horse and cart would take him quicker, and more comfortably than Reuben's bag of bones. He would not listen. Reuben is such a liar, and has such insinuating ways. The stranger was deceived. If he was in a hurry, he would have had better value for his money by taking my cart."

"You have a horse and cart too, then?" asked Chauvelin, peremptorily.

"Aye! that I have, your Excellency, and if your Excellency wants to drive . . ."

"Do you happen to know which way my friend went in Reuben Goldstein's cart?"

Thoughtfully the Jew rubbed his dirty chin. Marguerite's heart was beating well-nigh to bursting. She had heard the peremptory question; she looked anxiously at the Jew, but could not read his face beneath the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat. Vaguely she felt somehow as if he held Percy's fate in his long dirty hands.

There was a long pause, whilst Chauvelin frowned impatiently at the stooping figure before him: at last the Jew slowly put his hand in his breast pocket, and drew out from its capacious depths a number of silver coins. He gazed at them thoughtfully, then remarked, in a quiet tone of voice, —

"This is what the tall stranger gave me, when he drove away with Reuben, for holding my tongue about him, and his doings."

Chauvelin shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"How much is there there?" he asked.

"Twenty francs, your Excellency," replied the Jew, "and I have been an honest man all my life."

Chauvelin without further comment took a few pieces of gold out of his own pocket, and leaving them in the palm of his hand, he allowed them to jingle as he held them out towards the Jew.

"How many gold pieces are there in the palm of my hand?" he asked quietly.

Evidently he had no desire to terrorize the man, but to conciliate him, for his own purposes, for his manner was pleasant and suave. No doubt he feared that threats of the guillotine, and various other persuasive methods of that type, might addle the old man's brains, and that he would be more likely to be useful through greed of gain, than through terror of death.

The eyes of the Jew shot a quick, keen glance at the gold in his interlocutor's hand.

"At least five, I should say, your Excellency," he replied obsequiously.

"Enough, do you think, to loosen that honest tongue of yours?"

"What does your Excellency wish to know?"

"Whether your horse and cart can take me to where I can find my friend the tall stranger, who has driven off in Reuben Goldstein's cart?"

"My horse and cart can take your Honour there, where you please."

"To a place called the Pere Blanchard's hut?"

"Your Honour has guessed?" said the Jew in astonishment.

"You know the place? Which road leads to it?"

"The St. Martin Road, your Honour, then a footpath from there to the cliffs."

"You know the road?" repeated Chauvelin, roughly.

"Every stone, every blade of grass, your Honour," replied the Jew quietly.

Chauvelin without another word threw the five pieces of gold one by one before the Jew, who knelt down, and on his hands and knees struggled to collect them. One rolled away, and he had some trouble to get it, for it had lodged underneath the dresser. Chauvelin quietly waited while the old man scrambled on the floor, to find the piece of gold.

When the Jew was again on his feet, Chauvelin said, —

"How soon can your horse and cart be ready?"

"They are ready now, your Honour."

"Where?"

"Not ten metres from this door. Will your Excellency deign to look?"

"I don't want to see it. How far can you drive me in it?"

"As far as the Pere Blanchard's hut, your Honour, and further than Reuben's nag took your friend. I am sure that, not two leagues from here, we shall come across that wily Reuben, his nag, his cart and the tall stranger all in a heap in the middle of the road."

"How far is the nearest village from here?"

"On the road which the Englishman took, Miquelon is the nearest village, not two leagues from here."

"There he could get fresh conveyance, if he wanted to go further?"

"He could — if he ever got so far."

"Can you?"

"Will your Excellency try?" said the Jew simply.

"That is my intention," said Chauvelin very quietly, "but remember, if you have deceived me, I shall tell off two of my most stalwart soldiers to give you such a beating, that your breath will perhaps leave your ugly body for ever. But if we find my friend the tall Englishman, either on the road or at the Pere Blanchard's hut, there will be ten more gold pieces for you. Do you accept the bargain?"

The Jew again thoughtfully rubbed his chin. He looked at the money in his hand, then at this stern interlocutor, and at Desgas, who had stood silently behind him all this while. After a moment's pause, he said deliberately, —

"I accept."

"Go and wait outside then," said Chauvelin, "and remember to stick to your bargain, or by Heaven, I will keep to mine."

With a final, most abject and cringing bow, the old Jew shuffled out of the room. Chauvelin seemed pleased with his interview, for he rubbed his hands together, with that usual gesture of his, of malignant satisfaction.

"My coat and boots," he said to Desgas at last.

Desgas went to the door, and apparently gave the necessary orders, for presently a soldier entered, carrying Chauvelin's coat, boots, and hat.

He took off his soutane, beneath which he was wearing close-fitting breeches and a cloth waistcoat, and began changing his attire.

"You, citizen, in the meanwhile," he said to Desgas, "go back to Captain Jutley as fast as you can, and tell him to let you have another dozen men, and bring them with you along the St. Martin Road, where I daresay you will soon overtake the Jew's cart with myself in it. There will be hot work presently, if I mistake not, in the Pere Blanchard's hut. We shall corner our game there, I'll warrant, for this impudent Scarlet Pimpernel has had the audacity — or the stupidity, I hardly know which — to adhere to his original plans. He has gone to meet de Tournay, St. Just and the other traitors, which for the moment, I thought, perhaps, he did not intend to do. When we find them, there will be a band of desperate men at bay. Some of our men will, I presume, be put HORS DE COMBAT. These royalists are good swordsmen, and the Englishman is devilish cunning, and looks very powerful. Still, we shall be five against one at least. You can follow the cart closely with your men, all along the St. Martin Road, through Miquelon. The Englishman is ahead of us, and not likely to look behind him."

Whilst he gave these curt and concise orders, he had completed his change of attire. The priest's costume had been laid aside, and he was once more dressed in his usual dark, tight-fitting clothes. At last he took up his hat.

"I shall have an interesting prisoner to deliver into your hands," he said with a chuckle, as with unwonted familiarity he took Desgas' arm, and led him towards the door. "We won't kill him outright, eh, friend Desgas? The Pere Blanchard's hut is — an I mistake not — a lonely spot upon the beach, and our men will enjoy a bit of rough sport there with the wounded fox. Choose your men well, friend Desgas . . . of the sort who would enjoy that type of sport — eh? We must see that Scarlet Pimpernel wither a bit — what? — shrink and tremble, eh? . . . before we finally . . ." He made an expressive gesture, whilst he laughed a low, evil laugh, which filled Marguerite's soul with sickening horror.

"Choose your men well, Citizen Desgas," he said once more, as he led his secretary finally out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVII ON THE TRACK

Never for a moment did Marguerite Blakeney hesitate. The last sounds outside the "Chat Gris" had died away in the night. She had heard Desgas giving orders to his men, and then starting off towards the fort, to get a reinforcement of a dozen more men: six were not thought sufficient to capture the cunning Englishman, whose resourceful brain was even more dangerous than his valour and his strength.

Then a few minutes later, she heard the Jew's husky voice again, evidently shouting to his nag, then the rumble of wheels, and noise of a rickety cart bumping over the rough road.

Inside the inn, everything was still. Brogard and his wife, terrified of Chauvelin, had given no sign of life; they hoped to be forgotten, and at any rate to remain unperceived: Marguerite could not even hear their usual volleys of muttered oaths.

She waited a moment or two longer, then she quietly slipped down the broken stairs, wrapped her dark cloak closely round her and slipped out of the inn.

The night was fairly dark, sufficiently so at any rate to hide her dark figure from view, whilst her keen ears kept count of the sound of the cart going on ahead. She hoped by keeping well within the shadow of the ditches which lined the road, that she would not be seen by Desgas' men, when they approached, or by the patrols, which she concluded were still on duty.

Thus she started to do this, the last stage of her weary journey, alone, at night, and on foot. Nearly three leagues to Miquelon, and then on to the Pere Blanchard's hut, wherever that fatal spot might be, probably over rough roads: she cared not.

The Jew's nag could not get on very fast, and though she was weary with mental fatigue and nerve strain, she knew that she could easily keep up with it, on a hilly road, where the poor beast, who was sure to be half-starved, would have to be allowed long and frequent rests. The road lay some distance from the sea, bordered on either side by shrubs and stunted trees, sparsely covered with meagre foliage, all turning away from the North, with their branches looking in the semi-darkness, like stiff, ghostly hair, blown by a perpetual wind.

Fortunately, the moon showed no desire to peep between the clouds, and Marguerite hugging the edge of the road, and keeping close to the low line of shrubs, was fairly safe from view. Everything around her was so still: only from far, very far away, there came like a long soft moan, the sound of the distant sea.

The air was keen and full of brine; after that enforced period of inactivity, inside the evil-smelling, squalid inn, Marguerite would have enjoyed the sweet scent of this autumnal night, and the distant melancholy rumble of the autumnal night, and the distant melancholy rumble of the waves; she would have revelled in the calm and stillness of this lonely spot, a calm, broken only at intervals by the strident and mournful cry of some distant gull, and by the creaking of the wheels, some way down the road: she would have loved the cool atmosphere, the peaceful immensity of Nature, in this lonely part of the coast: but her heart was too full of cruel foreboding, of a great ache and longing for a being who had become infinitely dear to her.

Her feet slipped on the grassy bank, for she thought it safest not to walk near the centre of the road, and she found it difficult to keep up a sharp pace along the muddy incline. She even thought it best not to keep too near to the cart; everything was so still, that the rumble of the wheels could not fail to be a safe guide.

The loneliness was absolute. Already the few dim lights of Calais lay far behind, and on this road there was not a sign of human habitation, not even the hut of a fisherman or of a woodcutter anywhere near; far away on her right was the edge of the cliff, below it the rough beach, against which the incoming tide was dashing itself with its constant, distant murmur. And ahead the rumble of the wheels, bearing an implacable enemy to his triumph.

Marguerite wondered at what particular spot, on this lonely coast, Percy could be at this moment. Not very far surely, for he had had less than a quarter of an hour's start of Chauvelin. She wondered if he knew that in this cool, ocean-scented bit of France, there lurked many spies, all eager to sight his tall figure, to track him to where his unsuspecting friends waited for him, and then, to close the net over him and them.

Chauvelin, on ahead, jolted and jostled in the Jew's vehicle, was nursing comfortable thoughts. He rubbed his hands together, with content, as he thought of the web which he had woven, and through which that ubiquitous and daring Englishman could not hope to escape. As the time went on, and the old Jew drove him leisurely but surely along the dark road, he felt more and more eager for the grand finale of this exciting chase after the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. The capture of the audacious plotter would be the finest leaf in Citoyen Chauvelin's wreath of glory. Caught, red-handed, on the spot, in the very act of aiding and abetting the traitors against the Republic of France, the Englishman could claim no protection from his own country. Chauvelin had, in any case, fully made up his mind that all intervention should come too late.

Never for a moment did the slightest remorse enter his heart, as to the terrible position in which he had placed the unfortunate wife, who had unconsciously betrayed her husband. As a matter of fact, Chauvelin had ceased even to think of her: she had been a useful tool, that was all.

The Jew's lean nag did little more than walk. She was going along at a slow jog trot, and her driver had to give her long and frequent halts.

"Are we a long way yet from Miquelon?" asked Chauvelin from time to time.

"Not very far, your Honour," was the uniform placid reply.

"We have not yet come across your friend and mine, lying in a heap in the roadway," was Chauvelin's sarcastic comment.

"Patience, noble Excellency," rejoined the son of Moses, "they are ahead of us. I can see the imprint of the cart wheels, driven by that traitor, that son of the Amalekite."

"You are sure of the road?"

"As sure as I am of the presence of those ten gold pieces in the noble Excellency's pockets, which I trust will presently be mine."

"As soon as I have shaken hands with my friend the tall stranger, they will certainly be yours."

"Hark, what was that?" said the Jew suddenly.

Through the stillness, which had been absolute, there could now be heard distinctly the sound of horses' hoofs on the muddy road.

"They are soldiers," he added in an awed whisper.

"Stop a moment, I want to hear," said Chauvelin.

Marguerite had also heard the sound of galloping hoofs, coming towards the cart and towards herself. For some time she had been on the alert thinking that Desgas and his squad would soon overtake them, but these came from the opposite direction, presumably from Miquelon. The darkness lent her sufficient cover. She had perceived that the cart had stopped, and with utmost caution, treading noiselessly on the soft road, she crept a little nearer.

Her heart was beating fast, she was trembling in every limb; already she had guessed what news these mounted men would bring. "Every stranger on these roads or on the beach must be shadowed, especially if he be tall or stoops as if he would disguise his height; when sighted a mounted messenger must at once ride back and report." Those had been Chauvelin's orders. Had then the tall stranger been sighted, and was this the mounted messenger, come to bring the great news, that the hunted hare had run its head into the noose at last?

Marguerite, realizing that the cart had come to a standstill, managed to slip nearer to it in the darkness; she crept close up, hoping to get within earshot, to hear what the messenger had to say.

She heard the quick words of challenge —

"Liberte, Fraternite, Egalite!" then Chauvelin's quick query: —

"What news?"

Two men on horseback had halted beside the vehicle.

Marguerite could see them silhouetted against the midnight sky. She could hear their voices, and the snorting of their horses, and now, behind her, some little distance off, the regular and measured tread of a body of advancing men: Desgas and his soldiers.

There had been a long pause, during which, no doubt, Chauvelin satisfied the men as to his identity, for presently, questions and answers followed each other in quick succession.

"You have seen the stranger?" asked Chauvelin, eagerly.

"No, citoyen, we have seen no tall stranger; we came by the edge of the cliff."

"Then?"

"Less than a quarter of a league beyond Miquelon, we came across a rough construction of wood, which looked like the hut of a fisherman, where he might keep his tools and nets. When we first sighted it, it seemed to be empty, and, at first we thought that there was nothing suspicious about, until we saw some smoke issuing through an aperture at the side. I dismounted and crept close to it. It was then empty, but in one corner of the hut, there was a charcoal fire, and a couple of stools were also in the hut. I consulted with my comrades, and we decided that they should take cover with the horses, well out of sight, and that I should remain on the watch, which I did."

"Well! and did you see anything?"

"About half an hour later, I heard voices, citoyen, and presently, two men came along towards the edge of the cliff; they seemed to me to have come from the Lille Road. One was young, the other quite old. They were talking in a whisper, to one another, and I could not hear what they said." One was young, and the other quite old. Marguerite's aching heart almost stopped beating as she listened: was the young one Armand? — her brother? — and the old one de Tournay — were they the two fugitives who, unconsciously, were used as a decoy, to entrap their fearless and noble rescuer.

"The two men presently went into the hut," continued the soldier, whilst Marguerite's aching nerves seemed to catch the sound of Chauvelin's triumphant chuckle, "and I crept nearer to it then. The hut is very roughly built, and I caught snatches of their conversation."

"Yes? — Quick! — What did you hear?"

"The old man asked the young one if he were sure that was right place. 'Oh, yes,' he replied, 'tis the place sure enough,' and by the light of the charcoal fire he showed to his companion a paper, which he carried. 'Here is the plan,' he said, 'which he gave me before I left London. We were to adhere strictly to that plan, unless I had contrary orders, and I have had none. Here is the road we followed, see . . . here the fork . . . here we cut across the St. Martin Road . . . and here is the footpath which brought us to the edge of the cliff.' I must have made a slight noise then, for the young man came to the door of the hut, and peered anxiously all round him. When he again joined his companion, they whispered so low, that I could no longer hear them."

"Well? — and?" asked Chauvelin, impatiently.

"There were six of us altogether, patrolling that part of the beach, so we consulted together, and thought it best that four should remain behind and keep the hut in sight, and I and my comrade rode back at once to make report of what we had seen."

"You saw nothing of the tall stranger?"

"Nothing, citoyen."

"If your comrades see him, what would they do?"

"Not lose sight of him for a moment, and if he showed signs of escape, or any boat came in sight, they would close in on him, and, if necessary, they would shoot: the firing would bring the rest of the patrol to the spot. In any case they would not let the stranger go."

"Aye! but I did not want the stranger hurt — not just yet," murmured Chauvelin, savagely, "but there, you've done your best. The Fates grant that I may not be too late. . . ."

"We met half a dozen men just now, who have been patrolling this road for several hours."

"Well?"

"They have seen no stranger either."

"Yet he is on ahead somewhere, in a cart or else . . . Here! there is not a moment to lose. How far is that hut from here?"

"About a couple of leagues, citoyen."

"You can find it again? — at once? — without hesitation?"

"I have absolutely no doubt, citoyen."

“The footpath, to the edge of the cliff? — Even in the dark?”

“It is not a dark night, citizen, and I know I can find my way,” repeated the soldier firmly.

“Fall in behind then. Let your comrade take both your horses back to Calais. You won’t want them. Keep beside the cart, and direct the Jew to drive straight ahead; then stop him, within a quarter of a league of the footpath; see that he takes the most direct road.”

Whilst Chauvelin spoke, Desgas and his men were fast approaching, and Marguerite could hear their footsteps within a hundred yards behind her now. She thought it unsafe to stay where she was, and unnecessary too, as she had heard enough. She seemed suddenly to have lost all faculty even for suffering: her heart, her nerves, her brain seemed to have become numb after all these hours of ceaseless anguish, culminating in this awful despair.

For now there was absolutely not the faintest hope. Within two short leagues of this spot, the fugitives were waiting for their brave deliverer. He was on his way, somewhere on this lonely road, and presently he would join them; then the well-laid trap would close, two dozen men, led by one whose hatred was as deadly as his cunning was malicious, would close round the small band of fugitives, and their daring leader. They would all be captured. Armand, according to Chauvelin’s pledged word would be restored to her, but her husband, Percy, whom with every breath she drew she seemed to love and worship more and more, he would fall into the hands of a remorseless enemy, who had no pity for a brave heart, no admiration for the courage of a noble soul, who would show nothing but hatred for the cunning antagonist, who had baffled him so long.

She heard the soldier giving a few brief directions to the Jew, then she retired quickly to the edge of the road, and cowered behind some low shrubs, whilst Desgas and his men came up.

All fell in noiselessly behind the cart, and slowly they all started down the dark road. Marguerite waited until she reckoned that they were well outside the range of earshot, then, she too in the darkness, which suddenly seemed to have become more intense, crept noiselessly along.

CHAPTER XXVIII THE PERE BLANCHARD'S HUT

As in a dream, Marguerite followed on; the web was drawing more and more tightly every moment round the beloved life, which had become dearer than all. To see her husband once again, to tell him how she had suffered, how much she had wronged, and how little understood him, had become now her only aim. She had abandoned all hope of saving him: she saw him gradually hemmed in on all sides, and, in despair, she gazed round her into the darkness, and wondered whence he would presently come, to fall into the death-trap which his relentless enemy had prepared for him.

The distant roar of the waves now made her shudder; the occasional dismal cry of an owl, or a sea-gull, filled her with unspeakable horror. She thought of the ravenous beasts — in human shape — who lay in wait for their prey, and destroyed them, as mercilessly as any hungry wolf, for the satisfaction of their own appetite of hate. Marguerite was not afraid of the darkness, she only feared that man, on ahead, who was sitting at the bottom of a rough wooden cart, nursing thoughts of vengeance, which would have made the very demons in hell chuckle with delight.

Her feet were sore. Her knees shook under her, from sheer bodily fatigue. For days now she had lived in a wild turmoil of excitement; she had not had a quiet rest for three nights; now, she had walked on a slippery road for nearly two hours, and yet her determination never swerved for a moment. She would see her husband, tell him all, and, if he was ready to forgive the crime, which she had committed in her blind ignorance, she would yet have the happiness of dying by his side.

She must have walked on almost in a trance, instinct alone keeping her up, and guiding her in the wake of the enemy, when suddenly her ears, attuned to the slightest sound, by that same blind instinct, told her that the cart had stopped, and that the soldiers had halted. They had come to their destination. No doubt on the right, somewhere close ahead, was the footpath that led to the edge of the cliff and to the hut.

Heedless of any risks, she crept up quite close up to where Chauvelin stood, surrounded by his little troop: he had descended from the cart, and was giving some orders to the men. These she wanted to hear: what little chance she yet had, of being useful to Percy, consisted in hearing absolutely every word of his enemy's plans.

The spot where all the party had halted must have lain some eight hundred metres from the coast; the sound of the sea came only very faintly, as from a distance. Chauvelin and Desgas, followed by the soldiers, had turned off sharply to the right of the road, apparently on to the footpath, which led to the cliffs. The Jew had remained on the road, with his cart and nag.

Marguerite, with infinite caution, and literally crawling on her hands and knees, had also turned off to the right: to accomplish this she had to creep through the rough, low shrubs, trying to make as little noise as possible as she went along, tearing her face and hands against the dry twigs, intent only upon hearing without being seen or heard. Fortunately — as is usual in this part of France — the footpath was bordered by a low rough hedge, beyond which was a dry ditch, filled with coarse grass. In this Marguerite managed to find shelter; she was quite hidden from view, yet could contrive to get within three yards of where Chauvelin stood, giving orders to his men.

"Now," he was saying in a low and peremptory whisper, "where is the Pere Blanchard's hut?"

"About eight hundred metres from here, along the footpath," said the soldier who had lately been directing the party, "and half-way down the cliff."

"Very good. You shall lead us. Before we begin to descend the cliff, you shall creep down to the hut, as noiselessly as possible, and ascertain if the traitor royalists are there? Do you understand?"

"I understand, citizen."

"Now listen very attentively, all of you," continued Chauvelin, impressively, and addressing the soldiers collectively, "for after this we may not be able to exchange another word, so remember every syllable I utter, as if your very lives depended on your memory. Perhaps they do," he added drily.

"We listen, citizen," said Desgas, "and a soldier of the Republic never forgets an order."

"You, who have crept up to the hut, will try to peep inside. If an Englishman is there with those traitors, a man who is tall above the average, or who stoops as if he would disguise his height, then give a sharp, quick whistle as a signal to your comrades. All of you," he added, once more speaking to the soldiers collectively, "then quickly surround and rush into the hut, and each seize one of the men there, before they have time to draw their firearms; if any of them struggle, shoot at their legs or arms, but on no account kill the tall man. Do you understand?"

"We understand, citizen."

"The man who is tall above the average is probably also strong above the average; it will take four or five of you at least to overpower him."

There was a little pause, then Chauvelin continued, —

"If the royalist traitors are still alone, which is more than likely to be the case, then warn your comrades who are lying in wait there, and all of you creep and take cover behind the rocks and boulders round the hut, and wait there, in dead silence, until the tall Englishman arrives; then only rush the hut, when he is safely within its doors. But remember that you must be as silent as the wolf is at night, when he prowls around the pens. I do not wish those royalists to be on the alert — the firing of a pistol, a shriek or call on their part would be sufficient, perhaps, to warn the tall personage to keep clear of the cliffs, and of the hut, and," he added emphatically, "it is the tall Englishman whom it is your duty to capture tonight."

"You shall be implicitly obeyed, citizen."

"Then get along as noiselessly as possible, and I will follow you."

"What about the Jew, citizen?" asked Desgas, as silently like noiseless shadows, one by one the soldiers began to creep along the rough and narrow footpath.

"Ah, yes; I had forgotten about the Jew," said Chauvelin, and, turning towards the Jew, he called him peremptorily.

"Here, you . . . Aaron, Moses, Abraham, or whatever your confounded name may be," he said to the old man, who had quietly stood beside his lean nag, as far away from the soldiers as possible.

"Benjamin Rosenbaum, so it please your Honour," he replied humbly.

"It does not please me to hear your voice, but it does please me to give you certain orders, which you will find it wise to obey."

"So it please your Honour . . ."

"Hold your confounded tongue. You shall stay here, do you hear? with your horse and cart until our return. You are on no account to utter the faintest sound, or to even breathe louder than you can help; nor are you, on any consideration whatever, to leave your post, until I give you orders to do so. Do you understand?"

"But your Honour—" protested the Jew pitifully.

"There is no question of 'but' or of any argument," said Chauvelin, in a tone that made the timid old man tremble from head to foot. "If, when I return, I do not find you here, I most solemnly assure you that, wherever you may try to hide yourself, I can find you, and that punishment swift, sure and terrible, will sooner or later overtake you. Do you hear me?"

"But your Excellency . . ."

"I said, do you hear me?"

The soldiers had all crept away; the three men stood alone together in the dark and lonely road, with Marguerite there, behind the hedge, listening to Chauvelin's orders, as she would to her own death sentence.

"I heard your Honour," protested the Jew again, while he tried to draw nearer to Chauvelin, "and I swear by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that I would obey your Honour most absolutely, and that I would not move from this place until your Honour once more deigned to shed the light of your countenance upon your humble servant; but remember, your Honour, I am a poor man; my nerves are not as strong as those of a young soldier. If midnight marauders should come prowling round this lonely road, I might scream or run in my fright! And is my life to be forfeit, is some terrible punishment to come on my poor old head for that which I cannot help?"

The Jew seemed in real distress; he was shaking from head to foot. Clearly he was not the man to be left by himself on this lonely road. The man spoke truly; he might unwittingly, in sheer terror, utter the shriek that might prove a warning to the wily Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chauvelin reflected for a moment.

"Will your horse and cart be safe alone, here, do you think?" he asked roughly.

"I fancy, citizen," here interposed Desgas, "that they will be safer without that dirty, cowardly Jew than with him. There seems no doubt that, if he gets scared, he will either make a bolt of it, or shriek his head off."

"But what am I to do with the brute?"

"Will you send him back to Calais, citizen?"

"No, for we shall want him to drive back the wounded presently," said Chauvelin, with grim significance.

There was a pause again — Desgas waiting for the decision of his chief, and the old Jew whining beside his nag.

"Well, you lazy, lumbering old coward," said Chauvelin at last, "you had better shuffle along behind us. Here, Citizen Desgas, tie this handkerchief tightly round the fellow's mouth."

Chauvelin handed a scarf to Desgas, who solemnly began winding it round the Jew's mouth. Meekly Benjamin Rosenbaum allowed himself to be gagged; he, evidently, preferred this uncomfortable state to that of being left alone, on the dark St. Martin Road. Then the three men fell in line.

"Quick!" said Chauvelin, impatiently, "we have already wasted much valuable time."

And the firm footsteps of Chauvelin and Desgas, the shuffling gait of the old Jew, soon died away along the footpath.

Marguerite had not lost a single one of Chauvelin's words of command. Her every nerve was strained to completely grasp the situation first, then to make a final appeal to those wits which had so often been called the sharpest in Europe, and which alone might be of service now.

Certainly the situation was desperate enough; a tiny band of unsuspecting men, quietly awaiting the arrival of their rescuer, who was equally unconscious of the trap laid for them all. It seemed so horrible, this net, as it were drawn in a circle, at dead of night, on a lonely beach, round a few defenceless men, defenceless because they were tricked and unsuspecting; of these one was the husband she idolised, another the brother she loved. She vaguely wondered who the others were, who were also calmly waiting for the Scarlet Pimpernel, while death lurked behind every boulder of the cliffs.

For the moment she could do nothing but follow the soldiers and Chauvelin. She feared to lose her way, or she would have rushed forward and found that wooden hut, and perhaps been in time to warn the fugitives and their brave deliverer yet.

For a second, the thought flashed through her mind of uttering the piercing shrieks, which Chauvelin seemed to dread, as a possible warning to the Scarlet Pimpernel and his friends — in the wild hope that they would hear, and have yet time to escape before it was too late. But she did not know if her shrieks would reach the ears of the doomed men. Her effort might be premature, and she would never be allowed to make another. Her mouth would be securely gagged, like that of the Jew, and she, a helpless prisoner in the hands of Chauvelin's men.

Like a ghost she flitted noiselessly behind that hedge: she had taken her shoes off, and her stockings were by now torn off her feet. She felt neither soreness nor weariness; indomitable will to reach her husband in spite of adverse Fate, and of a cunning enemy, killed all sense of bodily pain within her, and rendered her instincts doubly acute.

She heard nothing save the soft and measured footsteps of Percy's enemies on in front; she saw nothing but — in her mind's eye — that wooden hut, and he, her husband, walking blindly to his doom.

Suddenly, those same keen instincts within her made her pause in her mad haste, and cower still further within the shadow of the hedge. The moon, which had proved a friend to her by remaining hidden behind a bank of clouds, now emerged in all the glory of an early autumn night, and in a moment flooded the weird and lonely landscape with a rush of brilliant light.

There, not two hundred metres ahead, was the edge of the cliff, and below, stretching far away to free and happy England, the sea rolled on smoothly and peaceably. Marguerite's gaze rested for an instant on the brilliant, silvery waters; and as she gazed, her heart,

which had been numb with pain for all these hours, seemed to soften and distend, and her eyes filled with hot tears: not three miles away, with white sails set, a graceful schooner lay in wait.

Marguerite had guessed rather than recognized her. It was the DAY DREAM, Percy's favourite yacht, and all her crew of British sailors: her white sails, glistening in the moonlight, seemed to convey a message to Marguerite of joy and hope, which yet she feared could never be. She waited there, out at sea, waited for her master, like a beautiful white bird all ready to take flight, and he would never reach her, never see her smooth deck again, never gaze any more on the white cliffs of England, the land of liberty and of hope.

The sight of the schooner seemed to infuse into the poor, wearied woman the superhuman strength of despair. There was the edge of the cliff, and some way below was the hut, where presently, her husband would meet his death. But the moon was out: she could see her way now: she would see the hut from a distance, run to it, rouse them all, warn them at any rate to be prepared and to sell their lives dearly, rather than be caught like so many rats in a hole.

She stumbled on behind the hedge in the low, thick grass of the ditch. She must have run on very fast, and had outdistanced Chauvelin and Desgas, for presently she reached the edge of the cliff, and heard their footsteps distinctly behind her. But only a very few yards away, and now the moonlight was full upon her, her figure must have been distinctly silhouetted against the silvery background of the sea.

Only for a moment, though; the next she had cowered, like some animal doubled up within itself. She peeped down the great rugged cliffs — the descent would be easy enough, as they were not precipitous, and the great boulders afforded plenty of foothold. Suddenly, as she gazed, she saw at some little distance on her left, and about midway down the cliffs, a rough wooden construction, through the wall of which a tiny red light glimmered like a beacon. Her very heart seemed to stand still, the eagerness of joy was so great that it felt like an awful pain.

She could not gauge how distant the hut was, but without hesitation she began the steep descent, creeping from boulder to boulder, caring nothing for the enemy behind, or for the soldiers, who evidently had all taken cover since the tall Englishman had not yet appeared.

On she pressed, forgetting the deadly foe on her track, running, stumbling, foot-sore, half-dazed, but still on . . . When, suddenly, a crevice, or stone, or slippery bit of rock, threw her violently to the ground. She struggled again to her feet, and started running forward once more to give them that timely warning, to beg them to flee before he came, and to tell him to keep away — away from this death-trap — away from this awful doom. But now she realised that other steps, quicker than her own, were already close at her heels. The next instant a hand dragged at her skirt, and she was down on her knees again, whilst something was wound round her mouth to prevent her uttering a scream.

Bewildered, half frantic with the bitterness of disappointment, she looked round her helplessly, and, bending down quite close to her, she saw through the mist, which seemed to gather round her, a pair of keen, malicious eyes, which appeared to her excited brain to have a weird, supernatural green light in them. She lay in the shadow of a great boulder; Chauvelin could not see her features, but he passed his thin, white fingers over her face.

"A woman!" he whispered, "by all the saints in the calendar."

"We cannot let her loose, that's certain," he muttered to himself. "I wonder now . . ."

Suddenly he paused, after a few moments of deadly silence, he gave forth a long, low, curious chuckle, while once again Marguerite felt, with a horrible shudder, his thin fingers wandering over her face.

"Dear me! dear me!" he whispered, with affected gallantry, "this is indeed a charming surprise," and Marguerite felt her resistless hand raised to Chauvelin's thin, mocking lips.

The situation was indeed grotesque, had it not been at the same time so fearfully tragic: the poor, weary woman, broken in spirit, and half frantic with the bitterness of her disappointment, receiving on her knees the BANAL gallantries of her deadly enemy.

Her senses were leaving her; half choked with the tight grip round her mouth, she had no strength to move or to utter the faintest sound. The excitement which all along had kept up her delicate body seemed at once to have subsided, and the feeling of blank despair to have completely paralyzed her brain and nerves.

Chauvelin must have given some directions, which she was too dazed to hear, for she felt herself lifted from off her feet: the bandage round her mouth was made more secure, and a pair of strong arms carried her towards that tiny, red light, on ahead, which she had looked upon as a beacon and the last faint glimmer of hope.

CHAPTER XXIX TRAPPED

She did not know how long she was thus carried along, she had lost all notion of time and space, and for a few seconds tired nature, mercifully, deprived her of consciousness.

When she once more realised her state, she felt that she was placed with some degree of comfort upon a man's coat, with her back resting against a fragment of rock. The moon was hidden again behind some clouds, and the darkness seemed in comparison more intense. The sea was roaring some two hundred feet below her, and on looking all round she could no longer see any vestige of the tiny glimmer of red light.

That the end of the journey had been reached, she gathered from the fact that she heard rapid questions and answers spoken in a whisper quite close to her.

"There are four men in there, citizen; they are sitting by the fire, and seem to be waiting quietly."

"The hour?"

"Nearly two o'clock."

"The tide?"

"Coming in quickly."

"The schooner?"

"Obviously an English one, lying some three kilometres out. But we cannot see her boat."

"Have the men taken cover?"

"Yes, citizen."

"They will not blunder?"

"They will not stir until the tall Englishman comes, then they will surround and overpower the five men."

"Right. And the lady?"

"Still dazed, I fancy. She's close beside you, citizen."

"And the Jew?"

"He's gagged, and his legs strapped together. He cannot move or scream."

"Good. Then have your gun ready, in case you want it. Get close to the hut and leave me to look after the lady."

Desgas evidently obeyed, for Marguerite heard him creeping away along the stony cliff, then she felt that a pair of warm, thin, talon-like hands took hold of both her own, and held them in a grip of steel.

"Before that handkerchief is removed from your pretty mouth, fair lady," whispered Chauvelin close to her ear, "I think it right to give you one small word of warning. What has procured me the honour of being followed across the Channel by so charming a companion, I cannot, of course, conceive, but, if I mistake it not, the purpose of this flattering attention is not one that would commend itself to my vanity and I think that I am right in surmising, moreover, that the first sound which your pretty lips would utter, as soon as the cruel gag is removed, would be one that would prove a warning to the cunning fox, which I have been at such pains to track to his lair."

He paused a moment, while the steel-like grasp seemed to tighten round her wrist; then he resumed in the same hurried whisper: —

"Inside that hut, if again I am not mistaken, your brother, Armand St. Just, waits with that traitor de Tournay, and two other men unknown to you, for the arrival of the mysterious rescuer, whose identity has for so long puzzled our Committee of Public Safety — the audacious Scarlet Pimpernel. No doubt if you scream, if there is a scuffle here, if shots are fired, it is more than likely that the same long legs that brought this scarlet enigma here, will as quickly take him to some place of safety. The purpose then, for which I have travelled all these miles, will remain unaccomplished. On the other hand it only rests with yourself that your brother — Armand — shall be free to go off with you to-night if you like, to England, or any other place of safety."

Marguerite could not utter a sound, as the handkerchief was would very tightly round her mouth, but Chauvelin was peering through the darkness very closely into her face; no doubt too her hand gave a responsive appeal to his last suggestion, for presently he continued: —

"What I want you to do to ensure Armand's safety is a very simple thing, dear lady."

"What is it?" Marguerite's hand seemed to convey to his, in response.

"To remain — on this spot, without uttering a sound, until I give you leave to speak. Ah! but I think you will obey," he added, with that funny dry chuckle of his as Marguerite's whole figure seemed to stiffen, in defiance of this order, "for let me tell you that if you scream, nay! if you utter one sound, or attempt to move from here, my men — there are thirty of them about — will seize St. Just, de Tournay, and their two friends, and shoot them here — by my orders — before your eyes."

Marguerite had listened to her implacable enemy's speech with ever-increasing terror. Numbed with physical pain, she yet had sufficient mental vitality in her to realize the full horror of this terrible "either — or" he was once more putting before her; "either — or" ten thousand times more appalling and horrible than the one he had suggested to her that fatal night at the ball.

This time it meant that she should keep still, and allow the husband she worshipped to walk unconsciously to his death, or that she should, by trying to give him a word of warning, which perhaps might even be unavailing, actually give the signal for her own brother's death, and that of three other unsuspecting men.

She could not see Chauvelin, but she could almost feel those keen, pale eyes of his fixed maliciously upon her helpless form, and his hurried, whispered words reached her ear, as the death-knell of her last faint, lingering hope.

"Nay, fair lady," he added urbanely, "you can have no interest in anyone save in St. Just, and all you need do for his safety is to remain where you are, and to keep silent. My men have strict orders to spare him in every way. As for that enigmatic Scarlet Pimpernel, what is he to you? Believe me, no warning from you could possibly save him. And now dear lady, let me remove this unpleasant coercion, which has been placed before your pretty mouth. You see I wish you to be perfectly free, in the choice which you are about to make."

Her thoughts in a whirl, her temples aching, her nerves paralyzed, her body numb with pain, Marguerite sat there, in the darkness which surrounded her as with a pall. From where she sat she could not see the sea, but she heard the incessant mournful murmur of the incoming tide, which spoke of her dead hopes, her lost love, the husband she had with her own hand betrayed, and sent to his death.

Chauvelin removed the handkerchief from her mouth. She certainly did not scream: at that moment, she had no strength to do anything but barely to hold herself upright, and to force herself to think.

Oh! think! think! think! of what she should do. The minutes flew on; in this awful stillness she could not tell how fast or how slowly; she heard nothing, she saw nothing: she did not feel the sweet-smelling autumn air, scented with the briny odour of the sea, she no longer heard the murmur of the waves, the occasional rattling of a pebble, as it rolled down some steep incline. More and more unreal did the whole situation seem. It was impossible that she, Marguerite Blakeney, the queen of London society, should actually be sitting here on this bit of lonely coast, in the middle of the night, side by side with a most bitter enemy; and oh! it was not possible that somewhere, not many hundred feet away perhaps, from where she stood, the being she had once despised, but who now, in every moment of this weird, dreamlike life, became more and more dear — it was not possible that HE was unconsciously, even now walking to his doom, whilst she did nothing to save him.

Why did she not with unearthly screams, that would re-echo from one end of the lonely beach to the other, send out a warning to him to desist, to retrace his steps, for death lurked here whilst he advanced? Once or twice the screams rose to her throat — as if by instinct: then, before her eyes there stood the awful alternative: her brother and those three men shot before her eyes, practically by her orders: she their murderer.

Oh! that fiend in human shape, next to her, knew human — female — nature well. He had played upon her feelings as a skilful musician plays upon an instrument. He had gauged her very thoughts to a nicety.

She could not give that signal — for she was weak, and she was a woman. How could she deliberately order Armand to be shot before her eyes, to have his dear blood upon her head, he dying perhaps with a curse on her, upon his lips. And little Suzanne's father, too! he, an old man; and the others! — oh! it was all too, too horrible.

Wait! wait! wait! how long? The early morning hours sped on, and yet it was not dawn: the sea continued its incessant mournful murmur, the autumnal breeze sighed gently in the night: the lonely beach was silent, even as the grave.

Suddenly from somewhere, not very far away, a cheerful, strong voice was heard singing “God save the King!”

CHAPTER XXX THE SCHOONER

Marguerite's aching heart stood still. She felt, more than she heard, the men on the watch preparing for the fight. Her senses told her that each, with sword in hand, was crouching, ready for the spring.

The voice came nearer and nearer; in the vast immensity of these lonely cliffs, with the loud murmur of the sea below, it was impossible to say how near, or how far, nor yet from which direction came that cheerful singer, who sang to God to save his King, whilst he himself was in such deadly danger. Faint at first, the voice grew louder and louder; from time to time a small pebble detached itself apparently from beneath the firm tread of the singer, and went rolling down the rocky cliffs to the beach below.

Marguerite as she heard, felt that her very life was slipping away, as if when that voice drew nearer, when that singer became entrapped . . .

She distinctly heard the click of Desgas' gun close to her. . . .

No! no! no! no! Oh, God in heaven! this cannot be! let Armand's blood then be on her own head! let her be branded as his murderer! let even he, whom she loved, despise and loathe her for this, but God! oh God! save him at any cost!

With a wild shriek, she sprang to her feet, and darted round the rock, against which she had been cowering; she saw the little red gleam through the chinks of the hut; she ran up to it and fell against its wooden walls, which she began to hammer with clenched fists in an almost maniacal frenzy, while she shouted, —

"Armand! Armand! for God's sake fire! your leader is near! he is coming! he is betrayed! Armand! Armand! fire in Heaven's name!"

She was seized and thrown to the ground. She lay there moaning, bruised, not caring, but still half-sobbing, half-shrieking, —

"Percy, my husband, for God's sake fly! Armand! Armand! why don't you fire?"

"One of you stop that woman screaming," hissed Chauvelin, who hardly could refrain from striking her.

Something was thrown over her face; she could not breathe, and perforce she was silent.

The bold singer, too, had become silent, warned, no doubt, of his impending danger by Marguerite's frantic shrieks. The men had sprung to their feet, there was no need for further silence on their part; the very cliffs echoed the poor, heart-broken woman's screams.

Chauvelin, with a muttered oath, which boded no good to her, who had dared to upset his most cherished plans, had hastily shouted the word of command, —

"Into it, my men, and let no one escape from that hut alive!"

The moon had once more emerged from between the clouds: the darkness on the cliffs had gone, giving place once more to brilliant, silvery light. Some of the soldiers had rushed to the rough, wooden door of the hut, whilst one of them kept guard over Marguerite.

The door was partially open; one of the soldiers pushed it further, but within all was darkness, the charcoal fire only lighting with a dim, red light the furthest corner of the hut. The soldiers paused automatically at the door, like machines waiting for further orders.

Chauvelin, who was prepared for a violent onslaught from within, and for a vigorous resistance from the four fugitives, under cover of the darkness, was for the moment paralyzed with astonishment when he saw the soldiers standing there at attention, like sentries on guard, whilst not a sound proceeded from the hut.

Filled with strange, anxious foreboding, he, too, went to the door of the hut, and peering into the gloom, he asked quickly, —

"What is the meaning of this?"

"I think, citizen, that there is no one there now," replied one of the soldiers imperturbably.

"You have not let those four men go?" thundered Chauvelin, menacingly. "I ordered you to let no man escape alive! — Quick, after them all of you! Quick, in every direction!"

The men, obedient as machines, rushed down the rocky incline towards the beach, some going off to right and left, as fast as their feet could carry them.

"You and your men will pay with your lives for this blunder, citizen sergeant," said Chauvelin viciously to the sergeant who had been in charge of the men; "and you, too, citizen," he added turning with a snarl to Desgas, "for disobeying my orders."

"You ordered us to wait, citizen, until the tall Englishman arrived and joined the four men in the hut. No one came," said the sergeant sullenly.

"But I ordered you just now, when the woman screamed, to rush in and let no one escape."

"But, citizen, the four men who were there before had been gone some time, I think . . ."

"You think? — You? . . ." said Chauvelin, almost choking with fury, "and you let them go . . ."

"You ordered us to wait, citizen," protested the sergeant, "and to implicitly obey your commands on pain of death. We waited."

"I heard the men creep out of the hut, not many minutes after we took cover, and long before the woman screamed," he added, as Chauvelin seemed still quite speechless with rage.

"Hark!" said Desgas suddenly.

In the distance the sound of repeated firing was heard. Chauvelin tried to peer along the beach below, but as luck would have it, the fitful moon once more hid her light behind a bank of clouds, and he could see nothing.

"One of you go into the hut and strike a light," he stammered at last.

Stolidly the sergeant obeyed: he went up to the charcoal fire and lit the small lantern he carried in his belt; it was evident that the hut was quite empty.

"Which way did they go?" asked Chauvelin.

"I could not tell, citizen," said the sergeant; "they went straight down the cliff first, then disappeared behind some boulders."

"Hush! what was that?"

All three men listened attentively. In the far, very far distance, could be heard faintly echoing and already dying away, the quick, sharp splash of half a dozen oars. Chauvelin took out his handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"The schooner's boat!" was all he gasped.

Evidently Armand St. Just and his three companions had managed to creep along the side of the cliffs, whilst the men, like true soldiers of the well-drilled Republican army, had with blind obedience, and in fear of their own lives, implicitly obeyed Chauvelin's orders — to wait for the tall Englishman, who was the important capture.

They had no doubt reached one of the creeks which jut far out to sea on this coast at intervals; behind this, the boat of the DAY DREAM must have been on the lookout for them, and they were by now safely on board the British schooner.

As if to confirm this last supposition, the dull boom of a gun was heard from out at sea.

"The schooner, citizen," said Desgas, quietly; "she's off."

It needed all Chauvelin's nerve and presence of mind not to give way to a useless and undignified access of rage. There was no doubt now, that once again, that accursed British head had completely outwitted him. How he had contrived to reach the hut, without being seen by one of the thirty soldiers who guarded the spot, was more than Chauvelin could conceive. That he had done so before the thirty men had arrived on the cliff was, of course, fairly clear, but how he had come over in Reuben Goldstein's cart, all the way from Calais, without being sighted by the various patrols on duty was impossible of explanation. It really seemed as if some potent Fate watched over that daring Scarlet Pimpernel, and his astute enemy almost felt a superstitious shudder pass through him, as he looked round at the towering cliffs, and the loneliness of this outlying coast.

But surely this was reality! and the year of grace 1792: there were no fairies and hobgoblins about. Chauvelin and his thirty men had all heard with their own ears that accursed voice singing "God save the King," fully twenty minutes AFTER they had all taken cover around the hut; by that time the four fugitives must have reached the creek, and got into the boat, and the nearest creek was more than a mile from the hut.

Where had that daring singer got to? Unless Satan himself had lent him wings, he could not have covered that mile on a rocky cliff in the space of two minutes; and only two minutes had elapsed between his song and the sound of the boat's oars away at sea. He must have remained behind, and was even now hiding somewhere about the cliffs; the patrols were still about, he would still be sighted, no doubt. Chauvelin felt hopeful once again.

One or two of the men, who had run after the fugitives, were now slowly working their way up the cliff: one of them reached Chauvelin's side, at the very moment that this hope arose in the astute diplomatist's heart.

"We were too late, citizen," the soldier said, "we reached the beach just before the moon was hidden by that bank of clouds. The boat had undoubtedly been on the look-out behind that first creek, a mile off, but she had shoved off some time ago, when we got to the beach, and was already some way out to sea. We fired after her, but of course, it was no good. She was making straight and quickly for the schooner. We saw her very clearly in the moonlight."

"Yes," said Chauvelin, with eager impatience, "she had shoved off some time ago, you said, and the nearest creek is a mile further on."

"Yes, citizen! I ran all the way, straight to the beach, though I guessed the boat would have waited somewhere near the creek, as the tide would reach there earliest. The boat must have shoved off some minutes before the woman began to scream."

"Bring the light in here!" he commanded eagerly, as he once more entered the hut.

The sergeant brought his lantern, and together the two men explored the little place: with a rapid glance Chauvelin noted its contents: the cauldron placed close under an aperture in the wall, and containing the last few dying embers of burned charcoal, a couple of stools, overturned as if in the haste of sudden departure, then the fisherman's tools and his nets lying in one corner, and beside them, something small and white.

"Pick that up," said Chauvelin to the sergeant, pointing to this white scrap, "and bring it to me."

It was a crumpled piece of paper, evidently forgotten there by the fugitives, in their hurry to get away. The sergeant, much awed by the citizen's obvious rage and impatience, picked the paper up and handed it respectfully to Chauvelin.

"Read it, sergeant," said the latter curtly.

"It is almost illegible, citizen . . . a fearful scrawl . . ."

"I ordered you to read it," repeated Chauvelin, viciously.

The sergeant, by the light of his lantern, began deciphering the few hastily scrawled words.

"I cannot quite reach you, without risking your lives and endangering the success of your rescue. When you receive this, wait two minutes, then creep out of the hut one by one, turn to your left sharply, and creep cautiously down the cliff; keep to the left all the time, till you reach the first rock, which you see jutting far out to sea — behind it in the creek the boat is on the look-out for you — give a long, sharp whistle — she will come up — get into her — my men will row you to the schooner, and thence to England and safety — once on board the DAY DREAM send the boat back for me, tell my men that I shall be at the creek, which is in a direct line opposite the 'Chat Gris' near Calais. They know it. I shall be there as soon as possible — they must wait for me at a safe distance out at sea, till they hear the usual signal. Do not delay — and obey these instructions implicitly."

"Then there is the signature, citizen," added the sergeant, as he handed the paper back to Chauvelin.

But the latter had not waited an instant. One phrase of the momentous scrawl had caught his ear. "I shall be at the creek which is in a direct line opposite the 'Chat Gris' near Calais": that phrase might yet mean victory for him. "Which of you knows this coast well?" he shouted to his men who now one by one all returned from their fruitless run, and were all assembled once more round the hut.

"I do, citizen," said one of them, "I was born in Calais, and know every stone of these cliffs."

"There is a creek in a direct line from the 'Chat Gris'?"

"There is, citizen. I know it well."

"The Englishman is hoping to reach that creek. He does NOT know every stone of these cliffs, he may go there by the longest way round, and in any case he will proceed cautiously for fear of the patrols. At any rate, there is a chance to get him yet. A thousand francs to each man who gets to that creek before that long-legged Englishman."

"I know of a short cut across the cliffs," said the soldier, and with an enthusiastic shout, he rushed forward, followed closely by his comrades.

Within a few minutes their running footsteps had died away in the distance. Chauvelin listened to them for a moment; the promise of the reward was lending spurs to the soldiers of the Republic. The gleam of hate and anticipated triumph was once more apparent on his face.

Close to him Desgas still stood mute and impassive, waiting for further orders, whilst two soldiers were kneeling beside the prostrate form of Marguerite. Chauvelin gave his secretary a vicious look. His well-laid plan had failed, its sequel was problematical; there was still a great chance now that the Scarlet Pimpernel might yet escape, and Chauvelin, with that unreasoning fury, which sometimes assails a strong nature, was longing to vent his rage on somebody.

The soldiers were holding Marguerite pinioned to the ground, though, she, poor soul, was not making the faintest struggle. Overwrought nature had at last peremptorily asserted herself, and she lay there in a dead swoon: her eyes circled by deep purple lines, that told of long, sleepless nights, her hair matted and damp round her forehead, her lips parted in a sharp curve that spoke of physical pain.

The cleverest woman in Europe, the elegant and fashionable Lady Blakeney, who had dazzled London society with her beauty, her wit and her extravagances, presented a very pathetic picture of tired-out, suffering womanhood, which would have appealed to any, but the hard, vengeful heart of her baffled enemy.

"It is no use mounting guard over a woman who is half dead," he said spitefully to the soldiers, "when you have allowed five men who were very much alive to escape."

Obediently the soldiers rose to their feet.

"You'd better try and find that footpath again for me, and that broken-down cart we left on the road."

Then suddenly a bright idea seemed to strike him.

"Ah! by-the-bye! where is the Jew?"

"Close by here, citizen," said Desgas; "I gagged him and tied his legs together as you commanded."

From the immediate vicinity, a plaintive moan reached Chauvelin's ears. He followed his secretary, who led the way to the other side of the hut, where, fallen into an absolute heap of dejection, with his legs tightly pinioned together and his mouth gagged, lay the unfortunate descendant of Israel.

His face in the silvery light of the moon looked positively ghastly with terror: his eyes were wide open and almost glassy, and his whole body was trembling, as if with ague, while a piteous wail escaped his bloodless lips. The rope which had originally been wound round his shoulders and arms had evidently given way, for it lay in a tangle about his body, but he seemed quite unconscious of this, for he had not made the slightest attempt to move from the place where Desgas had originally put him: like a terrified chicken which looks upon a line of white chalk, drawn on a table, as on a string which paralyzes its movements.

"Bring the cowardly brute here," commanded Chauvelin.

He certainly felt exceedingly vicious, and since he had no reasonable grounds for venting his ill-humour on the soldiers who had but too punctually obeyed his orders, he felt that the son of the despised race would prove an excellent butt. With true French contempt of the Jew, which has survived the lapse of centuries even to this day, he would not go too near him, but said with biting sarcasm, as the wretched old man was brought in full light of the moon by the two soldiers, —

"I suppose now, that being a Jew, you have a good memory for bargains?"

"Answer!" he again commanded, as the Jew with trembling lips seemed too frightened to speak.

"Yes, your Honour," stammered the poor wretch.

"You remember, then, the one you and I made together in Calais, when you undertook to overtake Reuben Goldstein, his nag and my friend the tall stranger? Eh?"

"B . . . b . . . but . . . your Honour . . ."

"There is no 'but.' I said, do you remember?"

"Y . . . y . . . y . . . yes . . . your Honour!"

"What was the bargain?"

There was dead silence. The unfortunate man looked round at the great cliffs, the moon above, the stolid faces of the soldiers, and even at the poor, prostrate, inanimate woman close by, but said nothing.

"Will you speak?" thundered Chauvelin, menacingly.

He did try, poor wretch, but, obviously, he could not. There was no doubt, however, that he knew what to expect from the stern man before him.

"Your Honour . . ." he ventured imploringly.

"Since your terror seems to have paralyzed your tongue," said Chauvelin sarcastically, "I must needs refresh your memory. It was agreed between us, that if we overtook my friend the tall stranger, before he reached this place, you were to have ten pieces of gold."

A low moan escaped from the Jew's trembling lips.

"But," added Chauvelin, with slow emphasis, "if you deceived me in your promise, you were to have a sound beating, one that would teach you not to tell lies."

"I did not, your Honour; I swear it by Abraham . . ."

"And by all the other patriarchs, I know. Unfortunately, they are still in Hades, I believe, according to your creed, and cannot help you much in your present trouble. Now, you did not fulfil your share of the bargain, but I am ready to fulfil mine. Here," he added, turning to the soldiers, "the buckle-end of your two belts to this confounded Jew."

As the soldiers obediently unbuckled their heavy leather belts, the Jew set up a howl that surely would have been enough to bring all the patriarchs out of Hades and elsewhere, to defend their descendant from the brutality of this French official.

"I think I can rely on you, citizen soldiers," laughed Chauvelin, maliciously, "to give this old liar the best and soundest beating he has ever experienced. But don't kill him," he added drily.

"We will obey, citizen," replied the soldiers as imperturbably as ever.

He did not wait to see his orders carried out: he knew that he could trust these soldiers — who were still smarting under his rebuke — not to mince matters, when given a free hand to belabour a third party.

“When that lumbering coward has had his punishment,” he said to Desgas, “the men can guide us as far as the cart, and one of them can drive us in it back to Calais. The Jew and the woman can look after each other,” he added roughly, “until we can send somebody for them in the morning. They can’t run away very far, in their present condition, and we cannot be troubled with them just now.”

Chauvelin had not given up all hope. His men, he knew, were spurred on by the hope of the reward. That enigmatic and audacious Scarlet Pimpernel, alone and with thirty men at his heels, could not reasonably be expected to escape a second time.

But he felt less sure now: the Englishman’s audacity had baffled him once, whilst the wooden-headed stupidity of the soldiers, and the interference of a woman had turned his hand, which held all the trumps, into a losing one. If Marguerite had not taken up his time, if the soldiers had had a grain of intelligence, if . . . it was a long “if,” and Chauvelin stood for a moment quite still, and enrolled thirty odd people in one long, overwhelming anathema. Nature, poetic, silent, balmy, the bright moon, the calm, silvery sea spoke of beauty and of rest, and Chauvelin cursed nature, cursed man and woman, and above all, he cursed all long-legged, meddlesome British enigmas with one gigantic curse.

The howls of the Jew behind him, undergoing his punishment sent a balm through his heart, overburdened as it was with revengeful malice. He smiled. It eased his mind to think that some human being at least was, like himself, not altogether at peace with mankind.

He turned and took a last look at the lonely bit of coast, where stood the wooden hut, now bathed in moonlight, the scene of the greatest discomfiture ever experienced by a leading member of the Committee of Public Safety.

Against a rock, on a hard bed of stone, lay the unconscious figure of Marguerite Blakeney, while some few paces further on, the unfortunate Jew was receiving on his broad back the blows of two stout leather belts, wielded by the stolid arms of two sturdy soldiers of the Republic. The howls of Benjamin Rosenbaum were fit to make the dead rise from their graves. They must have wakened all the gulls from sleep, and made them look down with great interest at the doings of the lords of the creation.

“That will do,” commanded Chauvelin, as the Jew’s moans became more feeble, and the poor wretch seemed to have fainted away, “we don’t want to kill him.”

Obediently the soldiers buckled on their belts, one of them viciously kicking the Jew to one side.

“Leave him there,” said Chauvelin, “and lead the way now quickly to the cart. I’ll follow.”

He walked up to where Marguerite lay, and looked down into her face. She had evidently recovered consciousness, and was making feeble efforts to raise herself. Her large, blue eyes were looking at the moonlit scene round her with a scared and terrified look; they rested with a mixture of horror and pity on the Jew, whose luckless fate and wild howls had been the first signs that struck her, with her returning senses; then she caught sight of Chauvelin, in his neat, dark clothes, which seemed hardly crumpled after the stirring events of the last few hours. He was smiling sarcastically, and his pale eyes peered down at her with a look of intense malice.

With mock gallantry, he stooped and raised her icy-cold hand to his lips, which sent a thrill of indescribable loathing through Marguerite’s weary frame.

“I much regret, fair lady,” he said in his most suave tones, “that circumstances, over which I have no control, compel me to leave you here for the moment. But I go away, secure in the knowledge that I do not leave you unprotected. Our friend Benjamin here, though a trifle the worse for wear at the present moment, will prove a gallant defender of your fair person, I have no doubt. At dawn I will send an escort for you; until then, I feel sure that you will find him devoted, though perhaps a trifle slow.”

Marguerite only had the strength to turn her head away. Her heart was broken with cruel anguish. One awful thought had returned to her mind, together with gathering consciousness: “What had become of Percy? — What of Armand?”

She knew nothing of what had happened after she heard the cheerful song, “God save the King,” which she believed to be the signal of death.

“I, myself,” concluded Chauvelin, “must now very reluctantly leave you. AU REVOIR, fair lady. We meet, I hope, soon in London. Shall I see you at the Prince of Wales’ garden party? — No? — Ah, well, AU REVOIR! — Remember me, I pray, to Sir Percy Blakeney.”

And, with a last ironical smile and bow, he once more kissed her hand, and disappeared down the footpath in the wake of the soldiers, and followed by the imperturbable Desgas.

CHAPTER XXXI THE ESCAPE

Marguerite listened — half-dazed as she was — to the fast-retreating, firm footsteps of the four men.

All nature was so still that she, lying with her ear close to the ground, could distinctly trace the sound of their tread, as they ultimately turned into the road, and presently the faint echo of the old cart-wheels, the halting gait of the lean nag, told her that her enemy was a quarter of a league away. How long she lay there she knew not. She had lost count of time; dreamily she looked up at the moonlit sky, and listened to the monotonous roll of the waves.

The invigorating scent of the sea was nectar to her wearied body, the immensity of the lonely cliffs was silent and dreamlike. Her brain only remained conscious of its ceaseless, its intolerable torture of uncertainty.

She did not know! —

She did not know whether Percy was even now, at this moment, in the hands of the soldiers of the Republic, enduring — as she had done herself — the gibes and jeers of his malicious enemy. She did not know, on the other hand, whether Armand's lifeless body did not lie there, in the hut, whilst Percy had escaped, only to hear that his wife's hands had guided the human bloodhounds to the murder of Armand and his friends.

The physical pain of utter weariness was so great, that she hoped confidently her tired body could rest here for ever, after all the turmoil, the passion, and the intrigues of the last few days — here, beneath that clear sky, within sound of the sea, and with this balmy autumn breeze whispering to her a last lullaby. All was so solitary, so silent, like unto dreamland. Even the last faint echo of the distant cart had long ago died away, afar.

Suddenly . . . a sound . . . the strangest, undoubtedly, that these lonely cliffs of France had ever heard, broke the silent solemnity of the shore.

So strange a sound was it that the gentle breeze ceased to murmur, the tiny pebbles to roll down the steep incline! So strange, that Marguerite, wearied, overwrought as she was, thought that the beneficial unconsciousness of the approach of death was playing her half-sleeping senses a weird and elusive trick.

It was the sound of a good, solid, absolutely British "Damn!"

The sea gulls in their nests awoke and looked round in astonishment; a distant and solitary owl set up a midnight hoot, the tall cliffs frowned down majestically at the strange, unheard-of sacrilege.

Marguerite did not trust her ears. Half-raising herself on her hands, she strained every sense to see or hear, to know the meaning of this very earthly sound.

All was still again for the space of a few seconds; the same silence once more fell upon the great and lonely vastness.

Then Marguerite, who had listened as in a trance, who felt she must be dreaming with that cool, magnetic moonlight overhead, heard again; and this time her heart stood still, her eyes large and dilated, looked round her, not daring to trust her other sense.

"Odd's life! but I wish those demmed fellows had not hit quite so hard!"

This time it was quite unmistakable, only one particular pair of essentially British lips could have uttered those words, in sleepy, drawly, affected tones.

"Damn!" repeated those same British lips, emphatically. "Zounds! but I'm as weak as a rat!"

In a moment Marguerite was on her feet.

Was she dreaming? Were those great, stony cliffs the gates of paradise? Was the fragrant breath of the breeze suddenly caused by the flutter of angels' wings, bringing tidings of unearthly joys to her, after all her suffering, or — faint and ill — was she the prey of delirium?

She listened again, and once again she heard the same very earthly sounds of good, honest British language, not the least akin to whisperings from paradise or flutter of angels' wings.

She looked round her eagerly at the tall cliffs, the lonely hut, the great stretch of rocky beach. Somewhere there, above or below her, behind a boulder or inside a crevice, but still hidden from her longing, feverish eyes, must be the owner of that voice, which once used to irritate her, but now would make her the happiest woman in Europe, if only she could locate it.

"Percy! Percy!" she shrieked hysterically, tortured between doubt and hope, "I am here! Come to me! Where are you? Percy! Percy! . . ."

"It's all very well calling me, m'dear!" said the same sleepy, drawly voice, "but odd's life, I cannot come to you: those demmed frog-eaters have trussed me like a goose on a spit, and I am weak as a mouse . . . I cannot get away."

And still Marguerite did not understand. She did not realise for at least another ten seconds whence came that voice, so drawly, so dear, but alas! with a strange accent of weakness and of suffering. There was no one within sight . . . except by that rock . . . Great God! . . . the Jew! . . . Was she mad or dreaming? . . .

His back was against the pale moonlight, he was half crouching, trying vainly to raise himself with his arms tightly pinioned. Marguerite ran up to him, took his head in both her hands . . . and look straight into a pair of blue eyes, good-natured, even a trifle amused — shining out of the weird and distorted mask of the Jew.

"Percy! . . . Percy! . . . my husband!" she gasped, faint with the fulness of her joy. "Thank God! Thank God!"

"La! m'dear," he rejoined good-humouredly, "we will both do that anon, an you think you can loosen these demmed ropes, and release me from my inelegant attitude."

She had no knife, her fingers were numb and weak, but she worked away with her teeth, while great welcome tears poured from her eyes, onto those poor, pinioned hands.

"Odd's life!" he said, when at last, after frantic efforts on her part, the ropes seemed at last to be giving way, "but I marvel whether it has ever happened before, that an English gentleman allowed himself to be licked by a demmed foreigner, and made no attempt to give as good as he got."

It was very obvious that he was exhausted from sheer physical pain, and when at last the rope gave way, he fell in a heap against the rock.

Marguerite looked helplessly round her.

"Oh! for a drop of water on this awful beach!" she cried in agony, seeing that he was ready to faint again.

"Nay, m'dear," he murmured with his good-humoured smile, "personally I should prefer a drop of good French brandy! an you'll dive in the pocket of this dirty old garment, you'll find my flask. . . . I am demmed if I can move."

When he had drunk some brandy, he forced Marguerite to do likewise.

"La! that's better now! Eh! little woman?" he said, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Heigh-ho! but this is a queer rig-up for Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., to be found in by his lady, and no mistake. Begad!" he added, passing his hand over his chin, "I haven't been shaved for nearly twenty hours: I must look a disgusting object. As for these curls . . ."

And laughingly he took off the disfiguring wig and curls, and stretched out his long limbs, which were cramped from many hours' stooping. Then he bent forward and looked long and searchingly into his wife's blue eyes.

"Percy," she whispered, while a deep blush suffused her delicate cheeks and neck, "if you only knew . . ."

"I do know, dear . . . everything," he said with infinite gentleness.

"And can you ever forgive?"

"I have naught to forgive, sweetheart; your heroism, your devotion, which I, alas! so little deserved, have more than atoned for that unfortunate episode at the ball."

"Then you knew? . . ." she whispered, "all the time . . ."

"Yes!" he replied tenderly, "I knew . . . all the time. . . . But, begad! had I but known what a noble heart yours was, my Margot, I should have trusted you, as you deserved to be trusted, and you would not have had to undergo the terrible sufferings of the past few hours, in order to run after a husband, who has done so much that needs forgiveness."

They were sitting side by side, leaning up against a rock, and he had rested his aching head on her shoulder. She certainly now deserved the name of "the happiest woman in Europe."

"It is a case of the blind leading the lame, sweetheart, is it not?" he said with his good-natured smile of old. "Odd's life! but I do not know which are the more sore, my shoulders or your little feet."

He bent forward to kiss them, for they peeped out through her torn stockings, and bore pathetic witness to her endurance and devotion.

"But Armand . . ." she said with sudden terror and remorse, as in the midst of her happiness the image of the beloved brother, for whose sake she had so deeply sinned, rose now before her mind.

"Oh! have no fear for Armand, sweetheart," he said tenderly, "did I not pledge you my word that he should be safe? He with de Tournay and the others are even now on board the DAY DREAM."

"But how?" she gasped, "I do not understand."

"Yet, 'tis simple enough, m'dear," he said with that funny, half-shy, half-inane laugh of his, "you see! when I found that that brute Chauvelin meant to stick to me like a leech, I thought the best thing I could do, as I could not shake him off, was to take him along with me. I had to get to Armand and the others somehow, and all the roads were patrolled, and every one on the look-out for your humble servant. I knew that when I slipped through Chauvelin's fingers at the 'Chat Gris,' that he would lie in wait for me here, whichever way I took. I wanted to keep an eye on him and his doings, and a British head is as good as a French one any day."

Indeed it had proved to be infinitely better, and Marguerite's heart was filled with joy and marvel, as he continued to recount to her the daring manner in which he had snatched the fugitives away, right from under Chauvelin's very nose.

"Dressed as the dirty old Jew," he said gaily, "I knew I should not be recognized. I had met Reuben Goldstein in Calais earlier in the evening. For a few gold pieces he supplied me with this rig-out, and undertook to bury himself out of sight of everybody, whilst he lent me his cart and nag."

"But if Chauvelin had discovered you," she gasped excitedly, "your disguise was good . . . but he is so sharp."

"Odd's fish!" he rejoined quietly, "then certainly the game would have been up. I could but take the risk. I know human nature pretty well by now," he added, with a note of sadness in his cheery, young voice, "and I know these Frenchmen out and out. They so loathe a Jew, that they never come nearer than a couple of yards of him, and begad! I fancy that I contrived to make myself look about as loathsome an object as it is possible to conceive."

"Yes! — and then?" she asked eagerly.

"Zooks! — then I carried out my little plan: that is to say, at first I only determined to leave everything to chance, but when I heard Chauvelin giving his orders to the soldiers, I thought that Fate and I were going to work together after all. I reckoned on the blind obedience of the soldiers. Chauvelin had ordered them on pain of death not to stir until the tall Englishman came. Desgas had thrown me down in a heap quite close to the hut; the soldiers took no notice of the Jew, who had driven Citoyen Chauvelin to this spot. I managed to free my hands from the ropes, with which the brute had trussed me; I always carry pencil and paper with me wherever I go, and I hastily scrawled a few important instructions on a scrap of paper; then I looked about me. I crawled up to the hut, under the very noses of the soldiers, who lay under cover without stirring, just as Chauvelin had ordered them to do, then I dropped my little note into the hut through a chink in the wall, and waited. In this note I told the fugitives to walk noiselessly out of the hut, creep down the cliffs, keep to the left until they came to the first creek, to give a certain signal, when the boat of the DAY DREAM, which lay in wait not far out to sea, would pick them up. They obeyed implicitly, fortunately for them and for me. The soldiers who saw them were equally obedient to Chauvelin's orders. They did not stir! I waited for nearly half an hour; when I knew that the fugitives were safe I gave the signal, which caused so much stir."

And that was the whole story. It seemed so simple! and Marguerite could but marvel at the wonderful ingenuity, the boundless pluck and audacity which had evolved and helped to carry out this daring plan.

"But those brutes struck you!" she gasped in horror, at the bare recollection of the fearful indignity.

"Well! that could not be helped," he said gently, "whilst my little wife's fate was so uncertain, I had to remain here by her side. Odd's life!" he added merrily, "never fear! Chauvelin will lose nothing by waiting, I warrant! Wait till I get him back to England! — La! he shall pay for the thrashing he gave me with compound interest, I promise you."

Marguerite laughed. It was so good to be beside him, to hear his cheery voice, to watch that good-humoured twinkle in his blue eyes, as he stretched out his strong arms, in longing for that foe, and anticipation of his well-deserved punishment.

Suddenly, however, she started: the happy blush left her cheek, the light of joy died out of her eyes: she had heard a stealthy footfall overhead, and a stone had rolled down from the top of the cliffs right down to the beach below.

"What's that?" she whispered in horror and alarm.

"Oh! nothing, m'dear," he muttered with a pleasant laugh, "only a trifle you happened to have forgotten . . . my friend, Ffoulkes . . ."

"Sir Andrew!" she gasped.

Indeed, she had wholly forgotten the devoted friend and companion, who had trusted and stood by her during all these hours of anxiety and suffering. She remembered him now, tardily and with a pang of remorse.

"Aye! you had forgotten him, hadn't you, m'dear?" said Sir Percy merrily. "Fortunately, I met him, not far from the 'Chat Gris.' before I had that interesting supper party, with my friend Chauvelin. . . . Odd's life! but I have a score to settle with that young reprobate! — but in the meanwhile, I told him of a very long, very circuitous road which Chauvelin's men would never suspect, just about the time when we are ready for him, eh, little woman?"

"And he obeyed?" asked Marguerite, in utter astonishment.

"Without word or question. See, here he comes. He was not in the way when I did not want him, and now he arrives in the nick of time. Ah! he will make pretty little Suzanne a most admirable and methodical husband."

In the meanwhile Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had cautiously worked his way down the cliffs: he stopped once or twice, pausing to listen for whispered words, which would guide him to Blakeney's hiding-place.

"Blakeney!" he ventured to say at last cautiously, "Blakeney! are you there?"

The next moment he rounded the rock against which Sir Percy and Marguerite were leaning, and seeing the weird figure still clad in the Jew's long gaberдинe, he paused in sudden, complete bewilderment.

But already Blakeney had struggled to his feet.

"Here I am, friend," he said with his funny, inane laugh, "all alive! though I do look a begad scarecrow in these demmed things."

"Zooks!" ejaculated Sir Andrew in boundless astonishment as he recognized his leader, "of all the . . ."

The young man had seen Marguerite, and happily checked the forcible language that rose to his lips, at sight of the exquisite Sir Percy in this weird and dirty garb.

"Yes!" said Blakeney, calmly, "of all the . . . hem! . . . My friend! — I have not yet had time to ask you what you were doing in France, when I ordered you to remain in London? Insubordination? What? Wait till my shoulders are less sore, and, by God, see the punishment you'll get."

"Odd's fish! I'll bear it," said Sir Andrew with a merry laugh, "seeing that you are alive to give it. . . . Would you have had me allow Lady Blakeney to do the journey alone? But, in the name of heaven, man, where did you get these extraordinary clothes?"

"Lud! they are a bit quaint, ain't they?" laughed Sir Percy, jovially, "But, odd's fish!" he added, with sudden earnestness and authority, "now you are here, Ffoulkes, we must lose no more time: that brute Chauvelin may send some one to look after us."

Marguerite was so happy, she could have stayed here for ever, hearing his voice, asking a hundred questions. But at mention of Chauvelin's name she started in quick alarm, afraid for the dear life she would have died to save.

"But how can we get back?" she gasped; "the roads are full of soldiers between here and Calais, and . . ."

"We are not going back to Calais, sweetheart," he said, "but just the other side of Gris Nez, not half a league from here. The boat of the DAY DREAM will meet us there."

"The boat of the DAY DREAM?"

"Yes!" he said, with a merry laugh; "another little trick of mine. I should have told you before that when I slipped that note into the hut, I also added another for Armand, which I directed him to leave behind, and which has sent Chauvelin and his men running full tilt back to the 'Chat Gris' after me; but the first little note contained my real instructions, including those to old Briggs. He had my orders to go out further to sea, and then towards the west. When well out of sight of Calais, he will send the galley to a little creek he and I know of, just beyond Gris Nez. The men will look out for me — we have a preconceived signal, and we will all be safely aboard, whilst Chauvelin and his men solemnly sit and watch the creek which is 'just opposite the 'Chat Gris.'"

"The other side of Gris Nez? But I . . . I cannot walk, Percy," she moaned helplessly as, trying to struggle to her tired feet, she found herself unable even to stand.

"I will carry you, dear," he said simply; "the blind leading the lame, you know."

Sir Andrew was ready, too, to help with the precious burden, but Sir Percy would not entrust his beloved to any arms but his own.

"When you and she are both safely on board the DAY DREAM," he said to his young comrade, "and I feel that Mlle. Suzanne's eyes will not greet me in England with reproachful looks, then it will be my turn to rest."

And his arms, still vigorous in spite of fatigue and suffering, closed round Marguerite's poor, weary body, and lifted her as gently as if she had been a feather.

Then, as Sir Andrew discreetly kept out of earshot, there were many things said, or rather whispered, which even the autumn breeze did not catch, for it had gone to rest.

All his fatigue was forgotten; his shoulders must have been very sore, for the soldiers had hit hard, but the man's muscles seemed made of steel, and his energy was almost supernatural. It was a weary tramp, half a league along the stony side of the cliffs, but never for a moment did his courage give way or his muscles yield to fatigue. On he tramped, with firm footstep, his vigorous arms encircling the precious burden, and . . . no doubt, as she lay, quiet and happy, at times lulled to momentary drowsiness, at others watching, through the slowly gathering morning light, the pleasant face with the lazy, drooping blue eyes, ever cheerful, ever illumined with a

good-humoured smile, she whispered many things, which helped to shorten the weary road, and acted as a soothing balsam to his aching sinews.

The many-hued light of dawn was breaking in the east, when at last they reached the creek beyond Gris Nez. The galley lay in wait: in answer to a signal from Sir Percy, she drew near, and two sturdy British sailors had the honour of carrying my lady into the boat.

Half an hour later, they were on board the DAY DREAM. The crew, who of necessity were in their master's secrets, and who were devoted to him heart and soul, were not surprised to see him arriving in so extraordinary a disguise.

Armand St. Just and the other fugitives were eagerly awaiting the advent of their brave rescuer; he would not stay to hear the expressions of their gratitude, but found the way to his private cabin as quickly as he could, leaving Marguerite quite happy in the arms of her brother.

Everything on board the DAY DREAM was fitted with that exquisite luxury, so dear to Sir Percy Blakeney's heart, and by the time they all landed at Dover he had found time to get into some of the sumptuous clothes which he loved, and of which he always kept a supply on board his yacht.

The difficulty was to provide Marguerite with a pair of shoes, and great was the little midddy's joy when my lady found that she could put foot on English shore in his best pair.

The rest is silence! — silence and joy for those who had endured so much suffering, yet found at last a great and lasting happiness.

But it is on record that at the brilliant wedding of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Bart., with Mlle. Suzanne de Tournay de Basserive, a function at which H. R. H. the Prince of Wales and all the ELITE of fashionable society were present, the most beautiful woman there was unquestionably Lady Blakeney, whilst the clothes of Sir Percy Blakeney were the talk of the JEUNESSE DOREE of London for many days.

It is also a fact that M. Chauvelin, the accredited agent of the French Republican Government, was not present at that or any other social function in London, after that memorable evening at Lord Grenville's ball.

SIR PERCY LEADS THE BAND

BOOK I

THE ABBE

1. THE KING ON HIS TRIAL

The Hall of the Pas Perdue, the precincts of the House of Justice, the corridors, the bureaux of the various officials, judges and advocates were all thronged that day as they had been during all the week, ever since Tuesday when the first question was put to the vote: "Is Louis Capet guilty of conspiring against liberty?" Louis Capet! Otherwise Louis XVI, descendant of a long line of kings of the Grand Monarque of Saint Louis, himself the anointed, the crowned King of France! And now! Arraigned at the bar before his fellow-men, before his one-time devoted subjects, or supposedly devoted, standing before them like any criminal, accused not of murder, or forgery or theft, but of conspiring against liberty.

A king on his trial! And for his life! Let there be no doubt about that. It is a matter of life or death for the King of France. There has been talk, endless talk and debate in the Hall of Justice ever since the eleventh day of December over a month ago now when Louis first appeared before the bar of the Convention. Fifty-seven questions were put to the accused. "Louis Capet, didst thou do this, that or the other? Didst thou conspire against liberty?" Louis to all the questions gave the simple reply: "No! I did not do that, nor did I do the other. If I did, it was in accordance with the then existing laws of France."

For a whole month and more this went on during the short December days when the snowfall, rain or fog obscured what there was of daylight, and the shades of evening wrapped the big hall, and all that it contained of men's passions and men's cruelty, in gloom. Then the candles were lighted and flickered in the draught till the clerk went the round with the snuffers and shipped off from each candle a bit of the thread that held the light. And the light flickered on, till judges and jury and advocates were weary, and filed out of the Hall of Justice, and the candles were finally snuffed out, extinguished by destiny and the vengeful hands of men.

A king on his trial! Heavens above, what a stupendous event! One that had only occurred once before in history a hundred and fifty years ago when Charles I, King of England, stood at the bar before his people and Parliament, accused by them of conspiring against their liberty. What the end would be, no one doubted for a moment. The paramount significance of the tragedy, the vital importance of what was at stake was reflected in the grave demeanour of the crowd that gathered day after day inside the precincts of the House of Justice. Men of all ages, of all creeds, of every kind of political opinion foregathered in the Salle des Pas Perdue, waited mostly in silence for scraps of news that came filtering through from the hall where a king once their King was standing his trial.

They waited for news, longing to see the end of this nerve-racking suspense, yet dreading to hear what the end would be.

On the Monday evening, one month after the opening of this momentous trial, the fifty-seven questions were finally disposed of. Advocate Barrère in a three-hours' speech, summed up the case and then invited Louis Capet to withdraw. And Louis the unfortunate, once Louis XVI, King of France, now just Louis Capet, was taken back to the Temple prison where, separated from his wife and children, he could do nothing but await with patience and resignation the final issue of his judges' deliberations, and assist his legal counsels in the preparation of his defence.

And on Tuesday the 15th of January, 1793, the question of whether a King of France was guilty or not guilty of conspiracy was put to the vote. Not one question but three questions were put forward, each to be voted on separately and by every one of the seven hundred and forty-nine members of the National Convention. Is Louis Capet guilty of conspiring against liberty? Shall the sentence pronounced by the National Convention be final, or shall appeal be made to the people? If Louis Capet be found guilty, what punishment should be meted out to him? The first two questions were disposed of on the Tuesday. By midday Louis Capet had been voted guilty by an immense majority. The second question took rather longer; the afternoon wore on, the shades of a mid-winter evening blotted out the outside world and spread its gloomy mantle over this assembly of men, gathered here to indict their King and to pronounce sentence upon him. It was midnight before the voting on this second question was ended. By a majority of two to one the House decided that its verdict shall be final and that no appeal shall be made to the people. Such an appeal would mean civil war, cry the Extremists, the loud and turbulent Patriots, while the Moderates, the Girondins, will have it that the people must not be ignored. But they are outvoted two to one, and at the close of this memorable Tuesday, Louis Capet stands definitely guilty of conspiring against the liberty of the people, and whatever sentence the National Convention may pronounce upon him shall be final, without appeal.

The loud and turbulent Patriots are full of hope. Marat, the people's friend, has apostrophized them from his bed of sickness, lashed them with his biting tongue: "O crowd of chatterers, can you not act?" And they are going to act. Let the third question be put to the vote, and the whole world shall see that Patriots can act as well as talk. So on this Wednesday, January 16th, 1793, they muster up in full force and swarm over the floors of the Salle des Pas Perdue, and of the corridors and committee rooms of the House of Justice. But somehow they are no longer turbulent now. Certain of triumph they appear almost overawed by the immensity of the tragedy which they have brought to a head.

Beyond the precincts of the Hall of Justice, the whole of Paris stands on the tiptoe of expectation. It is a raw midwinter day. The city is wrapped in a grey fog, through which every sound of voice or traffic becomes muffled, as if emitted through cotton-wool. Like the noisy elements inside the hall, the people of Paris wait in silence, hushed into a kind of grim stupefaction at this stupendous thing which is going on inside there, and which they, in a measure, have brought about.

In the hall itself the seven hundred and forty-nine deputies are all at their posts. After some talk and "orders of the day" put forward by one Patriot or another, Danton's proposal that the Convention shall sit in permanent session till the whole business of Louis Capet is finished and done with, is passed by a substantial majority. After which the voting on the third question begins. It is close on eight o'clock in the evening. The ushers in loud shrill voices call up the deputies by name and constituency, one by one: summon each one to mount the tribune and say, on his soul and conscience, what punishment shall be meted out to the accused. And one by one seven hundred and forty-nine men then mounted the tribune, said their say, justified their verdict and recorded their vote. The whole of that night and subsequent days and nights, from Wednesday evening until Friday afternoon, the procedure went on. Evening faded into night, night yielded to day and day to night again while a king's life hung in the balance. In the grey light of day, through the weary hours of the night, the three portentous words came muffled through the thin curtain of fog which pervaded the hall and dimmed the feeble flickering light of candles. Death! Banishment! Imprisonment till peace with the rest of Europe be signed. The word that came

most often from the tribune was death, though often tempered with weak recommendations for mercy; but all day Thursday and most of Friday the balance trembled between banishment and death. Through the curtain of fog or through the gloom of night the deputies looked like phantoms moving from their seats to the tribune and back again to their seats, there to snatch a few moments of restless sleep. Some of the votes were never in doubt, Robespierre's for instance, or that of Danton who disdained to justify his verdict; he stood only for one minute on the tribune, just long enough to say curtly: "La Mort sans phrases!" then resumed his seat, folded his arms and went quietly to sleep. "Death without so much talk!" Why talk? Louis Capet has got to die, so why argue?

Was there ever so strange a proceeding? Eyewitnesses, men like Sieyès and Roland, have described the scene as one of the most remarkable ever witnessed in the history of the Revolution, and the moment when Philippe d'Orléans, now nicknamed Philippe Égalité, and own kinsman of the accused, boldly voted death on his soul and conscience, the most tense in any history. A strange proceeding indeed! Philippe d'Orléans the traitor, the profligate, casting his vote against his kinsman; and up in the galleries among a privileged crowd a number of smartly dressed ladies, flaunting their laces and tricolour cocades and munching chocolates, while the honourable deputies who had already recorded their votes came to entertain them with small talk and bring them ices and refreshments. Some have cards and bins and prick down the deaths or banishments or imprisonments as they occur, something like race-cards on which with many a giggle they record their bets. Here in the galleries there is quite an element of fashion. No gloom here, no sense of foreboding or impending tragedy. Smart ladies! The beautiful Téroigne de Méricourt, the austere Madame Roland, the youthful Teresia Cabarrus. But down below men grow more and more weary, more and more like phantoms in the hazy light. Many have fallen asleep and the ushers have much ado to shake them and send them up to vote.

At dusk on Friday evening the voting was done. The secretaries sorted the papers and made the count. When this was over President Vergniaud demanded silence. And in a hush so profound that the rustle of a silk dress up in the gallery caused every one to give a start, he made the solemn declaration: "In the name of the Convention I declare that the punishment it pronounces on Louis Capet is that of death."

2. SENTENCE

Scarcely were the words out of the President's mouth than the King's advocates came running in. They lodged a protest in his name. They demanded delay and appeal to the people. The latter was promptly rejected unanimously. Appeal to the people had been put to the vote last Tuesday, and been definitely settled then. Delay might be granted, but for the moment nothing more could be done. Every one was sick to death of the whole thing. Nerve-racked. To-morrow should decide.

And it did. Delay or no delay? Patriots said "No." Philippe d'Orléans, kinsman of the accused, said "No!" A few said "Yes!" But finally, during the small hours of Sunday morning, that point perhaps the grimmest of the lot-was also settled. "No delay! Death within twenty- four hours." The final count showed a majority of seventy.

The Minister of Justice was sent to the Temple to break the news to the accused. To his credit be it said that he did not like the errand. "What a horrible business!" he was heard to say. But Louis received the news calmly, as a king should. He asked for a delay of three days to prepare himself for death, also for a confessor. The latter request was granted on condition that the confessor should be a man of the Convention's own choosing: but not delay. The verdict had been: "Death within twenty-four hours." There could be no question of respite.

Paris that Sunday morning woke to the news and was appalled. It had been expected, but there are events in this world that are expected, that are known to be certain to come, and yet when they do come they cause stupefaction. And Paris was stupefied. The Extremists rejoiced: the rowdy elements went about shouting "Vive la Liberté!" waving tricolour flags, carrying spikes crowned with red caps, but Paris as a whole did not respond. It pondered over the verdict, and shuddered at the murder of Lepelletier, the deputy who had put forward the proposal: "No delay! Death within twenty-four hours!" His proposal had been carried by a majority of seventy. It was then two o'clock in the morning, and he went on to Février's in the Palais Royal to get some supper. He had finished eating and was paying his bill, when he was suddenly attacked by an unknown man, said to have once belonged to the King's Guard, who plunged a dagger in the deputy's breast shouting: "Regicide! Take that!" and in the confusion that ensued made good his escape. Paris asked itself: "Why this man rather than another?" And the six hundred and ninety-six deputies who had voted for death without a recommendation for mercy shut themselves up in their apartments, being in fear of their lives.

The cafés and restaurants, on the other hand, did a roaring trade all that day, Sunday. Paris, though stupefied, had to be fed, and did feed too, and talked only in whispers but talked nevertheless. Groups lingered over their coffee and fine, and said the few things that were safe to say, in view of those turbulent Patriots who proclaimed every man, woman or child to be a traitor who showed any sympathy for the "conspirator" Louis Capet. There was also talk of war. England... Spain. Especially England, with Burke demanding sanctions against the regicide Republic. It could only be a matter of days now before she declared war. She had been itching to do so ever since Louis Capet had been deprived of his throne. Ambassador Chauvelin was still in London, but soon he would be recalled and his papers handed courteously to him, for undoubtedly war was imminent. English families residing in France were preparing to leave the country. Many, scenting trouble, had already sent their wives and children home and the packet-boats from Boulogne and Havre had been crowded day after day this week past.

But a good many stayed on: men in business, journalists or merely idlers. They mostly dined at Février's in the Palais Royal, the restaurant à la mode, where those deputies who were most in the public eye could always be met with on a Sunday. Robespierre and his friend Desmoulins, the elegant Saint-Just, President Vergniaud and others dined there regularly, and foreign newspaper correspondents frequented the place in the hope of picking up bits of gossip for their journals. On this particular Sunday there were about a dozen strangers gathered round the large table in the centre, where a somewhat meagre dinner was being served in view of the existing shortage of provisions and the penury that already stalked the countryside and more particularly the cities. Certainly here in the heart of Paris it would have been very injudicious to spread a rich repast in a frequented restaurant, in full view of hungry vagrants who might gather outside, under the arcades, smash windows and grab what they could off the tables. But in spite of the meagreness of the fare, good temper was not lacking round the board where the strangers were sitting. Most of them were English and they tackled the scraggy meat and thin wine put before them, with that happy-go-lucky tolerance that is so essentially English.

"What say you to beef with mustard?" one of the men quoted while he struggled with a tough piece of boiled pork garnished with haricot beans.

"I like it passing well," his neighbour completed the quotation, "but for the moment I have a fancy for a Lancashire hot-pot, such as my old lady makes at home."

"Well!" broke in a man obviously from the north, "Sunday at my home is the day for haggis, and with a wineglassful of good Scotch whiskey poured over it, I tell you, my friends..." He did not complete the sentence, but by way of illustrating his meaning he just smacked his lips, and attacked the tough bit of pork with almost savage vigour.

Two men were sitting together at a table close by. One of the said, speaking in French with a contemptuous shrug:

"These English! Their one subject of conversation is food."

The other, without commenting on this, merely remarked:

"You understand English then, Monsieur le Baron?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I never had any lessons," the other replied vaguely.

The two men were a strange contrast, both in appearance and in speech. The one who had been addressed as Monsieur le Baron it was not yet a crime to use a title in Republican France was short and broad-shouldered. He had a florid face, sensual lips and prominent eyes. He spoke French with a hardly perceptible guttural accent, which to a sensitive ear might have betrayed his German or Austrian origin. His manner and way of speaking were abrupt and fussy: his short, fat hands with the spatulated fingers were for ever fidgeting with something, making bread pellets or drumming with obvious nervousity on the table. The other was tall, above the average at any rate in this country: his speech was deliberate, almost pedantic in its purity of expression like a professor delivering a lecture at the Sorbonne: his hands, though slender, betrayed unusual strength. He scarcely ever moved them. Both men were very simply dressed,

in black coats and cloth breeches, but while Monsieur le Baron's coat fitted him where it touched, the other's complete suit was nothing short of a masterpiece of the tailor's art.

Just then there rose a general clatter in the room: chairs scraping against tiled floor, calls for hats and coats, comprehensive leave-takings, and more or less noisy exodus through the swing-doors. Robespierre and Desmoulins as they went out passed the time of day with Monsieur le Baron.

"Eh bien, de Batz," Robespierre said to him with a laugh, "I have won my bet, haven't I? Louis Capet has got his deserts."

De Batz shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Not yet," he retorted dryly.

When those two had gone, and were immediately followed by Vergniaud and Saint-Just, he who was called de Batz leaned back in his chair and gave a deep sigh of relief.

"Ah!" he said, "the air is purer now that filthy crowd has gone."

"You appeared to be on quite friendly terms with Monsieur Robespierre anyway," the other remarked with a cool smile.

"Appearances are often deceptive, my dear Professor," de Batz retorted.

"Ah?"

"Now take your case. I first met you at a meeting of the Jacobin Club, or was it the Feuillants? I forget which of those pestiferous gatherings you honoured with your presence; but anyway, had I only judged by appearances I would have avoided you like the plague, like I avoid that dirty crowd of assassins...."

"But you were there yourself, Monsieur le Baron," the Professor observed.

"I went out of curiosity, my friend, as you did and as a number of respectable-looking people did also. I sized up those respectable people very quickly. I had no use for them. They were just the sort of nincompoops whom Danton's oratory soon turns into potential regicides. But I accosted you that evening because I saw that you were different."

"Why different?"

"Your cultured speech and the cleanliness of your collar."

"You flatter me, sir."

"We talked of many things at first, if you remember. We touched on philosophy and on the poets, on English rhetoric and Italian art: and I went home that night convinced that I had met a kindred spirit, whom I hoped to meet again. When you entered this place an hour ago, and honoured me by allowing me to sit at your table, I felt that Chance had been benign to me."

"Again you flatter me, sir."

The Professor had hardly moved a muscle, while de Batz indulged first in reminiscences and then in flattery. He appeared unconscious of the other's growing excitement, sat leaning back in his chair, one slender hand framed in spotless cambric resting on the table. And all the time his eyes watched under heavy lids the exodus of the various clients of the restaurant, as one by one they finished their dinner, paid their bill, picked up hat and coat and passed out into the fast gathering gloom. And somehow one felt that nothing escaped those eyes, that they saw everything, and noted everything even though their expression never changed.

The room in the meanwhile had soon become deserted. There remained only de Batz and the Professor at one table, and in the farther corner a group of three men, two of whom were playing dominoes and the third reading a newspaper. De Batz' restless eyes took a quick survey of the room, then he leaned over the table and fixed his gaze on the other's placid face.

"I propose to flatter you still more, my friend," he said, sinking his voice to a whisper. "Nay! I may say to honour you...."

"Indeed?"

"By asking you to help me...."

"To do what?"

"To save the King."

"A heavy task, sir."

"But not impossible. Listen. I have five hundred friends who will be posted to-morrow in different houses along the route between the Temple and the Place de la Révolution. At a signal from me, they will rush the carriage in which only His Majesty and his confessor will be sitting, they will drag the King out of it, and in the mêlée smuggle him into a house close by, all the inhabitants of which are in my pay. You are silent, sir?" De Batz went on, his thick, guttural voice hoarse with emotion. "Of what are you thinking?" he added impatiently, seeing that the other remained impassive, almost motionless.

"Of General Santerre," the Professor replied, "and his eighty thousand armed men. Are they also in your pay?"

"Eighty thousand?" de Batz rejoined with a sneer. "Bah!"

"Do you doubt the figure?"

"No! I do not. I know all about Santerre and his eighty thousand armed men, his bristling cannons that are already being set up on the Place de la Révolution, and his cannoneers who will stand by with match burning. But you must take surprise into consideration. The unexpected. The sudden panic. The men off their guard. As a matter of fact, I could tell you of things that occurred before my very eyes when that dare-devil Englishman whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel snatched condemned prisoners from the very tumbrils that took them to execution. Surely you know about that?"

"I do," the Professor put in quietly, "but I don't suppose that those tumbrils were escorted by eighty thousand armed men. There is such a thing in this world as the impossible, you know, Monsieur le Baron: things that are beyond man's power to effect."

"Then you won't help me?"

"You have not yet told me what you want me to do."

"I am not going to ask you to risk your life," de Batz said, trying to keep the suspicion of a sneer out of his tone. "There are five hundred of us for that and one more or less wouldn't make any difference to our chance of success. But there is one little matter in which you could render our cause a signal service, and incidentally help to save His Majesty the King."

"What may that be, sir?"

A pause, after which de Batz resumed with seeming irrelevance:

"There is an Irish priest, the Abbé Edgeworth, you have met him perhaps?"

"Yes! I know him."

"He is known by renown to the King. The Convention, as perhaps you are aware, has acceded to His Majesty's desire for a confessor, but those inhuman brutes have made it a condition that that confessor shall be of their own choosing. We know what that means. Some apostate priest whose presence would distress and perhaps unnerve His Majesty when he will have need of all his courage. You agree with me?"

"Of course."

"Equally, of course, we want some one to be by the side of His Majesty during that harrowing drive from the Temple, and to prepare and encourage him for the coup which we are contemplating."

De Batz paused a moment, his restless eyes still studying the placid face of the Professor. At one moment it almost seemed as if he regretted having said so much. But the mood only lasted a moment or two. De Batz prided himself on his knowledge of men, and there was nothing in the grave demeanour and laconic speech of this elegant personage before him to arouse the faintest suspicion of Jacobinism. So after a time he resumed:

"The Abbé Edgeworth is the man we want for this mission. His loyalty is unquestioned, so is his courage. Cléry, the King's devoted valet, has tried to get in touch with him, and so have His Majesty's advocates, but they failed to find him. He is hiding somewhere in Paris, that we know. Until fairly recently he was a lecturer at the Sorbonne. I understand that you too, Monsieur le Professeur, have graced that seat of learning. Anyway, I thought that you might make inquiries in that direction. If you succeed," de Batz concluded, his voice thick with excitement, "you will have done your share in saving our King."

There was a moment's pause while de Batz, taking out his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his moist hands and his forehead which was streaming with perspiration. Seeing that the Professor still sat silent and impassive he said, with obvious impatience:

"Surely you are not hesitating, Monsieur le Professeur! A little thing like that! And for such a cause! I would scour Paris myself, only that my hands are full. And my five hundred adherents—"

"You should apply to one of them, Monsieur le Baron," the other broke in quietly.

Monsieur le Baron gave a jump.

"You don't mean to say that you hesitate?" he uttered in a hoarse whisper.

"I do more than that Monsieur le Baron. I refuse."

"Refuse?...ref-"

De Batz was choking. He passed his thick finger round the edge of his cravat.

"To lend a hand in dragging the Abbé Edgeworth into this affair."

De Batz' florid face had become the colour of beet-root. He stretched out his hand and clenched his fist as if he meant to strike that urbane milksop in the face. However, he thought better of that. A fracas in a public place was not part of his programme. His hand unclenched, but it closed round the stem of a wineglass and snapped it in two. The Professor scarcely moved. In the far corner the man who had been reading put down his paper and glanced round lazily, while one of the domino players paused in his game, with one piece between his fingers and a look of indifferent curiosity in his eyes.

De Batz was striving to control his temper: under his breath he muttered the words "Poltroon! Coward!" once or twice. Aloud he said:

"You are afraid?"

"I am a man of peace," the Professor replied.

"I don't believe it," de Batz protested. "No man with decent feeling in him would refuse to render this service. Good God, man! You are not risking your life, not like I and my friends are willing to do. You can help us, I know. You must have a reason a valid reason for refusing to do so. As I say, you wouldn't be risking your life...."

"Not mine, but that of an innocent and a good man."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"You are proposing to throw Abbé Edgeworth to the wolves."

"I am not. I am proposing to give him the chance of doing his bit in the work of saving the life of his King. He will thank me on his knees for this."

"He probably would, for he is of the stuff that martyrs are made. But I will not help you to send him to his death."

With that he rose, ready to go, and reached for his hat and coat. They hung on a peg just above de Batz' head, and de Batz made no movement to get out of the way.

"Don't go, man," he said earnestly, "not yet. Listen to me. You don't understand. It is all perfectly easy. In less than an hour I shall know who the apostate priest is whom the Convention are sending to His Majesty. I know all those fellows. Most of them are in my pay. They are useful, if distinctly dirty, tools. To substitute our abbé for the man chosen by the Convention will entail no risk, present no difficulties, and will cost me less than the price of a good dinner. Now what do you say?"

"What I said before," the other rejoined firmly. "Whoever accompanies Louis XVI to the guillotine, if he be other than the one chosen by the Convention, will be a marked man. His life will not be worth twelve hours' purchase!"

"The guillotine? The guillotine?" De Batz retorted hotly. "Who talks of the guillotine and of Louis XVI in one breath? I tell you, man, that our King will never mount the steps of the guillotine. There are five hundred of us, worth a hundred thousand of Santerre's armed men, who will drag him out of the clutches of those assassins."

"May I have my coat?" was the Professor's quiet rejoinder.

His calmness brought de Batz' temper to boiling-point. He jumped to his feet, snatched down the Professor's coat from its peg and threw it down with a vicious snarl on the nearest chair. The Professor, seemingly quite unperturbed, picked it up, put it on and with a polite "Au revoir, Monsieur le Baron!" to which the latter did not deign to respond, he walked quietly out of the restaurant.

3. THE LEAGUE

It was about an hour or two later. In a sparsely furnished room on the second floor of an apartment house in the Rue du Bac five men had met: four of them were sitting about on more or less rickety chairs, while the fifth stood by the window, gazing out into the dusk and on the gloomy outlook of the narrow street. He was tall above the average, was this individual, still dressed in the black, well-tailored suit which he had worn during his dinner in company with the Austrian Baron at Février's, and which suggested a professional man: a professor perhaps, at the university.

The outlook through the window was indeed gloomy. Dusk was quickly fading into night. A pitiless north-easterly wind drove the shower of sleet against the window-panes and howled down the chimney, driving the smoke from the small iron stove in gusts into the room. The five men were silent for the moment: indeed the only sound that penetrated to this dreary-looking apartment just now was the howling wind and the patter of the sleet against the windows. But outside depression did not apparently weigh on the spirits of the men. There was no look of despondency on their faces, rather the reverse, they looked eager and excited, and the back of the tall man in black with the broad shoulders and narrow hips suggested energy rather than dejection. After a time he turned away from the window and found a perch on the edge of a broken-down truckle bed that stood in a corner of the room.

"Well!" he began addressing the others collectively, "you heard what that madman said?"

"Most of it," one of them replied.

"He has a crack-brained scheme of stirring up five hundred madcaps into shouting and rushing the carriage in which the King will be driven from prison to the scaffold. Five hundred lunatics egged on by that candidate for Bedlam, trying to reach that carriage which will be escorted by eighty thousand armed men! It would be ludicrous if it were not so tragic."

"One wonders," remarked one of them, "who those wretched five hundred are."

"Young royalists," the other replied, "all of them known to the Committees. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that most of them, if not all, will receive a visit from the police during the early hours of the morning, and will not be allowed to leave their apartments till after the execution of the King."

"Heavens, man!" the eldest of the four men exclaimed, "how did you know that?"

"It was quite simple, my dear fellow, and quite easy. The crowd filed out, as you know, directly the final verdict was proclaimed. It was three o'clock in the morning. Everybody there was almost delirious with excitement. No one took notice of anybody else. The President and the other judges went into the refreshment-room which is reserved for them. You know the one I mean. It is in the Tour de César, at the back of the Hall of Justice. It has no door, only an archway. There was still quite a crowd moving along the corridors. I got as near the archway as I could, and I heard Vergniaud give the order that every inhabitant of the city, known to have royalist or even moderate tendencies, must be under police surveillance in their own apartments until midday."

"Percy, you are wonderful!" the young man exclaimed fervently.

"Tony, you are an idiot!" the other retorted with a laugh.

"Then we may take it that our Austrian friend's scheme will just fizzle out like a damp squib?"

"You had never thought, had you, Blakeney, that we..."

"God forbid!" Sir Percy broke in emphatically. "I wouldn't risk your precious lives in what common sense tells me is an impossible scheme. It may be quixotic. I dare say it is; but what in Heaven's name does that megalomaniac hope to accomplish? To break through a cordon of troops ten deep? Folly, of course! But even supposing he and his five hundred did succeed in approaching the carriage, what do they hope to do afterwards? Do they propose to fight the entire garrison of the city which is a hundred and thirty thousand strong? Does he imagine for a moment that the entire population of Paris will rise as one man and suddenly take up the cause of king-ship? Folly, of course! Folly of the worst type, because the first outcome of a hand-to-hand fight in the streets would be the murder of the King in the open street, by some unknown hand. Isn't that so?"

They all agreed. Their chief was not in the habit of talking lengthily on any point. That he did so on this occasion was proof how keenly he felt about the whole thing. Did he wish to justify before these devoted followers of his, his inaction with regard to the condemned King? I do not think so. He was accustomed to blind obedience that was indeed the factor that held the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel so indissolubly together and three of the four men who were here with him to-day, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Hastings, were his most enthusiastic followers.

Be that as it may, he did speak lengthily on this occasion, and placed before his friends a clear exposé of the situation on the morrow as far as any attempt at rescuing the King was concerned. But there was something more. The others knew there was something else coming, or their chief would not have given them the almost imperceptible signal when he left the restaurant to wait for him in this squalid apartment, which had for some time been their accustomed meeting place. They waited in silence and presently Sir Percy spoke again:

"Putting, therefore, aside the question of the King whose fate, of course, horrifies us all, the man we have got to think of now is that unfortunate priest whom de Batz wants to drag forcibly into his scheme, and who will surely lose his head if our League does not intervene."

"The Abbé Edgeworth?" one of them said.

"Exactly. Edgeworth is of Irish extraction, which adds to our interest in him. Still! that isn't the point. He is a very good man, who has worked unremittingly in the slums of Paris. Anyway, we are not going to throw him to the wolves, are we?"

They all nodded assent. And Ffoulkes added: "Of course not, if you say so, Percy."

"I shall know towards morning whether de Batz has arranged to substitute him for the man whom the Convention has chosen as confessor for the King. As soon as I do get definite information about that I will get in touch with you. We will take our stand at seven o'clock on the Place de la Révolution, at the angle of the Rue Égalité which used to be the Rue Royale. That will be the nearest point we can get to the guillotine. After the King's head has fallen there will be an immense commotion in the crowd and a rush for those

horrible souvenirs which the executioner will sell to the highest bidder. It makes one's gorge rise even to think of that. But it will be our opportunity. Between the five of us we'll soon get hold of Edgeworth and get him to safety."

"Where do you think of taking him?" Lord Tony asked.

"To Choisy. You remember the Levets?"

"Of course. I like old Levet. He is a sportsman."

"I like him too," Sir Andrew added, "and I am terribly sorry for the poor old mother. I don't mind the girl either, but I don't trust that sweetheart of hers."

"Which one?" Blakeney queried with a smile. "Pretty little Blanche Levet has quite a number."

"Ffoulkes means that doctor fellow," here interposed the youngest of the three men, Lord St. John Devinne, who had sat silent and obviously morose up to now, taking no part in the conversation between his chief and his other friends. He was a good-looking, tall young man of the usual high-bred English type, and could have been called decidedly handsome but for a certain look of obstinacy coupled with weakness, which lurked in his grey eyes and was accentuated by the somewhat effeminate curve of his lips.

"Pradel isn't a bad sort really," Sir Andrew responded. "Perhaps a little too fond of spouting about Liberté, Égalité, and the rest of it.

"I can't stand the brute," Devinne muttered sullenly. "He is always talking and arguing and telling the unwashed crowds what fine fellows they really are, if only they knew it, and what good times they are going to have in the future."

He shrugged and added with bitter contempt:

"Liberté? Égalité? What consummate rot!"

"Well!" Sir Percy interposed in his quiet, incisive voice, "isn't there just something to be said for it? The under-dog has had a pretty bad time in France. He is snarling now, and biting. But Pradel I know him is an intellectual, he will never be an assassin."

Devinne shrugged again and murmured: "I am not so sure about that," while Lord Tony broke in with his cheery laugh and said:

"I'll tell you what's the matter with our friend Pradel."

"What?" Sir Andrew asked.

"He is in love."

"Of course. With little Blanche Levet."

"Not he. He is in love with Cécile de la Rodière."

This was received with derision and incredulity.

"What rubbish!" Sir Andrew said.

"Not really?" Hastings queried.

But Blakeney assented: "I am afraid it's true."

While Devinne broke in hotly: "He wouldn't dare!"

"There's nothing very daring in being in love, my dear fellow," Sir Percy remarked dryly.

"Then why did you say you were afraid it was true," the other retorted.

"Because that sort of thing invariably leads to trouble even in these days."

"Can you see Madame la Marquise," was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' somewhat bitter comment on the situation, "and her son François, if they should happen to find out that the village doctor is in love with Mademoiselle de la Rodière?"

"I can," Devinne remarked spitefully. "There would be the good old story, which I must say has something to be said for it: a sound thrashing for Monsieur Pradel at the hands of Monsieur le Marquis, and..."

He paused, and a dark flush spread over his good-looking face. Chancing to look up he had met his chief's glance which rested upon him with an expression that was difficult to define. It was good-humoured, pitying, slightly sarcastic, and, anyway, reduced the obstinate young man to silence.

There was silence for a moment or two. Somehow Lord St. John Devinne's attitude, his curt argument with the chief, seemed to have thrown a kind of damper on the eagerness of the others. Blakeney after a time consulted his watch and then said very quietly:

"It is time we got back to business."

At once they were ready to listen. The word "business" meant so much to them: excitement, adventure, the spice of their lives. Only Devinne remained silent and sullen, never once looking up in the direction of his chief.

"Listen, you fellows," Blakeney now resumed in his firm, most authoritative tone, "if you hear nothing from me between now and to-morrow morning, it will mean that they have roped in that unfortunate abbé. Well! We are not going to allow that. He is a splendid chap, who does a great deal of good work among the poor, and if he allows himself to be roped in, it will be from an exaggerated sense of duty. Anyway, if you don't hear from me, we'll meet, as I said, at seven o'clock sharp at the angle of the Rue Égalité and the Place de la Révolution. After that, all you'll have to do will be to stick to me as closely as you can, and if we get separated we meet again at Choisy. Make yourselves look as demmed a set of ruffians as you can. That shouldn't be difficult."

Again he paused before concluding:

"If, on the other hand, the King is not to be accompanied to the scaffold by the Abbé Edgeworth, I will bring or send word to you here, not later than five o'clock in the morning. Remember that my orders to you all for the night are: don't get yourselves caught. If you do, there will be trouble for us all."

The others smiled. He then nodded to them, said briefly: "That is all. Good night! Bless you!" and the next moment was gone. The others listened intently for a while, trying to catch the sound of his footsteps down the stone staircase, but none came, and they went over to the window and looked out into the street. Through the fog and driving sleet they could just perceive the tall figure of their chief as he went across the road and then disappeared in the night.

With one accord three gallant English gentlemen murmured a fervent: "God guard him!" But Devinne still remained silent, and after a little while went out of the room.

Lord Tony said, speaking to both the others:

"Do you trust that fellow Devinne?" and then added emphatically: "I do not."

My Lord Hastings shook his head thoughtfully.

"I wonder what is the matter with him."

"I can tell you that," Lord Tony observed. "He is in love with Mademoiselle de la Rodière. He met her in Paris five years ago, before all this revolutionary trouble had begun. Her mother and, of course, her brother won't hear of her marrying a foreigner, any more than a village doctor, and Devinne, you know, is a queer-tempered fellow. He cannot really look on that fellow Pradel as a serious rival, and yet, as you could see just now, he absolutely hates him and vents his spleen upon him. His attitude to the chief I call unpardonable. That is why I do not trust him."

Whereupon Sir Andrew murmured under his breath: "If we have a traitor in the camp, then God help the lot of us."

4. JANUARY 21ST

The streets of Paris on that morning were silent as the grave: only at the gate of the Temple prison, when the King stepped out into the street, accompanied by the Abbé Edgeworth, and entered the carriage that was waiting for him, were there a few feeble cries of "Mercy! Mercy!" uttered mostly by women. No other sound came from the crowd that had assembled round the Temple gate. All along the route, too, there was silence. No one dared speak or utter a cry of compassion, for every man was in terror of his neighbour, who might denounce him as a traitor to the Republic. The windows of all the houses were closed, and no face was to be seen at them, peering out into the street. Eighty thousand men at arms stood aligned between the prison and the Place de la Révolution, where the guillotine awaited the royal victim of this glorious revolution. Through that cordon no man or body of men could break, and at every street corner cannons bristled and the cannoneers stood waiting with match burning, silent and motionless like stone statues rather than men. Nor was there sound of wheel traffic along the streets, only the rumble of one carriage, in which sat the descendant of sixteen kings, about to die a shameful death by the sentence of his people. Louis sat in the carriage listening to Abbé Edgeworth who read out to him the Prayers for the Dying.

At the angle of the Boulevard Bonne Nouvelle and the Rue de la Lune on a hillock made up of debris from recent excavations, a short, stout, florid man was standing, wrapped in a dark cape. It was the Baron de Batz. He had been standing here for the past three hours, trying vainly to keep himself warm by stamping his feet on the frozen ground. Two hours ago a couple of young men came down the narrow Rue de la Lune and joined the lonely watcher. There was some whispered conversation between the three of them, after which they all remained silent at their post, and from the height on which they stood they scanned the crowd to right and left of them with ever-increasing anxiety. But there was no sign of any of the five hundred accomplices who were to aid de Batz in his crazy scheme of saving the King. As a matter of fact, de Batz didn't know that in the early hours of the morning most of those five hundred had been roused from sleep by peremptory knocks at their door. A couple of gendarmes had then entered their apartment with orders to keep them under observation, and not to allow them outside their houses until past midday. De Batz and the two friends who were with him now had spent the night talking and scheming in a tavern on the Boulevard and thus escaped this domiciliary visit. They could not understand what had happened, and as time went on they fell to cursing their fellow-conspirators for their treachery or cowardice. Time went on, leaden-footed but inexorable. From the direction of the Temple prison there had already come the ominous sound of the roll of drums, soon followed by the rumble of carriage wheels.

Fog and sleet blurred the distant outline of the Boulevard, but soon through the vaporous mist de Batz and his friends could perceive the vanguard of the military cortège. First the mounted gendarmerie, barring the whole width of the street, then the grenadiers of the National Guard, then the artillery, followed by the drummers, and finally the carriage itself, hermetically closed with shutters against the windows, and round it and behind it more and more troops, more cannon and drummers and grenadiers. De Batz and his friends saw the march past. Luckily for them their five hundred adherents were not there to shout and wave their arms and attempt to break through a cordon of soldiery stronger than any that had ever marched through the streets of a city before. The three men were soon submerged in the crowd that moved and surged in the direction of the Place de la Révolution.

Here in front of the guillotine the carriage came to a halt. The Place de la Révolution behind the troops was crowded with idlers who were trying to get a view of the awe-inspiring spectacle. It was a great thing to see a king on trial for his life. It was a still greater thing to see him die.

The carriage door was opened. General Santerre commanded a general beating of drums as the King of France mounted the steps of the guillotine. The Abbé Edgeworth was close beside his King, still murmuring the Prayers for the Dying.

It was all over in a moment. Louis tried to say a few words to his people protesting his innocence, but Santerre cried "Tambours!" once more and the roll of drums drowned those last words of the dying monarch. The axe fell. There were shouts of "Vive la République!" there were caps raised on bayonets, hats were waved, and an excited crowd made a rush for the scaffold as the executioner held up the dead monarch's head. Handkerchiefs were dipped in the blood. Locks of hair were cut off the head and sold by the executioner for pieces of silver. There followed half an hour of frantic excitement, during which men shrieked and women screamed, men tumbled over one another trying to rush up the steps of the guillotine, and were hurled down again by the executioner and his aides, while missiles of every kind flew over the heads of this singing, waving, tumultuous mob. The din was incessant and drowned the intermittent roll of drums and the shouts of command from the officers to the soldiery.

And throughout all this uproar the Abbé Edgeworth remained on his knees, on the spot where last he had a sight of his King, and had urged this son of St. Louis to mount serenely up to heaven. He paid no attention to all the wild screaming and roaring, or to the occasional cries: "A la lanterne le calotin!" which were hurled threateningly at his calm kneeling figure.

"A moi le calotin!" came at one time with a roar like that of an unchained bull, quite close to his ear.

"Non, à moi!"

"À moi! à moi!"

It just went through the abbé's mind that some in the crowd were thirsting for his blood, that they would presently drag him to the guillotine, and that he would be sent to his death in just the same way as his King had been. But the thought did not frighten him. He went on mumbling his prayers, until suddenly he felt himself seized round the shoulders and lifted off his knees, while a frantic crowd still cried: "A la lanterne le calotin!" in the intervals of roaring with laughter. The last thing he heard was a shout from the executioner: "I sell Capet's breeches for twenty livres, his coat for thirty his shoes..."

In the excitement of security these relics the tumultuous crowd forgot the calotin, so wild a rush was there for the platform of the guillotine, where the gruesome auction was about to take place. The abbé by now was only half conscious. He felt the pushing and the jostling all round him, and then a heavy cloak or shawl was wrapped all round him, through which all the hideous sounds became more and more muffled and subdued, till they ceased altogether, and he finally completely lost consciousness.

On the Place de la Révolution, this half-hour of frantic excitement gradually passed away. Presently the troops departed and the crowd gradually dispersed. Men returned to their usual avocations, went to restaurants and cafés, bought, sold and bartered, as if this

21st day of January, 1793, had not been one of the most stupendous ones in the whole course of history.

In the Hall of the Convention members of the Government rubbed their hands together, and deputies called to one another across the room "C'est fait, c'est fait!" "It is done!" The great thing is done. A king has died on the scaffold like a common criminal for having conspired against the liberty of his people.

It was not until evening that the Convention in Committee decided that the priest who had received the last confessions of Louis Capet had better be put out of the way. He was not the man whom the Government had chosen for the purpose. Who knows what strange and uncomfortable things Louis Capet may have confided to him at the last? Anyway, he was better dead than alive, the committee decided, and the police was instructed to proceed at once with his arrest.

But somehow or other in the turmoil which immediately followed the execution of Louis Capet, the Abbé Edgeworth had disappeared.

5. THE LEVETS OF CHOISY

The Levet family at this time was composed of four members. The old man Charles he was actually not more than fifty but had always been known as "old Levet" as against his eldest son "young Levet," of whom more anon. The old man, then, was by profession a herbalist; his work took him out into the meadows and the mountains and along the river-banks to collect the medicinal herbs required by the druggists. This kind of life lonely of necessity for the most part had made him silent and introspective. He had lived with Nature and knew her every mood: nothing in her frightened him: frosts, snows, thunderstorms were his friends. He did not fear them: he communed with them. Outside nature, two loves had filled his life: his wife and his eldest son. "Young Levet," who was a lieutenant in the Royal Guard, was killed while defending the Tuileries attacked by the mob in August '92. "Old Levet" was never the same man after that. Sparing of words before, he became taciturn and morose. His wife never recovered from the shock. She had a paralytic stroke and had hovered between life and death ever since, unable to speak, unable to move, her great, dark eyes alone reflecting the mental anguish which news from Paris of the horrors of the Revolution caused to her enfeebled mind. Both she and her husband, like their beloved eldest son, were ardent royalists, and poor Henriette Levet had very nearly died when she heard other members of her family or friends speak of the trial of the King and the possibility of his death.

The second and now only son of the Levets, Augustin, was a priest, attached to Saint-Sulpice. Like his father, he was sparing of words save in the exercise of his calling. Whatever time he was able to spare from his duties in the parish, he spent with his mother, reading to her from books of devotion or the Lives of Saints, in a dull, dispassionate voice from which the poor sick woman did not seem to derive much comfort. On the other hand, Blanche, the daughter of the Levets, did her best to bring an atmosphere not exactly of cheerfulness, as that seemed impossible, but of distraction and of brightness into the Levet household. She was pretty, not yet twenty, and young men gathered round her like flies round a honey-pot. Her brother's constant admonitions that she should take life seriously had little effect on her mercurial temperament. In order not to come in conflict with her family and most of the friends who frequented her father's house, she professed, enthusiasm for the royalist cause, and as she had a quick, inventive brain she knew how to exhibit loyalty for the King and horror at his misfortunes. But it was all very much on the surface; her political views, such as they were, did not interfere with her ready acceptance of the homage of young men of avowedly revolutionary opinions such, for instance, as Louis Maurin, the young lawyer who was very much in love with Blanche and very much in awe of her papa, two reasons which caused him to keep his way of thinking to himself. "Old Levet" did not actually forbid Louis Maurin the house, but he did not encourage the young man's visits; however, when he did come, which was as often as he dared, Louis was very discreet, and Blanche's provocative smile caused him to endure patiently the old man's wrathful glances, whenever politics cropped up as subject of conversation.

As a matter of fact, Blanche did no more than flirt with young Maurin, as she did with anything that wore breeches and avowed admiration for her. The youth of Choisy mostly did. All except the local doctor, Simon Pradel of Provençal parentage, erudite, good-looking, athletic, and immensely popular in the commune where, with a small fortune left to him by an uncle whom he had never seen, he had founded and endowed a hospital for sick children. He came frequently to the house in his capacity as doctor to Madame Levet: the poor woman's large eyes spoke the welcome that her lips could not utter, and he was the only man with whom "old Levet" cared to have what he called a talk, which meant that he listened with sympathy and even an occasional smile to what the young doctor had to say.

Blanche did more than listen on those occasions, and both with smiles and glances she showed Pradel that his visits were welcome, although, as with all her admirers, she did no more than flirt with this one also. But strangely enough, the young man remained impervious to the spoilt beauty's blandishments, and his manner towards her was no different from that which he displayed towards Marie Bachelier, the maid of all work. In Choisy itself Pradel was called by some a misanthrope and even a woman-hater, but there were others who declared that they had seen Dr. Pradel roaming o' nights in the purlieus of the Château de la Rodière, in the hope, so they said, of catching a glimpse of Mademoiselle Cécile. Some of this tittle-tattle did not fail to reach pretty Blanche Levet's ears, and it is an uncontrovertible axiom that pique will always enkindle love. Jealousy too played its part in this sudden awakening of Blanche's unsophisticated heart. Certain it is that what had been at first little else than warm-hearted sympathy for the young doctor became something very like infatuation, almost in the turn of a hand.

6. NEWS

This 21st day of January had been one of unmitigated terror and despair for the inmates of the Levets' house at Choisy. Old Levet had gone out quite early in the morning. With snow on the ground and a fog lying thick over the river and the meadows he could not gather herbs and simples and follow his usual avocation. What he wanted above all, however, was to be alone, and then to wander into the town in search of news. News!! What this day and its destined terrible event meant to a man of Levet's convictions can scarcely be conceived. To him the execution of the King of France by the sentence of the people was nothing short of sacrilege, a crime only one degree less impious than that committed on Calvary. Old Levet wanted to be the first to hear the news. Unless a miracle happened at the eleventh hour he knew that it would surpass in horror anything that had ever occurred before in history. And he knew that he would have to break that news to his wife. If he didn't tell her, she would guess, and when she knew she would surely die.

And so the old man really old now though he was no more than fifty wandered out into the streets of Choisy alone, communing with himself, trying all in vain to steel himself against the awful blow that was sure to fall. All the morning he wandered aimlessly. But at ten o'clock he came to a halt. There was something in the air that told him that the awesome deed was accomplished: it was a distant rumbling that sounded like a roll of thunder; but Levet knew in his heart that it was the roll of drums, announcing to the world that the head of a King of France had fallen under the guillotine. And in his heart he felt acute physical pain, and a sudden intense hatred for the people all around him. They knew just as well as he did what had happened. Some of them had paused with finger uplifted, listening to that something in the air which was quite undefinable. There was a café close by. The proprietor had taken down the shutters a quarter of an hour ago. Customers had quickly flocked in. There was quite a crowd in there. And suddenly when that distant roll had died away, those inside set up a loud cheer. It was taken up by a few passers-by while others stood still, mute, as if awe had turned them to stone. Old Levet fled down the street. It led to the river and the bridge. At the bridge-head he stopped. There was a corner-stone there; he sat down on it and waited. He had risen very early in the morning, and when he opened the front door of his house, he saw a note weighted down with a stone lying on the doorstep. He stooped and picked it up and read it, well knowing where the note came from. He had had several like it before, usually giving him instructions how to help in a deed of mercy. He had always been ready to help and to obey those instructions, for they came from a man whom he only knew vaguely as a professor at some university, but whom he respected above all men he had ever come across. Charles Levet had always given what help he could, often at considerable risk to himself.

The note to-day also gave him instructions, very simple ones this time. All it said was: "Wait at the bridge-head from noon till dusk." It was only ten o'clock as yet, but old Levet didn't care. What were hours to him, now that such an awful calamity had sullied the fair name of France for ever? He was numb with cold and fatigue, but he didn't care. He just sat there, waiting and watching, with lack-lustre eyes, the stream of traffic go by over the bridge. Crowds were returning from Paris on foot, on horse-back or in cabriolets. They had been up in the capital "to see the show." They were talking and laughing quite naturally, as if they had been to a theatre or a race-meeting. Old Levet drew his cape closer round his shoulders, and closed his aching eyes. The cold had made him drowsy.

A distant church clock had struck four when out of the crowd of passers-by two figures detached themselves and made straight for the corner-stone where old Levet was sitting, waiting patiently. A tall figure and a short one: two men, both dressed in black and wrapped in heavy capes against the cold. Levet shook himself out of his torpor. The taller of the two men helped him struggle to his feet, and then said:

"This is the Abbé Edgeworth, Charles. He was with His Majesty until the last."

"We'll go straight home," Levet responded simply. "It is cold here, and Monsieur l'Abbé is welcome."

Without another words the three men started to walk back through the town. It was characteristic of Levet that he made no further comment, nor did he ask a question. He walked briskly, ahead of the other two, looking neither to right nor left. The priest appeared to be in a state of exhaustion; his tall friend held him tightly by the arm, to enable him to walk at all. At a distance of some hundred metres or so from his house old Levet came to a halt. He waited till the other came close to him, then he said simply:

"My wife is very ill. She knows nothing yet. Perhaps she guesses. But I must prepare her. Will you wait here?"

It was quite dark now, and the fog very dense. Levet's shrunken figure was quickly lost to view.

7. MONSIEUR LE PROFESSEUR

The Levet's house stood about four metres back from the road, behind a low wall which was surmounted by an iron railing. An iron grille gave access to a tiny front garden, intersected by a narrow brick path which led to the front door. Charles Levet went into the house, closing the door noiselessly. He took off his cloak, and went straight into the sitting-room. It adjoined his wife's bedroom. The double communicating doors were wide open, and he could see the invalid stretched out on her bed, with her thin arms spread outside the coverlet. Her great dark eyes looked agonizingly expectant. Her son Augustin was on his knees beside the bed, murmuring half-audible prayers. As soon as she caught sight of her husband, she guessed that all was over, and the unforgivable crime had been committed. Old Levet knew that she guessed. He came quickly to the bedside. An ashen-grey hue spread over the dying woman's face, and a film gathered over her eyes.

"The doctor," old Levet commanded, speaking to his son.

"Too late," Augustin responded without rising from his knees; "her soul has fled to God!" He turned over a page in his book of devotion and began reciting the Prayers for the Dead.

Levet stooped and kissed his dead wife's forehead. Then he reverently closed her eyes. The shock, even though she had expected it, had killed her. The death of her eldest son had stretched her on a bed of sickness, the death of her King had brought about the end. The horror of the deed, the knowledge of the appalling sacrilege had snapped the attenuated thread that held her to life.

Levet broke in, with some impatience, on his son's orisons:

"Where is your sister?" he asked.

"She went out a few moments ago to fetch Pradel. I could see that my mother was passing away, so I sent her."

"She shouldn't have gone out alone at night, in this fog, too...."

"She wasn't alone," the young priest rejoined, "Louis Maurin was with her."

At mention of the name the old man flared up: "You don't mean to tell me that, to-day of all days, that renegade was in my house?"

Augustin gave an indifferent shrug. His father went on with unabated vehemence: "With your mother lying on the point of death, Augustin, you should not have allowed this outrage."

"Communion with the dying," the priest retorted, "was of greater import than political quarrels. Maurin didn't stay long," he went on; "I had to send for Pradel, I wanted him to go. But Blanche insisted on going herself. But what does it all matter, Father? In face of what happened to-day, what does anything matter in this sinful world?"

This was the only indication Augustin Levet gave that he, too, felt acutely the horror of the crime that had been committed that morning, and had been the direct cause of his mother's death. Having said that much, he resumed his orisons, and in the room where the dead woman lay there fell a solemn silence, only broken by the dull sound of the young priest's muttered prayers.

Charles Levet remained standing, silent and almost motionless by the bedside of his dead wife. Then he turned abruptly and went through the sitting-room out into the street. Some two hundred metres up the road he came on Blakeney and the priest who were waiting for him. The latter by now was scarcely able to stand; he was leaning heavily against the Englishman's shoulder.

Levet said simply: "My wife is dead," and then added: "Come, Monsieur l'Abbé, you are welcome! And you too, Monsieur le Professeur."

Between them the two men supported the tottering footsteps of the abbé, almost carried him, in fact, as far as the grille. Here the three men came to a halt, and Blakeney said:

"I think Monsieur l'Abbé will be all right now. When he has had some food and a short rest, he will be able to come with me as far as the château. Monsieur le Marquis will look after him the rest of the night and," he added speaking to the priest, "we hope within the next twenty-four hours, Monsieur l'Abbé, to have you well on the way to permanent safety."

"I don't know," the abbé murmured feebly, "how to show my gratitude to you, sir. You and your friends were heroic in dragging me away from that cruel mob. I don't even know who you are yet you saved my life at risk of your own why you did it I cannot guess—"

"Don't try, Monsieur l'Abbé," Blakeney broke in quietly, "and reserve your gratitude for my friend Charles Levet, without whose loyalty my friends and I would have been helpless."

He gave Levet's hand a friendly squeeze and opened the grille for the two men to pass through. He waited a moment or two till they reached the front door, and was on the point of turning to go when he was confronted by two figures which had just emerged out of the fog. One of them was Blanche Levet. Blakeney raised his hat and she exclaimed:

"If it isn't Monsieur le Professeur? Why! What are you doing in Choisy, Monsieur, at this time of night?"

She turned to her companion and went on still lightly and inconsequently:

"Louis, don't you know Monsieur le Professeur?"

"D'Arblay," Blakeney put in, as Blanche had paused, not knowing the name of her father's friend, who had always been referred to in the house as Monsieur le Professeur. "No," he continued, turning to the young lawyer, "I have not yet had the honour of meeting Monsieur I mean Citizen—"

"Maurin," Blanche broke in, "Louis Maurin, and now you know each other's names, will you both come in and—"

"Not now, Mademoiselle," Blakeney said, "Madame Levet is too ill to—"

"My mother is dead," Blanche rejoined quietly. "I went to fetch Docteur Pradel, because Augustin wished me to, but I knew then already that she was dead."

She spoke without any emotion. Evidently no great tie of filial love bound her to her sick mother.

She murmured a quick "Good night," however. Blakeney held the grille open for her, and she ran swiftly into the house.

The two men waited a moment or two until they heard the door of the house close behind the young girl. Then Maurin said:

"Are you going back to Choisy, Citizen?" When Blakeney replied with a curt "Yes!" the lawyer continued: "May I walk with you part of the way? I am going into the town myself."

On the way down the street Louis Maurin did most of the talking. He spoke of the great event of the day, but did so in a sober, quiet manner. Evidently he did not belong to the Extremist Party, or at any rate did not wish to appear as anything but a moderate and patriotic Republican. Blakeney answered in mono-syllables. He knew little, he said, about politics; science, he said, was a hard taskmaster who monopolized all his time. Arrived opposite the Café Tison on the Grand' Place, he was about to take his leave when Maurin insisted that they should drink a fine together. Blakeney hesitated for a few seconds; then he suddenly made up his mind and he and the young lawyer went into the café together.

Louis Maurin had begun to interest him.

8. MAURIN THE LAWYER

There was quite a crowd in the café. A number of idlers and quidnuncs had drifted out by now from Paris, bringing with them news of the great event and of the minor happenings that clustered round it. Lepelletier, the rich and noted deputy who had voted for "Death with no delay," had been assassinated by an unknown and fanatical royalist while he sat at dinner in a fashionable restaurant. His funeral would be on the morrow. Philippe d'Orléans, now known as Philippe Égalité, Louis Capet's own cousin, had driven in a smart cabriolet to the Place de la Révolution, and watched his kinsman's head fall under the guillotine. "A good patriot, what?" was the universal comment on his attitude. The priest who had been with Capet to the last had mysteriously disappeared at the very moment when, in the Hall of Justice, a decree had been promulgated ordering his arrest. He was, it seems, a dangerous conspirator whom traitors in the pay of Austria had sent to the Temple prison as a substitute for the priest chosen by the Convention to attend on Louis Capet. This news was received with execration. But the priest could not have gone far. The police would soon get him, and he would then pay his second visit to Madame la Guillotine with no chance of paying her a third.

That was the general trend of conversation in the Café Tison: the telling of news and the comments thereon. Louis Maurin and Blakeney had secured a table in a quiet corner of the room; they ordered coffee and fine, and the lawyer told the waiter to bring him pen, ink and paper. These were set before him. He said a polite "Will you excuse me?" to his vis-à-vis before settling down to write. When he had finished what appeared to be a longish letter, he slipped it into an envelope, closed and addressed it, and then summoned the waiter back. He handed him the letter, together with some small money, and said peremptorily:

"There is a commissioner outside. Give him this and tell him to take it at once to the Town Hall."

The waiter said: "Yes, Citizen!" and went out with the letter, after which short incident the two men sat on silently opposite one another for a time, sipping their coffee and fine, watching the bustling crowd around them, and listening to the chatter, the comments and expressions of approval and disapproval more or less ear-splitting, as the news the quidnuncs brought were welcome or the reverse.

And suddenly Maurin came out with an abrupt question:

"Who was that with old Levet just now, Monsieur le Professeur?" he asked. "Do you happen to know? He was dressed like a priest. I am sure I saw a cassock."

He blurted this out in a loud, rasping voice, almost as if he felt irritated by Monsieur le Professeur's composure and desired to upset it. He did not know, astute lawyer though he was, that he was sitting opposite a man whom no power on earth could ever ruffle or disturb. The man to him was just a black-coated worker like himself, professor at some university or other, a Frenchman, of course, judging from his precise and highly cultured speech.

"I saw no one," Blakeney replied simply. "Perhaps it was a priest called in to attend Madame Levet. You heard Mademoiselle Blanche say that her mother was dying."

"Dead, I understood," Maurin commented dryly. "But Levet, anyhow, had no need to send for a priest. His own son is a calotin."

"Indeed? Then it must have been the doctor."

"The doctor? No, Blanche and I went to fetch Docteur Pradel, but he was not in."

Maurin remained silent for a minute or two and then said decisively:

"I am sure or nearly sure that it was not Pradel. Of course the fog was very dense and I may have been mistaken. But I don't think I was. At any rate..."

He paused, and thoughtfully sipped his coffee over the rim of his cup; he seemed to be watching his vis-à-vis very intently.

Suddenly he said:

"I shall be going to the Town Hall presently. Will you accompany me, Monsieur le Professeur?"

"To the Town Hall?" I regret, but I..."

"It won't take up much of your time," the young lawyer insisted, "and your presence would be very helpful to me."

"How so?"

"As a witness."

"Would you mind explaining? I don't quite understand."

Maurin called for another fine, drank it down at a gulp and went on:

"Should I be boring you, Monsieur le Professeur, if I were to tell you something of my own sentimental history. You are, I know, an intimate friend of the Levets, and my story is closely connected with theirs. Shall I be boring you?" he reiterated.

"Not in the least," Blakeney answered courteously.

The younger man leaned across the table and lowering his voice to a whisper he began:

"I love Blanche Levet. My great desire is to make her my wife. Unfortunately her father hates me like poison. Though I am a moderate, if convinced Republican, he classes me with all those he calls assassins and regicides." He paused a moment, then once more insisted: "You are quite sure that this does not bore you, Monsieur le Professeur?"

"Quite sure," Blakeney replied.

"You are very kind. I was hoping to enlist your sympathy, perhaps your co-operation, because Blanche has often told me that old Levet has a great regard for you."

"And I for him."

"Quite so. Now, my dear Professeur," the lawyer went on confidentially, "when I saw just now old Levet introducing a man surreptitiously into his house, a scheme suggested itself to me which fervently hope will bring about my union with the woman of my choice. I cannot tell you what put it into my head that Levet was acting surreptitiously, all I know is that the thought did occur to me, and that it gave rise in my mind to the scheme which, with your permission, I will now put before you, with a view to soliciting your kind co-operation. Will you allow me to proceed?"

"Please do," Blakeney responded. "You interest me enormously."

"You are very kind."

Once more the lawyer paused. The noise in the room made conversation difficult. He leaned farther over the table, and went on still in a subdued tone of voice:

"Whether the man who was with Charles Levet just now, and whom he took into his house, was a genuine priest or not, I neither know nor care. He may be the fugitive Abbé Edgeworth for aught it matters to me. I am practically certain that it wasn't the doctor, but anyway he is just a pawn in the close game which I propose to play, a game, the ultimate stakes of which are my future welfare and success of my career. Old Levet has more money than you would think," he added unblushingly, "and Blanche, besides being very attractive I am really in love with her will have a considerable dot, whilst I...."

He gave a significant shrug and added: "Well! We understand one another, do we not, Monsieur le Professeur? With us black-coated workers money is the only ladder to success."

"Quite so," Blakeney assented imperturbably.

"Anyway, what I am going to do is this. I have just sent a letter to the Chief of Section at the Town Hall, denouncing the Levet family as harbouring a traitor in their house. I enjoy a great deal of prestige with our local authorities and they will take my word for it that the Levets' guest is a dangerous conspirator against the Republic. Now do you guess my purpose?"

"Not exactly."

"It is really quite simple. Just think for a moment how we shall all stand within the next few hours. Levet, his daughter, his son and his guest arrested. I, Louis Maurin, using my influence with the authorities to get the family liberated. Levet's gratitude expressed by granting me his daughter's hand in marriage. Surely you can see how splendidly it will all work."

"Not quite," Blakeney remarked after a slight pause.

"Where's the hitch?"

"I was thinking of the guest. Will your influence be extended towards his liberation also?"

"Oh!" the lawyer replied airily, "I am not going to trouble myself about him. If nothing is proved against him, if he is really just a constitutional priest called in to administer the sacraments to a dying woman, he will get his release without interference on my part."

"He may not."

The lawyer shrugged. "Anyway, he will have to take his chance. My dear friend," he went on with an affected sigh, "a great many heads will fall within the next few days, weeks, months perhaps; are we not on the eve of far bigger things than have occurred as yet? One head more or less...what does it matter?"

To this Blakeney made no immediate reply; and presently the young lawyer resumed, putting all the persuasiveness he could command into his tone:

"You will not refuse me your co-operation, will you, Monsieur le Professeur?"

"You will pardon me," Blakeney responded, "but you have not yet told me what you desire me to do."

"Just for the moment, only to come with me as far as the Town Hall, and bear witness to the fact that old Levet introduced a man surreptitiously into his house this afternoon."

"But I don't know that he did."

Maurin shrugged. "Does that matter," he queried blandly, "between friends?"

Then, as Monsieur le Professeur made no comment on this amazing suggestion, he continued glibly:

"It is all perfectly simple, my dear Professeur, as you will see, and nothing that will happen need upset your over-sensitive conscience. I will merely call upon you to confirm with a word or two, my statement that Charles Levet introduced some one furtively into his house, at the very time when his wife was breathing her last. There will be no question of an oath or anything of the sort, just a few words. But we will both insist that Levet's actions were furtive. Won't we? I can reckon on you for this, can I not, my dear friend? I may call you my friend, may I not?"

"If you like."

"You really are most kind. And you will plead my cause with old Levet when my marriage with Blanche comes on the tapis presently, won't you, my friend? Funnily enough I felt you were going to be my friend the moment I sat down at this table opposite to you. But then Blanche had often spoken to me about you, and in what high regard her father held you...Well!" he concluded, after he had paused for breath for a few seconds, "what do you say?" and his eyes glowing and eager, fastened themselves on the other's face.

By way of an answer Blakeney rose.

"That the doors of the Town Hall will be closed against us, unless we hurry," he replied with a smile.

Maurin drew a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Then you really are coming with me?" he exclaimed, and jumped to his feet. He beckoned to the waiter, and there ensued a friendly little dispute as to who should pay the bill, a dispute from which the lawyer gracefully retired, leaving his newly-found friend to settle both the bill and the gratuity. While he reached for his hat and cloak he just went on talking, talking as if something in his brain had let loose a veritable flood-gate of eloquence. He talked and he talked, and never noticed that Monsieur le Professeur, in the interval of settling with the waiter, had scribbled a few lines on the back of the bill, and kept the crumpled bit of paper in the hollow of his hand. He piloted the voluble talker through the shrieking and gesticulating crowd as far as the door.

The next moment the two men were out in the Place. The fog seemed more dense than ever. As the Town Hall was at some distance from the Café Tison they started to walk briskly across the wide-open space. It was almost deserted, every one having taken refuge against the cold and the damp in the brilliantly-lighted restaurants and cafés: all except a group of three or four slouchy-looking fellows clad in the promiscuous garments affected by the irregular Republican Guard. They were standing outside the Café Tison, very much in the way of the customers who went in or out, and had to be jostled and pushed aside by Monsieur le Professeur before he and Louis Maurin could get past.

9. ORDERS FROM THE CHIEF

Maurin was walking on ahead while he and Monsieur le Professeur crossed the Grand' Place. In the centre of the open space there was at that time a monumental fountain to which a short flight of circular steps gave access. In addition to the fog, a sharp frost now made progress difficult. The ground, covered with a thin layer of half- melted snow, was very slippery, especially around the fountain which, though not playing at this hour, had been going all day, and had scattered spray all around, so that the steps and the pavement around it were covered with a sheet of ice.

Maurin was treading warily. He nearly slipped at one point, and was just in time to save himself from falling. He called out a quick "Take care!" to his companion. But the warning came, apparently, just a few seconds too late, for in answer to his call there came a sudden cry, accompanied by a few vigorous swear words, quite unlike the usual pedantic speech of Monsieur le Professeur. The lawyer turned round at once and saw that learned gentleman sprawling on the ground.

"Whatever has happened?" he queried with ill-disguised impatience.

It was pretty obvious. Monsieur le Professeur lay, groaning, across the steps.

"Can't you get up?" the lawyer asked tartly.

"I'll try," the other replied. Apparently he made a genuine effort to rise, but fell back again groaning piteously.

"But," Maurin insisted with distinct acerbity, "I have to be at the Town Hall before six. It is ten minutes to now, and it is a good step down to the Rue Haute. Can't you make an effort?"

"I'm afraid not. I think I have broken my ankle. I couldn't walk, unless you supported me."

"Then we should get to the Town Hall too late," the other retorted. "What's to be done?"

"You go, my friend, and I will follow as soon as I can. I dare say I can enlist the assistance of a passer-by to find me a cabriolet, and you can keep the Chief of Section talking till I come."

"Well, if you don't mind being left..."

"No, no! You go! I'll come along as quickly as possible."

"There's a fellow coming this way now. Shall I call him?"

"Thank you. If you will."

He seemed in great pain, and unable to move. A man in blouse and tattered breeches, apparently one of the irregular Republican Guard who had been hanging round the café, loomed out of the fog, and came slouching along towards the fountain. Maurin hailed him.

"My friend is hurt," he said quickly; "will you look after him and bring him to the Town Hall as soon as you can? He will pay you well."

The man came nearer. He mumbled something about a cabriolet.

"Yes, yes!" Maurin acquiesced eagerly. "Try and get one. Don't wait! Run!"

After which peremptory order he turned once more to Monsieur le Professeur.

"You will not fail me, will you?" he insisted.

"No, no! I'll be with you as soon as I can. I promise."

Whereupon the lawyer finally went his way. He fog soon wrapped him up, out of sight, for he crossed the Place now almost at a run. How surprised, not to say gravely disturbed, he would have been, if he had been gifted with second sight, and seen Monsieur le Professeur rise at once and without any effort to his feet, apparently quite unhurt. The fellow in blouse and tattered breeches was quite close to him again, and asked anxiously:

"You are not really hurt, are you, Percy?"

"Of course not, you idiot," Blakeney replied with a light laugh. "Tell me! Have the others gone?"

"Tony and Hastings went straight to the Levets, according to your orders. I suppose you scribbled the note while you were in the café."

"As best I could. You deciphered it all right?"

"Yes! Tony and Hastings will take charge of the abbé. The three of us are dressed in these rags as Irregulars of the Republican Guard. Tony has actually got a tricolour scarf round his middle. He and Hastings will formally arrest the abbé and take him at once to La Rodière. Devinne went first to headquarters to change into his own clothes and then will go on straight to the château in a cabriolet to prepare the Marquise and his family for the arrival of the priest. Hastings or Tony will try to get in a word with old man Levet to assure him that everything is by your orders. That is right, isn't it?"

"Quite all right. Now you go on to the château yourself, my good fellow, and wait for me there. Tell the others as soon as they have seen the abbé safely in the bosom of the La Rodière family, to take up their stand with you just outside the château gates. I will be there too as soon as I possibly can."

"Right!"

"You know your way?"

"I'll find it."

And so they parted: one going to the right, the other to the left. Both were soon swallowed up by the fog. A cabriolet came lumbering along presently. Blakeney hailed him, and ordered the driver to take him to the Town Hall.

10. THE ABBÉ EDGEWORTH

Chance favoured the two members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, my Lord Hastings and Lord Anthony Dewhurst. They had their orders from the chief and went straight to the Levets' house, and it was Levet himself who opened the door to them in answer to their ring at the outside bell. Briefly they told him who had sent them and what their orders were, and the old man went at once in search of his guest. The Abbé Edgeworth had in the meanwhile enjoyed Charles Levet's hospitality: he had had food, a little drink and a short rest, but he still appeared dazed and aghast, as if moonstruck and awed by everything that had happened to him since dawn the sudden call to attend his King, that terrible drive through Paris with the population silent and the clatter of thousands of armed men all around! Then the supreme moment when he had seen his King strapped to that hideous guillotine. He had made a crowning effort to smother his own horror and indignation and to speak to the martyred King a last word of encouragement: he had raised the crucifix and called out in a loud voice: "Son of St. Louis, ascend to heaven!" Nor had he faltered while that heinous crime was committed, which called to Heaven for vengeance, the crime that could never hope for forgiveness, the sin against the Holy Ghost!

After that everything had been turmoil and confusion: he had tried to concentrate on his devotions, to recite the Prayers for the Dead, but all round him men shouted and women shrieked, and sacrilegious hands were laid on the dead body of his King. He tried to pray, for he was not afraid, although there were shouts of "A la lanterne, le calotin!" He was not afraid. He was ready to follow the son of St. Louis on the path to heaven. Rough hands seized him, and dragged him down the steps of the guillotine. Hideous faces leered at him from above. He must have partly lost consciousness when he felt himself raised on powerful shoulders and thought that he was being taken straight to the nearest lamp-post with a halter round his neck.

The next thing he remembered was walking through the fog, in company with a man who held him up while he walked: the man, apparently, who had rescued him from the howling mob. And then the warmth and comfort of this hospitable house: kind voices uttering words of welcome, a warm drink, a bed on which to stretch his aching limbs. And now this kind old man telling him that all was well: powerful friends would take him to La Rodière where he would be received with open arms, and where he could remain until such time as a more permanent refuge could be found for him. The abbé was bewildered. Who, he asked, were those wonderful friends who had rescued him at peril of their own lives, and now continued their work of mercy? But Levet couldn't tell him. He spoke vaguely of a man who was professor at a university and seemed to have marvellous courage, and limitless resources. He himself had only known him a little while. Who he was, he couldn't say. He came and went mysteriously and equally mysteriously would invariably be on the spot when innocent men, women or children's lives were threatened. His dead wife had looked upon the man as a messenger from heaven. There was no time to say more just now. Old Levet urged the abbé to hurry.

A moment or two later he was standing once again at the gate of his house, watching three figures move away up the road. They looked like shadows in the fog. One of them was the Abbé Edgeworth. Levet didn't know the others. They had spoken to him in French, bringing a message from that mysterious Professor whom his dead wife had looked on as a messenger from heaven.

"Be sure," the priest had said when he finally took leave of his kind host, "be sure that he has a mandate from God."

These two who were emissaries of the Professor, had spoken French with a foreign accent. Levet thought they must have been English. But then it seemed incredible that foreigners would take any interest in the sufferings of Frenchmen who were loyal to their King. Englishmen especially. Why should they care? This awful revolution over here had nothing to do with them. Some people went so far as to assert that the English would soon declare war against France that is to say, not against France but against this abominable Republic which had established itself on a foundation of outrage and murder. Anyway, it was all quite inexplicable. Old Levet went indoors, very perplexed and shaking his head. He went straight into the room where his wife lay dead. Earlier in the day he had helped his daughter to set lighted candles at the head and foot of the bed and to dispose sprays of some everlasting shrub round the inert body of her who had been his life's companion for twenty-five years. Her hands were now reverently clasped round a crucifix.

Augustin was still in the room when Levet entered. He was talking in a subdued tone to a tall young man who had a tablet in his hand on which he was apparently making notes with a point of black lead. He was dressed in black from head to foot, with plain white frills at throat and wrists: he wore high boots, and his own hair, innocent of wig, was tied at the nape of the neck with a black bow. Apparently Levet knew that he was there, for he took no notice of him when he entered the room.

The young man, however, at once put tablet and pencil into his pocket and turned as if to go.

"Don't go, Pradel," Levet said curtly; "supper will be ready directly."

"If you will pardon me, Monsieur Levet," the other responded, "I will just say good night to Mademoiselle Blanche. I have been summoned to the château, and am already rather late."

"Some one ill up there?" the old man queried.

"Seemingly."

"Who is it?"

"They didn't tell me. Monsieur le Marquis's pet dog perhaps," the young doctor added with stinging bitterness, "or his favourite horse."

Levet made no remark on this. He moved to his wife's bedside, and Simon Pradel after bidding him and Augustin good night, went out of the room.

Blanche was in the sitting-room, apparently waiting for him.

"You are not going, Simon?" she asked eagerly as soon as he came through the door.

"I am afraid I must, Mademoiselle."

"Can't you stay and have supper with us?" she insisted so earnestly this time, that her voice shook a little and a few tears gathered in her eyes.

"I am sorry," he replied gently, "but I really must go."

"Why?"

He gave a slight shrug. "Professional visit, Mademoiselle," he said.

"You are going to the château," she retorted.

"What makes you say that?" he countered with a smile.

"You have your best clothes on, and your finest linen."

His smile broadened. It was a pleasant smile, which lent to his somewhat stern face a great deal of charm. He looked down ruefully at his well-worn suit of black.

"I have only this one," he said, "and I have great regard for clean linen."

Blanche said nothing for a moment or two. She was very obviously fighting a wave of emotion which caused her lips to quiver, and tears to gather thick and fast in her eyes. And all at once she moved up, close to him, and placed a hand on his arm.

"Don't go to the château, Simon," she entreated.

"My dear, I must. Madame la Marquise might be ill. Besides..."

"Besides what?" And as Simon didn't reply to this challenge, she went on vehemently: "You only go there because you hope to have a word or two with Cécile de la Rodière. You, a distinguished medical man, with medals and degrees from the great universities of Europe, you demean yourself by attending on these people's horses and dogs like any common veterinary lout. Have you no pride, Simon? And all the time you must know that that aristocrat's daughter can never be anything to you."

Pradel remained silent during this vehement tirade. He appeared detached and indifferent, as if the girl's lashing words were not addressed to him. Only the smile had vanished from his face leaving it rather pale and stern. When Blanche had finished speaking, chiefly because the words were choked in her throat, she sank into a chair and dissolved in tears. She cried and sobbed in a veritable paroxysm of grief. Pradel waited in silence till the worst of that paroxysm had passed, then he said gently:

"Mademoiselle Blanche, I am sure you meant kindly by me, when you struck at me with so much contempt and cruelty. I assure you that I bear you no ill-will for what you said just now. With your permission I will call in to-night on my way back from the château to see how your dear father is bearing up. Frankly, I am a little anxious about him. He is no age, but he has a tired heart, and he has had a great deal to endure to-day. Good night, Mademoiselle."

After he had gone Blanche remained for quite a long while, as if prostrate with grief. She was not crying now, but sobs, the aftermath of a flood of tears, shook her shoulders intermittently. Her head ached furiously, and she lay back in the chair, with eyes closed, almost in a state of torpor. From this she was presently aroused by her brother Augustin who came out from his dead mother's room, and seeing the girl there asleep, as he thought he said with some acerbity:

"Have you forgotten that it is supper-time, Blanche?"

Blanche roused herself sufficiently to go into the kitchen and order supper to be brought in at once. They all sat down to table and the old man said grace before he served the soup. They had just begun to eat, when a cabriolet drove up to the grille. A vigorous pull at the outside bell caused old Levet to rise. The family only kept one maid of all work and she was busy dishing up, so he went himself to the door as he most usually did: before he had time to reach the grille, the bell was pulled again.

"I wonder who that can be," Blanche remarked.

"Whoever it is seems in a great hurry," observed her brother.

Old Levet opened the door. Louis Maurin stepped over the threshold. He appeared breathless with excitement. Before Levet could formulate a question he thrust the old man back into the vestibule, exclaiming:

"Ah! My good friend! Such a calamity! Thank God I am just in time."

"In time for what?" Levet muttered. He had disliked the lawyer at all times, for he looked on him as a traitor and now a regicide, but never had he hated him so bitterly as he did to-day.

"I chanced to be at the Town Hall," Maurin went on, still breathlessly, "and heard that there is an order out for your arrest and I am afraid that the order includes your family and your guest," he concluded significantly.

Levet appeared to take the news with complete indifference. The mock arrest of the Abbé Edgeworth by two emissaries of Monsieur le Professeur had assured him that the priest at any rate had nothing to fear. He gave a slight shrug and said quietly:

"Let them arrest me and my family, if they want to. We are willing to share the fate of our King."

"Don't talk like that, my dear friend," the lawyer admonished earnestly; "such talk has become really dangerous now. And you have your son and daughter to think of."

"They are of one mind with me," Levet retorted gruffly, "and if that is all you have come to say..."

Instinct of hospitality, which with old Levet amounted to a virtue, did prevent his ordering this "traitor" summarily out of his house.

"I came from pure motives of friendship," the young man rejoined, in a tone of gentle reproach, "to warn you of what was impending. The matter is far more serious than you seem to realize."

"I needed no warning. Loyal people like ourselves must be prepared these days for any calamity."

"But there is your guest..." Maurin put in.

"My guest? What guest?"

"The man you brought to your house this afternoon. The authorities have got to know of this surreptitious visit. It has aroused their suspicion. Hence the order for your arrest and his."

Old Levet gave another shrug.

"There's no one here." He said coolly, "except my son and daughter and the maid."

"Come, come, my dear friend," the lawyer retorted, and his tone became more reproachful, and more gentle like that of a father admonishing his obstinate child, "you must not incriminate yourself by denying indisputable facts. I myself saw you introducing a stranger into your house, and your friend the professor can also bear witness to this."

"I tell you there's no stranger here," old Levet reasserted harshly. "And now I pray you to excuse me. My family waits with supper for me."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the sound of a rumble of wheels accompanied by the tramping of measured footsteps was heard approaching the house. There was a cry of "Halt!" outside the grille and then the usual summons: "In the name of

the Republic!" The grille was thrust open, there was more tramping of heavy feet over the stone path to the house, and loud banging on the massive front door.

"What did I tell you?" Maurin queried. He pushed past old Levet and strode quickly across the vestibule to the dining-room, where at the sound of that ominous call Blanche and Augustin had jumped to their feet. The lawyer put one finger to his lips and murmured rapidly:

"Do not be afraid. I am watching over you all. You have nothing to fear. But tell me quickly, where is the stranger?"

"The stranger?" Augustin responded "What stranger?"

"You know quite well," the other retorted. "Your father's guest, whom he brought here this afternoon."

"There has been no one here all day," Augustin rejoined quietly. "My mother died. Docteur Pradel was here to certify. There has been no one else."

Maurin turned sharply to the girl.

"Blanche," he said earnestly, "tell me the truth. Where is your father's guest?"

"Augustin has told you, Louis," she replied, "there is no one here but ourselves."

"They will search the house, you know," he insisted.

"Let them."

"And question your maid."

"She can only tell them the truth."

The lawyer was decidedly nonplussed. Looking about him, he could not help noticing that only three places were laid round the table, and that there were only three half-empty soup plates, there, while the tureen stood on the sideboard.

Through the door, which was ajar, he could hear old Levet give categorical replies to the questions which the sergeant of the guard put to him.

"There is no one here."

"Only the doctor came this afternoon."

"He came to certify."

"My son and daughter are at supper. My wife is dead. You can question the maid."

Maurin spoke once more to Blanche.

"Mademoiselle," he entreated, "for your own sake, tell me the truth."

"I have told you," she reasserted, "there is no one here except ourselves."

The lawyer smothered the harsh word which came to his lips: he said nothing more, however, turned on his heel and went out of the room.

"What is all this?" he asked curtly of the sergeant.

"You know best, Citizen Lawyer," was the soldier's equally curt reply.

"I?" Maurin retorted unblushingly. "What the devil has it got to do with me?"

"Well! It was you, I understand, who denounced these people."

"That is a lie. "Who did then?"

"A friend of the family, Professor d'Arblay."

"Where is he?"

"He had an accident in the road. Sprained his ankle. He had to drive home."

"Where is his home?"

"I don't know. I hardly know him."

"But you were with him in the Town Hall. You were seen coming out of the Chief Commissary's cabinet."

"I was there on professional business," the lawyer retorted tartly, "and you have no right to question me like that. I had nothing to do with this denunciation, as I have the honour of being on friendly terms with this family. And I may as well tell you that I shall use all the influence I possess to clear the whole of this matter up. So you had better behave decently while you are in this house. It won't be good for you if you do not."

He raised his voice and spoke peremptorily like one accustomed to be listened to with deference. But the sergeant seemed unimpressed. All he said was:

"Very well, Citizen. You will act, no doubt, as you think best in your own interests. I have only my duty to perform."

He gave a quick order to two of his men, who immediately stepped forward and took up their stand one on each side of Charles Levet. The sergeant then crossed the vestibule, and taking no further notice of the lawyer, he went into the dining-room. Blanche and Augustin had resumed their seats at the table. Blanche sat with her chin cupped in her hand. Augustin, his eyes closed, his fingers twined together, seemed absorbed in prayer. In the background Marie, the maid of all work, stood agape like a frightened hen.

The sergeant took a comprehensive survey of the room. He was a stolid-looking fellow, obviously a countryman and not over-endowed with intelligence, and he gave the impression that what he lacked in personality he strove to counterbalance by bluster: the sort of bumpkin, in fact, whom the Revolution had dragged out of obscurity and thrust into some measure of prominence, and who was determined to make the most of his unexpected rise to fortune. He took no further notice of the lawyer, cleared his throat, and announced with due pompousness:

"In the name of the Republic!"

He then unfolded a paper which he had in his hand, and continued:

"I have here a list of all the inmates of this house, as given to the Chief of Section this afternoon, either by Citizen Maurin or his friend the Professor with the sprained ankle, whose address is not known. I will read aloud the names on this list, and each one of you on hearing your name, say the one word. 'Present' and stand at attention. Now then!"

He then proceeded to read and to interpolate comments of his own after every name.

"Charles Levet, herbalist! We have got him safely already. Henriette his wife! She is dead, I understand. Augustin Levet, priest!...Why don't you answer?" he interposed peremptorily as Augustin had not made the required reply, "and why don't you rise? Have you also got a sprained ankle?"

Augustin then rose obediently and spoke the word:

"Present."

"Blanche Levet, daughter of Charles," the soldier continued.

"Present."

"Marie Bachelier, aide ménage."

"Here I am, Citizen Sergeant," quoth Marie, nearly scared out of her wits.

"And a guest, identity unknown," the soldier concluded. "Where is he?" He rolled up the paper and thrust it into his belt.

"Where is the guest?" he reiterated gruffly, and still receiving no answer, he asked once more: "Where is he?"

He looked round from one to the other, rolling his eyes and clearing his throat in a manner destined to impress these "traitors."

Augustin thereupon said emphatically: "There is no one here." And Blanche shook her pretty head and declared: "No one has been here all day except Citizen Maurin and the Citizen Doctor."

By way of a response to these declarations the sergeant of the Republican Guard turned on his heel and called to the small squad who were standing at attention, some in the vestibule, some outside the front door. To Blanche and Augustin he merely remarked: "We'll soon see about that." And to old Levet, who was standing patiently between the two soldiers, seemingly quite unmoved by what was going on in his house, he said sternly:

"I am about to order this house to be searched. So let me warn you, Citizen Levet, that if any stranger is found on your premises, it will be a far more serious matter for you and your family than if you had given him up of your own accord."

Old Levet merely shook his head and reiterated simply:

"There is no one here."

The sergeant then ordered his men to proceed with the search. It was thorough. The soldiers did not mince matters. They even invaded the room where Henriette Levet lay dead. They looked under her bed and lifted the sheet which covered her. Old Levet stood by, while this sacrilege was being committed, a silent figure as rigid as the dead. In the dining-room Augustin had once more taken refuge in prayer, while Blanche, half-dazed by all that she had gone through, sank back into a chair, her elbows resting on the table, and her eyes staring into vacancy.

Louis Maurin, as soon as the soldiers were out of the way, came and sat down opposite the young girl. He had remained silent and aloof while this last short episode was going on, but now he leaned over the table and began talking in an impressive whisper:

"Do not be afraid, Mademoiselle Blanche," he said. "I give you my word that nothing serious will happen to your father or to any of you, even if this meddlesome sergeant should discover your anonymous friend in this house. Please, please," he went on earnestly, as Blanche was obviously on the point of renewing her protest that there was no one here, "please say no more. I do firmly believe that you know nothing of what happened here this afternoon. As for your father Well! You know he is very silent and secretive. He may be sheltering some one who has come under the ban of the authorities. But I insist that you do not worry your pretty head about him, or about yourself and Augustin. I have a great deal of influence at the Commissariat and I give you my word that not later than to-morrow you will all be sitting having supper round this table. There now, let me see you smile. I tell you I can, and will, make the safety of those you care for a personal matter with the authorities. It might prove a little more difficult if your father has been sheltering some one surreptitiously instead of giving him up at once to the guard, but even so I can do it. My word on it, Mademoiselle Blanche."

He was very persuasive and very earnest. The ghost of a smile flitted round Blanche's pretty mouth.

"You are very kind, Louis," she said.

"I would do anything for you, Mademoiselle," the young man responded earnestly.

She sighed and murmured: "I cannot understand the whole thing."

"What can't you understand, Mademoiselle?"

"Monsieur le Professeur. He seemed such a friend. Do you really think that it was he?"

"Who caused all this trouble, you mean?"

"Yes!"

"Well! I am not sure," Maurin replied vaguely. "One never knows. He may be a spy of the revolutionary government and he may have denounced your father. They are very clever, those fellows. They worm themselves into your confidence, and then betray you for a mere pittance. I wish your father had not made such a friend of him. But as I assured you just now, Mademoiselle, you have no cause for worry. While I live, no possible harm shall come to you or to your family. You do trust me, don't you?"

She murmured a timid "Yes!" and gave him her hand, which he raised to his lips.

The soldiers in the meanwhile had continued their search on the floor above. The noise of heavy footsteps, of furniture being dragged out of place, of banging on walls and cupboards, disturbed the serenity of this house which at the moment, with its mistress lying dead, should have been an abode of peace. Whilst this loud chatter went on overhead, Maurin shot searching glances at the young girl to see if she betrayed any anxiety for the guest whom he firmly believed to be still in the house. But Blanche remained seemingly unmoved and, much to his chagrin, Maurin was forced to come to the conclusion that he had brought a squad of Republican Guards out on a fool's errand and that his well-laid plan would end in a manner not altogether to his credit, and not in accordance with his hopes.

A few moments later the sergeant and his men came clattering downstairs again, all of them obviously ill-tempered at having been dragged out of barracks at this hour and in such abominable weather. The sergeant kicked the dining-room door open with his boot, and addressed the lawyer in a harsh, almost insulting tone:

"I don't know what you were thinking of, Citizen Lawyer," he said, "when you stated before the Chief of Section that a suspicious stranger was lurking in this house. We have searched it from attic to cellar and there's no one in it except the family, one of whom is dead, and the others seemingly daft. At any rate, I can't get anything out of them. I don't know if you can."

"It's no business of mine, as you well know, Citizen Sergeant," Maurin responded coolly, "to question these people, any more than it is your business to question me. I attend to my duties, you had better attend to yours."

"My duty is to arrest the inmates of this house," the soldier countered, "and if they are wise they will come along quietly. Now then you," he added, addressing them all collectively: "Charles Levet, Augustin and Blanche Levet, and Marie Bachelier, I have a carriage waiting for you. Go and get ready quickly. I don't want to waste any more time."

Obediently and silently Blanche and Augustin made for the door. Blanche called to the maid who seemed by now more dead than alive.

"But this is an outrage," Maurin suddenly interposed vehemently, "you cannot leave the dead un-guarded. Some one must remain in the house to prevent any sacrilege being committed."

The sergeant shrugged. "Sacrilege?" he put in with a sneer. "What is sacrilege? And why shouldn't the dead woman be alone in the house. She can't run away. Anyway, if you feel like that, Citizen Lawyer, why don't you stay and look after her? Come on!" he concluded roughly, addressing the others, "didn't you hear me say I didn't want to waste any more time?"

He marshalled the three out of the room. As Blanche went past the lawyer, she threw him an appealing glance. He murmured under his breath: "I will look after her. I promise you."

Ten minutes later Charles Levet with his son and daughter and the maid were seated in the chaise, and were driven under arrest to the Town Hall, there to be charged with treason or intended treason against the Republic.

11. THE MORNING AFTER

But the very next day all was well. Charles Levet with his daughter and son, and the maid, had certainly passed a very uncomfortable night in the cells of the municipal prison, and the next morning had been conducted before the Chief of Section, where they had to submit to a searching examination. And here things did not go any too well. Charles Levet was taciturn and obstinate, Blanche voluble and tearful, and Augustin detached, and Marie the maid was so scared that she said first one thing then another, and all things untrue. The Chief of Section was impatient. He was desirous of doing the right thing, but he was a local man and the Levets were people of his own class: nothing "aristocratic" about them and, therefore, not likely to plot against the Republic, or to favour fugitive aristos. Indeed, he was very much annoyed that Maurin the lawyer a personal friend of his and also of his own class should have taken it upon himself to make incriminating statements against the Levets. To have indicted the Levet family for treason would have been a very unpopular move in Choisy where the old herbalist was highly respected and his pretty daughter courted by half the youth of the commune.

After the interrogation of the accused, the worthy Chief of Section had an interview with Maurin. The latter, as supple as an eel, wriggled out of his awkward position with his usual skill, and in a few movements had succeeded in persuading his friend that he, individually, had nothing to do with the false accusation brought against the Levets. He had, he said, been foolish enough to listen to the insinuations brought against these good people by a man whom he had met casually that day. A professor, so he understood, at the University of Grenoble.

"But why," the chief asked with some acerbity, "did you allow yourself to be led by the nose, by a man whom you hardly knew at all?"

"I said," the lawyer responded, "that I had met him casually that day, but I had often heard old Levet speak about him. He seemed to be a friend of the family and so—"

"A friend?" the other broke in. "But you say that it was he who denounced these people."

"It was."

"How do you make that out?"

"Between you and me, my friend," the lawyer replied confidentially, "I have come to the conclusion that that so-called university professor was just an agent provocateur, in other words, a spy of the government. There are a good many of those about, so I am told: the Convention makes use of them to ferret out obscure conspiracies, and treasonable associations. They get a small pittance for every plot they discover, and so much for every head that they bring to the guillotine."

"And so you think that this Professor—"

"Was just such another. I do. I met him outside the Levet's house. He took me by the arm, and led me to the Café Tison, where he began his long story of how he had seen old Levet bring a man surreptitiously into the house. I, of course, thought it my duty to let you know at once. You would have blamed me if I had not, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

The Chief of Section remained silent for a moment. Chin in hand, he reflected over the whole affair. He could not altogether dismiss the fact from his mind that some one, either his friend Maurin, or the mysterious professor had seen a stranger enter the Levets' house; and all afternoon yesterday there were persistent rumours that the priest who had attended Louis Capet to the last had unaccountably disappeared, even whilst the Convention at a special sitting of its Committee had ordered his arrest.

"One thing is very certain," Maurin now put in persuasively; "when your squad came to arrest the Levets there was no one in the house but themselves."

"They may have smuggled some one out."

"Where to, my friend?" the lawyer argued. And he added lightly: "Now you are crediting old Levet with more brains than he has got."

He paused a moment, then finally went on:

"I don't know what you feel about it all, my good man, but I am convinced in my own mind that Charles Levet had no other visitor in his house...except, of course, Docteur Pradel," he added as if in an afterthought.

"Ah, yes! Docteur Pradel...I hadn't thought about him."

"Nor had I...Till just now...."

Maurin rose and stretched out his hand to his friend who shook it warmly.

"Well!" He said glibly, "will you allow me to convey the good news to the Levets?"

"What good news?"

"That you have gone into the matter and have decided that the charge of treason against them has not been proved."

"Yes!" the chief responded after a moment's hesitation, "you may go and tell them that if you wish. I won't follow up the matter just now but, of course, I shall bear it in mind. In the meanwhile," he concluded as he saw his friend to the door, "I will just send for Docteur Pradel and have a talk with him."

Louis Maurin came away from that interview much elated. He had gained his point, and a very little clever wordy manipulation on his part would easily convince the Levets that they owed their freedom to him. The Professeur had fortunately kept out of the way. Maurin devoutly hoped that he really had broken his ankle and would be laid up for some days; by that time his wooing of the lovely Blanche, with the consent of her irascible papa, would be well on the way to a happy issue. But there was another matter that added greatly to his elation, and this was that he had put a spoke in the wheel of Simon Pradel, the one man in Choisy who, in his opinion, might prove a serious rival in the affections of Blanche. He was far too astute not to have scented this rivalry before now, and Blanche herself had unwittingly given his sharp eyes, more than one indication of the state of her feelings toward the young doctor.

Well! a rival out of the way is better than one who is constantly on the spot, and since times were getting troublesome now, it would not be difficult to keep a man out of the way permanently once the breath of suspicion touched him.

Everything then was for the best in the best possible world, and Louis Maurin made his way to the prison cells where the Levet family were still awaiting their fate, there to tell them that he and no one else had persuaded the Chief of Section to order their immediate liberation. Whether he quite succeeded in so persuading them, is somewhat doubtful, certainly as far as Charles Levet was concerned, for the old man remained as taciturn as ever in spite of the young man's eloquent protestations, whilst Augustin murmured something about good deeds being their own reward. But their lack of enthusiasm was countered by Blanche's outspoken gratitude. With tears in her eyes she thanked Louis again and again for all that he had done for them.

"We all tried to be brave," she said, "but, frankly, I for one was very frightened; as for poor Marie, she spent the night lamenting and calling on all the saints to protect her."

Later, when they reached the portal of the prison-house she said to her father:

"Let us drive home, Father. I am so anxious to know if everything has been all right in the house, with maman lying there alone."

It was a bright, frosty morning, but a thin layer of snow still lay on the ground. In this outlying part of the town, there were few passers-by and no cabriolets in sight, but a poor wretch in thin blouse and tattered breeches stood shivering in the middle of the road. He was an old man with arched back and wrinkled, grimy face; from under his shabby red cap wisps of white hair fluttered in the wind. His teeth were chattering as he murmured a prayer for charity. Maurin called to him:

"See if you can find a cabriolet, Citizen, and bring it along. You might get one in the Place Verte and there will be five sous for you. We'll wait for it at that tavern over the way."

The man raised a finger to his forelock and shuffled off in the direction of the Place Verte, his sabots made no sound on the thin carpet of snow.

"What misery, mon Dieu," Blanche sighed while she watched the old caitiff's retreating figure. "And this is what they call Equality and Fraternity. Can't anything be done for a poor wretch like that? He seems almost a cripple with that humped back."

"He could go to the Assistance Publique," Maurin replied dryly, "but some of these fellows seem to prefer begging in the streets. This one, I should say, has been a soldier in—"

He was about to say "in Louis Capet's army," but with Charles Levet within hearing, he thought better of it. This was obviously not the moment to irritate the old man.

"Come and drink a mug of hot ale with me while we wait," he suggested cheerily to the whole party. They were all very cold, having only had a meagre prison breakfast in the early hours of the morning: a small tavern over the way, at a short distance looked inviting. Old Levet would have demurred: he wore his most obstinate expression: but Blanche was obviously both weary and cold and the maid looked ready to faint with inanition; even Augustin cast longing eyes across the road. Louis Maurin without another word led the way. Levet followed reluctantly, the others with alacrity, and presently they were all seated at a table in a small stuffy room that reeked of lamp-oil and stale food, but sipping with gusto the hot ale which the land-lord, surly and out-at-elbows, had placed before them.

12. A FALSE MOVE

It was after the first ten minutes of desultory conversation among the party, that Louis Maurin made what he called afterwards the greatest mistake of his life. Indeed, he often cursed himself afterwards for that twinge of jealousy, coupled with boastfulness, which prompted him to speak of Simon Pradel at all. It was just one of those false moves which even an experienced chess-player might make with a view to protecting his queen, only to find himself checkmated in the end. Little did the astute lawyer guess that by a few words carelessly spoken he was actually precipitating the ruin of his cherished hopes and helping to bring about that extraordinary series of events which caused so many heartburnings, set all the quidnuncs of Choisy gossiping and remained the chief topic of conversation round local firesides for many weeks to come.

Blanche had drunk the ale, said a few pleasant words to Maurin, chaffed her brother and the maid, and relapsed into silence. Maurin, who was feeling at peace with all the world and very pleased with himself, queried after a time:

"Thoughtful, Mademoiselle?"

It seemed almost as if she had dropped to sleep for she gave no sign of response, and Maurin insisted.

"Of what are you thinking, Mademoiselle?"

She roused herself, gave a shrug, a sigh, a feeble smile and replied:

"Friends."

"Why friends?" he asked again.

"I was just wondering how many of our friends will have to suffer as we did last night...as innocently I mean...arrest...imprisonment...anxiety.... These are terrible times, Louis!"

"And there are worse to come, Mademoiselle," he declared ostentatiously; "happy those who have powerful friends to save them from disaster."

This hint was obvious, but neither old Levet nor Augustin responded to it. It was left for Blanche to say:

"You have been very kind, Louis."

Silence once more, until Augustin remarked:

"We were, of course, innocent."

"That helped a little, of course," Maurin was willing to admit, "but you have no idea how obstinate the Committee are, once there has been actual denunciation of treason. And we must always remember those poor wretches who for a miserable pittance will ferret out the secrets of some who have not been clever enough to keep their political opinions to themselves."

"I supposed it was one of those wretches who trumped up a charge against us," Blanche remarked.

"Undoubtedly. And I had all the difficulty in the world in fact I had to pledge my good name before I could persuade the Chief of Section that the charge was trumped up."

He paused a moment, then added self-complacently: "I shall find it still more difficult in the case of Simon Pradel, I'm afraid."

Blanche gave a start.

"Simon?" she queried. "What about Simon?"

"Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

Already Maurin realized that he had made a false move when he mentioned Pradel. Blanche all at once had become the living representation of eager, feverish anxiety. Her cheeks were aflame, her eyes glittered, her voice positively quavered when she insisted on getting an explanation from the lawyer.

"Why don't you answer, Louis? What is there to know about Simon?"

Why, oh, why had he brought the doctor's name on the tapis? He had done it primarily for his own glorification, and in order to stand better and better with the Levets because of his influence and his zeal. Never had he intended to rouse dormant passion in the girl by speaking of the danger which threatened Pradel. Women are queer, he commented with bitterness to himself. Let a man be sick or in any way in need of their help, and at once he becomes an object of interest, or, as in this case, simple friendship at once flames into love.

Old Levet, who had hardly opened his mouth all this while, and had seemed to be too deeply absorbed in his own thoughts to take notice what was said around him, now put in a word:

"Don't worry, my girl," he said; "Simon is no fool, and there is no one in Choisy who would dare touch him."

By this time, Maurin had succeeded in turning his thoughts in another direction. Self-reproach gave place to his usual self-complacency and self-exaltation. He had made a false move, but he thanked his stars that he was in a position to retrieve it.

"I am afraid you are wrong there, Monsieur Levet," he observed unctuously. "As a matter of fact, I happen to know that the Section has its eye on Docteur Pradel. His mysterious comings and goings yesterday, and his constant visits at the Château de la Rodière, which often extend late into the night, have aroused suspicion, and, as you know, from suspicion to denunciation there is only one step and that one sometimes leads as far as the guillotine. However, as I had the pleasure of telling you just now, I will do my best for the doctor, seeing that he is your friend."

"And that he is innocent," Blanche asserted vehemently. "There was nothing mysterious about Simon's comings and goings yesterday. He only goes to the château when he is sent for professionally, nor does he extend his visits late into the night."

Maurin shrugged.

"I can only repeat what I have been told, Mademoiselle," he said, "I can assure you..."

He felt that he had made another false move by saying that which was sure to arouse the girl's jealousy. Indeed, he was beginning to think that luck had not attended him in the manner he had hoped, and was quite relieved when the sound of shuffling sabots over the sanded floor cut this awkward conversation short. Maurin looked round to see the old beggar of a while ago standing in the middle of the room, waiting at a respectful distance till he was spoken to.

Maurin queried sharply:

"What do you want?"

The man raised a hand stiff with cold to his white forelock.

"The cabriolet, Citizen," he murmured.

The poor wretch seemed unable to say more than that. With trembling finger he pointed to the door behind him. A ramshackle vehicle drawn by a miserable nag was waiting outside. Levet paid for the drinks and the whole party made their way to the door. At the last, when the family had crowded into the cabriolet, old Levet pressed a piece of silver into the beggar's shaky hand.

Maurin remained in the road outside the tavern until the vehicle had disappeared at a turning of the street. He was not the man ever to admit, even to himself, that he was in the wrong, but in this case he had, perhaps, been somewhat injudicious, and he felt that he must take an early opportunity to retrieve whatever blunder he may have committed. Blanche was very young, he commented to himself; she scarcely knew her own mind, and Pradel was the man whom she met most constantly. But after this, gratitude would be sure to play an important rôle in the girl's attitude towards the friend who had helped her and her family out of a very difficult situation. Maurin prided himself on the fact that he had persuaded the girl, if not the others, that it was his influence and his alone that had brought about their liberation after a few hours' detention. She was already inclined to be grateful and affectionate for that. It would be his task after this to work unceasingly on her emotions and to his own advantage.

And reflecting thus, lawyer Maurin made final tracks for home.

BOOK II

THE DOCTOR

13. THE CHÂTEAU DE LA RODIÈRE

It had always been a stately château ever since the day when Luc de la Rodière, returning from the war with Holland after the peace of Ryswick, received this quasi-regal residence at the hands of Louis XIV in recognition for his gallantry in the field. It was still stately in this year 1793, even though it bore the indelible marks of four years of neglect following the riots of 1789 when the populace of Choisy, carried away by the events up in Paris and the storming of the Bastille, and egged on by paid agitators, marched in a body up to the château, smashed a quantity of furniture and a few windows and mirrors, tore curtains down and carpets up, ransacked the larders and cellars, and then marched down again with lusty shouts of the new popular cry: “A la lanterne les aristos!”

Luckily, Madame la Marquise with her son and daughter were absent on that day: they had gone up to Paris for the funeral of Monsieur le Marquis. Whether it was the emptiness of the house, or its atmosphere of faded flowers, stale incense, and burnt-out candles, which dampened the ebullient spirits of the crowd, it is impossible to say. Certain it is that after they had done what mischief they could on the ground floor, and then marched upstairs to the monumental ballroom, where they found lackeys and valets busy sweeping up dead floral wreaths, they felt awed all of a sudden: something of their old beliefs, of their respect for the dead, of all that these burnt-out candles and stale incense stood for kept them silent and subdued, even though such things had by government decree been denounced as superstition, and unworthy the dignity of man.

They had come up to the château determined to demand all sorts of things-they didn't know exactly what-and as there was no one there to give satisfaction to these demands, and the paid agitator had, as usual, kept carefully out of the way, these poor people felt very like a lot of dogs who had taken to the water, hoping to find something to play with, and merely succeeding in getting very wet.

But the mischief was done, and when the young Marquise with Madame, his mother, and Mademoiselle Cécile returned to La Rodière three days later, they found the château in the state in which the riotous crowd had left it; the stately hall on the ground floor, the banqueting room, the monumental staircase, the cellars and the larders, were a mass of wreckage. The terrified personnel of lackeys and female servants had run away, leaving the ballroom where their late master had lain dead, still a litter of dead flowers and linen cloths, of torn lace and stumps of wax candles. Only Paul Leroux and his wife Marie had remained. They were old people-very old-who had served feu Monsieur le Marquis and his father and mother before him, first as kitchen wench and scullion then on through the hierarchy of maid and valet, to that of butler and housekeeper. They had never known any other home but La Rodière: if they left it, they would not have known where to go: they had no children, no family, no kindred. And so they stayed on, after the mob had cleared away, and one by one the château staff-young and old, indoors and out of doors, garden and stable-men- had packed up their belongings and betaken themselves to their own homes wherever these might be. Paul and Marie stayed on and did their best to feed the horses and dogs that had been left behind, and to get a few rooms tidy and warm for the occupation of Madame la Marquise. And thus the widow and the young Marquis and Mademoiselle Cécile found them and their devastated home. Marie had prepared a meagre supper, Paul had brushed his clothes and polished his shoes, and placed such pieces of silver on the table as had escaped the attention of the mob. He wore his white gloves and served his young master and the family with the same solemnity as he had done, when half a dozen footmen were in attendance round the dinner-table.

Madame la Marquise, herself a scion of the old French noblesse, was far too proud to display her feelings before her servants, or before her children. She bore herself with marvellous courage during the terrible trial of this first evening in the wrecked château. Nor did she lose any of her dignity during the years that followed. In that attitude she emulated those of her own class with whom the watchword seemed to be not to let those assassins in the government know how bitterly they felt the repeated onslaughts on their property and on their privileges. Not one of them believed, in those early days of the Revolution, that such a state of tyranny and mob-law could persist, and secretly most of them-especially the older generation-nursed thoughts of exemplary retaliation. But the years rolled on and tyranny and mob-law did persist, and hopes of retribution had perforce to give way to a kind of proud indifference in the men and silent resignation in the women: but in the same way as tyranny and hatred grew in intensity in those who for centuries had been little else than bondslaves to the privileged classes, so did contempt for them and their accession to power continue to dwell in the hearts of the aristocrats. Where the latter had felt condescension and often kindly tolerance toward their subordinates, as in the case of Madame la Marquise, they had now, for the most part, nothing but lofty scorn for those whom they looked on as spoliators and assassins. The middle classes, those at any rate who professed liberal ideas, however moderate, they treated with contumely far worse than before: the local lawyer, the local doctor, the artist, the musician, all those in fact who were to a certain extent still dependent on them for their living, they still kept at arm's length: as for their actual dependants, the workers on their estate, or in the towns, they were the rabble in their sight, plagues which God sent down to earth to punish France for her sins.

To this attitude there were, of course, many and often pathetic exceptions. There were men and women, high-born, bred in every conceivable luxury, and now reduced to comparative poverty, who could always be called upon to assist those who were poorer than themselves. Cécile de la Rodière was one of them, so was the old Marquise to a certain extent, though in a more detached and aloof way. There were some even who had real understanding for the conditions that had brought about the present social upheaval, but these belonged for the most part to the younger generation: the old found it wellnigh impossible to accommodate themselves to the new order of things, which had made them subservient to those whom they had been bought up to regard as inferior products of God's creative scheme.

Madame la Marquise scarcely ever went out of doors and never beyond the park gates. She had a horror of meeting people who in the past would have curtsied or bowed low as she went past, and now merely nodded-nodded!-in a surly kind of way, or, if they spoke at all, would perhaps say: “Good day, Citizeness.” Citizeness! At least that is what she thought would occur if she set foot outside the house. So she remained most of the day in her boudoir doing crochet-work, or else turning out drawers full of beautiful laces and garments which she patted with loving hands, and put away again in soft paper with sachets of lavender. She invariably wore black, dresses from past days which she happened to have, some with hooped and quilted skirts, others with sacques, the rich silk of which had survived the wear and tear of years. She no longer wore powder on her hair, because she had used up the last box about a year ago,

and when she desired Marie to buy her some more, Marie said that the commodity could no longer be bought. Madame did not ask why; she guessed, and thereafter wore elaborate caps of old lace which she fashioned herself, and which entirely covered her hair.

Thanks to the goodwill of Paul and Marie some semblance of order had been brought into the devastated part of the château: broken window-panes were replaced and torn carpets and curtains put out of sight. In the stables most of the horses and valuable dogs were sold or destroyed: Monsieur le Marquis only kept a couple of sporting dogs and two or three horses for his own use. Then, as the winter grew severe and fuel and food became scarce and dear, three pairs of willing hands were recruited from Choisy to supplement the exiguous staff of the once luxurious household. These willing hands, two outdoor men to help in the garden and stables and a girl in the house were now called aides-ménage, the appellation servant or groom being thought derogatory to the dignity of free-born citizens of France. Even then, special permission for employing these aides had to be obtained from the government: and this was only granted in consideration of the fact that Paul and Marie Leroux were old and infirm, and that it was they and not the ci-devants who required help.

This, then was the house to which the Abbé Edgeworth was conducted in the evening of that horrible day when he had seen his anointed King perish on the guillotine like a common criminal. Ever since that early hour in the morning when he had been called in to administer the sacraments to the man who had once been Louis XVI, King of France, he had lived in a constant state of nerve-strain, and as the afternoon and evening wore on he felt that strain more and more acutely. Towards seven o'clock two men who looked more like cut-throats than any voluntary revolutionary guards the abbé had ever seen had conducted him to La Rodière. Before he started out with them old Levet had assured him that everything was being done to ensure his safety: the same powerful and generous friend who had rescued him from the hands of a howling mob had further engineered the final means for his escape out of France.

The old priest accepted this explanation in perfect faith and trust. He assured his kind host that he was not the least bit afraid. He had gone through such a terrible experience that nothing could occur now to frighten him. Nor did anything untoward happen on the way. He got very tired stumping up the rugged track which was a short cut to the château. The monumental gates, no longer closed against intruders, were wide open. The abbé and his escort passed through unchallenged and walked up the stately avenue. The front door of the mansion was opened to them by Paul, who stood by deferentially in his threadbare but immaculately brushed suit of black, whilst the old priest stepped over the threshold.

Tired though he was the abbé did not fail to turn immediately in order to express his gratitude to the two enigmatic ruffians who had guided his footsteps so carefully, but they had gone. Their footsteps in the clumsy sabots echoed down the long avenue for a time but they themselves had already disappeared in the gloom. Later on an attempt was made to overtake them, but perhaps the attempt was too desultory to lead to any result: anyway, no trace was found of these pseudo-revolutionaries about whom the abbé knew as little as anybody.

But this is by the way. The priest who by now was on the verge of exhaustion both mentally and physically, sank into an armchair which Paul offered him, and here he waited patiently with eyes closed and lips murmuring a feeble prayer while his arrival was being announced to Monsieur le Marquis.

A few moments later a young man came running down the stairs with arms outstretched, shouting a welcome even before he had caught sight of the priest.

François de la Rodière was the only son of the late Marquis. He had inherited the title and estates four years ago on the death of his father; he was a well-set-up, athletic-looking youth, who might have been called handsome but for an arrogant, not to say cruel, expression round his thin-lipped mouth, and a distinctly receding chin. He was dressed with utmost elegance, in the mode that had prevailed before the present regime of equality had made tattered breeches, threadbare coats and soiled linen, the fashion.

The abbé rose at once to greet him.

"We were expecting you, Monsieur l'Abbé," the young man said cheerily. "My mother and sister are upstairs. I hope you are not too tired."

The abbé was certainly tired, but he contrived to smile and to ask with some surprise:

"You were expecting me? But how could you know...?"

"It is all a long story, Father," François de la Rodière replied thoughtfully; "we are all of us under its spell for the moment. But never mind about that now. We'll tell you all about it when you have had supper and a rest."

The welcome which Madame la Marquise extended to the priest was no less cordial than that of her son. The Abbé Edgeworth, by virtue of his holy office, and because he had been privileged to attend the royal martyr during the last hours of his life, stood on an altogether different plane in the eyes of Madame than the rest of the despicable bourgeoisie. Thus Mademoiselle Cécile, her daughter, was ceremoniously presented to Monsieur l'Abbé, and so was the young English gentleman, my lord Devinne, a friend of the family, who had ridden over from Paris that afternoon, bringing news of the terrible doings there. He had, it seems, also brought tidings of the Abbé Edgeworth's early arrival at La Rodière.

It was while the family and their guest were seated round the supper-table that Mademoiselle Cécile related to the priest the mysterious occurrence which had puzzled them all since morning.

"It was all so wonderful!" she explained, "and I cannot tell you, Father, how excited I am, because the first intimation we had that you were coming was addressed to me."

"To you, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes! to me," she replied, "and you shall judge for yourself whether the whole thing is not enough to excite the most placid person, and I am anything but placid. Early this morning," she continued, "when I took my usual walk in the park, I saw down the avenue a scrubby-looking man coming slowly towards me from the direction of the gate. He was at some distance from where I was so I didn't really see him well, but somehow I knew that he had nothing to do with our own small staff. We are accustomed nowadays," she added with a pathetic little sigh, "to all sorts of people invading our privacy. This man, however, was obviously doing no harm; he just walked along, quite slowly, with his hands in his pockets, looking neither to right nor left. I didn't take any more notice of him until he came to one of the stone seats in the avenue. Then I saw him take a paper out of his pocket and lay it down on the seat, after which he

gave me a distinct sign, drawing my attention to the paper; he then turned and went back the way he came and I lost sight of him behind the shrubbery.”

She paused a moment, almost out of breath with excitement, then she went on: “You may imagine, Father, how I hurried to the seat and picked up the mysterious message. Here it is,” she said and drew from the folds of her fichu a crumpled piece of paper. “I have not parted from it since I picked it up and read its contents. Listen what it says: ‘The Abbé Edgeworth, vicar of St. André, who accompanied the King of France to the scaffold will claim your hospitality to-day for the night.’ Look at it, Monsieur l’Abbé. Isn’t it extraordinary? I have shown it to maman, of course, and to François. They couldn’t understand at all where it came from, until milord Divinne threw a still more puzzling light on the whole thing.”

She held the paper out to the priest who took it from her, put his spectacles on his nose and glanced down on the mysterious note.

“It certainly is very curious,” he said, “and it is not signed.”

“Only with a rough drawing of a small scarlet flower,” the girl observed. The priest handed the paper back to her. She took it, folded it together almost reverently and replaced it in the folds of her fichu. The abbé turned to the young Englishman:

“And you, milord,” he asked, “can actually throw some light on the sender of this anonymous message?”

“Not exactly that,” Devinne protested, “but I can tell you this: that small scarlet flower is a device adopted by the chief of a band of English gentlemen who have pledged themselves to save innocent men and women and children from the tragic fate that befell the King of France to-day.”

The old priest hastily crossed himself.

“May God forgive the sacrilege,” he murmured. Then he went on: “But what a high ideal, milord! Saving the innocent! And Englishmen, you say? Are you a member of that heroic band yourself?”

“I have that honour.”

“And your chief? Who is he?”

“Ah!” Devinne replied, “that is our secret and his.”

“Your pardon, milord! I had not thought to be indiscreet. The whole thing simply amazes me. It is so wonderful to do such noble deeds, to risk one’s life for the sake of others who may be nothing to you, and do it all unknown, probably unthanked! And to think that I owe my life to such men as you, milord, to your friends and to your chief! And that little red flower? It is a Scarlet Pimpernel, is it not?”

“Yes!”

“I seem to have heard something about it. But only vaguely. The police here speak of an anonymous English spying organization.”

“We do no spying, Monsieur l’Abbé. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel has nothing to do with politics.”

“I am sure it has not. But I understand that even the government is greatly disturbed by its activities, and has offered a large reward for the apprehension, milord, of your chief. But God will protect him, never fear.”

It was after this that the old priest seemed to collapse. He gave a gasp and sank back in his chair in a faint. François de la Rodière hastily called to Paul, and together the two men carried the old man upstairs to the room which had been prepared for him, and put him to bed. When they came back and explained that Monsieur l’Abbé appeared to be very ill, Madame la Marquise gave orders to Paul that Dr. Pradel be fetched at once.

“The doctor is in the house now, Madame la Marquise,” Paul observed.

“Doing what?” Madame asked.

“I sent for him, Maman,” François put in; “Stella needed a purge and César got a splinter in his paw. But I thought he would be gone by now.”

“And why hasn’t he gone?”

“Marie had one of her bad attacks of rheumatism, Madame la Marquise, and Berthe the kitchen girl had a poisoned finger. The doctor has been seeing to them.”

“Tell him to go up to Monsieur l’Abbé at once,” François commanded.

When Paul had gone, he turned to Lord Devinne.

“This is very unfortunate,” he said. “I do hope it won’t be a long affair. I don’t mind the abbé being here, say, a day or two, but you didn’t say anything about his being a sick man.”

“I didn’t know that he was,” the Englishman observed.

“Your wonder chief should have told you,” the other retorted with obvious ill-humour. “It won’t be over-safe either for maman or for the rest of us to be harbouring a man who is under the ban of this murdering government. Believe me, milord, I-”

He was interrupted by the opening of the door and the entrance of Simon Pradel. Madame la Marquise gave him a gracious nod, and Cécile a kindly glance. François, on the other hand, did not take the trouble to greet him.

“It is upstairs you have got to go,” he said curtly; “a friend of ours who was here at supper was suddenly taken ill.”

Simon took no notice of the insolence of the young man’s tone. He only frowned slightly, took his professional tablet and pencil from his pocket and asked:

“What is the name of your friend, Monsieur le Marquis?”

“His name has nothing to do with you,” the other retorted tartly.

“I am afraid it has, Monsieur le Marquis. I am bound by law to report to the local Section every case I attend within this area.”

Madame la Marquise sighed and turned her head away; the word “Section” or “law” invariably upset her. But François suffered contradiction badly, especially on the part of this fellow Pradel whom he knew to hold democratic if not revolutionary views.

“You can go and report to the devil,” he said with growing exasperation. He was still in a fume over the affair of the abbé’s inconvenient sickness, and now, what he considered presumption on the part of this purveyor of pills and purges, turned his annoyance into fury.

“Either,” he went on, not attempting to control his temper, “either you go and attend to my guest upstairs or you clear out of my house in double quick time.”

There was not much meekness in Simon Pradel either. The arrogance of these aristocrats exasperated him just as much as his own attitude exasperated them. His face went very white, and he was on the point of making a retort which probably would have had unpleasant consequences for everyone concerned when he caught a glance, an appealing glance, levelled at him out of Cécile's beautiful eyes.

"Our friend is old, Monsieur le Docteur," she said gently, "and very ill. I am sure he will tell you his name himself, for he has no reason to hide it."

The glance and the words froze the sharp retort on Pradel's lips. He succeeded in keeping his rising temper under control and without another word, and just a slight inclination of the head he went out of the room. François on the other hand made no attempt to swallow his wrath: he turned on his sister and said acidly:

"You were a fool, Cécile. What that fellow wanted was a sound thrashing: your amiability will only encourage him in his insolence. All his like ought to have tasted the whip-last long ago. If they had, we shouldn't be in the plight we are in to-day. Don't you agree with me, Maman?" he concluded, appealing to his stately mother.

But Madame la Marquise who was very much upset by the incident had already sailed out of the room.

14. AN OUTRAGE

It was at daybreak the following morning that Simon Pradel left the château. He had spent the whole night at the bedside of the Abbé Edgeworth, fighting a stubborn fight against a tired heart, which threatened any moment to cease beating. The old priest was hardly conscious during all those hours, only swallowing mechanically at intervals the cordials and restoratives which the doctor forced between his lips. Just before six he rallied a little. His first request was for a priest to hear his confession.

"You are no longer in danger now," Pradel said to him gently.

But the abbé insisted.

"I must see a priest," he said; "it is three days since I made confession."

"You have nothing on your conscience, I am sure, Monsieur l'Abbé, and I am afraid of too much mental effort for you."

"Concern at being deprived of a brother's ministrations will be worse for me than any effort," the old man declared with serene obstinacy.

There was nothing for it but to humour the sick man. Pradel immediately thought of Augustin Levet and decided to go and fetch him. He collected his impedimenta, left instructions with the woman who was in charge of the invalid, and made his way, with much relief, out of this inhospitable château. The morning was clear and cold, the sun just rising above the woods of Charenton, flooded the valley with its pale, wintry light. In the park one or two labourers were at work and in the stableyard away to the left Pradel saw three men, one of whom, a groom, was holding a horse by the bridle which another, presumably Lord Devinne was about to mount; the third had his back turned towards the avenue and Pradel couldn't see who it was. He was walking quickly now in the direction of the gate, and suddenly became aware of a woman's figure walking in the same direction as himself, some distance ahead of him. For the moment he came to a halt, and stood stockstill, hardly crediting his own eyes. It was not often that such a piece of good fortune came his way. The joy of meeting Mademoiselle Cécile, alone, of speaking with her unobserved, had only occurred twice during these last twelve months when first he had learned to love her.

Pradel was no fool. He knew well enough that his love was absolutely hopeless: that is to say he had known it until recently when the greatest social upheaval the world had ever seen, turned the whole fabric of society topsy-turvy. He would hardly have been human if he had not since then begun, not exactly to hope, but to wonder. Opposition on the part of these arrogant patricians who constituted Mademoiselle Cécile's family would probably continue, but there was no knowing what the next few months, even weeks, might bring in the way of drawing these aristocrats out of their fortresses of pride, and leaving them more completely at the mercy of the much despised middle class.

Pradel, of course, didn't think of all this at the moment when he saw Cécile de la Rodière walking alone in the park. He only marvelled at his own good fortune and hastened to overtake her. She was wrapped in an ample cloak from neck to ankles, but its hood had fallen away from her head and that same wintry sun that glistened on the river, touched the loose curls above her ears and made them shine like tiny streaks of gold.

All down the length of the avenue there were stone seats at intervals; the last of these was not very far from the entrance gate. Cécile came to a halt beside it, looked all round her almost, Pradel thought, as if she was expecting some one, and then sat down. At sound of the young man's footsteps she turned, and seeing him she rose, obviously a little confused. He came near, took off his hat, bowed low and said smiling:

"Up betimes, Mademoiselle?"

"The sunrise looked so beautiful from my window," she murmured, "I was tempted."

"I don't wonder. This morning air puts life into one."

Cécile sat down again. Without waiting for permission Simon sat down beside her.

"I might echo your question, Monsieur le Docteur," the girl resumed with a smile: "Up betimes?"

"Not exactly, Mademoiselle. As a matter of fact I am ready for bed now."

"You have been up all night?"

"With my patient."

"The dear old man! How is he?"

"Better now. But he has had a bad night."

"And you were with him all the time?"

"Of course."

"That was kind. And," the girl added with a smile, "did he confess to you?"

"No. But I guessed."

"Was he raving then, in delirium?"

"No. He was very weak, but quite conscious."

"Then how could you guess?"

"He is a priest, for he has a tonsure. He is a fugitive since his name was withheld. It was not very difficult."

"You won't..." she implored impulsively.

"Mademoiselle!" he retorted with gentle reproach. "I know. I know," she rejoined quickly. "I ought not to have asked. You would not be capable of such a mean action. Everyone knows how noble and generous you always are, and you must try and forgive me."

She gave a quaint little sigh, and added with a curious strain of bitterness:

"We all seem a little unhinged these days. Nothing seems the same as it was just a few years ago. Our poor country has gone mad and so have we, in a way. But," she resumed more evenly, "I must not keep you from your rest. You lead such a busy life, you must not overtire yourself."

"Rest?" he exclaimed involuntarily. "Overtire myself? As if there was anything in the world...."

He contrived to check himself in time. The torrent of words which were about to rise from his heart to his lips would have had consequences, the seriousness of which it had been difficult to overestimate. Cécile de la Rodière was woman enough to realize this also, but womanlike too, she didn't want the interview to end abruptly like this. So she rose and turned to walk towards the gate. He followed, thinking the while how gladly he would have lingered on, how gladly he would have prolonged this tête-à-tête which to her probably was banal enough but which for him had been one of the happiest moments of his lonely life. Cécile, however, said nothing till they reached the postern gate. Here she came to a standstill, and while he was in the act of opening the gate, she stretched her hand out to him.

"Am I forgiven?" she asked, and gave him a glance that would have addled a stoic's brain. What could a man in love do, but bend the knee and kiss the little hand. It was a moment of serenity and of peace, with the wintry sun touching the bare branches of sycamore and chestnut with its silvery light. Out of the depths of the shrubbery close by there came the sound of pattering tiny feet, the scarce perceptible movements of small rodents on the prowl. Then the beating of a horse's hoof in the near distance on the frozen ground, and a man's voice saying:

"A pleasant journey, my friend, and come and see us soon again," followed almost immediately by a loud curse and a shout:

"What is that lout doing there?"

Cécile snatched her head away, and turned frightened eyes in the direction whence the shout had come. But before Simon Pradel could jump to his feet, before Cécile could intervene, the young doctor was felled to the ground by a stunning blow from a riding-crop on the top of his head. All he heard as his senses reeled was Cécile's cry of horror and distress and her brother's infuriated shouts of "How dare you? How dare you?"

The crop was raised again and another blow came down, this time on the unfortunate young doctor's shoulders. But Pradel was not quite conscious now: he felt dizzy and sick and utterly helpless. All he could do was to put up one arm to shield his head from being hit again. He could just see Cécile's little feet beneath her skirt, and the edge of her cloak: he heard her agonized cry for help and Lord Devinne's voice called out:

"François! For God's sake stop! You might kill him."

He tried to struggle to his feet, cursing himself for his helplessness, when suddenly a curious sound came from somewhere close by. Was it from the shrubbery, or from the road opposite? Or from the cypress trees that stood sentinel outside the park gates? Impossible to say: but it had a curious paralysing effect on every one there, on that madman blind with fury as well as on his helpless victim. And yet the sound had nothing terrifying in it; it was just a prolonged, drawly, rather inane laugh; but the fact that it appeared to come from nowhere in particular and that there was no one in sight who could possibly have laughed at this moment, lent to the sound something peculiarly eerie. The age of superstition had not yet died away. François's curses froze on his lips, his cheeks became ashen grey, his arm brandishing the crop remained poised above his head as if suddenly turned to stone.

"What was that?" he continued to murmur.

"Some yokel in the road," Lord Devinne suggested, and then added lightly: "Anyway, my friend, it saved you from committing a murder."

The spell only lasted a few moments. Already François had recovered his senses, and with them, his rage.

"Committed a murder?" he retorted roughly. "I wish I had killed the brute."

He turned to his sister. "Come, Cécile!" he commanded.

She wouldn't come; she desired nothing else but to minister to the stricken man. He was lying huddled up on the ground and a gash across his forehead caused the blood to stream down his face; he had quite lost consciousness. François gave the prone, helpless form a vicious kick.

"François," the girl cried, herself roused to fury by his cowardice, "I forbid you...."

"And I swear to you that I will kill him, unless you come away with me at once."

He seized the girl by the wrist and tried to drag her away. The light of mania was in his eyes. His own fury had inflamed his blood, superstitious terror had also done its work, and the whole atmosphere of revolutionary France, materialized as it were in this low-born bourgeois who had dared to make love to the daughter of an aristocrat, completed the addling of his brain, so that by now he really was not quite sane.

Cécile, horrified and indignant and afraid that the boy might do some greater mischief still, turned to Lord Devinne and said coolly:

"Milord, my brother is not responsible for his actions, so I must look to you to act as a Christian and a gentleman. If you need help, please call to Antoine in the stables. He will attend to Docteur Pradel, until he is able to get home."

She gave him a curt nod. Indeed, she did not attempt to conceal the contempt which she felt for his attitude during the whole of this infamous episode, for with the exception of the one call to François:

"For God's sake, that's enough! you might kill him!" he had stood there beside his horse, with the reins over his arm, seemingly quite detached and indifferent to the abominable outrage perpetrated on a defenceless man. Even now as François by sheer force succeeded in dragging his sister away, he made a movement as if to get to horse again, until he met a last look from Cécile and apparently thought it better to make some show of human feeling.

"I'll get Antoine to give me a hand," he said, and leading his horse, he turned in the direction of the stables.

Chance, however, intervened. Antoine did not happen to be in the stables at the moment. Devinne tethered his horse in the yard, and then, after a few seconds' hesitation, he seemed to make up his mind to a certain course, and made his way round the shrubbery back to the château. His train of thought during those few seconds had been: "If I don't see Cécile now, she will brood over the whole thing, and imagine all sorts of things that didn't really happen."

Paul opened the door to him. He asked to see Mademoiselle. Paul took the message upstairs, but returned with a word from Mademoiselle that she was not feeling well and couldn't see anybody. Devinne sent up again, and again was refused. He asked when he might have the privilege of calling and was told that Mademoiselle could not say definitely. It would depend on the state of her health.

Useless to insist further. Devinne, very much chagrined, went back the way he came, feeling anything but at peace with the world in general and in particular with Simon Pradel, who was the primary cause of all this trouble. Back in the stable yard he found Antoine at work there; but all he did was to mount his horse and ride away without saying a word about a man lying unconscious by the roadside. However, when he rode past the gate he noted, rather to his surprise, that there was no sign of Simon Pradel.

“That sort of riff-raff is very tough,” was my Lord Devinne’s mental comment, as he put his horse to a trot down the road.

15. ALARMING NEWS

When Simon Pradel came back to complete consciousness, he found himself sitting propped up against a willow tree by the side of the little stream that runs winding its turbulent way for three or four hundred metres parallel with the road. His cloak was wrapped round him and his hat was at the back of his head. His head ached furiously and it took him some time to collect his senses and to remember what had happened. He put his hand to his forehead: it encountered a handkerchief tied round it underneath his hat.

Then he remembered everything, and insane fury took possession of him body and soul. Nothing would do but he must at once wreak vengeance on the coward who had reduced him to such a humiliating pass. He was strong, he was athletic, far more so than that effete young Marquis who had caught him unawares and struck him from behind before he had a chance of defending himself. All sorts of fantastic schemes, the result of fever in his blood, presented themselves to his mind while he struggled to his feet and, still rather giddy and stiff, made for the road, and thence toward the gate of the château. How he could best get a private interview with François de la Rodière at a spot where the young miscreant could not call anyone to his aid, was the puzzle that, for the moment, defied solution. The order had probably been given already that if he, Pradel, called at the château, the door should be slammed in his face. And he laughed aloud with rage and bitterness at thought that the man whose worthless life he could squeeze out with his own powerful hands was so hemmed in, even in these days, that nothing but mere chance would deliver him up to his victim's just revenge.

It was his own outburst of laughter that brought back to the young doctor's mind the curious incident which, as a matter of fact, had probably saved his life. There was not knowing to what lengths that madman would have gone in his senseless rage, had not that eerie laughter roused the echoes of the dawn and paralysed his murderous arm. But Pradel had no more idea than the others whence that laugh had come; all he knew was that it had saved his life, and that it remained as mysterious, as unaccountable as the fact that here he was, propped against a willow tree by the side of the stream, with his forehead bandaged, his hands and face wiped clean of blood and his clothes carefully freed from dirt. He did remember, but only vaguely, that he had been lifted off the ground by arms that seemed to be very powerful, and that he was being carried along in those same arms, he supposed across the road. There was also a moment when though semi-conscious, he seemed to hear that quaint laugh again, but this he put down to the figment of a dream. This new train of thought, however, did in a measure abate the worst of his fury. From thence to remembering more and more of the events of the morning was only a question of time. A few seconds, and he remembered Cécile, the beloved hand extended to him the kindly glance, the delicious tête-à-tête in the avenue. And he also remembered the Abbé Edgeworth and the old man's earnest request for the ministrations of a brother priest and his own determination to fetch Augustin Levet for this task.

Vengeance, then, would have to wait for that mere chance which might never come. God Himself had said "Vengeance is mine. I will repay!" What then?

With a last shrug of bitter contempt at his own impotence, Pradel turned his back finally on that château of evil. He was on the point of wending his way down the rough track, which is a short cut into Choisy, when he saw a shabbily dressed little man who seemed to be lurking desultorily at the angle of the road. He took no notice, however, not even when he became aware that as soon as he himself had started to follow the track, the man immediately turned and went leisurely down the other way.

Walking downhill on slippery frozen ground was a painful process, with every step a jar, and every movement a strain on aching limbs: but will-power is a sturdy crutch, and so many different thoughts were running riot in Simon Pradel's mind that they left no room in his brain for self-pity. Less than an hour later he was outside the Levets' house, ringing the front door bell. There was no answer. He rang again and again. It seemed strange, he thought, that there should be no one astir in the house to watch over the dead. Old Levet with his habit of wandering about the countryside was a very early riser, so was Marie the maid. Augustin, of course, might have gone to church, but there was Blanche also; surely the two women would not have left the dead unguarded.

Vaguely apprehensive, not knowing what to think, Simon thought he would go to the church close by where he knew the Levets worshipped, hoping to find Augustin there. As he turned out of the gate he met the Widow Dupont, a neighbour of the Levets, who, at sight of him, threw up her arms and exclaimed:

"Ah, Citizen Doctor, what a calamity!"

Pradel frowned inquiringly.

"Calamity? What calamity?"

"Didn't you know?"

"Know what?"

"The poor Levets! And the citizeness lying there dead, all alone! I and my girl would have gone in and kept watch as is only fitting, but we didn't know about it all until afterwards; and then the house was shut up like you see it now."

She talked on with the volubility peculiar to her kind. It was some time before Simon could get in a word edgewise:

"But, in God's name, what has happened?" he broke in at last.

"They were arrested last night."

"Arrested?"

"And they are all going to be guillotined," the worthy widow concluded, with that curious mixture of awe and complacency so characteristic of a certain type of countrywoman. "All of them! Poor old Levet, his saintly son, pretty little Blanche and Marie, the maid. Not that I would care about Marie as a maid. She is a good girl, but she is not thorough in her work, if you know what I mean—"

At this point she broke off, for she had caught sight of the bandage round the doctor's head:

"But you are hurt, Citizen Doctor!" she exclaimed. "Do come inside and let me—"

"It is nothing, Citizeness," he retorted impatiently; "only a false step on a slippery road. But—"

"One has to be so careful on a day like this, and I say that some of the roads about here are a disgrace to—"

"I know, I know. But tell me, how do you know all this, about the Levets? Did you see it happen?"

"No, Citizen, I did not. But I did see Citizen Maurin, the lawyer, afterwards—after they had all gone, that is, in a carriage and pair and lots of soldiers. I asked Citizen Maurin if they were really going to be guillotined, one never knows what may happen these days: like

that poor King now-I should say Louis Capet-one never knows. Does one?"

But Pradel had heard enough. With a hasty word of thanks to the voluble widow, he turned and walked rapidly up the street. It was no use trying to find Augustin now, but he went into the nearest church, saw the curé, asked him or his coadjutor to go at once to La Rodière to see a sick man, and then, anxious to get first-hand news, he went on to Maurin's office. There he was told by the servant that the citizen lawyer was out for the moment but was expected back for déjeuner. It was now close on ten o'clock and there would be two hours to kill; time enough to go back home, swallow a cup of coffee and get some rest before attending to his correspondence and professional work. As he walked away from Maurin's house, Simon happened to look back and was the shabby little man of a while ago go up to the front door and ring the bell. The same servant opened the door, but the shabby little man was at once admitted.

16. RUMOUR AND COUNTER-RUMOUR

There is nothing like a village or a small provincial town for disseminating news. Within a few hours of its occurrence it was known all over Choisy that a dastardly outrage had been committed on the person of the much-beloved and highly respected citizen, Dr. Pradel, by the ci-devant Marquis de la Rodière up at the château. Some of these rumours went even so far as to assert that it was a case of murder: this, however, was later on automatically contradicted, when Dr. Pradel was seen crossing the Grand' Place, looking pale and severe but certainly not dead.

Whence and how the rumour originated nobody knew but by the evening it was all over the place and the principal subject of conversation at street corners and in the cafés. Even the tragic event of the day before was relegated to the background while various versions of the story, more or less contradictory, went from mouth to mouth. Louis Maurin was one of the first to hear of it, and it made him very angry indeed. His aide-ménage, Henri, related to a crony afterwards that the citizen lawyer had had two visits from a seedy-looking individual, who often came to the office on business but whom he, Henri, didn't know by name. It was during this man's second visit that the citizen lawyer had flown into a rage. Henri had been quite frightened, and though he was not the least inquisitive by nature, he could not help overhearing what went on in the office.

"You consummate fool..." he heard his employer say.

And: "You told me to spread any rumours that were derogatory to him . . ."

Then again: "This is not derogatory, you idiot...it will just make a hero of him..."

All of which was very mysterious, as the crony was bound to admit. What a pity that the worthy aide-ménage could not hear more. It seems that the seedy-looking individual went away soon afterwards, looking very down in the mouth.

No wonder that Louis Maurin was furious. Everything he had planned recently for his wooing of Blanche Levet seemed to be going wrong. To spread rumours that were derogatory to Pradel's moral character was one thing. Blanche would be sure to hear of it, so would old Levet, and there was a good chance that the doctor would, in consequence, be forbidden the house. But to represent the man as the victim of aristocratic brutality and arrogance, to give, in fact, the whole incident a political significance, was to excite any young girl's imagination in favour of what she would call a martyr to his convictions. For that is the turn which the rumour had now taken. Dr. Pradel, so said the gossips, had professed liberal views: the ci-devants up at the château, enraged at the execution of Louis Capet, had lost all sense of restraint, and had vented their fury on the first victim who came to their hand. In the cafés and at street corners there was talk among the hot-headed youths of Choisy to go up to La Rodière in a body and extract vengeance from those insolent aristos for the outrage committed on a respected member of the community. If this project was put into execution Simon Pradel would, of course, at once become the most important personage in Choisy. He would be elected mayor without doubt, even perhaps member of the Convention; a second Danton or Robespierre, there was no knowing. In spite of the cold on this frosty January evening, Maurin perspired profusely at the prospect of seeing Blanche dazzled by the doctor's glory, and old Levet thinking it prudent perhaps to have such a progressive politician for his son-in-law.

The thought was maddening. Maurin didn't feel that he could endure it in solitude with only that fool of an aide-ménage for company. He saw the rosy future which he had mapped out for himself turning to darkly gathering clouds. It was now seven o'clock. The Levets would be at supper. He, Maurin, had every excuse for calling on them, to inquire after their health after the trying ordeals of the past twenty-four hours, and to offer his services in connexion with the funeral arrangements which could no longer be delayed.

Well wrapped up in a cosy mantle, the lawyer sallied forth. The Levets were at supper when he arrived. He was quite observant enough to note at once that there was an element of disturbance in the family circle. Blanche had evidently been crying: her eyes were heavy, and her cheeks aflame. She had pushed aside her plate of soup untasted. Augustin, serene and detached as usual, with his breviary propped up against a glass in front of him, was quietly finishing his, whilst Charles Levet's expression of face was inscrutable. Maurin had a shrewd suspicion, however, of what went on in the old royalist's mind. Pradel, in a sense, was his friend, and he was probably shocked at the story of the outrage, but deep down in his heart, the herbalist had kept a feeling of loyalty not only to his King, but to the seigneur. He had been born and bred in this loyalty, and in the belief that a seigneur, an aristocrat who was the prop and mainstay of the throne could do no wrong, or if he did, there was certainly a reason and an explanation for his misdoing. Augustin would look upon the outrage as the will of God, or a visitation of the devil, and would pray humbly and earnestly that Monsieur le Marquis de la Rodière be forgiven for his outburst of temper. Only Blanche would be indignant. Maurin's egoism merely attributed this to casual interest in a friend, the thought that the girl was seriously in love with the doctor, he dismissed as disturbing and certainly unlikely.

He had always prided himself on his tact. It was only his tact, so he believed, that enabled him ever to enter this house as a welcome guest, even though his political views were as abhorrent to old Levet as the plague. He entered the room now with hand out-stretched and an air of debonnaire geniality, coupled with the solemnity due to a house wherein its mistress lay dead. He was asked to sit down and was offered a glass of wine. He talked of funeral arrangements, connected with legal formalities; he asked after every one's health, professed to be the bearer of official apologies for the family's arrest and detention, and apparently was not aware that his volubility was countered by silence on the part of his three listeners. Blanche still looked very distressed, in fact, she seemed to have the greatest difficulty in restraining her tears. Maurin was on the point of broaching the subject of Pradel, when there was a ring at the bell.

"That'll be the Citizen Doctor," Marie remarked, and went waddling off like a duck to open the door.

"I'll see him outside," old Levet said, as he rose from the table. "Come Augustin!" he called to his son.

To Maurin, who had been watching Blanche keenly, it seemed as if it had been at a sign from her that her father had called to Augustin and with him had gone out of the room. A moment or two later he could hear two of the men talking together in the passage after which all three went into the sitting-room. There was no mistaking the expression in the girl's face now. It was all eagerness and excitement, and in her eyes there was just that look which only comes in a woman's eyes when the man she loves is near. Maurin cursed himself for his lack of judgement. He should have guessed which way the land lay and played his cards differently. It was not by involving Pradel in political imbroglios that he would succeed in turning Blanche against him. There were other means by which

the budding love of a young and inexperienced girl could be changed first to pique and thence perhaps to hatred. And pique would surely throw Blanche into the arms of the man who knew how to play his cards well, that man, of course, being himself.

Fortunately Louis Maurin did, in his own estimation, hold the trump card now, and he made up his mind to play it at once. He nodded in the direction whence the sound of men talking came as a faint and confused murmur, and said blandly:

“Our young friend in there has got over his trouble of this morning quite quickly. He-”

“Don’t speak of that outrage, Louis,” Blanche broke in vehemently; “I can’t bear it.”

“My dear,” he retorted suavely, “I was only going to say, that, like most men who are in love, he seems willing to endure both physical and moral humiliation, for the sake of the short glimpses he has of the lady of his choice. I don’t blame him. We are all of us like that, you know, all of us who know what love is. I would endure anything for your sake, Blanche...even blows.”

“And now you are talking nonsense,” the girl rejoined dryly. “There was no question of love in the unprovoked insult which that abominable aristo put upon Simon.”

The lawyer gave a light shrug and echoed with something of a sneer:

“Unprovoked? My dear Blanche!”

“Certainly it was unprovoked. Simon had been sitting up with a sick man all night. He was returning home in the small hours of the morning when that devil of a Marquis, coward as well as a bully, fell on him from behind and knocked him senseless before he could defend himself.”

Maurin gave a superior little smile.

“A very pretty story, my dear. May I ask from whom you had it?”

“Every one in Choisy will tell you the same. Every detail is known-”

“No, dear, not every detail; nor will every one in Choisy tell the pretty tale, for there is a man who stood by while the whole episode was going on, and who saw everything from the beginning.”

“Some liar, I suppose,” she retorted.

“No, not a liar. A man of integrity, of position, an official, in fact.”

“And what did he tell you?”

Maurin smiled once more. Imperceptibly this time. Blanche plied him with questions. She wanted to know. She did not, as older women would have done, refuse to hear another word that might prove derogatory to the man she loved.

“Simon Pradel, my dear Blanche, was discovered by François de la Rodière making love to his sister, in the early dawn...after a night spent at the château, but not with a sick man. He was, in fact, kneeling at Mademoiselle’s feet, kissing her hand in farewell. No wonder the ci-devant lost his temper.”

“It’s not true!” the girl cried, hot with indignation.

“I pledge you my word that it is,” the lawyer responded calmly.

Already Blanche had jumped to her feet. She went to the door, threw it open, and pointed to it with a dramatic gesture.

“Out of the house, Citizen Louis Maurin,” she said, speaking as calmly as he had done, “and never dare set foot into it again. You are a liar and a traducer and I hate you worse than any one I have ever known in all my life.”

She remained standing by the door, a forbidding, almost a tragic figure. Maurin remained for a time where he was, his eyes fixed upon her, pondering within himself what he should do. The girl’s sudden revulsion had struck him with dismay. It was so unexpected. Once again Fate, or a false move on his part perhaps, had upset all his plans.

For the moment, however, there was nothing for him to do but to obey. He rose slowly, picked up his hat and coat and went to the door. Striding past the girl he made her a low bow. As soon as he had gone through the door she slammed it to behind him.

17. TIMELY WARNING

It was in the early morning of the day following the outrage on Dr. Pradel that a cabriolet, more ramshackle perhaps than any that plied in Choisy, turned into the great gates of La Rodière and came to a halt at the front door of the château. A tall man, dressed in sober black, alighted from the vehicle and rang the outside bell. To Paul who opened the door to him, the tall man gave his name as d'Arblay, Professor at the University of Louvain in Belgium, and added that he desired to speak with Monsieur l'Abbé.

Paul was a little doubtful: one had to be so careful nowadays with so many spies of that murdering government about. The visitor looked respectable enough, but there was never any knowing, and Paul thought it wisest to shut the door in the "Professor's" face whilst he went to consult his better half. Marie too was doubtful. For months past now, no visitor had called at the château, and, of course, one never did know. In the end the two old people decided that the only thing to do as to report the whole matter to Monsieur le Marquis, and he would decide whether the "Professeur" was to be introduced into Monsieur l'Abbé's presence or not.

To their astonishment Monsieur le Marquis was overjoyed when he heard of the visit, and commanded that Monsieur le Professeur be shown at once into his own private room. Never had Monsieur le Marquis shown such condescension towards a member of the despised "bourgeoisie," and Paul ushered in the visitor with as much deference as he would have shown to one who had a handle to his name.

François de la Rodière was indeed more than condescending. He greeted the tall Professor most cordially.

"Your visit is more than welcome, sir," he said. "I have been expecting it ever since yesterday at noon, when I received one of those mysterious messages signed with the device of a small red flower which have already puzzled us. You, I suppose, know all about it."

"All?" the Professor replied. "Not exactly, Monsieur le Marquis. But I have been asked to call here in a cabriolet for Monsieur l'Abbé Edgeworth, and to drive with him as far as Vitry, where friends of his who are of Belgian nationality, and therefore safe from interference by the revolutionary government, will convey him safely to the frontier."

François could not help being impressed by the grave and dignified demeanour of this learned man, as well as by his exquisitely cut clothes and fine linen. Of course one didn't look on these people as one's equals. In spite of their erudition they had neither the culture, nor certainly the traditions, that made of one's own caste a privileged class; but this man seemed certainly superior to most of his kind. To begin with he spoke French with a precision that amounted to pedantry, and this was strange in a Belgian: their French was usually execrable. Then there was something almost noble in the man's bearing. He had not been asked to sit-of course not, in the august presence of Monsieur le Marquis-and stood there in an attitude of singular grace. He was tall and obviously powerful, and he had beautiful hands, one of which rested on the ivory knob of his cane. There was nothing Belgian about all that either, the Belgians being for the most part short and stocky and, with their Flemish ancestry were of a very different fibre to the aristocracy of France. Puzzled, François remarked casually:

"You are Belgian, are you not, Professor?"

"Cosmopolitan would be a better word, Monsieur le Marquis," the other replied coolly. "I trust Monsieur l'Abbé is in a better state of health. The journey might be trying for an invalid."

"Oh! he is much better. Much, much better," François replied, then went on in a confidential manner: "Entre nous, my good Professor, his being ill here was somewhat inconvenient, not to say dangerous for the safety of Madame la Marquise and all of us. I shall really be thankful to have him out of the way."

"I am sure. Especially in view of the fact that the people down in Choisy are none too friendly towards your family."

"Oh! the riff-raff down in Choisy do not frighten me. Riff-raff! that is all they are. They shout and yell and break a window or two. They did it once before, you know, four years ago. I was away at the time, or I would have put a few charges of shot into their vile bodies. I shall, too, and without compunction, if they dare show their ugly faces inside my gates. No! no, I am not afraid of that rabble. Let them come. They will get their deserts."

"It is sometimes best to be prepared."

"I am prepared. With powder and shot. The first man who sets foot on the perron is a dead man, so are all who follow him."

"Retreat before a powerful enemy is sometimes more prudent and often more brave than assured resistance."

"You mean run away before the canaille. Not I. I'll see them all in hell first."

"I was thinking of Madame la Marquise and Mademoiselle Cécile."

"Then, pray," François retorted, with supreme arrogance, "cease thinking of aught but your own business, which is to look after the welfare of Monsieur l'Abbé Edgeworth."

With that, he turned his back on his visitor and stalked out of the room, leaving the Professor standing there motionless, a thoughtful look in his deep blue eyes and a sarcastic curl round his firm lips. A moment or two later Paul came in.

"Monsieur l'Abbé is waiting to see Monsieur le Professeur," he said.

The latter gave a short, impatient sigh and followed Paul out of the room. His interview with the old priest was short. The abbé with that patient acceptance of fate which he had shown since the one catastrophic event two days ago, was ready to follow this unknown friend as he had followed the two ruffianly guards the other day from the Levets' home to the château. He made his adieux to the family who had so generously sheltered him, expressed his thanks to them, as well as to Paul and Marie, who had looked after him, and finally stepped into the cabriolet which he understood would take him on to Vitry first, there to meet Belgian friends who would drive him by coach to the frontier. Monsieur le Professeur sat by his side and drove with him for about a kilometre or so; he then called to the driver to stop, alighted from the vehicle and bade the old priest farewell.

"The friends, Monsieur l'Abbé," he said finally, "who will take care of you at Vitry and convey you to the frontier, are kind and generous. The head of the family has held an official position in Paris for the Belgian Government. He has a safe-conduct for you. Try and think of no one but yourself until you are over the border. God guard you."

He then spoke a word or two to the driver which the abbé failed to hear. There were two men on the box. One of them now got down and took his seat under the hood of the carriage. He looked something of a ruffian, but the abbé did not mind his looks. He was

used to friendly ruffians by now. He took a last look at the mysterious Professor, saw him standing bareheaded at the side of the road, his black cloak wrapped round his tall figure, one slender hand resting on the knob of his cane, his face a reflection of lofty thoughts within a noble soul.

It was a face and form the Abbé Edgeworth knew that he would never forget, even though he was destined never to see them again. As the driver whipped his nag, the priest murmured a prayer to God to bless and guard this mysterious friend to whom he owed his safety and his life.

18. IMPENDING TROUBLE

Three days had gone by since the incidents at la Rodière, and excitement in Choisy over the outrage on Dr. Pradel was working itself up to fever-pitch. In the evenings, men and women who had been at work in the government factories all day, would pour out in their hundreds and invade the cafés and restaurants, eager to hear further details of the abominable assault which by now had inflamed the passions of every adult in the commune. A devilish aristocrat had shown his hatred and contempt for the people by making a cowardly attack on one of the most respected citizens of Choisy, on a man who spent his life and fortune in ministering to the poor and doing good to every man, woman or child who called to him for help. Such an affront called aloud for vengeance. It was directed against the people, against the rights and privileges of every free-born citizen of France.

And paid agitators came down from Paris, and stood at street corners or on the tables in cafés and restaurants and harangued the excited crowds that readily enough gathered round them to hear them speak.

"Why, I ask you, Citizens," they would demand in ringing tones, "why did Louis Capet's head fall like that of a common criminal under the guillotine, a few days ago? Because he had conspired against the people. Conspired against our liberties: against yours, Citizens, and against mine. Judges and jury found him guilty, and pronounced death sentence upon him. King or ex-King, I didn't matter. He was found guilty by his fellow-men of having conspired against the people and he was punished by death. Then why, I ask you," the impassioned orator would then go on, "why should those ci-devants up at La Rodière not be punished also? The outrage which they have committed against the whole of our commune, and our commune must pronounce judgement upon them, by virtue of the sovereignty of the people of France."

Rapturous applause and shouts of "Vive la République" and "Vive" all sorts of other things greeted the peroration. "The sovereignty of the people" were magic words which always stirred the blood of every self-respecting citizen. They were spoken by men who knew how to work on the passions of poor, ignorant folk whose lot through life had been one of continuous struggle against misery and starvation, and whom it was easy enough to persuade that by the overthrow of all existing dynastic rights, the millennium for the humble and the lowly would surely come. They were men employed by the revolutionary government for the sole purpose of stirring up trouble in places where the bulk of the inhabitants appeared placid and contented with their lot. Such a place was this small commune of Choisy, where people like the Levets lived the simple life, following their own avocations without the usual show of discontent, and where men like Simon Pradel set the example of quiet, unassuming generosity.

And this was a grand opportunity for sowing seeds of anarchy and turbulence beloved by the government, seeds that had already brought forth wholesale massacres in Paris, and the tragedy of January 21st. So the men who were sent down by the government to make trouble, got their opportunity now. They enticed the crowds into cafés and restaurants, and standing on tables, throwing their arms about, they talked and they harangued and shouted: "Down with the aristos!" till these humble folk, intoxicated by promises of a millennium and a life of ease and plenty, took up the cry and shouted: "Down with the aristos! To hell with La Rodière and the whole brood up at the château!"

The chief centre of this growing agitation was the restaurant Tison adjoining the café of the same name on the Grand' Place; a great number of people, women as well as men, usually crowded in there in the evenings because it was known that the hero of the hour, Dr. Pradel, usually took his supper in the restaurant. People wanted to see him, to shake him by the hand and to explain to him how ready everyone was in Choisy to avenge his wrongs on those arrogant ci-devants up at La Rodière.

Unfortunately Simon Pradel did not see eye to eye with that agitated crowd. He resented his own impotence bitterly enough, but he didn't want other people—certainly not a lot of rioters—to make trouble up at the château and, God help them, strike perhaps at Mademoiselle Cécile whilst trying to punish her brother. Up to now he had succeeded in keeping the more aggressive hotheads within bounds. He had a great deal of influence with his fellow-citizens, was very highly respected and they did listen to him when he first begged, then commanded them to mind their own business and let him manage his own. In this, strangely enough, he had an ally in a man he detested, Louis Maurin, the lawyer, who appeared just as anxious as he was himself to put a stop to the insane project advocated by the agents of the government; this was to march in a body to La Rodière, there to loot or destroy the contents of the château as had already been done once, four years ago, and if not actually to murder the family of aristos, at any rate to give them a wholesome fright followed by exemplary punishment.

After Louis Maurin had ignominiously turned out of the Levets' house by Blanche, he did not attempt to set foot in it again. He took to frequenting the restaurant Tison more assiduously than ever before, there to use what influence he possessed to moderate the inflammatory harangues of the agitators, since he was hand in glove with most of these gentlemen. As a matter of fact the last thing in the world Maurin desired was an armed raid on La Rodière with Simon Pradel the centre of an admiring crowd, and the glorification of the one man who stood in the way of his cherished matrimonial schemes.

"You don't want to set the whole commune by the ears, Citizen Conty," he argued with the orator who had just ended an impassioned harangue amidst thunderous applause. "It is too soon for that sort of thing. The government wants you to incite the people to patriotism, to inflame their love for their country, not to work on this silly sentiment for one man, who, before you can put a stop to it, would become a sort of hero of the commune, be elected mayor and presently be sent to the Convention, there to become a dictator and rival to Robespierre or Danton, and what will you gain by that? Whereas if you will only bide your time..."

"Well, what should I gain by biding my time according to you, Citizen Lawyer?"

"Give those aristos up at the château enough rope, and presently you will be able to denounce them and get a big reward if they are condemned. I have known as much as twenty livres being paid for the apprehension of a ci-devant Marquis and thirty for his women-folk. As for a prominent citizen like that fellow Pradel, I know that I can get you fifty livres the day he is brought to trial for treason."

The other man shrugged, spat and gave a coarse laugh.

"Do you hate him so much as all that, Citizen Lawyer?" he queried.

"I do not hate Docteur Pradel," Maurin replied loftily, "more than I do all traitors to the Republic, and I know that Pradel is a traitor."

"How do you know that?"

"He is constantly up at the château. He puts his professional pride in his pocket and gives purges to the ci-devants' horses and dogs. And do you know why he was thrashed the other morning? Because he had spent the night with the wench Cécile, and was bidding her a fond farewell in the early dawn, when they were both caught in a compromising position by her brother, who took the law in his own hands and broke his riding-crop over the shoulders of the amorous young doctor."

Conversation was difficult in this atmosphere of noisy excitement. Maurin sat down at a table and asked Citizen Conty to join him in a plate of soup to be followed by onion pie. He had had no supper yet, and was hungry, but Choisy had done badly lately in the matter of provisions. It was too close to Paris to get the pick of the market and the commune had to be content with what was left over from the capital. In the farther corner of the crowded restaurant a small troupe of musicians were scraping the catgut, blowing down brass instruments and banging on drums to their own obvious satisfaction, for they made a great noise, wagged their heads and perspired profusely while they supplemented their ear-splitting attempts at a tune by singing lustily in accompaniment. They had struck up the opening bars of the old French ditty:

"Il était une bergère.

Et ron et petit pataplon."

The young people took it up:

"Il était une bergère.

Qui gardait ses moutons ton, ton.

Qui gardait ses moutons."

The older folk also joined in till the low-raftered room was filled with a deafening uproar that would effectually have drowned any further attempt at oratory on the part of Citizen Conty and his like.

"These cursed catgut scrapers," the latter cried in exasperation. "I'll have them turned out. One can't do anything with these fools while this row is going on."

He stood up on his chair and tried to shout, but while he shouted the crowd bellowed:

"El-le fit du fromage.

Et ron et ron petit pataplon.

El-le fit du fromage.

Du lait de ses moutons, to-ton.

Du lait de ses moutons."

The leader of the band was particularly active. Where he had got his fiddle from it was difficult to imagine: it gave forth sounds now creaking, now wheezing, anon screeching or howling and always discordant, provoking either laughter or the throwing of miscellaneous missiles at his head. They were all of them a scrubby lot, these musicians, unwashed, unshaved, in ragged breeches above their bare legs, shoes down-at-heel or else sabots, and grubby Phrygian caps adorned with tricolour cocades on their unkempt heads. They called themselves an itinerant orchestra whom the proprietor of the restaurant had enticed into the place under promise of a hot supper, and they were obviously doing their best to earn it:

"Le chat qui la regarde.

Et ron et ron petit pataplon."

"That rascal over there should be made to do honest work," Conty grunted, after he had made several vain attempts to shout the musicians down. "I call it an outrage on the country for a big hulking fellow like that to scrape a fiddle and ogle the girls when he should be training to fight the English."

"To fight the English?" Maurin interposed. "What do you mean, Citizen?"

He and Conty had a tureen of hot soup on the table between them. Each dipped into it with a big ladle and filled up his plate to the rim. The soup was very hot and they blew on their spoons before conveying them to their mouths.

The musicians lifted up their cracked voices with a hoot and a cheer, whilst the chorus took up the lively tune:

"Le chat qui la regarde

D'un petit air fripon, pon, pon.

D'un petit air fripon. "and the leader of the band, suiting the action to the word, cast side glances on the girls with an air as roguish as that of the cheese-maker's cat.

"What do you mean, Citizen Conty," the young lawyer reiterated, "by talking about fighting the English?"

"Just what I say," Conty replied. "We shall be at war with those barbarians before the month is out."

"Who told you that?"

"You'll hear of it, Citizen Lawyer. Ill news travels apace."

"But how did you know?" Maurin insisted.

"We government agents," Conty observed loftily, "know these things long before you ordinary people do."

"But..."

"As a matter of fact," the other now condescended to explain, "I was in Paris this morning. I met a number of deputies. There will be a debate about the whole affair in the Convention to-night. Citizen Chauvelin," he went on confidentially, "is back from London since the twenty-first. His work over there is finished, and he is travelling round the country on propaganda work for the government. Secret service, you know. I spoke with him. He told me he would be in Choisy to-night to have a look round. Now, you see," Conty concluded, as he attacked the savoury onion pie, "why I want to get all these fools into the right frame of mind. We want to show Paris what Choisy can do. What?"

"Chauvelin?" Maurin mused. "I've heard about him."

"And you'll see him presently. A clever fellow, but hard as steel. He was sent to England to represent our government, but he didn't stay long, and, name of a dog, how he does hate the English!"

The musicians had just led off with the last verse of the popular ditty:

“La bergère en colère.

Et ron, et ron, petit pataplon. “ when Conty jumped to his feet, and with a hasty: “There he is!” pushed his way through the crowd towards the door.

Armand Chauvelin, ex-envoy of the revolutionary government at the Court of St. James, had just returned from England, a sadder and wiser man: somewhat discredited perhaps, owing to his repeated failures in bringing the noted English spy, known as the Scarlet Pimpernel, to book but nevertheless still standing high in the Councils of the various Committees, not only because of his great abilities, but because of his well-known hatred for the spy who had baffled him. He was still an important member of the Central Committee of Public Safety, and as such both respected and feared wherever he went.

Conty, the political agitator, was all obsequiousness when greeting this important personage. He conducted Citizen Chauvelin to the table where Louis Maurin had also finished eating, presented him to the lawyer, after which the two men pressed the newcomer to partake of supper as their guest. Chauvelin refused. He was not staying in Choisy this night, having other business to attend to, he said, in the Loiret district. He wouldn’t even sit down. Despite his small, spare figure, he looked strangely impressive in his quietude, and, dressed as he was in sober black, amidst this noisy, excited crowd, many inquisitive glances were turned on him as he stood there. His thin white hands were clasped behind his back and he was listening to the answers which Conty and Maurin gave him in reply to his inquiries about the temper of the people in Choisy, and to their story of the outrage perpetrated on Docteur Pradel by the ci-devant Marquis up at La Rodière. This story interested him; he encouraged Conty in his efforts to keep the excitement of the populace at boiling point, and to inflame as far as possible the hatred of the people against the aristos. An armed raid on the château, he thought, would be a good move, if properly engineered, and as he intended to be back in Choisy in a couple of days, he desired the project to be put off until his return.

“Those aristos at La Rodière interest me,” he said. “There is an old woman, you say?”

“Yes,” Conty informed him; “the ci-devant Marquise, the mother of the present young cub who thrashed Docteur Pradel.”

“And there is a girl? A young girl?”

“Yes, Citizen, and two old aides-ménage. But they are harmless enough.”

“It would be so much better-” Maurin ventured to say.

“I was not asking your opinion, Citizen Lawyer,” Chauvelin broke in haughtily. “What I’ve said, I’ve said. Prepare the way, Citizen Conty,” he went on, “and as soon as I am back in Choisy I will let you know. If I mistake not,” he added under his breath, almost as if he didn’t wish the others to hear what he was saying, “we shall have some fun over that raid at La Rodière. An old woman, a young girl, two old servants! The very people to arouse the sympathy of our gallant English spies.”

He nodded to the two men and turned to go. The crowd in the small restaurant was more dense than ever. People were sitting on the tables, the side-boards, and on top of one another. The musicians had just played the last bar of the favoured tune, the chorus of which was bawled out by the enthusiastic crowd, to the accompaniment of thunderous handclaps and banging of miscellaneous tools on any surface that happened to be handy:

“La bergère en colère.

Tua son petit chanton, ton, ton.

Tua son petit chanton.”

Chauvelin had real difficulty in pushing his way through the dense throng. The vociferous shouts that filled the low room with a clamour that was deafening made him quite giddy. He would have liked to put his hands to his ears, but he had need of his elbows to get along at all. He felt dazed, what with the noise and the smell of stale food and of unwashed humanity; at any rate, he put his curious experience down to an addled state of his brain, for while he was being pushed and jostled, and only saw individual faces through a kind of haze made of dust and fumes, he suddenly felt as if a pair of eyes, one pair only, was looking at him out of the hundreds that were there. Of course, it was only a hallucination: he was sure it was, and yet for some reason or other he felt a cold shiver running down his spine. He tried to recapture the glance of those eyes, but no one now in the crowd seemed to be looking at him. The musicians had finished playing, or rather they tried to finish playing, but their audience wouldn’t allow them to. Every one was shouting at the top of his voice:

“Il était une bergère.”

They wanted the whole of the six verses all over again.

Chauvelin got as far as the door, was on the point of opening it when a sound—the sound he hated more than any on earth—reached his ear above the din: it was a loud, prolonged, rather inane burst of laughter. Chauvelin did not swear, nor did he shiver again: his nerves were suddenly quite steady, and if he could have translated his thoughts into words, he would have said with a chuckle: “I was right, then! and you are here, my gallant friend, at your old tricks again. Well, since you wish it, à nous deux once more, and I think I may promise you some fun, as you call it, at La Rodière.”

19. THE LEAGUE

Although Choisy is only twelve or fifteen kilometres from Paris, it was in those days just a small provincial town, with its Hôtel de Ville and its Committee of Public Safety sitting there, its Grand' Place, its ancient castle then used as a prison, and its famous bridge across the Seine. To the south and west of the Grand' Place there were two or three residential streets with a few substantial, stone-built houses, the homes of professional men, or of tradespeople who had retired on a competence, and farther along a few isolated, poorer-looking houses, such a one as old Levet's lying back from the road behind a small grille and a tiny front garden. But all these features only covered a small area, round which stretched fields and spinneys, with here and there a cottage for the most part roofless and derelict.

It was in one of these dilapidated cottages which stood in a meadow about half-way between Choisy and the height on which was perched the Château de la Rodière, that what looked like a troupe of itinerant musicians had sought shelter against the cold. They had made up a fire in the wide open hearth; the smoke curled up the chimney, and they sat round with their knees drawn up to their chins and their arms encircling their knees. It was the middle of the morning. The wintry dawn had been fine, but already its beauty had gone: ugly grey clouds gathered overhead, and a few thin flakes of snow were beginning to fall. The men sitting there appeared to be waiting for something or someone. They didn't say much: one or two of them were smoking clay-pipes, others were munching bits of stale bread or scraps of cheese which they drew out of their pockets. There were four of them altogether inside the cottage, and one sat outside on a broken-down stool propped against the wall, apparently on the watch. They all looked as if they had just donned such garments as they happened to picked up in an old clothes dealer's shop—a blouse, or a knitted vest, sabots or shoes down at heel, and breeches very much the worse for wear. In a corner of the room a number of musical instruments were piled up, a miscellaneous collection of violin, guitar, trumpet and drum. Precariously perched on top of this pile of rubbish sat Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the most fastidious dandy fashionable London had ever known, the arbiter of elegance, the friend of the Prince of Wales, the adored of every woman in England. He too was unwashed, unkempt, unshaved, his slender hands, those hands a queen had once termed exquisite, were covered with grime, his nails were in the deepest mourning. He wore a tattered blouse, sabots stuffed with straw on his bare feet, threadbare breeches and on his head a Phrygian cap which had once been red. At the moment he was scraping a fiddle, drawing from it wailing sounds that provoked loud groans from his friends and an occasional missile hurled at his head.

"Percy, if you don't leave off..." one of them threatened, and shied a mouldy piece of cheese at his chief.

"What will you do if I don't?" Sir Percy countered, and successfully dodged the missile, "for I am not going to leave off. I must get this demmed tune right, as we surely will be made to play it presently."

He went on scraping the opening bars of the new "Marseillaise."

"We are in for some fine sport, I imagine, what?" Lord Anthony Dewhurst remarked, and dug his teeth into a hard apple, which he had just extracted from his breeches' pocket.

"Tony," one of the others demanded—it was my Lord Hastings, "where did you get that apple?"

"My sweetheart gave it me. She stole it from her neighbour's garden . . ."

My Lord Tony got no further. He was attacked all at once from three sides. Three pairs of hands were stretched out to wrest the apple from him.

They were just a lot of schoolboys on the spree, these men, enjoying this life of voluntary penury and intense discomfort, sometimes even of starvation and always of short-commons, for it was not always thought advisable for the type of ragamuffin that they appeared to be to buy sufficient food in the markets, in places where the movements of every man, woman and child were known and reported to the police. But they didn't mind. They loved it all. It was such sport, they said, and all in the wake of their chief whom they would follow to the death.

"We are in for some fine sport!" Lord Tony had declared, before the attack on his apple was launched. He held it up at arm's length, trying to rescue it from his assailants who made grabs at it and invariably got in one another's way, until a firm hand finally seized it and Blakeney's pleasant drawly voice was raised to say:

"I'll toss you all for this precious thing...what there is left of it."

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes won the toss, and the apple, which had suffered wreckage during the fight, was finally hurled at the head of the revered chief, who had resumed his attempts at getting a tune out of his cracked fiddle. A distant church clock had struck eleven a few minutes ago. The man on the watch outside put his head in at the door and announced curtly:

"Here he comes."

And presently Devinne came in. He was dressed in his ordinary clothes with dark coat, riding breeches and boots. His face wore a sullen look and he scarcely glanced either at his friends or at his chief, just flung himself on the ground in front of the fire and muttered between his teeth:

"God! I'm tired!"

After a moment or two while no one else spoke he added as if grudgingly:

"I'm sorry I'm late, Percy. I had to put up my horse and..."

"Listen to this, you fellows," Blakeney said with a chuckle as he scraped his fiddle and extracted from it a wailing version of the "Marseillaise."

Young Devinne jumped to his feet, strode across the floor and snatched the fiddle out of Blakeney's hand.

"Percy!" he cried hoarsely.

"You don't like it my dear fellow? Well I don't blame you, but—"

"Percy," the young man rejoined, "you've got to be serious...you have got to help me...it is all damnable...damnable...I shall go mad if this goes on much longer...and if you don't help me."

He was obviously beside himself with excitement, strode up and down the place, his head pressed tightly, against his forehead. The words came tumbling out through his lips, whilst his voice was raucous with agitation.

Blakeney watched him for a moment or two without speaking. His face through all the grime and disfigurement wore that expression of infinite sympathy and understanding of which he, of all men, appeared to hold the secret, the understanding of other people's troubles and difficulties, and that wordless sympathy which had so endeared him to his friends.

"Help you, my dear fellow," he now said. "Of course, we'll all help you, if you want us. What are we here for but to help each other, as well as those poor wretches who are in trouble through no fault of their own?"

Then, as Devinne said nothing for the moment, just continued to pace up and down, up and down like a trapped feline, he went on:

"Tell us about it, boy. It is this La Rodière business, isn't it?"

"It is. And a damnable business it will be, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you do something about it in double quick time. Those ruffians in Choisy are planning mischief. You knew that two days ago, and you have done nothing. I wanted to go up to La Rodière to warn them of what was in the wind. I could have done it yesterday, gone up there this morning. It wouldn't have interfered with any of your plans: and it would have meant all the world to me. But what did you do: You took me along with Stowmarries to drive that old abbé as far as Vitry, a job any fool could have done."

"But you did it so admirably, my dear fellow," Sir Percy put in quietly, when young Devinne paused for want of breath. He had come to a halt in front of his chief, glaring at him with eyes that held anything but deference; his face was flushed, beads of perspiration stood on his forehead and glued his matted hair to his temples.

"Percy...!" he cried, not trying to disguise his exasperation. But Blakeney went on still quite quietly:

"You did the fool's job, as you call it, as admirably as you have always done everything the League set you to do; and you did it because you happen to have been born a gentleman and the son of a very great gentleman who honoured me with his friendship, and because you have always remembered that you swore to me on your word of honour that, while we are all of us engaged on the business of the League, you would obey me in all things."

"An oath of that sort," the young man retorted vehemently, "does not bind a man when—"

"When he is in love, and the woman he loves is in danger..." Sir Percy broke in gently. "That is what you were going to say, was it not, lad?"

He rose and put a kindly hand on Devinne's shoulder.

"Don't think I don't understand, my dear fellow," he said earnestly. "I do. God knows I do. But you know that the word of honour of an English gentleman is a big thing. A very, very big thing and a very hard one sometimes. So hard that nothing on earth can break it: but if by the agency of some devil, that word should get broken, then honour is irretrievably shattered too."

"Now tell me," he resumed more lightly, "did you on your way back from Vitry call on Charles Levet and tell him that the Abbé Edgeworth is by now safely on his way to the Belgian frontier?"

Devinne looked sullen.

"I forgot," he said curtly.

The others—Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, my Lord Hastings—had not spoken one word since Devinne had come into the room. Sir Philip Glynde (he was the son of the head of the great banking firm Glynde & Col, of Throgmorton Street), who had been on the watch outside, was leaning against the door-jamb, whilst keeping an eye on the road. He too was silent like the others and, like the others, his face expressed something like horror. It is a little difficult to estimate in these less romantic times, the depth of feeling that all these young men had for Percy Blakeney. It was a feeling akin to reverence, and the love they bore him had no resemblance to any love that any man has ever felt for another...and this because that love had its foundation in admiration for the character of the man: his extraordinary selflessness, his perfect disregard of personal danger and the cheerfulness with which he sacrificed everything, his personal comfort, even his love for his wife, in the cause of suffering humanity. And now to think that this boy...this... this young muckworm daring to...to what?...to defy their chosen chief...? It was unthinkable. Sir Andrew thought it sacrilege, Lord Tony unsportsmanly; Hastings would have struck him in the face, and Glynde would have taken him by the scruff of his neck and thrown him out into the road.

Blakeney gave a quaint little laugh:

"Gad! That is a pity," he said. "Fancy forgetting a little thing like that. But we have no control over our memory, have we? Well, dear lad, you have a long walk before you, so you'd best start right away now. Tell Charles Levet that the abbé is now with some Belgian friends who are looking after him. I promised the old man that I would let him know, he has been very good to us, and we must keep in touch with him. I have an idea that he and his family may have need of us one day."

Devinne still looked sulky.

"You want me to go to the Levets' house? Now?"

"Well, you did forget to call in on your way. Didn't you?"

"Then don't expect me back here—I shall go straight on to La Rodière."

There was a slight pause, during which no human sound disturbed the kind of awed hush that had fallen over this squalid, derelict place. Blakeney had scarcely made a movement when young Devinne thus flung defiance in his face. Only Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, the man who perhaps among all the others knew every line around the mouth of his chief, and every expression in the deep-set lazy blue eyes, noted a certain stiffening of the massive figure, and a tightening of the firm lips. But this only lasted for a few seconds. The very next moment Blakeney threw back his head and his prolonged inimitable laugh raised the echo of the dilapidated walls. The humour of the situation had tickled his fancy. This boy!!!...Well!...It was absolutely priceless. Those flaming eyes, the obstinate mouth, the attitude of a schoolboy in the act of defying his schoolmaster, and half afraid of the cane in the dominie's hand seemed to him ludicrous in the extreme.

"My dear fellow," he said, and once again the friendly hand was laid on Devinne's shoulder, and the kindest of lazy blue eyes looked down on this contumacious boy, "you really are a marvel. But don't let me keep you," he went on airily. "I don't suppose the Levets will invite you to dinner, and if they don't it will be hours before you are there and back and able to get something to eat. Anyway, you will meet us again in the restaurant, without fail, at one o'clock."

This, of course, was a command. Blakeney had been standing between Devinne and the direct access to the door. He now stepped a little to one side, leaving the way free for the young man to go out. There was an awkward moment. Devinne, half-ashamed but still half-defiant, would not meet the chief's gently ironical glance. The others said nothing, and after a minute or two, he finally strode out of the cottage. A thin layer of snow lay on field and road, and deadened the sound of his footsteps. Glynde after a time put his head in at the door.

"He is out of sight," he announced.

Lord Hastings jumped to his feet.

"My turn to watch," he said. "Glynde is frozen stiff."

"Never mind about the watch now," Sir Percy interrupted. "We are fairly safe here, and there are one or two things I want to talk over with you fellows."

With a gesture of the hand he seemed to dismiss Devinne and the boy's incipient rebellion out of his mind and to ask the others to forget also. They were willing enough to do this for the time being; there was nothing in the world they enjoyed more than to talk things over with the chief. Hunger, cold, discomfort, even dirt were all forgotten when they could squat round on the floor and hear him tell them of those wonderful adventures which he planned and which had for their aim the rescue of innocent men, women and children, from the hands of an administration that knew neither mercy, justice nor restraint; adventures, full of danger and excitement, which had become as the breath of life to them all.

"We are agreed, are we not?" Blakeney resumed, as soon as he held their full attention, "that for the next day or two we must concentrate on those wretched people up at La Rodière. Monsieur le Marquis François we care nothing about, it is true, but there is the old lady, there is the young girl and there are the two old people who have been faithful servants and are, therefore, just as much in danger as their masters. We cannot leave François out of our calculations because neither his mother nor his sister would go away without him. So it will be five people-not to say six-whom we shall have to get over to England as soon as danger becomes really imminent. That might be even no later than this evening. We shall be up there with the riotous crowd during the afternoon, and we shall have our fiddle, our trumpets and our drums, not to mention our melodious voices with which we can always divert their thoughts from unprofitable mischief, to some equally boisterous but less dangerous channels. You all know the ropes now: we have played that game successfully before and can do it again, what?"

There was unanimous assent to the project.

"Yes, by gad!" came from one of them.

"It is a game I particularly affection," from another.

"Always makes me think of tally-ho!"-this from the keen sportsman, Lord Anthony Dewhurst.

And: "Go on, Percy! This is violently exciting,"-from them all.

The fire had burned itself out; no one thought of feeding it; for one thing there was no more fuel. The wind drove in by the rickety door and unglazed window; they were shivering with cold, these young exquisites, but they were hard as nails, and certainly they didn't care. Excitement kept them warm. They were just like schoolboys looking forward to a raid on a neighbour's orchard, and they hung breathless on the lips of the man, their leader, who had planned the adventure for them.

"We'll bide our time, of course," Blakeney now continued. "Our friends, the worst of the hotheads, once they have accomplished their purpose and asserted their rights and privileges to make themselves unpleasant to the aristos, will turn their backs on La Rodière, their spirits slightly dampened perhaps. They will then crowd into the nearest cabaret, there is one close to the château, they will talk things over, eat and drink and allow those hellish agitators to talk their heads off, while we shall continue to addle their brains with strains of sentimental music. And all the time we'll be watching the opportunity for action. Of course, during the course of a long afternoon a number of incidents are certain to occur which we cannot foresee and which will either aid or hinder us. You know my favourite motto, to take Chance by the one hair on his head and force him to do my bidding. In a small place like this by far our best plan will be to proceed once more to La Rodière as soon as the crowd has made its way back to Choisy and we find the coast fairly clear. We'll go in the guise of a squad of Gendarmerie Nationale and there arrest Monsieur le Marquis, his mother, his sister and the two faithful old servants. With a little luck, those tactics are sure to succeed."

He paused a moment, striding up and down the narrow room, a set look on his face. His followers who watched him waited in silence, knowing that through that active brain the plan for the daring rescue of those innocents was gradually being elaborated and matured. After a time Blakeney resumed.

"I am not taking Devinne with us at any time this afternoon. The crowd up at the château is certain to deal harshly with the family, and if Mademoiselle Cécile is rough-handed he might do or say something rash which would compromise us all. So I shall send him to our headquarters outside Corbeil, to instruct Galveston and Holte to have horses ready and generally to be prepared for our arrival with a certain number of refugees, among whom there will be two ladies. Galveston is very expert in making all arrangements, I know I can trust him and Holte to do the necessary as far as lies in their power."

"At what time do you think you will carry the whole thing through, Percy?" one of the others asked. "The arrest, I mean, and the flight from La Rodière?"

"I cannot tell you that just yet. Sometime during the night, of course. I would prefer the early dawn for many reasons, if only for the sake of the light. The night might be very dark, bad for fast driving. But I will give you instructions about that later. It will only be by hearing the talk around us that I shall be able to decide finally. I shall also have to ascertain exactly how much help mine host of the cabaret will be willing to give us."

"You mean the cabaret on the Corbeil road, not far from La Rodière?"

"A matter of two or three hundred yards, yes. It boasts of the poetic sign: 'The Dog Without a Tail' I have been in touch with mine host and his Junoesque wife already."

"Percy, you are wonderful!"

"Glynde, you are an ass."

Laughter all round and then Blakeney resumed once more:

"There will also be Pradel to consider."

"Pradel?" one of them asked. "Why?"

"If we leave him here, we'd only have to come back and get him later. They'll have him, you may be sure of that. He has one or two bitter enemies, as men of his outstanding worth always have, and there are always petty jealousies both male and female that make for mischief. Anyhow, he is too fine a fellow to be left for these wolves to devour. But I shall be better able to judge of all this after I have gauged the temper of the crowd both at la Rodière and afterwards."

"That young Marquis was a fool not have got away before now."

"He wouldn't hear of it. You know their ways. They are all alike. Some of them quite fine fellows, but they have not yet learned to accept the inevitable, and the women, poor dears, have no influence over their menfolk."

"Then we are going up to La Rodière with the crowd, I take it," Lord Hastings observed.

"Certainly we are."

"You haven't forgotten, Percy, by any chance..." Sir Andrew suggested.

"I think not. You mean, my dear friend Monsieur Chambertin, beg pardon, Chauvelin?" Blakeney rejoined gaily. "No, by gad, I had not forgotten him. I am pining for his agreeable society. I wonder now whether during his last stay in London he has learned how to tie his cravat as a gentleman should."

"Percy! will you be..." Lord Tony hazarded.

"Careful, was the word you were going to say, eh, Tony? Of course, I won't be careful, but I give you my word that my friend Chambertin is not going to get me — not this time."

A soft look stole into his deep-set eyes. It seemed as if he had seen a vision of his exquisite wife Marguerite wandering lonely and anxious, in her garden at Richmond waiting for him, her husband and lover, who was her one absorbing thought, whilst he... She too was his absorbing thought, the great thought, that filled his mind and warmed his heart: but it was not all-absorbing. Foremost in his mind were all those innocents, little children, men and women, young and old who, unknown to themselves seemed to call to him, to stretch out imploring arms towards him for comfort and for help: those were the moments when Marguerite's lovely face appeared blurred by the rain of tears shed in devastated homes and inside prison walls, and when he, the adoring husband and devoted lover, dismissed with a sigh of longing, all thoughts of holding her in his arms.

Such a moment was the present one, when the name of his deadly enemy recalled as on a transient picture, his life of happiness and of ease in England: the garden at Richmond, his beautiful wife, the many friends, and a sigh of longing for it all came involuntarily to his lips. But the moment was very brief. A few seconds only went by, and Sir Percy Blakeney was once more the Scarlet Pimpernel, the man of action and of heroic self-sacrifice, the leader with so forceful a personality that he was able to hold nineteen men to his will, obedient to his commands, ready to face every kind of danger, even to meet death at a word from him.

"And now," he said, his voice perfectly firm and incisive, "it is time that we collected our goods and saw whether our friends down at Choisy are ready for the fight."

They set to, to collect their musical instruments, their fiddles and drums and trumpets. Just for a moment the glamour of the coming adventure faded before one hideous fear of which not one of them had ever spoken yet, but which troubled them all.

Blakeney was humming the tune of the "Marseillaise."

"I wish I could remember the words of the demmed thing," he said. "What comes after: 'Aux armes, citoyens!?' Ffoolkes, you ought to know."

Sir Andrew replied almost gruffly: "I don't," and Lord Tony called suddenly to his chief:

"Percy."

"Yes! What is it?"

"That fellow, Devinne..."

"What about him?"

"You don't trust him, do you?"

"The son of old Gery Rudford, the straightest rider to hounds I ever knew? Of course I trust him."

"I wish you wouldn't," Hastings put in.

"The father may have been a sportsman," Glynde added; "the son certainly is not."

"Don't say that, my dear fellow," Blakeney rejoined; "it sounds like treason to the rest of us. The boy is all right. Just mad with jealousy, that's all. He has offended his lady love and she will have nothing more to do with him. I dare say he is sorry that he behaved quite so badly the other morning. I'll admit that he did behave like a cad. He is only a boy, and jealousy...well! we know what a bad counsellor jealousy can be. But between that and doing what you all have in your minds...Egad! I'll not believe it!"

Hastings murmured savagely: "He'd better not."

Sir Philip Glynde nearly punched a hole in the drum, trying to express his feelings, and Lord Tony muttered a murderous oath. Sir Andrew alone said nothing. He knew—they all did, in fact—that Blakeney was one of those men who are so absolutely loyal and straight, that they simply cannot conceive treachery in a friend. Not one of them trusted Devinne. It was all very well making allowances for a boy thwarted in love, but there had been an expression in this one's face which suggested something more sinister than petty jealousy, and though nothing more was said at the moment, they all registered a vow to keep a close eye on his movements until this adventure in Choisy, which promised to be so exciting, had come to a successful issue, and they were all back in England once more, when they hoped to enlist Lady Blakeney's support in persuading Percy not to rely on young Devinne again.

20. A LIKELY ALLY

Heavy hearted and still sullen and rebellious, St. John Devinne, familiarly known as Johnny, made his way through the town to the Levets' house. All sorts of wild schemes chased one another through his brain, schemes which had the one main objective in view to see Cécile de la Rodière, and, by giving her and her family warning of the mischief contemplated against them by the rabble of Choisy, to worm himself once more into her good graces and regain the love which he had forfeited so foolishly. Indeed, he had every hope of achieving this happy state of things through the fact that it was obviously Simon Pradel who had inflamed the temper of his fellow-citizens, by posing as the heroic victim of his own political opinions. Devinne himself was so convinced of Pradel's rôle in the affair, that he did not think he would have the slightest difficulty in persuading even Cécile that that abominable doctor was the instigator of all the coming trouble, in order to be revenged on her bother for the well-deserved thrashing which he had received.

Chance has a very funny way of shuffling the cards in the game of life. Here were two men, Louis Maurin, the French lawyer, and Lord St. John Devinne, son of an English Duke, both deadly enemies of Simon Pradel, the local doctor, who hardly knew either of them but who was looked upon by both as a serious rival to their love, a rival who must incontinently be swept out of the way. Maurin desired his moral and physical downfall in order to find his way clear for the wooing of Blanche Levet, whilst Devinne had reluctantly come to the conclusion that Cécile de la Rodière had so far demeaned herself as to fall in love with the fellow. She certainly had turned her back on him.

Devinne, ever since that fatal morning, and unless he now took strong measures on his own behalf, he might lose all chance of ever winning her.

These thoughts, as well as certain contumacious ones against the discipline imposed on him by "the chief," kept the young man's mind busy while he made his way through the town. Snow was falling in thin flakes: it was very cold, and there were few people about. It was then just past twelve o'clock: at half-past the workers in the government factory would be coming out and cafés and restaurants would soon be filled to overcrowding.

The new calendar with its Sans-Culottides, its Republican years and its Décadis, had not yet been evolved, and this was still Sunday-not a Christian Sunday, surely, but just a Day of Rest, with factories closed in the afternoon and hours during which paid agitators and government spies could find work for idle hands to do and thoughts of mischief for empty heads to plan. Devinne hurried along, hoping to deliver his message at the Levets and be well on the way to La Rodière before the crowd had been stirred into an organised march on the château. He pulled the collar of his greatcoat up to his ears and his head down to meet it, for the wind blowing right across the Grand' Place was cutting. At the angle of the Rue Verte he suddenly became aware of the man who at the moment was foremost in his thoughts. Simon Pradel was standing at the corner of the street, talking to a girl whose head was swathed in a shawl. Devinne thought that in her he recognized Levet's daughter, whom he had once seen at the château. She was talking heatedly and appeared distressed, for her voice shook as she spoke, and she had one hand on Pradel's arm as if she were either entreating or restraining him. As he went past them, Devinne heard the girl say:

"Don't go up there, Simon! Those aristos hate you. They will only think that you are fawning on them.... Don't go, Simon.... You will regret it, and they will despise you for it...they will . . ."

She seemed to be working herself up into a state of excitement and kept on raising her voice until it sounded quite shrill.

Pradel tried to pacify her. "Hush, my dear," he said; "don't talk so loud: anyone might hear you."

But she was not to be pacified:

"I don't care who hears me," she retorted; "those aristos are devils who deserve all they will get. Why should you care what happens to them?...You only care because you are in love with Cécile...."

She burst into tears. Pradel put an arm round her shoulders.

"And now you talk like a foolish child...."

Devinne had instinctively halted within earshot, but now he was in danger of being seen and this he did not wish, so, rather reluctantly, he turned and went his way. It was too soon yet to gauge the importance of what he had heard, but already he felt that in this girl, who was obviously half crazy with jealousy, he might find a useful ally, should he fail to obtain an interview with Cécile on his own initiative. In any case, she must have the same desire that he had, namely, to keep Cécile and Pradel apart. This thought elated him, and it was with a more springy step that he strode briskly down the Rue Verte and after a few minutes rang the outside bell of the Levets' house.

Charles Levet opened the door to him, received the message sent to him by his friend Professor d'Arblay, expressed his satisfaction at hearing that Monsieur l'Abbé Edgeworth was safely on his way to Belgium, asked his visitor to join the family at dinner, and on the latter's courteous refusal, bade him a friendly farewell. Back the other side of the gate. Devinne paused a moment to reconsider the whole situation. Should he continue his protest against an irksome discipline, which he felt was incompatible with his dignity as a man of action and of thought, or should he make a virtue of necessity, meet Blakeney and the others in the Restaurant Tison, hear their plans and then act in accordance with his own schemes and in his own interest?

On the whole he felt inclined to adopt the latter course. He didn't want to quarrel with Blakeney, not just yet, nor yet with the others who were all influential and popular men about town, who might, if the split came, make his position extremely uncomfortable in London. There was nothing he desired more at the moment than to extricate himself from the entanglement of the League, but he was wise enough to realise that if this was done at this juncture, he would, on his return to England, find the doors of more than one smart hostess closed against him. So for the moment there was nothing for it but to keep his appointment with Percy and the others in the Restaurant Tison, and in any case learn what plans were being evolved for this afternoon. If nothing was going to be done right away for the safety of Cécile, then he would act on his own. To this he had fully made up his mind. All this would mean going back now to that horrible cottage and getting once more into those filthy rags which he had come to hate, but he didn't really care now that he knew he could count on the co-operation of a jealous woman, whom he had heard cry out in a voice shrill with emotion: "You only care because you are in love with Cécile!"

BOOK III MADEMOISELLE

21. CITIZEN CHAUVELIN

It must not be thought for a moment that authority as represented by the Gendarmerie Nationale, regular or volunteer, in any way approved, let alone aided and abetted, the insurrectionary movements that were such a feature of the first two years of the Revolution. Authority did not even wink at them, did its best, in fact, to put a stop to these marches and raids on neighbouring châteaux which only ended in a number of broken heads, in loot and unnecessary violence, and a severe remonstrance from the government who had its eye on all property owned by ci-devants and strongly disapproved of its wanton destruction at the hands of an irresponsible mob.

Thus it was that as soon as Simon Pradel became aware of the imminence of the mischief contemplated against the aristos up at La Rodière, and thinking only of Cécile and her safety, he went straight to the Hotel de Ville and drew the attention of the Chief Commissary of the Gendarmerie to what was in the wind.

"Citizen Conty," he explained, "has inflamed everyone's temper to such an extent that there is hardly a man or woman in Choisy to-day who will not march up to La Rodière, and, even if they do not commit murder, will certainly destroy a great deal of property which rightly belongs to the nation."

He was clever enough to know that it was this argument that would prevail. The Chief Commissary looked grave. He was mindful of his own position, not to say his own head, and therefore took the one drastic course which was most likely to minimise the mischief. He gave it out through a proclamation blazoned by the town crier, that by order of the government there would be no Day of Rest this Sunday, and that the work in the factories would be carried on as usual. This meant that four-fifths of the male population of Choisy and one-third of its womenfolk would be kept at work until seven o'clock in the evening and that the plans for the afternoon's holiday would have to be considerably modified or abandoned altogether.

There was a great deal of dissatisfaction and much murmuring over this, but no man was bold enough to suggest revolt against a government decree. Anything approaching disobedience was very dangerous these days. The armaments factory of Choisy was one of the most important of its kind in Northern France. Every one knew, of course, that war with England was imminent, and to hamper the government at this juncture by shortage of arms was to court disaster, if not death.

In the Restaurant Tison, which was to be the starting point for the march on La Rodière, turbulence had given place to gloom. Even the troupe of musicians who were working with a will to try and revive drooping spirits failed to bring about that state of excitement so essential to the success of the proposed plan. Citizen Conty, too, had received his orders. "Let the people simmer down," the Chief Commissary had commanded, "the government does not want a riot in Choisy just now." Conty didn't care one way or the other. He was paid to carry out government orders, and knew how to steer clear of trouble if these happened to be contradictory. Louis Maurin the lawyer had assured him that in the end it would pay him better to give the aristos at La Rodière a little more rope, and, when the time was ripe, to denounce them as traitors, and if the accusation held and they were actually condemned he, Conty, would then be paid for his services at the usual rate: twenty, thirty livres, even fifty. Of course, there was Citizen Chauvelin to reckon with, an influential man and member of the new Committee of Public Safety who had unlimited powers, and Citizen Chauvelin had distinctly said that he desired a row at La Rodière not later than this day; he had even murmured under his breath: "We shall have some fun over that raid at La Rodière," and had added something about "English spies," which at the time-it was two days ago-had greatly intrigued Citizen Conty.

The latter fully expected Chauvelin to put in an appearance in the restaurant, and there to give him final orders as to who should be obeyed in this case, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, or a mere Chief Commissary of Gendarmerie. It was close on two o'clock already. The factory bell calling the workers back would ring in half an hour, and Conty was getting anxious.

As time went on the general depression of spirits became more and more accentuated. Even the popular tunes, "Il était une bergère," or "Sur le pont d'Avignon," failed to bring forth the usual lusty response. The people sat at table, finishing their meagre fare, whispering, planning and grumbling. It would have been such fun to march in a body to La Rodière as one had done four years ago, and there was always something to pick up in a place of that sort, something for the larder or the cellar, not to mention things that one could sell presently to the Jew pedlars from Paris. And this afternoon would have been a perfect opportunity for the expedition. It was cold, and snow had ceased to fall. If one only could have made a start at two o'clock, one would have had a couple of hours daylight for the affair. Now, as things were, with work at the factory kept up till seven o'clock, what could anyone do? It would be pitch dark at five, with no moon and possibly a heavy fall of snow; and what was more: if the whole thing was put off those aristos up at La Rodière would certainly be warned by then of what awaited them and would get themselves safely out of the way. That was the general drift of conversation round the trestle tables of the Restaurant Tison. Conty could hear them all talking. He glanced repeatedly up at the clock hoping to see the trim figure of Citizen Chauvelin appear in the doorway. Once the workers had gone back to the factory it would be too late to carry out the original plan, which had been approved of by Chauvelin, and Conty didn't relish the idea of having to shoulder the responsibility of what might or might not occur in that case. He would have preferred to receive final orders from a member of an influential committee, one who alone could issue orders over the head of the Chief Commissary.

It was then with a feeling of intense relief that precisely at twenty minutes past two he saw the sable-clad figure of Chauvelin working his way towards him through the crowd.

"Well? And what have you done?" Chauvelin queried curtly, and refused the chair which Conty had obsequiously offered him.

"You have heard the proclamation, Citizen?" Conty responded; "about work at the factory this afternoon?"

"I have. But I am asking you what you have done."

"Nothing, Citizen. I was waiting for you."

"You didn't carry out my orders?"

"I hadn't any, Citizen."

"Two days ago I gave you my commands to prepare the way for an armed raid on the château as soon as I was back in Choisy. Yesterday I sent you word that I would be back to-day. But I see no sign of a raid being organized either by you or anyone else."

"The decree was only promulgated a couple of hours ago. All the able-bodied men and women will have to go back to work in a few minutes; there was nothing to be done."

"How do you mean? There was nothing to be done? What about all these people here? I can see at least a hundred that do not work in the factory, more than enough for what I want."

Conty gave a contemptuous shrug.

"The halt and the maimed," he retorted acidly; "the weaklings and the women. I thought every moment you would come, Citizen Chauvelin, and issue a counter decree giving the workers their usual Day of Rest. As you didn't come, I didn't know what to do."

"So you let them all get into the doldrums."

"What could I do, Citizen?" Conty reiterated sullenly. "I had no orders."

"You had no initiative, you mean? If you had you would have realized that if half the population of Choisy will in a moment or two go to work, the other half will still be here and ready for any mischief."

"Those bumpkins...!"

"Yes, louts and muckworms and cinderwenches. And let me tell you, Citizen Conty, that it is not for you to sneer at such excellent material, rather see that you utilize it as I directed you to do in the name of the government who know how to punish slackness as well as to reward energy."

Having said this, Chauvelin turned his back abruptly on the discomfited Conty and made for the door. Even as he did so an outside bell clanged out the summons for the workers to return to the factory. There was a general hubbub, chairs pushed aside and scraping against the stone floor, the tramp of feet all making for the door, voices shouting from one end of the room to the other. And right through the din, there came to Chauvelin's ears, at the very moment that he passed through the swing-doors, a sound that dominated ever other, just a prolonged merry, irritatingly inane laugh.

Muttering and grumbling, the workers filed out of the restaurant, and in straggling groups made their way across the Grand' Place. A few remained behind—a couple hundred or so: there was Hector the cobbler, who had lost a leg last year at Valmy, and Marius the wig-maker, who had only one hand where-with to ply his trade; and there was Jean, who suffered from epilepsy, and Anatole, who was half-witted, and Jacques, who was just a dwarf. There were men who were over fifty, and youths who were not yet fourteen, and, of course, there were the women. Conty looked about him, and in his mind agreed with what Citizen Chauvelin had said. Here was excellent material for a well-organized insurrection, and now that the responsibility was no longer his, he would know how to utilize it.

Hardly had the last able-bodied man gone out of the place than Citizen Conty had climbed on the top of the table, and begun his harangue by apostrophizing the musicians.

"What mean you, rascals," he cried lustily, "by scraping your fiddles to give us nothing but sentimental ballads fit only for weaklings to hear? Our fine men have gone to work for their country, and here you are trying to make us sing about shepherdesses and their cats. Mordieu! have you never heard of the air that every patriotic Frenchman should know, an air that puts fire into our blood, not water: 'Allons enfants de la patrie! Le jour de gloire est arrivé!'"

At first the people did not take much notice of Conty; the men had gone and there was nothing much to do but go back to one's own hovels and mope there till they returned. But when presently the musicians, in response to the speaker's challenge, took up the strains of the revolutionary song, they straightened out their backs, turned about the better to hear the impassioned oratory which now poured from Citizen Conty's lips.

"Citizens," he belted, while the musicians stopped playing so as not to drown his voice, "while our able-bodied men toil and toil to forge the arms wherewith the soldiers of France will smite the enemies of our beloved country, shall we who cannot join them in this noble work sit still and do nothing to rid France of those other enemies of hers who are far more insidious and far more dangerous to her safety than the English or the Dutch? You know to what enemies I refer! It is to those ci-devants, noble seigneurs, to those aristos who for years, nay, for centuries, batted on the misery and the toil of the people, who grew richer and fatter year by year, while you and your fathers and your grandfathers before you starved so that they might eat, bore misery and disease so that they might wallow in good food and sprawl in down beds."

Murmurs of approval greeted this somewhat confused metaphor, while the musicians at a sign from Conty once more struck up the martial strain:

"Contre nous de la tyrannie.

L'étendard sanglant est levé!"

Conty put up his hand. Once again the musicians paused and once again the orator raised his voice, certain now that he held the attention of his audience. But this time he did not bellow. He began quietly with hardly any emphasis, to explain to them just how in the past the rich had lived and the poor had suffered, how they had all worked hard in order to provide the aristos up in their château with all those luxuries of which they themselves had not even a conception. They, the women, had worked their fingers to the bone sewing and washing and scrubbing; the men had endured kicks from horses, bites from dogs, thrashings from their masters, had contracted sickness, lost a limb or an eye, all in the service of aristos who had never done anything to alleviate their woes.

At the first mention of a château, the crowd began to prick up its ears. They knew all about a château. There was La Rodière up on the hill whither they would all have marched this afternoon had not the aristos cajoled the Chief Commissary into ordering the men to go to work even on the Day of Rest.

"Aux armes, citoyens!

Chargez vos bataillons!"

The musicians seemed a little uncertain of the tune at this point, but what did it matter? The crowd was getting into the right mood, and a hundred lusty throats soon put them in the right way.

"Chargez vos bataillons!" they sang, and banged on the tables with their hands or any tools that were handy.

Conty was in his element. He held all these poor, half-starved people in a fever by the magic of his oratory, and he would not allow their fever to cool down again. From an abstract reference to any château to the actual mention of La Rodière did not take him long.

Now he was speaking of Dr. Pradel, the respected citizen of Choisy, the friend of the poor, who dared to express his political opinions in the presence of those arrogant ci-devants, and what had happened? He had been insulted, outraged, thrashed like a dog!

“And you, Citizens,” he once more bellowed, “though the government has not called upon you to fashion bayonets and sabres, are you going to sit still and allow your sworn enemies, the enemies of France, to ride rough-shod over you now that our glorious revolution has levelled all ranks and brought the most exalted heads down under the guillotine? You have no sabres or bayonets, it is true, but you have your scythes and your axes and you have your fists. Are you going to sit still, I say, and not show those traitors up there on the hill that there is only one sovereignty in the world that counts and which they must obey, the sovereignty of the people?”

The magic words had their usual effect. A perfect storm of applause greeted them, and all at once they began to sing: “Allons enfants de la patrie!” and the musicians blew their trumpets and banged their drums and soon there reigned in the restaurant the sort of mighty row beloved by agitators.

22. AT THE CHÂTEAU

It did not take Conty long after that to persuade a couple of hundred people who were down in the dumps and saw no prospect of getting out of them that it was their duty to go at once to the Château de la Rodière and show these arrogant ci-devants that when the sovereignty of the people was questioned, it would know how to turn the tables on those who dared to flout it. The fact that he quite omitted to explain how the sovereignty of the people had in this particular instance been assailed did not weigh with his unsophisticated audience in the least. They had nothing on earth to do this afternoon, and they were told that it was their patriotic duty to march to La Rodière and there to make themselves as unpleasant as possible, so why in the world should they hesitate?

Headed at first by Citizen Conty himself they all trooped out of the Restaurant Tison, after the manner of those determined Amazons who had marched from Paris to Versailles and there insisted on seeing the ci-devant royal family-Louis Capet, his wife and his two children-and on making their presence felt there, in spite of Bodyguards. So most of what was left of the population of Choisy assembled on the Grand' Place, there formed itself into a compact body and started to march through the town, and thence up the hill, headed by a band of musicians who had sprung up from nowhere a few days ago and had since then greatly contributed to the gaiety inside the cafés and restaurants by their spirited performance of popular airs. On this great occasion they headed the march with their fiddles and trumpets and drum. There were five of them altogether and their leader, a great hulking fellow who should have been fighting for his country instead of scraping the catgut, was soon very popular with the crowd. His rendering of the "Marseillaise" might be somewhat faulty, but he was such a lively kind of vagabond that he put every one into good humour long before they reached the château.

And they remained in rare good humour. For them this march, this proposed baiting of the aristos was just an afternoon's holiday, something to take them out of themselves, to help them to forget their misery, their squalor, the ever-present fear that conditions of life would get worse rather than better. Above all, it lured them into the belief that this glorious revolution had done something stupendous for them-they didn't quite know what, poor things, but there it was: the millennium, so the men from Paris kept on assuring them. Admittedly, this stupendous thing, this millennium, was already overdue, but these exciting expeditions and telling those arrogant ci-devants a few home truths, made it easier to wait for the really happy days to come, and so the insurrectionary march on La Rodière progressed merrily. It is a fact that insurrection, as an art, carried on by an unruly mob, was the direct product of the Revolution in France. It was revolutionary France that first invented and then perfected the art of insurrection. There was no such thing before 1789, when the crowd stormed the Bastille and reduced it, as a besieging army would reduce an enemy fort. And the movement has to a great extent retained its perfection only in France, probably because it suits the impulsive French temperament better than the temperament of other nations.

Actually a mob-an angry mob-say in England, in Russia or Germany, is usually just a mass of dull, tenacious and probably vindictive humanity; but in France, even during the fiercest days of revolution, there was always an element of inventiveness, almost of genius, in the crowd of men and women that went hammering at the gates of châteaux, insisted on seeing its owners, even when, as in Versailles, these were still their King and Queen, and devised a score of ways of humiliating and baiting them without necessarily resorting to violence. Thus, a French mob is unlike any other in the world.

And so it was in this instance with the hundred or two of women and derelicts who marched up the hill to La Rodière. In the wake of an unwashed, out-at-elbows, raffish troupe of musicians. They stumped along, those, at any rate, who were able-bodied, shouting and singing snatches of the "Marseillaise," not feeling the cold, which was bitter, nor the fatigue of breasting the incline up to the château, on a road slippery with ice and snow. They were as lively as they could be, not knowing exactly what they were going to do once they got up there and came face to face with the ci-devant Marquis and Marquise, for whom they had worked in the past and from whom they had received alternately many kindnesses and many blows. Those who were lame or otherwise feeble, such as Hector the cobbler or Jean the epileptic, stumped along, too, but more slowly, and soon there was a straggling group that fell away from the main body, a group made up of all the derelicts in Choisy who had lost a limb or an eye, were half-witted, or otherwise incapable, but nevertheless were as lively, as expectant of fun, as were their more favoured fellow-citizens.

And right in the rear of them all there walked two men. One of them was Citizen Conty, the paid agent of the government; the other was small and spare, was dressed from head to foot in sober black, his voluminous black cloak effectually concealing the tri-colour scarf which he wore round his waist. He never spoke to his companion while they both trudged up the road in the wake of the crowd, but now and then he would throw quick, searching glances on the surrounding landscape and up at the cloud-covered sky, almost as if he were seeking to wrest from the heavens or the earth some secret which Nature alone could reveal. This was Citizen Chauvelin, at one time representative of the revolutionary government at the English Court, now a member of the newly constituted Committee of Public Safety the most powerful organization in the country, created for the suppression of treason and the unmasking of traitors and of spies.

At the top of the hill there, where the narrow footpath abuts on the main road, the two men came to a halt. Chauvelin said curtly to his companion:

"You may go back now, Citizen Conty."

Conty was only too thankful to obey; he turned down the path and was soon out of sight and out of earshot.

Chauvelin walked on in the direction of the château. The crowd was a long way ahead now, even the stragglers had caught up with them, and there was lusty cheering when the gates of La Rodière first came into view.

Chauvelin came to a halt once more. There was no one in sight, and the perfect quietude of the place was only disturbed by the sound of revellings gradually dying away in the distance. Chauvelin now gave a soft, prolonged whistle, and a minute or two later a man in the uniform of the Gendarmerie Nationale, but wrapped in a huge cloak from head to foot so that his accoutrements could not be seen, came out cautiously from the thicket close by. Chauvelin beckoned to him to approach.

"Well, Citizen Sergeant," he demanded, "did you notice any man who might be that damnable English spy?"

"No, Citizen, I can't say that I did. I was well placed, too, and could see the whole crowd file past me, but I couldn't spot any man who appeared abnormally tall or who looked like an Englishman."

"I expect you were too dense to notice," Chauvelin retorted dryly. "But, anyway, it makes no matter. I will spot him soon enough. As soon as I do I will give you the signal we agreed on. You remember it?"

"Yes, Citizen. A long whistle twice and then one short one."

"How many men have you got?"

"Thirty, Citizen, and three corporals."

"Where are they?"

"Twenty, with two corporals, in the stables. Ten with one corporal in the coach-house."

"Any outdoor workers about? Grooms or gardeners?"

"Two gardeners, Citizen, and one in the stables."

"They understand?"

"Yes, Citizen. I have promised them fifty livres each if they keep their eyes and mouth shut, and certain arrest and death if they do not. They are terrified and quite safe to hold their tongue."

"My orders, Citizen Sergeant, are that the men remain where they are till they hear the signal, two prolonged whistles, followed by one short one. Like this"-and he took a toy whistle out of his waistcoat pocket and blew softly into it, twice and once again, in the manner which he had described.

"As soon as they hear the whistle, but not before, they are to come out of their hiding-place and make their way in double quick time to the house. Ten men with one corporal will then take up their stand outside each of the three entrances of the château. You know where these are?"

"Quite well, Citizen."

"No one must be allowed to go out of the château until I give the order."

"I quite understand, Citizen."

"It will be the worse for you if you do not. I suppose the men know that we are after that damnable English spy who calls himself the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"They know it, Citizen."

"And that there is a government reward of fifty livres for every soldier of the Republic who aids in his capture?"

"The men are not likely to shirk their duty, Citizen."

"Very well, then. And now about the aristos up there. There is the ci-devant Marquis with his mother and sister, also two aides-ménage who are not ashamed to serve those traitors to their country. Those five, then will be under arrest, but remain in the château till we are ready for them. I will give you further orders as to them. We shall convey them under escort to Choisy some time between the later afternoon, after we have packed the rabble off, and early dawn to-morrow; I have not decided which but will let you know later. You have a coach handy?"

"Yes, Citizen. There is a cabaret close by here, farther up the road. We put up the coach there in the yard, and left two of our men in charge. The place is quiet and quite handy."

"That is all, Citizen Sergeant. You may go and transmit my orders to your corporals. As soon as you have done that, go as unobtrusively as you can into the house. No one will notice you. They will all be busy baiting the aristos by then. Keep as near as you can to the room where the crowd is at its thickest-the noise will guide you-and wait for me there. Well? What is it now?" Chauvelin went on as the man seemed in no hurry to go.

"Could I order something for the men to keep themselves warm? It is bitterly cold in those stables. The roof is out of repair and-"

"Something?" the other broke in tartly. "What do you mean by 'something'?"

"A drop of eau-de-vie...the cabaret is quite close-"

"Certainly not," Chauvelin rasped out; "half the men would be drunk by the time I wanted them. They can stamp their feet to keep themselves warm. Nobody would hear them with all that row going on."

There was nothing for it but to obey. Citizen Chauvelin, of the committee of Public Safety, was not the man one could ever argue or plead with. The sergeant, resigned and submissive, saluted and turned on his heel. He walked away in the direction of the stables. Chauvelin remained for quite a long while standing there alone, his thoughts running riot in his brain. Twice the Scarlet Pimpernel had slipped through his fingers since that memorable night four months ago at Lord Grenville's ball in London when he, Chauvelin, had first realized that that daring adventurous spy was none other than Sir Percy Blakeney, the arbiter of fashion, the seemingly inane fop who kept London society in a perpetual ripple of laughter at his foolish antics, the most fastidious exquisite in sybaritic England.

"You were part of that unwashed crowd in the Restaurant Tison, my fine friend," he murmured to himself, "for I heard you laugh and felt your eyes daring to mock me again. Mock me? Aye! but not for long, my gallant fellow. The trap is laid and you won't escape me this time, let me assure you of that, and it will be your 'dear Monsieur Chambertin' who will mock you when you are brought down and gagged and trussed like a fowl ready for roasting."

23. THE RIGAUDON

Now then “allons enfants de la patri-i-i-e.” The crowd in a high state of excitement had pushed open the great gates of excitement had pushed open the great gates of La Rodière-these were never bolted these days- and marched up the stately avenue bordered by a double row of gigantic elms which seemed to be waving and nodding their majestic crowns at sight of the motley throng. Ahead of them all marched the musicians, blowing with renewed gusto into their brass trumpets or sending forth into the frosty atmosphere prolonged rolls of drums. Only the fiddler was not in his usual place. He had dropped back on the other side of the gate in order to fit a fresh length of catgut on his violin to replace a broken one. But he was not missed at this juncture, for the other musicians appeared bent on proving the fact that a fiddle was not of much value as a noise-maker when there were trumpets and drums in the orchestra.

Up the crowd marched and mounted the perron steps to the front door of the mansion. They pulled the chain and the bell responded with a loud clang-once, twice and three times. They were themselves making such a noise, shouting and singing, that probably poor old Paul, rather scared but trying to be brave, did not actually hear the bell. However, he did hear it after a time and with shaking knees and trembling voice went to get his orders from Monsieur le Marquis. By this time those in the forefront of the crowd had tugged so hard at the bell-pull that it snapped and came down with a clatter on the marble floor of the perron; whereupon they set to with their fists and nearly brought the solid front door down with their hammerings and their kicks. They didn't hear Paul's shuffling footsteps coming down the great staircase, nor yet his drawing of the bolts, so that when after a minute or two, while they were still hammering and kicking, the door was opened abruptly, the foremost in the ranks tumbled over one another into the hall. This caused great hilarity. Hurrah! Hurrah! This was going to be a wonderful afternoon's holiday! Onward children of la patrie, the day of glory has certainly arrived. Striving, pushing, laughing, singing, waving arms and stamping feet, the bulk of the crowd made its way up the grand staircase. Poor old Paul! As well attempt to stem the course of an avalanche as to stop this merry, jostling crowd from going where it listed. Some of them indeed wandered into the reception-rooms to right and left of the hall, the larger and smaller dining-rooms, the library, the long gallery and so on, but they found nothing worth destroying. They were not in a mood to smash windows or tear up books, and treasures of art and vertu had long since been put away in comparative safety. There certainly were a few pieces of furniture standing about, looking aloof and solitary under their dust-sheets, and one or two of the women with the French instinct for turning everything into money, turned these over and over, trying to appraise their value. But soon there came from the floor above such prolonged laughter and such hilarious shouts, that curiosity got the better of greed and the quest after loot was soon abandoned.

Upstairs the rest of the merry party, after wandering from room to room, arrived in the grand salon where close on four years ago now the remains of the late Marquis de la Rodière had rested for three days before being removed for internment in Paris. On that occasion they had all come to a halt, awed in spite of themselves, by the somewhat eerie atmosphere of the place, the dead flowers, the torn laces, the smell of guttering candles and of stale incense. The crowd to-day, more jaunty than they were then, had also come to a halt, but only for a few moments. They stared wide-eyed at the objects ranged against the walls, the gilded consols, the mirrors, the crystal sconces and the chairs, and presently they spied the platform whereon in the happy olden days the musicians used to stand playing dance music for Monsieur le Marquis and his guests. The spinet was still there and the desk of the conductor, and a number of stands in gilded wood which were used for holding the pieces of music.

Amid much excitement and laughter the musicians were called up to mount the platform. This they were quite willing to do, but where was the leader, the fiddler with the grimy face and toothless mouth whose stentorian voice would have raised the dead? A small group who had wandered up to the window saw him stumping up the avenue. They gave a warning shout, the window was thrown open, and cries of “Allons! hurry up!” soon galvanized him into activity. He was lame, and dragged his left leg, but the infirmity did not appear to worry him. As soon as he had reached the perron he started scraping his fiddle. He was met at the foot of the staircase by an enthusiastic throng who carried him up shoulder high, and dropped him down all of a heap on the musician's platform. And a queer sight did this vagabond orchestra look wielding their ramshackle fiddles and trumpets and drumsticks. What a sight to stir the imagination of any thinking man who in the past had seen and heard the private orchestra of Monsieur le Marquis de la Rodière, dressed in their gorgeous uniforms covered with gold lace, under the conductorship perhaps of a Mozart or a Grétry. But the stirrings of imagination were the last things that troubled this hilarious crowd to-day. With much laughter and clapping of hands they ordered the musicians to play a rigaudon. Jacques, the son of the butcher of Choisy, a lad of thirteen with a humped back and the stature of a dwarf, was known to be a great adept at the dance and so was Victoire, the buxom wife of the cabaretier round the corner. They were commanded to perform and together they stepped forward, a comical pair, for Jacques's head only reached as high as Victoire's massive hip and his short arm could not conveniently encircle her waist.

The musicians struck up “Sur le Pont d'Avignon,” the only dance tune they knew, and that one none too well.

“Sur le pont d'Avignon.

On y danse, on y danse.

Sur le pont d'Avignon.

On y danse tout en rond.”

And Jacques, with his dwarfish hand on Victoire's ample waist, stamped his feet and whirled the lady of large proportions round and round in the mazes of the dance. She was perspiring profusely and her small eyes deeply encased in flesh shone with excitement, whilst Jacques's impish face wore the expression of a young satyr.

It was at this point that the outbursts of laughter rose to such a high pitch that the thrifty housewives down below were tempted to abandon their loot. What had caused the uproar was the sudden appearance of the ci-devant Marquis through what seemed to be a hole in the wall. As a matter of fact this was a door masked by tapestry which gave first on a vestibule and thence on a small boudoir where Madame la Marquise had been sitting with François and Cécile, and with poor Marie huddled up in a corner like a frightened rabbit, all fully expecting that the tumultuous crowd would soon tire, and content itself as it had done four years ago with breaking a few windows, carrying off what portable furniture there was left in the salon, and ending its unpleasant visitation in the cellar and the larder, where there was little enough to tempt its greed.

François de la Rodière was facing the rabble with a riding-whip. For a time his sister was able to restrain him from such a palpable act of folly, but presently the sound of ribald laughter coming from the grand salon where his father had once lain in state, surrounded by flowers and ecclesiastical appurtenances, so outraged him that he lost all control over himself and all sense of prudence. He shook off Cécile's detaining hand, and strode out of the room. Madame la Marquise had offered no protest or advice; she was one of those women, the product of generations of French high-born ladies who, entrenched as it were in their own dignity, never gave a single thought to such a matter as a social upheaval. "It will all pass away," was their dictum "God will punish them all in His own time!" So she turned a deaf ear to the rioting of the rabble, and went on with her crochet work with perfect serenity.

Cécile, on the other hand, was all for conciliation. She knew her brother's violent temper and genuinely feared for his safety should he provoke the crowd, who at present seemed good-tempered enough, either by word or gesture. She followed him into the vestibule, and saw him take a riding-whip off the wall and throw open the narrow door which gave on the grand salon. The moment he did that the uproar in the salon which had been deafening up to now suddenly died down. Complete silence ensued, but only for a few seconds; the next moment François had closed the door behind him and at once the hubbub in the next room rose louder than ever and there came a terrific outburst of hilarious shouting and laughter and vigorous clapping of hands. Cécile stood there listening, terrified and undecided, longing to go to her brother's assistance, yet feeling the futility of any intervention on her part should the crowd turn ugly. For the moment they appeared distinctly amused, for the laughter went on louder than ever, and it was accompanied by the measured stamping of feet, the clapping of hands and the strains of dance music. What was going on in there? Cécile, terrified at first, felt a little more re-assured. She couldn't hear her brother's voice, and apparently the people were enjoying themselves, for they were dancing and laughing and the music never ceased. At last anxiety got the better of prudence. Tentatively she in her turn opened the communicating door, and exactly the same thing happened that had greet François de la Rodière's appearance in the crowded salon. Absolute silence for a few seconds, and then a terrific, uproarious shout.

What Cécile saw did indeed turn her almost sick with horror, for there was her brother in the middle of the room, dishevelled, with his necktie awry and his cheeks the colour of ashes, in the centre of a ring made up of the worst type of ragamuffins and cinderwenches she had ever seen, all holding hands and twirling round and round him to the tune of a wild rigaudon. His riding-whip was lying broken in half across the threshold at Cécile's feet. The crowd had seized upon him directly they were aware of his presence, torn the whip out of his hand, broken it and thrown it on the floor. They had dragged him and pushed him to the centre of the room, formed a ring round him, shouted injurious epithets and made rude gestures at him; and the more pale he got with rage, the more helpless he found himself, the louder was their laughter and the wilder their dance.

Cécile felt as if she were paralysed. She couldn't move, her knees were shaking under her, and before she could recover herself two women had seized her, one by each hand, and dragged her across the room, where she was thrust into the centre of another ring of uproarious females who danced and capered round her, holding hands and laughing at her obvious terror. It was all like a terrible nightmare. Cécile, trying in vain to control herself, could only put her hands up to her face so as to hide from the mocking crowd the blush of indignation and shame that flooded her cheeks at the sound of the obscene words that men and women, apparently all in right good-humour, flung at her, while they danced what seemed to the poor girl like a saraband of witches. Suddenly she heard a cry:

"Make her dance, Jacques! Make the aristo step it with you! I'll warrant she has never danced the rigaudon with such a handsome partner before."

And Cécile was conscious first of a whiff of garlic, then of a clammy hand seizing her own, and finally of a shoulder pressed against her side and of an arm around her waist. With a shudder she looked down and saw the grinning, puckish face and misshapen, dwarfish body of Jacques, the son of the local butcher, whom she had often befriended when he was baited by boys bigger and stronger than himself. He was leering up at her and clinging to her waist, trying to make her foot a measure with him. Now unlike her brother, Cécile de la Rodière was possessed of a good deal of sound common sense. She knew well enough that to try and run one's head against a stone wall could only result in bruises, if not worse. Here they were, both of them, she and François, not to mention maman, at the mercy of a couple of hundred people who, though fairly good-tempered at the moment, might soon turn ugly if provoked. She rather felt as if she had been thrust into a cage full of wild beasts and that to humour them was the only chance of safety. She looked about her helplessly, hoping against hope that she might encounter a face that was neither cruel nor mocking, and in her heart prayed, prayed to God to deliver her from this nightmare.

And then suddenly the miracle happened. It was a miracle in very truth, for there in the wide-open doorway was the one man in the world, her world, on whom she could rely, the man who alone next to God could save her from this awful humiliation. Pradel! Simon Pradel! He looked flushed and anxious; he was panting as if he had been running hard for goodness knows how long. His dark, deep-set eyes roamed rapidly round the room till they encountered hers. Thank God! Thank God, that he was here! The scar across his forehead where François had hit him still showed crimson across the pale, damp skin, but his eyes were kind and reassuring. Hers were fastened on him with a look of appeal, and in a moment he was half across the room, pushing his way towards her through the crowd.

All at once the crowd saw him. Dr. Pradel! Simon! their Simon! The hero of the hour! A lusty cheer roused the echo of the vast hall at sight of him. Now indeed would the fun be fast and furious! Pradel, in the meanwhile, had reached the centre of the room, he broke through the cordon that surrounded Cécile, quite good-naturedly but very firmly he thrust Jacques the butcher's son on one side, took hold of the girl's trembling hand and put his strong arms round her waist.

"Allons," he shouted to the musicians, "put some verve into your playing. 'Tis I will dance the rigaudon with the aristo!"

Nothing loth, the musicians blew their trumpets and beat their drums with renewed vigour:

"Sur le pont d'Avignon.

On y danse, on y danse.

Sur le pont d'Avignon.

On y danse tout en rond!"

A hundred couples were formed and soon they were all of them dancing and singing, not hoarsely or stridently, but just with immense gusto, as if they desired nothing else but enjoy a real jollity.

"Try to smile," Pradel whispered in Cécile's ear. "Be brave! don't show that you are afraid!"

Cécile said: "I am not afraid." And indeed, with her hand in his, she tripped the rigaudon step by step and was no longer afraid. It seemed to her as if with Pradel's nearness the nightmare had become just a dream. Everything now was gay, almost happy. Cruelty and mockery, the desire to humiliate had faded from the faces of the crowd. Every one was smiling at everybody else. One woman called out loudly across the room to Cécile: "Well chosen, my pretty! Our Simon will make you a fine husband! And you will give France some splendid sons!"

"Smile!" Pradel commanded. "Smile to them and nod! For God's sake, smile!"

And Cécile smiled and nodded while the cry was taken up. "Our Simon and the aristo! And a quiverful of handsome sons! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

In this wild saturnalia even François de la Rodière was forgotten. He was pushed on one side like a useless piece of furniture and collapsed into the nearest chair, half fainting with the exertion of keeping some semblance of control over himself. What he had suffered in the way of humiliation during the past quarter of an hour was unbelievable, and now to see his sister Mademoiselle de la Rodière made to demean herself by dancing with that purveyor of pills and purges, whom François would gladly have strangled, and to be forced to hear name coupled with that of this impudent upstart, seemed more than he could endure.

It was he who suddenly became aware of a curiously incongruous figure of a man who at this point was working his way unobtrusively through the throng. Short, spare, dressed in sober black from head to foot, he had the tricolour scarf round his waist. No one in the crowd took any notice of him. Only François saw him, and in spite of the tell-tale tricolour scarf which proclaimed the man to be in the service of the revolutionary government, he felt that some sort of rescue from this devil's carnival could be effected through one who at any rate looked as if he had washed and brushed his clothes. François tried to attract his attention, but the man walked quietly on, till he was quite close to the spot where Cécile was trying bravely to keep up the rôle of good-humour and even gaiety which Pradel had enjoined her to assume. She continued to step it, wondering how all this would end. She saw the little man in black wind his way in and out among the dancers, and she saw the leader of the musicians, the unkempt, unshaved, toothless fiddler step down from the platform and always playing his fiddle, follow on the heels of the little man in black. She was so fascinated by the sight of those two figures in such strange contrast one to the other, one so spruce and trim, the other so grimy, one so stern and the other grinning all over his face, that she lost step and had to cling with both hands to her partner's arm.

Then it was that there occurred the strangest of all the strange events of this memorable day. The little man in black was now quite close to her, and the fiddler was immediately behind him and Cécile watched them both, fascinated. All of a sudden the fiddler threw back his head and laughed. Such curious laughter it was, quite merry, but somehow it suggested the merriment of a fool. Cécile stared at the man, for there was something almost eerie about him now, and Pradel too stared at him as amazed, as fascinated as was the girl herself, for the fiddler had thrown down his fiddle.

He straightened his back and stretched out his arms till he appeared preternaturally tall, like a Titan or like a Samson about to shatter the marble pillars of the old château, and to hurl them down with a thunderous crash in the midst of the revellers.

The little man in black also stared at the fiddler, and very slowly the whole expression of his face underwent a change, from surprise to horror and thence to triumph mixed with a kind of awe. His thin lips curled into a mocking smile and through them there came words spoken in English, a language which Cécile understood. What he said was:

"So, my valiant Scarlet Pimpernel, we meet again at last!" and at the same time he put his hand in his waistcoat pocket and drew out what looked like an ordinary whistle which he was about to put to his mouth when the fiddler, with another outburst of inane laughter, knocked it out of his hand.

For the space of less than two seconds, breathless hush fell on the merry-making throng. The crashing of the fiddle as it was hurled to the floor, the strange outburst of laughter, the rattle of the whistle as it fell, had reduced everyone to silence. But now a wild shout broke in on this chastened mood.

"A spy! a spy!" the fiddler cried in a stentorian voice. "We are betrayed. We shall be massacred! Sauve qui peut!"

And with a sudden stretch of his powerful arms he picked up the little man in black and threw him over his shoulder as if he were a bale of goods and ran with his struggling and kicking burden across the room towards the door. And all the time he continued to shout: "A spy! a spy! We shall be massacred! Remember Paris last September!" And the crowd took up the cry as a crowd will, for are not one hundred humans the counterpart of one hundred sheep? They took up the cry and shouted: "A spy! A spy!" and ran in a body helter-skelter on the heels of the fiddler and his sable-clad load, out of the room across the marble vestibule, down the grand staircase and down below that, through the servants' old quarters, through the kitchen and the pantry, the wash-house and the buttery, and down by the winding staircase which led to the cellar. And behind him there was the crowd, no longer good-tempered now, or intent on holiday-making, but a real rabble this time, and a frightened crowd at that, jostling, pushing, tumbling over one another. An angry crowd is fearsome, but a frightened crowd is worse, for it is ready for anything-bloodshed, carnage, butchery. No one knew that better than the victim of this amazing aggression. He, Chauvelin, had often himself provoked a crowd into committing murder. Now he was utterly helpless; struggle and kick as he might, he was held as in a steel vice over those powerful shoulders, head down, with the blood hammering away in his temples, a wounded fox with a pack of hounds on his trail. What was going to happen to him? Would this enemy throw him to those hounds, who would surely tear him to pieces. At the top of the stairs, outside the grand salon, he had caught sight, but only dimly, of the sergeant flattened against the wall, as scared as any hunted animal. He had tried to shout to him: "The signal! the signal!" but he felt that his voice never reached the soldier's ears.

And still that awful crowd! the women! Nom d'un chien, the women!! Chauvelin could thank his stars that his merciless captor ran so fast that he left those terrifying Mænads at a good distance behind him. But what in the devil's name was going to happen to him? He learned it soon enough. Arrived at the bottom of the stone stairs, the acrid smell of wine and alcohol and dankness struck his nostrils. He raised his head as much as he could, and saw a yawning door ahead of him. Earlier in the afternoon a few among the ragamuffins had found their way down to the cellar. But the cellar was empty of liquor, and they went away, cursing and leaving the door wide open. Chauvelin felt himself carried in through that door and then thrown none too gently down on a heap of dank straw. The next moment he heard that horrible, hideous, hated laugh, the mocking words: "A bientôt, my dear Monsieur Chambertin!" Then the banging of a heavy door, the pushing of bolts, the clang of a chain and the grating of a rusty key in the lock, and nothing more.

He was crouching on a heap of damp straw, in almost total darkness, sore in body, humiliated to the very depths of his soul, burning with rage and the very bitterness of his disappointment.

He could only hear vaguely what went on the other side of the door. Murmurs and shouts, a few hoarse cries. Was that abominable rabble demanding its right to commit the murder for which their sadistic spirits clamoured? Chauvelin was not physically a coward, but he was afraid of a mob, because he had more than once seen one at its worst. Furious. Hysterical. Unchecked. Crawling on hands and knees, he drew close to the door, and cowered there, his ear glued to it. The only word he could distinguish was "Key!" The were demanding the key, and apparently were being refused. Was Sir Percy Blakeney defending the life of his most bitter enemy? Or was it that he himself wished to commit the murder which would rid him for ever of his inveterate foe? Huddled up against the door, his teeth chattering, his knees shaking, Chauvelin was not left long in doubt. The voice of Sir Percy rose and fell. He was talking. Talking and laughing, and soon the crowd forgot its ill-humour and its hysteria; he talked to them and presently they listened. He laughed and they laughed with him. And after a time they allowed themselves to be persuaded. The spy was safe under lock and key, so their friend the fiddler assured them; then why not leave him there? There would always be time later on to give him his deserts. And in the meanwhile would it not be wise to see if there were not more spies about the house and then go back and continue the fun? The music. The dancing. Why not? The day was young yet.

Chauvelin couldn't hear any of that, but he guessed it all. He had seen the Scarlet Pimpernel at that kind of work before. Grimy, sans-culotte, outwardly a real muckworm, but eloquent, persuasive, able by some subtle magic to sway a crowd as no one in Chauvelin's experience had ever done. He could see him in his mind's eye, standing with his back to the cellar door, with massive legs apart and arms outstretched, facing the crowd as he always faced any and every danger that threatened him, full of resource and of impudence. The wretched prisoner was conscious that the crowd had once more been swayed by this daring adventurer, as others had been swayed by him in Boulogne and in Paris, at Asnières and Moisson. Chauvelin saw those scenes pass before his mind's eye as in a dream, and as in a dream he heard the heavy footsteps treading once more the stone steps, but up this time to the floor above. He heard the talking and the laughter growing more and more indistinct and finally dying away altogether. The rabble had gone, but what was to become of him now? Would he be left to die of inanition, shut up in a cellar like a savage dog or cat? No! he felt quite sure that he need not fear that kind of revenge at the hands of the man whom he had pursued with such relentless hate. Instinctively he did pay this tribute to the most gallant foe he had ever pitted his wits against.

What then? He was left wondering. For how long he did not know. Was it for a few minutes or several hours? When presently he heard the rusty key grate once more in the lock, and once more he dragged himself away from the door. A shaft of yellow light from a lantern cut through the gloom of his prison, the door was opened, and that hateful mocking voice said:

"Company for you, my dear Monsieur Chambertin!" And a bundle which turned out to be a man wrapped in a cloak and wearing the uniform of the Gendarmerie Nationale was thrust into the cellar, and landed on the damp straw beside him. The humble sergeant of gendarmerie had fared no better than the powerful and influential member of the Committee of Public Safety.

24. A STRANGE PROPOSAL

After a time Cécile gradually felt as if she had suddenly wakened from an ugly dream, during which every one of her senses had been put to torture. Her eyes, her ears, her nostrils had been outraged by evil smells and ribald words, and the wild antics of King Mob. Then all at once silence, almost peace. The sound of those unruly masses, shouting, singing, stumping, was gradually dying away. A few stragglers, yielding to curiosity, were even now going out of the room. In another remote corner François was struggling to his feet. He appeared dazed and like a man broken in body and spirit. He staggered as far as the tapestried door which led to vestibule and boudoir; as he did so his foot knocked against his broken riding-whip. He stared down at it vacantly, as if he did not know what it was and why it was there, and then passed through the door and closed it behind him.

Pradel and Cécile were alone.

They were both silent. Constrained. She wanted to say something to him, but somehow the words would not come. She knew so little about this man who had, as a matter of fact, saved her reason. At one moment during this wild saraband she had felt as if she were going mad. Then he had come and a sense of security had descended into her soul. But why she should have felt comforted, she couldn't say. She knew that he loved her, at any rate had loved her until that awful hour when he had suffered a terrible outrage at her brother's hands. He couldn't continue to love her after that. Could not. He must hate her and all her family. But if he did, why had he come running all the way from Choisy and stopped this hysterical multitude from doing her bodily harm? There was no ignoring the fact that he had come running along all the way from Choisy, and that he had saved her and maman and François from disaster. Then why did he look so aloof, so entirely indifferent? His face was quite expressionless; only that horrid scar showed up on his pale forehead. She hated the sight of that scar, but couldn't help looking at it and thinking: "How he must hate us all!" Of course, he belonged to the party that deposed the King and proclaimed the Republic; that, in fact, was François's chief grievance against him. She had never heard him discuss politics, and she and maman lived such a secluded life she didn't know much of what went on. She hated all murderers and regicides-oh! regicides above all!-but somehow she didn't believe that Pradel was one of these. Even before the beginnings of this awful revolution he had always spent most of his time-and people said half his private fortune-in doing good to the needy and keeping up the children's hospital in Choisy. Cécile knew all that. She had even done her best in a small way in the past to help him with some of his charitable work when knowledge of it came her way. No, no, a man of that type was no murderer, no regicide. But it was all very puzzling. Especially as he neither spoke nor moved, apparently leaving the initiative to her.

At last she was able to take it. She mastered her absurd diffidence and steadied her voice as best she could.

"I wish I knew how to thank you, Monsieur le Docteur," she said. "You saved my reason. I think if you had not interfered when you did I should have gone mad."

"Not so bad as that, citizeness, I think," he responded with the ghost of a smile.

Cécile liked his smile. It was kind. But she hated his calling her "citizeness." She stiffened at the word and went on more coolly:

"You have remarkable influence over the people here. They love you."

"They are not a bad crowd really," he said and then added after a second's pause: "Not yet."

"It is strange how they followed that fiddler. Did you see him?"

"Yes!"

"To me he did not seem human. More like a giant out of a fairy-tale. Did you hear what that funny little man in black said to him?"

"I heard, Citizeness. But, unfortunately, I did not understand. He spoke in English, I think."

"Yes! and he called the fiddler 'my valiant Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

"What is that?"

"You have never heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Only as a mythical personage."

"He really does exist though. It was he, who-"

She paused abruptly, for she had been on the point of naming the Abbé Edgeworth and his escape from La Rodière. No news of the safety of the old priest had as yet been received and until it was definitely known that he was safe in Belgium, the secret of the escape must on no account be revealed. To Cécile's astonishment, however, Pradel himself alluded to it.

"Who engineered the escape of our mutual friend, Abbé Edgeworth, you mean?"

"You knew?"

"I only guessed."

"And I can tell you definitely that it was the English spy whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel who made every arrangement for the abbé's safety."

"Then why do you call him a spy? An ugly word, meseems, for the noble work which he does."

"You are right there, Monsieur le Docteur. It is always fine to serve your country, or to serve humanity in whichever way seems to you best. I only used the word 'spy' because the Scarlet Pimpernel, so I have heard said, is never seen as himself, but always in disguise. That is why I thought that the fiddler-"

"Yes, Citizeness?"

She shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "it can't be. He made no attempt to save me from those awful women. I suppose he does not think that we up here are in immediate danger. Do you think that we are?" she added abruptly and raised eyes shining with sudden fear up at Pradel.

He made no reply. What could he say? As a matter of fact it was all over Choisy that the arrest of the aristos up at La Rodière was only a question of hours. That was why he had come running up to the château, not so much in terror for her of a boisterous crowd, as of the decree of the Committee of Public Safety, and the inevitable Gendarmerie Nationale.

"I don't mind for myself," Cécile went on after a moment or two, "but maman and...and...François...I know you hate him, and I dare say he deserves your hatred. But he is my brother...and maman ...You don't think they would dare do anything to maman?...do you?"

She couldn't go on for tears were choking her. She turned away, half ashamed that he should see those tears, and walked across to the window. She stood in the embrasure for a time looking out at first into vacancy, then gradually becoming aware of what was going on down below. The perron and the long avenue were all thronged with that same abominable multitude who had insulted and humiliated her before the advent of Pradel. They were all going away in a body now, quite good-tempered, rather noisy, still singing and shouting. The shades of evening were drawing in fast. It was close on five o'clock, and they were all going home ready to tell of their many adventures to the workers when they came out of the factories, and to the few who had not been fortunate enough to join in the revels of this memorable afternoon. Five o'clock and it was half-past three when first that unruly mass of humanity had invaded the château. One hour and a half of mental torture. To Cécile it seemed an eternity. And now they were going away. Silence would once more reign in the ancestral home of the La Rodières, silence but not peace, for terror of death would from this hour be always present within its walls, the nameless dread which holds its greatest sway o' nights, banishes sleep, and rears its head at every chance word spoken by careless lips: arrest, denunciation, imprisonment, the guillotine.

The guillotine! In a way one had dreaded it for years, but only in a vague way, as something horrible that happened to others, to one's friends, even to one's King, but not to oneself. But now here it was, as it were, at one's very door. And there was maman to think of who was old, and François who was rash....

"Citizeness!"

Citizeness! Another of those chance words that brought the nameless dread striking at one's heart. It roused Cécile de la Rodière out of her sombre mood. The noise of the crowd below was growing fainter and fainter. Most of the rioters were out of sight already. They had gone quietly enough, and now only a few laggards, men who were lame and women who were feeble, could be seen making their way down the avenue in the fast gathering gloom.

"Citizeness!"

The voice was kindly, rather hoarse, perhaps, and authoritative, but kindly nevertheless. Pradel had come up close to her. He it was who had spoken the chance word. Cécile turned to him.

"Yes, Monsieur le Docteur?"

"You asked me a straight question just now, and I ought to have answered it at once, knowing you to be proud and brave. But I wanted you to collect yourself a little. You are young and have gone through a great deal. Naturally enough, you are slightly unnerved. At the same time I feel that it is best for you and for you all that you should know the truth."

"The truth?"

"The authorities at Choisy have decided on the arrest of your mother, your brother, yourself and your two servants. Directly I learned their decision I ran up here to see what I, as a single individual, could do to save you. I was on my way up already, because I knew that I could do a great deal to prevent a lot of irresponsible women and weaklings from doing more than, perhaps, frightening you, and I would have been here earlier only I could not leave the hospital, where I was attending a really serious case. I thank Heaven that I could not leave sooner, and that I was obliged to call in at the Town Hall, where I learned, by the merest chance, that the Committee of Public Safety had ordered your arrest at the instance of one of its members, the order to be executed within the next twenty-four hours."

Cécile had listened to all this without making any movement or any sign that she understood the meaning of what Pradel had just told her. She had turned to face him and while he talked, her glance never wavered. She looked him straight in the eyes. It was quite dark in the room now, only here in the window embrasure the last lingering evening light sent its dying shaft on the slim figure of Dr. Pradel. Never for one second did Cécile de la Rodière doubt that he spoke the truth.

She could not have explained even to herself how it was she knew, but she was absolutely convinced that when he spoke of this awful danger of death to those she cared for, he was speaking the truth.

For some time after Pradel had finished speaking Cécile said nothing and made no movement. Slowly the purport of what he said penetrated into her brain. Arrest! Within twenty-four hours! It meant death, of course. The guillotine for them all. For maman and François and for Paul and Marie. The guillotine! The horrible thing that happened to others, even to the King. And now to oneself!

Pradel waited, of course, for her to speak. The world for him, as for her, had faded from his ken. Time was standing still. Every thing around them was wrapped in darkness, was merged in a stupendous silence. And suddenly through the silence there came a curious sound, the harsh scraping of catgut on a common fiddle:

"Au clair de la lune

Mon ami Pierrot!"

The old ditty played very much out of tune by an inexperienced hand loosened the strain on Cécile's nerves. She was so young, had been so happy till this awful calamity had descended upon them all. It had begun four years ago with the death of her father whom she had adored, and then the home-coming after his funeral and finding the home a wreck and all the old servants gone except Paul and Marie. Then the murder of the King. And now this. Surely, surely something could be done to save those she loved from disaster and death.

"Docteur Pradel," she murmured appealingly, "can nothing be done?"

"Yes, Citizeness," he replied coldly; "something can be done, and it rests with you. I have told you the worst, but I earnestly believe that it is in my power to get you and your family and your two servants out of this trouble. If I am right in this belief, then I shall thank God on my knees for the privilege of being of service to you. May I proceed?"

"If you please, Monsieur."

"I am afraid that what I am about to say will shock you, wound you, perhaps, in your most cherished prejudices. Believe me, if I could see any other way of averting this terrible calamity, I would take it. I have, as perhaps you know, a certain amount of influence in the commune, not great enough, alas! to obtain a safe-conduct for you and those you care for now that an order for your arrest has been issued by an actual member of the Committee of Public Safety, but I could demand one for my wife."

Cécile could not suppress a gasp nor smother a cry:

"Your wife, Monsieur?"

"I pray you do not misunderstand me," Pradel rejoined calmly, even though at the sound of that cry of protest a shadow had spread over his face, leaving it more wan, more stern, too, than it had been before. "By a recent decree of the existing government marriage between citizens of this country only means going before the Mayor of the Commune and there reciting certain formulas which will bind them in matrimony for as long or as short a time as they desire. Should you decide to go through this ceremony with me, I swear to you that never through any fault of mine will you have cause to regret it. Once you are nominally my wife, I, as an important member of this commune, can protect you, your family and your servants until such time as I find it expedient and safe to convey you all out of this unfortunate country into Switzerland or Belgium, where you could remain until these troublesome times are past. Until then you will all live under my roof as honoured guests. I am a busy man, hardly ever at home. You will hardly ever see me; you need never speak to me unless you wish. And now, with your permission, I will leave you to think it all over quietly and, perhaps, to consult with your family. To-morrow at ten o'clock I will be back to receive your answer. We will then either go at once to the Mairie or I will offer you and the citizeness, your mother, my respectful adieux."

And he was gone. Cécile never heard him cross the room to go downstairs. All she heard were the strains of that ramshackle fiddle and the soft, wordless humming of the old, old tune:

"Ma chandelle est morte.

Je n'ai plus de feu.

Oubre moi ta porte.

Pour l'amour de Dieu!"

Well! the door was open for her to pass through from the fear of death to promised security for all those whom she loved. Oh! if it had only been a question of herself, she would not have wasted a moment's reflection on that outrageous proposition.

Outrageous? Was it really outrageous? A proposition couched in terms of dignified respect, and one calculated to safeguard the lives of all those she cared for, could not in all fairness be stigmatized as outrageous. Bold, perhaps, unique certainly: no girl, she supposed, had ever had such a remarkable proposal of marriage. But then the man who made it was nothing if not bold, and the situation was, of course, unique. Nor did she doubt him for an instant. From the first there had been something in his attitude and in the way he spoke that bore the imprint of absolute truth. No, she assuredly did not doubt him. The danger, she knew, was real enough; the way out of it she was convinced, was the only one possible. She was quite sorry now that Pradel had gone so quickly. There were so many things she would have liked to have asked him. The decision which she would have to make was one that should be made on the spur of the moment. The delay would give her a long, sleepless night and a great deal of nerve strain. And then there was the great question. Should she consult maman or confront her with the accomplished fact? And there was François, too. He, with the impulse of youth and prejudice, would say: "Better death than dishonour," and would continue to look on the transaction as a perpetual blot on the escutcheon of the la Rodières.

It was all terribly puzzling. A deep, deep sigh came from Cécile's heart, not a sorrowful sigh really. She did not understand her own feelings. Not entirely. All she knew was that she wished Pradel had not gone away quite so quickly.

She thought, anyhow, that she had best go back to maman now. As a matter of fact, she ought not to have left maman alone quite so long. But maman had François with her, as well as Marie and Paul too, probably. Whereas she, Cécile, was alone. She had no one to advise her, no one to help her analyse that strange mixture inside of her, of doubt and fear and, yes, elation, which was so unaccountable, so strange, so different to anything she had ever felt before. And why had Pradel made such a proposition to her? He loved her. She was woman enough to know that, then why...? why not...? Again she sighed, longed somehow to be older, more experienced in the ways of men... or the ways of lovers.

And what in God's name was she going to say to maman and to François?

BOOK IV THE TRAITOR

25. MUTINY

In the meanwhile the cabaret up the road was doing a roaring trade. A goodly number of revellers, not satisfied with the excitement of the afternoon, had turned in there for a drink and a gossip. There was such a lot to talk about, and the company quickly formed itself into groups round separate tables, some talking over one thing, some another. Jacques the butcher's boy was there; he was baited for having allowed his partner, the aristo, to be taken from him by the citizen doctor. "He was handsomer than you, Jacques," he was told; "that's what it was."

And Jacques, full of vanity, as many undersized boys and girls often are, declared most emphatically that he would bring the aristo to her knees, and that within the next three days.

"How wilt thou do that, thou ugly young moke?" he was asked, all in good humour.

"I shall make her marry me," he replied, puffing out his chest like a small turkey-cock.

Laughter all round, then some one queried:

"Thou'll make love to the aristo?"

"I will."

"And ask her in marriage?"

"Yes!"

"And if she says 'No!'"

"If she does, I'll warn her that I will go straight to the Chief Commissary and denounce her and her family as traitors, which will mean the guillotine for the lot of them. So what now?" he concluded with a ludicrous air of triumph.

"A splendid idea, Jacques," a lusty voice cried gaily, and a none-too-gentle hand gave the boy a vigorous slap on the back. "And we'll play a march at thy wedding."

It was the fiddler who had just come in with the other musicians. It seems they had accompanied the bulk of the crowd part of the way down to Choisy, and then felt woefully thirsty, and came to the "Chien sans Queue," which was so much nearer for a drink than the first cabaret down the other way. They certainly looked very weary, very grubby and very dry, which was small wonder, seeing that they had been on the go, marching with the crowd and blowing their trumpets, since before noon. Apparently, poor things, they had no money for though they professed to have mouths as dry as lime-kilns, they did not order drinks, but took their stand in a corner of the room and proceeded to tune up their instruments, which means that they made the kind of noise one usually associates in concert halls with tuning up, but when they had finished the process and started to play what might be called a tune, the sounds which their instruments emitted had no relation whatever to correct harmony. They seemed, however, to please the unsophisticated ears of the audience, or else, perhaps, the mood for song and gaiety had not yet passed away altogether; certain it is that when the ever-popular "Il était une bergère," was struck up, the chorus was taken up with the former gusto and there was much clapping of hands and banging of tin mugs on the tables. But when the woes of the shepherdess and her cat had been proclaimed in song from beginning to end once, twice and three times and the musicians, more weary and thirsty than ever, deputed their fiddler to go round and hold out his phrygian cap in a mute appeal for sous wherewith to pay for drinks, the whole crowd suddenly discovered that it was getting late and that wives and mothers were waiting for them at home. And there was a chorus something like this:

"Who would have thought it was supper-time?"

"And such a dark night, too."

"If I don't get home, my old woman will be as cross as a she-cat."

"Art thou coming my way, Henri?"

And one by one, or in groups of threes and fours they all filed out of the "Chien sans Queue." Only six sous had been thrown into the Phrygian cap. Polycarpe the landlord stood at his own front door for some time exchanging a few last words with his departing customers. His wife, the Junoesque Victoria, was clearing away the empty mugs in the taproom. The fiddler put his long arm round her capacious waist and drew her, giggling and smirking, on his knee. She smacked his face with elephantine playfulness.

"You couldn't run about with me on your shoulder," she said, "as you did with that poor little man this afternoon."

"He was just a dirty spy," the fiddler retorted, "but if you will challenge me, my Juno, I will have a try with you also."

"Take me upstairs, then, to my room," she said, with a simper. "I am dog-tired after all that dancing and Polycarpe can finish clearing away."

"What will you give me if I do?"

"Free drinks, my beauty," she replied, and pinched his cheeks with her plump fingers, "if you do not drop me on the way."

To her great amazement and no less to her delight the fiddler did heave her up, not as if she were a feather or even a bale of goods certainly, but he did hold her in his arms and carry her not only to the door, but up the narrow staircase, whence she directed him to her bedroom, where she demanded to be deposited on the bed, which gave a loud creak under her goodly weight. She laughed when she saw him give a loud puff of exhaustion.

"I weigh a hundred kilos," she said with some pride.

"I am sure you do," he was willing to admit. But at the provocative glance which the bouncing lady now threw him he took incontinently to his heels. As he was going down the stairs he heard her shouting to her husband.

"Polycarpe! He carried me all the way upstairs in his arms. There's a man for you!"

Polycarpe was standing at the foot of the stairs. His face wore an expression of comical amazement. He was small and spare, had a head as bald as an egg, and tired, purple-rimmed eyes.

"Give the musicians free drinks all round," the lady commanded.

Thus it was that presently five tired musicians were seated round one of the tables in a corner of the taproom of the cabaret "Le Chien sans Queue." With them was Citizen Polycarpe the landlord who, for the moment, was sprawling across the table, his head

buried in his arms and snoring like a grampus. The fiddler bent over him, turned his head over and with delicate, if very grimy finger, lifted the lid of one of his eyes.

"As drunk as a lord," he declared; "that stuff is very potent."

He had a smallish bottle in his hand which he now slipped back into his pocket.

"And the gargantuan lady upstairs," he went on, "is sleeping the sleep of the just. So as soon as Devinne is here we can get on with business."

"He is here," one of the others said, "I am sure I heard his footsteps outside."

He rose and went to the door, called out softly into the night: "Devinne! All serene!"

A minute or two later St. John Devinne came in. He was dressed in ordinary clothes, had clean face and hands, but though normally he would not by his appearance have attracted any attention, here in this squalid tap-room in the midst of his friends all grimy and clad in nothing but rags, he looked strangely conspicuous and, as it were, out of key. A pair of lazy eyes, slightly sarcastic in expression, looked him up and down. Devinne caught the glance and something of a blush mounted to his cheeks, nor did he after that meet the eyes of his chief. He took his seat at the table, edging away as far as he could from the sprawling form of Polycarpe the landlord.

"May I know what has happened this afternoon?" he asked curtly.

"Of course you may, my dear fellow," Blakeney replied. "Here," he added, and pushed a mug and jug of wine nearer to St. John, "have a drink."

"No, thanks."

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, that young dandy, was busy polishing a tin trumpet. He looked up from his work, glanced up at the chief who gave him a slight nod, whereupon he proceeded to give a short succinct account of the stirring events at the château.

"I thought something of the sort was in the wind," Devinne said with dry sarcasm, "or I should not have been sent up to Paris on that futile errand."

There was complete silence for a moment or two after that. Lord Tony's fist clenched until the knuckles shown smooth and white. Glynde was seen to swallow hard as if to choke words that had risen to his throat. They all looked up at their chief who had not moved a muscle, had not even frowned. Now he gave a light little laugh.

"Do have a drink, Johnny," he said; "it will do you good."

Sir Andrew blew a subdued blast in his tin trumpet and Tony, Glynde and Hastings only swore under their breath. But the tension was eased for the moment, and Blakeney presently resumed:

"The errand, lad," he rejoined simply, "was not futile. One of us had to let Galveston and Holte know that they will have to meet us at headquarters on the St. Gif-Le Perrey Road any time within the next twenty-four hours. You would have been wiser, I think, for their sakes as well as your own, to have assumed some inconspicuous disguise, but you have got through all right, I take it, so we won't say any more about that."

"Yes! I got through all right," Devinne mumbled sulkily. "I am not a fool."

"I am sure you are not, dear lad," Blakeney responded still very quietly, though to any one who knew him as intimately as did Sir Andrew Ffoulkes or Lord Tony, there was just a soupçon of hardness now in the tone of his usually pleasant voice. "You were spared, at any rate, the painful sight of seeing your friends up at La Rodière baited by that unruly crowd."

"Yes! Damn them!"

"And then you know, Johnny, you are nothing of a musician really. Now you should have heard Ffoulkes on his trumpet, or Hastings who played second fiddle; they were demmed marvellous, I tell you. If I were not afraid of waking my Juno upstairs, I would give you a specimen of our performance, right up to the time when our friend Monsieur Chambertin appeared upon the scene."

"By the way," Lord Tony now put in, "what did you do ultimately with that worthy man?"

"I locked him and his sergeant up in the cellar. It won't hurt them to starve for a bit. We'll arrange for them to be let out as soon as we feel that they cannot do us any harm."

"I suppose I shall be told off to do that," Devinne muttered peevishly.

"That's an idea, Johnny," Blakeney responded with imperturbable good humour. "Splendid! But cheer up, lad. We have splendid work before us. When dawn breaks over the hills yonder, we will be out for sport which is fit for the gods. Sport which you all love. Break-neck rides across country, with those poor innocents to save from the wolves who will be howling at us close to our heels. By gad! you will all feel like gods yourselves. You will have lived, all of you. Lived, I tell you! My God! I thank Thee for the chance! That is what you will say."

As the ringing voice of the light-hearted adventurer resounded against the rafters of the old tap-room, landlord Polycarpe raised his head for a moment, looked around him with bleary eyes, then dropped his head down again and emitted a thunderous snore. They all laughed like so many schoolboys, the atmosphere became, as it were, surcharged with the spirits of these young dare-devils, ready to hazard their lives in the pursuit of what Blakeney had called a sport fit for the gods. And so magnetic was the personality of their leader, the greatest and most selfless knight-errant that ever graced the pages of history, that even Devinne the rebellious felt its power and listened spell-bound to the stirring projects of his chief.

Sir Percy now stood in his favourite attitude leaning against the wall, facing the five glowing pairs of eyes, his own fixed on something that he alone saw, something beyond these four squalid walls, the open country perhaps, the break-neck ride that lay ahead of him and his followers, or was it the flower-garden of Richmond, the banks of the Thames, the blue eyes of Marguerite calling to him, asking him to come back to her arms? He threw up his head and laughed. Yes! his adored wife was calling to him even now, but so were those innocents up at the château, three women, an old man, up at La Rodière, and there were others, too, children! God in heaven! One couldn't allow children, women, old men to be butchered without doing what one could do to help them. Marguerite, my beloved, you must wait! I will come back to you, all in good time, when I have done the work which destiny, or was it God Himself? has mapped out for me.

"You remember," he began after a few moments during which he seemed to be collecting his thoughts, "that there came a time when I allowed the crowd to get ahead of me and I remained behind ostensibly to put a new string on my fiddle. I hid in the dense shrubbery

just inside the gates, and after a few minutes, five, perhaps I heard the welcome voice of our dear Monsieur Chauvelin. He gave that egregious agitator Conty the go-by, then he called to a soldier who had evidently been waiting for him, and gave him instructions for his well-conceived damnable plot which embraced the arrest of the whole La Rodière family and their two faithful servants, as well as the capture of mine humble self. I could hear every word he said. I learned that a squad of gendarmerie, thirty in number, was posted in the stables, and that at a certain signal given by my engaging friend, the men were to make their way up to the château and there to await further orders. As soon as this pair of blackguards had parted company, Chauvelin to go straight to the château, and the sergeant to transmit his orders, I slipped out of the gate and came on here.

"Worthy landlord Polycarpe is, of course, an old friend of ours. The place was deserted for the moment. I got him to open a couple of jorums of wine, into which I poured a good measure of this potent stuff, which that splendid fellow Barstow of York gave me recently. Look at old Polycarpe. You can see what a wonderful sleep it induces. With a jorum in each hand, my fiddle and a bunch of mugs, slung over my shoulder, I made my way to the stables, where, as you may well suppose, I was made extremely welcome. I stayed just long enough to see the wine poured out and handed round, then out I slipped, locking the stable and coach-house doors after me. Then back I went to join the merry throng in the château. The rest you know, and so much for the past. Now for the future. Give me some of this abominable vinegar to drink and I'll go on."

One of them poured out the wine, another handed him the mug. He drank it down and did not even make a wry face. Probably he had not the slightest notion what landlord Polycarpe's thin local wine tasted like. Anyway, he did go on.

"Just before dawn we'll go up to La Rodière. I have the key of the stables in my pocket, and I want to give those nice soldiers another drink. That will keep them quiet till far into the morning. By that time we shall be well away. We'll divest some of them of their accoutrements, which will save us the trouble of going all the way to headquarters to get our own. I have thought the matter well over and, as I said this morning, I am quite positive that in this part of the country, and far from a large city, a mock arrest is by far our best plan. Fortune has favoured us, let me tell you, for there is a coach and a pair here in the yard. I learned this also while I was eavesdropping. It was designed to accommodate the five prisoners. Now it will serve the same purpose for us with two of us on the box and the others freezing on the top, for it will be cold, I tell you. As soon we have effected the arrest, we'll make for the St. Gif-Le Perrey road. At St. Gif, Galveston and Holte will be at our usual quarters, ready with fresh horses to continue the journey to the coast."

"Then we don't start till dawn?" one of them asked.

"Just before dawn. The night will, I am afraid, be very dark, except at rare intervals, for there is a heavy bank of clouds coming over the mountains. We want the light, as we shall have to drive like the devil until well past Le Perrey.

"And we make for the coast?"

"For that little hole Trouville, this side of the Loire. You remember it Ffoulkes? But we'll talk all that over before I leave you."

"You are not coming all the way?"

"No, only as far as St. Gif. Directly I have seen you all safely on the road I shall have to turn my attention to one other prisoner, and that will be a difficult task. I don't mean that it will be so materially, but Pradel, I feel, will be obstinate. He has his hospital here, and his poor patients. How am I going to persuade him that anyhow when those murderers have done away with him, his hospital and his poor patients will still have to exist somehow?"

While the chief spoke and the others hung as usual breathless on his lips, Devinne's expression of face became more and more glowering. A dark frown deepened between his eyes. Once or twice he tried to speak, but it was not until Blakeney paused that he suddenly banged his fist on the table.

"Pradel?" he cried. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Just what I said, my dear fellow," Sir Percy replied, with just the slightest possible lifting of his eyebrows. "The others understood. Why not you?"

"The others? The others? I don't care about the others. All I know is that that insolent brute Pradel—"

Up went Blakeney's slender, commanding hand.

"Do not call that man a brute, my lad. He is a fine fellow, and his life is in immediate danger, though he does not know it. He has a bitter and very influential enemy in the lawyer Maurin, who has put up a trumpety charge against him. I learned as lately as last night that his arrest has been finally decided on by the Chief Commissary and is only a matter of a couple of days, till enough false evidence, I suppose, has been collected against him."

"Well! and why not?" Devinne retorted hotly.

"There is no time to go into that now, my dear fellow," Blakeney replied with unruffled patience.

"Why not?"

At sound of this curt challenge to their chief, at the defiant tone of the boy's voice, the others lost all patience, and there was a chorus which should have been a warning to Devinne, that though Blakeney himself was as usual extraordinarily patient and understanding, they in a body, Ffoulkes, Tony, Hastings, Glynde, would not tolerate effrontery, let alone insubordination.

"You young cub!"

"Insolent worm! Wait till you feel my glove on your face."

"By gad! I'll wring his neck!" were some of the threats and epithets they hurled at Devinne. But the latter was now in one of those obstinate moods that opposition soon turns into open revolt, and this, in spite of the fact that Percy now put a firm, but still friendly, hand on his shoulder.

"If I didn't know, lad, what is at the back of your mind," he said gently, "I might remind you once again that you promised me obedience, just like the others, in all matters connected with our League. We should never accomplish the good work which we have all of us undertaken if there was mutiny in our small camp."

Devinne shook the kindly hand off his shoulder.

"Oh! you'll never understand," he muttered glumly.

"What? That you are in love with Cécile de la Rodière and jealous of Simon Pradel?"

"Don't talk of love, Blakeney. You don't know what it means."

A slight pause. Only a second or two, while a curious shadow seemed to flit over those deep-set eyes that held such a wealth of suppressed emotion in their glance, of sorrow and of doubt and of visions of ecstasy that mayhap the daring adventurer would never taste again. He gave a quick sigh and said simply:

"Perhaps not, dear lad. You may be right. But we are not here to discuss matters of sentiment, and the knife which I am now about to wield will cut into your wounded vanity, and, I fear me, will hurt terribly. Cécile de la Rodière," he went on, and now his tone was very firm and he spoke very slowly, letting every word sink into the boy's consciousness, "is not and never will be in love with you. She is half in love with Pradel already."

Devinne jumped to his feet.

"And that's a lie—" he cried hoarsely, and would have said more only that Glynde struck him full on the mouth.

The others, too, were beside themselves with fury. They laid rough hands on his shoulders. Lord Tony flung an insult in his face, and Hastings called out:

"On your knees, you—"

Blakeney alone remained quite undisturbed. He only spoke when Hastings and Tony between them had nearly forced Devinne down on his knees; then he said with a light laugh:

"Leave the boy alone, Hastings. You too, Tony. Four against one is not a sporting proposition, is it?"

He took Devinne firmly under the arm, helped him to raise himself, and said quietly:

"You are not quite yourself just now, are you Johnny? Come out into the fresh air a bit. It will do you good."

Devinne tried to shake himself free, but held in Percy's iron grip, he was compelled to move with him across the room. The others naturally did not interfere. They were nursing their indignation, while they watched their chief lead the recalcitrant Johnny out of the room.

"I would like to scrag the brute," Glynde muttered savagely.

"I hope to God Percy does not trust him too far," Sir Andrew added.

"You know what he is," was Lord Tony's comment; "he is so straight, such a sportsman himself, that he simply cannot see treachery in others. The old duke, St. John's father, is a splendid old fellow, rides as straight to hounds as any man I know. Percy is his friend, and he cannot conceive that this young cub is anything but a chip of the old block."

"Shall I go out and wring his neck?" was my Lord Hastings's terse suggestion.

As this excellent solution of the present difficulty could not very well be acted upon, these loyal souls could do naught else but await the return of their chief. They fell to talking over the stirring events of the day and the still more stirring events that were to come.

Now and then they cast anxious looks in the direction of the door, wherever St. John Devinne's rasping voice reached their ears.

26. OPEN REVOLT

Outside, in the cold frosty night, a strange clash of wills was taking place with the issue never for a moment in doubt. Devinne, goaded by jealousy, had lost all sense of proportion and all sense of loyalty and honour. It was not only a question of a lover's hatred for a rival whom he still affected to despise, it was also jealousy of the power and influence of his chief, against whose orders he was determined to rebel.

St. John Devinne was an only son. His father, the old Duke of Rudford, a fine old sportsman as every one acknowledged, had been inordinately proud of a boy born to him when he was past middle age. His mother did her best to spoil the child. She gave in to every one of his many caprices. When presently he went to school she loaded him with presents both of money and of "tuck," with the result that he became a little king among his schoolmates. As his housemaster was a bachelor, there was just a housekeeper in charge who was clever enough to earn the good graces of the fond mother, and accepted quite unblushingly every bribe offered to her to pay special attention to young St. John and to favour him in every way she could. The boy came down from Harrow rather more spoilt and certainly more arrogant than he was when he went up.

There followed, however, a rather better time for him morally, when he came under the direct influence of his father. He became quite a good sportsman, rode straight to hounds, was a fine boxer and fencer. During the fashionable seasons in London and in Bath he was a great favourite with the ladies, for he was an amusing talker and an elegant partner in the minuet. When in '90 Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., accompanied by his beautiful young wife, made his dazzling entry in English society after a long sojourn in France, he became St. John Devinne's beau ideal. The boy's one aim in life was to emulate that perfect gentlemen in all things. And when, after a time, he was actually admitted into the intimate circle of young exquisites of whom Sir Percy was the acknowledged leader, he felt that life could hold no greater happiness for him.

Then the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel was formed and in August '91 St. John Devinne was enrolled as a member and swore the prescribed oath of allegiance, secrecy and obedience to the chief. From certain correspondence that came to light subsequently, it has been established that Blakeney first spoke of his scheme for the establishment of the League with the old Duke, for there is a letter still extant written by the latter to his friend Percy, in which he says:

"Alas, that my two enemies old age and rheumatism prevent my becoming a member of that glorious League which you are contemplating. Gladly would I have sworn allegiance and obedience to you, my dear Percy, whom I love and respect more than any man I have ever known. If you on the other hand do really bear me the affection which you have expressed so beautifully in your letter to me, then allow my boy St. John to be one of your followers and to take what should have been my place by your side, proud to obey you in all things and swearing allegiance to you, second only to that which he owes to his King."

St. John Devinne participated in the rescue of Mariette Joly and Henri Chanel in Paris, in that of the Tourmon-d'Agenays in the forest of Epone, and in two or three other equally daring and successful adventures. He was always looked upon by the others as thoroughly loyal and a good sportsman. Only Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, that truest of all true friends, never really trusted him.

That, then, was the man who in these early days of '93 had gradually allowed his boyish vices to get the better of his finer nature. The devils of arrogance, obstinacy and rebellion against authority had been the overlords that presided over his development from youth to manhood. They were held in check during the first few months of an adventurous life, fuller and more glorious than he had ever dreamed of, but those three devils in him had got the upper hand over him again.

"You may talk as much as you like, Percy," he said, when he found himself alone with his chief, "you will never induce me to lend a hand in that wild scheme of yours."

"What wild scheme do you mean, Johnny?"

"Risking all our lives to save that upstart from getting his deserts."

"You are still alluding to Simon Pradel?"

"Of course I am. You don't know him as I do. You weren't there when he thrust his attentions on Cécile de la Rodière and was soundly thrashed by François for his pains."

"As it happens, my dear fellow, I was there and I saw and heard everything that went on. You gave me the lie just now when I told you what I know to be a fact, that Cécile de la Rodière is half in love with Simon Pradel. Hers is a simple, thoroughly fine nature which could not help being touched by the man's silent devotion to her. He has a scheme for saving her and her family from disaster, very much, in my opinion, at risk of his own life."

"A scheme?" Devinne retorted with a sneer. "He has a scheme, too, has he?"

"A scheme," Blakeney rejoined earnestly, "which has for its keystone his marriage with Mademoiselle Cécile."

"The devil!"

"No, not the devil, my dear fellow, only the little pagan god who has had a shot at you, too, with his arrow, but has not, methinks, wounded you very deeply."

"Anyhow, Cécile would not marry without her family's consent and they would never allow such a damnable mésalliance."

"The word has not much meaning with us in England these days when foreign princes and dukes earn their living as best they can. And as I have already told you, our League has taken Simon Pradel under its protection along with the la Rodière family."

"You mean that you have taken him under your protection."

"Put it that way if you like."

"And that...in England?"

"In England, too, of course. Don't we always look after our protégés once we have them over there?"

"Then let me tell you this, Blakeney," Devinne retorted, emboldened probably by the patient way in which his chief continued to speak with him. He was being treated like a child, certainly, but like a child of whom the stern schoolmaster was half afraid. "Let me tell you this, now that we are alone and those bullies in there are not here to interfere, that I resent your hectoring me in the manner you have done these last few days. You talk a lot about honour and obedience and all that sort of thing, but I am not a child and you are not

a schoolmaster. I will do all I can to help you save Cécile de la Rodière and her mother, even her brother, though I care less for him than for a brass farthing. But help save Pradel I will not, and that is my last word."

Blakeney had let him talk on without interruption. Perhaps he wished to probe the entire depth of the boy's disloyalty, or perhaps he was just wondering what he could say to his friend's only son to bring him back to the path of honour. Blakeney himself was a man of infinite understanding. During these past two years he had mixed with men and women who belonged to the lowest dregs of society; in the pursuit of his aims he had associated with potential assassins, as well as with misguided fools, and he had such a love of humanity that he had sometimes found it in his heart to sympathize with those whom misery and starvation had turned into criminals. But the case of St. John Devinne was altogether different. Here was a gentleman, a sportsman who almost within the turn of a hand had become blind to the dictates of honour and seemed ready to break his sworn word. To Percy Blakeney, in whose heart the worship of honour was second only to that which he offered to God, the whole circumstance of this boy's attitude was absolutely incomprehensible. He tried with all the patience at his command to understand or sympathize or, at any rate, to find some sort of an explanation for what seemed to him an inconceivable situation. He said very quietly:

"Look here, Johnny, you tell me that you will not lend a hand in saving Pradel, that you intend, in fact, to go against my orders, which means going back on your word of honour. Now that is a very big thing to do, as I told you once before. I won't qualify it any other way, I'll just say that it is a big thing. Will you then tell me why you think of doing it? What is your excuse? Or explanation? You'll want a cast-iron one, my dear fellow, you know, to make me understand it."

Devinne shrugged.

"Excuse? I might refuse to give you one, for I don't admit your right to question me like this. But I will try and remember that we were friends once, and, as far as I am concerned, we can go on being friends. I have two cast-iron reasons why I refuse to risk my life in order to save Pradel, who is my enemy. He has tried to alienate Cécile's love from me. Thank Heaven, he has not succeeded, but he has tried and will go on trying, once he is out of this country, in safety in England. And you expect me to help him in that? You must think I am a fool. My second reason is that in my opinion we must concentrate on saving Madame la Marquise and Mademoiselle Cécile, François, too, if you insist, but to hamper ourselves with those two old servants, not to mention that damned doctor fellow, is sheer madness to my mind, and I contend that I can make better use of my life than lose it perhaps in the pursuit of such folly."

Blakeney had listened to all this tirade in perfect quietude, never once turning his eyes away from the speaker's face. He couldn't see him very clearly because the shadows of the night were deep and dark, but he had manoeuvred so as to get Devinne within the feeble shaft of light which struck across from the tap-room through the narrow, uncurtained window. Thus he could watch the sneer which curled round the young man's lips and now and then catch the expression of scorn or defiance which distorted his good-looking face. But he made no movement to punish with a blow the insults which this young miscreant dared to fling at his chief. He had himself well in hand; only those who loved him would have been aware of the stiffening of his massive figure and seen the slender hands tightly clenched.

Now that Devinne had paused for lack of breath and still panting with excitement, Blakeney gave him answer, with utmost calm, never once raising his voice.

"I thank you, my good fellow, for this explanation. I am beginning to understand now. As to your last remark, that is as may be. A man must judge for himself what his own life is worth, and to what use he can put it. It is impossible for any members of the League to arrange for you to return to England for at least another day or two. I am taking it that you would prefer to travel alone rather than in the company of those whom we are going to do our utmost to save from death. If I can possibly arrange it, I will get in touch with Everingham and Aincourt, who know nothing of your treachery."

"Percy!" the other cried in angry protest.

"Who know nothing of your treachery," Blakeney reiterated with deliberate emphasis. "If they did," he added, with a short laugh, "they would possibly wring your neck."

"You needn't worry about me," Devinne retorted sullenly. "I can look after myself."

"Then do, my good fellow. It is the best thing you can do. Good night."

He went up to the door, but paused there, his hand on the latch, his eyes turned once more to the comrade who had turned renegade. It almost seemed as if he still entertained the hope that a sudden revulsion of feeling would bring the son of his old friend back to his side, back to the path of honour and loyalty which he had sworn to follow, back to that life of self-sacrifice and love of humanity which they had all pledged themselves to pursue. Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., that beau ideal of every dandy in London, looked strangely incongruous, almost weird, standing there by the cabaret door, in rags and tatters, with grimy unshaven face, a dirty Phrygian cap over his unkempt hair, his slender hand, which duchesses liked to fondle, covered with soot and dust. Yet also strangely commanding, the living presentation of a brave man brought face to face with some hideous monster, a ghoul in the very existence of which he had never believed up till now and whose very presence was a pollution.

Did some feeling akin to shame assail St. John Devinne then? It is impossible to say. Certain it is that without another word or backward glance he started to walk away down the hill. And Blakeney with a bitter sigh went to rejoin his comrades in the tap-room. They asked him no questions, for they guessed, if only vaguely, what had happened, and that after this they would have to face that most deadly of all dangers a traitor in the camp.

"If we have a traitor in the camp," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had once said, "then God help the lot of us."

27. TREACHERY

It is a little difficult to analyse the feelings of a man like St. John Devinne, for he was not really by nature an out and out blackguard. Vanity more than anything else was at the root of his present dishonourable actions. He imagined himself more deeply in love with Cécile de la Rodière than he had ever been before and more deeply than he actually was. Love, in a man of Devinne's type does not really mean much, except the satisfaction of vanity, and, looking back on the pages of history in every civilized land, one cannot help but admit that vanity in men and women has caused more mischief, more misery and greater disasters than any other frailty to which humanity is heir.

And so it was with this man who now was striding rapidly along the snow-covered road which leads down to Choisy. He was not aware of the time, nor of the cold, nor of the roughness of the road. At every dozen steps or so he stumbled over the slippery ground. Once or twice he measured his length in the ditch, but he didn't care. He had set a purpose in his mind, the best part of the night in which to carry it through and nothing else mattered. Nothing. At the cost of dishonour he had made up his mind that he would not lend a hand in any adventure that had for its object the rescue of Simon Pradel from the fate which apparently was waiting for him. Well, if it did, that was his look out, his own fault, too, for daring to court intimacy with his superiors and incurring thereby the enmity of this proletarian government. There was just one thing to be put down to the credit of this young traitor, and that is that mixed with his desire to leave Pradel to his fate, there was also the conviction that the only to ensure Cécile's safety was by concentrating on her and perhaps her mother, and leaving every other issue to take care of itself.

He had formed a plan, of course, and all the way between the heights of La Rodière and the outskirts of Choisy, running when he could, stumbling often, falling more than once, he elaborated this plan. He covered the ground quickly enough, for the way was downhill all the time and it was no longer very dark, now that a pale moon shed its cold silvery light on the carpet of snow. Somewhere in the far distance a church clock struck the half-hour. Half-past eight it must be, reckoned Devinne, and the Levets would have finished supper. There was their house just in sight. Now for a lucky chance to find the girl alone, the girl who in an access of jealousy as great as his own had cried out: "You only care because you are in love with Cécile!" He paused a moment outside the grill in order to shake the snow and dirt off his clothes, to straighten his hat and adjust his cravat. Then he walked up to the front door and rang the bell. It was old man Levet who opened the door. Devinne raised his hat and said:

"I have come with a message from Professeur D'Arblay. May I enter?"

"Certainly, Monsieur," the old man replied, and as soon as Devinne stood beside him in the vestibule he added: "What can I do for Professeur d'Arblay?"

"The message is actually for your daughter, Monsieur Levet. But if you wish I will deliver it to you."

"I will call my daughter," was Levet's simple response. He called to Blanche, who came out from the kitchen, a dishcloth still in her hand. Seeing a stranger, she quickly put the dishcloth down and wiped her hands on her apron.

"What is it, Father?" she asked.

"A message for you from Professeur d'Arblay. If you want me, you can call. Monsieur," he added, with a slight bow to Devinne, "at your service."

He went in to the sitting-room. Blanche and Devinne were alone. She turned anxious, inquiring eyes on him. He said:

"It is very important and urgent, Mademoiselle. It means life and death to Madame la Marquise up at the château and to Mademoiselle Cécile."

He noted with satisfaction that at the mention of Cécile's name the young girl's figure appeared to stiffen, and that an expression almost of hostility crept into her eyes. She was silent for a moment or two. Then she turned and said coldly:

"Will you come in here, Monsieur?" and led the way into the small dining-room, closing the door behind him. Chance, then, was bestowing her favours upon the traitor. He could talk to the girl undisturbed. Everything else would be easy. She offered him a chair by the table and sat down opposite him with a small oil-lamp between them, and Devinne, who studied her face closely, did not fail to see that the look of cold hostility still lingered in her eyes, and that her lips were tightly pressed together.

"I had best come at once to the point, Mademoiselle," he began, "for my time is short. The question which I must put to you first of all is this: would you have sufficient courage to go up to La Rodière to-night? I would accompany you, but only as far as the gate, and you would then go on to the château and transmit Professeur d'Arblay's message to Mademoiselle Cécile."

Blanche hesitated a moment, then she said coldly:

"That depends, Monsieur."

"On what?"

"I must know something more about the message."

"You shall, Mademoiselle, you shall. But first will you tell me this? Have you ever heard speak of the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Only vaguely."

"What have you heard?"

"That he is a dangerous English spy. The sworn enemy of our country. His activities, they say, chiefly consist in helping traitors to escape from justice."

"Would you be very surprised, then, to learn that Professeur d'Arblay is none other than the Scarlet Pimpernel himself?"

Once again Blanche paused before she answered. When she did, she spoke very slowly, almost as if she were searching her memory for facts which had been relegated up to now to the back of her mind.

"No, it would not surprise me. I always looked on Professeur d'Arblay as somewhat mysterious. Father liked him, and they often had long talks together, and maman, pauvre maman! looked upon him, I often thought, as a messenger of God. As a matter of fact, I never knew his name till quite lately, the day when the King was executed and the Abbé Edgeworth--"

"Yes? The Abbé Edgeworth? You know about him and his escape from the mob who tried to murder him?"

"Yes. It was Professeur d'Arblay who brought him to this house."

"It was the Scarlet Pimpernel, Mademoiselle."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel?" the girl murmured, "and you know him, Monsieur?"

"I am English, Mademoiselle, and we Englishmen all know him. We work together in the secret service of our country. I told him that I should be going past your house this evening, so he asked me to bring you the message which he desires you to convey to Mademoiselle de la Rodière."

"A verbal message?"

"No. I will write it if you will allow me. It would not have been over safe for a lonely wayfarer as I was to carry a compromising paper about his person. There are many spies and vagabonds about."

"But when we go up to La Rodière?"

"I am going down into Choisy first, and will hire a chaise. We will drive up to the château, with a couple of men on the box."

Blanche looked intently at the young man for a second or two, then she rose, fetched paper, ink and a pen from a side table and placed them before him.

"Will you write your message, Monsieur?" she said simply.

"Will you promise to take it?" he retorted.

"I will make no promise. It will depend on the message."

"Then I must take the chance that it meets with your approval," he decided, and with a smile he took up the pen and began to write. Blanche, her elbow resting on the table, her chin cupped in her hand, watched him while he wrote a dozen lines. In the end he made a rough drawing which looked like a device.

"What is that?" she asked.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel, Mademoiselle, a small five-petalled flower. We always use it in our service."

"May I see what you have written?"

"Certainly."

He handed her the paper; she glanced down on it and frowned.

"It is in English," she remarked.

"Yes! my written French is very faulty. But Mademoiselle Cécile will understand."

"But I do not."

"Shall I translate?"

"If you please."

She handed him back the missive and he translated it as he read:

"Mademoiselle."

"Will you and your august family honour the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel by accepting its protection. Your arrest is only a question of hours. A coach waits for you outside your gate. It will convey you and Madame la Marquise with all possible speed to a place of safety and then return to fetch Monsieur le Marquis, your two servants and Docteur Simon Pradel."

The girl gave a violent start.

"Simon Pradel?"

"You know him, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes!...yes!...I know him.... But why?"

"He and Mademoiselle Cécile have arranged to get married as soon as they are in England."

"It's not true!" Blanche exclaimed vehemently. She then appeared to make an effort to control herself and went on more quietly: "I mean . . . Docteur Pradel has so many interests here...I cannot imagine that he would leave them and become an exile in England...even if his life were in danger, which I pray to God is not the case."

"I can reassure you as to that, Mademoiselle," Devinne said with deep earnestness. "Only to-day did I hear that the charge of treason preferred against the doctor before the Chief Commissary has been dismissed as non-proven. He is held in high esteem in the commune, and like yourself, I cannot believe that he would leave his philanthropic work over here except under constraint."

"What do you mean by constraint?" the girl asked, frowning.

He gave a smile and a shrug.

"Well!" he rejoined, "we all know that when a woman is in love, and sees that her lover is not as ardent as she would wish, she will exercise pressure, which a mere man cannot always resist."

"Then you do not think-" the girl cried impulsively, and quickly checked herself, realizing that she was giving herself away before a stranger. A blush, that was almost one of shame, flooded her cheeks, and tears of mortification came to her eyes.

"I don't know what you will think of me, Monsieur..." she murmured.

"Only that you are a wonderfully loyal friend, Mademoiselle, and that you are grieved to see a man of Docteur Pradel's worth throw up his career for a futile reason. After all, these troublous days will soon be over. Mademoiselle de la Rodière will then return from England, and if she and the doctor are still of the same mind, they could be affianced then."

Blanche's eager, inquiring eyes searched the young man's face, almost as if she tried to gather in its expression comfort and hope in this awful calamity which threatened to ruin her life. Simon Pradel gone from her for ever, married to Cécile de la Rodière, permanently settled in England probably! What would life be worth to her after that? She saw before her as in a vision, a long vista of years without Simon's companionship, without the hope of ever winning his love, of feeling his arms round her, or his kiss upon her mouth.

She felt a clutch cold as ice upon her heart, tearing at its strings till she could have cried out with the physical pain of it. She shuddered and murmured involuntarily under her breath: "If I could only see him once more."

There followed a few moments silence, while Devinne scrutinized the girl's face, aware though he was too young to be a serious psychologist, of the terrible battle which her better nature was waging against pride and jealousy. He had no cause now to doubt the issue of the conflict. Blanche Levet would be his ally in the act of treachery which he was about to commit. Ignorant and unsuspecting,

she did not realize that she was on the point of sacrificing the man she loved, and depriving him of the protection of the one man who had resolved to save him. Jealousy won the day by letting her fall headlong into the trap which a traitor had so cunningly set for her. She was about to become the instrument which would deliver Simon Pradel into the hands of the revolutionary government.

"I will tell you what I can do, Mademoiselle," Devinne resumed after a time, "and I hope my plan will meet your wishes. I am going straight into Choisy now, and will call on Docteur Pradel and use all the eloquence I possess to persuade him to put off his journey to England, at any rate for a few days. I shall be able to assure him that in his case it is not a matter of life and death, whilst, in any event, Mademoiselle de la Rodière and her family are perfectly safe under the ægis of the Scarlet Pimpernel. And then I hope to bring you news within the hour that your friend will do nothing rash until after he has seen you again."

Blanche listened to him with glowing eyes. In every line of her pretty face the speaker could trace the mastery of hope over the doubts and fears of a while ago.

"You really would do that for me, Monsieur?" she exclaimed, and clasped her little hands together, while tears of emotion and gratitude gathered in her eyes.

"Of course I would, Mademoiselle. I shall only be doing what our brave Scarlet Pimpernel himself would have suggested."

Blanche's heart now felt so warm, so full of joy that she broke into a happy little laugh.

"It is my turn to write," she said almost gaily, and took up the pen and drew paper towards her. She only wrote a few lines:

"My Dear Simon.

"The bearer of this note is a gallant English gentleman who was instrumental in saving the Abbé Edgeworth from being murdered by the mob. You know all about that, don't you? And cannot wonder therefore, that I beg you to trust him in everything he may tell you."

She signed the short missive with her name, strewed sand over the wet ink, folded the paper into a small compass and handed it to Devinne, who rose as he took it from her.

"I will fly on the wings of friendship, Mademoiselle," he said, and picked up his hat. "On my return I will pay my respects to Monsieur Levet. Will you tell him everything, and prepare him for the visit of adieu? Au revoir, Mademoiselle."

She went to the door and opened it for him.

"God guard you, Monsieur!" she said fervently, "and send an angel from heaven to watch over you, on your errand of mercy."

She accompanied him to the front door. As he was passing out into the cold and gloom, she asked naïvely:

"Your name, Monsieur? You never told me your name."

"My name is Collin, Mademoiselle," he replied with hardly a moment's hesitation, "a humble satellite of the brilliant Scarlet Pimpernel."

28. CHECK

Everything then had worked out to the entire satisfaction of this young traitor, who, unlike Judas, had no qualms of conscience for his shameful betrayal of his comrades and his chief. Not yet, at any rate. He had, of course, no intention of interviewing his enemy Pradel: in fact, he blotted the doctor entirely out from his scheme. It was good to think of him as remaining behind in Choisy while the girl whom he planned to marry was safely on her way to England without any help from him.

"What becomes of that miserable upstart after that I neither know nor care," was the substance of Devinne's reflections as he strode quickly downhill into town. A few minor details suggested themselves to him that would make his plan work more smoothly. He would stop the chaise at the smaller grille of La Rodière, the one opposite to the main gate, which gave on the narrow and less frequented cross-road to Alfort. Blanche Levet would take his message to Cécile, help her and Madame la Marquise to put a few things together, and accompany them to the chaise. She would have strict injunctions when going through the park with the two ladies to talk and move as if they were merely taking a stroll for the sake of fresh air. He certainly could reckon on Blanche to follow his instructions to the letter, she had as much at stake as he had himself, and jealousy, coupled with the desire to keep Simon Pradel in France, would be a powerful goad.

With the two ladies safely inside the chaise, he would then drive along to St. Gif as far as headquarters, where Galveston and Holte would be on the look-out for the chief and the refugees. This was a derelict house which had once been a wayside hostelry in the prosperous coaching days, but it had long fallen into disrepair, the landlord and his family having fled the country at the outbreak of the Revolution. It was now used as headquarters by the League whenever its activities required the presence of its members in this part of France. It had the great advantage of stables and barns which, though in the last stages of dilapidation, offered some sort of shelter for man and beast. Three or four horses were usually kept there in case they were wanted, and two members of the League took it in turns to remain in charge. There was always of course, a certain element of risk in all that, but what were risks and dangers to these young madcaps but the very spice of their lives?

Luck had favoured St. John Devinne from the start, since it was he who had been deputed to seek out Galveston and Holte, who were in charge at St. Gif, and give them the chief's instructions for the provision of horses, of fresh disguises and above all of passports, some of them forged, others purchased from venal officials or merely stolen, of everything, in fact, that was required to ensure the success of the expedition that was contemplated for the rescue of the La Rodières and their servants and their ultimate flight to England. Mention had been made of the coach, but not of the likely number of its occupants nor of the size of the escort, and whether it would be headed by the chief himself or not. Galveston was to remain on the lookout at headquarters with horses ready saddled, and Holte was to make for Le Perrey with all speed and make provision there for relays.

And chance continued to favour the traitor's plans.

He had no difficulty in hiring a coach in the town, giving himself out as an American merchant, a friend of General La Fayette, desirous to join a ship at St. Nazaire, and having no time to lose. The first halt would be made at Dreux. In manner, his well-cut clothes, his money of which he was not sparing, gave verisimilitude to his story and enabled him to secure what he wanted. He required, he said, an extra man on the box beside the driver, as his sister would be travelling with him; he understood that the road past Le Perrey was lonely, and she was inclined to be nervous. His papers were in order, as papers in the possession of members of the League always were, and forty minutes after his departure from the Levets' house he was back there again and ringing the bell at the front door.

Blanche was on the look-out for him. As soon as she had opened the door he stretched both his hands out to her, and in a quick whisper said:

"Everything is well! I have seen Docteur Pradel. He laughed the idea to scorn that he was in any danger, and assured me that he had no intention of emigrating. Not just yet, at all events. I did not mention Mademoiselle de la Rodière's name, but he himself spoke of you and announced his intention of coming over to see you to-morrow."

The girl was dumb with emotion. All she could do was to allow her hand to respond to the pressure of his. He asked permission to pay his respects to Monsieur Levet. But father, it seems, was not in a mood to see anyone just now.

"I told him about the message which I was to take up to Mademoiselle," Blanche explained, "and he quite approved of my doing it. I told him that you were escorting me and that you were a friend of Professeur d'Arblay. This he already knew. He had also guessed, before I told him, that Professeur d'Arblay was in reality the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Did you mention Docteur Pradel, also?"

"No, I did not. That is a matter which will remain between Simon and myself. I shall be eternally grateful to you for what you have done for him. But for you he would have made shipwreck of his life. Now he will, I know, take up its threads with its usual energy as soon as all this matter is past and forgotten."

"You are the best friend any man ever had," Devinne concluded as he escorted the girl to the coach; "Docteur Pradel is indeed a lucky man."

To himself he added: "And I hope that my luck will hold out to the end, and that Cécile and I will be well on the way to England before those two meet again."

Devinne ordered the driver to pull up on the Alfort road at a couple of hundred metres from the small grille of La Rodière. Grilles and gates were never bolted these days, by an order of the government which decreed that all parks and pleasure grounds were as much the property of the people as those aristos who had stolen them, and that every citizen had the right to use them for pleasure or convenience. Devinne jumped out of the chaise and helped Blanche to alight. Together they walked up to the grille, and the girl passed through into the park. The young man remained standing by the low wall close to the gate in the shadow of tall bordering trees. He strained his ears to listen to Blanche's light footstep treading the frozen ground. The road was quite deserted, and the moon had hidden her pale face behind a bank of clouds. Only the pale face behind a bank of clouds. Only a pawing and snorting of the horses in the near distance broke the silence of the night. Wrapped in his cloak Devinne appeared, but as part of the shadows that enveloped him. A dark, motionless figure.

A distant church clock struck eleven and then a quarter past. Devinne thought of all those men whom Blakeney, with his usual recklessness, had rendered helpless with drugged wine, of Chauvelin cursing in his dank prison, and of Blakeney himself and his satellites in the squalid hostelry the other side of the part, still discussing and elaborating the marvellous plan of rescue, which they little thought was frustrated already. And, thinking of all that, the young traitor felt wonderfully elated, proud of himself for the ease with which he had gone athwart the schemes of the invincible Scarlet Pimpernel, proud, too, of the fact that his nerves were perfectly calm, that he felt neither compunction nor fear. His heart beat perhaps a little faster than usual, but that was all.

Nearly half an hour went by before his ear once more caught the sound of a light footstep treading the frozen garden path. One step only. He heard it a long way off, but tripping very quickly. Running now. It must, he thought, be Blanche returning for something she may have forgotten or, perhaps, with a message for him from the château. It was Blanche, of course. The clouds overhead rolled slowly away. The pale light of the moon revealed the dark figure of the young girl against the white background of frozen lawn. And she was running. Running. She was alone, and Devinne felt that his heart suddenly froze inside his breast. He held open the grille. Blanche almost fell into his arms.

"They have gone," she gasped.

"Gone? Who?"

"All of them. There is no one in the château. Not a soul. The doors are all left open. I ran upstairs, downstairs, everywhere. There is no one. Madame la Marquise, Monsieur, Mademoiselle Cécile, Paul, Marie. They have all gone. What does it mean?"

Aye! What did it mean, but the one thing? The one awful terrible thing, that it was his treachery that had been frustrated by the man whom he had betrayed. What had happened exactly, he could not conjecture. The plan was to effect the mock arrest of the La Rodières in the early dawn, and it was not yet midnight. Had suspicion of treachery lurked in the mind of the Scarlet Pimpernel? He was not the man to change his plans once he had mapped them out, for every phase of them fitted one into the other, like the pieces of those puzzles that children love to play with. Or had a real arrest been effected by soldiers of the Republic? Had Chauvelin contrived to escape? To liberate the men imprisoned in the stables? To order the arrest of the aristos, pending the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel? Anything may have occurred during these past three hours, and Devinne almost hoped that this last conjecture would prove to be the solution of the appalling riddle that faced him now. With half an ear he heard Blanche Levet tell him of her further adventures in the château.

"It seemed peopled with ghosts," she said, "for when I ran down into the sous-sol, I heard strange sounds proceeding from the cellar. Groans and curses they sounded like. But I was frightened and ran upstairs again. I lost my head, I think, and lost time, too, by running towards the great gate. Then I met Antoine. He is the groom, you know. He said to me: 'They've all gone: Monsieur le Marquis, Madame and Mademoiselle, and Paul and Marie. They walked down the avenue and went through this gate. They didn't see me.' I asked him which way they went," Blanche continued, "and he said: 'Up Corbeil way; about an hour ago, it was.' But before I could ask him any more questions he was gone. Then I ran back to tell you."

As Devinne said nothing, Blanche began to cry.

"What are we going to do now?" she asked, and tried to swallow her tears.

Devinne roused himself from his torpor. What a chivalry there was left in him urged him first of all to see to the girl's safety.

"We'll drive back to your house, of course. Come."

He took hold of her arm and led her back to the chaise. She climbed in and he gave instructions to the driver.

"Straight back to Citizen Levet's house in the Rue Micheline."

Not a word was spoken between the two of them on the way home. Blanche's delicate form was trembling as if in a fit of ague. A name and eager questions were forming on her lips, but for some inexplicable reason she felt averse to uttering them. It was only when the chaise drew up outside her house, and Devinne, after he had escorted her to the front door, was taking his leave of her, that she spoke the name that was foremost in her thoughts.

"Docteur Pradel?"

But apparently he didn't hear her, for he made no reply. The next moment the door was opened. Old Levet had been sitting up, waiting for his daughter. At sight of her he took hold of her hand and drew her into the house. She turned to say a last word to Devinne, but he had already crossed the short path that led to the gate. Blanche could hear his voice speaking to the driver, but it was dark and she could not see him. The next moment there was the crack of the driver's whip, the jingle of harness, the snorting of horses and finally, the rumble of wheels. She was left with heart full of anxiety and fear for the man she loved. Many hours must go by before she could hope to glean information as to what had happened to him. And here was her father waiting to hear what had occurred at the château. She tried to tell him, but she knew so little. The family had gone, that was all she knew. Were they under arrest, awaiting trial, and perhaps, death? Or was their mysterious departure connected in any way with that strange personage the Scarlet Pimpernel?

In either case, where was Simon now? In the cells of the Old Castle, awaiting the same fate as Cécile and the others? Or was he on his way to England and to safety, gone out of her life for ever?

"Yes, Father," she murmured in answer to old Levet's command that she should go to bed now and give him further details on the morrow: "I will go to bed now. I am very tired."

Wearily she crept up the stairs.

29. CHECKMATE

Devinne did not re-enter the chaise. He gave money to the two men, the driver saluted with his whip, clicked his tongue, whipped up his horses, and the vehicle went rattling down the cobbled street, leaving the young man standing by the Levets' gate. And here he remained for several minutes, until he heard the clock in the tower of the Town Hall strike midnight. This seemed to shake him out of his trance-like state. He started to walk up the street in an aimless sort of way. The whole town appeared deserted. Shutters tightly closed everywhere. Not a soul in sight. Two cats, chasing one another, raced across his path. But not a human sound to break the stillness of the night. Only caterwauling, weird sounds of prowling felines, and a bitter north-easterly wind moaning and groaning through the leafless trees of the Avenue Lafayette, and splitting of tiny dried branches, the cracking and shivering of woodwork shaken by the blast.

Devinne shivered. He was inured to cold weather as a rule; considered himself hard as nails, and he had on a thick mantle, but, somehow, he felt the cold to-night right in the marrow of his bones, right into the depth of his heart. Still walking aimlessly, he reached the Grand' Place. There on the right were the Café Tison and the Restaurant, the scene of one of Blakeney's maddest frolics. Blakeney! the leader, the comrade, the friend whom he, St. John Devinne, was about to betray! He had not betrayed him yet. He had tried to thwart his plans...and had failed, but he had done this from the sole desire to ensure the safety of the girl he loved. He had worked himself up into the belief that by dragging others into the rescue, Blakeney was jeopardizing the success of his plan. It might fail and Cécile's precious life be imperilled. No! there was no betrayal of a friend in that. Insubordination, perhaps, which Percy, in his arrogance, termed dishonour, but it was not betrayal. If his own plan had succeeded, the League and its chief, or for a matter of that, the other refugees, would not have been any worse off, save for the failure of relays at Le Perrey, perhaps, which might have held up the flight, but only for a time; and that was all. His plan, however, had failed. He had been forestalled. How? Why? By what devilish agency, he did not know. But he was no longer in doubt now. The more he thought about it all, the more convinced he was that it was Blakeney who had forestalled him as a counter-blast to his insubordination. And a coach driven at breakneck speed was even now outstripping the wind on the road to St. Gif and Le Perrey.

An insensate rage took possession of Devinne's soul, for he had remembered Pradel. Pradel in that same carriage with Cécile, under the ægis of the Scarlet Pimpernel, who had never failed in a single one of his undertakings. Pradel and Cécile! The thought was maddening. It hammered in the young man's brain like blows from a weighted stick. Pradel and Cécile! Thrown together in England under the protection of Sir Percy Blakeney, the friend of the Prince of Wales, and arbiter of style and fashion. And then marriage. Of course, the marriage would follow. In England fellows like this Pradel, doctors, lawyers, and so on, were often held in high esteem, and if His Royal Highness approved, the marriage would come about as a matter of course.

Devinne felt that he was going mad. He still wandered aimlessly up one street and down another, like a Judas meditating treachery. He turned into the Rue Haute, and there was the Town Hall. The tower clock had just struck one. For an hour he had been roaming the streets like this. He was cold and very tired. He came to a halt now opposite the municipal building, and leaning against a wall, he stared up at the imposing façade. The place was closed for the night. It would not open probably before eight o'clock. Seven hours to kill while that hammering in his brain went on, driving him to insanity.

He didn't know where Pradel lived or he would have gone there, rung the bell, asked to see the doctor. If he was in, he would kill him. That would be the best way out of this trouble. Kill him and get away. Nobody would know. But if Pradel was gone, that would mean that he was on his way to England with Cécile and the others, under the protection of the League, and he, Devinne, would have no longer any compunction in doing what he had already made up his mind to do. No compunction now, and no remorse in the future.

After a time he turned his back on the Town Hall, and on the Rue Haute, crossed the Grand' Place once more, and almost against his will his footsteps led him in the direction of the derelict cottage, the headquarters of the League, where he had first dreamt of mutiny and Glynde and the others had been ready to knock him down. There it was, looming out of the darkness, a pale, moon mist covered, outlined its broken walls and tumbledown chimney. Devinne went in, groping his way for the tinder-box, knowing where it was always kept. His fingers came in contact with it. It was in its usual place, so was the piece of tallow candle in its pewter sconce. He struck a light, put it to the wick and then looked about him. The familiar place was just the same as it always was. Devinne half expected to see Ffoulkes and Tony and the others squatting round the fire, and to hear the voice of his chief, chaffing, laughing. Laughing? Surely there was still an echo of that laughter lingering within these dilapidated walls. Devinne put his hands quickly up to his ears, fearful lest they caught a sound which, of a certainty, would shatter the last shred of reason in his brain. He picked up the guttering candle and holding it high above his head he wandered round the room. Seeking for what? He couldn't say. Unless it was for the broken fragments of an English gentleman's honour.

What he did come across was a pile of garments in one corner. Coats, hats, phrygian caps, rags, tattered bits of uniforms and accoutrements, the whole paraphernalia so often used in the pursuit of those stirring adventures the like of which he would never witness again after he had accomplished his final purpose. He would have to make his way back to England unaided by his comrades, lacking the advice of his chief. Well, he had papers and money, both of which would help him on his route. He had gained experience, too, under the guidance of the Scarlet Pimpernel, of how to travel through a country seething with insurrection and suspicious of strangers. He spoke the language well. Oh! he would get on all right without help from anyone. His clothes, perhaps, were rather too tidy and too well-tailored for the adventurous journey. He turned over the pile of garments. Found what he wanted. Clothes, boots and hat such as a well-to-do farmer might wear going from market-place to market-place. He would hire a cabriolet when he could, or a cart; avoid big cities and frequented roads. Oh, yes! he had experience now, he would get on all right.

He dressed himself up in the clothes he had selected. In this too, he had experience, gained through the teaching of a veritable master in the art of disguise: he knew the importance of minor details, the discarding of a fine linen shirt, the use of mud and sand to hide the delicacy of the hands and face. By the time the tallow candle ceased to flicker and died out, he had become the well-to-do farmer right down to his skin. He was left in total darkness, his eyes were heavy with want of sleep and his head ached furiously. There were yet some hours to live through before the dawn when he could make his way back to Choisy and the Town Hall. So he threw

himself down on the pile of garments and tried to woo sleep which refused to come. His brain was so alert that all through the night he heard the tower clock strike every hour. Sleep does not come when the mind is busy evolving a plan of treason and dishonour. Seven o'clock. Aching in every limb, half-perished with cold, my Lord St. John Devinne, Earl Welhaven, son and heir of the Duke of Rudford, went forth on an errand, which, for perfidy, was perhaps only rivalled once, nineteen hundred years ago. He has sworn to himself that he would have no compunction, if, on calling at Pradel's house, he was told that the doctor had gone away. He didn't know where Pradel lived, but it was morning now and he would find out.

His first objective was the Café Tison, for, besides being cold, he was also hungry. These sort of places, mostly new to provincial towns, usually opened their doors very early, and were frequented by men and women on their way to work: here for a few sous they could get a plate of hot soup, or, if they were more sophisticated, a cup of coffee. Devinne, in his rough clothes and with grimy hands and face, attracted no attention. There were a dozen or so workmen sitting at different tables noisily consuming their croûte-au-pot. The Englishman sat down and ordered coffee. This he sipped slowly and munched a piece of stale bread. The municipal offices in the Town Hall, he was told on inquiry, opened at eight o'clock. He then asked to be directed to the house of Docteur Pradel.

"Rue du Chemin Neuf, Citizen," some one told him, "corner of the Rue Verte. You will find him at home for certain."

Devinne paid his account and went out. He no longer felt cold now or stiff. His blood was tingling all over his body, only his fingertips felt like lumps of ice. But nothing physical mattered now. Revenge for humiliation endured, satisfaction over a successful rival, were all that counted at this hour. He found the house at the corner of the Rue du Chemin Neuf. A painted sign hung before the door stating that Citizen Docteur Pradel de la Faculté de Paris lived here and received callers between the hours of eight and ten in the morning, and two and three in the afternoon. Devinne rang the bell, a middle-aged woman opened the door.

"The Citizen Doctor?" he demanded.

"He is not in," the woman answered curtly.

"Not in?"

"As I have told you, Citizen."

"Where can I find him? It is for an urgent case."

"I cannot tell you, Citizen. The doctor was sent for late last night for an urgent case. He has not yet returned."

The woman was apparently become impatient and was on the point of closing the door in the visitor's face, when something in the expression of his eyes seemed to arouse her compassion, for she added, not unkindly:

"It is probably a confinement, Citizen. These cases often keep the doctor out all night. He was fetched away in a cabriolet. I expect him back every moment. Would you care to wait?"

While Devinne parleyed with her a few callers had assembled on the doctor's doorstep. He thanked the woman, but no, he would not wait. He would have liked to ask one more question, but thought better of it and, turning on his heel, went his way.

Why should he wait? What for? Pradel had gone and Percy had done his worst. It was up him, Devinne, now to show that arrogant chief of a league of sycophants, who was the better man.

30. DISHONOUR

Although it was only a few minutes after eight, Devinne found the waiting-hall of the municipal building crowded with visitors waiting for an interview with the Chief Commissary. Men and women of all sorts, country bumpkins and townsfolk, ragamuffins scantily clothed, shivering with cold, business men in threadbare coats, women with a child in their arms and another clinging to their skirts.

When Devinne entered he was told to give in his name to a clerk who sat making entries at a desk. On the spur of the moment he gave his name as Collin and his nationality as Canadian.

"Your occupation?" the clerk asked him curtly.

"Farmer."

"What are you doing in Choisy?"

"I will explain it to the Citizen Commissary."

The clerk looked up at him and said peremptorily: "You will explain it to me, and state your business with the Citizen Commissary."

"My business is secret," Devinne retorted; "the Commissary himself will tell you so. Give me pen and paper," he demanded, "and I will write it down."

The clerk appeared to hesitate. He scrutinized the face of the visitor for a moment or two and seemed on the point of meeting the demand with a definite refusal, when something in the expression of this Canadian farmer's face caused him to change his mind. He pushed a paper towards Devinne and held out his own pen to him.

Pen in hand Devinne paused a moment, seeking for the right words wherewith to arrest the attention of the Chief Commissary. Finally he wrote:

"Citizen Chauvelin and a squad of Republican Guard are held in durance, the writer will tell you where. The aristos up at La Rodière have made good their escape. The writer will tell you how."

He put down the pen, read the missive through, was satisfied that it was to the point, strewed sand over the wet ink, then demanded curtly:

"Wax."

The clerk gave him the wax, he took his ring off his finger and sealed the note down. When handing it over to the clerk, he slipped a gold coin into the latter's hand. This settled the matter. The clerk became at once quite amenable, almost obsequious.

"One moment, Citizen," he said; "I will see to it that the Chief Commissary receives you without delay."

A few minutes later St. John Devinne was sitting in the Chief Commissary's private office, opposite that important personage, once again giving his name, nationality and occupation, which the Commissary duly noted down.

"Mathieu Collin, Citizen Commissary. Of Canadian nationality and French parentage. Spent most of my life farming in Canada, hence my foreign intonation in speaking your language."

The Commissary was fingering Devinne's note, the seal of which he had broken. He read and re-read it two or three times over, gave the Canadian farmer a searching glance, then said:

"And you have come to give me certain information relating to Citizen Chauvelin, member of the Committee of Public Safety?"

"Yes!"

"What is it?"

"As I have had the honour to inform you in my note, Citizen Chauvelin and a squad of Republican Guard are prisoners since yesterday afternoon."

"Where?"

"In the Château de la Rodière. Citizen Chauvelin and a sergeant of the Guard in the cellar, the men in the stables."

"But who dared to arrest Citizen Chauvelin?" the Commissary queried, almost beside himself with horror at this amazing statement.

"He was not arrested, Citizen. He was just thrust into the cellar with the sergeant and locked in."

"But by whom?" the other insisted.

"By the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"The devil!" cried the Commissary, and gave a mighty jump, causing every article on his desk to rattle.

"No, Citizen, not the devil, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"One and the same."

"Not exactly. We do not believe in the devil in this free and enlightened country, but the Scarlet Pimpernel really does exist. He is just a spy in the pay of the English Government, and has set himself the task of aiding the enemies of the Republic to escape from justice. It was in order thus to aid the aristos up at La Rodière that he and his followers, among whom must be reckoned that abominable traitor Docteur Pradel, plied the soldiers with drugged wine, and when they were helpless locked them up in the stables, then proceeded to kidnap Citizen Chauvelin."

The Chief Commissary appeared almost ludicrous in the excess of his stupefaction; he puffed and he snorted like an old seal, took out his handkerchief and mopped his perspiring brow.

"And do you mean to tell me," he gasped, "that all this is true?"

"As I live, Citizen."

"And...and...the citizen doctor...? You mentioned him just now. Surely-"

"I called Pradel an abominable traitor," Devinne asserted firmly, "for I know him to be a follower of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"But how do you know all that Citizen...er...Collin? What proof have you-?"

"I will tell you, Citizen Commissary," Devinne replied, but got no further, because the clerk came in at the moment and announced that Citizen Maurin had just come into the building and desired to speak with the Chief Commissary. The latter gave a great sigh of relief. Lawyer Maurin was a man of resource. His advice in this terrible emergency would be invaluable. The harassed Commissary gave orders that Citizen Maurin be admitted at once, and no sooner had the lawyer entered the room and the door been closed behind

him than he was put au fait of the appalling event. The whole story was retold by the Canadian farmer at command of the Commissary—the soldiers of the Guard drugged and locked up in the stables, a member of the Committee of Public Safety kidnapped and held in durance in the cellar, and finally the escape from justice of the ci-devant La Rodières when the order of their arrest had already been signed, and all through the agency of that limb of Satan, the English spy, the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, and his followers, including that abominable traitor, Docteur Pradel.

It was Maurin's turn to give a jump.

"Pradel?" He then added more soberly: "What makes you think that the citizen doctor is a member of the English gang of spies?"

"The simple fact," Devinne replied, "that he, too, has fled from justice, which he knew was about to overtake him and punish him for his crime."

"What do you mean?"

"Only this. All that I have told you I learned through listening to the talk of a group of vagabonds in the cabaret of the Chien sans Queue on the Corbeil road. They were musicians who had scraped their catgut and blown their trumpets all afternoon up at La Rodière. I was one of the crowd who had gone up there to see the fun, and then adjourned to the Chien sans Queue for a mug of ale. The vagrants were talking in whispers. I caught a word or two. To my astonishment those ragamuffins were speaking English, which I, as a Canadian, know well. I edged closer to them and heard every word they said. That is how I know everything and how I knew all about their plans. And," he concluded, with slow emphasis, measuring every word, "they spoke of Pradel as being a member of their gang and of their resolve to take him along with the la Rodières to England."

After Devinne had finished speaking there fell a stillness over this banal office, in the center of which, round the desk littered with papers and paraphernalia, three men sat pondering over what would follow the amazing events of the previous night. The Chief Commissary perspired more freely than ever and kept on muttering in tones almost of despair:

"What are we going to do? Nom d'un nom, what are we going to do?"

Maurin said nothing. He was thinking. Thing very deeply indeed, and at the same time trying to keep a mask of indifference over his face, so as not to allow that fool of a Commissary to guess that he felt neither doubt nor bewilderment at this turn of events, but only satisfaction. Pradel, his enemy, was disarmed. No longer could he be a rival in the affections of Blanche Levet. Neither as an émigré flying to England to save his skin, nor standing at the bar of the Hall of Justice under an accusation of treasonable association with a gang of English spies, could he ever hope to capture the glamour which had dazzled an unsophisticated young girl. And when the Commissary reiterated his complaint for the third time: "Non d'un nom, what am I to do?" the lawyer responded dryly:

"It is too late to do anything now. That wily Scarlet Pimpernel with his drove of traitors and aristos will be half-way to the coast by now."

"Not so bad as that, Citizen Lawyer," Devinne put in. "They will have to make a forced halt at Le Perrey for relays. Of course, they will drive like Satan himself as far as there, but the coach with its heavy load will be slow of progress."

A ray of hope glistened in the eyes of the Commissary at this suggestion.

"You are certain about Le Perrey?" he asked.

"Quite certain. I heard the gang discuss the question of relays and the enforced halt there. At any rate, it might be worth your while, Citizen Commissary," he went on in an insinuating manner, "to send a squad of mounted men in pursuit. They could get fresh horses at Le Perrey and ride like the wind. They are bound to come up with the lumbering coach."

"Do you know which route they mean to take, beyond Le Perrey?"

"Yes, I do. They will make straight for Dreux, Pont Audemer and Trouville. The Scarlet Pimpernel has established headquarters all along that route and it is the nearest way from here to the coast."

The Commissary brought his fist down with a crash upon the desk.

"Pardieu!" he said lustily. "Citizen Collin is right. There is time and to spare to be at the heels of these cursed spies. What say you, Citizen Lawyer?"

But the citizen lawyer really didn't care one way or the other. Whether Pradel was caught in the company of English spies, or was still in Choisy, when of a surety he would be arrested for treason on the evidence of this Canadian farmer, mattered nothing to Louis Maurin, the prospective husband of Blanche Levet. He gave a shrug of indifference and said casually: "You must do as you thing best, Citizen Commissary."

The latter by way of an answer tinkled his hand-bell furiously. The clerk entered, looking scared.

"Send Citizen Captain Cabel to me at once," the Commissary commanded. He was feeling decidedly better. Much relieved. He mopped his still streaming forehead, picked up a pen and started tap-tapping it against the top of the desk. And while he did so a look of absolute beatitude crept slowly all over his face. He had just remembered that a reward of five hundred louis was offered by the government for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

To Captain Cabel, who entered the office a few minutes later, he gave quick orders:

"A gang of English spies, probably in disguise, and escorting a coach in which are the aristos from La Rodière, are speeding towards the coast by way of Le Perrey, Dreux and Pont Audemer. They will probably make for Trouville. Take a mounted squad of sixteen picked men and ride like hell in pursuit. The leader of the gang is the famous Scarlet Pimpernel. There is a reward of five hundred louis for his apprehension. Fifty louis will be for you if you get him and another twenty to be distributed among the men. Lose no time, Citizen Captain; your promotion and your whole future depend on your success."

Captain Cabel, dumb with emotion, gave the salute, and turning on his heel, marched out of the room. There was no mistaking the expression of his face as he did so. If it was humanly possible to accomplish such a thing, he would bring that audacious Scarlet Pimpernel back to Choisy in chains. The Commissary rubbed his hands together with glee. He had never done a better morning's work in all his life. Five hundred, or what would be left of it after he had shared it with the captain and the men, was a fortune in these days of penury. Yes, Chief Commissary Lacaine had reason to be elated. He rose and with an inviting gesture begged his distinguished visitors to join him in a vin d'honneur at the Café Tison.

Maurin accepted with pleasure. He liked to be on friendly terms with the Commissary, who was the most important personage in the Commune. But Devinne asked politely to be excused. He was heartily sick of all these people, the like of whom in his own country he would not have touched with a barge pole. He longed to be back in England, where rabble such as ruled France to-day would be sent to gaol for venality and corruption. He took his leave with as polite a bow as he could force himself to make. The Commissary tinkled his bell, the clerk re-entered and ushered Citizen Collin out of the place.

Maurin gazed thoughtfully on the door that had closed behind the pseudo Canadian farmer.

"A strange person that," he remarked to his friend Lacaune. "Do you suppose he spoke the truth?"

The Commissary gave a gasp. He did not relish this sudden onslaught on his newly risen hopes.

"I'll soon ascertain," he replied tartly, "for I'll send up to La Rodière to liberate Citizen Chauvelin and the men from durance. If they are not there, it will give the lie to our Canadian; in which case—" he went on, and completed the sentence by drawing the edge of his hand across his throat.

"And, anyway, I am having him watched. You may be sure of that, my friend." After which he gave a short laugh and added lightly:

"But I am more than hopeful that my men will find the distinguished member of the Committee of Public Safety locked up in the cellar of the Château, as our friend the Canadian has truly informed us."

With that the worthy Commissary took his friend the lawyer by the arm and together the two compeers adjourned for a vin d'honneur at the Café Tison.

BOOK V THE CHIEF

31. THE DREAM

To Cécile de la Rodière that January day and night always seemed to her afterwards more like a dream than a reality. She certainly lived through those twenty-four hours more intensely than she had ever lived before. It seemed as if everything that the world could hold of emotion and excitement all came to her during that short space of time.

There was that awful rioting to begin with, the invasion of her stately home by that turbulent mob who shouted and sang and danced, and mocked and baited her in a manner that for years to come would always bring a rush of blood to her cheeks. And then the amazing, appalling and mysterious figure of that fiddler, who had suddenly grown in stature, and become a sort of giant, endowed with superhuman strength. She could see him at any time just by closing her eyes, stretching out his immense arms and picking up that small, sable-clad man as if he were a bale of goods, throwing him over his shoulder and carrying him away through the hall and down the grand staircase, followed by the yelling and cheering crowd. Cécile could see it all as a vision. Never would she forget it. She had by that time been worked up to such a pitch of excitement that the whole world appeared as if it tottered round her, and that at any moment she and all that awful rabble would be engulfed in the debris of the château.

After that intensely vivid picture, what followed was more dim and equally unreal. She remembered seeing poor François, who was nothing but a wreck of his former proud self, dragging himself out of the room and desiring her to come with him. But this she did not do. She remained in the great hall where a strange silence reigned after the din and hurly-burly of a while ago. The shades of evening were drawing in and she was alone with Simon Pradel. He talked to her at great length in a quiet measured voice, and she listened. He told her of the danger in which she stood, she and all those she cared for. Strangely enough it never entered her head to doubt him. He said so, therefore it must be true. He then pointed out to her the way, the one and only way by which she could save maman and François and faithful old Paul and Marie from that awful, awful guillotine. Again she listened, and never doubted him for an instant. There was to be a mock marriage. She would have to bear his name, and nothing more, until such time as France and the people of France were granted a return to sanity. She and maman and François, and the two old servants, would have to live under his roof and accept his hospitality, for his name and his house would be a protection for them all against danger of death.

After that he went away and she was left alone to ponder over these matters. Since then so many more things had happened that she had no time to analyse her feelings. But now she was alone and she could think things over, all those things that seemed so like a dream. One thing was certain. After Pradel had left her, she did not feel altogether unhappy. Very excited, yes, but not unhappy. She had gone back to maman and François. Maman was quite placid, doing her usual crochet-work, not the least bit interested in hearing what had happened during those two hours of nightmare when what she termed the lowest dregs of humanity had polluted the old château with their presence. François tired out with emotion which he had been forced to suppress for so long, sat by sulky and taciturn, obviously pondering on what he could do to have his revenge.

All was quiet in the château then. After a time Paul and Marie gathered their old wits together and prepared and served supper for the family. It was taken almost in silence, all three of them being absorbed in thoughts they could not share one with the other. At nine o'clock they all assembled for prayers in the small boudoir, and at half-past nine came bedtime, and Paul was on the point of going downstairs to put out lights and bolt the front door, when the sound of heavy footsteps coming up the grand staircase caused terror to descend once again like a thundercloud upon these five unfortunates. François cursed under his breath as was his wont. Madame la Marquise raised aristocratic eyebrows, and, with a sigh of resignation, resumed her crochet-work. Marie shrank into a remote corner of the room, while Cécile strained her ears to listen to those footsteps which had halted on the threshold of the grand salon for a moment, only to resume their march in the direction of the concealed door of the boudoir.

What did it all mean? Pradel had, of course, warned her of danger, but had also declared that danger was not imminent. He was to call for her to-morrow morning at ten o'clock and go with her to the mairie where, if she consented, the formalities connected with the new form of civil marriage would immediately take place. She, Cécile de la Rodière, would after that become nominally Madame Simon Pradel, and maman and the others would be safe against such awful contingencies as those ominous footsteps now fore-shadowed. Paul, with the instinct of the old retainer, set to guard the welfare of his masters, slipped out into the vestibule ready to face a whole crowd of miscreants, if they dared interfere with them. Before closing the door behind him he said to François in a half-audible whisper:

"While I parley with them, Monsieur le Marquis, take the ladies down the back staircase to the sous-sol. I will say that Marie and I are alone in the château, and that you all drove away an hour ago in the direction of Corbeil."

François saw the force of this advice. There were several good hiding-places in the vast area below the ground. There was even an underground passage which led to a dependency of the château, where the laundry, the buttery and so on were situated. At any rate the advice was worth taking.

"Come, Maman," he said curtly to his mother, and with scant ceremony took crochet-needle and wool out of her hands, even while from the grand salon there rang out the harsh word of command:

"Open in the name of the Republic!"

"How did those devils know where we were," François muttered between his teeth: "and how did they find the door behind the tapestry?"

There was no time, however, to speculate over that. Suddenly there was a terrific bang, a deal of cursing and swearing and an agonizing cry of protest from Paul. The door had been broken open. Madame la Marquise, aided by her son and Cécile, was struggling to rise, but she was old and heavy. She got entangled in the wool and fell back in her chair dragging Cécile down with her.

Paul now slipped back into the room, but remained standing with his back to the door, holding it against the intruders.

"Quick, Madame la Marquise," he urged in a hoarse whisper, "the staircase."

It was too late. François wasted a few moments in fumbling in a drawer for a pistol and seeing that it was loaded, and he had just got the ladies as far as the opposite door, when Paul was violently thrown forward and sent sprawling right across the room. Four men

pushed their way in. They wore shabby military uniforms and each carried a pistol. François levelled his, but one of the men who appeared to be the sergeant in command said sharply in a tone of authority:

“Put that down or I give the order to fire.”

By way of a retort François cocked his pistol. It was promptly knocked out of his hand, and he was left standing like an animal at bay, glaring at the soldiers, the ladies and the old servants crowding round him. Even his facility for cursing and swearing had deserted him. Madame la Marquise was speechless and dignified. She would not allow that rabble to think that she was afraid. Paul and Marie took refuge in murmuring their prayers. Cécile alone kept a level head.

When the sergeant rapped out the order:

“Arrest these people in the name of the Republic,” and all four men stepped forward, each to put a hand on her and those she cared for, she said, with as much pride as she could call to her aid:

“I pray you not to put hands on us. We will follow you quietly.”

And seeing that the sergeant then gave a sign to his men to step back again, she added:

“I hope you will allow Madame la Marquise and myself, also our maid, to put a few things together which we may need.”

“I regret, Citizeness,” the sergeant replied firmly, but not unkindly; “time is short and my orders are strict. I have a coach waiting outside to convey you to Choisy without a moment’s delay. Your requirements will be attended to to-morrow.”

“But my man...” Madame la Marquise protested. They were the first words she had uttered since this unwarrantable incursion by these insolent plebeians into her privacy, but she did not get any further with what she would have liked to say. She had a great deal of dignity, had this foolish old lady, and a goodly measure of sound French common sense. The fact that the sergeant stood by like a wooden dummy, obviously just a slave to his duty, with no feeling or humanity in him, helped her to realize that neither resistance, nor hauteur nor abuse, would be of the slightest use. The insolent plebeians stood now for Fate, inexorable Fate, and the decree of le bon Dieu who had chosen to inflict this calamity on her and her children, and against whose commandments there was no appeal.

Cécile did not speak again either. She picked up a shawl and wrapped it round her mother. She looked a pathetic little figure in her thin silk dress. The small room was warm with a wood fire burning in the grate, but it looked as if she would have to go and face a long drive with no protection against the cold save her lace fichu. She heard the sergeant say curtly:

“There are shawls and wraps in plenty downstairs, Citizeness.”

That seemed a strange thing for a revolutionary soldier to say, for they had not the reputation of being considerate to state prisoners. Cécile glanced up at the sergeant, her lips framing a word of two of gratitude, but he stood back in the shadow and she could not see his face.

François had remained silent all this time, with still that look as of a baffled tiger in his eyes. His teeth were tightly clenched, so were his fists. Cécile was thankful that he did not make matters worse by indulging in violent curses or loud abuse. At one moment he made a movement and raised his fist as if he meant to strike that insolent sergeant in the face first and then make a dash for freedom, but immediately four arms were raised and four pistols were levelled at him. Madame la Marquise said dryly: “No use my son. You would, anyhow, have to leave me behind.”

Each of the soldiers now took a prisoner by the arm. The sergeant leading the way with Madame la Marquise and poor old Marie left to follow on alone. The small procession then marched out of the room in close formation. They traversed the wide salon and descended the grand staircase. Staircase and hall were only dimly lighted by one oil-lamp and placed in a convenient spot on a consol table. Cécile was walking immediately behind her mother. In the dim light she could vaguely see the tall sergeant walking in front of her. She could see his broad shoulders, one arm and the hand which held a pistol; the rest of him was in shadow.

Down in the hall, on the centre table—a masterpiece of Italian art left untouched after two raids by riotous mobs, because of its size and weight—there was a pile of rugs and coats and shawls. Madame la Marquise and François took it as a matter of course that these things should have been provided for their comfort by the same men, police or military, who had chosen this late evening hour for the arrest of three women and two men against whom no accusation of treason had yet been formulated. Marie fussed round her old mistress with shawl and mantle, and Paul round his young master with a thick coat. Cécile saw the sergeant pick up a cloak and hood. He came behind her and put it round her shoulders. She looked up at him while he did this and met his eyes, kind, deep-set eyes they were, with heavy lids, and in their depths a gentle look of humour which for some unaccountable reason gave her a feeling of confidence.

But there was no time now to ponder over things, however strange they might appear. Within a very few moments all five of them, maman, François, the two servants and Cécile herself were bundled out of the front door and into a coach which was waiting at the bottom of the perron. A man, dressed like the others in military uniform, stood at the horses’ heads. He stepped aside when all the prisoners were installed in the coach. Looking through the carriage window Cécile was the sergeant talking for a moment to one of the men; he then climbed up to the box-seat and took the reins. It was very dark, and the carriage lanterns had not been lighted. One of the men led the horses all the way down the avenue and through the main gate. The others had evidently climbed up to the roof, for there was much heavy tramping overhead.

Surely all that had been a dream. It couldn’t all have happened, not just like that and not in the space of a few hours. And the dream did not stop there.

There were more happenings all through the night and the next day, all of which partook of the character of a dream. Outside the main gate of La Rodière the coach did not turn in the direction of Choisy, but to the right. It went on for a little while and then drew up. Some one lighted the carriage lanterns, and after that the horses went on at a trot. Cécile, whenever she looked out of the window, saw the snow-carpeted road gliding swiftly past. The moon had come out again and the road glistened like a narrow sheet of white crystals.

32. STRATAGEM

Cécile was wide awake for a long time. Her mother was asleep in the farther corner of the carriage, so was François, who sat between them, leaning against the back cushions. Paul and Marie had spent some time murmuring their prayers until they, too, fell asleep. She herself must have dozed off at one time, for presently she was roused with a jerk when the coach wheels went rattling over cobblestones. This must be St. Gif, she thought, for she could see houses and shuttered shops on either side and an occasional street lamp. At one time there was a peremptory call of "Halt!" followed by some parleying between the sergeant-driver and what was probably a police patrol. Cécile caught the words "citizen" and "papers" and "only my duty, Citizen Sergeant." And presently the call:

"Right. Pass on."

And the wearying drive went on along the jolting road. Progress was slow, because the ground was slippery for the horses, and the night intermittently very dark when heavy snow-laden clouds driven by the north-easterly wind obscured the pale face of the moon. The coach went lumbering on for hours and hours, an eternity, so it seemed to the unfortunate inmates, until presently the first streak of a cold grey dawn came creeping in through the carriage windows. After which the pace became less slow. The ground was, of course, as slippery as before, but there was obviously a very firm hand on the reins, and nothing untoward occurred to interrupt progress.

It was not yet daylight when once again the carriage wheels rattled over a cobbled street. There were gleams of light to be seen through shuttered windows on either side, and here and there a passer-by: men in blouses, women with shawls over their heads. Le Perrey in all probability, thought Cécile. The others were still asleep. Poor maman, she must be terribly stiff and tired, and François looked more dead than alive. Paul and Marie were muttering even in their sleep, words that were prayers to God or protests against the cruel fate that befell their master and mistress. Cécile had no idea whither they were being driven, or whether this flight through the night would end in safety or disaster. Fortunately maman was obviously not thinking on the matter at all, whilst François effectually hid his own doubts and fears behind a mask of sullen indifference.

Le Perrey was soon left behind, and after a time the coach was again pulled up, this time in open country. There was a good deal of scrambling overhead, and a minute or two later the carriage door was opened and a pleasant, cultured voice said:

"I am afraid there is a piece of rough ground to walk over. Can you do it, Mademoiselle?"

This, of course, was still part of the dream. Cécile heard herself replying: "Yes, I can," and then adding tentatively: "But maman—"

And the pleasant voice responded: "I will carry Madame la Marquise if she will allow me. Will you and Monsieur le Marquis descend, Mademoiselle?"

Whereupon Cécile obeyed without demur. It seemed quite natural that she should. François appeared to dazed to raise his voice. He got down, and was followed by Paul and Marie, still mumbling prayers to le bon Dieu. Madame la Marquise did not apparently care what happened to her. She allowed herself to be lifted out of the coach without protest and Cécile heard that same pleasant voice saying in English:

"Cloaks and rugs, Tony, for the ladies, and, Hastings and Glynde, take the coach a couple of kilometres down that other road. Take out the horses and bring them along with you to headquarters."

She understood what was said, though not quite all. A man put a shawl round her shoulders, over her cloak, whilst another busied himself by wrapping a rug round maman, who was lying snugly in the arms of the tall sergeant. After which the little procession was formed, the sergeant on ahead carrying maman, who was no light weight. François came next with Paul and Marie, and finally she, Cécile walked between two soldiers, one of whom had her by the elbow to guide her over the rough ground, while the other, after a minute or two, performed the same kindly office to poor old Marie.

And walking thus, in the rear of the little procession, the girl all at once understood what was happening. These soldiers had nothing to do with the Gendarmerie Nationale, the uniform of which they only wore as a disguise. They were friends who were helping them all to escape from death, the same friends who had saved the Abbé Edgeworth from that awful, awful guillotine. And the sergeant on ahead was none other than the fiddler who had carried that small sable-clad form of a man on his shoulder as if he were a bale of goods, and was carrying maman now as if she were a child. She gazed almost awestruck on the silhouette of that broad back ahead of her, for if her conjectures were correct, then that pseudo-fiddler or pseudo-sergeant was none other than the legendary Scarlet Pimpernel himself.

After which surmises and reflections Cécile de la Rodière was entirely unconscious of the roughness of the road, of cold or hunger. She became like a sleep-walker, moving without consciousness. Presently a solid mass loomed out of the frosty mist. It was a house with trees clustered round it. Its aspect, as it gradually was revealed to her, appeared familiar to Cécile, but her brain was too tired to ponder over this. The place looked deserted, the house in a state of dilapidation. It had evidently been suddenly abandoned and left to the mercy of rust and decay. The time-worn façade and crumbling stonework told the usual pitiable tale of summary arrest and its awful corollary.

The way up to the front door was along a short drive bordered by Lombardy poplars. There was a low perron of three or four steps. To Cécile's intense astonishment she presently perceived that the place was not deserted, as she thought, for two men were standing on the perron. At sight of the approaching party they came down the steps, and called out in English: "All well?" to which her own escort replied lustily: "Splendid!" They stood aside while the pseudo-sergeant carried Madame la Marquise into the house. The others, including herself, followed him. He crossed a narrow vestibule and went into what might have been a small salon at one time, but now presented a shocking spectacle of wreckage: windows broken, doors off their hinges, panelling stripped from the walls. There was no furniture in the room except a few chairs, a horsehair sofa and a kitchen table. The only cheerful thing about the place, and that was very cheerful indeed, was a log fire in the open hearth. In spite of the broken window the room was deliciously warm.

The sergeant deposited maman on the sofa, asked her in perfect French how she felt, and on receiving a grateful smile in response, he turned to Cécile.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, "We will get you some hot wine, after which you can all have a short rest. But I am afraid we must make a fresh start within the hour, and I shall have to ask you and Madame la Marquise, as well as Monsieur le Marquis, to don

the country clothes which you will find the chest in the next room, together with all requirements to make yourselves look as like as possible to a company of worthy yokels and bumpkins on their way to the nearest market town. One of us will, with your permission, put the finishing touches on your disguise.”

And the next moment he was gone, leaving behind him an atmosphere of cheerfulness and of security. Even François reacted to that. The ladies trooped into the next room, burning with curiosity to see the dresses which they were ordered to wear. Maman said quite seriously: “I think God has sent one of His angels to protect us.” Marie murmured a fervent: “Amen!”

But Cécile didn’t speak. She was under the spell of the marvellous discovery she had made, namely, that maman, she and François, all of them, in fact, had been rescued from death by that marvel of God’s creation, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

33. THE BALD PATE OF CHANCE

How surprised they would all have been could they have seen through the dilapidated walls of this ramshackle abode their rescuers sitting on the table in what was presumably the kitchen. They were sipping hot wine and talking over their impressions of this last glorious adventure. Their noses and hands were blue with the cold, and they were all going through the process of getting shaved. One of them had served the fugitives with the hot wine, and presently they were joined by Glynde and Hastings.

"Where did you leave the coach?" the chief asked them as soon as they appeared.

"Do you know Moulins?" Glynde responded.

"Quite well."

"Just the other side of it. Past the church. We rode back, of course, and Hastings was nearly thrown when his horse slipped on a sheet of ice."

"No other accident?"

"No."

"Good. Now, any news here?" He turned to my Lord Galveston.

"Yes. Rather strange. When Holte and I got here about an hour ago, we saw to our surprise smoke coming out of one of the chimneys. To make a long story short, we found that a vagabond had quartered himself in the place. We couldn't very well turn him out, and we felt that he was less dangerous here than at large. So we let him stay where he was."

"And where is he now?"

"In the room next to this with a fire, a chair and a bottle of wine."

"Let's have a look at him."

Blakeney and Galveston went into the room to have a look at the intruder. He was just a miserable wreck of humanity, of the type found, alas! all too frequently on the high roads these days. There were a few dying embers in the hearth and three empty bottles on the floor beside it.

"The miserable muckworm," my Lord Galveston muttered and swore lustily; "he has ferreted out our stores and stolen two bottles of our best."

The "miserable muckworm," however, was impervious to his lordship's curses. He was squatting on the floor, his head resting precariously on the hard seat of the chair, fast asleep.

Galveston was for shaking the fellow up and throwing him out of the place. But Blakeney took his friend by the arm and dragged him back forcibly into the kitchen.

"You lay a hand on that gossoon at your peril," he said, with his infectious laugh. "Do you know what he really is?"

"No, I do not."

"He is the one hair on the bald pate of Chance which you and Holte have enabled me to seize."

"I don't understand."

"No, but you will by and by. Is there a key to that door?"

"Yes, on the inside."

"Get it, my dear fellow, will you? Then lock the door and give me the key."

"Everything all right here?" he asked, turning to Holte (Viscount Holte of Frogham, familiarly known as "Froggie").

"I think everything."

"Horses?"

"With the two out of the coach we have six. Those here are quite fresh."

"And vehicles?"

"Two light carts. Covered."

"Good. Tony, you must take charge. You and Hastings on one cart. Glynde and Galveston on the other. I want Froggie to remain here with four horses which we shall want later. You fellows must drive by way of Dreux to that little village we all know they call Trouville. Avoid the main road and you will find the side tracks quite safe. Tony has all the necessary papers. I bought them of a poor caitiff in Choisy who works in the commissariat, and, as a matter of fact, the country on this side of the Loire is not yet infested by that murdering Gendarmerie Nationale. When you get to Trouville make straight for the Cabaret Le Paradis, a filthy hole, but the landlord is my friend to the death. He is noted in the district as a rabid revolutionary, but, as a matter of fact, he batters on me and is exceedingly rich. He is grimy and stinks of garlic like the devil, but he'll look after you till I come, which won't be long. Of course, there are risks. You all know them and are prepared to face them. Bless you all."

There was silence amongst them after that for a moment or two. Four of them there had one name on their lips which they were loth to utter- Devinne. But Jimmy Holte and Tom Galveston, knowing nothing of the young traitor's mutiny, asked where he was.

"Back in Choisy," the chief replied simply.

There were one or two more details of the expedition to discuss. The present military uniforms must be discarded and simple country clothes donned.

"I have already told the ladies about that," Blakeney explained, "and I imagine you will find the whole party quite excited to play their rôle of country bumpkins. Froggie, who is such a dandy, will see that they have not forgotten any important detail. Madame la Marquise is quite capable of playing the part of a labourer's wife with a dainty patch under her left eye and her finger-nails carefully tended."

"But what are you going to do, Percy?"

"Ffoulkes and I have a little piece of business to transact here. He doesn't know it yet-that is why he looks such an ass, ain't it, Ffoulkes? But he'll know presently. As a matter of fact, we are going back to Choisy to get hold of Pradel. He must be in a tight corner

by now, poor fellow. But that one hair on the bald pate of Chance is going to work miracles for us. I have all sorts of plans in my head and Ffoulkes and I are going to have a rattling day, eh, Ffoulkes?"

"I am sure we are if you say so," Sir Andrew replied simply.

After which the party broke up on a note of gaiety and excitement. The refugees were found to have donned the required disguises. Madame la Marquise looked an old market woman to the life, Cécile was a very presentable cinder-wench, and even François had taken pains to enter into the spirit of the adventure and was as grimy and as unkempt as any vagabond might be. A few small details here and there suggested by my Lord Holte and the transformation from aristos to out-at-elbows patriots was complete, which does not by any means tend to suggest that elegance of mien is entirely a matter of clothes and cleanliness, but that it goes very near it.

The start was made at nine o'clock. Two covered carts had been got ready and their drivers were waiting in the road. Madame la Marquise was again carried over the rough ground by the pseudo-sergeant, who to her mind was more than ever a messenger from God. The whole party was bundled in the tow carts, the drivers cracked their whips and away they went.

The last picture that Cécile saw when she ventured to peep round the hood of the cart remained engraved in her memory for the rest of her life. This was the tall figure of the pseudo-sergeant standing by the road-side, his slender hand up to the salute, looking for all the world like one of those representations of the heroes of old which she had admired in the museums of Paris-tall, erect, a leader of men, the mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel.

34. THE ENGLISH SPY

Long before midday the whole of Choisy was seething with excitement. All sorts of rumours had been flying about for the past two hours and now they had received confirmation, and the most amazing happenings ever known even in these revolutionary times were freely discussed in the open streets, in every home and more especially in the cafés and restaurants of the commune.

It seems that no less a personage than Citizen Chauvelin, who, it appears, was an influential member of the Committee of Public Safety, had been discovered in the Château de la Rodière, locked up with a sergeant of the Gendarmerie Nationale in the cellar, and that thirty men of the same military corps were found to have been locked up in the adjoining stables. And the person who had single-handedly perpetrated this abominable outrage was none other than that legendary English spy, that messenger of the devil known as the Scarlet Pimpernel. And would you believe it, he was the fiddler who with his band of musicians had played the rigaudon all the afternoon at the château! Of course everybody remembered how he had shouted: "A spy! A spy!" and "We shall all be massacred. Remember Paris!" and how he had picked a little man up as if he were a bale of goods and had carried him on his shoulder down the stairs and locked him up in the cellar. Well, that little man was no spy at all, but a very important personage indeed, member of the Committee of Public Safety, Citizen Chauvelin. The men of the Gendarmerie Nationale, when they were liberated from the stables, had hardly recovered from a drugged sleep. A large jorum of wine and a number of empty mugs all containing the dregs of some potent drug were scattered about the floor. The men knew nothing of what had happened to them. They understood that Citizen Chauvelin, under whose orders they were, had sent them some wine to keep them warm. They were not fully in their senses yet when presently they were marched back to Choisy, there to give an account of how they came to have neglected their duty in such a flagrant manner by drinking and falling asleep.

These remarkable events, however, were not by any means the only ones that excited the population of Choisy almost to frenzy. There was the rumour, now amounting to a certainty, of what had happened to the citizen Dr. Simon Pradel. It appears that he had been out all night, having been called to a serious maternity case in the late evening. By the time he was free it was past nine o'clock and he went straight to the hospital situated about three kilometres outside Choisy in the little village of Manderieu. His regular time for attending there was seven o'clock, so he went straight there without going home first. But, mark what happened—and this was authentic—Dr. Pradel, founder and chief supporter of this hospital for sick children, was refused admission into the building. The gates were held by armed sentinels who crossed their bayonets in front of him. On his demanding an explanation an officer came across the forecourt and coolly informed him that the government had taken over the hospital, that no doctor, save those nominated by the National Convention, would be allowed to practise there, and that if there were any reclamations to be made, these must be addressed directly to them.

Of course no one could say exactly what Citizen Pradel thought of this insult to the dignity of his profession. What was known, however, was that he went straight back to Choisy and lodged a formal protest with the Chief Commissary at the Town Hall against what he called this outrageous action on the part of the government. It was also known that he was there and then put under arrest and conveyed under escort back to Manderieu, there to remain in charge of the Commissary of the Commune, until such time as it was decided what course should be taken with regard to conduct that was nothing short of an insult directed against the Republic. As a matter of fact, those in the know asserted with a wink that the Chief Commissary of the district desired to hand over the responsibility of dealing with Citizen Pradel to his subordinate at Manderieu. The young doctor was so well known in Choisy that there was no knowing what the populace, already in ebullition over the incidents of La Rodière, might not do when it heard of the arrest of their popular townsman.

But even this extraordinary event paled before what really and truly was the most astonishing, the most marvellous, the most miraculous and most unexpected of all. The English spy, the mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel, who for over two years had led the police of France by the nose, who was the greatest and most dangerous enemy the Republic had yet known, was captured, caught on his way to the coast. Yes! captured, laid by the heels, trussed and manacled, and was now under lock and key in the dungeons of the old castle. And there was a big reward to come from the government for his apprehension. Five hundred louis to be divided between the Chief Commissary, who had ordered the pursuit, Captain Cabel co-operated in it with unexampled valour. What had actually happened was this: Captain Cabel at the head of a squad of Gendarmerie Nationale was in hot pursuit of the spy and the aristos from La Rodière who were fleeing from justice. Half-way between St. Gif and Le Perrey, they spied coming towards them, two horsemen who were riding like the wind. Captain Cabel, seized with suspicion, drew his men across the road, and was on the point of crying "Halt," when the two horsemen suddenly drew rein at a distance of not more than three metres, throwing their horses on their haunches. They, too, wore the uniform of the Gendarmerie Nationale, and one of them had a man riding on the pillion behind him.

"We've got him!" this man cried in a stentorian voice.

"Got whom?" the captain countered.

"The English spy! the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Where is he?"

"On the pad of my saddle."

The captain raised himself on his stirrups and beheld a kind of vagabond with head hanging down on his chest and blood streaming from his forehead. His legs were firmly secured together under the horse's belly and his arms were tied with a rope round the soldier's waist.

"What?" he cried in amazement, "that beggarly tramp, the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Beggarly tramp forsooth? He and his gang fought like ten thousand devils. There were eight of us. Six are now in hospital at Le Perrey with battered heads and broken bones. I downed him at last by giving him a crack on the head with the butt end of my pistol. When the others saw him fall, they turned and fled taking their wounded with them."

"Wasn't there a coach?"

"Yes. Stuffed full of aristos. We saw that first and ordered them to halt, when were suddenly attacked from the rear, and while we fought for our lives, the coach was driven away. But," the man concluded with a shout of triumph, "we have got the leader of the gang, and we are taking him to Choisy to get the reward. Do not bar the way, Citizen Captain."

He set spurs to his horse, but Cabel and his squad did not move.

"One moment," the captain commanded. "Where do you come from?"

"From Dreux, of course," the other responded, and pointed to his regimental number on his collar. "And we are going to Choisy."

"By whose orders?" Cabel asked.

"The Citizen Commissary at Dreux."

"What orders did he give you?"

"To keep a sharp look out for a gang of English spies, disguised, of course, who are known to be in the neighbourhood, and, if we find them, to convey them under arrest to Choisy."

"And do you know who I am?"

"Yes! The captain commanding the second division of the Gendarmerie Nationale."

"Very well then, listen to my orders. You will immediately transfer your prisoner to the saddle of my sergeant here, and you and your comrade can go back to Dreux and report."

For a moment it seemed as if the other would refuse to obey. He and his comrade even turned their horses as if ready to gallop back the way they came, but at a word of command from the captain, the squad closed in round them and no doubt they realized the futility of rebellion. Within a very short time "the English spy" was transferred to the sergeant's saddle. The captain watched the operation with a grin of satisfaction. Here was luck indeed! He recalled the words wherewith the Chief Commissary had finally dismissed him: "Lose no time, Citizen Captain, your promotion and your whole future depend on your success."

And here were promotion, reward, success, all within his grasp and without striking a blow. His name would ring throughout the length and breadth of the land as the saviour of the Republic, the man who had captured the Scarlet Pimpernel.

The squad was reformed, and soon the horses were put to a trot, leaving those two others in apparent discomfort in the middle of the road. Not a head was turned to see or an ear strained to hear what they said. If it had, a strange sound would have come wafted over the frosty air, a prolonged and ringing laugh, and a resonant voice calling gaily in a language not often heard in these parts:

"That's done it, eh, Ffoulkes? Gad! I never spent such a pleasant half-hour in my life. Now, hell for leather, dear lad. I know a short cut across those fields, which will save us at least four miles."

But Captain Cabel and the men of his squad heard nothing of that ringing laughter and resonant voice. They were trotting merrily along the hard road back to Choisy, bearing in triumph, on the pillion of the sergeant's saddle, the unconscious form of a beggarly vagabond who was none other than the daring English spy the Scarlet Pimpernel.

35. AN UNWELCOME GUEST

To say that the news of the arrest of Dr. Pradel caused agitation in Choisy would be to understate the true facts. The whole commune had been seething with excitement all day, and by the time the street lamps were lighted and the munition workers had trooped out of the factories, excitement had turned to frenzy. A frenzy fostered partly by indignation but mostly by fear. If the citizen doctor, as good a young man as any one could wish to see, as straight, as loyal, as generous, could without any warning see the bread taken out of his mouth, could be cast into prison without as much as an accusation being brought against him, could, *nom d'un nom* be brought to trial and perhaps to death, then what chance had any respectable citizen, father of a family perhaps, of escaping out of the clutches of such a relentless government? Guillotine to the right of them, guillotine to the left, guillotine and threat of guillotine all the time. Life would soon not be worth an hour's purchase. As for liberty, was there such a thing as liberty these days? Liberty to starve, yes, to send your sons to be slaughtered in wars against the foreigners, but slavery in everything else, and one trembled more fearfully these days before the Chief Commissary of the Committee of Public Safety, than one did in the past before those arrogant aristos.

Of course, none of these mutterings and grumbings reached the ears of the powers that be. They were all done in a whisper, for one never knew where government spies plied their dirty trade, nor in what disguise, witness the citizen doctor who was obviously a victim to one of that *canaille*. So everything that was said was said in a whisper, whilst furtive glances of contempt were cast on the inscriptions that decorated the portals of every public building: *Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité*.

Liberty, I ask you!

As usual the Restaurant and Café Tison were the chief centre of grumbings and discontent. Pradel! the doctor! the man who looked after one when one was ill and after the children! What was going to happen to the children when Pradel was no longer there? Oh! if one only dared!...

But one didn't dare, that was the trouble. All one could do was to troop down to Manderieu and there learn for certain what was happening to Pradel. It was evening now, nearly six o'clock. But no matter. It was dark, but every one knew the road to Manderieu. And so the company trooped out in a body from the Restaurant Tison. As they all emerged out into the Grand' Place, they called to their friends, and to casual passers-by to join them. "Art coming, Jean? And thou, Pierre?"

"Whither are you going?"

"The Manderieu. The hospital is closed."

"I know."

"And Docteur Pradel a prisoner in the Commissariat."

"I know, but what can we do?"

"Let's go and see, anyway."

The three kilometres to Manderieu were soon got over. The little village, usually so tranquil, had also caught the excitement which was raging in the town. In the market-place where stood the hospital and the Commissariat of Police, a small knot of country folk had assembled, some by the gates of the hospital, where sentinels stood on the watch, and others in front of the Commissariat. It was a silent crowd. Only now and again was a voice raised to murmur or to curse. The place was only dimly lighted by a couple of oil-lamps at the hospital gates and one over the portal of the Commissariat. The crowd from Choisy joined in now with the villagers of Manderieu. After this fusion, silence was broken more frequently, but the attitude of Pradel's sympathizers remained subdued. They were sorry enough for him, and they were indignant, but they were also very much afraid. None of them quite knew what it was that had brought them out in a body to Manderieu, except perhaps the desire to ascertain just what was happening to the citizen doctor and to the children's hospital. A man down in the Restaurant Tison, they didn't know who he was, had urged them to it. "After all," he had said, "things might not be so bad as they seem. Docteur Pradel may not have been arrested and the hospital may not be closed." But the hospital was closed and the country folk of Manderieu declared that the doctor was a prisoner in the Commissariat.

"Let us ask and make sure," some one in the crowd suggested to his neighbour. And, as is the way with crowds, the suggestion was taken up. It traveled from mouth to mouth until there were quite two hundred malcontents who kept on reiterating: "Let us make sure," while others just muttered: "Doc Pradel. Doc Pradel. Where is Doc Pradel?"

The Commissary was beginning to feel worried. Manderieu was a quiet little hole where such things as turbulent crowds and rioters were unknown. The holding of the popular doctor in durance pending further instructions had been thrust upon him and he had been promised by his superior that he would be relieved of responsibility by nightfall, when the prisoner would be conveyed, under escort, back to Choisy. But here it was six o'clock and Dr. Pradel was still the unwelcome guest of Citizen Delorme, Commissary of Manderieu. The latter in his distress sent a mounted messenger over to Choisy with a hurriedly written note to his chief, demanding that the prisoner be removed from the village as quickly as possible. But half an hour, at least, must elapse before the return of the messenger, and in the meanwhile the crowd had concentrated in front of the Commissariat and was striking terror in the heart of Citizen Delorme by its persistent parrot-cry of "Doc Pradel! Doc Pradel! We want to see Doc Pradel!" After a time the cry was accompanied by boos and hisses and banging of fists and sabots against the door of the Commissariat.

Delorme now was like Bluebeard's wife of the fairy tale. He had posted two of his gendarmes at the entrance of the village, at a point where a narrow side street led to the back of the Commissariat, with orders to intercept any messenger or escort from Choisy, take them round to the back gate of the building, then fetch the prisoner from the lock-up and hand him over to the escort for conveyance to the city. And like Bluebeard's wife, the unfortunate Commissary might have called in his agony of mind: "Sister Anne, Sister Anne, is no one coming down the road?"

His sergeant of the guard suggested his going to the door and talking to the people. Delorme demurred. He did not relish facing the crowd. There were a lot of loose stones lying about, one of them might be hurled at his head. "Sister Anne! Sister Anne!"

He didn't use these words exactly, but the sentiment that prompted the words he did use were the same as those that caused Bluebeard's wife to call to her sister in the depths of her terror and distress. In the end he had to come to a decision. Some kind of risk had to be taken, flying stones or the certain disapprobation of his superiors, if things went wrong with the prisoner or the crowd got beyond control. The thought of such disapprobation gave the unfortunate Commissary an unpleasant feeling round the neck. "Sister Anne! Sister Anne! is no one coming down the road?"

36. DUPED

At about this same hour in the late afternoon of this cold January day, Citizen Lacaune, Chief Commissary of Choisy, was going through a far more lamentable experience than that which befell his subordinate at Manderieu. He had had two hours of absolute bliss when Captain Cabel presented himself at the Town Hall with the marvellous, the miraculous, the amazing news that he had really and truly succeeded in capturing that damnable English spy, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and had brought him into Choisy strapped to the pillion of the sergeant's saddle, wounded and nearly dead, after a terrific fight wherein he, Cabel, and his squad had displayed prodigies of valour. The worthy Commissary nearly had a fit of apoplexy when he heard this wonderful news. He gave the order that the notorious spy, safely bound and gagged, be brought into his office and thrown down like a bale of refuse in a corner of the room. He gazed with awe not unmixed with astonishment at the helpless form of what seemed at first sight to be that of a drunken vagabond. Like Cabel himself, his first feeling was one of doubt that this miserable wreck of humanity could be the daring adventurer whose name was dreaded throughout the whole country and who had led the entire police force of the Republic for three years by the nose. It was only after he had learned from the captain the whole story of the amazing capture, the coach crammed full of escaping aristos, of the attack and desperate fighting, that his doubts were finally set at rest. Every one knew, of course, that spies are the scum of the earth, and English spies more ignoble than those of any other land. He ordered two of his gendarmes to stand guard over the prisoner and then sent word of the joyful news to Citizen Chauvelin, Member of the Committee of Public Safety. The latter was at the moment nursing his wrath and humiliation in the house of Citizen Maurin, the lawyer, who had offered him hospitality after his liberation from the cellar of La Rodière.

Chauvelin had not only suffered humiliation for close on four-and- twenty hours, but also bodily pain, lying on damp straw in an atmosphere of stale alcohol and decaying corpses of rats and mice. He had spent a few hours in bed, nursed devotedly by the lawyer, always on the look out for a chance to secure for himself influential friends. The news of the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel was real balm for his mental and bodily ills.

"I pray you, Citizen, come at once," the Chief Commissary had written in his hurried message. "I am keeping the prisoner here under guard so that you may have the satisfaction of seeing him yourself. I must say he is not attractive to look at, nor does he inspire one with awe. A big hulking fellow who looks like an unwashed mudlark. I had no thought that a reputable government would employ such canaille even as a spy."

A big hulking fellow who looks like an unwashed mudlark? How well did that description fit in with Chauvelin's recollections of the several disguises so cleverly assumed by that prince of dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart. He could have laughed aloud, as that reckless Scarlet Pimpernel was ever wont to do, when he remembered Mantes and Limours and Levallois-Péret, the trial of Henri Chanel and Mariette Joly, the coal-heaver, the drunken lout of the Cabaret de la Liberté, the fiddler at La Rodière and the countless other times when he had been baffled by that pastmaster in the art of disguise. A big hulking fellow who looks like an unwashed mudlark may have raised doubts in the mind of the Chief Commissary of Choisy, but not in his. He sent word to Citizen Lacaune that he would be round at the Town Hall within half an hour, and while he rose and dressed himself, he forced his mind not to dwell on the triumph which awaited him there, for he felt that if he thought on it too much he would surely go mad with joy.

Then, of course, came the catastrophe. As soon as Citizen Chauvelin arrived at the Town Hall he was ushered with every mark of respect into the office of the Chief Commissary. It was a large room, lighted by an oil-lamp which hung from the ceiling and a couple of wax candles on the centre desk. In a far corner, to which the light did not penetrate, Chauvelin perceived the vague outline of a human form lying prone behind two men in uniform with fixed bayonets. His enemy! A deep sigh of contentment, of joy and of triumph escaped his breast. The excitement of the moment was almost more than he could bear. His hands were cold as ice and his temples throbbed with heat. He tried to appear calm, to show dignity and aloofness while receiving the deferential greeting of the Chief Commissary, and a brief report of the circumstances under which the amazing capture was effected. Then at last he felt free, free to gaze on the humiliation and the helplessness of the man who had so often brought him to shame. He picked up a candle and walked with a firm step across the room. The prisoner lay on his side, his head turned to the wall. He was bound round and round his whole body with a rope. Chauvelin stooped, holding the candle high, and with his thin, claw-like hand turned the man's head towards the light.

He gave one cry, like that of a man-eating tiger when robbed of its prey, and the heavy candlestick fell with a loud clatter on the floor. Then he turned like a fury on the Chief Commissary, who was standing by his desk, rubbing his hands complacently together, a smile of beatitude on his face.

"You oaf!" he cried out hoarsely. "You fool! You...you...!"

Words failed him. Lacaune's face was a picture of complete bewilderment, until Citizen Chauvelin finally almost spat out the words at him:

"This lout is not the Scarlet Pimpernel."

There followed a dead silence. The Commissary felt that his senses were reeling. He trembled as if suddenly stricken with ague and sank into a chair to save himself from falling. The candle sent a stream of wax on the carpet; Chauvelin stamped on it viciously with his foot.

"Not the Scarlet Pimpernel?" Lacaune contrived to murmur at last.

"Any idiot would have known that," the other retorted savagely.

"But...but," the Commissary stuttered, "the captain—"

"I don't know what lies the captain told you, but they were deliberate lies, and he and you and the whole pack of you will suffer for this blunder."

With that he strode out of the room, thrusting aside the obsequious clerk, whilst Citizen Lacaune, Chief Commissary of Choisy, remained sunk in his chair in a state of collapse.

When presently the messenger from Manderieu was ushered into his presence, he was not in a fit state to give instructions to anyone. What he needed was first a tonic for his shattered nerves and then guidance as to what in the world he was to do now to save his own neck. The clerk who had introduced the messenger casually mentioned the name of Pradel, whereupon the Chief Commissary contrived to pull himself somewhat together. Pradel! Yes, something might be done with regard to Pradel, now in durance at Manderieu, a man of distinction who was both noted and popular. If a charge of treason could be proved against him, and he was brought to justice, the credit of it would be ascribed to the zeal of the Chief Commissary, and it would effectively counterbalance such accusations as Citizen Chauvelin would in his wrath formulate against all those connected with this unfortunate affair. The risk of rioting in the city, following an unpopular arrest, appeared as nothing compared with this new terrible eventuality.

Lacaune remembered the talk he had earlier in the day with Louis Maurin, the lawyer, and the Canadian farmer. The latter had certainly denounced Pradel as being in league with the Scarlet Pimpernel, and Maurin had confirmed the charge. With a little luck, then, all might yet be well. Chief Commissaries in outlying districts had before now received important promotion through indicting notable personages in their district and bringing them to justice. Then why not he? His first move, then, was to send Delorme's messenger back to Manderieu with written orders to send Dr. Pradel at once under escort to Choisy; he then gave instructions to his clerk to seek out first Citizen Maurin, the lawyer, and tell him that his presence at the Town Hall was urgently required, and then the Canadian farmer named Collin, who had sent in a request for a special travelling permit and would probably be waiting at the Café Tison till summoned to come and get them.

37. ACCUSING SPECTRES

It was close on midday before the rumour of the arrest of Dr. Pradel reached the ears of St. John Devinne. He had spent the morning in planning and making active preparations for his journey first to Paris and thence to England. Although he, like every member of the League, was well provided by his chief with papers requisite for travelling across France, he, Devinne, had never done that journey by himself, nor had he done it since France and England were actually in a state of war, when difficulties that usually confronted travellers of foreign nationality would be considerably increased. Against that he flattered himself that he had made friends with the Chief Commissary and the staff at the Town Hall, and that he could apply there for special permits and papers that would greatly facilitate his movements across country, and this he did. The clerk received him most affably, took his petition in to the Chief Commissary and came back with the reply from his chief that Citizen Collin's request would be complied with as soon as the papers could be got ready. But, as in all official matters in France these days, the getting the papers ready took a considerable amount of time. Devinne had no fixed abode in Choisy. He did not feel that he could go again to the derelict cottage, so full of memories, and was compelled in consequence to kill time as best he could in one of the smaller cafés of the town. And here it was that he first heard the rumour of the closing of the hospital at Manderieu and of the arrest of Dr. Pradel.

He heard it with unmixed satisfaction. Blakeney's plans, then, had been brought to naught. Pradel was not being conveyed to England in the company of Cécile de la Rodière, and the almighty Scarlet Pimpernel had failed in his purpose. Failed lamentably, despite his arrogance and belief in himself. Devinne could have stood up on a table and shouted for joy. As to what would be the ultimate fate of that upstart Pradel, he cared not one jot. Anyway, he would be parted from Cécile for ever. Time after that did not seem to hang quite so heavily on the young traitor's hands. He went two or three times over to the Town Hall to see about his papers, but he was still put off with vague assurances that they were being got ready. All in good time.

Then, in the early part of the evening, he heard the great news, the wonderful, miraculous news which spread through the little city like wildfire. The English spy, the daring and mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, had been captured by Citizen Captain Cabel of the Gendarmerie Nationale, captured and brought to Choisy, wounded and bound with cords, and was even now in the Town Hall pending his incarceration in the Old Castle. It must be said with truth that Devinne did not receive this news with the same satisfaction as he had that of Pradel's arrest. Something stirred within the depths of his soul which he could not have defined. He certainly could not have shouted for joy. It was not joy that he felt. Not elation. Not triumph. Was it the first stirring of remorse or of shame? He, St. John Devinne, Earl Welhaven, son and heir of the Duke of Rudford, the greatest gentleman, the finest sportsman that ever sat a horse, had done a deed of darkness which for infamy had not had a parallel for close on two thousand years. And as he sat there in this squalid café, he fell to wondering whether if, amongst that rag-tag and bob-tail round him, there was one man base enough to have done what he did. He was before his eyes a vision of the friend he had betrayed, light-hearted, debonair, the perfect type of an English gentleman, now lying bound with cords at the mercy of a proletarian government that knew no compunction.

So insistent was the vision and so harrowing, that he felt he could bear it no longer. He tried to visualize Cécile, the woman for whose sake he had committed this vilest of crimes, but her picture evaded him, and when his mind's eye caught sight of her fleeting image, she was looking down on him with horror and contempt. There rose in him the desire to obliterate these phantasma, to saturate his brain with a narcotic that would rid him of their obsession. He ordered eau de vie, and drank till he felt a warm glow coursing through his veins, and his sight became so blurred that he could no longer see those accusing spectres. Soon he felt hilarious. Avaunt ye ghosts! ye vengeful apparitions with your flaming swords! Come pride, come triumph! The arrogant school-master, the tyrannical dictator has been effectually downed. Let us laugh and sing and dance, enjoy every moment of life as this half-starved rabble was doing, pending the inevitable day when that all-embracing guillotine would hold them in her arms.

St. John Devinne was not quite sober, nor was he very drunk when a couple of hours later he became aware of a certain agitation among the customers of the café. Words which at first had no meaning for him were bandied to and fro. Men rose from the tables at which they had been sitting and joined others, and remained with them in compact groups talking in whispers, gesticulating, ejaculating: "Impossible!" or "Who told thee?" together with plenty of cursing and mutterings. Excitement became more intense when André the street-cleaner came running in, brandishing his broom and shouting: "It is true. True. The man they have got is not the English spy." And those last words: "not the English spy," were taken up by others, until the low-raftered room seemed to ring from corner to corner with them. Devinne sat up and pricked up his ears, demanding a glass of cold water and drank it down at a gulp. Yes! some one was just saying: "Where didst hear all this, André?"

And the street-cleaner explained with volubility: "I have it from the clerk of the Town Hall himself. He was talking to the citizen captain and telling him, as he valued his neck, to go into hiding somewhere, anywhere, at once, if he could. It seems that the Member of the Committee of Public Safety who was locked up in the cellar of La Rodière has sworn that every man connected with the affair would be sent to the guillotine within twenty-four hours."

Devinne never could have said afterwards what exactly were his feelings when he heard this news. It must have been relief, of course, to a certain extent. His crime was none the less heinous, of course, but, at any rate, the spectral vision of his friend, Percy Blakeney, lying at the mercy of a crowd of savage brutes thirsting for his blood, would no longer haunt him. He rose, paid for his drinks and with somewhat uncertain steps made for the door and the open. Here he paused a moment, leaning against the wall. His temples were throbbing, and at the back of his mind there stirred the recollection of those papers and the travelling permit which were to be delivered to him at the Town Hall. As soon as the cold, frosty air had revived him, he made his way to the Commissariat, hoping to get speech with the Chief Commissary or, at any rate, with the clerk.

But to his chagrin he found the gates closed and sentinels posted to warn off all visitors. Impossible to gain access even to the courtyard. An amiable passer-by, noting his distress, volunteered the information that the Citizen Commissary had given orders that no one was to be admitted inside the Town Hall under any circumstances whatever.

"I suppose you have heard the news, citizen," the passer-by continued affably. "It will be a regular cataclysm for all the officials in Choisy when the Committee of Public Safety gets hold of the affair . . ."

But Devinne listened no further. He suddenly had the feeling as if a trap was closing in upon him. Not that he was actually frightened, for he had not yet realized that his position after this might become serious, but he did suddenly remember that when he had applied for the special travelling permit he had been made to deposit his existing passport at the Commissariat, but he had done it under a promise from his friend the Chief Commissary that all his papers and the special permit would be delivered to him in due course. But there was the question now, would this friend be in a position to keep his word with this awful cataclysm hanging over his head.

Anyway, there was nothing that could be done to-night. It was close on nine o'clock, and the various cafés did not of a certainty offer any attraction, with their squalor, their abominable coffee and their jabbering crowds. But there was always the derelict cottage which, though not very attractive either, did, at any rate, offer shelter for the night, and Devinne turned his footsteps thither, hoping that he might get a few hours' sleep, free from the nightmare that had haunted him for the past four-and-twenty hours. The place looked very much the same as it had done when he left it in the morning, the candle and tinder were in their usual place, but as soon as he had struck a light he got the impression that some one had been in the place during the day—was it Blakeney, by any chance?—surely not, for he must be half-way to Trouville by now with the refugees. There had always been the possibility of the cottage being invaded by vagabonds or even by the police. Certain it was that some one had been here, for the pile of garments in the corner had been disturbed, and on looking round Devinne spied on the floor near the empty hearth, a bottle of wine, half empty, and beside it a mug with dregs in the bottom. The place as a night-shelter would obviously not be safe. Devinne blew out the candle and made his way out once more, and then turned his steps back in the direction of Choisy.

There was a fairly decent inn in the Rue Verte. Devinne secured a room there. He was quite thankful now that he had been obliged to seek night quarters elsewhere than in the cottage, for he was badly in need of what the derelict cottage could not offer him, namely, a good wash.

38. SISTER ANNE

And all this time the tumult in the neighboring little village of Manderieu had been growing in intensity, and Citizen Delorme, Commissary, was at his wits' end and in a state bordering on despair. Then suddenly, when the crowd was on the point of storming the Commissariat, "Sister Anne," in the form of one of the gendarmes whom Delorme had posted at the entrance to the village, came running in with the welcome news that Chief Commissary Lacaune had sent an escort round with written orders to convey Dr. Pradel immediately to Choisy. Even Bluebeard's wife could not have felt greater relief than did the harassed Commissary.

"Where," he asked, "is the escort now?"

"At the back, Citizen," came the quick answer. "Waiting at the gate."

"On horseback?"

"Yes, Citizen."

"How many men?"

"Only two, but they are stalwarts. The Chief Commissary sent word that they would be sufficient. They have a third horse on the lead."

"Quite right. Quite right. Let the prisoner be smuggled out very quietly by the back way-he'll make no trouble, I'll warrant-and let him be handed over to the Chief Commissary's men. After that, we shall have peace in Manderieu, please God."

He checked himself abruptly. On the spur of the moment, much relieved at the conclusion of this tense situation, he had forgotten that the Government had decreed by law that God no longer existed. Delorme, a loyal servant of the Republic, hoped that the gendarme had not heard his pious ejaculation.

Five minutes later, satisfied that his unwelcome guest had been duly handed over to the men from Choisy, and was well on the way to the city, he made up his mind to face the noisy crowd outside. No sooner he had commanded the door of the Commissariat to be opened than he was greeted with hoots and boos, and a first shower of loose stones, which, fortunately, failed to hit him. The gendarmes then charged into the crowd and thrust it back some way down the place, whilst Commissary Delorme's voice went ringing across the market-square.

"Citizens all," he bellowed at the top of his voice, "you are mistaken in thinking that Docteur Pradel is in my charge. By order of my superior he was conveyed to Choisy some time ago."

As was to be expected, this assertion was received with incredulity. There were more boos and hisses, and one stone flung by a practised hand hit and broke a window. The crowd then stormed the Commissariat, and made their way down to the lock-up, where they found the door wide open and the captive bird very obviously flown. They also wandered in and out of the offices and the private rooms of the Commissary, but, not finding the man they sought, they went away again in a subdued mood, some to their own homes in Manderieu, others to more distant Choisy. They all shook their heads thoughtfully when they went past the hospital and past the two sentinels at its gate.

It was some time later, when the small village had re-assumed its air of tranquility and one by one windows and shutters had been closed for the night, that the watchman asked leave to say a word to the Citizen Commissary. The clock in the market-place had not long before struck ten. The Commissary was in his nightshirt, about to get into bed, but he ordered the watchman to come up.

"Well? What is it?"

"Only this, Citizen Commissary," the man said, and held up a grimy piece of paper.

"What's that?"

"I don't know, Citizen. A letter, I think. I was doing my round and had got as far as the cross-road, when a man of the Gendarmerie Nationale gave me the paper and said: 'Take this to the Citizen Commissary; he will reward you for your pains, and here is something for your trouble.' And he gave me a silver franc."

Delorme took the paper and turned it round and round between his fingers. There was something queer, almost eerie about this missive, sent at this hour of the night.

"How long ago was this?" he asked.

"About half an hour, I should say. I finished my round and then came on here. Is it all right, Citizen?"

"Yes," the Commissary replied curtly. "You may go."

Only when the watchman had gone did Delorme unroll the mysterious missive. It turned out to be nothing but a hoax. There were four lines of what looked like verse, but as these were written in a foreign language which he, Delorme, did not understand, the joke, if joke there was, failed to amuse him. The only thing that interested him was a rough device at the end, by way of a signature possibly. It represented a small five-petalled flower and had been limned in red chalk.

The worthy Commissary put the note on one side, thinking that, perhaps, on the morrow he might meet a learned man who was conversant with foreign tongues. He would show the funny message to him.

After that he got into bed, snuffed out the candle, and went peacefully to sleep.

39. THE CANADIAN

Chief Commissary Lacaune had spent a restless night. His mind was not altogether at ease when he thought over the happenings of the past eventful day. The tragic farce of the pseudo Scarlet Pimpernel, and his capture by that dolt Cabel, weighed heavily on his soul. As for the wrath of Citizen Chauvelin, whenever Lacaune thought of that a cold shiver would course down the length of his spine. Somehow he had a presentiment which drove away sleep from his weary lids. A prevision of worse calamities yet to come.

And when they came, which they did early in the morning, they proved to be more dire than he had anticipated. No sooner had he settled down to work in his office than his clerk brought in the staggering news that the two men of the Gendarmerie Nationale whom he, Lacaune, had dispatched in the course of the evening to Manderieu in response to an urgent request from his subordinate, had been discovered half an hour ago, lying bound and gagged in a field a hundred or so metres from the roadside, half-way between Choisy and Manderieu. The third man, who belonged to the village gendarmerie and had been Delorme's messenger, was found a couple of hundred metres farther on in a field the opposite side of the road. He had started from Choisy a quarter of an hour before the other two. All three men, when freed from their bonds, told the same pitiable tale. They were attacked in the dark by what they supposed were common footpads, when there were no passers-by on the road. The rogues had suddenly jumped out from behind a clump of trees and were on them before they had a chance of defending themselves. Commissary Delorme's messenger had been quickly knocked out. He was alone. The other two vowed that they had put up a good fight, but the miscreants were armed with pistols, while they only had their cutlasses, which they never had a chance of drawing. They were dragged out of their saddles by a man who was a veritable giant for strength, and knocked on the head so that they lost consciousness and remembered nothing more till they found themselves in the field, trussed like fowls and frozen stiff. Their horses were nowhere to be seen.

The three men were ushered into the presence of the Chief Commissary, but they could only reiterate their story. They supposed that robbery was the object of the attack, but none of them carried anything of value. One certainly had the written order of the Chief Commissary tucked in his belt, but that would be of no use to highway robbers; at any rate, it had disappeared, supposedly been lost in the scuffle.

At first the incident, grave as it seemed, could not be called staggering. Three valuable horses were lost, and there were two desperate footpads at large, but that was all. On the other hand Commissary Delorme over at Manderieu was doubtless fretting and fuming, waiting for the orders which had not come, and Chief Commissary Lacaune now set to at once to re-indite the order to his subordinate that the prisoner Pradel be at once sent under escort to Choisy. He had just finished writing this out when another messenger from Manderieu came riding in with the report from the Commissary of the happenings of the evening before. After a graphic account of the riots which had disturbed the peace of the little village and had only been quelled by his, Delorme's presence of mind and courage in facing the irate mob, the Commissary went on to say:

"You may imagine, Citizen, how thankful I was when your men arrived on the scene with your orders to deliver the prisoner to them. I am glad to be rid of him, as the people here would never have quietened down while they knew that Pradel was held in durance in the Commissariat. I presume you have him locked up in the Old Castle and can but hope that the citizens of Choisy will prove less choleric over the incarceration of their favourite leech than the country-folk of Manderieu."

Chief Commissary Lacaune had to read these last lines over and over again before their full significance entered his brain. When it did he was on the verge of an attack of apoplexy. What in the devil's name did it all mean, and where in h — was Pradel? The escort whom he, Lacaune, had sent to fetch him, had been put out of action before they ever got to Manderieu. Then what happened? Where did it happen? and what had become of Simon Pradel? Ah! if he ever put hands on that stormy petrel again, the guillotine would not be robbed of its prey. But in the meanwhile, what was to be done? He sent a mounted carrier in haste to Manderieu to ask for fuller details. The courier returned in less than half an hour with a further report from the Commissary, stating that the prisoner, Dr. Simon Pradel, was duly handed over to the two men of the Gendarmerie Nationale on a written order from the Chief Commissary himself. To prove his assertion, Citizen Delorme enclosed the order which one of the soldiers had handed over to him. Moreover, he respectfully would ask his chief why his own messenger had been detained in Choisy; he wanted all his men in Manderieu, as the temper of the village folk was far from reassuring.

This second report, on the face of it, only made matters worse. Chief Commissary Lacaune thought that both he and his subordinate were going mad. Who were the two men of the Gendarmerie Nationale who had come to fetch away the prisoner? How did the written order come into their hands? What had they done with Pradel once they had got him? Was he, Lacaune, awake or dreaming?

Luckily for him, his friend Louis Maurin presented himself just then. At any rate, here was a sane man with whom one could talk things over fearlessly. But the lawyer was in an unhelpful mood. He appeared entirely indifferent as to the whereabouts of Simon Pradel.

"My good friend," he said with a shrug, "your stormy petrel, as you rightly call him, is on his way to England by now, you may be sure, and a good thing too. Let him be, I say. Once he is in the land of fogs and savages, he can do no more mischief. If you start running after him you will only get yourself into more trouble...like you did yesterday. Let him be."

"But why should you say that he is on his way to England?"

"I am sure he is."

"But two of my men fetched him away from Manderieu."

"They were not your men at all."

"Who were they?"

"The English spies."

"You don't mean?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel whom that fool Cabel failed to lay by the heels, and who has tricked you, my friend, as he has tricked our police and our spies all over the country for nigh on two years. Yes! that's the man I mean, and if I were you I would make the best of what has happened and leave others to fish in those turbid waters."

At mention of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Chief Commissary Lacaune felt thoroughly uncomfortable. Since the establishment of a free-thinking and enlightened government, one had to be rational, what? Had to be a man and not a weakling with mind full of superstitious nonsense such as the calotins used to put into one in the past days. But nom de nom! there was something unpleasantly mysterious about this elusive English spy. Here one day, across country the next. A regular will-o'-the-wisp. He slipped through one's fingers when one thought one had him and trouble awaited any man who ever came across him. Lacaune drew a deep sigh.

"You may be right, my friend," he said, "but it goes against the grain and against my duty to let things be. I have always been a faithful servant of the Republic, and I will not rest till I get to the bottom of this extraordinary occurrence. I am already in bad odour with the Committee of Public Safety over that unfortunate affair yesterday, and I feel that nothing but zeal will save me from disaster."

"Well, you will act as you think best," the lawyer said, and rose to take his leave, "but, believe me—"

He was interrupted by the entrance of the clerk who handed him a letter which had just come from the Committee of Public Safety, sitting in special session at Sceaux, the capital of the department. He asked at the same time if the Citizen Commissary would receive Citizen Collin, who had come to inquire about his papers.

"Collin? Collin?" the jaded Commissary exclaimed, and fingered with obvious apprehension the letter from the Committee of Public Safety. Did it contain good or bad news for him? A threat? A warning? Or what? To the clerk he said: "Tell Citizen Collin to wait." And when the clerk had gone he turned to his friend.

"It was that Canadian, or whatever he is, who led me into sending Cabel after that cursed English spy. I believe that it was all a conspiracy to lead me off the scent, and that this man Collin is the prime mover in it all. But I'll have him under lock and key at once. I'll send him to join that ruffian who impersonated the Scarlet Pimpernel and led us all by the nose."

After which piece of oratory, delivered with all the spite which he felt against everything and everybody, he at last made up his mind to read the letter which had been sent to him from Sceaux. First he looked at the superscription. The letter was signed "Armand Chauvelin, Member of the Committee of Public Safety," and its contents were the following:

"Citizen Commissary.

"We, the Committee of Public Safety, sitting in extraordinary session at Sceaux, desire you to send over to us for special enquiry the man who impersonated the English spy and was brought a prisoner to you in the course of yesterday. Our sittings are held in the Mairie. If you have any other prisoner or suspect of note in your district, send him also. The bearer of this note is in our employ. He knows just what to do. Your responsibility ceases with the handing over of the prisoner or prisoners to him."

Lacaune held the missive out to his friend, the lawyer. His hand was shaking with excitement. His face was beaming both with joy and with triumph. There was not a word of threat or warning in the letter. It was quite simple, official, almost friendly; it showed, in fact, that he had not forfeited the confidence of his superiors since it left it to his direction to send along "any other prisoner or suspect in his district." Here was relief indeed after the torturing fears of the past twelve hours.

"My friend! my friend!" he cried, and rubbed his hands gleefully together. "I feel a new man for all is well."

He took pen and paper and wrote a few words rapidly.

"What are you going to do?" Maurin asked.

"Send that damned Canadian too before the Committee of Public Safety for special inquiry."

He tinkled his bell, and on the entrance of the clerk, handed him the paper he had just written.

"Here," he said, "is an order for the arrest of the man, Collin. See it carried out, then send the messenger from Sceaux in to me."

The lawyer now finally took his leave. The matter of the Canadian and the pseudo Scarlet Pimpernel did not interest him in the least. With Pradel out of the way he cared about nothing else. Left to himself, Commissary Lacaune strode up and down the room, unable for sheer excitement to sit still. At one moment he pricked up his ears when he heard a tumult and some shouting outside his door. "The Canadian is giving trouble," he muttered complacently to himself.

Presently the messenger was ushered in. He was a sober, fine-looking official dressed in dark clothes. He wore a hat of the new sugar-loaf shape which he took off when he entered. He also turned back the lapel of his coat to show the badge which he wore indicative of his status as representative or employee of the government. Lacaune addressed him curtly:

"Who gave you this letter?"

"Citizen Chauvelin."

"You know its contents."

"Yes, Citizen."

"Your orders are to convey a certain prisoner to Sceaux."

"That is so."

"Are you riding or driving?"

"Driving, Citizen Commissary. I have requisitioned a cart with a hood and a couple of good horses from a guard just outside this city. Citizen Chauvelin said he did not wish the prisoner to be seen."

"A very wise precaution. Now listen. One prisoner will be handed over to you here. Keep a special eye on him, he is dangerous. There is another whom you will go and fetch at the Old Castle. One of my men will accompany you as far as there with an order from me that the prisoner be delivered over to you."

"I understand, Citizen."

"Would you like an escort as far as Sceaux?"

"Not unless you desire to send one, Citizen Commissary. But it is not necessary. I am well armed and so is the driver."

"Very good, then. You can go."

The man saluted, turned on his heel and went out. The Commissary wrote out the order to be taken to the Old Castle, gave it to his clerk and then went to the window from which he had a view of the street. He saw a cart with hood up, standing outside the gates. A pair of horses were harnessed to the cart, they looked strong and fresh. After a moment or two he saw the Canadian being brought across the courtyard by two soldiers. He was in chains, wrist to ankle both sides of him, and was apparently only just able to walk. Obviously he had given trouble. His clothes were torn, his hair dishevelled, and his knuckles stained with blood. The soldiers did not

deal any too gently with him, and bundled him like a bale of goods into the cart. The government representative watched the proceedings with an official eye. When he had satisfied himself that the prisoner was safely out of mischief, he beckoned to one of the soldiers to sit on the tailboard of the cart while he himself took his seat beside the driver. The latter flicked his whip and away they went down the Rue Haute.

Chief Commissary Lacaune watched all these doings with utmost satisfaction. He strode back to his desk, turned a few papers over, but he felt too excited to settle down to business. He thought a glass of wine would do him good; he picked up his hat and coat and went out, telling his clerk that he would be back in an hour.

He didn't go straight to Tyson's for his glass of wine, being tempted to stroll down as far as the Old Castle and see that miserable ruffian who had hood-winked him take his place, also in chains, by the side of that cursed Canadian. He was just in time to see this pleasing spectacle; there is always something very soothing to the nerves to witness the discomfiture of one's enemies. Citizen Lacaune exchanged a few affable words with the government official, gave orders that the two prisoners be chained one to the other for additional safety, and when this was done, he went with a light, springy step to enjoy a quiet half-hour with a glass of wine at the Café Tison.

40. REMORSE

Under the hood of the cart, St. John Devinne gradually came to the consciousness that this was in very truth the end of his inglorious life. Shame and remorse both held him in their grip, and not only because he had staked his honour on a despicable gamble and lost, but also because he had at last realized the utter baseness of what he had done. Visions of happy days under the leadership of a man who was the bravest of the brave, who sacrificed his comfort, his happiness, even his love, in order to succour the helpless and the innocent, to follow whom was in itself a glory, tortured him with the knowledge that they could never come again. They were past for ever because of his own black treachery and there was nothing now ahead of him save darkness, and in the end a shameful death.

It was not of death itself that he was afraid, but of the awful, awful shame of it all, and of this racking remorse which might unnerve him when the end came. That Chief Commissary had played him false, trapped him like a noxious feline, and here he was now lying like a captive beast driven to the slaughter-house, chained to a malodorous mudlark- he, St. John Devinne, Earl Welhaven, son and heir of the Duke of Rudford! Oh, the shame, the shame of it all! He ached in every limb, his ankles and wrists were bleeding under the weight of the irons. The close proximity of his grimy companion made him feel sick. The cold was intense. Devinne trembled under a thick cloak that had been thrown over him at one time, he did not recollect when. The day wore on with agonizing slowness. At first Devinne had wondered whether he was being driven, but soon he knew that he really didn't care. The ultimate end of his journey would anyhow be the guillotine, so what did the halts on the way matter? There were one or two halts, probably in order to give the horses a drink and a rest. Several villages were passed on the way, and at one time the cart rattled over what obviously was a cobbled street, at the end of which the driver pulled up. There was a good deal of talking and shouting. Apparently fresh horses were being put to. Presently Devinne heard subdued voices quite close to him in a rapid colloquy:

"You know the way, Citizen?"

"Quite well. I thank you."

"You will find good accommodation there for the night. Tell landlord Freson I sent you. Henri Gros, that's my name. He will do the best for you."

"And what do I owe you, Citizen Gros?"

"Twenty gold louis, Citizen. That will be for the two horses and the cart. And if you ever bring them back this way and the horses are in good condition, I will buy the lot back from you."

There followed obsequious thanks, from which Devinne gathered that the bargain had been concluded. Vaguely he wondered why it had been made. A change of driver apparently as well as of horses, but what did it all matter to him? Somewhere in the town a clock struck three. The shades of evening were beginning to draw in and through a chink in the hood Devinne saw that snow was falling.

After many hearty "Good-byes" and "Bon voyages" a fresh start was made. Soon the road became very rough and the jostling of the cart added greatly to Devinne's discomfort. He felt terribly tired and drowsy, but too ill to get any sleep. Everything around him now seemed to be very still; the only sounds that reached his ears were the clap- clap of the horse's hoofs over the snow-covered road and the stertorous breathing of his fellow-captive. Weary almost to death, Devinne fell into a trance-like somnolence. What roused him was the presence of someone bending over him and the sound of the grating of a steel file near his ankle. The cart was at a standstill and it was getting dark; only the feeble glow of a small storm-lantern threw a narrow circle of light round where his foot was. The pain of it was almost intolerable, even when after a few minutes he felt those heavy irons lifted away from his ankle. Through half-closed eyes he saw a dark form bending to the task. As soon as his ankles were free, dexterous fingers, armed with the file, started working on the irons on his wrists.

Devinne thought that he was either delirious or dreaming. A sense of well-being spread right through him when those horrible irons were removed, and presently an arm was passed under his shoulders and the neck of a bottle was pushed into his mouth. He took a great gulp, a fiery liquid flowed down his throat, he coughed and spluttered and then fell back in a real state of unconsciousness.

Again he woke, this time feeling a different man. His ankles and wrists were free and he was not nearly so cold. He sat up and looked about him. The vehicle was still at a dead stop, and the night was fast drawing in. All that Devinne could perceive through the gloom was the body of his fellow-captive being lifted out of the cart by a pair of powerful arms; the head was just vanishing beyond the tail-board. Then he heard footsteps, heavy measured footsteps receding into the distance. For a long time he was alone in the semi-darkness, sitting up with his legs drawn up and his arms encircling his knees. He wanted to think, but couldn't. His mind was at a standstill, as it is in a dream.

All was silence around him, save for those footsteps treading the snow-covered earth, receding at first, then a pause while he heard nothing at all, and then the same footsteps returning. His heart was beating furiously. He tried to call out, but the one word which he longed to utter was smothered in his throat. It was the name of the friend whom he had betrayed and who had risked his life to save him. He could vaguely discern through the gloom the familiar tall form mounting the driver's seat and picking of the reins, and after that just the broad back, a solid mass hardly distinguishable now. He had never felt quite so alone in his life, not even during that night in the derelict cottage when he had planned his abominable treachery. He had the company of his thoughts then, black, ugly thoughts and torturing visions of past joys and future ignominious triumphs. Now he had nothing, just that indistinct shadow in front of him which seemed to be fading, fading into the gloom like his hopes, like his honour and his joy of life.

There was still a faint pale light in the sky when the cart turned abruptly to the left and then went plodding over very rough ground. Devinne crept on hands and knees to the tail-board, and squatting on his heels, he peeped out under the hood. Even in the gathering darkness the place looked familiar. Away on his right he could see the dim lights of what appeared to be a small city, but the cart was driven round it, always over very rough ground, gradually leaving those city lights behind. And suddenly Devinne realized where he was. The small city was Le Perrey, and he was being driven to the lonely house which was the headquarters of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

The cart drew up, and he heard a distant shout: "Hallo!" immediately followed by an eager question: "All well?" It was the voice of David Holte, familiarly known as Froggie. He was over at the house and came running along, swinging a lantern.

Whereupon there came the answer in a voice which Devinne thought he would never hear again.

"All well!"

The next moment he saw Blakeney through the gloom standing by the side of the car.

"Can you get down?" he asked, "or shall I give you a hand?"

Devinne was still squatting on his heels, but he couldn't move. Not at first. His eyes, peered through the darkness, trying to say Blakeney's face.

"Percy..." he murmured, but could say no more, for an aching sob had risen to his throat.

"Easy, lad," Blakeney responded; "pull yourself together. Froggie knows nothing."

Froggie was within earshot now. He began to talk. Devinne did not at once catch what he said, for all his senses were numb. But he did make an effort to drag himself out of the cart.

Holte greeted him with an exuberant: "Hello, Johnnie!" and Blakeney said: "Devinne is a bit stiff; he was badly knocked about at Choisy."

Whereupon Holte took Devinne by the arm and turned with him towards the house.

"Are you staying the night?" he asked of the chief.

"Yes. We can't make much headway this weather. The snow may give over after midnight and the moon may come out. If she does not, we'll start in the early dawn. Get along, Froggie," he went on; "I'll see to the horses. I suppose you've got something for us to eat."

"Yes," the other called out over his shoulder. "Stale bread and a piece of pig's meat, and I can hot up some sour wine for you. I've been to market this morning."

Blakeney took the horses round to the back while Holte guided Devinne's footsteps up to the house. He was one of those men who couldn't stop talking, and immediately he began: "You know, of course," and "Blakeney told you, I suppose." This, that and the other. Devinne, who knew nothing, only listened with half an ear. Presently he found himself sitting in front of a wood fire with Holte still talking volubly.

And then Blakeney came in. He asked:

"At what time did Ffoulkes and Pradel come through?"

"In the early morning, I couldn't say exactly when. My watch has stopped, curse it!"

"They had no adventures?"

"None. I soon had the fresh horses ready for them, you know, the ones from the coach, and off they went again. I made Ffoulkes tell me how you got the Frenchman away. He seemed a nice fellow, I thought. Very quiet. But, begad! according to Ffoulkes, the way you engineered that affair was--"

"Perfectly simple," Blakeney broke in quickly. "You are a good fellow, Froggie, but you talk too much. Suppose you get us something to eat. Devinne is famished and so am I."

"All right! All right!" Holte retorted good-humouredly and turned to go. But at the door he halted.

"I'll tell you all about it, Johnnie," he said, "just as I had it from Ffoulkes. I tell you it was nothing short of--"

He was interrupted by his own hat being hurled at his head, and his chief's voice saying peremptorily:

"And if you don't go and get that luxurious supper, I'll put you in irons for insubordination."

Holte went and the two men were alone. He who had done to his friend the greatest possible injury any man could do to another, was now face to face with the chief whom he had betrayed. Blakeney went over to the window and gazed out into the darkness and the thickly falling snow. Devinne rose and went across the room. He put out his hand. Tentatively. It was moist and shaking. He took Percy's hand which was hanging by his side, that slender hand which had so often grasped his in friendship, and with a heart-rending sob laid his hot forehead against it.

"Percy!" he murmured, "for God's sake, say something."

"What shall I say, dear lad?" Blakeney responded, and gently disengaged his hand. "That I could not bear to see an English gentleman, the son of my old friend, thrown to those hyenas."

"How you must despise me!"

"I despise no one, Johnnie. I have seen too much of sorrow, misguided enthusiasm, even of crime, not to understand many, many things I had not even dreamed of before."

"Crime? There is no worse crime in the world than mine."

"And no worse punishment, lad, than what you will endure."

"God, yes!" Devinne said fervently. "Then why did you risk your precious life to save my miserable one?"

Blakeney broke into his infectious laugh.

"Why? Why? I don't know, Johnnie. Ask Ffoulkes—he will give you a sentimental reason. Ask Tony and he will say it is for the love of sport, and I am not sure that good old Tony wouldn't be right after all. Thanks to you, lad, I have had one of the most exhilarating runs across country I have ever had in my life."

Devinne sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands.

"How they will all loathe the sight of me," he murmured.

"Well, you will have to put up with that, my good fellow, and with other things as well. Anyway, your father knows nothing and never will. After that...Well! England is at war with France, so you will know what to do."

"Percy...I..."

"Easy now. Here's Holte coming with his banquet."

And the three of them sat down to a sumptuous meal of pig's meat and stale bread and drank hot wine, which put warmth into them. Blakeney was at his merriest.

"You should have seen," he said to Holte, "that miserable catiff who, much against his will, impersonated the Scarlet Pimpernel. The one thing I shall regret to my dying day is that I was not present when my dear Monsieur Chambertin first gazed on his beautiful

countenance and saw that it was not that of his friend, Sir Percy Blakeney." Holte did a great deal of talking, and asked numberless questions, but Devinne, with aching soul and aching body, soon made his way to one of the other rooms in the house where there was a truckle bed on which he had slept more than once in the happy olden days. He sat down on the edge of it, and burying his head in his hands, he sobbed like a child.

41. EPILOGUE

Often, after the curtain has been rung down on the last act of a play, comedy or drama, one would wish to peep through and see what is going on on the darkened stage. A moment ago it was full of light, of animation, of that tense atmosphere which pervades the closing scene of a moving story, and now there are only the scene-shifters moving about like ghosts through the dimmed light, the stage-manager talking to the carpenter or the electricians, the minor rôles still chattering in the wings, or the principals hurrying to their dressing-rooms.

In the same way it seems to me that one would wish to see just once more those actors who each in their individual way have played their part in that strange drama which had for its chief characters a young traitor and a light-hearted adventurer, reckless of his life, a true sportsman who in a spirit of sublime devilry achieved one of the noblest exploits it has ever been the good fortune of an historian to relate.

Thus it is possible to have a peep at the minor rôles, to see Monsieur le Docteur Pradel and Cécile, his pretty young wife, in their humble home in the village of Kensington. They are supremely happy, but are as poor as the proverbial church mice, as poor as all those unfortunate French men and women whom a lucky chance has enabled to find a refuge in hospitable England—chance or the devotion of a man whose real identity they will never discover. Sometimes one among them who is over-sensitive, perhaps, will feel a thrill when meeting a pair of lazy, good-natured blue eyes, the true expression of which is veiled behind heavy lids. Such a one is Cécile Pradel who, when she meets those eyes, or hears the timbre of a quaint rather inane laugh, will suddenly recall a day of torment in the old château of La Rodière, a dance, the music of the rigaudon, a fiddler with grimy face and ringing voice and strange compelling eyes. The same voice? The same eyes? No! no! it couldn't be! And she would look up almost with apology for those foolish thoughts on the magnificent figure of Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the friend of the Prince of Wales, the most exquisite dandy that ever graced a ballroom, the most inane fop that ever caused society to laugh.

And she would see the greatest ladies in the land crowd round him, smirk and flirt their fans, entreating him to repeat the silly doggerel which he vowed had come to him as an inspiration while tying his cravat:

“We seek him here, we seek him there.

Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.

Is he in heaven! Is he in h-ll?

That demmed elusive Pimpernel.”

He would recite this for the entertainment of his admirers with many airs and graces which of a certainty could only belong to a man who had no thought save of vanity and pleasure.

More often than not the talk in ballrooms would be of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his exploits, and Sir Percy Blakeney, who usually was half asleep in a chair whenever the subject cropped up, was dragged out of his slumbers by the ladies and asked with many a jest what he thought of the national hero. Whereupon he would endeavour to be polite and to smother a yawn, whilst he gave reply:

“Excuse me, ladies, but on my honour I would prefer not to think of that demmed fellow.”

And he would turn to a group of friends and call to them:

“Come Froggie, Ffoulkes, you too, Tony, a manly game of hazard, what? while the ladies sit around and worship a cursed shadow.”

No, no, a thousand times no! this empty-headed dandy, this fool, this sybarite, could never have been the grimy out-at-elbows fiddler who slung a man over his shoulder as if he were a bundle of shavings, or the sergeant who carried maman in his arms over rough ground from the coach to the lonely house by the roadside. But the next moment, as Sir Percy Blakeney strode out of the room, Cécile would catch a quick glance which flew to him from the deep violet eyes of Lady Blakeney, his exquisite wife, and another which that perfect grand dame exchanged with His Royal Highness, and Cécile Pradel, who owed her life to the Scarlet Pimpernel, was left wondering. Wondering! Still peeping through the curtain which has fallen on the last act of the drama one likes to see little Blanche Levett as a young matron now, married to a well-to-do and kindly fellow who stands well with the authorities that are in power after the terrible days of the Terror and the fall of Robespierre. There are times when memories and regrets become over-poignant, and she sheds tears over the bundle of tiny garments which she has fashioned in view of a happy eventuality, just as there are times when Dr. Pradel would gladly exchange the life of peace in England for one of activity in Choisy and in his beloved hospital in Manderieu. But with him regrets soon vanish, whereas with Blanche they will always abide. And one last peep at St. John Devinne, home on leave after the English victory over the French at Valenciennes, and kneeling by the death-bed of his father. Percy Blakeney stands beside him. Some of the last words the old man spoke were: “Percy, you will look after the boy, won't you? He is headstrong, but his heart is in the right place, and, thank God! his honour is intact.”

THE LEAGUE

SIR PERCY EXPLAINS

It was not, Heaven help us all! a very uncommon occurrence these days: a woman almost unsexed by misery, starvation, and the abnormal excitement engendered by daily spectacles of revenge and of cruelty. They were to be met with every day, round every street corner, these harridans, more terrible far than were the men.

This one was still comparatively young, thirty at most; would have been good-looking too, for the features were really delicate, the nose chiselled, the brow straight, the chin round and small. But the mouth! Heavens, what a mouth! Hard and cruel and thin-lipped; and those eyes! sunken and rimmed with purple; eyes that told tales of sorrow and, yes! of degradation. The crowd stood round her, sullen and apathetic; poor, miserable wretches like herself, staring at her antics with lack-lustre eyes and an ever-recurrent contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

The woman was dancing, contorting her body in the small circle of light formed by a flickering lanthorn which was hung across the street from house to house, striking the muddy pavement with her shoeless feet, all to the sound of a be-ribboned tambourine which she struck now and again with her small, grimy hand. From time to time she paused, held out the tambourine at arm's length, and went the round of the spectators, asking for alms. But at her approach the crowd at once seemed to disintegrate, to melt into the humid evening air; it was but rarely that a greasy token fell into the outstretched tambourine. Then as the woman started again to dance the crowd gradually reassembled, and stood, hands in pockets, lips still sullen and contemptuous, but eyes watchful of the spectacle. There were such few spectacles these days, other than the monotonous processions of tumbrils with their load of aristocrats for the guillotine!

So the crowd watched, and the woman danced. The lanthorn overhead threw a weird light on red caps and tricolour cockades, on the sullen faces of the men and the shoulders of the women, on the dancer's weird antics and her flying, tattered skirts. She was obviously tired, as a poor, performing cur might be, or a bear prodded along to uncongenial buffoonery. Every time that she paused and solicited alms with her tambourine the crowd dispersed, and some of them laughed because she insisted.

"Voyons," she said with a weird attempt at gaiety, "a couple of sous for the entertainment, citizen! You have stood here half an hour. You can't have it all for nothing, what?"

The man — young, square-shouldered, thick-lipped, with the look of a bully about his well-clad person — retorted with a coarse insult, which the woman resented. There were high words; the crowd for the most part ranged itself on the side of the bully. The woman backed against the wall nearest to her, held feeble, emaciated hands up to her ears in a vain endeavour to shut out the hideous jeers and ribald jokes which were the natural weapons of this untamed crowd.

Soon blows began to rain; not a few fell upon the unfortunate woman. She screamed, and the more she screamed the louder did the crowd jeer, the uglier became its temper. Then suddenly it was all over. How it happened the woman could not tell. She had closed her eyes, feeling sick and dizzy; but she had heard a loud call, words spoken in English (a language which she understood), a pleasant laugh, and a brief but violent scuffle. After that the hurrying retreat of many feet, the click of sabots on the uneven pavement and patter of shoeless feet, and then silence.

She had fallen on her knees and was cowering against the wall, had lost consciousness probably for a minute or two. Then she heard that pleasant laugh again and the soft drawl of the English tongue.

"I love to see those beggars scuttling off, like so many rats to their burrows, don't you, Ffoulkes?"
"They didn't put up much fight, the cowards!" came from another voice, also in English. "A dozen of them against this wretched woman. What had best be done with her?"

"I'll see to her," rejoined the first speaker. "You and Tony had best find the others. Tell them I shall be round directly."

It all seemed like a dream. The woman dared not open her eyes lest reality — hideous and brutal — once more confronted her. Then all at once she felt that her poor, weak body, encircled by strong arms, was lifted off the ground, and that she was being carried down the street, away from the light projected by the lanthorn overhead, into the sheltering darkness of a yawning porte cochere. But she was not then fully conscious.

When she reopened her eyes she was in what appeared to be the lodge of a concierge. She was lying on a horsehair sofa. There was a sense of warmth and of security around her. No wonder that it still seemed like a dream. Before her stood a man, tall and straight, surely a being from another world — or so he appeared to the poor wretch who, since uncountable time, had set eyes on none but the most miserable dregs of struggling humanity, who had seen little else but rags, and faces either cruel or wretched. This man was clad in a huge caped coat, which made his powerful figure seem preternaturally large. His hair was fair and slightly curly above his low, square brow; the eyes beneath their heavy lids looked down on her with unmistakable kindness.

The poor woman struggled to her feet. With a quick and pathetically humble gesture she drew her ragged, muddy skirts over her ankles and her tattered kerchief across her breast.

"I had best go now, Monsieur ... citizen," she murmured, while a hot flush rose to the roots of her unkempt hair. "I must not stop here.... I—"

"You are not going, Madame," he broke in, speaking now in perfect French and with a great air of authority, as one who is accustomed to being implicitly obeyed, "until you have told me how, a lady of culture and of refinement, comes to be masquerading as a street-dancer. The game is a dangerous one, as you have experienced to-night."

"It is no game, Monsieur ... citizen," she stammered; "nor yet a masquerade. I have been a street-dancer all my life, and—"

By way of an answer he took her hand, always with that air of authority which she never thought to resent.

"This is not a street-dancer's hand; Madame," he said quietly. "Nor is your speech that of the people."

She drew her hand away quickly, and the flush on her haggard face deepened.

"If you will honour me with your confidence, Madame," he insisted.

The kindly words, the courtesy of the man, went to the poor creature's heart. She fell back upon the sofa and with her face buried in her arms she sobbed out her heart for a minute or two. The man waited quite patiently. He had seen many women weep these days, and

had dried many a tear through deeds of valour and of self-sacrifice, which were for ever recorded in the hearts of those whom he had succoured.

When this poor woman had succeeded in recovering some semblance of self-control, she turned her wan, tear-stained face to him and said simply:

"My name is Madeleine Lannoy, Monsieur. My husband was killed during the *emeutes* at Versailles, whilst defending the persons of the Queen and of the royal children against the fury of the mob. When I was a girl I had the misfortune to attract the attentions of a young doctor named Jean Paul Marat. You have heard of him, Monsieur?"

The other nodded.

"You know him, perhaps," she continued, "for what he is: the most cruel and revengeful of men. A few years ago he threw up his lucrative appointment as Court physician to Monseigneur le Comte d'Artois, and gave up the profession of medicine for that of journalist and politician. Politician! Heaven help him! He belongs to the most bloodthirsty section of revolutionary brigands. His creed is pillage, murder, and revenge; and he chooses to declare that it is I who, by rejecting his love, drove him to these foul extremities. May God forgive him that abominable lie! The evil we do, Monsieur, is within us; it does not come from circumstance. I, in the meanwhile, was a happy wife. My husband, M. de Lannoy, who was an officer in the army, idolised me. We had one child, a boy—"

She paused, with another catch in her throat. Then she resumed, with calmness that, in view of the tale she told, sounded strangely weird:

"In June last year my child was stolen from me — stolen by Marat in hideous revenge for the supposed wrong which I had done him. The details of that execrable outrage are of no importance. I was decoyed from home one day through the agency of a forged message purporting to come from a very dear friend whom I knew to be in grave trouble at the time. Oh! the whole thing was thoroughly well thought out, I can assure you!" she continued, with a harsh laugh which ended in a heartrending sob. "The forged message, the suborned servant, the threats of terrible reprisals if anyone in the village gave me the slightest warning or clue. When the whole miserable business was accomplished, I was just like a trapped animal inside a cage, held captive by immovable bars of obstinate silence and cruel indifference. No one would help me. No one ostensibly knew anything; no one had seen anything, heard anything. The child was gone! My servants, the people in the village — some of whom I could have sworn were true and sympathetic — only shrugged their shoulders. 'Que voulez-vous, Madame? Children of bourgeois as well as of aristos were often taken up by the State to be brought up as true patriots and no longer pampered like so many lap-dogs.'

"Three days later I received a letter from that inhuman monster, Jean Paul Marat. He told me that he had taken my child away from me, not from any idea of revenge for my disdain in the past, but from a spirit of pure patriotism. My boy, he said, should not be brought up with the same ideas of bourgeois effiteness and love of luxury which had disgraced the nation for centuries. No! he should be reared amongst men who had realised the true value of fraternity and equality and the ideal of complete liberty for the individual to lead his own life, unfettered by senseless prejudices of education and refinement. Which means, Monsieur," the poor woman went on with passionate misery, "that my child is to be reared up in the company of all that is most vile and most degraded in the disease-haunted slums of indigent Paris; that, with the connivance of that execrable fiend Marat, my only son will, mayhap, come back to me one day a potential thief, a criminal probably, a drink-sodden reprobate at best. Such things are done every day in this glorious Revolution of ours — done in the sacred name of France and of Liberty. And the moral murder of my child is to be my punishment for daring to turn a deaf ear to the indignant passion of a brute!"

Once more she paused, and when the melancholy echo of her broken voice had died away in the narrow room, not another murmur broke the stillness of this far-away corner of the great city.

The man did not move. He stood looking down upon the poor woman before him, a world of pity expressed in his deep-set eyes. Through the absolute silence around there came the sound as of a gentle flutter, the current of cold air, mayhap, sighing through the ill-fitting shutters, or the soft, weird sighing made by unseen things. The man's heart was full of pity, and it seemed as if the Angel of Compassion had come at his bidding and enfolded the sorrowing woman with his wings.

A moment or two later she was able to finish her pathetic narrative.

"Do you marvel, Monsieur," she said, "that I am still sane — still alive? But I only live to find my child. I try and keep my reason in order to fight the devilish cunning of a brute on his own ground. Up to now all my inquiries have been in vain. At first I squandered money, tried judicial means, set an army of sleuth-hounds on the track. I tried bribery, corruption. I went to the wretch himself and abased myself in the dust before him. He only laughed at me and told me that his love for me had died long ago; he now was lavishing its treasures upon the faithful friend and companion — that awful woman, Simonne Evrard — who had stood by him in the darkest hours of his misfortunes. Then it was that I decided to adopt different tactics. Since my child was to be reared in the midst of murderers and thieves, I, too, would haunt their abodes. I became a street-singer, dancer, what you will. I wear rags now and solicit alms. I haunt the most disreputable cabarets in the lowest slums of Paris. I listen and I spy; I question every man, woman, and child who might afford some clue, give me some indication. There is hardly a house in these parts that I have not visited and whence I have not been kicked out as an importunate beggar or worse. Gradually I am narrowing the circle of my investigations. Presently I shall get a clue. I shall! I know I shall! God cannot allow this monstrous thing to go on!"

Again there was silence. The poor woman had completely broken down. Shame, humiliation, passionate grief, had made of her a mere miserable wreck of humanity.

The man waited awhile until she was composed, then he said simply:

"You have suffered terribly, Madame; but chiefly, I think, because you have been alone in your grief. You have brooded over it until it has threatened your reason. Now, if you will allow me to act as your friend, I will pledge you my word that I will find your son for you. Will you trust me sufficiently to give up your present methods and place yourself entirely in my hands? There are more than a dozen gallant gentlemen, who are my friends, and who will help me in my search. But for this I must have a free hand, and only help from you when I require it. I can find you lodgings where you will be quite safe under the protection of my wife, who is as like an angel as any man or woman I have ever met on this earth. When your son is once more in your arms, you will, I hope, accompany us to

England, where so many of your friends have already found a refuge. If this meets with your approval, Madame, you may command me, for with your permission I mean to be your most devoted servant.”

Dante, in his wild imaginations of hell and of purgatory and fleeting glimpses of paradise, never put before us the picture of a soul that was lost and found heaven, after a cycle of despair. Nor could Madeleine Lannoy ever explain her feelings at that moment, even to herself. To begin with, she could not quite grasp the reality of this ray of hope, which came to her at the darkest hour of her misery. She stared at the man before her as she would on an ethereal vision; she fell on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

What happened afterwards she hardly knew; she was in a state of semi-consciousness. When she once more woke to reality, she was in comfortable lodgings; she moved and talked and ate and lived like a human being. She was no longer a pariah, an outcast, a poor, half-demented creature, insentient save for an infinite capacity for suffering. She suffered still, but she no longer despaired. There had been such marvellous power and confidence in that man's voice when he said: “I pledge you my word.” Madeleine Lannoy lived now in hope and a sweet sense of perfect mental and bodily security. Around her there was an influence, too, a presence which she did not often see, but always felt to be there: a woman, tall and graceful and sympathetic, who was always ready to cheer, to comfort, and to help. Her name was Marguerite. Madame Lannoy never knew her by any other. The man had spoken of her as being as like an angel as could be met on this earth, and poor Madeleine Lannoy fully agreed with him.

Even that bloodthirsty tiger, Jean Paul Marat, has had his apologists. His friends have called him a martyr, a selfless and incorruptible exponent of social and political ideals. We may take it that Simonne Evrard loved him, for a more impassioned obituary speech was, mayhap, never spoken than the one which she delivered before the National Assembly in honour of that sinister demagogue, whose writings and activities will for ever sully some of the really fine pages of that revolutionary era.

But with those apologists we have naught to do. History has talked its fill of the inhuman monster. With the more intimate biographers alone has this true chronicle any concern. It is one of these who tells us that on or about the eighteenth day of Messidor, in the year I of the Republic (a date which corresponds with the sixth of July, 1793, of our own calendar), Jean Paul Marat took an additional man into his service, at the instance of Jeannette Marechal, his cook and maid-of-all-work. Marat was at this time a martyr to an unpleasant form of skin disease, brought on by the terrible privations which he had endured during the few years preceding his association with Simonne Evrard, the faithful friend and housekeeper, whose small fortune subsequently provided him with some degree of comfort.

The man whom Jeannette Marechal, the cook, introduced into the household of No. 30, Rue des Cordeliers, that worthy woman had literally picked one day out of the gutter where he was grabbing for scraps of food like some wretched starving cur. He appeared to be known to the police of the section, his identity book proclaiming him to be one Paul Mole, who had served his time in gaol for larceny. He professed himself willing to do any work required of him, for the merest pittance and some kind of roof over his head. Simonne Evrard allowed Jeannette to take him in, partly out of compassion and partly with a view to easing the woman's own burden, the only other domestic in the house — a man named Bas — being more interested in politics and the meetings of the Club des Jacobins than he was in his master's ailments. The man Mole, moreover, appeared to know something of medicine and of herbs and how to prepare the warm baths which alone eased the unfortunate Marat from pain. He was powerfully built, too, and though he muttered and grumbled a great deal, and indulged in prolonged fits of sulkiness, when he would not open his mouth to anyone, he was, on the whole, helpful and good-tempered.

There must also have been something about his whole wretched personality which made a strong appeal to the “Friend of the People,” for it is quite evident that within a few days Paul Mole had won no small measure of his master's confidence.

Marat, sick, fretful, and worried, had taken an unreasoning dislike to his servant Bas. He was thankful to have a stranger about him, a man who was as miserable as he himself had been a very little while ago; who, like himself, had lived in cellars and in underground burrows, and lived on the scraps of food which even street-curs had disdained.

On the seventh day following Mole's entry into the household, and while the latter was preparing his employer's bath, Marat said abruptly to him:

“You'll go as far as the Chemin de Pantin to-day for me, citizen. You know your way?”

“I can find it, what?” muttered Mole, who appeared to be in one of his surly moods.

“You will have to go very circumspectly,” Marat went on, in his cracked and feeble voice. “And see to it that no one spies upon your movements. I have many enemies, citizen ... one especially ... a woman.... She is always prying and spying on me.... So beware of any woman you see lurking about at your heels.”

Mole gave a half-audible grunt in reply.

“You had best go after dark,” the other rejoined after awhile. “Come back to me after nine o'clock. It is not far to the Chemin de Pantin — just where it intersects the Route de Meaux. You can get there and back before midnight. The people will admit you. I will give you a ring — the only thing I possess.... It has little or no value,” he added with a harsh, grating laugh. “It will not be worth your while to steal it. You will have to see a brat and report to me on his condition — his appearance, what?... Talk to him a bit.... See what he says and let me know. It is not difficult.”

“No, citizen.”

Mole helped the suffering wretch into his bath. Not a movement, not a quiver of the eyelid betrayed one single emotion which he may have felt — neither loathing nor sympathy, only placid indifference. He was just a half-starved menial, thankful to accomplish any task for the sake of satisfying a craving stomach. Marat stretched out his shrunken limbs in the herbal water with a sigh of well-being.

“And the ring, citizen?” Mole suggested presently.

The demagogue held up his left hand — it was emaciated and disfigured by disease. A cheap-looking metal ring, set with a false stone, glistened upon the fourth finger.

“Take it off,” he said curtly.

The ring must have all along been too small for the bony hand of the once famous Court physician. Even now it appeared embedded in the flabby skin and refused to slide over the knuckle.

“The water will loosen it,” remarked Mole quietly.

Marat dipped his hand back into the water, and the other stood beside him, silent and stolid, his broad shoulders bent, his face naught but a mask, void and expressionless beneath its coating of grime.

One or two seconds went by. The air was heavy with steam and a medley of evil-smelling fumes, which hung in the close atmosphere of the narrow room. The sick man appeared to be drowsy, his head rolled over to one side, his eyes closed. He had evidently forgotten all about the ring.

A woman's voice, shrill and peremptory, broke the silence which had become oppressive:

"Here, citizen Mole, I want you! There's not a bit of wood chopped up for my fire, and how am I to make the coffee without firing, I should like to know?"

"The ring, citizen," Mole urged gruffly.

Marat had been roused by the woman's sharp voice. He cursed her for a noisy harriidan; then he said fretfully:

"It will do presently — when you are ready to start. I said nine o'clock ... it is only four now. I am tired. Tell citizeness Evrard to bring me some hot coffee in an hour's time.... You can go and fetch me the Moniteur now, and take back these proofs to citizen Dufour. You will find him at the 'Cordeliers,' or else at the printing works.... Come back at nine o'clock.... I am tired now ... too tired to tell you where to find the house which is off the Chemin de Pantin. Presently will do...."

Even while he spoke he appeared to drop into a fitful sleep. His two hands were hidden under the sheet which covered the bath. Mole watched him in silence for a moment or two, then he turned on his heel and shuffled off through the ante-room into the kitchen beyond, where presently he sat down, squatting in an angle by the stove, and started with his usual stolidness to chop wood for the citizeness' fire.

When this task was done, and he had received a chunk of sour bread for his reward from Jeannette Marechal, the cook, he shuffled out of the place and into the street, to do his employer's errands.

Paul Mole had been to the offices of the Moniteur and to the printing works of L'Ami du Peuple. He had seen the citizen Dufour at the Club and, presumably, had spent the rest of his time wandering idly about the streets of the quartier, for he did not return to the rue des Cordeliers until nearly nine o'clock.

As soon as he came to the top of the street, he fell in with the crowd which had collected outside No. 30. With his habitual slouchy gait and the steady pressure of his powerful elbows, he pushed his way to the door, whilst gleaning whisperings and rumours on his way.

"The citizen Marat has been assassinated."

"By a woman."

"A mere girl."

"A wench from Caen. Her name is Corday."

"The people nearly tore her to pieces awhile ago."

"She is as much as guillotined already."

The latter remark went off with a loud guffaw and many a ribald joke.

Mole, despite his great height, succeeded in getting through unperceived. He was of no account, and he knew his way inside the house. It was full of people: journalists, gaffers, women and men — the usual crowd that come to gape. The citizen Marat was a great personage. The Friend of the People. An Incorruptible, if ever there was one. Just look at the simplicity, almost the poverty, in which he lived! Only the aristos hated him, and the fat bourgeois who battered on the people. Citizen Marat had sent hundreds of them to the guillotine with a stroke of his pen or a denunciation from his fearless tongue.

Mole did not pause to listen to these comments. He pushed his way through the throng up the stairs, to his late employer's lodgings on the first floor.

The anteroom was crowded, so were the other rooms; but the greatest pressure was around the door immediately facing him, the one which gave on the bathroom. In the kitchen on his right, where awhile ago he had been chopping wood under a flood of abuse from Jeannette Marechal, he caught sight of this woman, cowering by the hearth, her filthy apron thrown over her head, and crying — yes! crying for the loathsome creature, who had expiated some of his abominable crimes at the hands of a poor, misguided girl, whom an infuriated mob was even now threatening to tear to pieces in its rage.

The parlour and even Simonne's room were also filled with people: men, most of whom Mole knew by sight; friends or enemies of the ranting demagogue who lay murdered in the very bath which his casual servant had prepared for him. Every one was discussing the details of the murder, the punishment of the youthful assassin. Simonne Evrard was being loudly blamed for having admitted the girl into citizen Marat's room. But the wench had looked so simple, so innocent, and she said she was the bearer of a message from Caen. She had called twice during the day, and in the evening the citizen himself said that he would see her. Simonne had been for sending her away. But the citizen was peremptory. And he was so helpless ... in his bath ... name of a name, the pitiable affair!

No one paid much attention to Mole. He listened for a while to Simonne's impassioned voice, giving her version of the affair; then he worked his way stolidly into the bathroom.

It was some time before he succeeded in reaching the side of that awful bath wherein lay the dead body of Jean Paul Marat. The small room was densely packed — not with friends, for there was not a man or woman living, except Simonne Evrard and her sisters, whom the bloodthirsty demagogue would have called "friend"; but his powerful personality had been a menace to many, and now they came in crowds to see that he was really dead, that a girl's feeble hand had actually done the deed which they themselves had only contemplated. They stood about whispering, their heads averted from the ghastly spectacle of this miserable creature, to whom even death had failed to lend his usual attribute of tranquil dignity.

The tiny room was inexpressibly hot and stuffy. Hardly a breath of outside air came in through the narrow window, which only gave on the bedroom beyond. An evil-smelling oil-lamp swung from the low ceiling and shed its feeble light on the upturned face of the murdered man.

Mole stood for a moment or two, silent and pensive, beside that hideous form. There was the bath, just as he had prepared it: the board spread over with a sheet and laid across the bath, above which only the head and shoulders emerged, livid and stained. One hand,

the left, grasped the edge of the board with the last convulsive clutch of supreme agony.

On the fourth finger of that hand glistened the shoddy ring which Marat had said was not worth stealing. Yet, apparently, it roused the cupidity of the poor wretch who had served him faithfully for these last few days, and who now would once more be thrown, starving and friendless, upon the streets of Paris.

Mole threw a quick, furtive glance around him. The crowd which had come to gloat over the murdered Terrorist stood about whispering, with heads averted, engrossed in their own affairs. He slid his hand surreptitiously over that of the dead man. With dexterous manipulation he lifted the finger round which glistened the metal ring. Death appeared to have shrivelled the flesh still more upon the bones, to have contracted the knuckles and shrunk the tendons. The ring slid off quite easily. Mole had it in his hand, when suddenly a rough blow struck him on the shoulder.

"Trying to rob the dead?" a stern voice shouted in his ear. "Are you a disguised aristo, or what?"

At once the whispering ceased. A wave of excitement went round the room. Some people shouted, others pressed forward to gaze on the abandoned wretch who had been caught in the act of committing a gruesome deed.

"Robbing the dead!"

They were experts in evil, most of these men here. Their hands were indelibly stained with some of the foulest crimes ever recorded in history. But there was something ghoulish in this attempt to plunder that awful thing lying there, helpless, in the water. There was also a great relief to nerve-tension in shouting Horror and Anathema with self-righteous indignation; and additional excitement in the suggested "aristo in disguise."

Mole struggled vigorously. He was powerful and his fists were heavy. But he was soon surrounded, held fast by both arms, whilst half a dozen hands tore at his tattered clothes, searched him to his very skin, for the booty which he was thought to have taken from the dead.

"Leave me alone, curse you!" he shouted, louder than his aggressors. "My name is Paul Mole, I tell you. Ask the citizeness Evrard. I waited on citizen Marat. I prepared his bath. I was the only friend who did not turn away from him in his sickness and his poverty. Leave me alone, I say! Why," he added, with a hoarse laugh, "Jean Paul in his bath was as naked as on the day he was born!"

"'Tis true," said one of those who had been most active in rummaging through Mole's grimy rags. "There's nothing to be found on him."

But suspicion once aroused was not easily allayed. Mole's protestations became more and more vigorous and emphatic. His papers were all in order, he vowed. He had them on him: his own identity papers, clear for anyone to see. Someone had dragged them out of his pocket; they were dank and covered with splashes of mud — hardly legible. They were handed over to a man who stood in the immediate circle of light projected by the lamp. He seized them and examined them carefully. This man was short and slight, was dressed in well-made cloth clothes; his hair was held in at the nape of the neck in a modish manner with a black taffeta bow. His hands were clean, slender, and claw-like, and he wore the tricolour scarf of office round his waist which proclaimed him to be a member of one of the numerous Committees which tyrannised over the people.

The papers appeared to be in order, and proclaimed the bearer to be Paul Mole, a native of Besancon, a carpenter by trade. The identity book had recently been signed by Jean Paul Marat, the man's latest employer, and been counter-signed by the Commissary of the section.

The man in the tricolour scarf turned with some acerbity on the crowd who was still pressing round the prisoner.

"Which of you here," he queried roughly, "levelled an unjust accusation against an honest citizen?"

But, as usual in such cases, no one replied directly to the charge. It was not safe these days to come into conflict with men like Mole. The Committees were all on their side, against the bourgeois as well as against the aristos. This was the reign of the proletariat, and the sans-culotte always emerged triumphant in a conflict against the well-to-do. Nor was it good to rouse the ire of citizen Chauvelin, one of the most powerful, as he was the most pitiless members of the Committee of Public Safety. Quiet, sarcastic rather than aggressive, something of the aristo, too, in his clean linen and well-cut clothes, he had not even yielded to the defunct Marat in cruelty and relentless persecution of aristocrats.

Evidently his sympathies now were all with Mole, the out-at-elbows, miserable servant of an equally miserable master. His pale-coloured, deep-set eyes challenged the crowd, which gave way before him, slunk back into the corners, away from his coldly threatening glance. Thus he found himself suddenly face to face with Mole, somewhat isolated from the rest, and close to the tin bath with its grim contents. Chauvelin had the papers in his hand.

"Take these, citizen," he said curtly to the other. "They are all in order."

He looked up at Mole as he said this, for the latter, though his shoulders were bent, was unusually tall, and Mole took the papers from him. Thus for the space of a few seconds the two men looked into one another's face, eyes to eyes — and suddenly Chauvelin felt an icy sweat coursing down his spine. The eyes into which he gazed had a strange, ironical twinkle in them, a kind of good-humoured arrogance, whilst through the firm, clear-cut lips, half hidden by a dirty and ill-kempt beard, there came the sound — oh! a mere echo — of a quaint and inane laugh.

The whole thing — it seemed like a vision — was over in a second. Chauvelin, sick and faint with the sudden rush of blood to his head, closed his eyes for one brief instant. The next, the crowd had closed round him; anxious inquiries reached his re-awakened senses.

But he uttered one quick, hoarse cry:

"Hebert! A moi! Are you there?"

"Present, citizen!" came in immediate response. And a tall figure in the tattered uniform affected by the revolutionary guard stepped briskly out of the crowd. Chauvelin's claw-like hand was shaking visibly.

"The man Mole," he called in a voice husky with excitement. "Seize him at once! And, name of a dog! do not allow a living soul in or out of the house!"

Hebert turned on his heel. The next moment his harsh voice was heard above the din and the general hubbub around:

"Quite safe, citizen!" he called to his chief. "We have the rogue right enough!"

There was much shouting and much cursing, a great deal of bustle and confusion, as the men of the Surete closed the doors of the defunct demagogue's lodgings. Some two score men, a dozen or so women, were locked in, inside the few rooms which reeked of dirt and of disease. They jostled and pushed, screamed and protested. For two or three minutes the din was quite deafening. Simonne Evrard pushed her way up to the forefront of the crowd.

"What is this I hear?" she queried peremptorily. "Who is accusing citizen Mole? And of what, I should like to know? I am responsible for everyone inside these apartments ... and if citizen Marat were still alive—"

Chauvelin appeared unaware of all the confusion and of the woman's protestations. He pushed his way through the crowd to the corner of the anteroom where Mole stood, crouching and hunched up, his grimy hands idly fingering the papers which Chauvelin had returned to him a moment ago. Otherwise he did not move.

He stood, silent and sullen; and when Chauvelin, who had succeeded in mastering his emotion, gave the peremptory command: "Take this man to the depot at once. And do not allow him one instant out of your sight!" he made no attempt at escape.

He allowed Hebert and the men to seize him, to lead him away. He followed without a word, without a struggle. His massive figure was hunched up like that of an old man; his hands, which still clung to his identity papers, trembled slightly like those of a man who is very frightened and very helpless. The men of the Surete handled him very roughly, but he made no protest. The woman Evrard did all the protesting, vowing that the people would not long tolerate such tyranny. She even forced her way up to Hebert. With a gesture of fury she tried to strike him in the face, and continued, with a loud voice, her insults and objurgations, until, with a movement of his bayonet, he pushed her roughly out of the way.

After that Paul Mole, surrounded by the guard, was led without ceremony out of the house. Chauvelin gazed after him as if he had been brought face to face with a ghoul.

Chauvelin hurried to the depot. After those few seconds wherein he had felt dazed, incredulous, almost under a spell, he had quickly regained the mastery of his nerves, and regained, too, that intense joy which anticipated triumph is wont to give.

In the out-at-elbows, half-starved servant of the murdered Terrorist, citizen Chauvelin, of the Committee of Public Safety, had recognised his arch enemy, that meddlesome and adventurous Englishman who chose to hide his identity under the pseudonym of the Scarlet Pimpernel. He knew that he could reckon on Hebert; his orders not to allow the prisoner one moment out of sight would of a certainty be strictly obeyed.

Hebert, indeed, a few moments later, greeted his chief outside the doors of the depot with the welcome news that Paul Mole was safely under lock and key.

"You had no trouble with him?" Chauvelin queried, with ill-concealed eagerness.

"No, no! citizen, no trouble," was Hebert's quick reply. "He seems to be a well-known rogue in these parts," he continued with a complacent guffaw; "and some of his friends tried to hustle us at the corner of the Rue de Touraine; no doubt with a view to getting the prisoner away. But we were too strong for them, and Paul Mole is now sulking in his cell and still protesting that his arrest is an outrage against the liberty of the people."

Chauvelin made no further remark. He was obviously too excited to speak.

Pushing past Hebert and the men of the Surete who stood about the dark and narrow passages of the depot, he sought the Commissary of the Section in the latter's office.

It was now close upon ten o'clock. The citizen Commissary Cuisinier had finished his work for the day and was preparing to go home and to bed. He was a family man, had been a respectable bourgeois in his day, and though he was a rank opportunist and had sacrificed not only his political convictions but also his conscience to the exigencies of the time, he still nourished in his innermost heart a secret contempt for the revolutionary brigands who ruled over France at this hour.

To any other man than citizen Chauvelin, the citizen Commissary would, no doubt, have given a curt refusal to a request to see a prisoner at this late hour of the evening. But Chauvelin was not a man to be denied, and whilst muttering various objections in his ill-kempt beard, Cuisinier, nevertheless, gave orders that the citizen was to be conducted at once to the cells.

Paul Mole had in truth turned sulky. The turnkey vowed that the prisoner had hardly stirred since first he had been locked up in the common cell. He sat in a corner at the end of the bench, with his face turned to the wall, and paid no heed either to his fellow-prisoners or to the facetious remarks of the warder.

Chauvelin went up to him, made some curt remark. Mole kept an obstinate shoulder turned towards him — a grimy shoulder, which showed naked through a wide rent in his blouse. This portion of the cell was well-nigh in total darkness; the feeble shaft of light which came through the open door hardly penetrated to this remote angle of the squalid burrow. The same sense of mystery and unreality overcame Chauvelin again as he looked on the miserable creature in whom, an hour ago, he had recognised the super-exquisite Sir Percy Blakeney. Now he could only see a vague outline in the gloom: the stooping shoulders, the long limbs, that naked piece of shoulder which caught a feeble reflex from the distant light. Nor did any amount of none too gentle prodding on the part of the warder induce him to change his position.

"Leave him alone," said Chauvelin curly at last. "I have seen all that I wished to see."

The cell was insufferably hot and stuffy. Chauvelin, finical and queasy, turned away with a shudder of disgust. There was nothing to be got now out of a prolonged interview with his captured foe. He had seen him: that was sufficient. He had seen the super-exquisite Sir Percy Blakeney locked up in a common cell with some of the most scrubby and abject rogues which the slums of indigent Paris could yield, having apparently failed in some undertaking which had demanded for its fulfilment not only tattered clothes and grimy hands, but menial service with a beggarly and disease-ridden employer, whose very propinquity must have been positive torture to the fastidious dandy.

Of a truth this was sufficient for the gratification of any revenge. Chauvelin felt that he could now go contentedly to rest after an evening's work excellently done.

He gave order that Mole should be put in a separate cell, denied all intercourse with anyone outside or in the depot, and that he should be guarded on sight day and night. After that he went his way.

The following morning citizen Chauvelin, of the Committee of Public Safety, gave due notice to citizen Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, that the dangerous English spy, known to the world as the Scarlet Pimpernel, was now safely under lock and key, and that he must be transferred to the Abbaye prison forthwith and to the guillotine as quickly as might be. No one was to take any risks this time; there must be no question either of discrediting his famous League or of obtaining other more valuable information out of him. Such methods had proved disastrous in the past.

There were no safe Englishmen these days, except the dead ones, and it would not take citizen Fouquier-Tinville much thought or time to frame an indictment against the notorious Scarlet Pimpernel, which would do away with the necessity of a prolonged trial. The revolutionary government was at war with England now, and short work could be made of all poisonous spies.

By order, therefore, of the Committee of Public Safety, the prisoner, Paul Mole, was taken out of the cells of the depot and conveyed in a closed carriage to the Abbaye prison. Chauvelin had the pleasure of watching this gratifying spectacle from the windows of the Commissariat. When he saw the closed carriage drive away, with Hebert and two men inside and two others on the box, he turned to citizen Commissary Cuisinier with a sigh of intense satisfaction.

"There goes the most dangerous enemy our glorious revolution has had," he said, with an accent of triumph which he did not attempt to disguise.

Cuisinier shrugged his shoulders.

"Possibly," he retorted curtly. "He did not seem to me to be very dangerous and his papers were quite in order."

To this assertion Chauvelin made no reply. Indeed, how could he explain to this stolid official the subtle workings of an intriguing brain? Had he himself not had many a proof of how little the forging of identity papers or of passports troubled the members of that accursed League? Had he not seen the Scarlet Pimpernel, that exquisite Sir Percy Blakeney, under disguises that were so grimy and so loathsome that they would have repelled the most abject, suborned spy?

Indeed, all that was wanted now was the assurance that Hebert — who himself had a deadly and personal grudge against the Scarlet Pimpernel — would not allow him for one moment out of his sight.

Fortunately as to this, there was no fear. One hint to Hebert and the man was as keen, as determined, as Chauvelin himself.

"Set your mind at rest, citizen," he said with a rough oath. "I guessed how matters stood the moment you gave me the order. I knew you would not take all that trouble for a real Paul Mole. But have no fear! That accursed Englishman has not been one second out of my sight, from the moment I arrested him in the late citizen Marat's lodgings, and by Satan! he shall not be either, until I have seen his impudent head fall under the guillotine."

He himself, he added, had seen to the arrangements for the disposal of the prisoner in the Abbaye: an inner cell, partially partitioned off in one of the guard-rooms, with no egress of its own, and only a tiny grated air-hole high up in the wall, which gave on an outside corridor, and through which not even a cat could manage to slip. Oh! the prisoner was well guarded! The citizen Representative need, of a truth, have no fear! Three or four men — of the best and most trustworthy — had not left the guard-room since the morning. He himself (Hebert) had kept the accursed Englishman in sight all night, had personally conveyed him to the Abbaye, and had only left the guard-room a moment ago in order to speak with the citizen Representative. He was going back now at once, and would not move until the order came for the prisoner to be conveyed to the Court of Justice and thence to summary execution.

For the nonce, Hebert concluded with a complacent chuckle, the Englishman was still crouching dejectedly in a corner of his new cell, with little of him visible save that naked shoulder through his torn shirt, which, in the process of transference from one prison to another, had become a shade more grimy than before.

Chauvelin nodded, well satisfied. He commended Hebert for his zeal, rejoiced with him over the inevitable triumph. It would be well to avenge that awful humiliation at Calais last September. Nevertheless, he felt anxious and nervy; he could not comprehend the apathy assumed by the factitious Mole. That the apathy was assumed Chauvelin was keen enough to guess. What it portended he could not conjecture. But that the Englishman would make a desperate attempt at escape was, of course, a foregone conclusion. It rested with Hebert and a guard that could neither be bribed nor fooled into treachery, to see that such an attempt remained abortive.

What, however, had puzzled citizen Chauvelin all along was the motive which had induced Sir Percy Blakeney to play the role of menial to Jean Paul Marat. Behind it there lay, undoubtedly, one of those subtle intrigues for which that insolent Scarlet Pimpernel was famous; and with it was associated an attempt at theft upon the murdered body of the demagogue ... an attempt which had failed, seeing that the supposititious Paul Mole had been searched and nothing suspicious been found upon his person.

Nevertheless, thoughts of that attempted theft disturbed Chauvelin's equanimity. The old legend of the crumpled roseleaf was applicable in his case. Something of his intense satisfaction would pale if this final enterprise of the audacious adventurer were to be brought to a triumphant close in the end.

That same forenoon, on his return from the Abbaye and the depot, Chauvelin found that a visitor was waiting for him. A woman, who gave her name as Jeannette Marechal, desired to speak with the citizen Representative. Chauvelin knew the woman as his colleague Marat's maid-of-all-work, and he gave orders that she should be admitted at once.

Jeannette Marechal, tearful and not a little frightened, assured the citizen Representative that her errand was urgent. Her late employer had so few friends; she did not know to whom to turn until she bethought herself of citizen Chauvelin. It took him some little time to disentangle the tangible facts out of the woman's voluble narrative. At first the words: "Child ... Chemin de Pantin ... Leridan," were only a medley of sounds which conveyed no meaning to his ear. But when occasion demanded, citizen Chauvelin was capable of infinite patience. Gradually he understood what the woman was driving at.

"The child, citizen!" she reiterated excitedly. "What's to be done about him? I know that citizen Marat would have wished—"

"Never mind now what citizen Marat would have wished," Chauvelin broke in quietly. "Tell me first who this child is."

"I do not know, citizen," she replied.

"How do you mean, you do not know? Then I pray you, citizeness, what is all this pother about?"

"About the child, citizen," reiterated Jeannette obstinately.

"What child?"

"The child whom citizen Marat adopted last year and kept at that awful house on the Chemin de Pantin."

"I did not know citizen Marat had adopted a child," remarked Chauvelin thoughtfully.

"No one knew," she rejoined. "Not even citizeness Evrard. I was the only one who knew. I had to go and see the child once every month. It was a wretched, miserable brat," the woman went on, her shrivelled old breast vaguely stirred, mayhap, by some atrophied feeling of motherhood. "More than half-starved ... and the look in its eyes, citizen! It was enough to make you cry! I could see by his poor little emaciated body and his nice little hands and feet that he ought never to have been put in that awful house, where—"

She paused, and that quick look of furtive terror, which was so often to be met with in the eyes of the timid these days, crept into her wrinkled face.

"Well, citizeness," Chauvelin rejoined quietly, "why don't you proceed? That awful house, you were saying. Where and what is that awful house of which you speak?"

"The place kept by citizen Leridan, just by Bassin de l'Ourcq," the woman murmured. "You know it, citizen."

Chauvelin nodded. He was beginning to understand.

"Well, now, tell me," he said, with that bland patience which had so oft served him in good stead in his unavowable profession. "Tell me. Last year citizen Marat adopted — we'll say adopted — a child, whom he placed in the Leridans' house on the Pantin road. Is that correct?"

"That is just how it is, citizen. And I—"

"One moment," he broke in somewhat more sternly, as the woman's garrulity was getting on his nerves. "As you say, I know the Leridans' house. I have had cause to send children there myself. Children of aristos or of fat bourgeois, whom it was our duty to turn into good citizens. They are not pampered there, I imagine," he went on drily; "and if citizen Marat sent his — er — adopted son there, it was not with a view to having him brought up as an aristo, what?"

"The child was not to be brought up at all," the woman said gruffly. "I have often heard citizen Marat say that he hoped the brat would prove a thief when he grew up, and would take to alcoholism like a duck takes to water."

"And you know nothing of the child's parents?"

"Nothing, citizen. I had to go to Pantin once a month and have a look at him and report to citizen Marat. But I always had the same tale to tell. The child was looking more and more like a young reprobate every time I saw him."

"Did citizen Marat pay the Leridans for keeping the child?"

"Oh, no, citizen! The Leridans make a trade of the children by sending them out to beg. But this one was not to be allowed out yet. Citizen Marat's orders were very stern, and he was wont to terrify the Leridans with awful threats of the guillotine if they ever allowed the child out of their sight."

Chauvelin sat silent for a while. A ray of light had traversed the dark and tortuous ways of his subtle brain. While he mused the woman became impatient. She continued to talk on with the volubility peculiar to her kind. He paid no heed to her, until one phrase struck his ear.

"So now," Jeannette Marechal was saying, "I don't know what to do. The ring has disappeared, and the Leridans are suspicious."

"The ring?" queried Chauvelin curtly. "What ring?"

"As I was telling you, citizen," she replied querulously, "when I went to see the child, the citizen Marat always gave me this ring to show to the Leridans. Without I brought the ring they would not admit me inside their door. They were so terrified with all the citizen's threats of the guillotine."

"And now you say the ring has disappeared. Since when?"

"Well, citizen," replied Jeannette blandly, "since you took poor Paul Mole into custody."

"What do you mean?" Chauvelin riposted. "What had Paul Mole to do with the child and the ring?"

"Only this, citizen, that he was to have gone to Pantin last night instead of me. And thankful I was not to have to go. Citizen Marat gave the ring to Mole, I suppose. I know he intended to give it to him. He spoke to me about it just before that execrable woman came and murdered him. Anyway, the ring has gone and Mole too. So I imagine that Mole has the ring and—"

"That's enough!" Chauvelin broke in roughly. "You can go!"

"But, citizen—"

"You can go, I said," he reiterated sharply. "The matter of the child and the Leridans and the ring no longer concerns you. You understand?"

"Y — y — yes, citizen," murmured Jeannette, vaguely terrified.

And of a truth the change in citizen Chauvelin's demeanour was enough to scare any timid creature. Not that he raved or ranted or screamed. Those were not his ways. He still sat beside his desk as he had done before, and his slender hand, so like the talons of a vulture, was clenched upon the arm of his chair. But there was such a look of inward fury and of triumph in his pale, deep-set eyes, such lines of cruelty around his thin, closed lips, that Jeannette Marechal, even with the picture before her mind of Jean Paul Marat in his maddest moods, fled, with the unreasoning terror of her kind, before the sternly controlled, fierce passion of this man.

Chauvelin never noticed that she went. He sat for a long time, silent and immovable. Now he understood. Thank all the Powers of Hate and Revenge, no thought of disappointment was destined to embitter the overflowing cup of his triumph. He had not only brought his arch-enemy to his knees, but had foiled one of his audacious ventures. How clear the whole thing was! The false Paul Mole, the newly acquired menial in the household of Marat, had wormed himself into the confidence of his employer in order to wrest from him the secret of the aristo's child. Bravo! bravo! my gallant Scarlet Pimpernel! Chauvelin now could see it all. Tragedies such as that which had placed an aristo's child in the power of a cunning demon like Marat were not rare these days, and Chauvelin had been fitted by nature and by temperament to understand and appreciate an execrable monster of the type of Jean Paul Marat.

And Paul Mole, the grimy, degraded servant of the indigent demagogue, the loathsome mask which hid the fastidious personality of Sir Percy Blakeney, had made a final and desperate effort to possess himself of the ring which would deliver the child into his power. Now, having failed in his machinations, he was safe under lock and key — guarded on sight. The next twenty-four hours would see him unmasked, awaiting his trial and condemnation under the scathing indictment prepared by Fouquier-Tinville, the unerring Public Prosecutor. The day after that, the tumbrel and the guillotine for that execrable English spy, and the boundless sense of satisfaction that his last intrigue had aborted in such a signal and miserable manner.

Of a truth Chauvelin at this hour had every cause to be thankful, and it was with a light heart that he set out to interview the Leridans.

The Leridans, anxious, obsequious, terrified, were only too ready to obey the citizen Representative in all things.

They explained with much complacency that, even though they were personally acquainted with Jeannette Marechal, when the citizeness presented herself this very morning without the ring they had refused her permission to see the brat.

Chauvelin, who in his own mind had already reconstructed the whole tragedy of the stolen child, was satisfied that Marat could not have chosen more efficient tools for the execution of his satanic revenge than these two hideous products of revolutionary Paris.

Grasping, cowardly, and avaricious, the Leridans would lend themselves to any abomination for a sufficiency of money; but no money on earth would induce them to risk their own necks in the process. Marat had obviously held them by threats of the guillotine. They knew the power of the “Friend of the People,” and feared him accordingly. Chauvelin’s scarf of office, his curt, authoritative manner, had an equally awe-inspiring effect upon the two miserable creatures. They became absolutely abject, cringing, maudlin in their protestations of good-will and loyalty. No one, they vowed, should as much as see the child — ring or no ring — save the citizen Representative himself. Chauvelin, however, had no wish to see the child. He was satisfied that its name was Lannoy — for the child had remembered it when first he had been brought to the Leridans. Since then he had apparently forgotten it, even though he often cried after his “Maman!”

Chauvelin listened to all these explanations with some impatience. The child was nothing to him, but the Scarlet Pimpernel had desired to rescue it from out of the clutches of the Leridans; had risked his all — and lost it — in order to effect that rescue! That in itself was a sufficient inducement for Chauvelin to interest himself in the execution of Marat’s vengeance, whatever its original mainspring may have been.

At any rate, now he felt satisfied that the child was safe, and that the Leridans were impervious to threats or bribes which might land them on the guillotine.

All that they would own to was to being afraid.

“Afraid of what?” queried Chauvelin sharply.

That the brat may be kidnapped ... stolen. Oh! he could not be decoyed ... they were too watchful for that! But apparently there were mysterious agencies at work....

“Mysterious agencies!” Chauvelin laughed aloud at the suggestion. The “mysterious agency” was even now rotting in an obscure cell at the Abbaye. What other powers could be at work on behalf of the brat?

Well, the Leridans had had a warning!

What warning?

“A letter,” the man said gruffly. “But as neither my wife nor I can read—”

“Why did you not speak of this before?” broke in Chauvelin roughly. “Let me see the letter.”

The woman produced a soiled and dank scrap of paper from beneath her apron. Of a truth she could not read its contents, for they were writ in English in the form of a doggerel rhyme which caused Chauvelin to utter a savage oath.

“When did this come?” he asked. “And how?”

“This morning, citizen,” the woman mumbled in reply. “I found it outside the door, with a stone on it to prevent the wind from blowing it away. What does it mean, citizen?” she went on, her voice shaking with terror, for of a truth the citizen Representative looked as if he had seen some weird and unearthly apparition.

He gave no reply for a moment or two, and the two catiffs had no conception of the tremendous effort at self-control which was hidden behind the pale, rigid mask of the redoubtable man.

“It probably means nothing that you need fear,” Chauvelin said quietly at last. “But I will see the Commissary of the Section myself, and tell him to send a dozen men of the Surete along to watch your house and be at your beck and call if need be. Then you will feel quite safe, I hope.”

“Oh, yes! quite safe, citizen!” the woman replied with a sigh of genuine relief. Then only did Chauvelin turn on his heel and go his way.

But that crumpled and soiled scrap of paper given to him by the woman Leridan still lay in his clenched hand as he strode back rapidly citywards. It seemed to scorch his palm. Even before he had glanced at the contents he knew what they were. That atrocious English doggerel, the signature — a five-petalled flower traced in crimson! How well he knew them!

“We seek him here, we seek him there!”

The most humiliating moments in Chauvelin’s career were associated with that silly rhyme, and now here it was, mocking him even when he knew that his bitter enemy lay fettered and helpless, caught in a trap, out of which there was no escape possible; even though he knew for a positive certainty that the mocking voice which had spoken those rhymes on that far-off day last September would soon be stilled for ever.

No doubt one of that army of abominable English spies had placed this warning outside the Leridans’ door. No doubt they had done that with a view to throwing dust in the eyes of the Public Prosecutor and causing a confusion in his mind with regard to the identity of the prisoner at the Abbaye, all to the advantage of their chief.

The thought that such a confusion might exist, that Fouquier-Tinville might be deluded into doubting the real personality of Paul Mole, brought an icy sweat all down Chauvelin’s spine. He hurried along the interminably long Chemin de Pantin, only paused at the Barriere du Combat in order to interview the Commissary of the Section on the matter of sending men to watch over the Leridans’

house. Then, when he felt satisfied that this would be effectively and quickly done, an unconquerable feeling of restlessness prompted him to hurry round to the lodgings of the Public Prosecutor in the Rue Blanche — just to see him, to speak with him, to make quite sure.

Oh! he must be sure that no doubts, no pusillanimity on the part of any official would be allowed to stand in the way of the consummation of all his most cherished dreams. Papers or no papers, testimony or no testimony, the incarcerated Paul Mole was the Scarlet Pimpernel — of this Chauvelin was as certain as that he was alive. His every sense had testified to it when he stood in the narrow room of the Rue des Cordeliers, face to face — eyes gazing into eyes — with his sworn enemy.

Unluckily, however, he found the Public Prosecutor in a surly and obstinate mood, following on an interview which he had just had with citizen Commissary Cuisinier on the matter of the prisoner Paul Mole.

“His papers are all in order, I tell you,” he said impatiently, in answer to Chauvelin’s insistence. “It is as much as my head is worth to demand a summary execution.”

“But I tell you that, those papers of his are forged,” urged Chauvelin forcefully.

“They are not,” retorted the other. “The Commissary swears to his own signature on the identity book. The concierge at the Abbaye swears that he knows Mole, so do all the men of the Surete who have seen him. The Commissary has known him as an indigent, good-for-nothing lubbard who has begged his way in the streets of Paris ever since he was released from gaol some months ago, after he had served a term for larceny. Even your own man Hebert admits to feeling doubtful on the point. You have had the nightmare, citizen,” concluded Fouquier-Tinville with a harsh laugh.

“But, name of a dog!” broke in Chauvelin savagely. “You are not proposing to let the man go?”

“What else can I do?” the other rejoined fretfully. “We shall get into terrible trouble if we interfere with a man like Paul Mole. You know yourself how it is these days. We should have the whole of the rabble of Paris clamouring for our blood. If, after we have guillotined him, he is proved to be a good patriot, it will be my turn next. No! I thank you!”

“I tell you, man,” retorted Chauvelin desperately, “that the man is not Paul Mole — that he is the English spy whom we all know as the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“EH BIEN!” riposted Fouquier-Tinville. “Bring me more tangible proof that our prisoner is not Paul Mole and I’ll deal with him quickly enough, never fear. But if by to-morrow morning you do not satisfy me on the point ... I must let him go his way.”

A savage oath rose to Chauvelin’s lips. He felt like a man who has been running, panting to reach a goal, who sees that goal within easy distance of him, and is then suddenly captured, caught in invisible meshes which hold him tightly, and against which he is powerless to struggle. For the moment he hated Fouquier-Tinville with a deadly hatred, would have tortured and threatened him until he wrung a consent, an admission, out of him.

Name of a name! when that damnable English spy was actually in his power, the man was a pusillanimous fool to allow the rich prize to slip from his grasp! Chauvelin felt as if he were choking; his slender fingers worked nervily around his cravat; beads of perspiration trickled unheeded down his pallid forehead.

Then suddenly he had an inspiration — nothing less! It almost seemed as if Satan, his friend, had whispered insinuating words into his ear. That scrap of paper! He had thrust it awhile ago into the breast pocket of his coat. It was still there, and the Public Prosecutor wanted a tangible proof.... Then, why not....?

Slowly, his thoughts still in the process of gradual coordination, Chauvelin drew that soiled scrap of paper out of his pocket. Fouquier-Tinville, surly and ill-humoured, had his back half-turned towards him, was moodily picking at his teeth. Chauvelin had all the leisure which he required. He smoothed out the creases in the paper and spread it out carefully upon the desk close to the other man’s elbow. Fouquier-Tinville looked down on it, over his shoulder.

“What is that?” he queried.

“As you see, citizen,” was Chauvelin’s bland reply. “A message, such as you yourself have oft received, methinks, from our mutual enemy, the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

But already the Public Prosecutor had seized upon the paper, and of a truth Chauvelin had no longer cause to complain of his colleague’s indifference. That doggerel rhyme, no less than the signature, had the power to rouse Fouquier-Tinville’s ire, as it had that of disturbing Chauvelin’s well-studied calm.

“What is it?” reiterated the Public Prosecutor, white now to the lips.

“I have told you, citizen,” rejoined Chauvelin imperturbably. “A message from that English spy. It is also the proof which you have demanded of me — the tangible proof that the prisoner, Paul Mole, is none other than the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“But,” ejaculated the other hoarsely, “where did you get this?”

“It was found in the cell which Paul Mole occupied in the depot of the Rue de Touraine, where he was first incarcerated. I picked it up there after he was removed ... the ink was scarcely dry upon it.”

The lie came quite glibly to Chauvelin’s tongue. Was not every method good, every device allowable, which would lead to so glorious an end?

“Why did you not tell me of this before?” queried Fouquier-Tinville, with a sudden gleam of suspicion in his deep-set eyes.

“You had not asked me for a tangible proof before,” replied Chauvelin blandly. “I myself was so firmly convinced of what I averred that I had well-nigh forgotten the existence of this damning scrap of paper.”

Damning indeed! Fouquier-Tinville had seen such scraps of paper before. He had learnt the doggerel rhyme by heart, even though the English tongue was quite unfamiliar to him. He loathed the English — the entire nation — with all that deadly hatred which a divergence of political aims will arouse in times of acute crises. He hated the English government, Pitt and Burke and even Fox, the happy-go-lucky apologist of the young Revolution. But, above all, he hated that League of English spies — as he was pleased to call

them — whose courage, resourcefulness, as well as reckless daring, had more than once baffled his own hideous schemes of murder, of pillage, and of rape.

Thank Beelzebub and his horde of evil spirits, citizen Chauvelin had been clear-sighted enough to detect that elusive Pimpernel under the disguise of Paul Mole.

“You have deserved well of your country,” said Tinville with lusty fervour, and gave Chauvelin a vigorous slap on the shoulder. “But for you I should have allowed that abominable spy to slip through our fingers.”

“I have succeeded in convincing you, citizen?” Chauvelin retorted dryly.

“Absolutely!” rejoined the other. “You may now leave the matter to me. And ‘twill be friend Mole who will be surprised to-morrow,” he added with a harsh guffaw, “when he finds himself face to face with me, before a Court of Justice.”

He was all eagerness, of course. Such a triumph for him! The indictment of the notorious Scarlet Pimpernel on a charge of espionage would be the crowning glory of his career! Let other men look to their laurels! Those who brought that dangerous enemy of revolution to the guillotine would for ever be proclaimed as the saviours of France.

“A short indictment,” he said, when Chauvelin, after a lengthy discussion on various points, finally rose to take his leave, “but a scathing one! I tell you, citizen Chauvelin, that to-morrow you will be the first to congratulate me on an unprecedented triumph.”

He had been arguing in favour of a sensational trial and no less sensational execution. Chauvelin, with his memory harking back on many mysterious abductions at the very foot of the guillotine, would have liked to see his elusive enemy quietly put to death amongst a batch of traitors, who would help to mask his personality until after the guillotine had fallen, when the whole of Paris should ring with the triumph of this final punishment of the hated spy.

In the end, the two friends agreed upon a compromise, and parted well pleased with the turn of events which a kind Fate had ordered for their own special benefit.

Thus satisfied, Chauvelin returned to the Abbaye. Hebert was safe and trustworthy, but Hebert, too, had been assailed with the same doubts which had well-nigh wrecked Chauvelin’s triumph, and with such doubts in his mind he might slacken his vigilance.

Name of a name! every man in charge of that damnable Scarlet Pimpernel should have three pairs of eyes wherewith to watch his movements. He should have the alert brain of a Robespierre, the physical strength of a Danton, the relentlessness of a Marat. He should be a giant in sheer brute force, a tiger in caution, an elephant in weight, and a mouse in stealthiness!

Name of a name! but ’twas only hate that could give such powers to any man!

Hebert, in the guard-room, owned to his doubts. His comrades, too, admitted that after twenty-four hours spent on the watch, their minds were in a whirl. The Citizen Commissary had been so sure — so was the chief concierge of the Abbaye even now; and the men of the Surete!... they themselves had seen the real Mole more than once ... and this man in the cell.... Well, would the citizen Representative have a final good look at him?

“You seem to forget Calais, citizen Hebert,” Chauvelin said sharply, “and the deadly humiliation you suffered then at the hands of this man who is now your prisoner. Surely your eyes should have been, at least, as keen as mine own.”

Anxious, irritable, his nerves well-nigh on the rack, he nevertheless crossed the guard-room with a firm step and entered the cell where the prisoner was still lying upon the palliasse, as he had been all along, and still presenting that naked piece of shoulder through the hole in his shirt.

“He has been like this the best part of the day,” Hebert said with a shrug of the shoulders. “We put his bread and water right under his nose. He ate and he drank, and I suppose he slept. But except for a good deal of swearing, he has not spoken to any of us.”

He had followed his chief into the cell, and now stood beside the palliasse, holding a small dark lantern in his hand. At a sign from Chauvelin he flashed the light upon the prisoner’s averted head.

Mole cursed for awhile, and muttered something about “good patriots” and about “retribution.” Then, worried by the light, he turned slowly round, and with fish-like, bleary eyes looked upon his visitor.

The words of stinging irony and triumphant sarcasm, all fully prepared, froze on Chauvelin’s lips. He gazed upon the prisoner, and a weird sense of something unfathomable and mysterious came over him as he gazed. He himself could not have defined that feeling: the very next moment he was prepared to ridicule his own cowardice — yes, cowardice! because for a second or two he had felt positively afraid.

Afraid of what, forsooth? The man who crouched here in the cell was his arch-enemy, the Scarlet Pimpernel — the man whom he hated most bitterly in all the world, the man whose death he desired more than that of any other living creature. He had been apprehended by the very side of the murdered man whose confidence he had all but gained. He himself (Chauvelin) had at that fateful moment looked into the factitious Mole’s eyes, had seen the mockery in them, the lazy insouciance which was the chief attribute of Sir Percy Blakeney. He had heard a faint echo of that inane laugh which grated upon his nerves. Hebert had then laid hands upon this very same man; agents of the Surete had barred every ingress and egress to the house, had conducted their prisoner straightway to the depot and thence to the Abbaye, had since that moment guarded him on sight, by day and by night. Hebert and the other men as well as the chief warder, all swore to that!

No, no! There could be no doubt! There was no doubt! The days of magic were over! A man could not assume a personality other than his own; he could not fly out of that personality like a bird out of its cage. There on the palliasse in the miserable cell were the same long limbs, the broad shoulders, the grimy face with the three days’ growth of stubbly beard — the whole wretched personality of Paul Mole, in fact, which hid the exquisite one of Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart. And yet!...

A cold sweat ran down Chauvelin’s spine as he gazed, mute and immovable, into those fish-like, bleary eyes, which were not — no! they were not those of the real Scarlet Pimpernel.

The whole situation became dreamlike, almost absurd. Chauvelin was not the man for such a mock-heroic, melodramatic situation. Commonsense, reason, his own cool powers of deliberation, would soon reassert themselves. But for the moment he was dazed. He had worked too hard, no doubt; had yielded too much to excitement, to triumph, and to hate. He turned to Hebert, who was standing stolidly by, gave him a few curt orders in a clear and well-pitched voice. Then he walked out of the cell, without bestowing another look on the prisoner.

Mole had once more turned over on his palliasse and, apparently, had gone to sleep. Hebert, with a strange and puzzled laugh, followed his chief out of the cell.

At first Chauvelin had the wish to go back and see the Public Prosecutor — to speak with him — to tell him — what? Yes, what? That he, Chauvelin, had all of a sudden been assailed with the same doubts which already had worried Hebert and the others? — that he had told a deliberate lie when he stated that the incriminating doggerel rhyme had been found in Mole's cell? No, no! Such an admission would not only be foolish, it would be dangerous now, whilst he himself was scarce prepared to trust to his own senses. After all, Fouquier-Tinville was in the right frame of mind for the moment. Paul Mole, whoever he was, was safely under lock and key.

The only danger lay in the direction of the house on the Chemin de Pantin. At the thought Chauvelin felt giddy and faint. But he would allow himself no rest. Indeed, he could not have rested until something approaching certainty had once more taken possession of his soul. He could not — would not — believe that he had been deceived. He was still prepared to stake his very life on the identity of the prisoner at the Abbaye. Tricks of light, the flash of the lantern, the perfection of the disguise, had caused a momentary illusion — nothing more.

Nevertheless, that awful feeling of restlessness which had possessed him during the last twenty-four hours once more drove him to activity. And although commonsense and reason both pulled one way, an eerie sense of superstition whispered in his ear the ominous words, "If, after all!"

At any rate, he would see the Leridans, and once more make sure of them; and, late as was the hour, he set out for the lonely house on the Pantin Road.

Just inside the Barriere du Combat was the Poste de Section, where Commissary Burban was under orders to provide a dozen men of the Surete, who were to be on the watch round and about the house of the Leridans. Chauvelin called in on the Commissary, who assured him that the men were at their post.

Thus satisfied, he crossed the Barriere and started at a brisk walk down the long stretch of the Chemin de Pantin. The night was dark. The rolling clouds overhead hid the face of the moon and presaged the storm. On the right, the irregular heights of the Buttes Chaumont loomed out dense and dark against the heavy sky, whilst to the left, on ahead, a faintly glimmering, greyish streak of reflected light revealed the proximity of the canal.

Close to the spot where the main Route de Meux intersects the Chemin de Pantin, Chauvelin slackened his pace. The house of the Leridans now lay immediately on his left; from it a small, feeble ray of light, finding its way no doubt through an ill-closed shutter, pierced the surrounding gloom. Chauvelin, without hesitation, turned up a narrow track which led up to the house across a field of stubble. The next moment a peremptory challenge brought him to a halt.

"Who goes there?"

"Public Safety," replied Chauvelin. "Who are you?"

"Of the Surete," was the counter reply. "There are a dozen of us about here."

"When did you arrive?"

"Some two hours ago. We marched out directly after you left the orders at the Commissariat."

"You are prepared to remain on the watch all night?"

"Those are our orders, citizen," replied the man.

"You had best close up round the house, then. And, name of a dog!" he added, with a threatening ring in his voice. "Let there be no slackening of vigilance this night. No one to go in or out of that house, no one to approach it under any circumstances whatever. Is that understood?"

"Those were our orders from the first, citizen," said the man simply.

"And all has been well up to now?"

"We have seen no one, citizen."

The little party closed in around their chief and together they marched up to the house. Chauvelin, on tenterhooks, walked quicker than the others. He was the first to reach the door. Unable to find the bell-pull in the dark, he knocked vigorously.

The house appeared silent and wrapped in sleep. No light showed from within save that one tiny speck through the cracks of an ill-fitting shutter, in a room immediately overhead.

In response to Chauvelin's repeated summons, there came anon the sound of someone moving in one of the upstairs rooms, and presently the light overhead disappeared, whilst a door above was heard to open and to close and shuffling footsteps to come slowly down the creaking stairs.

A moment or two later the bolts and bars of the front door were unfastened, a key grated in the rusty lock, a chain rattled in its socket, and then the door was opened slowly and cautiously.

The woman Leridan appeared in the doorway. She held a guttering tallow candle high above her head. Its flickering light illumined Chauvelin's slender figure.

"Ah! the citizen Representative!" the woman ejaculated, as soon as she recognised him. "We did not expect you again to-day, and at this late hour, too. I'll tell my man—"

"Never mind your man," broke in Chauvelin impatiently, and pushed without ceremony past the woman inside the house. "The child? Is it safe?"

He could scarcely control his excitement. There was a buzzing, as of an angry sea, in his ears. The next second, until the woman spoke, seemed like a cycle of years.

"Quite safe, citizen," she said placidly. "Everything is quite safe. We were so thankful for those men of the Surete. We had been afraid before, as I told the citizen Representative, and my man and I could not rest for anxiety. It was only after they came that we dared go to bed."

A deep sigh of intense relief came from the depths of Chauvelin's heart. He had not realised himself until this moment how desperately anxious he had been. The woman's reassuring words appeared to lift a crushing weight from his mind. He turned to the man behind him.

"You did not tell me," he said, "that some of you had been here already."

"We have not been here before," the sergeant in charge of the little platoon said in reply. "I do not know what the woman means."

"Some of your men came about three hours ago," the woman retorted; "less than an hour after the citizen Representative was here. I remember that my man and I marvelled how quickly they did come, but they said that they had been on duty at the Barriere du Combat when the citizen arrived, and that he had dispatched them off at once. They said they had run all the way. But even so, we thought it was quick work—"

The words were smothered in her throat in a cry of pain, for, with an almost brutal gesture, Chauvelin had seized her by the shoulders.

"Where are those men?" he queried hoarsely. "Answer!"

"In there, and in there," the woman stammered, well-nigh faint with terror as she pointed to two doors, one on each side of the passage. "Three in each room. They are asleep now, I should say, as they seem so quiet. But they were an immense comfort to us, citizen ... we were so thankful to have them in the house..."

But Chauvelin had snatched the candle from her hand. Holding it high above his head, he strode to the door on the right of the passage. It was ajar. He pushed it open with a vicious kick. The room beyond was in total darkness.

"Is anyone here?" he queried sharply.

Nothing but silence answered him. For a moment he remained there on the threshold, silent and immovable as a figure carved in stone. He had just a sufficiency of presence of mind and of will power not to drop the candle, to stand there motionless, with his back turned to the woman and to the men who had crowded in, in his wake. He would not let them see the despair, the rage and grave superstitious fear, which distorted every line of his pallid face.

He did not ask about the child. He would not trust himself to speak, for he had realised already how completely he had been baffled. Those abominable English spies had watched their opportunity, had worked on the credulity and the fears of the Leridans and, playing the game at which they and their audacious chief were such unconquerable experts, they had made their way into the house under a clever ruse.

The men of the Surete, not quite understanding the situation, were questioning the Leridans. The man, too, corroborated his wife's story. Their anxiety had been worked upon at the moment that it was most acute. After the citizen Representative left them, earlier in the evening, they had received another mysterious message which they had been unable to read, but which had greatly increased their alarm. Then, when the men of the Surete came.... Ah! they had no cause to doubt that they were men of the Surete!... their clothes, their speech, their appearance ... figure to yourself, even their uniforms! They spoke so nicely, so reassuringly. The Leridans were so thankful to see them! Then they made themselves happy in the two rooms below, and for additional safety the Lannoy child was brought down from its attic and put to sleep in the one room with the men of the Surete.

After that the Leridans went to bed. Name of a dog! how were they to blame? Those men and the child had disappeared, but they (the Leridans) would go to the guillotine swearing that they were not to blame.

Whether Chauvelin heard all these jeremiads, he could not afterwards have told you. But he did not need to be told how it had all been done. It had all been so simple, so ingenious, so like the methods usually adopted by that astute Scarlet Pimpernel! He saw it all so clearly before him. Nobody was to blame really, save he himself — he, who alone knew and understood the adversary with whom he had to deal.

But these people here should not have the gratuitous spectacle of a man enduring the torments of disappointment and of baffled revenge. Whatever Chauvelin was suffering now would for ever remain the secret of his own soul. Anon, when the Leridans' rasping voices died away in one of the more distant portions of the house and the men of the Surete were busy accepting refreshment and gratuity from the two terrified wretches, he had put down the candle with a steady hand and then walked with a firm step out of the house.

Soon the slender figure was swallowed up in the gloom as he strode back rapidly towards the city.

Citizen Fouquier-Tinville had returned home from the Palais at a very late hour that same evening. His household in his simple lodgings in the Place Dauphine was already abed: his wife and the twins were asleep. He himself had sat down for a moment in the living-room, in dressing-gown and slippers, and with the late edition of the *Moniteur* in his hand, too tired to read.

It was half-past ten when there came a ring at the front door bell. Fouquier-Tinville, half expecting citizen Chauvelin to pay him a final visit, shuffled to the door and opened it.

A visitor, tall, well-dressed, exceedingly polite and urbane, requested a few minutes' conversation with citizen Fouquier-Tinville.

Before the Public Prosecutor had made up his mind whether to introduce such a late-comer into his rooms, the latter had pushed his way through the door into the ante-chamber, and with a movement as swift as it was unexpected, had thrown a scarf round Fouquier-Tinville's neck and wound it round his mouth, so that the unfortunate man's call for help was smothered in his throat.

So dexterously and so rapidly indeed had the miscreant acted, that his victim had hardly realised the assault before he found himself securely gagged and bound to a chair in his own ante-room, whilst that dare-devil stood before him, perfectly at his ease, his hands buried in the capacious pockets of his huge caped coat, and murmuring a few casual words of apology.

"I entreat you to forgive, citizen," he was saying in an even and pleasant voice, "this necessary violence on my part towards you. But my errand is urgent, and I could not allow your neighbours or your household to disturb the few minutes' conversation which I am obliged to have with you. My friend Paul Mole," he went on, after a slight pause, "is in grave danger of his life owing to a hallucination on the part of our mutual friend citizen Chauvelin; and I feel confident that you yourself are too deeply enamoured of your own neck to risk it wilfully by sending an innocent and honest patriot to the guillotine."

Once more he paused and looked down upon his unwilling interlocutor, who, with muscles straining against the cords that held him, and with eyes nearly starting out of their sockets in an access of fear and of rage, was indeed presenting a pitiful spectacle.

"I dare say that by now, citizen," the brigand continued imperturbably, "you will have guessed who I am. You and I have oft crossed invisible swords before; but this, methinks, is the first time that we have met face to face. I pray you, tell my dear friend M. Chauvelin that you have seen me. Also that there were two facts which he left entirely out of his calculations, perfect though these were. The one

fact was that there were two Paul Moles — one real and one factitious. Tell him that, I pray you. It was the factitious Paul Mole who stole the ring and who stood for one moment gazing into clever citizen Chauvelin's eyes. But that same factitious Paul Mole had disappeared in the crowd even before your colleague had recovered his presence of mind. Tell him, I pray you, that the elusive Pimpernel whom he knows so well never assumes a fanciful disguise. He discovered the real Paul Mole first, studied him, learned his personality, until his own became a perfect replica of the miserable caitiff. It was the false Paul Mole who induced Jeannette Marechal to introduce him originally into the household of citizen Marat. It was he who gained the confidence of his employer; he, for a consideration, borrowed the identity papers of his real prototype. He again who for a few francs induced the real Paul Mole to follow him into the house of the murdered demagogue and to mingle there with the throng. He who thrust the identity papers back into the hands of their rightful owner whilst he himself was swallowed up by the crowd. But it was the real Paul Mole who was finally arrested and who is now lingering in the Abbaye prison, whence you, citizen Fouquier-Tinville, must free him on the instant, on pain of suffering yourself for the nightmares of your friend."

"The second fact," he went on with the same good-humoured pleasantry, "which our friend citizen Chauvelin had forgotten was that, though I happen to have aroused his unconquerable ire, I am but one man amongst a league of gallant English gentlemen. Their chief, I am proud to say; but without them, I should be powerless. Without one of them near me, by the side of the murdered Marat, I could not have rid myself of the ring in time, before other rough hands searched me to my skin. Without them, I could not have taken Madeleine Lannoy's child from out that terrible hell, to which a miscreant's lustful revenge had condemned the poor innocent. But while citizen Chauvelin, racked with triumph as well as with anxiety, was rushing from the Leridans' house to yours, and thence to the Abbaye prison, to gloat over his captive enemy, the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel carefully laid and carried out its plans at leisure. Disguised as men of the Surete, we took advantage of the Leridans' terror to obtain access into the house. Frightened to death by our warnings, as well as by citizen Chauvelin's threats, they not only admitted us into their house, but actually placed Madeleine Lannoy's child in our charge. Then they went contentedly to bed, and we, before the real men of the Surete arrived upon the scene, were already safely out of the way. My gallant English friends are some way out of Paris by now, escorting Madeleine Lannoy and her child into safety. They will return to Paris, citizen," continued the audacious adventurer, with a laugh full of joy and of unconquerable vitality, "and be my henchmen as before in many an adventure which will cause you and citizen Chauvelin to gnash your teeth with rage. But I myself will remain in Paris," he concluded lightly. "Yes, in Paris; under your very nose, and entirely at your service!"

The next second he was gone, and Fouquier-Tinville was left to marvel if the whole apparition had not been a hideous dream. Only there was no doubt that he was gagged and tied to a chair with cords: and here his wife found him, an hour later, when she woke from her first sleep, anxious because he had not yet come to bed.

A QUESTION OF PASSPORTS

Bibot was very sure of himself. There never was, never had been, there never would be again another such patriotic citizen of the Republic as was citizen Bibot of the Town Guard.

And because his patriotism was so well known among the members of the Committee of Public Safety, and his uncompromising hatred of the aristocrats so highly appreciated, citizen Bibot had been given the most important military post within the city of Paris.

He was in command of the Porte Montmartre, which goes to prove how highly he was esteemed, for, believe me, more treachery had been going on inside and out of the Porte Montmartre than in any other quarter of Paris. The last commandant there, citizen Ferney, was guillotined for having allowed a whole batch of aristocrats — traitors to the Republic, all of them — to slip through the Porte Montmartre and to find safety outside the walls of Paris. Ferney pleaded in his defence that these traitors had been spirited away from under his very nose by the devil's agency, for surely that meddlesome Englishman who spent his time in rescuing aristocrats — traitors, all of them — from the clutches of Madame la Guillotine must be either the devil himself, or at any rate one of his most powerful agents.

"Nom de Dieu! just think of his name! The Scarlet Pimpernel they call him! No one knows him by any other name! and he is preternaturally tall and strong and superhumanly cunning! And the power which he has of being transmuted into various personalities — rendering himself quite unrecognisable to the eyes of the most sharp-seeing patriot of France, must of a surety be a gift of Satan!"

But the Committee of Public Safety refused to listen to Ferney's explanations. The Scarlet Pimpernel was only an ordinary mortal — an exceedingly cunning and meddlesome personage it is true, and endowed with a superfluity of wealth which enabled him to break the thin crust of patriotism that overlay the natural cupidity of many Captains of the Town Guard — but still an ordinary man for all that! and no true lover of the Republic should allow either superstitious terror or greed to interfere with the discharge of his duties which at the Porte Montmartre consisted in detaining any and every person — aristocrat, foreigner, or otherwise traitor to the Republic — who could not give a satisfactory reason for desiring to leave Paris. Having detained such persons, the patriot's next duty was to hand them over to the Committee of Public Safety, who would then decide whether Madame la Guillotine would have the last word over them or not.

And the guillotine did nearly always have the last word to say, unless the Scarlet Pimpernel interfered.

The trouble was, that that same accursed Englishman interfered at times in a manner which was positively terrifying. His impudence, certes, passed all belief. Stories of his daring and of his impudence were abroad which literally made the lank and greasy hair of every patriot curl with wonder. 'Twas even whispered — not too loudly, forsooth — that certain members of the Committee of Public Safety had measured their skill and valour against that of the Englishman and emerged from the conflict beaten and humiliated, vowing vengeance which, of a truth, was still slow in coming.

Citizen Chauvelin, one of the most implacable and unyielding members of the Committee, was known to have suffered overwhelming shame at the hands of that daring gang, of whom the so-called Scarlet Pimpernel was the accredited chief. Some there were who said that citizen Chauvelin had for ever forfeited his prestige, and even endangered his head by measuring his well-known astuteness against that mysterious League of spies.

But then Bibot was different!

He feared neither the devil, nor any Englishman. Had the latter the strength of giants and the protection of every power of evil, Bibot was ready for him. Nay! he was aching for a tussle, and haunted the purlieus of the Committees to obtain some post which would enable him to come to grips with the Scarlet Pimpernel and his League.

Bibot's zeal and perseverance were duly rewarded, and anon he was appointed to the command of the guard at the Porte Montmartre.

A post of vast importance as aforesaid; so much so, in fact, that no less a person than citizen Jean Paul Marat himself came to speak with Bibot on that third day of Nivose in the year I of the Republic, with a view to impressing upon him the necessity of keeping his eyes open, and of suspecting every man, woman, and child indiscriminately until they had proved themselves to be true patriots.

"Let no one slip through your fingers, citizen Bibot," Marat admonished with grim earnestness. "That accursed Englishman is cunning and resourceful, and his impudence surpasses that of the devil himself."

"He'd better try some of his impudence on me!" commented Bibot with a sneer, "he'll soon find out that he no longer has a Ferney to deal with. Take it from me, citizen Marat, that if a batch of aristocrats escape out of Paris within the next few days, under the guidance of the d — d Englishman, they will have to find some other way than the Porte Montmartre."

"Well said, citizen!" commented Marat. "But be watchful to-night ... to-night especially. The Scarlet Pimpernel is rampant in Paris just now."

"How so?"

"The ci-devant Duc and Duchesse de Montreux and the whole of their brood — sisters, brothers, two or three children, a priest, and several servants — a round dozen in all, have been condemned to death. The guillotine for them to-morrow at daybreak! Would it could have been to-night," added Marat, whilst a demoniacal leer contorted his face which already exuded lust for blood from every pore. "Would it could have been to-night. But the guillotine has been busy; over four hundred executions to-day ... and the tumbrils are full — the seats bespoken in advance — and still they come.... But to-morrow morning at daybreak Madame la Guillotine will have a word to say to the whole of the Montreux crowd!"

"But they are in the Conciergerie prison surely, citizen! out of the reach of that accursed Englishman?"

"They are on their way, an I mistake not, to the prison at this moment. I came straight on here after the condemnation, to which I listened with true joy. Ah, citizen Bibot! the blood of these hated aristocrats is good to behold when it drips from the blade of the guillotine. Have a care, citizen Bibot, do not let the Montreux crowd escape!"

"Have no fear, citizen Marat! But surely there is no danger! They have been tried and condemned! They are, as you say, even now on their way — well guarded, I presume — to the Conciergerie prison! — to-morrow at daybreak, the guillotine! What is there to

fear?"

"Well! well!" said Marat, with a slight tone of hesitation, "it is best, citizen Bibot, to be over-careful these times."

Even whilst Marat spoke his face, usually so cunning and so vengeful, had suddenly lost its look of devilish cruelty which was almost superhuman in the excess of its infamy, and a greyish hue — suggestive of terror — had spread over the sunken cheeks. He clutched Bibot's arm, and leaning over the table he whispered in his ear:

"The Public Prosecutor had scarce finished his speech to-day, judgment was being pronounced, the spectators were expectant and still, only the Montreux woman and some of the females and children were blubbering and moaning, when suddenly, it seemed from nowhere, a small piece of paper fluttered from out the assembly and alighted on the desk in front of the Public Prosecutor. He took the paper up and glanced at its contents. I saw that his cheeks had paled, and that his hand trembled as he handed the paper over to me."

"And what did that paper contain, citizen Marat?" asked Bibot, also speaking in a whisper, for an access of superstitious terror was gripping him by the throat.

"Just the well-known accursed device, citizen, the small scarlet flower, drawn in red ink, and the few words: 'To-night the innocent men and women now condemned by this infamous tribunal will be beyond your reach!'"

"And no sign of a messenger?"

"None."

"And when did — —"

"Hush!" said Marat peremptorily, "no more of that now. To your post, citizen, and remember — all are suspect! let none escape!"

The two men had been sitting outside a small tavern, opposite the Porte Montmartre, with a bottle of wine between them, their elbows resting on the grimy top of a rough wooden table. They had talked in whispers, for even the walls of the tumble-down cabaret might have had ears.

Opposite them the city wall — broken here by the great gate of Montmartre — loomed threateningly in the fast-gathering dusk of this winter's afternoon. Men in ragged red shirts, their unkempt heads crowned with Phrygian caps adorned with a tricolour cockade, lounged against the wall, or sat in groups on the top of piles of refuse that littered the street, with a rough deal plank between them and a greasy pack of cards in their grimy fingers. Guns and bayonets were propped against the wall. The gate itself had three means of egress; each of these was guarded by two men with fixed bayonets at their shoulders, but otherwise dressed like the others, in rags — with bare legs that looked blue and numb in the cold — the sans-culottes of revolutionary Paris.

Bibot rose from his seat, nodding to Marat, and joined his men.

From afar, but gradually drawing nearer, came the sound of a ribald song, with chorus accompaniment sung by throats obviously surfeited with liquor.

For a moment — as the sound approached — Bibot turned back once more to the Friend of the People.

"Am I to understand, citizen," he said, "that my orders are not to let anyone pass through these gates to-night?"

"No, no, citizen," replied Marat, "we dare not do that. There are a number of good patriots in the city still. We cannot interfere with their liberty or—"

And the look of fear of the demagogue — himself afraid of the human whirlpool which he has let loose — stole into Marat's cruel, piercing eyes.

"No, no," he reiterated more emphatically, "we cannot disregard the passports issued by the Committee of Public Safety. But examine each passport carefully, citizen Bibot! If you have any reasonable ground for suspicion, detain the holder, and if you have not — —"

The sound of singing was quite near now. With another wink and a final leer, Marat drew back under the shadow of the cabaret, and Bibot swaggered up to the main entrance of the gate.

"Qui va la?" he thundered in stentorian tones as a group of some half-dozen people lurched towards him out of the gloom, still shouting hoarsely their ribald drinking song.

The foremost man in the group paused opposite citizen Bibot, and with arms akimbo, and legs planted well apart tried to assume a rigidity of attitude which apparently was somewhat foreign to him at this moment.

"Good patriots, citizen," he said in a thick voice which he vainly tried to render steady.

"What do you want?" queried Bibot.

"To be allowed to go on our way unmolested."

"What is your way?"

"Through the Porte Montmartre to the village of Barençy."

"What is your business there?"

This query delivered in Bibot's most pompous manner seemed vastly to amuse the rowdy crowd. He who was the spokesman turned to his friends and shouted hilariously:

"Hark at him, citizens! He asks me what is our business. Oh, citizen Bibot, since when have you become blind? A dolt you've always been, else you had not asked the question."

But Bibot, undeterred by the man's drunken insolence, retorted gruffly:

"Your business, I want to know."

"Bibot! my little Bibot!" cooed the bibulous orator now in dulcet tones, "dost not know us, my good Bibot? Yet we all know thee, citizen — Captain Bibot of the Town Guard, eh, citizens! Three cheers for the citizen captain!"

When the noisy shouts and cheers from half a dozen hoarse throats had died down, Bibot, without more ado, turned to his own men at the gate.

"Drive these drunken louts away!" he commanded; "no one is allowed to loiter here."

Loud protest on the part of the hilarious crowd followed, then a slight scuffle with the bayonets of the Town Guard. Finally the spokesman, somewhat sobered, once more appealed to Bibot.

"Citizen Bibot! you must be blind not to know me and my mates! And let me tell you that you are doing yourself a deal of harm by interfering with the citizens of the Republic in the proper discharge of their duties, and by disregarding their rights of egress through this gate, a right confirmed by passports signed by two members of the Committee of Public Safety."

He had spoken now fairly clearly and very pompously. Bibot, somewhat impressed and remembering Marat's admonitions, said very civilly:

"Tell me your business then, citizen, and show me your passports. If everything is in order you may go your way."

"But you know me, citizen Bibot?" queried the other.

"Yes, I know you — unofficially, citizen Durand."

"You know that I and the citizens here are the carriers for citizen Legrand, the market gardener of Barençy?"

"Yes, I know that," said Bibot guardedly, "unofficially."

"Then, unofficially, let me tell you, citizen, that unless we get to Barençy this evening, Paris will have to do without cabbages and potatoes to-morrow. So now you know that you are acting at your own risk and peril, citizen, by detaining us."

"Your passports, all of you," commanded Bibot.

He had just caught sight of Marat still sitting outside the tavern opposite, and was glad enough, in this instance, to shelve his responsibility on the shoulders of the popular "Friend of the People." There was general searching in ragged pockets for grimy papers with official seals thereon, and whilst Bibot ordered one of his men to take the six passports across the road to citizen Marat for his inspection, he himself, by the last rays of the setting winter sun, made close examination of the six men who desired to pass through the Porte Montmartre.

As the spokesman had averred, he — Bibot — knew every one of these men. They were the carriers to citizen Legrand, the Barençy market gardener. Bibot knew every face. They passed with a load of fruit and vegetables in and out of Paris every day. There was really and absolutely no cause for suspicion, and when citizen Marat returned the six passports, pronouncing them to be genuine, and recognising his own signature at the bottom of each, Bibot was at last satisfied, and the six bibulous carriers were allowed to pass through the gate, which they did, arm in arm, singing a wild curmagnole, and vociferously cheering as they emerged out into the open.

But Bibot passed an unsteady hand over his brow. It was cold, yet he was in a perspiration. That sort of thing tells on a man's nerves. He rejoined Marat, at the table outside the drinking booth, and ordered a fresh bottle of wine.

The sun had set now, and with the gathering dusk a damp mist descended on Montmartre. From the wall opposite, where the men sat playing cards, came occasional volleys of blasphemous oaths. Bibot was feeling much more like himself. He had half forgotten the incident of the six carriers, which had occurred nearly half an hour ago.

Two or three other people had, in the meanwhile, tried to pass through the gates, but Bibot had been suspicious and had detained them all.

Marat having commended him for his zeal took final leave of him. Just as the demagogue's slouchy, grimy figure was disappearing down a side street there was the loud clatter of hoofs from that same direction, and the next moment a detachment of the mounted Town Guard, headed by an officer in uniform, galloped down the ill-paved street.

Even before the troopers had drawn rein the officer had hailed Bibot.

"Citizen," he shouted, and his voice was breathless, for he had evidently ridden hard and fast, "this message to you from the citizen Chief Commissary of the Section. Six men are wanted by the Committee of Public Safety. They are disguised as carriers in the employ of a market gardener, and have passports for Barençy!... The passports are stolen: the men are traitors — escaped aristocrats — and their spokesman is that d — d Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Bibot tried to speak; he tugged at the collar of his ragged shirt; an awful curse escaped him.

"Ten thousand devils!" he roared.

"On no account allow these people to go through," continued the officer.

"Keep their passports. Detain them!... Understand?"

Bibot was still gasping for breath even whilst the officer, ordering a quick "Turn!" reeled his horse round, ready to gallop away as far as he had come.

"I am for the St. Denis Gate — Grosjean is on guard there!" he shouted.

"Same orders all round the city. No one to leave the gates!... Understand?"

His troopers fell in. The next moment he would be gone, and those cursed aristocrats well in safety's way.

"Citizen Captain!"

The hoarse shout at last contrived to escape Bibot's parched throat. As if involuntarily, the officer drew rein once more.

"What is it? Quick! — I've no time. That confounded Englishman may be at the St. Denis Gate even now!"

"Citizen Captain," gasped Bibot, his breath coming and going like that of a man fighting for his life. "Here!... at this gate!... not half an hour ago ... six men ... carriers ... market gardeners ... I seemed to know their faces...."

"Yes! yes! market gardener's carriers," exclaimed the officer gleefully, "aristocrats all of them ... and that d — d Scarlet Pimpernel. You've got them? You've detained them?... Where are they?... Speak, man, in the name of hell!..."

"Gone!" gasped Bibot. His legs would no longer bear him. He fell backwards on to a heap of street debris and refuse, from which lowly vantage ground he contrived to give away the whole miserable tale.

"Gone! half an hour ago. Their passports were in order!... I seemed to know their faces! Citizen Marat was here.... He, too—"

In a moment the officer had once more swung his horse round, so that the animal reared, with wild forefeet pawing the air, with champing of bit, and white foam scattered around.

"A thousand million curses!" he exclaimed. "Citizen Bibot, your head will pay for this treachery. Which way did they go?"

A dozen hands were ready to point in the direction where the merry party of carriers had disappeared half an hour ago; a dozen tongues gave rapid, confused explanations.

"Into it, my men!" shouted the officer; "they were on foot! They can't have gone far. Remember the Republic has offered ten thousand francs for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Already the heavy gates had been swung open, and the officer's voice once more rang out clear through a perfect thunder-clap of fast galloping hoofs:

"Ventre a terre! Remember! — ten thousand francs to him who first sights the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

The thunder-clap died away in the distance, the dust of four score hoofs was merged in the fog and in the darkness; the voice of the captain was raised again through the mist-laden air. One shout ... a shout of triumph ... then silence once again.

Bibot had fainted on the heap of debris.

His comrades brought him wine to drink. He gradually revived. Hope came back to his heart; his nerves soon steadied themselves as the heavy beverage filtrated through into his blood.

"Bah!" he ejaculated as he pulled himself together, "the troopers were well-mounted ... the officer was enthusiastic; those carriers could not have walked very far. And, in any case, I am free from blame. Citoyen Marat himself was here and let them pass!"

A shudder of superstitious terror ran through him as he recollected the whole scene: for surely he knew all the faces of the six men who had gone through the gate. The devil indeed must have given the mysterious Englishman power to transmute himself and his gang wholly into the bodies of other people.

More than an hour went by. Bibot was quite himself again, bullying, commanding, detaining everybody now.

At that time there appeared to be a slight altercation going on, on the farther side of the gate. Bibot thought it his duty to go and see what the noise was about. Someone wanting to get into Paris instead of out of it at this hour of the night was a strange occurrence.

Bibot heard his name spoken by a raucous voice. Accompanied by two of his men he crossed the wide gates in order to see what was happening. One of the men held a lanthorn, which he was swinging high above his head. Bibot saw standing there before him, arguing with the guard by the gate, the bibulous spokesman of the band of carriers.

He was explaining to the sentry that he had a message to deliver to the citizen commanding at the Porte Montmartre.

"It is a note," he said, "which an officer of the mounted guard gave me. He and twenty troopers were galloping down the great North Road not far from Barency. When they overtook the six of us they drew rein, and the officer gave me this note for citizen Bibot and fifty francs if I would deliver it tonight."

"Give me the note!" said Bibot calmly.

But his hand shook as he took the paper; his face was livid with fear and rage.

The paper had no writing on it, only the outline of a small scarlet flower done in red — the device of the cursed Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"Which way did the officer and the twenty troopers go," he stammered, "after they gave you this note?"

"On the way to Calais," replied the other, "but they had magnificent horses, and didn't spare them either. They are a league and more away by now!"

All the blood in Bibot's body seemed to rush up to his head, a wild buzzing was in his ears....

And that was how the Duc and Duchesse de Montreux, with their servants and family, escaped from Paris on that third day of Nivose in the year I of the Republic.

TWO GOOD PATRIOTS

Being the deposition of citizeness Fanny Roussell, who was brought up, together with her husband, before the Tribunal of the Revolution on a charge of treason — both being subsequently acquitted.

My name is Fanny Roussell, and I am a respectable married woman, and as good a patriot as any of you sitting there.

Aye, and I'll say it with my dying breath, though you may send me to the guillotine ... as you probably will, for you are all thieves and murderers, every one of you, and you have already made up your minds that I and my man are guilty of having sheltered that accursed Englishman whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel ... and of having helped him to escape.

But I'll tell you how it all happened, because, though you call me a traitor to the people of France, yet am I a true patriot and will prove it to you by telling you exactly how everything occurred, so that you may be on your guard against the cleverness of that man, who, I do believe, is a friend and confederate of the devil ... else how could he have escaped that time?

Well! it was three days ago, and as bitterly cold as anything that my man and I can remember. We had no travellers staying in the house, for we are a good three leagues out of Calais, and too far for the folk who have business in or about the harbour. Only at midday the coffee-room would get full sometimes with people on their way to or from the port.

But in the evenings the place was quite deserted, and so lonely that at times we fancied that we could hear the wolves howling in the forest of St. Pierre.

It was close on eight o'clock, and my man was putting up the shutters, when suddenly we heard the tramp of feet on the road outside, and then the quick word, "Halt!"

The next moment there was a peremptory knock at the door. My man opened it, and there stood four men in the uniform of the 9th Regiment of the Line ... the same that is quartered at Calais. The uniform, of course, I knew well, though I did not know the men by sight.

"In the name of the People and by the order of the Committee of Public Safety!" said one of the men, who stood in the forefront, and who, I noticed, had a corporal's stripe on his left sleeve.

He held out a paper, which was covered with seals and with writing, but as neither my man nor I can read, it was no use our looking at it.

Hercule — that is my husband's name, citizens — asked the corporal what the Committee of Public Safety wanted with us poor hoteliers of a wayside inn.

"Only food and shelter for to-night for me and my men," replied the corporal, quite civilly.

"You can rest here," said Hercule, and he pointed to the benches in the coffee-room, "and if there is any soup left in the stockpot, you are welcome to it."

Hercule, you see, is a good patriot, and he had been a soldier in his day.... No! no ... do not interrupt me, any of you ... you would only be saying that I ought to have known ... but listen to the end.

"The soup we'll gladly eat," said the corporal very pleasantly. "As for shelter ... well! I am afraid that this nice warm coffee-room will not exactly serve our purpose. We want a place where we can lie hidden, and at the same time keep a watch on the road. I noticed an outhouse as we came. By your leave we will sleep in there."

"As you please," said my man curtly.

He frowned as he said this, and it suddenly seemed as if some vague suspicion had crept into Hercule's mind.

The corporal, however, appeared unaware of this, for he went on quite cheerfully:

"Ah! that is excellent! Entre nous, citizen, my men and I have a desperate customer to deal with. I'll not mention his name, for I see you have guessed it already. A small red flower, what?... Well, we know that he must be making straight for the port of Calais, for he has been traced through St. Omer and Ardres. But he cannot possibly enter Calais city to-night, for we are on the watch for him. He must seek shelter somewhere for himself and any other aristocrat he may have with him, and, bar this house, there is no other place between Ardres and Calais where he can get it. The night is bitterly cold, with a snow blizzard raging round. I and my men have been detailed to watch this road, other patrols are guarding those that lead toward Boulogne and to Gravelines; but I have an idea, citizen, that our fox is making for Calais, and that to me will fall the honour of handing that tiresome scarlet flower to the Public Prosecutor en route for Madame la Guillotine."

Now I could not really tell you, citizens, what suspicions had by this time entered Hercule's head or mine; certainly what suspicions we did have were still very vague.

I prepared the soup for the men and they ate it heartily, after which my husband led the way to the outhouse where we sometimes stabled a traveller's horse when the need arose.

It is nice and dry, and always filled with warm, fresh straw. The entrance into it immediately faces the road; the corporal declared that nothing would suit him and his men better.

They retired to rest apparently, but we noticed that two men remained on the watch just inside the entrance, whilst the two others curled up in the straw.

Hercule put out the lights in the coffee-room, and then he and I went upstairs — not to bed, mind you — but to have a quiet talk together over the events of the past half-hour.

The result of our talk was that ten minutes later my man quietly stole downstairs and out of the house. He did not, however, go out by the front door, but through a back way which, leading through a cabbage-patch and then across a field, cuts into the main road some two hundred metres higher up.

Hercule and I had decided that he would walk the three leagues into Calais, despite the cold, which was intense, and the blizzard, which was nearly blinding, and that he would call at the post of gendarmerie at the city gates, and there see the officer in command and tell him the exact state of the case. It would then be for that officer to decide what was to be done; our responsibility as loyal citizens would be completely covered.

Hercule, you must know, had just emerged from our cabbage-patch on to the field when he was suddenly challenged:

“Qui va là?”

He gave his name. His certificate of citizenship was in his pocket; he had nothing to fear. Through the darkness and the veil of snow he had discerned a small group of men wearing the uniform of the 9th Regiment of the Line.

“Four men,” said the foremost of these, speaking quickly and commandingly, “wearing the same uniform that I and my men are wearing ... have you seen them?”

“Yes,” said Hercule hurriedly.

“Where are they?”

“In the outhouse close by.”

The other suppressed a cry of triumph.

“At them, my men!” he said in a whisper, “and you, citizen, thank your stars that we have not come too late.”

“These men ...” whispered Hercule. “I had my suspicions.”

“Aristocrats, citizen,” rejoined the commander of the little party, “and one of them is that cursed Englishman — the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

Already the soldiers, closely followed by Hercule, had made their way through our cabbage-patch back to the house.

The next moment they had made a bold dash for the barn. There was a great deal of shouting, a great deal of swearing and some firing, whilst Hercule and I, not a little frightened, remained in the coffee-room, anxiously awaiting events.

Presently the group of soldiers returned, not the ones who had first come, but the others. I noticed their leader, who seemed to be exceptionally tall.

He looked very cheerful, and laughed loudly as he entered the coffee-room. From the moment that I looked at his face I knew, somehow, that Hercule and I had been fooled, and that now, indeed, we stood eye to eye with that mysterious personage who is called the Scarlet Pimpernel.

I screamed, and Hercule made a dash for the door; but what could two humble and peaceful citizens do against this band of desperate men, who held their lives in their own hands? They were four and we were two, and I do believe that their leader has supernatural strength and power.

He treated us quite kindly, even though he ordered his followers to bind us down to our bed upstairs, and to tie a cloth round our mouths so that our cries could not be distinctly heard.

Neither my man nor I closed an eye all night, of course, but we heard the miscreants moving about in the coffee-room below. But they did no mischief, nor did they steal any of the food or wines.

At daybreak we heard them going out by the front door, and their footsteps disappearing toward Calais. We found their discarded uniforms lying in the coffee-room. They must have entered Calais by daylight, when the gates were opened — just like other peaceable citizens. No doubt they had forged passports, just as they had stolen uniforms.

Our maid-of-all-work released us from our terrible position in the course of the morning, and we released the soldiers of the 9th Regiment of the Line, whom we found bound and gagged, some of them wounded, in the outhouse.

That same afternoon we were arrested, and here we are, ready to die if we must, but I swear that I have told you the truth, and I ask you, in the name of justice, if we have done anything wrong, and if we did not act like loyal and true citizens, even though we were pitted against an emissary of the devil?

THE OLD SCARECROW

Nobody in the quartier could quite recollect when it was that the new Public Letter-Writer first set up in business at the angle formed by the Quai des Augustins and the Rue Dauphine, immediately facing the Pont Neuf; but there he certainly was on the 28th day of February, 1793, when Agnes, with eyes swollen with tears, a market basket on her arm, and a look of dreary despair on her young face, turned that selfsame angle on her way to the Pont Neuf, and nearly fell over the rickety construction which sheltered him and his stock-in-trade.

"Oh, mon Dieu! citizen Lepine, I had no idea you were here," she exclaimed as soon as she had recovered her balance.

"Nor I, citizeness, that I should have the pleasure of seeing you this morning," he retorted.

"But you were always at the other corner of the Pont Neuf," she argued.

"So I was," he replied, "so I was. But I thought I would like a change. The Faubourg St. Michel appealed to me; most of my clients came to me from this side of the river — all those on the other side seem to know how to read and write."

"I was just going over to see you," she remarked.

"You, citizeness," he exclaimed in unfeigned surprise, "what should procure a poor public writer the honour of—"

"Hush, in God's name!" broke in the young girl quickly as she cast a rapid, furtive glance up and down the quai and the narrow streets which converged at this angle.

She was dressed in the humblest and poorest of clothes, her skimpy shawl round her shoulders could scarce protect her against the cold of this cruel winter's morning; her hair was entirely hidden beneath a frilled and starched cap, and her feet were encased in coarse worsted stockings and sabots, but her hands were delicate and fine, and her face had that nobility of feature and look of patient resignation in the midst of overwhelming sorrow which proclaimed a lofty refinement both of soul and of mind.

The old Letter-Writer was surveying the pathetic young figure before him through his huge horn-rimmed spectacles, and she smiled on him through her fast-gathering tears. He used to have his pitch at the angle of the Pont Neuf, and whenever Agnes had walked past it, she had nodded to him and bidden him "Good morrow!" He had at times done little commissions for her and gone on errands when she needed a messenger; to-day, in the midst of her despair, she had suddenly thought of him and that rumour credited him with certain knowledge which she would give her all to possess.

She had sallied forth this morning with the express purpose of speaking with him; but now suddenly she felt afraid, and stood looking at him for a moment or two, hesitating, wondering if she dared tell him — one never knew these days into what terrible pitfall an ill-considered word might lead one.

A scarecrow he was, that old Public Letter-Writer, more like a great, gaunt bird than a human being, with those spectacles of his, and his long, very sparse and very lanky fringe of a beard which fell from his cheeks and chin and down his chest for all the world like a crumpled grey bib. He was wrapped from head to foot in a caped coat which had once been green in colour, but was now of many hues not usually seen in rainbows. He wore his coat all buttoned down the front, like a dressing-gown, and below the hem there peeped out a pair of very large feet encased in boots which had never been a pair. He sat upon a rickety, straw-bottomed chair under an improvised awning which was made up of four poles and a bit of sacking. He had a table in front of him — a table partially and very insecurely propped up by a bundle of old papers and books, since no two of its four legs were completely whole — and on the table there was a neckless bottle half-filled with ink, a few sheets of paper and a couple of quill pens.

The young girl's hesitation had indeed not lasted more than a few seconds.

Furtively, like a young creature terrified of lurking enemies, she once more glanced to right and left of her and down the two streets and the river bank, for Paris was full of spies these days — human bloodhounds ready for a few sous to sell their fellow-creatures' lives. It was middle morning now, and a few passers-by were hurrying along wrapped to the nose in mufflers, for the weather was bitterly cold.

Agnes waited until there was no one in sight, then she leaned forward over the table and whispered under her breath:

"They say, citizen, that you alone in Paris know the whereabouts of the English milor' — of him who is called the Scarlet Pimpernel...."

"Hush-sh-sh!" said the old man quickly, for just at that moment two men had gone by, in ragged coats and torn breeches, who had leered at Agnes and her neat cap and skirt as they passed. Now they had turned the angle of the street and the old man, too, sank his voice to a whisper.

"I know nothing of any Englishman," he muttered.

"Yes, you do," she rejoined insistently. "When poor Antoine Carre was somewhere in hiding and threatened with arrest, and his mother dared not write to him lest her letter be intercepted, she spoke to you about the English milor', and the English milor' found Antoine Carre and took him and his mother safely out of France. Mme. Carre is my godmother.... I saw her the very night when she went to meet the English milor' at his commands. I know all that happened then.... I know that you were the intermediary."

"And if I was," he muttered sullenly as he fiddled with his pen and paper, "maybe I've had cause to regret it. For a week after that Carre episode I dared not show my face in the streets of Paris; for nigh on a fortnight I dared not ply my trade ... I have only just ventured again to set up in business. I am not going to risk my old neck again in a hurry...."

"It is a matter of life and death," urged Agnes, as once more the tears rushed to her pleading eyes and the look of misery settled again upon her face.

"Your life, citizeness?" queried the old man, "or that of citizen-deputy Fabrice?"

"Hush!" she broke in again, as a look of real terror now overspread her face. Then she added under her breath: "You know?"

"I know that Mademoiselle Agnes de Lucines is fiancée to the citizen-deputy Arnould Fabrice," rejoined the old man quietly, "and that it is Mademoiselle Agnes de Lucines who is speaking with me now."

"You have known that all along?"

"Ever since mademoiselle first tripped past me at the angle of the Pont Neuf dressed in winsey kirtle and wearing sabots on her feet...."

"But how?" she murmured, puzzled, not a little frightened, for his knowledge might prove dangerous to her. She was of gentle birth, and as such an object of suspicion to the Government of the Republic and of the Terror; her mother was a hopeless cripple, unable to move: this together with her love for Arnould Fabrice had kept Agnes de Lucines in France these days, even though she was in hourly peril of arrest.

"Tell me what has happened," the old man said, unheeding her last anxious query. "Perhaps I can help ..."

"Oh! you cannot — the English milor' can and will if only we could know where he is. I thought of him the moment I received that awful man's letter — and then I thought of you...."

"Tell me about the letter — quickly," he interrupted her with some impatience. "I'll be writing something — but talk away, I shall hear every word. But for God's sake be as brief as you can."

He drew some paper nearer to him and dipped his pen in the ink. He appeared to be writing under her dictation. Thin, flaky snow had begun to fall and settled in a smooth white carpet upon the frozen ground, and the footsteps of the passers-by sounded muffled as they hurried along. Only the lapping of the water of the sluggish river close by broke the absolute stillness of the air.

Agnes de Lucines' pale face looked ethereal in this framework of white which covered her shoulders and the shawl crossed over her bosom: only her eyes, dark, appealing, filled with a glow of immeasurable despair, appeared tensely human and alive.

"I had a letter this morning," she whispered, speaking very rapidly, "from citizen Heriot — that awful man — you know him?"

"Yes, yes!"

"He used to be valet in the service of deputy Fabrice. Now he, too, is a member of the National Assembly ... he is arrogant and cruel and vile. He hates Arnould Fabrice and he professes himself passionately in love with me."

"Yes, yes!" murmured the old man, "but the letter?"

"It came this morning. In it he says that he has in his possession a number of old letters, documents and manuscripts which are quite enough to send deputy Fabrice to the guillotine. He threatens to place all those papers before the Committee of Public Safety unless ... unless I...."

She paused, and a deep blush, partly of shame, partly of wrath, suffused her pale cheeks.

"Unless you accept his grimy hand in marriage," concluded the man dryly.

Her eyes gave him answer. With pathetic insistence she tried now to glean a ray of hope from the old scarecrow's inscrutable face. But he was bending over his writing: his fingers were blue with cold, his great shoulders were stooping to his task.

"Citizen," she pleaded.

"Hush!" he muttered, "no more now. The very snowflakes are made up of whispers that may reach those bloodhounds yet. The English milor' shall know of this. He will send you a message if he thinks fit."

"Citizen—"

"Not another word, in God's name! Pay me five sous for this letter and pray Heaven that you have not been watched."

She shivered and drew her shawl closer round her shoulders, then she counted out five sous with elaborate care and laid them out upon the table. The old man took up the coins. He blew into his fingers, which looked paralysed with the cold. The snow lay over everything now; the rough awning had not protected him or his wares.

Agnes turned to go. The last she saw of him, as she went up the rue Dauphine, was one broad shoulder still bending over the table, and clad in the shabby, caped coat all covered with snow like an old Santa Claus.

It was half-an-hour before noon, and citizen-deputy Heriot was preparing to go out to the small tavern round the corner where he habitually took his déjeuner. Citizen Rondeau, who for the consideration of ten sous a day looked after Heriot's paltry creature-comforts, was busy tidying up the squalid apartment which the latter occupied on the top floor of a lodging-house in the Rue Cocatrice. This apartment consisted of three rooms leading out of one another; firstly there was a dark and narrow antichambre wherein slept the aforesaid citizen-servant; then came a sitting-room sparsely furnished with a few chairs, a centre table and an iron stove, and finally there was the bedroom wherein the most conspicuous object was a large oak chest clamped with wide iron hinges and a massive writing-desk; the bed and a very primitive washstand were in an alcove at the farther end of the room and partially hidden by a tapestry curtain.

At exactly half-past seven that morning there came a peremptory knock at the door of the antichambre, and as Rondeau was busy in the bedroom, Heriot went himself to see who his unexpected visitor might be. On the landing outside stood an extraordinary-looking individual — more like a tall and animated scarecrow than a man — who in a tremulous voice asked if he might speak with the citizen Heriot.

"That is my name," said the deputy gruffly, "what do you want?"

He would have liked to slam the door in the old scarecrow's face, but the latter, with the boldness which sometimes besets the timid, had already stepped into the anti-chambre and was now quietly sauntering through to the next room into the one beyond. Heriot, being a representative of the people and a social democrat of the most advanced type, was supposed to be accessible to every one who desired speech with him. Though muttering sundry curses, he thought it best not to go against his usual practice, and after a moment's hesitation he followed his unwelcome visitor.

The latter was in the sitting-room by this time; he had drawn a chair close to the table and sat down with the air of one who has a perfect right to be where he is; as soon as Heriot entered he said placidly:

"I would desire to speak alone with the citizen-deputy."

And Heriot, after another slight hesitation, ordered Rondeau to close the bedroom door.

"Keep your ears open in case I call," he added significantly.

"You are cautious, citizen," merely remarked the visitor with a smile.

To this Heriot vouchsafed no reply. He, too, drew a chair forward and sat opposite his visitor, then he asked abruptly: "Your name and quality?"

"My name is Lepine at your service," said the old man, "and by profession I write letters at the rate of five sous or so, according to length, for those who are not able to do it for themselves."

"Your business with me?" queried Heriot curtly.

"To offer you two thousand francs for the letters which you stole from deputy Fabrice when you were his valet," replied Lepine with perfect calm.

In a moment Heriot was on his feet, jumping up as if he had been stung; his pale, short-sighted eyes narrowed till they were mere slits, and through them he darted a quick, suspicious glance at the extraordinary out-at-elbows figure before him. Then he threw back his head and laughed till the tears streamed down his cheeks and his sides began to ache.

"This is a farce, I presume, citizen," he said when he had recovered something of his composure.

"No farce, citizen," replied Lepine calmly. "The money is at your disposal whenever you care to bring the letters to my pitch at the angle of the Rue Dauphine and the Quai des Augustins, where I carry on my business."

"Whose money is it? Agnes de Lucines' or did that fool Fabrice send you?"

"No one sent me, citizen. The money is mine — a few savings I possess — I honour citizen Fabrice — I would wish to do him service by purchasing certain letters from you."

Then as Heriot, moody and sullen, remained silent and began pacing up and down the long, bare floor of the room, Lepine added persuasively, "Well! what do you say? Two thousand francs for a packet of letters — not a bad bargain these hard times."

"Get out of this room," was Heriot's fierce and sudden reply.

"You refuse?"

"Get out of this room!"

"As you please," said Lepine as he, too, rose from his chair. "But before I go, citizen Heriot," he added, speaking very quietly, "let me tell you one thing. Mademoiselle Agnes de Lucines would far sooner cut off her right hand than let yours touch it even for one instant. Neither she nor deputy Fabrice would ever purchase their lives at such a price."

"And who are you — you mangy old scarecrow?" retorted Heriot, who was getting beside himself with rage, "that you should assert these things? What are those people to you, or you to them, that you should interfere in their affairs?"

"Your question is beside the point, citizen," said Lepine blandly; "I am here to propose a bargain. Had you not better agree to it?"

"Never!" reiterated Heriot emphatically.

"Two thousand francs," reiterated the old man imperturbably.

"Not if you offered me two hundred thousand," retorted the other fiercely. "Go and tell that, to those who sent you. Tell them that I — Heriot — would look upon a fortune as mere dross against the delight of seeing that man Fabrice, whom I hate beyond everything in earth or hell, mount up the steps to the guillotine. Tell them that I know that Agnes de Lucines loathes me, that I know that she loves him. I know that I cannot win her save by threatening him. But you are wrong, citizen Lepine," he continued, speaking more and more calmly as his passions of hatred and of love seemed more and more to hold him in their grip; "you are wrong if you think that she will not strike a bargain with me in order to save the life of Fabrice, whom she loves. Agnes de Lucines will be my wife within the month, or Arnould Fabrice's head will fall under the guillotine, and you, my interfering friend, may go to the devil, if you please."

"That would be but a tame proceeding, citizen, after my visit to you," said the old man, with unruffled sang-froid. "But let me, in my turn, assure you of this, citizen Heriot," he added, "that Mlle. de Lucines will never be your wife, that Arnould Fabrice will not end his valuable life under the guillotine — and that you will never be allowed to use against him the cowardly and stolen weapon which you possess."

Heriot laughed — a low, cynical laugh and shrugged his thin shoulders:

"And who will prevent me, I pray you?" he asked sarcastically.

The old man made no immediate reply, but he came just a step or two closer to the citizen-deputy and, suddenly drawing himself up to his full height, he looked for one brief moment down upon the mean and sordid figure of the ex-valet. To Heriot it seemed as if the whole man had become transfigured; the shabby old scarecrow looked all of a sudden like a brilliant and powerful personality; from his eyes there flashed down a look of supreme contempt and of supreme pride, and Heriot — unable to understand this metamorphosis which was more apparent to his inner consciousness than to his outward sight, felt his knees shake under him and all the blood rush back to his heart in an agony of superstitious terror.

From somewhere there came to his ear the sound of two words: "I will!" in reply to his own defiant query. Surely those words uttered by a man conscious of power and of strength could never have been spoken by the dilapidated old scarecrow who earned a precarious living by writing letters for ignorant folk.

But before he could recover some semblance of presence of mind citizen Lepine had gone, and only a loud and merry laugh seemed to echo through the squalid room.

Heriot shook off the remnant of his own senseless terror; he tore open the door of the bedroom and shouted to Rondeau, who truly was thinking that the citizen-deputy had gone mad:

"After him! — after him! Quick! curse you!" he cried.

"After whom?" gasped the man.

"The man who was here just now — an aristo."

"I saw no one — but the Public Letter-Writer, old Lepine — I know him well—"

"Curse you for a fool!" shouted Heriot savagely, "the man who was here was that cursed Englishman — the one whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel. Run after him — stop him, I say!"

"Too late, citizen," said the other placidly; "whoever was here before is certainly half-way down the street by now."

"No use, Ffoulkes," said Sir Percy Blakeney to his friend half-an-hour later, "the man's passions of hatred and desire are greater than his greed."

The two men were sitting together in one of Sir Percy Blakeney's many lodgings — the one in the Rue des Petits Peres — and Sir Percy had just put Sir Andrew Ffoulkes au fait with the whole sad story of Arnould Fabrice's danger and Agnes de Lucines' despair.

"You could do nothing with the brute, then?" queried Sir Andrew.

"Nothing," replied Blakeney. "He refused all bribes, and violence would not have helped me, for what I wanted was not to knock him down, but to get hold of the letters."

"Well, after all, he might have sold you the letters and then denounced Fabrice just the same."

"No, without actual proofs he could not do that. Arnould Fabrice is not a man against whom a mere denunciation would suffice. He has the grudging respect of every faction in the National Assembly. Nothing but irrefutable proof would prevail against him — and bring him to the guillotine."

"Why not get Fabrice and Mlle. de Lucines safely over to England?"

"Fabrice would not come. He is not of the stuff that emigres are made of. He is not an aristocrat; he is a republican by conviction, and a demmed honest one at that. He would scorn to run away, and Agnes de Lucines would not go without him."

"Then what can we do?"

"Filch those letters from that brute Heriot," said Blakeney calmly.

"House-breaking, you mean!" commented Sir Andrew Ffoulkes dryly.

"Petty theft, shall we say?" retorted Sir Percy. "I can bribe the lout who has charge of Heriot's rooms to introduce us into his master's sanctum this evening when the National Assembly is sitting and the citizen-deputy safely out of the way."

And the two men — one of whom was the most intimate friend of the Prince of Wales and the acknowledged darling of London society — thereupon fell to discussing plans for surreptitiously entering a man's room and committing larceny, which in normal times would entail, if discovered, a long term of imprisonment, but which, in these days, in Paris, and perpetrated against a member of the National Assembly, would certainly be punished by death.

Citizen Rondeau, whose business it was to look after the creature comforts of deputy Heriot, was standing in the antichambre facing the two visitors whom he had just introduced into his master's apartments, and idly turning a couple of gold coins over and over between his grimy fingers.

"And mind, you are to see nothing and hear nothing of what goes on in the next room," said the taller of the two strangers; "and when we go there'll be another couple of louis for you. Is that understood?"

"Yes! it's understood," grunted Rondeau sullenly; "but I am running great risks. The citizen-deputy sometimes returns at ten o'clock, but sometimes at nine.... I never know."

"It is now seven," rejoined the other; "we'll be gone long before nine."

"Well," said Rondeau surlily, "I go out now for my supper. I'll return in half an hour, but at half-past eight you must clear out."

Then he added with a sneer:

"Citizens Legros and Desgas usually come back with deputy Heriot of nights, and citizens Jeanniot and Bompard come in from next door for a game of cards. You wouldn't stand much chance if you were caught here."

"Not with you to back up so formidable a quintette of stalwarts," assented the tall visitor gaily. "But we won't trouble about that just now. We have a couple of hours before us in which to do all that we want. So au revoir, friend Rondeau ... two more louis for your complaisance, remember, when we have accomplished our purpose."

Rondeau muttered something more, but the two strangers paid no further heed to him; they had already walked to the next room, leaving Rondeau in the antichambre.

Sir Percy Blakeney did not pause in the sitting-room where an oil lamp suspended from the ceiling threw a feeble circle of light above the centre table. He went straight through to the bedroom. Here, too, a small lamp was burning which only lit up a small portion of the room — the writing-desk and the oak chest — leaving the corners and the alcove, with its partially drawn curtains, in complete shadow.

Blakeney pointed to the oak chest and to the desk.

"You tackle the chest, Ffoulkes, and I will go for the desk," he said quietly, as soon as he had taken a rapid survey of the room. "You have your tools?"

Ffoulkes nodded, and anon in this squalid room, ill-lit, ill-ventilated, barely furnished, was presented one of the most curious spectacles of these strange and troublous times: two English gentlemen, the acknowledged dandies of London drawing-rooms, busy picking locks and filing hinges like any common house-thieves.

Neither of them spoke, and a strange hush fell over the room — a hush only broken by the click of metal against metal, and the deep breathing of the two men bending to their task. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was working with a file on the padlocks of the oak chest, and Sir Percy Blakeney, with a bunch of skeleton keys, was opening the drawers of the writing-desk. These, when finally opened, revealed nothing of any importance; but when anon Sir Andrew was able to lift the lid of the oak chest, he disclosed an innumerable quantity of papers and documents tied up in neat bundles, docketed and piled up in rows and tiers to the very top of the chest.

"Quick to work, Ffoulkes," said Blakeney, as in response to his friend's call he drew a chair forward and, seating himself beside the chest, started on the task of looking through the hundreds of bundles which lay before him. "It will take us all our time to look through these."

Together now the two men set to work — methodically and quietly — piling up on the floor beside them the bundles of papers which they had already examined, and delving into the oak chest for others. No sound was heard save the crackling of crisp paper and an occasional ejaculation from either of them when they came upon some proof or other of Heriot's propensity for blackmail.

"Agnes de Lucines is not the only one whom this brute is terrorising," murmured Blakeney once between his teeth; "I marvel that the man ever feels safe, alone in these lodgings, with no one but that weak-kneed Rondeau to protect him. He must have scores of enemies in this city who would gladly put a dagger in his heart or a bullet through his back."

They had been at work for close on half an hour when an exclamation of triumph, quickly smothered, escaped Sir Percy's lips.

"By Gad, Ffoulkes!" he said, "I believe I have got what we want!"

With quick, capable hands he turned over a bundle which he had just extracted from the chest. Rapidly he glanced through them. "I have them, Ffoulkes," he reiterated more emphatically as he put the bundle into his pocket; "now everything back in its place and—"

Suddenly he paused, his slender hand up to his lips, his head turned toward the door, an expression of tense expectancy in every line of his face.

"Quick, Ffoulkes," he whispered, "everything back into the chest, and the lid down."

"What ears you have," murmured Ffoulkes as he obeyed rapidly and without question. "I heard nothing."

Blakeney went to the door and bent his head to listen.

"Three men coming up the stairs," he said; "they are on the landing now."

"Have we time to rush them?"

"No chance! They are at the door. Two more men have joined them, and I can distinguish Rondeau's voice, too."

"The quintette," murmured Sir Andrew. "We are caught like two rats in a trap."

Even as he spoke the opening of the outside door could be distinctly heard, then the confused murmur of many voices. Already Blakeney and Ffoulkes had with perfect presence of mind put the finishing touches to the tidying of the room — put the chairs straight, shut down the lid of the oak chest, closed all the drawers of the desk.

"Nothing but good luck can save us now," whispered Blakeney as he lowered the wick of the lamp. "Quick now," he added, "behind that tapestry in the alcove and trust to our stars."

Securely hidden for the moment behind the curtains in the dark recess of the alcove the two men waited. The door leading into the sitting-room was ajar, and they could hear Heriot and his friends making merry irruption into the place. From out the confusion of general conversation they soon gathered that the debates in the Chamber had been so dull and uninteresting that, at a given signal, the little party had decided to adjourn to Heriot's rooms for their habitual game of cards. They could also hear Heriot calling to Rondeau to bring bottles and glasses, and vaguely they marvelled what Rondeau's attitude might be like at this moment. Was he brazening out the situation, or was he sick with terror?

Suddenly Heriot's voice came out more distinctly.

"Make yourselves at home, friends," he was saying; "here are cards, dominoes, and wine. I must leave you to yourselves for ten minutes whilst I write an important letter."

"All right, but don't be long," came in merry response.

"Not longer than I can help," rejoined Heriot. "I want my revenge against Bompard, remember. He did fleece me last night."

"Hurry on, then," said one of the men. "I'll play Desgas that return game of dominoes until then."

"Ten minutes and I'll be back," concluded Heriot.

He pushed open the bedroom door. The light within was very dim. The two men hidden behind the tapestry could hear him moving about the room muttering curses to himself. Presently the light of the lamp was shifted from one end of the room to the other. Through the opening between the two curtains Blakeney could just see Heriot's back as he placed the lamp at a convenient angle upon his desk, divested himself of his overcoat and muffler, then sat down and drew pen and paper closer to him. He was leaning forward, his elbow resting upon the table, his fingers fidgeting with his long, lank hair. He had closed the door when he entered, and from the other room now the voices of his friends sounded confused and muffled. Now and then an exclamation: "Double!" "Je ... tiens!" "Cinq-deux!" an oath, a laugh, the click of glasses and bottles came out more clearly; but the rest of the time these sounds were more like a droning accompaniment to the scraping of Heriot's pen upon the paper when he finally began to write his letter.

Two minutes went by and then two more. The scratching of Heriot's pen became more rapid as he appeared to be more completely immersed in his work. Behind the curtain the two men had been waiting: Blakeney ready to act, Ffoulkes equally ready to interpret the slightest signal from his chief.

The next minute Blakeney had stolen out of the alcove, and his two hands — so slender and elegant looking, and yet with a grip of steel — had fastened themselves upon Heriot's mouth, smothering within the space of a second the cry that had been half-uttered. Ffoulkes was ready to complete the work of rendering the man helpless: one handkerchief made an efficient gag, another tied the ankles securely. Heriot's own coat-sleeves supplied the handcuffs, and the blankets off the bed tied around his legs rendered him powerless to move. Then the two men lifted this inert mass on to the bed and Ffoulkes whispered anxiously: "Now, what next?"

Heriot's overcoat, hat, and muffler lay upon a chair. Sir Percy, placing a warning finger upon his lips, quickly divested himself of his own coat, slipped that of Heriot on, twisted the muffler round his neck, hunched up his shoulders, and murmuring: "Now for a bit of luck!" once more lowered the light of the lamp and then went to the door.

"Rondeau!" he called. "Hey, Rondeau!" And Sir Percy himself was surprised at the marvellous way in which he had caught the very inflection of Heriot's voice.

"Hey, Rondeau!" came from one of the players at the table, "the citizen-deputy is calling you!"

They were all sitting round the table: two men intent upon their game of dominoes, the other two watching with equal intentness. Rondeau came shuffling out of the antichambre. His face, by the dim light of the oil lamp, looked jaundiced with fear.

"Rondeau, you fool, where are you?" called Blakeney once again.

The next moment Rondeau had entered the room. No need for a signal or an order this time. Ffoulkes knew by instinct what his chief's bold scheme would mean to them both if it succeeded. He retired into the darkest corner of the room as Rondeau shuffled

across to the writing-desk. It was all done in a moment. In less time than it had taken to bind and gag Heriot, his henchman was laid out on the floor, his coat had been taken off him, and he was tied into a mummy-like bundle with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' elegant coat fastened securely round his arms and chest. It had all been done in silence. The men in the next room were noisy and intent on their game; the slight scuffle, the quickly smothered cries had remained unheeded.

"Now, what next?" queried Sir Andrew Ffoulkes once more.

"The impudence of the d — I, my good Ffoulkes," replied Blakeney in a whisper, "and may our stars not play us false. Now let me make you look as like Rondeau as possible — there! Slip on his coat — now your hair over your forehead — your coat-collar up — your knees bent — that's better!" he added as he surveyed the transformation which a few deft strokes had made in Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' appearance. "Now all you have to do is to shuffle across the room — here's your prototype's handkerchief — of dubious cleanliness, it is true, but it will serve — blow your nose as you cross the room, it will hide your face. They'll not heed you — keep in the shadows and God guard you — I'll follow in a moment or two ... but don't wait for me."

He opened the door, and before Sir Andrew could protest his chief had pushed him out into the room where the four men were still intent on their game. Through the open door Sir Percy now watched his friend who, keeping well within the shadows, shuffled quietly across the room. The next moment Sir Andrew was through and in the antichambre. Blakeney's acutely sensitive ears caught the sound of the opening of the outer door. He waited for a while, then he drew out of his pocket the bundle of letters which he had risked so much to obtain. There they were neatly docketed and marked: "The affairs of Arnould Fabrice."

Well! if he got away to-night Agnes de Lucines would be happy and free from the importunities of that brute Heriot; after that he must persuade her and Fabrice to go to England and to freedom.

For the moment his own safety was terribly in jeopardy; one false move — one look from those players round the table.... Bah! even then — !

With an inward laugh he pushed open the door once more and stepped into the room. For the moment no one noticed him; the game was at its most palpitating stage; four shaggy heads met beneath the lamp and four pairs of eyes were gazing with rapt attention upon the intricate maze of the dominoes.

Blakeney walked quietly across the room; he was just midway and on a level with the centre table when a voice was suddenly raised from that tense group beneath the lamp: "Is it thou, friend Heriot?"

Then one of the men looked up and stared, and another did likewise and exclaimed: "It is not Heriot!"

In a moment all was confusion, but confusion was the very essence of those hair-breadth escapes and desperate adventures which were as the breath of his nostrils to the Scarlet Pimpernel. Before those four men had had time to jump to their feet, or to realise that something was wrong with their friend Heriot, he had run across the room, his hand was on the knob of the door — the door that led to the antichambre and to freedom.

Bompard, Desgas, Jeannot, Legros were at his heels, but he tore open the door, bounded across the threshold, and slammed it to with such a vigorous bang that those on the other side were brought to a momentary halt. That moment meant life and liberty to Blakeney; already he had crossed the antichambre. Quite coolly and quietly now he took out the key from the inner side of the main door and slipped it to the outside. The next second — even as the four men rushed helter-skelter into the antichambre he was out on the landing and had turned the key in the door.

His prisoners were safely locked in — in Heriot's apartments — and Sir Percy Blakeney, calmly and without haste, was descending the stairs of the house in the Rue Cocatrice.

The next morning Agnes de Lucines received, through an anonymous messenger, the packet of letters which would so gravely have compromised Arnould Fabrice. Though the weather was more inclement than ever, she ran out into the streets, determined to seek out the old Public Letter-Writer and thank him for his mediation with the English milor, who surely had done this noble action.

But the old scarecrow had disappeared.

A FINE BIT OF WORK"Sh!... sh!... It's the Englishman. I'd know his footstep anywhere—"

"God bless him!" murmured petite maman fervently.

Pere Lenegre went to the door; he stepped cautiously and with that stealthy foot-tread which speaks in eloquent silence of daily, hourly danger, of anguish and anxiety for lives that are dear.

The door was low and narrow — up on the fifth floor of one of the huge tenement houses in the Rue Jolivet in the Montmartre quarter of Paris. A narrow stone passage led to it — pitch-dark at all times, but dirty, and evil-smelling when the concierge — a free citizen of the new democracy — took a week's holiday from his work in order to spend whole afternoons either at the wineshop round the corner, or on the Place du Carrousel to watch the guillotine getting rid of some twenty aristocrats an hour for the glorification of the will of the people.

But inside the small apartment everything was scrupulously neat and clean. Petite maman was such an excellent manager, and Rosette was busy all the day tidying and cleaning the poor little home, which Pere Lenegre contrived to keep up for wife and daughter by working fourteen hours a day in the government saddlery.

When Pere Lenegre opened the narrow door, the entire framework of it was filled by the broad, magnificent figure of a man in heavy caped coat and high leather boots, with dainty frills of lace at throat and wrist, and elegant chapeau-bras held in the hand.

Pere Lenegre at sight of him, put a quick finger to his own quivering lips.

"Anything wrong, vieux papa?" asked the newcomer lightly.

The other closed the door cautiously before he made reply. But petite maman could not restrain her anxiety.

"My little Pierre, milor?" she asked as she clasped her wrinkled hands together, and turned on the stranger her tear-dimmed restless eyes.

"Pierre is safe and well, little mother," he replied cheerily. "We got him out of Paris early this morning in a coal cart, carefully hidden among the sacks. When he emerged he was black but safe. I drove the cart myself as far as Courbevoie, and there handed over your Pierre and those whom we got out of Paris with him to those of my friends who were going straight to England. There's nothing more to be afraid of, petite maman," he added as he took the old woman's wrinkled hands in both his own; "your son is now under the

care of men who would die rather than see him captured. So make your mind at ease, Pierre will be in England, safe and well, within a week.”

Petite maman couldn't say anything just then because tears were choking her, but in her turn she clasped those two strong and slender hands — the hands of the brave Englishman who had just risked his life in order to save Pierre from the guillotine — and she kissed them as fervently as she kissed the feet of the Madonna when she knelt before her shrine in prayer.

Pierre had been a footman in the household of unhappy Marie Antoinette. His crime had been that he remained loyal to her in words as well as in thought. A hot-headed but nobly outspoken harangue on behalf of the unfortunate queen, delivered in a public place, had at once marked him out to the spies of the Terrorists as suspect of intrigue against the safety of the Republic. He was denounced to the Committee of Public Safety, and his arrest and condemnation to the guillotine would have inevitably followed had not the gallant band of Englishmen, known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, succeeded in effecting his escape.

What wonder that petite maman could not speak for tears when she clasped the hands of the noble leader of that splendid little band of heroes? What wonder that Pere Lenegre, when he heard that his son was safe murmured a fervent: “God bless you, milor, and your friends!” and that Rosette surreptitiously raised the fine caped coat to her lips, for Pierre was her twin-brother, and she loved him very dearly.

But already Sir Percy Blakeney had, with one of his characteristic cheery words, dissipated the atmosphere of tearful emotion which oppressed these kindly folk.

“Now, Papa Lenegre,” he said lightly, “tell me why you wore such a solemn air when you let me in just now.”

“Because, milor,” replied the old man quietly, “that d —— d concierge, Jean Baptiste, is a black-hearted traitor.”

Sir Percy laughed, his merry, infectious laugh.

“You mean that while he has been pocketing bribes from me, he has denounced me to the Committee.”

Pere Lenegre nodded: “I only heard it this morning,” he said, “from one or two threatening words the treacherous brute let fall. He knows that you lodge in the Place des Trois Maries, and that you come here frequently. I would have given my life to warn you then and there,” continued the old man with touching earnestness, “but I didn't know where to find you. All I knew was that you were looking after Pierre.”

Even while the man spoke there darted from beneath the Englishman's heavy lids a quick look like a flash of sudden and brilliant light out of the lazy depths of his merry blue eyes; it was one of those glances of pure delight and exultation which light up the eyes of the true soldier when there is serious fighting to be done.

“La, man,” he said gaily, “there was no cause to worry. Pierre is safe, remember that! As for me,” he added with that wonderful insouciance which caused him to risk his life a hundred times a day with a shrug of his broad shoulders and a smile upon his lips; “as for me, I'll look after myself, never fear.”

He paused awhile, then added gravely: “So long as you are safe, my good Lenegre, and petite maman, and Rosette.”

Whereupon the old man was silent, petite maman murmured a short prayer, and Rosette began to cry. The hero of a thousand gallant rescues had received his answer.

“You, too, are on the black list, Pere Lenegre?” he asked quietly.

The old man nodded.

“How do you know?” queried the Englishman.

“Through Jean Baptiste, milor.”

“Still that demmed concierge,” muttered Sir Percy.

“He frightened petite maman with it all this morning, saying that he knew my name was down on the Sectional Committee's list as a ‘suspect.’ That's when he let fall a word or two about you, milor. He said it is known that Pierre has escaped from justice, and that you helped him to it.

“I am sure that we shall get a domiciliary visit presently,” continued Pere Lenegre, after a slight pause. “The gendarmes have not yet been, but I fancy that already this morning early I saw one or two of the Committee's spies hanging about the house, and when I went to the workshop I was followed all the time.”

The Englishman looked grave: “And tell me,” he said, “have you got anything in this place that may prove compromising to any of you?”

“No, milor. But, as Jean Baptiste said, the Sectional Committee know about Pierre. It is because of my son that I am suspect.”

The old man spoke quite quietly, very simply, like a philosopher who has long ago learned to put behind him the fear of death. Nor did petite maman cry or lament. Her thoughts were for the brave milor who had saved her boy; but her fears for her old man left her dry-eyed and dumb with grief.

There was silence in the little room for one moment while the angel of sorrow and anguish hovered round these faithful and brave souls, then the Englishman's cheery voice, so full of spirit and merriment, rang out once more — he had risen to his full, towering height, and now placed a kindly hand on the old man's shoulder:

“It seems to me, my good Lenegre,” he said, “that you and I haven't many moments to spare if we mean to cheat those devils by saving your neck. Now, petite maman,” he added, turning to the old woman, “are you going to be brave?”

“I will do anything, milor,” she replied quietly, “to help my old man.”

“Well, then,” said Sir Percy Blakeney in that optimistic, light-hearted yet supremely authoritative tone of which he held the secret, “you and Rosette remain here and wait for the gendarmes. When they come, say nothing; behave with absolute meekness, and let them

search your place from end to end. If they ask you about your husband say that you believe him to be at his workshop. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, milor," replied petite maman.

"And you, Pere Lenegre," continued the Englishman, speaking now with slow and careful deliberation, "listen very attentively to the instructions I am going to give you, for on your implicit obedience to them depends not only your own life but that of these two dear women. Go at once, now, to the Rue Ste. Anne, round the corner, the second house on your right, which is numbered thirty-seven. The porte cochere stands open, go boldly through, past the concierge's box, and up the stairs to apartment number twelve, second floor. Here is the key of the apartment," he added, producing one from his coat pocket and handing it over to the old man. "The rooms are nominally occupied by a certain Maitre Turandot, maker of violins, and not even the concierge of the place knows that the hunchbacked and snuffy violin-maker and the meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel, whom the Committee of Public Safety would so love to lay by the heels, are one and the same person. The apartment, then, is mine; one of the many which I occupy in Paris at different times," he went on. "Let yourself in quietly with this key, walk straight across the first room to a wardrobe, which you will see in front of you. Open it. It is hung full of shabby clothes; put these aside, and you will notice that the panels at the back do not fit very closely, as if the wardrobe was old or had been badly put together. Insert your fingers in the tiny aperture between the two middle panels. These slide back easily: there is a recess immediately behind them. Get in there; pull the doors of the wardrobe together first, then slide the back panels into their place. You will be perfectly safe there, as the house is not under suspicion at present, and even if the revolutionary guard, under some meddle-some sergeant or other, chooses to pay it a surprise visit, your hiding-place will be perfectly secure. Now is all that quite understood?"

"Absolutely, milor," replied Lenegre, even as he made ready to obey Sir Percy's orders, "but what about you? You cannot get out of this house, milor," he urged; "it is watched, I tell you."

"La!" broke in Blakeney, in his light-hearted way, "and do you think I didn't know that? I had to come and tell you about Pierre, and now I must give those worthy gendarmes the slip somehow. I have my rooms downstairs on the ground floor, as you know, and I must make certain arrangements so that we can all get out of Paris comfortably this evening. The demmed place is no longer safe either for you, my good Lenegre, or for petite maman and Rosette. But wherever I may be, meanwhile, don't worry about me. As soon as the gendarmes have been and gone, I'll go over to the Rue Ste. Anne and let you know what arrangements I've been able to make. So do as I tell you now, and in Heaven's name let me look after myself."

Whereupon, with scant ceremony, he hustled the old man out of the room.

Pere Lenegre had contrived to kiss petite maman and Rosette before he went. It was touching to see the perfect confidence with which these simple-hearted folk obeyed the commands of milor. Had he not saved Pierre in his wonderful, brave, resourceful way? Of a truth he would know how to save Pere Lenegre also. But, nevertheless, anguish gripped the women's hearts; anguish doubly keen since the saviour of Pierre was also in danger now.

When Pere Lenegre's shuffling footsteps had died away along the flagged corridor, the stranger once more turned to the two women.

"And now, petite maman," he said cheerily, as he kissed the old woman on both her furrowed cheeks, "keep up a good heart, and say your prayers with Rosette. Your old man and I will both have need of them."

He did not wait to say good-bye, and anon it was his firm footstep that echoed down the corridor. He went off singing a song, at the top of his voice, for the whole house to hear, and for that traitor, Jean Baptiste, to come rushing out of his room marvelling at the impudence of the man, and cursing the Committee of Public Safety who were so slow in sending the soldiers of the Republic to lay this impertinent Englishman by the heels.

A quarter of an hour later half dozen men of the Republican Guard, with corporal and sergeant in command, were in the small apartment on the fifth floor of the tenement house in the Rue Jolivet. They had demanded an entry in the name of the Republic, had roughly hustled petite maman and Rosette, questioned them to Lenegre's whereabouts, and not satisfied with the reply which they received, had turned the tidy little home topsy-turvy, ransacked every cupboard, dislocated every bed, table or sofa which might presumably have afforded a hiding place for a man.

Satisfied now that the "suspect" whom they were searching for was not on the premises, the sergeant stationed four of his men with the corporal outside the door, and two within, and himself sitting down in the centre of the room ordered the two women to stand before him and to answer his questions clearly on pain of being dragged away forthwith to the St. Lazare house of detention.

Petite maman smoothed out her apron, crossed her arms before her, and looked the sergeant quite straight in the face. Rosette's eyes were full of tears, but she showed no signs of fear either, although her shoulder — where one of the gendarmes had seized it so roughly — was terribly painful.

"Your husband, citizeness," asked the sergeant peremptorily, "where is he?"

"I am not sure, citizen," replied petite maman. "At this hour he is generally at the government works in the Quai des Messageries."

"He is not there now," asserted the sergeant. "We have knowledge that he did not go back to his work since dinner-time."

Petite maman was silent.

"Answer," ordered the sergeant.

"I cannot tell you more, citizen sergeant," she said firmly. "I do not know."

"You do yourself no good, woman, by this obstinacy," he continued roughly. "My belief is that your husband is inside this house, hidden away somewhere. If necessary I can get orders to have every apartment searched until he is found: but in that case it will go much harder with you and with your daughter, and much harder too with your husband than if he gave us no trouble and followed us quietly."

But with sublime confidence in the man who had saved Pierre and who had given her explicit orders as to what she should do, petite maman, backed by Rosette, reiterated quietly:

"I cannot tell you more, citizen sergeant, I do not know."

"And what about the Englishman?" queried the sergeant more roughly, "the man they call the Scarlet Pimpernel, what do you know of him?"

"Nothing, citizen," replied petite maman, "what should we poor folk know of an English milor?"

"You know at any rate this much, citizeness, that the English milor helped your son Pierre to escape from justice."

"If that is so," said petite maman quietly, "it cannot be wrong for a mother to pray to God to bless her son's preserver."

"It behooves every good citizen," retorted the sergeant firmly, "to denounce all traitors to the Republic."

"But since I know nothing about the Englishman, citizen sergeant — ?"

And petite maman shrugged her thin shoulders as if the matter had ceased to interest her.

"Think again, citizeness," admonished the sergeant, "it is your husband's neck as well as your daughter's and your own that you are risking by so much obstinacy."

He waited a moment or two as if willing to give the old woman time to speak: then, when he saw that she kept her thin, quivering lips resolutely glued together he called his corporal to him.

"Go to the citizen Commissary of the Section," he commanded, "and ask for a general order to search every apartment in No. 24 Rue Jolivet. Leave two of our men posted on the first and third landings of this house and leave two outside this door. Be as quick as you can. You can be back here with the order in half an hour, or perhaps the committee will send me an extra squad; tell the citizen Commissary that this is a big house, with many corridors. You can go."

The corporal saluted and went.

Petite maman and Rosette the while were still standing quietly in the middle of the room, their arms folded underneath their aprons, their wide-open, anxious eyes fixed into space. Rosette's tears were falling slowly, one by one down her cheeks, but petite maman was dry-eyed. She was thinking, and thinking as she had never had occasion to think before.

She was thinking of the brave and gallant Englishman who had saved Pierre's life only yesterday. The sergeant, who sat there before her, had asked for orders from the citizen Commissary to search this big house from attic to cellar. That is what made petite maman think and think.

The brave Englishman was in this house at the present moment: the house would be searched from attic to cellar and he would be found, taken, and brought to the guillotine.

The man who yesterday had risked his life to save her boy was in imminent and deadly danger, and she — petite maman — could do nothing to save him.

Every moment now she thought to hear milor's firm tread resounding on stairs or corridor, every moment she thought to hear snatches of an English song, sung by a fresh and powerful voice, never after to-day to be heard in gaiety again.

The old clock upon the shelf ticked away these seconds and minutes while petite maman thought and thought, while men set traps to catch a fellow-being in a deathly snare, and human carnivorous beasts lay lurking for their prey.

Another quarter of an hour went by. Petite maman and Rosette had hardly moved. The shadows of evening were creeping into the narrow room, blurring the outlines of the pieces of furniture and wrapping all the corners in gloom.

The sergeant had ordered Rosette to bring in a lamp. This she had done, placing it upon the table so that the feeble light glinted upon the belt and buckles of the sergeant and upon the tricolour cockade which was pinned to his hat. Petite maman had thought and thought until she could think no more.

Anon there was much commotion on the stairs; heavy footsteps were heard ascending from below, then crossing the corridors on the various landings. The silence which reigned otherwise in the house, and which had fallen as usual on the squalid little street, void of traffic at this hour, caused those footsteps to echo with ominous power.

Petite maman felt her heart beating so vigorously that she could hardly breathe. She pressed her wrinkled hands tightly against her bosom.

There were the quick words of command, alas! so familiar in France just now, the cruel, peremptory words that invariably preceded an arrest, preliminaries to the dragging of some wretched — often wholly harmless — creature before a tribunal that knew neither pardon nor mercy.

The sergeant, who had become drowsy in the close atmosphere of the tiny room, roused himself at the sound and jumped to his feet. The door was thrown open by the men stationed outside even before the authoritative words, "Open! in the name of the Republic!" had echoed along the narrow corridor.

The sergeant stood at attention and quickly lifted his hand to his forehead in salute. A fresh squad of some half-dozen men of the Republican Guard stood in the doorway; they were under the command of an officer of high rank, a rough, uncouth, almost bestial-looking creature, with lank hair worn the fashionable length under his greasy chapeau-bras, and unkempt beard round an ill-washed and bloated face. But he wore the tricolour sash and badge which proclaimed him one of the military members of the Sectional Committee of Public Safety, and the sergeant, who had been so overbearing with the women just now, had assumed a very humble and even obsequious manner.

"You sent for a general order to the sectional Committee," said the new-comer, turning abruptly to the sergeant after he had cast a quick, searching glance round the room, hardly condescending to look on petite maman and Rosette, whose very souls were now gazing out of their anguish-filled eyes.

"I did, citizen commandant," replied the sergeant.

"I am not a commandant," said the other curtly. "My name is Rouget, member of the Convention and of the Committee of Public Safety. The sectional Committee to whom you sent for a general order of search thought that you had blundered somehow, so they sent me to put things right."

"I am not aware that I committed any blunder, citizen," stammered the sergeant dolefully. "I could not take the responsibility of making a domiciliary search all through the house. So I begged for fuller orders."

"And wasted the Committee's time and mine by such nonsense," retorted Rouget harshly. "Every citizen of the Republic worthy of the name should know how to act on his own initiative when the safety of the nation demands it."

"I did not know — I did not dare—" murmured the sergeant, obviously cowed by this reproof, which had been delivered in the rough, overbearing tones peculiar to these men who, one and all, had risen from the gutter to places of importance and responsibility in

the newly-modelled State.

"Silence!" commanded the other peremptorily. "Don't waste any more of my time with your lame excuses. You have failed in zeal and initiative. That's enough. What else have you done? Have you got the man Lenegre?"

"No, citizen. He is not in hiding here, and his wife and daughter will not give us any information about him."

"That is their look-out," retorted Rouget with a harsh laugh. "If they give up Lenegre of their own free will the law will deal leniently with them, and even perhaps with him. But if we have to search the house for him, then it means the guillotine for the lot of them."

He had spoken these callous words without even looking on the two unfortunate women; nor did he ask them any further questions just then, but continued speaking to the sergeant:

"And what about the Englishman? The sectional Committee sent down some spies this morning to be on the look-out for him on or about this house. Have you got him?"

"Not yet, citizen. But—"

"Ah ca, citizen sergeant," broke in the other brusquely, "meseems that your zeal has been even more at fault than I had supposed. Have you done anything at all, then, in the matter of Lenegre or the Englishman?"

"I have told you, citizen," retorted the sergeant sullenly, "that I believe Lenegre to be still in this house. At any rate, he had not gone out of it an hour ago — that's all I know. And I wanted to search the whole of this house, as I am sure we should have found him in one of the other apartments. These people are all friends together, and will always help each other to evade justice. But the Englishman was no concern of mine. The spies of the Committee were ordered to watch for him, and when they reported to me I was to proceed with the arrest. I was not set to do any of the spying work. I am a soldier, and obey my orders when I get them."

"Very well, then, you'd better obey them now, citizen sergeant," was Rouget's dry comment on the other man's surly explanation, "for you seem to have properly blundered from first to last, and will be hard put to it to redeem your character. The Republic, remember, has no use for fools."

The sergeant, after this covert threat, thought it best, apparently, to keep his tongue, whilst Rouget continued, in the same aggressive, peremptory tone:

"Get on with your domiciliary visits at once. Take your own men with you, and leave me the others. Begin on this floor, and leave your sentry at the front door outside. Now let me see your zeal atoning for your past slackness. Right turn! Quick march!"

Then it was that petite maman spoke out. She had thought and thought, and now she knew what she ought to do; she knew that that cruel, inhuman wretch would presently begin his tramp up and down corridors and stairs, demanding admittance at every door, entering every apartment. She knew that the man who had saved her Pierre's life was in hiding somewhere in the house — that he would be found and dragged to the guillotine, for she knew that the whole governing body of this abominable Revolution was determined not to allow that hated Englishman to escape again.

She was old and feeble, small and thin — that's why everyone called her petite maman — but once she knew what she ought to do, then her spirit overpowered the weakness of her wizened body.

Now she knew, and even while that arrogant member of an execrated murdering Committee was giving final instructions to the sergeant, petite maman said, in a calm, piping voice:

"No need, citizen sergeant, to go and disturb all my friends and neighbours. I'll tell you where my husband is."

In a moment Rouget had swung round on his heel, a hideous gleam of satisfaction spread over his grimy face, and he said, with an ugly sneer:

"So! you have thought better of it, have you? Well, out with it! You'd better be quick about it if you want to do yourselves any good."

"I have my daughter to think of," said petite maman in a feeble, querulous way, "and I won't have all my neighbours in this house made unhappy because of me. They have all been kind neighbours. Will you promise not to molest them and to clear the house of soldiers if I tell you where Lenegre is?"

"The Republic makes no promises," replied Rouget gruffly. "Her citizens must do their duty without hope of a reward. If they fail in it, they are punished. But privately I will tell you, woman, that if you save us the troublesome and probably unprofitable task of searching this rabbit-warren through and through, it shall go very leniently with you and with your daughter, and perhaps — I won't promise, remember — perhaps with your husband also."

"Very good, citizen," said petite maman calmly. "I am ready."

"Ready for what?" he demanded.

"To take you to where my husband is in hiding."

"Oho! He is not in the house, then?"

"No."

"Where is he, then?"

"In the Rue Ste. Anne. I will take you there."

Rouget cast a quick, suspicious glance on the old woman, and exchanged one of understanding with the sergeant.

"Very well," he said after a slight pause. "But your daughter must come along too. Sergeant," he added, "I'll take three of your men with me; I have half a dozen, but it's better to be on the safe side. Post your fellows round the outer door, and on my way to the rue Ste. Anne I will leave word at the gendarmerie that a small reinforcement be sent on to you at once. These can be here in five minutes; until then you are quite safe."

Then he added under his breath, so that the women should not hear: "The Englishman may still be in the house. In which case, hearing us depart, he may think us all gone and try to give us the slip. You'll know what to do?" he queried significantly.

"Of course, citizen," replied the sergeant.

"Now, then, citizeness — hurry up."

Once more there was tramping of heavy feet on stone stairs and corridors. A squad of soldiers of the Republican Guard, with two women in their midst, and followed by a member of the Committee of Public Safety, a sergeant, corporal and two or three more men, excited much anxious curiosity as they descended the steep flights of steps from the fifth floor.

Pale, frightened faces peeped shyly through the doorways at sound of the noisy tramp from above, but quickly disappeared again at sight of the grimy scarlet facings and tricolour cockades.

The sergeant and three soldiers remained stationed at the foot of the stairs inside the house. Then citizen Rouget roughly gave the order to proceed. It seemed strange that it should require close on a dozen men to guard two women and to apprehend one old man, but as the member of the Committee of Public Safety whispered to the sergeant before he finally went out of the house: "The whole thing may be a trap, and one can't be too careful. The Englishman is said to be very powerful; I'll get the gendarmerie to send you another half-dozen men, and mind you guard the house until my return."

Five minutes later the soldiers, directed by petite maman, had reached No. 37 Rue Ste. Anne. The big outside door stood wide open, and the whole party turned immediately into the house.

The concierge, terrified and obsequious, rushed — trembling — out of his box.

"What was the pleasure of the citizen soldiers?" he asked.

"Tell him, citizeness," commanded Rouget curtly.

"We are going to apartment No. 12 on the second floor," said petite maman to the concierge.

"Have you a key of the apartment?" queried Rouget.

"No, citizen," stammered the concierge, "but—"

"Well, what is it?" queried the other peremptorily.

"Papa Turandot is a poor, harmless maker of volins," said the concierge. "I know him well, though he is not often at home. He lives with a daughter somewhere Passy way, and only uses this place as a workshop. I am sure he is no traitor."

"We'll soon see about that," remarked Rouget dryly.

Petite maman held her shawl tightly crossed over her bosom: her hands felt clammy and cold as ice. She was looking straight out before her, quite dry-eyed and calm, and never once glanced on Rosette, who was not allowed to come anywhere near her mother.

As there was no duplicate key to apartment No. 12, citizen Rouget ordered his men to break in the door. It did not take very long: the house was old and ramshackle and the doors rickety. The next moment the party stood in the room which a while ago the Englishman had so accurately described to pere Lenegre in petite maman's hearing.

There was the wardrobe. Petite maman, closely surrounded by the soldiers, went boldly up to it; she opened it just as milor had directed, and pushed aside the row of shabby clothes that hung there. Then she pointed to the panels that did not fit quite tightly together at the back. Petite maman passed her tongue over her dry lips before she spoke.

"There's a recess behind those panels," she said at last. "They slide back quite easily. My old man is there."

"And God bless you for a brave, loyal soul," came in merry, ringing accent from the other end of the room. "And God save the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

These last words, spoken in English, completed the blank amazement which literally paralysed the only three genuine Republican soldiers there — those, namely, whom Rouget had borrowed from the sergeant. As for the others, they knew what to do. In less than a minute they had overpowered and gagged the three bewildered soldiers.

Rosette had screamed, terror-stricken, from sheer astonishment, but petite maman stood quite still, her pale, tear-dimmed eyes fixed upon the man whose gay "God bless you!" had so suddenly turned her despair into hope.

How was it that in the hideous, unkempt and grimy Rouget she had not at once recognised the handsome and gallant milor who had saved her Pierre's life? Well, of a truth he had been unrecognisable, but now that he tore the ugly wig and beard from his face, stretched out his fine figure to its full height, and presently turned his lazy, merry eyes on her, she could have screamed for very joy.

The next moment he had her by the shoulders and had imprinted two sounding kisses upon her cheeks.

"Now, petite maman," he said gaily, "let us liberate the old man."

Pere Lenegre, from his hiding-place, had heard all that had been going on in the room for the last few moments. True, he had known exactly what to expect, for no sooner had he taken possession of the recess behind the wardrobe than milor also entered the apartment and then and there told him of his plans not only for pere's own safety, but for that of petite maman and Rosette who would be in grave danger if the old man followed in the wake of Pierre.

Milor told him in his usual light-hearted way that he had given the Committee's spies the slip.

"I do that very easily, you know," he explained. "I just slip into my rooms in the Rue Jolivet, change myself into a snuffy and hunchback violin-maker, and walk out of the house under the noses of the spies. In the nearest wine-shop my English friends, in various disguises, are all ready to my hand: half a dozen of them are never far from where I am in case they may be wanted."

These half-dozen brave Englishmen soon arrived one by one: one looked like a coal-heaver, another like a seedy musician, a third like a coach-driver. But they all walked boldly into the house and were soon all congregated in apartment No. 12. Here fresh disguises were assumed, and soon a squad of Republican Guards looked as like the real thing as possible.

Pere Lenegre admitted himself that though he actually saw milor transforming himself into citizen Rouget, he could hardly believe his eyes, so complete was the change.

"I am deeply grieved to have frightened and upset you so, petite maman," now concluded milor kindly, "but I saw no other way of getting you and Rosette out of the house and leaving that stupid sergeant and some of his men behind. I did not want to arouse in him even the faintest breath of suspicion, and of course if he had asked me for the written orders which he was actually waiting for, or if his corporal had returned sooner than I anticipated, there might have been trouble. But even then," he added with his usual careless insouciance, "I should have thought of some way of baffling those brutes."

“And now,” he concluded more authoritatively, “it is a case of getting out of Paris before the gates close. Pere Lenegre, take your wife and daughter with you and walk boldly out of this house. The sergeant and his men have not vacated their post in the Rue Jolivet, and no one else can molest you. Go straight to the Porte de Neuilly, and on the other side wait quietly in the little cafe at the corner of the Avenue until I come. Your old passes for the barriers still hold good; you were only placed on the ‘suspect’ list this morning, and there has not been a hue and cry yet about you. In any case some of us will be close by to help you if needs be.”

“But you, milor,” stammered pere Lenegre, “and your friends — ?”

“La, man,” retorted Blakeney lightly, “have I not told you before never to worry about me and my friends? We have more ways than one of giving the slip to this demmed government of yours. All you’ve got to think of is your wife and your daughter. I am afraid that petite maman cannot take more with her than she has on, but we’ll do all we can for her comfort until we have you all in perfect safety — in England — with Pierre.”

Neither pere Lenegre, nor petite maman, nor Rosette could speak just then, for tears were choking them, but anon when milor stood nearer, petite maman knelt down, and, imprisoning his slender hand in her brown, wrinkled ones, she kissed it reverently.

He laughed and chided her for this.

“’Tis I should kneel to you in gratitude, petite maman,” he said earnestly, “you were ready to sacrifice your old man for me.”

“You have saved Pierre, milor,” said the mother simply.

A minute later pere Lenegre and the two women were ready to go. Already milor and his gallant English friends were busy once more transforming themselves into grimy workmen or seedy middle-class professionals.

As soon as the door of apartment No. 12 finally closed behind the three good folk, my lord Tony asked of his chief:

“What about these three wretched soldiers, Blakeney?”

“Oh! they’ll be all right for twenty-four hours. They can’t starve till then, and by that time the concierge will have realised that there’s something wrong with the door of No. 12 and will come in to investigate the matter. Are they securely bound, though?”

“And gagged! Rather!” ejaculated one of the others. “Odds life, Blakeney!” he added enthusiastically, “that was a fine bit of work!”

HOW JEAN PIERRE MET THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

As told by Himself

Ah, monsieur! the pity of it, the pity! Surely there are sins which le bon Dieu Himself will condone. And if not — well, I had to risk His displeasure anyhow. Could I see them both starve, monsieur? I ask you! and M. le Vicomte had become so thin, so thin, his tiny, delicate bones were almost through his skin. And Mme. la Marquise! an angel, monsieur! Why, in the happy olden days, before all these traitors and assassins ruled in France, M. and Mme. la Marquise lived only for the child, and then to see him dying — yes, dying, there was no shutting one's eyes to that awful fact — M. le Vicomte de Mortain was dying of starvation and of disease.

There we were all herded together in a couple of attics — one of which little more than a cupboard — at the top of a dilapidated half-ruined house in the Rue des Pipots — Mme. la Marquise, M. le Vicomte and I — just think of that, monsieur! M. le Marquis had his chateau, as no doubt you know, on the outskirts of Lyons. A loyal high-born gentleman; was it likely, I ask you, that he would submit passively to the rule of those execrable revolutionaries who had murdered their King, outraged their Queen and Royal family, and, God help them! had already perpetrated every crime and every abomination for which of a truth there could be no pardon either on earth or in Heaven? He joined that plucky but, alas! small and ill-equipped army of royalists who, unable to save their King, were at least determined to avenge him.

Well, you know well enough what happened. The counter-revolution failed; the revolutionary army brought Lyons down to her knees after a siege of two months. She was then marked down as a rebel city, and after the abominable decree of October 9th had deprived her of her very name, and Couthon had exacted bloody reprisals from the entire population for its loyalty to the King, the infamous Laporte was sent down in order finally to stamp out the lingering remnants of the rebellion. By that time, monsieur, half the city had been burned down, and one-tenth and more of the inhabitants — men, women, and children — had been massacred in cold blood, whilst most of the others had fled in terror from the appalling scene of ruin and desolation. Laporte completed the execrable work so ably begun by Couthon. He was a very celebrated and skilful doctor at the Faculty of Medicine, now turned into a human hyena in the name of Liberty and Fraternity.

M. le Marquis contrived to escape with the scattered remnant of the Royalist army into Switzerland. But Mme la Marquise throughout all these strenuous times had stuck to her post at the chateau like the valiant creature that she was. When Couthon entered Lyons at the head of the revolutionary army, the whole of her household fled, and I was left alone to look after her and M. le Vicomte.

Then one day when I had gone into Lyons for provisions, I suddenly chanced to hear outside an eating-house that which nearly froze the marrow in my old bones. A captain belonging to the Revolutionary Guard was transmitting to his sergeant certain orders, which he had apparently just received.

The orders were to make a perquisition at ten o'clock this same evening in the chateau of Mortaine as the Marquis was supposed to be in hiding there, and in any event to arrest every man, woman, and child who was found within its walls.

"Citizen Laporte," the captain concluded, "knows for a certainty that the ci-devant Marquise and her brat are still there, even if the Marquis has fled like the traitor that he is. Those cursed English spies who call themselves the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel have been very active in Lyons of late, and citizen Laporte is afraid that they might cheat the guillotine of the carcase of those aristos, as they have already succeeded in doing in the case of a large number of traitors."

I did not, of course, wait to hear any more of that abominable talk. I sped home as fast as my old legs would carry me. That self-same evening, as soon as it was dark, Mme. la Marquise, carrying M. le Vicomte in her arms and I carrying a pack with a few necessities on my back, left the ancestral home of the Mortaines never to return to it again: for within an hour of our flight a detachment of the revolutionary army made a descent upon the chateau; they ransacked it from attic to cellar, and finding nothing there to satisfy their lust of hate, they burned the stately mansion down to the ground.

We were obliged to take refuge in Lyons, at any rate for a time. Great as was the danger inside the city, it was infinitely greater on the high roads, unless we could arrange for some vehicle to take us a considerable part of the way to the frontier, and above all for some sort of passports — forged or otherwise — to enable us to pass the various toll-gates on the road, where vigilance was very strict. So we wandered through the ruined and deserted streets of the city in search of shelter, but found every charred and derelict house full of miserable tramps and destitutes like ourselves. Half dead with fatigue, Mme. la Marquise was at last obliged to take refuge in one of these houses which was situated in the Rue des Pipots. Every room was full to overflowing with a miserable wreckage of humanity thrown hither by the tide of anarchy and of bloodshed. But at the top of the house we found an attic. It was empty save for a couple of chairs, a table and a broken-down bedstead on which were a ragged mattress and pillow.

Here, monsieur, we spent over three weeks, at the end of which time M. le Vicomte fell ill, and then there followed days, monsieur, through which I would not like my worst enemy to pass.

Mme. la Marquise had only been able to carry away in her flight what ready money she happened to have in the house at the time. Securities, property, money belonging to aristocrats had been ruthlessly confiscated by the revolutionary government in Lyons. Our scanty resources rapidly became exhausted, and what was left had to be kept for milk and delicacies for M. le Vicomte. I tramped through the streets in search of a doctor, but most of them had been arrested on some paltry charge or other of rebellion, whilst others had fled from the city. There was only that infamous Laporte — a vastly clever doctor, I knew — but as soon take a lamb to a hungry lion as the Vicomte de Mortaine to that bloodthirsty cut-throat.

Then one day our last franc went and we had nothing left. Mme. la Marquise had not touched food for two days. I had stood at the corner of the street, begging all the day until I was driven off by the gendarmes. I had only obtained three sous from the passers-by. I bought some milk and took it home for M. le Vicomte. The following morning when I entered the larger attic I found that Mme. la Marquise had fainted from inanition.

I spent the whole of the day begging in the streets and dodging the guard, and even so I only collected four sous. I could have got more perhaps, only that at about midday the smell of food from an eating-house turned me sick and faint, and when I regained consciousness I found myself huddled up under a doorway and evening gathering in fast around me. If Mme. la Marquise could go two

days without food I ought to go four. I struggled to my feet; fortunately I had retained possession of my four sous, else of a truth I would not have had the courage to go back to the miserable attic which was the only home I knew.

I was wending my way along as fast as I could — for I knew that Mme. la Marquise would be getting terribly anxious — when, just as I turned into the Rue Blanche, I spied two gentlemen — obviously strangers, for they were dressed with a luxury and care with which we had long ceased to be familiar in Lyons — walking rapidly towards me. A moment or two later they came to a halt, not far from where I was standing, and I heard the taller one of the two say to the other in English — a language with which I am vaguely conversant: “All right again this time, what, Tony?”

Both laughed merrily like a couple of schoolboys playing truant, and then they disappeared under the doorway of a dilapidated house, whilst I was left wondering how two such elegant gentlemen dared be abroad in Lyons these days, seeing that every man, woman and child who was dressed in anything but threadbare clothes was sure to be insulted in the streets for an aristocrat, and as often as not summarily arrested as a traitor.

However, I had other things to think about, and had already dismissed the little incident from my mind, when at the bottom of the Rue Blanche I came upon a knot of gaffers, men and women, who were talking and gesticulating very excitedly outside the door of a cook-shop. At first I did not take much notice of what was said: my eyes were glued to the front of the shop, on which were displayed sundry delicacies of the kind which makes a wretched, starved beggar’s mouth water as he goes by; a roast capon especially attracted my attention, together with a bottle of red wine; these looked just the sort of luscious food which Mme. la Marquise would relish.

Well, sir, the law of God says: “Thou shalt not covet!” and no doubt that I committed a grievous sin when my hungry eyes fastened upon that roast capon and that bottle of Burgundy. We also know the stories of Judas Iscariot and of Jacob’s children who sold their own brother Joseph into slavery — such a crime, monsieur, I took upon my conscience then; for just as the vision of Mme. la Marquise eating that roast capon and drinking that Burgundy rose before my eyes, my ears caught some fragments of the excited conversation which was going on all around me.

“He went this way!” someone said.

“No; that!” protested another.

“There’s no sign of him now, anyway.”

The owner of the shop was standing on his own doorstep, his legs wide apart, one arm on his wide hip, the other still brandishing the knife wherewith he had been carving for his customers.

“He can’t have gone far,” he said, as he smacked his thick lips.

“The impudent rascal, flaunting such fine clothes — like the aristo that he is.”

“Bah! these cursed English! They are aristos all of them! And this one with his followers is no better than a spy!”

“Paid by that damned English Government to murder all our patriots and to rob the guillotine of her just dues.”

“They say he had a hand in the escape of the ci-devant Duc de Sermeuse and all his brats from the very tumbril which was taking them to execution.”

A cry of loathing and execration followed this statement. There was vigorous shaking of clenched fists and then a groan of baffled rage.

“We almost had him this time. If it had not been for these confounded, ill-lighted streets—”

“I would give something,” concluded the shopkeeper, “if we could lay him by the heels.”

“What would you give, citizen Dompierre?” queried a woman in the crowd, with a ribald laugh, “one of your roast capons?”

“Aye, little mother,” he replied jovially, “and a bottle of my best Burgundy to boot, to drink confusion to that meddlesome Englishman and his crowd and a speedy promenade up the steps of the guillotine.”

Monsieur, I assure you that at that moment my heart absolutely stood still. The tempter stood at my elbow and whispered, and I deliberately smothered the call of my conscience. I did what Joseph’s brethren did, what brought Judas Iscariot to hopeless remorse. There was no doubt that the hue and cry was after the two elegantly dressed gentlemen whom I had seen enter the dilapidated house in the Rue Blanche. For a second or two I closed my eyes and deliberately conjured up the vision of Mme. la Marquise fainting for lack of food, and of M. le Vicomte dying for want of sustenance; then I worked my way to the door of the shop and accosted the burly proprietor with as much boldness as I could muster.

“The two Englishmen passed by me at the top of the Rue Blanche,” I said to him. “They went into a house ... I can show you which it is—”

In a moment I was surrounded by a screeching, gesticulating crowd. I told my story as best I could; there was no turning back now from the path of cowardice and of crime. I saw that brute Dompierre pick up the largest roast capon from the front of his shop, together with a bottle of that wine which I had coveted; then he thrust both these treasures into my trembling hands and said:

“En avant!”

And we all started to run up the street, shouting: “Death to the English spies!” I was the hero of the expedition. Dompierre and another man carried me, for I was too weak to go as fast as they wished. I was hugging the capon and the bottle of wine to my heart; I had need to do that, so as to still the insistent call of my conscience, for I felt a coward — a mean, treacherous, abominable coward!

When we reached the house and I pointed it out to Dompierre, the crowd behind us gave a cry of triumph. In the topmost storey a window was thrown open, two heads appeared silhouetted against the light within, and the cry of triumph below was answered by a merry, prolonged laugh from above.

I was too dazed to realise very clearly what happened after that. Dompierre, I know, kicked open the door of the house, and the crowd rushed in, in his wake. I managed to keep my feet and to work my way gradually out of the crowd. I must have gone on mechanically, almost unconsciously, for the next thing that I remember with any distinctness was that I found myself once more speeding down the Rue Blanche, with all the yelling and shouting some little way behind me.

With blind instinct, too, I had clung to the capon and the wine, the price of my infamy. I was terribly weak and felt sick and faint, but I struggled on for a while, until my knees refused me service and I came down on my two hands, whilst the capon rolled away into the gutter, and the bottle of Burgundy fell with a crash against the pavement, scattering its precious contents in every direction.

There I lay, wretched, despairing, hardly able to move, when suddenly I heard rapid and firm footsteps immediately behind me, and the next moment two firm hands had me under the arms, and I heard a voice saying:

"Steady, old friend. Can you get up? There! Is that better?"

The same firm hands raised me to my feet. At first I was too dazed to see anything, but after a moment or two I was able to look around me, and, by the light of a street lanthorn immediately overhead, I recognised the tall, elegantly dressed Englishman and his friend, whom I had just betrayed to the fury of Dompierre and a savage mob.

I thought that I was dreaming, and I suppose that my eyes betrayed the horror which I felt, for the stranger looked at me scrutinisingly for a moment or two, then he gave the quaintest laugh I had ever heard in all my life, and said something to his friend in English, which this time I failed to understand.

Then he turned to me:

"By my faith," he said in perfect French — so that I began to doubt if he was an English spy after all — "I verily believe that you are the clever rogue, eh? who obtained a roast capon and a bottle of wine from that fool Dompierre. He and his boon companions are venting their wrath on you, old compeer; they are calling you liar and traitor and cheat, in the intervals of wrecking what is left of the house, out of which my friend and I have long since escaped by climbing up the neighbouring gutter-pipes and scrambling over the adjoining roofs."

Monsieur, will you believe me when I say that he was actually saying all this in order to comfort me? I could have sworn to that because of the wonderful kindness which shone out of his eyes, even through the good-humoured mockery wherewith he obviously regarded me. Do you know what I did then, monsieur? I just fell on my knees and loudly thanked God that he was safe; at which both he and his friend once again began to laugh, for all the world like two schoolboys who had escaped a whipping, rather than two men who were still threatened with death.

"Then it WAS you!" said the taller stranger, who was still laughing so heartily that he had to wipe his eyes with his exquisite lace handkerchief.

"May God forgive me," I replied.

The next moment his arm was again round me. I clung to him as to a rock, for of a truth I had never felt a grasp so steady and withal so gentle and kindly, as was his around my shoulders. I tried to murmur words of thanks, but again that wretched feeling of sickness and faintness overcame me, and for a second or two it seemed to me as if I were slipping into another world. The stranger's voice came to my ear, as it were through cotton-wool.

"The man is starving," he said. "Shall we take him over to your lodgings, Tony? They are safer than mine. He may be able to walk in a minute or two, if not I can carry him."

My senses at this partly returned to me, and I was able to protest feebly:

"No, no! I must go back — I must — kind sirs," I murmured. "Mme. la Marquise will be getting so anxious."

No sooner were these foolish words out of my mouth than I could have bitten my tongue out for having uttered them; and yet, somehow, it seemed as if it was the stranger's magnetic personality, his magic voice and kindly act towards me, who had so basely sold him to his enemies, which had drawn them out of me. He gave a low, prolonged whistle.

"Mme. la Marquise?" he queried, dropping his voice to a whisper.

Now to have uttered Mme. la Marquise de Mortaine's name here in Lyons, where every aristocrat was termed a traitor and sent without trial to the guillotine, was in itself an act of criminal folly, and yet — you may believe me, monsieur, or not — there was something within me just at that moment that literally compelled me to open my heart out to this stranger, whom I had so basely betrayed, and who requited my abominable crime with such gentleness and mercy. Before I fully realised what I was doing, monsieur, I had blurted out the whole history of Mme. la Marquise's flight and of M. le Vicomte's sickness to him. He drew me under the cover of an open doorway, and he and his friend listened to me without speaking a word until I had told them my pitiable tale to the end.

When I had finished he said quietly:

"Take me to see Mme. la Marquise, old friend. Who knows? perhaps I may be able to help."

Then he turned to his friend.

"Will you wait for me at my lodgings, Tony," he said, "and let Ffoulkes and Hastings know that I may wish to speak with them on my return?"

He spoke like one who had been accustomed all his life to give command, and I marvelled how his friend immediately obeyed him. Then when the latter had disappeared down the dark street, the stranger once more turned to me.

"Lean on my arm, good old friend," he said, "and we must try and walk as quickly as we can. The sooner we allay the anxieties of Mme. la Marquise the better."

I was still hugging the roast capon with one arm, with the other I clung to him as together we walked in the direction of the Rue des Pipots. On the way we halted at a respectable eating-house, where my protector gave me some money wherewith to buy a bottle of good wine and sundry provisions and delicacies which we carried home with us.

Never shall I forget the look of horror which came in Mme. la Marquise's eyes when she saw me entering our miserable attic in the company of a stranger. The last of the little bit of tallow candle flickered in its socket. Madame threw her emaciated arms over her child, just like some poor hunted animal defending its young. I could almost hear the cry of terror which died down in her throat ere it reached her lips. But then, monsieur, to see the light of hope gradually illuminating her pale, wan face as the stranger took her hand and spoke to her — oh! so gently and so kindly — was a sight which filled my poor, half-broken heart with joy.

"The little invalid must be seen by a doctor at once," he said, "after that only can we think of your ultimate safety."

Mme. la Marquise, who herself was terribly weak and ill, burst out crying. "Would I not have taken him to a doctor ere now?" she murmured through her tears. "But there is no doctor in Lyons. Those who have not been arrested as traitors have fled from this stricken

city. And my little Jose is dying for want of medical care.”

“Your pardon, madame,” he rejoined gently, “one of the ablest doctors in France is at present in Lyons—”

“That infamous Laporte,” she broke in, horrified. “He would snatch my sick child from my arms and throw him to the guillotine.”

“He would save your boy from disease,” said the stranger earnestly, “his own professional pride or professional honour, whatever he might choose to call it, would compel him to do that. But the moment the doctor’s work was done, that of the executioner would commence.”

“You see, milor,” moaned Madame in pitiable agony, “that there is no hope for us.”

“Indeed there is,” he replied. “We must get M. le Vicomte well first — after that we shall see.”

“But you are not proposing to bring that infamous Laporte to my child’s bedside!” she cried in horror.

“Would you have your child die here before your eyes,” retorted the stranger, “as he undoubtedly will this night?”

This sounded horribly cruel, and the tone in which it was said was commanding. There was no denying its truth. M. le Vicomte was dying. I could see that. For a moment or two madame remained quite still, with her great eyes, circled with pain and sorrow, fixed upon the stranger. He returned her gaze steadily and kindly, and gradually that frozen look of horror in her pale face gave place to one of deep puzzlement, and through her bloodless lips there came the words, faintly murmured: “Who are you?”

He gave no direct reply, but from his little finger he detached a ring and held it out for her to see. I saw it too, for I was standing close by Mme. la Marquise, and the flickering light of the tallow candle fell full upon the ring. It was of gold, and upon it there was an exquisitely modelled, five-petalled little flower in vivid red enamel.

Madame la Marquise looked at the ring, then once again up into his face. He nodded assent, and my heart seemed even then to stop its beating as I gazed upon his face. Had we not — all of us — heard of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel? And did I not know — far better than Mme. la Marquise herself — the full extent of his gallantry and his self-sacrifice? The hue and cry was after him. Human bloodhounds were even now on his track, and he spoke calmly of walking out again in the streets of Lyons and of affronting that infamous Laporte, who would find glory in sending him to death. I think he guessed what was passing in my mind, for he put a finger up to his lip and pointed significantly to M. le Vicomte.

But it was beautiful to see how completely Mme. la Marquise now trusted him. At his bidding she even ate a little of the food and drank some wine — and I was forced to do likewise. And even when anon he declared his intention of fetching Laporte immediately, she did not flinch. She kissed M. le Vicomte with passionate fervour, and then gave the stranger her solemn promise that the moment he returned she would take refuge in the next room and never move out of it until after Laporte had departed.

When he went I followed him to the top of the stairs. I was speechless with gratitude and also with fears for him. But he took my hand and said, with that same quaint, somewhat inane laugh which was so characteristic of him:

“Be of good cheer, old fellow! Those confounded murderers will not get me this time.”

Less than half an hour later, monsieur, citizen Laporte, one of the most skillful doctors in France and one of the most bloodthirsty tyrants this execrable Revolution has known, was sitting at the bedside of M. le Vicomte de Mortaine, using all the skill, all the knowledge he possessed in order to combat the dread disease of which the child was dying, ere he came to save him — as he cynically remarked in my hearing — for the guillotine.

I heard afterwards how it all came about.

Laporte, it seems, was in the habit of seeing patients in his own house every evening after he had settled all his business for the day. What a strange contradiction in the human heart, eh, monsieur? The tiger turned lamb for the space of one hour in every twenty-four — the butcher turned healer. How well the English milor had gauged the strange personality of that redoubtable man! Professional pride — interest in intricate cases — call it what you will — was the only redeeming feature in Laporte’s abominable character. Everything else in him, every thought, every action was ignoble, cruel and vengeful.

Milor that night mingled with the crowd who waited on the human hyena to be cured of their hurts. It was a motley crowd that filled the dreaded pro-consul’s ante-chamber — men, women and children — all of them too much preoccupied with their own troubles to bestow more than a cursory glance on the stranger who, wrapped in a dark mantle, quietly awaited his turn. One or two muttered curses were flung at the aristo, one or two spat in his direction to express hatred and contempt, then the door which gave on the inner chamber would be flung open — a number called — one patient would walk out, another walk in — and in the ever-recurring incident the stranger for the nonce was forgotten.

His turn came — his number being called — it was the last on the list, and the ante-chamber was now quite empty save for him. He walked into the presence of the pro-consul. Claude Lemoine, who was on guard in the room at the time, told me that just for the space of two seconds the two men looked at one another. Then the stranger threw back his head and said quietly:

“There’s a child dying of pleurisy, or worse, in an attic in the Rue des Pipots. There’s not a doctor left in Lyons to attend on him, and the child will die for want of medical skill. Will you come to him, citizen doctor?”

It seems that for a moment or two Laporte hesitated.

“You look to me uncommonly like an aristo, and therefore a traitor,” he said, “and I’ve half a mind—”

“To call your guard and order my immediate arrest,” broke in milor with a whimsical smile, “but in that case a citizen of France will die for want of a doctor’s care. Let me take you to the child’s bedside, citizen doctor, you can always have me arrested afterwards.”

But Laporte still hesitated.

“How do I know that you are not one of those English spies?” he began.

“Take it that I am,” rejoined milor imperturbably, “and come and see the patient.”

Never had a situation been carried off with so bold a hand. Claude Lemoine declared that Laporte’s mouth literally opened for the call which would have summoned the sergeant of the guard into the room and ordered the summary arrest of this impudent stranger. During the veriest fraction of a second life and death hung in the balance for the gallant English milor. In the heart of Laporte every

evil passion fought the one noble fibre within him. But the instinct of the skilful healer won the battle, and the next moment he had hastily collected what medicaments and appliances he might require, and the two men were soon speeding along the streets in the direction of the Rue des Pipots.

During the whole of that night, milor and Laporte sat together by the bedside of M. le Vicomte. Laporte only went out once in order to fetch what further medicaments he required. Mme. la Marquise took the opportunity of running out of her hiding-place in order to catch a glimpse of her child. I saw her take milor's hand and press it against her heart in silent gratitude. On her knees she begged him to go away and leave her and the boy to their fate. Was it likely that he would go? But she was so insistent that at last he said:

"Madame, let me assure you that even if I were prepared to play the coward's part which you would assign to me, it is not in my power to do so at this moment. Citizen Laporte came to this house under the escort of six picked men of his guard. He has left these men stationed on the landing outside this door."

Madame la Marquise gave a cry of terror, and once more that pathetic look of horror came into her face. Milor took her hand and then pointed to the sick child.

"Madame," he said, "M. le Vicomte is already slightly better. Thanks to medical skill and a child's vigorous hold on life, he will live. The rest is in the hands of God."

Already the heavy footsteps of Laporte were heard upon the creaking stairs. Mme. la Marquise was forced to return to her hiding-place.

Soon after dawn he went. M. le Vicomte was then visibly easier. Laporte had all along paid no heed to me, but I noticed that once or twice during his long vigil by the sick-bed his dark eyes beneath their overhanging brows shot a quick suspicious look at the door behind which cowered Mme. la Marquise. I had absolutely no doubt in my mind then that he knew quite well who his patient was.

He gave certain directions to milor — there were certain fresh medicaments to be got during the day. While he spoke there was a sinister glint in his eyes — half cynical, wholly menacing — as he looked up into the calm, impassive face of milor.

"It is essential for the welfare of the patient that these medicaments be got for him during the day," he said dryly, "and the guard have orders to allow you to pass in and out. But you need have no fear," he added significantly, "I will leave an escort outside the house to accompany you on your way."

He gave a mocking, cruel laugh, the meaning of which was unmistakable. His well-drilled human bloodhounds would be on the track of the English spy, whenever the latter dared to venture out into the streets.

Mme. la Marquise and I were prisoners for the day. We spent it in watching alternately beside M. le Vicomte. But milor came and went as freely as if he had not been carrying his precious life in his hands every time that he ventured outside the house.

In the evening Laporte returned to see his patient, and again the following morning, and the next evening. M. le Vicomte was making rapid progress towards recovery.

The third day in the morning Laporte pronounced his patient to be out of danger, but said that he would nevertheless come again to see him at the usual hour in the evening. Directly he had gone, milor went out in order to bring in certain delicacies of which the invalid was now allowed to partake. I persuaded Madame to lie down and have a couple of hours' good sleep in the inner attic, while I stayed to watch over the child.

To my horror, hardly had I taken up my stand at the foot of the bed when Laporte returned; he muttered something as he entered about having left some important appliance behind, but I was quite convinced that he had been on the watch until milor was out of sight, and then slipped back in order to find me and Madame here alone.

He gave a glance at the child and another at the door of the inner attic, then he said in a loud voice:

"Yes, another twenty-four hours and my duties as doctor will cease and those of patriot will re-commence. But Mme. la Marquise de Mortaine need no longer be in any anxiety about her son's health, nor will Mme. la Guillotine be cheated of a pack of rebels."

He laughed, and was on the point of turning on his heel when the door which gave on the smaller attic was opened and Mme. la Marquise appeared upon the threshold.

Monsieur, I had never seen her look more beautiful than she did now in her overwhelming grief. Her face was as pale as death, her eyes, large and dilated, were fixed upon the human monster who had found it in his heart to speak such cruel words. Clad in a miserable, threadbare gown, her rich brown hair brought to the top of her head like a crown, she looked more regal than any queen.

But proud as she was, monsieur, she yet knelt at the feet of that wretch. Yes, knelt, and embraced his knees and pleaded in such pitiable accents as would have melted the heart of a stone. She pleaded, monsieur — ah, not for herself. She pleaded for her child and for me, her faithful servant, and she pleaded for the gallant gentleman who had risked his life for the sake of the child, who was nothing to him.

"Take me!" she said. "I come of a race that have always known how to die! But what harm has that innocent child done in this world? What harm has poor old Jean-Pierre done, and, oh ... is the world so full of brave and noble men that the bravest of them all be so unjustly sent to death?"

Ah, monsieur, any man, save one of those abject products of that hideous Revolution, would have listened to such heartrending accents. But this man only laughed and turned on his heel without a word.

Shall I ever forget the day that went by? Mme. la Marquise was well-nigh prostrate with terror, and it was heartrending to watch the noble efforts which she made to amuse M. le Vicomte. The only gleams of sunshine which came to us out of our darkness were the brief appearances of milor. Outside we could hear the measured tramp of the guard that had been set there to keep us close prisoners. They were relieved every six hours, and, in fact, we were as much under arrest as if we were already incarcerated in one of the prisons of Lyons.

At about four o'clock in the afternoon milor came back to us after a brief absence. He stayed for a little while playing with M. le Vicomte. Just before leaving he took Madame's hand in his and said very earnestly, and sinking his voice to the merest whisper:

"To-night! Fear nothing! Be ready for anything! Remember that the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel have never failed to succour, and that I hereby pledge you mine honour that you and those you care for will be out of Lyons this night."

He was gone, leaving us to marvel at his strange words. Mme. la Marquise after that was just like a person in a dream. She hardly spoke to me, and the only sound that passed her lips was a quaint little lullaby which she sang to M. le Vicomte ere he dropped off to sleep.

The hours went by leaden-footed. At every sound on the stairs Madame started like a frightened bird. That infamous Laporte usually paid his visits at about eight o'clock in the evening, and after it became quite dark, Madame sat at the tiny window, and I felt that she was counting the minutes which still lay between her and the dreaded presence of that awful man.

At a quarter before eight o'clock we heard the usual heavy footfall on the stairs. Madame started up as if she had been struck. She ran to the bed — almost like one demented, and wrapping the one poor blanket round M. le Vicomte, she seized him in her arms. Outside we could hear Laporte's raucous voice speaking to the guard. His usual query: "Is all well?" was answered by the brief: "All well, citizen." Then he asked if the English spy were within, and the sentinel replied: "No, citizen, he went out at about five o'clock and has not come back since."

"Not come back since five o'clock?" said Laporte with a loud curse.

"Pardi! I trust that that fool Caudy has not allowed him to escape."

"I saw Caudy about an hour ago, citizen," said the man.

"Did he say anything about the Englishman then?"

It seemed to us, who were listening to this conversation with bated breath, that the man hesitated a moment ere he replied; then he spoke with obvious nervousness.

"As a matter of fact, citizen," he said, "Caudy thought then that the Englishman was inside the house, whilst I was equally sure that I had seen him go downstairs an hour before."

"A thousand devils!" cried Laporte with a savage oath, "if I find that you, citizen sergeant, or Caudy have blundered there will be trouble for you."

To the accompaniment of a great deal more swearing he suddenly kicked open the door of our attic with his boot, and then came to a standstill on the threshold with his hands in the pockets of his breeches and his legs planted wide apart, face to face with Mme. la Marquise, who confronted him now, herself like a veritable tigress who is defending her young.

He gave a loud, mocking laugh.

"Ah, the aristos!" he cried, "waiting for that cursed Englishman, what? to drag you and your brat out of the claws of the human tiger.... Not so, my fine ci-devant Marquise. The brat is no longer sick — he is well enough, anyhow, to breathe the air of the prisons of Lyons for a few days pending a final rest in the arms of Mme. la Guillotine. Citizen sergeant," he called over his shoulder, "escort these aristos to my carriage downstairs. When the Englishman returns, tell him he will find his friends under the tender care of Doctor Laporte. En avant, little mother," he added, as he gripped Mme. la Marquise tightly by the arm, "and you, old scarecrow," he concluded, speaking to me over his shoulder, "follow the citizen sergeant, or — —"

Mme. la Marquise made no resistance. As I told you, she had been, since dusk, like a person in a dream; so what could I do but follow her noble example? Indeed, I was too dazed to do otherwise.

We all went stumbling down the dark, rickety staircase, Laporte leading the way with Mme. la Marquise, who had M. le Vicomte tightly clasped in her arms. I followed with the sergeant, whose hand was on my shoulder; I believe that two soldiers walked behind, but of that I cannot be sure.

At the bottom of the stairs through the open door of the house I caught sight of the vague outline of a large barouche, the lanthorns of which threw a feeble light upon the cruppers of two horses and of a couple of men sitting on the box.

Mme. la Marquise stepped quietly into the carriage. Laporte followed her, and I was bundled in in his wake by the rough hands of the soldiery. Just before the order was given to start, Laporte put his head out of the window and shouted to the sergeant:

"When you see Caudy tell him to report himself to me at once. I will be back here in half an hour; keep strict guard as before until then, citizen sergeant."

The next moment the coachman cracked his whip, Laporte called loudly, "En avant!" and the heavy barouche went rattling along the ill-paved streets.

Inside the carriage all was silence. I could hear Mme. la Marquise softly whispering to M. le Vicomte, and I marvelled how wondrously calm — nay, cheerful, she could be. Then suddenly I heard a sound which of a truth did make my heart stop its beating. It was a quaint and prolonged laugh which I once thought I would never hear again on this earth. It came from the corner of the barouche next to where Mme. la Marquise was so tenderly and gaily crooning to her child. And a kindly voice said merrily:

"In half an hour we shall be outside Lyons. To-morrow we'll be across the Swiss frontier. We've cheated that old tiger after all. What say you, Mme. la Marquise?"

It was milor's voice, and he was as merry as a school-boy.

"I told you, old Jean-Pierre," he added, as he placed that firm hand which I loved so well upon my knee, "I told you that those confounded murderers would not get me this time."

And to think that I did not know him, as he stood less than a quarter of an hour ago upon the threshold of our attic in the hideous guise of that abominable Laporte. He had spent two days in collecting old clothes that resembled those of that infamous wretch, and in taking possession of one of the derelict rooms in the house in the Rue des Pipots. Then while we were expecting every moment that Laporte would order our arrest, milor assumed the personality of the monster, hoodwinked the sergeant on the dark staircase, and by that wonderfully audacious coup saved Mme. la Marquise, M. le Vicomte and my humble self from the guillotine.

Money, of which he had plenty, secured us immunity on the way, and we were in safety over the Swiss frontier, leaving Laporte to eat out his tigerish heart with baffled rage.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH

Being a fragment from the diary of Valentine Lemercier, in the possession of her great-granddaughter.

We were such a happy family before this terrible Revolution broke out; we lived rather simply, but very comfortably, in our dear old home just on the borders of the forest of Compiègne. Jean and Andre were the twins; just fifteen years old they were when King Louis was deposed from the throne of France which God had given him, and sent to prison like a common criminal, with our beautiful Queen Marie Antoinette and the Royal children, and Madame Elizabeth, who was so beloved by the poor!

Ah! that seems very, very long ago now. No doubt you know better than I do all that happened in our beautiful land of France and in lovely Paris about that time: goods and property confiscated, innocent men, women, and children condemned to death for acts of treason which they had never committed.

It was in August last year that they came to “Mon Repos” and arrested papa, and maman, and us four young ones and dragged us to Paris, where we were imprisoned in a narrow and horribly dank vault in the Abbaye, where all day and night through the humid stone walls we heard cries and sobs and moans from poor people, who no doubt were suffering the same sorrows and the same indignities as we were.

I had just passed my nineteenth birthday, and Marguerite was only thirteen. Maman was a perfect angel during that terrible time; she kept up our courage and our faith in God in a way that no one else could have done. Every night and morning we knelt round her knee and papa sat close beside her, and we prayed to God for deliverance from our own afflictions, and for the poor people who were crying and moaning all the day.

But of what went on outside our prison walls we had not an idea, though sometimes poor papa would brave the warder’s brutalities and ask him questions of what was happening in Paris every day.

“They are hanging all the aristos to the street-lamps of the city,” the man would reply with a cruel laugh, “and it will be your turn next.”

We had been in prison for about a fortnight, when one day — oh! shall I ever forget it? — we heard in the distance a noise like the rumbling of thunder; nearer and nearer it came, and soon the sound became less confused, cries and shrieks could be heard above that rumbling din; but so weird and menacing did those cries seem that instinctively — though none of us knew what they meant — we all felt a nameless terror grip our hearts.

Oh! I am not going to attempt the awful task of describing to you all the horrors of that never-to-be-forgotten day. People, who to-day cannot speak without a shudder of the September massacres, have not the remotest conception of what really happened on that awful second day of that month.

We are all at peace and happy now, but whenever my thoughts fly back to that morning, whenever the ears of memory recall those hideous yells of fury and of hate, coupled with the equally horrible cries for pity, which pierced through the walls behind which the six of us were crouching, trembling, and praying, whenever I think of it all my heart still beats violently with that same nameless dread which held it in its deathly grip then.

Hundreds of men, women, and children were massacred in the prisons of that day — it was a St. Bartholomew even more hideous than the last.

Maman was trying in vain to keep our thoughts fixed upon God — papa sat on the stone bench, his elbows resting on his knees, his head buried in his hands; but maman was kneeling on the floor, with her dear arms encircling us all and her trembling lips moving in continuous prayer.

We felt that we were facing death — and what a death, O my God!

Suddenly the small grated window — high up in the dank wall — became obscured. I was the first to look up, but the cry of terror which rose from my heart was choked ere it reached my throat.

Jean and Andre looked up, too, and they shrieked, and so did Marguerite, and papa jumped up and ran to us and stood suddenly between us and the window like a tiger defending its young.

But we were all of us quite silent now. The children did not even cry; they stared, wide-eyed, paralysed with fear.

Only maman continued to pray, and we could hear papa’s rapid and stertorous breathing as he watched what was going on at that window above.

Heavy blows were falling against the masonry round the grating, and we could hear the nerve-racking sound of a file working on the iron bars; and farther away, below the window, those awful yells of human beings transformed by hate and fury into savage beasts.

How long this horrible suspense lasted I cannot now tell you; the next thing I remember clearly is a number of men in horrible ragged clothing pouring into our vault-like prison from the window above; the next moment they rushed at us simultaneously — or so it seemed to me, for I was just then recommending my soul to God, so certain was I that in that same second I would cease to live.

It was all like a dream, for instead of the horrible shriek of satisfied hate which we were all expecting to hear, a whispering voice, commanding and low, struck our ears and dragged us, as it were, from out the abyss of despair into the sudden light of hope.

“If you will trust us,” the voice whispered, “and not be afraid, you will be safely out of Paris within an hour.”

Papa was the first to realise what was happening; he had never lost his presence of mind even during the darkest moment of this terrible time, and he said quite calmly and steadily now:

“What must we do?”

“Persuade the little ones not to be afraid, not to cry, to be as still and silent as may be,” continued the voice, which I felt must be that of one of God’s own angels, so exquisitely kind did it sound to my ear.

“They will be quiet and still without persuasion,” said papa; “eh, children?”

And Jean, Andre, and Marguerite murmured: “Yes!” whilst maman and I drew them closer to us and said everything we could think of to make them still more brave.

And the whispering, commanding voice went on after awhile:

"Now will you allow yourselves to be muffled and bound, and, after that, will you swear that whatever happens, whatever you may see or hear, you will neither move nor speak? Not only your own lives, but those of many brave men will depend upon your fulfilment of this oath."

Papa made no reply save to raise his hand and eyes up to where God surely was watching over us all. Maman said in her gentle, even voice:

"For myself and my children, I swear to do all that you tell us."

A great feeling of confidence had entered into her heart, just as it had done into mine. We looked at one another and knew that we were both thinking of the same thing: we were thinking of the brave Englishman and his gallant little band of heroes, about whom we had heard many wonderful tales — how they had rescued a number of innocent people who were unjustly threatened with the guillotine; and we all knew that the tall figure, disguised in horrible rags, who spoke to us with such a gentle yet commanding voice, was the man whom rumour credited with supernatural powers, and who was known by the mysterious name of "The Scarlet Pimpernel."

Hardly had we sworn to do his bidding than his friends most unceremoniously threw great pieces of sacking over our heads, and then proceeded to tie ropes round our bodies. At least, I know that that is what one of them was doing to me, and from one or two whispered words of command which reached my ear I concluded that papa and maman and the children were being dealt with in the same summary way.

I felt hot and stifled under that rough bit of sacking, but I would not have moved or even sighed for worlds. Strangely enough, as soon as my eyes and ears were shut off from the sounds and sights immediately round me, I once more became conscious of the horrible and awful din which was going on, not only on the other side of our prison walls, but inside the whole of the Abbaye building and in the street beyond.

Once more I heard those terrible howls of rage and of satisfied hatred, uttered by the assassins who were being paid by the government of our beautiful country to butcher helpless prisoners in their hundreds.

Suddenly I felt myself hoisted up off my feet and slung up on to a pair of shoulders that must have been very powerful indeed, for I am no light weight, and once more I heard the voice, the very sound of which was delight, quite close to my ear this time, giving a brief and comprehensive command:

"All ready! — remember your part — en avant!"

Then it added in English. "Here, Tony, you start kicking against the door whilst we begin to shout!"

I loved those few words of English, and hoped that maman had heard them too, for it would confirm her — as it did me — in the happy knowledge that God and a brave man had taken our rescue in hand.

But from that moment we might have all been in the very ante-chamber of hell. I could hear the violent kicks against the heavy door of our prison, and our brave rescuers seemed suddenly to be transformed into a cageful of wild beasts. Their shouts and yells were as horrible as any that came to us from the outside, and I must say that the gentle, firm voice which I had learnt to love was as execrable as any I could hear.

Apparently the door would not yield, as the blows against it became more and more violent, and presently from somewhere above my head — the window presumably — there came a rough call, and a raucous laugh:

"Why? what in the name of — is happening here?"

And the voice near me answered back equally roughly: "A quarry of six — but we are caught in this confounded trap — get the door open for us, citizen — we want to get rid of this booty and go in search for more."

A horrible laugh was the reply from above, and the next instant I heard a terrific crash; the door had at last been burst open, either from within or without, I could not tell which, and suddenly all the din, the cries, the groans, the hideous laughter and bibulous songs which had sounded muffled up to now burst upon us with all their hideousness.

That was, I think, the most awful moment of that truly fearful hour. I could not have moved then, even had I wished or been able to do so; but I knew that between us all and a horrible, yelling, murdering mob there was now nothing — except the hand of God and the heroism of a band of English gentlemen.

Together they gave a cry — as loud, as terrifying as any that were uttered by the butchering crowd in the building, and with a wild rush they seemed to plunge with us right into the thick of the awful melee.

At least, that is what it all felt like to me, and afterwards I heard from our gallant rescuer himself that that is exactly what he and his friends did. There were eight of them altogether, and we four young ones had each been hoisted on a pair of devoted shoulders, whilst maman and papa were each carried by two men.

I was lying across the finest pair of shoulders in the world, and close to me was beating the bravest heart on God's earth.

Thus burdened, these eight noble English gentlemen charged right through an army of butchering, howling brutes, they themselves howling with the fiercest of them.

All around me I heard weird and terrific cries: "What ho! citizens — what have you there?"

"Six aristos!" shouted my hero boldly as he rushed on, forging his way through the crowd.

"What are you doing with them?" yelled a raucous voice.

"Food for the starving fish in the river," was the ready response. "Stand aside, citizen," he added, with a round curse; "I have my orders from citizen Danton himself about these six aristos. You hinder me at your peril."

He was challenged over and over again in the same way, and so were his friends who were carrying papa and maman and the children; but they were always ready with a reply, ready with an invective or a curse; with eyes that could not see, one could imagine them as hideous, as vengeful, as cruel as the rest of the crowd.

I think that soon I must have fainted from sheer excitement and terror, for I remember nothing more till I felt myself deposited on a hard floor, propped against the wall, and the stifling piece of sacking taken off my head and face.

I looked around me, dazed and bewildered; gradually the horrors of the past hour came back to me, and I had to close my eyes again, for I felt sick and giddy with the sheer memory of it all.

But presently I felt stronger and looked around me again. Jean and Andre were squatting in a corner close by, gazing wide-eyed at the group of men in filthy, ragged clothing, who sat round a deal table in the centre of a small, ill-furnished room.

Maman was lying on a horsehair sofa at the other end of the room, with Marguerite beside her, and papa sat in a low chair by her side, holding her hand.

The voice I loved was speaking in its quaint, somewhat drawly cadence:

"You are quite safe now, my dear Monsieur Lemercier," it said; "after Madame and the young people have had a rest, some of my friends will find you suitable disguises, and they will escort you out of Paris, as they have some really genuine passports in their possessions, which we obtain from time to time through the agency of a personage highly placed in this murdering government, and with the help of English banknotes. Those passports are not always unchallenged, I must confess," added my hero with a quaint laugh; "but to-night everyone is busy murdering in one part of Paris, so the other parts are comparatively safe."

Then he turned to one of his friends and spoke to him in English:

"You had better see this through, Tony," he said, "with Hastings and Mackenzie. Three of you will be enough; I shall have need of the others."

No one seemed to question his orders. He had spoken, and the others made ready to obey. Just then papa spoke up:

"How are we going to thank you, sir?" he asked, speaking broken English, but with his habitual dignity of manner.

"By leaving your welfare in our hands, Monsieur," replied our gallant rescuer quietly.

Papa tried to speak again, but the Englishman put up his hand to stop any further talk.

"There is no time now, Monsieur," he said with gentle courtesy. "I must leave you, as I have much work yet to do."

"Where are you going, Blakeney?" asked one of the others.

"Back to the Abbaye prison," he said; "there are other women and children to be rescued there!"

THE TRAITOR

Not one of them had really trusted him for some time now. Heaven and his conscience alone knew what had changed my Lord Kulmsted from a loyal friend and keen sportsman into a surly and dissatisfied adherent — adherent only in name.

Some say that lack of money had embittered him. He was a confirmed gambler, and had been losing over-heavily of late; and the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel demanded sacrifices of money at times from its members, as well as of life if the need arose. Others averred that jealousy against the chief had outweighed Kulmsted's honesty. Certain it is that his oath of fealty to the League had long ago been broken in the spirit. Treachery hovered in the air.

But the Scarlet Pimpernel himself, with that indomitable optimism of his, and almost maddening insouciance, either did not believe in Kulmsted's disloyalty or chose not to heed it.

He even asked him to join the present expedition — one of the most dangerous undertaken by the League for some time, and which had for its object the rescue of some women of the late unfortunate Marie Antoinette's household: maids and faithful servants, ruthlessly condemned to die for their tender adherence to a martyred queen. And yet eighteen pairs of faithful lips had murmured words of warning.

It was towards the end of November, 1793. The rain was beating down in a monotonous drip, drip, drip on to the roof of a derelict house in the Rue Berthier. The wan light of a cold winter's morning peeped in through the curtainless window and touched with its weird grey brush the pallid face of a young girl — a mere child — who sat in a dejected attitude on a rickety chair, with elbows leaning on the rough deal table before her, and thin, grimy fingers wandering with pathetic futility to her tearful eyes.

In the farther angle of the room a tall figure in dark clothes was made one, by the still lingering gloom, with the dense shadows beyond.

"We have starved," said the girl, with rebellious tears. "Father and I and the boys are miserable enough, God knows; but we have always been honest."

From out the shadows in that dark corner of the room there came the sound of an oath quickly suppressed.

"Honest!" exclaimed the man, with a harsh, mocking laugh, which made the girl wince as if with physical pain. "Is it honest to harbour the enemies of your country? Is it honest—"

But quickly he checked himself, biting his lips with vexation, feeling that his present tactics were not like to gain the day.

He came out of the gloom and approached the girl with every outward sign of eagerness. He knelt on the dusty floor beside her, his arms stole round her meagre shoulders, and his harsh voice was subdued to tones of gentleness.

"I was only thinking of your happiness, Yvonne," he said tenderly; "of poor blind papa and the two boys to whom you have been such a devoted little mother. My only desire is that you should earn the gratitude of your country by denouncing her most bitter enemy — an act of patriotism which will place you and those for whom you care for ever beyond the reach of sorrow or of want."

The voice, the appeal, the look of love, was more than the poor, simple girl could resist. Milor was so handsome, so kind, so good.

It had all been so strange: these English aristocrats coming here, she knew not whence, and who seemed fugitives even though they had plenty of money to spend. Two days ago they had sought shelter like malefactors escaped from justice — in this same tumbledown, derelict house where she, Yvonne, with her blind father and two little brothers, crept in of nights, or when the weather was too rough for them all to stand and beg in the streets of Paris.

There were five of them altogether, and one seemed to be the chief. He was very tall, and had deep blue eyes, and a merry voice that went echoing along the worm-eaten old rafters. But milor — the one whose arms were encircling her even now — was the handsomest among them all. He had sought Yvonne out on the very first night when she had crawled shivering to that corner of the room where she usually slept.

The English aristocrats had frightened her at first, and she was for flying from the derelict house with her family and seeking shelter elsewhere; but he who appeared to be the chief had quickly reassured her. He seemed so kind and good, and talked so gently to blind papa, and made such merry jests with Francois and Clovis that she herself could scarce refrain from laughing through her tears.

But later on in the night, milor — her milor, as she soon got to call him — came and talked so beautifully that she, poor girl, felt as if no music could ever sound quite so sweetly in her ear.

That was two days ago, and since then milor had often talked to her in the lonely, abandoned house, and Yvonne had felt as if she dwelt in Heaven. She still took blind papa and the boys out to beg in the streets, but in the morning she prepared some hot coffee for the English aristocrats, and in the evening she cooked them some broth. Oh! they gave her money lavishly; but she quite understood that they were in hiding, though what they had to fear, being English, she could not understand.

And now milor — her milor — was telling her that these Englishmen, her friends, were spies and traitors, and that it was her duty to tell citizen Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety all about them and their mysterious doings. And poor Yvonne was greatly puzzled and deeply distressed, because, of course, whatever milor said, that was the truth; and yet her conscience cried out within her poor little bosom, and the thought of betraying those kind Englishmen was horrible to her.

"Yvonne," whispered milor in that endearing voice of his, which was like the loveliest music in her ear, "my little Yvonne, you do trust me, do you not?"

"With all my heart, milor," she murmured fervently.

"Then, would you believe it of me that I would betray a real friend?"

"I believe, milor, that whatever you do is right and good."

A sigh of infinite relief escaped his lips.

"Come, that's better!" he said, patting her cheek kindly with his hand. "Now, listen to me, little one. He who is the chief among us here is the most unscrupulous and daring rascal whom the world has ever known. He it is who is called the 'Scarlet Pimpernel!'"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" murmured Yvonne, her eyes dilated with superstitious awe, for she too had heard of the mysterious Englishman and of his followers, who rescued aristocrats and traitors from the death to which the tribunal of the people had justly

condemned them, and on whom the mighty hand of the Committee of Public Safety had never yet been able to fall.

"This Scarlet Pimpernel," said milor earnestly after a while, "is also mine own most relentless enemy. With lies and promises he induced me to join him in his work of spying and of treachery, forcing me to do this work against which my whole soul rebels. You can save me from this hated bondage, little one. You can make me free to live again, make me free to love and place my love at your feet."

His voice had become exquisitely tender, and his lips, as he whispered the heavenly words, were quite close to her ear. He, a great gentleman, loved the miserable little waif whose kindred consisted of a blind father and two half-starved little brothers, and whose only home was this miserable hovel, whence milor's graciousness and bounty would soon take her.

Do you think that Yvonne's sense of right and wrong, of honesty and treachery, should have been keener than that primeval instinct of a simple-hearted woman to throw herself trustingly into the arms of the man who has succeeded in winning her love?

Yvonne, subdued, enchanted, murmured still through her tears:

"What would milor have me do?"

Lord Kulmsted rose from his knees satisfied.

"Listen to me, Yvonne," he said. "You are acquainted with the Englishman's plans, are you not?"

"Of course," she replied simply. "He has had to trust me."

"Then you know that at sundown this afternoon I and the three others are to leave for Courbevoie on foot, where we are to obtain what horses we can whilst awaiting the chief."

"I did not know whither you and the other three gentlemen were going, milor," she replied; "but I did know that some of you were to make a start at four o'clock, whilst I was to wait here for your leader and prepare some supper against his coming."

"At what time did he tell you that he would come?"

"He did not say; but he did tell me that when he returns he will have friends with him — a lady and two little children. They will be hungry and cold. I believe that they are in great danger now, and that the brave English gentleman means to take them away from this awful Paris to a place of safety."

"The brave English gentleman, my dear," retorted milor, with a sneer, "is bent on some horrible work of spying. The lady and the two children are, no doubt, innocent tools in his hands, just as I am, and when he no longer needs them he will deliver them over to the Committee of Public Safety, who will, of a surety, condemn them to death. That will also be my fate, Yvonne, unless you help me now."

"Oh, no, no!" she exclaimed fervently. "Tell me what to do, milor, and I will do it."

"At sundown," he said, sinking his voice so low that even she could scarcely hear, "when I and the three others have started on our way, go straight to the house I spoke to you about in the Rue Dauphine — you know where it is?"

"Oh, yes, milor."

"You will know the house by its tumbledown portico and the tattered red flag that surmounts it. Once there, push the door open and walk in boldly. Then ask to speak with citizen Robespierre."

"Robespierre?" exclaimed the child in terror.

"You must not be afraid, Yvonne," he said earnestly; "you must think of me and of what you are doing for me. My word on it — Robespierre will listen to you most kindly."

"What shall I tell him?" she murmured.

"That a mysterious party of Englishmen are in hiding in this house — that their chief is known among them as the Scarlet Pimpernel. The rest leave to Robespierre's discretion. You see how simple it is?"

It was indeed very simple! Nor did the child recoil any longer from the ugly task which milor, with suave speech and tender voice, was so ardently seeking to impose on her.

A few more words of love, which cost him nothing, a few kisses which cost him still less, since the wench loved him, and since she was young and pretty, and Yvonne was as wax in the hands of the traitor.

Silence reigned in the low-raftered room on the ground floor of the house in the Rue Dauphine.

Citizen Robespierre, chairman of the Cordeliers Club, the most bloodthirsty, most Evolutionary club of France, had just re-entered the room.

He walked up to the centre table, and through the close atmosphere, thick with tobacco smoke, he looked round on his assembled friends.

"We have got him," he said at last curtly.

"Got him! Whom?" came in hoarse cries from every corner of the room.

"That Englishman," replied the demagogue, "the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

A prolonged shout rose in response — a shout not unlike that of a caged herd of hungry wild beasts to whom a succulent morsel of flesh has unexpectedly been thrown.

"Where is he?" "Where did you get him?" "Alive or dead?" And many more questions such as these were hurled at the speaker from every side.

Robespierre, calm, impassive, immaculately neat in his tightly fitting coat, his smart breeches, and his lace cravat, waited awhile until the din had somewhat subsided. Then he said calmly:

"The Scarlet Pimpernel is in hiding in one of the derelict houses in the Rue Berthier."

Snarls of derision as vigorous as the former shouts of triumph drowned the rest of his speech.

"Bah! How often has that cursed Scarlet Pimpernel been said to be alone in a lonely house? Citizen Chauvelin has had him at his mercy several times in lonely houses."

And the speaker, a short, thick-set man with sparse black hair plastered over a greasy forehead, his shirt open at the neck, revealing a powerful chest and rough, hairy skin, spat in ostentatious contempt upon the floor.

"Therefore will we not boast of his capture yet, citizen Roger," resumed Robespierre imperturbably. "I tell you where the Englishman is. Do you look to it that he does not escape."

The heat in the room had become intolerable. From the grimy ceiling an oil-lamp, flickering low, threw lurid, ruddy lights on tricolour cockades, on hands that seemed red with the blood of innocent victims of lust and hate, and on faces glowing with desire and with anticipated savage triumph.

"Who is the informer?" asked Roger at last.

"A girl," replied Robespierre curtly. "Yvonne Lebeau, by name; she and her family live by begging. There are a blind father and two boys; they herd together at night in the derelict house in the Rue Berthier. Five Englishmen have been in hiding there these past few days. One of them is their leader. The girl believes him to be the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Why has she not spoken of this before?" muttered one of the crowd, with some scepticism.

"Frightened, I suppose. Or the Englishman paid her to hold her tongue."

"Where is the girl now?"

"I am sending her straight home, a little ahead of us. Her presence should reassure the Englishman whilst we make ready to surround the house. In the meanwhile, I have sent special messengers to every gate of Paris with strict orders to the guard not to allow anyone out of the city until further orders from the Committee of Public Safety. And now," he added, throwing back his head with a gesture of proud challenge, "citizens, which of you will go man-hunting to-night?"

This time the strident roar of savage exultation was loud and deep enough to shake the flickering lamp upon its chain.

A brief discussion of plans followed, and Roger — he with the broad, hairy chest and that gleam of hatred for ever lurking in his deep-set, shifty eyes — was chosen the leader of the party.

Thirty determined and well-armed patriots set out against one man, who mayhap had supernatural powers. There would, no doubt, be some aristocrats, too, in hiding in the derelict house — the girl Lebeau, it seems, had spoken of a woman and two children. Bah! These would not count. It would be thirty to one, so let the Scarlet Pimpernel look to himself.

From the towers of Notre Dame the big bell struck the hour of six, as thirty men in ragged shirts and torn breeches, shivering beneath a cold November drizzle, began slowly to wend their way towards the Rue Berthier.

They walked on in silence, not heeding the cold or the rain, but with eyes fixed in the direction of their goal, and nostrils quivering in the evening air with the distant scent of blood.

At the top of the Rue Berthier the party halted. On ahead — some two hundred metres farther — Yvonne Lebeau's little figure, with her ragged skirt pulled over her head and her bare feet pattering in the mud, was seen crossing one of those intermittent patches of light formed by occasional flickering street lamps, and then was swallowed up once more by the inky blackness beyond.

The Rue Berthier is a long, narrow, ill-paved and ill-lighted street, composed of low and irregular houses, which abut on the line of fortifications at the back, and are therefore absolutely inaccessible save from the front.

Midway down the street a derelict house rears ghostly debris of roofs and chimney-stacks upward to the sky. A tiny square of yellow light, blinking like a giant eye through a curtainless window, pierced the wall of the house. Roger pointed to that light.

"That," he said, "is the quarry where our fox has run to earth."

No one said anything; but the dank night air seemed suddenly alive with all the passions of hate let loose by thirty beating hearts.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, who had tricked them, mocked them, fooled them so often, was there, not two hundred metres away; and they were thirty to one, and all determined and desperate.

The darkness was intense.

Silently now the party approached the house, then again they halted, within sixty metres of it.

"Hist!"

The whisper could scarce be heard, so low was it, like the sighing of the wind through a misty veil.

"Who is it?" came in quick challenge from Roger.

"I — Yvonne Lebeau!"

"Is he there?" was the eager whispered query.

"Not yet. But he may come at any moment. If he saw a crowd round the house, mayhap he would not come."

"He cannot see a crowd. The night is as dark as pitch."

"He can see in the darkest night," and the girl's voice sank to an awed whisper, "and he can hear through a stone wall."

Instinctively, Roger shuddered. The superstitious fear which the mysterious personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel evoked in the heart of every Terrorist had suddenly seized this man in its grip.

Try as he would, he did not feel as valiant as he had done when first he emerged at the head of his party from under the portico of the Cordeliers Club, and it was with none too steady a voice that he ordered the girl roughly back to the house. Then he turned once more to his men.

The plan of action had been decided on in the Club, under the presidency of Robespierre; it only remained to carry the plans through with success.

From the side of the fortifications there was, of course, nothing to fear. In accordance with military regulations, the walls of the houses there rose sheer from the ground without doors or windows, whilst the broken-down parapets and dilapidated roofs towered

forty feet above the ground.

The derelict itself was one of a row of houses, some inhabited, others quite abandoned. It was the front of that row of houses, therefore, that had to be kept in view. Marshalled by Roger, the men flattened their meagre bodies against the walls of the houses opposite, and after that there was nothing to do but wait.

To wait in the darkness of the night, with a thin, icy rain soaking through ragged shirts and tattered breeches, with bare feet frozen by the mud of the road — to wait in silence while turbulent hearts beat well-nigh to bursting — to wait for food whilst hunger gnaws the bowels — to wait for drink whilst the parched tongue cleaves to the roof of the mouth — to wait for revenge whilst the hours roll slowly by and the cries of the darkened city are stilled one by one!

Once — when a distant bell tolled the hour of ten — a loud prolonged laugh, almost impudent in its suggestion of merry insouciance, echoed through the weird silence of the night.

Roger felt that the man nearest to him shivered at that sound, and he heard a volley or two of muttered oaths.

"The fox seems somewhere near," he whispered. "Come within. We'll wait for him inside his hole."

He led the way across the street, some of the men following him.

The door of the derelict house had been left on the latch. Roger pushed it open.

Silence and gloom here reigned supreme; utter darkness, too, save for a narrow streak of light which edged the framework of a door on the right. Not a sound stirred the quietude of this miserable hovel, only the creaking of boards beneath the men's feet as they entered.

Roger crossed the passage and opened the door on the right. His friends pressed closely round to him and peeped over his shoulder into the room beyond.

A guttering piece of tallow candle, fixed to an old tin pot, stood in the middle of the floor, and its feeble, flickering light only served to accentuate the darkness that lay beyond its range. One or two rickety chairs and a rough deal table showed vaguely in the gloom, and in the far corner of the room there lay a bundle of what looked like heaped-up rags, but from which there now emerged the sound of heavy breathing and also a little cry of fear.

"Yvonne," came in feeble, querulous accents from that same bundle of wretchedness, "are these the English milors come back at last?"

"No, no, father," was the quick whispered reply.

Roger swore a loud oath, and two puny voices began to whimper piteously.

"It strikes me the wench has been fooling us," muttered one of the men savagely.

The girl had struggled to her feet. She crouched in the darkness, and two little boys, half-naked and shivering, were clinging to her skirts. The rest of the human bundle seemed to consist of an oldish man, with long, gaunt legs and arms blue with the cold. He turned vague, wide-open eyes in the direction whence had come the harsh voices.

"Are they friends, Yvonne?" he asked anxiously.

The girl did her best to reassure him.

"Yes, yes, father," she whispered close to his ear, her voice scarce above her breath; "they are good citizens who hoped to find the English milor here. They are disappointed that he has not yet come."

"Ah! but he will come, of a surety," said the old man in that querulous voice of his. "He left his beautiful clothes here this morning, and surely he will come to fetch them." And his long, thin hand pointed towards a distant corner of the room.

Roger and his friends, looking to where he was pointing, saw a parcel of clothes, neatly folded, lying on one of the chairs. Like so many wild cats snarling at sight of prey, they threw themselves upon those clothes, tearing them out from one another's hands, turning them over and over as if to force the cloth and satin to yield up the secret that lay within their folds.

In the skirmish a scrap of paper fluttered to the ground. Roger seized it with avidity, and, crouching on the floor, smoothed the paper out against his knee.

It contained a few hastily scrawled words, and by the feeble light of the fast-dying candle Roger spelt them out laboriously:

"If the finder of these clothes will take them to the cross-roads opposite the foot-bridge which leads straight to Courbevoie, and will do so before the clock of Courbevoie Church has struck the hour of midnight, he will be rewarded with the sum of five hundred francs."

"There is something more, citizen Roger," said a raucous voice close to his ear.

"Look! Look, citizen — in the bottom corner of the paper!"

"The signature."

"A scrawl done in red," said Roger, trying to decipher it.

"It looks like a small flower."

"That accursed Scarlet Pimpernel!"

And even as he spoke the guttering tallow candle, swaying in its socket, suddenly went out with a loud splutter and a sizzle that echoed through the desolate room like the mocking laugh of ghouls.

Once more the tramp through the dark and deserted streets, with the drizzle — turned now to sleet — beating on thinly clad shoulders. Fifteen men only on this tramp. The others remained behind to watch the house. Fifteen men, led by Roger, and with a blind old man, a young girl carrying a bundle of clothes, and two half-naked children dragged as camp-followers in the rear.

Their destination now was the sign-post which stands at the cross-roads, past the footbridge that leads to Courbevoie.

The guard at the Maillot Gate would have stopped the party, but Roger, member of the Committee of Public Safety, armed with his papers and his tricolour scarf, overruled Robespierre's former orders, and the party marched out of the gate.

They pressed on in silence, instinctively walking shoulder to shoulder, vaguely longing for the touch of another human hand, the sound of a voice that would not ring weirdly in the mysterious night.

There was something terrifying in this absolute silence, in such intense darkness, in this constant wandering towards a goal that seemed for ever distant, and in all this weary, weary fruitless waiting; and these men, who lived their life through, drunken with blood,

deafened by the cries of their victims, satiated with the moans of the helpless and the innocent, hardly dared to look around them, lest they should see ghoulish forms flitting through the gloom.

Soon they reached the cross-roads, and in the dense blackness of the night the gaunt arms of the sign-post pointed ghostlike towards the north.

The men hung back, wrapped in the darkness as in a pall, while Roger advanced alone.

"Hola! Is anyone there?" he called softly.

Then, as no reply came, he added more loudly:

"Hola! A friend — with some clothes found in the Rue Berthier. Is anyone here? Hola! A friend!"

But only from the gently murmuring river far away the melancholy call of a waterfowl seemed to echo mockingly:

"A friend!"

Just then the clock of Courbevoie Church struck the midnight hour.

"It is too late," whispered the men.

They did not swear, nor did they curse their leader. Somehow it seemed as if they had expected all along that the Englishman would evade their vengeance yet again, that he would lure them out into the cold and into the darkness, and then that he would mock them, fool them, and finally disappear into the night.

It seemed futile to wait any longer. They were so sure that they had failed again.

"Who goes there?"

The sound of naked feet and of wooden sabots pattering on the distant footbridge had caused Roger to utter the quick challenge.

"Hola! Hola! Are you there?" was the loud, breathless response.

The next moment the darkness became alive with men moving quickly forward, and raucous shouts of "Where are they?" "Have you got them?" "Don't let them go!" filled the air.

"Got whom?" "Who are they?" "What is it?" were the wild counter-cries.

"The man! The girl! The children! Where are they?"

"What? Which? The Lebeau family? They are here with us."

"Where?"

Where, indeed? To a call to them from Roger there came no answer, nor did a hasty search result in finding them — the old man, the two boys, and the girl carrying the bundle of clothes had vanished into the night.

"In the name of — , what does this mean?" cried hoarse voices in the crowd.

The new-comers, breathless, terrified, shaking with superstitious fear, tried to explain.

"The Lebeau family — the old man, the girl, the two boys — we discovered after your departure, locked up in the cellar of the house — prisoners."

"But, then — the others?" they gasped.

"The girl and the children whom you saw must have been some aristocrats in disguise. The old man who spoke to you was that cursed Englishman — the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

And as if in mocking confirmation of these words there suddenly rang, echoing from afar, a long and merry laugh.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" cried Roger. "In rags and barefooted! At him, citizens; he cannot have got far!"

"Hush! Listen!" whispered one of the men, suddenly gripping him by the arm.

And from the distance — though Heaven only knew from what direction — came the sound of horses' hoofs pawing the soft ground; the next moment they were heard galloping away at breakneck speed.

The men turned to run in every direction, blindly, aimlessly, in the dark, like bloodhounds that have lost the trail.

One man, as he ran, stumbled against a dark mass prone upon the ground.

With a curse on his lips, he recovered his balance.

"Hold! What is this?" he cried.

Some of his comrades gathered round him. No one could see anything, but the dark mass appeared to have human shape, and it was bound round and round with cords. And now feeble moans escaped from obviously human lips.

"What is it? Who is it?" asked the men.

"An Englishman," came in weak accents from the ground.

"Your name?"

"I am called Kulmsted."

"Bah! An aristocrat!"

"No! An enemy of the Scarlet Pimpernel, like yourselves. I would have delivered him into your hands. But you let him escape you. As for me, he would have been wiser if he had killed me."

They picked him up and undid the cords from round his body, and later on took him with them back into Paris.

But there, in the darkness of the night, in the mud of the road, and beneath the icy rain, knees were shaking that had long ago forgotten how to bend, and hasty prayers were muttered by lips that were far more accustomed to blasphemy.

THE CABARET DE LA LIBERTE"Eight!"

"Twelve!"

"Four!"

A loud curse accompanied this last throw, and shouts of ribald laughter greeted it.

"No luck, Guidal!"

"Always at the tail end of the cart, eh, citizen?"

"Do not despair yet, good old Guidal! Bad beginnings oft make splendid ends!"

Then once again the dice rattled in the boxes; those who stood around pressed closer round the gamesters; hot, avid faces, covered with sweat and grime, peered eagerly down upon the table.

"Eight and eleven — nineteen!"

"Twelve and zero! By Satan! Curse him! Just my luck!"

"Four and nine — thirteen! Unlucky number!"

"Now then — once more! I'll back Merri! Ten assignats of the most worthless kind! Who'll take me that Merri gets the wench in the end?"

This from one of the lookers-on, a tall, cadaverous-looking creature, with sunken eyes and broad, hunched-up shoulders, which were perpetually shaken by a dry, rasping cough that proclaimed the ravages of some mortal disease, left him trembling as with ague and brought beads of perspiration to the roots of his lank hair. A recrudescence of excitement went the round of the spectators. The gamblers sitting round a narrow deal table, on which past libations had left marks of sticky rings, had scarce room to move their elbows.

"Nineteen and four — twenty-three!"

"You are out of it, Desmonts!"

"Not yet!"

"Twelve and twelve!"

"There! What did I tell you?"

"Wait! wait! Now, Merri! Now! Remember I have backed you for ten assignats, which I propose to steal from the nearest Jew this very night."

"Thirteen and twelve! Twenty-five, by all the demons and the ghouls!" came with a triumphant shout from the last thrower.

"Merri has it! Vive Merri!" was the unanimous and clamorous response.

Merri was evidently the most popular amongst the three gamblers. Now he sprawled upon the bench, leaning his back against the table, and surveyed the assembled company with the air of an Achilles having vanquished his Hector.

"Good luck to you and to your aristo!" began his backer lustily — would, no doubt, have continued his song of praise had not a violent fit of coughing smothered the words in his throat. The hand which he had raised in order to slap his friend genially on the back now went with a convulsive clutch to his own chest.

But his obvious distress did not apparently disturb the equanimity of Merri, or arouse even passing interest in the lookers-on.

"May she have as much money as rumour avers," said one of the men sententiously.

Merri gave a careless wave of his grubby hand.

"More, citizen; more!" he said loftily.

Only the two losers appeared inclined to scepticism.

"Bah!" one of them said — it was Desmonts. "The whole matter of the woman's money may be a tissue of lies!"

"And England is a far cry!" added Guidal.

But Merri was not likely to be depressed by these dismal croakings.

"'Tis simple enough," he said philosophically, "to disparage the goods if you are not able to buy."

Then a lusty voice broke in from the far corner of the room:

"And now, citizen Merri, 'tis time you remembered that the evening is hot and your friends thirsty!"

The man who spoke was a short, broad-shouldered creature, with crimson face surrounded by a shock of white hair, like a ripe tomato wrapped in cotton wool.

"And let me tell you," he added complacently, "that I have a cask of rum down below, which came straight from that accursed country, England, and is said to be the nectar whereon feeds that confounded Scarlet Pimpernel. It gives him the strength, so 'tis said, to intrigue successfully against the representatives of the people."

"Then by all means, citizen," concluded Merri's backer, still hoarse and spent after his fit of coughing, "let us have some of your nectar. My friend, citizen Merri, will need strength and wits too, I'll warrant, for, after he has married the aristo, he will have to journey to England to pluck the rich dowry which is said to lie hidden there."

"Cast no doubt upon that dowry, citizen Rateau, curse you!" broke in Merri, with a spiteful glance directed against his former rivals, "or Guidal and Desmonts will cease to look glum, and half my joy in the aristo will have gone."

After which, the conversation drifted to general subjects, became hilarious and ribald, while the celebrated rum from England filled the close atmosphere of the narrow room with its heady fumes.

Open to the street in front, the locality known under the pretentious title of "Cabaret de la Liberte" was a favoured one among the flotsam and jetsam of the population of this corner of old Paris; men and sometimes women, with nothing particular to do, no special means of livelihood save the battenning on the countless miseries and sorrows which this Revolution, which was to have been so glorious, was bringing in its train; idlers and loafers, who would crawl desultorily down the few worn and grimy steps which led into the cabaret from the level of the street. There was always good brandy or eau de vie to be had there, and no questions asked, no scares from the revolutionary guards or the secret agents of the Committee of Public Safety, who knew better than to interfere with the citizen host and his dubious clientele. There was also good Rhine wine or rum to be had, smuggled across from England or Germany, and no interference from the spies of some of those countless Committees, more autocratic than any ci-devant despot. It was, in fact, an ideal

place wherein to conduct those shady transactions which are unavoidable corollaries of an unfettered democracy. Projects of burglary, pillage, rapine, even murder, were hatched within this underground burrow, where, as soon as evening drew in, a solitary, smoky oil-lamp alone cast a dim light upon faces that liked to court the darkness, and whence no sound that was not meant for prying ears found its way to the street above. The walls were thick with grime and smoke, the floor mildewed and cracked; dirt vied with squalor to make the place a fitting abode for thieves and cut-throats, for some of those sinister night-birds, more vile even than those who shrieked with satisfied lust at sight of the tumbril, with its daily load of unfortunates for the guillotine.

On this occasion the project that was being hatched was one of the most abject. A young girl, known by some to be possessed of a fortune, was the stake for which these workers of iniquity gambled across one of mine host's greasy tables. The latest decree of the Convention, encouraging, nay, commanding, the union of aristocrats with so-called patriots, had fired the imagination of this nest of jail-birds with thoughts of glorious possibilities. Some of them had collected the necessary information; and the report had been encouraging.

That self-indulgent aristo, the *ci-devant* banker Amede Vincent, who had expiated his villainies upon the guillotine, was known to have been successful in abstracting the bulk of his ill-gotten wealth and concealing it somewhere — it was not exactly known where, but thought to be in England — out of the reach, at any rate, of deserving patriots.

Some three or four years ago, before the glorious principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity had made short shrift of all such pestilential aristocrats, the *ci-devant* banker, then a widower with an only daughter, Esther, had journeyed to England. He soon returned to Paris, however, and went on living there with his little girl in comparative retirement, until his many crimes found him out at last and he was made to suffer the punishment which he so justly deserved. Those crimes consisted for the most part in humiliating the aforesaid deserving patriots with his benevolence, shaming them with many kindnesses, and the simplicity of his home-life, and, above all, in flouting the decrees of the Revolutionary Government, which made every connection with *ci-devant* churches and priests a penal offence against the security of the State.

Amede Vincent was sent to the guillotine, and the representatives of the people confiscated his house and all his property on which they could lay their hands; but they never found the millions which he was supposed to have concealed. Certainly his daughter Esther — a young girl, not yet nineteen — had not found them either, for after her father's death she went to live in one of the poorer quarters of Paris, alone with an old and faithful servant named Lucienne. And while the Committee of Public Safety was deliberating whether it would be worth while to send Esther to the guillotine, to follow in her father's footsteps, a certain number of astute jail-birds plotted to obtain possession of her wealth.

The wealth existed, over in England; of that they were ready to take their oath, and the project which they had formed was as ingenious as it was diabolic: to feign a denunciation, to enact a pretended arrest, to place before the unfortunate girl the alternative of death or marriage with one of the gang, were the chief incidents of this iniquitous project, and it was in the Cabaret de la Liberte that lots were thrown as to which among the herd of miscreants should be the favoured one to play the chief role in the sinister drama.

The lot fell to Merri; but the whole gang was to have a share in the putative fortune — even Rateau, the wretched creature with the hacking cough, who looked as if he had one foot in the grave, and shivered as if he were stricken with ague, put in a word now and again to remind his good friend Merri that he, too, was looking forward to his share of the spoils. Merri, however, was inclined to repudiate him altogether.

"Why should I share with you?" he said roughly, when, a few hours later, he and Rateau parted in the street outside the Cabaret de la Liberte. "Who are you, I would like to know, to try and poke your ugly nose into my affairs? How do I know where you come from, and whether you are not some crapulent spy of one of those pestilential committees?"

From which eloquent flow of language we may infer that the friendship between these two worthies was not of very old duration. Rateau would, no doubt, have protested loudly, but the fresh outer air had evidently caught his wheezy lungs, and for a minute or two he could do nothing but cough and splutter and groan, and cling to his unresponsive comrade for support. Then at last, when he had succeeded in recovering his breath, he said dolefully and with a ludicrous attempt at dignified reproach:

"Do not force me to remind you, citizen Merri, that if it had not been for my suggestion that we should all draw lots, and then play hazard as to who shall be the chosen one to woo the *ci-devant* millionairess, there would soon have been a free fight inside the cabaret, a number of broken heads, and no decision whatever arrived at; whilst you, who were never much of a fighter, would probably be lying now helpless, with a broken nose, and deprived of some of your teeth, and with no chance of entering the lists for the heiress. Instead of which, here you are, the victor by a stroke of good fortune, which you should at least have the good grace to ascribe to me."

Whether the poor wretch's argument had any weight with citizen Merri, or whether that worthy patriot merely thought that procrastination would, for the nonce, prove the best policy, it were impossible to say. Certain it is that in response to his companion's tirade he contented himself with a dubious grunt, and without another word turned on his heel and went slouching down the street.

For the persistent and optimistic romanticist, there were still one or two idylls to be discovered flourishing under the shadow of the grim and relentless Revolution. One such was that which had Esther Vincent and Jack Kennard for hero and heroine. Esther, the orphaned daughter of one of the richest bankers of pre-Revolution days, now a daily governess and household drudge at ten francs a week in the house of a retired butcher in the Rue Richelieu, and Jack Kennard, formerly the representative of a big English firm of woollen manufacturers, who had thrown up his employment and prospects in England in order to watch over the girl whom he loved. He, himself an alien enemy, an Englishman, in deadly danger of his life every hour that he remained in France; and she, unwilling at the time to leave the horrors of revolutionary Paris while her father was lingering at the Conciergerie awaiting condemnation, as such forbidden to leave the city. So Kennard stayed on, unable to tear himself away from her, and obtained an unlucrative post as accountant in a small wine shop over by Montmartre. His life, like hers, was hanging by a thread; any day, any hour now, some malevolent denunciation might, in the sight of the Committee of Public Safety, turn the eighteen years old "suspect" into a living peril to the State, or the alien enemy into a dangerous spy.

Some of the happiest hours these two spent in one another's company were embittered by that ever-present dread of the peremptory knock at the door, the portentous: "Open, in the name of the Law!" the perquisition, the arrest, to which the only issue, these days, was the guillotine.

But the girl was only just eighteen, and he not many years older, and at that age, in spite of misery, sorrow, and dread, life always has its compensations. Youth cries out to happiness so insistently that happiness is forced to hear, and for a few moments, at the least, drives care and even the bitterest anxiety away.

For Esther Vincent and her English lover there were moments when they believed themselves to be almost happy. It was in the evenings mostly, when she came home from her work and he was free to spend an hour or two with her. Then old Lucienne, who had been Esther's nurse in the happy, olden days, and was an unpaid maid-of-all-work and a loved and trusted friend now, would bring in the lamp and pull the well-darned curtains over the windows. She would spread a clean cloth upon the table and bring in a meagre supper of coffee and black bread, perhaps a little butter or a tiny square of cheese. And the two young people would talk of the future, of the time when they would settle down in Kennard's old home, over in England, where his mother and sister even now were eating out their hearts with anxiety for him.

"Tell me all about the South Downs," Esther was very fond of saying; "and your village, and your house, and the rambler roses and the clematis arbour."

She never tired of hearing, or he of telling. The old Manor House, bought with his father's savings; the garden which was his mother's hobby; the cricket pitch on the village green. Oh, the cricket! She thought that so funny — the men in high, sugar-loaf hats, grown-up men, spending hours and hours, day after day, in banging at a ball with a wooden bat!

"Oh, Jack! The English are a funny, nice, dear, kind lot of people. I remember—"

She remembered so well that happy summer which she had spent with her father in England four years ago. It was after the Bastille had been stormed and taken, and the banker had journeyed to England with his daughter in something of a hurry. Then her father had talked of returning to France and leaving her behind with friends in England. But Esther would not be left. Oh, no! Even now she glowed with pride at the thought of her firmness in the matter. If she had remained in England she would never have seen her dear father again. Here remembrances grew bitter and sad, until Jack's hand reached soothingly, consolingly out to her, and she brushed away her tears, so as not to sadden him still more.

Then she would ask more questions about his home and his garden, about his mother and the dogs and the flowers; and once more they would forget that hatred and envy and death were already stalking their door.

"Open, in the name of the Law!"

It had come at last. A bolt from out the serene blue of their happiness. A rough, dirty, angry, cursing crowd, who burst through the heavy door even before they had time to open it. Lucienne collapsed into a chair, weeping and lamenting, with her apron thrown over her head. But Esther and Kennard stood quite still and calm, holding one another by the hand, just to give one another courage.

Some half dozen men stalked into the little room. Men? They looked like ravenous beasts, and were unspeakably dirty, wore soiled tricolour scarves above their tattered breeches in token of their official status. Two of them fell on the remnants of the meagre supper and devoured everything that remained on the table — bread, cheese, a piece of home-made sausage. The others ransacked the two attic-rooms which had been home for Esther and Lucienne: the little living-room under the sloping roof, with the small hearth on which very scanty meals were wont to be cooked, and the bare, narrow room beyond, with the iron bedstead, and the palliasse on the floor for Lucienne.

The men poked about everywhere, struck great, spiked sticks through the poor bits of bedding, and ripped up the palliasse. They tore open the drawers of the rickety chest and of the broken-down wardrobe, and did not spare the unfortunate young girl a single humiliation or a single indignity.

Kennard, burning with wrath, tried to protest.

"Hold that cub!" commanded the leader of the party, almost as soon as the young Englishman's hot, indignant words had resounded above the din of overturned furniture. "And if he opens his mouth again throw him into the street!" And Kennard, terrified lest he should be parted from Esther, thought it wiser to hold his peace.

They looked at one another, like two young trapped beasts — not despairing, but trying to infuse courage one into the other by a look of confidence and of love. Esther, in fact, kept her eyes fixed on her good-looking English lover, firmly keeping down the shudder of loathing which went right through her when she saw those awful men coming nigh her. There was one especially whom she abominated worse than the others, a bandy-legged ruffian, who regarded her with a leer that caused her an almost physical nausea. He did not take part in the perquisition, but sat down in the centre of the room and sprawled over the table with the air of one who was in authority. The others addressed him as "citizen Merri," and alternately ridiculed and deferred to him. And there was another, equally hateful, a horrible, cadaverous creature, with huge bare feet thrust into sabots, and lank hair, thick with grime. He did most of the talking, even though his loquacity occasionally broke down in a racking cough, which literally seemed to tear at his chest, and left him panting, hoarse, and with beads of moisture upon his low, pallid forehead.

Of course, the men found nothing that could even remotely be termed compromising. Esther had been very prudent in deference to Kennard's advice; she also had very few possessions. Nevertheless, when the wretches had turned every article of furniture inside out, one of them asked curtly:

"What do we do next, citizen Merri?"

"Do?" broke in the cadaverous creature, even before Merri had time to reply. "Do? Why, take the wench to — to—"

He got no further, became helpless with coughing. Esther, quite instinctively, pushed the carafe of water towards him.

"Nothing of the sort!" riposted Merri sententiously. "The wench stays here!"

Both Esther and Jack had much ado to suppress an involuntary cry of relief, which at this unexpected pronouncement had risen to their lips.

The man with the cough tried to protest.

"But—" he began hoarsely.

"I said, the wench stays here!" broke in Merri peremptorily. "Ah ca!" he added, with a savage imprecation. "Do you command here, citizen Rateau, or do I?"

The other at once became humble, even cringing.

"You, of course, citizen," he rejoined in his hollow voice. "I would only remark—"

"Remark nothing," retorted the other curtly. "See to it that the cub is out of the house. And after that put a sentry outside the wench's door. No one to go in and out of here under any pretext whatever. Understand?"

Kennard this time uttered a cry of protest. The helplessness of his position exasperated him almost to madness. Two men were holding him tightly by his sinewy arms. With an Englishman's instinct for a fight, he would not only have tried, but also succeeded in knocking these two down, and taken the other four on after that, with quite a reasonable chance of success. That tuberculous creature, now! And that bandy-legged ruffian! Jack Kennard had been an amateur middle-weight champion in his day, and these brutes had no more science than an enraged bull! But even as he fought against that instinct he realised the futility of a struggle. The danger of it, too — not for himself, but for her. After all, they were not going to take her away to one of those awful places from which the only egress was the way to the guillotine; and if there was that amount of freedom there was bound to be some hope. At twenty there is always hope!

So when, in obedience to Merri's orders, the two ruffians began to drag him towards the door, he said firmly:

"Leave me alone. I'll go without this unnecessary struggling."

Then, before the wretches realised his intention, he had jerked himself free from them and run to Esther.

"Have no fear," he said to her in English, and in a rapid whisper. "I'll watch over you. The house opposite. I know the people. I'll manage it somehow. Be on the look-out."

They would not let him say more, and she only had the chance of responding firmly: "I am not afraid, and I'll be on the look-out." The next moment Merri's compeers seized him from behind — four of them this time.

Then, of course, prudence went to the winds. He hit out to the right and left. Knocked two of those recreants down, and already was prepared to seize Esther in his arms, make a wild dash for the door, and run with her, whither only God knew, when Rateau, that awful consumptive reprobate, crept slyly up behind him and dealt him a swift and heavy blow on the skull with his weighted stick. Kennard staggered, and the bandits closed upon him. Those on the floor had time to regain their feet. To make assurance doubly sure, one of them emulated Rateau's tactics, and hit the Englishman once more on the head from behind. After that, Kennard became inert; he had partly lost consciousness. His head ached furiously. Esther, numb with horror, saw him bundled out of the room. Rateau, coughing and spluttering, finally closed the door upon the unfortunate and the four brigands who had hold of him.

Only Merri and that awful Rateau had remained in the room. The latter, gasping for breath now, poured himself out a mugful of water and drank it down at one draught. Then he swore, because he wanted rum, or brandy, or even wine. Esther watched him and Merri, fascinated. Poor old Lucienne was quietly weeping behind her apron.

"Now then, my wench," Merri began abruptly, "suppose you sit down here and listen to what I have to say."

He pulled a chair close to him and, with one of those hideous leers which had already caused her to shudder, he beckoned her to sit. Esther obeyed as if in a dream. Her eyes were dilated like those of one in a waking trance. She moved mechanically, like a bird attracted by a serpent, terrified, yet unresisting. She felt utterly helpless between these two villainous brutes, and anxiety for her English lover seemed further to numb her senses. When she was sitting she turned her gaze, with an involuntary appeal for pity, upon the bandy-legged ruffian beside her. He laughed.

"No! I am not going to hurt you," he said with smooth condescension, which was far more loathsome to Esther's ears than his comrades' savage oaths had been. "You are pretty and you have pleased me. 'Tis no small matter, forsooth!" he added, with loud-voiced bombast, "to have earned the good-will of citizen Merri. You, my wench, are in luck's way. You realise what has occurred just now. You are amenable to the law which has decreed you to be suspect. I hold an order for your arrest. I can have you seized at once by my men, dragged to the Conciergerie, and from thence nothing can save you — neither your good looks nor the protection of citizen Merri. It means the guillotine. You understand that, don't you?"

She sat quite still; only her hands were clutched convulsively together. But she contrived to say quite firmly:

"I do, and I am not afraid."

Merri waved a huge and very dirty hand with a careless gesture.

"I know," he said with a harsh laugh. "They all say that, don't they, citizen Rateau?"

"Until the time comes," assented that worthy dryly.

"Until the time comes," reiterated the other. "Now, my wench," he added, once more turning to Esther, "I don't want that time to come. I don't want your pretty head to go rolling down into the basket, and to receive the slap on the face which the citizen executioner has of late taken to bestowing on those aristocratic cheeks which Mme. la Guillotine has finally blanched for ever. Like this, you see."

And the inhuman wretch took up one of the round cushions from the nearest chair, held it up at arm's length, as if it were a head which he held by the hair, and then slapped it twice with the palm of his left hand. The gesture was so horrible and withal so grotesque, that Esther closed her eyes with a shudder, and her pale cheeks took on a leaden hue. Merri laughed aloud and threw the cushion down again.

"Unpleasant, what? my pretty wench! Well, you know what to expect ... unless," he added significantly, "you are reasonable and will listen to what I am about to tell you."

Esther was no fool, nor was she unsophisticated. These were not times when it was possible for any girl, however carefully nurtured and tenderly brought up, to remain ignorant of the realities and the brutalities of life. Even before Merri had put his abominable proposition before her, she knew what he was driving at. Marriage — marriage to him! that ignoble wretch, more vile than any dumb creature! In exchange for her life!

It was her turn now to laugh. The very thought of it was farcical in its very odiousness. Merri, who had embarked on his proposal with grandiloquent phraseology, suddenly paused, almost awed by that strange, hysterical laughter.

"By Satan and all his ghouls!" he cried, and jumped to his feet, his cheeks paling beneath the grime.

Then rage seized him at his own cowardice. His egregious vanity, wounded by that laughter, egged him on. He tried to seize Esther by the waist. But she, quick as some panther on the defence, had jumped up, too, and pounced upon a knife — the very one she had been using for that happy little supper with her lover a brief half hour ago. Unguarded, unthinking, acting just with a blind instinct, she raised it and cried hoarsely:

“If you dare touch me, I’ll kill you!”

It was ludicrous, of course. A mouse threatening a tiger. The very next moment Rateau had seized her hand and quietly taken away the knife. Merri shook himself like a frowsy dog.

“Whew!” he ejaculated. “What a vixen! But,” he added lightly, “I like her all the better for that — eh, Rateau? Give me a wench with a temperament, I say!”

But Esther, too, had recovered herself. She realised her helplessness, and gathered courage from the consciousness of it! Now she faced the infamous villain more calmly.

“I will never marry you,” she said loudly and firmly. “Never! I am not afraid to die. I am not afraid of the guillotine. There is no shame attached to death. So now you may do as you please — denounce me, and send me to follow in the footsteps of my dear father, if you wish. But whilst I am alive you will never come nigh me. If you ever do but lay a finger upon me, it will be because I am dead and beyond the reach of your polluting touch. And now I have said all that I will ever say to you in this life. If you have a spark of humanity left in you, you will, at least, let me prepare for death in peace.”

She went round to where poor old Lucienne still sat, like an insentient log, panic-stricken. She knelt down on the floor and rested her arm on the old woman’s knees. The light of the lamp fell full upon her, her pale face, and mass of chestnut-brown hair. There was nothing about her at this moment to inflame a man’s desire. She looked pathetic in her helplessness, and nearly lifeless through the intensity of her pallor, whilst the look in her eyes was almost maniacal.

Merri cursed and swore, tried to hearten himself by turning on his friend. But Rateau had collapsed — whether with excitement or the ravages of disease, it were impossible to say. He sat upon a low chair, his long legs, his violet-circled eyes staring out with a look of hebetude and overwhelming fatigue. Merri looked around him and shuddered. The atmosphere of the place had become strangely weird and uncanny; even the tablecloth, dragged half across the table, looked somehow like a shroud.

“What shall we do, Rateau?” he asked tremulously at last.

“Get out of this infernal place,” replied the other huskily. “I feel as if I were in my grave-clothes already.”

“Hold your tongue, you miserable coward! You’ll make the aristo think that we are afraid.”

“Well?” queried Rateau blandly. “Aren’t you?”

“No!” replied Merri fiercely. “I’ll go now because ... because ... well! because I have had enough to-day. And the wench sickens me. I wish to serve the Republic by marrying her, but just now I feel as if I should never really want her. So I’ll go! But, understand!” he added, and turned once more to Esther, even though he could not bring himself to go nigh her again. “Understand that to-morrow I’ll come again for my answer. In the meanwhile, you may think matters over, and, maybe, you’ll arrive at a more reasonable frame of mind. You will not leave these rooms until I set you free. My men will remain as sentinels at your door.”

He beckoned to Rateau, and the two men went out of the room without another word.

The whole of that night Esther remained shut up in her apartment in the Petite Rue Taranne. All night she heard the measured tramp, the movements, the laughter and loud talking of men outside her door. Once or twice she tried to listen to what they said. But the doors and walls in these houses of old Paris were too stout to allow voices to filter through, save in the guise of a confused murmur. She would have felt horribly lonely and frightened but for the fact that in one window on the third floor in the house opposite the light of a lamp appeared like a glimmer of hope. Jack Kennard was there, on the watch. He had the window open and sat beside it until a very late hour; and after that he kept the light in, as a beacon, to bid her be of good cheer.

In the middle of the night he made an attempt to see her, hoping to catch the sentinels asleep or absent. But, having climbed the five stories of the house wherein she dwelt, he arrived on the landing outside her door and found there half a dozen ruffians squatting on the stone floor and engaged in playing hazard with a pack of greasy cards. That wretched consumptive, Rateau, was with them, and made a facetious remark as Kennard, pale and haggard, almost ghostlike, with a white bandage round his head, appeared upon the landing.

“Go back to bed, citizen,” the odious creature said, with a raucous laugh. “We are taking care of your sweetheart for you.”

Never in all his life had Jack Kennard felt so abjectly wretched as he did then, so miserably helpless. There was nothing that he could do, save to return to the lodging, which a kind friend had lent him for the occasion, and from whence he could, at any rate, see the windows behind which his beloved was watching and suffering.

When he went a few moments ago, he had left the porte cochere ajar. Now he pushed it open and stepped into the dark passage beyond. A tiny streak of light filtrated through a small curtained window in the concierge’s lodge; it served to guide Kennard to the foot of the narrow stone staircase which led to the floors above. Just at the foot of the stairs, on the mat, a white paper glimmered in the dim shaft of light. He paused, puzzled, quite certain that the paper was not there five minutes ago when he went out. Oh! it may have fluttered in from the courtyard beyond, or from anywhere, driven by the draught. But, even so, with that mechanical action peculiar to most people under like circumstances, he stooped and picked up the paper, turned it over between his fingers, and saw that a few words were scribbled on it in pencil. The light was too dim to read by, so Kennard, still quite mechanically, kept the paper in his hand and went up to his room. There, by the light of the lamp, he read the few words scribbled in pencil:

“Wait in the street outside.”

Nothing more. The message was obviously not intended for him, and yet... A strange excitement possessed him. If it should be! If...! He had heard — everyone had — of the mysterious agencies that were at work, under cover of darkness, to aid the unfortunate, the innocent, the helpless. He had heard of that legendary English gentleman who had before now defied the closest vigilance of the Committees, and snatched their intended victims out of their murderous clutches, at times under their very eyes.

If this should be...! He scarce dared put his hope into words. He could not bring himself really to believe. But he went. He ran downstairs and out into the street, took his stand under a projecting doorway nearly opposite the house which held the woman he loved, and leaning against the wall, he waited.

After many hours — it was then past three o'clock in the morning, and the sky of an inky blackness — he felt so numb that despite his will a kind of trance-like drowsiness overcame him. He could no longer stand on his feet; his knees were shaking; his head felt so heavy that he could not keep it up. It rolled round from shoulder to shoulder, as if his will no longer controlled it. And it ached furiously. Everything around him was very still. Even "Paris-by-Night," that grim and lurid giant, was for the moment at rest. A warm summer rain was falling; its gentle, pattering murmur into the gutter helped to lull Kennard's senses into somnolence. He was on the point of dropping off to sleep when something suddenly roused him. A noise of men shouting and laughing — familiar sounds enough in these squalid Paris streets.

But Kennard was wide awake now; numbness had given place to intense quivering of all his muscles, and super-keenness of his every sense. He peered into the darkness and strained his ears to hear. The sound certainly appeared to come from the house opposite, and there, too, it seemed as if something or things were moving. Men! More than one or two, surely! Kennard thought that he could distinguish at least three distinct voices; and there was that weird, racking cough which proclaimed the presence of Rateau.

Now the men were quite close to where he — Kennard — still stood cowering. A minute or two later they had passed down the street. Their hoarse voices soon died away in the distance. Kennard crept cautiously out of his hiding-place. Message or mere coincidence, he now blessed that mysterious scrap of paper. Had he remained in his room, he might really have dropped off to sleep and not heard these men going away. There were three of them at least — Kennard thought four. But, anyway, the number of watch-dogs outside the door of his beloved had considerably diminished. He felt that he had the strength to grapple with them, even if there were still three of them left. He, an athlete, English, and master of the art of self-defence; and they, a mere pack of drink-sodden brutes! Yes! He was quite sure he could do it. Quite sure that he could force his way into Esther's rooms and carry her off in his arms — whither? God alone knew. And God alone would provide.

Just for a moment he wondered if, while he was in that state of somnolence, other bandits had come to take the place of those that were going. But this thought he quickly dismissed. In any case, he felt a giant's strength in himself, and could not rest now till he had tried once more to see her. He crept very cautiously along; was satisfied that the street was deserted.

Already he had reached the house opposite, had pushed open the porte cochere, which was on the latch — when, without the slightest warning, he was suddenly attacked from behind, his arms seized and held behind his back with a vice-like grip, whilst a vigorous kick against the calves of his legs caused him to lose his footing and suddenly brought him down, sprawling and helpless, in the gutter, while in his ear there rang the hideous sound of the consumptive ruffian's racking cough.

"What shall we do with the cub now?" a raucous voice came out of the darkness.

"Let him lie there," was the quick response. "It'll teach him to interfere with the work of honest patriots."

Kennard, lying somewhat bruised and stunned, heard this decree with thankfulness. The bandits obviously thought him more hurt than he was, and if only they would leave him lying here, he would soon pick himself up and renew his attempt to go to Esther. He did not move, feigning unconsciousness, even though he felt rather than saw that hideous Rateau stooping over him, heard his stertorous breathing, the wheezing in his throat.

"Run and fetch a bit of cord, citizen Desmonts," the wretch said presently. "A trussed cub is safer than a loose one."

This dashed Kennard's hopes to a great extent. He felt that he must act quickly, before those brigands returned and rendered him completely helpless. He made a movement to rise — a movement so swift and sudden as only a trained athlete can make. But, quick as he was, that odious, wheezing creature was quicker still, and now, when Kennard had turned on his back, Rateau promptly sat on his chest, a dead weight, with long legs stretched out before him, coughing and spluttering, yet wholly at his ease.

Oh! the humiliating position for an amateur middle-weight champion to find himself in, with that drink-sodden — Kennard was sure that he was drink-sodden — consumptive sprawling on the top of him!

"Don't trouble, citizen Desmonts," the wretch cried out after his retreating companions. "I have what I want by me."

Very leisurely he pulled a coil of rope out of the capacious pocket of his tattered coat. Kennard could not see what he was doing, but felt it with supersensitive instinct all the time. He lay quite still beneath the weight of that miscreant, feigning unconsciousness, yet hardly able to breathe. That tuberculous caitiff was such a towering weight. But he tried to keep his faculties on the alert, ready for that surprise spring which would turn the tables, at the slightest false move on the part of Rateau.

But, as luck would have it, Rateau did not make a single false move. It was amazing with what dexterity he kept Kennard down, even while he contrived to pinion him with cords. An old sailor, probably, he seemed so dexterous with knots.

My God! the humiliation of it all. And Esther a helpless prisoner, inside that house not five paces away! Kennard's heavy, wearied eyes could perceive the light in her window, five stories above where he lay, in the gutter, a helpless log. Even now he gave a last desperate shriek:

"Esther!"

But in a second the abominable brigand's hand came down heavily upon his mouth, whilst a raucous voice spluttered rather than said, right through an awful fit of coughing:

"Another sound, and I'll gag as well as bind you, you young fool!"

After which, Kennard remained quite still.

Esther, up in her little attic, knew nothing of what her English lover was even then suffering for her sake. She herself had passed, during the night, through every stage of horror and of fear. Soon after midnight that execrable brigand Rateau had poked his ugly, cadaverous face in at the door and peremptorily called for Lucienne. The woman, more dead than alive now with terror, had answered with mechanical obedience.

"I and my friends are thirsty," the man had commanded. "Go and fetch us a litre of eau-de-vie."

Poor Lucienne stammered a piteable: "Where shall I go?"

"To the house at the sign of 'Le fort Samson,' in the Rue de Seine," replied Rateau curtly. "They'll serve you well if you mention my name."

Of course Lucienne protested. She was a decent woman, who had never been inside a cabaret in her life.

"Then it's time you began," was Rateau's dry comment, which was greeted with much laughter from his abominable companions.

Lucienne was forced to go. It would, of course, have been futile and madness to resist. This had occurred three hours since. The Rue de Seine was not far, but the poor woman had not returned. Esther was left with this additional horror weighing upon her soul. What had happened to her unfortunate servant? Visions of outrage and murder floated before the poor girl's tortured brain. At best, Lucienne was being kept out of the way in order to make her — Esther — feel more lonely and desperate! She remained at the window after that, watching that light in the house opposite and fingering her prayer-book, the only solace which she had. Her attic was so high up and the street so narrow, that she could not see what went on in the street below. At one time she heard a great to-do outside her door. It seemed as if some of the bloodhounds who were set to watch her had gone, or that others came. She really hardly cared which it was. Then she heard a great commotion coming from the street immediately beneath her: men shouting and laughing, and that awful creature's rasping cough.

At one moment she felt sure that Kennard had called to her by name. She heard his voice distinctly, raised as if in a despairing cry.

After that, all was still.

So still that she could hear her heart beating furiously, and then a tear falling from her eyes upon her open book. So still that the gentle patter of the rain sounded like a soothing lullaby. She was very young, and was very tired. Out, above the line of sloping roofs and chimney pots, the darkness of the sky was yielding to the first touch of dawn. The rain ceased. Everything became deathly still. Esther's head fell, wearied, upon her folded arms.

Then, suddenly, she was wide awake. Something had roused her. A noise. At first she could not tell what it was, but now she knew. It was the opening and shutting of the door behind her, and then a quick, stealthy footstep across the room. The horror of it all was unspeakable. Esther remained as she had been, on her knees, mechanically fingering her prayer-book, unable to move, unable to utter a sound, as if paralysed. She knew that one of those abominable creatures had entered her room, was coming near her even now. She did not know who it was, only guessed it was Rateau, for she heard a raucous, stertorous wheeze. Yet she could not have then turned to look if her life had depended upon her doing so.

The whole thing had occurred in less than half a dozen heart-beats. The next moment the wretch was close to her. Mercifully she felt that her senses were leaving her. Even so, she felt that a handkerchief was being bound over her mouth to prevent her screaming. Wholly unnecessary this, for she could not have uttered a sound. Then she was lifted off the ground and carried across the room, then over the threshold. A vague, subconscious effort of will helped her to keep her head averted from that wheezing wretch who was carrying her. Thus she could see the landing, and two of those abominable watchdogs who had been set to guard her.

The ghostly grey light of dawn came peeping in through the narrow dormer window in the sloping roof, and faintly illumined their sprawling forms, stretched out at full length, with their heads buried in their folded arms and their naked legs looking pallid and weird in the dim light. Their stertorous breathing woke the echoes of the bare, stone walls. Esther shuddered and closed her eyes. She was now like an insentient log, without power, or thought, or will — almost without feeling.

Then, all at once, the coolness of the morning air caught her full in the face. She opened her eyes and tried to move, but those powerful arms held her more closely than before. Now she could have shrieked with horror. With returning consciousness the sense of her desperate position came on her with its full and ghastly significance, its awe-inspiring details. The grey dawn, the abandoned wretch who held her, and the stillness of this early morning hour, when not one pitying soul would be astir to lend her a helping hand or give her the solace of mute sympathy. So great, indeed, was this stillness that the click of the man's sabots upon the uneven pavement reverberated, ghoul-like and weird.

And it was through that awesome stillness that a sound suddenly struck her ear, which, in the instant, made her feel that she was not really alive, or, if alive, was sleeping and dreaming strange and impossible dreams. It was the sound of a voice, clear and firm, and with a wonderful ring of merriment in its tones, calling out just above a whisper, and in English, if you please:

"Look out, Ffoulkes! That young cub is as strong as a horse. He will give us all away if you are not careful."

A dream? Of course it was a dream, for the voice had sounded very close to her ear; so close, in fact, that ... well! Esther was quite sure that her face still rested against the hideous, tattered, and grimy coat which that repulsive Rateau had been wearing all along. And there was the click of his sabots upon the pavement all the time. So, then, the voice and the merry, suppressed laughter which accompanied it, must all have been a part of her dream. How long this lasted she could not have told you. An hour and more, she thought, while the grey dawn yielded to the roseate hue of morning. Somehow, she no longer suffered either terror or foreboding. A subtle atmosphere of strength and of security seemed to encompass her. At one time she felt as if she were driven along in a car that jolted horribly, and when she moved her face and hands they came in contact with things that were fresh and green and smelt of the country. She was in darkness then, and more than three parts unconscious, but the handkerchief had been removed from her mouth. It seemed to her as if she could hear the voice of her Jack, but far away and indistinct; also the tramp of horses' hoofs and the creaking of cart-wheels, and at times that awful, rasping cough, which reminded her of the presence of a loathsome wretch, who should not have had a part in her soothing dream.

Thus many hours must have gone by.

Then, all at once, she was inside a house — a room, and she felt that she was being lowered very gently to the ground. She was on her feet, but she could not see where she was. There was furniture; a carpet; a ceiling; the man Rateau with the sabots and the dirty coat, and the merry English voice, and a pair of deep-set blue eyes, thoughtful and lazy and infinitely kind.

But before she could properly focus what she saw, everything began to whirl and to spin around her, to dance a wild and idiotic saraband, which caused her to laugh, and to laugh, until her throat felt choked and her eyes hot; after which she remembered nothing more.

The first thing of which Esther Vincent was conscious, when she returned to her senses, was of her English lover kneeling beside her. She was lying on some kind of couch, and she could see his face in profile, for he had turned and was speaking to someone at the far end of the room.

"And was it you who knocked me down?" he was saying, "and sat on my chest, and trussed me like a fowl?"

"La! my dear sir," a lazy, pleasant voice riposted, "what else could I do? There was no time for explanations. You were half-crazed, and would not have understood. And you were ready to bring all the nightwatchmen about our ears."

"I am sorry!" Kennard said simply. "But how could I guess?"

"You couldn't," rejoined the other. "That is why I had to deal so summarily with you and with Mademoiselle Esther, not to speak of good old Lucienne, who had never, in her life, been inside a cabaret. You must all forgive me ere you start upon your journey. You are not out of the wood yet, remember. Though Paris is a long way behind, France itself is no longer a healthy place for any of you."

"But how did we ever get out of Paris? I was smothered under a pile of cabbages, with Lucienne on one side of me and Esther, unconscious, on the other. I could see nothing. I know we halted at the barrier. I thought we would be recognised, turned back! My God! how I trembled!"

"Bah!" broke in the other, with a careless laugh. "It is not so difficult as it seems. We have done it before — eh, Ffoulkes? A market-gardener's cart, a villainous wretch like myself to drive it, another hideous object like Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Bart., to lead the scraggy nag, a couple of forged or stolen passports, plenty of English gold, and the deed is done!"

Esther's eyes were fixed upon the speaker. She marvelled now how she could have been so blind. The cadaverous face was nothing but a splendid use of grease paint! The rags! the dirt! the whole assumption of a hideous character was masterly! But there were the eyes, deep-set, and thoughtful and kind. How did she fail to guess?

"You are known as the Scarlet Pimpernel," she said suddenly. "Suzanne de Tournai was my friend. She told me. You saved her and her family, and now ... oh, my God!" she exclaimed, "how shall we ever repay you?"

"By placing yourselves unreservedly in my friend Ffoulkes' hands," he replied gently. "He will lead you to safety and, if you wish it, to England."

"If we wish it!" Kennard sighed fervently.

"You are not coming with us, Blakeney?" queried Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, and it seemed to Esther's sensitive ears as if a tone of real anxiety and also of entreaty rang in the young man's voice.

"No, not this time," replied Sir Percy lightly. "I like my character of Rateau, and I don't want to give it up just yet. I have done nothing to arouse suspicion in the minds of my savoury compeers up at the Cabaret de la Liberte. I can easily keep this up for some time to come, and frankly I admire myself as citizen Rateau. I don't know when I have enjoyed a character so much!"

"You mean to return to the Cabaret de la Liberte!" exclaimed Sir Andrew.

"Why not?"

"You will be recognised!"

"Not before I have been of service to a good many unfortunates, I hope."

"But that awful cough of yours! Percy, you'll do yourself an injury with it one day."

"Not I! I like that cough. I practised it for a long time before I did it to perfection. Such a splendid wheeze! I must teach Tony to do it some day. Would you like to hear it now?"

He laughed, that perfect, delightful, lazy laugh of his, which carried every hearer with it along the path of light-hearted merriment. Then he broke into the awful cough of the consumptive Rateau. And Esther Vincent instinctively closed her eyes and shuddered.

"NEEDS MUST"— "The children were all huddled up together in one corner of the room. Etienne and Valentine, the two eldest, had their arms round the little one. As for Lucile, she would have told you herself that she felt just like a bird between two snakes — terrified and fascinated — oh! especially by that little man with the pale face and the light grey eyes and the slender white hands unstained by toil, one of which rested lightly upon the desk, and was only clenched now and then at a word or a look from the other man or from Lucile herself.

But Commissary Lebel just tried to browbeat her. It was not difficult, for in truth she felt frightened enough already, with all this talk of "traitors" and that awful threat of the guillotine.

Lucile Clamette, however, would have remained splendidly loyal in spite of all these threats, if it had not been for the children. She was little mother to them; for father was a cripple, with speech and mind already impaired by creeping paralysis, and maman had died when little Josephine was born. And now those fiends threatened not only her, but Etienne who was not fourteen, and Valentine who was not much more than ten, with death, unless she — Lucile — broke the solemn word which she had given to M. le Marquis. At first she had tried to deny all knowledge of M. le Marquis' whereabouts.

"I can assure M. le Commissaire that I do not know," she had persisted quietly, even though her heart was beating so rapidly in her bosom that she felt as if she must choke.

"Call me citizen Commissary," Lebel had riposted curtly. "I should take it as a proof that your aristocratic sentiments are not so deep-rooted as they appear to be."

"Yes, citizen!" murmured Lucile, under her breath.

Then the other one, he with the pale eyes and the slender white hands, leaned forward over the desk, and the poor girl felt as if a mighty and unseen force was holding her tight, so tight that she could neither move, nor breathe, nor turn her gaze away from those pale, compelling eyes. In the remote corner little Josephine was whimpering, and Etienne's big, dark eyes were fixed bravely upon his eldest sister.

"There, there! little citizeness," the awful man said, in a voice that sounded low and almost caressing, "there is nothing to be frightened of. No one is going to hurt you or your little family. We only want you to be reasonable. You have promised to your former employer that you would never tell anyone of his whereabouts. Well! we don't ask you to tell us anything.

"All that we want you to do is to write a letter to M. le Marquis — one that I myself will dictate to you. You have written to M. le Marquis before now, on business matters, have you not?"

"Yes, monsieur — yes, citizen," stammered Lucile through her tears.

"Father was bailiff to M. le Marquis until he became a cripple and now I—"

"Do not write any letter, Lucile," Etienne suddenly broke in with forceful vehemence. "It is a trap set by these miscreants to entrap M. le Marquis."

There was a second's silence in the room after this sudden outburst on the part of the lad. Then the man with the pale face said quietly:

"Citizen Lebel, order the removal of that boy. Let him be kept in custody till he has learned to hold his tongue."

But before Lebel could speak to the two soldiers who were standing on guard at the door, Lucile had uttered a loud cry of agonised protest.

"No! no! monsieur! — that is citizen!" she implored. "Do not take Etienne away. He will be silent.... I promise you that he will be silent ... only do not take him away! Etienne, my little one!" she added, turning her tear-filled eyes to her brother, "I entreat thee to hold thy tongue!"

The others, too, clung to Etienne, and the lad, awed and subdued, relapsed into silence.

"Now then," resumed Lebel roughly, after a while, "let us get on with this business. I am sick to death of it. It has lasted far too long already."

He fixed his blood-shot eyes upon Lucile and continued gruffly:

"Now listen to me, my wench, for this is going to be my last word. Citizen Chauvelin here has already been very lenient with you by allowing this letter business. If I had my way I'd make you speak here and now. As it is, you either sit down and write the letter at citizen Chauvelin's dictation at once, or I send you with that impudent brother of yours and your imbecile father to jail, on a charge of treason against the State, for aiding and abetting the enemies of the Republic; and you know what the consequences of such a charge usually are. The other two brats will go to a House of Correction, there to be detained during the pleasure of the Committee of Public Safety. That is my last word," he reiterated fiercely. "Now, which is it to be?"

He paused, the girl's wan cheeks turned the colour of lead. She moistened her lips once or twice with her tongue; beads of perspiration appeared at the roots of her hair. She gazed helplessly at her tormentors, not daring to look on those three huddled-up little figures there in the corner. A few seconds sped away in silence. The man with the pale eyes rose and pushed his chair away. He went to the window, stood there with his back to the room, those slender white hands of his clasped behind him. Neither the commissary nor the girl appeared to interest him further. He was just gazing out of the window.

The other was still sprawling beside the desk, his large, coarse hand — how different his hands were! — was beating a devil's tattoo upon the arm of his chair.

After a few minutes, Lucile made a violent effort to compose herself, wiped the moisture from her pallid forehead and dried the tears which still hung upon her lashes. Then she rose from her chair and walked resolutely up to the desk.

"I will write the letter," she said simply.

Lebel gave a snort of satisfaction; but the other did not move from his position near the window. The boy, Etienne, had uttered a cry of passionate protest.

"Do not give M. le Marquis away, Lucile!" he said hotly. "I am not afraid to die."

But Lucile had made up her mind. How could she do otherwise, with these awful threats hanging over them all? She and Etienne and poor father gone, and the two young ones in one of those awful Houses of Correction, where children were taught to hate the Church, to shun the Sacraments, and to blaspheme God!

"What am I to write?" she asked dully, resolutely closing her ears against her brother's protest.

Lebel pushed pen, ink and paper towards her and she sat down, ready to begin.

"Write!" now came in a curt command from the man at the window. And Lucile wrote at his dictation:

"MONSIEUR LE MARQUIS, — We are in grave trouble. My brother Etienne and I have been arrested on a charge of treason. This means the guillotine for us and for poor father, who can no longer speak; and the two little ones are to be sent to one of those dreadful Houses of Correction, where children are taught to deny God and to blaspheme. You alone can save us, M. le Marquis; and I beg you on my knees to do it. The citizen Commissary here says that you have in your possession certain papers which are of great value to the State, and that if I can persuade you to give these up, Etienne, father and I and the little ones will be left unmolested. M. le Marquis, you once said that you could never adequately repay my poor father for all his devotion in your service. You can do it now, M. le Marquis, by saving us all. I will be at the chateau a week from to-day. I entreat you, M. le Marquis, to come to me then and to bring the papers with you; or if you can devise some other means of sending the papers to me, I will obey your behests. — I am, M. le Marquis' faithful and devoted servant,

LUCILE CLAMETTE."

The pen dropped from the unfortunate girl's fingers. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed convulsively. The children were silent, awed and subdued — tired out, too. Only Etienne's dark eyes were fixed upon his sister with a look of mute reproach.

Lebel had made no attempt to interrupt the flow of his colleague's dictation. Only once or twice did a hastily smothered "What the —!" of astonishment escape his lips. Now, when the letter was finished and duly signed, he drew it to him and strewed the sand over it. Chauvelin, more impassive than ever, was once more gazing out of the window.

"How are the ci-devant aristos to get this letter?" the commissary asked.

"It must be put in the hollow tree which stands by the side of the stable gate at Montorgueil," whispered Lucile.

"And the aristos will find it there?"

"Yes. M. le Vicomte goes there once or twice a week to see if there is anything there from one of us."

"They are in hiding somewhere close by, then?"

But to this the girl gave no reply. Indeed, she felt as if any word now might choke her.

"Well, no matter where they are!" the inhuman wretch resumed, with brutal cynicism. "We've got them now — both of them. Marquis! Vicomte!" he added, and spat on the ground to express his contempt of such titles. "Citizens Montorgueil, father and son — that's all they are! And as such they'll walk up in state to make their bow to Mme. la Guillotine!"

"May we go now?" stammered Lucile through her tears.

Lebel nodded in assent, and the girl rose and turned to walk towards the door. She called to the children, and the little ones clustered round her skirts like chicks around the mother-hen. Only Etienne remained aloof, wrathful against his sister for what he deemed her treachery. "Women have no sense of honour!" he muttered to himself, with all the pride of conscious manhood. But Lucile felt more than ever like a bird who is vainly trying to evade the clutches of a fowler. She gathered the two little ones around her. Then, with a cry like a wounded doe she ran quickly out of the room.

As soon as the sound of the children's footsteps had died away down the corridor, Lebel turned with a grunt to his still silent companion.

"And now, citizen Chauvelin," he said roughly, "perhaps you will be good enough to explain what is the meaning of all this tomfoolery."

"Tomfoolery, citizen?" queried the other blandly. "What tomfoolery, pray?"

"Why, about those papers!" growled Lebel savagely. "Curse you for an interfering busybody! It was I who got information that those pestilential aristos, the Montorgueils, far from having fled the country are in hiding somewhere in my district. I could have made the girl give up their hiding-place pretty soon, without any help from you. What right had you to interfere, I should like to know?"

"You know quite well what right I had, citizen Lebel," replied Chauvelin with perfect composure. "The right conferred upon me by the Committee of Public Safety, of whom I am still an unworthy member. They sent me down here to lend you a hand in an investigation which is of grave importance to them."

"I know that!" retorted Lebel sulkily. "But why have invented the story of the papers?"

"It is no invention, citizen," rejoined Chauvelin with slow emphasis. "The papers do exist. They are actually in the possession of the Montorgueils, father and son. To capture the two aristos would be not only a blunder, but criminal folly, unless we can lay hands on the papers at the same time."

"But what in Satan's name are those papers?" ejaculated Lebel with a fierce oath.

"Think, citizen Lebel! Think!" was Chauvelin's cool rejoinder. "Methinks you might arrive at a pretty shrewd guess." Then, as the other's bluster and bounce suddenly collapsed upon his colleague's calm, accusing gaze, the latter continued with impressive deliberation:

"The papers which the two aristos have in their possession, citizen, are receipts for money, for bribes paid to various members of the Committee of Public Safety by Royalist agents for the overthrow of our glorious Republic. You know all about them, do you not?"

While Chauvelin spoke, a look of furtive terror had crept into Lebel's eyes; his cheeks became the colour of lead. But even so, he tried to keep up an air of incredulity and of amazement.

"I?" he exclaimed. "What do you mean, citizen Chauvelin? What should I know about it?"

"Some of those receipts are signed with your name, citizen Lebel," retorted Chauvelin forcefully. "Bah!" he added, and a tone of savage contempt crept into his even, calm voice now. "Heriot, Fouquier, Ducros and the whole gang of you are in it up to the neck: trafficking with our enemies, trading with England, taking bribes from every quarter for working against the safety of the Republic. Ah! if I had my way, I would let the hatred of those aristos take its course. I would let the Montorgueils and the whole pack of Royalist agents publish those infamous proofs of your treachery and of your baseness to the entire world, and send the whole lot of you to the guillotine!"

He had spoken with so much concentrated fury, and the hatred and contempt expressed in his pale eyes were so fierce that an involuntary ice-cold shiver ran down the length of Lebel's spine. But, even so, he would not give in; he tried to sneer and to keep up something of his former surly defiance.

"Bah!" he exclaimed, and with a lowering glance gave hatred for hatred, and contempt for contempt. "What can you do? An I am not mistaken, there is no more discredited man in France to-day than the unsuccessful tracker of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

The taunt went home. It was Chauvelin's turn now to lose countenance, to pale to the lips. The glow of virtuous indignation died out of his eyes, his look became furtive and shamed.

"You are right, citizen Lebel," he said calmly after a while. "Recriminations between us are out of place. I am a discredited man, as you say. Perhaps it would have been better if the Committee had sent me long ago to expiate my failures on the guillotine. I should at least not have suffered, as I am suffering now, daily, hourly humiliation at thought of the triumph of an enemy, whom I hate with a

passion which consumes my very soul. But do not let us speak of me," he went on quietly. "There are graver affairs at stake just now than mine own."

Lebel said nothing more for the moment. Perhaps he was satisfied at the success of his taunt, even though the terror within his craven soul still caused the cold shiver to course up and down his spine. Chauvelin had once more turned to the window; his gaze was fixed upon the distance far away. The window gave on the North. That way, in a straight line, lay Calais, Boulogne, England — where he had been made to suffer such bitter humiliation at the hands of his elusive enemy. And immediately before him was Paris, where the very walls seemed to echo that mocking laugh of the daring Englishman which would haunt him even to his grave.

Lebel, unnerved by his colleague's silence, broke in gruffly at last:

"Well then, citizen," he said, with a feeble attempt at another sneer, "if you are not thinking of sending us all to the guillotine just yet, perhaps you will be good enough to explain just how the matter stands?"

"Fairly simply, alas!" replied Chauvelin dryly. "The two Montorgueils, father and son, under assumed names, were the Royalist agents who succeeded in suborning men such as you, citizen — the whole gang of you. We have tracked them down, to this district, have confiscated their lands and ransacked the old chateau for valuables and so on. Two days later, the first of a series of pestilential anonymous letters reached the Committee of Public Safety, threatening the publication of a whole series of compromising documents if the Marquis and the Vicomte de Montorgueil were in any way molested, and if all the Montorgueil property is not immediately restored."

"I suppose it is quite certain that those receipts and documents do exist?" suggested Lebel.

"Perfectly certain. One of the receipts, signed by Heriot, was sent as a specimen."

"My God!" ejaculated Lebel, and wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

"Yes, you'll all want help from somewhere," retorted Chauvelin coolly. "From above or from below, what? if the people get to know what miscreants you are. I do believe," he added, with a vicious snap of his thin lips, "that they would cheat the guillotine of you and, in the end, drag you out of the tumbrils and tear you to pieces limb from limb!"

Once more that look of furtive terror crept into the commissary's bloodshot eyes.

"Thank the Lord," he muttered, "that we were able to get hold of the wench Clamette!"

"At my suggestion," retorted Chauvelin curtly. "I always believe in threatening the weak if you want to coerce the strong. The Montorgueils cannot resist the wench's appeal. Even if they do at first, we can apply the screw by clapping one of the young ones in gaol. Within a week we shall have those papers, citizen Lebel; and if, in the meanwhile, no one commits a further blunder, we can close the trap on the Montorgueils without further trouble."

Lebel said nothing more, and after a while Chauvelin went back to the desk, picked up the letter which poor Lucile had written and watered with her tears, folded it deliberately and slipped it into the inner pocket of his coat.

"What are you going to do?" queried Lebel anxiously.

"Drop this letter into the hollow tree by the side of the stable gate at Montorgueil," replied Chauvelin simply.

"What?" exclaimed the other. "Yourself?"

"Why, of course! Think you I would entrust such an errand to another living soul?"

A couple of hours later, when the two children had had their dinner and had settled down to play in the garden, and father been cosily tucked up for his afternoon sleep, Lucile called her brother Etienne to her. The boy had not spoken to her since that terrible time spent in the presence of those two awful men. He had eaten no dinner, only sat glowering, staring straight out before him, from time to time throwing a look of burning reproach upon his sister. Now, when she called to him, he tried to run away, was halfway up the stairs before she could seize hold of him.

"Etienne, mon petit!" she implored, as her arms closed around his shrinking figure.

"Let me go, Lucile!" the boy pleaded obstinately.

"Mon petit, listen to me!" she pleaded. "All is not lost, if you will stand by me."

"All is lost, Lucile!" Etienne cried, striving to keep back a flood of passionate tears. "Honour is lost. Your treachery has disgraced us all. If M. le Marquis and M. le Vicomte are brought to the guillotine, their blood will be upon our heads."

"Upon mine alone, my little Etienne," she said sadly. "But God alone can judge me. It was a terrible alternative: M. le Marquis, or you and Valentine and little Josephine and poor father, who is so helpless! But don't let us talk of it. All is not lost, I am sure. The last time that I spoke with M. le Marquis — it was in February, do you remember? — he was full of hope, and oh! so kind. Well, he told me then that if ever I or any of us here were in such grave trouble that we did not know where to turn, one of us was to put on our very oldest clothes, look as like a bare-footed beggar as we could, and then go to Paris to a place called the Cabaret de la Liberte in the Rue Christine. There we were to ask for the citizen Rateau, and we were to tell him all our troubles, whatever they might be. Well! we are in such trouble now, mon petit, that we don't know where to turn. Put on thy very oldest clothes, little one, and run bare-footed into Paris, find the citizen Rateau and tell him just what has happened: the letter which they have forced me to write, the threats which they held over me if I did not write it — everything. Dost hear?"

Already the boy's eyes were glowing. The thought that he individually could do something to retrieve the awful shame of his sister's treachery spurred him to activity. It needed no persuasion on Lucile's part to induce him to go. She made him put on some old clothes and stuffed a piece of bread and cheese into his breeches pocket.

It was close upon a couple of leagues to Paris, but that run was one of the happiest which Etienne had ever made. And he did it bare-footed, too, feeling neither fatigue nor soreness, despite the hardness of the road after a two weeks' drought, which had turned mud into hard cakes and ruts into fissures which tore the lad's feet till they bled.

He did not reach the Cabaret de la Liberte till nightfall, and when he got there he hardly dared to enter. The filth, the squalor, the hoarse voices which rose from that cellar-like place below the level of the street, repelled the country-bred lad. Were it not for the

desperate urgency of his errand he never would have dared to enter. As it was, the fumes of alcohol and steaming, dirty clothes nearly choked him, and he could scarce stammer the name of "citizen Rateau" when a gruff voice presently demanded his purpose.

He realised now how tired he was and how hungry. He had not thought to pause in order to consume the small provision of bread and cheese wherewith thoughtful Lucile had provided him. Now he was ready to faint when a loud guffaw, which echoed from one end of the horrible place to the other, greeted his timid request.

"Citizen Rateau!" the same gruff voice called out hilariously. "Why, there he is! Here, citizen! there's a blooming aristo to see you."

Etienne turned his weary eyes to the corner which was being indicated to him. There he saw a huge creature sprawling across a bench, with long, powerful limbs stretched out before him. Citizen Rateau was clothed, rather than dressed, in a soiled shirt, ragged breeches and tattered stockings, with shoes down at heel and faded crimson cap. His face looked congested and sunken about the eyes; he appeared to be asleep, for stertorous breathing came at intervals from between his parted lips, whilst every now and then a racking cough seemed to tear at his broad chest.

Etienne gave him one look, shuddering with horror, despite himself, at the aspect of this bloated wretch from whom salvation was to come. The whole place seemed to him hideous and loathsome in the extreme. What it all meant he could not understand; all that he knew was that this seemed like another hideous trap into which he and Lucile had fallen, and that he must fly from it — fly at all costs, before he betrayed M. le Marquis still further to these drink-sodden brutes. Another moment, and he feared that he might faint. The din of a bibulous song rang in his ears, the reek of alcohol turned him giddy and sick. He had only just enough strength to turn and totter back into the open. There his senses reeled, the lights in the houses opposite began to dance wildly before his eyes, after which he remembered nothing more.

There is nothing now in the whole countryside quite so desolate and forlorn as the chateau of Montorgueil, with its once magnificent park, now overgrown with weeds, its encircling walls broken down, its terraces devastated, and its stately gates rusty and torn.

Just by the side of what was known in happier times as the stable gate there stands a hollow tree. It is not inside the park, but just outside, and shelters the narrow lane, which skirts the park walls, against the blaze of the afternoon sun.

Its beneficent shade is a favourite spot for an afternoon siesta, for there is a bit of green sward under the tree, and all along the side of the road. But as the shades of evening gather in, the lane is usually deserted, shunned by the neighbouring peasantry on account of its eerie loneliness, so different to the former bustle which used to reign around the park gates when M. le Marquis and his family were still in residence. Nor does the lane lead anywhere, for it is a mere loop which gives on the main road at either end.

Henri de Montorgueil chose a peculiarly dark night in mid-September for one of his periodical visits to the hollow-tree. It was close on nine o'clock when he passed stealthily down the lane, keeping close to the park wall. A soft rain was falling, the first since the prolonged drought, and though it made the road heavy and slippery in places, it helped to deaden the sound of the young man's furtive footsteps. The air, except for the patter of the rain, was absolutely still. Henri de Montorgueil paused from time to time, with neck craned forward, every sense on the alert, listening, like any poor, hunted beast, for the slightest sound which might betray the approach of danger.

As many a time before, he reached the hollow tree in safety, felt for and found in the usual place the letter which the unfortunate girl Lucile had written to him. Then, with it in his hand, he turned to the stable gate. It had long since ceased to be kept locked and barred. Pillaged and ransacked by order of the Committee of Public Safety, there was nothing left inside the park walls worth keeping under lock and key.

Henri slipped stealthily through the gates and made his way along the drive. Every stone, every nook and cranny of his former home was familiar to him, and anon he turned into a shed where in former times wheelbarrows and garden tools were wont to be kept. Now it was full of debris, lumber of every sort. A more safe or secluded spot could not be imagined. Henri crouched in the furthestmost corner of the shed. Then from his belt he detached a small dark lanthorn, opened its shutter, and with the aid of the tiny, dim light read the contents of the letter. For a long while after that he remained quite still, as still as a man who has received a stunning blow on the head and has partly lost consciousness. The blow was indeed a staggering one. Lucile Clamette, with the invincible power of her own helplessness, was demanding the surrender of a weapon which had been a safeguard for the Montorgueils all this while. The papers which compromised a number of influential members of the Committee of Public Safety had been the most perfect arms of defence against persecution and spoliation.

And now these were to be given up: Oh! there could be no question of that. Even before consulting with his father, Henri knew that the papers would have to be given up. They were clever, those revolutionaries. The thought of holding innocent children as hostages could only have originated in minds attuned to the villainies of devils. But it was unthinkable that the children should suffer.

After a while the young man roused himself from the torpor into which the suddenness of this awful blow had plunged him. By the light of the lanthorn he began to write upon a sheet of paper which he had torn from his pocket-book.

"MY DEAR LUCILE," he wrote, "As you say, our debt to your father and to you all never could be adequately repaid. You and the children shall never suffer whilst we have the power to save you. You will find the papers in the receptacle you know of inside the chimney of what used to be my mother's boudoir. You will find the receptacle unlocked. One day before the term you name I myself will place the papers there for you. With them, my father and I do give up our lives to save you and the little ones from the persecution of those fiends. May the good God guard you all."

He signed the letter with his initials, H. de M. Then he crept back to the gate and dropped the message into the hollow of the tree.

A quarter of an hour later Henri de Montorgueil was wending his way back to the hiding place which had sheltered him and his father for so long. Silence and darkness then held undisputed sway once more around the hollow tree. Even the rain had ceased its gentle pattering. Anon from far away came the sound of a church bell striking the hour of ten. Then nothing more.

A few more minutes of absolute silence, then something dark and furtive began to move out of the long grass which bordered the roadside — something that in movement was almost like a snake. It dragged itself along close to the ground, making no sound as it moved. Soon it reached the hollow tree, rose to the height of a man and flattened itself against the tree-trunk. Then it put out a hand, felt for the hollow receptacle and groped for the missive which Henri de Montorgueil had dropped in there a while ago.

The next moment a tiny ray of light gleamed through the darkness like a star. A small, almost fragile, figure of a man, dressed in the mud-stained clothes of a country yokel, had turned up the shutter of a small lantern. By its flickering light he deciphered the letter which Henri de Montorgueil had written to Lucile Clamette.

"One day before the term you name I myself will place the papers there for you."

A sigh of satisfaction, quickly suppressed, came through his thin, colourless lips, and the light of the lantern caught the flash of triumph in his pale, inscrutable eyes.

Then the light was extinguished. Impenetrable darkness swallowed up that slender, mysterious figure again.

Six days had gone by since Chauvelin had delivered his cruel "either — or" to poor little Lucile Clamette; three since he had found Henri de Montorgueil's reply to the girl's appeal in the hollow of the tree. Since then he had made a careful investigation of the chateau, and soon was able to settle it in his own mind as to which room had been Madame la Marquise's boudoir in the past. It was a small apartment, having direct access on the first landing of the staircase, and the one window gave on the rose garden at the back of the house. Inside the monumental hearth, at an arm's length up the wide chimney, a receptacle had been contrived in the brickwork, with a small iron door which opened and closed with a secret spring. Chauvelin, whom his nefarious calling had rendered proficient in such matters, had soon mastered the workings of that spring. He could now open and close the iron door at will.

Up to a late hour on the sixth night of this weary waiting, the receptacle inside the chimney was still empty. That night Chauvelin had determined to spend at the chateau. He could not have rested elsewhere.

Even his colleague Lebel could not know what the possession of those papers would mean to the discredited agent of the Committee of Public Safety. With them in his hands, he could demand rehabilitation, and could purchase immunity from those sneers which had been so galling to his arrogant soul — sneers which had become more and more marked, more and more unendurable, and more and more menacing, as he piled up failure on failure with every encounter with the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Immunity and rehabilitation! This would mean that he could once more measure his wits and his power with that audacious enemy who had brought about his downfall.

"In the name of Satan, bring us those papers!" Robespierre himself had cried with unwonted passion, ere he sent him out on this important mission. "We none of us could stand the scandal of such disclosures. It would mean absolute ruin for us all."

And Chauvelin that night, as soon as the shades of evening had drawn in, took up his stand in the chateau, in the small inner room which was contiguous to the boudoir.

Here he sat, beside the open window, for hour upon hour, his every sense on the alert, listening for the first footfall upon the gravel path below. Though the hours went by leaden-footed, he was neither excited nor anxious. The Clamette family was such a precious hostage that the Montorgueils were bound to comply with Lucile's demand for the papers by every dictate of honour and of humanity.

"While we have those people in our power," Chauvelin had reiterated to himself more than once during the course of his long vigil, "even that meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel can do nothing to save those cursed Montorgueils."

The night was dark and still. Not a breath of air stirred the branches of the trees or the shrubberies in the park; any footsteps, however wary, must echo through that perfect and absolute silence. Chauvelin's keen, pale eyes tried to pierce the gloom in the direction whence in all probability the aristo would come. Vaguely he wondered if it would be Henri de Montorgueil or the old Marquis himself who would bring the papers.

"Bah! whichever one it is," he muttered, "we can easily get the other, once those abominable papers are in our hands. And even if both the aristos escape," he added mentally, "'tis no matter, once we have the papers."

Anon, far away a distant church bell struck the midnight hour. The stillness of the air had become oppressive. A kind of torpor born of intense fatigue lulled the Terrorist's senses to somnolence. His head fell forward on his breast....

Then suddenly a shiver of excitement went right through him. He was fully awake now, with glowing eyes wide open and the icy calm of perfect confidence ruling every nerve. The sound of stealthy footsteps had reached his ear.

He could see nothing, either outside or in; but his fingers felt for the pistol which he carried in his belt. The aristo was evidently alone; only one solitary footstep was approaching the chateau.

Chauvelin had left the door ajar which gave on the boudoir. The staircase was on the other side of that fateful room, and the door leading to that was closed. A few minutes of tense expectancy went by. Then through the silence there came the sound of furtive footsteps on the stairs, the creaking of a loose board and finally the stealthy opening of the door.

In all his adventurous career Chauvelin had never felt so calm. His heart beat quite evenly, his senses were undisturbed by the slightest tingling of his nerves. The stealthy sounds in the next room brought the movements of the aristo perfectly clear before his mental vision. The latter was carrying a small dark lantern. As soon as he entered he flashed its light about the room. Then he deposited the lantern on the floor, close beside the hearth, and started to feel up the chimney for the hidden receptacle.

Chauvelin watched him now like a cat watches a mouse, savouring these few moments of anticipated triumph. He pushed open the door noiselessly which gave on the boudoir. By the feeble light of the lantern on the ground he could only see the vague outline of the aristo's back, bending forward to his task; but a thrill went through him as he saw a bundle of papers lying on the ground close by.

Everything was ready; the trap was set. Here was a complete victory at last. It was obviously the young Vicomte de Montorgueil who had come to do the deed. His head was up the chimney even now. The old Marquis's back would have looked narrower and more fragile. Chauvelin held his breath; then he gave a sharp little cough, and took the pistol from his belt.

The sound caused the aristo to turn, and the next moment a loud and merry laugh roused the dormant echoes of the old chateau, whilst a pleasant, drawly voice said in English:

"I am demmed if this is not my dear old friend M. Chambertin! Zounds, sir! who'd have thought of meeting you here?"

Had a cannon suddenly exploded at Chauvelin's feet he would, I think, have felt less unnerved. For the space of two heart-beats he stood there, rooted to the spot, his eyes glued on his arch-enemy, that execrated Scarlet Pimpernel, whose mocking glance, even through the intervening gloom, seemed to have deprived him of consciousness. But that phase of helplessness only lasted for a moment; the next, all the marvellous possibilities of this encounter flashed through the Terrorist's keen mind.

Everything was ready; the trap was set! The unfortunate Clamettes were still the bait which now would bring a far more noble quarry into the mesh than even he — Chauvelin — had dared to hope.

He raised his pistol, ready to fire. But already Sir Percy Blakeney was on him, and with a swift movement, which the other was too weak to resist, he wrenched the weapon from his enemy's grasp.

"Why, how hasty you are, my dear M. Chambertin," he said lightly.

"Surely you are not in such a hurry to put a demmed bullet into me!"

The position now was one which would have made even a braver man than Chauvelin quake. He stood alone and unarmed in face of an enemy from whom he could expect no mercy. But, even so, his first thought was not of escape. He had not only apprised his own danger, but also the immense power which he held whilst the Clamettes remained as hostages in the hands of his colleague Lebel.

"You have me at a disadvantage, Sir Percy," he said, speaking every whit as coolly as his foe. "But only momentarily. You can kill me, of course; but if I do not return from this expedition not only safe and sound, but with a certain packet of papers in my hands, my colleague Lebel has instructions to proceed at once against the girl Clamette and the whole family."

"I know that well enough," rejoined Sir Percy with a quaint laugh. "I know what venomous reptiles you and those of your kidney are. You certainly do owe your life at the present moment to the unfortunate girl whom you are persecuting with such infamous callousness."

Chauvelin drew a sigh of relief. The situation was shaping itself more to his satisfaction already. Through the gloom he could vaguely discern the Englishman's massive form standing a few paces away, one hand buried in his breeches pockets, the other still holding the pistol. On the ground close by the hearth was the small lantern, and in its dim light the packet of papers gleamed white and tempting in the darkness. Chauvelin's keen eyes had fastened on it, saw the form of receipt for money with Heriot's signature, which he recognised, on the top.

He himself had never felt so calm. The only thing he could regret was that he was alone. Half a dozen men now, and this impudent foe could indeed be brought to his knees. And this time there would be no risks taken, no chances for escape. Somehow it seemed to Chauvelin as if something of the Scarlet Pimpernel's audacity and foresight had gone from him. As he stood there, looking broad and physically powerful, there was something wavering and undecided in his attitude, as if the edge had been taken off his former recklessness and enthusiasm. He had brought the compromising papers here, had no doubt helped the Montorgueils to escape; but while Lucile Clamette and her family were under the eye of Lebel no amount of impudence could force a successful bargaining.

It was Chauvelin now who appeared the more keen and the more alert; the Englishman seemed undecided what to do next, remained silent, toying with the pistol. He even smothered a yawn. Chauvelin saw his opportunity. With the quick movement of a cat pouncing upon a mouse he stooped and seized that packet of papers, would then and there have made a dash for the door with them, only that, as he seized the packet, the string which held it together gave way and the papers were scattered all over the floor.

Receipts for money? Compromising letters? No! Blank sheets of paper, all of them — all except the one which had lain tantalisingly on the top: the one receipt signed by citizen Heriot. Sir Percy laughed lightly:

"Did you really think, my good friend," he said, "that I would be such a demmed fool as to place my best weapon so readily to your hand?"

"Your best weapon, Sir Percy!" retorted Chauvelin, with a sneer. "What use is it to you while we hold Lucile Clamette?"

"While I hold Lucile Clamette, you mean, my dear Monsieur Chambertin," riposted Blakeney with elaborate blandness.

"You hold Lucile Clamette? Bah! I defy you to drag a whole family like that out of our clutches. The man a cripple, the children helpless! And you think they can escape our vigilance when all our men are warned! How do you think they are going to get across the river, Sir Percy, when every bridge is closely watched? How will they get across Paris, when at every gate our men are on the look-out for them?"

"They can't do it, my dear Monsieur Chambertin," rejoined Sir Percy blandly, "else I were not here."

Then, as Chauvelin, fuming, irritated despite himself, as he always was when he encountered that impudent Englishman, shrugged his shoulders in token of contempt, Blakeney's powerful grasp suddenly clutched his arm.

"Let us understand one another, my good M. Chambertin," he said coolly. "Those unfortunate Clamettes, as you say, are too helpless and too numerous to smuggle across Paris with any chance of success. Therefore I look to you to take them under your protection. They are all stowed away comfortably at this moment in a conveyance which I have provided for them. That conveyance is waiting at the bridgehead now. We could not cross without your help; we could not get across Paris without your august presence and your tricolour scarf of office. So you are coming with us, my dear M. Chambertin," he continued, and, with force which was quite irresistible, he began to drag his enemy after him towards the door. "You are going to sit in that conveyance with the Clamettes, and I myself will have the honour to drive you. And at every bridgehead you will show your pleasing countenance and your scarf of office to the guard and demand free passage for yourself and your family, as a representative member of the Committee of Public Safety. And then we'll enter Paris by the Porte d'Ivry and leave it by the Batignolles; and everywhere your charming presence will lull the guards' suspicions to rest. I pray you, come! There is no time to consider! At noon to-morrow, without a moment's grace, my friend Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, who has the papers in his possession, will dispose of them as he thinks best unless I myself do claim them from him."

While he spoke he continued to drag his enemy along with him, with an assurance and an impudence which were past belief. Chauvelin was trying to collect his thoughts; a whirl of conflicting plans were running riot in his mind. The Scarlet Pimpernel in his power! At any point on the road he could deliver him up to the nearest guard ... then still hold the Clamettes and demand the papers....

"Too late, my dear Monsieur Chambertin!" Sir Percy's mocking voice broke in, as if divining his thoughts. "You do not know where to find my friend Ffoulkes, and at noon to-morrow, if I do not arrive to claim those papers, there will not be a single ragamuffin in Paris who will not be crying your shame and that of your precious colleagues upon the housetops."

Chauvelin's whole nervous system was writhing with the feeling of impotence. Mechanically, unresisting now, he followed his enemy down the main staircase of the chateau and out through the wide open gates. He could not bring himself to believe that he had been so completely foiled, that this impudent adventurer had him once more in the hollow of his hand.

"In the name of Satan, bring us back those papers!" Robespierre had commanded. And now he — Chauvelin — was left in a maze of doubt; and the vital alternative was hammering in his brain: "The Scarlet Pimpernel — or those papers—" Which, in Satan's name, was the more important? Passion whispered "The Scarlet Pimpernel!" but common sense and the future of his party, the whole future of the Revolution mayhap, demanded those compromising papers. And all the while he followed that relentless enemy through the avenues of the park and down the lonely lane. Overhead the trees of the forest of Sucy, nodding in a gentle breeze, seemed to mock his perplexity.

He had not arrived at a definite decision when the river came in sight, and when anon a carriage lanthorn threw a shaft of dim light through the mist-laden air. Now he felt as if he were in a dream. He was thrust unresisting into a closed chaise, wherein he felt the presence of several other people — children, an old man who was muttering ceaselessly. As in a dream he answered questions at the bridge to a guard whom he knew well.

"You know me — Armand Chauvelin, of the Committee of Public Safety!"

As in a dream, he heard the curt words of command:

"Pass on, in the name of the Republic!"

And all the while the thought hammered in his brain: "Something must be done! This is impossible! This cannot be! It is not I — Chauvelin — who am sitting here, helpless, unresisting. It is not that impudent Scarlet Pimpernel who is sitting there before me on the box, driving me to utter humiliation!"

And yet it was all true. All real. The Clamette children were sitting in front of him, clinging to Lucile, terrified of him even now. The old man was beside him — imbecile and not understanding. The boy Etienne was up on the box next to that audacious adventurer, whose broad back appeared to Chauvelin like a rock on which all his hopes and dreams must for ever be shattered.

The chaise rattled triumphantly through the Batignolles. It was then broad daylight. A brilliant early autumn day after the rains. The sun, the keen air, all mocked Chauvelin's helplessness, his humiliation. Long before noon they passed St. Denis. Here the barouche turned off the main road, halted at a small wayside house — nothing more than a cottage. After which everything seemed more dreamlike than ever. All that Chauvelin remembered of it afterwards was that he was once more alone in a room with his enemy, who had demanded his signature to a number of safe-conducts, ere he finally handed over the packet of papers to him.

"How do I know that they are all here?" he heard himself vaguely muttering, while his trembling fingers handled that precious packet.

"That's just it!" his tormentor retorted airily. "You don't know. I don't know myself," he added, with a light laugh. "And, personally, I don't see how either of us can possibly ascertain. In the meanwhile, I must bid you au revoir, my dear M. Chambertin. I am sorry that I cannot provide you with a conveyance, and you will have to walk a league or more ere you meet one, I fear me. We, in the meanwhile, will be well on our way to Dieppe, where my yacht, the Day Dream, lies at anchor, and I do not think that it will be worth your while to try and overtake us. I thank you for the safe-conducts. They will make our journey exceedingly pleasant. Shall I give your regards to M. le Marquis de Montorgueil or to M. le Vicomte? They are on board the Day Dream, you know. Oh! and I was forgetting! Lady Blakeney desired to be remembered to you."

The next moment he was gone. Chauvelin, standing at the window of the wayside house, saw Sir Percy Blakeney once more mount the box of the chaise. This time he had Sir Andrew Ffoulkes beside him. The Clamette family were huddled together — happy and free — inside the vehicle. After which there was the usual clatter of horses' hoofs, the creaking of wheels, the rattle of chains. Chauvelin saw and heard nothing of that. All that he saw at the last was Sir Percy's slender hand, waving him a last adieu.

After which he was left alone with his thoughts. The packet of papers was in his hand. He fingered it, felt its crispness, clutched it with a fierce gesture, which was followed by a long-drawn-out sigh of intense bitterness.

No one would ever know what it had cost him to obtain these papers. No one would ever know how much he had sacrificed of pride, revenge and hate in order to save a few shreds of his own party's honour.

A BATTLE OF WITS

What had happened was this:

Tournefort, one of the ablest of the many sleuth-hounds employed by the Committee of Public Safety, was out during that awful storm on the night of the twenty-fifth. The rain came down as if it had been poured out of buckets, and Tournefort took shelter under the portico of a tall, dilapidated-looking house somewhere at the back of St. Lazare. The night was, of course, pitch dark, and the howling of the wind and beating of the rain effectually drowned every other sound.

Tournefort, chilled to the marrow, had at first cowered in the angle of the door, as far away from the draught as he could. But presently he spied the glimmer of a tiny light some little way up on his left, and taking this to come from the concierge's lodge, he went cautiously along the passage intending to ask for better shelter against the fury of the elements than the rickety front door afforded.

Tournefort, you must remember, was always on the best terms with every concierge in Paris. They were, as it were, his subordinates; without their help he never could have carried on his unavowable profession quite so successfully. And they, in their turn, found it to their advantage to earn the good-will of that army of spies, which the Revolutionary Government kept in its service, for the tracking down of all those unfortunates who had not given complete adhesion to their tyrannical and murderous policy.

Therefore, in this instance, Tournefort felt no hesitation in claiming the hospitality of the concierge of the squalid house wherein he found himself. He went boldly up to the lodge. His hand was already on the latch, when certain sounds which proceeded from the interior of the lodge caused him to pause and to bend his ear in order to listen. It was Tournefort's metier to listen. What had arrested his attention was the sound of a man's voice, saying in a tone of deep respect:

"Bien, Madame la Comtesse, we'll do our best."

No wonder that the servant of the Committee of Public Safety remained at attention, no longer thought of the storm or felt the cold blast chilling him to the marrow. Here was a wholly unexpected piece of good luck. "Madame la Comtesse!" Peste! There were not many such left in Paris these days. Unfortunately, the tempest of the wind and the rain made such a din that it was difficult to catch every sound which came from the interior of the lodge. All that Tournefort caught definitely were a few fragments of conversation.

"My good M. Bertin ..." came at one time from a woman's voice. "Truly I do not know why you should do all this for me."

And then again: "All I possess in the world now are my diamonds. They alone stand between my children and utter destitution."

The man's voice seemed all the time to be saying something that sounded cheerful and encouraging. But his voice came only as a vague murmur to the listener's ears. Presently, however, there came a word which set his pulses tingling. Madame said something about "Gentilly," and directly afterwards: "You will have to be very careful, my dear M. Bertin. The chateau, I feel sure, is being watched."

Tournefort could scarce repress a cry of joy. "Gentilly? Madame la Comtesse? The chateau?" Why, of course, he held all the necessary threads already. The *ci-devant* Comte de Sucy — a pestilential aristo if ever there was one! — had been sent to the guillotine less than a fortnight ago. His chateau, situated just outside Gentilly, stood empty, it having been given out that the widow Sucy and her two children had escaped to England. Well! she had not gone apparently, for here she was, in the lodge of the concierge of a mean house in one of the desolate quarters of Paris, begging some traitor to find her diamonds for her, which she had obviously left concealed inside the chateau. What a haul for Tournefort! What commendation from his superiors! The chances of a speedy promotion were indeed glorious now! He blessed the storm and the rain which had driven him for shelter to this house, where a poisonous plot was being hatched to rob the people of valuable property, and to aid a few more of those abominable aristos in cheating the guillotine of their traitorous heads.

He listened for a while longer, in order to get all the information that he could on the subject of the diamonds, because he knew by experience that those perfidious aristos, once they were under arrest, would sooner bite out their tongues than reveal anything that might be of service to the Government of the people. But he learned little else. Nothing was revealed of where Madame la Comtesse was in hiding, or how the diamonds were to be disposed of once they were found. Tournefort would have given much to have at least one of his colleagues with him. As it was, he would be forced to act single-handed and on his own initiative. In his own mind he had already decided that he would wait until Madame la Comtesse came out of the concierge's lodge, and that he would follow her and apprehend her somewhere out in the open streets, rather than here where her friend Bertin might prove to be a stalwart as well as a desperate man, ready with a pistol, whilst he — Tournefort — was unarmed. Bertin, who had, it seemed, been entrusted with the task of finding the diamonds, could then be shadowed and arrested in the very act of filching property which by decree of the State belonged to the people.

So he waited patiently for a while. No doubt the aristo would remain here under shelter until the storm had abated. Soon the sound of voices died down, and an extraordinary silence descended on this miserable, abandoned corner of old Paris. The silence became all the more marked after a while, because the rain ceased its monotonous pattering and the souging of the wind was stilled. It was, in fact, this amazing stillness which set citizen Tournefort thinking. Evidently the aristo did not intend to come out of the lodge to-night. Well! Tournefort had not meant to make himself unpleasant inside the house, or to have a quarrel just yet with the traitor Bertin, whoever he was; but his hand was forced and he had no option.

The door of the lodge was locked. He tugged vigorously at the bell again and again, for at first he got no answer. A few minutes later he heard the sound of shuffling footsteps upon creaking boards. The door was opened, and a man in night attire, with bare, thin legs and tattered carpet slippers on his feet, confronted an exceedingly astonished servant of the Committee of Public Safety. Indeed, Tournefort thought that he must have been dreaming, or that he was dreaming now. For the man who opened the door to him was well known to every agent of the Committee. He was an ex-soldier who had been crippled years ago by the loss of one arm, and had held the post of concierge in a house in the Ruelle du Paradis ever since. His name was Grosjean. He was very old, and nearly doubled up with rheumatism, had scarcely any hair on his head or flesh on his bones. At this moment he appeared to be suffering from a cold in the head, for his eyes were streaming and his narrow, hooked nose was adorned by a drop of moisture at its tip. In fact, poor old

Grosjean looked more like a dilapidated scarecrow than a dangerous conspirator. Tournefort literally gasped at sight of him, and Grosjean uttered a kind of croak, intended, no doubt, for complete surprise.

"Citizen Tournefort!" he exclaimed. "Name of a dog! What are you doing here at this hour and in this abominable weather? Come in! Come in!" he added, and, turning on his heel, he shuffled back into the inner room, and then returned carrying a lighted lamp, which he set upon the table. "Amelie left a sup of hot coffee on the hob in the kitchen before she went to bed. You must have a drop of that."

He was about to shuffle off again when Tournefort broke in roughly:

"None of that nonsense, Grosjean! Where are the aristos?"

"The aristos, citizen?" queried Grosjean, and nothing could have looked more utterly, more ludicrously bewildered than did the old concierge at this moment. "What aristos?"

"Bertin and Madame la Comtesse," retorted Tournefort gruffly. "I heard them talking."

"You have been dreaming, citizen Tournefort," the old man said, with a husky little laugh. "Sit down, and let me get you some coffee—"

"Don't try and hoodwink me, Grosjean!" Tournefort cried now in a sudden access of rage. "I tell you that I saw the light. I heard the aristos talking. There was a man named Bertin, and a woman he called 'Madame la Comtesse,' and I say that some devilish royalist plot is being hatched here, and that you, Grosjean, will suffer for it if you try and shield those aristos."

"But, citizen Tournefort," replied the concierge meekly, "I assure you that I have seen no aristos. The door of my bedroom was open, and the lamp was by my bedside. Amelie, too, has only been in bed a few minutes. You ask her! There has been no one, I tell you — no one! I should have seen and heard them — the door was open," he reiterated pathetically.

"We'll soon see about that!" was Tournefort's curt comment.

But it was his turn indeed to be utterly bewildered. He searched — none too gently — the squalid little lodge through and through, turned the paltry sticks of furniture over, hauled little Amelie, Grosjean's granddaughter, out of bed, searched under the mattresses, and even poked his head up the chimney.

Grosjean watched him wholly unperturbed. These were strange times, and friend Tournefort had obviously gone a little off his head. The worthy old concierge calmly went on getting the coffee ready. Only when presently Tournefort, worn out with anger and futile exertion, threw himself, with many an oath, into the one armchair, Grosjean remarked coolly:

"I tell you what I think it is, citizen. If you were standing just by the door of the lodge you had the back staircase of the house immediately behind you. The partition wall is very thin, and there is a disused door just there also. No doubt the voices came from there. You see, if there had been any aristos here," he added naively, "they could not have flown up the chimney, could they?"

That argument was certainly unanswerable. But Tournefort was out of temper. He roughly ordered Grosjean to bring the lamp and show him the back staircase and the disused door. The concierge obeyed without a murmur. He was not in the least disturbed or frightened by all this blustering. He was only afraid that getting out of bed had made his cold worse. But he knew Tournefort of old. A good fellow, but inclined to be noisy and arrogant since he was in the employ of the Government. Grosjean took the precaution of putting on his trousers and wrapping an old shawl round his shoulders. Then he had a final sip of hot coffee; after which he picked up the lamp and guided Tournefort out of the lodge.

The wind had quite gone down by now. The lamp scarcely flickered as Grosjean held it above his head.

"Just here, citizen Tournefort," he said, and turned sharply to his left. But the next sound which he uttered was a loud croak of astonishment.

"That door has been out of use ever since I've been here," he muttered.

"And it certainly was closed when I stood up against it," rejoined Tournefort, with a savage oath, "or, of course, I should have noticed it."

Close to the lodge, at right angles to it, a door stood partially open. Tournefort went through it, closely followed by Grosjean. He found himself in a passage which ended in a cul de sac on his right; on the left was the foot of the stairs. The whole place was pitch dark save for the feeble light of the lamp. The cul de sac itself reeked of dirt and fustiness, as if it had not been cleaned or ventilated for years.

"When did you last notice that this door was closed?" queried Tournefort, furious with the sense of discomfiture, which he would have liked to vent on the unfortunate concierge.

"I have not noticed it for some days, citizen," replied Grosjean meekly. "I have had a severe cold, and have not been outside my lodge since Monday last. But we'll ask Amelie!" he added more hopefully.

Amelie, however, could throw no light upon the subject. She certainly kept the back stairs cleaned and swept, but it was not part of her duties to extend her sweeping operations as far as the cul de sac. She had quite enough to do as it was, with grandfather now practically helpless. This morning, when she went out to do her shopping, she had not noticed whether the disused door did or did not look the same as usual.

Grosjean was very sorry for his friend Tournefort, who appeared vastly upset, but still more sorry for himself, for he knew what endless trouble this would entail upon him.

Nor was the trouble slow in coming, not only on Grosjean, but on every lodger inside the house; for before half an hour had gone by Tournefort had gone and come back, this time with the local commissary of police and a couple of agents, who had every man, woman and child in that house out of bed and examined at great length, their identity books searchingly overhauled, their rooms turned topsy-turvy and their furniture knocked about.

It was past midnight before all these perquisitions were completed. No one dared to complain at these indignities put upon peaceable citizens on the mere denunciation of an obscure police agent. These were times when every regulation, every command, had

to be accepted without a murmur. At one o'clock in the morning, Grosjean himself was thankful to get back to bed, having satisfied the commissary that he was not a dangerous conspirator.

But of anyone even remotely approaching the description of the ci-devant Comtesse de Sucey, or of any man called Bertin, there was not the faintest trace.

But no feeling of discomfort ever lasted very long with citizen Tournefort. He was a person of vast resource and great buoyancy of temperament.

True, he had not apprehended two exceedingly noxious aristos, as he had hoped to do; but he held the threads of an abominable conspiracy in his hands, and the question of catching both Bertin and Madame la Comtesse red-handed was only a question of time. But little time had been lost. There was always someone to be found at the offices of the Committee of Public Safety, which were open all night. It was possible that citizen Chauvelin would be still there, for he often took on the night shift, or else citizen Gourdon.

It was Gourdon who greeted his subordinate, somewhat ill-humouredly, for he was indulging in a little sleep, with his toes turned to the fire, as the night was so damp and cold. But when he heard Tournefort's story, he was all eagerness and zeal.

"It is, of course, too late to do anything now," he said finally, after he had mastered every detail of the man's adventures in the Ruelle du Paradis; "but get together half a dozen men upon whom you can rely, and by six o'clock in the morning, or even five, we'll be on our way to Gentilly. Citizen Chauvelin was only saying to-day that he strongly suspected the ci-devant Comtesse de Sucey of having left the bulk of her valuable jewellery at the chateau, and that she would make some effort to get possession of it. It would be rather fine, citizen Tournefort," he added with a chuckle, "if you and I could steal a march on citizen Chauvelin over this affair, what? He has been extraordinarily arrogant of late and marvellously in favour, not only with the Committee, but with citizen Robespierre himself."

"They say," commented Tournefort, "that he succeeded in getting hold of some papers which were of great value to the members of the Committee."

"He never succeeded in getting hold of that meddling Englishman whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel," was Gourdon's final dry comment.

Thus was the matter decided on. And the following morning at daybreak, Gourdon, who was only a subordinate officer on the Committee of Public Safety, took it upon himself to institute a perquisition in the chateau of Gentilly, which is situated close to the commune of that name. He was accompanied by his friend Tournefort and a gang of half a dozen ruffians recruited from the most disreputable cabarets of Paris.

The intention had been to steal a march on citizen Chauvelin, who had been over arrogant of late; but the result did not come up to expectations. By midday the chateau had been ransacked from attic to cellar; every kind of valuable property had been destroyed, priceless works of art irretrievably damaged. But priceless works of art had no market in Paris these days; and the property of real value — the Sucey diamonds namely — which had excited the cupidity or the patriotic wrath of citizens Gourdon and Tournefort could nowhere be found.

To make the situation more deplorable still, the Committee of Public Safety had in some unexplainable way got wind of the affair, and the two worthies had the mortification of seeing citizen Chauvelin presently appear upon the scene.

It was then two o'clock in the afternoon. Gourdon, after he had snatched a hasty dinner at a neighbouring cabaret, had returned to the task of pulling the chateau of Gentilly about his own ears if need be, with a view to finding the concealed treasure.

For the nonce he was standing in the centre of the finely proportioned hall. The rich ormolu and crystal chandelier lay in a tangled, broken heap of scraps at his feet, and all around there was a confused medley of pictures, statuettes, silver ornaments, tapestry and brocade hangings, all piled up in disorder, smashed, tattered, kicked at now and again by Gourdon, to the accompaniment of a savage oath.

The house itself was full of noises; heavy footsteps tramping up and down the stairs, furniture turned over, curtains torn from their poles, doors and windows battered in. And through it all the ceaseless hammering of pick and axe, attacking these stately walls which had withstood the wars and sieges of centuries.

Every now and then Tournefort, his face perspiring and crimson with exertion, would present himself at the door of the hall. Gourdon would query gruffly: "Well?"

And the answer was invariably the same: "Nothing!"

Then Gourdon would swear again and send curt orders to continue the search, relentlessly, ceaselessly.

"Leave no stone upon stone," he commanded. "Those diamonds must be found. We know they are here, and, name of a dog! I mean to have them."

When Chauvelin arrived at the chateau he made no attempt at first to interfere with Gourdon's commands. Only on one occasion he remarked curtly:

"I suppose, citizen Gourdon, that you can trust your search party?"

"Absolutely," retorted Gourdon. "A finer patriot than Tournefort does not exist."

"Probably," rejoined the other dryly. "But what about the men?"

"Oh! they are only a set of barefooted, ignorant louts. They do as they are told, and Tournefort has his eye on them. I dare say they'll contrive to steal a few things, but they would never dare lay hands on valuable jewellery. To begin with, they could never dispose of it. Imagine a va-nu-pieds peddling a diamond tiara!"

"There are always receivers prepared to take risks."

"Very few," Gourdon assured him, "since we decreed that trafficking with aristo property was a crime punishable by death."

Chauvelin said nothing for the moment. He appeared wrapped in his own thoughts, listened for a while to the confused hubbub about the house, then he resumed abruptly:

"Who are these men whom you are employing, citizen Gourdon?"

"A well-known gang," replied the other. "I can give you their names."

"If you please."

Gourdon searched his pockets for a paper which he found presently and handed to his colleague. The latter perused it thoughtfully.

"Where did Tournefort find these men?" he asked.

"For the most part at the Cabaret de la Liberte — a place of very evil repute down in the Rue Christine."

"I know it," rejoined the other. He was still studying the list of names which Gourdon had given him. "And," he added, "I know most of these men. As thorough a set of ruffians as we need for some of our work. Merri, Guidal, Rateau, Desmonds. TIENS!" he exclaimed. "Rateau! Is Rateau here now?"

"Why, of course! He was recruited, like the rest of them, for the day. He won't leave till he has been paid, you may be sure of that. Why do you ask?"

"I will tell you presently. But I would wish to speak with citizen Rateau first."

Just at this moment Tournefort paid his periodical visit to the hall. The usual words, "Still nothing," were on his lips, when Gourdon curtly ordered him to go and fetch the citizen Rateau.

A minute or two later Tournefort returned with the news that Rateau could nowhere be found. Chauvelin received the news without any comment; he only ordered Tournefort, somewhat roughly, back to his work. Then, as soon as the latter had gone, Gourdon turned upon his colleague.

"Will you explain—" he began with a show of bluster.

"With pleasure," replied Chauvelin blandly. "On my way hither, less than an hour ago, I met your man Rateau, a league or so from here."

"You met Rateau!" exclaimed Gourdon impatiently. "Impossible! He was here then, I feel sure. You must have been mistaken."

"I think not. I have only seen the man once, when I, too, went to recruit a band of ruffians at the Cabaret de la Liberte, in connection with some work I wanted doing. I did not employ him then, for he appeared to me both drink-sodden and nothing but a miserable, consumptive creature, with a churchyard cough you can hear half a league away. But I would know him anywhere. Besides which, he stopped and wished me good morning. Now I come to think of it," added Chauvelin thoughtfully, "he was carrying what looked like a heavy bundle under his arm."

"A heavy bundle!" cried Gourdon, with a forceful oath. "And you did not stop him!"

"I had no reason for suspecting him. I did not know until I arrived here what the whole affair was about, or whom you were employing. All that the Committee knew for certain was that you and Tournefort and a number of men had arrived at Gentilly before daybreak, and I was then instructed to follow you hither to see what mischief you were up to. You acted in complete secrecy, remember, citizen Gourdon, and without first ascertaining the wishes of the Committee of Public Safety, whose servant you are. If the Sucey diamonds are not found, you alone will be held responsible for their loss to the Government of the People."

Chauvelin's voice had now assumed a threatening tone, and Gourdon felt all his audacity and self-assurance fall away from him, leaving him a prey to nameless terror.

"We must round up Rateau," he murmured hastily. "He cannot have gone far."

"No, he cannot," rejoined Chauvelin dryly. "Though I was not specially thinking of Rateau or of diamonds when I started to come hither. I did send a general order forbidding any person on foot or horseback to enter or leave Paris by any of the southern gates. That order will serve us well now. Are you riding?"

"Yes. I left my horse at the tavern just outside Gentilly. I can get to horse within ten minutes."

"To horse, then, as quickly as you can. Pay off your men and dismiss them — all but Tournefort, who had best accompany us. Do not lose a single moment. I'll be ahead of you and may come up with Rateau before you overtake me. And if I were you, citizen Gourdon," he concluded, with ominous emphasis, "I would burn one or two candles to your compeer the devil. You'll have need of his help if Rateau gives us the slip."

The first part of the road from Gentilly to Paris runs through the valley of the Biere, and is densely wooded on either side. It winds in and out for the most part, ribbon-like, through thick coppice of chestnut and birch. Thus it was impossible for Chauvelin to spy his quarry from afar; nor did he expect to do so this side of the Hopital de la Sante. Once past that point, he would find the road quite open and running almost straight, in the midst of arid and only partially cultivated land.

He rode at a sharp trot, with his caped coat wrapped tightly round his shoulders, for it was raining fast. At intervals, when he met an occasional wayfarer, he would ask questions about a tall man who had a consumptive cough, and who was carrying a cumbersome burden under his arm.

Almost everyone whom he thus asked remembered seeing a personage who vaguely answered to the description: tall and with a decided stoop — yes, and carrying a cumbersome-looking bundle under his arm. Chauvelin was undoubtedly on the track of the thief.

Just beyond Meuves he was overtaken by Gourdon and Tournefort. Here, too, the man Rateau's track became more and more certain. At one place he had stopped and had a glass of wine and a rest, at another he had asked how close he was to the gates of Paris.

The road was now quite open and level; the irregular buildings of the hospital appeared vague in the rain-sodden distance. Twenty minutes later Tournefort, who was riding ahead of his companions, spied a tall, stooping figure at the spot where the Chemin de Gentilly forks, and where stands a group of isolated houses and bits of garden, which belong to la Sante. Here, before the days when the glorious Revolution swept aside all such outward signs of superstition, there had stood a Calvary. It was now used as a signpost. The man stood before it, scanning the half-obliterated indications.

At the moment that Tournefort first caught sight of him he appeared uncertain of his way. Then for a while he watched Tournefort, who was coming at a sharp trot towards him. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind very suddenly and, giving a last, quick look round, he walked rapidly along the upper road. Tournefort drew rein, waited for his colleagues to come up with him. Then he told them what he had seen.

"It is Rateau, sure enough," he said. "I saw his face quite distinctly and heard his abominable cough. He is trying to get into Paris. That road leads nowhere but to the barrier. There, of course, he will be stopped, and—"

The other two had also brought their horses to a halt. The situation had become tense, and a plan for future action had at once to be decided on. Already Chauvelin, masterful and sure of himself, had assumed command of the little party. Now he broke in abruptly on Tournefort's rapid reflections.

"We don't want him stopped at the barrier," he said in his usual curt, authoritative manner. "You, citizen Tournefort," he continued, "will ride as fast as you can to the gate, making a detour by the lower road. You will immediately demand to speak with the sergeant who is in command, and you will give him a detailed description of the man Rateau. Then you will tell him in my name that, should such a man present himself at the gate, he must be allowed to enter the city unmolested."

Gourdon gave a quick cry of protest.

"Let the man go unmolested? Citizen Chauvelin, think what you are doing!"

"I always think of what I am doing," retorted Chauvelin curtly, "and have no need of outside guidance in the process." Then he turned once more to Tournefort. "You yourself, citizen," he continued, in sharp, decisive tones which admitted of no argument, "will dismount as soon as you are inside the city. You will keep the gate under observation. The moment you see the man Rateau, you will shadow him, and on no account lose sight of him. Understand?"

"You may trust me, citizen Chauvelin," Tournefort replied, elated at the prospect of work which was so entirely congenial to him.

"But will you tell me—"

"I will tell you this much, citizen Tournefort," broke in Chauvelin with some acerbity, "that though we have traced the diamonds and the thief so far, we have, through your folly last night, lost complete track of the *ci-devant* Comtesse de Sucy and of the man Bertin. We want Rateau to show us where they are."

"I understand," murmured the other meekly.

"That's a mercy!" riposted Chauvelin dryly. "Then quickly man. Lose no time! Try to get a few minutes' advance on Rateau; then slip in to the guard-room to change into less conspicuous clothes. Citizen Gourdon and I will continue on the upper road and keep the man in sight in case he should think of altering his course. In any event, we'll meet you just inside the barrier. But if, in the meanwhile, you have to get on Rateau's track before we have arrived on the scene, leave the usual indications as to the direction which you have taken."

Having given his orders and satisfied himself that they were fully understood, he gave a curt command, "En avant," and once more the three of them rode at a sharp trot down the road towards the city.

Citizen Rateau, if he thought about the matter at all, must indeed have been vastly surprised at the unwonted amiability or indifference of sergeant Ribot, who was in command at the gate of Gentilly. Ribot only threw a very perfunctory glance at the greasy permit which Rateau presented to him, and when he put the usual query, "What's in that parcel?" and Rateau gave the reply: "Two heads of cabbage and a bunch of carrots," Ribot merely poked one of his fingers into the bundle, felt that a cabbage leaf did effectually lie on the top, and thereupon gave the formal order: "Pass on, citizen, in the name of the Republic!" without any hesitation.

Tournefort, who had watched the brief little incident from behind the window of a neighbouring cabaret, could not help but chuckle to himself. Never had he seen game walk more readily into a trap. Rateau, after he had passed the barrier, appeared undecided which way he would go. He looked with obvious longing towards the cabaret, behind which the keenest agent on the staff of the Committee of Public Safety was even now ensconced. But seemingly a halt within those hospitable doors did not form part of his programme, and a moment or two later he turned sharply on his heel and strode rapidly down the Rue de l'Oursine.

Tournefort allowed him a fair start, and then made ready to follow.

Just as he was stepping out of the cabaret he spied Chauvelin and Gourdon coming through the gates. They, too, had apparently made a brief halt inside the guard-room, where — as at most of the gates — a store of various disguises was always kept ready for the use of the numerous sleuth-hounds employed by the Committee of Public Safety. Here the two men had exchanged their official garments for suits of sombre cloth, which gave them the appearance of a couple of humble bourgeois going quietly about their business. Tournefort had donned an old blouse, tattered stockings, and shoes down at heel. With his hands buried in his breeches' pockets, he, too, turned into the long narrow Rue de l'Oursine, which, after a sharp curve, abuts on the Rue Mouffetard.

Rateau was walking rapidly, taking big strides with his long legs. Tournefort, now sauntering in the gutter in the middle of the road, now darting in and out of open doorways, kept his quarry well in sight. Chauvelin and Gourdon lagged some little way behind. It was still raining, but not heavily — a thin drizzle, which penetrated almost to the marrow. Not many passers-by haunted this forlorn quarter of old Paris. To right and left tall houses almost obscured the last, quickly-fading light of the grey September day.

At the bottom of the Rue Mouffetard, Rateau came once more to a halt. A network of narrow streets radiated from this centre. He looked all round him and also behind. It was difficult to know whether he had a sudden suspicion that he was being followed; certain it is that, after a very brief moment of hesitation, he plunged suddenly into the narrow Rue Contrescarpe and disappeared from view.

Tournefort was after him in a trice. When he reached the corner of the street he saw Rateau, at the further end of it, take a sudden sharp turn to the right. But not before he had very obviously spied his pursuer, for at that moment his entire demeanour changed. An air of furtive anxiety was expressed in his whole attitude. Even at that distance Tournefort could see him clutching his bulky parcel close to his chest.

After that the pursuit became closer and hotter. Rateau was in and out of that tight network of streets which cluster around the Place de Fourci, intent, apparently, on throwing his pursuers off the scent, for after a while he was running round and round in a circle. Now up the Rue des Poules, then to the right and to the right again; back in the Place de Fourci. Then straight across it once more to the Rue Contrescarpe, where he presently disappeared so completely from view that Tournefort thought that the earth must have swallowed him up.

Tournefort was a man capable of great physical exertion. His calling often made heavy demands upon his powers of endurance; but never before had he grappled with so strenuous a task. Puffing and panting, now running at top speed, anon brought to a halt by the doubling-up tactics of his quarry, his great difficulty was the fact that citizen Chauvelin did not wish the man Rateau to be

apprehended; did not wish him to know that he was being pursued. And Tournefort had need of all his wits to keep well under the shadow of any projecting wall or under cover of open doorways which were conveniently in the way, and all the while not to lose sight of that consumptive giant, who seemed to be playing some intricate game which well-nigh exhausted the strength of citizen Tournefort.

What he could not make out was what had happened to Chauvelin and to Gourdon. They had been less than three hundred metres behind him when first this wild chase in and out of the Rue Contrescarpe had begun. Now, when their presence was most needed, they seemed to have lost track both of him — Tournefort — and of the very elusive quarry. To make matters more complicated, the shades of evening were drawing in very fast, and these narrow streets of the Faubourg were very sparsely lighted.

Just at this moment Tournefort had once more caught sight of Rateau, striding leisurely this time up the street. The worthy agent quickly took refuge under a doorway and was mopping his streaming forehead, glad of this brief respite in the mad chase, when that awful churchyard cough suddenly sounded so close to him that he gave a great jump and well-nigh betrayed his presence then and there. He had only just time to withdraw further still into the angle of the doorway, when Rateau passed by.

Tournefort peeped out of his hiding-place, and for the space of a dozen heart beats or so, remained there quite still, watching that broad back and those long limbs slowly moving through the gathering gloom. The next instant he perceived Chauvelin standing at the end of the street.

Rateau saw him too — came face to face with him, in fact, and must have known who he was for, without an instant's hesitation and just like a hunted creature at bay, he turned sharply on his heel and then ran back down the street as hard as he could tear. He passed close to within half a metre of Tournefort, and as he flew past he hit out with his left fist so vigorously that the worthy agent of the Committee of Public Safety, caught on the nose by the blow, staggered and measured his length upon the flagged floor below.

The next moment Chauvelin had come by. Tournefort, struggling to his feet, called to him, panting:

"Did you see him? Which way did he go?"

"Up the Rue Bordet. After him, citizen!" replied Chauvelin grimly, between his teeth.

Together the two men continued the chase, guided through the intricate mazes of the streets by their fleeing quarry. They had Rateau well in sight, and the latter could no longer continue his former tactics with success now that two experienced sleuth-hounds were on his track.

At a given moment he was caught between the two of them. Tournefort was advancing cautiously up the Rue Bordet; Chauvelin, equally stealthily, was coming down the same street, and Rateau, once more walking quite leisurely, was at equal distance between the two.

There are no side turnings out of the Rue Bordet, the total length of which is less than fifty metres; so Tournefort, feeling more at his ease, ensconced himself at one end of the street, behind a doorway, whilst Chauvelin did the same at the other. Rateau, standing in the gutter, appeared once more in a state of hesitation. Immediately in front of him the door of a small cabaret stood invitingly open; its signboard, "Le Bon Copain," promised rest and refreshment. He peered up and down the road, satisfied himself presumably that, for the moment, his pursuers were out of sight, hugged his parcel to his chest, and then suddenly made a dart for the cabaret and disappeared within its doors.

Nothing could have been better. The quarry, for the moment, was safe, and if the sleuth-hounds could not get refreshment, they could at least get a rest. Tournefort and Chauvelin crept out of their hiding-places. They met in the middle of the road, at the spot where Rateau had stood a while ago. It was then growing dark and the street was innocent of lanterns, but the lights inside the cabaret gave a full view of the interior. The lower half of the wide shop-window was curtained off, but above the curtain the heads of the customers of "Le Bon Copain," and the general comings and goings, could very clearly be seen.

Tournefort, never at a loss, had already climbed upon a low projection in the wall of one of the houses opposite. From this point of vantage he could more easily observe what went on inside the cabaret, and in short, jerky sentences he gave a description of what he saw to his chief.

"Rateau is sitting down ... he has his back to the window ... he has put his bundle down close beside him on the bench ... he can't speak for a minute, for he is coughing and spluttering like an old walrus.... A wench is bringing him a bottle of wine and a hunk of bread and cheese.... He has started talking ... is talking volubly ... the people are laughing ... some are applauding.... And here comes Jean Victor, the landlord ... you know him, citizen ... a big, hulking fellow, and as good a patriot as I ever wish to see.... He, too, is laughing and talking to Rateau, who is doubled up with another fit of coughing—"

Chauvelin uttered an exclamation of impatience:

"Enough of this, citizen Tournefort. Keep your eye on the man and hold your tongue. I am spent with fatigue."

"No wonder," murmured Tournefort. Then he added insinuatingly: "Why not let me go in there and apprehend Rateau now? We should have the diamonds and—"

"And lose the ci-devant Comtesse de Sucy and the man Bertin," retorted Chauvelin with sudden fierceness. "Bertin, who can be none other than that cursed Englishman, the—"

He checked himself, seeing Tournefort was gazing down on him, with awe and bewilderment expressed in his lean, hatchet face.

"You are losing sight of Rateau, citizen," Chauvelin continued calmly.

"What is he doing now?"

But Tournefort felt that this calmness was only on the surface; something strange had stirred the depths of his chief's keen, masterful mind. He would have liked to ask a question or two, but knew from experience that it was neither wise nor profitable to try and probe citizen Chauvelin's thoughts. So after a moment or two he turned back obediently to his task.

"I can't see Rateau for the moment," he said, "but there is much talking and merriment in there. Ah! there he is, I think. Yes, I see him!... He is behind the counter, talking to Jean Victor ... and he has just thrown some money down upon the counter.... gold too! name of a dog...."

Then suddenly, without any warning, Tournefort jumped down from his post of observation. Chauvelin uttered a brief:

"What the —— are you doing, citizen?"

"Rateau is going," replied Tournefort excitedly. "He drank a mug of wine at a draught and has picked up his bundle, ready to go."

Once more cowering in the dark angle of a doorway, the two men waited, their nerves on edge, for the reappearance of their quarry.

"I wish citizen Gourdon were here," whispered Tournefort. "In the darkness it is better to be three than two."

"I sent him back to the Station in the Rue Mouffetard," was Chauvelin's curt retort; "there to give notice that I might require a few armed men presently. But he should be somewhere about here by now, looking for us. Anyway, I have my whistle, and if——"

He said no more, for at that moment the door of the cabaret was opened from within and Rateau stepped out into the street, to the accompaniment of loud laughter and clapping of hands which came from the customers of the "Bon Copain."

This time he appeared neither in a hurry nor yet anxious. He did not pause in order to glance to right or left, but started to walk quite leisurely up the street. The two sleuth-hounds quietly followed him. Through the darkness they could only vaguely see his silhouette, with the great bundle under his arm. Whatever may have been Rateau's fears of being shadowed awhile ago, he certainly seemed free of them now. He sauntered along, whistling a tune, down the Montagne Ste. Genevieve to the Place Maubert, and thence straight towards the river.

Having reached the bank, he turned off to his left, sauntered past the Ecole de Medecine and went across the Petit Pont, then through the New Market, along the Quai des Orfevres. Here he made a halt, and for awhile looked over the embankment at the river and then round about him, as if in search of something. But presently he appeared to make up his mind, and continued his leisurely walk as far as the Pont Neuf, where he turned sharply off to his right, still whistling, Tournefort and Chauvelin hard upon his heels.

"That whistling is getting on my nerves," muttered Tournefort irritably; "and I haven't heard the ruffian's churchyard cough since he walked out of the 'Bon Copain.'"

Strangely enough, it was this remark of Tournefort's which gave Chauvelin the first inkling of something strange and, to him, positively awesome. Tournefort, who walked close beside him, heard him suddenly mutter a fierce exclamation.

"Name of a dog!"

"What is it, citizen?" queried Tournefort, awed by this sudden outburst on the part of a man whose icy calmness had become proverbial throughout the Committee.

"Sound the alarm, citizen!" cried Chauvelin in response. "Or, by Satan, he'll escape us again!"

"But——" stammered Tournefort in utter bewilderment, while, with fingers that trembled somewhat, he fumbled for his whistle.

"We shall want all the help we can," retorted Chauvelin roughly. "For, unless I am much mistaken, there's more noble quarry here than even I could dare to hope!"

Rateau in the meanwhile had quietly lolled up to the parapet on the right-hand side of the bridge, and Tournefort, who was watching him with intense keenness, still marvelled why citizen Chauvelin had suddenly become so strangely excited. Rateau was merely lolling against the parapet, like a man who has not a care in the world. He had placed his bundle on the stone ledge beside him. Here he waited a moment or two, until one of the small craft upon the river loomed out of the darkness immediately below the bridge. Then he picked up the bundle and threw it straight into the boat. At that same moment Tournefort had the whistle to his lips. A shrill, sharp sound rang out through the gloom.

"The boat, citizen Tournefort, the boat!" cried Chauvelin. "There are plenty of us here to deal with the man."

Immediately, from the quays, the streets, the bridges, dark figures emerged out of the darkness and hurried to the spot. Some reached the bridgehead even as Rateau made a dart forward, and two men were upon him before he succeeded in running very far. Others had scrambled down the embankment and were shouting to some unseen boatman to "halt, in the name of the people!"

But Rateau gave in without a struggle. He appeared more dazed than frightened, and quietly allowed the agents of the Committee to lead him back to the bridge, where Chauvelin had paused, waiting for him.

A minute or two later Tournefort was once more beside his chief. He was carrying the precious bundle, which, he explained, the boatman had given up without question.

"The man knew nothing about it," the agent said. "No one, he says, could have been more surprised than he was when this bundle was suddenly flung at him over the parapet of the bridge."

Just then the small group, composed of two or three agents of the Committee, holding their prisoner by the arms, came into view. One man was walking ahead and was the first to approach Chauvelin. He had a small screw of paper in his hand, which he gave to his chief.

"Found inside the lining of the prisoner's hat, citizen," he reported curtly, and opened the shutter of a small, dark lantern which he wore at his belt.

Chauvelin took the paper from his subordinate. A weird, unexplainable foreknowledge of what was to come caused his hand to shake and beads of perspiration to moisten his forehead. He looked up and saw the prisoner standing before him. Crushing the paper in his hand he snatched the lantern from the agent's belt and flashed it in the face of the quarry who, at the last, had been so easily captured.

Immediately a hoarse cry of disappointment and of rage escaped his throat.

"Who is this man?" he cried.

One of the agents gave reply:

"It is old Victor, the landlord of the 'Bon Copain.' He is just a fool, who has been playing a practical joke."

Tournefort, too, at sight of the prisoner had uttered a cry of dismay and of astonishment.

"Victor!" he exclaimed. "Name of a dog, citizen, what are you doing here?"

But Chauvelin had gripped the man by the arm so fiercely that the latter swore with the pain.

"What is the meaning of this?" he queried roughly.

"Only a bet, citizen," retorted Victor reproachfully. "No reason to fall on an honest patriot for a bet, just as if he were a mad dog."

"A joke? A bet?" murmured Chauvelin hoarsely, for his throat now felt hot and parched. "What do you mean? Who are you, man? Speak, or I'll——"

"My name is Jean Victor," replied the other. "I am the landlord of the 'Bon Copain.' An hour ago a man came into my cabaret. He was a queer, consumptive creature, with a churchyard cough that made you shiver. Some of my customers knew him by sight, told me that the man's name was Rateau, and that he was an habitue of the 'Liberte,' in the Rue Christine. Well; he soon fell into conversation, first with me, then with some of my customers — talked all sorts of silly nonsense, made absurd bets with everybody. Some of these he won, and others he lost; but I must say that when he lost he always paid up most liberally. Then we all got excited, and soon bets flew all over the place. I don't rightly know how it happened at the last, but all at once he bet me that I would not dare to walk out then and there in the dark, as far as the Pont Neuf, wearing his blouse and hat and carrying a bundle the same as his under my arm. I not dare?... I, Jean Victor, who was a fine fighter in my day! I bet him a gold piece that I would and he said that he would make it five if I came back without my bundle, having thrown it over the parapet into any passing boat. Well, citizen!" continued Jean Victor with a laugh, "I ask you, what would you have done? Five gold pieces means a fortune these hard times, and I tell you the man was quite honest and always paid liberally when he lost. He slipped behind the counter and took off his blouse and hat, which I put on. Then we made up a bundle with some cabbage heads and a few carrots, and out I came. I didn't think there could be anything wrong in the whole affair — just the tomfoolery of a man who has got the betting mania and in whose pocket money is just burning a hole. And I have won my bet," concluded Jean Victor, still unabashed, "and I want to go back and get my money. If you don't believe me, come with me to my CABARET. You will find the citizen Rateau there, for sure; and I know that I shall find my five gold pieces."

Chauvelin had listened to the man as he would to some weird dream-story, wherein ghouls and devils had played a part. Tournefort, who was watching him, was awed by the look of fierce rage and grim hopelessness which shone from his chief's pale eyes. The other agents laughed. They were highly amused at the tale, but they would not let the prisoner go.

"If Jean Victor's story is true, citizen," their sergeant said, speaking to Chauvelin, "there will be witnesses to it over at 'Le Bon Copain.' Shall we take the prisoner straightway there and await further orders?"

Chauvelin gave a curt acquiescence, nodding his head like some insentient wooden automaton. The screw of paper was still in his hand; it seemed to sear his palm. Tournefort even now broke into a grim laugh. He had just undone the bundle which Jean Victor had thrown over the parapet of the bridge. It contained two heads of cabbage and a bunch of carrots. Then he ordered the agents to march on with their prisoner, and they, laughing and joking with Jean Victor, gave a quick turn, and soon their heavy footsteps were echoing down the flagstones of the bridge.

Chauvelin waited, motionless and silent, the dark lantern still held in his shaking hand, until he was quite sure that he was alone. Then only did he unfold the screw of paper.

It contained a few lines scribbled in pencil — just that foolish rhyme which to his fevered nerves was like a strong irritant, a poison which gave him an unendurable sensation of humiliation and impotence:

"We seek him here, we seek him there!
Chauvelin seeks him everywhere!
Is he in heaven? Is he in hell?
That demmed, elusive Pimpernel!"

He crushed the paper in his hand and, with a loud groan, of misery, fled over the bridge like one possessed.

Madame la Comtesse de Sucey never went to England. She was one of those French women who would sooner endure misery in their own beloved country than comfort anywhere else. She outlived the horrors of the Revolution and speaks in her memoirs of the man Bertin. She never knew who he was nor whence he came. All that she knew was that he came to her like some mysterious agent of God, bringing help, counsel, a semblance of happiness, at the moment when she was at the end of all her resources and saw grim starvation staring her and her children in the face. He appointed all sorts of strange places in out-of-the-way Paris where she was wont to meet him, and one night she confided to him the history of her diamonds, and hardly dared to trust his promise that he would get them for her.

Less than twenty-four hours later he brought them to her, at the poor lodgings in the Rue Blanche which she occupied with her children under an assumed name. That same night she begged him to dispose of them. This also he did, bringing her the money the next day.

She never saw him again after that.

But citizen Tournefort never quite got over his disappointment of that night. Had he dared, he would have blamed citizen Chauvelin for the discomfiture. It would have been better to have apprehended the man Rateau while there was a chance of doing so with success.

As it was, the impudent ruffian slipped clean away, and was never heard of again either at the "Bon Copain" or at the "Liberte." The customers at the cabaret certainly corroborated the story of Jean Victor. The man Rateau, they said, had been honest to the last. When time went on and Jean Victor did not return, he said that he could no longer wait, had work to do for the Government over the other side of the water and was afraid he would get punished if he dallied. But, before leaving, he laid the five gold pieces on the table. Every one wondered that so humble a workman had so much money in his pocket, and was withal so lavish with it. But these were not the times when one inquired too closely into the presence of money in the pocket of a good patriot.

And citizen Rateau was a good patriot, for sure.

And a good fellow to boot!

They all drank his health in Jean Victor's sour wine; then each went his way.

I'LL REPAY PROLOGUE.

I

Paris: 1783.

“Coward! Coward! Coward!”

The words rang out, clear, strident, passionate, in a crescendo of agonised humiliation.

The boy, quivering with rage, had sprung to his feet, and, losing his balance, he fell forward clutching at the table, whilst with a convulsive movement of the lids, he tried in vain to suppress the tears of shame which were blinding him.

“Coward!” He tried to shout the insult so that all might hear, but his parched throat refused him service, his trembling hand sought the scattered cards upon the table, he collected them together, quickly, nervously, fingering them with feverish energy, then he hurled them at the man opposite, whilst with a final effort he still contrived to mutter: “Coward!”

The older men tried to interpose, but the young ones only laughed, quite prepared for the adventure which must inevitably ensue, the only possible ending to a quarrel such as this.

Conciliation or arbitration was out of the question. Déroulède should have known better than to speak disrespectfully of Adèle de Montchéri, when the little Vicomte de Marny’s infatuation for the notorious beauty had been the talk of Paris and Versailles these many months past.

Adèle was very lovely and a veritable tower of greed and egotism. The Marnys were rich and the little Vicomte very young, and just now the brightly-plumaged hawk was busy plucking the latest pigeon, newly arrived from its ancestral cote.

The boy was still in the initial stage of his infatuation. To him Adèle was a paragon of all the virtues, and he would have done battle on her behalf against the entire aristocracy of France, in a vain endeavour to justify his own exalted opinion of one of the most dissolute women of the epoch. He was a first-rate swordsman too, and his friends had already learned that it was best to avoid all allusions to Adèle’s beauty and weaknesses.

But Déroulède was a noted blunderer. He was little versed in the manners and tones of that high society in which, somehow, he still seemed an intruder. But for his great wealth, no doubt, he never would have been admitted within the intimate circle of aristocratic France. His ancestry was somewhat doubtful and his coat-of-arms unadorned with quarterings.

But little was known of his family or the origin of its wealth; it was only known that his father had suddenly become the late King’s dearest friend, and commonly surmised that Déroulède gold had on more than one occasion filled the emptied coffers of the First Gentleman of France.

Déroulède had not sought the present quarrel. He had merely blundered in that clumsy way of his, which was no doubt a part of the inheritance bequeathed to him by his bourgeois ancestry.

He knew nothing of the little Vicomte’s private affairs, still less of his relationship with Adèle, but he knew enough of the world and enough of Paris to be acquainted with the lady’s reputation. He hated at all times to speak of women. He was not what in those days would be termed a ladies’ man, and was even somewhat unpopular with the sex. But in this instance the conversation had drifted in that direction, and when Adèle’s name was mentioned, every one became silent, save the little Vicomte, who waxed enthusiastic.

A shrug of the shoulders on Déroulède’s part had aroused the boy’s ire, then a few casual words, and, without further warning, the insult had been hurled and the cards thrown in the older man’s face.

Déroulède did not move from his seat. He sat erect and placid, one knee crossed over the other, his serious, rather swarthy face perhaps a shade paler than usual: otherwise it seemed as if the insult had never reached his ears, or the cards struck his cheek.

He had perceived his blunder, just twenty seconds too late. Now he was sorry for the boy and angered with himself, but it was too late to draw back. To avoid a conflict he would at this moment have sacrificed half his fortune, but not one particle of his dignity.

He knew and respected the old Duc de Marny, a feeble old man now, almost a dotard whose hitherto spotless *blason*, the young Vicomte, his son, was doing his best to besmirch.

When the boy fell forward, blind and drunk with rage, Déroulède leant towards him automatically, quite kindly, and helped him to his feet. He would have asked the lad’s pardon for his own thoughtlessness, had that been possible: but the stilted code of so-called honour forbade so logical a proceeding. It would have done no good, and could but imperil his own reputation without averting the traditional sequel.

The panelled walls of the celebrated gaming saloon had often witnessed scenes such as this. All those present acted by routine. The etiquette of duelling prescribed certain formalities, and these were strictly but rapidly adhered to.

The young Vicomte was quickly surrounded by a close circle of friends. His great name, his wealth, his father’s influence, had opened for him every door in Versailles and Paris. At this moment he might have had an army of seconds to support him in the coming conflict.

Déroulède for a while was left alone near the card table, where the unsnuffed candles began smouldering in their sockets. He had risen to his feet, somewhat bewildered at the rapid turn of events. His dark, restless eyes wandered for a moment round the room, as if in quick search for a friend.

But where the Vicomte was at home by right, Déroulède had only been admitted by reason of his wealth. His acquaintances and sycophants were many, but his friends very few.

For the first time this fact was brought home to him. Every one in the room must have known and realised that he had not wilfully sought this quarrel, that throughout he had borne himself as any gentleman would, yet now, when the issue was so close at hand, no one came forward to stand by him.

“For form’s sake, monsieur, will you choose your seconds?”

It was the young Marquis de Villefranche who spoke, a little haughtily, with a certain ironical condescension towards the rich parvenu, who was about to have the honour of crossing swords with one of the noblest gentlemen in France.

"I pray you, Monsieur le Marquis," rejoined Déroulède coldly, "to make the choice for me. You see, I have few friends in Paris."

The Marquis bowed, and gracefully flourished his lace handkerchief. He was accustomed to being appealed to in all matters pertaining to etiquette, to the toilet, to the latest cut in coats, and the procedure in duels. Good-natured, foppish, and idle, he felt quite happy and in his element thus to be made chief organiser of the tragic farce, about to be enacted on the parquet floor of the gaming saloon.

He looked about the room for a while, scrutinising the faces of those around him. The gilded youth was crowding round De Marny; a few older men stood in a group at the farther end of the room: to these the Marquis turned, and addressing one of them, an elderly man with a military bearing and a shabby brown coat:

"Mon Colonel," he said, with another flourishing bow; "I am deputed by M. Déroulède to provide him with seconds for this affair of honour, may I call upon you to ..."

"Certainly, certainly," replied the Colonel. "I am not intimately acquainted with M. Déroulède, but since you stand sponsor, M. le Marquis ..."

"Oh!" rejoined the Marquis, lightly, "a mere matter of form, you know. M. Déroulède belongs to the entourage of Her Majesty. He is a man of honour. But I am not his sponsor. Marny is my friend, and if you prefer not to ..."

"Indeed I am entirely at M. Déroulède's service," said the Colonel, who had thrown a quick, scrutinising glance at the isolated figure near the card table, "if he will accept my services ..."

"He will be very glad to accept, my dear Colonel," whispered the Marquis with an ironical twist of his aristocratic lips. "He has no friends in our set, and if you and De Quettare will honour him, I think he should be grateful."

M. de Quettare, adjutant to M. le Colonel, was ready to follow in the footsteps of his chief, and the two men, after the prescribed salutations to M. le Marquis de Villefranche, went across to speak to Déroulède.

"If you will accept our services, monsieur," began the Colonel abruptly, "mine, and my adjutant's, M. de Quettare, we place ourselves entirely at your disposal."

"I thank you, messieurs," rejoined Déroulède. "The whole thing is a farce, and that young man is a fool; but I have been in the wrong and ..."

"You would wish to apologise?" queried the Colonel icily.

The worthy soldier had heard something of Déroulède's reputed bourgeois ancestry. This suggestion of an apology was no doubt in accordance with the customs of the middle-classes, but the Colonel literally gasped at the unworthiness of the proceeding. An apology? Bah! Disgusting! cowardly! beneath the dignity of any gentleman, however wrong he might be. How could two soldiers of His Majesty's army identify themselves with such doings?

But Déroulède seemed unconscious of the enormity of his suggestion.

"If I could avoid a conflict," he said, "I would tell the Vicomte that I had no knowledge of his admiration for the lady we were discussing and ..."

"Are you so very much afraid of getting a sword scratch, monsieur?" interrupted the Colonel impatiently, whilst M. de Quettare elevated a pair of aristocratic eyebrows in bewilderment at such an extraordinary display of bourgeois cowardice.

"You mean, Monsieur le Colonel?" — queried Déroulède.

"That you must either fight the Vicomte de Marny to-night, or clear out of Paris to-morrow. Your position in our set would become untenable," retorted the Colonel, not unkindly, for in spite of Déroulède's extraordinary attitude, there was nothing in his bearing or his appearance that suggested cowardice or fear.

"I bow to your superior knowledge of your friends, M. le Colonel," responded Déroulède, as he silently drew his sword from its sheath.

The centre of the saloon was quickly cleared. The seconds measured the length of the swords and then stood behind the antagonists, slightly in advance of the groups of spectators, who stood massed all round the room.

They represented the flower of what France had of the best and noblest in name, in lineage, in chivalry, in that year of grace 1783. The storm-cloud which a few years hence was destined to break over their heads, sweeping them from their palaces to the prison and the guillotine, was only gathering very slowly in the dim horizon of squalid, starving Paris: for the next half-dozen years they would still dance and gamble, fight and flirt, surround a tottering throne, and hoodwink a weak monarch. The Fates' avenging sword still rested in its sheath; the relentless, ceaseless wheel still bore them up in their whirl of pleasure; the downward movement had only just begun: the cry of the oppressed children of France had not yet been heard above the din of dance music and lovers' serenades.

The young Duc de Châteaudun was there, he who, nine years later, went to the guillotine on that cold September morning, his hair dressed in the latest fashion, the finest Mechlin lace around his wrists, playing a final game of piquet with his younger brother, as the tumbril bore them along through the hooting, yelling crowd of the half-naked starvelings of Paris.

There was the Vicomte de Mirepoix, who, a few years later, standing on the platform of the guillotine, laid a bet with M. de Miranges that his own blood would flow bluer than that of any other head cut off that day in France. Citizen Samson heard the bet made, and when De Mirepoix's head fell into the basket, the headsman lifted it up for M. de Miranges to see. The latter laughed.

"Mirepoix was always a braggart," he said lightly, as he laid his head upon the block.

"Who'll take my bet that my blood turns out to be bluer than his?"

But of all these comedies, these tragico-farces of later years, none who were present on that night, when the Vicomte de Marny fought Paul Déroulède, had as yet any presentiment.

They watched the two men fighting, with the same casual interest, at first, which they would have bestowed on the dancing of a new movement in the minuet.

De Marny came of a race that had wielded the sword of many centuries, but he was hot, excited, not a little addled with wine and rage. Déroulède was lucky; he would come out of the affair with a slight scratch.

A good swordsman too, that wealthy parvenu. It was interesting to watch his sword-play: very quiet at first, no feint or parry, scarcely a riposte, only *en garde*, always *en garde* very carefully, steadily, ready for his antagonist at every turn and in every circumstance.

Gradually the circle round the combatants narrowed. A few discreet exclamations of admiration greeted Déroulède's most successful parry. De Marny was getting more and more excited, the older man more and more sober and reserved.

A thoughtless lunge placed the little Vicomte at his opponent's mercy. The next instant he was disarmed, and the seconds were pressing forward to end the conflict.

Honour was satisfied: the parvenu and the scion of the ancient race had crossed swords over the reputation of one of the most dissolute women in France. Déroulède's moderation was a lesson to all the hot-headed young bloods who toyed with their lives, their honour, their reputation as lightly as they did with their lace-edged handkerchiefs and gold snuff-boxes.

Already Déroulède had drawn back. With the gentle tact peculiar to kindly people, he avoided looking at his disarmed antagonist. But something in the older man's attitude seemed to further nettle the over-stimulated sensibility of the young Vicomte.

"This is no child's play, monsieur," he said excitedly. "I demand full satisfaction."

"And are you not satisfied?" queried Déroulède. "You have borne yourself bravely, you have fought in honour of your liege lady. I, on the other hand ..."

"You," shouted the boy hoarsely, "you shall publicly apologise to a noble and virtuous woman whom you have outraged — now — at — once — on your knees ..."

"You are mad, Vicomte," rejoined Déroulède coldly. "I am willing to ask your forgiveness for my blunder ..."

"An apology — in public — on your knees ..."

The boy had become more and more excited. He had suffered humiliation after humiliation. He was a mere lad, spoilt, adulated, pampered from his boyhood: the wine had got into his head, the intoxication of rage and hatred blinded his saner judgment.

"Coward!" he shouted again and again.

His seconds tried to interpose, but he waved them feverishly aside. He would listen to no one. He saw no one save the man who had insulted Adèle, and who was heaping further insults upon her, by refusing this public acknowledgment of her virtues.

De Marny hated Déroulède at this moment with the most deadly hatred the heart of man can conceive. The older man's calm, his chivalry, his consideration only enhanced the boy's anger and shame.

The hubbub had become general. Everyone seemed carried away with this strange fever of enmity, which was seething in the Vicomte's veins. Most of the young men crowded round De Marny, doing their best to pacify him. The Marquis de Villefranche declared that the matter was getting quite outside the rules.

No one took much notice of Déroulède. In the remote corners of the saloon a few elderly dandies were laying bets as to the ultimate issue of the quarrel.

Déroulède, however, was beginning to lose his temper. He had no friends in that room, and therefore there was no sympathetic observer there, to note the gradual darkening of his eyes, like the gathering of a cloud heavy with the coming storm.

"I pray you, messieurs, let us cease the argument," he said at last, in a loud, impatient voice. "M. le Vicomte de Marny desires a further lesson, and, by God! he shall have it. *En garde*, M. le Vicomte!"

The crowd quickly drew back. The seconds once more assumed the bearing and imperturbable expression which their important function demanded. The hubbub ceased as the swords began to clash.

Everyone felt that farce was turning to tragedy.

And yet it was obvious from the first that Déroulède merely meant once more to disarm his antagonist, to give him one more lesson, a little more severe perhaps than the last. He was such a brilliant swordsman, and De Marny was so excited, that the advantage was with him from the very first.

How it all happened, nobody afterwards could say. There is no doubt that the little Vicomte's sword-play had become more and more wild: that he uncovered himself in the most reckless way, whilst lunging wildly at his opponent's breast, until at last, in one of these mad, unguarded moments, he seemed literally to throw himself upon Déroulède's weapon.

The latter tried with lightning-swift motion of the wrist to avoid the fatal issue, but it was too late, and without a sigh or groan, scarce a tremor, the Vicomte de Marny fell.

The sword dropped out of his hand, and it was Déroulède himself who caught the boy in his arms.

It had all occurred so quickly and suddenly that no one had realised it all, until it was over, and the lad was lying prone on the ground, his elegant blue satin coat stained with red, and his antagonist bending over him.

There was nothing more to be done. Etiquette demanded that Déroulède should withdraw. He was not allowed to do anything for the boy whom he had so unwillingly sent to his death.

As before, no one took much notice of him. Silence, the awesome silence caused by the presence of the great Master, fell upon all those around. Only in the far corner a shrill voice was heard to say:

"I hold you at five hundred louis, Marquis. The parvenu is a good swordsman."

The groups parted as Déroulède walked out of the room, followed by the Colonel and M. de Quettare, who stood by him to the last. Both were old and proved soldiers, both had chivalry and courage in them, with which to do tribute to the brave man whom they had seconded.

At the door of the establishment, they met the leech who had been summoned some little time ago to hold himself in readiness for any eventuality.

The great eventuality had occurred: it was beyond the leech's learning. In the brilliantly lighted saloon above, the only son of the Duc de Marny was breathing his last, whilst Déroulède, wrapping his mantle closely round him, strode out into the dark street, all alone.

The head of the house of Marny was at this time barely seventy years of age. But he had lived every hour, every minute of his life, from the day when the Grand Monarque gave him his first appointment as gentleman page in waiting when he was a mere lad, barely twelve years of age, to the moment — some ten years ago now — when Nature's relentless hand struck him down in the midst of his pleasures, withered him in a flash as she does a sturdy old oak, and nailed him — a cripple, almost a dotard — to the invalid chair which he would only quit for his last resting place.

Juliette was then a mere slip of a girl, an old man's child, the spoilt darling of his last happy years. She had retained some of the melancholy which had characterised her mother, the gentle lady who had endured so much so patiently, and who had bequeathed this final tender burden — her baby girl — to the brilliant, handsome husband whom she had so deeply loved, and so often forgiven.

When the Duc de Marny entered the final awesome stage of his gilded career, that deathlike life which he dragged on for ten years wearily to the grave, Juliette became his only joy, his one gleam of happiness in the midst of torturing memories.

In her deep, tender eyes he would see mirrored the present, the future for her, and would forget his past, with all its gaieties, its mad, merry years, that meant nothing now but bitter regrets, and endless rosary of the might-have-beens.

And then there was the boy. The little Vicomte, the future Duc de Marny, who would in *his* life and with *his* youth recreate the glory of the family, and make France once more ring with the echo of brave deeds and gallant adventures, which had made the name of Marny so glorious in camp and court.

The Vicomte was not his father's love, but he was his father's pride, and from the depths of his huge, cushioned arm-chair, the old man would listen with delight to stories from Versailles and Paris, the young Queen and the fascinating Lamballe, the latest play and the newest star in the theatrical firmament. His feeble, tottering mind would then take him back, along the paths of memory, to his own youth and his own triumphs, and in the joy and pride in his son, he would forget himself for the sake of the boy.

When they brought the Vicomte home that night, Juliette was the first to wake. She heard the noise outside the great gates, the coach slowly drawing up, the ring for the doorkeeper, and the sound of Matthieu's mutterings, who never liked to be called up in the middle of the night to let anyone through the gates.

Somehow a presentiment of evil at once struck the young girl: the footsteps sounded so heavy and muffled along the flagged courtyard, and up the great oak staircase. It seemed as if they were carrying something heavy, something inert or dead.

She jumped out of bed and hastily wrapped a cloak round her thin girlish shoulders, and slipped her feet into a pair of heelless shoes, then she opened her bedroom door and looked out upon the landing.

Two men, whom she did not know, were walking upstairs abreast, two more were carrying a heavy burden, and Matthieu was behind moaning and crying bitterly.

Juliette did not move. She stood in the doorway rigid as a statue. The little cortège went past her. No one saw her, for the landings in the Hotel de Marny are very wide, and Matthieu's lantern only threw a dim, flickering light upon the floor.

The men stopped outside the Vicomte's room. Matthieu opened it, and then the five men disappeared within, with their heavy burden.

A moment later old Pétronelle, who had been Juliette's nurse, and was now her devoted slave, came to her, all bathed in tears.

She had just heard the news, and she could scarcely speak, but she folded the young girl, her dear pet lamb, in her arms, and rocking herself to and fro she sobbed and eased her aching, motherly heart.

But Juliette did not cry. It was all so sudden, so awful. She, at fourteen years of age, had never dreamed of death; and now there was her brother, her Philippe, in whom she had so much joy, so much pride — he was dead — and her father must be told ...

The awfulness of this task seemed to Juliette like unto the last Judgment Day; a thing so terrible, so appalling, so impossible, that it would take a host of angels to proclaim its inevitableness.

The old cripple, with one foot in the grave, whose whole feeble mind, whose pride, whose final flicker of hope was concentrated in his boy, must be told that the lad had been brought home dead.

"Will you tell him, Pétronelle?" she asked repeatedly, during the brief intervals when the violence of the old nurse's grief subsided somewhat.

"No — no — darling, I cannot — I cannot—" moaned Pétronelle, amidst a renewed shower of sobs.

Juliette's entire soul — a child's soul it was — rose in revolt at thought of what was before her. She felt angered with God for having put such a thing upon her. What right had He to demand a girl of her years to endure so much mental agony?

To lose her brother, and to witness her father's grief! She couldn't! she couldn't! she couldn't! God was evil and unjust!

A distant tinkle of a bell made all her nerves suddenly quiver. Her father was awake then? He had heard the noise, and was ringing his bell to ask for an explanation of the disturbance.

With one quick movement Juliette jerked herself free from the nurse's arms, and before Pétronelle could prevent her, she had run out of the room, straight across the dark landing to a large panelled door opposite.

The old Duc de Marny was sitting on the edge of his bed, with his long, thin legs dangling helplessly to the ground.

Crippled as he was, he had struggled to this upright position, he was making frantic, miserable efforts to raise himself still further. He, too, had heard the dull thud of feet, the shuffling gait of men when carrying a heavy burden.

His mind flew back half-a-century, to the days when he had witnessed scenes wherein he was then merely a half-interested spectator. He knew the cortège composed of valets and friends, with the leech walking beside that precious burden, which anon would be deposited on the bed and left to the tender care of a mourning family.

Who knows what pictures were conjured up before that enfeebled vision? But he guessed. And when Juliette dashed into his room and stood before him, pale, trembling, a world of misery in her great eyes, she knew that he guessed and that she need not tell him. God had already done that for her.

Pierre, the old Duc's devoted valet, dressed him as quickly as he could. M. le Duc insisted on having his *habit de cérémonie*, the rich suit of black velvet with the priceless lace and diamond buttons, which he had worn when they laid le Roi Soleil to his eternal rest.

He put on his orders and buckled on his sword. The gorgeous clothes, which had suited him so well in the prime of his manhood, hung somewhat loosely on his attenuated frame, but he looked a grand and imposing figure, with his white hair tied behind with a great

black bow, and the fine jabot of beautiful point d'Angleterre falling in a soft cascade below his chin.

Then holding himself as upright as he could, he sat in his invalid chair, and four flunkies in full livery carried him to the deathbed of his son.

All the house was astir by now. Torches burned in great sockets in the vast hall and along the massive oak stairway, and hundreds of candles flickered ghostlike in the vast apartments of the princely mansion.

The numerous servants were arrayed on the landing, all dressed in the rich livery of the ducal house.

The death of an heir of the Marnys is an event that history makes a note of.

The old Duc's chair was placed close to the bed, where lay the dead body of the young Vicomte. He made no movement, nor did he utter a word or sigh. Some of those who were present at the time declared that his mind had completely given way, and that he neither felt nor understood the death of his son.

The Marquis de Villefranche, who had followed his friend to the last, took a final leave of the sorrowing house.

Juliette scarcely noticed him. Her eyes were fixed on her father. She would not look at her brother. A childlike fear had seized her, there, suddenly, between these two silent figures: the living and the dead.

But just as the Marquis was leaving the room, the old man spoke for the first time.

"Marquis," he said very quietly, "you forget — you have not yet told me who killed my son."

"It was in a fair fight, M. de Duc," replied the young Marquis, awed in spite of all his frivolity, his light-heartedness, by this strange, almost mysterious tragedy.

"Who killed my son, M. le Marquis?" repeated the old man mechanically. "I have the right to know," he added with sudden, weird energy.

"It was M. Paul Déroulède, M. le Duc," replied the Marquis. "I repeat, it was in fair fight."

The old Duc sighed as if in satisfaction. Then with a courteous gesture of farewell reminiscent of the *grand siècle* he added:

"All thanks from me and mine to you, Marquis, would seem but a mockery. Your devotion to my son is beyond human thanks. I'll not detain you now. Farewell."

Escorted by two lacqueys, the Marquis passed out of the room.

"Dismiss all the servants, Juliette; I have something to say," said the old Duc, and the young girl, silent, obedient, did as her father bade her.

Father and sister were alone with their dead. As soon as the last hushed footsteps of the retreating servants died away in the distance, the Duc de Marny seemed to throw away the lethargy which had enveloped him until now. With a quick, feverish gesture he seized his daughter's wrist, and murmured excitedly:

"His name. You heard his name, Juliette?"

"Yes, father," replied the child.

"Paul Déroulède! Paul Déroulède! You'll not forget it?"

"Never, father!"

"He killed your brother! You understand that? Killed my only son, the hope of my house, the last descendant of the most glorious race that has ever added lustre to the history of France."

"In fair fight, father!" protested the child.

"Tis not fair for a man to kill a boy," retorted the old man, with furious energy.

"Déroulède is thirty: my boy was scarce out of his teens: may the vengeance of God fall upon the murderer!"

Juliette, awed, terrified, was gazing at her father with great, wondering eyes. He seemed unlike himself. His face wore a curious expression of ecstasy and of hatred, also of hope and exultation, whenever he looked steadily at her.

That the final glimmer of a tottering reason was fast leaving the poor, aching head she was too young to realise. Madness was a word that had only a vague meaning for her. Though she did not understand her father at the present moment, though she was half afraid of him, she would have rejected with scorn and horror any suggestion that he was mad.

Therefore when he took her hand and, drawing her nearer to the bed and to himself, placed it upon her dead brother's breast, she recoiled at the touch of the inanimate body, so unlike anything she had ever touched before, but she obeyed her father without any question, and listened to his words as to those of a sage.

"Juliette, you are now fourteen, and able to understand what I am going to ask of you. If I were not chained to this miserable chair, if I were not a hopeless, abject cripple, I would not depute anyone, not even you, my only child, to do that, which God demands that one of us should do."

He paused a moment, then continued earnestly:

"Remember, Juliette, that you are of the house of Marny, that you are a Catholic, and that God hears you now. For you shall swear an oath before Him and me, an oath from which only death can relieve you. Will you swear, my child?"

"If you wish it, father."

"You have been to confession lately, Juliette?"

"Yes, father; also to holy communion, yesterday," replied the child. "It was the Fête-Dieu, you know."

"Then you are in a state of grace, my child?"

"I was yesterday morning, father," replied the young girl naïvely, "but I have committed some little sins since then."

"Then make your confession to God in your heart now. You must be in a state of grace when you speak the oath."

The child closed her eyes, and as the old man watched her, he could see the lips framing the words of her spiritual confession.

Juliette made the sign of the cross, then opened her eyes and looked at her father.

"I am ready, father," she said; "I hope God has forgiven me the little sins of yesterday."

"Will you swear, my child?"

"What, father?"

"That you will avenge your brother's death on his murderer?"

"But, father ..."

"Swear it, my child!"

"How can I fulfil that oath, father? — I don't understand ..."

"God will guide you, my child. When you are older you will understand."

For a moment Juliette still hesitated. She was just on that borderland between childhood and womanhood when all the sensibilities, the nervous system, the emotions, are strung to their highest pitch.

Throughout her short life she had worshipped her father with a whole-hearted, passionate devotion, which had completely blinded her to his weakening faculties and the feebleness of his mind.

She was also in that initial stage of enthusiastic piety which overwhelms every girl of temperament, if she be brought up in the Roman Catholic religion, when she is first initiated into the mysteries of the Sacraments.

Juliette had been to confession and communion. She had been confirmed by Monseigneur, the Archbishop. Her ardent nature had responded to the full to the sensuous and ecstatic expressions of the ancient faith.

And somehow her father's wish, her brother's death, all seemed mingled in her brain with that religion, for which in her juvenile enthusiasm she would willingly have laid down her life.

She thought of all the saints, whose lives she had been reading. Her young heart quivered at the thought of *their* sacrifices, their martyrdoms, their sense of duty.

An exaltation, morbid perhaps, superstitious and overwhelming, took possession of her mind; also, perhaps, far back in the innermost recesses of her heart, a pride in her own importance, her mission in life, her individuality: for she was a girl after all, a mere child, about to become a woman.

But the old Duc was waxing impatient.

"Surely you do not hesitate, Juliette, with your dead brother's body clamouring mutely for revenge? You, the only Marny left now! — for from this day I too shall be as dead."

"No, father," said the young girl in an awed whisper, "I do not hesitate. I will swear, just as you bid me."

"Repeat the words after me, my child."

"Yes, father."

"Before the face of Almighty God, who sees and hears me ..."

"Before the face of Almighty God, who sees and hears me," repeated Juliette firmly.

"I swear that I will seek out Paul Déroulède."

"I swear that I will seek out Paul Déroulède."

"And in any manner which God may dictate to me encompass his death, his ruin or dishonour, in revenge for my brother's death."

"And in any manner which God may dictate to me encompass his death, his ruin or dishonour, in revenge for my brother's death," said Juliette solemnly.

"May my brother's soul remain in torment until the final Judgment Day if I should break my oath, but may it rest in eternal peace the day on which his death is fitly avenged."

"May my brother's soul remain in torment until the final Judgment Day if I should break my oath, but may it rest in eternal peace the day on which his death is fitly avenged."

The child fell upon her knees. The oath was spoken, the old man was satisfied.

He called for his valet, and allowed himself quietly to be put to bed.

One brief hour had transformed a child into a woman. A dangerous transformation when the brain is overburdened with emotions, when the nerves are overstrung and the heart full to breaking.

For the moment, however, the childlike nature reasserted itself for the last time, for Juliette, sobbing, had fled out of the room, to the privacy of her own apartment, and thrown herself passionately into the arms of kind old Pétronelle.

CHAPTER I

Paris: 1793; The outrage.

It would have been very difficult to say why Citizen Déroulède was quite so popular as he was. Still more difficult would it have been to state the reason why he remained immune from the prosecutions, which were being conducted at the rate of several scores a day, now against the moderate Gironde, anon against the fanatic Mountain, until the whole of France was transformed into one gigantic prison, that daily fed the guillotine.

But Déroulède remained unscathed. Even Merlin's law of the suspect had so far failed to touch him. And when, last July, the murder of Marat brought an entire holocaust of victims to the guillotine — from Adam Lux, who would have put up a statue in honour of Charlotte Corday, with the inscription: "Greater than Brutus", to Charlier, who would have had her publicly tortured and burned at the stake for her crime — Déroulède alone said nothing, and was allowed to remain silent.

The most seething time of that seething revolution. No one knew in the morning if his head would still be on his own shoulders in the evening, or if it would be held up by Citizen Samson the headsman, for the sansculottes of Paris to see.

Yet Déroulède was allowed to go his own way. Marat once said of him: "Il n'est pas dangereux." The phrase had been taken up. Within the precincts of the National Convention, Marat was still looked upon as the great protagonist of Liberty, a martyr to his own convictions carried to the extreme, to squalor and dirt, to the downward levelling of man to what is the lowest type in humanity. And his sayings were still treasured up: even the Girondins did not dare to attack his memory. Dead Marat was more powerful than his living presentment had been.

And he had said that Déroulède was not dangerous. Not dangerous to Republicanism, to liberty, to that downward, levelling process, the tearing down of old traditions, and the annihilation of past pretensions.

Déroulède had once been very rich. He had had sufficient prudence to give away in good time that which, undoubtedly, would have been taken away from him later on.

But when he gave willingly, at a time when France needed it most, and before she had learned how to help herself to what she wanted.

And somehow, in this instance, France had not forgotten: an invisible fortress seemed to surround Citizen Déroulède and keep his enemies at bay. They were few, but they existed. The National Convention trusted him. "He was not dangerous" to them. The people looked upon him as one of themselves, who gave whilst he had something to give. Who can gauge that most elusive of all things: *Popularity?*

He lived a quiet life, and had never yielded to the omni-prevalent temptation of writing pamphlets, but lived alone with his mother and Anne Mie, the little orphaned cousin whom old Madame Déroulède had taken care of, ever since the child could toddle.

Everyone knew his house in the Rue Ecole de Médecine, not far from the one wherein Marat lived and died, the only solid, stone house in the midst of a row of hovels, evil-smelling and squalid.

The street was narrow then, as it is now, and whilst Paris was cutting off the heads of her children for the sake of Liberty and Fraternity, she had no time to bother about cleanliness and sanitation.

Rue Ecole de Médecine did little credit to the school after which it was named, and it was a most unattractive crowd that usually thronged its uneven, muddy pavements.

A neat gown, a clean kerchief, were quite an unusual sight down this way, for Anne Mie seldom went out, and old Madame Déroulède hardly ever left her room. A good deal of brandy was being drunk at the two drinking bars, one at each end of the long, narrow street, and by five o'clock in the afternoon it was undoubtedly best for women to remain indoors.

The crowd of dishevelled elderly Amazons who stood gossiping at the street corner could hardly be called women now. A ragged petticoat, a greasy red kerchief round the head, a tattered, stained shift — to this pass of squalor and shame had Liberty brought the daughters of France.

And they jeered at any passer-by less filthy, less degraded than themselves.

"Ah! voyons l'aristo!" they shouted every time a man in decent clothes, a woman with tidy cap and apron, passed swiftly down the street.

And the afternoons were very lively. There was always plenty to see: first and foremost, the long procession of tumbrils, winding its way from the prisons to the Place de la Révolution. The forty-four thousand sections of the Committee of Public Safety sent their quota, each in their turn, to the guillotine.

At one time these tumbrils contained royal ladies and gentlemen, *ci-devant* dukes and princesses, aristocrats from every county in France, but now this stock was becoming exhausted. The wretched Queen Marie Antoinette still lingered in the Temple with her son and daughter. Madame Elisabeth was still allowed to say her prayers in peace, but *ci-devant* dukes and counts were getting scarce: those who had not perished at the hand of Citizen Samson were playing some trade in Germany or England.

There were aristocratic joiners, innkeepers, and hairdressers. The proudest names in France were hidden beneath trade signs in London and Hamburg. A good number owed their lives to that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, that unknown Englishman who had snatched scores of victims from the clutches of Tinvillle the Prosecutor, and sent M. Chauvelin, baffled, back to France.

Aristocrats were getting scarce, so it was now the turn of deputies of the National Convention, of men of letters, men of science or of art, men who had sent others to the guillotine a twelvemonth ago, and men who had been loudest in defence of anarchy and its Reign of Terror.

They had revolutionised the Calendar: the Citizen-Deputies, and every good citizen of France, called this 19th day of August 1793 the 2nd Fructidor of the year I. of the New Era.

At six o'clock on that afternoon a young girl suddenly turned the angle of the Rue Ecole de Médecine, and after looking quickly to the right and left she began deliberately walking along the narrow street.

It was crowded just then. Groups of excited women stood jabbering before every doorway. It was the home-coming hour after the usual spectacle on the Place de la Révolution. The men had paused at the various drinking booths, crowding the women out. It would be the turn of these Amazons next, at the brandy bars; for the moment they were left to gossip, and to jeer at the passer-by.

At first the young girl did not seem to heed them. She walked quickly along, looking defiantly before her, carrying her head erect, and stepping carefully from cobblestone to cobblestone, avoiding the mud, which could have dirtied her dainty shoes.

The harridans passed the time of day to her, and the time of day meant some obscene remark unfit for women's ears. The young girl wore a simple grey dress, with fine lawn kerchief neatly folded across her bosom, a large hat with flowing ribbons sat above the fairest face that ever gladdened men's eyes to see.

Fairer still it would have been, but for the look of determination which made it seem hard and old for the girl's years.

She wore the tricolour scarf round her waist, else she had been more seriously molested ere now. But the Republican colours were her safeguard: whilst she walked quietly along, no one could harm her.

Then suddenly a curious impulse seemed to seize her. It was just outside the large stone house belonging to Citizen-Deputy Déroulède. She had so far taken no notice of the groups of women which she had come across. When they obstructed the footway, she had calmly stepped out into the middle of the road.

It was wise and prudent, for she could close her ears to obscene language and need pay no heed to insult.

Suddenly she threw up her head defiantly.

"Will you please let me pass?" she said loudly, as a dishevelled Amazon stood before her with arms akimbo, glancing sarcastically at the lace petticoat, which just peeped beneath the young girl's simple grey frock.

"Let her pass? Let her pass? Ho! ho! ho!" laughed the old woman, turning to the nearest group of idlers, and apostrophising them with a loud oath. "Did *you* know, citizeness, that this street had been specially made for aristos to pass along?"

"I am in a hurry, will you let me pass at once?" commanded the young girl, tapping her foot impatiently on the ground.

There was the whole width of the street on her right, plenty of room for her to walk along. It seemed positive madness to provoke a quarrel singlehanded against this noisy group of excited females, just home from the ghastly spectacle around the guillotine.

And yet she seemed to do it wilfully, as if coming to the end of her patience, all her proud, aristocratic blood in revolt against this evil-smelling crowd which surrounded her.

Half-tipsy men and noisome, naked urchins seemed to have sprung from everywhere.

"Oho, quelle aristo!" they shouted with ironical astonishment, gazing at the young girl's face, fingering her gown, thrusting begrimed, hate-distorted faces close to her own.

Instinctively she recoiled and backed towards the house immediately on her left. It was adorned with a porch made of stout oak beams, with a tiled roof; an iron lantern descended from this, and there was a stone parapet below, and a few steps, at right angles from the pavement, led up to the massive door.

On these steps the young girl had taken refuge. Proud, defiant, she confronted the howling mob, which she had so wilfully provoked.

"Of a truth, Citizeness Margot, that grey dress would become you well!" suggested a young man, whose red cap hung in tatters over an evil and dissolute-looking face.

"And all that fine lace would make a splendid jabot round the aristo's neck when Citizen Samson holds up her head for us to see," added another, as with mock elegance he stooped and with two very grimy fingers slightly raised the young girl's grey frock, displaying the lace-edged petticoat beneath.

A volley of oaths and loud, ironical laughter greeted this sally.

"Tis mighty fine lace to be thus hidden away," commented an elderly harridan. "Now, would you believe it, my fine madam, but my legs are bare underneath my kirtle?"

"And dirty, too, I'll lay a wager," laughed another. "Soap is dear in Paris just now."

"The lace on the aristo's kerchief would pay the baker's bill of a whole family for a month!" shouted an excited voice.

Heat and brandy further addled the brains of this group of French citizens; hatred gleamed out of every eye. Outrage was imminent. The young girl seemed to know it, but she remained defiant and self-possessed, gradually stepping back and back up the steps, closely followed by her assailants.

"To the Jew with the gewgaw, then!" shouted a thin, haggard female viciously, as she suddenly clutched at the young girl's kerchief, and with a mocking, triumphant laugh tore it from her bosom.

This outrage seemed to be the signal for the breaking down of the final barriers which ordinary decency should have raised. The language and vituperation became such as no chronicler could record.

The girl's dainty white neck, her clear skin, the refined contour of shoulders and bust, seemed to have aroused the deadliest lust of hate in these wretched creatures, rendered bestial by famine and squalor.

It seemed almost as if one would vie with the other in seeking for words which would most offend these small aristocratic ears.

The young girl was now crouching against the doorway, her hands held up to her ears to shut out the awful sounds. She did not seem frightened, only appalled at the terrible volcano which she had provoked.

Suddenly a miserable harridan struck her straight in the face, with hard, grimy fist, and a long shout of exultation greeted this monstrous deed.

Then only did the girl seem to lose her self-control.

"A moi," she shouted loudly, whilst hammering with both hands against the massive doorway. "A moi! Murder! Murder! Citoyen Déroulède, à moi!"

But her terror was greeted with renewed glee by her assailants. They were now roused to the highest point of frenzy: the crowd of brutes would in the next moment have torn the helpless girl from her place of refuge and dragged her into the mire, an outraged prey, for the satisfaction of an ungovernable hate.

But just as half-a-dozen pairs of talon-like hands clutched frantically at her skirts, the door behind her was quickly opened. She felt her arm seized firmly, and herself dragged swiftly within the shelter of the threshold.

Her senses, overwrought by the terrible adventure which she had just gone through, were threatening to reel; she heard the massive door close, shutting out the yells of baffled rage, the ironical laughter, the obscene words, which sounded in her ears like the shrieks of Dante's damned.

She could not see her rescuer, for the hall into which he had hastily dragged her was only dimly lighted. But a peremptory voice said quickly:

"Up the stairs, the room straight in front of you, my mother is there. Go quickly."

She had fallen on her knees, cowering against the heavy oak beam which supported the ceiling, and was straining her eyes to catch sight of the man, to whom at this moment she perhaps owed more than her life: but he was standing against the doorway, with his hand on the latch.

"What are you going to do?" she murmured.

"Prevent their breaking into my house in order to drag you out of it," he replied quietly; "so, I pray you, do as I bid you."

Mechanically she obeyed him, drew herself to her feet, and, turning towards the stairs, began slowly to mount the shallow steps. Her knees were shaking under her, her whole body was trembling with horror at the awesome crisis she had just traversed.

She dared not look back at her rescuer. Her head was bent, and her lips were murmuring half-audible words as she went.

Outside the hooting and yelling was becoming louder and louder. Enraged fists were hammering violently against the stout oak door.

At the top of the stairs, moved by an irresistible impulse, she turned and looked into the hall.

She saw his figure dimly outlined in the gloom, one hand on the latch, his head thrown back to watch her movements.

A door stood ajar immediately in front of her. She pushed it open and went within.

At that moment he too opened the door below. The shrieks of the howling mob once more resounded close to her ears. It seemed as if they had surrounded him. She wondered what was happening, and marvelled how he dared to face that awful crowd alone.

The room into which she had entered was gay and cheerful-looking with its dainty chintz hangings and graceful, elegant pieces of furniture. The young girl looked up, as a kindly voice said to her, from out the depths of a capacious armchair:

"Come in, come in, my dear, and close the door behind you! Did those wretches attack you? Never mind. Paul will speak to them. Come here, my dear, and sit down; there's no cause now for fear."

Without a word the young girl came forward. She seemed now to be walking in a dream, the chintz hangings to be swaying ghostlike around her, the yells and shrieks below to come from the very bowels of the earth.

The old lady continued to prattle on. She had taken the girl's hand in hers, and was gently forcing her down on to a low stool beside her armchair. She was talking about Paul, and said something about Anne Mie, and then about the National Convention, and those beasts and savages, but mostly about Paul.

The noise outside had subsided. The girl felt strangely sick and tired. Her head seemed to be whirling round, the furniture to be dancing round her; the old lady's face looked at her through a swaying veil, and then — and then ...

Tired Nature was having her way at last; she folded the quivering young body in her motherly arms, and wrapped the aching senses beneath her merciful mantle of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II

Citizen-Deputy.

When, presently, the young girl awoke, with a delicious feeling of rest and well-being, she had plenty of leisure to think.

So, then, this was his house! She was actually a guest, a rescued protégé, beneath the roof of Citoyen Déroulède.

He had dragged her from the clutches of the howling mob which she had provoked; his mother had made her welcome, a sweet-faced, young girl scarce out of her teens, sad-eyed and slightly deformed, had waited upon her and made her happy and comfortable.

Juliette de Marny was in the house of the man, whom she had sworn before her God and before her father to pursue with hatred and revenge.

Ten years had gone by since then.

Lying upon the sweet-scented bed which the hospitality of the Déroulèdes had provided for her, she seemed to see passing before her the spectres of these past ten years — the first four, after her brother's death, until the old Duc de Marny's body slowly followed his soul to its grave.

After that last glimmer of life beside the deathbed of his son, the old Duc had practically ceased to be. A mute, shrunken figure, he merely existed; his mind vanished, his memory gone, a wreck whom Nature fortunately remembered at last, and finally took away from the invalid chair which had been his world.

Then came those few years at the Convent of the Ursulines. Juliette had hoped that she had a vocation; her whole soul yearned for a secluded, a religious, life, for great barriers of solemn vows and days spent in prayer and contemplation, to interpose between herself and the memory of that awful night when, obedient to her father's will, she had made the solemn oath to avenge her brother's death.

She was only eighteen when she first entered the convent, directly after her father's death, when she felt very lonely — both morally and mentally lonely — and followed by the obsession of that oath.

She never spoke of it to anyone except to her confessor, and he, a simple-minded man of great learning and a total lack of knowledge of the world, was completely at a loss how to advise.

The Archbishop was consulted. He could grant a dispensation, and release her of that most solemn vow.

When first this idea was suggested to her, Juliette was exultant. Her entire nature, which in itself was wholesome, light-hearted, the very reverse of morbid, rebelled against this unnatural task placed upon her young shoulders. It was only religion — the strange, warped religion of that extraordinary age — which kept her to it, which forbade her breaking lightly that most unnatural oath.

The Archbishop was a man of many duties, many engagements. He agreed to give this strange "cas de conscience" his most earnest attention. He would make no promises. But Mademoiselle de Marny was rich: a munificent donation to the poor of Paris, or to some cause dear to the Holy Father himself, might perhaps be more acceptable to God than the fulfilment of a compulsory vow.

Juliette, within the convent walls, was waiting patiently for the Archbishop's decision at the very moment, when the greatest upheaval the world has ever known was beginning to shake the very foundations of France.

The Archbishop had other things now to think about than isolated cases of conscience. He forgot all about Juliette, probably. He was busy consoling a monarch for the loss of his throne, and preparing himself and his royal patron for the scaffold.

The Convent of the Ursulines was scattered during the Terror. Everyone remembers the Thermidor massacres, and the thirty-four nuns, all daughters of ancient families of France, who went so cheerfully to the scaffold.

Juliette was one of those who escaped condemnation. How or why, she herself could not have told. She was very young, and still a postulant; she was allowed to live in retirement with Pétronelle, her old nurse, who had remained faithful through all these years.

Then the Archbishop was prosecuted and imprisoned. Juliette made frantic efforts to see him, but all in vain. When he died, she looked upon her spiritual guide's death as a direct warning from God, that nothing could relieve her of her oath.

She had watched the turmoils of the Revolution through the attic window of her tiny apartment in Paris. Waited upon by faithful Pétronelle, she had been forced to live on the savings of that worthy old soul, as all her property, all the Marny estates, the *dot* she took with her to the convent — everything, in fact — had been seized by the Revolutionary Government, self appointed to level fortunes, as well as individuals.

From that attic window she had seen beautiful Paris writhing under the pitiless lash of the demon of terror which it had provoked; she had heard the rumble of the tumbrils, dragging day after day their load of victims to the insatiable maker of this Revolution of Fraternity — the Guillotine.

She had seen the gay, light-hearted people of this Star-City turned to howling beasts of prey, its women changed to sexless vultures, with murderous talons implanted in everything that is noble, high or beautiful.

She was not twenty when the feeble, vacillating monarch and his imperious consort were dragged back — a pair of humiliated prisoners — to the capital from which they had tried to flee.

Two years later, she had heard the cries of an entire people exulting over a regicide. Then the murder of Marat, by a young girl like herself, the pale-faced, large-eyed Charlotte, who had committed a crime for the sake of a conviction. "Greater than Brutus!" some had called her. Greater than Joan of Arc, for it was to a mission of evil and of sin that she was called from the depths of her Breton village, and not to one of glory and triumph.

"Greater than Brutus!"

Juliette followed the trial of Charlotte Corday with all the passionate ardour of her exalted temperament.

Just think what an effect it must have had upon the mind of this young girl, who for nine years — the best of her life — had also lived with the idea of a sublime mission pervading her very soul.

She watched Charlotte Corday at her trial. Conquering her natural repulsion for such scenes, and the crowds which usually watched them, she had forced her way into the foremost rank of the narrow gallery which overlooked the Hall of the Revolutionary Tribunal.

She heard the indictment, heard Tinville's speech and the calling of the witnesses.

“All this is unnecessary. I killed Marat!”

Juliette heard the fresh young voice ringing out clearly above the murmur of voices, the howls of execration; she saw the beautiful young face, clear, calm, impassive.

“I killed Marat!”

And there in the special space allotted to the Citizen-Deputies, sitting among those who represented the party of the Moderate Gironde, was Paul Déroulède, the man whom she had sworn to pursue with a vengeance as great, as complete, as that which guided Charlotte Corday’s hand.

She watched him during the trial, and wondered if he had any presentiment of the hatred which dogged him, like unto the one which had dogged Marat.

He was very dark, almost swarthy a son of the South, with brown hair, free from powder, thrown back and revealing the brow of a student rather than that of a legislator. He watched Charlotte Corday earnestly, and Juliette who watched him saw the look of measureless pity, which softened the otherwise hard look of his close-set eyes.

He made an impassioned speech for the defence: a speech which has become historic. It would have cost any other man his head.

Juliette marvelled at his courage; to defend Charlotte Corday was equivalent to acquiescing in the death of Marat: Marat, the friend of the people; Marat, whom his funeral orators had compared to the Great, the Sacred Leveller of Mankind!

But Déroulède’s speech was not a defence, it was an appeal. The most eloquent man of that eloquent age, his words seemed to find that hidden bit of sentiment which still lurked in the hearts of these strange protagonists of Hate.

Everyone round Juliette listened as he spoke: “It is Citoyen Déroulède!” whispered the bloodthirsty Amazons, who sat knitting in the gallery.

But there was no further comment. A huge, magnificently-equipped hospital for sick children had been thrown open in Paris that very morning, a gift to the nation from Citoyen Déroulède. Surely he was privileged to talk a little, if it pleased him. His hospital would cover quite a good many defalcations.

Even the rabid Mountain, Danton, Merlin, Santerre, shrugged their shoulders. “It is Déroulède, let him talk an he list. Murdered Marat said of him that he was not dangerous.”

Juliette heard it all. The knitters round her were talking loudly. Even Charlotte was almost forgotten whilst Déroulède talked. He had a fine voice, of strong calibre, which echoed powerfully through the hall.

He was rather short, but broad-shouldered and well knit, with an expressive hand, which looked slender and delicate below the fine lace ruffle.

Charlotte Corday was condemned. All Déroulède’s eloquence could not save her.

Juliette left the court in a state of mad exultation. She was very young: the scenes she had witnessed in the past two years could not help but excite the imagination of a young girl, left entirely to her own intellectual and moral resources.

What scenes! Great God!

And now to wait for an opportunity! Charlotte Corday, the half-educated little provincial should not put to shame Mademoiselle de Marny, the daughter of a hundred dukes, of those who had made France before she took to unmaking herself.

But she could not formulate any definite plans. Pétronelle, poor old soul, her only confidante, was not of the stuff that heroines are made of. Juliette felt impelled by duty, and duty at best is not so prompt a counsellor as love or hate.

Her adventure outside Déroulède’s house had not been premeditated. Impulse and coincidence had worked their will with her.

She had been in the habit, daily, for the past month, of wandering down the Rue Ecole de Médecine, ostensibly to gaze at Marat’s dwelling, as crowds of idlers were wont to do, but really in order to look at Déroulède’s house. Once or twice she saw him coming or going from home. Once she caught sight of the inner hall, and of a young girl in a dark kirtle and snow-white kerchief bidding him good-bye at his door. Another time she caught sight of him at the corner of the street, helping that same young girl over the muddy pavement. He had just met her, and she was carrying a basket of provisions: he took it from her and carried it to the house.

Chivalrous — eh? — and innately so, evidently, for the girl was slightly deformed: hardly a hunchback, but weak and unattractive-looking, with melancholy eyes, and a pale, pinched face.

It was the thought of that little act of simple chivalry, witnessed the day before, which caused Juliette to provoke the scene which, but for Déroulède’s timely interference, might have ended so fatally. But she reckoned on that interference: the whole thing had occurred to her suddenly, and she had carried it through.

Had not her father said to her that when the time came, God would show her a means to the end?

And now she was inside the house of the man who had murdered her brother and sent her sorrowing father, a poor, senseless maniac, tottering to the grave.

Would God’s finger point again, and show her what to do next, how best to accomplish what she had sworn to do?

CHAPTER III

Hospitality.

"Is there anything more I can do for you now, mademoiselle?"

The gentle, timid voice roused Juliette from the contemplation of the past.

She smiled at Anne Mie, and held her hand out towards her.

"You have all been so kind," she said, "I want to get up now and thank you all."

"Don't move unless you feel quite well."

"I am quite well now. Those horrid people frightened me so, that is why I fainted."

"They would have half-killed you, if ..."

"Will you tell me where I am?" asked Juliette.

"In the house of M. Paul Déroulède — I should have said of Citizen-Deputy Déroulède. He rescued you from the mob, and pacified them. He has such a beautiful voice that he can make anyone listen to him, and ..."

"And you are fond of him, mademoiselle?" added Juliette, suddenly feeling a mist of tears rising to her eyes.

"Of course I am fond of him," rejoined the other girl simply, whilst a look of the most tender-hearted devotion seemed to beautify her pale face. "He and Madame Déroulède have brought me up; I never knew my parents. They have cared for me, and he has taught me all I know."

"What do they call you, mademoiselle?"

"My name is Anne Mie."

"And mine, Juliette — Juliette Marny," she added after a slight hesitation. "I have no parents either. My old nurse, Pétronelle, has brought me up, and — But tell me more about M. Déroulède — I owe him so much, I'd like to know him better."

"Will you not let me arrange your hair?" said Anne Mie as if purposely evading a direct reply. "M. Déroulède is in the salon with madame. You can see him then."

Juliette asked no more questions, but allowed Anne Mie to tidy her hair for her, to lend her a fresh kerchief and generally to efface all traces of her terrible adventure. She felt puzzled and tearful. Anne Mie's gentleness seemed somehow to jar on her spirits. She could not understand the girl's position in the Déroulède household. Was she a relative, or a superior servant? In these troublous times she might easily have been both.

In any case she was a childhood's companion of the Citizen-Deputy — whether on an equal or a humbler footing, Juliette would have given much to ascertain.

With the marvellous instinct peculiar to women of temperament, she had already divined Anne Mie's love for Déroulède. The poor young cripple's very soul seemed to quiver magnetically at the bare mention of his name, her whole face became transfigured: Juliette even thought her beautiful then.

She looked at herself critically in the glass, and adjusted a curl, which looked its best when it was rebellious. She scrutinised her own face carefully; why? she could not tell: another of those subtle feminine instincts perhaps.

The becoming simplicity of the prevailing mode suited her to perfection. The waist line, rather high but clearly defined — a precursor of the later more accentuated fashion — gave grace to her long slender limbs, and emphasised the lissomeness of her figure. The kerchief, edged with fine lace, and neatly folded across her bosom, softened the contour of her girlish bust and shoulders.

And her hair was a veritable glory round her dainty, piquant face. Soft, fair, and curly, it emerged in a golden halo from beneath the prettiest little lace cap imaginable.

She turned and faced Anne Mie, ready to follow her out of the room, and the young crippled girl sighed as she smoothed down the folds of her own apron, and gave a final touch to the completion of Juliette's attire.

The time before the evening meal slipped by like a dream-hour for Juliette.

She had lived so much alone, had led such an introspective life, that she had hardly realised and understood all that was going on around her. At the time when the inner vitality of France first asserted itself and then swept away all that hindered its mad progress, she was tied to the invalid chair of her half-demented father; then, after that, the sheltering walls of the Ursuline Convent had hidden from her mental vision the true meaning of the great conflict, between the Old Era and the New.

Déroulède was neither a pedant nor yet a revolutionary: his theories were Utopian and he had an extraordinary overpowering sympathy for his fellow-men.

After the first casual greetings with Juliette, he had continued a discussion with his mother, which the young girl's entrance had interrupted.

He seemed to take but little notice of her, although at times his dark, keen eyes would seek hers, as if challenging her for a reply.

He was talking of the mob of Paris, whom he evidently understood so well. Incidents such as the one which Juliette had provoked, had led to rape and theft, often to murder, before now: but outside Citizen-Deputy Déroulède's house everything was quiet, half-an-hour after Juliette's escape from that howling, brutish crowd.

He had merely spoken to them, for about twenty minutes, and they had gone away quite quietly, without even touching one hair of his head. He seemed to love them: to know how to separate the little good that was in them, from that hard crust of evil, which misery had put around their hearts.

Once he addressed Juliette somewhat abruptly: "Pardon me, mademoiselle, but for your own sake we must guard you a prisoner here awhile. No one would harm you under this roof, but it would not be safe for you to cross the neighbouring streets to-night."

"But I must go, monsieur. Indeed, indeed I must!" she said earnestly. "I am deeply grateful to you, but I could not leave Pétronelle."

"Who is Pétronelle?"

"My dear old nurse, monsieur. She has never left me. Think how anxious and miserable she must be, at my prolonged absence."

“Where does she live?”

“At No. 15 Rue Taitbout, but ...”

“Will you allow me to take her a message? — telling her that you are safe and under my roof, where it is obviously more prudent that you should remain at present.”

“If you think it best, monsieur,” she replied.

Inwardly she was trembling with excitement. God had not only brought her to this house, but willed that she should stay in it.

“In whose name shall I take the message, mademoiselle?” he asked.

“My name is Juliette Marny.”

She watched him keenly as she said it, but there was not the slightest sign in his expressive face, to show that he had recognised the name.

Ten years is a long time, and every one had lived through so much during those years! A wave of intense wrath swept through Juliette’s soul, as she realised that he had forgotten. The name meant nothing to him! It did not recall to him the fact that his hand was stained with blood. During ten years she had suffered, she had fought with herself, fought for him as it were, against the Fate which she was destined to mete out to him, whilst he had forgotten, or at least had ceased to think.

He bowed to her and went out of the room.

The wave of wrath subsided, and she was left alone with Madame Déroulède: presently Anne Mie came in.

The three women chatted together, waiting for the return of the master of the house. Juliette felt well and, in spite of herself, almost happy. She had lived so long in the miserable, little attic alone with Pétronelle that she enjoyed the well-being of this refined home. It was not so grand or gorgeous of course as her father’s princely palace opposite the Louvre, a wreck now, since it was annexed by the Committee of National Defence, for the housing of soldiery. But the Déroulèdes’ home was essentially a refined one. The delicate china on the tall chimney-piece, the few bits of Buhl and Vernis Martin about the room, the vision through the open doorway of the supper-table spread with a fine white cloth, and sparkling with silver, all spoke of fastidious tastes, of habits of luxury and elegance, which the spirit of Equality and Anarchy had not succeeded in eradicating.

When Déroulède came back, he brought an atmosphere of breezy cheerfulness with him.

The street was quiet now, and when walking past the hospital — his own gift to the Nation — he had been loudly cheered. One or two ironical voices had asked him what he had done with the aristo and her lace furbelows, but it remained at that and Mademoiselle Marny need have no fear.

He had brought Pétronelle along with him: his careless, lavish hospitality would have suggested the housing of Juliette’s entire domestic establishment, had she possessed one.

As it was, the worthy old soul’s deluge of happy tears had melted his kindly heart. He offered her and her young mistress shelter, until the small cloud should have rolled by.

After that he suggested a journey to England. Emigration now was the only real safety, and Mademoiselle Marny had unpleasantly drawn on herself the attention of the Paris rabble. No doubt, within the next few days her name would figure among the “suspect.” She would be safest out of the country, and could not do better than place herself under the guidance of that English enthusiast, who had helped so many persecuted Frenchmen to escape from the terrors of the Revolution: the man who was such a thorn in the flesh of the Committee of Public Safety, and who went by the nickname of The Scarlet Pimpernel.

CHAPTER IV

The faithful house-dog.

After supper they talked of Charlotte Corday.

Juliette clung to the vision of that heroine, and liked to talk of her. She appeared as a justification of her own actions, which somehow seemed to require justification.

She loved to hear Paul Déroulède talk; liked to provoke his enthusiasm and to see his stern, dark face light up with the inward fire of the enthusiast.

She had openly avowed herself as the daughter of the Duc de Marny. When she actually named her father, and her brother killed in duel, she saw Déroulède looking long and searchingly at her. Evidently he wondered if she knew everything: but she returned his gaze fearlessly and frankly, and he apparently was satisfied.

Madame Déroulède seemed to know nothing of the circumstances of that duel. Déroulède tried to draw Juliette out, to make her speak of her brother. She replied to his questions quite openly, but there was nothing in what she said, suggestive of the fact that she knew who killed her brother.

She wanted him to know who she was. If he feared an enemy in her, there was yet time enough for him to close his doors against her.

But less than a minute later, he had renewed his warmest offers of hospitality.

"Until we can arrange for your journey to England," he added with a short sigh, as if reluctant to part from her.

To Juliette his attitude seemed one of complete indifference for the wrong he had done to her and to her father: feeling that she was an avenging spirit, with flaming sword in hand, pursuing her brother's murderer like a relentless Nemesis, she would have preferred to see him cowed before her, even afraid of her, though she was only a young and delicate girl.

She did not understand that in the simplicity of his heart, he only wished to make amends. The quarrel with the young Vicomte de Marny had been forced upon him, the fight had been honourable and fair, and on his side fought with every desire to spare the young man. He had merely been the instrument of Fate, but he felt happy that Fate once more used him as her tool, this time to save the sister.

Whilst Déroulède and Juliette talked together Anne Mie cleared the supper-table, then came and sat on a low stool at madame's feet. She took no part in the conversation, but every now and then Juliette felt the girl's melancholy eyes fixed almost reproachfully upon her.

When Juliette had retired with Pétronelle, Déroulède took Anne Mie's hand in his.

"You will be kind to my guest, Anne Mie, won't you? She seems very lonely, and has gone through a great deal."

"Not more than I have," murmured the young girl involuntarily.

"You are not happy, Anne Mie? I thought ..."

"Is a wretched, deformed creature ever happy?" she said with sudden vehemence, as tears of mortification rushed to her eyes, in spite of herself.

"I did not think that you were wretched," he replied with some sadness, "and neither in my eyes, nor in my mother's, are you in any way deformed."

Her mood changed at once. She clung to him, pressing his hand between her own.

"Forgive me! I — I don't know what's the matter with me to-night," she said with a nervous little laugh. "Let me see, you asked me to be kind to Mademoiselle Marny, did you not?"

He nodded with a smile.

"Of course I'll be kind to her. Isn't every one kind to one who is young and beautiful, and has great, appealing eyes, and soft, curly hair? Ah me! how easy is the path in life for some people! What do you want me to do, Paul? Wait on her? Be her little maid? Soothe her nerves or what? I'll do it all, though in her eyes I shall remain both wretched and deformed, a creature to pity, the harmless, necessary house-dog ..."

She paused a moment: said "Good-night" to him, and turned to go, candle in hand, looking pathetic and fragile, with that ugly contour of shoulder, which Déroulède assured her he could not see.

The candle flickered in the draught, illumining the thin, pinched face, the large melancholy eyes of the faithful house-dog.

"Who can watch and bite!" she said half-audibly as she slipped out of the room. "For I do not trust you, my fine madam, and there was something about that comedy this afternoon, which somehow, I don't quite understand."

CHAPTER V

A day in the woods.

But whilst men and women set to work to make the towns of France hideous with their shrieks and their hootings, their mock-trials and bloody guillotines, they could not quite prevent Nature from working her sweet will with the country.

June, July, and August had received new names — they were now called Messidor, Thermidor, and Fructidor, but under these new names they continued to pour forth upon the earth the same old fruits, the same flowers, the same grass in the meadows and leaves upon the trees.

Messidor brought its quota of wild roses in the hedgerows, just as archaic June had done. Thermidor covered the barren cornfields with its flaming mantle of scarlet poppies, and Fructidor, though now called August, still tipped the wild sorrel with dots of crimson, and laid the first wash of tender colour on the pale cheeks of the ripening peaches.

And Juliette — young, girlish, feminine and inconsequent — had sighed for country and sunshine, had longed for a ramble in the woods, the music of the birds, the sight of the meadows sugared with marguerites.

She had left the house early: accompanied by Pétronelle, she had been rowed along the river as far as Suresnes. They had brought some bread and fresh butter, a little wine and fruit in a basket, and from here she meant to wander homewards through the woods.

It was all so peaceful, so remote: even the noise of shrieking, howling Paris did not reach the leafy thickets of Suresnes.

It almost seemed as if this little old-world village had been forgotten by the destroyers of France. It had never been a royal residence, the woods had never been preserved for royal sport: there was no vengeance to be wreaked upon its peaceful glades and sleepy, fragrant meadows.

Juliette spent a happy day; she loved the flowers, the trees, the birds, and Pétronelle was silent and sympathetic. As the afternoon wore on, and it was time to go home, Juliette turned townwards with a sigh.

You all know that road through the woods, which lies to the north-west of Paris: so leafy, so secluded. No large, hundred-year-old trees, no fine oaks or antique elms, but numberless delicate stems of hazel-nut and young ash, covered with honeysuckle at this time of year, sweet-smelling and so peaceful after that awful turmoil of the town.

Obedient to Madame Déroulède's suggestion, Juliette had tied a tricolour scarf round her waist, and a Phrygian cap of crimson cloth, with the inevitable rosette on one side, adorned her curly head.

She had gathered a huge bouquet of poppies, marguerites and blue lupin — Nature's tribute to the national colours — and as she wandered through the sylvan glades she looked like some quaint dweller of the woods — a sprite, mayhap — with old mother Pétronelle trotting behind her, like an attendant witch.

Suddenly she paused, for in the near distance she had perceived the sound of footsteps upon the leafy turf, and the next moment Paul Déroulède emerged from out the thicket and came rapidly towards her.

"We were so anxious about you at home!" he said, almost by way of an apology. "My mother became so restless ..."

"That to quiet her fears you came in search of me!" she retorted with a gay little laugh, the laugh of a young girl, scarce a woman as yet, who feels that she is good to look at, good to talk to, who feels her wings for the first time, the wings with which to soar into that mad, merry, elusive and called Romance. Ay, her wings! but her power also! that sweet, subtle power of the woman: the yoke which men love, rail at, and love again, the yoke that enslaves them and gives them the joy of kings.

How happy the day had been! Yet it had been incomplete!

Pétronelle was somewhat dull, and Juliette was too young to enjoy long companionship with her own thoughts. Now suddenly the day seemed to have become perfect. There was someone there to appreciate the charm of the woods, the beauty of that blue sky peeping through the tangled foliage of the honeysuckle-covered trees. There was some one to talk to, someone to admire the fresh white frock Juliette had put on that morning.

"But how did you know where to find me?" she asked with a quaint touch of immature coquetry.

"I didn't know," he replied quietly. "They told me you had gone to Suresnes, and meant to wander homewards through the woods. It frightened me, for you will have to go through the north-west barrier, and ..."

"Well?"

He smiled, and looked earnestly for a moment at the dainty apparition before him.

"Well, you know!" he said gaily, "that tricolour scarf and the red cap are not quite sufficient as a disguise: you look anything but a staunch friend of the people. I guessed that your muslin frock would be clean, and that there would still be some tell-tale lace upon it."

She laughed again, and with delicate fingers lifted her pretty muslin frock, displaying a white frou-frou of flounces beneath the hem.

"How careless and childish!" he said, almost roughly.

"Would you have me coarse and grimy to be a fitting match for your partisans?" she retorted.

His tone of mentor nettled her, his attitude seemed to her priggish and dictatorial, and as the sun disappearing behind a sudden cloud, so her childish merriment quickly gave place to a feeling of unexplainable disappointment.

"I humbly beg your pardon," he said quietly, "And must crave your kind indulgence for my mood: but I have been so anxious ..."

"Why should you be anxious about me?"

She had meant to say this indifferently, as if caring little what the reply might be: but in her effort to seem indifferent her voice became haughty, a reminiscence of the days when she still was the daughter of the Duc de Marny, the richest and most high-born heiress in France.

"Was that presumptuous?" he asked, with a slight touch of irony, in response to her own hauteur.

"It was merely unnecessary," she replied. "I have already laid too many burdens on your shoulders, without wishing to add that of anxiety."

"You have laid no burden on me," he said quietly, "save one of gratitude."

"Gratitude? What have I done?"

"You committed a foolish, thoughtless act outside my door, and gave me the chance of easing my conscience of a heavy load."

"In what way?"

"I had never hoped that the Fates would be so kind as to allow me to render a member of your family a slight service."

"I understand that you saved my life the other day, Monsieur Déroulède. I know that I am still in peril and that I owe my safety to you ..."

"Do you also know that your brother owed his death to me?"

She closed her lips firmly, unable to reply, wrathful with him, for having suddenly and without any warning, placed a clumsy hand upon that hidden sore.

"I always meant to tell you," he continued somewhat hurriedly; "for it almost seemed to me that I have been cheating you, these last few days. I don't suppose that you can quite realise what it means to me to tell you this just now; but I owe it to you, I think. In later years you might find out, and then regret the days you spent under my roof. I called you childish a moment ago, you must forgive me; I know that you are a woman, and hope therefore that you will understand me. I killed your brother in fair fight. He provoked me as no man was ever provoked before ..."

"Is it necessary, M. Déroulède, that you should tell me all this?" she interrupted him with some impatience.

"I thought you ought to know."

"You must know, on the other hand, that I have no means of hearing the history of the quarrel from my brother's point of view now."

The moment the words were out of her lips she had realised how cruelly she had spoken. He did not reply; he was too chivalrous, too gentle, to reproach her. Perhaps he understood for the first time how bitterly she had felt her brother's death, and how deeply she must be suffering, now that she knew herself to be face to face with his murderer.

She stole a quick glance at him, through her tears. She was deeply penitent for what she had said. It almost seemed to her as if a dual nature was at war within her.

The mention of her brother's name, the recollection of that awful night beside his dead body, of those four years whilst she watched her father's moribund reason slowly wandering towards the grave, seemed to rouse in her a spirit of rebellion, and of evil, which she felt was not entirely of herself.

The woods had become quite silent. It was late afternoon, and they had gradually wandered farther and farther away from pretty sylvan Suresness, towards great, anarchic, deathdealing Paris. In this part of the woods the birds had left their homes; the trees, shorn of their lower branches looked like gaunt spectres, raising melancholy heads towards the relentless, silent sky.

In the distance, from behind the barriers, a couple of miles away, the boom of a gun was heard.

"They are closing the barriers," he said quietly after a long pause. "I am glad I was fortunate enough to meet you."

"It was kind of you to seek for me," she said meekly. "I didn't mean what I said just now ..."

"I pray you, say no more about it. I can so well understand. I only wish ..."

"It would be best I should leave your house," she said gently; "I have so ill repaid your hospitality. Pétronelle and I can easily go back to our lodgings."

"You would break my mother's heart if you left her now," he said, almost roughly. "She has become very fond of you, and knows, just as well as I do, the dangers that would beset you outside my house. My coarse and grimy partisans," he added, with a bitter touch of sarcasm, "have that advantage, that they are loyal to me, and would not harm you while under my roof."

"But you ..." she murmured.

She felt somehow that she had wounded him very deeply, and was half angry with herself for her seeming ingratitude, and yet childishly glad to have suppressed in him that attitude of mentorship, which he was beginning to assume over her.

"You need not fear that my presence will offend you much longer, mademoiselle," he said coldly. "I can quite understand how hateful it must be to you, though I would have wished that you could believe at least in my sincerity."

"Are you going away then?"

"Not out of Paris altogether. I have accepted the post of Governor of the Conciergerie."

"Ah! — where the poor Queen ..."

She checked herself suddenly. Those words would have been called treasonable to the people of France.

Instinctively and furtively, as everyone did in these days, she cast a rapid glance behind her.

"You need not be afraid," he said; "there is no one here but Pétronelle."

"And you."

"Oh! I echo your words. Poor Marie Antoinette!"

"You pity her?"

"How can I help it?"

"But you are that horrible National Convention, who will try her, condemn her, execute her as they did the King."

"I am of the National Convention. But I will not condemn her, nor be a party to another crime. I go as Governor of the Conciergerie, to help her, if I can."

"But your popularity — your life — if you befriend her?"

"As you say, mademoiselle, my life, if I befriend her," he said simply.

She looked at him with renewed curiosity in her gaze.

How strange were men in these days! Paul Déroulède, the republican, the recognised idol of the lawless people of France, was about to risk his life for the woman he had helped to dethrone.

Pity with him did not end with the rabble of Paris; it had reached Charlotte Corday, though it failed to save her, and now it extended to the poor dispossessed Queen. Somehow, in his face this time, she saw either success or death.

"When do you leave?" she asked.

“To-morrow night.”

She said nothing more. Strangely enough, a tinge of melancholy had settled over her spirits. No doubt the proximity of the town was the cause of this. She could already hear the familiar noise of muffled drums, the loud, excited shrieking of the mob, who stood round the gates of Paris, at this time of the evening, waiting to witness some important capture, perhaps that of a hated aristocrat striving to escape from the people’s revenge.

They had reached the edge of the wood, and gradually, as she walked, the flowers she had gathered fell unheeded out of her listless hands one by one.

First the blue lupins: their bud-laden heads were heavy and they dropped to the ground, followed by the white marguerites, that lay thick behind her now on the grass like a shroud. The red poppies were the lightest, their thin gummy stalks clung to her hands longer than the rest. At last she let them fall too, singly, like great drops of blood, that glistened as her long white gown swept them aside.

Déroulède was absorbed in his thoughts, and seemed not to heed her. At the barrier, however, he roused himself and took out the passes which alone enabled Juliette and Pétronelle to re-enter the town unchallenged. He himself as Citizen-Deputy could come and go as he wished.

Juliette shuddered as the great gates closed behind her with a heavy clank. It seemed to shut out even the memory of this happy day, which for a brief space had been quite perfect.

She did not know Paris very well, and wondered where lay that gloomy Conciergerie, where a dethroned queen was living her last days, in an agonised memory of the past. But as they crossed the bridge she recognised all round her the massive towers of the great city: Notre Dame, the grateful spire of La Sainte Chapelle, the sombre outline of St. Gervais, and behind her the Louvre with its great history and irreclaimable grandeur. How small her own tragedy seemed in the midst of this great sanguinary drama, the last act of which had not yet even begun. Her own revenge, her oath, her tribulations, what were they in comparison with that great flaming Nemesis which had swept away a throne, that vow of retaliation carried out by thousands against other thousands, that long story of degradation, of regicide, of fratricide, the awesome chapters of which were still being unfolded one by one?

She felt small and petty: ashamed of the pleasure she had felt in the woods, ashamed of her high spirits and light-heartedness, ashamed of that feeling of sudden pity and admiration for the man who had done her and her family so deep an injury, which she was too feeble, too vacillating to avenge.

The majestic outline of the Louvre seemed to frown sarcastically on her weakness, the silent river to mock her and her wavering purpose. The man beside her had wronged her and hers far more deeply than the Bourbons had wronged their people. The people of France were taking their revenge, and God had at the close of this last happy day of her life pointed once more to the means for her great end.

CHAPTER VI

The Scarlet Pimpernel.

It was some few hours later. The ladies sat in the drawing-room, silent and anxious.

Soon after supper a visitor had called, and had been closeted with Paul Déroutède in the latter's study for the past two hours.

A tall, somewhat lazy-looking figure, he was sitting at a table face to face with the Citizen-Deputy. On a chair beside him lay a heavy caped coat, covered with the dust and the splashings of a long journey, but he himself was attired in clothes that suggested the most fastidious taste, and the most perfect of tailors; he wore with apparent ease the eccentric fashion of the time, the short-waisted coat of many lapels, the double waistcoat and billows of delicate lace. Unlike Déroutède he was of great height, with fair hair and a somewhat lazy expression in his good-natured blue eyes, and as he spoke, there was just a soupçon of foreign accent in the pronunciation of the French vowels, a certain drawl of o's and a's, that would have betrayed the Britisher to an observant ear.

The two men had been talking earnestly for some time, the tall Englishman was watching his friend keenly, whilst an amused, pleasant smile lingered round the corners of his firm mouth and jaw. Déroutède, restless and enthusiastic, was pacing to and fro.

"But I don't understand now, how you managed to reach Paris, my dear Blakeney!" said Déroutède at last, placing an anxious hand on his friend's shoulder. "The government has not forgotten The Scarlet Pimpernel."

"La! I took care of that!" responded Blakeney with his short, pleasant laugh. "I sent Tinville my autograph this morning."

"You are mad, Blakeney!"

"Not altogether, my friend. My faith! 'twas on only foolhardiness caused me to grant that devilish prosecutor another sight of my scarlet device. I knew what you maniacs would be after, so I came across in the *Daydream*, just to see if I couldn't get my share of the fun."

"Fun, you call it?" queried the other bitterly.

"Nay! what would you have me call it? A mad, insane, senseless tragedy, with but one issue? — the guillotine for you all."

"Then why did you come?"

"To — What shall I say, my friend?" rejoined Sir Percy Blakeney, with that inimitable drawl of his. "To give your demmed government something else to think about, whilst you are all busy running your heads into a noose."

"What makes you think we are doing that?"

"Three things, my friend — may I offer you a pinch of snuff — No? — Ah well!..." And with the graceful gesture of an accomplished dandy, Sir Percy flicked off a grain of dust from his immaculate Mechlin ruffles.

"Three things," he continued quietly; "an imprisoned Queen, about to be tried for her life, the temperament of a Frenchman — some of them — and the idiocy of mankind generally. These three things make me think that a certain section of hot-headed Republicans with yourself, my dear Déroutède, *en tête*, are about to attempt the most stupid, senseless, purposeless thing that was ever concocted by the excitable brain of a demmed Frenchman."

Déroutède smiled.

"Does it not seem amusing to you, Blakeney, that you should sit there and condemn anyone for planning mad, insane, senseless things."

"La! I'll not sit, I'll stand!" rejoined Blakeney with a laugh, as he drew himself up to his full height, and stretched his long, lazy limbs. "And now let me tell you, friend, that my League of The Scarlet Pimpernel never attempted the impossible, and to try and drag the Queen out of the clutches of these murderous rascals now, is attempting the unattainable."

"And yet we mean to try."

"I know it. I guessed it, that is why I came: that is also why I sent a pleasant little note to the Committee of Public Safety, signed with the device they know so well: The Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Well?"

"Well! the result is obvious. Robespierre, Danton, Tinville, Merlin, and the whole of the demmed murderous crowd, will be busy looking after me — a needle in a haystack. They'll put the abortive attempt down to me, and you may — *ma foi!* I only suggest that you *may* escape safely out of France — in the *Daydream*, and with the help of your humble servant."

"But in the meanwhile they'll discover you, and they'll not let you escape a second time."

"My friend! if a terrier were to lose his temper, he never would run a rat to earth. Now your Revolutionary Government has lost its temper with me, ever since I slipped through Chauvelin's fingers; they are blind with their own fury, whilst I am perfectly happy and cool as a cucumber. My life has become valuable to me, my friend. There is someone over the water now who weeps when I don't return — No! no! never fear — they'll not get The Scarlet Pimpernel this journey ..."

He laughed, a gay, pleasant laugh, and his strong, firm face seemed to soften at thought of the beautiful wife, over in England, who was waiting anxiously for his safe return.

"And yet you'll not help us to rescue the Queen?" rejoined Déroutède, with some bitterness.

"By every means in my power," replied Blakeney, "save the insane. But I will help to get you all out of the demmed hole, when you have failed."

"We'll not fail," asserted the other hotly.

Sir Percy Blakeney went close up to his friend and placed his long, slender hand, with a touch of almost womanly tenderness upon the latter's shoulder.

"Will you tell me your plans?"

In a moment Déroutède was all fire and enthusiasm.

"There are not many of us in it," he began, "although half France will be in sympathy with us. We have plenty of money, of course, and also the necessary disguise for the royal lady."

"Yes?"

"I, in the meanwhile, have asked for and obtained the post of Governor of the Conciergerie; I go into my new quarters to-morrow. In the meanwhile, I am making arrangements for my mother and — and those dependent upon me to quit France immediately."

Blakeney had perceived the slight hesitation when Déroulède mentioned those dependent upon him. He looked scrutinisingly at his friend, who continued quickly:

"I am still very popular among the people. My family can go about unmolested. I must get them out of France, however, in case — in case ..."

"Of course," rejoined the other simply.

"As soon as I am assured that they are safe, my friends and I can prosecute our plans. You see the trial of the Queen has not yet been decided on, but I know that it is in the air. We hope to get her away, disguised in one of the uniforms of the National Guard. As you know, it will be my duty to make the final round every evening in the prison, and to see that everything is safe for the night. Two fellows watch all night, in the room next to that occupied by the Queen. Usually they drink and play cards all night long. I want an opportunity to drug their brandy, and thus to render them more loutish and idiotic than usual; then for a blow on the head that will make them senseless. It should be easy, for I have a strong fist, and after that ..."

"Well? After that, friend?" rejoined Sir Percy earnestly, "after that? Shall I fill in the details of the picture? — the guard twenty-five strong outside the Conciergerie, how will you pass them?"

"I as the Governor, followed by one of my guards ..."

"To go whither?"

"I have the right to come and go as I please."

"I' faith! so you have, but 'one of your guards' — eh? Wrapped to the eyes in a long mantle to hide the female figure beneath. I have been in Paris but a few hours, and yet already I have realised that there is not one demmed citizen within its walls, who does not at this moment suspect some other demmed citizen of conniving at the Queen's escape. Even the sparrows on the house-tops are objects of suspicion. No figure wrapped in a mantle will from this day forth leave Paris unchallenged."

"But you yourself, friend?" suggested Déroulède. "You think you can quit Paris unrecognised — then why not the Queen?"

"Because she is a woman, and has been a queen. She has nerves, poor soul, and weaknesses of body and of mind now. Alas for her! Alas for France! who wreaks such idle vengeance on so poor an enemy? Can you take hold of Marie Antoinette by the shoulders, shove her into the bottom of a cart and pile sacks of potatoes on the top of her? I did that to the Comtesse de Tournai and her daughter, as stiff-necked a pair of French aristocrats as ever deserved the guillotine for their insane prejudices. But can you do it to Marie Antoinette? She'd rebuke you publicly, and betray herself and you in a flash, sooner than submit to a loss of dignity."

"But would you leave her to her fate?"

"Ah! there's the trouble, friend. Do you think you need appeal to the sense of chivalry of my league? We are still twenty strong, and heart and soul in sympathy with your mad schemes. The poor, poor Queen! But you are bound to fail, and then who will help you all, if we too are put out of the way?"

"We should succeed if you helped us. At one time you used proudly to say: 'The League of The Scarlet Pimpernel has never failed.'"

"Because it attempted nothing which it could not accomplish. But, la! since you put me on my mettle — Demm it all! I'll have to think about it!"

And he laughed that funny, somewhat inane laugh of his, which had deceived the clever men of two countries as to his real personality.

Déroulède went up to the heavy oak desk which occupied a conspicuous place in the centre of one of the walls. He unlocked it and drew forth a bundle of papers.

"Will you look through these?" he asked, handing them to Sir Percy Blakeney.

"What are they?"

"Different schemes I have drawn up, in case my original plan should not succeed."

"Burn them, my friend," said Blakeney laconically. "Have you not yet learned the lesson of never putting your hand to paper?"

"I can't burn these. You see, I shall not be able to have long conversations with Marie Antoinette. I must give her my suggestions in writing, that she may study them and not fail me, through lack of knowledge of her part."

"Better than papers in these times, my friend: these papers, if found, would send you, untried, to the guillotine."

"I am careful, and, at present, quite beyond suspicion. Moreover, among the papers is a complete collection of passports, suitable for any character the Queen and her attendant may be forced to assume. It has taken me some months to collect them, so as not to arouse suspicion; I gradually got them together, on one pretence or another: now I am ready for any eventuality ..."

He suddenly paused. A look in his friend's face had given him a swift warning.

He turned, and there in the doorway, holding back the heavy portière, stood Juliette, graceful, smiling, a little pale, this no doubt owing to the flickering light of the unsnuffed candles.

So young and girlish did she look in her soft, white muslin frock that at sight of her the tension in Déroulède's face seemed to relax. Instinctively he had thrown the papers back into the desk, but his look had softened, from the fire of obstinate energy to that of inexpressible tenderness.

Blakeney was quietly watching the young girl as she stood in the doorway, a little bashful and undecided.

"Madame Déroulède sent me," she said hesitatingly, "she says the hour is getting late and she is very anxious. M. Déroulède, would you come and reassure her?"

"In a moment, mademoiselle," he replied lightly, "my friend and I have just finished our talk. May I have the honour to present him? — Sir Percy Blakeney, a traveller from England. Blakeney, this is Mademoiselle Juliette de Marny, my mother's guest."

CHAPTER VII

A warning.

Sir Percy bowed very low, with all the graceful flourish and elaborate gesture the eccentric customs of the time demanded.

He had not said a word, since the first exclamation of warning, with which he had drawn his friend's attention to the young girl in the doorway.

Noiselessly, as she had come, Juliette glided out of the room again, leaving behind her an atmosphere of wild flowers, of the bouquet she had gathered, then scattered in the woods.

There was silence in the room for awhile. Déroulède was locking up his desk and slipping the keys into his pocket.

"Shall we join my mother for a moment, Blakeney?" he said, moving towards the door.

"I shall be proud to pay my respects," replied Sir Percy; "but before we close the subject, I think I'll change my mind about those papers. If I am to be of service to you I think I had best look through them, and give you my opinion of your schemes."

Déroulède looked at him keenly for a moment.

"Certainly," he said at last, going up to his desk. "I'll stay with you whilst you read them through."

"La! not to-night, my friend," said Sir Percy lightly; "the hour is late, and madame is waiting for us. They'll be quite safe with me, and you'll entrust them to my care."

Déroulède seemed to hesitate. Blakeney had spoken in his usual airy manner, and was even now busy readjusting the set of his perfectly-tailored coat.

"Perhaps you cannot quite trust me?" laughed Sir Percy gaily. "I seemed too lukewarm just now."

"No; it's not that, Blakeney!" said Déroulède quietly at last. "There is no mistrust in me, all the mistrust is on your side."

"Faith!—" began Sir Percy.

"Nay! do not explain. I understand and appreciate your friendship, but I should like to convince you how unjust is your mistrust of one of God's purest angels, that ever walked the earth."

"Oho! that's it, is it, friend Déroulède? Methought you had foresworn the sex altogether, and now you are in love."

"Madly, blindly, stupidly in love, my friend," said Déroulède with a sigh. "Hopelessly, I fear me!"

"Why hopelessly?"

"She is the daughter of the late Duc de Marny, one of the oldest names in France; a Royalist to the backbone ..."

"Hence your overwhelming sympathy for the Queen!"

"Nay! you wrong me there, friend. I'd have tried to save the Queen, even if I had never learned to love Juliette. But you see now how unjust were your suspicions."

"Had I any?"

"Don't deny it. You were loud in urging me to burn those papers a moment ago. You called them useless and dangerous and now ..."

"I still think them useless and dangerous, and by reading them would wish to confirm my opinion and give weight to my arguments."

"If I were to part from them now I would seem to be mistrusting her."

"You are a mad idealist, my dear Déroulède!"

"How can I help it? I have lived under the same roof with her for three weeks now. I have begun to understand what a saint is like."

"And 'twill be when you understand that your idol has feet of clay that you'll learn the real lesson of love," said Blakeney earnestly.

"Is it love to worship a saint in heaven, whom you dare not touch, who hovers above you like a cloud, which floats away from you even as you gaze? To love is to feel one being in the world at one with us, our equal in sin as well as in virtue. To love, for us men, is to clasp one woman with our arms, feeling that she lives and breathes just as we do, suffers as we do, thinks with us, loves with us, and, above all, sins with us. Your mock saint who stands in a niche is not a woman if she have not suffered, still less a woman if she have not sinned. Fall at the feet of your idol as you wish, but drag her down to your level after that — the only level she should ever reach, that of your heart."

Who shall render faithfully a true account of the magnetism which poured forth from this remarkable man as he spoke: this well-dressed, foppish apostle of the greatest love that man has ever known. And as he spoke the whole story of his own great, true love for the woman who once had so deeply wronged him seemed to stand clearly written in the strong, lazy, good-humoured, kindly face glowing with tenderness for her.

Déroulède felt this magnetism, and therefore did not resent the implied suggestion, anent the saint whom he was still content to worship.

A dreamer and an idealist, his mind held spellbound by the great social problems which were causing the upheaval of a whole country, he had not yet had the time to learn the sweet lesson which Nature teaches to her elect — the lesson of a great, a true, human and passionate love. To him, at present, Juliette represented the perfect embodiment of his most idealistic dreams. She stood in his mind so far above him that if she proved unattainable, he would scarce have suffered. It was such a foregone conclusion.

Blakeney's words were the first to stir in his heart a desire for something beyond that quasi-mediaeval worship, something weaker and yet infinitely stronger, something more earthy and yet almost divine.

"And now, shall we join the ladies?" said Blakeney after a long pause, during which the mental workings of his alert brain were almost visible, in the earnest look which he cast at his friend. "You shall keep the papers in your desk, give them into the keeping of your saint, trust her all in all rather than not at all, and if the time should come that your heaven-enthroned ideal fall somewhat heavily to earth, then give me the privilege of being a witness to your happiness."

"You are still mistrustful, Blakeney," said Déroulède lightly. "If you say much more I'll give these papers into Mademoiselle Marny's keeping until to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

Anne Mie.

That night, when Blakeney, wrapped in his cloak, was walking down the Rue Ecole de Médecine towards his own lodgings, he suddenly felt a timid hand upon his sleeve.

Anne Mie stood beside him, her pale, melancholy face peeping up at the tall Englishman, through the folds of a dark hood closely tied under her chin.

"Monsieur," she said timidly, "do not think me very presumptuous. I — I would wish to have five minutes' talk with you — may I?"

He looked down with great kindness at the quaint, wizened little figure, and the strong face softened at the sight of the poor, deformed shoulder, the hard, pinched look of the young mouth, the general look of pathetic helplessness which appeals so strongly to the chivalrous.

"Indeed, mademoiselle," he said gently, "you make me very proud; and I can serve you in any way, I pray you command me. But," he added, seeing Anne Mie's somewhat scared look, "this street is scarce fit for private conversation. Shall we try and find a better spot?"

Paris had not yet gone to bed. In these times it was really safest to be out in the open streets. There, everybody was more busy, more on the move, on the lookout for suspected houses, leaving the wanderer alone.

Blakeney led Anne Mie towards the Luxembourg Gardens, the great devastated pleasure-ground of the ci-devant tyrants of the people. The beautiful Anne of Austria, and the Medici before her, Louis XIII, and his gallant musketeers — all have given place to the great cannon-forging industry of this besieged Republic. France, attacked on every side, is forcing her sons to defend her: persecuted, martyred, done to death by her, she is still their Mother: La Patrie, who needs their arms against the foreign foe. England is threatening the north, Prussia and Austria the east. Admiral Hood's flag is flying on Toulon Arsenal.

The siege of the Republic!

And the Republic is fighting for dear life. The Tuileries and Luxembourg Gardens are transformed into a township of gigantic smithies; and Anne Mie, with scared eyes, and clinging to Blakeney's arm, cast furtive, terrified glances at the huge furnaces and the begrimed, darkly scowling faces of the workers within.

"The people of France in arms against tyranny!" Great placards, bearing these inspiring words, are affixed to gallows-shaped posts, and flutter in the evening breeze, rendered scorching by the heat of the furnaces all around.

Farther on, a group of older men, squatting on the ground, are busy making tents, and some women — the same Megaeras who daily shriek round the guillotine — are plying their needles and scissors for the purpose of making clothes for the soldiers.

The soldiers are the entire able-bodied male population of France.

"The people of France in arms against tyranny!"

That is their sign, their trade-mark; one of these placards, fitfully illumined by a torch of resin, towers above a group of children busy tearing up scraps of old linen — their mothers', their sisters' linen — in order to make lint for the wounded.

Loud curses and suppressed mutterings fill the smoke-laden air.

The people of France, in arms against tyranny, is bending its broad back before the most cruel, the most absolute and brutish slave-driving ever exercised over mankind.

Not even mediaeval Christianity has ever dared such wholesale enforcements of its doctrines, as this constitution of Liberty and Fraternity.

Merlin's "Law of the Suspect" has just been formulated. From now onward each and every citizen of France must watch his words, his looks, his gestures, lest they be suspect. Of what — of treason to the Republic, to the people? Nay, worse! lest they be suspect of being suspect to the great era of Liberty.

Therefore in the smithies and among the groups of tent-makers a moment's negligence, a careless attention to the work, might lead to a brief trial on the morrow and the inevitable guillotine. Negligence is treason to the higher interests of the Republic.

Blakeney dragged Anne Mie away from the sight. These roaring furnaces frightened her; he took her down the Place St Michel, towards the river. It was quieter here.

"What dreadful people they have become," she said, shuddering; "even I can remember how different they used to be."

The houses on the banks of the river were mostly converted into hospitals, preparatory for the great siege. Some hundred mètres lower down, the new children's hospital, endowed by Citizen-Deputy Déroulède, loomed, white, clean, and comfortable-looking, amidst its more squalid fellows.

"I think it would be best not to sit down," suggested Blakeney, "and wiser for you to throw your hood away from your face."

He seemed to have no fears for himself; many had said that he bore a charmed life; and yet ever since Admiral Hood had planted his flag on Toulon Arsenal, the English were more feared than ever, and The Scarlet Pimpernel more hated than most.

"You wished to speak to me about Paul Déroulède," he said kindly, seeing that the young girl was making desperate efforts to say what lay on her mind. "He is my friend, you know."

"Yes; that is why I wished to ask you a question," she replied.

"What is it?"

"Who is Juliette de Marny, and why did she seek an entrance into Paul's house?"

"Did she seek it, then?"

"Yes; I saw the scene from the balcony. At the time it did not strike me as a farce. I merely thought that she had been stupid and foolhardy. But since then I have reflected. She provoked the mob of the street, wilfully, just at the very moment when she reached M. Déroulède's door. She meant to appeal to his chivalry, and called for help, well knowing that he would respond."

She spoke rapidly and excitedly now, throwing off all shyness and reserve. Blakeney was forced to check her vehemence, which might have been thought "suspicious" by some idle citizen unpleasantly inclined.

"Well? And now?" he asked, for the young girl had paused, as if ashamed of her excitement.

"And now she stays in the house, on and on, day after day," continued Anne Mie, speaking more quietly, though with no less intensity. "Why does she not go? She is not safe in France. She belongs to the most hated of all the classes — the idle, rich aristocrats of the old régime. Paul has several times suggested plans for her emigration to England. Madame Déroulède, who is an angel, loves her, and would not like to part from her, but it would be obviously wiser for her to go, and yet she stays. Why?"

"Presumably because ..."

"Because she is in love with Paul?" interrupted Anne Mie vehemently. "No, no; she does not love him — at least — Oh! sometimes I don't know. Her eyes light up when he comes, and she is listless when he goes. She always spends a longer time over her toilet, when we expect him home to dinner," she added, with a touch of naïve femininity. "But — if it be love, then that love is strange and unwomanly; it is a love that will not be for his good ..."

"Why should you think that?"

"I don't know," said the girl simply. "Isn't it an instinct?"

"Not a very unerring one in this case, I fear."

"Why?"

"Because your own love for Paul Déroulède has blinded you — Ah! you must pardon me, mademoiselle; you sought this conversation and not I, and I fear me I have wounded you. Yet I would wish you to know how deep is my sympathy with you, and how great my desire to render you a service if I could."

"I was about to ask a service of you, monsieur."

"Then command me, I beg of you."

"You are Paul's friend — persuade him that that woman in his house is a standing danger to his life and liberty."

"He would not listen to me."

"Oh! a man always listens to another."

"Except on one subject — the woman he loves."

He had said the last words very gently but very firmly. He was deeply, tenderly sorry for the poor, deformed, fragile girl, doomed to be a witness of that most heartrending of human tragedies, the passing away of her own scarce-hoped-for happiness. But he felt that at this moment the kindest act would be one of complete truth. He knew that Paul Déroulède's heart was completely given to Juliette de Marny; he too, like Anne Mie, instinctively mistrusted the beautiful girl and her strange, silent ways, but, unlike the poor hunchback, he knew that no sin which Juliette might commit would henceforth tear her from out the heart of his friend; that if, indeed, she turned out to be false, or even treacherous, she would, nevertheless, still hold a place in Déroulède's very soul, which no one else would ever fill.

"You think he loves her?" asked Anne Mie at last.

"I am sure of it."

"And she?"

"Ah! I do not know. I would trust your instinct — a woman's — sooner than my own."

"She is false, I tell you, and is hatching treason against Paul."

"Then all we can do is to wait."

"Wait?"

"And watch carefully, earnestly, all the time. There! shall I pledge you my word that Déroulède shall come to no harm?"

"Pledge me your word that you'll part him from that woman."

"Nay; that is beyond my power. A man like Paul Déroulède only loves once in life, but when he does, it is for always."

Once more she was silent, pressing her lips closely together, as if afraid of what she might say.

He saw that she was bitterly disappointed, and sought for a means of tempering the cruelty of the blow.

"It will be your task to watch over Paul," he said; "with your friendship to guard and protect him, we need have no fear for his safety, I think."

"I will watch," she replied quietly.

Gradually he had led her steps back towards the Rue Ecole de Médecine.

A great melancholy had fallen over his bold, adventurous spirit. How full of tragedies was this great city, in the last throes of its insane and cruel struggle for an unattainable goal. And yet, despite its guillotine and mock trials, its tyrannical laws and overfilled prisons, its very sorrows paled before the dead, dull misery of this deformed girl's heart.

A wild exaltation, a fever of enthusiasm lent glamour to the scenes which were daily enacted on the Place de la Revolution, turning the final acts of the tragedies into glaring, lurid melodrama, almost unreal in its poignant appeal to the sensibilities.

But here there was only this dead, dull misery, an aching heart, a poor, fragile creature in the throes of an agonised struggle for a fast-disappearing happiness.

Anne Mie hardly knew now what she had hoped, when she sought this interview with Sir Percy Blakeney. Drowning in a sea of hopelessness, she had clutched at what might prove a chance of safety. Her reason told her that Paul's friend was right. Déroulède was a man who would love but once in his life. He had never loved — for he had too much pitied — poor, pathetic little Anne Mie.

Nay; why should we say that love and pity are akin?

Love, the great, the strong, the conquering god — Love that subdues a world, and rides roughshod over principle, virtue, tradition, over home, kindred, and religion — what cares he for the easy conquest of the pathetic being, who appeals to his sympathy?

Love means equality — the same height of heroism or of sin. When Love stoops to pity, he has ceased to soar in the boundless space, that rarefied atmosphere wherein man feels himself made at last truly in the image of God.

CHAPTER IX

Jealousy.

At the door of her home Blakeney parted from Anne Mie, with all the courtesy with which he would have bade adieu to the greatest lady in his own land.

Anne Mie let herself into the house with her own latch-key. She closed the heavy door noiselessly, then glided upstairs like a quaint little ghost.

But on the landing above she met Paul Déroulède.

He had just come out of his room, and was still fully dressed.

"Anne Mie!" he said, with such an obvious cry of pleasure, that the young girl, with beating heart, paused a moment on the top of the stairs, as if hoping to hear that cry again, feeling that indeed he was glad to see her, had been uneasy because of her long absence.

"Have I made you anxious?" she asked at last.

"Anxious!" he exclaimed. "Little one, I have hardly lived this last hour, since I realised that you had gone out so late as this, and all alone."

"How did you know?"

"Mademoiselle de Marny knocked at my door an hour ago. She had gone to your room to see you, and, not finding you there, she searched the house for you, and finally, in her anxiety, came to me. We did not dare to tell my mother. I won't ask you where you have been, Anne Mie, but another time, remember, little one, that the streets of Paris are not safe, and that those who love you suffer deeply, when they know you to be in peril."

"Those who love me!" murmured the girl under her breath.

"Could you not have asked me to come with you?"

"No; I wanted to be alone. The streets were quite safe, and — I wanted to speak with Sir Percy Blakeney."

"With Blakeney?" he exclaimed in boundless astonishment. "Why, what in the world did you want to say him?"

The girl, so unaccustomed to lying, had blurted out the truth, almost against her will.

"I thought he could help me, as I was much perturbed and restless."

"You went to him sooner than to me?" said Déroulède in a tone of gentle reproach, and still puzzled at this extraordinary action on the part of the girl, usually so shy and reserved.

"My anxiety was about you, and you would have mocked me for it."

"Indeed, I should never mock you, Anne Mie. But why should you be anxious about me?"

"Because I see you wandering blindly on the brink of a great danger, and because I see you confiding in those, whom you had best mistrust."

He frowned a little, and bit his lip to check the rough word that was on the tip of his tongue.

"Is Sir Percy Blakeney one of those whom I had best mistrust?" he said lightly.

"No," she answered curtly.

"Then, dear, there is no cause for unrest. He is the only one of my friends whom you have not known intimately. All those who are round me now, you know that you can trust and that you can love," he added earnestly and significantly.

He took her hand; it was trembling with obvious suppressed agitation. She knew that he had guessed what was passing in her mind, and now was deeply ashamed of what she had done. She had been tortured with jealousy for the past three weeks, but at least she had suffered quite alone: on one had been allowed to touch that wound, which more often than not, excites derision rather than pity. Now, by her own actions, two men knew her secret. Both were kind and sympathetic; but Déroulède resented her imputations, and Blakeney had been unable to help her.

A wave of morbid introspection swept over her soul. She realised in a moment how petty and base had been her thoughts and how purposeless her actions. She would have given her life at this moment to eradicate from Déroulède's mind the knowledge of her own jealousy; she hoped that at least he had not guessed her love.

She tried to read his thoughts, but in the dark passage, only dimly lighted by the candles in Déroulède's room beyond, she could not see the expression of his face, but the hand which held hers was warm and tender. She felt herself pitied, and blushed at the thought. With a hasty good-night she fled down the passage, and locked herself in her room, alone with her own thoughts at last.

CHAPTER X

Denunciation.

But what of Juliette?

What of this wild, passionate, romantic creature tortured by a Titanic conflict? She, but a girl, scarcely yet a woman, torn by the greatest antagonistic powers that ever fought for a human soul. On the one side duty, tradition, her dead brother, her father — above all, her religion and the oath she had sworn before God; on the other justice and honour, a case of right and wrong, honesty and pity.

How she fought with these powers now!

She fought with them, struggled with them on her knees. She tried to crush memory, tried to forget that awful midnight scene ten years ago, her brother's dead body, her father's avenging hand holding her own, as he begged her to do that, which he was too feeble, too old to accomplish.

His words rang in her ears from across that long vista of the past.

"Before the face of Almighty God, who sees and hears me, I swear ..."

And she had repeated those words loudly and of her own free will, with her hand resting on her brother's breast, and God Himself looking down upon her, for she had called upon Him to listen.

"I swear that I will seek out Paul Déroulède, and in any manner which God may dictate to me encompass his death, his ruin, or dishonour in revenge for my brother's death. May my brother's soul remain in torment until the final Judgment Day if I should break my oath, but may it rest in eternal peace, the day on which his death is fitly avenged."

Almost it seemed to her as if father and brother were standing by her side, as she knelt and prayed. — Oh! how she prayed!

In many ways she was only a child. All her years had been passed in confinement, either beside her dying father or, later, between the four walls of the Ursuline Convent. And during those years her soul had been fed on a contemplative, ecstatic religion, a kind of sanctified superstition, which she would have deemed sacrilege to combat.

Her first step into womanhood was taken with that oath upon her lips; since then, with a stoical sense of duty, she had lashed herself into a daily, hourly remembrance of the great mission imposed upon her.

To have neglected it would have been, to her, equal to denying God.

She had but vague ideas of the doctrinal side of religion. Purgatory was to her merely a word, but a word representing a real spiritual state — one of expectancy, of restlessness, of sorrow. And vaguely, yet determinedly, she believed that her brother's soul suffered, because she had been too weak to fulfil her oath.

The Church had not come to her rescue. The ministers of her religion were scattered to the four corners of besieged, agonising France. She had no one to help her, no one to comfort her. That very peaceful, contemplative life she had led in the convent, only served to enhance her feeling of the solemnity of her mission.

It was true, it was inevitable, because it was so hard.

To the few who, throughout those troublous times, had kept a feeling of veneration for their religion, this religion had become one of abnegation and martyrdom.

A spirit of uncompromising Jansenism seemed to call forth sacrifices and renunciation, whereas the happy-go-lucky Catholicism of the past century had only suggested an easy, flowered path, to a comfortable, well-upholstered heaven.

The harder the task seemed which was set before her, the more real it became to Juliette. God, she firmly believed, had at last, after ten years, shown her the way to wreak vengeance upon her brother's murderer. He had brought her to this house, caused her to see and hear part of the conversation between Blakeney and Déroulède, and this at the moment of all others, when even the semblance of a conspiracy against the Republic would bring the one inevitable result in its train: disgrace first, the hasty mock trial, the hall of justice, and the guillotine.

She tried not to hate Déroulède. She wished to judge him coldly and impartially, or rather to indict him before the throne of God, and to punish him for the crime he had committed ten years ago. Her personal feelings must remain out of the question.

Had Charlotte Corday considered her own sensibilities, when with her own hand she put an end to Marat?

Juliette remained on her knees for hours. She heard Anne Mie come home, and Déroulède's voice of welcome on the landing. This was perhaps the most bitter moment of this awful soul conflict, for it brought to her mind the remembrance of those others who would suffer too, and who were innocent — Madame Déroulède and poor, crippled Anne Mie. They had done no wrong, and yet how heavily would they be punished!

And then the saner judgment, the human, material code of ethics gained for a while the upper hand. Juliette would rise from her knees, dry her eyes, prepare quietly to go to bed, and to forget all about the awful, relentless Fate which dragged her to the fulfilment of its will, and then sink back, broken-hearted, murmuring impassioned prayers for forgiveness to her father, her brother, her God.

The soul was young and ardent, and it fought for abnegation, martyrdom, and stern duty; the body was childlike, and it fought for peace, contentment, and quiet reason.

The rational body was conquered by the passionate, powerful soul.

Blame not the child, for in herself she was innocent. She was but another of the many victims of this cruel, mad, hysterical time, that spirit of relentless tyranny, forcing its doctrines upon the weak.

With the first break of dawn Juliette at last finally rose from her knees, bathed her burning eyes and head, tidied her hair and dress, then she sat down at the table, and began to write.

She was a transformed being now, no longer a child, essentially a woman — a Joan of Arc with a mission, a Charlotte Corday going to martyrdom, a human, suffering, erring soul, committing a great crime for the sake of an idea.

She wrote out carefully and with a steady hand the denunciation of Citizen-Deputy Déroulède which has become an historical document, and is preserved in the chronicles of France.

You have all seen it at the Musée Carnavalet in its glass case, its yellow paper and faded ink revealing nothing of the soul conflict of which it was the culminating victory. The cramped, somewhat schoolgirlish writing is the mute, pathetic witness of one of the saddest tragedies, that era of sorrow and crime has ever known:

To the Representatives of the People now sitting in Assembly at the National Convention

You trust and believe in the Representative of the people: Citizen-Deputy Paul Déroulède. He is false, and a traitor to the Republic. He is planning, and hopes to effect, the release of ci-devant Marie Antoinette, widow of the traitor Louis Capet. Haste! ye representatives of the people! proofs of his assertion, papers and plans, are still in the house of the Citizen-Deputy Déroulède. This statement is made by one who knows.

I. The 23rd Fructidor.

When her letter was written she read it through carefully, made the one or two little corrections, which are still visible in the document, then folded her missive, hid it within the folds of her kerchief, and, wrapping a dark cloak and hood round her, she slipped noiselessly out of her room.

The house was all quiet and still. She shuddered a little as the cool morning air fanned her hot cheeks: it seemed like the breath of ghosts.

She ran quickly down the stairs, and as rapidly as she could, pushed back the heavy bolts of the front door, and slipped out into the street.

Already the city was beginning to stir. There was no time for sleep, when so much had to be done for the safety of the threatened Republic. As Juliette turned her steps towards the river, she met the crowd of workmen, whom France was employing for her defence.

Behind her, in the Luxembourg Gardens, and all along the opposite bank of the river, the furnaces were already ablaze, and the smiths at work forging the guns.

At every step now Juliette came across the great placards, pinned to the tall gallows-shaped posts, which proclaim to every passing citizen, that the people of France are up and in arms.

Right across the Place de l'Institut a procession of market carts, laden with vegetables and a little fruit, wends its way slowly towards the centre of the town. They each carry tiny tricolour flags, with a Pike and Cap of Liberty surmounting the flagstaff.

They are good patriots the market-gardeners, who come in daily to feed the starving mob of Paris, with the few handfuls of watery potatoes, and miserable, vermin-eaten cabbages, which that fraternal Revolution still allows them to grow without hindrance.

Everyone seems busy with their work this early in the morning: the business of killing does not begin until later in the day.

For the moment Juliette can get along quite unmolested: the women and children mostly hurrying on towards the vast encampments in the Tuileries, where lint, and bandages, and coats for the soldiers are manufactured all the day.

The walls of all the houses bear the great patriotic device: "*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, sinon La Mort*"; others are more political in their proclamation: "*La République une et indivisible*."

But on the walls of the Louvre, of the great palace of whilom kings, where the Roi Soleil held his Court, and flirted with the prettiest women in France, there the new and great Republic has affixed its final mandate.

A great poster glued to the wall bears the words: "*La Loi concernant les Suspects*." Below the poster is a huge wooden box with a slit at the top.

This is the latest invention for securing the safety of this one and indivisible Republic.

Henceforth everyone becomes a traitor at one word of denunciation from an idler or an enemy, and, as in the most tyrannical days of the Spanish Inquisition one-half of the nation was set to spy upon the other, that wooden box, with its slit, is put there ready to receive denunciations from one hand against another.

Had Juliette paused but for the fraction of a second, had she stopped to read the placard setting forth this odious law, had she only reflected, then she would even now have turned back, and fled from that gruesome box of infamies, as she would from a dangerous and noisome reptile or from the pestilence.

But her long vigil, her prayers, her ecstatic visions of heroic martyrs had now completely numbed her faculties. Her vitality, her sensibilities were gone: she had become an automaton gliding to her doom, without a thought or a tremor.

She drew the letter from her bosom, and with a steady hand dropped it into the box. The irreclaimable had now occurred. Nothing she could henceforth say or do, no prayers or agonised vigils, no miracles even, could undo her action or save Paul Déroulède from trial and guillotine.

One or two groups of people hurrying to their work had seen her drop the letter into the box. A couple of small children paused, finger in mouth, gazing at her with inane curiosity; one woman uttered a coarse jest, all of them shrugged their shoulders, and passed on, on their way. Those who habitually crossed this spot were used to such sights.

That wooden box, with its mouthlike slit was like an insatiable monster that was constantly fed, yet was still gaping for more.

Having done the deed Juliette turned, and as rapidly as she had come, so she went back to her temporary home.

A home no more now; she must leave it at once, to-day if possible. This much she knew, that she no longer could touch the bread of the man she had betrayed. She would not appear at breakfast, she could plead a headache, and in the afternoon Pétionelle should pack her things.

She turned into a little shop close by, and asked for a glass of milk and a bit of bread. The woman who served her eyed her with some curiosity, for Juliette just now looked almost out of her mind.

She had not yet begun to think, and she had ceased to suffer.

Both would come presently, and with them the memory of this last irretrievable hour and a just estimate of what she had done.

CHAPTER XI

“Vengeance is mine.”

The pretence of a headache enabled Juliette to keep in her room the greater part of the day. She would have liked to shut herself out from the entire world during those hours which she spent face to face with her own thoughts and her own sufferings.

The sight of Anne Mie’s pathetic little face as she brought her food and delicacies and various little comforts, was positive torture to the poor, harrowed soul.

At every sound in the great, silent house she started up, quivering with apprehension and horror. Had the sword of Damocles, which she herself had suspended, already fallen over the heads of those who had shown her nothing but kindness?

She could not think of Madame Déroulède or of Anne Mie without the most agonising, the most torturing shame.

And what of him — the man she had so remorselessly, so ruthlessly betrayed to a tribunal which would know no mercy?

Juliette dared not think of him.

She had never tried to analyse her feelings with regard to him. At the time of Charlotte Corday’s trial, when his sonorous voice rang out in its pathetic appeal for the misguided woman, Juliette had given him ungrudging admiration. She remembered now how strongly his magnetic personality had roused in her a feeling of enthusiasm for the poor girl, who had come from the depths of her quiet provincial home, in order to accomplish the horrible deed which would immortalise her name through all the ages to come, and cause her countrymen to proclaim her “greater than Brutus.”

Déroulède was pleading for the life of that woman, and it was his very appeal which had aroused Juliette’s dormant energy, for the cause which her dead father had enjoined her not to forget. It was Déroulède again whom she had seen but a few weeks ago, standing alone before the mob who would have torn her to pieces, haranguing them on her behalf, speaking to them with that quiet, strong voice of his, ruling them with the rule of love and pity, and turning their wrath to gentleness.

Did she hate him, then?

Surely, surely she hated him for having thrust himself into her life, for having caused her brother’s death and covered her father’s declining years with sorrow. And, above all, she hated him — indeed, indeed it was hate! — for being the cause of this most hideous action of her life: an action to which she had been driven against her will, one of basest ingratitude and treachery, foreign to every sentiment within her heart, cowardly, abject, the unconscious outcome of this strange magnetism which emanated from him and had cast a spell over her, transforming her individuality and will power, and making of her an unconscious and automatic instrument of Fate.

She would not speak of God’s finger again: it was Fate — pagan, devilish Fate! — the weird, shrivelled women who sit and spin their interminable thread. They had decreed; and Juliette, unable to fight, blind and broken by the conflict, had succumbed to the Megaeras and their relentless wheel.

At length silence and loneliness became unendurable. She called Pétronelle, and ordered her to pack her boxes.

“We leave for England to-day,” she said curtly.

“For England?” gasped the worthy old soul, who was feeling very happy and comfortable in this hospitable house, and was loth to leave it. “So soon?”

“Why, yes; we had talked of it for some time. We cannot remain here always. My cousins De Crécy are there, and my aunt De Coudremont. We shall be among friends, Pétronelle, if we ever get there.”

“If we ever get there!” sighed poor Pétronelle; “we have but very little money, *ma chérie*, and no passports. Have you thought of asking M. Déroulède for them?”

“No, no,” rejoined Juliette hastily; “I’ll see to the passports somehow, Pétronelle. Sir Percy Blakeney is English; he’ll tell me what to do.”

“Do you know where he lives, my jewel?”

“Yes; I heard him tell Madame Déroulède last night that he was lodging with a provincial named Brogard at the Sign of the Cruche Cassée. I’ll go seek him, Pétronelle; I am sure he will help me. The English are so resourceful and practical. He’ll get us our passports, I know, and advise us as to the best way to proceed. Do you stay here and get all our things ready. I’ll not be long.”

She took up a cloak and hood, and, throwing them over her arm, she slipped out of the room.

Déroulède had left the house earlier in the day. She hoped that he had not yet returned, and ran down the stairs quickly, so that she might go out unperceived.

The house was quite peaceful and still. It seemed strange to Juliette that there did not hang over it some sort of pall-like presentiment of coming evil.

From the kitchen, at some little distance from the hall, Anne Mie’s voice was heard singing an old ditty:

“De ta tige détachée

Pauvre feuille desséchée

Où vas-tu?”

Juliette paused a moment. An awful ache had seized her heart; her eyes unconsciously filled with tears, as they roamed round the walls of this house which had sheltered her so hospitably, these three weeks past.

And now whither was she going? Like the poor, dead leaf of the song, she was wastrel, torn from the parent bough, homeless, friendless, having turned against the one hand which, in this great time of peril, had been extended to her in kindness and in love.

Conscience was beginning to rise up against her, and that hydra-headed tyrant Remorse. She closed her eyes to shut out the hideous vision of her crime; she tried to forget this home which her treachery had desecrated.

“Je vais où va toute chose

Où va la feuille de rose

Et la feuille de laurier,”

sang Anne Mie plaintively.

A great sob broke from Juliette’s aching heart. The misery of it all was more than she could bear. Ah, pity her if you can! She had fought and striven, and been conquered. A girl’s soul is so young, so impressionable; and she had grown up with that one, awful, all-pervading idea of duty to accomplish, a most solemn oath to fulfil, one sworn to her dying father, and on the dead body of her brother. She had begged for guidance, prayed for release, and the voice from above had remained silent. Weak, miserable, cringing, the human soul, when torn with earthly passion, must look at its own strength for the fight.

And now the end had come. That swift, scarce tangible dream of peace, which had flitted through her mind during the past few weeks, had vanished with the dawn, and she was left desolate, alone with her great sin and its lifelong expiation.

Scarce knowing what she did, she fell on her knees, there on that threshold, which she was about to leave for ever. Fate had placed on her young shoulders a burden too heavy for her to bear.

“Juliette!”

At first she did not move. It was his voice coming from the study behind her. Its magic thrilled her, as it had done that day in the Hall of Justice. Strong, passionate, tender, it seemed now to raise every echo of response in her heart. She thought it was a dream, and remained there on her knees lest it should be dispelled.

Then she heard his footsteps on the flagstones of the hall. Anne Mie’s plaintive singing had died away in the distance. She started, and jumped to her feet, hastily drying her eyes. The momentary dream was dispelled, and she was ashamed of her weakness.

He, the cause of all her sorrows, of her sin, and of her degradation, had no right to see her suffer.

She would have fled out of the house now, but it was too late. He had come out of his study, and, seeing her there on her knees weeping, he came quickly forward, trying, with all the innate chivalry of his upright nature, not to let her see that he had been a witness to her tears.

“You are going out, mademoiselle?” he said courteously, as, wrapping her cloak around her, she was turning towards the door.

“Yes, yes,” she replied hastily; “a small errand, I ...”

“Is it anything I can do for you?”

“No.”

“If ...” he added, with visible embarrassment, “if your errand would brook a delay, might I crave the honour of your presence in my study for a few moments?”

“My errand brooks of no delay, Citizen Déroulède,” she said as composedly as she could, “and perhaps on my return I might ...”

“I am leaving almost directly, mademoiselle, and I would wish to bid you good-bye.”

He stood aside to allow her to pass, either out, through the street door or across the hall to his study.

There had been no reproach in his voice towards the guest, who was thus leaving him without a word of farewell. Perhaps if there had been any, Juliette would have rebelled. As it was, an unconquerable magnetism seemed to draw her towards him, and, making an almost imperceptible sign of acquiescence, she glided past him into his room.

The study was dark and cool; for the room faced the west, and the shutters had been closed, in order to keep out the hot August sun. At first Juliette could see nothing, but she felt his presence near her, as he followed her into the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

“It is kind of you, mademoiselle,” he said gently, “to accede to my request, which was perhaps presumptuous. But, you see, I am leaving this house to-day, and I had a selfish longing to hear your voice bidding me farewell.”

Juliette’s large, burning eyes were gradually piercing the semi-gloom around her. She could see him distinctly now, standing close beside her, in an attitude of the deepest, almost reverential respect.

The study was as usual neat and tidy, denoting the orderly habits of a man of action and energy. On the ground there was a valise, ready strapped as if for a journey, and on the top of it a bulky letter-case of stout pigskin, secured with a small steel lock. Juliette’s eyes fastened upon this case with a look of fascination and of horror. Obviously it contained Déroulède’s papers, the plans for Marie Antoinette’s escape, the passports of which he had spoken the day before to his friend, Sir Percy Blakeney — the proofs, in fact, which she had offered to the representatives of the people, in support of her denunciation of the Citizen-Deputy.

After his request he had said nothing more. He was waiting for her to speak; but her voice felt parched; it seemed to her as if hands of steel were gripping her throat, smothering the words she would have longed to speak.

“Will you not wish me godspeed, mademoiselle?” he repeated gently.

“Godspeed?” Oh! the awful irony of it all! Should God speed him to a mock trial and to the guillotine? He was going thither, though he did not know it, and was even now trying to take the hand which had deliberately sent him there.

At last she made an effort to speak, and in a toneless, even voice she contrived to murmur:

“You are not going for long, Citizen-Deputy?”

“In these times, mademoiselle,” he replied, “any farewell might be for ever. But I am actually going for a month to the Conciergerie, to take charge of the unfortunate prisoner there.”

“For a month!” she repeated mechanically.

“Oh yes!” he said, with a smile. “You see, our present Government is afraid that poor Marie Antoinette will exercise her fascinations over any lieutenant-governor of her prison, if he remain near her long enough, so a new one is appointed every month. I shall be in charge during this coming Vendémiaire. I shall hope to return before the equinox, but — who can tell?”

"In any case then, Citoyen Déroulède, the farewell I bid you to-night will be a very long one."

"A month will seem a century to me," he said earnestly, "since I must spend it without seeing you, but ..."

He looked long and searchingly at her. He did not understand her in her present mood, so scared and wild did she seem, so unlike that girlish, light-hearted self, which had made the dull old house so bright these past few weeks.

"But I should not dare to hope," he murmured, "that a similar reason would cause you to call that month a long one."

She turned perhaps a trifle paler than she had been hitherto, and her eyes roamed round the room like those of a trapped hare seeking to escape.

"You misunderstand me, Citoyen Déroulède," she said at last hurriedly. "You have all been kind — very kind — but Pétronelle and I can no longer trespass on your hospitality. We have friends in England, and many enemies here ..."

"I know," he interrupted quietly; "it would be the most arrant selfishness on my part to suggest, that you should stay here an hour longer than necessary. I fear that after to-day my roof may no longer prove a sheltering one for you. But will you allow me to arrange for your safety, as I am arranging for that of my mother and Anne Mie? My English friend Sir Percy Blakeney, has a yacht in readiness off the Normandy coast. I have already seen to your passports and to all the arrangements of your journey as far as there, and Sir Percy, or one of his friends, will see you safely on board the English yacht. He has given me his promise that he will do this, and I trust him as I would myself. For the journey through France, my name is a sufficient guarantee that you will be unmolested; and if you will allow it, my mother and Anne Mie will travel in your company. Then ..."

"I pray you stop, Citizen Déroulède," she suddenly interrupted excitedly. "You must forgive me, but I cannot allow thus to make any arrangements for me. Pétronelle and I must do as best we can. All your time and trouble should be spent for the benefit of those who have a claim upon you, whilst I ..."

"You speak unkindly, mademoiselle; there is no question of claim."

"And you have no right to think ..." she continued, with a growing, nervous excitement, drawing her hand hurriedly away, for he had tried to seize it.

"Ah! pardon me," he interrupted earnestly, "there you are wrong. I have the right to think of you and for you — the inalienable right conferred upon me by my great love for you."

"Citizen-Deputy!"

"Nay, Juliette; I know my folly, and I know my presumption. I know the pride of your caste and of your party, and how much you despise the partisan of the squalid mob of France. Have I said that I aspired to gain your love? I wonder if I have ever dreamed it? I only know, Juliette, that you are to me something akin to the angels, something white and ethereal, intangible, and perhaps ununderstandable. Yet, knowing my folly, I glory in it, my dear, and I would not let you go out of my life without telling you of that, which has made every hour of the past few weeks a paradise for me — my love for you, Juliette."

He spoke in that low, impressive voice of his, and with those soft, appealing tones with which she had once heard him pleading for poor Charlotte Corday. Yet now he was not pleading for himself, not for his selfish wish or for his own happiness, only pleading for his love, that she should know of it, and, knowing it, have pity in her heart for him, and let him serve her to the end.

He did not say anything more for a while; he had taken her hand, which she no longer withdrew from him, for there was sweet pleasure in feeling his strong fingers close tremblingly over hers. He pressed his lips upon her hand, upon the soft palm and delicate wrist, his burning kisses bearing witness to the tumultuous passion, which his reverence for her was holding in check.

She tried to tear herself away from him, but he would not let her go:

"Do not go away just yet, Juliette," he pleaded. "Think! I may never see you again; but when you are far from me — in England, perhaps — amongst your own kith and kin, will you try sometimes to think kindly of one who so wildly, so madly worships you?"

She would have stilled, as she could, the beating of her heart, which went out to him at last with all the passionate intensity of her great, pent-up love. Every word he spoke had its echo within her very soul, and she tried not to hear his tender appeal, not to see his dark head bending in worship before her. She tried to forget his presence, not to know that he was there — he, the man whom she had betrayed to serve her own miserable vengeance, whom in her mad, exalted rage she had thought that she hated, but whom she now knew that she loved better than her life, better than her soul, her traditions, or her oath.

Now, at this moment, she made every effort to conjure up the vision of her brother brought home dead upon a stretcher, of her father's declining years, rendered hideous by the mind unhinged through the great sorrow.

She tried to think of the avenging finger of God pointing the way to the fulfilment of her oath, and called to Him to stand by her in this terrible agony of her soul.

And God spoke to her at last; through the eternal vistas of boundless universe, from that heaven which had known no pity, His voice came to her now, clear, awesome, and implacable:

"Vengeance is mine! I will repay!"

CHAPTER XII

The sword of Damocles.

“In the name of the Republic!”

Absorbed in his thoughts, his dreams, his present happiness, Déroulède had heard nothing of what was going on in the house, during the past few seconds.

At first, to Anne Mie, who was still singing her melancholy ditty over her work in the kitchen, there had seemed nothing unusual in the peremptory ring at the front-door bell. She pulled down her sleeves over her thin arms, smoothed down her cooking apron, then only did she run to see who the visitor might be.

As soon as she had opened the door, however, she understood.

Five men were standing before her, four of whom wore the uniform of the National Guard, and the fifth, the tricolour scarf fringed with gold, which denoted service under the Convention.

This man seemed to be in command of the others, and he immediately stepped into the hall, followed by his four companions, who at a sign from him, effectively cut off Anne Mie from what had been her imminent purpose — namely, to run to the study and warn Déroulède of his danger.

That it was danger of the most certain, the most deadly kind she never doubted for one moment. Even had her instinct not warned her, she would have guessed. One glance at the five men had sufficed to tell her: their attitude, their curt word of command, their air of authority as they crossed the hall — everything revealed the purpose of their visit: a domiciliary search in the house of Citizen-Deputy Déroulède.

Merlin’s Law of the Suspect was in full operation. Someone had denounced the Citizen-Deputy to the Committee of Public Safety; and in this year of grace, 1793, and I. of the Revolution, men and women were daily sent to the guillotine on suspicion.

Anne Mie would have screamed, had she dared, but instinct such as hers was far too keen, to betray her into so injudicious an act. She felt that, were Paul Déroulède’s eyes upon her at this moment, he would wish her to remain calm and outwardly serene.

The foremost man — he with the tricolour scarf — had already crossed the hall, and was standing outside the study door. It was his word of command which first roused Déroulède from his dream:

“In the name of the Republic!”

Déroulède did not immediately drop the small hand, which a moment ago he had been covering with kisses. He held it to his lips once more, very gently, lingering over this last fond caress, as if over an eternal farewell, then he straightened out his broad, well-knit figure, and turned to the door.

He was very pale, but there was neither fear nor even surprise expressed in his earnest, deep-set eyes. They still seemed to be looking afar, gazing upon a heaven-born vision, which the touch of her hand and the avowal of his love had conjured up before him.

“In the name of the Republic!”

Once more, for the third time — according to custom — the words rang out, clear, distinct, peremptory.

In that one fraction of a second, whilst those six words were spoken, Déroulède’s eyes wandered swiftly towards the heavy letter-case, which now held his condemnation, and a wild, mad thought — the mere animal desire to escape from danger — surged up in his brain.

The plans for the escape of Marie Antoinette, the various passports, worded in accordance with the possible disguises the unfortunate Queen might assume — all these papers were more than sufficient proof of what would be termed his treason against the Republic.

He could already hear the indictment against him, could see the filthy mob of Paris dancing a wild saraband round the tumbril, which bore him towards the guillotine; he could hear their yells of execration, could feel the insults hurled against him, by those who had most admired, most envied him. And from all this he would have escaped if he could, if it had not been too late.

It was but a second, or less, whilst the words were spoken outside his door, and whilst all other thoughts in him were absorbed in this one mad desire for escape. He even made a movement, as if to snatch up the letter-case and to hide it about his person. But it was heavy and bulky; it would be sure to attract attention, and might bring upon him the additional indignity of being forced to submit to a personal search.

He caught Juliette’s eyes fixed upon him with an intensity of gaze which, in that same one mad moment, revealed to him the depths of her love. Then the second’s weakness was gone; he was once more quiet, firm, the man of action, accustomed to meet danger boldly, to rule and to subdue the most turgid mob.

With a quiet shrug of the shoulders, he dismissed all thought of the compromising lettercase, and went to the door.

Already, as no reply had come to the third word of command, it had been thrown open from outside, and Déroulède found himself face to face with the five men.

“Citizen Merlin!” he said quietly, as he recognised the foremost among them.

“Himself, Citizen-Deputy,” rejoined the latter, with a sneer, “at your service.”

Anne Mie, in a remote corner of the hall, had heard the name, and felt her very soul sicken at its sound.

Merlin! Author of that infamous Law of the Suspect which had set man against man, a father against his son, brother against brother, and friend against friend, had made of every human creature a bloodhound on the track of his fellowmen, dogging in order not to be dogged, denouncing, spying, hounding, in order not to be denounced.

And he, Merlin, gloried in this, the most fiendishly evil law ever perpetrated for the degradation of the human race.

There is that sketch of him in the Musée Carnavalet, drawn just before he, in his turn, went to expiate his crimes on that very guillotine, which he had sharpened and wielded so powerfully against his fellows. The artist has well caught the slouchy, slovenly look of his loosely knit figure, his long limbs and narrow head, with the snakelike eyes and slightly receding chin. Like Marat, his model

and prototype, Merlin affected dirty, ragged clothes. The real Sansculottism, the downward levelling of his fellowmen to the lowest rung of the social ladder, pervaded every action of this noted product of the great Revolution.

Even Déroulède, whose entire soul was filled with a great, all-understanding pity for the weaknesses of mankind, recoiled at sight of this incarnation of the spirit of squalor and degradation, of all that was left of the noble Utopian theories of the makers of the Revolution.

Merlin grinned when he saw Déroulède standing there, calm, impassive, well dressed, as if prepared to receive an honoured guest, rather than a summons to submit to the greatest indignity a proud man has ever been called upon to suffer.

Merlin had always hated the popular Citizen-Deputy. Friend and boon-companion of Marat and his gang, he had for over two years now exerted all the influence he possessed in order to bring Déroulède under a cloud of suspicion.

But Déroulède had the ear of the populace. No one understood as he did the tone of a Paris mob; and the National Convention, ever terrified of the volcano it had kindled, felt that a popular member of its assembly was more useful alive than dead.

But now at last Merlin was having his way. An anonymous denunciation against Déroulède had reached the Public Prosecutor that day. Tinville and Merlin were the fastest of friends, so the latter easily obtained the privilege of being the first to proclaim to his hated enemy, the news of his downfall.

He stood facing Déroulède for a moment, enjoying the present situation to its full. The light from the vast hall struck full upon the powerful figure of the Citizen-Deputy and upon his firm, dark face and magnetic, restless eyes. Behind him the study, with its closely-drawn shutters, appeared wrapped in gloom.

Merlin turned to his men, and, still delighted with his position of a cat playing with a mouse, he pointed to Déroulède, with a smile and a shrug of the shoulders.

“*Voyez-moi donc ça*,” he said, with a coarse jest, and expectorating contemptuously upon the floor, “the aristocrat seems not to understand that we are here in the name of the Republic. There is a very good proverb, Citizen-Deputy,” he added, once more addressing Déroulède, “which you seem to have forgotten, and that is that the pitcher which goes too often to the well breaks at last. You have conspired against the liberties of the people for the past ten years. Retribution has come to you at last; the people of France have come to their senses. The National Convention wants to know what treason you are hatching between these four walls, and it has deputed me to find out all there is to know.”

“At your service, Citizen-Deputy!” said Déroulède, quietly stepping aside, in order to make way for Merlin and his men.

Resistance was useless, and, like all strong, determined natures, he knew when it was best to give in.

During this while, Juliette had neither moved nor uttered a sound. Little more than a minute had elapsed since the moment when the first peremptory order, to open in the name of the Republic, had sounded like the tocsin through the stillness of the house. Déroulède’s kisses were still hot upon her hand, his words of love were still ringing in her ears.

And now this awful, deadly peril, which she with her own hand had brought on the man she loved!

If in one moment’s anguish the soul be allowed to expiate a lifelong sin, then indeed did Juliette atone during this one terrible second.

Her conscience, her heart, her entire being rose in revolt against her crime. Her oath, her life, her final denunciation appeared before her in all their hideousness.

And now it was too late.

Déroulède stood facing Merlin, his most implacable enemy. The latter was giving orders to his men, preparatory to searching the house, and there, just on the top of the valise, lay the letter-case, obviously containing those papers, to which the day before she had overheard Déroulède making allusion, whilst he spoke to his friend, Sir Percy Blakeney.

An unexplainable instinct seemed to tell her that the papers were in that case. Her eyes were riveted on it, as if fascinated. An awful terror held her enthralled for one second more, whilst her thoughts, her longings, her desires were all centred on the safety of that one thing.

The next instant she had seized it and thrown it upon the sofa. Then seating herself beside it, with the gesture of a queen and the grace of a Parisienne, she had spread the ample folds of her skirts over the compromising case, hiding it entirely from view.

Merlin in the hall was ordering two men to stand one on each side of Déroulède, and two more to follow him into the room. Now he entered it himself, his narrow eyes trying to pierce the semi-obscurity, which was rendered more palpable by the brilliant light in the hall.

He had not seen Juliette’s gesture, but he had heard the *frou-frou* of her skirts, as she seated herself upon the sofa.

“You are not alone Citizen-Deputy, I see,” he said, with a sneer, as his snakelike eyes lighted upon the young girl.

“My guest, Citizen Merlin,” replied Déroulède as calmly as he could— “Citizen Juliette Marny. I know that it is useless, under these circumstances, to ask for consideration for a woman, but I pray you to remember, as far as is possible, that although we are all Republicans, we are also Frenchmen, and all still equal in our sentiment of chivalry towards our mothers, our sisters, or our guests.”

Merlin chuckled, and gazed for a moment ironically at Juliette. He had held, between his talon-like fingers, that very morning, a thin scrap of paper, on which a schoolgirlish hand had scrawled the denunciation against Citizen-Deputy Déroulède.

Coarse in nature, and still coarser in thoughts, this representative of the people had very quickly arrived at a conclusion in his mind, with regard to this so-called guest in the Déroulède household.

“A discarded mistress,” he muttered to himself. “Just had another scene, I suppose. He’s got tired of her, and she’s given him away out of spite.”

Satisfied with this explanation of the situation, he was quite inclined to be amiable to Juliette. Moreover, he had caught sight of the valise, and almost thought that the young girl’s eyes had directed his attention towards it.

“Open those shutters!” he commanded, “this place is like a vault.”

One of the men obeyed immediately, and as the brilliant August sun came streaming into the room, Merlin once more turned to Déroulède.

"Information has been laid against you, Citizen-Deputy," he said, "by an anonymous writer, who states that you have just now in your possession correspondence or other papers intended for the Widow Capet: and the Committee of Public Safety has entrusted me and these citizens to seize such correspondence, and make you answerable for its presence in your house."

Déroulède hesitated for one brief fraction of a second. As soon as the shutters had been opened, and the room flooded in daylight, he had at once perceived that his letter-case had disappeared, and guessed, from Juliette's attitude upon the sofa, that she had concealed it about her person. It was this which caused him to hesitate.

His heart was filled with boundless gratitude to her for her noble effort to save him, but he would have given his life at this moment, to undo what she had done.

The Terrorists were no respecters of persons or of sex. A domiciliary search order, in those days, conferred full powers on those in authority, and Juliette might at any moment now be peremptorily ordered to rise. Through her action she had made herself one with the Citizen-Deputy; if the case were found under the folds of her skirts, she would be accused of connivance, or at any rate of the equally grave charge of shielding a traitor.

The manly pride in him rebelled at the thought of owing his immediate safety to a woman, yet he could not now discard her help, without compromising her irretrievably.

He dared not even to look again towards her, for he felt that at this moment her life as well as his own lay in the quiver of an eyelid; and Merlin's keen, narrow eyes were fixed upon him in eager search for a tremor, a flash, which might betray fear or prove an admission of guilt.

Juliette sat there, calm, impassive, disdainful, and she seemed to Déroulède more angelic, more unattainable even than before. He could have worshipped her for her heroism, her resourcefulness, her quiet aloofness from all these coarse creatures who filled the room with the odour of their dirty clothes, with their rough jests, and their noisome suggestions.

"Well, Citizen-Deputy," sneered Merlin after a while, "you do not reply, I notice."

"The insinuation is unworthy of a reply, citizen," replied Déroulède quietly; "my services to the Republic are well known. I should have thought that the Committee of Public Safety would disdain an anonymous denunciation against a faithful servant of the people of France."

"The Committee of Public Safety knows its own business best, Citizen-Deputy," rejoined Merlin roughly. "If the accusation prove a calumny, so much the better for you. I presume," he added with a sneer, "that you do not propose to offer any resistance whilst these citizens and I search your house."

Without another word Déroulède handed a bunch of keys to the man by his side. Every kind of opposition, argument even, would be worse than useless.

Merlin had ordered the valise and desk to be searched, and two men were busy turning out the contents of both on to the floor. But the desk now only contained a few private household accounts, and notes for the various speeches which Déroulède had at various times delivered in the assemblies of the National Convention. Among these, a few pencil jottings for his great defence of Charlotte Corday were eagerly seized upon by Merlin, and his grimy, clawlike hands fastened upon this scrap of paper, as upon a welcome prey.

But there was nothing else of any importance. Déroulède was a man of thought and of action, with all the enthusiasm of real conviction, but none of the carelessness of a fanatic. The papers which were contained in the letter-case, and which he was taking with him to the Conciergerie, he considered were necessary to the success of his plans, otherwise he never would have kept them, and they were the only proofs that could be brought up against him.

The valise itself was only packed with the few necessities for a month's sojourn at the Conciergerie; and the men, under Merlin's guidance, were vainly trying to find something, anything that might be construed into treasonable correspondence with the unfortunate prisoner there.

Merlin, whilst his men were busy with the search, was sprawling in one of the big leather-covered chairs, on the arms of which his dirty finger-nails were beating an impatient devil's tattoo. He was at no pains to conceal the intense disappointment which he would experience, were his errand to prove fruitless.

His narrow eyes every now and then wandered towards Juliette, as if asking for her help and guidance. She, understanding his frame of mind, responded to the look. Shutting her mentality off from the coarse suggestion of his attitude towards her, she played her part with cunning, and without flinching. With a glance here and there, she directed the men in their search. Déroulède himself could scarcely refrain from looking at her; he was puzzled, and vaguely marvelled at the perfection, with which she carried through her rôle to the end.

Merlin found himself baffled.

He knew quite well that Citizen-Deputy Déroulède was not a man to be lightly dealt with. No mere suspicion or anonymous denunciation would be sufficient in his case, to bring him before the tribunal of the Revolution. Unless there were proofs — positive, irrefutable, damnable proofs — of Paul Déroulède's treachery, the Public Prosecutor would never dare to frame an indictment against him. The mob of Paris would rise to defend its idol; the hideous hags, who plied their knitting at the foot of the scaffold, would tear the guillotine down, before they would allow Déroulède to mount it.

This was Déroulède's stronghold: the people of Paris, whom he had loved through all their infamies, and whom he had succoured and helped in their private need; and above all the women of Paris, whose children he had caused to be tended in the hospitals which he had built for them — this they had not yet forgotten, and Merlin knew it. One day they would forget — soon, perhaps — then they would turn on their former idol, and, howling, send him to his death, amidst cries of rancour and execration. When that day came there would be no need to worry about treason or about proofs. When the populace had forgotten all that he had done, then Déroulède would fall.

But that time was not yet.

The men had finished ransacking the room; every scrap of paper, every portable article had been eagerly seized upon.

Merlin, half blind with fury, had jumped to his feet.

"Search him!" he ordered peremptorily.

Déroulède set his teeth, and made no protest, calling up every fibre of moral strength within him, to aid him in submitting to this indignity. At a coarse jest from Merlin, he buried his nails into the palms of his hand, not to strike the foulmouthed creature in the face. But he submitted, and stood impassive by, whilst the pockets of his coat were turned inside out by the rough hands of the soldiers.

All the while Juliette had remained silent, watching Merlin as any hawk would its prey. But the Terrorist, through the very coarseness of his nature, was in this case completely fooled.

He knew that it was Juliette who had denounced Déroulède, and had satisfied himself as to her motive. Because he was low and brutish and degraded, he never once suspected the truth, never saw in that beautiful young woman, anything of the double nature within her, of that curious, self-torturing, at times morbid sense of religion and of duty, at war with her own upright, innately healthy disposition.

The low-born, self-degraded Terrorist had put his own construction on Juliette's action, and with this he was satisfied, since it answered to his own estimate of the human race, the race which he was doing his best to bring down to the level of the beast.

Therefore Merlin did not interfere with Juliette, but contented himself with insinuating, by jest and action, what her share in this day's work had been. To these hints Déroulède, of course, paid no heed. For him Juliette was as far above political intrigue as the angels. He would as soon have suspected one of the saints enshrined in Notre Dame as this beautiful, almost ethereal creature, who had been sent by Heaven to gladden his heart and to elevate his very thought.

But Juliette understood Merlin's attitude, and guessed that her written denunciation had come into his hands. Her every thought, every living sensation within her, was centred in this one thing: to save the man she loved from the consequences of her own crime against him. And for this, even the shadow of suspicion must be removed from him. Merlin's iniquitous law should not touch him again.

When Déroulède at last had been released, after the outrage to which he had been personally subjected, Merlin was literally, and figuratively too, looking about him for an issue to his present dubious position.

Judging others by his own standard of conduct, he feared now that the popular Citizen-Deputy would incite the mob against him, in revenge for the indignities which he had had to suffer. And with it all the Terrorist was convinced that Déroulède was guilty, that proofs of his treason did exist, if only he knew where to lay hands on them.

He turned to Juliette with an unexpressed query in his adder-like eyes. She shrugged her shoulders, and made a gesture as if pointing towards the door.

"There are other rooms in the house besides this," her gesture seemed to say; "try them. The proofs are there, 'tis for you to find them."

Merlin had been standing between her and Déroulède, so that the latter saw neither query nor reply.

"You are cunning, Citizen-Deputy," said Merlin now, turning towards him, "and no doubt you have been at pains to put your treasonable correspondence out of the way. You must understand that the Committee of Public Safety will not be satisfied with a mere examination of your study," he added, assuming an air of ironical benevolence, "and I presume you will have no objection, if I and these citizen soldiers pay a visit to other portions of your house."

"As you please," responded Déroulède drily.

"You will accompany us, Citizen-Deputy," commanded the other curtly.

The four men of the National Guard formed themselves into line outside the study door; with a peremptory nod, Merlin ordered Déroulède to pass between them, then he too prepared to follow. At the door he turned, and once more faced Juliette.

"As for you, citizeness," he said, with a sudden access of viciousness against her, "if you have brought us here on a fool's errand, it will go ill with you, remember. Do not leave the house until our return. I may have some questions to put to you."

CHAPTER XIII

Tangled meshes.

Juliette waited a moment or two, until the footsteps of the six men died away up the massive oak stairs.

For the first time, since the sword of Damocles had fallen, she was alone with her thoughts.

She had but a few moments at her command in which to devise an issue out of these tangled meshes, which she had woven round the man she loved.

Merlin and his men would return anon. The comedy could not be kept up through another visit from them, and while the compromising letter-case remained in Déroutède's private study he was in imminent danger at the hands of his enemy.

She thought for a moment of concealing the case about her person, but a second's reflection showed her the futility of such a move. She had not seen the papers themselves; any one of them might be an absolute proof of Déroutède's guilt; the correspondence might be in his handwriting.

If Merlin, furious, baffled, vicious, were to order her to be searched! The horror of the indignity made her shudder, but she would have submitted to that, if thereby she could have saved Déroutède. But of this she could not be sure until after she had looked through the papers, and this she had not the time to do.

Her first and greatest idea was to get out of this room, his private study, with the compromising papers. Not a trace of them must be found here, if he were to remain beyond suspicion.

She rose from the sofa, and peeped through the door. The hall was now deserted; from the left wing of the house, on the floor above, the heavy footsteps of the soldiers and Merlin's occasional brutish laugh could be distinctly heard.

Juliette listened for a moment, trying to understand what was happening. Yes; they had all gone to Déroutède's bedroom, which was on the extreme left, at the end of the first-floor landing. There might be just time to accomplish what she had now resolved to do.

As best she could, she hid the bulky leather case in the folds of her skirt. It was literally neck or nothing now. If she were caught on the stairs by one of the men nothing could save her or — possibly — Déroutède.

At any rate, by remaining where she was, by leaving the events to shape themselves, discovery was absolutely certain. She chose to take the risk.

She slipped noiselessly out of the room and up the great oak stairs. Merlin and his men, busy with their search in Déroutède's bedroom, took no heed of what was going on behind them; Juliette arrived on the landing, and turned sharply to her right, running noiselessly along the thick Aubusson carpet, and thence quickly to her own room.

All this had taken less than a minute to accomplish. The very next moment she heard Merlin's voice ordering one of his men to stand at attention on the landing, but by that time she was safe inside her room. She closed the door noiselessly.

Pétronelle, who had been busy all the afternoon packing up her young mistress' things, had fallen asleep in an arm-chair. Unconscious of the terrible events which were rapidly succeeding each other in the house, the worthy old soul was snoring peaceably, with her hands complacently folded on her ample bosom.

Juliette, for the moment, took no notice of her. As quickly and as dexterously as she could, she was tearing open the heavy leather case with a sharp pair of scissors, and very soon its contents were scattered before her on the table.

One glance at them was sufficient to convince her that most of the papers would undoubtedly, if found, send Déroutède to the guillotine. Most of the correspondence was in the Citizen-Deputy's handwriting. She had, of course, no time to examine it more closely, but instinct naturally told her that it was of a highly compromising character.

She gathered the papers up into a heap, tearing some of them up into strips; then she spread them out upon the ash-pan in front of the large earthenware stove, which stood in a corner of the room.

Unfortunately, this was a hot day in August. Her task would have been far easier if she had wished to destroy a bundle of papers in the depth of winter, when there was a good fire burning in the stove.

But her purpose was firm and her incentive, the greatest that has ever spurred mankind to heroism.

Regardless of any consequences to herself, she had but the one object in view, to save Déroutède at all costs.

On the wall facing her bed, and immediately above a velvet-covered prie-dieu, there was a small figure of the Virgin and Child — one of those quaintly pretty devices for holding holy water, which the reverent superstition of the past century rendered a necessary adjunct of every girl's room.

In front of the figure a small lamp was kept perpetually burning. This Juliette now took between her fingers, carefully, lest the tiny flame should die out. First she poured the oil over the fragments of paper in the ash-pan, then with the wick she set fire to the whole compromising correspondence.

The oil helped the paper to burn quickly; the smell, or perhaps the presence of Juliette in the room caused worthy old Pétronelle to wake.

"It's nothing, Pétronelle," said Juliette quietly; "only a few old letters I am burning. But I want to be alone for a few moments — will you go down to the kitchen until I call you?"

Accustomed to do as her young mistress commanded, Pétronelle rose without a word.

"I have finished putting away your few things, my jewel. There, there! why didn't you tell me to burn your papers for you? You have soiled your dear hands, and ..."

"Sh! Sh! Pétronelle!" said Juliette impatiently, and gently pushing the garrulous old woman towards the door. "Run to the kitchen now quickly, and don't come out of it until I call you. And, Pétronelle," she added, "you will see soldiers about the house perhaps."

"Soldiers! The good God have mercy!"

"Don't be frightened, Pétronelle. But they may ask you questions."

"Questions?"

“Yes; about me.”

“My treasure, my jewel,” exclaimed Pétronelle in alarm, “have those devils ...?”

“No, no; nothing has happened as yet, but, you know, in these times there is always danger.”

“Good God! Holy Mary! Mother of God!”

“Nothing ‘ll happen if you try to keep quite calm and do exactly as I tell you. Go to the kitchen, and wait there until I call you. If the soldiers come in and question you, if they try to frighten you, remember that we have nothing to fear from men, and that our lives are in God’s keeping.”

All the while that Juliette spoke, she was watching the heap of paper being gradually reduced to ashes. She tried to fan the flames as best she could, but some of the correspondence was on tough paper, and was slow in being consumed. Pétronelle, tearful but obedient, prepared to leave the room. She was overawed by her mistress’ air of aloofness, the pale face rendered ethereally beautiful by the sufferings she had gone through. The eyes glowed large and magnetic, as if in presence of spiritual visions beyond mortal ken; the golden hair looked like a saintly halo above the white, immaculate young brow.

Pétronelle made the sign of the cross, as if she were in the presence of a saint.

As she opened the door there was a sudden draught, and the last flickering flame died out in the ash-pan. Juliette, seeing that Pétronelle had gone, hastily turned over the few half burnt fragments of paper that were left. In none of them had the writing remained legible. All that was compromising to Déroulède was effectually reduced to dust. The small wick in the lamp at the foot of the Virgin and Child had burned itself out for want of oil; there was no means for Juliette to strike another light and to destroy what remained. The leather case was, of course, still there, with its sides ripped open, an indestructible thing.

There was nothing to be done about that. Juliette after a second’s hesitation threw it among her dresses in the valise.

Then she too went out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

A happy moment.

The search in the Citizen-Deputy's bedroom had proved as fruitless as that in his study. Merlin was beginning to have vague doubts as to whether he had been effectively fooled.

His manner towards Déroulède had undergone a change. He had become suave and unctuous, a kind of elephantine irony pervading his laborious attempts at conciliation. He and the Public Prosecutor would be severely blamed for this day's work, if the popular Deputy, relying upon the support of the people of Paris, chose to take his revenge.

In France, in this glorious year of the Revolution, there was but one step between censure and indictment. And Merlin knew it. Therefore, although he had not given up all hope of finding proofs of Déroulède's treason, although by the latter's attitude he remained quite convinced that such proof did exist, he was already reckoning upon the cat's paw, the sop he would offer to that Cerberus, the Committee of Public Safety, in exchange for his own exculpation in the matter.

This sop would be Juliette, the denunciator instead of Déroulède the denounced.

But he was still seeking for the proofs.

Somewhat changing his tactics, he had allowed Déroulède to join his mother in the living-room, and had betaken himself to the kitchen in search of Anne Mie, whom he had previously caught sight of in the hall. There he also found old Pétronelle, whom he could scare out of her wits to his heart's content, but from whom he was quite unable to extract any useful information. Pétronelle was too stupid to be dangerous, and Anne Mie was too much on the alert.

But, with a vague idea that a cunning man might choose the most unlikely places for the concealment of compromising property, he was ransacking the kitchen from floor to ceiling.

In the living-room Déroulède was doing his best to reassure his mother, who, in her turn, was forcing herself to be brave, and not to show by her tears how deeply she feared for the safety of her son. As soon as Déroulède had been freed from the presence of the soldiers, he had hastened back to his study, only to find that Juliette had gone, and that the letter-case had also disappeared. Not knowing what to think, trembling for the safety of the woman he adored, he was just debating whether he would seek for her in her own room, when she came towards him across the landing.

There seemed a halo around her now. Déroulède felt that she had never been so beautiful and to him so unattainable. Something told him then, that at this moment she was as far away from him, as if she were an inhabitant of another, more ethereal planet.

When she saw him coming towards her, she put a finger to her lips, and whispered:

"Sh! sh! the papers are destroyed, burned."

"And I owe my safety to you!"

He had said it with his whole soul, an infinity of gratitude filled his heart, a joy and pride in that she had cared for his safety.

But at his words she had grown paler than she was before. Her eyes, large, dilated, and dark, were fixed upon him with an intensity of gaze which almost startled him. He thought that she was about to faint, that the emotions of the past half hour had been too much for her overstrung nerves. He took her hand, and gently dragged her into the living-room.

She sank into a chair, as if utterly weary and exhausted, and he, forgetting his danger, forgetting the world and all else besides, knelt at her feet, and held her hands in his.

She sat bolt upright, her great eyes still fixed upon him. At first it seemed as if he could not be satiated with looking at her; he felt as if he had never, never really seen her. She had been a dream of beauty to him ever since that awful afternoon when he had held her, half fainting, in his arms, and had dragged her under the shelter of his roof.

From that hour he had worshipped her: she had cast over him the magic spell of her refinement, her beauty, that aroma of youth and innocence which makes such a strong appeal to the man of sentiment.

He had worshipped her and not tried to understand. He would have deemed it almost sacrilege to pry into the mysteries of her inner self, of that second nature in her which at times made her silent, and almost morose, and cast a lurid gloom over her young beauty.

And though his love for her had grown in intensity, it had remained as heaven born as he deemed her to be — the love of a mortal for a saint, the ecstatic adoration of a St Francis for his Madonna.

Sir Percy Blakeney had called Déroulède an idealist. He was that, in the strictest sense, and Juliette had embodied all that was best in his idealism.

It was for the first time to-day, that he had held her hand just for a moment longer than mere conventionality allowed. The first kiss on her finger-tips had sent the blood rushing wildly to his heart; but he still worshipped her, and gazed upon her as upon a divinity.

She sat bolt upright in the chair, abandoning her small, cold hands to his burning grasp.

His very senses ached with the longing to clasp her in his arms, to draw her to him, and to feel her pulses beat closer against his. It was almost torture now to gaze upon her beauty — that small, oval face, almost like a child's, the large eyes which at times had seemed to be blue but which now appeared to be a deep, unfathomable colour, like the tempestuous sea.

"Juliette!" he murmured at last, as his soul went out to her in a passionate appeal for the first kiss.

A shudder seemed to go through her entire frame, her very lips turned white and cold, and he, not understanding, timorous, chivalrous and humble, thought that she was repelled by his ardour and frightened by a passion to which she was too pure to respond.

Nothing but that one word had been spoken — just her name, an appeal from a strong man, overmastered at last by his boundless love — and she, poor, stricken soul, who had so much loved, so deeply wronged him, shuddered at the thought of what she might have done, had Fate not helped her to save him.

Half ashamed of his passion, he bowed his dark head over her hands, and, once more forcing himself to be calm now, he kissed her finger-tips reverently.

When he looked up again the hard lines in her face had softened, and two tears were slowly trickling down her pale cheeks.

"Will you forgive me, madonna?" he said gently. "I am only a man and you are very beautiful. No — don't take your little hands away. I am quite calm now, and know how one should speak to angels."

Reason, justice, rectitude — everything was urging Juliette to close her ears to the words of love, spoken by the man whom she had betrayed. But who shall blame her for listening to the sweetest sound the ears of a woman can ever hear — the sound of the voice of the loved one in his first declaration of love?

She sat and listened, whilst he whispered to her those soft, endearing words, of which a strong man alone possesses the enchanting secret.

She sat and listened, whilst all around her was still. Madame Déroulède, at the farther end of the room, was softly muttering a few prayers.

They were all alone these two in the mad and beautiful world, which man has created for himself — the world of romance — that world more wonderful than any heaven, where only those may enter who have learned the sweet lesson of love. Déroulède roamed in it at will. He had created his own romance, wherein he was as a humble worshipper, spending his life in the service of his madonna.

And she too forgot the earth, forgot the reality, her oath, her crime and its punishment, and began to think that it was good to live, good to love, and good to have at her feet the one man in all the world whom she could fondly worship.

Who shall tell what he whispered? Enough that she listened and that she smiled; and he, seeing her smile, felt happy.

CHAPTER XV

Detected.

The opening and shutting of the door roused them both from their dreams.

Anne Mie, pale, trembling, with eyes looking wild and terrified, had glided into the room.

Déroulède had sprung to his feet. In a moment he had thrust his own happiness into the background at sight of the poor child's obvious suffering. He went quickly towards her, and would have spoken to her, but she ran past him up to Madame Déroulède, as if she were beside herself with some unexplainable terror.

"Anne Mie," he said firmly, "what is it? Have those devils dared ..."

In a moment reality had come rushing back upon him with full force, and bitter reproaches surged up in his heart against himself, for having in this moment of selfish joy forgotten those who looked up to him for help and protection.

He knew the temper of the brutes who had been set upon his track, knew that low-minded Merlin and his noisome ways, and blamed himself severely for having left Anne Mie and Pétronelle alone with him even for a few moments.

But Anne Mie quickly reassured him.

"They have not molested us much," she said, speaking with a visible effort and enforced calmness. "Pétronelle and I were together, and they made us open all the cupboards and uncover all the dishes. They then asked us many questions."

"Questions? Of what kind?" asked Déroulède.

"About you, Paul," replied Anne Mie, "and about maman, and also about — about the citizeness, your guest."

Déroulède looked at her closely, vaguely wondering at the strange attitude of the child. She was evidently labouring under some strong excitement, and in her thin, brown little hand she was clutching a piece of paper.

"Anne Mie! Child," he said very gently, "you seem quite upset — as if something terrible had happened. What is that paper you are holding, my dear?"

Anne Mie gazed down upon it. She was obviously making frantic efforts to maintain her self-possession.

Juliette at first sight of Anne Mie seemed literally to have been turned to stone. She sat upright, rigid as a statue, her eyes fixed upon the poor, crippled girl as if upon an inexorable judge, about to pronounce sentence upon her of life or death.

Instinct, that keen sense of coming danger which Nature sometimes gives to her elect, had told her that, within the next few seconds, her doom would be sealed; that Fate would descend upon her, holding the sword of Nemesis; and it was Anne Mie's tiny, half-shrivelled hand which had placed that sword into the grasp of Fate.

"What is that paper? Will you let me see it, Anne Mie?" repeated Déroulède.

"Citizen Merlin gave it to me just now," began Anne Mie more quietly; "he seems very wroth at finding nothing compromising against you, Paul. They were a long time in the kitchen, and now they have gone to search my room and Pétronelle's; but Merlin — oh! that awful man! — he seemed like a beast infuriated with his disappointment."

"Yes, yes."

"I don't know what he hoped to get out of me, for I told him that you never spoke to your mother or to me about your political business, and that I was not in the habit of listening at the keyholes."

"Yes. And ..."

"Then he began to speak of — of our guest — but, of course, there again I could tell him nothing. He seemed to be puzzled as to who had denounced you. He spoke about an anonymous denunciation, which reached the Public Prosecutor early this morning. It was written on a scrap of paper, and thrown into the public box, it seems, and ..."

"It is indeed very strange," said Déroulède, musing over this extraordinary occurrence, and still more over Anne Mie's strange excitement in the telling of it. "I never knew I had a hidden enemy. I wonder if I shall ever find out ..."

"That is just what I said to Citizen Merlin," rejoined Anne Mie.

"What?"

"That I wondered if you, or — or any of us who love you, will ever find out who your hidden enemy might be."

"It was a mistake to talk so fully with such a brute, little one."

"I didn't say much, and I thought it wisest to humour him, as he seemed to wish to talk on that subject."

"Well? And what did he say?"

"He laughed, and asked me if I would very much like to know."

"I hope you said No, Anne Mie?"

"Indeed, indeed, I said Yes," she retorted with sudden energy, her eyes fixed now upon Juliette, who still sat rigid and silent, watching every movement of Anne Mie from the moment in which she began to tell her story.

"Would I not wish to know who is your enemy, Paul — the creature who was base and treacherous enough to attempt to deliver you into the hands of those merciless villains? What wrong had you done to anyone?"

"Sh! Hush, Anne Mie! you are too excited," he said, smiling now, in spite of himself, at the young girl's vehemence over what he thought was but a trifle — the discovery of his own enemy.

"I am sorry, Paul. How can I help being excited," rejoined Anne Mie with quaint, pathetic gentleness, "when I speak of such base treachery, as that which Merlin has suggested?"

"Well? And what did he suggest?"

"He did more than suggest," whispered Anne Mie almost inaudibly; "he gave me this paper — the anonymous denunciation which reached the Public Prosecutor this morning — he thought one of us might recognise the handwriting."

Then she paused, some five steps away from Déroulède, holding out towards him the crumpled paper, which up to now she had clutched determinedly in her hand. Déroulède was about to take it from her, and just before he had turned to do so, his eyes lighted on Juliette.

She said nothing, she had merely risen instinctively, and had reached Anne Mie's side in less than the fraction of a second.

It was all a flash, and there was dead silence in the room, but in that one-hundredth part of a second, Déroulède had read guilt in the face of Juliette.

It was nothing but instinct, a sudden, awful, unexplainable revelation. Her soul seemed suddenly to stand before him in all its misery and in all its sin.

It was if the fire from heaven had descended in one terrific crash, burying beneath its devastating flames his ideals, his happiness, and his divinity. She was no longer there. His madonna had ceased to be.

There stood before him a beautiful woman, on whom he had lavished all the pent-up treasures of his love, whom he had succoured, sheltered, and protected, and who had repaid him thus.

She had forced an entry into his house; she had spied upon him, dogged him, lied to him. The moment was too sudden, too awful for him to make even a wild guess at her motives. His entire life, his whole past, the present, and the future, were all blotted out in this awful dispersal of his most cherished dream. He had forgotten everything else save her appalling treachery; how could he even remember that once, long ago, in fair fight, he had killed her brother?

She did not even try now to hide her guilt.

A look of appeal, touching in its trustfulness, went out to him, begging him to spare her further shame. Perhaps she felt that love, such as his, could not be killed in a flash.

His entire nature was full of pity, and to that pity she made a final appeal, lest she should be humiliated before Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie.

And he, still under the spell of those magic moments when he had knelt at her feet, understood her prayer, and closing his eyes just for one brief moment in order to shut out for ever that radiant vision of a pure angel whom he had worshipped, turned quietly to Anne Mie.

"Give me that paper, Anne Mie," he said coldly. "I may perhaps recognise the handwriting of my most bitter enemy."

"'Tis unnecessary now," replied Anne Mie slowly, still gazing at the face of Juliette, in which she too had read what she wished to read.

The paper dropped out of her hand.

Déroulède stooped to pick it up. He unfolded it, smoothed it out, and then saw that it was blank.

"There is nothing written on this paper," he said mechanically.

"No," rejoined Anne Mie; "no other words save the story of her treachery."

"What you have done is evil and wicked, Anne Mie."

"Perhaps so; but I had guessed the truth, and I wished to know. God showed me this way, how to do it, and how to let you know as well."

"The less you speak of God just now, Anne Mie, the better, I think. Will you attend to maman? she seems faint and ill."

Madame Déroulède, silent and placid in her arm-chair, had watched the tragic scene before her, almost like a disinterested spectator. All her ideas and all her thoughts had been paralysed, since the moment when the first summons at the front door had warned her of the imminence of the peril to her son.

The final discovery of Juliette's treachery had left her impassive. Since her son was in danger, she cared little as to whence that danger had come.

Obedient to Déroulède's wish, Anne Mie was attending to the old lady's comforts. The poor, crippled girl was already feeling the terrible reaction of her deed.

In her childish mind she had planned this way, in which to bring the traitor to shame. Anne Mie knew nothing, cared nothing, about the motives which had actuated Juliette; all she knew was that a terrible Judas-like deed had been perpetrated against the man, on whom she herself had lavished her pathetic, hopeless love.

All the pent-up jealousy which had tortured her for the past three weeks rose up, and goaded her into unmasking her rival.

Never for a moment did she doubt Juliette's guilt. The god of love may be blind, tradition has so decreed it, but the demon of jealousy has a hundred eyes, more keen than those of the lynx.

Anne Mie, pushed aside by Merlin's men when they forced their way into Déroulède's study, had, nevertheless, followed them to the door. When the curtains were drawn aside and the room filled with light, she had seen Juliette enthroned, apparently calm and placid, upon the sofa.

It was instinct, the instinct born of her own rejected passion, which caused her to read in the beautiful girl's face all that lay hidden behind the pale, impassive mask. That same second sight made her understand Merlin's hints and allusions. She caught every inflection of his voice, heard everything, saw everything.

And in the midst of her anxiety and her terrors for the man she loved, there was the wild, primitive, intensely human joy at the thought of bringing that enthroned idol, who had stolen his love, down to earth at last.

Anne Mie was not clever; she was simple and childish, with no complexity of passions or devious ways of intellect. It was her elemental jealousy which suggested the cunning plan for the unmasking of Juliette. She would make the girl cringe and fear, threaten her with discovery, and through her very terror shame her before Paul Déroulède.

And now it was all done; it had all occurred as she had planned it. Paul knew that his love had been wasted upon a liar and a traitor, and Juliette stood pale, humiliated, a veritable wreck of shamed humanity.

Anne Mie had triumphed, and was profoundly, abjectly wretched in her triumph. Great sobs seemed to tear at her very heart-strings. She had pulled down Paul's idol from her pedestal, but the one look she had cast at his face had shown her that she had also wrecked his life.

He seemed almost old now. The earnest, restless gaze had gone from his eyes; he was staring mutely before him, twisting between nerveless fingers that blank scrap of paper, which had been the means of annihilating his dream.

All energy of attitude, all strength of bearing, which were his chief characteristics, seemed to have gone. There was a look of complete blankness, of hopelessness in his listless gesture.

"How he loved her!" sighed Anne Mie, as she tenderly wrapped the shawl round Madame Déroulède's shoulders.

Juliette had said nothing; it seemed as if her very life had gone out of her. She was a mere statue now, her mind numb, her heart dead, her very existence a fragile piece of mechanism. But she was looking at Déroulède. That one sense in her had remained alive: her sight.

She looked and looked: and saw every passing sign of mental agony on his face: the look of recognition of her guilt, the bewilderment at the appalling crash, and now that hideous deathlike emptiness of his soul and mind.

Never once did she detect horror or loathing. He had tried to save her from being further humiliated before his mother, but there was no hatred or contempt in his eyes, when he realised that she had been unmasked by a trick.

She looked and looked, for there was no hope in her, not even despair. There was nothing in her mind, nothing in her soul, but a great pall-like blank.

Then gradually, as the minutes sped on, she saw the strong soul within him make a sudden fight against the darkness of his despair: the movement of the fingers became less listless; the powerful, energetic figure straightened itself out; remembrance of other matters, other interests than his own began to lift the overwhelming burden of his grief.

He remembered the letter-case containing the compromising papers. A vague wonder arose in him as to Juliette's motives in warding off, through her concealment of it, the inevitable moment of its discovery by Merlin.

The thought that her entire being had undergone a change, and that she now wished to save him, never once entered his mind; if it had, he would have dismissed it as the outcome of maudlin sentimentality, the conceit of the fop, who believes his personality to be irresistible.

His own self-torturing humility pointed but to the one conclusion: that she had fooled him all along; fooled him when she sought his protection; fooled him when she taught him to love her; fooled him, above all, at the moment when, subjugated by the intensity of his passion, he had for one brief second ceased to worship in order to love.

When the bitter remembrance of that moment of sweetest folly rushed back to his aching brain, then at last did he look up at her with one final, agonised look of reproach, so great, so tender, and yet so final, that Anne Mie, who saw it, felt as if her own heart would break with the pity of it all.

But Juliette had caught the look too. The tension of her nerves seemed suddenly to relax. Memory rushed back upon her with tumultuous intensity. Very gradually her knees gave beneath her, and at last she knelt down on the floor before him, her golden head bent under the burden of her guilt and her shame.

CHAPTER XVI

Under arrest.

Déroulède did not attempt to go to her.

Only presently, when the heavy footsteps of Merlin and his men were once more heard upon the landing, she quietly rose to her feet.

She had accomplished her act of humiliation and repentance, there before them all. She looked for the last time upon those whom she had so deeply wronged, and in her heart spoke an eternal farewell to that great, and mighty, and holy love which she had called forth and then had so hopelessly crushed.

Now she was ready for the atonement.

Merlin had already swaggered into the room. The long and arduous search throughout the house had not improved either his temper or his personal appearance. He was more covered with grime than he had been before, and his narrow forehead had almost disappeared beneath the tangled mass of his ill-kempt hair, which he had perpetually tugged forward and roughed up in his angry impatience.

One look at his face had already told Juliette what she wished to know. He had searched her room, and found the fragments of burnt paper, which she had purposely left in the ash-pan.

How he would act now was the one thing of importance left for Juliette to ponder over. That she would not escape arrest and condemnation was at once made clear to her. Merlin's look of sneering contempt, when he glanced towards her, had told her that.

Déroulède himself had been conscious of a feeling of intense relief when the men re-entered the room. The tension had become unendurable. When he saw his dethroned madonna kneel in humiliation at his feet, an overwhelming pain had wrenched his very heart-strings.

And yet he could not go to her. The passionate, human nature within him felt a certain proud exultation at seeing her there.

She was not above him now, she was no longer akin to the angels.

He had given no further thought to his own immediate danger. Vaguely he guessed that Merlin would find the leather case. Where it was he could not tell; perhaps Juliette herself had handed it to the soldiers. She had only hidden it for a few moments, out of impulse perhaps, fearing lest, at the first instant of its discovery, Merlin might betray her.

He remembered now those hints and insinuations which had gone out from the Terrorist to Juliette whilst the search was being conducted in the study. At the time he had merely looked upon these as a base attempt at insult, and had tortured himself almost beyond bearing, in the endeavour to refrain from punishing that evilmouthed creature, who dared to bandy words with his madonna.

But now he understood, and felt his very soul writhing with shame at the remembrance of it all.

Oh yes; the return of Merlin and his men, the presence of these grimy, degraded brutes, was welcome now. He would have wished to crowd in the entire world, the universe and its population, between him and his fallen idol.

Merlin's manner towards him had lost nothing of its ironical benevolence. There was even a touch of obsequiousness apparent in the ugly face, as the representative of the people approached the popular Citizen-Deputy.

"Citizen-Deputy," began Merlin, "I have to bring you the welcome news, that we have found nothing in your house that in any way can cast suspicion upon your loyalty to the Republic. My orders, however, were to bring you before the Committee of Public Safety, whether I had found proofs of your guilt or not. I have found none."

He was watching Déroulède keenly, hoping even at this eleventh hour to detect a look or a sign, which would furnish him with the proofs for which he was seeking. The slightest suggestion of relief on Déroulède's part, a sigh of satisfaction, would have been sufficient at this moment, to convince him and the Committee of Public Safety that the Citizen-Deputy was guilty after all.

But Déroulède never moved. He was sufficiently master of himself not to express either surprise or satisfaction. Yet he felt both — satisfaction not for his own safety, but because of his mother and Anne Mie, whom he would immediately send out of the country, out of all danger; and also because of her, of Juliette Marny, his guest, who, whatever she may have done against him, had still a claim on his protection. His feeling of surprise was less keen, and quite transient. Merlin had not found the letter-case. Juliette, stricken with tardy remorse perhaps, had succeeded in concealing it. The matter had practically ceased to interest him. It was equally galling to owe his betrayal or his ultimate safety to her.

He kissed his mother tenderly, bidding her good-bye, and pressed Anne Mie's timid little hand warmly between his own. He did what he could to reassure them, but, for their own sakes, he dared say nothing before Merlin, as to his plans for their safety.

After that he was ready to follow the soldiers.

As he passed close to Juliette he bowed, and almost inaudibly whispered:

"Adieu!"

She heard the whisper, but did not respond. Her look alone gave him the reply to his eternal farewell.

His footsteps and those of his escort were heard echoing down the staircase, then the hall door to open and shut. Through the open window came the sound of hoarse cheering as the popular Citizen-Deputy appeared in the street.

Merlin, with two men beside him, remained under the portico; he told off the other two to escort Déroulède as far as the Hall of Justice, where sat the members of the Committee of Public Safety. The Terrorist had a vague fear that the Citizen-Deputy would speak to the mob.

An unruly crowd of women had evidently been awaiting his appearance. The news had quickly spread along the streets that Merlin, Merlin himself, the ardent, bloodthirsty Jacobin, had made a descent upon Paul Déroulède's house, escorted by four soldiers. Such an indignity, put upon the man they most trusted in the entire assembly of the Convention, had greatly incensed the crowd. The women jeered at the soldiers as soon as they appeared, and Merlin dared not actually forbid Déroulède to speak.

"*A la lanterne, vieux crétin!*" shouted one of the women, thrusting her fist under Merlin's nose.

"Give the word, Citizen-Deputy," rejoined another, "and we'll break his ugly face. *Nous lui casserons la gueule!*"

"*A la lanterne! A la lanterne!*"

One word from Déroulède now would have caused an open riot, and in those days self defence against the mob was construed into enmity against the people.

Merlin's work, too, was not yet accomplished. He had had no intention of escorting Déroulède himself; he had still important business to transact inside the house which he had just quitted, and had merely wished to get the Citizen-Deputy well out of the way, before he went upstairs again.

Moreover, he had expected something of a riot in the streets. The temper of the people of Paris was at fever heat just now. The hatred of the populace against a certain class, and against certain individuals, was only equalled by their enthusiasm in favour of others.

They had worshipped Marat for his squalor and his vices; they worshipped Danton for his energy and Robespierre for his calm; they worshipped Déroulède for his voice, his gentleness and his pity, for his care of their children and the eloquence of his speech.

It was that eloquence which Merlin feared now; but he little knew the type of man he had to deal with.

Déroulède's influence over the most unruly, the most vicious populace the history of the world has ever known, was not obtained through fanning its passions. That popularity, though brilliant, is always ephemeral. The passions of a mob will invariably turn against those who have helped to rouse them. Marat did not live to see the waning of his star; Danton was dragged to the guillotine by those whom he had taught to look upon that instrument of death as the only possible and unanswerable political argument; Robespierre succumbed to the orgies of bloodshed he himself had brought about. But Déroulède remained master of the people of Paris for as long as he chose to exert that mastery. When they listened to him they felt better, nobler, less hopelessly degraded.

He kept up in their poor, misguided hearts that last flickering sense of manhood which their bloodthirsty tyrants, under the guise of Fraternity and Equality, were doing their best to smother.

Even now, when he might have turned the temper of the small crowd outside his door to his own advantage, he preferred to say nothing; he even pacified them with a gesture.

He well knew that those whom he incited against Merlin now would, once their blood was up, probably turn against him in less than half-an-hour.

Merlin, who all along had meant to return to the house, took his opportunity now. He allowed Déroulède and the two men to go on ahead, and beat a hasty retreat back into the house, followed by the jeers of the women.

"A la lanterne, vieux crétin!" they shouted as soon as the hall door was once more closed in their faces. A few of them began hammering against the door with their fists; then they realised that their special favourite, Citizen-Deputy Déroulède, was marching along between two soldiers, as if he were a prisoner. The word went round that he was under arrest, and was being taken to the Hall of Justice — a prisoner.

This was not to be. The mob of Paris had been taught that it was the master in the city, and it had learned its lesson well. For the moment it had chosen to take Paul Déroulède under its special protection, and as a guard of honour to him — the women in ragged kirtles, the men with bare legs and stripped to the waist, the children all yelling, hooting, and shrieking — followed him, to see that none dared harm him.

CHAPTER XVII

Atonement.

Merlin waited a while in the hall, until he heard the noise of the shrieking crowd gradually die away in the distance, then with a grunt of satisfaction he once more mounted the stairs.

All these events outside had occurred during a very few minutes, and Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie had been too anxious as to what was happening in the streets, to take any notice of Juliette.

They had not dared to step out on to the balcony to see what was going on, and, therefore, did not understand what the reopening and shutting of the front door had meant.

The next instant, however, Merlin's heavy, slouching footsteps on the stairs had caused Anne Mie to look round in alarm.

"It is only the soldiers come back for me," said Juliette quietly.

"For you?"

"Yes; they are coming to take me away. I suppose they did not wish to do it in the presence of Mr. Déroulède, for fear ..."

She had no time to say more. Anne Mie was still looking at her in awed and mute surprise, when Merlin entered the room.

In his hand he held a leather case, all torn, and split at one end, and a few tiny scraps of half-charred paper. He walked straight up to Juliette, and roughly thrust the case and papers into her face.

"These are yours?" he said roughly.

"Yes."

"I suppose you know where they were found?"

She nodded quietly in reply.

"What were these papers which you burnt?"

"Love letters."

"You lie!"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"As you please," she said curtly.

"What were these papers?" he repeated, with a loud obscene oath which, however, had not the power to disturb the young girl's serenity.

"I have told you," she said: "love letters, which I wished to burn."

"Who was your lover?" he asked.

Then as she did not reply he indicated the street, where cries of "Déroulède! Vive Déroulède!" still echoed from afar.

"Were the letters from him?"

"No."

"You had more than one lover, then?"

He laughed, and a hideous leer seemed further to distort his ugly countenance.

He thrust his face quite close to hers, and she closed her eyes, sick with the horror of this contact with the degraded wretch. Even Anne Mie had uttered a cry of sympathy at sight of this evil-smelling, squalid creature torturing, with his close proximity, the beautiful, refined girl before him.

With a rough gesture he put his clawlike hand under her delicate chin, forcing her to turn round and to look at him. She shuddered at the loathsome touch, but her quietude never forsook her for a moment.

It was into the power of wretches such as this man, that she had wilfully delivered the man she loved. This brutish creature's familiarity put the finishing touch to her own degradation, but it gave her the courage to carry through her purpose to the end.

"You had more than one lover, then?" said Merlin, with a laugh which would have pleased the devil himself. "And you wished to send one of them to the guillotine in order to make way for the other? Was that it?"

"Was that it?" he repeated, suddenly seizing one of her wrists, and giving it a savage twist, so that she almost screamed with the pain.

"Yes," she replied firmly.

"Do you know that you brought me here on a fool's errand?" he asked viciously; "that the Citizen-Deputy Déroulède cannot be sent to the guillotine on mere suspicion, eh? Did you know that, when you wrote out that denunciation?"

"No; I did not know."

"You thought we could arrest him on mere suspicion?"

"Yes."

"You knew he was Innocent?"

"I knew it."

"Why did you burn your love letters?"

"I was afraid that they would be found, and would be brought under the notice of the Citizen-Deputy."

"A splendid combination, *ma foi!*" said Merlin, with an oath, as he turned to the two other women, who sat pale and shrinking in a corner of the room, not understanding what was going on, not knowing what to think or what to believe. They had known nothing of Déroulède's plans for the escape of Marie Antoinette, they didn't know what the letter-case had contained, and yet they both vaguely felt that the beautiful girl, who stood up so calmly before the loathsome Terrorist, was not a wanton, as she tried to make out, but only misguided, mad perhaps — perhaps a martyr.

"Did you know anything of this?" queried Merlin roughly from trembling Anne Mie.

"Nothing," she replied.

"No one knew anything of my private affairs or of my private correspondence," said Juliette coldly; "as you say, it was a splendid combination. I had hoped that it would succeed. But I understand now that Citizen-Deputy Déroulède is a personage of too much importance to be brought to trial on mere suspicion, and my denunciation of him was not based on facts."

"And do you know, my fine aristocrat," sneered Merlin viciously, "that it is not wise either to fool the Committee of Public Safety, or to denounce without cause one of the representatives of the people?"

"I know," she rejoined quietly, "that you, Citizen Merlin, are determined that someone shall pay for this day's blunder. You dare not now attack the Citizen-Deputy, and so you must be content with me."

"Enough of this talk now; I have no time to bandy words with aristos," he said roughly.

"Come now, follow the men quietly. Resistance would only aggravate your case."

"I am quite prepared to follow you. May I speak two words to my friends before I go?"

"No."

"I may never be able to speak to them again."

"I have said No, and I mean No. Now then, forward. March! I have wasted too much time already."

Juliette was too proud to insist any further. She had hoped, by one word, to soften Madame Déroulède's and Anne Mie's heart towards her. She did not know whether they believed that miserable lie which she had been telling to Merlin; she only guessed that for the moment they still thought her the betrayer of Paul Déroulède.

But that one word was not to be spoken. She would have to go forth to her certain trial, to her probable death, under the awful cloud, which she herself had brought over her own life.

She turned quietly, and walked towards the door, where the two men already stood at attention.

Then it was that some heaven-born instinct seemed suddenly to guide Anne Mie. The crippled girl was face to face with a psychological problem, which in itself was far beyond her comprehension, but vaguely she felt that it was a problem. Something in Juliette's face had already caused her to bitterly repent her action towards her, and now, as this beautiful, refined woman was about to pass from under the shelter of this roof, to the cruel publicity and terrible torture of that awful revolutionary tribunal, Anne Mie's whole heart went out to her in boundless sympathy.

Before Merlin or the men could prevent her, she had run up to Juliette, taken her hand, which hung listless and cold, and kissed it tenderly.

Juliette seemed to wake as if from a dream. She looked down at Anne Mie with a glance of hope, almost of joy, and whispered:

"It was an oath — I swore it to my father and my dead brother. Tell him."

Anne Mie could only nod; she could not speak, for her tears were choking her.

"But I'll atone — with my life. Tell him," whispered Juliette.

"Now then," shouted Merlin, "out of the way, hunchback, unless you want to come along too."

"Forgive me," said Anne Mie through her tears.

Then the men pushed her roughly aside. But at the door Juliette turned to her once more, and said:

"Pétronelle — take care of her ..."

And with a firm step she followed the soldiers out of the room.

Presently the front door was heard to open, then to shut with a loud bang, and the house in the Rue Ecole de Médecine was left in silence.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the Luxembourg prison.

Juliette was alone at last — that is to say, comparatively alone, for there were too many aristocrats, too many criminals and traitors, in the prisons of Paris now, to allow of any seclusion of those who were about to be tried, condemned, and guillotined.

The young girl had been marched through the crowded streets of Paris, followed by a jeering mob, who readily recognised in the gentle, high-bred girl the obvious prey, which the Committee of Public Safety was wont, from time to time to throw to the hungry hydra-headed dog of the Revolution.

Lately the squalid spectators of the noisome spectacle on the Place de la Guillotine had had few of these very welcome sights: an aristocrat — a real, elegant, refined woman, with white hands and proud, pale face — mounting the steps of the same scaffold on which perished the vilest criminals and most degraded brutes.

Madame Guillotine was, above all, catholic in her tastes, her gaunt arms, painted blood red, were open alike to the murderer and the thief, the aristocrats of ancient lineage, and the proletariat from the gutter.

But lately the executions had been almost exclusively of a political character. The Girondins were fighting their last upon the bloody arena of the Revolution. One by one they fell still fighting, still preaching moderation, still foretelling disaster and appealing to that people, whom they had roused from one slavery, in order to throw it headlong under a tyrannical yoke more brutish, more absolute than before.

There were twelve prisons in Paris then, and forty thousand in France, and they were all full. An entire army went round the country recruiting prisoners. There was no room for separate cells, no room for privacy, no cause or desire for the most elementary sense of delicacy.

Women, men, children — all were herded together, for one day, perhaps two, and a night or so, and then death would obliterate the petty annoyances, the womanly blushes caused by this sordid propinquity.

Death levelled all, erased everything.

When Marie Antoinette mounted the guillotine she had forgotten that for six weeks she practically lived day and night in the immediate companionship of a set of degraded soldiery.

Juliette, as she marched through the streets between two men of the National Guard, and followed by Merlin, was hooted and jeered at, insulted, pelted with mud. One woman tried to push past the soldiers, and to strike her in the face — a woman! not thirty! — and who was dragging a pale, squalid little boy by the hand.

“*Crache donc sur l’aristo, voyons!*” the woman said to this poor, miserable little scrap of humanity as the soldiers pushed her roughly aside. “Spit on the aristocrat!” And the child tortured its own small, parched mouth so that, in obedience to its mother, it might defile and bespatter a beautiful, innocent girl.

The soldiers laughed, and improved the occasion with another insulting jest. Even Merlin forgot his vexation, delighted at the incident.

But Juliette had seen nothing of it all.

She was walking as in a dream. The mob did not exist for her; she heard neither insult nor vituperation. She did not see the evil, dirty faces pushed now and then quite close to her; she did not feel the rough hands of the soldiers jostling her through the crowd: she had gone back to her own world of romance, where she dwelt alone now with the man she loved. Instead of the squalid houses of Paris, with their eternal device of Fraternity and Equality, there were beautiful trees and shrubs of laurel and of roses around her, making the air fragrant with their soft, intoxicating perfumes; sweet voices from the land of dreams filled the atmosphere with their tender murmur, whilst overhead a cloudless sky illumined this earthly paradise.

She was happy — supremely, completely happy. She had saved him from the consequences of her own iniquitous crime, and she was about to give her life for him, so that his safety might be more completely assured.

Her love for him he would never know; now he knew only her crime, but presently, when she would be convicted and condemned, confronted with a few scraps of burned paper and a torn letter-case, then he would know that she had stood her trial, self-accused, and meant to die for him.

Therefore the past few moments were now wholly hers. She had the rights to dwell on those few happy seconds when she listened to the avowal of his love. It was ethereal, and perhaps not altogether human, but it was hers. She had been his divinity, his madonna; he had loved in her that, which was her truer, her better self.

What was base in her was not truly her. That awful oath, sworn so solemnly, had been her relentless tyrant; and her religion — a religion of superstition and of false ideals — had blinded her, and dragged her into crime.

She had arrogated to herself that which was God’s alone — “Vengeance!” which is not for man.

That through it all she should have known love, and learned its tender secrets, was more than she deserved. That she should have felt his burning kisses on her hand was heavenly compensation for all she would have to suffer.

And so she allowed them to drag her through the sansculotte mob of Paris, who would have torn her to pieces then and there, so as not to delay the pleasure of seeing her die.

They took her to the Luxembourg, once the palace of the Medici, the home of proud “Monsieur” in the days of the Great Monarch, now a loathsome, overfilled prison.

It was then six o’clock in the afternoon, drawing towards the close of this memorable day. She was handed over to the governor of the prison, a short, thick-set man in black trousers and black-shag woollen shirt, and wearing a dirty red cap, with tricolour rosette on the side of his unkempt head.

He eyed her up and down as she passed under the narrow doorway, then murmured one swift query to Merlin:

“Dangerous?”

“Yes,” replied Merlin laconically.

“You understand,” added the governor; “we are so crowded. We ought to know if individual attention is required.”

“Certainly,” said Merlin, “you will be personally responsible for this prisoner to the Committee of Public Safety.”

“Any visitors allowed?”

“Certainly not, without the special permission of the Public Prosecutor.”

Juliette heard this brief exchange of words over her future fate.

No visitor would be allowed to see her. Well, perhaps that would be best. She would have been afraid to meet Déroulède again, afraid to read in his eyes that story of his dead love, which alone might have destroyed her present happiness.

And she wished to see no one. She had a memory to dwell on — a short, heavenly memory. It consisted of a few words, a kiss — the last one — on her hand, and that passionate murmur which had escaped from his lips when he knelt at her feet:

“Juliette!”

CHAPTER XIX

Complexities.

Citizen-Deputy Déroulède had been privately interviewed by the Committee of Public Safety, and temporarily allowed to go free.

The brief proceedings had been quite private, the people of Paris were not to know as yet that their favourite was under a cloud. When he had answered all the questions put to him, and Merlin — just returned from his errand at the Luxembourg Prison — had given his version of the domiciliary visitation in the Citizen-Deputy's house, the latter was briefly told that for the moment the Republic had no grievance against him.

But he knew quite well what that meant. He would be henceforth under suspicion, watched incessantly, as a mouse is by the cat, and pounced upon, the moment time would be considered propitious for his final downfall.

The inevitable waning of his popularity would be noted by keen, jealous eyes; and Déroulède, with his sure knowledge of mankind and of character, knew well enough that his popularity was bound to wane sooner or later, as all such ephemeral things do.

In the meanwhile, during the short respite which his enemies would leave him, his one thought and duty would be to get his mother and Anne Mie safely out of the country.

And also ...

He thought of *her*; and wondered what had happened. As he walked swiftly across the narrow footbridge, and reached the other side of the river, the events of the past few hours rushed upon his memory with terrible, overwhelming force.

A bitter ache filled his heart at the remembrance of her treachery. The baseness of it all was so appalling. He tried to think if he had ever wronged her; wondered if perhaps she loved someone else, and wished *him* out of her way.

But, then, he had been so humble, so unassuming in his love. He had arrogated nothing unto himself, asked for nothing, demanded nothing in virtue of his protecting powers over her.

He was torturing himself with this awful wonderment of why she had treated him thus.

Out of revenge for her brother's death — that was the only explanation he could find, the only palliation for her crime.

He knew nothing of her oath to her father, and, of course, had never heard of the sad history of this young, sensitive girl placed in one terrible moment between her dead brother and her demented father. He only thought of common, sordid revenge for a sin he had been practically forced to commit.

And how he had loved her! Yes, *loved* — for that was in the past now.

She had ceased to be a saint or a madonna; she had fallen from her pedestal so low that he could not find the way to descend and grope after the fragments of his ideal.

At his own door he was met by Anne Mie in tears.

"She has gone," murmured the young girl. "I feel as if I had murdered her."

"Gone? Who? Where?" queried Déroulède rapidly, an icy feeling of terror gripping him by the heart-strings.

"Juliette has gone," replied Anne Mie; "those awful brutes took her away."

"When?"

"Directly after you left. That man Merlin found some ashes and scraps of paper in her room ..."

"Ashes?"

"Yes; and a torn letter-case."

"Great God!"

"She said that they were love letters, which she had been burning for fear you should see them."

"She said so? Anne Mie, Anne Mie, are you quite sure?"

It was all so horrible, and he did not quite understand it all; his brain, which was usually so keen and so active, refused him service at this terrible juncture.

"Yes; I am quite sure," continued Anne Mie, in the midst of her tears. "And oh! that awful Merlin said some dastardly things. But she persisted in her story, that she had — another lover. Oh, Paul, I am sure it is not true. I hated her because — because — you loved her so, and I mistrusted her, but I cannot believe that she was quite as base as that."

"No, no, child," he said in a toneless, miserable voice; "she was not so base as that. Tell me more of what she said."

"She said very little else. But Merlin asked her whether she had denounced you so as to get you out of the way. He hinted that — that ..."

"That I was her lover too?"

"Yes," murmured Anne Mie.

She hardly liked to look at him; the strong face had become hard and set in its misery.

"And she allowed them to say all this?" he asked at last.

"Yes. And she followed them without a murmur, as Merlin said she would have to answer before the Committee of Public Safety, for having fooled the representatives of the people."

"She'll answer for it with her life," murmured Déroulède. "And with mine!" he added half audibly.

Anne Mie did not hear him; her pathetic little soul was filled with a great, an overwhelming pity of Juliette and for Paul.

"Before they took her away," she said, placing her thin, delicate-looking hands on his arm. "I ran to her, and bade her farewell. The soldiers pushed me roughly aside; but I contrived to kiss her — and then she whispered a few words to me."

"Yes? What were they?"

"'It was an oath,' she said. 'I swore it to my father and to my dead brother. Tell him,'" repeated Anne Mie slowly.

An oath!

Now he understood, and oh! how he pitied her. How terribly she must have suffered in her poor, harassed soul when her noble, upright nature fought against this hideous treachery.

That she was true and brave in herself, of that Déroulède had no doubt. And now this awful sin upon her conscience, which must be causing her endless misery.

And, alas! the atonement would never free her from the load of self-condemnation. She had elected to pay with her life for her treason against him and his family. She would be arraigned before a tribunal which would inevitably condemn her. Oh! the pity of it all!

One moment's passionate emotion, a lifelong superstition and mistaken sense of duty, and now this endless misery, this terrible atonement of a wrong that could never be undone.

And she had never loved him!

That was the true, the only sting which he knew now; it rankled more than her sin, more than her falsehood, more than the shattering of his ideal.

With a passionate desire for his safety, she had sacrificed herself in order to atone for the material evil which she had done.

But there was the wreck of his hopes and of his dreams!

Never until now, when he had irretrievably lost her, did Déroulède realise how great had been his hopes; how he had watched day after day for a look in her eyes, a word from her lips, to show him that she too — his unattainable saint — would one day come to earth, and respond to his love.

And now and then, when her beautiful face lighted up at sight of him, when she smiled a greeting to him on his return from his work, when she looked with pride and admiration on him from the public bench in the assemblies of the Convention — then he had begun to hope, to think, to dream.

And it was all a sham! A mask to hide the terrible conflict that was raging within her soul, nothing more.

She did not love him, of that he felt convinced. Man like, he did not understand to the full that great and wonderful enigma, which has puzzled the world since primeval times: a woman's heart.

The eternal contradictions which go to make up the complex nature of an emotional woman were quite incomprehensible to him. Juliette had betrayed him to serve her own sense of what was just and right, her revenge and her oath. Therefore she did not love him.

It was logic, sound common-sense, and, aided by his own diffidence where women were concerned, it seemed to him irrefutable.

To a man like Paul Déroulède, a man of thought, of purpose, and of action, the idea of being false to the thing loved, of hate and love being interchangeable, was absolutely foreign and unbelievable. He had never hated the thing he loved or loved the thing he hated. A man's feelings in these respects are so much less complex, so much less contradictory.

Would a man betray his friend? No — never. He might betray his enemy, the creature he abhorred, whose downfall would cause him joy. But his friend? The very idea was repugnant, impossible to an upright nature.

Juliette's ultimate access of generosity in trying to save him, when she was at last brought face to face with the terrible wrong she had committed, *that* he put down to one of those noble impulses of which he knew her soul to be fully capable, and even then his own diffidence suggested that she did it more for the sake of his mother or for Anne Mie rather than for him.

Therefore what mattered life to him now? She was lost to him for ever, whether he succeeded in snatching her from the guillotine or not. He had but little hope to save her, but he would not owe his life to her.

Anne Mie, seeing him wrapped in his own thoughts, had quietly withdrawn. Her own good sense told her already that Paul Déroulède's first step would be to try and get his mother out of danger, and out of the country, while there was yet time.

So, without waiting for instructions, she began that same evening to pack up her belongings and those of Madame Déroulède.

There was no longer any hatred in her heart against Juliette. Where Paul Déroulède had failed to understand, there Anne Mie had already made a guess. She firmly believed that nothing now could save Juliette from death, and a great feeling of tenderness had crept into her heart, for the woman whom she had looked upon as an enemy and a rival.

She too had learnt in those brief days the great lesson that revenge belongs to God alone.

CHAPTER XX

The Cheval Borgne.

It was close upon midnight.

The place had become suffocatingly hot; the fumes of rank tobacco, of rancid butter, and of raw spirits hung like a vapour in mid-air.

The principal room in the “Auberge du Cheval Borgne” had been used for the past five years now as the chief meeting-place of the ultra-sansculotte party of the Republic.

The house itself was squalid and dirty, up one of those mean streets which, by their narrow way and shelving buildings, shut out sun, air, and light from their miserable inhabitants.

The Cheval Borgne was one of the most wretched-looking dwellings in this street of evil repute. The plaster was cracked, the walls themselves seemed bulging outward, preparatory to a final collapse. The ceilings were low, and supported by beams black with age and dirt.

At one time it had been celebrated for its vast cellarage, which had contained some rare old wines. And in the days of the Grand Monarch young bucks were wont to quit the gay salons of the ladies, in order to repair to the Cheval Borgne for a night's carouse.

In those days the vast cellarage was witness of many a dark encounter, of many a mysterious death; could the slimy walls have told their own tale, it would have been one which would have put to shame the wildest chronicles of M. Vidoq.

Now it was no longer so.

Things were done in broad daylight on the Place de la Révolution: there was no need for dark, mysterious cellars, in which to accomplish deeds of murder and of revenge.

Rats and vermin of all sorts worked their way now in the underground portion of the building. They ate up each other, and held their orgies in the cellars, whilst men did the same sort of thing in the rooms above.

It was a club of Equality and Fraternity. Any passer-by was at liberty to enter and take part in the debates, his only qualification for this temporary membership being an inordinate love for Madame la Guillotine.

It was from the sordid rooms of the Cheval Borgne that most of the denunciations had gone forth which led but to the one inevitable ending — death.

They sat in conclave here, some twoscore or so at first, the rabid patriots of this poor, downtrodden France. They talked of Liberty mostly, with many oaths and curses against the tyrants, and then started a tyranny, an autocracy, ten thousand times more awful than any wielded by the dissolute Bourbons.

And this was the temple of Liberty, this dark, damp, evil-smelling brothel, with its narrow, cracked window-panes, which let in but an infinitesimal fraction of air, and that of the foulest, most unwholesome kind.

The floor was of planks roughly put together; now they were worm-eaten, bare, save for a thick carpet of greasy dust, which deadened the sound of booted feet. The place only boasted of a couple of chairs, both of which had to be propped against the wall lest they should break, and bring the sitter down upon the floor; otherwise a number of empty wine barrels did duty for seats, and rough deal boards on broken trestles for tables.

There had once been a paper on the walls, now it hung down in strips, showing the cracked plaster beneath. The whole place had a tone of yellowish-grey grime all over it, save where, in the centre of the room, on a rough double post, shaped like the guillotine, a scarlet cap of Liberty gave a note of lurid colour to the dismal surroundings.

On the walls here and there the eternal device, so sublime in conception, so sordid in execution, recalled the aims of the so-called club: “Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité, sinon la Mort.”

Below the device, in one or two corners of the room, the wall was further adorned with rough charcoal sketches, mostly of an obscene character, the work of one of the members of the club, who had chosen this means of degrading his art.

To-night the assembly had been reduced to less than a score.

Even according to the dictates of these apostles of Fraternity: “*la guillotine va toujours*” — the guillotine goes on always. She had become the most potent factor in the machinery of government, of this great Revolution, and she had been daily, almost hourly fed through the activity of this nameless club, which held its weird and awesome sittings in the dank coffee-room of the Cheval Borgne.

The number of the active members had been reduced. Like the rats in the cellars below, they had done away with one another, swallowed one another up, torn each other to pieces in this wild rage for a Utopian fraternity.

Marat, founder of the organisation, had been murdered by a girl's hand; but Charon, Manuel, Osselin had gone the usual way, denounced by their colleagues, Rabaut, Custine, Bison, who in their turn were sent to the guillotine by those more powerful, perhaps more eloquent, than themselves.

It was merely a case of who could shout the loudest at an assembly of the National Convention.

“*La guillotine va toujours!*”

After the death of Marat, Merlin became the most prominent member of the club — he and Fouquier-Tinville, his bosom friend, Public Prosecutor, and the most bloodthirsty homicide of this homicidal age.

Bosom friend both, yet they worked against one another, undermining each other's popularity, whispering persistently, one against the other: “He is a traitor!” It had become just a neck-to-neck race between them towards the inevitable goal — the guillotine.

Fouquier-Tinville is in the ascendant for the moment. Merlin had been given a task which he had failed to accomplish. For days now, weeks even, the debates of this noble assembly had been chiefly concerned with the downfall of Citizen-Deputy Déroulède. His popularity, his calm security in the midst of this reign of terror and anarchy, had been a terrible thorn in the flesh of these rabid Jacobins.

And now the climax had been reached. An anonymous denunciation had roused the hopes of these sanguinary patriots. It all sounded perfectly plausible. To try and save that traitor, Marie Antoinette, the widow of Louis Capet, was just the sort of scheme that would originate in the brain of Paul Déroulède.

He had always been at heart an aristocrat, and the feeling of chivalry for a persecuted woman was only the outward signs of his secret adherence to the hated class.

Merlin had been sent to search the Deputy's house for proofs of the latter's guilt.

And Merlin had come back empty-handed.

The arrest of a female aristo — the probable mistress of Déroulède, who obviously had denounced him — was but small compensation for the failure of the more important capture.

As soon as Merlin joined his friends in the low, ill-lit, evil-smelling room he realised at once that there was a feeling of hostility against him.

Tinville, enthroned on one of the few chairs of which the Cheval Borgne could boast, was surrounded by a group of surly adherents.

On the rough trestles a number of glasses, half filled with raw potato-spirit, gave the keynote to the temper of the assembly.

All those present were dressed in the black-shag spencer, the seedy black breeches, and down-at-heel boots, which had become recognised as the distinctive uniform of the sansculotte party. The inevitable Phrygian cap, with its tricolour cockade, appeared on the heads of all those present, in various stages of dirt and decay.

Tinville had chosen to assume a sarcastic tone with regard to his whilom bosom friend, Merlin. Leaning both elbows on the table, he was picking his teeth with a steel fork, and in the intervals of his interesting operation, gave forth his views on the broad principles of patriotism.

Those who sat round him felt that his star was in the ascendant and assumed the position of satellites. Merlin as he entered had grunted a sullen "Good-even," and sat himself down in a remote corner of the room.

His greeting had been responded to with a few jeers and a good many dark, threatening looks. Tinville himself had bowed to him with mock sarcasm and an unpleasant leer.

One of the patriots, a huge fellow, almost a giant, with heavy, coarse fists and broad shoulders that obviously suggested coal-heaving, had, after a few satirical observations, dragged one of the empty wine barrels to Merlin's table, and sat down opposite him.

"Take care, Citizen Lenoir," said Tinville, with an evil laugh, "Citizen-Deputy Merlin will arrest you instead of Deputy Déroulède, whom he has allowed to slip through his fingers."

"Nay; I've no fear," replied Lenoir, with an oath. "Citizen Merlin is too much of an aristo to hurt anyone; his hands are too clean; he does not care to do the dirty work of the Republic. Isn't that so, Monsieur Merlin?" added the giant, with a mock bow, and emphasising the appellation which had fallen into complete disuse in these days of equality.

"My patriotism is too well known," said Merlin roughly, "to fear any attacks from jealous enemies; and as for my search in the Citizen-Deputy's house this afternoon, I was told to find proofs against him, and I found none."

Lenoir expectorated on the floor, crossed his dark hairy arms over the table, and said quietly:

"Real patriotism, as the true Jacobin understands it, makes the proofs it wants and leaves nothing to chance."

A chorus of hoarse murmurs of "Vive la Liberté!" greeted this harangue of the burly coal-heaver.

Feeling that he had gained the ear and approval of the gallery, Lenoir seemed, as it were, to spread himself out, to arrogate to himself the leadership of this band of malcontents, who, disappointed in their lust of Déroulède's downfall, were ready to exult over that of Merlin.

"You were a fool, Citizen Merlin," said Lenoir with slow significance, "not to see that the woman was playing her own game."

Merlin had become livid under the grime on his face. With this ill-kempt sansculotte giant in front of him, he almost felt as if he were already arraigned before that awful, merciless tribunal, to which he had dragged so many innocent victims.

Already he felt, as he sat ensconced behind a table in the far corner of the room, that he was a prisoner at the bar, answering for his failure with his life.

His own laws, his own theories now stood in bloody array against him. Was it not he who had framed the indictments against General Custine for having failed to subdue the cities of the south? against General Westerman and Brunet and Beauharnais for having failed and failed and failed?

And now it was his turn.

These bloodthirsty jackals had been cheated of their prey; they would tear him to pieces in compensation of their loss.

"How could I tell?" he murmured roughly, "the woman had denounced him."

A chorus of angry derision greeted this feeble attempt at defence.

"By your own law, Citizen-Deputy Merlin," commented Tinville sarcastically, "it is a crime against the Republic to be suspected of treason. It is evident, however, that it is quite one thing to frame a law and quite another to obey it."

"What could I have done?"

"Hark at the innocent!" rejoined Lenoir, with a sneer. "What could he have done? Patriots, friends, brothers, I ask you, what could he have done?"

The giant had pushed the wine cask aside, it rolled away from under him, and in the fulness of his contempt for Merlin and his impotence, he stood up before them all, strong in his indictment against treasonable incapacity.

"I ask you," he repeated, with a loud oath, "what any patriot would do, what you or I would have done, in the house of a man whom we all *know* is a traitor to the Republic? Brothers, friends, Citizen-Deputy Merlin found a heap of burn paper in a grate, he found a letter-case which had obviously contained important documents, and he asks us what he could do!"

"Déroulède is too important a man to be tried without proofs. The whole mob of Paris would have turned on us for having arraigned him, for having dared lay hands upon his sacred person."

"Without proofs? Who said there were no proofs?" queried Lenoir.

“I found the burnt papers and torn letter-case in the woman’s room. She owned that they were love letters, and that she had denounced Déroulède in order to be rid of him.”

“Then let me tell you, Citizen-Deputy Merlin, that a true patriot would have found those papers in Déroulède’s, and not the woman’s room; that in the hands of a faithful servant of the Republic those documents would not all have been destroyed, for he would have ‘found’ one letter addressed to the Widow Capet, which would have proved conclusively that Citizen-Deputy Déroulède was a traitor. That is what a true patriot would have done — what I would have done. *Pardi!* since Déroulède is so important a personage, since we must all put on kid gloves when we lay hands upon him, then let us fight him with other weapons. Are we aristocrats that we should hesitate to play the part of jackal to this cunning fox? Citizen-Deputy Merlin, are you the son of some ci-devant duke or prince that you dared not *forge* a document which would bring a traitor to his doom? Nay; let me tell you, friends, that the Republic has no use for curs, and calls him a traitor who allows one of her enemies to remain inviolate through his cowardice, his terror of that intangible and fleeting shadow — the wrath of a Paris mob.”

Thunderous applause greeted this peroration, which had been delivered with an accompaniment of violent gestures and a wealth of obscene epithets, quite beyond the power of the mere chronicler to render. Lenoir had a harsh, strident voice, very high pitched, and he spoke with a broad, provincial accent, somewhat difficult to locate, but quite unlike the hoarse, guttural tones of the low-class Parisian. His enthusiasm made him seem impressive. He looked, in his ragged, dust-stained clothes, the very personification of the squalid herd which had driven culture, art, refinement to the scaffold in order to make way for sordid vice, and satisfied lusts of hate.

CHAPTER XXI

A Jacobin orator.

Tinville alone had remained silent during Lenoir's impassioned speech. It seemed to be his turn now to become surly. He sat picking his teeth, and staring moodily at the enthusiastic orator, who had so obviously diverted popular feeling in his own direction. And Tinville brooked popularity only for himself.

"It is easy to talk now, Citizen — er — Lenoir. Is that your name? Well, you are a comparative stranger here, Citizen Lenoir, and have not yet proved to the Republic that you can do ought else but talk."

"If somebody did not talk, Citizen Tinville — is that your name?" rejoined Lenoir, with a sneer — "if somebody didn't talk, nothing would get done. You all sit here, and condemn the Citizen-Deputy Merlin for being a fool, and I must say I am with you there, but ..."

"*Pardi!* tell us your 'but' citizen," said Tinville, for the coal-heaver had paused, as if trying to collect his thoughts. He had dragged a wine barrel to collect his thoughts. He had dragged a wine barrel close to the trestle table, and now sat astride upon it, facing Tinville and the group of Jacobins. The flickering tallow candle behind him threw into bold silhouette his square, massive head, crowned with its Phrygian cap, and the great breadth of his shoulders, with the shabby knitted spencer and low, turned-down collar.

He had long, thin hands, which were covered with successive coats of coal dust, and with these he constantly made weird gestures, as if in the act of gripping some live thing by the throat.

"We all know that the Deputy Déroulède is a traitor, eh?" he said, addressing the company in general.

"We do," came with uniform assent from all those present.

"Then let us put it to the vote. The Ayes mean death, the Noes freedom."

"Ay, ay!" came from every hoarse, parched throat; and twelve gaunt hands were lifted up demanding death for Citizen-Deputy Déroulède.

"The Ayes have it," said Lenoir quietly, "Now all we need do is to decide how best to carry out our purpose."

Merlin, very agreeably surprised to see public attention thus diverted from his own misdeeds, had gradually lost his surly attitude. He too dragged one of the wine barrels, which did duty for chairs, close to the trestle table, and thus the members of the nameless Jacobin club made a compact group, picturesque in its weird horror, its uncompromising, flaunting ugliness.

"I suppose," said Tinville, who was loth to give up his position as leader of these extremists — "I suppose, Citizen Lenoir, that you are in position to furnish me with proofs of the Citizen-Deputy's guilt?"

"If I furnish you with such proofs, Citizen Tinville," retorted the other, "will you, as Public Prosecutor, carry the indictment through?"

"It is my duty to publicly accuse those who are traitors to the Republic."

"And you, Citizen Merlin," queried Lenoir, "will you help the Republic to the best of your ability to be rid of a traitor?"

"My services to the cause of our great Revolution are too well known —" began Merlin.

But Lenoir interrupted him with impatience.

"*Pardi!* but we'll have no rhetoric now, Citizen Merlin. We all know that you have blundered, and that the Republic cares little for those of her sons who have failed, but whilst you are still Minister of Justice the people of France have need of you — for bringing *other* traitors to the guillotine."

He spoke this last phrase slowly and significantly, lingering on the word "other," as if he wished its whole awesome meaning to penetrate well into Merlin's brain.

"What is your advice then, Citizen Lenoir?"

Apparently, by unanimous consent, the coalheaver, from some obscure province of France, had been tacitly acknowledged the leader of the band. Merlin, still in terror for himself, looked to him for advice; even Tinville was ready to be guided by him. All were at one in their desire to rid themselves of Déroulède, who by his clean living, his aloofness from their own hideous orgies and deadly hates, seemed a living reproach to them all; and they all felt that in Lenoir there must exist some secret dislike of the popular Citizen-Deputy, which would give him a clear insight of how best to bring about his downfall.

"What is your advice?" had been Merlin's query, and everyone there listened eagerly for what was to come.

"We are all agreed," commenced Lenoir quietly, "that just at this moment it would be unwise to arraign the Citizen-Deputy without material proof. The mob of Paris worship him, and would turn against those who had tried to dethrone their idol. Now, Citizen Merlin failed to furnish us with proofs of Déroulède's guilt. For the moment he is a free man, and I imagine a wise one; within two days he will have quitted this country, well knowing that, if he stayed long enough to see his popularity wane, he would also outstay his welcome on earth altogether."

"Ay! Ay!" said some of the men approvingly, whilst others laughed hoarsely at the weird jest.

"I propose, therefore," continued Lenoir after a slight pause, "that it shall be Citizen-Deputy Déroulède himself who shall furnish to the people of France proofs of his own treason against the Republic."

"But how? But how?" rapid, loud and excited queries greeted this extraordinary suggestion from the provincial giant.

"By the simplest means imaginable," retorted Lenoir with imperturbable calm. "Isn't there a good proverb which our grandmothers used to quote, that if you only give a man a sufficient length of rope, he is sure to hang himself? We'll give our aristocratic Citizen-Deputy plenty of rope, I'll warrant, if only our present Minister of Justice," he added, indicating Merlin, "will help us in the little comedy which I propose that we should play."

"Yes! Yes! Go on!" said Merlin excitedly.

"The woman who denounced Déroulède — that is our trump card," continued Lenoir, now waxing enthusiastic with his own scheme and his own eloquence. "She denounced him. Ergo, he had been her lover, whom she wished to be rid of — why? Not, as

Citizen Merlin supposed, because he had discarded her. No, no; she had another lover — she has admitted that. She wished to be rid of Déroulède to make way for the other, because he was too persistent — ergo, because he loved her.”

“Well, and what does that prove?” queried Tinville with dry sarcasm.

“It proves that Déroulède, being in love with the woman, would do much to save her from the guillotine.”

“Of course.”

“*Pardi!* let him try, say I,” rejoined Lenoir placidly. “Give him the rope with which to hang himself.”

“What does he mean?” asked one or two of the men, whose dull brains had not quite as yet grasped the full meaning of this monstrous scheme.

“You don’t understand what I mean, citizens; you think I am mad, or drunk, or a traitor like Déroulède? *Eh bien!* give me your attention five minutes longer, and you shall see. Let me suppose that we have reached the moment when the woman — what is her name? Oh! ah! yes! Juliette Marny — stands in the Hall of Justice on her trial before the Committee of Public Safety. Citizen Fouquier-Tinville, one of our greatest patriots, reads the indictment against her: the papers surreptitiously burnt, the torn, mysterious letter-case found in her room. If these are presumed, in the indictment, to be treasonable correspondence with the enemies of the Republic, condemnation follows at once, then the guillotine. There is no defence, no respite. The Minister of Justice, according to Article IX of the Law framed by himself, allows no advocate to those directly accused of treason. But,” continued the giant, with slow and calm impressiveness, “in the case of ordinary, civil indictments, offences against public morality or matters pertaining to the penal code, the Minister of Justice allows the accused to be publicly defended. Place Juliette Marny in the dock on a treasonable charge, she will be hustled out of the court in a few minutes, amongst a batch of other traitors, dragged back to her own prison, and executed in the early dawn, before Déroulède has had time to frame a plan for her safety or defence. If, then, he tries to move heaven and earth to rescue the woman he loves, the mob of Paris may, — who knows? — take his part warmly. They are mad where Déroulède is concerned; and we all know that two devoted lovers have ere now found favour with the people of France — a curious remnant of sentimentalism, I suppose — and the popular Citizen-Deputy knows better than anyone else on earth, how to play upon the sentimental feelings of the populace. Now, in the case of a penal offence, mark where the difference would be! The woman Juliette Marny, arraigned for wantonness, for an offence against public morals; the burnt correspondence, admitted to be the letters of a lover — her hatred for Déroulède suggesting the false denunciation. Then the Minister of Justice allows an advocate to defend her. She has none in court; but think you Déroulède would not step forward, and bring all the fervour of his eloquence to bear in favour of his mistress? Can you hear his impassioned speech on her behalf? — I can — the rope, I tell you, citizens, with which he’ll hang himself. Will he admit in open court that the burnt correspondence was another lover’s letters? No! — a thousand times no! — and, in the face of his emphatic denial of the existence of another lover for Juliette, it will be for our clever Public Prosecutor to bring him down to an admission that the correspondence was his, that it was treasonable, that she burnt them to save him.”

He paused, exhausted at last, mopping his forehead, then drinking large gulps of brandy to ease his parched throat.

A veritable chorus of enthusiasm greeted the end of his long peroration. The Machiavelian scheme, almost devilish in its cunning, in its subtle knowledge of human nature and of the heart-strings of a noble organisation like Déroulède’s, commended itself to these patriots, who were thirsting for the downfall of a superior enemy.

Even Tinville lost his attitude of dry sarcasm; his thin cheeks were glowing with the lust of the fight.

Already for the past few months, the trials before the Committee of Public Safety had been dull, monotonous, uninteresting. Charlotte Corday had been a happy diversion, but otherwise it had been the case of various deputies, who had held views that had become too moderate, or of the generals who had failed to subdue the towns or provinces of the south.

But now this trial on the morrow — the excitement of it all, the trap laid for Déroulède, the pleasure of seeing him take the first step towards his own downfall. Everyone there was eager and enthusiastic for the fray. Lenoir, having spoken at such length, had now become silent, but everyone else talked, and drank brandy, and hugged his own hate and likely triumph.

For several hours, far into the night, the sitting was continued. Each one of the score of members had some comment to make on Lenoir’s speech, some suggestion to offer.

Lenoir himself was the first to break up this weird gathering of human jackals, already exulting over their prey. He bad his companions a quiet good-night, then passed out into the dark street.

After he had gone there were a few seconds of complete silence in the dark and sordid room, where men’s ugliest passions were holding absolute sway. The giant’s heavy footsteps echoed along the ill-paved street, and gradually died away in the distance.

Then at last Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, spoke:

“And who is that man?” he asked, addressing the assembly of patriots.

Most of them did not know.

“A provincial from the north,” said one of the men at last; “he has been here several times before now, and last year he was a fairly constant attendant. I believe he is a butcher by trade, and I fancy he comes from Calais. He was originally brought here by Citizen Brogard, who is good patriot enough.”

One by one the members of this bond of Fraternity began to file out of the Cheval Borgne. They nodded curt good-nights to each other, and then went to their respective abodes, which surely could not be dignified with the name of home.

Tinville remained one of the last; he and Merlin seemed suddenly to have buried the hatchet, which a few hours ago had threatened to destroy one or the other of these whilom bosom friends.

Two or three of the most ardent of these ardent extremists had gathered round the Public Prosecutor, and Merlin, the framer of the Law of the Suspect.

“What say you, citizens?” said Tinville at last quietly. “That man Lenoir, meseems, is too eloquent — eh?”

“Dangerous,” pronounced Merlin, whilst the others nodded approval.

“But his scheme is good,” suggested one of the men.

“And we’ll avail ourselves of it,” assented Tinville, “but afterwards ...”

He paused, and once more everyone nodded approval.

“Yes; he is dangerous. We’ll leave him in peace to-morrow, but afterwards ...”

With a gentle hand Tinville caressed the tall double post, which stood in the centre of the room, and which was shaped like the guillotine. An evil look was on his face: the grin of a death-dealing monster, savage and envious. The others laughed in grim content. Merlin grunted a surly approval. He had no cause to love the provincial coal-heaver who had raised a raucous voice to threaten him.

Then, nodding to one another, the last of the patriots, satisfied with this night’s work, passed out into the night.

The watchman was making his rounds, carrying his lantern, and shouting his customary cry:

“Inhabitants of Paris, sleep quietly. Everything is in order, everything is at peace.”

CHAPTER XXII

The close of day.

Déroulède had spent the whole of this same night in a wild, impassioned search for Juliette.

Earlier in the day, soon after Anne Mie's revelations, he had sought out his English friend, Sir Percy Blakeney, and talked over with him the final arrangements for the removal of Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie from Paris.

Though he was a born idealist and a Utopian, Paul Déroulède had never for a moment had any illusions with regard to his own popularity. He knew that at any time, and for any trivial cause, the love which the mob bore him would readily turn to hate. He had seen Mirabeau's popularity wane, La Fayette's, Desmoulin's — was it likely that *he* alone would survive the inevitable death of so ephemeral a thing?

Therefore, whilst he was in power, whilst he was loved and trusted, he had, figuratively and actually, put his house in order. He had made full preparations for his own inevitable downfall, for that probable flight from Paris of those who were dependent upon him.

He had, as far back as a year ago, provided himself with the necessary passports, and bespoken with his English friend certain measures for the safety of his mother and his crippled little relative. Now it was merely a question of putting these measures into execution.

Within two hours of Juliette Marny's arrest, Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie had quitted the house in the Rue Ecole de Médecine. They had but little luggage with them, and were ostensibly going into the country to visit a sick cousin.

The mother of the popular Citizen-Deputy was free to travel unmolested. The necessary passports which the safety of the Republic demanded were all in perfect order, and Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie passed through the north gate of Paris an hour before sunset, on that 24th day of Fructidor.

Their large travelling chaise took them some distance on the North Road, where they were to meet Lord Hastings and Lord Anthony Dewhurst, two of The Scarlet Pimpernel's most trusted lieutenants, who were to escort them as far as the coast, and thence see them safely aboard the English yacht.

On that score, therefore, Déroulède had no anxiety. His chief duty was to his mother and to Anne Mie, and that was now fully discharged.

Then there was old Pétronelle.

Ever since the arrest of her young mistress the poor old soul had been in a state of mind bordering on frenzy, and no amount of eloquence on Déroulède's part would persuade her to quit Paris without Juliette.

"If my pet lamb is to die," she said amidst heart-broken sobs, "then I have no cause to live. Let those devils take me along too, if they want a useless, old woman like me. But if my darling is allowed to go free, then what would become of her in this awful city without me? She and I have never been separated; she wouldn't know where to turn for a home. And who would cook for her and iron out her kerchiefs, I'd like to know?"

Reason and common sense were, of course, powerless in face of this sublime and heroic childishness. No one had the heart to tell the old woman that the murderous dog of the Revolution seldom loosened its fangs, once they had closed upon a victim.

All Déroulède could do was to convey Pétronelle to the old abode, which Juliette had quitted in order to come to him, and which had never been formally given up. The worthy soul, calmed and refreshed, deluded herself into the idea that she was waiting for the return of her young mistress, and became quite cheerful at sight of the familiar room.

Déroulède had provided her with money and necessities. He had but few remaining hopes in his heart, but among them was the firmly implanted one that Pétronelle was too insignificant to draw upon herself the terrible attention of the Committee of Public Safety.

By the nightfall he had seen the good woman safely installed. Then only did he feel free.

At last he could devote himself to what seemed to him the one, the only, aim of his life — to find Juliette.

A dozen prisons in this vast Paris!

Over five thousand prisoners on that night, awaiting trial, condemnation and death.

Déroulède at first, strong in his own power, his personality, had thought that the task would be comparatively easy.

At the Palais de Justice they would tell him nothing: the list of new arrests had not yet been handled in by the commandant of Paris, Citizen Santerre, who classified and docketed the miserable herd of aspirants for the next day's guillotine.

The lists, moreover, would not be completed until the next day, when the trials of the new prisoners would already be imminent.

The work of the Committee of Public Safety was done without much delay.

Then began Déroulède's weary quest through those twelve prisons of Paris. From the Temple to the Conciergerie, from Palais Condé to the Luxembourg, he spent hours in the fruitless search.

Everywhere the same shrug of the shoulders, the same indifferent reply to his eager query:

"Juliette Marny? *Inconnue*."

Unknown! She had not yet been docketed, not yet classified; she was still one of that immense flock of cattle, sent in ever-increasing numbers to the slaughter-house.

Presently, to-morrow, after a trial which might last ten minutes, after a hasty condemnation and quick return to prison, she would be listed as one of the traitors, whom this great and beneficent Republic sent daily to the guillotine.

Vainly did Déroulède try to persuade, to entreat, to bribe. The sullen guardians of these twelve charnel-houses knew nothing of individual prisoners.

But the Citizen-Deputy was allowed to look for himself. He was conducted to the great vaulted rooms of the Temple, to the vast ballrooms of the Palais Condé, where herded the condemned and those still awaiting trial; he was allowed to witness there the grim farcical tragedies, with which the captives beguiled the few hours which separated them from death.

Mock trials were acted there; Tinville was mimicked; then the Place de la Révolution; Samson the headsman, with a couple of inverted chairs to represent the guillotine.

Daughters of dukes and princes, descendants of ancient lineage, acted in these weird and ghastly comedies. The ladies, with hair bound high over their heads, would kneel before the inverted chairs, and place the snowwhite necks beneath this imaginary guillotine. Speeches were delivered to a mock populace, whilst a mock Santerre ordered a mock roll of drums to drown the last flow of eloquence of the supposed victim.

Oh! the horror of it all — the pity, pathos, and misery of this ghastly parody, in the very face of the sublimity of death!

Déroulède shuddered when first he beheld the scene, shuddered at the very thought of finding Juliette amongst these careless, laughing, thoughtless mimes.

His own, his beautiful Juliette, with her proud face and majestic, queen-like gestures; it was a relief not to see her there.

“Juliette Marny? *Inconnue*,“ was the final word he heard about her.

No one told him that by Deputy Merlin’s strictest orders she had been labelled “dangerous,” and placed in a remote wing of the Luxembourg Palace, together with a few, who, like herself, were allowed to see no one, communicate with no one.

Then when the *couvre-feu* had sounded, when all public places were closed, when the night watchman had begun his rounds, Déroulède knew that his quest for that night must remain fruitless.

But he could not rest. In and out the tortuous streets of Paris he roamed during the better part of that night. He was now only awaiting the dawn to publicly demand the right to stand beside Juliette.

A hopeless misery was in his heart, a longing for a cessation of life; only one thing kept his brain active, his mind clear: the hope of saving Juliette.

The dawn was breaking in the far east when, wandering along the banks of the river, he suddenly felt a touch on his arm.

“Come to my hovel,” said a pleasant, lazy voice close to his ear, whilst a kindly hand seemed to drag him away from the contemplation of the dark, silent river. “And a demmed, beastly place it is too, but at least we can talk quietly there.”

Déroulède, roused from his meditation, looked up, to see his friend, Sir Percy Blakeney, standing close beside him. Tall, *débonnaire*, well-dressed, he seemed by his very presence to dissipate the morbid atmosphere which was beginning to weigh upon Déroulède’s active mind.

Déroulède followed him readily enough through, the intricate mazes of old Paris, and down the Rue des Arts, until Sir Percy stopped outside a small hostelry, the door of which stood wide open.

“Mine host has nothing to lose from footpads and thieves,” explained the Englishman as he guided his friend through the narrow doorway, then up a flight of rickety stairs, to a small room on the floor above. “He leaves all doors open for anyone to walk in, but, la! the interior of the house looks so uninviting that no one is tempted to enter.”

“I wonder you care to stay here,” remarked Déroulède, with a momentary smile, as he contrasted in his mind the fastidious appearance of his friend with the dinginess and dirt of these surroundings.

Sir Percy deposited his large person in the capacious depths of a creaky chair, stretched his long limbs out before him, and said quietly:

“I am only staying in this demmed hole until the moment when I can drag you out of this murderous city.”

Déroulède shook his head.

“You’d best go back to England, then,” he said, “for I’ll never leave Paris now.”

“Not without Juliette Marny, shall we say?” rejoined Sir Percy placidly.

“And I fear me that she has placed herself beyond our reach,” said Déroulède sombrely.

“You know that she is in the Luxembourg Prison?” queried the Englishman suddenly.

“I guessed it, but could find no proof.”

“And that she will be tried to-morrow?”

“They never keep a prisoner pining too long,” replied Déroulède bitterly. “I guessed that too.”

“What do you mean to do?”

“Defend her with the last breath in my body.”

“You love her still, then?” asked Blakeney, with a smile.

“Still?” The look, the accent, the agony of a hopeless passion conveyed in that one word, told Sir Percy Blakeney all that he wished to know.

“Yet she betrayed you,” he said tentatively.

“And to atone for that sin — an oath, mind you, friend, sworn to her father — she is already to give her life for me.”

“And you are prepared to forgive?”

“To understand *is* to forgive,” rejoined Déroulède simply, “and I love her.”

“Your madonna!” said Blakeney, with a gently ironical smile.

“No; the woman I love, with all her weaknesses, all her sins; the woman to gain whom I would give my soul, to save whom I will give my life.”

“And she?”

“She does not love me — would she have betrayed me else?”

He sat beside the table, and buried his head in his hands. Not even his dearest friend should see how much he had suffered, how deeply his love had been wounded.

Sir Percy said nothing, a curious, pleasant smile lurked round the corners of his mobile mouth. Through his mind there flitted the vision of beautiful Marguerite, who had so much loved yet so deeply wronged him, and, looking at his friend, he thought that Déroulède too would soon learn all the contradictions, which wage a constant war in the innermost recesses of a feminine heart.

He made a movement as if he would say something more, something of grave import, then seemed to think better of it, and shrugged his broad shoulders, as if to say:

“Let time and chance take their course now.”

When Déroulède looked up again Sir Percy was sitting placidly in the arm-chair, with an absolutely blank expression on his face.

“Now that you know how much I love her, my friend,” said Déroulède as soon as he had mastered his emotions, “will you look after her when they have condemned me, and save her for my sake?”

A curious, enigmatic smile suddenly illumined Sir Percy’s earnest countenance.

“Save her? Do you attribute supernatural powers to me, then, or to The League of The Scarlet Pimpernel?”

“To you, I think,” rejoined Déroulède seriously.

Once more it seemed as if Sir Percy were about to reveal something of great importance to his friend, then once more he checked himself. The Scarlet Pimpernel was, above all, far-seeing and practical, a man of action and not of impulse. The glowing eyes of his friend, his nervous, febrile movements, did not suggest that he was in a fit state to be entrusted with plans, the success of which hung on a mere thread.

Therefore Sir Percy only smiled, and said quietly:

“Well, I’ll do my best.”

CHAPTER XXIII

Justice.

The day had been an unusually busy one.

Five and thirty prisoners, arraigned before the bar of the Committee of Public Safety, had been tried in the last eight hours — an average of rather more than four to the hour; twelve minutes and a half in which to send a human creature, full of life and health, to solve the great enigma which lies hidden beyond the waters of the Styx.

And Citizen-Deputy Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, had surpassed himself. He seemed indefatigable.

Each of these five and thirty prisoners had been arraigned for treason against the Republic, for conspiracy with her enemies, and all had to have irrefutable proofs of their guilt brought before the Committee of Public Safety. Sometimes a few letters, written to friends abroad, and seized at the frontier; a word of condemnation of the measures of the extremists; and expression of horror at the massacres on the Place de la Révolution, where the guillotine creaked incessantly — these were irrefutable proofs; or else perhaps a couple of pistols, or an old family sword seized in the house of a peaceful citizen, would be brought against a prisoner, as an irrefutable proof of his warlike dispositions against the Republic.

Oh! it was not difficult!

Out of five and thirty indictments, Fouquier-Tinville had obtained thirty convictions.

No wonder his friends declared that he had surpassed himself. It had indeed been a glorious day, and the glow of satisfaction as much as the heat, caused the Public Prosecutors to mop his high, bony cranium before he had adjourned for the much-needed respite for refreshment.

The day's work was not yet done.

The "politicals" had been disposed of, and there had been such an accumulation of them recently that it was difficult to keep pace with the arrests.

And in the meanwhile the criminal record of the great city had not diminished. Because men butchered one another in the name of Equality, there were none the fewer among the Fraternity of thieves and petty pilferers, of ordinary cut-throats and public wantons.

And these too had to be dealt with by law. The guillotine was impartial, and fell with equal velocity on the neck of the proud duke and the gutter-born *fille de joie*, on a descendant of the Bourbons and the wastrel born in a brothel.

The ministerial decrees favoured the proletariat. A crime against the Republic was indefensible, but one against the individual was dealt with, with all the paraphernalia of an elaborate administration of justice. There were citizen judges and citizen advocates, and the rabble, who crowded in to listen to the trials, acted as honorary jury.

It was all thoroughly well done. The citizen criminals were given every chance.

The afternoon of this hot August day, one of the last of glorious Fructidor, had begun to wane, and the shades of evening to slowly creep into the long, bare room where this travesty of justice was being administered.

The Citizen-President sat at the extreme end of the room, on a rough wooden bench, with a desk in front of him littered with papers.

Just above him, on the bare, whitewashed wall, the words: "*La République: une et indivisible*," and below them the device: "*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité!*"

To the right and left of the Citizen-President, four clerks were busy making entries in that ponderous ledger, that amazing record of the foulest crimes the world has ever known, the "*Bulletin du Tribunal Révolutionnaire*."

At present no one is speaking, and the grating of the clerks' quill pens against the paper is the only sound which disturbs the silence of the hall.

In front of the President, on a bench lower than his, sits Citizen Fouquier-Tinville, rested and refreshed, ready to take up his occupation, for as many hours as his country demands it of him.

On every desk a tallow candle, smoking and spluttering, throws a weird light, and more weird shadows, on the faces of clerks and President, on blank walls and ominous devices.

In the centre of the room a platform surrounded by an iron railing is ready for the accused. Just in front of it, from the tall, raftered ceiling above, there hangs a small brass lamp, with a green *abat-jour*.

Each side of the long, whitewashed walls there are three rows of benches, beautiful old carved oak pews, snatched from Notre Dame and from the Churches of St Eustache and St Germain l'Auxerrois. Instead of the pious worshippers of mediaeval times, they now accommodate the lookers-on of the grim spectacle of unfortunates, in their brief halt before the scaffold.

The front row of these benches is reserved for those citizen-deputies who desire to be present at the debates of the Tribunal Révolutionnaire. It is their privilege, almost their duty, as representatives of the people, to see that the sittings are properly conducted.

These benches are already well filled. At one end, on the left, Citizen Merlin, Minister of Justice, sits; next to him Citizen-Minister Lebrun; also Citizen Robespierre, still in the height of his ascendancy, and watching the proceedings with those pale, watery eyes of his and that curious, disdainful smile, which have earned for him the nickname of "the sea-green incorruptible."

Other well-known faces are there also, dimly outlined in the fast-gathering gloom. But everyone notes Citizen-Deputy Déroulède, the idol of the people, as he sits on the extreme end of a bench on the right, with arms tightly folded across his chest, the light from the hanging lamp falling straight on his dark head and proud, straight brows, with the large, restless, eager eyes.

Anon the Citizen-President rings a hand-bell, and there is a discordant noise of hoarse laughter and loud curses, some pushing, jolting, and swearing, as the general public is admitted into the hall.

Heaven save us! What a rabble! Has humanity really such a scum?

Women with a single ragged kirtle and shift, through the interstices of which the naked, grime-covered flesh shows shamelessly: with bare legs, and feet thrust into heavy sabots, hair dishevelled, and evil, spirit-sodden faces: women without a semblance of womanhood, with shrivelled, barren breasts, and dry, parched lips, that have never known how to kiss. Women without emotion save

that of hate, without desire, save for the satisfaction of hunger and thirst, and lust for revenge against their sisters less wretched, less unsexed than themselves. They crowd in, jostling one another, swarming into the front rows of the benches, where they can get a better view of the miserable victims about to be pilloried before them.

And the men without a semblance of manhood. Bent under the heavy care of their own degradation, dead to pity, to love, to chivalry; dead to all save an inordinate longing for the sight of blood.

And God help them all! for there were the children too. Children — save the mark! — with pallid, precocious little faces, pinched with the ravages of starvation, gazing with dim, filmy eyes on this world of rapacity and hideousness. Children who have seen death!

Oh, the horror of it! Not beautiful, peaceful death, a slumber or a dream, a loved parent or fond sister or brother lying all in white amidst a wealth of flowers, but death in its most awesome aspect, violent, lurid, horrible.

And now they stare around them with eager, greedy eyes, awaiting the amusement of the spectacle; gazing at the President, with his tall Phrygian cap; at the clerks wielding their indefatigable quill pens, writing, writing, writing; at the flickering lights, throwing clouds of sooty smoke, up to the dark ceiling above.

Then suddenly the eyes of one little mite — a poor, tiny midget not yet in her teens — alight on Paul Déroulède's face, on the opposite side of the rooms.

"*Tiens! Papa Déroulède!*" she says, pointing an attenuated little finger across at him, and turning eagerly to those around her, her eyes dilating in wishful recollection of a happy afternoon spent in Papa Déroulède's house, with fine white bread to eat in plenty, and great jars of foaming milk.

He rouses himself from his apathy, and his great earnest eyes lose their look of agonised misery, as he responds to the greeting of the little one.

For one moment — oh! a mere fraction of a second — the squalid faces, the miserable, starved expressions of the crowd, soften at sight of him. There is a faint murmur among the women, which perhaps God's recording angel registered as a blessing. Who knows?

Foucquier-Tinville suppresses a sneer, and the Citizen-President impatiently rings his hand-bell again.

"Bring forth the accused!" he commands in stentorian tones.

There is a movement of satisfaction among the crowd, and the angel of God is forced to hide his face again.

CHAPTER XXIV

The trial of Juliette.

It is all indelibly placed on record in the “Bulletin du Tribunal Révolutionnaire,” under date 25th Fructidor, year I. of the Revolution.

Anyone who cares may read, for the Bulletin is in the Archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris.

One by one the accused had been brought forth, escorted by two men of the National Guard in ragged, stained uniforms of red, white, and blue; they were then conducted to the small raised platform in the centre of the hall, and made to listen to the charge brought against them by Citizen Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor.

They were petty charges mostly: pilfering, fraud, theft, occasionally arson or manslaughter. One man, however, was arraigned for murder with highway robbery, and a woman for the most ignoble traffic, which evil feminine ingenuity could invent.

These two were condemned to the guillotine, the others sent to the galleys at Brest or Toulon — the forger along with the petty thief, the housebreaker with the absconding clerk.

There was no room in the prison for ordinary offences against the criminal code; they were overfilled already with so-called traitors against the Republic.

Three women were sent to the penitentiary at the Salpêtrière, and were dragged out of the court shrilly protesting their innocence, and followed by obscene jeers from the spectators on the benches.

Then there was a momentary hush.

Juliette Marny had been brought in.

She was quite calm, and exquisitely beautiful, dressed in a plain grey bodice and kirtle, with a black band round her slim waist and a soft white kerchief folded across her bosom. Beneath the tiny, white cap her golden hair appeared in dainty, curly profusion; her child-like, oval face was very white, but otherwise quite serene.

She seemed absolutely unconscious of her surroundings, and walked with a firm step up to the platform, looking neither to the right nor to the left of her.

Therefore she did not see Déroulède. A great, a wonderful radiance seemed to shine in her large eyes — the radiance of self-sacrifice.

She was offering not only her life, but everything a woman of refinement holds most dear, for the safety of the man she loved.

A feeling that was almost physical pain, so intense was it, overcame Déroulède, when at last he heard her name loudly called by the Public Prosecutor.

All day he had waited for this awful moment, forgetting his own misery, his own agonised feeling of an irretrievable loss, in the horrible thought of what *she* would endure, what *she* would think, when first she realised the terrible indignity, which was to be put upon her.

Yet for the sake of her, of her chances of safety and of ultimate freedom, it was undoubtedly best that it should be so.

Arraigned for conspiracy against the Republic, she was liable to secret trial, to be brought up, condemned, and executed before he could even hear of her whereabouts, before he could throw himself before her judges and take all guilt upon himself.

Those suspected of treason against the Republic forfeited, according to Merlin's most iniquitous Law, their rights of citizenship, in publicity of trial and in defence.

It all might have been finished before Déroulède knew anything of it.

The other way was, of course, more terrible. Brought forth amongst the scum of criminal Paris, on a charge, the horror of which, he could but dimly hope that she was too innocent to fully understand, he dared not even think of what she would suffer.

But undoubtedly it was better so.

The mud thrown at her robes of purity could never cling to her, and at least her trial would be public; he would be there to take all infamy, all disgrace, all opprobrium on himself.

The strength of his appeal would turn her judges' wrath from her to him; and after these few moments of misery, she would be free to leave Paris, France, to be happy, and to forget him and the memory of him.

An overwhelming, all-compelling love filled his entire soul for the beautiful girl, who had so wronged, yet so nobly tried to save him. A longing for her made his very sinews ache; she was no longer madonna, and her beauty thrilled him, with the passionate, almost sensuous desire to give his life for her.

The indictment against Juliette Marny has become history now.

On that day, the 25th Fructidor, at seven o'clock in the evening, it was read out by the Public Prosecutor, and listened to by the accused — so the Bulletin tells us — with complete calm and apparent indifference. She stood up in that same pillory where once stood poor, guilty Charlotte Corday, where presently would stand proud, guiltless Marie Antoinette.

And Déroulède listened to the scurrilous document, with all the outward calm his strength of will could command. He would have liked to rise from his seat then and there, at once, and in mad, purely animal fury have, with a blow of his fist, quashed the words in Fouquier-Tinville's lying throat.

But for her sake he was bound to listen, and, above all, to act quietly, deliberately, according to form and procedure, so as in no way to imperil her cause.

Therefore he listened whilst the Public Prosecutor spoke.

“Juliette Marny, you are hereby accused of having, by a false and malicious denunciation, slandered the person of a representative of the people; you caused the Revolutionary Tribunal, through this same mischievous act, to bring a charge against this representative of the people, to institute a domiciliary search in his house, and to waste valuable time, which otherwise belonged to the service of the Republic. And this you did, not from a misguided sense of duty towards your country, but in wanton and impure spirit, to be rid of the surveillance of one who had your welfare at heart, and who tried to prevent your leading the immoral life which had become a public

scandal, and which has now brought you before this court of justice, to answer to a charge of wantonness, impurity, defamation of character, and corruption of public morals. In proof of which I now place before the court your own admission, that more than one citizen of the Republic has been led by you into immoral relationship with yourself; and further, your own admission, that your accusation against Citizen-Deputy Déroulède was false and mischievous; and further, and finally, your immoral and obscene correspondence with some persons unknown, which you vainly tried to destroy. In consideration of which, and in the name of the people of France, whose spokesman I am, I demand that you be taken hence from this Hall of Justice to the Place de la Révolution, in full view of the citizens of Paris and its environs, and clad in a soiled white garment, emblem of the smirch upon your soul, that there you be publicly whipped by the hands of Citizen Samson, the public executioner; after which, that you be taken to the prison of the Salpêtrière, there to be further detained at the discretion of the Committee of Public Safety. And now, Juliette Marny, you have heard the indictment preferred against you, have you anything to say, why the sentence which I have demanded shall not be passed upon you?"

Jeers, shouts, laughter, and curses greeted this speech of the Public Prosecutor.

All that was most vile and most bestial in this miserable, misguided people struggling for Utopia and Liberty, seemed to come to the surface, whilst listening to the reading of this most infamous document.

The delight of seeing this beautiful, ethereal woman, almost unearthly in her proud aloofness, smirched with the vilest mud to which the vituperation of man can contrive to sink, was a veritable treat to the degraded wretches.

The women yelled hoarse approval; the children, not understanding, laughed in mirthless glee; the men, with loud curses, showed their appreciation of Fouquier-Tinville's speech.

As for Déroulède, the mental agony he endured surpassed any torture which the devils, they say, reserve for the damned. His sinews cracked in his frantic efforts to control himself; he dug his finger-nails into his flesh, trying by physical pain to drown the sufferings of his mind.

He thought that his reason was tottering, that he would go mad if he heard another word of this infamy. The hooting and yelling of that filthy mob sounded like the cries of lost souls, shrieking from hell. All his pity for them was gone, his love for humanity, his devotion to the suffering poor.

A great, an immense hatred for this ghastly Revolution and the people it professed to free filled his whole being, together with a mad, hideous desire to see them suffer, starve, die a miserable, loathsome death. The passion of hate, that now overwhelmed his soul, was at least as ugly as theirs. He was, for one brief moment, now at one with them in their inordinate lust for revenge.

Only Juliette throughout all this remained calm, silent, impassive.

She had heard the indictment, heard the loathsome sentence, for her white cheeks had gradually become ashy pale, but never for a moment did she depart from her attitude of proud aloofness.

She never once turned her head towards the mob who insulted her. She waited in complete passiveness until the yelling and shouting had subsided, motionless save for her finger-tips, which beat an impatient tattoo upon the railing in front of her.

The Bulletin says that she took out her handkerchief and wiped her face with it. *Elle s'essuya le front qui fut perlé de sueur.* The heat had become oppressive.

The atmosphere was overcharged with the dank, penetrating odour of steaming, dirty clothes. The room, though vast, was close and suffocating, the tallow candles flickering in the humid, hot air threw the faces of the President and clerks into bold relief, with curious caricature effects of light and shade.

The petrol lamp above the head of the accused had flared up, and begun to smoke, causing the chimney to crack with a sharp report. This diversion effected a momentary silence among the crowd, and the Public Prosecutor was able to repeat his query:

"Juliette Marny, have you anything to say in reply to the charge brought against you, and why the sentence which I have demanded should not be passed against you?"

The sooty smoke from the lamp came down in small, black, greasy particles; Juliette with her slender finger-tips flicked one of these quietly off her sleeve, then she replied:

"No; I have nothing to say."

"Have you instructed an advocate to defend you, according to your rights of citizenship, which the Law allows?" added the Public Prosecutor solemnly.

Juliette would have replied at once; her mouth had already framed the No with which she meant to answer.

But now at last had come Déroulède's hour. For this he had been silent, had suffered and had held his peace, whilst twice twenty-four hours had dragged their weary lengths along, since the arrest of the woman he loved.

In a moment he was on his feet before them all, accustomed to speak, to dominate, to command.

"Citiziness Juliette Marny has entrusted me with her defence," he said, even before the No had escaped Juliette's white lips, "and I am here to refute the charges brought against her, and to demand in the name of the people of France full acquittal and justice for her."

CHAPTER XXV

The defence.

Intense excitement, which found vent in loud applause, greeted Déroulède's statement.

"*Ça ira! ça ira! vas-y Déroulède!*" came from the crowded benches round; and men, women, and children, wearied with the monotony of the past proceedings, settled themselves down for a quarter of an hour's keen enjoyment.

If Déroulède had anything to do with it, the trial was sure to end in excitement. And the people were always ready to listen to their special favourite.

The citizen-deputies, drowsy after the long, oppressive day, seemed to rouse themselves to renewed interest. Lebrun, like a big, shaggy dog, shook himself free from creeping somnolence. Robespierre smiled between his thin lips, and looked across at Merlin to see how the situation affected him. The enmity between the Minister of Justice and Citizen Déroulède was well known, and everyone noted, with added zest, that the former wore a keen look of anticipated triumph.

High up, on one of the topmost benches, sat Citizen Lenoir, the stage-manager of this palpitating drama. He looked down, with obvious satisfaction, at the scene which he himself had suggested last night to the members of the Jacobin Club. Merlin's sharp eyes had tried to pierce the gloom, which wrapped the crowd of spectators, searching vainly to distinguish the broad figure and massive head of the provincial giant.

The light from the petrol lamp shone full on Déroulède's earnest, dark countenance as he looked Juliette's infamous accuser full in the face, but the tallow candles, flickering weirdly on the President's desk, threw Tinville's short, spare figure and large, unkempt head into curious grotesque silhouette.

Juliette apparently had lost none of her calm, and there was no one there sufficiently interested in her personality to note the tinge of delicate colour which, at the first word of Déroulède, had slowly mounted to her pale cheeks.

Tinville waited until the wave of excitement had broken upon the shoals of expectancy.

Then he resumed:

"Then, Citizen Déroulède, what have *you* to say, why sentence should not be passed upon the accused?"

"I have to say that the accused is innocent of every charge brought against her in your indictment," replied Déroulède firmly.

"And how do you substantiate this statement, Citizen-Deputy?" queried Tinville, speaking with mock unctuousness.

"Very simply, Citizen Tinville. The correspondence to which you refer did not belong to the accused, but to me. It consisted of certain communications, which I desired to hold with Marie Antoinette, now a prisoner in the Conciergerie, during my state there as lieutenant-governor. The Citizeness Juliette Marny, by denouncing me, was serving the Republic, for my communications with Marie Antoinette had reference to my own hopes of seeing her quit this country and take refuge in her own native land."

Gradually, as Déroulède spoke, a murmur, like the distant roar of a monstrous breaker, rose among the crowd on the upper benches. As he continued quietly and firmly, so it grew in volume and in intensity, until his last words were drowned in one mighty, thunderous shout of horror and execration.

Déroulède, the friend and idol of the people, the privileged darling of this unruly population, the father of the children, the friend of the women, the sympathiser in all troubles, Papa Déroulède as the little ones called him — he a traitor, self-accused, plotting and planning for an ex-tyrant, a harlot who had called herself a queen, for Marie Antoinette the Austrian, who had desired and worked for the overthrow of France! He, Déroulède, a traitor!

In one moment, as he spoke, the love which in their crude hearts they bore him, that animal primitive love, was turned to sudden, equally irresponsible hate. He had deceived them, laughed at them, tried to bribe them by feeding their little ones!

Bah! the bread of the traitor! It might have choked the children.

Surprise at first had taken their breath away. Already they had marvelled why he should stand up to defend a wanton. And now, probably feeling that he was on the point of being found out, he thought it better to make a clean breast of his own treason, trusting in his popularity, in his power over the people.

Bah!!!

Not one extenuating circumstance did they find in their hardened hearts for him.

He had been their idol, enshrined in their squalid, degraded minds, and now he had fallen, shattered beyond recall, and they hated and loathed him as much as they had loved him before.

And this his enemies noted, and smiled with complete satisfaction.

Merlin heaved a sigh of relief. Tinville nodded his shaggy head, in token of intense delight.

What that provincial coal-heaver had foretold had indeed come to pass.

The populace, that most fickle of all fickle things in this world, had turned all at once against its favourite. This Lenoir had predicted, and the transition had been even more rapid than he had anticipated.

Déroulède had been given a length of rope, and, figuratively speaking, had already hanged himself.

The reality was a mere matter of a few hours now. At dawn to-morrow the guillotine; and the mob of Paris, who yesterday would have torn his detractors limb from limb, would on the morrow be dragging him, with hoots and yells and howls of execration, to the scaffold.

The most shadowy of all footholds, that of the whim of a populace, had already given way under him. His enemies knew it, and were exulting in their triumph. He knew it himself, and stood up, calmly defiant, ready for any event, if only he succeeded in snatching her beautiful head from the ready embrace of the guillotine.

Juliette herself had remained as if entranced. The colour had again fled from her cheeks, leaving them paler, more ashen than before. It seemed as if in this moment she suffered more than human creature could bear, more than any torture she had undergone hitherto.

He would not owe his life to her.

That was the one overwhelming thought in her, which annihilated all others. His love for her was dead, and he would not accept the great sacrifice at her hands.

Thus these two in the supreme moment of their life saw each other, yet did not understand. A word, a touch would have given them both the key to one another's heart, and it now seemed as if death would part them for ever, whilst that great enigma remained unsolved.

The Public Prosecutor had been waiting until the noise had somewhat subsided, and his voice could be heard above the din, then he said, with a smile of ill-concealed satisfaction:

"And is the court, then, to understand, Citizen-Deputy Déroulède, that it was you who tried to burn the treasonable correspondence and to destroy the case which contained it?"

"The treasonable correspondence was mine, and it was I who destroyed it."

"But the accused admitted before Citizen Merlin that she herself was trying to burn certain love letters, that would have brought to light her illicit relationship with another man than yourself," argued Tinville suavely. The rope was perhaps not quite long enough; Déroulède must have all that could be given him, ere this memorable sitting was adjourned.

Déroulède, however, instead of directing his reply straight to his enemy, now turned towards the dense crowd of spectators, on the benches opposite to him.

"Citizens, friends, brothers," he said warmly, "the accused is only a girl, young, innocent knowing nothing of peril or of sin. You all have mothers, sisters, daughters — have you not watched those dear to you in the many moods of which a feminine heart is capable; have you not seen them affectionate, tender, and impulsive? Would you love them so dearly but for the fickleness of their moods? Have you not worshipped them in your hearts, for those sublime impulses which put all man's plans and calculations to shame? Look on the accused, citizens. She loves the Republic, the people of France, and feared that I, an unworthy representative of her sons, was hatching treason against our great mother. That was her first wayward impulse — to stop me before I committed the awful crime, to punish me, or perhaps only to warn me. Does a young girl calculate, citizens? She acts as her heart dictates; her reason but awakes from slumber later on, when the act is done. Then comes repentance sometimes: another impulse of tenderness which we all revere. Would you extract vinegar from rose leaves? Just as readily could you find reason in a young girl's head. Is that a crime? She wished to thwart me in my treason; then, seeing me in peril, the sincere friendship she had for me gained the upper hand once more. She loved my mother, who might be losing a son; she loved my crippled foster-sister; for *their* sakes, not for mine — a traitor's — did she yield to another, a heavenly impulse, that of saving me from the consequences of my own folly. Was *that* a crime, citizens? When you are ailing, do not your mothers, sisters, wives tend you? when you are seriously ill, would they not give their heart's blood to save you? and when, in the dark hours of your lives, some deed which you would not openly avow before the world overweighs your soul with its burden of remorse, is it not again your womenkind who come to you, with tender words and soothing voices, trying to ease your aching conscience, bringing solace, comfort, and peace? And so it was with the accused, citizens. She had seen my crime, and longed to punish it; she saw those who had befriended her in sorrow, and she tried to ease their pain by taking *my* guilt upon her shoulders. She has suffered for the noble lie, which she had told on my behalf, as no woman has ever been made to suffer before. She has stood, white and innocent as your new-born children, in the pillory of infamy. She was ready to endure death, and what was ten thousand times worse than death, because of her own warm-hearted affection. But you, citizens of France, who, above all, are noble, true, and chivalrous, you will not allow the sweet impulses of young and tender womanhood to be punished with the ban of felony. To you, women of France, I appeal in the name of your childhood, your girlhood, your motherhood; take her to your hearts, she is worthy of it, worthier now for having blushed before you, worthier than any heroine in the great roll of honour of France."

His magnetic voice went echoing along the rafters of the great, sordid Hall of Justice, filling it with a glory it had never known before. His enthusiasm thrilled his hearers, his appeal to their honour and chivalry roused all the finer feelings within them. Still hating him for his treason, his magical appeal had turned their hearts towards her.

They had listened to him without interruption, and now at last, when he paused, it was very evident, by muttered exclamations and glances cast at Juliette, that popular feeling, which up to the present had practically ignored her, now went out towards her personality with overwhelming sympathy.

Obviously at the present moment, if Juliette's fate had been put to the plebiscite, she would have been unanimously acquitted.

Merlin, as Déroulède spoke, had once or twice tried to read his friend Fouquier-Tinville's enigmatical expression, but the Public Prosecutor, with his face in deep shadow, had not moved a muscle during the Citizen-Deputy's noble peroration. He sat at his desk, chin resting on hand, staring before him with an expression of indifference, almost of boredom.

Now, when Déroulède finished speaking, and the outburst of human enthusiasm had somewhat subsided, he rose slowly to his feet, and said quietly:

"So you maintain, Citizen-Deputy, that the accused is a chaste and innocent girl, unjustly charged with immorality?"

"I do," protested Déroulède loudly.

"And will you tell the court why you are so ready to publicly accuse yourself of treason against the Republic, knowing full well all the consequences of your action?"

"Would any Frenchman care to save his own life at the expense of a woman's honour?" retorted Déroulède proudly.

A murmur of approval greeted these words, and Tinville remarked unctuously:

"Quite so, quite so. We esteem your chivalry, Citizen-Deputy. The same spirit, no doubt, actuates you to maintain that the accused knew nothing of the papers which you say you destroyed?"

"She knew nothing of them. I destroyed them; I did not know that they had been found; on my return to my house I discovered that the Citizeness Juliette Marny had falsely accused herself of having destroyed some papers surreptitiously."

"She said they were love letters."

"It is false."

"You declare her to be pure and chaste?"

"Before the whole world."

"Yet you were in the habit of frequenting the bedroom of this pure and chaste girl, who dwelt under your roof," said Tinville with slow and deliberate sarcasm.

"It is false."

"If it be false, Citizen Déroulède," continued the other with the same unctuous suavity, "then how comes it that the correspondence which you admit was treasonable, and therefore presumably secret — how comes it that it was found, still smouldering, in the chaste young woman's bedroom, and the torn letter-case concealed among her dresses in a valise?"

"It is false."

"The Minister of Justice, Citizen-Deputy Merlin, will answer for the truth of that."

"It is the truth," said Juliette quietly.

Her voice rang out clear, almost triumphant, in the midst of the breathless pause, caused by the previous swift questions and loud answers.

Déroulède now was silent.

This one simple fact he did not know. Anne Mie, in telling him the events in connection with the arrest of Juliette, had omitted to give him the one little detail, that the burnt letters were found in the young girl's bedroom.

Up to the moment when the Public Prosecutor confronted him with it, he had been under the impression that she had destroyed the papers and the letter-case in the study, where she had remained alone after Merlin and his men had left the room. She could easily have burnt them there, as a tiny spirit lamp was always kept alight on a side table for the use of smokers.

This little fact now altered the entire course of events. Tinville had but to frame an indignant ejaculation:

"Citizens of France, see how you are being befooled and hoodwinked!"

Then he turned once more to Déroulède.

"Citizen Déroulède ..." he began.

But in the tumult that ensued he could no longer hear his own voice. The pent-up rage of the entire mob of Paris seemed to find vent for itself in the howls with which the crowd now tried to drown the rest of the proceedings.

As their brutish hearts had been suddenly melted on behalf of Juliette, in response to Déroulède's passionate appeal, so now they swiftly changed their sympathetic attitude to one of horror and execration.

Two people had fooled and deceived them. One of these they had revered and trusted, as much as their degraded minds were capable of reverencing anything, therefore *his* sin seemed doubly damnable.

He and that pale-face aristocrat had for weeks now, months, or years perhaps, conspired against the Republic, against the Revolution, which had been made by a people thirsting for liberty. During these months and years *he* had talked to them, and they had listened; he had poured forth treasures of eloquence, cajoled them, as he had done just now.

The noise and hubbub were growing apace. If Tinville and Merlin had desired to infuriate the mob, they had more than succeeded. All that was most bestial, most savage in this awful Parisian populace rose to the surface now in one wild, mad desire for revenge.

The crowd rushed down from the benches, over one another's heads, over children's fallen bodies; they rushed down because they wanted to get at him, their whilom favourite, and at his pale-faced mistress, and tear them to pieces, hit them, scratch out their eyes. They snarled like so many wild beasts, the women shrieked, the children cried, and the men of the National Guard, hurrying forward, had much ado to keep back this flood-tide of hate.

Had any of them broken loose, from behind the barrier of bayonets hastily raised against them, it would have fared ill with Déroulède and Juliette.

The President wildly rang his bell, and his voice, quivering with excitement, was heard once or twice above the din.

"Clear the court! Clear the court!"

But the people refused to be cleared out of court.

"*A la lanterne les traîtres! Mort à Déroulède. A la lanterne! l'aristo!*"

And in the thickest of the crowd, the broad shoulders and massive head of Citizen Lenoir towered above the others.

At first it seemed as if he had been urging on the mob in its fury. His strident voice, with its broad provincial accent, was heard distinctly shouting loud vituperations against the accused.

Then at a given moment, when the tumult was at its height, when the National Guard felt their bayonets giving way before this onrushing tide of human jackals, Lenoir changed his tactics.

"*Tiens! c'est bête!*" he shouted loudly, "we shall do far better with the traitors when we get them outside. What say you, citizens? Shall we leave the judges here to conclude the farce, and arrange for its sequel ourselves outside the 'Tigre Jaune'?"

At first but little heed was paid to his suggestion, and he repeated it once or twice, adding some interesting details:

"One is freer in the streets, where these apes of the National Guard can't get between the people of France and their just revenge. *Ma foi!*" he added, squaring his broad shoulders, and pushing his way through the crowd towards the door, "I for one am going to see where hangs the most suitable *lanterne*."

Like a flock of sheep the crowd now followed him.

"The nearest *lanterne!*" they shouted. "In the streets — in the streets! *A la lanterne!* The traitors!"

And with many a jeer, many a loathsome curse, and still more loathsome jests, some of the crowd began to file out. A few only remained to see the conclusion of the farce.

CHAPTER XXVI

Sentence of death.

The “Bulletin du Tribunal Révolutionnaire” tells us that both the accused had remained perfectly calm during the turmoil which raged within the bare walls of the Hall of Justice.

Citizen-Deputy Déroulède, however, so the chroniclers aver, though outwardly impassive, was evidently deeply moved. He had very expressive eyes, clear mirrors of the fine, upright soul within, and in them there was a look of intense emotion as he watched the crowd, which he had so often dominated and controlled, now turning in hatred against him.

He seemed actually to be seeing with a spiritual vision, his own popularity wane and die.

But when the thick of the crowd had pushed and jostled itself out of the hall, that transient emotion seemed to disappear, and he allowed himself quietly to be led from the front bench, where he had sat as a privileged member of the National Convention, to a place immediately behind the dock, and between two men of the National Guard.

From that moment he was a prisoner, accused of treason against the Republic, and obviously his mock trial would be hurried through by his triumphant enemies, whilst the temper of the people was at boiling point against him.

Complete silence had succeeded to the raging tumult of the past few moments. Nothing now could be heard in the vast room, save Fouquier-Tinville’s hastily whispered instructions to the clerk nearest to him, and the scratch of the latter’s quill pen against the paper.

The President was, with equal rapidity, affixing his signature to various papers handed up to him by the other clerks. The few remaining spectators, the deputies, and those among the crowd who had elected to see the close of the debate, were silent and expectant.

Merlin was mopping his forehead as if in intense fatigue after a hard struggle; Robespierre was coolly taking snuff.

From where Déroulède stood, he could see Juliette’s graceful figure silhouetted against the light of the petrol lamp. His heart was torn between intense misery at having failed to save her and a curious, exultant joy at thought of dying beside her.

He knew the procedure of this revolutionary tribunal well — knew that within the next few moments he too would be condemned, that they would both be hustled out of the crowd and dragged through the streets of Paris, and finally thrown into the same prison, to herd with those who, like themselves, had but a few hours to live.

And then to-morrow at dawn, death for them both under the guillotine. Death in public, with all its attendant horrors: the packed tumbrel; the priest, in civil clothes, appointed by this godless government, muttering conventional prayers and valueless exhortations.

And in his heart there was nothing but love for her — love and an intense pity — for the punishment she was suffering was far greater than her crime. He hoped that in her heart remorse would not be too bitter; and he looked forward with joy to the next few hours, which he would pass near her, during which he could perhaps still console and soothe her.

She was but the victim of an ideal, of Fate stronger than her own will. She stood, an innocent martyr to the great mistake of her life.

But the minutes sped on. Fouquier-Tinville had evidently completed his new indictments.

The one against Juliette Marny was read out first. She was now accused of conspiring with Paul Déroulède against the safety of the Republic, by having cognisance of a treasonable correspondence carried on with the prisoner, Marie Antoinette; by virtue of which accusation the Public Prosecutor asked her if she had anything to say.

“No,” she replied loudly and firmly. “I pray to God for the safety and deliverance of our Queen, Marie Antoinette, and for the overthrow of this Reign of Terror and Anarchy.”

These words, registered in the “Bulletin du Tribunal Révolutionnaire” were taken as final and irrefutable proofs of her guilt, and she was then summarily condemned to death.

She was then made to step down from the dock and Déroulède to stand in her place.

He listened quietly to the long indictment which Fouquier-Tinville had already framed against him the evening before, in readiness for this contingency. The words “treason against the Republic” occurred conspicuously and repeatedly. The document itself is at one with the thousands of written charges, framed by that odious Fouquier-Tinville during these periods of bloodshed, and which in themselves are the most scathing indictments against the odious travesty of Justice, perpetrated with his help.

Self-accused, and avowedly a traitor, Déroulède was not even asked if he had anything to say; sentence of death was passed on him, with the rapidity and callousness peculiar to these proceedings.

After which Paul Déroulède and Juliette Marny were led forth, under strong escort, into the street.

CHAPTER XXVII

The Fructidor Riots.

Many accounts, more or less authentic, have been published of the events known to history as the "Fructidor Riots."

But this is how it all happened: at any rate it is the version related some few days later in England to the Prince of Wales by no less a personage than Sir Percy Blakeney; and who indeed should know better than The Scarlet Pimpernel himself?

Déroulède and Juliette Marny were the last of the batch of prisoners who were tried on that memorable day of Fructidor.

There had been such a number of these, that all the covered carts in use for the conveyance of prisoners to and from the Hall of Justice had already been despatched with their weighty human load; thus it was that only a rough wooden cart, hoodless and rickety, was available, and into this Déroulède and Juliette were ordered to mount.

It was now close on nine o'clock in the evening. The streets of Paris, sparsely illuminated here and there with solitary oil lamps swung across from house to house on wires, presented a miserable and squalid appearance. A thin, misty rain had begun to fall, transforming the ill-paved roads into morasses of sticky mud.

The Hall of Justice was surrounded by a howling and shrieking mob, who, having imbibed all the stores of brandy in the neighbouring drinking bars, was now waiting outside in the dripping rain for the express purpose of venting its pent-up, spirit-sodden lust of rage against the man whom it had once worshipped, but whom now it hated. Men, women, and even children swarmed round the principal entrances of the Palais de Justice, along the bank of the river as far as the Pont au Change, and up towards the Luxembourg Palace, now transformed into the prison, to which the condemned would no doubt be conveyed.

Along the river-bank, and immediately facing the Palais de Justice, a row of gallows-shaped posts, at intervals of a hundred yards or more, held each a smoky petrol lamp, at a height of some eight feet from the ground.

One of these lamps had been knocked down, and from the post itself there now hung ominously a length of rope, with a noose at the end.

Around this improvised gallows a group of women sat, or rather squatted, in the mud; their ragged shifts and kirtles, soaked through with the drizzling rain, hung dankly on their emaciated forms; their hair, in some cases grey, and in others dark or straw-coloured, clung matted round their wet faces, on which the dirt and the damp had drawn weird and grotesque lines.

The men were restless and noisy, rushing aimlessly hither and thither, from the corner of the bridge, up the Rue du Palais, fearful lest their prey be conjured away ere their vengeance was satisfied.

Oh, how they hated their former idol now! Citizen Lenoir, with his broad shoulders and powerful, grime-covered head, towered above the throng; his strident voice, with its raucous, provincial accent, could be distinctly heard above the din, egging on the men, shouting to the women, stirring up hatred against the prisoners, wherever it showed signs of abating in intensity.

The coal-heaver, hailing from some distant province, seemed to have set himself the grim task of provoking the infuriated populace to some terrible deed of revenge against Déroulède and Juliette.

The darkness of the street, the fast-falling mist which obscured the light from the meagre oil lamps, seemed to add a certain weirdness to this moving, seething multitude. No one could see his neighbour. In the blackness of the night the muttering or yelling figures moved about like some spectral creatures from hellish regions — the Akous of Brittany who call to those about to die; whilst the women squatting in the oozing mud, beneath that swinging piece of rope, looked like a group of ghostly witches, waiting for the hour of their Sabbath.

As Déroulède emerged into the open, the light from a swinging lantern in the doorway fell upon his face. The foremost of the crowd recognised him; a howl of execration went up to the cloud-covered sky, and a hundred hands were thrust out in deadly menace against him.

It seemed as if they wished to tear him to pieces.

"A la lanterne! A la lanterne! le traître!"

He shivered slightly, as if with the sudden blast of cold, humid air, but he stepped quietly into the cart, closely followed by Juliette.

The strong escort of the National Guard, with Commandant Santerre and his two drummers, had much ado to keep back the mob. It was not the policy of the revolutionary government to allow excesses of summary justice in the streets: the public execution of traitors on the Place de la Révolution, the processions in the tumbrils, were thought to be wholesome examples for other would-be traitors to mark and digest.

Citizen Santerre, military commandant of Paris, had ordered his men to use their bayonets ruthlessly, and, to further overawe the populace, he ordered a prolonged roll of drums, lest Déroulède took it into his head to speak to the crowd.

But Déroulède had no such intention: he seemed chiefly concerned in shielding Juliette from the cold; she had been made to sit in the cart beside him, and he had taken off his coat, and was wrapping it round her against the penetrating rain.

The eye-witnesses of these memorable events have declared that, at a given moment, he looked up suddenly with a curious, eager expression in his eyes, and then raised himself in the cart and seemed to be trying to penetrate the gloom round him, as if in search of a face, or perhaps a voice.

"A la lanterne! A la lanterne!" was the continual hoarse cry of the mob.

Up to now, flanked in their rear by the outer walls of the Palais de Justice, the soldiers had found it a fairly easy task to keep the crowd at bay. But there came a time when the cart was bound to move out into the open, in order to convey the prisoners along, by the Rue du Palais, up to the Luxembourg Prison.

This task, however, had become more and more difficult every moment. The people of Paris, who for two years had been told by its tyrants that it was supreme lord of the universe, was mad with rage at seeing its desires frustrated by a few soldiers.

The drums had been greeted by terrific yells, which effectually drowned their roll; the first movement of the cart was hailed by a veritable tumult.

Only the women who squatted round the gallows had not moved from their position of vantage; one of these Mægæras was quietly readjusting the rope, which had got out of place.

But all the men and some of the women were literally besieging the cart, and threatening the soldiers, who stood between them and the object of their fury.

It seemed as if nothing now could save Déroulède and Juliette from an immediate and horrible death.

"A mort! A mort! A la lanterne les traîtres!"

Santerne himself, who had shouted himself hoarse, was at a loss what to do. He had sent one man to the nearest cavalry barracks, but reinforcements would still be some little time coming; whilst in the meanwhile his men were getting exhausted, and the mob, more and more excited, threatened to break through their line at every moment.

There was not another second to be lost.

Santerne was for letting the mob have its way, and he would willingly have thrown it the prey for which it clamoured; but orders were orders, and in the year I. of the Revolution it was not good to disobey.

At this supreme moment of perplexity he suddenly felt a respectful touch on his arm.

Close behind him a soldier of the National Guard — not one of his own men — was standing at attention, and holding a small, folded paper in his hand.

"Sent to you by the Minister of Justice," whispered the soldier hurriedly. "The citizen-deputies have watched the tumult from the Hall; they say, you must not lose an instant."

Santerne withdrew from the front rank, up against the side of the cart, where a rough stable lantern had been fixed. He took the paper from the soldier's hand, and, hastily tearing it open, he read it by the dim light of the lantern.

As he read, his thick, coarse features expressed the keenest satisfaction.

"You have two more men with you?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, citizen," replied the man, pointing towards his right; "and the Citizen-Minister said you would give me two more."

"You'll take the prisoners quietly across to the Prison of the Temple — you understand that?"

"Yes, citizen; Citizen Merlin has given me full instructions. You can have the cart drawn back a little more under the shadow of the portico, where the prisoners can be made to alight; they can then be given into my charge. You in the meantime are to stay here with your men, round the empty cart, as long as you can. Reinforcements have been sent for, and must soon be here. When they arrive you are to move along with the cart, as if you were making for the Luxembourg Prison. This manoeuvre will give us time to deliver the prisoners safely at the Temple."

The man spoke hurriedly and peremptorily, and Santerne was only too ready to obey. He felt relieved at thought of reinforcements, and glad to be rid of the responsibility of conducting such troublesome prisoners.

The thick mist, which grew more and more dense, favoured the new manoeuvre, and the constant roll of drums drowned the hastily given orders.

The cart was drawn back into the deepest shadow of the great portico, and whilst the mob were howling their loudest, and yelling out frantic demands for the traitors, Déroulède and Juliette were summarily ordered to step out of the cart. No one saw them, for the darkness here was intense.

"Follow quietly!" whispered a raucous voice in their ears as they did so, "or my orders are to shoot you where you stand."

But neither of them had any wish for resistance. Juliette, cold and numb, was clinging to Déroulède, who had placed a protecting arm round her.

Santerne had told off two of his men to join the new escort of the prisoners, and presently the small party, skirting the walls of the Palais de Justice, began to walk rapidly away from the scene of the riot.

Déroulède noted that some half-dozen men seemed to be surrounding him and Juliette, but the drizzling rain blurred every outline. The blackness of the night too had become absolutely dense, and in the distance the cries of the populace grew more and more faint.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The unexpected.

The small party walked on in silence. It seemed to consist of a very few men of the National Guard, whom Santerne had placed under the command of the soldier who had transmitted to him the orders of the Citizen-Deputies.

Juliette and Déroulède both vaguely wondered whither they were being led; to some other prison mayhap, away from the fury of the populace. They were conscious of a sense of satisfaction at thought of being freed from that pack of raging wild beasts.

Beyond that they cared nothing. Both felt already the shadow of death hovering over them. The supreme moment of their lives had come, and had found them side by side.

What neither fear nor remorse, sorrow nor joy, could do, that the great and mighty Shadow accomplished in a trice.

Juliette, looking death bravely in the face, held out her hand, and sought that of the man she loved.

There was not one word spoken between them, not even a murmur.

Déroulède, with the unerring instinct of his own unselfish passion, understood all that the tiny hand wished to convey to him.

In a moment everything was forgotten save the joy of this touch. Death, or the fear of death, had ceased to exist. Life was beautiful, and in the soul of these two human creatures there was perfect peace, almost perfect happiness.

With one grasp of the hand they had sought and found one another's soul. What mattered the yelling crowd, the noise and tumult of this sordid world? They had found one another, and, hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, they had gone off wandering into the land of dreams, where dwelt neither doubt nor treachery, where there was nothing to forgive.

He no longer said: "She does not love me — would she have betrayed me else?" He felt the clinging, trustful touch of her hand, and knew that, with all her faults, her great sin and her lasting sorrow, her woman's heart, Heaven's most priceless treasure, was indeed truly his.

And she knew that he had forgiven — nay, that he had naught to forgive — for Love is sweet and tender, and judges not. Love is Love — whole, trustful, passionate. Love is perfect understanding and perfect peace.

And so they followed their escort whithersoever it chose to lead them.

Their eyes wandered aimlessly over the mist-laden landscape of this portion of deserted Paris. They had turned away from the river now, and were following the Rue des Arts. Close by on the right was the dismal little hostelry, "La Cruche Cassée," where Sir Percy Blakeney lived. Déroulède, as they neared the place, caught himself vaguely wondering what had become of his English friend.

But it would take more than the ingenuity of the Scarlet Pimpernel to get two noted prisoners out of Paris to-day. Even if ...

"Halt!"

The word of command rang out clearly and distinctly through the rain-soaked atmosphere.

Déroulède threw up his head and listened. Something strange and unaccountable in that same word of command had struck his sensitive ear.

Yet the party had halted, and there was a click as of bayonets or muskets levelled ready to fire.

All had happened in less than a few seconds. The next moment there was a loud cry:

"*A moi, Déroulède!* 'tis the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

A vigorous blow from an unseen hand had knocked down and extinguished the nearest street lantern.

Déroulède felt that he and Juliette were being hastily dragged under an adjoining doorway even as the cheery voice echoed along the narrow street.

Half-a-dozen men were struggling below in the mud, and there was a plentiful supply of honest English oaths. It looked as if the men of the National Guard had fallen upon one another, and had it not been for those same English oaths perhaps Déroulède and Juliette would have been slower to understand.

"Well done, Tony! Gadzooks, Ffoulkes, that was a smart bit of work!"

The lazy, pleasant voice was unmistakable, but, God in heaven! where did it come from?

Of one thing there could be no doubt. The two men despatched by Santerne were lying disabled on the ground, whilst three other soldiers were busy pinioning them with ropes.

What did it all mean?

"La, friend Déroulède! you had not thought, I trust, that I would leave Mademoiselle Juliette in such a demmed, uncomfortable hole?"

And there, close beside Déroulède and Juliette, stood the tall figure of the Jacobin orator, the bloodthirsty Citizen Lenoir. The two young people gazed and gazed, then looked again, dumfounded, hardly daring to trust their vision, for through the grime-covered mask of the gigantic coal-heaver a pair of merry blue eyes was regarding them with lazy-amusement.

"La! I do look a miserable object, I know," said the pseudo coal-heaver at last, "but 'twas the only way to get those murderous devils to do what I wanted. A thousand pardons, mademoiselle; 'twas I brought you to such a terrible pass, but la! you are amongst friends now. Will you deign to forgive me?"

Juliette looked up. Her great, earnest eyes, now swimming in tears, sought those of the brave man who had so nobly stood by her and the man she loved.

"Blakeney ..." began Déroulède.

But Sir Percy quickly interrupted him:

"Hush, man! we have but a few moments. Remember you are in Paris still, and the Lord only knows how we shall all get out of this murderous city to-night. I have said that you and mademoiselle are among friends. That is all for the moment. I had to get you together, or I should have failed. I could only succeed by subjecting you and mademoiselle to terrible indignities. Our League could plan but one rescue, and I had to adopt the best means at my command to have you condemned and led away together. Faith!" he added, with a

pleasant laugh, "my friend Tinville will not be pleased when he realises that Citizen Lenoir has dragged the Citizen-Deputies by the nose."

Whilst he spoke he had led Déroulède and Juliette into a dark and narrow room on the ground floor of the hostelry, and presently he called loudly for Brogard, the host of this uninviting abode.

"Brogard!" shouted Sir Percy. "Where is that ass Brogard? La! man," he added as Citizen Brogard, obsequious and fussy, and with pockets stuffed with English gold, came shuffling along, "where do you hide your engaging countenance? Here! another length of rope for the gallant soldiers. Bring them in here, then give them that potion down their throats, as I have prescribed. Demm it! I wish we need not have brought them along, but that devil Santerre might have been suspicious else. They'll come to no harm, though, and can do us no mischief."

He prattled along merrily. Innately kind and chivalrous, he wished to give Déroulède and Juliette time to recover from their dazed surprise.

The transition from dull despair to buoyant hope had been so sudden: it had all happened in less than three minutes.

The scuffle had been short and sudden outside. The two soldiers of Santerre had been taken completely unawares, and the three young lieutenants of the Scarlet Pimpernel had fallen on them with such vigour that they had hardly had time to utter a cry of "Help!"

Moreover, that cry would have been useless. The night was dark and wet, and those citizens who felt ready for excitement were busy mobbing the Hall of Justice, a mile and a half away. One or two heads had appeared at the small windows of the squalid houses opposite, but it was too dark to see anything, and the scuffle had very quickly subsided.

All was silent now in the Rue des Arts, and in the grimy coffee-room of the Cruche Cassée two soldiers of the National Guard were lying bound and gagged, whilst three others were gaily laughing, and wiping their rain-soaked hands and faces.

In the midst of them all stood the tall, athletic figure of the bold adventurer who had planned this impudent coup.

"La! we've got so far, friends, haven't we?" he said cheerily, "and now for the immediate future. We must all be out of Paris to-night, or the guillotine for the lot of us to-morrow."

He spoke gaily, and with that pleasant drawl of his which was so well known in the fashionable assemblies of London; but there was a ring of earnestness in his voice, and his lieutenants looked up at him, ready to obey him in all things, but aware that danger was looming threateningly ahead.

Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, and Lord Hastings, dressed as soldiers of the National Guard, had played their part to perfection. Lord Hastings had presented the order to Santerre, and the three young bucks, at the word of command from their chief, had fallen upon and overpowered the two men whom the commandant of Paris had despatched to look after the prisoners.

So far all was well. But how to get out of Paris? Everyone looked to the Scarlet Pimpernel for guidance.

Sir Percy now turned to Juliette, and with the consummate grace which the elaborate etiquette of the times demanded, he made her a courtly bow.

"Mademoiselle de Marny," he said, "allow me to conduct you to a room, which though unworthy of your presence will, nevertheless, enable you to rest quietly for a few minutes, whilst I give my friend Déroulède further advice and instructions. In the room you will find a disguise, which I pray you to don with all haste. La! they are filthy rags, I own, but your life and — and ours depend upon your help."

Gallantly he kissed the tips of her fingers, and opened the door of an adjoining room to enable her to pass through; then he stood aside, so that her final look, as she went, might be for Déroulède.

As soon as the door had closed upon her he once more turned to the men.

"Those uniforms will not do now," he said peremptorily, "there are bundles of abominable clothes here, Tony. Will you all don them as quickly as you can? We must all look as filthy a band of *sansculottes* to-night as ever walked the streets of Paris."

His lazy drawl had deserted him now. He was the man of action and of thought, the bold adventurer who held the lives of his friends in the hollow of his hand.

The four men hastily obeyed. Lord Anthony Dewhurst — one of the most elegant dandies of London society — had brought forth from a dank cupboard a bundle of clothes, mere rags, filthy but useful.

Within ten minutes the change was accomplished, and four dirty, slouchy figures stood confronting their chief.

"That's capital!" said Sir Percy merrily.

"Now for Mademoiselle de Marny."

Hardly had he spoken when the door of the adjoining room was pushed open, and a horrible apparition stood before the men. A woman in filthy bodice and skirt, with face covered in grime, her yellow hair, matted and greasy, thrust under a dirty and crumpled cap.

A shout of rapturous delight greeted this uncanny apparition.

Juliette, like the true woman she was, had found all her energy and spirits now that she felt that she had an important part to play. She woke from her dream to realise that noble friends had risked their lives for the man she loved and for her.

Of herself she did not think; she only remembered that her presence of mind, her physical and mental strength, would be needed to carry the rescue to a successful end.

Therefore with the rags of a Paris *tricoteuse* she had also donned her personality. She played her part valiantly, and one look at the perfection of her disguise was sufficient to assure the leader of this band of heroes that his instructions would be carried through to the letter.

Déroulède too now looked the ragged *sansculotte* to the life, with bare and muddy feet, frayed breeches, and shabby, black-shag spencer. The four men stood waiting together with Juliette, whilst Sir Percy gave them his final instructions.

"We'll mix with the crowd," he said, "and do all that the crowd does. It is for us to see that that unruly crowd does what we want. Mademoiselle de Marny, a thousand congratulations. I entreat you to take hold of my friend Déroulède's hand, and not to let go of it, on any pretext whatever. La! not a difficult task, I ween," he added, with his genial smile; "and yours, Déroulède, is equally easy. I enjoin you to take charge of Mademoiselle Juliette, and on no account to leave her side until we are out of Paris."

"Out of Paris!" echoed Déroulède, with a troubled sigh.

“Aye!” rejoined Sir Percy boldly; “out of Paris! with a howling mob at our heels causing the authorities to take double precautions. And above all remember, friends, that our rallying cry is the shrill call of the sea-mew thrice repeated. Follow it until you are outside the gates of Paris. Once there, listen for it again; it will lead you to freedom and safety at last. Aye! Outside Paris, by the grace of God.”

The hearts of his hearers thrilled as they heard him. Who could help but follow this brave and gallant adventurer, with the magic voice and the noble bearing?

“And now *en route* !” said Blakeney finally, “that ass Santerre will have dispersed the pack of yelling hyenas with his cavalry by now. They’ll to the Temple prison to find their prey; we’ll in their wake. *A moi*, friends! and remember the sea-gull’s cry.”

Déroulède drew Juliette’s hand in his.

“We are ready,” he said; “and God bless the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

Then the five men, with Juliette in their midst, went out into the street once more.

CHAPTER XXIX

Père Lachaise.

It was not difficult to guess which way the crowd had gone; yells, hoots, and hoarse cries could be heard from the farther side of the river.

Citizen Santerne had been unable to keep the mob back until the arrival of the cavalry reinforcements. Within five minutes of the abduction of Déroulède and Juliette the crowd had broken through the line of soldiers, and had stormed the cart, only to find it empty, and the prey disappeared.

"They are safe in the Temple by now!" shouted Santerne hoarsely, in savage triumph at seeing them all baffled.

At first it seemed as if the wrath of the infuriated populace, fooled in its lust for vengeance, would vent itself against the commandant of Paris and his soldiers; for a moment even Santerre's ruddy cheeks had paled at the sudden vision of this unlooked for danger.

Then just as suddenly the cry was raised.

"To the Temple!"

"To the Temple! To the Temple!" came in ready response.

The cry was soon taken up by the entire crowd, and in less than two minutes the purlieu of the Hall of Justice were deserted, and the Pont St Michel, then the Cité and the Pont au Change, swarmed with the rioters. Thence along the north bank of the river, and up the Rue du Temple, the people still yelling, muttering, singing the "*Ça ira*," and shouting: "*A la lanterne! A la lanterne!*"

Sir Percy Blakeney and his little band of followers had found the Pont Neuf and the adjoining streets practically deserted. A few stragglers from the crowd, soaked through with the rain, their enthusiasm damped, and their throats choked with the mist, were sulkily returning to their homes.

The desultory group of six *sansculottes* attracted little or no attention, and Sir Percy boldly challenged every passer-by.

"The way to the Rue du Temple, citizen?" he asked once or twice, or:

"Have they hung the traitor yet? Can you tell me, citizeness?"

A grunt or an oath were the usual replies, but no one took any further notice of the gigantic coal-heaver and his ragged friends.

At the corner of one of the cross streets, between the Rue du Temple and the Rue des Archives, Sir Percy Blakeney suddenly turned to his followers:

"We are close to the rabble now," he said in a whisper, and speaking in English; "do you all follow the nearest stragglers, and get as soon as possible into the thickest of the crowd. We'll meet again outside the prison — and remember the sea-gull's cry."

He did not wait for an answer, and presently disappeared in the mist.

Already a few stragglers, hangers-on of the multitude, were gradually coming into view, and the yells could be distinctly heard. The mob had evidently assembled in the great square outside the prison, and was loudly demanding the object of its wrath.

The moment for cool-headed action was at hand. The Scarlet Pimpernel had planned the whole thing, but it was for his followers and for those, whom he was endeavouring to rescue from certain death, to help him heart and soul.

Déroulède's grasp tightened on Juliette's little hand.

"Are you frightened, my beloved?" he whispered.

"Not whilst you are near me," she murmured in reply.

A few more minutes' walk up the Rue des Archives and they were in the thick of the crowd. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, and Lord Hastings, the three Englishmen, were in front; Déroulède and Juliette immediately behind them.

The mob itself now carried them along. A motley throng they were, soaked through with the rain, drunk with their own baffled rage, and with the brandy which they had imbibed.

Everyone was shouting; the women louder than the rest; one of them was dragging the length of rope, which might still be useful.

"*Ça ira! ça ira! A la lanterne! A la lanterne! les traîtres!*"

And Déroulède, holding Juliette by the hand, shouted lustily with them:

"*Ça ira!*"

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes turned, and laughed. It was rare sport for these young bucks, and they all entered into the spirit of the situation. They all shouted "*A la lanterne!*" egging and encouraging those around them.

Déroulède and Juliette felt the intoxication of the adventure. They were drunk with the joy of their reunion, and seized with the wild, mad, passionate desire for freedom and for life ... Life and love!

So they pushed and jostled on in the mud, followed the crowd, sang and yelled louder than any of them. Was not that very crowd the great bulwark of their safety?

As well have sought for the proverbial needle in the haystack, as for two escaped prisoners in this mad, heaving throng.

The large open space in front of the Temple Prison looked like one great, seething, black mass.

The darkness was almost thick here, the ground like a morass, with inches of clayey mud, which stuck to everything, whilst the sparse lanterns, hung to the prison walls and beneath the portico, threw practically no light into the square.

As the little band, composed of the three Englishmen, and of Déroulède, holding Juliette by the hand, emerged into the open space, they heard a strident cry, like that of a sea-mew thrice repeated, and a hoarse voice shouting from out the darkness:

"*Ma foi!* I'll not believe that the prisoners are in the Temple now! It is my belief, friends, citizens, that we have been fooled once more!"

The voice, with its strange, unaccountable accent, which seemed to belong to no province of France, dominated the almost deafening noise; it penetrated through, even into the brandy-soddened minds of the multitude, for the suggestion was received with renewed shouts of the wildest wrath.

Like one great, living, seething mass the crowd literally bore down upon the huge and frowning prison. Pushing, jostling, yelling, the women screaming, the men cursing, it seemed as if that awesome day — the 14th of July — was to have its sanguinary counterpart to-night, as if the Temple were destined to share the fate of the Bastille.

Obedient to their leader's orders the three young Englishmen remained in the thick of the crowd: together with Déroulède they contrived to form a sturdy rampart round Juliette, effectually protecting her against rough buffetings.

On their right, towards the direction of Ménilmontant, the sea-mew's cry at intervals gave the strength and courage.

The foremost rank of the crowd had reached the portico of the building, and, with howls and snatches of their gutter song, were loudly clamouring for the guardian of the grim prison.

No one appeared; the great gates with their massive bars and hinges remained silent and defiant.

The crowd was becoming dangerous: whispers of the victory of the Bastille, five years ago, engendered thoughts of pillage and of arson.

Then the strident voice was heard again:

"*Pardi!* the prisoners are not in the Temple! The dolts have allowed them to escape, and now are afraid of the wrath of the people!"

It was strange how easily the mob assimilated this new idea. Perhaps the dark, frowning block of massive buildings had overawed them with its peaceful strength, perhaps the dripping rain and oozing clay had damped their desire for an immediate storming of the grim citadel; perhaps it was merely the human characteristic of a wish for something new, something unexpected.

Be that as it may, the cry was certainly taken up with marvellous, quick-change rapidity.

"The prisoners have escaped! The prisoners have escaped!"

Some were for proceeding with the storming of the Temple, but they were in the minority. All along, the crowd had been more inclined for private revenge than for martial deeds of valour; the Bastille had been taken by daylight; the effort might not have been so successful on a pitch-black night such as this, when one could not see one's hand before one's eyes, and the drizzling rain went through to the marrow.

"They've got through one of the barriers by now!" suggested the same voice from out the darkness.

"The barriers — the barriers!" came in sheeplike echo from the crowd.

The little group of fugitives and their friends tightened their hold on one another.

They had understood at last.

"It is for us to see that the crowd does what we want," the Scarlet Pimpernel had said.

He wanted it to take him and his friends out of Paris, and, by God! he was like to succeed.

Juliette's heart within her beat almost to choking; her strong little hand gripped Déroulède's fingers with the wild strength of a mad exultation.

Next to the man to whom she had given her love and her very soul she admired and looked up to the remarkable and noble adventurer, the high-born and exquisite dandy, who with grime-covered face, and strong limbs encased in filthy clothes, was playing the most glorious part ever enacted upon the stage.

"To the barriers — to the barriers!"

Like a herd of wild horses, driven by the whip of the herdsmen, the mob began to scatter in all directions. Not knowing what it wanted, not knowing what it would find, half forgetting the very cause and object of its wrath, it made one gigantic rush for the gates of the great city through which the prisoners were supposed to have escaped.

The three Englishmen and Déroulède, with Juliette well protected in their midst, had not joined the general onrush as yet. The crowd in the open place was still very thick, the outward-branching streets were very narrow: through these the multitude, scampering, hurrying, scurrying, like a human torrent let out of a whirlpool, rushed down headlong towards the barriers.

Up the Rue Turbigo to the Belleville gate, the Rue des Filles, and the Rue du Chemin Vert, towards Popincourt, they ran, knocking each other down, jostling the weaker ones on one side, trampling others underfoot. They were all rough, coarse creatures, accustomed to these wild bousculades, ready to pick themselves up, again after any number of falls; whilst the mud was slimy and soft to tumble on, and those who did the trampling had no shoes on their feet.

They rushed out from the dark, open place, these creatures of the night, into streets darker still.

On they ran — on! on! — now in thick, heaving masses, anon in loose, straggling groups — some north, some south, some east, some west.

But it was from the east that came the seagull's cry.

The little band ran boldly towards the east. Down the Rue de la République they followed their leader's call. The crowd was very thick here; the Barrière Ménilmontant was close by, and beyond it there was the cemetery of Père Lachaise. It was the nearest gate to the Temple Prison, and the mob wanted to be up and doing, not to spend too much time running along the muddy streets and getting wet and cold, but to repeat the glorious exploits of the 14th of July, and capture the barriers of Paris by force of will rather than force of arms.

In this rushing mob the four men, with Juliette in their midst, remained quite unchallenged, mere units in an unruly crowd.

In a quarter of an hour Ménilmontant was reached.

The great gates of the city were well guarded by detachments of the National Guard, each under command of an officer. Twenty strong at most — what was that against such a throng?

Who had ever dreamed of Paris being stormed from within?

At every gate to the north and east of the city there was now a rabble some four or five thousand strong, wanting it knew not what. Everyone had forgotten what it was that caused him or her to rush on so blindly, so madly, towards the nearest barrier.

But everyone knew that he or she wanted to get through that barrier, to attack the soldiery, to knock down the captain of the Guard.

And with a wild cry every city gate was stormed.

Like one huge wind-tossed wave, the populace on that memorable night of Fructidor, broke against the cordon of soldiery, that vainly tried to keep it back. Men and women, drunk with brandy and exultation, shouted "*Quatorze Juillet!*" and amidst curses and

threats demanded the opening of the gates.

The people of France *would* have its will.

Was it not the supreme lord and ruler of the land, the arbiter of the Fate of this great, beautiful, and maddened country?

The National Guard was powerless; the officers in command could offer but feeble resistance.

The desultory fire, which in the darkness and the pouring rain did very little harm, had the effect of further infuriating the mob.

The drizzle had turned to a deluge, a veritable heavy summer downpour, with occasional distant claps of thunder and incessant sheet-lightning, which ever and anon illumined with its weird, fantastic flash this heaving throng, these begrimed faces, crowned with red caps of Liberty, these witchlike female creatures with wet, straggly hair and gaunt, menacing arms.

Within half-an-hour the people of Paris was outside its own gates.

Victory was complete. The Guard did not resist; the officers had surrendered; the great and mighty rabble had had its way.

Exultant, it swarmed around the fortifications and along the *terrains vagues* which it had conquered by its will.

But the downpour was continuous, and with victory came satiety — satiety coupled with wet skins, muddy feet, tired, wearied bodies, and throats parched with continual shouting.

At Ménilmontant, where the crowd had been thickest, the tempers highest, and the yells most strident, there now stretched before this tired, excited throng, the peaceful vastness of the cemetery of Père Lachaise.

The great alleys of sombre monuments, the weird cedars with their fantastic branches, like arms of a hundred ghosts, quelled and awed these hooting masses of degraded humanity.

The silent majesty of this city of the dead seemed to frown with withering scorn on the passions of the sister city.

Instinctively the rabble was cowed. The cemetery looked dark, dismal, and deserted. The flashed of lightning seemed to reveal ghostlike processions of the departed heroes of France, wandering silently amidst the tombs.

And the populace turned with a shudder away from this vast place of eternal peace.

From within the cemetery gates, there was suddenly heard the sound of a sea-mew calling thrice to its mate. And five dark figures, wrapped in cloaks, gradually detached themselves from the throng, and one by one slipped into the grounds of Père Lachaise through that break in the wall, which is quite close to the main entrance.

Once more the sea-gull's cry.

Those in the crowd who heard it, shivered beneath their dripping clothes. They thought it was a soul in pain risen from one of the graves, and some of the women, forgetting the last few years of godlessness, hastily crossed themselves, and muttered an invocation to the Virgin Mary.

Within the gates all was silent and at peace. The sodden earth gave forth no echo of the muffled footsteps, which slowly crept towards the massive block of stone, which covers the graves of the immortal lovers — Abélard and Heloïse.

CHAPTER XXX

Conclusion.

There is but little else to record.

History has told us how, shamefaced, tired, dripping, the great, all-powerful people of Paris quietly slunk back to their homes, even before the first cock-crow in the villages beyond the gates, acclaimed the pale streak of dawn.

But long before that, even before the church bells of the great city had tolled the midnight hour, Sir Percy Blakeney and his little band of followers had reached the little tavern which stands close to the farthest gate of Père Lachaise.

Without a word, like six silent ghosts, they had traversed the vast cemetery, and reached the quiet hostelry, where the sounds of the seething revolution only came, attenuated by their passage through the peaceful city of the dead.

English gold had easily purchased silence and good will from the half-starved keeper of this wayside inn. A huge travelling chaise already stood in readiness, and four good Flanders horses had been pawing the ground impatiently for the past half hour. From the window of the chaise old Pétronelle's face, wet with anxious tears, was peering anxiously.

A cry of joy and surprise escaped Déroulède and Juliette, and both turned, with a feeling akin to awe, towards the wonderful man who had planned and carried through this bold adventure.

"Nay, my friend," said Sir Percy, speaking more especially to Déroulède; "if you only knew how simple it all was! Gold can do so many things, and my only merit seems to be the possession of plenty of that commodity. You told me yourself how you had provided for old Pétronelle. Under the most solemn assurance that she would meet her young mistress here, I got her to leave Paris. She came out most bravely this morning in one of the market carts. She is so obviously a woman of the people, that no one suspected her. As for the worthy couple who keep this wayside hostel, they have been well paid, and money soon procures a chaise and horses. My English friends and I, we have our own passports, and one for Mademoiselle Juliette, who must travel as an English lady, with her old nurse, Pétronelle. There are some decent clothes in readiness for us all in the inn. A quarter of an hour in which to don them and we must on our way. You can use your own passport, of course; your arrest has been so very sudden that it has not yet been cancelled, and we have an eight hours' start of our enemies. They'll wake up to-morrow morning, begad! and find that you have slipped through their fingers."

He spoke with easy carelessness, and that slow drawl of his, as if he were talking airy nothings in a London drawing-room, instead of recounting the most daring, most colossal piece of effrontery the adventurous brain of man could conceive.

Déroulède could say nothing. His own noble heart was too full of gratitude towards his friend to express it all in a few words.

And time, of course, was precious.

Within the prescribed quarter of an hour the little band of heroes had doffed their grimy, ragged clothes, and now appeared dressed as respectable bourgeois of Paris *en route* for the country. Sir Percy Blakeney had donned the livery of a coachman of a well-to-do house, whilst Lord Anthony Dewhurst wore that of an English lacquey.

Five minutes later Déroulède had lifted Juliette into the travelling chaise, and in spite of fatigue, of anxiety, and emotion, it was immeasurable happiness to feel her arm encircling his shoulders in perfect joy and trust.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Hastings joined them inside the chaise; Lord Anthony sat next to Sir Percy on the box.

And whilst the crowd of Paris was still wondering why it had stormed the gates of the city, the escaped prisoners were borne along the muddy roads of France at breakneck speed northward to the coast.

Sir Percy Blakeney held the reins himself. With his noble heart full of joy, the gallant adventurer himself drove his friends to safety.

They had an eight hours' start, and The League of The Scarlet Pimpernel had done its work thoroughly: well provided with passports, and with relays awaiting them at every station of fifty miles or so, the journey, though wearisome was free from further adventure.

At Le Havre the little party embarked on board Sir Percy Blakeney's yacht the *Daydream*, where they met Madame Déroulède and Anne Mie.

The two ladies, acting under the instructions of Sir Percy, had as originally arranged, pursued their journey northwards, to the populous seaport town.

Anne Mie's first meeting with Juliette was intensely pathetic. The poor little cripple had spent the last few days in an agony of remorse, whilst the heavy travelling chaise bore her farther and farther away from Paris.

She thought Juliette dead, and Paul a prey to despair, and her tender soul ached when she remembered that it was she who had given the final deadly stab to the heart of the man she loved.

Hers was the nature born to abnegation: aye! and one destined to find bliss therein. And when one glance in Paul Déroulède's face told her that she was forgiven, her cup of joy at seeing him happy beside his beloved, was unalloyed with any bitterness.

It was in the beautiful, rosy dawn of one of the last days of that memorable Fructidor, when Juliette and Paul Déroulède, standing on the deck of the *Daydream*, saw the shores of France gradually receding from their view.

Déroulède's arm was round his beloved, her golden hair, fanned by the breeze, brushed lightly against his cheek.

"Madonna!" he murmured.

She turned her head to him. It was the first time that they were quite alone, the first time that all thought of danger had become a mere dream. What had the future in store for them, in that beautiful, strange land to which the graceful yacht was swiftly bearing them? England, the land of freedom, would shelter their happiness and their joy; and they looked out towards the North, where lay, still hidden in the arms of the distant horizon, the white cliffs of Albion, whilst the mist even now was wrapping it its obliterating embrace the shores of the land where they had both suffered, where they had both learned to love. He took her in his arms. "My wife!" he whispered. The rosy light touched her golden hair; he raised her face to his, and soul met soul in one long, passionate kiss.

THE ELUSIVE

Chapter I: Paris: 1793

There was not even a reaction.

On! ever on! in that wild, surging torrent; sowing the wind of anarchy, of terrorism, of lust of blood and hate, and reaping a hurricane of destruction and of horror.

On! ever on! France, with Paris and all her children still rushes blindly, madly on; defies the powerful coalition, — Austria, England, Spain, Prussia, all joined together to stem the flow of carnage, — defies the Universe and defies God!

Paris this September 1793! — or shall we call it Vendemiaire, Year I. of the Republic? — call it what we will! Paris! a city of bloodshed, of humanity in its lowest, most degraded aspect. France herself a gigantic self-devouring monster, her fairest cities destroyed, Lyons razed to the ground, Toulon, Marseilles, masses of blackened ruins, her bravest sons turned to lustful brutes or to abject cowards seeking safety at the cost of any humiliation.

That is thy reward, oh mighty, holy Revolution! apotheosis of equality and fraternity! grand rival of decadent Christianity. Five weeks now since Marat, the bloodthirsty Friend of the People, succumbed beneath the sheath-knife of a virgin patriot, a month since his murderess walked proudly, even enthusiastically, to the guillotine! There has been no reaction — only a great sigh!... Not of content or satisfied lust, but a sigh such as the man-eating tiger might heave after his first taste of long-coveted blood.

A sigh for more!

A king on the scaffold; a queen degraded and abased, awaiting death, which lingers on the threshold of her infamous prison; eight hundred scions of ancient houses that have made the history of France; brave generals, Custine, Blanchelande, Houchard, Beauharnais; worthy patriots, noble-hearted women, misguided enthusiasts, all by the score and by the hundred, up the few wooden steps which lead to the guillotine.

An achievement of truth!

And still that sigh for more!

But for the moment, — a few seconds only, — Paris looked round her mighty self, and thought things over!

The man-eating tiger for the space of a sigh licked his powerful jaws and pondered!

Something new! — something wonderful!

We have had a new Constitution, a new Justice, new Laws, a new Almanack!

What next?

Why, obviously! — How comes it that great, intellectual, aesthetic Paris never thought of such a wonderful thing before?

A new religion!

Christianity is old and obsolete, priests are aristocrats, wealthy oppressors of the People, the Church but another form of wanton tyranny.

Let us by all means have a new religion.

Already something has been done to destroy the old! To destroy! always to destroy! Churches have been ransacked, altars spoliated, tombs desecrated, priests and curates murdered; but that is not enough.

There must be a new religion; and to attain that there must be a new God.

“Man is a born idol-worshipper.”

Very well then! let the People have a new religion and a new God.

Stay! — Not a God this time! — for God means Majesty, Power, Kingship! everything in fact which the mighty hand of the people of France has struggled and fought to destroy.

Not a God, but a goddess.

A goddess! an idol! a toy! since even the man-eating tiger must play sometimes.

Paris wanted a new religion, and a new toy, and grave men, ardent patriots, mad enthusiasts, sat in the Assembly of the Convention and seriously discussed the means of providing her with both these things which she asked for.

Chaumette, I think it was, who first solved the difficulty: — Procureur Chaumette, head of the Paris Municipality, he who had ordered that the cart which bore the dethroned queen to the squalid prison of the Conciergerie should be led slowly past her own late palace of the Tuileries, and should be stopped there just long enough for her to see and to feel in one grand mental vision all that she had been when she dwelt there, and all that she now was by the will of the People.

Chaumette, as you see, was refined, artistic; — the torture of the fallen Queen's heart meant more to him than a blow of the guillotine on her neck.

No wonder, therefore, that it was Procureur Chaumette who first discovered exactly what type of new religion Paris wanted just now.

“Let us have a Goddess of Reason,” he said, “typified if you will by the most beautiful woman in Paris. Let us have a feast of the Goddess of Reason, let there be a pyre of all the gew-gaws which for centuries have been flaunted by overbearing priests before the eyes of starving multitudes, let the People rejoice and dance around that funeral pile, and above it all let the new Goddess tower smiling and triumphant. The Goddess of Reason! the only deity our new and regenerate France shall acknowledge throughout the centuries which are to come!”

Loud applause greeted the impassioned speech.

“A new goddess, by all means!” shouted the grave gentlemen of the National Assembly, “the Goddess of Reason!”

They were all eager that the People should have this toy; something to play with and to tease, round which to dance the mad Carmagnole and sing the ever-recurring “Ca ira.”

Something to distract the minds of the populace from the consequences of its own deeds, and the helplessness of its legislators.

Procureur Chaumette enlarged upon his original idea; like a true artist who sees the broad effect of a picture at a glance and then fills in the minute details, he was already busy elaborating his scheme.

"The goddess must be beautiful... not too young... Reason can only go hand in hand with the riper age of second youth... she must be decked out in classical draperies, severe yet suggestive... she must be rouged and painted... for she is a mere idol... easily to be appeased with incense, music and laughter."

He was getting deeply interested in his subject, seeking minutiae of detail, with which to render his theme more and more attractive.

But patience was never the characteristic of the Revolutionary Government of France. The National Assembly soon tired of Chaumette's dithyrambic utterances. Up aloft on the Mountain, Danton was yawning like a gigantic leopard.

Soon Henriot was on his feet. He had a far finer scheme than that of the Procureur to place before his colleagues. A grand National fete, semi-religious in character, but of the new religion which destroyed and desecrated and never knelt in worship.

Citizen Chaumette's Goddess of Reason by all means — Henriot conceded that the idea was a good one — but the goddess merely as a figure-head: around her a procession of unfrocked and apostate priests, typifying the destruction of ancient hierarchy, mules carrying loads of sacred vessels, the spoils of ten thousand churches of France, and ballet girls in bacchanalian robes, dancing the Carmagnole around the new deity.

Public Prosecutor Fouquier Tinville thought all these schemes very tame. Why should the People of France be led to think that the era of a new religion would mean an era of milk and water, of pageants and of fireworks? Let every man, woman, and child know that this was an era of blood and again of blood.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in passionate accents, "would that all the traitors in France had but one head, that it might be cut off with one blow of the guillotine!"

He approved of the National fete, but he desired an apotheosis of the guillotine; he undertook to find ten thousand traitors to be beheaded on one grand and glorious day: ten thousand heads to adorn the Place de la Revolution on a great, never-to-be-forgotten evening, after the guillotine had accomplished this record work.

But Collot d'Herbois would also have his say. Collot lately hailed from the South, with a reputation for ferocity unparalleled throughout the whole of this horrible decade. He would not be outdone by Tinville's bloodthirsty schemes.

He was the inventor of the "Noyades," which had been so successful at Lyons and Marseilles. "Why not give the inhabitants of Paris one of these exhilarating spectacles?" he asked with a coarse, brutal laugh.

Then he explained his invention, of which he was inordinately proud. Some two or three hundred traitors, men, women, and children, tied securely together with ropes in great, human bundles and thrown upon a barge in the middle of the river: the barge with a hole in her bottom! not too large! only sufficient to cause her to sink slowly, very slowly, in sight of the crowd of delighted spectators.

The cries of the women and children, and even of the men, as they felt the waters rising and gradually enveloping them, as they felt themselves powerless even for a fruitless struggle, had proved most exhilarating, so Citizen Collot declared, to the hearts of the true patriots of Lyons.

Thus the discussion continued.

This was the era when every man had but one desire, that of outdoing others in ferocity and brutality, and but one care, that of saving his own head by threatening that of his neighbour.

The great duel between the Titanic leaders of these turbulent parties, the conflict between hot-headed Danton on the one side and cold-blooded Robespierre on the other, had only just begun; the great, all-devouring monsters had dug their claws into one another, but the issue of the combat was still at stake.

Neither of these two giants had taken part in these deliberations anent the new religion and the new goddess. Danton gave signs now and then of the greatest impatience, and muttered something about a new form of tyranny, a new kind of oppression.

On the left, Robespierre in immaculate sea-green coat and carefully gaufered linen was quietly polishing the nails of his right hand against the palm of his left.

But nothing escaped him of what was going on. His ferocious egoism, his unbounded ambition was even now calculating what advantages to himself might accrue from this idea of the new religion and of the National fete, what personal aggrandisement he could derive therefrom.

The matter outwardly seemed trivial enough, but already his keen and calculating mind had seen various side issues which might tend to place him — Robespierre — on a yet higher and more unassailable pinnacle.

Surrounded by those who hated him, those who envied and those who feared him, he ruled over them all by the strength of his own cold-blooded savagery, by the resistless power of his merciless cruelty.

He cared about nobody but himself, about nothing but his own exaltation: every action of his career, since he gave up his small practice in a quiet provincial town in order to throw himself into the wild vortex of revolutionary politics, every word he ever uttered had but one aim — Himself.

He saw his colleagues and comrades of the old Jacobin Clubs ruthlessly destroyed around him: friends he had none, and all left him indifferent; and now he had hundreds of enemies in every assembly and club in Paris, and these too one by one were being swept up in that wild whirlpool which they themselves had created.

Impassive, serene, always ready with a calm answer, when passion raged most hotly around him, Robespierre, the most ambitious, most self-seeking demagogue of his time, had acquired the reputation of being incorruptible and selfless, an enthusiastic servant of the Republic.

The sea-green Incorruptible!

And thus whilst others talked and argued, waxed hot over schemes for processions and pageantry, or loudly denounced the whole matter as the work of a traitor, he, of the sea-green coat, sat quietly polishing his nails.

But he had already weighed all these discussions in the balance of his mind, placed them in the crucible of his ambition, and turned them into something that would benefit him and strengthen his position.

Aye! the feast should be brilliant enough! gay or horrible, mad or fearful, but through it all the people of France must be made to feel that there was a guiding hand which ruled the destinies of all, a head which framed the new laws, which consolidated the new religion and established its new goddess: the Goddess of Reason. Robespierre, her prophet!

Chapter II: A Retrospect

The room was close and dark, filled with the smoke from a defective chimney.

A tiny boudoir, once the dainty sanctum of imperious Marie Antoinette; a faint and ghostly odour, like unto the perfume of spectres, seemed still to cling to the stained walls, and to the torn Gobelin tapestries.

Everywhere lay the impress of a heavy and destroying hand: that of the great and glorious Revolution.

In the mud-soiled corners of the room a few chairs, with brocaded cushions rudely torn, leant broken and desolate against the walls. A small footstool, once gilt-legged and satin-covered, had been overturned and roughly kicked to one side, and there it lay on its back, like some little animal that had been hurt, stretching its broken limbs upwards, pathetic to behold.

From the delicately wrought Buhl table the silver inlay had been harshly stripped out of its bed of shell.

Across the Lunette, painted by Boucher and representing a chaste Diana surrounded by a bevy of nymphs, an uncouth hand had scribbled in charcoal the device of the Revolution: *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite ou la Mort*; whilst, as if to give a crowning point to the work of destruction and to emphasise its motto, someone had decorated the portrait of Marie Antoinette with a scarlet cap, and drawn a red and ominous line across her neck.

And at the table two men were sitting in close and eager conclave.

Between them a solitary tallow candle, unsnuffed and weirdly flickering, threw fantastic shadows upon the walls, and illumined with fitful and uncertain light the faces of the two men.

How different were these in character!

One, high cheek-boned, with coarse, sensuous lips, and hair elaborately and carefully powdered; the other pale and thin-lipped, with the keen eyes of a ferret and a high intellectual forehead, from which the sleek brown hair was smoothly brushed away.

The first of these men was Robespierre, the ruthless and incorruptible demagogue; the other was Citizen Chauvelin, ex-ambassador of the Revolutionary Government at the English Court.

The hour was late, and the noises from the great, seething city preparing for sleep came to this remote little apartment in the now deserted Palace of the Tuileries, merely as a faint and distant echo.

It was two days after the Fructidor Riots. Paul Deroulede and the woman Juliette Marny, both condemned to death, had been literally spirited away out of the cart which was conveying them from the Hall of Justice to the Luxembourg Prison, and news had just been received by the Committee of Public Safety that at Lyons, the Abbe du Mesnil, with the *ci-devant* Chevalier d'Egremont and the latter's wife and family, had effected a miraculous and wholly incomprehensible escape from the Northern Prison.

But this was not all. When Arras fell into the hands of the Revolutionary army, and a regular cordon was formed round the town, so that not a single royalist traitor might escape, some three score women and children, twelve priests, the old aristocrats Chermeuil, Delleville and Galipaux and many others, managed to pass the barriers and were never recaptured.

Raids were made on the suspected houses: in Paris chiefly where the escaped prisoners might have found refuge, or better still where their helpers and rescuers might still be lurking. Fouquier Tinville, Public Prosecutor, led and conducted these raids, assisted by that bloodthirsty vampire, Merlin. They heard of a house in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comedie where an Englishman was said to have lodged for two days.

They demanded admittance, and were taken to the rooms where the Englishman had stayed. These were bare and squalid, like hundreds of other rooms in the poorer quarters of Paris. The landlady, toothless and grimy, had not yet tidied up the one where the Englishman had slept: in fact she did not know he had left for good.

He had paid for his room, a week in advance, and came and went as he liked, she explained to Citizen Tinville. She never bothered about him, as he never took a meal in the house, and he was only there two days. She did not know her lodger was English until the day he left. She thought he was a Frenchman from the South, as he certainly had a peculiar accent when he spoke.

"It was the day of the riots," she continued; "he would go out, and I told him I did not think that the streets would be safe for a foreigner like him: for he always wore such very fine clothes, and I made sure that the starving men and women of Paris would strip them off his back when their tempers were roused. But he only laughed. He gave me a bit of paper and told me that if he did not return I might conclude that he had been killed, and if the Committee of Public Safety asked me questions about me, I was just to show the bit of paper and there would be no further trouble."

She had talked volubly, more than a little terrified at Merlin's scowls, and the attitude of Citizen Tinville, who was known to be very severe if anyone committed any blunders.

But the Citizeness — her name was Brogard and her husband's brother kept an inn in the neighbourhood of Calais — the Citizeness Brogard had a clear conscience. She held a license from the Committee of Public Safety for letting apartments, and she had always given due notice to the Committee of the arrival and departure of her lodgers. The only thing was that if any lodger paid her more than ordinarily well for the accommodation and he so desired it, she would send in the notice conveniently late, and conveniently vaguely worded as to the description, status and nationality of her more liberal patrons.

This had occurred in the case of her recent English visitor.

But she did not explain it quite like that to Citizen Fouquier Tinville or to Citizen Merlin.

However, she was rather frightened, and produced the scrap of paper which the Englishman had left with her, together with the assurance that when she showed it there would be no further trouble.

Tinville took it roughly out of her hand, but would not glance at it. He crushed it into a ball and then Merlin snatched it from him with a coarse laugh, smoothed out the creases on his knee and studied it for a moment.

There were two lines of what looked like poetry, written in a language which Merlin did not understand. English, no doubt.

But what was perfectly clear, and easily comprehended by any one, was the little drawing in the corner, done in red ink and representing a small star-shaped flower.

Then Tinville and Merlin both cursed loudly and volubly, and bidding their men follow them, turned away from the house in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comedie and left its toothless landlady on her own doorstep still volubly protesting her patriotism and her desire to serve the government of the Republic.

Tinville and Merlin, however, took the scrap of paper to Citizen Robespierre, who smiled grimly as he in his turn crushed the offensive little document in the palm of his well-washed hands.

Robespierre did not swear. He never wasted either words or oaths, but he slipped the bit of paper inside the double lid of his silver snuff box and then he sent a special messenger to Citizen Chauvelin in the Rue Corneille, bidding him come that same evening after ten o'clock to room No. 16 in the ci-devant Palace of the Tuileries.

It was now half-past ten, and Chauvelin and Robespierre sat opposite one another in the ex-boudoir of Queen Marie Antoinette, and between them on the table, just below the tallow-candle, was a much creased, exceedingly grimy bit of paper.

It had passed through several unclean hands before Citizen Robespierre's immaculately white fingers had smoothed it out and placed it before the eyes of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

The latter, however, was not looking at the paper, he was not even looking at the pale, cruel face before him. He had closed his eyes and for a moment had lost sight of the small dark room, of Robespierre's ruthless gaze, of the mud-stained walls and greasy floor. He was seeing, as in a bright and sudden vision, the brilliantly-lighted salons of the Foreign Office in London, with beautiful Marguerite Blakeney gliding queenlike on the arm of the Prince of Wales.

He heard the flutter of many fans, the frou-frou of silk dresses, and above all the din and sound of dance music, he heard an inane laugh and an affected voice repeating the doggerel rhyme that was even now written on that dirty piece of paper which Robespierre had placed before him:

"We seek him here, and we seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere!
Is he in heaven, is he in hell,
That demmed elusive Pimpernel?"

It was a mere flash! One of memory's swiftly effaced pictures, when she shows us for the fraction of a second, indelible pictures from our past. Chauvelin, in that same second, while his own eyes were closed and Robespierre's fixed upon him, also saw the lonely cliffs of Calais, heard the same voice singing: "God save the King!" the volley of musketry, the despairing cries of Marguerite Blakeney; and once again he felt the keen and bitter pang of complete humiliation and defeat.

Chapter III: Ex-Ambassador Chauvelin

Robespierre had quietly waited the while. He was in no hurry: being a night-bird of very pronounced tastes, he was quite ready to sit here until the small hours of the morning watching Citizen Chauvelin mentally writhing in the throes of recollections of the past few months.

There was nothing that delighted the sea-green Incorruptible quite so much as the aspect of a man struggling with a hopeless situation and feeling a net of intrigue drawing gradually tighter and tighter around him.

Even now, when he saw Chauvelin's smooth forehead wrinkled into an anxious frown, and his thin hand nervously clutched upon the table, Robespierre heaved a pleasurable sigh, leaned back in his chair, and said with an amiable smile:

"You do agree with me, then, Citizen, that the situation has become intolerable?"

Then as Chauvelin did not reply, he continued, speaking more sharply:

"And how terribly galling it all is, when we could have had that man under the guillotine by now, if you had not blundered so terribly last year."

His voice had become hard and trenchant like that knife to which he was so ready to make constant allusion. But Chauvelin still remained silent. There was really nothing that he could say.

"Citizen Chauvelin, how you must hate that man!" exclaimed Robespierre at last.

Then only did Chauvelin break the silence which up to now he had appeared to have forced himself to keep.

"I do!" he said with unmistakable fervour.

"Then why do you not make an effort to retrieve the blunders of last year?" queried Robespierre blandly. "The Republic has been unusually patient and long-suffering with you, Citizen Chauvelin. She has taken your many services and well-known patriotism into consideration. But you know," he added significantly, "that she has no use for worthless tools."

Then as Chauvelin seemed to have relapsed into sullen silence, he continued with his original ill-omened blandness:

"Ma foi! Citizen Chauvelin, were I standing in your buckled shoes, I would not lose another hour in trying to avenge mine own humiliation!"

"Have I ever had a chance?" burst out Chauvelin with ill-suppressed vehemence. "What can I do single-handed? Since war has been declared I cannot go to England unless the Government will find some official reason for my doing so. There is much grumbling and wrath over here, and when that damned Scarlet Pimpernel League has been at work, when a score or so of valuable prizes have been snatched from under the very knife of the guillotine, then, there is much gnashing of teeth and useless cursings, but nothing serious or definite is done to smother those accursed English flies which come buzzing about our ears."

"Nay! you forget, Citizen Chauvelin," retorted Robespierre, "that we of the Committee of Public Safety are far more helpless than you. You know the language of these people, we don't. You know their manners and customs, their ways of thought, the methods they are likely to employ: we know none of these things. You have seen and spoken to men in England who are members of that damned League. You have seen the man who is its leader. We have not."

He leant forward on the table and looked more searchingly at the thin, pallid face before him.

"If you named that leader to me now, if you described him, we could go to work more easily. You could name him, and you would, Citizen Chauvelin."

"I cannot," retorted Chauvelin doggedly.

"Ah! but I think you could. But there! I do not blame your silence. You would wish to reap the reward of your own victory, to be the instrument of your own revenge. Passions! I think it natural! But in the name of your own safety, Citizen, do not be too greedy with your secret. If the man is known to you, find him again, find him, lure him to France! We want him — the people want him! And if the people do not get what they want, they will turn on those who have withheld their prey."

"I understand, Citizen, that your own safety and that of your government is involved in this renewed attempt to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel," retorted Chauvelin drily.

"And your head, Citizen Chauvelin," concluded Robespierre.

"Nay! I know that well enough, and you may believe me, and you will, Citizen, when I say that I care but little about that. The question is, if I am to lure that man to France what will you and your government do to help me?"

"Everything," replied Robespierre, "provided you have a definite plan and a definite purpose."

"I have both. But I must go to England in, at least, a semi-official capacity. I can do nothing if I am to hide in disguise in out-of-the-way corners."

"That is easily done. There has been some talk with the British authorities anent the security and welfare of peaceful French subjects settled in England. After a good deal of correspondence they have suggested our sending a semi-official representative over there to look after the interests of our own people commercially and financially. We can easily send you over in that capacity if it would suit your purpose."

"Admirably. I have only need of a cloak. That one will do as well as another."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. I have several plans in my head, and I must know that I am fully trusted. Above all, I must have power — decisive, absolute, illimitable power."

There was nothing of the weakling about this small, sable-clad man, who looked the redoubtable Jacobin leader straight in the face and brought a firm fist resolutely down upon the table before him. Robespierre paused a while ere he replied; he was eying the other man keenly, trying to read if behind that earnest, frowning brow there did not lurk some selfish, ulterior motive along with that demand for absolute power.

But Chauvelin did not flinch beneath that gaze which could make every cheek in France blanch with unnamed terror, and after that slight moment of hesitation Robespierre said quietly:

"You shall have the complete power of a military dictator in every town or borough of France which you may visit. The Revolutionary Government shall create you, before you start for England, Supreme Head of all the Sub-Committees of Public Safety. This will mean that in the name of the safety of the Republic every order given by you, of whatsoever nature it might be, must be obeyed implicitly under pain of an arraignment for treason."

Chauvelin sighed a quick, sharp sigh of intense satisfaction, which he did not even attempt to disguise before Robespierre.

"I shall want agents," he said, "or shall we say spies? and, of course, money."

"You shall have both. We keep a very efficient secret service in England and they do a great deal of good over there. There is much dissatisfaction in their Midland counties — you remember the Birmingham riots? They were chiefly the work of our own spies. Then you know Candeille, the actress? She had found her way among some of those circles in London who have what they call liberal tendencies. I believe they are called Whigs. Funny name, isn't it? It means perruque, I think. Candeille has given charity performances in aid of our Paris poor, in one or two of these Whig clubs, and incidentally she has been very useful to us."

"A woman is always useful in such cases. I shall seek out the Citizeness Candeille."

"And if she renders you useful assistance, I think I can offer her what should prove a tempting prize. Women are so vain!" he added, contemplating with rapt attention the enamel-like polish on his finger-nails. "There is a vacancy in the Maison Moliere. Or — what might prove more attractive still — in connection with the proposed National fete, and the new religion for the people, we have not yet chosen a Goddess of Reason. That should appeal to any feminine mind. The impersonation of a goddess, with processions, pageants, and the rest... Great importance and prominence given to one personality.... What say you, Citizen? If you really have need of a woman for the furtherance of your plans, you have that at your disposal which may enhance her zeal."

"I thank you, Citizen," rejoined Chauvelin calmly. "I always entertained a hope that some day the Revolutionary Government would call again on my services. I admit that I failed last year. The Englishman is resourceful. He has wits and he is very rich. He would not have succeeded, I think, but for his money — and corruption and bribery are rife in Paris and on our coasts. He slipped through my fingers at the very moment when I thought that I held him most securely. I do admit all that, but I am prepared to redeem my failure of last year, and... there is nothing more to discuss. — I am ready to start."

He looked round for his cloak and hat, and quietly readjusted the set of his neck-tie. But Robespierre detained him a while longer: that born mountebank, born torturer of the souls of men, had not gloated sufficiently yet on the agony of mind of this fellow-man.

Chauvelin had always been trusted and respected. His services in connection with the foreign affairs of the Revolutionary Government had been invaluable, both before and since the beginning of the European War. At one time he formed part of that merciless decemvirate which — with Robespierre at its head — meant to govern France by laws of bloodshed and of unparalleled ferocity.

But the sea-green Incorruptible had since tired of him, then had endeavoured to push him on one side, for Chauvelin was keen and clever, and, moreover, he possessed all those qualities of selfless patriotism which were so conspicuously lacking in Robespierre.

His failure in bringing that interfering Scarlet Pimpernel to justice and the guillotine had completed Chauvelin's downfall. Though not otherwise molested, he had been left to moulder in obscurity during this past year. He would soon enough have been completely forgotten.

Now he was not only to be given one more chance to regain public favour, but he had demanded powers which in consideration of the aim in view, Robespierre himself could not refuse to grant him. But the Incorruptible, ever envious and jealous, would not allow him to exult too soon.

With characteristic blandness he seemed to be entering into all Chauvelin's schemes, to be helping in every way he could, for there was something at the back of his mind which he meant to say to the ex-ambassador, before the latter took his leave: something which would show him that he was but on trial once again, and which would demonstrate to him with perfect clearness that over him there hovered the all-powerful hand of a master.

"You have but to name the sum you want, Citizen Chauvelin," said the Incorruptible, with an encouraging smile, "the government will not stint you, and you shall not fail for lack of authority or for lack of funds."

"It is pleasant to hear that the government has such uncounted wealth," remarked Chauvelin with dry sarcasm.

"Oh! the last few weeks have been very profitable," retorted Robespierre; "we have confiscated money and jewels from emigrant royalists to the tune of several million francs. You remember the traitor Juliette Marny, who escape to England lately? Well! her mother's jewels and quite a good deal of gold were discovered by one of our most able spies to be under the care of a certain Abbe Fouquet, a calotin from Boulogne — devoted to the family, so it seems."

"Yes?" queried Chauvelin indifferently.

"Our men seized the jewels and gold, that is all. We don't know yet what we mean to do with the priest. The fisherfolk of Boulogne like him, and we can lay our hands on him at any time, if we want his old head for the guillotine. But the jewels were worth having. There's a historic necklace worth half a million at least."

"Could I have it?" asked Chauvelin.

Robespierre laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"You said it belonged to the Marny family," continued the ex-ambassador. "Juliette Marny is in England. I might meet her. I cannot tell what may happen: but I feel that the historic necklace might prove useful. Just as you please," he added with renewed indifference. "It was a thought that flashed through my mind when you spoke — nothing more."

"And to show you how thoroughly the government trusts you, Citizen Chauvelin," replied Robespierre with perfect urbanity, "I will myself direct that the Marny necklace be placed unreservedly in your hands; and a sum of fifty thousand francs for your expenses in England. You see," he added blandly, "we give you no excuse for a second failure."

"I need none," retorted Chauvelin drily, as he finally rose from his seat, with a sigh of satisfaction that this interview was ended at last.

But Robespierre too had risen, and pushing his chair aside he took a step or two towards Chauvelin. He was a much taller man than the ex-ambassador. Spare and gaunt, he had a very upright bearing, and in the uncertain light of the candle he seemed to tower

strangely and weirdly above the other man: the pale hue of his coat, his light-coloured hair, the whiteness of his linen, all helped to give to his appearance at that moment a curious spectral effect.

Chauvelin somehow felt an unpleasant shiver running down his spine as Robespierre, perfectly urbane and gentle in his manner, placed a long, bony hand upon his shoulder.

“Citizen Chauvelin,” said the Incorruptible, with some degree of dignified solemnity, “meseems that we very quickly understood one another this evening. Your own conscience, no doubt, gave you a premonition of what the purport of my summons to you would be. You say that you always hoped the Revolutionary Government would give you one great chance to redeem your failure of last year. I, for one, always intended that you should have that chance, for I saw, perhaps, just a little deeper into your heart than my colleagues. I saw not only enthusiasm for the cause of the People of France, not only abhorrence for the enemy of your country, I saw a purely personal and deadly hate of an individual man — the unknown and mysterious Englishman who proved too clever for you last year. And because I believe that hatred will prove sharper and more far-seeing than selfless patriotism, therefore I urged the Committee of Public Safety to allow you to work out your own revenge, and thereby to serve your country more effectually than any other — perhaps more pure-minded patriot would do. You go to England well-provided with all that is necessary for the success of your plans, for the accomplishment of your own personal vengeance. The Revolutionary Government will help you with money, passports, safe conducts; it places its spies and agents at your disposal. It gives you practically unlimited power, wherever you may go. It will not enquire into your motives, nor yet your means, so long as these lead to success. But private vengeance or patriotism, whatever may actuate you, we here in France demand you deliver into our hands the man who is known in two countries as the Scarlet Pimpernel! We want him alive if possible, or dead if it must be so, and we want as many of his henchmen as will follow him to the guillotine. Get them to France, and we’ll know how to deal with them, and let the whole of Europe be damned.”

He paused for a while, his hand still resting on Chauvelin’s shoulder, his pale green eyes holding those of the other man as if in a trance. But Chauvelin neither stirred nor spoke. His triumph left him quite calm; his fertile brain was already busy with his plans. There was no room for fear in his heart, and it was without the slightest tremor that he waited for the conclusion of Robespierre’s oration.

“Perhaps, Citizen Chauvelin,” said the latter at last, “you have already guessed what there is left for me to say. But lest there should remain in your mind one faint glimmer of doubt or of hope, let me tell you this. The Revolutionary Government gives you this chance of redeeming your failure, but this one only; if you fail again, your outraged country will know neither pardon nor mercy. Whether you return to France or remain in England, whether you travel North, South, East or West, cross the Oceans, or traverse the Alps, the hand of an avenging People will be upon you. Your second failure will be punished by death, wherever you may be, either by the guillotine, if you are in France, or if you seek refuge elsewhere, then by the hand of an assassin.

“Look to it, Citizen Chauvelin! for there will be no escape this time, not even if the mightiest tyrant on earth tried to protect you, not even if you succeeded in building up an empire and placing yourself upon a throne.”

His thin, strident voice echoed weirdly in the small, close boudoir. Chauvelin made no reply. There was nothing that he could say. All that Robespierre had put so emphatically before him, he had fully realised, even whilst he was forming his most daring plans.

It was an “either — or” this time, uttered to HIM now. He thought again of Marguerite Blakeney, and the terrible alternative he had put before HER less than a year ago.

Well! he was prepared to take the risk. He would not fail again. He was going to England under more favourable conditions this time. He knew who the man was, whom he was bidden to lure to France and to death.

And he returned Robespierre’s threatening gaze boldly and unflinchingly; then he prepared to go. He took up his hat and cloak, opened the door and peered for a moment into the dark corridor, wherein, in the far distance, the steps of a solitary sentinel could be faintly heard: he put on his hat, turned to look once more into the room where Robespierre stood quietly watching him, and went his way.

Chapter IV: The Richmond Gala

It was perhaps the most brilliant September ever known in England, where the last days of dying summer are nearly always golden and beautiful.

Strange that in this country, where that same season is so peculiarly radiant with a glory all its own, there should be no special expression in the language with which to accurately name it.

So we needs must call it “fin d’ete”: the ending of the summer; not the absolute end, nor yet the ultimate departure, but the tender lingering of a friend obliged to leave us anon, yet who fain would steal a day here and there, a week or so in which to stay with us: who would make that last pathetic farewell of his endure a little while longer still, and brings forth in gorgeous array for our final gaze all that he has which is most luxuriant, most desirable, most worthy of regret.

And in this year of grace 1793, departing summer had lavished the treasures of her palette upon woodland and river banks; had tinged the once crude green of larch and elm with a tender hue of gold, had brushed the oaks with tones of warm russet, and put patches of sienna and crimson on the beech.

In the gardens the roses were still in bloom, not the delicate blush or lemon ones of June, nor yet the pale Banksias and climbers, but the full-blooded red roses of late summer, and deep-coloured apricot ones, with crinkled outside leaves faintly kissed by the frosty dew. In sheltered spots the purple clematis still lingered, whilst the dahlias, brilliant of hue, seemed overbearing in their gorgeous insolence, flaunting their crudely colored petals against sober backgrounds of mellow leaves, or the dull, mossy tones of ancient, encircling walls.

The Gala had always been held about the end of September. The weather, on the riverside, was most dependable then, and there was always sufficient sunshine as an excuse for bringing out Madam’s last new muslin gown, or her pale-coloured quilted petticoat. Then the ground was dry and hard, good alike for walking and for setting up tents and booths. And of these there was of a truth a most goodly array this year: mountebanks and jugglers from every corner of the world, so it seemed, for there was a man with a face as black as my lord’s tricorn, and another with such flat yellow cheeks as made one think of batter pudding, and spring aconite, of eggs and other very yellow things.

There was a tent wherein dogs — all sorts of dogs, big, little, black, white or tan — did things which no Christian with respect for his own backbone would have dared to perform, and another where a weird-faced old man made bean-stalks and walking sticks, coins of the realm and lace kerchiefs vanish into thin air.

And as it was nice and hot one could sit out upon the green and listen to the strains of the band, which discoursed sweet music, and watch the young people tread a measure on the sward.

The quality had not yet arrived: for humbler folk had partaken of very early dinner so as to get plenty of fun, and long hours of delight for the sixpenny toll demanded at the gates.

There was so much to see and so much to do: games of bowls on the green, and a beautiful Aunt Sally, there was a skittle alley, and two merry-go-rounds: there were performing monkeys and dancing bears, a woman so fat that three men with arms outstretched could not get round her, and a man so thin that he could put a lady’s bracelet round his neck and her garter around his waist.

There were some funny little dwarfs with pinched faces and a knowing manner, and a giant come all the way from Russia — so ’twas said.

The mechanical toys too were a great attraction. You dropped a penny into a little slit in a box and a doll would begin to dance and play the fiddle: and there was the Magic Mill, where for another modest copper a row of tiny figures, wrinkled and old and dressed in the shabbiest of rags, marched in weary procession up a flight of steps into the Mill, only to emerge again the next moment at a further door of this wonderful building looking young and gay, dressed in gorgeous finery and tripping a dance measure as they descended some steps and were finally lost to view.

But what was most wonderful of all and collected the goodliest crowd of gazers and the largest amount of coins, was a miniature representation of what was going on in France even at this very moment.

And you could not help but be convinced of the truth of it all, so cleverly was it done. There was a background of houses and a very red-looking sky. “Too red!” some people said, but were immediately quashed by the dictum of the wise, that the sky represented a sunset, as anyone who looked could see. Then there were a number of little figures, no taller than your hand, but with little wooden faces and arms and legs, just beautifully made little dolls, and these were dressed in kirtles and breeches — all rags mostly — and little coats and wooden shoes. They were massed together in groups with their arms all turned upwards.

And in the center of this little stage on an elevated platform there were miniature wooden posts close together, and with a long flat board at right angles at the foot of the posts, and all painted a bright red. At the further end of the boards was a miniature basket, and between the two posts, at the top, was a miniature knife which ran up and down in a groove and was drawn by a miniature pulley. Folk who knew said that this was a model of a guillotine.

And lo and behold! when you dropped a penny into a slot just below the wooden stage, the crowd of little figures started waving their arms up and down, and another little doll would ascend the elevated platform and lie down on the red board at the foot of the wooden posts. Then a figure dressed in brilliant scarlet put out an arm presumably to touch the pulley, and the tiny knife would rattle down on to the poor little reclining doll’s neck, and its head would roll off into the basket beyond.

Then there was a loud whirr of wheels, a buzz of internal mechanism, and all the little figures would stop dead with arms outstretched, whilst the beheaded doll rolled off the board and was lost to view, no doubt preparatory to going through the same gruesome pantomime again.

It was very thrilling, and very terrible: a certain air of hushed awe reigned in the booth where this mechanical wonder was displayed.

The booth itself stood in a secluded portion of the grounds, far from the toll gates, and the band stand and the noise of the merry-go-round, and there were great texts, written in red letters on a black ground, pinned all along the walls.

“Please spare a copper for the starving poor of Paris.”

A lady, dressed in grey quilted petticoat and pretty grey and black striped paniers, could be seen walking in the booth from time to time, then disappearing through a partition beyond. She would emerge again presently carrying an embroidered reticule, and would wander round among the crowd, holding out the bag by its chain, and repeating in tones of somewhat monotonous appeal: "For the starving poor of Paris, if you please!"

She had fine, dark eyes, rather narrow and tending upwards at the outer corners, which gave her face a not altogether pleasant expression. Still, they were fine eyes, and when she went round soliciting alms, most of the men put a hand into their breeches pocket and dropped a coin into her embroidered reticule.

She said the word "poor" in rather a funny way, rolling the "r" at the end, and she also said "please" as if it were spelt with a long line of "e's," and so it was concluded that she was French and was begging for her poorer sisters. At stated intervals during the day, the mechanical toy was rolled into a corner, and the lady in grey stood up on a platform and sang queer little songs, the words of which nobody could understand.

"Il etait une bergere et ron et petit pataplon...."

But it all left an impression of sadness and of suppressed awe upon the minds and susceptibilities of the worthy Richmond yokels come with their wives or sweethearts to enjoy the fun of the fair, and gladly did everyone emerge out of that melancholy booth into the sunshine, the brightness and the noise.

"Lud! but she do give me the creeps," said Mistress Polly, the pretty barmaid from the Bell Inn, down by the river. "And I must say that I don't see why we English folk should send our hard-earned pennies to those murdering ruffians over the water. Bein' starving so to speak, don't make a murderer a better man if he goes on murdering," she added with undisputable if ungrammatical logic. "Come, let's look at something more cheerful now."

And without waiting for anyone else's assent, she turned towards the more lively portion of the grounds, closely followed by a ruddy-faced, somewhat sheepish-looking youth, who very obviously was her attendant swain.

It was getting on for three o'clock now, and the quality were beginning to arrive. Lord Anthony Dewhurst was already there, chucking every pretty girl under the chin, to the annoyance of her beau. Ladies were arriving all the time, and the humbler feminine hearts were constantly set a-flutter at sight of rich brocaded gowns, and the new Charlottes, all crinkled velvet and soft marabout, which were so becoming to the pretty faces beneath.

There was incessant and loud talking and chattering, with here and there the shriller tones of a French voice being distinctly noticeable in the din. There were a good many French ladies and gentlemen present, easily recognisable, even in the distance, for their clothes were of more sober hue and of lesser richness than those of their English compeers.

But they were great lords and ladies, nevertheless, Dukes and Duchesses and Countesses, come to England for fear of being murdered by those devils in their own country. Richmond was full of them just now, as they were made right welcome both at the Palace and at the magnificent home of Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney.

Ah! here comes Sir Andrew Ffoulkes with his lady! so pretty and dainty does she look, like a little china doll, in her new-fashioned short-waisted gown: her brown hair in soft waves above her smooth forehead, her great, hazel eyes fixed in unaffected admiration on the gallant husband by her side.

"No wonder she dotes on him!" sighed pretty Mistress Polly after she had bobbed her curtsy to my lady. "The brave deeds he did for love of her! Rescued her from those murderers over in France and brought her to England safe and sound, having fought no end of them single-handed, so I've heard it said. Have you not, Master Thomas Jezzard?"

And she looked defiantly at her meek-looking cavalier.

"Bah!" replied Master Thomas with quite unusual vehemence in response to the disparaging look in her brown eyes, "'Tis not he who did it all, as you well know, Mistress Polly. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes is a gallant gentleman, you may take your Bible oath on that, but he that fights the murdering frog-eaters single-handed is he whom they call The Scarlet Pimpernel: the bravest gentleman in all the world."

Then, as at mention of the national hero, he thought that he detected in Mistress Polly's eyes an enthusiasm which he could not very well ascribe to his own individuality, he added with some pique:

"But they do say that this same Scarlet Pimpernel is mightily ill-favoured, and that's why no one ever sees him. They say he is fit to scare the crows away and that no Frenchy can look twice at his face, for it's so ugly, and so they let him get out of the country, rather than look at him again."

"Then they do say a mighty lot of nonsense," retorted Mistress Polly, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, "and if that be so, then why don't you go over to France and join hands with the Scarlet Pimpernel? I'll warrant no Frenchman'll want to look twice at your face."

A chorus of laughter greeted this sally, for the two young people had in the meanwhile been joined by several of their friends, and now formed part of a merry group near the band, some sitting, others standing, but all bent on seeing as much as there was to see in Richmond Gala this day. There was Johnny Cullen, the grocer's apprentice from Twickenham, and Ursula Quekett, the baker's daughter, and several "young 'uns" from the neighbourhood, as well as some older folk.

And all of them enjoyed a joke when they heard one and thought Mistress Polly's retort mightily smart. But then Mistress Polly was possessed of two hundred pounds, all her own, left to her by her grandmother, and on the strength of this extensive fortune had acquired a reputation for beauty and wit not easily accorded to a wench that had been penniless.

But Mistress Polly was also very kind-hearted. She loved to tease Master Jezzard, who was an indefatigable hanger-on at her pretty skirts, and whose easy conquest had rendered her somewhat contemptuous, but at the look of perplexed annoyance and bewildered distress in the lad's face, her better nature soon got the upper hand. She realized that her remark had been unwarrantably spiteful, and wishing to make atonement, she said with a touch of coquetry which quickly spread balm over the honest yokel's injured vanity:

"La! Master Jezzard, you do seem to make a body say some queer things. But there! you must own 'tis mighty funny about that Scarlet Pimpernel!" she added, appealing to the company in general, just as if Master Jezzard had been disputing the fact. "Why won't he let anyone see who he is? And those who know him won't tell. Now I have it for a fact from my lady's own maid Lucy, that the

young lady as is stopping at Lady Blakeney's house has actually spoken to the man. She came over from France, come a fortnight tomorrow; she and the gentleman they call Mossou Derouledé. They both saw the Scarlet Pimpernel and spoke to him. He brought them over from France. Then why won't they say?"

"Say what?" commented Johnny Cullen, the apprentice.

"Who this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel is."

"Perhaps he isn't," said old Clutterbuck, who was clerk of the vestry at the church of St. John's the Evangelist.

"Yes!" he added sententiously, for he was fond of his own sayings and usually liked to repeat them before he had quite done with them, "that's it, you may be sure. Perhaps he isn't."

"What do you mean, Master Clutterbuck?" asked Ursula Quekett, for she knew the old man liked to explain his wise saws, and as she wanted to marry his son, she indulged him whenever she could. "What do you mean? He isn't what?"

"He isn't. That's all," explained Clutterbuck with vague solemnity.

Then seeing that he had gained the attention of the little party round him, he condescended to come to more logical phraseology.

"I mean, that perhaps we must not ask, 'who IS this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel?' but 'who WAS that poor and unfortunate gentleman?'"

"Then you think..." suggested Mistress Polly, who felt unaccountably low-spirited at this oratorical pronouncement.

"I have it for a fact," said Mr. Clutterbuck solemnly, "that he whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel no longer exists now: that he was collared by the Frenchies, as far back as last fall, and in the language of the poets, has never been heard of no more."

Mr. Clutterbuck was very fond of quoting from the works of certain writers whose names he never mentioned, but who went by the poetical generality of "the poets." Whenever he made use of phrases which he was supposed to derive from these great and unnamed authors, he solemnly and mechanically raised his hat, as a tribute of respect to these giant minds.

"You think that The Scarlet Pimpernel is dead, Mr. Clutterbuck? That those horrible Frenchies murdered him? Surely you don't mean that?" sighed Mistress Polly ruefully.

Mr. Clutterbuck put his hand up to his hat, preparatory no doubt to making another appeal to the mysterious poets, but was interrupted in the very act of uttering great thoughts by a loud and prolonged laugh which came echoing from a distant corner of the grounds.

"Lud! but I'd know that laugh anywhere," said Mistress Quekett, whilst all eyes were turned in the direction whence the merry noise had come.

Half a head taller than any of his friends around him, his lazy blue eyes scanning from beneath their drooping lids the motley throng around him, stood Sir Percy Blakeney, the centre of a gaily-dressed little group which seemingly had just crossed the toll-gate.

"A fine specimen of a man, for sure," remarked Johnnie Cullen, the apprentice.

"Aye! you may take your Bible oath on that!" sighed Mistress Polly, who was inclined to be sentimental.

"Speakin' as the poets," pronounced Mr. Clutterbuck sententiously, "inches don't make a man."

"Nor fine clothes neither," added Master Jezzard, who did not approve of Mistress Polly's sentimental sigh.

"There's my lady!" gasped Miss Barbara suddenly, clutching Master Clutterbuck's arm vigorously. "Lud! but she is beautiful to-day!"

Beautiful indeed, and radiant with youth and happiness, Marguerite Blakeney had just gone through the gates and was walking along the sward towards the band stand. She was dressed in clinging robes of shimmery green texture, the new-fashioned high-waisted effect suiting her graceful figure to perfection. The large Charlotte, made of velvet to match the gown, cast a deep shadow over the upper part of her face, and gave a peculiar softness to the outline of her forehead and cheeks.

Long lace mittens covered her arms and hands and a scarf of diaphanous material edged with dull gold hung loosely around her shoulders.

Yes! she was beautiful! No captious chronicler has ever denied that! and no one who knew her before, and who saw her again on this late summer's afternoon, could fail to mark the additional charm of her magnetic personality. There was a tenderness in her face as she turned her head to and fro, a joy of living in her eyes that was quite irresistibly fascinating.

Just now she was talking animatedly with the young girl who was walking beside her, and laughing merrily the while:

"Nay! we'll find your Paul, never fear! Lud! child, have you forgotten he is in England now, and that there's no fear of his being kidnapped here on the green in broad daylight."

The young girl gave a slight shudder and her child-like face became a shade paler than before. Marguerite took her hand and gave it a kindly pressure. Juliette Marny, but lately come to England, saved from under the very knife of the guillotine, by a timely and daring rescue, could scarcely believe as yet that she and the man she loved were really out of danger.

"There is Monsieur Derouledé," said Marguerite after a slight pause, giving the young girl time to recover herself and pointing to a group of men close by. "He is among friends, as you see."

They made such a pretty picture, these two women, as they stood together for a moment on the green with the brilliant September sun throwing golden reflections and luminous shadows on their slender forms. Marguerite, tall and queen-like in her rich gown, and costly jewels, wearing with glorious pride the invisible crown of happy wifehood: Juliette, slim and girlish, dressed all in white, with a soft, straw hat on her fair curls, and bearing on an otherwise young and child-like face, the hard imprint of the terrible sufferings she had undergone, of the deathly moral battle her tender soul had had to fight.

Soon a group of friends joined them. Paul Derouledé among these, also Sir Andrew and Lady Ffoulkes, and strolling slowly towards them, his hands buried in the pockets of his fine cloth breeches, his broad shoulders set to advantage in a coat of immaculate cut, priceless lace ruffles at neck and wrist, came the inimitable Sir Percy.

Chapter V: Sir Percy and His Lady

To all appearances he had not changed since those early days of matrimony, when his young wife dazzled London society by her wit and by her beauty, and he was one of the many satellites that helped to bring into bold relief the brilliance of her presence, of her sallies and of her smiles.

His friends alone, mayhap — and of these only an intimate few — had understood that beneath that self-same lazy manner, those shy and awkward ways, that half-inane, half-cynical laugh, there now lurked an undercurrent of tender and passionate happiness.

That Lady Blakeney was in love with her own husband, nobody could fail to see, and in the more frivolous cliques of fashionable London this extraordinary phenomenon had oft been eagerly discussed.

“A monstrous thing, of a truth, for a woman of fashion to adore her own husband!” was the universal pronouncement of the gaily-decked little world that centred around Carlton House and Ranelagh.

Not that Sir Percy Blakeney was unpopular with the fair sex. Far be it from the veracious chronicler’s mind even to suggest such a thing. The ladies would have voted any gathering dull if Sir Percy’s witty sallies did not ring from end to end of the dancing hall, if his new satin coat and ‘broided waistcoat did not call for comment or admiration.

But that was the frivolous set, to which Lady Blakeney had never belonged.

It was well known that she had always viewed her good-natured husband as the most willing and most natural butt for her caustic wit; she still was fond of aiming a shaft or two at him, and he was still equally ready to let the shaft glance harmlessly against the flawless shield of his own imperturbable good humour, but now, contrary to all precedent, to all usages and customs of London society, Marguerite seldom was seen at routs or at the opera without her husband; she accompanied him to all the races, and even one night — oh horror! — had danced the gavotte with him.

Society shuddered and wondered! tried to put Lady Blakeney’s sudden infatuation down to foreign eccentricity, and finally consoled itself with the thought that after all this nonsense could not last, and that she was too clever a woman and he too perfect a gentleman to keep up this abnormal state of things for any length of time.

In the meanwhile, the ladies averred that this matrimonial love was a very one-sided affair. No one could assert that Sir Percy was anything but politely indifferent to his wife’s obvious attentions. His lazy eyes never once lighted up when she entered a ball-room, and there were those who knew for a fact that her ladyship spent many lonely days in her beautiful home at Richmond whilst her lord and master absented himself with persistent if unchivalrous regularity.

His presence at the Gala had been a surprise to everyone, for all thought him still away, fishing in Scotland or shooting in Yorkshire, anywhere save close to the apron strings of his doting wife. He himself seemed conscious of the fact that he had not been expected at this end-of-summer fete, for as he strolled forward to meet his wife and Juliette Marny, and acknowledge with a bow here and a nod there the many greetings from subordinates and friends, there was quite an apologetic air about his good-looking face, and an obvious shyness in his smile.

But Marguerite gave a happy little laugh when she saw him coming towards her.

“Oh, Sir Percy!” she said gaily, “and pray have you seen the show? I vow ’tis the maddest, merriest throng I’ve seen for many a day. Nay! but for the sighs and shudders of my poor little Juliette, I should be enjoying one of the liveliest days of my life.”

She patted Juliette’s arm affectionately.

“Do not shame me before Sir Percy,” murmured the young girl, casting shy glances at the elegant cavalier before her, vainly trying to find in the indolent, foppish personality of this society butterfly, some trace of the daring man of action, the bold adventurer who had snatched her and her lover from out the very tumbrel that bore them both to death.

“I know I ought to be gay,” she continued with an attempt at a smile, “I ought to forget everything, save what I owe to...”

Sir Percy’s laugh broke in on her half-finished sentence.

“Lud! and to think of all that I ought not to forget!” he said loudly. “Tony here has been clamouring for iced punch this last half-hour, and I promised to find a booth wherein the noble liquid is properly dispensed. Within half an hour from now His Royal Highness will be here. I assure you, Mlle. Juliette, that from that time onwards I have to endure the qualms of the damned, for the heir to Great Britain’s throne always contrives to be thirsty when I am satiated, which is Tantalus’ torture magnified a thousandfold, or to be satiated when my parched palate most requires solace; in either case I am a most pitiable man.”

“In either case you contrive to talk a deal of nonsense, Sir Percy,” said Marguerite gaily.

“What else would your ladyship have me do this lazy, hot afternoon?”

“Come and view the booths with me,” she said. “I am dying for a sight of the fat woman and the lean man, the pig-faced child, the dwarfs and the giants. There! Monsieur Derouledé,” she added, turning to the young Frenchman who was standing close beside her, “take Mlle. Juliette to hear the clavecin players. I vow she is tired of my company.”

The gaily-dressed group was breaking up. Juliette and Paul Derouledé were only too ready to stroll off arm-in-arm together, and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was ever in attendance on his young wife.

For one moment Marguerite caught her husband’s eye. No one was within earshot.

“Percy,” she said.

“Yes, m’dear.”

“When did you return?”

“Early this morning.”

“You crossed over from Calais?”

“From Boulogne.”

“Why did you not let me know sooner?”

“I could not, dear. I arrived at my lodgings in town, looking a disgusting object.... I could not appear before you until I had washed some of the French mud from off my person. Then His Royal Highness demanded my presence. He wanted news of the Duchesse de

Verneuil, whom I had the honour of escorting over from France. By the time I had told him all that he wished to hear, there was no chance of finding you at home, and I thought I should see you here.”

Marguerite said nothing for a moment, but her foot impatiently tapped the ground, and her fingers were fidgeting with the gold fringe of her scarf. The look of joy, of exquisite happiness, seemed to have suddenly vanished from her face; there was a deep furrow between her brows.

She sighed a short, sharp sigh, and cast a rapid upward glance at her husband.

He was looking down at her, smiling good-naturedly, a trifle sarcastically perhaps, and the frown on her face deepened.

“Percy,” she said abruptly.

“Yes, m’dear.”

“These anxieties are terrible to bear. You have been twice over to France within the last month, dealing with your life as lightly as if it did not now belong to me. When will you give up these mad adventures, and leave others to fight their own battles and to save their own lives as best they may?”

She had spoken with increased vehemence, although her voice was scarce raised above a whisper. Even in her sudden, passionate anger she was on her guard not to betray his secret. He did not reply immediately, but seemed to be studying the beautiful face on which heartbroken anxiety was now distinctly imprinted.

Then he turned and looked at the solitary booth in the distance, across the frontal of which a large placard had been recently affixed, bearing the words: “Come and see the true representation of the guillotine!”

In front of the booth a man dressed in ragged breeches, with Phrygian cap on his head, adorned with a tri-colour cockade, was vigorously beating a drum, shouting volubly the while:

“Come in and see, come in and see! the only realistic presentation of the original guillotine. Hundreds perish in Paris every day! Come and see! Come and see! the perfectly vivid performance of what goes on hourly in Paris at the present moment.”

Marguerite had followed the direction of Sir Percy’s eyes. She too was looking at the booth, she heard the man’s monotonous, raucous cries. She gave a slight shudder and once more looked imploringly at her husband. His face — though outwardly as lazy and calm as before — had a strange set look about the mouth and firm jaw, and his slender hand, the hand of a dandy accustomed to handle cards and dice and to play lightly with the foils, was clutched tightly beneath the folds of the priceless Mechlin frills.

It was but a momentary stiffening of the whole powerful frame, an instant’s flash of the ruling passion hidden within that very secretive soul. Then he once more turned towards her, the rigid lines of his face relaxed, he broke into a pleasant laugh, and with the most elaborate and most courtly bow he took her hand in his and raising her fingers to his lips, he gave the answer to her questions:

“When your ladyship has ceased to be the most admired woman in Europe, namely, when I am in my grave.”

Chapter VI: For the Poor of Paris

There was no time to say more then. For the laughing, chatting groups of friends had once more closed up round Marguerite and her husband, and she, ever on the alert, gave neither look nor sign that any serious conversation had taken place between Sir Percy and herself.

Whatever she might feel or dread with regard to the foolhardy adventures in which he still persistently embarked, no member of the League ever guarded the secret of his chief more loyally than did Marguerite Blakeney.

Though her heart overflowed with a passionate pride in her husband, she was clever enough to conceal every emotion save that which Nature had insisted on imprinting in her face, her present radiant happiness and her irresistible love. And thus before the world she kept up that bantering way with him, which had characterized her earlier matrimonial life, that good-natured, easy contempt which he had so readily accepted in those days, and which their entourage would have missed and would have enquired after, if she had changed her manner towards him too suddenly.

In her heart she knew full well that within Percy Blakeney's soul she had a great and powerful rival: his wild, mad, passionate love of adventure. For it he would sacrifice everything, even his life; she dared not ask herself if he would sacrifice his love.

Twice in a few weeks he had been over to France: every time he went she could not know if she would ever see him again. She could not imagine how the French Committee of Public Safety could so clumsily allow the hated Scarlet Pimpernel to slip through its fingers. But she never attempted either to warn him or to beg him not to go. When he brought Paul Derouledé and Juliette Marny over from France, her heart went out to the two young people in sheer gladness and pride because of his precious life, which he had risked for them.

She loved Juliette for the dangers Percy had passed, for the anxieties she herself had endured; only to-day, in the midst of this beautiful sunshine, this joy of the earth, of summer and of the sky, she had suddenly felt a mad, overpowering anxiety, a deadly hatred of the wild adventurous life, which took him so often away from her side. His pleasant, bantering reply precluded her following up the subject, whilst the merry chatter of people round her warned her to keep her words and looks under control.

But she seemed now to feel the want of being alone, and, somehow, that distant booth with its flaring placard, and the crier in the Phrygian cap, exercised a weird fascination over her.

Instinctively she bent her steps thither, and equally instinctively the idle throng of her friends followed her. Sir Percy alone had halted in order to converse with Lord Hastings, who had just arrived.

"Surely, Lady Blakeney, you have no thought of patronising that gruesome spectacle?" said Lord Anthony Dewhurst, as Marguerite almost mechanically had paused within a few yards of the solitary booth.

"I don't know," she said, with enforced gaiety, "the place seems to attract me. And I need not look at the spectacle," she added significantly, as she pointed to a roughly-scribbled notice at the entrance of the tent: "In aid of the starving poor of Paris."

"There's a good-looking woman who sings, and a hideous mechanical toy that moves," said one of the young men in the crowd. "It is very dark and close inside the tent. I was lured in there for my sins, and was in a mighty hurry to come out again."

"Then it must be my sins that are helping to lure me too at the present moment," said Marguerite lightly. "I pray you all to let me go in there. I want to hear the good-looking woman sing, even if I do not see the hideous toy on the move."

"May I escort you then, Lady Blakeney?" said Lord Tony.

"Nay! I would rather go in alone," she replied a trifle impatiently. "I beg of you not to heed my whim, and to await my return, there, where the music is at its merriest."

It had been bad manners to insist. Marguerite, with a little comprehensive nod to all her friends, left the young cavaliers still protesting and quickly passed beneath the roughly constructed doorway that gave access into the booth.

A man, dressed in theatrical rags and wearing the characteristic scarlet cap, stood immediately within the entrance, and ostentatiously rattled a money box at regular intervals.

"For the starving poor of Paris," he drawled out in nasal monotonous tones the moment he caught sight of Marguerite and of her rich gown. She dropped some gold into the box and then passed on.

The interior of the booth was dark and lonely-looking after the glare of the hot September sun and the noisy crowd that thronged the sward outside. Evidently a performance had just taken place on the elevated platform beyond, for a few yokels seemed to be lingering in a desultory manner as if preparatory to going out.

A few disjointed comments reached Marguerite's ears as she approached, and the small groups parted to allow her to pass. One or two women gaped in astonishment at her beautiful dress, whilst others bobbed a respectful curtsy.

The mechanical toy arrested her attention immediately. She did not find it as gruesome as she expected, only singularly grotesque, with all those wooden little figures in their quaint, arrested action.

She drew nearer to have a better look, and the yokels who had lingered behind, paused, wondering if she would make any remark.

"Her ladyship was born in France," murmured one of the men, close to her, "she would know if the thing really looks like that."

"She do seem interested," quoth another in a whisper.

"Lud love us all!" said a buxom wench, who was clinging to the arm of a nervous-looking youth, "I believe they're coming for more money."

On the elevated platform at the further end of the tent, a slim figure had just made its appearance, that of a young woman dressed in peculiarly sombre colours, and with a black lace hood thrown lightly over her head.

Marguerite thought that the face seemed familiar to her, and she also noticed that the woman carried a large embroidered reticule in her bemitted hand.

There was a general exodus the moment she appeared. The Richmond yokels did not like the look of that reticule. They felt that sufficient demand had already been made upon their scant purses, considering the meagerness of the entertainment, and they dreaded being lured to further extravagance.

When Marguerite turned away from the mechanical toy, the last of the little crowd had disappeared, and she was alone in the booth with the woman in the dark kirtle and black lace hood.

"For the poor of Paris, Madame," said the latter mechanically, holding out her reticule.

Marguerite was looking at her intently. The face certainly seemed familiar, recalling to her mind the far-off days in Paris, before she married. Some young actress no doubt driven out of France by that terrible turmoil which had caused so much sorrow and so much suffering. The face was pretty, the figure slim and elegant, and the look of obvious sadness in the dark, almond-shaped eyes was calculated to inspire sympathy and pity.

Yet, strangely enough, Lady Blakeney felt repelled and chilled by this sombrely-dressed young person: an instinct, which she could not have explained and which she felt had no justification, warned her that somehow or other, the sadness was not quite genuine, the appeal for the poor not quite heartfelt.

Nevertheless, she took out her purse, and dropping some few sovereigns into the capacious reticule, she said very kindly:

"I hope that you are satisfied with your day's work, Madame; I fear me our British country folk hold the strings of their purses somewhat tightly these times."

The woman sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, Madame!" she said with a tone of great dejection, "one does what one can for one's starving countrymen, but it is very hard to elicit sympathy over here for them, poor dears!"

"You are a Frenchwoman, of course," rejoined Marguerite, who had noted that though the woman spoke English with a very pronounced foreign accent, she had nevertheless expressed herself with wonderful fluency and correctness.

"Just like Lady Blakeney herself," replied the other.

"You know who I am?"

"Who could come to Richmond and not know Lady Blakeney by sight?"

"But what made you come to Richmond on this philanthropic errand of yours?"

"I go where I think there is a chance of earning a little money for the cause which I have at heart," replied the Frenchwoman with the same gentle simplicity, the same tone of mournful dejection.

What she said was undoubtedly noble and selfless. Lady Blakeney felt in her heart that her keenest sympathy should have gone out to this young woman — pretty, dainty, hardly more than a girl — who seemed to be devoting her young life in a purely philanthropic and unselfish cause. And yet in spite of herself, Marguerite seemed unable to shake off that curious sense of mistrust which had assailed her from the first, nor that feeling of unreality and staginess with which the Frenchwoman's attitude had originally struck her.

Yet she tried to be kind and to be cordial, tried to hide that coldness in her manner which she felt was unjustified.

"It is all very praiseworthy on your part, Madame," she said somewhat lamely. "Madame..." she added interrogatively.

"My name is Candeille — Desiree Candeille," replied the Frenchwoman.

"Candeille?" exclaimed Marguerite with sudden alacrity, "Candeille... surely..."

"Yes... of the Varietes."

"Ah! then I know why your face from the first seemed familiar to me," said Marguerite, this time with unaffected cordiality. "I must have applauded you many a time in the olden days. I am an ex-colleague, you know. My name was St. Just before I married, and I was of the Maison Moliere."

"I knew that," said Desiree Candeille, "and half hoped that you would remember me."

"Nay! who could forget Demoiselle Candeille, the most popular star in the theatrical firmament?"

"Oh! that was so long ago."

"Only four years."

"A fallen star is soon lost out of sight."

"Why fallen?"

"It was a choice for me between exile from France and the guillotine," rejoined Candeille simply.

"Surely not?" queried Marguerite with a touch of genuine sympathy. With characteristic impulsiveness, she had now cast aside her former misgivings: she had conquered her mistrust, at any rate had relegated it to the background of her mind. This woman was a colleague: she had suffered and was in distress; she had every claim, therefore, on a compatriot's help and friendship. She stretched out her hand and took Desiree Candeille's in her own; she forced herself to feel nothing but admiration for this young woman, whose whole attitude spoke of sorrows nobly borne, of misfortunes proudly endured.

"I don't know why I should sadden you with my story," rejoined Desiree Candeille after a slight pause, during which she seemed to be waging war against her own emotion. "It is not a very interesting one. Hundreds have suffered as I did. I had enemies in Paris. God knows how that happened. I had never harmed anyone, but someone must have hated me and must have wished me ill. Evil is so easily wrought in France these days. A denunciation — a perquisition — an accusation — then the flight from Paris... the forged passports... the disguise... the bribe... the hardships... the squalid hiding places... Oh! I have gone through it all... tasted every kind of humiliation... endured every kind of insult... Remember! that I was not a noble aristocrat... a Duchess or an impoverished Countess..." she added with marked bitterness, "or perhaps the English cavaliers whom the popular voice has called the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel would have taken some interest in me. I was only a poor actress and had to find my way out of France alone, or else perish on the guillotine."

"I am so sorry!" said Marguerite simply.

"Tell me how you got on, once you were in England," she continued after a while, seeing that Desiree Candeille seemed absorbed in thought.

"I had a few engagements at first," replied the Frenchwoman. "I played at Sadler's Wells and with Mrs. Jordan at Covent Garden, but the Aliens' Bill put an end to my chances of livelihood. No manager cared to give me a part, and so..."

"And so?"

"Oh! I had a few jewels and I sold them.... A little money and I live on that.... But when I played at Covent Garden I contrived to send part of my salary over to some of the poorer clubs of Paris. My heart aches for those that are starving.... Poor wretches, they are misguided and misled by self-seeking demagogues.... It hurts me to feel that I can do nothing more to help them... and eases my self-respect if, by singing at public fairs, I can still send a few francs to those who are poorer than myself."

She had spoken with ever-increasing passion and vehemence. Marguerite, with eyes fixed into vacancy, seeing neither the speaker nor her surroundings, seeing only visions of those same poor wreckages of humanity, who had been goaded into thirst for blood, when their shrunken bodies should have been clamouring for healthy food, — Marguerite thus absorbed, had totally forgotten her earlier prejudices and now completely failed to note all that was unreal, stogy, theatrical, in the oratorical declamations of the ex-actress from the Varietes.

Pre-eminently true and loyal herself in spite of the many deceptions and treacheries which she had witnessed in her life, she never looked for falsehood or for cant in others. Even now she only saw before her a woman who had been wrongfully persecuted, who had suffered and had forgiven those who had caused her to suffer. She bitterly accused herself for her original mistrust of this noble-hearted, unselfish woman, who was content to tramp around in an alien country, bartering her talents for a few coins, in order that some of those, who were the originators of her sorrows, might have bread to eat and a bed in which to sleep.

"Mademoiselle," she said warmly, "truly you shame me, who am also French-born, with the many sacrifices you so nobly make for those who should have first claim on my own sympathy. Believe me, if I have not done as much as duty demanded of me in the cause of my starving compatriots, it has not been for lack of good-will. Is there any way now," she added eagerly, "in which I can help you? Putting aside the question of money, wherein I pray you to command my assistance, what can I do to be of useful service to you?"

"You are very kind, Lady Blakeney..." said the other hesitatingly.

"Well? What is it? I see there is something in your mind..."

"It is perhaps difficult to express... but people say I have a good voice... I sing some French ditties... they are a novelty in England, I think.... If I could sing them in fashionable salons... I might perhaps..."

"Nay! you shall sing in fashionable salons," exclaimed Marguerite eagerly, "you shall become the fashion, and I'll swear the Prince of Wales himself shall bid you sing at Carlton House... and you shall name your own fee, Mademoiselle... and London society shall vie with the elite of Bath, as to which shall lure you to its most frequented routs.... There! there! you shall make a fortune for the Paris poor... and to prove to you that I mean every word I say, you shall begin your triumphant career in my own salon to-morrow night. His Royal Highness will be present. You shall sing your most engaging songs... and for your fee you must accept a hundred guineas, which you shall send to the poorest workman's club in Paris in the name of Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney."

"I thank your ladyship, but..."

"You'll not refuse?"

"I'll accept gladly... but... you will understand... I am not very old," said Candaille quaintly, "I... I am only an actress... but if a young actress is unprotected... then..."

"I understand," replied Marguerite gently, "that you are far too pretty to frequent the world all alone, and that you have a mother, a sister or a friend... which?... whom you would wish to escort you to-morrow. Is that it?"

"Nay," rejoined the actress, with marked bitterness, "I have neither mother, nor sister, but our Revolutionary Government, with tardy compassion for those it has so relentlessly driven out of France, has deputed a representative of theirs in England to look after the interests of French subjects over here!"

"Yes?"

"They have realised over in Paris that my life here has been devoted to the welfare of the poor people of France. The representative whom the government has sent to England is specially interested in me and in my work. He is a stand-by for me in case of trouble... in case of insults... A woman alone is oft subject to those, even at the hands of so-called gentlemen... and the official representative of my own country becomes in such cases my most natural protector."

"I understand."

"You will receive him?"

"Certainly."

"Then may I present him to your ladyship?"

"Whenever you like."

"Now, and it please you."

"Now?"

"Yes. Here he comes, at your ladyship's service."

Desiree Candaille's almond-shaped eyes were fixed upon a distant part of the tent, behind Lady Blakeney in the direction of the main entrance to the booth. There was a slight pause after she had spoken and then Marguerite slowly turned in order to see who this official representative of France was, whom at the young actress' request she had just agreed to receive in her house. In the doorway of the tent, framed by its gaudy draperies, and with the streaming sunshine as a brilliant background behind him, stood the sable-clad figure of Chauvelin.

Chapter VII: Premonition

Marguerite neither moved nor spoke. She felt two pairs of eyes fixed upon her, and with all the strength of will at her command she forced the very blood in her veins not to quit her cheeks, forced her eyelids not to betray by a single quiver the icy pang of a deadly premonition which at sight of Chauvelin seemed to have chilled her entire soul.

There he stood before her, dressed in his usual somber garments, a look almost of humility in those keen grey eyes of his, which a year ago on the cliffs of Calais had peered down at her with such relentless hate.

Strange that at this moment she should have felt an instinct of fear. What cause had she to throw more than a pitiful glance at the man who had tried so cruelly to wrong her, and who had so signally failed?

Having bowed very low and very respectfully, Chauvelin advanced towards her, with all the airs of a disgraced courtier craving audience from his queen.

As he approached she instinctively drew back.

"Would you prefer not to speak to me, Lady Blakeney?" he said humbly.

She could scarcely believe her ears, or trust her eyes. It seemed impossible that a man could have so changed in a few months. He even looked shorter than last year, more shrunken within himself. His hair, which he wore free from powder, was perceptibly tinged with grey.

"Shall I withdraw?" he added after a pause, seeing that Marguerite made no movement to return his salutation.

"It would be best, perhaps," she replied coldly. "You and I, Monsieur Chauvelin, have so little to say to one another."

"Very little indeed," he rejoined quietly; "the triumphant and happy have ever very little to say to the humiliated and the defeated. But I had hoped that Lady Blakeney in the midst of her victory would have spared one thought of pity and one of pardon."

"I did not know that you had need of either from me, Monsieur."

"Pity perhaps not, but forgiveness certainly."

"You have that, if you so desire it."

"Since I failed, you might try to forget."

"That is beyond my power. But believe me, I have ceased to think of the infinite wrong which you tried to do to me."

"But I failed," he insisted, "and I meant no harm to YOU."

"To those I care for, Monsieur Chauvelin."

"I had to serve my country as best I could. I meant no harm to your brother. He is safe in England now. And the Scarlet Pimpernel was nothing to you."

She tried to read his face, tried to discover in those inscrutable eyes of his, some hidden meaning to his words. Instinct had warned her of course that this man could be nothing but an enemy, always and at all times. But he seemed so broken, so abject now, that contempt for his dejected attitude, and for the defeat which had been inflicted on him, chased the last remnant of fear from her heart.

"I did not even succeed in harming that enigmatical personage," continued Chauvelin with the same self-abasement. "Sir Percy Blakeney, you remember, threw himself across my plans, quite innocently of course. I failed where you succeeded. Luck has deserted me. Our government offered me a humble post, away from France. I look after the interests of French subjects settled in England. My days of power are over. My failure is complete. I do not complain, for I failed in a combat of wits... but I failed... I failed... I failed... I am almost a fugitive and I am quite disgraced. That is my present history, Lady Blakeney," he concluded, taking once more a step towards her, "and you will understand that it would be a solace if you extended your hand to me just once more, and let me feel that although you would never willingly look upon my face again, you have enough womanly tenderness in you to force your heart to forgiveness and mayhap to pity."

Marguerite hesitated. He held out his hand and her warm, impulsive nature prompted her to be kind. But instinct would not be gainsaid: a curious instinct to which she refused to respond. What had she to fear from this miserable and cringing little worm who had not even in him the pride of defeat? What harm could he do to her, or to those whom she loved? Her brother was in England! Her husband! Bah! not the enmity of the entire world could make her fear for him!

Nay! That instinct, which caused her to draw away from Chauvelin, as she would from a venomous asp, was certainly not fear. It was hate! She hated this man! Hated him for all that she had suffered because of him; for that terrible night on the cliffs of Calais! The peril to her husband who had become so infinitely dear! The humiliations and self-reproaches which he had endured.

Yes! it was hate! and hate was of all emotions the one she most despised.

Hate? Does one hate a slimy but harmless toad or a stinging fly? It seemed ridiculous, contemptible and pitiable to think of hate in connection with the melancholy figure of this discomfited intriguer, this fallen leader of revolutionary France.

He was holding out his hand to her. If she placed even the tips of her fingers upon it, she would be making the compact of mercy and forgiveness which he was asking of her. The woman Desiree Candaille roused within her the last lingering vestige of her slumbering wrath. False, theatrical and stacy — as Marguerite had originally suspected — she appeared to have been in league with Chauvelin to bring about this undesirable meeting.

Lady Blakeney turned from one to another, trying to conceal her contempt beneath a mask of passionless indifference. Candaille was standing close by, looking obviously distressed and not a little puzzled. An instant's reflection was sufficient to convince Marguerite that the whilom actress of the Varieties Theatre was obviously ignorant of the events to which Chauvelin had been alluding: she was, therefore, of no serious consequence, a mere tool, mayhap, in the ex-ambassador's hands. At the present moment she looked like a silly child who does not understand the conversation of the "grown-ups."

Marguerite had promised her help and protection, had invited her to her house, and offered her a munificent gift in aid of a deserving cause. She was too proud to go back now on that promise, to rescind the contract because of an unexplainable fear. With regard to Chauvelin, the matter stood differently: she had made him no direct offer of hospitality: she had agreed to receive in her

house the official chaperone of an unprotected girl, but she was not called upon to show cordiality to her own and her husband's most deadly enemy.

She was ready to dismiss him out of her life with a cursory word of pardon and a half-expressed promise of oblivion: on that understanding and that only she was ready to let her hand rest for the space of one second in his.

She had looked upon her fallen enemy, seen his discomfiture and his humiliation! Very well! Now let him pass out of her life, all the more easily, since the last vision of him would be one of such utter abjection as would even be unworthy of hate.

All these thoughts, feelings and struggles passed through her mind with great rapidity. Her hesitation had lasted less than five seconds: Chauvelin still wore the look of doubting entreaty with which he had first begged permission to take her hand in his. With an impulsive toss of the head, she had turned straight towards him, ready with the phrase with which she meant to dismiss him from her sight now and forever, when suddenly a well-known laugh broke in upon her ear, and a lazy, drawly voice said pleasantly:

"La! I vow the air is fit to poison you! Your Royal Highness, I entreat, let us turn our backs upon these gates of Inferno, where lost souls would feel more at home than doth your humble servant."

The next moment His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had entered the tent, closely followed by Sir Percy Blakeney.

Chapter VIII: The Invitation

It was in truth a strange situation, this chance meeting between Percy Blakeney and ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

Marguerite looked up at her husband. She saw him shrug his broad shoulders as he first caught sight of Chauvelin, and glance down in his usual lazy, good-humoured manner at the shrunken figure of the silent Frenchman. The words she meant to say never crossed her lips; she was waiting to hear what the two men would say to one another.

The instinct of the grande dame in her, the fashionable lady accustomed to the exigencies of society, just gave her sufficient presence of mind to make the requisite low curtsy before His Royal Highness. But the Prince, forgetting his accustomed gallantry, was also absorbed in the little scene before him. He, too, was looking from the sable-clad figure of Chauvelin to that of gorgeously arrayed Sir Percy. He, too, like Marguerite, was wondering what was passing behind the low, smooth forehead of that inimitable dandy, what behind the inscrutably good-humoured expression of those sleepy eyes.

Of the five persons thus present in the dark and stuffy booth, certainly Sir Percy Blakeney seemed the least perturbed. He had paused just long enough to allow Chauvelin to become fully conscious of a feeling of supreme irritation and annoyance, then he strolled up to the ex-ambassador, with hand outstretched and the most engaging of smiles.

"Ha!" he said, with his usual half-shy, half-pleasant-tempered smile, "my engaging friend from France! I hope, sir, that our demmed climate doth find you well and hearty to-day."

The cheerful voice seemed to ease the tension. Marguerite sighed a sigh of relief. After all, what was more natural than that Percy with his amazing fund of pleasant irresponsibility should thus greet the man who had once vowed to bring him to the guillotine? Chauvelin, himself, accustomed by now to the audacious coolness of his enemy, was scarcely taken by surprise. He bowed low to His Highness, who, vastly amused at Blakeney's sally, was inclined to be gracious to everyone, even though the personality of Chauvelin as a well-known leader of the regicide government was inherently distasteful to him. But the Prince saw in the wizened little figure before him an obvious butt for his friend Blakeney's impertinent shafts, and although historians have been unable to assert positively whether or no George Prince of Wales knew aught of Sir Percy's dual life, yet there is no doubt that he was always ready to enjoy a situation which brought about the discomfiture of any of the Scarlet Pimpernel's avowed enemies.

"I, too, have not met M. Chauvelin for many a long month," said His Royal Highness with an obvious show of irony. "And I mistake not, sir, you left my father's court somewhat abruptly last year."

"Nay, your Royal Highness," said Percy gaily, "my friend Monsieur... er... Chaubertin and I had serious business to discuss, which could only be dealt with in France.... Am I not right, Monsieur?"

"Quite right, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin curtly.

"We had to discuss abominable soup in Calais, had we not?" continued Blakeney in the same tone of easy banter, "and wine that I vowed was vinegar. Monsieur... er... Chaubertin... no, no, I beg pardon... Chauvelin... Monsieur Chauvelin and I quite agreed upon that point. The only matter on which we were not quite at one was the question of snuff."

"Snuff?" laughed His Royal Highness, who seemed vastly amused.

"Yes, your Royal Highness... snuff... Monsieur Chauvelin here had — if I may be allowed to say so — so vitiated a taste in snuff that he prefers it with an admixture of pepper... Is that not so, Monsieur... er... Chaubertin?"

"Chauvelin, Sir Percy," remarked the ex-ambassador drily.

He was determined not to lose his temper and looked urbane and pleasant, whilst his impudent enemy was enjoying a joke at his expense. Marguerite the while had not taken her eyes off the keen, shrewd face. Whilst the three men talked, she seemed suddenly to have lost her sense of the reality of things. The present situation appeared to her strangely familiar, like a dream which she had dreamt oft times before.

Suddenly it became absolutely clear to her that the whole scene had been arranged and planned: the booth with its flaring placard, Demoiselle Candaille soliciting her patronage, her invitation to the young actress, Chauvelin's sudden appearance, all, all had been concocted and arranged, not here, not in England at all, but out there in Paris, in some dark gathering of blood-thirsty ruffians, who had invented a final trap for the destruction of the bold adventurer, who went by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And she also was only a puppet, enacting a part which had been written for her: she had acted just as THEY had anticipated, had spoken the very words they had meant her to say: and when she looked at Percy, he seemed supremely ignorant of it all, unconscious of this trap of the existence of which everyone here present was aware, save indeed himself. She would have fought against this weird feeling of obsession, of being a mechanical toy would up to do certain things, but this she could not do; her will appeared paralysed, her tongue even refused her service.

As in a dream she heard His Royal Highness ask for the name of the young actress who was soliciting alms for the poor of Paris.

That also had been prearranged. His Royal Highness for the moment was also a puppet, made to dance, to speak and to act as Chauvelin and his colleagues over in France had decided that he should. Quite mechanically Marguerite introduced Demoiselle Candaille to the Prince's gracious notice.

"If your Highness will permit," she said, "Mademoiselle Candaille will give us some of her charming old French songs at my rout to-morrow."

"By all means! By all means!" said the Prince. "I used to know some in my childhood days. Charming and poetic.... I know.... I know.... We shall be delighted to hear Mademoiselle sing, eh, Blakeney?" he added good-humouredly, "and for your rout to-morrow will you not also invite M. Chauvelin?"

"Nay! but that goes without saying, your Royal Highness," responded Sir Percy, with hospitable alacrity and a most approved bow directed at his arch-enemy. "We shall expect M. Chauvelin. He and I have not met for so long, and he shall be made right welcome at Blakeney Manor."

Chapter IX: Demoiselle Candeille

Her origin was of the humblest, for her mother — so it was said — had been kitchen-maid in the household of the Duc de Marny, but Desiree had received some kind of education, and though she began life as a dresser in one of the minor theatres of Paris, she became ultimately one of its most popular stars.

She was small and dark, dainty in her manner and ways, and with a graceful little figure, peculiarly supple and sinuous. Her humble origin certainly did not betray itself in her hands and feet, which were exquisite in shape and lilliputian in size.

Her hair was soft and glossy, always free from powder, and cunningly arranged so as to slightly overshadow the upper part of her face.

The chin was small and round, the mouth extraordinarily red, the neck slender and long. But she was not pretty: so said all the women. Her skin was rather coarse in texture and darkish in colour, her eyes were narrow and slightly turned upwards at the corners; no! she was distinctly not pretty.

Yet she pleased the men! Perhaps because she was so artlessly determined to please them. The women said that Demoiselle Candeille never left a man alone until she had succeeded in captivating his fancy if only for five minutes; an interval in a dance... the time to cross a muddy road.

But for five minutes she was determined to hold any man's complete attention, and to exact his admiration. And she nearly always succeeded.

Therefore the women hated her. The men were amused. It is extremely pleasant to have one's admiration compelled, one's attention so determinedly sought after.

And Candeille could be extremely amusing, and as Madelon in Moliere's "Les Precieuses" was quite inimitable.

This, however, was in the olden days, just before Paris went quite mad, before the Reign of Terror had set in, and *ci-devant* Louis the King had been executed.

Candeille had taken it into her frolicsome little head that she would like to go to London. The idea was of course in the nature of an experiment. Those dull English people over the water knew so little of what good acting really meant. Tragedy? Well! *passons!* Their heavy, large-boned actresses might manage one or two big scenes where a commanding presence and a powerful voice would not come amiss, and where prominent teeth would pass unnoticed in the agony of a dramatic climax.

But Comedy!

Ah! *ca non*, *par exemple!* Demoiselle Candeille had seen several English gentlemen and ladies in those same olden days at the Tuileries, but she really could not imagine any of them enacting the piquant scenes of Moliere or Beaumarchais.

Demoiselle Candeille thought of every English-born individual as having very large teeth. Now large teeth do not lend themselves to well-spoken comedy scenes, to smiles, or to double entendre.

Her own teeth were exceptionally small and white, and very sharp, like those of a kitten.

Yes! Demoiselle Candeille thought it would be extremely interesting to go to London and to show to a nation of shopkeepers how daintily one can be amused in a theatre.

Permission to depart from Paris was easy to obtain. In fact the fair lady had never really found it difficult to obtain anything she very much wanted.

In this case she had plenty of friends in high places. Marat was still alive and a great lover of the theatre. Tallien was a personal admirer of hers, Deputy Dupont would do anything she asked.

She wanted to act in London, at a theatre called Drury Lane. She wanted to play Moliere in England in French, and had already spoken with several of her colleagues, who were ready to join her. They would give public representations in aid of the starving population of France; there were plenty of Socialistic clubs in London quite Jacobin and Revolutionary in tendency: their members would give her full support.

She would be serving her country and her countrymen and incidentally see something of the world, and amuse herself. She was bored in Paris.

Then she thought of Marguerite St. Just, once of the *Maison Moliere*, who had captivated an English milord of enormous wealth. Demoiselle Candeille had never been of the *Maison Moliere*; she had been the leading star of one of the minor — yet much-frequented — theatres of Paris, but she felt herself quite able and ready to captivate some other unattached milord, who would load her with English money and incidentally bestow an English name upon her.

So she went to London.

The experiment, however, had not proved an unmitigated success. At first she and her company did obtain a few engagements at one or two of the minor theatres, to give representations of some of the French classical comedies in the original language.

But these never quite became the fashion. The feeling against France and all her doings was far too keen in that very set, which Demoiselle Candeille had desired to captivate with her talents, to allow of the English *jeunesse doree* to flock and see Moliere played in French, by a French troupe, whilst Candeille's own compatriots resident in England had given her but scant support.

One section of these — the aristocrats and emigres — looked upon the actress who was a friend of all the Jacobins in Paris as nothing better than *canaille*. They sedulously ignored her presence in this country, and snubbed her whenever they had an opportunity.

The other section — chiefly consisting of agents and spies of the Revolutionary Government — she would gladly have ignored. They had at first made a constant demand on her purse, her talents and her time: then she grew tired of them, and felt more and more chary of being identified with a set which was in such ill-odour with that very same *jeunesse doree* whom Candeille had desired to please.

In her own country she was and always had been a good republican: Marat had given her her first start in life by his violent praises of her talent in his widely-circulated paper; she had been associated in Paris with the whole coterie of artists and actors: every one of them republican to a man. But in London, although one might be snubbed by the emigres and aristocrats — it did not do to be mixed

up with the sans-culotte journalists and pamphleteers who haunted the Socialistic clubs of the English capital, and who were the prime organizers of all those seditious gatherings and treasonable unions that caused Mr. Pitt and his colleagues so much trouble and anxiety.

One by one, Desiree Candaille's comrades, male and female, who had accompanied her to England, returned to their own country. When war was declared, some of them were actually sent back under the provisions of the Aliens Bill.

But Desiree had stayed on.

Her old friends in Paris had managed to advise her that she would not be very welcome there just now. The sans-culotte journalists of England, the agents and spies of the Revolutionary Government, had taken their revenge of the frequent snubs inflicted upon them by the young actress, and in those days the fact of being unwelcome in France was apt to have a more lurid and more dangerous significance.

Candaille did not dare return: at any rate not for the present.

She trusted to her own powers of intrigue, and her well-known fascinations, to re-conquer the friendship of the Jacobin clique, and she once more turned her attention to the affiliated Socialistic clubs of England. But between the proverbial two stools, Demoiselle Candaille soon came to the ground. Her machinations became known in official quarters, her connection with all the seditious clubs of London was soon bruited abroad, and one evening Desiree found herself confronted with a document addressed to her: "From the Office of His Majesty's Privy Seal," wherein it was set forth that, pursuant to the statute 33 George III. ca, she, Desiree Candaille, a French subject now resident in England, was required to leave this kingdom by order of His Majesty within seven days, and that in the event of the said Desiree Candaille refusing to comply with this order, she would be liable to commitment, brought to trial and sentenced to imprisonment for a month, and afterwards to removal within a limited time under pain of transportation for life.

This meant that Demoiselle Candaille had exactly seven days in which to make complete her reconciliation with her former friends who now ruled Paris and France with a relentless and perpetually bloodstained hand. No wonder that during the night which followed the receipt of this momentous document, Demoiselle Candaille suffered gravely from insomnia.

She dared not go back to France, she was ordered out of England! What was to become of her?

This was just three days before the eventful afternoon of the Richmond Gala, and twenty-four hours after ex-Ambassador Chauvelin had landed in England. Candaille and Chauvelin had since then met at the "Cercle des Jacobins Francais" in Soho Street, and now fair Desiree found herself in lodgings in Richmond, the evening of the day following the Gala, feeling that her luck had not altogether deserted her.

One conversation with Citizen Chauvelin had brought the fickle jade back to Demoiselle Candaille's service. Nay, more, the young actress saw before her visions of intrigue, of dramatic situations, of pleasant little bits of revenge; — all of which was meat and drink and air to breathe for Mademoiselle Desiree.

She was to sing in one of the most fashionable salons in England: that was very pleasant. The Prince of Wales would hear and see her! that opened out a vista of delightful possibilities! And all she had to do was to act a part dictated to her by Citizen Chauvelin, to behave as he directed, to move in the way he wished! Well! that was easy enough, since the part which she would have to play was one peculiarly suited to her talents.

She looked at herself critically in the glass. Her maid Fanchon — a little French waif picked up in the slums of Soho — helped to readjust a stray curl which had rebelled against the comb.

"Now for the necklace, Mademoiselle," said Fanchon with suppressed excitement.

It had just arrived by messenger: a large morocco case, which now lay open on the dressing table, displaying its dazzling contents.

Candaille scarcely dared to touch it, and yet it was for her. Citizen Chauvelin had sent a note with it.

"Citizeness Candaille will please accept this gift from the government of France in acknowledgment of useful services past and to come."

The note was signed with Robespierre's own name, followed by that of Citizen Chauvelin. The morocco case contained a necklace of diamonds worth the ransom of a king.

"For useful services past and to come!" and there were promises of still further rewards, a complete pardon for all defalcations, a place within the charmed circle of the Comedie Francaise, a grand pageant and apotheosis with Citizeness Candaille impersonating the Goddess of Reason, in the midst of a grand national fete, and the acclamations of excited Paris: and all in exchange for the enactment of a part — simple and easy — outlined for her by Chauvelin!...

How strange! how inexplicable! Candaille took the necklace up in her trembling fingers and gazed musingly at the priceless gems. She had seen the jewels before, long, long ago! round the neck of the Duchesse de Marny, in whose service her own mother had been. She — as a child — had often gazed at and admired the great lady, who seemed like a wonderful fairy from an altogether world, to the poor little kitchen slut.

How wonderful are the vagaries of fortune! Desiree Candaille, the kitchen-maid's daughter, now wearing her ex-mistress' jewels. She supposed that these had been confiscated when the last of the Marnys — the girl, Juliette — had escaped from France! confiscated and now sent to her — Candaille — as a reward or as a bribe!

In either case they were welcome. The actress' vanity was soothed. She knew Juliette Marny was in England, and that she would meet her to-night at Lady Blakeney's. After the many snubs which she had endured from French aristocrats settled in England, the actress felt that she was about to enjoy an evening of triumph.

The intrigue excited her. She did not quite know what schemes Chauvelin was aiming at, what ultimate end he had had in view when he commanded her services and taught her the part which he wished her to play.

That the schemes were vast and the end mighty, she could not doubt. The reward she had received was proof enough of that.

Little Fanchon stood there in speechless admiration, whilst her mistress still fondly fingered the magnificent necklace.

"Mademoiselle will wear the diamond to-night?" she asked with evident anxiety: she would have been bitterly disappointed to have seen the beautiful thing once more relegated to its dark morocco case.

"Oh, yes, Fanchon!" said Candaille with a sigh of great satisfaction; "see that they are fastened quite securely, my girl."

She put the necklace round her shapely neck and Fanchon looked to see that the clasp was quite secure.

There came the sound of loud knocking at the street door.

"That is M. Chauvelin come to fetch me with the chaise. Am I quite ready, Fanchon?" asked Desiree Candeille.

"Oh yes, Mademoiselle!" sighed the little maid; "and Mademoiselle looks very beautiful to-night."

"Lady Blakeney is very beautiful too, Fanchon," rejoined the actress naively, "but I wonder if she will wear anything as fine as the Marny necklace?"

The knocking at the street door was repeated. Candeille took a final, satisfied survey of herself in the glass. She knew her part and felt that she had dressed well for it. She gave a final, affectionate little tap to the diamonds round her neck, took her cloak and hood from Fanchon, and was ready to go.

Chapter X: Lady Blakeney's Rout

There are several accounts extant, in the fashionable chronicles of the time, of the gorgeous reception given that autumn by Lady Blakeney in her magnificent riverside home.

Never had the spacious apartments of Blakeney Manor looked more resplendent than on this memorable occasion — memorable because of the events which brought the brilliant evening to a close.

The Prince of Wales had come over by water from Carlton House; the Royal Princesses came early, and all fashionable London was there, chattering and laughing, displaying elaborate gowns and priceless jewels dancing, flirting, listening to the strains of the string band, or strolling listlessly in the gardens, where the late roses and clumps of heliotrope threw soft fragrance on the balmy air.

But Marguerite was nervous and agitated. Strive how she might, she could not throw off that foreboding of something evil to come, which had assailed her from the first moment when she met Chauvelin face to face.

That unaccountable feeling of unreality was still upon her, that sense that she, and the woman Candeille, Percy and even His Royal Highness were, for the time being, the actors in a play written and stage-managed by Chauvelin. The ex-ambassador's humility, his offers of friendship, his quietude under Sir Percy's good-humoured banter, everything was a sham. Marguerite knew it; her womanly instinct, her passionate love, all cried out to her in warning: but there was that in her husband's nature which rendered her powerless in the face of such dangers, as, she felt sure, were now threatening him.

Just before her guests had begun to assemble, she had been alone with him for a few minutes. She had entered the room in which he sat, looking radiantly beautiful in a shimmering gown of white and silver, with diamonds in her golden hair and round her exquisite neck.

Moments like this, when she was alone with him, were the joy of her life. Then and then only did she see him as he really was, with that wistful tenderness in his deep-set eyes, that occasional flash of passion from beneath the lazily-drooping lids. For a few minutes — seconds, mayhap — the spirit of the reckless adventurer was laid to rest, relegated into the furthestmost background of this senses by the powerful emotions of the lover.

Then he would seize her in his arms, and hold her to him, with a strange longing to tear from out his heart all other thoughts, feelings and passions save those which made him a slave to her beauty and her smiles.

"Percy!" she whispered to him to-night when freeing herself from his embrace she looked up at him, and for this one heavenly second felt him all her own. "Percy, you will do nothing rash, nothing foolhardy to-night. That man had planned all that took place yesterday. He hates you, and ..."

In a moment his face and attitude had changed, the heavy lids drooped over the eyes, the rigidity of the mouth relaxed, and that quaint, half-shy, half-inane smile played around the firm lips.

"Of course he does, m'dear," he said in his usual affected, drawly tones, "of course he does, but that is so demmed amusing. He does not really know what or how much he knows, or what I know.... In fact... er... we none of us know anything... just at present...."

He laughed lightly and carelessly, then deliberately readjusted the set of his lace tie.

"Percy!" she said reproachfully.

"Yes, m'dear."

"Lately when you brought Deroulede and Juliette Marny to England... I endured agonies of anxiety... and..."

He sighed, a quick, short, wistful sigh, and said very gently:

"I know you did, m'dear, and that is where the trouble lies. I know that you are fretting, so I have to be so demmed quick about the business, so as not to keep you in suspense too long.... And now I can't take Ffoulkes away from his young wife, and Tony and the others are so mighty slow."

"Percy!" she said once more with tender earnestness.

"I know, I know," he said with a slight frown of self-reproach. "La! but I don't deserve your solicitude. Heavens know what a brute I was for years, whilst I neglected you, and ignored the noble devotion which I, alas! do even now so little to deserve."

She would have said something more, but was interrupted by the entrance of Juliette Marny into the room.

"Some of your guests have arrived, Lady Blakeney," said the young girl, apologising for her seeming intrusion. "I thought you would wish to know."

Juliette looked very young and girlish in a simple white gown, without a single jewel on her arms or neck. Marguerite regarded her with unaffected approval.

"You look charming to-night, Mademoiselle, does she not, Sir Percy?"

"Thanks to your bounty," smiled Juliette, a trifle sadly. "Whilst I dressed to-night, I felt how I should have loved to wear my dear mother's jewels, of which she used to be so proud."

"We must hope that you will recover them, dear, some day," said Marguerite vaguely, as she led the young girl out of the small study towards the larger reception rooms.

"Indeed I hope so," sighed Juliette. "When times became so troublous in France after my dear father's death, his confessor and friend, the Abbe Foucquet, took charge of all my mother's jewels for me. He said they would be safe with the ornaments of his own little church at Boulogne. He feared no sacrilege, and thought they would be most effectually hidden there, for no one would dream of looking for the Marny diamonds in the crypt of a country church."

Marguerite said nothing in reply. Whatever her own doubts might be upon such a subject, it could serve no purpose to disturb the young girl's serenity.

"Dear Abbe Foucquet," said Juliette after a while, "his is the kind of devotion which I feel sure will never be found under the new regimes of anarchy and of so-called equality. He would have laid down his life for my father or for me. And I know that he would never part with the jewels which I entrusted to his care, whilst he had breath and strength to defend them."

Marguerite would have wished to pursue the subject a little further. It was very pathetic to witness poor Juliette's hopes and confidences, which she felt sure would never be realised.

Lady Blakeney knew so much of what was going on in France just now: spoliations, confiscations, official thefts, open robberies, all in the name of equality, of fraternity and of patriotism. She knew nothing, of course, of the Abbe Fouquet, but the tender little picture of the devoted old man, painted by Juliette's words, had appealed strongly to her sympathetic heart.

Instinct and knowledge of the political aspect of France told her that by entrusting valuable family jewels to the old Abbe, Juliette had most unwittingly placed the man she so much trusted in danger of persecution at the hands of a government which did not even admit the legality of family possessions. However, there was neither time nor opportunity now to enlarge upon the subject. Marguerite resolved to recur to it a little later, when she would be alone with Mlle. de Marny, and above all when she could take counsel with her husband as to the best means of recovering the young girl's property for her, whilst relieving a devoted old man from the dangerous responsibility which he had so selflessly undertaken.

In the meanwhile the two women had reached the first of the long line of state apartments wherein the brilliant fete was to take place. The staircase and the hall below were already filled with the early arrivals. Bidding Juliette to remain in the ballroom, Lady Blakeney now took up her stand on the exquisitely decorated landing, ready to greet her guests. She had a smile and a pleasant word for all, as, in a constant stream, the elite of London fashionable society began to file past her, exchanging the elaborate greetings which the stilted mode of the day prescribed to this butterfly-world.

The lacqueys in the hall shouted the names of the guests as they passed up the stairs: names celebrated in politics, in worlds of sport, of science or of art, great historic names, humble, newly-made ones, noble illustrious titles. The spacious rooms were filling fast. His Royal Highness, so 'twas said, had just stepped out of his barge. The noise of laughter and chatter was incessant, like unto a crowd of gaily-plumaged birds. Huge bunches of apricot-coloured roses in silver vases made the air heavy with their subtle perfume. Fans began to flutter. The string band struck the preliminary cords of the gavotte.

At that moment the lacqueys at the foot of the stairs called out in stentorian tones:

"Mademoiselle Desiree Candeille! and Monsieur Chauvelin!"

Marguerite's heart gave a slight flutter; she felt a sudden tightening of the throat. She did not see Candeille at first, only the slight figure of Chauvelin dressed all in black, as usual, with head bent and hands clasped behind his back; he was slowly mounting the wide staircase, between a double row of brilliantly attired men and women, who looked with no small measure of curiosity at the ex-ambassador from revolutionary France.

Demoiselle Candeille was leading the way up the stairs. She paused on the landing in order to make before her hostess a most perfect and most elaborate curtsy. She looked smiling and radiant, beautifully dressed, a small wreath of wrought gold leaves in her hair, her only jewel an absolutely regal one, a magnificent necklace of diamonds round her shapely throat.

Chapter XI: The Challenge

It all occurred just before midnight, in one of the smaller rooms, which lead in enfilade from the principal ballroom.

Dancing had been going on for some time, but the evening was close, and there seemed to be a growing desire on the part of Lady Blakeney's guests to wander desultorily through the gardens and glasshouses, or sit about where some measure of coolness could be obtained.

There was a rumour that a new and charming French artiste was to sing a few peculiarly ravishing songs, unheard in England before. Close to the main ballroom was the octagon music-room which was brilliantly illuminated, and in which a large number of chairs had been obviously disposed for the comfort of an audience. Into this room many of the guests had already assembled. It was quite clear that a chamber-concert — select and attractive as were all Lady Blakeney's entertainments — was in contemplation.

Marguerite herself, released for a moment from her constant duties near her royal guests, had strolled through the smaller rooms, accompanied by Juliette, in order to search for Mademoiselle Candeille and to suggest the commencement of the improvised concert.

Desiree Candeille had kept herself very much aloof throughout the evening, only talking to the one or two gentlemen whom her hostess had presented to her on her arrival, and with M. Chauvelin always in close attendance upon her every movement.

Presently, when dancing began, she retired to a small boudoir, and there sat down, demurely waiting, until Lady Blakeney should require her services.

When Marguerite and Juliette Marny entered the little room, she rose and came forward a few steps.

"I am ready, Madame," she said pleasantly, "whenever you wish me to begin. I have thought out a short programme, — shall I start with the gay or the sentimental songs?"

But before Marguerite had time to utter a reply, she felt her arm nervously clutched by a hot and trembling hand.

"Who... who is this woman?" murmured Juliette Marny close to her ear.

The young girl looked pale and very agitated, and her large eyes were fixed in unmistakable wrath upon the French actress before her. A little startled, not understanding Juliette's attitude, Marguerite tried to reply lightly:

"This is Mademoiselle Candeille, Juliette dear," she said, affecting the usual formal introduction, "of the Varietes Theatre of Paris — Mademoiselle Desiree Candeille, who will sing some charming French ditties for us to-night."

While she spoke she kept a restraining hand on Juliette's quivering arm. Already, with the keen intuition which had been on the quiver the whole evening, she scented some mystery in this sudden outburst on the part of her young protegee.

But Juliette did not heed her: she felt surging up in her young, overburdened heart all the wrath and the contempt of the persecuted, fugitive aristocrat against the triumphant usurper. She had suffered so much from that particular class of the risen kitchen-wench of which the woman before her was so typical and example: years of sorrow, of poverty were behind her: loss of fortune, of kindred, of friends — she, even now a pauper, living on the bounty of strangers.

And all this through no fault of her own: the fault of her class mayhap! but not hers!

She had suffered much, and was still overwrought and nerve-strung: for some reason she could not afterwards have explained, she felt spiteful and uncontrolled, goaded into stupid fury by the look of insolence and of triumph with which Candeille calmly regarded her.

Afterwards she would willingly have bitten out her tongue for her vehemence, but for the moment she was absolutely incapable of checking the torrent of her own emotions.

"Mademoiselle Candeille, indeed?" she said in wrathful scorn, "Desiree Candeille, you mean, Lady Blakeney! my mother's kitchen-maid, flaunting shamelessly my dear mother's jewels which she has stolen mayhap..."

The young girl was trembling from head to foot, tears of anger obscured her eyes; her voice, which fortunately remained low — not much above a whisper — was thick and husky.

"Juliette! Juliette! I entreat you," admonished Marguerite, "you must control yourself, you must, indeed you must. Mademoiselle Candeille, I beg of you to retire..."

But Candeille — well-schooled in the part she had to play — had no intention of quitting the field of battle. The more wrathful and excited Mademoiselle de Marny became the more insolent and triumphant waxed the young actress' whole attitude. An ironical smile played round the corners of her mouth, her almond-shaped eyes were half-closed, regarding through dropping lashes the trembling figure of the young impoverished aristocrat. Her head was thrown well back, in obvious defiance of the social conventions, which should have forbidden a fracas in Lady Blakeney's hospitable house, and her fingers provocatively toyed with the diamond necklace which glittered and sparkled round her throat.

She had no need to repeat the words of a well-learned part: her own wit, her own emotions and feelings helped her to act just as her employer would have wished her to do. Her native vulgarity helped her to assume the very bearing which he would have desired. In fact, at this moment Desiree Candeille had forgotten everything save the immediate present: a more than contemptuous snub from one of those penniless aristocrats, who had rendered her own sojourn in London so unpleasant and unsuccessful.

She had suffered from these snubs before, but had never had the chance of forcing an esclandre, as a result of her own humiliation. That spirit of hatred for the rich and idle classes, which was so characteristic of revolutionary France, was alive and hot within her: she had never had an opportunity — she, the humble fugitive actress from a minor Paris theatre — to retort with forcible taunts to the ironical remarks made at and before her by the various poverty-stricken but haughty emigres who swarmed in those very same circles of London society into which she herself had vainly striven to penetrate.

Now at last, one of this same hated class, provoked beyond self-control, was allowing childish and unreasoning fury to outstrip the usual calm irony of aristocratic rebuffs.

Juliette had paused awhile, in order to check the wrathful tears which, much against her will, were choking the words in her throat and blinding her eyes.

"Hoity! toity!" laughed Candeille, "hark at the young baggage!"

But Juliette had turned to Marguerite and began explaining volubly:

"My mother's jewels!" she said in the midst of her tears, "ask her how she came by them. When I was obliged to leave the home of my fathers, — stolen from me by the Revolutionary Government — I contrived to retain my mother's jewels... you remember, I told you just now.... The Abbe Fouquet — dear old man! Saved them for me... that and a little money which I had... he took charge of them... he said he would place them in safety with the ornaments of his church, and now I see them round that woman's neck... I know that he would not have parted with them save with his life."

All the while that the young girl spoke in a voice half-choked with sobs, Marguerite tried with all the physical and mental will at her command to drag her out of the room and thus to put a summary ending to this unpleasant scene. She ought to have felt angry with Juliette for this childish and senseless outburst, were it not for the fact that somehow she knew within her innermost heart that all this had been arranged and preordained: not by Fate — not by a Higher Hand, but by the most skilful intriguer present-day France had ever known.

And even now, as she was half succeeding in turning Juliette away from the sight of Candeille, she was not the least surprised or startled at seeing Chauvelin standing in the very doorway through which she had hoped to pass. One glance at his face had made her fears tangible and real: there was a look of satisfaction and triumph in his pale, narrow eyes, a flash in them of approbation directed at the insolent attitude of the French actress: he looked like the stage-manager of a play, content with the effect his own well-arranged scenes were producing.

What he hoped to gain by this — somewhat vulgar — quarrel between the two women, Marguerite of course could not guess: that something was lurking in his mind, inimical to herself and to her husband, she did not for a moment doubt, and at this moment she felt that she would have given her very life to induce Candeille and Juliette to cease this passage of arms, without further provocation on either side.

But though Juliette might have been ready to yield to Lady Blakeney's persuasion, Desiree Candeille, under Chauvelin's eye, and fired by her own desire to further humiliate this overbearing aristocrat, did not wish the little scene to end so tamely just yet.

"Your old calotin was made to part with his booty, m'dear," she said, with a contemptuous shrug of her bare shoulders. "Paris and France have been starving these many years past: a paternal government seized all it could with which to reward those that served it well, whilst all that would have been brought bread and meat for the poor was being greedily stowed away by shameless traitors!"

Juliette winced at the insult.

"Oh!" she moaned, as she buried her flaming face in her hands.

Too late now did she realise that she had deliberately stirred up a mud-heap and sent noisome insects buzzing about her ears.

"Mademoiselle," said Marguerite authoritatively, "I must ask you to remember that Mlle. de Marny is my friend and that you are a guest in my house."

"Aye! I try not to forget it," rejoined Candeille lightly, "but of a truth you must admit, Citizeness, that it would require the patience of a saint to put up with the insolence of a penniless baggage, who but lately has had to stand her trial in her own country for impurity of conduct."

There was a moment's silence, whilst Marguerite distinctly heard a short sigh of satisfaction escaping from the lips of Chauvelin. Then a pleasant laugh broke upon the ears of the four actors who were enacting the dramatic little scene, and Sir Percy Blakeney, immaculate in his rich white satin coat and filmy lace ruffles, exquisite in manners and courtesy, entered the little boudoir, and with his long back slightly bent, his arm outstretched in a graceful and well-studied curve, he approached Mademoiselle Desiree Candeille.

"May I have the honour," he said with his most elaborate air of courtly deference, "of conducting Mademoiselle to her chaise?"

In the doorway just behind him stood His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales chatting with apparent carelessness to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Anthony Dewhurst. A curtain beyond the open door was partially drawn aside, disclosing one or two brilliantly dressed groups, strolling desultorily through the further rooms.

The four persons assembled in the little boudoir had been so absorbed by their own passionate emotions and the violence of their quarrel that they had not noticed the approach of Sir Percy Blakeney and of his friends. Juliette and Marguerite certainly were startled and Candeille was evidently taken unawares. Chauvelin alone seemed quite indifferent and stood back a little when Sir Percy advanced, in order to allow him to pass.

But Candeille recovered quickly enough from her surprise: without heeding Blakeney's proffered arm, she turned with all the airs of an insulted tragedy queen towards Marguerite.

"So 'tis I," she said with affected calm, "who am to bear every insult in a house in which I was bidden as a guest. I am turned out like some intrusive and importunate beggar, and I, the stranger in this land, am destined to find that amidst all these brilliant English gentlemen there is not one man of honour.

"M. Chauvelin," she added loudly, "our beautiful country has, meseems, deputed you to guard the honour as well as the worldly goods of your unprotected compatriots. I call upon you, in the name of France, to avenge the insults offered to me to-night."

She looked round defiantly from one to the other of the several faces which were now turned towards her, but no one, for the moment, spoke or stirred. Juliette, silent and ashamed, had taken Marguerite's hand in hers, and was clinging to it as if wishing to draw strength of character and firmness of purpose through the pores of the other woman's delicate skin.

Sir Percy with backbone still bent in a sweeping curve had not relaxed his attitude of uttermost deference. The Prince of Wales and his friends were viewing the scene with slightly amused aloofness.

For a moment — seconds at most — there was dead silence in the room, during which time it almost seemed as if the beating of several hearts could be distinctly heard.

Then Chauvelin, courtly and urbane, stepped calmly forward.

"Believe me, Citizeness," he said, addressing Candeille directly and with marked emphasis, "I am entirely at your command, but am I not helpless, seeing that those who have so grossly insulted you are of your own irresponsible, if charming, sex?"

Like a great dog after a nap, Sir Percy Blakeney straightened his long back and stretched it out to its full length.

"La!" he said pleasantly, "my ever engaging friend from Calais. Sir, your servant. Meseems we are ever destined to discuss amiable matters, in an amiable spirit.... A glass of punch, Monsieur... er... Chauvelin?"

"I must ask you, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin sternly, "to view this matter with becoming seriousness."

"Seriousness is never becoming, sir," said Blakeney, politely smothering a slight yawn, "and it is vastly unbecoming in the presence of ladies."

"Am I to understand then, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin, "that you are prepared to apologize to Mademoiselle Candaille for this insult offered to her by Lady Blakeney?"

Sir Percy again tried to smother that tiresome little yawn, which seemed most distressing, when he desired to be most polite. Then he flicked off a grain of dust from his immaculate lace ruffle and buried his long, slender hands in the capacious pockets of his white satin breeches; finally he said with the most good-natured of smiles:

"Sir, have you seen the latest fashion in cravats? I would wish to draw your attention to the novel way in which we in England tie a Mechlin-edged bow."

"Sir Percy," retorted Chauvelin firmly, "since you will not offer Mademoiselle Candaille the apology which she has the right to expect from you, are you prepared that you and I should cross swords like honourable gentlemen?"

Blakeney laughed his usual pleasant, somewhat shy laugh, shook his powerful frame and looked from his altitude of six feet three inches down on the small, sable-clad figure of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

"The question is, sir," he said slowly, "should we then be two honourable gentlemen crossing swords?"

"Sir Percy..."

"Sir?"

Chauvelin, who for one moment had seemed ready to lose his temper, now made a sudden effort to resume a calm and easy attitude and said quietly:

"Of course, if one of us is coward enough to shirk the contest..."

He did not complete the sentence, but shrugged his shoulders expressive of contempt. The other side of the curtained doorway a little crowd had gradually assembled, attracted hither by the loud and angry voices which came from that small boudoir. Host and hostess had been missed from the reception rooms for some time, His Royal Highness, too, had not been seen for the quarter of an hour: like flies attracted by the light, one by one, or in small isolated groups, some of Lady Blakeney's quests had found their way to the room adjoining the royal presence.

As His Highness was standing in the doorway itself, no one could of course cross the threshold, but everyone could see into the room, and could take stock of the various actors in the little comedy. They were witnessing a quarrel between the French envoy and Sir Percy Blakeney wherein the former was evidently in deadly earnest and the latter merely politely bored. Amused comments flew to and fro: laughter and a babel of irresponsible chatter made an incessant chirruping accompaniment to the duologue between the two men.

But at this stage, the Prince of Wales, who hitherto had seemingly kept aloof from the quarrel, suddenly stepped forward and abruptly interposed the weight of his authority and of his social position between the bickering adversaries.

"Tush, man!" he said impatiently, turning more especially towards Chauvelin, "you talk at random. Sir Percy Blakeney is an English gentleman, and the laws of this country do not admit of duelling, as you understand it in France; and I for one certainly could not allow..."

"Pardon, your Royal Highness," interrupted Sir Percy with irresistible bonhomie, "your Highness does not understand the situation. My engaging friend here does not propose that I should transgress the laws of this country, but that I should go over to France with him, and fight him there, where duelling and... er... other little matters of that sort are allowed."

"Yes! quite so!" rejoined the Prince, "I understand M. Chauvelin's desire. ... But what about you, Blakeney?"

"Oh!" replied Sir Percy lightly, "I have accepted his challenge, of course!"

Chapter XII: Time — Place — Conditions

It would be very difficult indeed to say why — at Blakeney's lightly spoken words — an immediate silence should have fallen upon all those present. All the actors in the little drawing-room drama, who had played their respective parts so unerringly up to now, had paused a while, just as if an invisible curtain had come down, marking the end of a scene, and the interval during which the players might recover strength and energy to resume their roles. The Prince of Wales as foremost spectator said nothing for the moment, and beyond the doorway, the audience there assembled seemed suddenly to be holding its breath, waiting — eager, expectant, palpitation — for what would follow now.

Only here and there the gentle frou-frou of a silk skirt, the rhythmic flutter of a fan, broke those few seconds' deadly, stony silence.

Yet it was all simple enough. A fracas between two ladies, the gentlemen interposing, a few words of angry expostulation, then the inevitable suggestion of Belgium or of some other country where the childish and barbarous custom of settling such matters with a couple of swords had not been as yet systematically stamped out.

The whole scene — with but slight variations — had occurred scores of times in London drawing-rooms, English gentlemen had scores of times crossed the Channel for the purpose of settling similar quarrels in continental fashion.

Why should the present situation appear so abnormal? Sir Percy Blakeney — an accomplished gentleman — was past master in the art of fence, and looked more than a match in strength and dexterity for the meagre, sable-clad little opponent who had so summarily challenged him to cross over to France, in order to fight a duel.

But somehow everyone had a feeling at this moment that this proposed duel would be unlike any other combat every fought between two antagonists. Perhaps it was the white, absolutely stony and unexpressive face of Marguerite which suggested a latent tragedy: perhaps it was the look of unmistakable horror in Juliette's eyes, or that of triumph in those of Chauvelin, or even that certain something in His Royal Highness' face, which seemed to imply that the Prince, careless man of the world as he was, would have given much to prevent this particular meeting from taking place.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that a certain wave of electrical excitement swept over the little crowd assembled there, the while the chief actor in the little drama, the inimitable dandy, Sir Percy Blakeney himself, appeared deeply engrossed in removing a speck of powder from the wide black satin ribbon which held his gold-rimmed eyeglass.

"Gentlemen!" said His Royal Highness suddenly, "we are forgetting the ladies. My lord Hastings," he added, turning to one of the gentlemen who stood close to him, "I pray you to remedy this unpardonable neglect. Men's quarrels are not fit for ladies' dainty ears."

Sir Percy looked up from his absorbing occupation. His eyes met those of his wife; she was like a marble statue, hardly conscious of what was going on round her. But he, who knew every emotion which swayed that ardent and passionate nature, guessed that beneath that stony calm there lay a mad, almost unconquerable impulse: and that was to shout to all these puppets here, the truth, the awful, the unanswerable truth, to tell them what this challenge really meant; a trap wherein one man consumed with hatred and desire for revenge hoped to entice a brave and fearless foe into a death-dealing snare.

Full well did Percy Blakeney guess that for the space of one second his most cherished secret hovered upon his wife's lips, one turn of the balance of Fate, one breath from the mouth of an unseen sprite, and Marguerite was ready to shout:

"Do not allow this monstrous thing to be! The Scarlet Pimpernel, whom you all admire for his bravery, and love for his daring, stands before you now, face to face with his deadliest enemy, who is here to lure him to his doom!"

For that momentous second therefore Percy Blakeney held his wife's gaze with the magnetism of his own; all there was in him of love, of entreaty, of trust, and of command went out to her through that look with which he kept her eyes riveted upon his face.

Then he saw the rigidity of her attitude relax. She closed her eyes in order to shut out the whole world from her suffering soul. She seemed to be gathering all the mental force of which her brain was capable, for one great effort of self-control. Then she took Juliette's hand in hers, and turned to go out of the room; the gentlemen bowed as she swept past them, her rich silken gown making a soft hush-sh as she went. She nodded to some, curtsied to the Prince, and had at the last moment the supreme courage and pride to turn her head once more towards her husband, in order to reassure him finally that his secret was as safe with her now, in this hour of danger, as it had been in the time of triumph.

She smiled and passed out of his sight, preceded by Desirée Candeille, who, escorted by one of the gentlemen, had become singularly silent and subdued.

In the little room now there only remained a few men. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had taken the precaution of closing the door after the ladies had gone.

Then His Royal Highness turned once more to Monsieur Chauvelin and said with an obvious show of indifference:

"Faith, Monsieur! meseems we are all enacting a farce, which can have no final act. I vow that I cannot allow my friend Blakeney to go over to France at your bidding. Your government now will not allow my father's subjects to land on your shores without a special passport, and then only for a specific purpose."

"La, your Royal Highness," interposed Sir Percy, "I pray you have no fear for me on that score. My engaging friend here has — an I mistake not — a passport ready for me in the pocket of his sable-hued coat, and as we are hoping effectually to spit one another over there... gadzooks! but there's the specific purpose.... Is it not true, sir," he added, turning once more to Chauvelin, "that in the pocket of that exquisitely cut coat of yours, you have a passport — name in blank perhaps — which you had specially designed for me?"

It was so carelessly, so pleasantly said, that no one save Chauvelin guessed the real import of Sir Percy's words. Chauvelin, of course, knew their inner meaning: he understood that Blakeney wished to convey to him the fact that he was well aware that the whole scene to-night had been prearranged, and that it was willingly and with eyes wide open that he walked into the trap which the revolutionary patriot had so carefully laid for him.

"The passport will be forthcoming in due course, sir," retorted Chauvelin evasively, "when our seconds have arranged all formalities."

"Seconds be demmed, sir," rejoined Sir Percy placidly, "you do not propose, I trust, that we travel a whole caravan to France."

"Time, place and conditions must be settled, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin; "you are too accomplished a cavalier, I feel sure, to wish to arrange such formalities yourself."

"Nay! neither you nor I, Monsieur... er... Chauvelin," quoth Sir Percy blandly, "could, I own, settle such things with persistent good-humour; and good-humour in such cases is the most important of all formalities. Is it not so?"

"Certainly, Sir Percy."

"As for seconds? Perish the thought. One second only, I entreat, and that one a lady — the most adorable — the most detestable — the most true — the most fickle amidst all her charming sex.... Do you agree, sir?"

"You have not told me her name, Sir Percy?"

"Chance, Monsieur, Chance.... With His Royal Highness' permission let the wilful jade decide."

"I do not understand."

"Three throws of the dice, Monsieur.... Time... Place... Conditions, you said — three throws and the winner names them.... Do you agree?"

Chauvelin hesitated. Sir Percy's bantering mood did not quite fit in with his own elaborate plans, moreover the ex-ambassador feared a pitfall of some sort, and did not quite like to trust to this arbitration of the dice-box.

He turned, quite involuntarily, in appeal to the Prince of Wales and the other gentlemen present.

But the Englishman of those days was a born gambler. He lived with the dice-box in one pocket and a pack of cards in the other. The Prince himself was no exception to this rule, and the first gentleman in England was the most avowed worshipper of Hazard in the land.

"Chance, by all means," quoth His Highness gaily.

"Chance! Chance!" repeated the others eagerly.

In the midst of so hostile a crowd, Chauvelin felt it unwise to resist. Moreover, one second's reflection had already assured him that this throwing of the dice could not seriously interfere with the success of his plans. If the meeting took place at all — and Sir Percy now had gone too far to draw back — then of necessity it would have to take place in France.

The question of time and conditions of the fight, which at best would be only a farce — only a means to an end — could not be of paramount importance.

Therefore he shrugged his shoulders with well-marked indifference, and said lightly:

"As you please."

There was a small table in the centre of the room with a settee and two or three chairs arranged close to it. Around this table now an eager little group had congregated: the Prince of Wales in the forefront, unwilling to interfere, scarce knowing what madcap plans were floating through Blakeney's adventurous brain, but excited in spite of himself at this momentous game of hazard the issues of which seemed so nebulous, so vaguely fraught with dangers. Close to him were Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Lord Grenville and perhaps a half score gentlemen, young men about town mostly, gay and giddy butterflies of fashion, who did not even attempt to seek in this strange game of chance any hidden meaning save that it was one of Blakeney's irresponsible pranks.

And in the centre of the compact group, Sir Percy Blakeney in his gorgeous suit of shimmering white satin, one knee bent upon a chair, and leaning with easy grace — dice-box in hand — across the small gilt-legged table; beside him ex-Ambassador Chauvelin, standing with arms folded behind his back, watching every movement of his brilliant adversary like some dark-plumaged hawk hovering near a bird of paradise.

"Place first, Monsieur?" suggested Sir Percy.

"As you will, sir," assented Chauvelin.

He took up a dice-box which one of the gentlemen handed to him and the two men threw.

"'Tis mine, Monsieur," said Blakeney carelessly, "mine to name the place where shall occur this historic encounter, 'twixt the busiest man in France and the most idle fop that e'er disgraced these three kingdoms.... Just for the sake of argument, sir, what place would you suggest?"

"Oh! the exact spot is immaterial, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin coldly, "the whole of France stands at your disposal."

"Aye! I thought as much, but could not be quite sure of such boundless hospitality," retorted Blakeney imperturbably.

"Do you care for the woods around Paris, sir?"

"Too far from the coast, sir. I might be sea-sick crossing over the Channel, and glad to get the business over as soon as possible.... No, not Paris, sir — rather let us say Boulogne.... Pretty little place, Boulogne... do you not think so...?"

"Undoubtedly, Sir Percy."

"Then Boulogne it is.. the ramparts, an you will, on the south side of the town."

"As you please," rejoined Chauvelin drily. "Shall we throw again?"

A murmur of merriment had accompanied this brief colloquy between the adversaries, and Blakeney's bland sallies were received with shouts of laughter. Now the dice rattled again and once more the two men threw.

"'Tis yours this time, Monsieur Chauvelin," said Blakeney, after a rapid glance at the dice. "See how evenly Chance favours us both. Mine, the choice of place... admirably done you'll confess.... Now yours the choice of time. I wait upon your pleasure, sir.... The southern ramparts at Boulogne — when?"

"The fourth day from this, sir, at the hour when the Cathedral bell chimes the evening Angelus," came Chauvelin's ready reply.

"Nay! but methought that your demmed government had abolished Cathedrals, and bells and chimes.... The people of France have now to go to hell their own way... for the way to heaven has been barred by the National Convention.... Is that not so?... Methought the Angelus was forbidden to be rung."

"Not at Boulogne, I think, Sir Percy," retorted Chauvelin drily, "and I'll pledge you my word that the evening Angelus shall be rung that night."

"At what hour is that, sir?"

"One hour after sundown."

"But why four days after this? Why not two or three?"

"I might have asked, why the southern ramparts, Sir Percy; why not the western? I chose the fourth day — does it not suit you?" asked Chauvelin ironically.

"Suit me! Why, sir, nothing could suit me better," rejoined Blakeney with his pleasant laugh. "Zounds! but I call it marvellous... demmed marvellous... I wonder now," he added blandly, "what made you think of the Angelus?"

Everyone laughed at this, a little irrelevantly perhaps.

"Ah!" continued Blakeney gaily, "I remember now.... Faith! to think that I was nigh forgetting that when last you and I met, sir, you had just taken or were about to take Holy Orders.... Ah! how well the thought of the Angelus fits in with your clerical garb.... I recollect that the latter was mightily becoming to you, sir..."

"Shall we proceed to settle the conditions of the fight, Sir Percy?" said Chauvelin, interrupting the flow of his antagonist's gibes, and trying to disguise his irritation beneath a mask of impassive reserve.

"The choice of weapons you mean," here interposed His Royal Highness, "but I thought that swords had already been decided on."

"Quite so, your Highness," assented Blakeney, "but there are various little matters in connection with this momentous encounter which are of vast importance.... Am I not right, Monsieur?... Gentlemen, I appeal to you.... Faith! one never knows... my engaging opponent here might desire that I should fight him in green socks, and I that he should wear a scarlet flower in his coat."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel, Sir Percy?"

"Why not, Monsieur? It would look so well in your buttonhole, against the black of the clerical coat, which I understand you sometime affect in France... and when it is withered and quite dead you would find that it would leave an overpowering odour in your nostrils, far stronger than that of incense."

There was general laughter after this. The hatred which every member of the French revolutionary government — including, of course, ex-Ambassador Chauvelin — bore to the national hero was well known.

"The conditions then, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin, without seeming to notice the taunt conveyed in Blakeney's last words. "Shall we throw again?"

"After you, sir," acquiesced Sir Percy.

For the third and last time the two opponents rattled the dice-box and threw. Chauvelin was now absolutely unmoved. These minor details quite failed to interest him. What mattered the conditions of the fight which was only intended as a bait with which to lure his enemy in the open? The hour and place were decided on and Sir Percy would not fail to come. Chauvelin knew enough of his opponent's boldly adventurous spirit not to feel in the least doubtful on that point. Even now, as he gazed with grudging admiration at the massive, well-knit figure of his arch-enemy, noted the thin nervy hands and square jaw, the low, broad forehead and deep-set, half-veiled eyes, he knew that in this matter wherein Percy Blakeney was obviously playing with his very life, the only emotion that really swayed him at this moment was his passionate love of adventure.

The ruling passion strong in death!

Yes! Sir Percy would be on the southern ramparts of Boulogne one hour after sunset on the day named, trusting, no doubt, in his usual marvellous good-fortune, his own presence of mind and his great physical and mental strength, to escape from the trap into which he was so ready to walk.

That remained beyond a doubt! Therefore what mattered details?

But even at this moment, Chauvelin had already resolved on one great thing: namely, that on that eventful day, nothing whatever should be left to Chance; he would meet his cunning enemy not only with cunning, but also with power, and if the entire force of the republican army then available in the north of France had to be requisitioned for the purpose, the ramparts of Boulogne would be surrounded and no chance of escape left for the daring Scarlet Pimpernel.

His wave of meditation, however, was here abruptly stemmed by Blakeney's pleasant voice.

"Lud! Monsieur Chauvelin," he said, "I fear me your luck has deserted you. Chance, as you see, has turned to me once more."

"Then it is for you, Sir Percy," rejoined the Frenchman, "to name the conditions under which we are to fight."

"Ah! that is so, is it not, Monsieur?" quoth Sir Percy lightly. "By my faith! I'll not plague you with formalities.... We'll fight with our coats on if it be cold, in our shirtsleeves if it be sultry.... I'll not demand either green socks or scarlet ornaments. I'll even try and be serious for the space of two minutes, sir, and confine my whole attention — the product of my infinitesimal brain — to thinking out some pleasant detail for this duel, which might be acceptable to you. Thus, sir, the thought of weapons springs to my mind.... Swords you said, I think. Sir! I will e'en restrict my choice of conditions to that of the actual weapons with which we are to fight.... Ffoulkes, I pray you," he added, turning to his friend, "the pair of swords which lie across the top of my desk at this moment...."

"We'll not ask a menial to fetch them, eh, Monsieur?" he continued gaily, as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes at a sign from him had quickly left the room. "What need to bruit our pleasant quarrel abroad? You will like the weapons, sir, and you shall have your own choice from the pair.... You are a fine fencer, I feel sure... and you shall decide if a scratch or two or a more serious wound shall be sufficient to avenge Mademoiselle Candaille's wounded vanity."

Whilst he prattled so gaily on, there was dead silence among all those present. The Prince had his shrewd eyes steadily fixed upon him, obviously wondering what this seemingly irresponsible adventurer held at the back of his mind. There is no doubt that everyone felt oppressed, and that a strange murmur of anticipatory excitement went round the little room, when, a few seconds later, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes returned, with two sheathed swords in his hand.

Blakeney took them from his friend and placed them on the little table in front of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin. The spectators strained their necks to look at the two weapons. They were exactly similar one to the other: both encased in plain black leather sheaths, with steel ferrules polished to shine like silver; the handles too were of plain steel, with just the grip fashioned in a twisted basket pattern of the same highly-tempered metal.

"What think you of these weapons, Monsieur?" asked Blakeney, who was carelessly leaning against the back of a chair.

Chauvelin took up one of the two swords and slowly drew it from out its scabbard, carefully examining the brilliant, narrow steel blade as he did so.

"A little old-fashioned in style and make, Sir Percy," he said, closely imitating his opponent's easy demeanour, "a trifle heavier, perhaps, than we in France have been accustomed to lately, but, nevertheless, a beautifully tempered piece of steel."

"Of a truth there's not much the matter with the tempering, Monsieur," quoth Blakeney, "the blades were fashioned at Toledo just two hundred years ago."

"Ah! here I see an inscription," said Chauvelin, holding the sword close to his eyes, the better to see the minute letters engraved in the steel.

"The name of the original owner. I myself bought them — when I travelled in Italy — from one of his descendants."

"Lorenzo Giovanni Cenci," said Chauvelin, spelling the Italian names quite slowly.

"The greatest blackguard that ever trod this earth. You, no doubt, Monsieur, know his history better than we do. Rapine, theft, murder, nothing came amiss to Signor Lorenzo... neither the deadly drug in the cup nor the poisoned dagger."

He had spoken lightly, carelessly, with that same tone of easy banter which he had not forsaken throughout the evening, and the same drawly manner which was habitual to him. But at these last words of his, Chauvelin gave a visible start, and then abruptly replaced the sword — which he had been examining — upon the table.

He threw a quick, suspicious glance at Blakeney, who, leaning back against the chair and one knee resting on the cushioned seat, was idly toying with the other blade, the exact pair to the one which the ex-ambassador had so suddenly put down.

"Well, Monsieur," quoth Sir Percy after a slight pause, and meeting with a swift glance of lazy irony his opponent's fixed gaze. "Are you satisfied with the weapons? Which of the two shall be yours, and which mine?"

"Of a truth, Sir Percy..." murmured Chauvelin, still hesitating.

"Nay, Monsieur," interrupted Blakeney with pleasant bonhomie, "I know what you would say... of a truth, there is no choice between this pair of perfect twins: one is as exquisite as the other.... And yet you must take one and I the other... this or that, whichever you prefer.... You shall take it home with you to-night and practise thrusting at a haystack or at a bobbin, as you please... The sword is yours to command until you have used it against my unworthy person... yours until you bring it out four days hence — on the southern ramparts of Boulogne, when the cathedral bells chime the evening Angelus; then you shall cross it against its faithless twin.... There, Monsieur — they are of equal length... of equal strength and temper... a perfect pair... Yet I pray you choose."

He took up both the swords in his hands and carefully balancing them by the extreme tip of their steel-bound scabbards, he held them out towards the Frenchman. Chauvelin's eyes were fixed upon him, and he from his towering height was looking down at the little sable-clad figure before him.

The Terrorist seemed uncertain what to do. Though he was one of those men whom by the force of their intellect, the strength of their enthusiasm, the power of their cruelty, had built a new anarchical France, had overturned a throne and murdered a king, yet now, face to face with this affected fop, this lazy and debonnair adventurer, he hesitated — trying in vain to read what was going on behind that low, smooth forehead or within the depth of those lazy, blue eyes.

He would have given several years of his life at this moment for one short glimpse into the innermost brain cells of this daring mind, to see the man start, quiver but for the fraction of a second, betray himself by a tremor of the eyelid. What counterplan was lurking in Percy Blakeney's head, as he offered to his opponent the two swords which had once belonged to Lorenzo Cenci?

Did any thought of foul play, of dark and deadly poisonings linger in the fastidious mind of this accomplished gentleman?

Surely not!

Chauvelin tried to chide himself for such fears. It seemed madness even to think of Italian poisons, of the Cencis or the Borgias in the midst of this brilliantly lighted English drawing-room.

But because he was above all a diplomatist, a fencer with words and with looks, the envoy of France determined to know, to probe and to read. He forced himself once more to careless laughter and nonchalance of manner and schooled his lips to smile up with gentle irony at the good-humoured face of his arch-enemy.

He tapped one of the swords with his long pointed finger.

"Is this the one you choose, sir?" asked Blakeney.

"Nay! which do you advise, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin lightly. "Which of those two blades think you is most like to hold after two hundred years the poison of the Cenci?"

But Blakeney neither started nor winced. He broke into a laugh, his own usual pleasant laugh, half shy and somewhat inane, then said in tones of lively astonishment:

"Zounds! sir, but you are full of surprises.... Faith! I never would have thought of that.... Marvellous, I call it... demmed marvellous.... What say you, gentlemen?... Your Royal Highness, what think you?... Is not my engaging friend here of a most original turn of mind.... Will you have this sword or that, Monsieur?... Nay, I must insist — else we shall weary our friends if we hesitate too long.... This one then, sir, since you have chosen it," he continued, as Chauvelin finally took one of the swords in his hand. "And now for a bowl of punch.... Nay, Monsieur, 'twas demmed smart what you said just now... I must insist on your joining us in a bowl.... Such wit as yours, Monsieur, must need whetting at times. ... I pray you repeat that same sally again..."

Then finally turning to the Prince and to his friends, he added:

"And after that bowl, gentlemen, shall we rejoin the ladies?"

Chapter XIII: Reflections

It seemed indeed as if the incident were finally closed, the chief actors in the drama having deliberately vacated the centre of the stage.

The little crowd which had stood in a compact mass round the table, began to break up into sundry small groups: laughter and desultory talk, checked for a moment by that oppressive sense of unknown danger, which had weighed on the spirits of those present, once more became general. Blakeney's light-heartedness had put everyone into good-humour; since he evidently did not look upon the challenge as a matter of serious moment, why then, no one else had any cause for anxiety, and the younger men were right glad to join in that bowl of punch which their genial host had offered with so merry a grace.

Lacqueys appeared, throwing open the doors. From a distance the sound of dance music once more broke upon the ear.

A few of the men only remained silent, deliberately holding aloof from the renewed mirthfulness. Foremost amongst these was His Royal Highness, who was looking distinctly troubled, and who had taken Sir Percy by the arm, and was talking to him with obvious earnestness. Lord Anthony Dewhurst and Lord Hastings were holding converse in a secluded corner of the room, whilst Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, as being the host's most intimate friend, felt it incumbent on him to say a few words to ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

The latter was desirous of effecting a retreat. Blakeney's invitation to join in the friendly bowl of punch could not be taken seriously, and the Terrorist wanted to be alone, in order to think out the events of the past hour.

A lacquy waited on him, took the momentous sword from his hand, found his hat and cloak and called his coach for him: Chauvelin having taken formal leave of his host and acquaintances, quickly worked his way to the staircase and hall, through the less frequented apartments.

He sincerely wished to avoid meeting Lady Blakeney face to face. Not that the slightest twinge of remorse disturbed his mind, but he feared some impulsive action on her part, which indirectly might interfere with his future plans. Fortunately no one took much heed of the darkly-clad, insignificant little figure that glided so swiftly by, obviously determined to escape attention.

In the hall he found Demoiselle Candaille waiting for him. She, too, had evidently been desirous of leaving Blakeney Manor as soon as possible. He saw her to her chaise; then escorted her as far as her lodgings, which were close by: there were still one or two things which he wished to discuss with her, one or two final instructions which he desired to give.

One the whole, he was satisfied with his evening's work: the young actress had well supported him, and had played her part so far with marvellous sang-froid and skill. Sir Percy, whether willingly or blindly, had seemed only too ready to walk into the trap which was being set for him.

This fact alone disturbed Chauvelin not a little, and as half an hour or so later, having taken final leave of his ally, he sat alone in the coach, which was conveying him back to town, the sword of Lorenzo Cenci close to his hand, he pondered very seriously over it.

That the adventurous Scarlet Pimpernel should have guessed all along, that sooner or later the French Revolutionary Government — whom he had defrauded of some of its most important victims, — would desire to be even with him, and to bring him to the scaffold, was not to be wondered at. But that he should be so blind as to imagine that Chauvelin's challenge was anything else but a lure to induce him to go to France, could not possibly be supposed. So bold an adventurer, so keen an intriguer was sure to have scented the trap immediately, and if he appeared ready to fall into it, it was because there had already sprung up in his resourceful mind some bold coup or subtle counterplan, with which he hoped to gratify his own passionate love of sport, whilst once more bringing his enemies to discomfiture and humiliation.

Undoubtedly Sir Percy Blakeney, as an accomplished gentleman of the period, could not very well under the circumstances which had been so carefully stage-managed and arranged by Chauvelin, refuse the latter's challenge to fight him on the other side of the Channel. Any hesitation on the part of the leader of that daring Scarlet Pimpernel League would have covered him with a faint suspicion of pusillanimity, and a subtle breath of ridicule, and in a moment the prestige of the unknown and elusive hero would have vanished forever.

But apart from the necessity of the fight, Blakeney seemed to enter into the spirit of the plot directed against his own life, with such light-hearted merriment, such zest and joy, that Chauvelin could not help but be convinced that the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel at Boulogne or elsewhere would not prove quite so easy a matter as he had at first anticipated.

That same night he wrote a long and circumstantial letter to his colleague, Citizen Robespierre, shifting thereby, as it were, some of the responsibility of coming events from his own shoulders on to the executive of the Committee of Public Safety.

"I guarantee to you, Citizen Robespierre," he wrote, "and to the members of the Revolutionary Government who have entrusted me with the delicate mission, that four days from this date at one hour after sunset, the man who goes by the mysterious name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, will be on the ramparts of Boulogne on the south side of the town. I have done what has been asked of me. On that day and at that hour, I shall have brought the enemy of the Revolution, the intriguer against the policy of the republic, within the power of the government which he has flouted and outraged. Now look to it, citizens all, that the fruits of my diplomacy and of my skill be not lost to France again. The man will be there at my bidding, 'tis for you to see that he does not escape this time."

This letter he sent by special courier which the National Convention had placed at his disposal in case of emergency. Having sealed it and entrusted it to the man, Chauvelin felt at peace with the world and with himself. Although he was not so sure of success as he would have wished, he yet could not see *how* failure could possibly come about: and the only regret which he felt to-night, when he finally in the early dawn sought a few hours' troubled rest, was that that momentous fourth day was still so very far distant.

Chapter XIV: The Ruling Passion

In the meanwhile silence had fallen over the beautiful old manorial house. One by one the guests had departed, leaving that peaceful sense of complete calm and isolation which follows the noisy chatter of any great throng bent chiefly on enjoyment.

The evening had been universally acknowledged to have been brilliantly successful. True, the much talked of French artiste had not sung the promised ditties, but in the midst of the whirl and excitement of dances, of the inspiring tunes of the string band, the elaborate supper and recherche wines, no one had paid much heed to this change in the programme of entertainments.

And everyone had agreed that never had Lady Blakeney looked more radiantly beautiful than on this night. She seemed absolutely indefatigable; a perfect hostess, full of charming little attentions towards every one, although more than ordinarily absorbed by her duties towards her many royal guests.

The dramatic incidents which had taken place in the small boudoir had not been much bruited abroad. It was always considered bad form in those courtly days to discuss men's quarrels before ladies, and in this instance, those who were present when it all occurred instinctively felt that their discretion would be appreciated in high circles, and held their tongues accordingly.

Thus the brilliant evening was brought to a happy conclusion without a single cloud to mar the enjoyment of the guests. Marguerite performed a veritable miracle of fortitude, forcing her very smiles to seem natural and gay, chatting pleasantly, even wittily, upon every known fashionable topic of the day, laughing merrily the while her poor, aching heart was filled with unspeakable misery.

Now, when everybody had gone, when the last of her guests had bobbed before her the prescribed curtsy, to which she had invariably responded with the same air of easy self-possession, now at last she felt free to give rein to her thoughts, to indulge in the luxury of looking her own anxiety straight in the face and to let the tension of her nerves relax.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had been the last to leave and Percy had strolled out with him as far as the garden gate, for Lady Ffoulkes had left in her chaise some time ago, and Sir Andrew meant to walk to his home, not many yards distant from Blakeney Manor.

In spite of herself Marguerite felt her heartstrings tighten as she thought of this young couple so lately wedded. People smiled a little when Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' name was mentioned, some called him effeminate, others uxorious, his fond attachment for his pretty little wife was thought to pass the bounds of decorum. There was no doubt that since his marriage the young man had greatly changed. His love of sport and adventure seemed to have died out completely, yielding evidently to the great, more overpowering love, that for his young wife.

Suzanne was nervous for her husband's safety. She had sufficient influence over him to keep him at home, when other members of the brave little League of The Scarlet Pimpernel followed their leader with mad zest, on some bold adventure.

Marguerite too at first had smiled in kindly derision when Suzanne Ffoulkes, her large eyes filled with tears, had used her wiles to keep Sir Andrew tied to her own dainty apronstrings. But somehow, lately, with that gentle contempt which she felt for the weaker man, there had mingled a half-acknowledged sense of envy.

How different 'twixt her and her husband.

Percy loved her truly and with a depth of passion proportionate to his own curious dual personality: it were sacrilege, almost, to doubt the intensity of his love. But nevertheless she had at all times a feeling as if he were holding himself and his emotions in check, as if his love, as if she, Marguerite, his wife, were but secondary matters in his life; as if her anxieties, her sorrow when he left her, her fears for his safety were but small episodes in the great book of life which he had planned out and conceived for himself.

Then she would hate herself for such thoughts: they seemed like doubts of him. Did any man ever love a woman, she asked herself, as Percy loved her? He was difficult to understand, and perhaps — oh! that was an awful "perhaps" — perhaps there lurked somewhere in his mind a slight mistrust of her. She had betrayed him once! unwittingly 'tis true! did he fear she might do so again?

And to-night after her guests had gone she threw open the great windows that gave on the beautiful terrace, with its marble steps leading down to the cool river beyond. Everything now seemed so peaceful and still; the scent of the heliotrope made the midnight air swoon with its intoxicating fragrance: the rhythmic murmur of the waters came gently echoing from below, and from far away there came the melancholy cry of a night-bird on the prowl.

That cry made Marguerite shudder: her thoughts flew back to the episodes of this night and to Chauvelin, the dark bird of prey with his mysterious death-dealing plans, his subtle intrigues which all tended towards the destruction of one man: his enemy, the husband whom Marguerite loved.

Oh! how she hated these wild adventures which took Percy away from her side. Is not a woman who loves — be it husband or child — the most truly selfish, the most cruelly callous creature in the world, there, where the safety and the well-being of the loved one is in direct conflict with the safety and well-being of others.

She would right gladly have closed her eyes to every horror perpetrated in France, she would not have known what went on in Paris, she wanted her husband! And yet month after month, with but short intervals, she saw him risk that precious life of his, which was the very essence of her own soul, for others! for others! always for others!

And she! she! Marguerite, his wife, was powerless to hold him back! powerless to keep him beside her, when that mad fit of passion seized him to go on one of those wild quests, wherefrom she always feared he could not return alive: and this, although she might use every noble artifice, every tender wile of which a loving and beautiful wife is capable.

At times like those her own proud heart was filled with hatred and with envy towards everything that took him away from her: and to-night all these passionate feelings which she felt were quite unworthy of her and of him seemed to surge within her soul more tumultuously than ever. She was longing to throw herself in his arms, to pour out into his loving ear all that she suffered, in fear and anxiety, and to make one more appeal to his tenderness and to that passion which had so often made him forget the world at her feet.

And so instinctively she walked along the terrace towards that more secluded part of the garden just above the river bank, where she had so oft wandered hand in hand with him, in the honeymoon of their love. There great clumps of old-fashioned cabbage roses grew in untidy splendour, and belated lilies sent intoxicating odours into the air, whilst the heavy masses of Egyptian and Michaelmas daisies looked like ghostly constellations in the gloom.

She thought Percy must soon be coming this way. Though it was so late, she knew that he would not go to bed. After the events of the night, his ruling passion, strong in death, would be holding him in its thrall.

She too felt wide awake and unconscious of fatigue; when she reached the secluded path beside the river, she peered eagerly up and down, and listened for a sound.

Presently it seemed to her that above the gentle clapper of the waters she could hear a rustle and the scrunching of the fine gravel under carefully measured footsteps. She waited a while. The footsteps seemed to draw nearer, and soon, although the starlit night was very dark, she perceived a cloaked and hooded figure approaching cautiously toward her.

"Who goes there?" she called suddenly.

The figure paused: then came rapidly forward, and a voice said timidly:

"Ah! Lady Blakeney!"

"Who are you?" asked Marguerite peremptorily.

"It is I... Desiree Candeille," replied the midnight prowler.

"Demoiselle Candeille!" ejaculated Marguerite, wholly taken by surprise. "What are you doing here? alone? and at this hour?"

"Sh-sh-sh..." whispered Candeille eagerly, as she approached quite close to Marguerite and drew her hood still lower over her eyes. "I am all alone ... I wanted to see someone — you if possible, Lady Blakeney... for I could not rest... I wanted to know what had happened."

"What had happened? When? I don't understand."

"What happened between Citizen Chauvelin and your husband?" asked Candeille.

"What is that to you?" replied Marguerite haughtily.

"I pray you do not misunderstand me..." pleaded Candeille eagerly. "I know my presence in your house... the quarrel which I provoked must have filled your heart with hatred and suspicion towards me... but oh! how can I persuade you?... I acted unwillingly... will you not believe me?... I was that man's tool... and... Oh God!" she added with sudden, wild vehemence, "if only you could know what tyranny that accursed government of France exercises over poor helpless women or men who happen to have fallen within reach of its relentless clutches..."

Her voice broke down in a sob. Marguerite hardly knew what to say or think. She had always mistrusted this woman with her theatrical ways and stazy airs, from the very first moment she saw her in the tent on the green: and she did not wish to run counter against her instinct, in anything pertaining to the present crisis. And yet in spite of her mistrust the actress' vehement words found an echo in the depths of her own heart. How well she knew that tyranny of which Candeille spoke with such bitterness! Had she not suffered from it, endured terrible sorrow and humiliation, when under the ban of that same appalling tyranny she had betrayed the identity — then unknown to her — of the Scarlet Pimpernel?

Therefore when Candeille paused after those last excited words, she said with more gentleness than she had shown hitherto, though still quite coldly:

"But you have not yet told me why you came back here to-night? If Citizen Chauvelin was your taskmaster, then you must know all that has occurred."

"I had a vague hope that I might see you."

"For what purpose?"

"To warn you if I could."

"I need no warning."

"Or are too proud to take one.... Do you know, Lady Blakeney, that Citizen Chauvelin has a personal hatred against your husband?"

"How do you know that?" asked Marguerite, with her suspicions once more on the qui-vive. She could not understand Candeille's attitude. This midnight visit, the vehemence of her language, the strange mixture of knowledge and ignorance which she displayed. What did this woman know of Chauvelin's secret plans? Was she his open ally, or his helpless tool? And was she even now playing a part taught her or commanded her by that prince of intriguers?

Candeille, however, seemed quite unaware of the spirit of antagonism and mistrust which Marguerite took but little pains now to disguise. She clasped her hands together, and her voice shook with the earnestness of her entreaty.

"Oh!" she said eagerly, "have I not seen that look of hatred in Chauvelin's cruel eyes?... He hates your husband, I tell you.... Why I know not... but he hates him... and means that great harm shall come to Sir Percy through this absurd duel.... Oh! Lady Blakeney, do not let him go... I entreat you, do not let him go!"

But Marguerite proudly drew back a step or two, away from the reach of those hands, stretched out towards her in such vehement appeal.

"You are overwrought, Mademoiselle," she said coldly. "Believe me, I have no need either of your entreaties or of your warning.... I should like you to think that I have no wish to be ungrateful... that I appreciate any kind thought you may have harboured for me in your mind.... But beyond that... please forgive me if I say it somewhat crudely — I do not feel that the matter concerns you in the least.... The hour is late," she added more gently, as if desiring to attenuate the harshness of her last words. "Shall I send my maid to escort you home? She is devoted and discreet..."

"Nay!" retorted the other in tones of quiet sadness, "there is no need of discretion... I am not ashamed of my visit to you to-night.... You are very proud, and for your sake I will pray to God that sorrow and humiliation may not come to you, as I feared.... We are never likely to meet again, Lady Blakeney... you will not wish it, and I shall have passed out of your life as swiftly as I had entered into it.... But there was another thought lurking in my mind when I came to-night.... In case Sir Percy goes to France... the duel is to take place in or near Boulogne... this much I do know... would you not wish to go with him?"

"Truly, Mademoiselle, I must repeat to you..."

"That 'tis no concern of mine... I know... I own that.... But, you see when I came back here to-night in the silence and the darkness — I had not guessed that you would be so proud... I thought that I, a woman, would know how to touch your womanly heart.... I was clumsy, I suppose.... I made so sure that you would wish to go with your husband, in case... in case he insisted on running his head into

the noose, which I feel sure Chauvelin has prepared for him.... I myself start for France shortly. Citizen Chauvelin has provided me with the necessary passport for myself and my maid, who was to have accompanied me.... Then, just now, when I was all alone... and thought over all the mischief which that fiend had forced me to do for him, it seemed to me that perhaps..."

She broke off abruptly, and tried to read the other woman's face in the gloom. But Marguerite, who was taller than the Frenchwoman, was standing, very stiff and erect, giving the young actress neither discouragement nor confidence. She did not interrupt Candeille's long and voluble explanation: vaguely she wondered what it was all about, and even now when the Frenchwoman paused, Marguerite said nothing, but watched her quietly as she took a folded paper from the capacious pocket of her cloak and then held it out with a look of timidity towards Lady Blakeney.

"My maid need not come with me," said Desiree Candeille humbly. "I would far rather travel alone... this is her passport and... Oh! you need not take it out of my hand," she added in tones of bitter self-deprecation, as Marguerite made no sign of taking the paper from her. "See! I will leave it here among the roses!... You mistrust me now... it is only natural... presently, perhaps, calmer reflection will come... you will see that my purpose now is selfless... that I only wish to serve you and him."

She stooped and placed the folded paper in the midst of a great clump of centifolium roses, and then without another word she turned and went her way. For a few moments, whilst Marguerite still stood there, puzzled and vaguely moved, she could hear the gentle frou-frou of the other woman's skirts against the soft sand of the path, and then a long-drawn sigh that sounded like a sob.

Then all was still again. The gentle midnight breeze caressed the tops of the ancient oaks and elms behind her, drawing murmurs from their dying leaves like unto the whisperings of ghosts.

Marguerite shuddered with a slight sense of cold. Before her, amongst the dark clump of leaves and the roses, invisible in the gloom, there fluttered with a curious, melancholy flapping, the folded paper placed there by Candeille. She watched it for awhile, as, disturbed by the wind, it seemed ready to take its flight towards the river. Anon it fell to the ground, and Marguerite with sudden overpowering impulse, stooped and picked it up. Then clutching it nervously in her hand, she walked rapidly back towards the house.

Chapter XV: Farewell

As she neared the terrace, she became conscious of several forms moving about at the foot of the steps, some few feet below where she was standing. Soon she saw the glimmer of lanterns, heard whispering voices, and the lapping of the water against the side of a boat.

Anon a figure, laden with cloaks and sundry packages, passed down the steps close beside her. Even in the darkness Marguerite recognized Benyon, her husband's confidential valet. Without a moment's hesitation, she flew along the terrace towards the wing of the house occupied by Sir Percy. She had not gone far before she discerned his tall figure walking leisurely along the path which here skirted part of the house.

He had on his large caped coat, which was thrown open in front, displaying a grey travelling suit of fine cloth; his hands were as usual buried in the pockets of his breeches, and on his head he wore the folding chapeau-bras which he habitually affected.

Before she had time to think, or to realize that he was going, before she could utter one single word, she was in his arms, clinging to him with passionate intensity, trying in the gloom to catch every expression of his eyes, every quiver of the face now bent down so close to her.

"Percy, you cannot go... you cannot go!..." she pleaded.

She had felt his strong arms closing round her, his lips seeking hers, her eyes, her hair, her clinging hands, which dragged at his shoulders in a wild agony of despair.

"If you really loved me, Percy," she murmured, "you would not go, you would not go..."

He would not trust himself to speak; it well-nigh seemed as if his sinews cracked with the violent effort at self-control. Oh! how she loved him, when she felt in him the passionate lover, the wild, untamed creature that he was at heart, on whom the frigid courtliness of manner sat but as a thin veneer. This was his own real personality, and there was little now of the elegant and accomplished gentleman of fashion, schooled to hold every emotion in check, to hide every thought, every desire save that for amusement or for display.

She — feeling her power and his weakness now — gave herself wholly to his embrace, not grudging one single, passionate caress, yielding her lips to him, the while she murmured:

"You cannot go... you cannot... why should you go?... It is madness to leave me... I cannot let you go..."

Her arms clung tenderly round him, her voice was warm and faintly shaken with suppressed tears, and as he wildly murmured: "Don't! for pity's sake!" she almost felt that her love would be triumphant.

"For pity's sake, I'll go on pleading, Percy!" she whispered. "Oh! my love, my dear! do not leave me!... we have scarce had time to savour our happiness... we have such arrears of joy to make up.... Do not go, Percy... there's so much I want to say to you.... Nay! you shall not! you shall not!" she added with sudden vehemence. "Look me straight in the eyes, my dear, and tell me if you can leave now?"

He did not reply, but, almost roughly, he placed his hand over her tear-dimmed eyes, which were turned up to his, in an agony of tender appeal. Thus he blindfolded her with that wild caress. She should not see — no, not even she! — that for the space of a few seconds stern manhood was well-nigh vanquished by the magic of her love.

All that was most human in him, all that was weak in this strong and untamed nature, cried aloud for peace and luxury and idleness: for long summer afternoons spent in lazy content, for the companionship of horses and dogs and of flowers, with no thought or cares save those for the next evening's gavotte, no graver occupation save that of sitting at HER feet.

And during these few seconds, whilst his hand lay across her eyes, the lazy, idle fop of fashionable London was fighting a hand-to-hand fight with the bold leader of a band of adventurers: and his own passionate love for his wife ranged itself with fervent intensity on the side of his weaker self. Forgotten were the horrors of the guillotine, the calls of the innocent, the appeal of the helpless; forgotten the daring adventures, the excitements, the hair's-breadth escapes; for those few seconds, heavenly in themselves, he only remembered her — his wife — her beauty and her tender appeal to him.

She would have pleaded again, for she felt that she was winning in this fight: her instinct — that unerring instinct of the woman who loves and feels herself beloved — told her that for the space of an infinitesimal fraction of time, his iron will was inclined to bend; but he checked her pleading with a kiss.

Then there came a change.

Like a gigantic wave carried inwards by the tide, his turbulent emotion seemed suddenly to shatter itself against a rock of self-control. Was it a call from the boatmen below? a distant scrunching of feet upon the gravel? — who knows, perhaps only a sigh in the midnight air, a ghostly summons from the land of dreams that recalled him to himself.

Even as Marguerite was still clinging to him, with the ardent fervour of her own passion, she felt the rigid tension of his arms relax, the power of his embrace weaken, the wild love-light become dim in his eyes.

He kissed her fondly, tenderly, and with infinite gentleness smoothed away the little damp curls from her brow. There was a wistfulness now in his caress, and in his kiss there was the finality of a long farewell.

"'Tis time I went," he said, "or we shall miss the tide."

These were the first coherent words he had spoken since first she had met him here in this lonely part of the garden, and his voice was perfectly steady, conventional and cold. An icy pang shot through Marguerite's heart. It was as if she had been abruptly awakened from a beautiful dream.

"You are not going, Percy!" she murmured, and her own voice now sounded hollow and forced. "Oh! if you loved me you would not go!"

"If I love you!"

Nay! in this at least there was no dream! no coldness in his voice when he repeated those words with such a sigh of tenderness, such a world of longing, that the bitterness of her great pain vanished, giving place to tears. He took her hand in his. The passion was momentarily conquered, forced within his innermost soul, by his own alter ego, that second personality in him, the cold-blooded and coolly-calculating adventurer who juggled with his life and tossed it recklessly upon the sea of chance 'twixt a doggerel and a smile.

But the tender love lingered on, fighting the enemy a while longer, the wistful desire was there for her kiss, the tired longing for the exquisite repose of her embrace.

He took her hand in his, and bent his lips to it, and with the warmth of his kiss upon it, she felt a moisture like a tear.

"I must go, dear," he said, after a little while.

"Why? Why?" she repeated obstinately. "Am I nothing then? Is my life of no account? My sorrows? My fears? My misery? Oh!" she added with vehement bitterness, "why should it always be others? What are others to you and to me, Percy?... Are we not happy here?... Have you not fulfilled to its uttermost that self-imposed duty to people who can be nothing to us?... Is not your life ten thousand times more precious to me than the lives of ten thousand others?"

Even through the darkness, and because his face was so close to hers, she could see a quaint little smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

"Nay, m'dear," he said gently, "'tis not ten thousand lives that call to me to-day... only one at best.... Don't you hate to think of that poor little old cure sitting in the midst of his ruined pride and hopes: the jewels so confidently entrusted to his care, stolen from him, he waiting, perhaps, in his little presbytery for the day when those brutes will march him to prison and to death.... Nay! I think a little sea voyage and English country air would suit the Abbe Fouquet, m'dear, and I only mean to ask him to cross the Channel with me!..."

"Percy!" she pleaded.

"Oh! I know! I know!" he rejoined with that short deprecatory sigh of his, which seemed always to close any discussion between them on that point, "you are thinking of that absurd duel..." He laughed lightly, good-humouredly, and his eyes gleamed with merriment.

"La, m'dear!" he said gaily, "will you not reflect a moment? Could I refuse the challenge before His Royal Highness and the ladies? I couldn't. ... Faith! that was it.... Just a case of couldn't.... Fate did it all... the quarrel... my interference... the challenge.... HE had planned it all of course.... Let us own that he is a brave man, seeing that he and I are not even yet, for that beating he gave me on the Calais cliffs."

"Yes! he has planned it all," she retorted vehemently. "The quarrel to-night, your journey to France, your meeting with him face to face at a given hour and place where he can most readily, most easily close the death-trap upon you."

This time he broke into a laugh. A good, hearty laugh, full of the joy of living, of the madness and intoxication of a bold adventure, a laugh that had not one particle of anxiety or of tremor in it.

"Nay! m'dear!" he said, "but your ladyship is astonishing.... Close a death-trap upon your humble servant?... Nay! the governing citizens of France will have to be very active and mighty wide-awake ere they succeed in stealing a march on me.... Zounds! but we'll give them an exciting chase this time.... Nay! little woman, do not fear!" he said with sudden infinite gentleness, "those demmed murderers have not got me yet."

Oh! how often she had fought with him thus: with him, the adventurer, the part of his dual nature that was her bitter enemy, and which took him, the lover, away from her side. She knew so well the finality of it all, the amazing hold which that unconquerable desire for these mad adventures had upon him. Impulsive, ardent as she was, Marguerite felt in her very soul an overwhelming fury against herself for her own weakness, her own powerlessness in the face of that which forever threatened to ruin her life and her happiness.

Yes! and his also! for he loved her! he loved her! he loved her! the thought went on hammering in her mind, for she knew of its great truth! He loved her and went away! And she, poor, puny weakling, was unable to hold him back; the tendrils which fastened his soul to hers were not so tenacious as those which made him cling to suffering humanity, over there in France, where men and women were in fear of death and torture, and looked upon the elusive and mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel as a heaven-born hero sent to save them from their doom. To them at these times his very heartstrings seemed to turn with unconquerable force, and when, with all the ardour of her own passion, she tried to play upon the cords of his love for her, he could not respond, for they — the strangers — had the stronger claim.

And yet through it all she knew that this love of humanity, this mad desire to serve and to help, in no way detracted from his love for her. Nay, it intensified it, made it purer and better, adding to the joy of perfect intercourse the poetic and subtle fragrance of ever-recurring pain.

But now at last she felt weary of the fight: her heart was aching, bruised and sore. An infinite fatigue seemed to weigh like lead upon her very soul. This seemed so different to any other parting, that had perforce been during the past year. The presence of Chauvelin in her house, the obvious planning of this departure for France, had filled her with a foreboding, nay, almost a certitude of a gigantic and deadly cataclysm.

Her senses began to reel; she seemed not to see anything very distinctly: even the loved form took on a strange and ghostlike shape. He now looked preternaturally tall, and there was a mist between her and him.

She thought that he spoke to her again, but she was not quite sure, for his voice sounded like some weird and mysterious echo. A bosquet of climbing heliotrope close by threw a fragrance into the evening air, which turned her giddy with its overpowering sweetness.

She closed her eyes, for she felt as if she must die, if she held them open any longer; and as she closed them it seemed to her as if he folded her in one last, long, heavenly embrace.

He felt her graceful figure swaying in his arms like a tall and slender lily bending to the wind. He saw that she was but half-conscious, and thanked heaven for this kindly solace to his heart-breaking farewell.

There was a sloping, mossy bank close by, there where the marble terrace yielded to the encroaching shrubbery: a tangle of pale pink monthly roses made a bower overhead. She was just sufficiently conscious to enable him to lead her to this soft green couch. There he laid her amongst the roses, kissed the dear, tired eyes, her hands, her lips, her tiny feet, and went.

Chapter XVI: The Passport

The rhythmic clapper of oars roused Marguerite from this trance-like swoon.

In a moment she was on her feet, all her fatigue gone, her numbness of soul and body vanished as in a flash. She was fully conscious now! conscious that he had gone! that according to every probability under heaven and every machination concocted in hell, he would never return from France alive, and that she had failed to hear the last words which he spoke to her, had failed to glean his last look or to savour his final kiss.

Though the night was starlit and balmy it was singularly dark, and vainly did Marguerite strain her eyes to catch sight of that boat which was bearing him away so swiftly now: she strained her ears, vaguely hoping to catch one last, lingering echo of his voice. But all was silence, save that monotonous clapper, which seemed to beat against her heart like a rhythmic knell of death.

She could hear the oars distinctly: there were six or eight, she thought: certainly no fewer. Eight oarsmen probably, which meant the larger boat, and undoubtedly the longer journey... not to London only with a view to posting to Dover, but to Tilbury Fort, where the "Day Dream" would be in readiness to start with a favourable tide.

Thought was returning to her, slowly and coherently: the pain of the last farewell was still there, bruising her very senses with its dull and heavy weight, but it had become numb and dead, leaving her, herself, her heart and soul, stunned and apathetic, whilst her brain was gradually resuming its activity.

And the more she thought it over, the more certain she grew that her husband was going as far as Tilbury by river and would embark on the "Day Dream" there. Of course he would go to Boulogne at once. The duel was to take place there, Candeille had told her that... adding that she thought she, Marguerite, would wish to go with him.

To go with him!

Heavens above! was not that the only real, tangible thought in that whirling chaos which was raging in her mind?

To go with him! Surely there must be some means of reaching him yet! Fate, Nature, God Himself would never permit so monstrous a thing as this: that she should be parted from her husband, now when his life was not only in danger, but forfeited already... lost... a precious thing all but gone from this world.

Percy was going to Boulogne... she must go too. By posting at once to Dover, she could get the tidal boat on the morrow and reach the French coast quite as soon as the "Day Dream." Once at Boulogne, she would have no difficulty in finding her husband, of that she felt sure. She would have but to dog Chauvelin's footsteps, find out something of his plans, of the orders he gave to troops or to spies, — oh! she would find him! of that she was never for a moment in doubt!

How well she remembered her journey to Calais just a year ago, in company with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes! Chance had favoured her then, had enabled her to be of service to her husband if only by distracting Chauvelin's attention for awhile to herself. Heaven knows! she had but little hope of being of use to him now: an aching sense was in her that fate had at last been too strong! that the daring adventurer had staked once too often, had cast the die and had lost.

In the bosom of her dress she felt the sharp edge of the paper left for her by Desiree Candeille among the roses in the park. She had picked it up almost mechanically then, and tucked it away, hardly heeding what she was doing. Whatever the motive of the French actress had been in placing the passport at her disposal, Marguerite blessed her in her heart for it. To the woman she had mistrusted, she would owe the last supreme happiness of her life.

Her resolution never once wavered. Percy would not take her with him: that was understandable. She could neither expect it nor think it. But she, on the other hand, could not stay in England, at Blakeney Manor, whilst any day, any hour, the death-trap set by Chauvelin for the Scarlet Pimpernel might be closing upon the man whom she worshipped. She would go mad if she stayed. As there could be no chance of escape for Percy now, as he had agreed to meet his deadly enemy face to face at a given place, and a given hour, she could not be a hindrance to him: and she knew enough subterfuge, enough machinations and disguises by now, to escape Chauvelin's observation, unless... unless Percy wanted her, and then she would be there.

No! she could not be a hindrance. She had a passport in her pocket, everything en règle, nobody could harm her, and she could come and go as she pleased. There were plenty of swift horses in the stables, plenty of devoted servants to do her bidding quickly and discreetly: moreover, at moments like these, conventionalities and the possible conjectures and surmises of others became of infinitesimally small importance. The household of Blakeney Manor were accustomed to the master's sudden journeys and absences of several days, presumably on some shooting or other sporting expeditions, with no one in attendance on him, save Benyon, his favourite valet. These passed without any comments now! Bah! let everyone marvel for once at her ladyship's sudden desire to go to Dover, and let it all be a nine days' wonder; she certainly did not care. Skirting the house, she reached the stables beyond. One or two men were astir. To these she gave the necessary orders for her coach and four, then she found her way back to the house.

Walking along the corridor, she went past the room occupied by Juliette de Marny. For a moment she hesitated, then she turned and knocked at the door.

Juliette was not yet in bed, for she went to the door herself and opened it. Obviously she had been quite unable to rest, her hair was falling loosely over her shoulders, and there was a look of grave anxiety on her young face.

"Juliette," said Marguerite in a hurried whisper, the moment she had closed the door behind her and she and the young girl were alone, "I am going to France to be near my husband. He has gone to meet that fiend in a duel which is nothing but a trap, set to capture him, and lead him to his death. I want you to be of help to me, here in my house, in my absence."

"I would give my life for you, Lady Blakeney," said Juliette simply, "is it not HIS since he saved it?"

"It is only a little presence of mind, a little coolness and patience, which I will ask of you, dear," said Marguerite. "You of course know who your rescuer was, therefore you will understand my fears. Until to-night, I had vague doubts as to how much Chauvelin really knew, but now these doubts have naturally vanished. He and the French Revolutionary Government know that the Scarlet Pimpernel and Percy Blakeney are one and the same. The whole scene to-night was prearranged: you and I and all the spectators, and that woman Candeille — we were all puppets piping to that devil's tune. The duel, too, was prearranged!... that woman wearing your

mother's jewels!... Had you not provoked her, a quarrel between her and me, or one of my guests would have been forced somehow... I wanted to tell you this, lest you should fret, and think that you were in any way responsible for what has happened.... You were not.... He had arranged it all.... You were only the tool... just as I was. ... You must understand and believe that.... Percy would hate to think that you felt yourself to blame... you are not that, in any way.... The challenge was bound to come.... Chauvelin had arranged that it should come, and if you had failed him as a tool, he soon would have found another! Do you believe that?"

"I believe that you are an angel of goodness, Lady Blakeney," replied Juliette, struggling with her tears, "and that you are the only woman in the world worthy to be his wife."

"But," insisted Marguerite firmly, as the young girl took her cold hand in her own, and gently fondling it, covered it with grateful kisses, "but if... if anything happens... anon... you will believe firmly that you were in no way responsible?... that you were innocent... and merely a blind tool?..."

"God bless you for that!"

"You will believe it?"

"I will."

"And now for my request," rejoined Lady Blakeney in a more quiet, more matter-of-fact tone of voice. "You must represent me, here, when I am gone: explain as casually and as naturally as you can, that I have gone to join my husband on his yacht for a few days. Lucie, my maid, is devoted and a tower of secrecy; she will stand between you and the rest of the household, in concocting some plausible story. To every friend who calls, to anyone of our world whom you may meet, you must tell the same tale, and if you note an air of incredulity in anyone, if you hear whispers of there being some mystery, well! let the world wag its busy tongue — I care less than naught: it will soon tire of me and my doings, and having torn my reputation to shreds will quickly leave me in peace. But to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes," she added earnestly, "tell the whole truth from me. He will understand and do as he thinks right."

"I will do all you ask, Lady Blakeney, and am proud to think that I shall be serving you, even in so humble and easy a capacity. When do you start?"

"At once. Good-bye, Juliette."

She bent down to the young girl and kissed her tenderly on the forehead, then she glided out of the room as rapidly as she had come. Juliette, of course, did not try to detain her, or to force her help of companionship on her when obviously she would wish to be alone.

Marguerite quickly reached her room. Her maid Lucie was already waiting for her. Devoted and silent as she was, one glance at her mistress' face told her that trouble — grave and imminent — had reached Blakeney Manor.

Marguerite, whilst Lucie undressed her, took up the passport and carefully perused the personal description of one, Celine Dumont, maid to Citizeness Desiree Candeille, which was given therein: tall, blue eyes, light hair, age about twenty-five. It all might have been vaguely meant for her. She had a dark cloth gown, and long black cloak with hood to come well over the head. These she now donned, with some thick shoes, and a dark-coloured handkerchief tied over her head under the hood, so as to hide the golden glory of her hair.

She was quite calm and in no haste. She made Lucie pack a small hand valise with some necessities for the journey, and provided herself plentifully with money — French and English notes — which she tucked well away inside her dress.

Then she bade her maid, who was struggling with her tears, a kindly farewell, and quickly went down to her coach.

Chapter XVII: Boulogne

During the journey Marguerite had not much leisure to think. The discomforts and petty miseries incidental on cheap travelling had the very welcome effect of making her forget, for the time being, the soul-rendering crisis through which she was now passing.

For, of necessity, she had to travel at the cheap rate, among the crowd of poorer passengers who were herded aft the packet boat, leaning up against one another, sitting on bundles and packages of all kinds; that part of the deck, reeking with the smell of tar and seawater, damp, squally and stuffy, was an abomination of hideous discomfort to the dainty, fastidious lady of fashion, yet she almost welcomed the intolerable propinquity, the cold douches of salt water, which every now and then wetted her through and through, for it was the consequent sense of physical wretchedness that helped her to forget the intolerable anguish of her mind.

And among these poorer travellers she felt secure from observation. No one took much notice of her. She looked just like one of the herd, and in the huddled-up little figure, in the dark bedraggled clothes, no one would for a moment have recognized the dazzling personality of Lady Blakeney.

Drawing her hood well over her head, she sat in a secluded corner of the deck, upon the little black valise which contained the few belongings she had brought with her. Her cloak and dress, now mud-stained and dank with splashings of salt-water, attracted no one's attention. There was a keen northeasterly breeze, cold and penetrating, but favourable to a rapid crossing. Marguerite, who had gone through several hours of weary travelling by coach, before she had embarked at Dover in the late afternoon, was unspeakably tired. She had watched the golden sunset out at sea until her eyes were burning with pain, and as the dazzling crimson and orange and purple gave place to the soft grey tones of evening, she descried the round cupola of the church of Our Lady of Boulogne against the dull background of the sky.

After that her mind became a blank. A sort of torpor fell over her sense: she was wakeful and yet half-asleep, unconscious of everything around her, seeing nothing but the distant massive towers of old Boulogne churches gradually detaching themselves one by one from out the fast gathering gloom.

The town seemed like a dream city, a creation of some morbid imagination, presented to her mind's eye as the city of sorrow and death.

When the boat finally scraped her sides along the rough wooden jetty, Marguerite felt as if she were forcibly awakened. She was numb and stiff and thought she must have fallen asleep during the last half hour of the journey. Everything round her was dark. The sky was overcast, and the night seemed unusually sombre. Figures were moving all around her, there was noise and confusion of voices, and a general pushing and shouting which seemed strangely weird in this gloom. Here among the poorer passengers, there had not been thought any necessity for a light, one solitary lantern fixed to a mast only enhanced the intense blackness of everything around. Now and then a face would come within range of this meagre streak of yellow light, looking strangely distorted, with great, elongated shadows across the brow and chin, a grotesque, ghostly apparition which quickly vanished again, scurrying off like some frightened gnome, giving place other forms, other figures all equally grotesque and equally weird.

Marguerite watched them all half stupidly and motionlessly for awhile. She did not quite know what she ought to do, and did not like to ask any questions: she was dazed and the darkness blinded her. Then gradually things began to detach themselves more clearly. On looking straight before her, she began to discern the landing place, the little wooden bridge across which the passengers walked one by one from the boat onto the jetty. The first-class passengers were evidently all alighting now: the crowd of which Marguerite formed a unit, had been pushed back in a more compact herd, out of the way for the moment, so that their betters might get along more comfortably.

Beyond the landing stage a little booth had been erected, a kind of tent, open in front and lighted up within by a couple of lanterns. Under this tent there was a table, behind which sat a man dressed in some sort of official looking clothes, and wearing the tricolour scarf across his chest.

All the passengers from the boat had apparently to file past this tent. Marguerite could see them now quite distinctly, the profiles of the various faces, as they paused for a moment in front of the table, being brilliantly illuminated by one of the lanterns. Two sentinels wearing the uniform of the National Guard stood each side of the table. The passengers one by one took out their passport as they went by, handed it to the man in the official dress, who examined it carefully, very lengthily, then signed it and returned the paper to its owner: but at times, he appeared doubtful, folded the passport and put it down in front of him: the passenger would protest; Marguerite could not hear what was said, but she could see that some argument was attempted, quickly dismissed by a peremptory order from the official. The doubtful passport was obviously put on one side for further examination, and the unfortunate owner thereof detained, until he or she had been able to give more satisfactory references to the representatives of the Committee of Public Safety, stationed at Boulogne.

This process of examination necessarily took a long time. Marguerite was getting horribly tired, her feet ached and she scarcely could hold herself upright: yet she watched all these people mechanically, making absurd little guesses in her weary mind as to whose passport would find favour in the eyes of the official, and whose would be found suspect and inadequate.

Suspect! a terrible word these times! since Merlin's terrible law decreed now that every man, woman or child, who was suspected by the Republic of being a traitor was a traitor in fact.

How sorry she felt for those whose passports were detained: who tried to argue — so needlessly! — and who were finally led off by a soldier, who had stepped out from somewhere in the dark, and had to await further examination, probably imprisonment and often death.

As to herself, she felt quite safe: the passport given to her by Chauvelin's own accomplice was sure to be quite en règle.

Then suddenly her heart seemed to give a sudden leap and then to stop in its beating for a second or two. In one of the passengers, a man who was just passing in front of the tent, she had recognized the form and profile of Chauvelin.

He had no passport to show, but evidently the official knew who he was, for he stood up and saluted, and listened deferentially whilst the ex-ambassador apparently gave him a few instructions. It seemed to Marguerite that these instructions related to two women

who were close behind Chauvelin at the time, and who presently seemed to file past without going through the usual formalities of showing their passports. But of this she could not be quite sure. The women were closely hooded and veiled and her own attention had been completely absorbed by this sudden appearance of her deadly enemy.

Yet what more natural than that Chauvelin should be here now? His object accomplished, he had no doubt posted to Dover, just as she had done. There was no difficulty in that, and a man of his type and importance would always have unlimited means and money at his command to accomplish any journey he might desire to undertake.

There was nothing strange or even unexpected in the man's presence here; and yet somehow it had made the whole, awful reality more tangible, more wholly unforgettable. Marguerite remembered his abject words to her, when first she had seen him at the Richmond fete: he said that he had fallen into disgrace, that, having failed in his service to the Republic, he had been relegated to a subordinate position, pushed aside with contumely to make room for better, abler men.

Well! all that was a lie, of course, a cunning method of gaining access into her house; of that she had already been convinced, when Candaille provoked the esclandre which led to the challenge.

That on French soil he seemed in anything but a subsidiary position, that he appeared to rule rather than to obey, could in no way appear to Marguerite in the nature of surprise.

As the actress had been a willing tool in the cunning hands of Chauvelin, so were probably all these people around her. Where others cringed in the face of officialism, the ex-ambassador had stepped forth as a master: he had shown a badge, spoken a word mayhap, and the man in the tent who had made other people tremble, stood up deferentially and obeyed all commands.

It was all very simple and very obvious: but Marguerite's mind had been asleep, and it was the sight of the sable-clad little figure which had roused it from its happy torpor.

In a moment now her brain was active and alert, and presently it seemed to her as if another figure — taller than those around — had crossed the barrier immediately in the wake of Chauvelin. Then she chided herself for her fancies!

It could not be her husband. Not yet! He had gone by water, and would scarce be in Boulogne before the morning!

Ah! now at last came the turn of the second-class passengers! There was a general bousculade and the human bundle began to move. Marguerite lost sight of the tent and its awe-inspiring appurtenances: she was a mere unit again in this herd on the move. She too progressed along slowly, one step at a time; it was wearisome and she was deadly tired. She was beginning to form plans now that she had arrived in France. All along she had made up her mind that she would begin by seeking out the Abbe Fouquet, for he would prove a link 'twixt her husband and herself. She knew that Percy would communicate with the abbe; had he not told her that the rescue of the devoted old man from the clutches of the Terrorists would be one of the chief objects of his journey? It had never occurred to her what she would do if she found the Abbe Fouquet gone from Boulogne.

"He! la mere! your passport!"

The rough words roused her from her meditations. She had moved forward, quite mechanically, her mind elsewhere, her thoughts not following the aim of her feet. Thus she must have crossed the bridge along with some of the crowd, must have landed on the jetty, and reached the front of the tent, without really knowing what she was doing.

Ah yes! her passport! She had quite forgotten that! But she had it by her, quite in order, given to her in a fit of tardy remorse by Demoiselle Candaille, the intimate friend of one of the most influential members of the Revolutionary Government of France.

She took the passport from the bosom of her dress and handed it to the man in the official dress.

"Your name?" he asked peremptorily.

"Celine Dumont," she replied unhesitatingly, for had she not rehearsed all this in her mind dozens of times, until her tongue could rattle off the borrowed name as easily as it could her own; "servitor to Citizeness Desiree Candaille!"

The man who had very carefully been examining the paper the while, placed it down on the table deliberately in front of him, and said:

"Celine Dumont! Eh! la mere! what tricks are you up to now?"

"Tricks? I don't understand!" she said quietly, for she was not afraid. The passport was en regle: she knew she had nothing to fear.

"Oh! but I think you do!" retorted the official with a sneer, "and 'tis a mighty clever one, I'll allow. Celine Dumont, ma foi! Not badly imagined, ma petite mere: and all would have passed off splendidly; unfortunately, Celine Dumont, servitor to Citizeness Desiree Candaille, passed through these barriers along with her mistress not half an hour ago."

And with long, grimy finger he pointed to an entry in the large book which lay open before him, and wherein he had apparently been busy making notes of the various passengers who had filed past him.

Then he looked up with a triumphant leer at the calm face of Marguerite. She still did not feel really frightened, only puzzled and perturbed; but all the blood had rushed away from her face, leaving her cheeks ashen white, and pressing against her heart, until it almost choked her.

"You are making a mistake, Citizen," she said very quietly. "I am Citizeness Candaille's maid. She gave me the passport herself, just before I left for England; if you will ask her the question, she will confirm what I say, and she assured me that it was quite en regle."

But the man only shrugged his shoulders and laughed derisively. The incident evidently amused him, yet he must have seen many of the same sort; in the far corner of the tent Marguerite seemed to discern a few moving forms, soldiers, she thought, for she caught sight of a glint like that of steel. One or two men stood close behind the official at the desk, and the sentinels were to the right and left of the tent.

With an instinctive sense of appeal, Marguerite looked round from one face to the other: but each looked absolutely impassive and stolid, quite uninterested in this little scene, the exact counterpart of a dozen others, enacted on this very spot within the last hour.

"He! la! la! petite mere!" said the official in the same tone of easy persiflage which he had adopted all along, "but we do know how to concoct a pretty lie, aye! and so circumstantially too! Unfortunately it was Citizeness Desiree Candaille herself who happened to be standing just where you are at the present moment, along with her maid, Celine Dumont, both of whom were specially signed for and recommended as perfectly trustworthy, by no less a person than Citoyen Chauvelin of the Committee of Public Safety."

"But I assure you that there is a mistake," pleaded Marguerite earnestly, "'Tis the other woman who lied, I have my passport and..."

"A truce on this," retorted the man peremptorily. "If everything is as you say, and if you have nothing to hide, you'll be at liberty to continue your journey to-morrow, after you have explained yourself before the citizen governor. Next one now, quick!"

Marguerite tried another protest, just as those others had done, whom she had watched so mechanically before. But already she knew that that would be useless, for she had felt that a heavy hand was being placed on her shoulder, and that she was being roughly led away.

In a flash she had understood and seen the whole sequel of the awful trap which had all along been destined to engulf her as well as her husband.

What a clumsy, blind fool she had been!

What a miserable antagonist the subtle schemes of a past master of intrigue as was Chauvelin. To have enticed the Scarlet Pimpernel to France was a great thing! The challenge was clever, the acceptance of it by the bold adventurer a forgone conclusion, but the master stroke of the whole plan was done, when she, the wife, was enticed over too with the story of Candaille's remorse and the offer of the passport.

Fool! fool that she was!

And how well did Chauvelin know feminine nature! How cleverly he had divined her thoughts, her feelings, the impulsive way in which she would act; how easily he had guessed that, knowing her husband's danger, she, Marguerite, would immediately follow him.

Now the trap had closed on her — and she saw it all, when it was too late.

Percy Blakeney in France! His wife a prisoner! Her freedom and safety in exchange for his life!

The hopelessness of it all struck her with appalling force, and her senses reeled with the awful finality of the disaster.

Yet instinct in her still struggled for freedom. Ahead of her, and all around, beyond the tent and in the far distance there was a provocative alluring darkness: if she only could get away, only could reach the shelter of that remote and sombre distance, she would hide, and wait, not blunder again, oh no! she would be prudent and wary, if only she could get away!

One woman's struggles, against five men! It was pitiable, sublime, absolutely useless.

The man in the tent seemed to be watching her with much amusement for a moment or two, as her whole graceful body stiffened for that absurd and unequal physical contest. He seemed vastly entertained at the sight of this good-looking young woman striving to pit her strength against five sturdy soldiers of the Republic.

"Allons! that will do now!" he said at last roughly. "We have no time to waste! Get the jade away, and let her cool her temper in No. 6, until the citizen governor gives further orders.

"Take her away!" he shouted more loudly, banging a grimy fist down on the table before him, as Marguerite still struggled on with the blind madness of despair. "Pardi! can none of you rid us of that turbulent baggage?"

The crowd behind were pushing forward: the guard within the tent were jeering at those who were striving to drag Marguerite away: these latter were cursing loudly and volubly, until one of them, tired out, furious and brutal, raised his heavy fist and with an obscene oath brought it crashing down upon the unfortunate woman's head.

Perhaps, though it was the work of a savage and cruel creature, the blow proved more merciful than it had been intended: it had caught Marguerite full between the eyes; her aching senses, wearied and reeling already, gave way beneath this terrible violence; her useless struggles ceased, her arms fell inert by her side: and losing consciousness completely, her proud, unbendable spirit was spared the humiliating knowledge of her final removal by the rough soldiers, and of the complete wreckage of her last, lingering hopes.

Chapter XVIII: No. 6

Consciousness returned very slowly, very painfully.

It was night when last Marguerite had clearly known what was going on around her; it was daylight before she realized that she still lived, that she still knew and suffered.

Her head ached intolerably: that was the first conscious sensation which came to her; then she vaguely perceived a pale ray of sunshine, very hazy and narrow, which came from somewhere in front of her and struck her in the face. She kept her eyes tightly shut, for that filmy light caused her an increase of pain.

She seemed to be lying on her back, and her fingers wandering restlessly around felt a hard paillasse, beneath their touch, then a rough pillow, and her own cloak laid over her: thought had not yet returned, only the sensation of great suffering and of infinite fatigue.

Anon she ventured to open her eyes, and gradually one or two objects detached themselves from out the haze which still obscured her vision.

Firstly, the narrow aperture — scarcely a window — filled in with tiny squares of coarse, unwashed glass, through which the rays of the morning sun were making kindly efforts to penetrate, then the cloud of dust illumined by those same rays, and made up — so it seemed to the poor tired brain that strove to perceive — of myriads of abnormally large molecules, over-abundant, and over-active, for they appeared to be dancing a kind of wild saraband before Marguerite's aching eyes, advancing and retreating, forming themselves into groups and taking on funny shapes of weird masques and grotesque faces which grinned at the unconscious figure lying helpless on the rough paillasse.

Through and beyond them Marguerite gradually became aware of three walls of a narrow room, dank and grey, half covered with whitewash and half with greenish mildew! Yes! and there, opposite to her and immediately beneath that semblance of a window, was another paillasse, and on it something dark, that moved.

The words: "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite ou la Mort!" stared out at her from somewhere beyond those active molecules of dust, but she also saw just above the other paillasse the vague outline of a dark crucifix.

It seemed a terrible effort to co-ordinate all these things, and to try and realize what the room was, and what was the meaning of the paillasse, the narrow window and the stained walls, too much altogether for the aching head to take in save very slowly, very gradually.

Marguerite was content to wait and to let memory creep back as reluctantly as it would.

"Do you think, my child, you could drink a little of this now?"

It was a gentle, rather tremulous voice which struck upon her ear. She opened her eyes, and noticed that the dark something which had previously been on the opposite paillasse was no longer there, and that there appeared to be a presence close to her only vaguely defined, someone kindly and tender who had spoken to her in French, with that soft sing-song accent peculiar to the Normandy peasants, and who now seemed to be pressing something cool and soothing to her lips.

"They gave me this for you!" continued the tremulous voice close to her ear. "I think it would do you good, if you tried to take it."

A hand and arm was thrust underneath the rough pillow, causing her to raise her head a little. A glass was held to her lips and she drank.

The hand that held the glass was all wrinkled, brown and dry, and trembled slightly, but the arm which supported her head was firm and very kind.

"There! I am sure you feel better now. Close your eyes and try to go to sleep."

She did as she was bid, and was ready enough to close her eyes. It seemed to her presently as if something had been interposed between her aching head and that trying ray of white September sun.

Perhaps she slept peacefully for a little while after that, for though her head was still very painful, her mouth and throat felt less parched and dry. Through this sleep or semblance of sleep, she was conscious of the same pleasant voice softly droning Paters and Aves close to her ear.

Thus she lay, during the greater part of the day. Not quite fully conscious, not quite awake to the awful memories which anon would crowd upon her thick and fast.

From time to time the same kind and trembling hands would with gentle pressure force a little liquid food through her unwilling lips: some warm soup, or anon a glass of milk. Beyond the pain in her head, she was conscious of no physical ill; she felt at perfect peace, and an extraordinary sense of quiet and repose seemed to pervade this small room, with its narrow window through which the rays of the sun came gradually in more golden splendour as the day drew towards noon, and then they vanished altogether.

The drony voice close beside her acted as a soporific upon her nerves. In the afternoon she fell into a real and beneficent sleep....

But after that, she woke to full consciousness!

Oh! the horror, the folly of it all!

It came back to her with all the inexorable force of an appalling certainty.

She was a prisoner in the hands of those who long ago had sworn to bring The Scarlet Pimpernel to death!

She! his wife, a hostage in their hands! her freedom and safety offered to him as the price of his own! Here there was no question of dreams or of nightmares: no illusions as to the ultimate intentions of her husband's enemies. It was all a reality, and even now, before she had the strength fully to grasp the whole nature of this horrible situation, she knew that by her own act of mad and passionate impulse, she had hopelessly jeopardized the life of the man she loved.

For with that sublime confidence in him begotten of her love, she never for a moment doubted which of the two alternatives he would choose, when once they were placed before him. He would sacrifice himself for her; he would prefer to die a thousand deaths so long as they set her free.

For herself, her own sufferings, her danger or humiliation she cared nothing! Nay! at this very moment she was conscious of a wild passionate desire for death.... In this sudden onrush of memory and of thought she wished with all her soul and heart and mind to die

here suddenly, on this hard paillese, in this lonely and dark prison... so that she should be out of the way once and for all... so that she should NOT be the hostage to be bartered against his precious life and freedom.

He would suffer acutely, terribly at her loss, because he loved her above everything else on earth, he would suffer in every fibre of his passionate and ardent nature, but he would not then have to endure the humiliations, the awful alternatives, the galling impotence and miserable death, the relentless "either — or" which his enemies were even now preparing for him.

And then came a revulsion of feeling. Marguerite's was essentially a buoyant and active nature, a keen brain which worked and schemed and planned, rather than one ready to accept the inevitable.

Hardly had these thoughts of despair and of death formulated themselves in her mind, than with brilliant swiftness, a new train of ideas began to take root.

What if matters were not so hopeless after all?

Already her mind had flown instinctively to thoughts of escape. Had she the right to despair? She, the wife and intimate companion of the man who had astonished the world with his daring, his prowess, his amazing good luck, she to imagine for a moment that in this all-supreme moment of adventurous life the Scarlet Pimpernel would fail!

Was not English society peopled with men, women and children whom his ingenuity had rescued from plights quite as seemingly hopeless as her own, and would not all the resources of that inventive brain be brought to bear upon this rescue which touched him nearer and more deeply than any which he had attempted hitherto.

Now Marguerite was chiding herself for her doubts and for her fears. Already she remembered that amongst the crowd on the landing stage she had perceived a figure — unusually tall — following in the wake of Chauvelin and his companions. Awakened hope had already assured her that she had not been mistaken, that Percy, contrary to her own surmises, had reached Boulogne last night: he always acted so differently to what anyone might expect, that it was quite possible that he had crossed over in the packet-boat after all unbeknown to Marguerite as well as to his enemies.

Oh yes! the more she thought about it all, the more sure was she that Percy was already in Boulogne, and that he knew of her capture and her danger.

What right had she to doubt even for a moment that he would know how to reach her, how — when the time came — to save himself and her?

A warm glow began to fill her veins, she felt excited and alert, absolutely unconscious now of pain or fatigue, in this radiant joy of reawakened hope.

She raised herself slightly, leaning on her elbow: she was still very weak and the slight movement had made her giddy, but soon she would be strong and well... she must be strong and well and ready to do his bidding when the time for escape would have come.

"Ah! you are better, my child, I see..." said that quaint, tremulous voice again, with its soft sing-song accent, "but you must not be so venturesome, you know. The physician said that you had received a cruel blow. The brain has been rudely shaken... and you must lie quite still all to-day, or your poor little head will begin to ache again."

Marguerite turned to look at the speaker, and in spite of her excitement, of her sorrow and of her anxieties, she could not help smiling at the whimsical little figure which sat opposite to her, on a very rickety chair, solemnly striving with slow and measured movement of hand and arm, and a large supply of breath, to get up a polish on the worn-out surface of an ancient pair of buckled shoes.

The figure was slender and almost wizened, the thin shoulders round with an habitual stoop, the lean shanks were encased in a pair of much-darned, coarse black stockings. It was the figure of an old man, with a gentle, clear-cut face furrowed by a forest of wrinkles, and surmounted by scanty white locks above a smooth forehead which looked yellow and polished like an ancient piece of ivory.

He had looked across at Marguerite as he spoke, and a pair of innately kind and mild blue eyes were fixed with tender reproach upon her. Marguerite thought that she had never seen quite so much goodness and simple-heartedness portrayed on any face before. It literally beamed out of those pale blue eyes, which seemed quite full of unshed tears.

The old man wore a tattered garment, a miracle of shining cleanliness, which had once been a soutane of smooth black cloth, but was now a mass of patches and threadbare at shoulders and knees. He seemed deeply intent in the task of polishing his shoes, and having delivered himself of his little admonition, he very solemnly and earnestly resumed his work.

Marguerite's first and most natural instinct had, of course, been one of dislike and mistrust of anyone who appeared to be in some way on guard over her. But when she took in every detail of the quaint figure of the old man, his scrupulous tidiness of apparel, the resigned stoop of his shoulders, and met in full the gaze of those moist eyes, she felt that the whole aspect of the man, as he sat there polishing his shoes, was infinitely pathetic and, in its simplicity, commanding of respect.

"Who are you?" asked Lady Blakeney at last, for the old man after looking at her with a kind of appealing wonder, seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

"A priest of the good God, my dear child," replied the old man with a deep sigh and a shake of his scanty locks, "who is not allowed to serve his divine Master any longer. A poor old fellow, very harmless and very helpless, who had been set here to watch over you.

"You must not look upon me as a jailer because of what I say, my child," he added with a quaint air of deference and apology. "I am very old and very small, and only take up a very little room. I can make myself very scarce; you shall hardly know that I am here. They forced me to it much against my will.... But they are strong and I am weak, how could I deny them since they put me here. After all," he concluded naively, "perhaps it is the will of le bon Dieu, and He knows best, my child, He knows best."

The shoes evidently refused to respond any further to the old man's efforts at polishing them. He contemplated them now, with a whimsical look of regret on his furrowed face, then set them down on the floor and slipped his stockinged feet into them.

Marguerite was silently watching him, still leaning on her elbow. Evidently her brain was still numb and fatigued, for she did not seem able to grasp all that the old man said. She smiled to herself too as she watched him. How could she look upon him as a jailer? He did not seem at all like a Jacobin or a Terrorist, there was nothing of the dissatisfied democrat, of the snarling anarchist ready to lend his hand to any act of ferocity directed against a so-called aristocrat, about this pathetic little figure in the ragged soutane and worn shoes.

He seemed singularly bashful too and ill at ease, and loath to meet Marguerite's great, ardent eyes, which were fixed questioningly upon him.

"You must forgive me, my daughter," he said shyly, "for concluding my toilet before you. I had hoped to be quite ready before you woke, but I had some trouble with my shoes; except for a little water and soap the prison authorities will not provide us poor captives with any means of cleanliness and tidiness, and le bon Dieu does love a tidy body as well as a clean soul.

"But there, there," he added fussily, "I must not continue to gossip like this. You would like to get up, I know, and refresh your face and hands with a little water. Oh! you will see how well I have thought it out. I need not interfere with you at all, and when you make your little bit of toilette, you will feel quite alone... just as if the old man was not there."

He began busying himself about the room, dragging the rickety, rush-bottomed chairs forward. There were four of these in the room, and he began forming a kind of bulwark with them, placing two side by side, then piling the two others up above.

"You will see, my child, you will see!" he kept repeating at intervals as the work of construction progressed. It was no easy matter, for he was of low stature, and his hands were unsteady from apparently uncontrollable nervousness.

Marguerite, leaning slightly forward, her chin resting in her hand, was too puzzled and anxious to grasp the humour of this comical situation. She certainly did not understand. This old man had in some sort of way, and for a hitherto unexplained reason, been set as a guard over her; it was not an unusual device on the part of the inhuman wretches who now ruled France, to add to the miseries and terrors of captivity, where a woman of refinement was concerned, the galling outrage of never leaving her alone for a moment.

That peculiar form of mental torture, surely the invention of brains rendered mad by their own ferocious cruelty, was even now being inflicted on the hapless, dethroned Queen of France. Marguerite, in far-off England, had shuddered when she heard of it, and in her heart had prayed, as indeed every pure-minded woman did then, that proud, unfortunate Marie Antoinette might soon find release from such torments in death.

There was evidently some similar intention with regard to Marguerite herself in the minds of those who now held her prisoner. But this old man seemed so feeble and so helpless, his very delicacy of thought as he built up a screen to divide the squalid room in two, proved him to be singularly inefficient for the task of a watchful jailer.

When the four chairs appeared fairly steady, and in comparatively little danger of toppling, he dragged the paillasse forward and propped it up against the chairs. Finally he drew the table along, which held the cracked ewer and basin, and placed it against this improvised partition: then he surveyed the whole construction with evident gratification and delight.

"There now!" he said, turning a face beaming with satisfaction to Marguerite, "I can continue my prayers on the other side of the fortress. Oh! it is quite safe..." he added, as with a fearsome hand he touched his engineering feat with gingerly pride, "and you will be quite private.... Try and forget that the old abbe is in the room.... He does not count... really he does not count... he has ceased to be of any moment these many months now that Saint Joseph is closed and he may no longer say Mass."

He was obviously prattling on in order to hide his nervous bashfulness. He ensconced himself behind his own finely constructed bulwark, drew a breviary from his pocket and having found a narrow ledge on one of the chairs, on which he could sit, without much danger of bringing the elaborate screen onto the top of his head, he soon became absorbed in his orisons.

Marguerite watched him for a little while longer: he was evidently endeavouring to make her think that he had become oblivious of her presence, and his transparent little manoeuvres amused and puzzled her not a little.

He looked so comical with his fussy and shy ways, yet withal so gentle and so kindly that she felt completely reassured and quite calm.

She tried to raise herself still further and found the process astonishingly easy. Her limbs still ached and the violent, intermittent pain in her head certainly made her feel sick and giddy at times, but otherwise she was not ill. She sat up on the paillasse, then put her feet to the ground and presently walked up to the improvised dressing-room and bathed her face and hands. The rest had done her good, and she felt quite capable of co-ordinating her thoughts, of moving about without too much pain, and of preparing herself both mentally and physically for the grave events which she knew must be imminent.

While she busied herself with her toilet her thoughts dwelt on the one all-absorbing theme: Percy was in Boulogne, he knew that she was here, in prison, he would reach her without fail, in fact he might communicate with her at any moment now, and had without a doubt already evolved a plan of escape for her, more daring and ingenious than any which he had conceived hitherto; therefore, she must be ready, and prepared for any eventuality, she must be strong and eager, in no way despondent, for if he were here, would he not chide her for her want of faith?

By the time she had smoothed her hair and tidied her dress, Marguerite caught herself singing quite cheerfully to herself.

So full of buoyant hope was she.

Chapter XIX: The Strength of the Weak

"M. L'Abbe!..." said Marguerite gravely.

"Yes, mon enfant."

The old man looked up from his breviary, and saw Marguerite's great earnest eyes fixed with obvious calm and trust upon him. She had finished her toilet as well as she could, had shaken up and tidied the paillasse, and was now sitting on the edge of it, her hands clasped between her knees. There was something which still puzzled her, and impatient and impulsive as she was, she had watched the abbe as he calmly went on reading the Latin prayers for the last five minutes, and now she could contain her questionings no longer.

"You said just now that they set you to watch over me..."

"So they did, my child, so they did..." he replied with a sigh, as he quietly closed his book and slipped it back into his pocket. "Ah! they are very cunning... and we must remember that they have the power. No doubt," added the old man, with his own, quaint philosophy, "no doubt le bon Dieu meant them to have the power, or they would not have it, would they?"

"By 'they' you mean the Terrorists and Anarchists of France, M. L'Abbe.... The Committee of Public Safety who pillage and murder, outrage women, and desecrate religion.... Is that not so?"

"Alas! my child!" he sighed.

"And it is 'they' who have set you to watch over me?... I confess I don't understand..."

She laughed, quite involuntarily indeed, for in spite of the reassurance in her heart her brain was still in a whirl of passionate anxiety.

"You don't look at all like one of 'them,' M. l'Abbe," she said.

"The good God forbid!" ejaculated the old man, raising protesting hands up toward the very distant, quite invisible sky. "How could I, a humble priest of the Lord, range myself with those who would flout and defy Him."

"Yet I am a prisoner of the Republic and you are my jailer, M. l'Abbe."

"Ah, yes!" he sighed. "But I am very helpless. This was my cell. I had been here with Francois and Felicite, my sister's children, you know. Innocent lambs, whom those fiends would lead to slaughter. Last night," he continued, speaking volubly, "the soldiers came in and dragged Francois and Felicite out of this room, where, in spite of the danger before us, in spite of what we suffered, we had contrived to be quite happy together. I could read the Mass, and the dear children would say their prayers night and morning at my knee."

He paused awhile. The unshed tears in his mild blue eyes struggled for freedom now, and one or two flowed slowly down his wrinkled cheek. Marguerite, though heartsore and full of agonizing sorrow herself, felt her whole noble soul go out to this kind old man, so pathetic, so high and simple-minded in his grief.

She said nothing, however, and the Abbe continued after a few seconds' silence.

"When the children had gone, they brought you in here, mon enfant, and laid you on the paillasse where Felicite used to sleep. You looked very white, and stricken down, like one of God's lambs attacked by the ravening wolf. Your eyes were closed and you were blissfully unconscious. I was taken before the governor of the prison, and he told me that you would share the cell with me for a time, and that I was to watch you night and day, because..."

The old man paused again. Evidently what he had to say was very difficult to put into words. He groped in his pockets and brought out a large bandana handkerchief, red and yellow and green, with which he began to mop his moist forehead. The quaver in his voice and the trembling of his hands became more apparent and pronounced.

"Yes, M. l'Abbe? Because?..." queried Marguerite gently.

"They said that if I guarded you well, Felicite and Francois would be set free," replied the old man after a while, during which he made vigorous efforts to overcome his nervousness, "and that if you escaped the children and I would be guillotined the very next day."

There was silence in the little room now. The Abbe was sitting quite still, clasping his trembling fingers, and Marguerite neither moved nor spoke. What the old man had just said was very slowly finding its way to the innermost cells of her brain. Until her mind had thoroughly grasped the meaning of it all, she could not trust herself to make a single comment.

It was some seconds before she fully understood it all, before she realized what it meant not only to her, but indirectly to her husband. Until now she had not been fully conscious of the enormous wave of hope which almost in spite of herself had risen triumphant above the dull, grey sea of her former despair; only now when it had been shattered against this deadly rock of almost superhuman devilry and cunning did she understand what she had hoped, and what she must now completely forswear.

No bolts and bars, no fortified towers or inaccessible fortresses could prove so effectual a prison for Marguerite Blakeney as the dictum which morally bound her to her cell.

"If you escape the children and I would be guillotined the very next day."

This meant that even if Percy knew, even if he could reach her, he could never set her free, since her safety meant death to two innocent children and to this simple hearted man.

It would require more than the ingenuity of the Scarlet Pimpernel himself to untie this Gordian knot.

"I don't mind for myself, of course," the old man went on with gentle philosophy. "I have lived my life. What matters if I die tomorrow, or if I linger on until my earthly span is legitimately run out? I am ready to go home whenever my Father calls me. But it is the children, you see. I have to think of them. Francois is his mother's only son, the bread-winner of the household, a good lad and studious too, and Felicite has always been very delicate. She is blind from birth and..."

"Oh! don't... for pity's sake, don't..." moaned Marguerite in an agony of helplessness. "I understand... you need not fear for your children, M. l'Abbe: no harm shall come to them through me."

"It is as the good God wills!" replied the old man quietly.

Then, as Marguerite had once more relapsed into silence, he fumbled for his beads, and his gentle voice began droning the Paters and Aves wherein no doubt his child-like heart found peace and solace.

He understood that the poor woman would not wish to speak, he knew as well as she did the overpowering strength of his helpless appeal. Thus the minutes sped on, the jailer and the captive, tied to one another by the strongest bonds that hand of man could forge, had nothing to say to one another: he, the old priest, imbued with the traditions of his calling, could pray and resign himself to the will of the Almighty, but she was young and ardent and passionate, she loved and was beloved, and an impassable barrier was built up between her and the man she worshipped!

A barrier fashioned by the weak hands of children, one of whom was delicate and blind. Outside was air and freedom, reunion with her husband, an agony of happy remorse, a kiss from his dear lips, and trembling held her back from it all, because of Francois who was the bread-winner and of Felicite who was blind.

Mechanically now Marguerite rose again, and like an automaton — lifeless and thoughtless — she began putting the dingy, squalid room to rights. The Abbe helped her demolish the improvised screen; with the same gentle delicacy of thought which had caused him to build it up, he refrained from speaking to her now: he would not intrude himself on her grief and her despair.

Later on, she forced herself to speak again, and asked the old man his name.

"My name is Foucquet," he replied, "Jean Baptiste Marie Foucquet, late parish priest of the Church of Saint Joseph, the patron saint of Boulogne."

Foucquet! This was l'Abbe Foucquet! the faithful friend and servant of the de Marny family.

Marguerite gazed at him with great, questioning eyes.

What a wealth of memories crowded in on her mind at sound of that name! Her beautiful home at Richmond, her brilliant array of servants and guests, His Royal Highness at her side! life in free, joyous happy England — how infinitely remote it now seemed. Her ears were filled with the sound of a voice, drawly and quaint and gentle, a voice and a laugh half shy, wholly mirthful, and oh! so infinitely dear:

"I think a little sea voyage and English country air would suit the Abbe Foucquet, m'dear, and I only mean to ask him to cross the Channel with me..."

Oh! the joy and confidence expressed in those words! the daring, the ambition! the pride! and the soft, languorous air of the old-world garden round her then, the passion of his embrace! the heavy scent of late roses and of heliotrope, which caused her to swoon in his arms!

And now a narrow prison cell, and that pathetic, tender little creature there, with trembling hands and tear-dimmed eyes, the most powerful and most relentless jailer which the ferocious cunning of her deadly enemies could possibly have devised.

Then she talked to him of Juliette Marny.

The Abbe did not know that Mlle. de Marny had succeeded in reaching England safely and was overjoyed to hear it.

He recounted to Marguerite the story of the Marny jewels: how he had put them safely away in the crypt of his little church, until the Assembly of the Convention had ordered the closing of the churches, and placed before every minister of le bon Dieu the alternative of apostasy or death.

"With me it has only been prison so far," continued the old man simply, "but prison has rendered me just as helpless as the guillotine would have done, for the enemies of le bon Dieu have ransacked the Church of Saint Joseph and stolen the jewels which I should have guarded with my life."

But it was obvious joy for the Abbe to talk of Juliette Marny's happiness. Vaguely, in his remote little provincial cure, he had heard of the prowess and daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel and liked to think that Juliette owed her safety to him.

"The good God will reward him and those whom he cares for," added Abbe Foucquet with that earnest belief in divine interference which seemed so strangely pathetic under these present circumstances.

Marguerite sighed, and for the first time in this terrible soul-stirring crisis through which she was passing so bravely, she felt a beneficent moisture in her eyes: the awful tension of her nerves relaxed. She went up to the old man took his wrinkled hand in hers and falling on her knees beside him she eased her overburdened heart in a flood of tears.

Chapter XX: Triumph

The day that Citizen Chauvelin's letter was received by the members of the Committee of Public Safety was indeed one of great rejoicing.

The Moniteur tells us that in the Seance of September 22nd, 1793, or Vendemiaire 1st of the Year I. it was decreed that sixty prisoners, not absolutely proved guilty of treason against the Republic — only suspected — were to be set free.

Sixty!... at the mere news of the possible capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

The Committee was inclined to be magnanimous. Ferocity yielded for the moment to the elusive joy of anticipatory triumph.

A glorious prize was about to fall into the hands of those who had the welfare of the people at heart.

Robespierre and his decemvirs rejoiced, and sixty persons had cause to rejoice with them. So be it! There were plans evolved already as to national fetes and wholesale pardons when that impudent and meddlesome Englishman at last got his deserts.

Wholesale pardons which could easily be rescinded afterwards. Even with those sixty it was a mere respite. Those of le Salut Public only loosened their hold for a while, were nobly magnanimous for a day, quite prepared to be doubly ferocious the next.

In the meanwhile let us heartily rejoice!

The Scarlet Pimpernel is in France or will be very soon, and on an appointed day he will present himself conveniently to the soldiers of the Republic for capture and for subsequent guillotine. England is at war with us, there is nothing therefore further to fear from her. We might hang every Englishman we can lay hands on, and England could do no more than she is doing at the present moment: bombard our ports, bluster and threaten, join hands with Flanders, and Austria and Sardinia, and the devil if she choose.

Allons! vogue la galere! The Scarlet Pimpernel is perhaps on our shores at this very moment! Our most stinging, most irritating foe is about to be delivered into our hands.

Citizen Chauvelin's letter is very categorical:

"I guarantee to you, Citizen Robespierre, and to the Members of the Revolutionary Government who have entrusted me with the delicate mission..."

Robespierre's sensuous lips curl into a sarcastic smile. Citizen Chauvelin's pen was ever florid in its style: "entrusted me with the delicate mission," is hardly the way to describe an order given under penalty of death.

But let it pass.

"... that four days from this date, at one hour after sunset, the man who goes by the mysterious name of the Scarlet Pimpernel will be on the southern ramparts of Boulogne, at the extreme southern corner of the town."

"Four days from this date..." and Citizen Chauvelin's letter is dated the nineteenth of September, 1793.

"Too much of an aristocrat — Monsieur le Marquis Chauvelin..." sneers Merlin, the Jacobin. "He does not know that all good citizens had called that date the 28th Fructidor, Year I. of the Republic."

"No matter," retorts Robespierre with impatient frigidity, "whatever we may call the day it was forty-eight hours ago, and in forty-eight hours more that damned Englishman will have run his head into a noose, from which, an I mistake not, he'll not find it easy to extricate himself."

"And you believe in Citizen Chauvelin's assertion," commented Danton with a lazy shrug of the shoulders.

"Only because he asks for help from us," quoth Robespierre drily; "he is sure that the man will be there, but not sure if he can tackle him."

But many were inclined to think that Chauvelin's letter was an idle boast. They knew nothing of the circumstances which had caused that letter to be written: they could not conjecture how it was that the ex-ambassador could be so precise in naming the day and hour when the enemy of France would be at the mercy of those whom he had outraged and flouted.

Nevertheless Citizen Chauvelin asks for help, and help must not be denied him. There must be no shadow of blame upon the actions of the Committee of Public Safety.

Chauvelin had been weak once, had allowed the prize to slip through his fingers; it must not occur again. He has a wonderful head for devising plans, but he needs a powerful hand to aid him, so that he may not fail again.

Collot d'Herbois, just home from Lyons and Tours, is the right man in an emergency like this. Citizen Collot is full of ideas; the inventor of the "Noyades" is sure to find a means of converting Boulogne into one gigantic prison out of which the mysterious English adventurer will find it impossible to escape.

And whilst the deliberations go on, whilst this committee of butchers are busy slaughtering in imagination the game they have not yet succeeded in bringing down, there comes another messenger from Citizen Chauvelin.

He must have ridden hard on the other one's heels, and something very unexpected and very sudden must have occurred to cause the Citizen to send this second note.

This time it is curt and to the point. Robespierre unfolds it and reads it to his colleagues.

"We have caught the woman — his wife — there may be murder attempted against my person, send me some one at once who will carry out my instructions in case of my sudden death."

Robespierre's lips curl in satisfaction, showing a row of yellowish teeth, long and sharp like the fangs of a wolf. A murmur like unto the snarl of a pack of hyenas rises round the table, as Chauvelin's letter is handed round.

Everyone has guessed the importance of this preliminary capture: "the woman — his wife." Chauvelin evidently thinks much of it, for he anticipates an attempt against his life, nay! he is quite prepared for it, ready to sacrifice it for the sake of his revenge.

Who had accused him of weakness?

He only thinks of his duty, not of his life; he does not fear for himself, only that the fruits of his skill might be jeopardized through assassination.

Well! this English adventurer is capable of any act of desperation to save his wife and himself, and Citizen Chauvelin must not be left in the lurch.

Thus, Citizen Collot d'Herbois is despatched forthwith to Boulogne to be a helpmeet and counsellor to Citizen Chauvelin.

Everything that can humanly be devised must be done to keep the woman secure and to set the trap for that elusive Pimpernel.

Once he is caught the whole of France shall rejoice, and Boulogne, who had been instrumental in running the quarry to earth, must be specially privileged on that day.

A general amnesty for all prisoners the day the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured. A public holiday and a pardon for all natives of Boulogne who are under sentence of death: they shall be allowed to find their way to the various English boats — trading and smuggling craft — that always lie at anchor in the roads there.

The Committee of Public Safety feel amazingly magnanimous towards Boulogne; a proclamation embodying the amnesty and the pardon is at once drawn up and signed by Robespierre and his bloodthirsty Council of Ten, it is entrusted to Citizen Collot d'Herbois to be read out at every corner of the ramparts as an inducement to the little town to do its level best. The Englishman and his wife — captured in Boulogne — will both be subsequently brought to Paris, formally tried on a charge of conspiring against the Republic and guillotined as English spies, but Boulogne shall have the greater glory and shall reap the first and richest reward.

And armed with the magnanimous proclamation, the orders for general rejoicings and a grand local fete, armed also with any and every power over the entire city, its municipality, its garrisons, its forts, for himself and his colleague Chauvelin, Citizen Collot d'Herbois starts for Boulogne forthwith.

Needless to tell him not to let the grass grow under his horse's hoofs. The capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, though not absolutely an accomplished fact, is nevertheless a practical certainty, and no one rejoices over this great event more than the man who is to be present and see all the fun.

Riding and driving, getting what relays of horses or waggons from roadside farms that he can, Collot is not likely to waste much time on the way.

It is 157 miles to Boulogne by road, and Collot, burning with ambition to be in at the death, rides or drives as no messenger of good tidings has ever ridden or driven before.

He does not stop to eat, but munches chunks of bread and cheese in the recess of the lumbering chaise or waggon that bears him along whenever his limbs refuse him service and he cannot mount a horse.

The chronicles tell us that twenty-four hours after he left Paris, half-dazed with fatigue, but ferocious and eager still, he is borne to the gates of Boulogne by an old cart horse requisitioned from some distant farm, and which falls down, dead, at the Porte Gayole, whilst its rider, with a last effort, loudly clamours for admittance into the town "in the name of the Republic."

Chapter XXI: Suspense

In his memorable interview with Robespierre, the day before he left for England, Chauvelin had asked that absolute power be given him, in order that he might carry out the plans for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, which he had in his mind. Now that he was back in France he had no cause to complain that the revolutionary government had grudged him this power for which he had asked.

Implicit obedience had followed whenever he had commanded.

As soon as he heard that a woman had been arrested in the act of uttering a passport in the name of Celine Dumont, he guessed at once that Marguerite Blakeney had, with characteristic impulse, fallen into the trap which, with the aid of the woman Candeille, he had succeeded in laying for her.

He was not the least surprised at that. He knew human nature, feminine nature, far too well, ever to have been in doubt for a moment that Marguerite would follow her husband without calculating either costs or risks.

Ye gods! the irony of it all! Had she not been called the cleverest woman in Europe at one time? Chauvelin himself had thus acclaimed her, in those olden days, before she and he became such mortal enemies, and when he was one of the many satellites that revolved round brilliant Marguerite St. Just. And to-night, when a sergeant of the town guards brought him news of her capture, he smiled grimly to himself; the cleverest woman in Europe had failed to perceive the trap laid temptingly open for her.

Once more she had betrayed her husband into the hands of those who would not let him escape a second time. And now she had done it with her eyes open, with loving, passionate heart which ached for self-sacrifice, and only succeeded in imperilling the loved one more hopelessly than before.

The sergeant was waiting for orders. Citizen Chauvelin had come to Boulogne, armed with more full and more autocratic powers than any servant of the new republic had ever been endowed with before. The governor of the town, the captain of the guard, the fort and municipality were all as abject slaves before him.

As soon as he had taken possession of the quarters organized for him in the town hall, he had asked for a list of prisoners who for one cause or another were being detained pending further investigations.

The list was long and contained many names which were of not the slightest interest to Chauvelin: he passed them over impatiently.

"To be released at once," he said curtly.

He did not want the guard to be burdened with unnecessary duties, nor the prisons of the little sea-port town to be inconveniently encumbered. He wanted room, space, air, the force and intelligence of the entire town at his command for the one capture which meant life and revenge to him.

"A woman — name unknown — found in possession of a forged passport in the name of Celine Dumont, maid to the Citizeness Desiree Candeille — attempted to land — was interrogated and failed to give satisfactory explanation of herself — detained in room No. 6 of the Gayole prison."

This was one of the last names on the list, the only one of any importance to Citizen Chauvelin. When he read it he nearly drove his nails into the palms of his hands, so desperate an effort did he make not to betray before the sergeant by look or sigh the exultation which he felt.

For a moment he shaded his eyes against the glare of the lamp, but it was not long before he had formulated a plan and was ready to give his orders.

He asked for a list of prisoners already detained in the various forts. The name of l'Abbe Foucquet with those of his niece and nephew attracted his immediate attention. He asked for further information respecting these people, heard that the boy was a widow's only son, the sole supporter of his mother's declining years: the girl was ailing, suffering from incipient phthisis, and was blind.

Pardi! the very thing! L'Abbe himself, the friend of Juliette Marny, the pathetic personality around which this final adventure of the Scarlet Pimpernel was intended to revolve! and these two young people! his sister's children! one of them blind and ill, the other full of vigour and manhood.

Citizen Chauvelin had soon made up his mind.

A few quick orders to the sergeant of the guard, and l'Abbe Foucquet, weak, helpless and gentle, became the relentless jailer who would guard Marguerite more securely than a whole regiment of loyal soldiers could have done.

Then, having despatched a messenger to the Committee of Public Safety, Chauvelin laid himself down to rest. Fate had not deceived him. He had thought and schemed and planned, and events had shaped themselves exactly as foreseen, and the fact that Marguerite Blakeney was at the present moment a prisoner in his hands was merely the result of his own calculations.

As for the Scarlet Pimpernel, Chauvelin could not very well conceive what he would do under these present circumstances. The duel on the southern ramparts had of course become a farce, not likely to be enacted now that Marguerite's life was at stake. The daring adventurer was caught in a network at last, from which all his ingenuity, all his wit, his impudence and his amazing luck could never extricate him.

And in Chauvelin's mind there was still something more. Revenge was the sweetest emotion his bruised and humbled pride could know: he had not yet tasted its complete intoxicating joy: but every hour now his cup of delight became more and more full: in a few days it would overflow.

In the meanwhile he was content to wait. The hours sped by and there was no news yet of that elusive Pimpernel. Of Marguerite he knew nothing save that she was well guarded; the sentry who passed up and down outside room No. 6 had heard her voice and that of the Abbe Foucquet, in the course of the afternoon.

Chauvelin had asked the Committee of Public Safety for aid in his difficult task, but forty-eight hours at least must elapse before such aid could reach him. Forty-eight hours, during which the hand of an assassin might be lurking for him, and might even reach him ere his vengeance was fully accomplished.

That was the only thought which really troubled him. He did not want to die before he had seen the Scarlet Pimpernel a withered abject creature, crushed in fame and honour, too debased to find glorification even in death.

At this moment he only cared for his life because it was needed for the complete success of his schemes. No one else he knew would have that note of personal hatred towards the enemy of France which was necessary now in order to carry out successfully the plans which he had formed.

Robespierre and all the others only desired the destruction of a man who had intrigued against the reign of terror which they had established; his death on the guillotine, even if it were surrounded with the halo of martyrdom, would have satisfied them completely. Chauvelin looked further than that. He hated the man! He had suffered humiliation through him individually. He wished to see him as an object of contempt rather than of pity. And because of the anticipation of this joy, he was careful of his life, and throughout those two days which elapsed between the capture of Marguerite and the arrival of Collot d'Herbois at Boulogne, Chauvelin never left his quarters at the Hotel de Ville, and requisitioned a special escort consisting of proved soldiers of the town guard to attend his every footstep.

On the evening of the 22nd, after the arrival of Citizen Collot in Boulogne, he gave orders that the woman from No. 6 cell be brought before him in the ground floor room of the Fort Gayole.

Chapter XXII: Not Death

Two days of agonizing suspense, of alternate hope and despair, had told heavily on Marguerite Blakeney.

Her courage was still indomitable, her purpose firm and her faith secure, but she was without the slightest vestige of news, entirely shut off from the outside world, left to conjecture, to scheme, to expect and to despond alone.

The Abbe Foucquet had tried in his gentle way to be of comfort to her, and she in her turn did her very best not to render his position more cruel than it already was.

A message came to him twice during those forty-eight hours from Francois and Felicite, a little note scribbled by the boy, or a token sent by the blind girl, to tell the Abbe that the children were safe and well, that they would be safe and well so long as the Citizeness with the name unknown remained closely guarded by him in room No. 6.

When these messages came, the old man would sigh and murmur something about the good God: and hope, which perhaps had faintly risen in Marguerite's heart within the last hour or so, would once more sink back into the abyss of uttermost despair.

Outside the monotonous walk of the sentry sounded like the perpetual thud of a hammer beating upon her bruised temples.

"What's to be done? My God? what's to be done?"

Where was Percy now?

"How to reach him!... Oh, God! grant me light!"

The one real terror which she felt was that she would go mad. Nay! that she was in a measure mad already. For hours now, — or was it days?... or years?... she had heard nothing save that rhythmic walk of the sentinel, and the kindly, tremulous voice of the Abbe whispering consolations, or murmuring prayers in her ears, she had seen nothing save that prison door, of rough deal, painted a dull grey, with great old-fashioned lock, and hinges rusty with the damp of ages.

She had kept her eyes fixed on that door until they burned and ached with well-nigh intolerable pain; yet she felt that she could not look elsewhere, lest she missed the golden moment when the bolts would be drawn, and that dull, grey door would swing slowly on its rusty hinges.

Surely, surely, that was the commencement of madness!

Yet for Percy's sake, because he might want her, because he might have need of her courage and of her presence of mind, she tried to keep her wits about her. But it was difficult! oh! terribly difficult! especially when the shade of evening began to gather in, and peopled the squalid, whitewashed room with innumerable threatening ghouls.

Then when the moon came up, a silver ray crept in through the tiny window and struck full upon that grey door, making it look weird and spectral like the entrance to a house of ghosts.

Even now as there was a distinct sound of the pushing of bolts and bars, Marguerite thought that she was the prey of hallucinations. The Abbe Foucquet was sitting in the remote and darkest corner of the room, quietly telling his beads. His serene philosophy and gentle placidity could in no way be disturbed by the opening or shutting of a door, or by the bearer of good or evil tidings.

The room now seemed strangely gloomy and cavernous, with those deep, black shadows all around and that white ray of the moon which struck so weirdly on the door.

Marguerite shuddered with one of those unaccountable premonitions of something evil about to come, which oftentimes assail those who have a nervous and passionate temperament.

The door swung slowly open upon its hinges: there was a quick word of command, and the light of a small oil lamp struck full into the gloom. Vaguely Marguerite discerned a group of men, soldiers no doubt, for there was a glint of arms and the suggestion of tricolour cockades and scarves. One of the men was holding the lamp aloft, another took a few steps forward into the room. He turned to Marguerite, entirely ignoring the presence of the old priest, and addressed her peremptorily.

"Your presence is desired by the citizen governor," he said curtly; "stand up and follow me."

"Whither am I to go?" she asked.

"To where my men will take you. Now then, quick's the word. The citizen governor does not like to wait."

At a word of command from him, two more soldiers now entered the room and placed themselves one on each side of Marguerite, who, knowing that resistance was useless, had already risen and was prepared to go.

The Abbe tried to utter a word of protest and came quickly forward towards Marguerite, but he was summarily and very roughly pushed aside.

"Now then, calotin," said the first soldier with an oath, "this is none of your business. Forward! march!" he added, addressing his men, "and you, Citizeness, will find it wiser to come quietly along and not to attempt any tricks with me, or the gag and manacles will have to be used."

But Marguerite had no intention of resisting. She was too tired even to wonder as to what they meant to do with her or whither they were going; she moved as in a dream and felt a hope within her that she was being led to death: summary executions were the order of the day, she knew that, and sighed for this simple solution of the awful problem which had been harassing her these past two days.

She was being led along a passage, stumbling ever and anon as she walked, for it was but dimly lighted by the same little oil lamp, which one of the soldiers was carrying in front, holding it high up above his head: then they went down a narrow flight of stone steps, until she and her escort reached a heavy oak door.

A halt was ordered at this point: and the man in command of the little party pushed the door open and walked in. Marguerite caught sight of a room beyond, dark and gloomy-looking, as was her own prison cell. Somewhere on the left there was obviously a window; she could not see it but guessed that it was there because the moon struck full upon the floor, ghost-like and spectral, well fitting in with the dream-like state in which Marguerite felt herself to be.

In the centre of the room she could discern a table with a chair close beside it, also a couple of tallow candles, which flickered in the draught caused no doubt by that open window which she could not see.

All these little details impressed themselves on Marguerite's mind, as she stood there, placidly waiting until she should once more be told to move along. The table, the chair, that unseen window, trivial objects though they were, assumed before her overwrought fancy an utterly disproportionate importance. She caught herself presently counting up the number of boards visible on the floor, and watching the smoke of the tallow-candles rising up towards the grimy ceiling.

After a few minutes' weary waiting which seemed endless to Marguerite, there came a short word of command from within and she was roughly pushed forward into the room by one of the men. The cool air of a late September's evening gently fanned her burning temples. She looked round her and now perceived that someone was sitting at the table, the other side of the tallow-candles — a man, with head bent over a bundle of papers and shading his face against the light with his hand.

He rose as she approached, and the flickering flame of the candles played weirdly upon the slight, sable-clad figure, illumining the keen, ferret-like face, and throwing fitful gleams across the deep-set eyes and the narrow, cruel mouth.

It was Chauvelin.

Mechanically Marguerite took the chair which the soldier drew towards her, ordering her curtly to sit down. She seemed to have but little power to move. Though all her faculties had suddenly become preternaturally alert at sight of this man, whose very life now was spent in doing her the most grievous wrong that one human being can do to another, yet all these faculties were forcefully centred in the one mighty effort not to flinch before him, not to let him see for a moment that she was afraid.

She compelled her eyes to look at him fully and squarely, her lips not to tremble, her very heart to stop its wild, excited beating. She felt his keen eyes fixed intently upon her, but more in curiosity than in hatred or satisfied vengeance.

When she had sat down he came round the table and moved towards her. When he drew quite near, she instinctively recoiled. It had been an almost imperceptible action on her part and certainly an involuntary one, for she did not wish to betray a single thought or emotion, until she knew what he wished to say.

But he had noted her movement — a sort of drawing up and stiffening of her whole person as he approached. He seemed pleased to see it, for he smiled sarcastically but with evident satisfaction, and — as if his purpose was now accomplished — he immediately withdrew and went back to his former seat on the other side of the table. After that he ordered the soldiers to go.

"But remain at attention outside, you and your men," he added, "ready to enter if I call."

It was Marguerite's turn to smile at this obvious sign of a lurking fear on Chauvelin's part, and a line of sarcasm and contempt curled her full lips.

The soldiers having obeyed and the oak door having closed upon them, Marguerite was now alone with the man whom she hated and loathed beyond every living thing on earth.

She wondered when he would begin to speak and why he had sent for her. But he seemed in no hurry to begin. Still shading his face with his hand, he was watching her with utmost attention: she, on the other hand, was looking through and beyond him, with contemptuous indifference, as if his presence here did not interest her in the least.

She would give him no opening for this conversation which he had sought and which she felt would prove either purposeless or else deeply wounding to her heart and to her pride. She sat, therefore, quite still with the flickering and yellow light fully illumining her delicate face, with its child-like curves, and delicate features, the noble, straight brow, the great blue eyes and halo of golden hair.

"My desire to see you here to-night, must seem strange to you, Lady Blakeney," said Chauvelin at last.

Then, as she did not reply, he continued, speaking quite gently, almost deferentially:

"There are various matters of grave importance, which the events of the next twenty-four hours will reveal to your ladyship: and believe me that I am actuated by motives of pure friendship towards you in this my effort to mitigate the unpleasantness of such news as you might hear to-morrow perhaps, by giving you due warning of what its nature might be."

She turned great questioning eyes upon him, and in their expression she tried to put all the contempt which she felt, all the bitterness, all the defiance and the pride.

He quietly shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! I fear me," he said, "that your ladyship, as usual doth me grievous wrong. It is but natural that you should misjudge me, yet believe me..."

"A truce on this foolery, M. Chauvelin," she broke in, with sudden impatient vehemence, "pray leave your protestations of friendship and courtesy alone, there is no one here to hear them. I pray you proceed with what you have to say."

"Ah!" It was a sigh of satisfaction on the part of Chauvelin. Her anger and impatience even at this early stage of the interview proved sufficiently that her icy restraint was only on the surface.

And Chauvelin always knew how to deal with vehemence. He loved to play with the emotions of a passionate fellow-creature: it was only the imperturbable calm of a certain enemy of his that was wont to shake his own impenetrable armour of reserve.

"As your ladyship desires," he said, with a slight and ironical bow of the head. "But before proceeding according to your wish, I am compelled to ask your ladyship just one question."

"And that is?"

"Have you reflected what your present position means to that inimitable prince of dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney?"

"Is it necessary for your present purpose, Monsieur, that you should mention my husband's name at all?" she asked.

"It is indispensable, fair lady," he replied suavely, "for is not the fate of your husband so closely intertwined with yours, that his actions will inevitably be largely influenced by your own?"

Marguerite gave a start of surprise, and as Chauvelin had paused she tried to read what hidden meaning lay behind these last words of his. Was it his intention then to propose some bargain, one of those terrible "either-or's" of which he seemed to possess the malignant secret? Oh! if that was so, if indeed he had sent for her in order to suggest one of those terrible alternatives of his, then — be it what it may, be it the wildest conception which the insane brain of a fiend could invent, she would accept it, so long as the man she loved were given one single chance of escape.

Therefore she turned to her arch-enemy in a more conciliatory spirit now, and even endeavoured to match her own diplomatic cunning against his.

"I do not understand," she said tentatively. "How can my actions influence those of my husband? I am a prisoner in Boulogne: he probably is not aware of that fact yet and..."

"Sir Percy Blakeney may be in Boulogne at any moment now," he interrupted quietly. "An I mistake not, few places can offer such great attractions to that peerless gentleman of fashion than doth this humble provincial town of France just at this present.... Hath it not the honour of harbouring Lady Blakeney within its gates?... And your ladyship may indeed believe me when I say that the day that Sir Percy lands in our hospitable port, two hundred pairs of eyes will be fixed upon him, lest he should wish to quit it again."

"And if there were two thousand, sir," she said impulsively, "they would not stop his coming or going as he pleased."

"Nay, fair lady," he said, with a smile, "are you then endowing Sir Percy Blakeney with the attributes which, as popular fancy has it, belong exclusively to that mysterious English hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"A truce to your diplomacy, Monsieur Chauvelin," she retorted, goaded by his sarcasm, "why should we try to fence with one another? What was the object of your journey to England? of the farce which you enacted in my house, with the help of the woman Candeille? of that duel and that challenge, save that you desired to entice Sir Percy Blakeney to France?"

"And also his charming wife," he added with an ironical bow.

She bit her lip, and made no comment.

"Shall we say that I succeeded admirably?" he continued, speaking with persistent urbanity and calm, "and that I have strong cause to hope that the elusive Pimpernel will soon be a guest on our friendly shores?... There! you see I too have laid down the foils.... As you say, why should we fence? Your ladyship is now in Boulogne, soon Sir Percy will come to try and take you away from us, but believe me, fair lady, that it would take more than the ingenuity and the daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel magnified a thousandfold to get him back to England again... unless..."

"Unless?..."

Marguerite held her breath. She felt now as if the whole universe must stand still during the next supreme moment, until she had heard what Chauvelin's next words would be.

There was to be an "unless" then? An "either-or" more terrible no doubt than the one he had formulated before her just a year ago.

Chauvelin, she knew, was past master in the art of putting a knife at his victim's throat and of giving it just the necessary twist with his cruel and relentless "unless"!

But she felt quite calm, because her purpose was resolute. There is no doubt that during this agonizing moment of suspense she was absolutely firm in her determination to accept any and every condition which Chauvelin would put before her as the price of her husband's safety. After all, these conditions, since he placed them before HER, could resolve themselves into questions of her own life against her husband's.

With that unreasoning impulse which was one of her most salient characteristics, she never paused to think that, to Chauvelin, her own life or death were only the means to the great end which he had in view: the complete annihilation of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

That end could only be reached by Percy Blakeney's death — not by her own.

Even now as she was watching him with eyes glowing and lips tightly closed, lest a cry of impatient agony should escape her throat, he, — like a snail that has shown its slimy horns too soon, and is not ready to face the enemy as yet, — seemed suddenly to withdraw within his former shell of careless suavity. The earnestness of his tone vanished, giving place to light and easy conversation, just as if he were discussing social topics with a woman of fashion in a Paris drawing-room.

"Nay!" he said pleasantly, "is not your ladyship taking this matter in too serious a spirit? Of a truth you repeated my innocent word 'unless' even as if I were putting knife at your dainty throat. Yet I meant naught that need disturb you yet. Have I not said that I am your friend? Let me try and prove it to you."

"You will find that a difficult task, Monsieur," she said drily.

"Difficult tasks always have had a great fascination for your humble servant. May I try?"

"Certainly."

"Shall we then touch at the root of this delicate matter? Your ladyship, so I understand, is at this moment under the impression that I desire to encompass — shall I say? — the death of an English gentleman for whom, believe me, I have the greatest respect. That is so, is it not?"

"What is so, M. Chauvelin?" she asked almost stupidly, for truly she had not even begun to grasp his meaning. "I do not understand."

"You think that I am at this moment taking measures for sending the Scarlet Pimpernel to the guillotine? Eh?"

"I do."

"Never was so great an error committed by a clever woman. Your ladyship must believe me when I say that the guillotine is the very last place in the world where I would wish to see that enigmatic and elusive personage."

"Are you trying to fool me, M. Chauvelin? If so, for what purpose? And why do you lie to me like that?"

"On my honour, 'tis the truth. The death of Sir Percy Blakeney — I may call him that, may I not? — would ill suit the purpose which I have in view."

"What purpose? You must pardon me, Monsieur Chauvelin," she added with a quick, impatient sigh, "but of a truth I am getting confused, and my wits must have become dull in the past few days. I pray to you to add to your many protestations of friendship a little more clearness in your speech and, if possible, a little more brevity. What then is the purpose which you had in view when you enticed my husband to come over to France?"

"My purpose was the destruction of the Scarlet Pimpernel, not the death of Sir Percy Blakeney. Believe me, I have a great regard for Sir Percy. He is a most accomplished gentleman, witty, brilliant, an inimitable dandy. Why should he not grace with his presence the drawing-rooms of London or of Brighton for many years to come?"

She looked at him with puzzled inquiry. For one moment the thought flashed through her mind that, after all, Chauvelin might be still in doubt as to the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel.... But no! that hope was madness.... It was preposterous and impossible.... But then, why? why? why?... Oh God! for a little more patience!

“What I have just said may seem a little enigmatic to your ladyship,” he continued blandly, “but surely so clever a woman as yourself, so great a lady as is the wife of Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet, will be aware that there are other means of destroying an enemy than the taking of his life.”

“For instance, Monsieur Chauvelin?”

“There is the destruction of his honour,” he replied slowly.

A long, bitter laugh, almost hysterical in its loud outburst, broke from the very depths of Marguerite’s convulsed heart.

“The destruction of his honour!... ha! ha! ha! ha!... of a truth, Monsieur Chauvelin, your inventive powers have led you beyond the bounds of dreamland!... Ha! ha! ha! ha!... It is in the land of madness that you are wandering, sir, when you talk in one breath of Sir Percy Blakeney and the possible destruction of his honour!”

But he remained apparently quite unruffled, and when her laughter had somewhat subsided, he said placidly:

“Perhaps!...”

Then he rose from his chair, and once more approached her. This time she did not shrink from him. The suggestion which he had made just now, this talk of attacking her husband’s honour rather than his life, seemed so wild and preposterous — the conception truly of a mind unhinged — that she looked upon it as a sign of extreme weakness on his part, almost as an acknowledgement of impotence.

But she watched him as he moved round the table more in curiosity now than in fright. He puzzled her, and she still had a feeling at the back of her mind that there must be something more definite and more evil lurking at the back of that tortuous brain.

“Will your ladyship allow me to conduct you to yonder window?” he said, “the air is cool, and what I have to say can best be done in sight of yonder sleeping city.”

His tone was one of perfect courtesy, even of respectful deference through which not the slightest trace of sarcasm could be discerned, and she, still actuated by curiosity and interest, not in any way by fear, quietly rose to obey him. Though she ignored the hand which he was holding out towards her, she followed him readily enough as he walked up to the window.

All through this agonizing and soul-stirring interview she had felt heavily oppressed by the close atmosphere of the room, rendered nauseous by the evil smell of the smoky tallow-candles which were left to spread their grease and smoke abroad unchecked. Once or twice she had gazed longingly towards the suggestion of pure air outside.

Chauvelin evidently had still much to say to her: the torturing, mental rack to which she was being subjected had not yet fully done its work. It still was capable of one or two turns, a twist or so which might succeed in crushing her pride and her defiance. Well! so be it! she was in the man’s power: had placed herself therein through her own unreasoning impulse. This interview was but one of the many soul-agonies which she had been called upon to endure, and if by submitting to it all she could in a measure mitigate her own faults and be of help to the man she loved, she would find the sacrifice small and the mental torture easy to bear.

Therefore when Chauvelin beckoned to her to draw near, she went up to the window, and leaning her head against the deep stone embrasure, she looked out into the night.

Chapter XXIII The Hostage

Chauvelin, without speaking, extended his hand out towards the city as if to invite Marguerite to gaze upon it.

She was quite unconscious what hour of the night it might be, but it must have been late, for the little town, encircled by the stony arms of its forts, seemed asleep. The moon, now slowly sinking in the west, edged the towers and spires with filmy lines of silver. To the right Marguerite caught sight of the frowning Beffroi, which even as she gazed out began tolling its heavy bell. It sounded like the tocsin, dull and muffled. After ten strokes it was still.

Ten o'clock! At this hour in far-off England, in fashionable London, the play was just over, crowds of gaily dressed men and women poured out of the open gates of the theatres calling loudly for attendant or chaise. Thence to balls or routs, gaily fluttering like so many butterflies, brilliant and irresponsible....

And in England also, in the beautiful gardens of her Richmond home, oftentimes at ten o'clock she had wandered alone with Percy, when he was at home, and the spirit of adventure in him momentarily laid to rest. Then, when the night was very dark and the air heavy with the scent of roses and lilies, she lay quiescent in his arms in that little arbour beside the river. The rhythmic lapping of the waves was the only sound that stirred the balmy air. He seldom spoke then, for his voice would shake whenever he uttered a word: but his impenetrable armour of flippancy was pierced through and he did not speak because his lips were pressed to hers, and his love had soared beyond the domain of speech.

A shudder of intense mental pain went through her now as she gazed on the sleeping city, and sweet memories of the past turned to bitterness in this agonizing present. One by one as the moon gradually disappeared behind a bank of clouds, the towers of Boulogne were merged in the gloom. In front of her far, far away, beyond the flat sand dunes, the sea seemed to be calling to her with a ghostly and melancholy moan.

The window was on the ground floor of the Fort, and gave direct onto the wide and shady walk which runs along the crest of the city walls; from where she stood Marguerite was looking straight along the ramparts, some thirty metres wide at this point, flanked on either side by the granite balustrade, and adorned with a double row of ancient elms stunted and twisted into grotesque shapes by the persistent action of the wind.

"These wide ramparts are a peculiarity of this city..." said a voice close to her ear, "at times of peace they form an agreeable promenade under the shade of the trees, and a delightful meeting-place for lovers... or enemies...."

The sound brought her back to the ugly realities of the present: the rose-scented garden at Richmond, the lazily flowing river, the tender memories which for that brief moment had confronted her from out a happy past, suddenly vanished from her ken. Instead of these the brine-laden sea-air struck her quivering nostrils, the echo of the old Beffroi died away in her ear, and now from out one of the streets or open places of the sleeping city there came the sound of a raucous voice, shooting in monotonous tones a string of words, the meaning of which failed to reach her brain.

Not many feet below the window, the southern ramparts of the town stretched away into the darkness. She felt unaccountably cold suddenly as she looked down upon them and, with aching eyes, tried to pierce the gloom. She was shivering in spite of the mildness of this early autumnal night: her overwrought fancy was peopling the lonely walls with unearthly shapes strolling along, discussing in spectral language a strange duel which was to take place here between a noted butcher of men and a mad Englishman overfond of adventure.

The ghouls seemed to pass and repass along in front of her and to be laughing audibly because that mad Englishman had been offered his life in exchange for his honour. They laughed and laughed, no doubt because he refused the bargain — Englishmen were always eccentric, and in these days of equality and other devices of a free and glorious revolution, honour was such a very marketable commodity that it seemed ridiculous to prize it quite so highly. Then they strolled away again and disappeared, whilst Marguerite distinctly heard the scrunching of the path beneath their feet. She leant forward to peer still further into the darkness, for this sound had seemed so absolutely real, but immediately a detaining hand was placed upon her arm and a sarcastic voice murmured at her elbow:

"The result, fair lady, would only be a broken leg or arm; the height is not great enough for picturesque suicides, and believe me these ramparts are only haunted by ghosts."

She drew back as if a viper had stung her; for the moment she had become oblivious of Chauvelin's presence. However, she would not take notice of his taunt, and, after a slight pause, he asked her if she could hear the town crier over in the public streets.

"Yes," she replied.

"What he says at this present moment is of vast importance to your ladyship," he remarked drily.

"How so?"

"Your ladyship is a precious hostage. We are taking measures to guard our valuable property securely."

Marguerite thought of the Abbe Foucquet, who no doubt was still quietly telling his beads, even if in his heart he had begun to wonder what had become of her. She thought of Francois, who was the breadwinner, and of Felicite, who was blind.

"Methinks you and your colleagues have done that already," she said.

"Not as completely as we would wish. We know the daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel. We are not even ashamed to admit that we fear his luck, his impudence and his marvellous ingenuity.... Have I not told you that I have the greatest possible respect for that mysterious English hero.... An old priest and two young children might be spirited away by that enigmatical adventurer, even whilst Lady Blakeney herself is made to vanish from our sight."

"Ah! I see your ladyship is taking my simple words as a confession of weakness," he continued, noting the swift sigh of hope which had involuntarily escaped her lips. "Nay! and it please you, you shall despise me for it. But a confession of weakness is the first sign of strength. The Scarlet Pimpernel is still at large, and whilst we guard our hostage securely, he is bound to fall into our hands."

"Aye! still at large!" she retorted with impulsive defiance. "Think you that all your bolts and bars, the ingenuity of yourself and your colleagues, the collaboration of the devil himself, would succeed in outwitting the Scarlet Pimpernel, now that his purpose will be to try and drag ME from out your clutches."

She felt hopeful and proud. Now that she had the pure air of heaven in her lungs, that from afar she could smell the sea, and could feel that perhaps in a straight line of vision from where she stood, the "Day-Dream" with Sir Percy on board, might be lying out there in the roads, it seemed impossible that he should fail in freeing her and those poor people — an old man and two children — whose lives depended on her own.

But Chauvelin only laughed a dry, sarcastic laugh and said:

"Hm! perhaps not!... It of course will depend on you and your personality... your feelings in such matters... and whether an English gentleman likes to save his own skin at the expense of others."

Marguerite shivered as if from cold.

"Ah! I see," resumed Chauvelin quietly, "that your ladyship has not quite grasped the position. That public crier is a long way off: the words have lingered on the evening breeze and have failed to reach your brain. Do you suppose that I and my colleagues do not know that all the ingenuity of which the Scarlet Pimpernel is capable will now be directed in piloting Lady Blakeney, and incidentally the Abbe Fouquet with his nephew and niece, safely across the Channel! Four people!... Bah! a bagatelle, for this mighty conspirator, who but lately snatched twenty aristocrats from the prisons of Lyons.... Nay! nay! two children and an old man were not enough to guard our precious hostage, and I was not thinking of either the Abbe Fouquet or of the two children, when I said that an English gentleman would not save himself at the expense of others."

"Of whom then were you thinking, Monsieur Chauvelin? Whom else have you set to guard the prize which you value so highly?"

"The whole city of Boulogne," he replied simply.

"I do not understand."

"Let me make my point clear. My colleague, Citizen Collot d'Herbois, rode over from Paris yesterday; like myself he is a member of the Committee of Public Safety whose duty it is to look after the welfare of France by punishing all those who conspire against her laws and the liberties of the people. Chief among these conspirators, whom it is our duty to punish is, of course, that impudent adventurer who calls himself the Scarlet Pimpernel. He has given the government of France a great deal of trouble through his attempts — mostly successful, as I have already admitted, — at frustrating the just vengeance which an oppressed country has the right to wreak on those who have proved themselves to be tyrants and traitors."

"Is it necessary to recapitulate all this, Monsieur Chauvelin?" she asked impatiently.

"I think so," he replied blandly. "You see, my point is this. We feel that in a measure now the Scarlet Pimpernel is in our power. Within the next few hours he will land at Boulogne... Boulogne, where he has agreed to fight a duel with me... Boulogne, where Lady Blakeney happens to be at this present moment... as you see, Boulogne has a great responsibility to bear: just now she is to a certain extent the proudest city in France, since she holds within her gates a hostage for the appearance on our shores of her country's most bitter enemy. But she must not fall from that high estate. Her double duty is clear before her: she must guard Lady Blakeney and capture the Scarlet Pimpernel; if she fail in the former she must be punished, if she succeed in the latter she shall be rewarded."

He paused and leaned out of the window again, whilst she watched him, breathless and terrified. She was beginning to understand.

"Hark!" he said, looking straight at her. "Do you hear the crier now? He is proclaiming the punishment and the reward. He is making it clear to the citizens of Boulogne that on the day when the Scarlet Pimpernel falls into the hands of the Committee of Public Safety a general amnesty will be granted to all natives of Boulogne who are under arrest at the present time, and a free pardon to all those who, born within these city walls, are to-day under sentence of death.... A noble reward, eh? well-deserved you'll admit.... Should you wonder then if the whole town of Boulogne were engaged just now in finding that mysterious hero, and delivering him into our hands?... How many mothers, sisters, wives, think you, at the present moment, would fail to lay hands on the English adventurer, if a husband's or a son's life or freedom happened to be at stake?... I have some records there," he continued, pointing in the direction of the table, "which tell me that there are five and thirty natives of Boulogne in the local prisons, a dozen more in the prisons of Paris; of these at least twenty have been tried already and are condemned to death. Every hour that the Scarlet Pimpernel succeeds in evading his captors so many deaths lie at his door. If he succeeds in once more reaching England safely three score lives mayhap will be the price of his escape.... Nay! but I see your ladyship is shivering with cold..." he added with a dry little laugh, "shall I close the window? or do you wish to hear what punishment will be meted out to Boulogne, if on the day that the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured, Lady Blakeney happens to have left the shelter of these city walls?"

"I pray you proceed, Monsieur," she rejoined with perfect calm.

"The Committee of Public Safety," he resumed, "would look upon this city as a nest of traitors if on the day that the Scarlet Pimpernel becomes our prisoner Lady Blakeney herself, the wife of that notorious English spy, had already quitted Boulogne. The whole town knows by now that you are in our hands — you, the most precious hostage we can hold for the ultimate capture of the man whom we all fear and detest. Virtually the town-crier is at the present moment proclaiming to the inhabitants of this city: 'We want that man, but we already have his wife, see to it, citizens, that she does not escape! for if she do, we shall summarily shoot the breadwinner in every family in the town!'"

A cry of horror escaped Marguerite's parched lips.

"Are you devils then, all of you," she gasped, "that you should think of such things?"

"Aye! some of us are devils, no doubt," said Chauvelin drily; "but why should you honour us in this case with so flattering an epithet? We are mere men striving to guard our property and mean no harm to the citizens of Boulogne. We have threatened them, true! but is it not for you and that elusive Pimpernel to see that the threat is never put into execution?"

"You would not do it!" she repeated, horror-stricken.

"Nay! I pray you, fair lady, do not deceive yourself. At present the proclamation sounds like a mere threat, I'll allow, but let me assure you that if we fail to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel and if you on the other hand are spirited out of this fortress by that mysterious adventurer we shall undoubtedly shoot or guillotine every able-bodied man and woman in this town."

He had spoken quietly and emphatically, neither with bombast, nor with rage, and Marguerite saw in his face nothing but a calm and ferocious determination, the determination of an entire nation embodied in this one man, to be revenged at any cost. She would not let

him see the depth of her despair, nor would she let him read in her face the unutterable hopelessness which filled her soul. It were useless to make an appeal to him: she knew full well that from him she could obtain neither gentleness nor mercy.

"I hope at last I have made the situation quite clear to your ladyship?" he was asking quite pleasantly now. "See how easy is your position: you have but to remain quiescent in room No. 6, and if any chance of escape be offered you ere the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured, you need but to think of all the families of Boulogne, who would be deprived of their breadwinner — fathers and sons mostly, but there are girls too, who support their mothers or sisters; the fish curers of Boulogne are mostly women, and there are the net-makers and the seamstresses, all would suffer if your ladyship were no longer to be found in No. 6 room of this ancient fort, whilst all would be included in the amnesty if the Scarlet Pimpernel fell into our hands..."

He gave a low, satisfied chuckle which made Marguerite think of the evil spirits in hell exulting over the torments of unhappy lost souls.

"I think, Lady Blakeney," he added drily and making her an ironical bow, "that your humble servant hath outwitted the elusive hero at last."

Quietly he turned on his heel and went back into the room, Marguerite remaining motionless beside the open window, where the soft, brine-laden air, the distant murmur of the sea, the occasional cry of a sea-mew, all seemed to mock her agonizing despair.

The voice of the town-crier came nearer and nearer now: she could hear the words he spoke quite distinctly: something about "amnesty" and pardon, the reward for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the lives of men, women and children in exchange for his.

Oh! she knew what all that meant! that Percy would not hesitate one single instant to throw his life into the hands of his enemies, in exchange for that of others. Others! others! always others! this sigh that had made her heart ache so often in England, what terrible significance it bore now!

And how he would suffer in his heart and in his pride, because of her whom he could not even attempt to save since it would mean the death of others! of others, always of others!

She wondered if he had already landed in Boulogne! Again she remembered the vision on the landing stage: his massive figure, the glimpse she had of the loved form, in the midst of the crowd!

The moment he entered the town he would hear the proclamation read, see it posted up no doubt on every public building, and realize that she had been foolish enough to follow him, that she was a prisoner and that he could do nothing to save her.

What would he do? Marguerite at the thought instinctively pressed her hands to her heart, the agony of it all had become physically painful. She hoped that perhaps this pain meant approaching death! oh! how easy would this simple solution be!

The moon peered out from beneath the bank of clouds which had obscured her for so long; smiling, she drew her pencilled silver lines along the edge of towers and pinnacles, the frowning Beffroi and those stony walls which seemed to Marguerite as if they encircled a gigantic graveyard.

The town-crier had evidently ceased to read the proclamation. One by one the windows in the public square were lighted up from within. The citizens of Boulogne wanted to think over the strange events which had occurred without their knowledge, yet which were apparently to have such direful or such joyous consequences for them.

A man to be captured! the mysterious English adventurer of whom they had all heard, but whom nobody had seen. And a woman — his wife — to be guarded until the man was safely under lock and key.

Marguerite felt as if she could almost hear them talking it over and vowing that she should not escape, and that the Scarlet Pimpernel should soon be captured.

A gentle wind stirred the old gnarled trees on the southern ramparts, a wind that sounded like the sigh of swiftly dying hope.

What could Percy do now? His hands were tied, and he was inevitably destined to endure the awful agony of seeing the woman he loved die a terrible death beside him.

Having captured him, they would not keep him long; no necessity for a trial, for detention, for formalities of any kind. A summary execution at dawn on the public place, a roll of drums, a public holiday to mark the joyful event, and a brave man will have ceased to live, a noble heart have stilled its beatings forever, whilst a whole nation gloried over the deed.

"Sleep, citizens of Boulogne! all is still!"

The night watchman had replaced the town-crier. All was quiet within the city walls: the inhabitants could sleep in peace, a beneficent government was wakeful and guarding their rest.

But many of the windows of the town remained lighted up, and at a little distance below her, round the corner so that she could not see it, a small crowd must have collected in front of the gateway which led into the courtyard of the Gayole Fort. Marguerite could hear a persistent murmur of voices, mostly angry and threatening, and once there were loud cries of: "English spies," and "a la lanterne!"

"The citizens of Boulogne are guarding the treasures of France!" commented Chauvelin drily, as he laughed again, that cruel, mirthless laugh of his.

Then she roused herself from her torpor: she did not know how long she had stood beside the open window, but the fear seized her that that man must have seen and gloated over the agony of her mind. She straightened her graceful figure, threw back her proud head defiantly, and quietly walked up to the table, where Chauvelin seemed once more absorbed in the perusal of his papers.

"Is this interview over?" she asked quietly, and without the slightest tremor in her voice. "May I go now?"

"As soon as you wish," he replied with gentle irony.

He regarded her with obvious delight, for truly she was beautiful: grand in this attitude of defiant despair. The man, who had spent the last half-hour in martyring her, gloried over the misery which he had wrought, and which all her strength of will could not entirely banish from her face.

"Will you believe me, Lady Blakeney?" he added, "that there is no personal animosity in my heart towards you or your husband? Have I not told you that I do not wish to compass his death?"

"Yet you propose to send him to the guillotine as soon as you have laid hands on him."

"I have explained to you the measures which I have taken in order to make sure that we DO lay hands on the Scarlet Pimpernel. Once he is in our power, it will rest with him to walk to the guillotine or to embark with you on board his yacht."

"You propose to place an alternative before Sir Percy Blakeney?"

"Certainly."

"To offer him his life?"

"And that of his charming wife."

"In exchange for what?"

"His honour."

"He will refuse, Monsieur."

"We shall see."

Then he touched a handbell which stood on the table, and within a few seconds the door was opened and the soldier who had led Marguerite hither, re-entered the room.

The interview was at an end. It had served its purpose. Marguerite knew now that she must not even think of escape for herself, or hope for safety for the man she loved. Of Chauvelin's talk of a bargain which would touch Percy's honour she would not even think: and she was too proud to ask anything further from him.

Chauvelin stood up and made her a deep bow, as she crossed the room and finally went out of the door. The little company of soldiers closed in around her and she was once more led along the dark passages, back to her own prison cell.

Chapter XXIV: Colleagues

As soon as the door had closed behind Marguerite, there came from somewhere in the room the sound of a yawn, a grunt and a volley of oaths.

The flickering light of the tallow candles had failed to penetrate into all the corners, and now from out one of these dark depths, a certain something began to detach itself, and to move forward towards the table at which Chauvelin had once more resumed his seat.

"Has the damned aristocrat gone at last?" queried a hoarse voice, as a burly body clad in loose-fitting coat and mud-stained boots and breeches appeared within the narrow circle of light.

"Yes," replied Chauvelin curtly.

"And a cursed long time you have been with the baggage," grunted the other surlily. "Another five minutes and I'd have taken the matter in my own hands.

"An assumption of authority," commented Chauvelin quietly, "to which your position here does not entitle you, Citizen Collot."

Collot d'Herbois lounged lazily forward, and presently he threw his ill-knit figure into the chair lately vacated by Marguerite. His heavy, square face bore distinct traces of the fatigue endured in the past twenty-four hours on horseback or in jolting market waggons. His temper too appeared to have suffered on the way, and, at Chauvelin's curt and dictatorial replies, he looked as surly as a chained dog.

"You were wasting your breath over that woman," he muttered, bringing a large and grimy fist heavily down on the table, "and your measures are not quite so sound as your fondly imagine, Citizen Chauvelin."

"They were mostly of your imagining, Citizen Collot," rejoined the other quietly, "and of your suggestion."

"I added a touch of strength and determination to your mild milk-and-water notions, Citizen," snarled Collot spitefully. "I'd have knocked that intriguing woman's brains out at the very first possible opportunity, had I been consulted earlier than this."

"Quite regardless of the fact that such violent measures would completely damn all our chances of success as far as the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel is concerned," remarked Chauvelin drily, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. "Once his wife is dead, the Englishman will never run his head into the noose which I have so carefully prepared for him."

"So you say, Chauvelin; and therefore I suggested to you certain measures to prevent the woman escaping which you will find adequate, I hope."

"You need have no fear, Citizen Collot," said Chauvelin curtly, "this woman will make no attempt at escape now."

"If she does..." and Collot d'Herbois swore an obscene oath.

"I think she understands that we mean to put our threat in execution."

"Threat?... It was no empty threat, Citizen.... Sacre tonnerre! if that woman escapes now, by all the devils in hell I swear that I'll wield the guillotine myself and cut off the head of every able-bodied man or woman in Boulogne, with my own hands."

As he said this his face assumed such an expression of inhuman cruelty, such a desire to kill, such a savage lust for blood, that instinctively Chauvelin shuddered and shrank away from his colleague. All through his career there is no doubt that this man, who was of gentle birth, of gentle breeding, and who had once been called M. le Marquis de Chauvelin, must have suffered in his susceptibilities and in his pride when in contact with the revolutionaries with whom he had chosen to cast his lot. He could not have thrown off all his old ideas of refinement quite so easily, as to feel happy in the presence of such men as Collot d'Herbois, or Marat in his day — men who had become brute beasts, more ferocious far than any wild animal, more scientifically cruel than any feline prowler in jungle or desert.

One look in Collot's distorted face was sufficient at this moment to convince Chauvelin that it were useless for him to view the proclamation against the citizens of Boulogne merely as an idle threat, even if he had wished to do so. That Marguerite would not, under the circumstances, attempt to escape, that Sir Percy Blakeney himself would be forced to give up all thoughts of rescuing her, was a foregone conclusion in Chauvelin's mind, but if this high-born English gentleman had not happened to be the selfless hero that he was, if Marguerite Blakeney were cast in a different, a rougher mould — if, in short, the Scarlet Pimpernel in the face of the proclamation did succeed in dragging his wife out of the clutches of the Terrorists, then it was equally certain that Collot d'Herbois would carry out his rabid and cruel reprisals to the full. And if in the course of the wholesale butchery of the able-bodied and wage-earning inhabitants of Boulogne, the headsman should sink worn out, then would this ferocious sucker of blood put his own hand to the guillotine, with the same joy and lust which he had felt when he ordered one hundred and thirty-eight women of Nantes to be stripped naked by the soldiery before they were flung helter-skelter into the river.

A touch of strength and determination! Aye! Citizen Collot d'Herbois had plenty of that. Was it he, or Carriere who at Arras commanded mothers to stand by while their children were being guillotined? And surely it was Maignet, Collot's friend and colleague, who at Bedouin, because the Red Flag of the Republic had been mysteriously torn down over night, burnt the entire little village down to the last hovel and guillotined every one of the three hundred and fifty inhabitants.

And Chauvelin knew all that. Nay, more! he was himself a member of that so-called government which had countenanced these butcheries, by giving unlimited powers to men like Collot, like Maignet and Carriere. He was at one with them in their republican ideas and he believed in the regeneration and the purification of France, through the medium of the guillotine, but he propounded his theories and carried out his most bloodthirsty schemes with physically clean hands and in an immaculately cut coat.

Even now when Collot d'Herbois lounged before him, with mud-bespattered legs stretched out before him, with dubious linen at neck and wrists, and an odour of rank tobacco and stale, cheap wine pervading his whole personality, the more fastidious man of the world, who had consorted with the dandies of London and Brighton, winced at the enforced proximity.

But it was the joint characteristic of all these men who had turned France into a vast butchery and charnel-house, that they all feared and hated one another, even more whole-heartedly than they hated the aristocrats and so-called traitors whom they sent to the guillotine. Citizen Lebon is said to have dipped his sword into the blood which flowed from the guillotine, whilst exclaiming: "Comme

je l'aime ce sang coule de traître!" but he and Collot and Danton and Robespierre, all of them in fact would have regarded with more delight still the blood of any one of their colleagues.

At this very moment Collot d'Herbois and Chauvelin would with utmost satisfaction have denounced, one the other, to the tender mercies of the Public Prosecutor. Collot made no secret of his hatred for Chauvelin, and the latter disguised it but thinly under the veneer of contemptuous indifference.

"As for that dammed Englishman," added Collot now, after a slight pause, and with another savage oath, "if 'tis my good fortune to lay hands on him, I'd shoot him then and there like a mad dog, and rid France once and forever of this accursed spy."

"And think you, Citizen Collot," rejoined Chauvelin with a shrug of the shoulders, "that France would be rid of all English adventurers by the summary death of this one man?"

"He is the ringleader, at any rate..."

"And has at least nineteen disciples to continue his traditions of conspiracy and intrigue. None perhaps so ingenuous as himself, none with the same daring and good luck perhaps, but still a number of ardent fools only too ready to follow in the footsteps of their chief. Then there's the halo of martyrdom around the murdered hero, the enthusiasm created by his noble death... Nay! nay, Citizen, you have not lived among these English people, you do not understand them, or you would not talk of sending their popular hero to an honoured grave."

But Collot d'Herbois only shook his powerful frame like some big, sulky dog, and spat upon the floor to express his contempt of this wild talk which seemed to have no real tangible purpose.

"You have not caught your Scarlet Pimpernel yet, Citizen," he said with a snort.

"No, but I will, after sundown to-morrow."

"How do you know?"

"I have ordered the Angelus to be rung at one of the closed churches, and he agreed to fight a duel with me on the southern ramparts at that hour and on that day," said Chauvelin simply.

"You take him for a fool?" sneered Collot.

"No, only for a foolhardy adventurer."

"You imagine that with his wife as hostage in our hands, and the whole city of Boulogne on the lookout for him for the sake of the amnesty, that the man would be fool enough to walk on those ramparts at a given hour, for the express purpose of getting himself caught by you and your men?"

"I am quite sure that if we do not lay hands on him before that given hour, that he will be on the ramparts at the Angelus to-morrow," said Chauvelin emphatically.

Collot shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Is the man mad?" he asked with an incredulous laugh.

"Yes, I think so," rejoined the other with a smile.

"And having caught your hare," queried Collot, "how do you propose to cook him?"

"Twelve picked men will be on the ramparts ready to seize him the moment he appears."

"And to shoot him at sight, I hope."

"Only as a last resource, for the Englishman is powerful and may cause our half-famished men a good deal of trouble. But I want him alive, if possible..."

"Why? a dead lion is safer than a live one any day."

"Oh! we'll kill him right enough, Citizen. I pray you have no fear. I hold a weapon ready for that meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel, which will be a thousand times more deadly and more effectual than a chance shot, or even a guillotine."

"What weapon is that, Citizen Chauvelin?"

Chauvelin leaned forward across the table and rested his chin in his hands; instinctively Collot too leaned towards him, and both men peered furtively round them as if wondering if prying eyes happened to be lurking round. It was Chauvelin's pale eyes which now gleamed with hatred and with an insatiable lust for revenge at least as powerful as Collot's lust for blood; the unsteady light of the tallow candles threw grotesque shadows across his brows, and his mouth was set in such rigid lines of implacable cruelty that the brutish sot beside him gazed on him amazed, vaguely scenting here a depth of feeling which was beyond his power to comprehend. He repeated his question under his breath:

"What weapon do you mean to use against that accursed spy, Citizen Chauvelin?"

"Dishonour and ridicule!" replied the other quietly.

"Bah!"

"In exchange for his life and that of his wife."

"As the woman told you just now... he will refuse."

"We shall see, Citizen."

"You are mad to think such things, Citizen, and ill serve the Republic by sparing her bitterest foe."

A long, sarcastic laugh broke from Chauvelin's parted lips.

"Spare him? — spare the Scarlet Pimpernel!" he ejaculated. "Nay, Citizen, you need have no fear of that. But believe me, I have schemes in my head by which the man whom we all hate will be more truly destroyed than your guillotine could ever accomplish: schemes, whereby the hero who is now worshipped in England as a demi-god will suddenly become an object of loathing and of contempt... Ah! I see you understand me now... I wish to so cover him with ridicule that the very name of the small wayside flower will become a term of derision and of scorn. Only then shall we be rid of these pestilential English spies, only then will the entire League of the Scarlet Pimpernel become a thing of the past when its whilom leader, now thought akin to a god, will have found refuge in a suicide's grave, from the withering contempt of the entire world."

Chauvelin had spoken low, hardly above a whisper, and the echo of his last words died away in the great, squalid room like a long-drawn-out sigh. There was dead silence for a while save for the murmur in the wind outside and from the floor above the measured

tread of the sentinel guarding the precious hostage in No. 6.

Both men were staring straight in front of them. Collot d'Herbois incredulous, half-contemptuous, did not altogether approve of these schemes which seemed to him wild and uncanny: he liked the direct simplicity of a summary trial, of the guillotine, or of his own well stage-managed "Noyades." He did not feel that any ridicule or dishonour would necessarily paralyze a man in his efforts at intrigue, and would have liked to set Chauvelin's authority aside, to behead the woman upstairs and then to take his chances of capturing the man later on.

But the orders of the Committee of Public Safety had been peremptory: he was to be Chauvelin's help — not his master, and to obey in all things. He did not dare to take any initiative in the matter, for in that case, if he failed, the reprisals against him would indeed be terrible.

He was fairly satisfied now that Chauvelin had accepted his suggestion of summarily sending to the guillotine one member of every family resident in Boulogne, if Marguerite succeeded in effecting an escape, and, of a truth, Chauvelin had hailed the fiendish suggestion with delight. The old abbe with his nephew and niece were undoubtedly not sufficient deterrents against the daring schemes of the Scarlet Pimpernel, who, as a matter of fact, could spirit them out of Boulogne just as easily as he would his own wife.

Collot's plan tied Marguerite to her own prison cell more completely than any other measure could have done, more so indeed than the originator thereof knew or believed.... A man like this d'Herbois — born in the gutter, imbued with every brutish tradition, which generations of jail-birds had bequeathed to him, — would not perhaps fully realize the fact that neither Sir Percy nor Marguerite Blakeney would ever save themselves at the expense of others. He had merely made the suggestion, because he felt that Chauvelin's plans were complicated and obscure, and above all insufficient, and that perhaps after all the English adventurer and his wife would succeed in once more outwitting him, when there would remain the grand and bloody compensation of a wholesale butchery in Boulogne.

But Chauvelin was quite satisfied. He knew that under present circumstances neither Sir Percy nor Marguerite would make any attempt to escape. The ex-ambassador had lived in England: he understood the class to which these two belonged, and was quite convinced that no attempt would be made on either side to get Lady Blakeney away whilst the present ferocious order against the bread-winner of every family in the town held good.

Aye! the measures were sound enough. Chauvelin was easy in his mind about that. In another twenty-four hours he would hold the man completely in his power who had so boldly outwitted him last year; to-night he would sleep in peace: an entire city was guarding the precious hostage.

"We'll go to bed now, Citizen," he said to Collot, who, tired and sulky, was moodily fingering the papers on the table. The scraping sound which he made thereby grated on Chauvelin's overstrung nerves. He wanted to be alone, and the sleepy brute's presence here jarred on his own solemn mood.

To his satisfaction, Collot grunted a surly assent. Very leisurely he rose from his chair, stretched out his loose limbs, shook himself like a shaggy cur, and without uttering another word he gave his colleague a curt nod, and slowly lounged out of the room.

Chapter XXV: The Unexpected

Chauvelin heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction when Collot d'Herbois finally left him to himself. He listened for awhile until the heavy footsteps died away in the distance, then leaning back in his chair, he gave himself over to the delights of the present situation.

Marguerite in his power. Sir Percy Blakeney compelled to treat for her rescue if he did not wish to see her die a miserable death.

"Aye! my elusive hero," he muttered to himself, "methinks that we shall be able to cry quits at last."

Outside everything had become still. Even the wind in the trees out there on the ramparts had ceased their melancholy moaning. The man was alone with his thoughts. He felt secure and at peace, sure of victory, content to await the events of the next twenty-four hours. The other side of the door the guard which he had picked out from amongst the more feeble and ill-fed garrison of the little city for attendance on his own person were ranged ready to respond to his call.

"Dishonour and ridicule! Derision and scorn!" he murmured, gloating over the very sound of these words, which expressed all that he hoped to accomplish, "utter abjections, then perhaps a suicide's grave..."

He loved the silence around him, for he could murmur these words and hear them echoing against the bare stone walls like the whisperings of all the spirits of hate which were waiting to lend him their aid.

How long he had remained thus absorbed in his meditations, he could not afterwards have said; a minute or two perhaps at most, whilst he leaned back in his chair with eyes closed, savouring the sweets of his own thoughts, when suddenly the silence was interrupted by a loud and pleasant laugh and a drawly voice speaking in merry accents:

"The lud live you, Monsieur Chaubertin, and pray how do you propose to accomplish all these pleasant things?"

In a moment Chauvelin was on his feet and with eyes dilated, lips parted in awed bewilderment, he was gazing towards the open window, where astride upon the sill, one leg inside the room, the other out, and with the moon shining full on his suit of delicate-coloured cloth, his wide caped coat and elegant chapeau-bras, sat the imperturbable Sir Percy.

"I heard you muttering such pleasant words, Monsieur," continued Blakeney calmly, "that the temptation seized me to join in the conversation. A man talking to himself is ever in a sorry plight... he is either a mad man or a fool..."

He laughed his own quaint and inane laugh and added apologetically:

"Far be it from me, sir, to apply either epithet to you... demmed bad form calling another fellow names... just when he does not quite feel himself, eh?... You don't feel quite yourself, I fancy just now... eh, Monsieur Chaubertin... er... beg pardon, Chauvelin..."

He sat there quite comfortably, one slender hand resting on the gracefully-fashioned hilt of his sword — the sword of Lorenzo Cenci, — the other holding up the gold-rimmed eyeglass through which he was regarding his avowed enemy; he was dressed as for a ball, and his perpetually amiable smile lurked round the corners of his firm lips.

Chauvelin had undoubtedly for the moment lost his presence of mind. He did not even think of calling to his picked guard, so completely taken aback was he by this unforeseen move on the part of Sir Percy. Yet, obviously, he should have been ready for this eventuality. Had he not caused the town-crier to loudly proclaim throughout the city that if ONE female prisoner escaped from Fort Gayole the entire able-bodied population of Boulogne would suffer?

The moment Sir Percy entered the gates of the town, he could not help but hear the proclamation, and hear at the same time that this one female prisoner who was so precious a charge, was the wife of the English spy: the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Moreover, was it not a fact that whenever or wherever the Scarlet Pimpernel was least expected there and then would he surely appear? Having once realized that it was his wife who was incarcerated in Fort Gayole, was it not natural that he would go and prowl around the prison, and along the avenue on the summit of the southern ramparts, which was accessible to every passer-by? No doubt he had lain in hiding among the trees, had perhaps caught snatches of Chauvelin's recent talk with Collot.

Aye! it was all so natural, so simple! Strange that it should have been so unexpected!

Furious at himself for his momentary stupor, he now made a vigorous effort to face his impudent enemy with the same sang-froid of which the latter had so inexhaustible a fund.

He walked quietly towards the window, compelling his nerves to perfect calm and his mood to indifference. The situation had ceased to astonish him; already his keen mind had seen its possibilities, its grimness and its humour, and he was quite prepared to enjoy these to the full.

Sir Percy now was dusting the sleeve of his coat with a lace-edged handkerchief, but just as Chauvelin was about to come near him, he stretched out one leg, turning the point of a dainty boot towards the ex-ambassador.

"Would you like to take hold of me by the leg, Monsieur Chaubertin?" he said gaily. "'Tis more effectual than a shoulder, and your picked guard of six stalwart fellows can have the other leg.... Nay! I pray you, sir, do not look at me like that.... I vow that it is myself and not my ghost.... But if you still doubt me, I pray you call the guard... ere I fly out again towards that fitful moon..."

"Nay, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin, with a steady voice, "I have no thought that you will take flight just yet.... Methinks you desire conversation with me, or you had not paid me so unexpected a visit."

"Nay, sir, the air is too oppressive for lengthy conversation... I was strolling along these ramparts, thinking of our pleasant encounter at the hour of the Angelus to-morrow... when this light attracted me.... feared I had lost my way and climbed the window to obtain information."

"As to your way to the nearest prison cell, Sir Percy?" queried Chauvelin drily.

"As to anywhere, where I could sit more comfortably than on this demmed sill.... It must be very dusty, and I vow 'tis terribly hard..."

"I presume, Sir Percy, that you did my colleague and myself the honour of listening to our conversation?"

"An you desired to talk secrets, Monsieur... er... Chaubertin... you should have shut this window... and closed this avenue of trees against the chance passer-by."

"What we said was no secret, Sir Percy. It is all over the town to-night."

"Quite so... you were only telling the devil your mind... eh?"

"I had also been having conversation with Lady Blakeney.... Pray did you hear any of that, sir?"

But Sir Percy had evidently not heard the question, for he seemed quite absorbed in the task of removing a speck of dust from his immaculate chapeau-bras.

"These hats are all the rage in England just now," he said airily, "but they have had their day, do you not think so, Monsieur? When I return to town, I shall have to devote my whole mind to the invention of a new headgear..."

"When will you return to England, Sir Percy?" queried Chauvelin with good-natured sarcasm.

"At the turn of the tide to-morrow eve, Monsieur," replied Blakeney.

"In company with Lady Blakeney?"

"Certainly, sir... and yours if you will honour us with your company."

"If you return to England to-morrow, Sir Percy, Lady Blakeney, I fear me, cannot accompany you."

"You astonish me, sir," rejoined Blakeney with an exclamation of genuine and unaffected surprise. "I wonder now what would prevent her?"

"All those whose death would be the result of her flight, if she succeeded in escaping from Boulogne..."

But Sir Percy was staring at him, with wide open eyes expressive of utmost amazement.

"Dear, dear, dear... Lud! but that sounds most unfortunate..."

"You have not heard of the measures which I have taken to prevent Lady Blakeney quitting this city without our leave?"

"No, Monsieur Chauvelin... no... I have heard nothing..." rejoined Sir Percy blandly. "I lead a very retired life when I come abroad and..."

"Would you wish to hear them now?"

"Quite unnecessary, sir, I assure you... and the hour is getting late..."

"Sir Percy, are you aware of the fact that unless you listen to what I have to say, your wife will be dragged before the Committee of Public Safety in Paris within the next twenty-four hours?" said Chauvelin firmly.

"What swift horses you must have, sir," quoth Blakeney pleasantly. "Lud! to think of it!... I always heard that these demmed French horses would never beat ours across country."

But Chauvelin now would not allow himself to be ruffled by Sir Percy's apparent indifference. Keen reader of emotions as he was, he had not failed to note a distinct change in the drawly voice, a sound of something hard and trenchant in the flippant laugh, ever since Marguerite's name was first mentioned. Blakeney's attitude was apparently as careless, as audacious as before, but Chauvelin's keen eyes had not missed the almost imperceptible tightening of the jaw and the rapid clenching of one hand on the sword hilt even whilst the other toyed in graceful idleness with the filmy Mechlin lace cravat.

Sir Percy's head was well thrown back, and the pale rays of the moon caught the edge of the clear-cut profile, the low massive brow, the drooping lids through which the audacious plotter was lazily regarding the man who held not only his own life, but that of the woman who was infinitely dear to him, in the hollow of his hand.

"I am afraid, Sir Percy," continued Chauvelin drily, "that you are under the impression that bolts and bars will yield to your usual good luck, now that so precious a life is at stake as that of Lady Blakeney."

"I am a greater believer in impressions, Monsieur Chauvelin."

"I told her just now that if she quitted Boulogne ere the Scarlet Pimpernel is in our hands, we should summarily shoot one member of every family in the town — the bread-winner."

"A pleasant conceit, Monsieur... and one that does infinite credit to your inventive faculties."

"Lady Blakeney, therefore, we hold safely enough," continued Chauvelin, who no longer heeded the mocking observations of his enemy; "as for the Scarlet Pimpernel..."

"You have but to ring a bell, to raise a voice, and he too will be under lock and key within the next two minutes, eh?... Passons, Monsieur... you are dying to say something further... I pray you proceed... your engaging countenance is becoming quite interesting in its seriousness."

"What I wish to say to you, Sir Percy, is in the nature of a proposed bargain."

"Indeed?... Monsieur, you are full of surprises... like a pretty woman.... And pray what are the terms of this proposed bargain?"

"Your side of the bargain, Sir Percy, or mine? Which will you hear first?"

"Oh yours, Monsieur... yours, I pray you.... Have I not said that you are like a pretty woman?... Place aux dames, sir! always!"

"My share of the bargain, sir, is simple enough: Lady Blakeney, escorted by yourself and any of your friends who might be in this city at the time, shall leave Boulogne harbour at sunset to-morrow, free and unmolested, if you on the other hand will do your share..."

"I don't yet know what my share in this interesting bargain is to be, sir... but for the sake of argument let us suppose that I do not carry it out.... What then?..."

"Then, Sir Percy... putting aside for the moment the question of the Scarlet Pimpernel altogether... then, Lady Blakeney will be taken to Paris, and will be incarcerated in the prison of the Temple lately vacated by Marie Antoinette — there she will be treated in exactly the same way as the ex-queen is now being treated in the Conciergerie.... Do you know what that means, Sir Percy?... It does not mean a summary trial and a speedy death, with the halo and glory of martyrdom thrown in... it means days, weeks, nay, months, perhaps, of misery and humiliation... it means, that like Marie Antoinette, she will never be allowed solitude for one single instant of the day or night... it means the constant proximity of soldiers, drunk with cruelty and with hate... the insults, the shame..."

"You hound!... you dog!... you cur!... do you not see that I must strangle you for this!..."

The attack had been so sudden and so violent that Chauvelin had not the time to utter the slightest call for help. But a second ago, Sir Percy Blakeney had been sitting on the window-sill, outwardly listening with perfect calm to what his enemy had to say; now he was at the latter's throat, pressing with long and slender hands the breath out of the Frenchman's body, his usually placid face distorted into a mask of hate.

"You cur!... you cur!..." he repeated, "am I to kill you or will you unsay those words?"

Then suddenly he relaxed his grip. The habits of a lifetime would not be gainsaid even now. A second ago his face had been livid with rage and hate, now a quick flush overspread it, as if he were ashamed of this loss of self-control. He threw the little Frenchman away from him like he would a beast which had snarled, and passed his hand across his brow.

"Lud forgive me!" he said quaintly, "I had almost lost my temper."

Chauvelin was not slow in recovering himself. He was plucky and alert, and his hatred for this man was so great that he had actually ceased to fear him. Now he quietly readjusted his cravat, made a vigorous effort to re-conquer his breath, and said firmly as soon as he could contrive to speak at all:

"And if you did strangle me, Sir Percy, you would do yourself no good. The fate which I have mapped out for Lady Blakeney, would then irrevocably be hers, for she is in our power and none of my colleagues are disposed to offer you a means of saving her from it, as I am ready to do."

Blakeney was now standing in the middle of the room, with his hands buried in the pockets of his breeches, his manner and attitude once more calm, debonnair, expressive of lofty self-possession and of absolute indifference. He came quite close to the meagre little figure of his exultant enemy, thereby forcing the latter to look up at him.

"Oh!... ah!... yes!" he said airily, "I had nigh forgotten... you were talking of a bargain... my share of it... eh?... Is it me you want?... Do you wish to see me in your Paris prisons?... I assure you, sir, that the propinquity of drunken soldiers may disgust me, but it would in no way disturb the equanimity of my temper."

"I am quite sure of that, Sir Percy — and I can but repeat what I had the honour of saying to Lady Blakeney just now — I do not desire the death of so accomplished a gentleman as yourself."

"Strange, Monsieur," retorted Blakeney, with a return of his accustomed flippancy. "Now I do desire your death very strongly indeed — there would be so much less vermin on the face of the earth.... But pardon me — I was interrupting you.... Will you be so kind as to proceed?"

Chauvelin had not winced at the insult. His enemy's attitude now left him completely indifferent. He had seen that self-possessed man of the world, that dainty and fastidious dandy, in the throes of an overmastering passion. He had very nearly paid with his life for the joy of having roused that supercilious and dormant lion. In fact he was ready to welcome any insults from Sir Percy Blakeney now, since these would be only additional evidences that the Englishman's temper was not yet under control.

"I will try to be brief, Sir Percy," he said, setting himself the task of imitating his antagonist's affected manner. "Will you not sit down?... We must try and discuss these matters like two men of the world.... As for me, I am always happiest beside a board littered with papers.... I am not an athlete, Sir Percy... and serve my country with my pen rather than with my fists."

Whilst he spoke he had reached the table and once more took the chair whereon he had been sitting lately, when he dreamed the dreams which were so near realization now. He pointed with a graceful gesture to the other vacant chair, which Blakeney took without a word.

"Ah!" said Chauvelin with a sigh of satisfaction, "I see that we are about to understand one another.... I have always felt it was a pity, Sir Percy, that you and I could not discuss certain matters pleasantly with one another.... Now, about this unfortunate incident of Lady Blakeney's incarceration, I would like you to believe that I had no part in the arrangements which have been made for her detention in Paris. My colleagues have arranged it all... and I have vainly tried to protest against the rigorous measures which are to be enforced against her in the Temple prison.... But these are answering so completely in the case of the ex-queen, they have so completely broken her spirit and her pride, that my colleagues felt that they would prove equally useful in order to bring the Scarlet Pimpernel — through his wife — to an humbler frame of mind."

He paused a moment, distinctly pleased with his peroration, satisfied that his voice had been without a tremor and his face impassive, and wondering what effect this somewhat lengthy preamble had upon Sir Percy, who through it all had remained singularly quiet. Chauvelin was preparing himself for the next effect which he hoped to produce, and was vaguely seeking for the best words with which to fully express his meaning, when he was suddenly startled by a sound as unexpected as it was disconcerting.

It was the sound of a loud and prolonged snore. He pushed the candle aside, which somewhat obstructed his line of vision, and casting a rapid glance at the enemy, with whose life he was toying even as a cat doth with that of a mouse, he saw that the aforesaid mouse was calmly and unmistakably asleep.

An impatient oath escaped Chauvelin's lips, and he brought his fist heavily down on the table, making the metal candlesticks rattle and causing Sir Percy to open one sleepy eye.

"A thousand pardons, sir," said Blakeney with a slight yawn. "I am so demmed fatigued, and your preface was unduly long.... Beastly bad form, I know, going to sleep during a sermon... but I haven't had a wink of sleep all day.... I pray you to excuse me..."

"Will you condescend to listen, Sir Percy?" queried Chauvelin peremptorily, "or shall I call the guard and give up all thoughts of treating with you?"

"Just whichever you demmed well prefer, sir," rejoined Blakeney impatiently.

And once more stretching out his long limbs, he buried his hands in the pockets of his breeches and apparently prepared himself for another quiet sleep. Chauvelin looked at him for a moment, vaguely wondering what to do next. He felt strangely irritated at what he firmly believed was mere affectation on Blakeney's part, and although he was burning with impatience to place the terms of the proposed bargain before this man, yet he would have preferred to be interrogated, to deliver his "either-or" with becoming sternness and decision, rather than to take the initiative in this discussion, where he should have been calm and indifferent, whilst his enemy should have been nervous and disturbed. Sir Percy's attitude had disconcerted him, a touch of the grotesque had been given to what should have been a tense moment, and it was terribly galling to the pride of the ex-diplomatist that with this elusive enemy and in spite of his own preparedness for any eventuality, it was invariably the unforeseen that happened. After a moment's reflection, however, he decided upon a fresh course of action. He rose and crossed the room, keeping as much as possible an eye upon Sir Percy, but the latter sat placid and dormant and evidently in no hurry to move. Chauvelin having reached the door, opened it noiselessly, and to the sergeant in command of his bodyguard who stood at attention outside, he whispered hurriedly: "The prisoner from No. 6.... Let two of the men bring her hither back to me at once."

Chapter XXVI: The Terms of the Bargain

Less than three minutes later, there came to Chauvelin's expectant ears the soft sound made by a woman's skirts against the stone floor. During those three minutes, which had seemed an eternity to his impatience, he had sat silently watching the slumber — affected or real — of his enemy.

Directly he heard the word: "Halt!" outside the door, he jumped to his feet. The next moment Marguerite had entered the room.

Hardly had her foot crossed the threshold than Sir Percy rose, quietly and without haste but evidently fully awake, and turning towards her, made her a low obeisance.

She, poor woman, had of course caught sight of him at once. His presence here, Chauvelin's demand for her reappearance, the soldiers in a small compact group outside the door, all these were unmistakable proofs that the awful cataclysm had at last occurred.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, Percy Blakeney, her husband, was in the hands of the Terrorists of France, and though face to face with her now, with an open window close to him, and an apparently helpless enemy under his hand, he could not — owing to the fiendish measures taken by Chauvelin — raise a finger to save himself and her.

Mercifully for her, nature — in the face of this appalling tragedy — deprived her of the full measure of her senses. She could move and speak and see, she could hear and in a measure understand what was said, but she was really an automaton or a sleep-walker, moving and speaking mechanically and without due comprehension.

Possibly, if she had then and there fully realized all that the future meant, she would have gone mad with the horror of it all.

"Lady Blakeney," began Chauvelin after he had quickly dismissed the soldiers from the room, "when you and I parted from one another just now, I had no idea that I should so soon have the pleasure of a personal conversation with Sir Percy.... There is no occasion yet, believe me, for sorrow or fear.... Another twenty-four hours at most, and you will be on board the 'Day-Dream' outward bound for England. Sir Percy himself might perhaps accompany you; he does not desire that you should journey to Paris, and I may safely say, that in his mind, he has already accepted certain little conditions which I have been forced to impose upon him ere I sign the order for your absolute release."

"Conditions?" she repeated vaguely and stupidly, looking in bewilderment from one to the other.

"You are tired, m'dear," said Sir Percy quietly, "will you not sit down?"

He held the chair gallantly for her. She tried to read his face, but could not catch even a flash from beneath the heavy lids which obstinately veiled his eyes.

"Oh! it is a mere matter of exchanging signatures," continued Chauvelin in response to her inquiring glance and toying with the papers which were scattered on the table. "Here you see is the order to allow Sir Percy Blakeney and his wife, nee Marguerite St. Just, to quit the town of Boulogne unmolested."

He held a paper out towards Marguerite, inviting her to look at it. She caught sight of an official-looking document, bearing the motto and seal of the Republic of France, and of her own name and Percy's written thereon in full.

"It is perfectly en regle, I assure you," continued Chauvelin, "and only awaits my signature."

He now took up another paper which looked like a long closely-written letter. Marguerite watched his every movement, for instinct told her that the supreme moment had come. There was a look of almost superhuman cruelty and malice in the little Frenchman's eyes as he fixed them on the impassive figure of Sir Percy, the while with slightly trembling hands he fingered that piece of paper and smoothed out its creases with loving care.

"I am quite prepared to sign the order for your release, Lady Blakeney," he said, keeping his gaze still keenly fixed upon Sir Percy. "When it is signed you will understand that our measures against the citizens of Boulogne will no longer hold good, and that on the contrary, the general amnesty and free pardon will come into force."

"Yes, I understand that," she replied.

"And all that will come to pass, Lady Blakeney, the moment Sir Percy will write me in his own hand a letter, in accordance with the draft which I have prepared, and sign it with his name.

"Shall I read it to you?" he asked.

"If you please."

"You will see how simple it all is.... A mere matter of form.... I pray you do not look upon it with terror, but only as the prelude to that general amnesty and free pardon, which I feel sure will satisfy the philanthropic heart of the noble Scarlet Pimpernel, since three score at least of the inhabitants of Boulogne will owe their life and freedom to him."

"I am listening, Monsieur," she said calmly.

"As I have already had the honour of explaining, this little document is in the form of a letter addressed personally to me and of course in French," he said finally, and then he looked down on the paper and began to read:

Citizen Chauvelin —

In consideration of a further sum of one million francs and on the understanding that this ridiculous charge brought against me of conspiring against the Republic of France is immediately withdrawn, and I am allowed to return to England unmolested, I am quite prepared to acquaint you with the names and whereabouts of certain persons who under the guise of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel are even now conspiring to free the woman Marie Antoinette and her son from prison and to place the latter upon the throne of France. You are quite well aware that under the pretence of being the leader of a gang of English adventurers, who never did the Republic of France and her people any real harm, I have actually been the means of unmasking many a royalist plot before you, and of bringing many persistent conspirators to the guillotine. I am surprised that you should cavil at the price I am asking this time for the very important information with which I am able to furnish you, whilst you have often paid me similar sums for work which was a great deal less difficult to do. In order to serve your government effectually, both in England and in France, I must have a sufficiency of money, to enable me to live in a costly style befitting a gentleman of my rank. Were I to alter my mode of life I could not continue to

mix in that same social milieu to which all my friends belong and wherein, as you are well aware, most of the royalist plots are hatched.

Trusting therefore to receive a favourable reply to my just demands within the next twenty-four hours, whereupon the names in question shall be furnished you forthwith,

I have the honour to remain, Citizen,

Your humble and obedient servant,

When he had finished reading, Chauvelin quietly folded the paper up again, and then only did he look at the man and the woman before him.

Marguerite sat very erect, her head thrown back, her face very pale and her hands tightly clutched in her lap. She had not stirred whilst Chauvelin read out the infamous document, with which he desired to brand a brave man with the ineradicable stigma of dishonour and of shame. After she heard the first words, she looked up swiftly and questioningly at her husband, but he stood at some little distance from her, right out of the flickering circle of yellowish light made by the burning tallow-candle. He was as rigid as a statue, standing in his usual attitude with legs apart and hands buried in his breeches pockets.

She could not see his face.

Whatever she may have felt with regard to the letter, as the meaning of it gradually penetrated into her brain, she was, of course, convinced of one thing, and that was that never for a moment would Percy dream of purchasing his life or even hers at such a price. But she would have liked some sign from him, some look by which she could be guided as to her immediate conduct: as, however, he gave neither look nor sign, she preferred to assume an attitude of silent contempt.

But even before Chauvelin had had time to look from one face to the other, a prolonged and merry laugh echoed across the squalid room.

Sir Percy, with head thrown back, was laughing whole-heartedly.

"A magnificent epistle, sir," he said gaily, "Lud love you, where did you wield the pen so gracefully?... I vow that if I signed this interesting document no one will believe I could have expressed myself with perfect ease.. and in French too..."

"Nay, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin drily, "I have thought of all that, and lest in the future there should be any doubt as to whether your own hand had or had not penned the whole of this letter, I also make it a condition that you write out every word of it yourself, and sign it here in this very room, in the presence of Lady Blakeney, of myself, of my colleagues and of at least half a dozen other persons whom I will select."

"It is indeed admirably thought out, Monsieur," rejoined Sir Percy, "and what is to become of the charming epistle, may I ask, after I have written and signed it?... Pardon my curiosity.... I take a natural interest in the matter... and truly your ingenuity passes belief..."

"Oh! the fate of this letter will be as simple as was the writing thereof.... A copy of it will be published in our 'Gazette de Paris' as a bait for enterprising English journalists.... They will not be backward in getting hold of so much interesting matter.... Can you not see the attractive headlines in 'The London Gazette,' Sir Percy? 'The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel unmasked! A gigantic hoax! The origin of the Blakeney millions!...' I believe that journalism in England has reached a high standard of excellence... and even the 'Gazette de Paris' is greatly read in certain towns of your charming country.... His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and various other influential gentlemen in London, will, on the other hand, be granted a private view of the original through the kind offices of certain devoted friends whom we possess in England.... I don't think that you need have any fear, Sir Percy, that your caligraphy will sink into oblivion. It will be our business to see that it obtains the full measure of publicity which it deserves..."

He paused a moment, then his manner suddenly changed: the sarcastic tone died out of his voice, and there came back into his face that look of hatred and cruelty which Blakeney's persiflage had always the power to evoke.

"You may rest assured of one thing, Sir Percy," he said with a harsh laugh, "that enough mud will be thrown at that erstwhile glorious Scarlet Pimpernel... some of it will be bound to stick..."

"Nay, Monsieur... er... Chaubertin," quoth Blakeney lightly, "I have no doubt that you and your colleagues are past masters in the graceful art of mud-throwing.... But pardon me... er.... I was interrupting you.... Continue, Monsieur... continue, I pray. 'Pon my honour, the matter is vastly diverting."

"Nay, sir, after the publication of this diverting epistle, meseems your honour will ceased to be a marketable commodity."

"Undoubtedly, sir," rejoined Sir Percy, apparently quite unruffled, "pardon a slip of the tongue... we are so much the creatures of habit.... As you were saying..."

"I have but little more to say, sir.... But lest there should even now be lurking in your mind a vague hope that, having written this letter, you could easily in the future deny its authorship, let me tell you this: my measures are well taken, there will be witnesses to your writing of it.... You will sit here in this room, unfettered, uncoerced in any way, and the money spoken of in the letter will be handed over to you by my colleague, after a few suitable words spoken by him, and you will take the money from him, Sir Percy... and the witnesses will see you take it after having seen you write the letter... they will understand that you are being PAID by the French government for giving information anent royalist plots in this country and in England... they will understand that your identity as the leader of that so-called band is not only known to me and to my colleague, but that it also covers your real character and profession as the paid spy of France."

"Marvellous, I call it... demmed marvellous," quoth Sir Percy blandly.

Chauvelin had paused, half-choked by his own emotion, his hatred and prospective revenge. He passed his handkerchief over his forehead, which was streaming with perspiration.

"Warm work, this sort of thing... eh... Monsieur... er... Chaubertin?..." queried his imperturbable enemy.

Marguerite said nothing; the whole thing was too horrible for words, but she kept her large eyes fixed upon her husband's face... waiting for that look, that sign from him which would have eased the agonizing anxiety in her heart, and which never came.

With a great effort now, Chauvelin pulled himself together and, though his voice still trembled, he managed to speak with a certain amount of calm:

"Probably, Sir Percy, you know," he said, "that throughout the whole of France we are inaugurating a series of national fetes, in honour of the new religion which the people are about to adopt.... Demoiselle Desiree Candaille, whom you know, will at these festivals impersonate the Goddess of Reason, the only deity whom we admit now in France.... She has been specially chosen for this honour, owing to the services which she has rendered us recently... and as Boulogne happens to be the lucky city in which we have succeeded in bringing the Scarlet Pimpernel to justice, the national fete will begin within these city walls, with Demoiselle Candaille as the thrice-honoured goddess."

"And you will be very merry here in Boulogne, I dare swear..."

"Aye, merry, sir," said Chauvelin with an involuntary and savage snarl, as he placed a long claw-like finger upon the momentous paper before him, "merry, for we here in Boulogne will see that which will fill the heart of every patriot in France with gladness.... Nay! 'twas not the death of the Scarlet Pimpernel we wanted... not the noble martyrdom of England's chosen hero... but his humiliation and defeat... derision and scorn... contumely and contempt. You asked me airily just now, Sir Percy, how I proposed to accomplish this object... Well! you know it now — by forcing you... aye, forcing — to write and sign a letter and to take money from my hands which will brand you forever as a liar and informer, and cover you with the thick and slimy mud of irreclaimable infamy..."

"Lud! sir," said Sir Percy pleasantly, "what a wonderful command you have of our language.... I wish I could speak French half as well..."

Marguerite had risen like an automaton from her chair. She felt that she could no longer sit still, she wanted to scream out at the top of her voice, all the horror she felt for this dastardly plot, which surely must have had its origin in the brain of devils. She could not understand Percy. This was one of those awful moments, which she had been destined to experience once or twice before, when the whole personality of her husband seemed to become shadowy before her, to slip, as it were, past her comprehension, leaving her indescribably lonely and wretched, trusting yet terrified.

She thought that long ere this he would have flung back every insult in his opponent's teeth; she did not know what inducements Chauvelin had held out in exchange for the infamous letter, what threats he had used. That her own life and freedom were at stake, was, of course, evident, but she cared nothing for life, and he should know that certainly she would care still less if such a price had to be paid for it.

She longed to tell him all that was in her heart, longed to tell him how little she valued her life, how highly she prized his honour! but how could she, before this fiend who snarled and sneered in his anticipated triumph, and surely, surely Percy knew!

And knowing all that, why did he not speak? Why did he not tear that infamous paper from out that devil's hands and fling it in his face? Yet, though her loving ear caught every intonation of her husband's voice, she could not detect the slightest harshness in his airy laugh; his tone was perfectly natural and he seemed to be, indeed, just as he appeared — vastly amused.

Then she thought that perhaps he would wish her to go now, that he felt desire to be alone with this man, who had outraged him in everything that he held most holy and most dear, his honour and his wife... that perhaps, knowing that his own temper was no longer under control, he did not wish her to witness the rough and ready chastisement which he was intending to mete out to this dastardly intriguer.

Yes! that was it no doubt! Herein she could not be mistaken; she knew his fastidious notions of what was due and proper in the presence of a woman, and that even at a moment like this, he would wish the manners of London drawing-rooms to govern his every action.

Therefore she rose to go, and as she did so, once more tried to read the expression in his face... to guess what was passing in his mind.

"Nay, Madam," he said, whilst he bowed gracefully before her, "I fear me this lengthy conversation hath somewhat fatigued you.... This merry jest 'twixt my engaging friend and myself should not have been prolonged so far into the night.... Monsieur, I pray you, will you not give orders that her ladyship be escorted back to her room?"

He was still standing outside the circle of light, and Marguerite instinctively went up to him. For this one second she was oblivious of Chauvelin's presence, she forgot her well-schooled pride, her firm determination to be silent and to be brave: she could no longer restrain the wild beatings of her heart, the agony of her soul, and with sudden impulse she murmured in a voice broken with intense love and subdued, passionate appeal:

"Percy!"

He drew back a step further into the gloom: this made her realize the mistake she had made in allowing her husband's most bitter enemy to get this brief glimpse into her soul. Chauvelin's thin lips curled with satisfaction, the brief glimpse had been sufficient for him, the rapidly whispered name, the broken accent had told him what he felt desire to know hitherto: namely, that between this man and woman there was a bond far more powerful than that which usually existed between husband and wife, and merely made up of chivalry on the one side and trustful reliance on the other.

Marguerite having realized her mistake, ashamed of having betrayed her feelings even for a moment, threw back her proud head and gave her exultant foe a look of defiance and of scorn. He responded with one of pity, not altogether unmixed with deference. There was something almost unearthly and sublime in this beautiful woman's agonizing despair.

He lowered his head and made her a deep obeisance, lest she should see the satisfaction and triumph which shone through his pity.

As usual Sir Percy remained quite imperturbable, and now it was he, who, with characteristic impudence, touched the hand-bell on the table:

"Excuse this intrusion, Monsieur," he said lightly, "her ladyship is overfatigued and would be best in her room."

Marguerite threw him a grateful look. After all she was only a woman and was afraid of breaking down. In her mind there was no issue to the present deadlock save in death. For this she was prepared and had but one great hope that she could lie in her husband's arms just once again before she died. Now, since she could not speak to him, scarcely dared to look into the loved face, she was quite ready to go.

In answer to the bell, the soldier had entered.

"If Lady Blakeney desires to go..." said Chauvelin.

She nodded and Chauvelin gave the necessary orders: two soldiers stood at attention ready to escort Marguerite back to her prison cell. As she went towards the door she came to within a couple of steps from where her husband was standing, bowing to her as she passed. She stretched out an icy cold hand towards him, and he, in the most approved London fashion, with the courtly grace of a perfect English gentleman, took the little hand in his and stooping very low kissed the delicate finger-tips.

Then only did she notice that the strong, nervy hand which held hers trembled perceptibly, and that his lips — which for an instant rested on her fingers — were burning hot.

Chapter XXVII: The Decision

Once more the two men were alone.

As far as Chauvelin was concerned he felt that everything was not yet settled, and until a moment ago he had been in doubt as to whether Sir Percy would accept the infamous conditions which had been put before him, or allow his pride and temper to get the better of him and throw the deadly insults back into his adversary's teeth.

But now a new secret had been revealed to the astute diplomatist. A name, softly murmured by a broken-hearted woman, had told him a tale of love and passion, which he had not even suspected before.

Since he had made this discovery he knew that the ultimate issue was no longer in doubt. Sir Percy Blakeney, the bold adventurer, ever ready for a gamble where lives were at stake, might have demurred before he subscribed to his own dishonour, in order to save his wife from humiliation and the shame of the terrible fate that had been mapped out for her. But the same man passionately in love with such a woman as Marguerite Blakeney would count the world well lost for her sake.

One sudden fear alone had shot through Chauvelin's heart when he stood face to face with the two people whom he had so deeply and cruelly wronged, and that was that Blakeney, throwing aside all thought of the scores of innocent lives that were at stake, might forget everything, risk everything, dare everything, in order to get his wife away there and then.

For the space of a few seconds Chauvelin had felt that his own life was in jeopardy, and that the Scarlet Pimpernel would indeed make a desperate effort to save himself and his wife. But the fear was short-lived: Marguerite — as he had well foreseen — would never save herself at the expense of others, and she was tied! tied! tied! That was his triumph and his joy!

When Marguerite finally left the room, Sir Percy made no motion to follow her, but turned once more quietly to his antagonist.

"As you were saying, Monsieur?..." he queried lightly.

"Oh! there is nothing more to say, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin; "my conditions are clear to you, are they not? Lady Blakeney's and your own immediate release in exchange for a letter written to me by your own hand, and signed here by you — in this room — in my presence and that of sundry other persons whom I need not name just now. Also certain money passing from my hand to yours. Failing the letter, a long, hideously humiliating sojourn in the Temple prison for your wife, a prolonged trial and the guillotine as a happy release!... I would add, the same thing for yourself, only that I will do you the justice to admit that you probably do not care."

"Nay! a grave mistake, Monsieur.... I do care... vastly care, I assure you ... and would seriously object to ending my life on your demmed guillotine... a nasty, uncomfortable thing, I should say... and I am told that an inexperienced barber is deputed to cut one's hair.... Brrr!... Now, on the other hand, I like the idea of a national fete... that pretty wench Candeille, dressed as a goddess... the boom of the cannon when your amnesty comes into force.... You WILL boom the cannon, will you not, Monsieur?... Cannon are demmed noisy, but they are effective sometimes, do you not think so, Monsieur?"

"Very effective certainly, Sir Percy," sneered Chauvelin, "and we will certainly boom the cannon from this very fort, an it so please you...."

"At what hour, Monsieur, is my letter to be ready?"

"Why! at any hour you please, Sir Percy."

"The 'Day-Dream' could weigh anchor at eight o'clock... would an hour before that be convenient to yourself?"

"Certainly, Sir Percy... if you will honour me by accepting my hospitality in these uncomfortable quarters until seven o'clock to-morrow eve?..."

"I thank you, Monsieur..."

"Then am I to understand, Sir Percy, that..."

A loud and ringing laugh broke from Blakeney's lips.

"That I accept your bargain, man!... Zounds! I tell you I accept... I'll write the letter, I'll sign it... an you have our free passes ready for us in exchange.... At seven o'clock to-morrow eve, did you say?... Man! do not look so astonished.... The letter, the signature, the money... all your witnesses... have everything ready.... I accept, I say.... And now, in the name of all the evil spirits in hell, let me have some supper and a bed, for I vow that I am demmed fatigued."

And without more ado Sir Percy once more rang the handbell, laughing boisterously the while: then suddenly, with quick transition of mood, his laugh was lost in a gigantic yawn, and throwing his long body onto a chair, he stretched out his legs, buried his hands in his pockets, and the next moment was peacefully asleep.

Chapter XXVIII: The Midnight Watch

Boulogne had gone through many phases, in its own languid and sleepy way, whilst the great upheaval of a gigantic revolution shook other cities of France to their very foundations.

At first the little town had held somnolently aloof, and whilst Lyons and Tours conspired and rebelled, whilst Marseilles and Toulon opened their ports to the English and Dunkirk was ready to surrender to the allied forces, she had gazed through half-closed eyes at all the turmoil, and then quietly turned over and gone to sleep again.

Boulogne fished and mended nets, built boats and manufactured boots with placid content, whilst France murdered her king and butchered her citizens.

The initial noise of the great revolution was only wafted on the southerly breezes from Paris to the little seaport towns of Northern France, and lost much of its volume and power in this aerial transit: the fisher folk were too poor to worry about the dethronement of kings: the struggle for daily existence, the perils and hardships of deep-sea fishing engrossed all the faculties they possessed.

As for the burghers and merchants of the town, they were at first content with reading an occasional article in the "Gazette de Paris" or the "Gazette des Tribunaux," brought hither by one or other of the many travellers who crossed the city on their way to the harbour. They were interested in these articles, at times even comfortably horrified at the doings in Paris, the executions and the tumbrils, but on the whole they liked the idea that the country was in future to be governed by duly chosen representatives of the people, rather than be a prey to the despotism of kings, and they were really quite pleased to see the tricolour flag hoisted on the old Beffroi, there where the snow-white standard of the Bourbons had erstwhile flaunted its golden fleur-de-lis in the glare of the midday sun.

The worthy burgesses of Boulogne were ready to shout: "Vive la Republique!" with the same cheerful and raucous Normandy accent as they had lately shouted "Dieu protege le Roi!"

The first awakening from this happy torpor came when that tent was put up on the landing stage in the harbour. Officials, dressed in shabby uniforms and wearing tricolour cockades and scarves, were now quartered in Town Hall, and repaired daily to that roughly erected tent, accompanied by so many soldiers from the garrison.

There installed, they busied themselves with examining carefully the passports of all those who desired to leave or enter Boulogne. Fisher-folk who had dwelt in the city — father and son and grandfather and many generations before that — and had come and gone in and out of their own boats as they pleased, were now stopped as they beached their craft and made to give an account of themselves to these officials from Paris.

It was, of a truth, more than ridiculous, that these strangers should ask of Jean-Marie who he was, or of Pierre what was his business, or of Desire Francois whither he was going, when Jean-Marie and Pierre and Desire Francois had plied their nets in the roads outside Boulogne harbour for more years than they would care to count.

It also caused no small measure of annoyance that fishermen were ordered to wear tricolour cockades on their caps. They had no special ill-feeling against tricolour cockades, but they did not care about them. Jean-Marie flatly refused to have one pinned on, and being admonished somewhat severely by one of the Paris officials, he became obstinate about the whole thing and threw the cockade violently on the ground and spat upon it, not from any sentiment of anti-republicanism, but just from a feeling of Norman doggedness.

He was arrested, shut up in Fort Gayole, tried as a traitor and publicly guillotined.

The consternation in Boulogne was appalling.

The one little spark had found its way to a barrel of blasting powder and caused a terrible explosion. Within twenty-four hours of Jean-Marie's execution the whole town was in the throes of the Revolution. What the death of King Louis, the arrest of Marie Antoinette, the massacres of September had failed to do, that the arrest and execution of an elderly fisherman accomplished in a trice.

People began to take sides in politics. Some families realized that they came from ancient lineage, and that their ancestors had helped to build up the throne of the Bourbons. Others looked up ancient archives and remembered past oppressions at the hands of the aristocrats.

Thus some burghers of Boulogne became ardent reactionaries, whilst others secretly nursed enthusiastic royalist convictions: some were ready to throw in their lot with the anarchists, to deny the religion of their fathers, to scorn the priests and close the places of worship; others adhered strictly still to the usages and practices of the Church.

Arrest became frequent: the guillotine, erected in the Place de la Senechaussee, had plenty of work to do. Soon the cathedral was closed, the priests thrown into prison, whilst scores of families hoped to escape a similar fate by summary flight.

Vague rumours of a band of English adventurers soon reached the little sea-port town. The Scarlet Pimpernel — English spy or hero, as he was alternately called — had helped many a family with pronounced royalist tendencies to escape the fury of the blood-thirsty Terrorists.

Thus gradually the anti-revolutionaries had been weeded out of the city: some by death and imprisonment, others by flight. Boulogne became the hotbed of anarchism: the idlers and loafers, inseparable from any town where there is a garrison and a harbour, practically ruled the city now. Denunciations were the order of the day. Everyone who owned any money, or lived with any comfort was accused of being a traitor and suspected of conspiracy. The fisher folk wandered about the city, surly and discontented: their trade was at a standstill, but there was a trifle to be earned by giving information: information which meant the arrest, oftentimes the death of men, women and even children who had tried to seek safety in flight, and to denounce whom — as they were trying to hire a boat anywhere along the coast — meant a good square meal for a starving family.

Then came the awful cataclysm.

A woman — a stranger — had been arrested and imprisoned in the Fort Gayole and the town-crier publicly proclaimed that if she escaped from jail, one member of every family in the town — rich or poor, republican or royalist, Catholic or free-thinker — would be summarily guillotined.

That member, the bread-winner!

"Why, then, with the Duvals it would be young Francois-Auguste. He keeps his old mother with his boot-making..."

"And it would be Marie Lebon, she has her blind father dependent on her net-mending."

"And old Mother Laferriere, whose grandchildren were left penniless... she keeps them from starvation by her wash-tub."

"But Francois-Auguste is a real Republican; he belongs to the Jacobin Club."

"And look at Pierre, who never meets a calotin but he must needs spit on him."

"Is there no safety anywhere?... are we to be butchered like so many cattle?..."

Somebody makes the suggestion:

"It is a threat... they would not dare!..."

"Would not dare?..."

'Tis old Andre Lemoine who has spoken, and he spits vigorously on the ground. Andre Lemoine has been a soldier; he was in La Vendee. He was wounded at Tours... and he knows!

"Would not dare?..." he says in a whisper. "I tell you, friends, that there's nothing the present government would not dare. There was the Plaine Saint Mauve... Did you ever hear about that?... little children fusilladed by the score... little ones, I say, and women with babies at their breasts ... weren't they innocent?... Five hundred innocent people butchered in La Vendee... until the Headsman sank — worn not... I could tell worse than that... for I know.... There's nothing they would not dare!..."

Consternation was so great that the matter could not even be discussed.

"We'll go to Gayole and see this woman at any rate."

Angry, sullen crowds assembled in the streets. The proclamation had been read just as the men were leaving the public houses, preparing to go home for the night.

They brought the news to the women, who, at home, were setting the soup and bread on the table for their husbands' supper. There was no thought of going to bed or of sleeping that night. The bread-winner in every family and all those dependent on him for daily sustenance were trembling for their lives.

Resistance to the barbarous order would have been worse than useless, nor did the thought of it enter the heads of these humble and ignorant fisher folk, wearied out with the miserable struggle for existence. There was not sufficient spirit left in this half-starved population of a small provincial city to suggest open rebellion. A regiment of soldiers come up from the South were quartered in the Chateau, and the natives of Boulogne could not have mustered more than a score of disused blunderbusses between them.

Then they remembered tales which Andre Lemoine had told, the fate of Lyons, razed to the ground, of Toulon burnt to ashes, and they did not dare rebel.

But brothers, fathers, sons trooped out towards Gayole, in order to have a good look at the frowning pile, which held the hostage for their safety. It looked dark and gloomy enough, save for one window which gave on the southern ramparts. This window was wide open and a feeble light flickered from the room beyond, and as the men stood about, gazing at the walls in sullen silence, they suddenly caught the sound of a loud laugh proceeding from within, and of a pleasant voice speaking quite gaily in a language which they did not understand, but which sounded like English.

Against the heavy oaken gateway, leading to the courtyard of the prison, the proclamation written on stout parchment had been pinned up. Beside it hung a tiny lantern, the dim light of which flickered in the evening breeze, and brought at times into sudden relief the bold writing and heavy signature, which stood out, stern and grim, against the yellowish background of the paper, like black signs of approaching death.

Facing the gateway and the proclamation, the crowd of men took its stand. The moon, from behind them, cast fitful, silvery glances at the weary heads bent in anxiety and watchful expectancy: on old heads and young heads, dark, curly heads and heads grizzled with age, on backs bent with toil, and hands rough and gnarled like seasoned timber.

All night the men stood and watched.

Sentinels from the town guard were stationed at the gates, but these might prove inattentive or insufficient, they had not the same price at stake, so the entire able-bodied population of Boulogne watched the gloomy prison that night, lest anyone escaped by wall or window.

They were guarding the precious hostage whose safety was the stipulation for their own.

There was dead silence among them, and dead silence all around, save for that monotonous tok-tok-tok of the parchment flapping in the breeze. The moon, who all along had been capricious and chary of her light, made a final retreat behind a gathering bank of clouds, and the crowd, the soldiers and the great grim walls were all equally wrapped in gloom.

Only the little lantern on the gateway now made a ruddy patch of light, and tinged that fluttering parchment with the colour of blood. Every now and then an isolated figure would detach itself from out the watching throng, and go up to the heavy, oaken door, in order to gaze at the proclamation. Then the light of the lantern illumined a dark head or a grey one, for a moment or two: black or white locks were stirred gently in the wind, and a sigh of puzzlement and disappointment would be distinctly heard.

At times a group of three or four would stand there for awhile, not speaking, only sighing and casting eager questioning glances at one another, whilst trying vainly to find some hopeful word, some turn of phrase of meaning that would be less direful, in that grim and ferocious proclamation. Then a rough word from the sentinel, a push from the butt-end of a bayonet would disperse the little group and send the men, sullen and silent, back into the crowd.

Thus they watched for hours whilst the bell of the Beffroi tolled all the hours of that tedious night. A thin rain began to fall in the small hours of the morning, a wetting, soaking drizzle which chilled the weary watchers to the bone.

But they did not care.

"We must not sleep, for the woman might escape."

Some of them squatted down in the muddy road, the luckier ones managed to lean their backs against the slimy walls.

Twice before the hour of midnight they heard that same quaint and merry laugh proceeding from the lighted room, through the open window. Once it sounded very low and very prolonged, as if in response to a delightful joke.

Anon the heavy gateway of Gayole was opened from within, and half a dozen soldiers came walking out of the courtyard. They were dressed in the uniform of the town-guard, but had evidently been picked out of the rank and file, for all six were exceptionally tall

and stalwart, and towered above the sentinel, who saluted and presented arms as they marched out of the gate.

In the midst of them walked a slight, dark figure, clad entirely in black, save for the tricolour scarf round his waist.

The crowd of watchers gazed on the little party with suddenly awakened interest.

"Who is it?" whispered some of the men.

"The citizen-governor," suggested one.

"The new public executioner," ventured another.

"No! no!" quoth Pierre Maxime, the doyen of Boulogne fishermen, and a great authority on every matter public or private with the town; "no, no he is the man who has come down from Paris, the friend of Robespierre. He makes the laws now, the citizen-governor even must obey him. 'Tis he who made the law that if the woman up yonder should escape..."

"Hush!... sh!... sh!..." came in frightened accents from the crowd.

"Hush, Pierre Maxime!... the Citizen might hear thee," whispered the man who stood closest to the old fisherman; "the Citizen might hear thee, and think that we rebelled..."

"What are these people doing here?" queried Chauvelin as he passed out into the street.

"They are watching the prison, Citizen," replied the sentinel, whom he had thus addressed, "lest the female prisoner should attempt to escape."

With a satisfied smile, Chauvelin turned toward the Town Hall, closely surrounded by his escort. The crowd watched him and the soldiers as they quickly disappeared in the gloom, then they resumed the stolid, wearisome vigil of the night.

The old Beffroi now tolled the midnight hour, the one solitary light in the old Fort was extinguished, and after that the frowning pile remained dark and still.

Chapter XXIX: The National Fete

"Citizens of Boulogne, awake!"

They had not slept, only some of them had fallen into drowsy somnolence, heavy and nerve-racking, worse indeed than any wakefulness.

Within the houses, the women too had kept the tedious vigil, listening for every sound, dreading every bit of news, which the wind might waft in through the small, open windows.

If one prisoner escaped, every family in Boulogne would be deprived of the bread-winner. Therefore the women wept, and tried to remember those Paters and Aves which the tyranny of liberty, fraternity and equality had ordered them to forget.

Broken rosaries were fetched out from neglected corners, and knees stiff with endless, thankless toil were bent once more in prayer.

"Oh God! Good God! Do not allow that woman to flee!"

"Holy Virgin! Mother of God! Make that she should not escape!"

Some of the women went out in the early dawn to take hot soup and coffee to their men who were watching outside the prison.

"Has anything been seen?"

"Have ye seen the woman?"

"Which room is she in?"

"Why won't they let us see her?"

"Are you sure she hath not already escaped?"

Questions and surmises went round in muffled whispers as the steaming cans were passed round. No one had a definite answer to give, although Desire Melun declared that he had, once during the night, caught sight of a woman's face at one of the windows above: but as he could not describe the woman's face, nor locate with any degree of precision the particular window at which she was supposed to have appeared, it was unanimously decided that Desire must have been dreaming.

"Citizens of Boulogne, awake!"

The cry came first from the Town Hall, and therefore from behind the crowd of men and women, whose faces had been so resolutely set for all these past hours towards the Gayole prison.

They were all awake! but too tired and cramped to move as yet, and to turn in the direction whence arose that cry.

"Citizens of Boulogne, awake!"

It was just the voice of Auguste Moleux, the town-crier of Boulogne, who, bell in hand, was trudging his way along the Rue Daumont, closely followed by two fellows of the municipal guard.

Auguste was in the very midst of the sullen crowd, before the men even troubled about his presence here, but now with many a vigorous "Allons donc!" and "Voyez-moi ca, fais donc place, voyons!" he elbowed his way through the throng.

He was neither tired nor cramped; he served the Republic in comfort and ease, and had slept soundly on his paillasse in the little garret allotted to him in the Town Hall.

The crowd parted in silence, to allow him to pass. Auguste was lean and powerful, the scanty and meagre food, doled out to him by a paternal government, had increased his muscular strength whilst reducing his fat. He had very hard elbows, and soon he managed, by dint of pushing and cursing to reach the gateway of Gayole.

"Voyons! enlevez-moi ca," he commanded in stentorian tones, pointing to the proclamation.

The fellows of the municipal guard fell to and tore the parchment away from the door whilst the crowd looked on with stupid amazement.

What did it all mean?

Then Auguste Moleux turned and faced the men.

"Mes enfants," he said, "my little cabbages! wake up! the government of the Republic has decreed that to-day is to be a day of gaiety and public rejoicings!"

"Gaiety?... Public rejoicings forsooth, when the bread-winner of every family..."

"Hush! Hush! Be silent, all of you," quoth Auguste impatiently, "you do not understand!... All that is at an end... There is no fear that the woman shall escape.... You are all to dance and rejoice.... The Scarlet Pimpernel has been captured in Boulogne, last night..."

"Qui ca the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Mais! 'tis that mysterious English adventurer who rescued people from the guillotine!"

"A hero? quoi?"

"No! no! only an English spy, a friend of aristocrats... he would have cared nothing for the bread-winners of Boulogne..."

"He would not have raised a finger to save them."

"Who knows?" sighed a feminine voice, "perhaps he came to Boulogne to help them."

"And he has been caught anyway," concluded Auguste Moleux sententiously, "and, my little cabbages, remember this, that so great is the pleasure of the all-powerful Committee of Public Safety at this capture, that because he has been caught in Boulogne, therefore Boulogne is to be specially rewarded!"

"Holy Virgin, who'd have thought it?"

"Sh... Jeanette, dost not know that there's no Holy Virgin now?"

"And dost know, Auguste, how we are to be rewarded?"

It is a difficult matter for the human mind to turn very quickly from despair to hope, and the fishermen of Boulogne had not yet grasped the fact that they were to make merry and that thoughts of anxiety must be abandoned for those of gaiety.

Auguste Moleux took out a parchment from the capacious pocket of his coat; he put on his most solemn air of officialdom, and pointing with extended forefinger to the parchment, he said:

"A general amnesty to all natives of Boulogne who are under arrest at the present moment: a free pardon to all natives of Boulogne who are under sentence of death: permission to all natives of Boulogne to quit the town with their families, to embark on any vessel they please, in or out of the harbour, and to go whithersoever they choose, without passports, formalities or questions of any kind."

Dead silence followed this announcement. Hope was just beginning to crowd anxiety and sullenness out of the way.

"Then poor Andre Legrand will be pardoned," whispered a voice suddenly; "he was to have been guillotined to-day."

"And Denise Latour! she was innocent enough, the gentle pigeon."

"And they'll let poor Abbe Foucquet out of prison too."

"And Francois!"

"And poor Felicite, who is blind!"

"M. l'Abbe would be wise to leave Boulogne with the children."

"He will too: thou canst be sure of that!"

"It is not good to be a priest just now!"

"Bah! calotins are best dead than alive."

But some in the crowd were silent, others whispered eagerly.

"Thinkest thou it would be safer for us to get out of the country whilst we can?" said one of the men in a muffled tone, and clutching nervously at a woman's wrist.

"Aye! aye! it might leak out about that boat we procured for..."

"Sh!... I was thinking of that..."

"We can go to my aunt Lebrun in Belgium..."

Others talked in whispers of England or the New Land across the seas: they were those who had something to hide, money received from refugee aristocrats, boats sold to would-be emigres, information withheld, denunciations shirked: the amnesty would not last long, 'twas best to be safely out of the way.

"In the meanwhile, my cabbages," quoth Auguste sententiously, "are you not grateful to Citizen Robespierre, who has sent this order specially down from Paris?"

"Aye! aye!" assented the crowd cheerfully.

"Hurrah for Citizen Robespierre!"

"Viva la Republique!"

"And you will enjoy yourselves to-day?"

"That we will!"

"Processions?"

"Aye! with music and dancing."

Out there, far away, beyond the harbour, the grey light of dawn was yielding to the crimson glow of morning. The rain had ceased and heavy slaty clouds parted here and there, displaying glints of delicate turquoise sky, and tiny ethereal vapours in the dim and remote distance of infinity, flecked with touches of rose and gold.

The towers and pinnacles of old Boulogne detached themselves one by one from the misty gloom of night. The old bell of the Beffroi tolled the hour of six. Soon the massive cupola of Notre Dame was clothed in purple hues, and the gilt cross on St. Joseph threw back across the square a blinding ray of gold.

The town sparrows began to twitter, and from far out at sea in the direction of Dunkirk there came the muffled boom of cannon.

"And remember, my pigeons," admonished Auguste Moleux solemnly, "that in this order which Robespierre has sent from Paris, it also says that from to-day onwards le bon Dieu has ceased to be!"

Many faces were turned towards the East just then, for the rising sun, tearing with one gigantic sweep the banks of cloud asunder, now displayed his magnificence in a gorgeous immensity of flaming crimson. The sea, in response, turned to liquid fire beneath the glow, whilst the whole sky was irradiated with the first blush of morning.

Le bon Dieu has ceased to be!

"There is only one religion in France now," explained Auguste Moleux, "the religion of Reason! We are all citizens! We are all free and all able to think for ourselves. Citizen Robespierre has decreed that there is no good God. Le bon Dieu was a tyrant and an aristocrat, and, like all tyrants and aristocrats, He has been deposed. There is no good God, there is no Holy Virgin and no Saints, only Reason, who is a goddess and whom we all honour."

And the townsfolk of Boulogne, with eyes still fixed on the gorgeous East, shouted with sullen obedience:

"Hurrah! for the Goddess of Reason!"

"Hurrah for Robespierre!"

Only the women, trying to escape the town-crier's prying eyes, or the soldiers' stern gaze, hastily crossed themselves behind their husbands' backs, terrified lest le bon Dieu had, after all, not altogether ceased to exist at the bidding of Citizen Robespierre.

Thus the worthy natives of Boulogne, forgetting their anxieties and fears, were ready enough to enjoy the national fete ordained for them by the Committee of Public Safety, in honour of the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. They were even willing to accept this new religion which Robespierre had invented: a religion which was only a mockery, with an actress to represent its supreme deity.

Mais, que voulez-vous? Boulogne had long ago ceased to have faith in God: the terrors of the Revolution, which culminated in that agonizing watch of last night, had smothered all thoughts of worship and of prayer.

The Scarlet Pimpernel must indeed be a dangerous spy that his arrest should cause so much joy in Paris!

Even Boulogne had learned by experience that the Committee of Public Safety did not readily give up a prey, once its vulture-like claws had closed upon it. The proportion of condemnations as against acquittals was as a hundred to one.

But because this one man was taken, scores to-day were to be set free!

In the evening at a given hour — seven o'clock had Auguste Moleux, the town-crier, understood — the boom of the cannon would be heard, the gates of the town would be opened, the harbour would become a free port.

The inhabitants of Boulogne were ready to shout:

“Vive the Scarlet Pimpernel!”

Whatever he was — hero or spy — he was undoubtedly the primary cause of all their joy.

By the time Auguste Moleux had cried out the news throughout the town, and pinned the new proclamation of mercy up on every public building, all traces of fatigue and anxiety had vanished. In spite of the fact that wearisome vigils had been kept in every home that night, and that hundreds of men and women had stood about for hours in the vicinity of the Gayole Fort, no sooner was the joyful news known, than all lassitude was forgotten and everyone set to with a right merry will to make the great fete-day a complete success.

There is in every native of Normandy, be he peasant or gentleman, an infinite capacity for enjoyment, and at the same time a marvellous faculty for co-ordinating and systematizing his pleasures.

In a trice the surly crowds had vanished. Instead of these, there were groups of gaily-visaged men pleasantly chattering outside every eating and drinking place in the town. The national holiday had come upon these people quite unawares, so the early part of it had to be spent in thinking out a satisfactory programme for it. Sipping their beer or coffee, or munching their cherries a l’eau-de-vie, the townsfolk of Boulogne, so lately threatened with death, were quietly organizing processions.

There was to be a grand muster on the Place de la Senchaussee, then a torchlight and lantern-light march, right round the Ramparts, culminating in a gigantic assembly outside the Town Hall, where the Citizen Chauvelin, representing the Committee of Public Safety, would receive an address of welcome from the entire population of Boulogne.

The procession was to be in costume! There were to be Pierrots and Pierettes, Harlequins and English clowns, aristocrats and goddesses! All day the women and girls were busy contriving travesties of all sorts, and the little tumbledown shops in the Rue de Chateau and the Rue Frederic Sauvage — kept chiefly by Jews and English traders — were ransacked for old bits of finery, and for remnants of costumes, worn in the days when Boulogne was still a gay city and Carnivals were held every year.

And then, of course, there would be the Goddess of Reason, in her triumphal car! the apotheosis of the new religion, which was to make everybody happy, rich and free.

Forgotten were the anxieties of the night, the fears of death, the great and glorious Revolution, which for this one day would cease her perpetual demand for the toll of blood.

Nothing was remembered save the pleasures and joys of the moment, and at times the name of that Englishman — spy, hero or adventurer — the cause of all this bounty: the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chapter XXX: The Procession

The grandfathers of the present generation of Boulonnese remembered the great day of the National Fete, when all Boulogne, for twenty-four hours, went crazy with joy. So many families had fathers, brothers, sons, languishing in prison under some charge of treason, real or imaginary; so many had dear ones for whom already the guillotine loomed ahead, that the feast on this memorable day of September, 1793, was one of never-to-be-forgotten relief and thanksgiving.

The weather all day had been exceptionally fine. After that glorious sunrise, the sky had remained all day clad in its gorgeous mantle of blue and the sun had continued to smile benignly on the many varied doings of this gay, little seaport town. When it began to sink slowly towards the West a few little fluffy clouds appeared on the horizon, and from a distance, although the sky remained clear and blue, the sea looked quite dark and slaty against the brilliance of the firmament.

Gradually, as the splendour of the sunset gave place to the delicate purple and grey tints of evening, the little fluffy clouds merged themselves into denser masses, and these too soon became absorbed in the great, billowy banks which the southwesterly wind was blowing seawards.

By the time that the last grey streak of dusk vanished in the West, the whole sky looked heavy with clouds, and the evening set in, threatening and dark.

But this by no means mitigated the anticipation of pleasure to come. On the contrary, the fast-gathering gloom was hailed with delight, since it would surely help to show off the coloured lights of the lanterns, and give additional value to the glow of the torches.

Of a truth 'twas a motley throng which began to assemble on the Place de la Senechaussee, just as the old bell of the Beffroi tolled the hour of six. Men, women and children in ragged finery, Pierrots with neck frills and floured faces, hideous masks of impossible beasts roughly besmeared in crude colours. There were gaily-coloured dominoes, blue, green, pink and purple, harlequins combining all the colours of the rainbow in one tight-fitting garment, and Columbines with short, tarlatan skirts, beneath which peeped bare feet and ankles. There were judges' perruques, and soldiers' helmets of past generations, tall Normandy caps adorned with hundreds of streaming ribbons, and powdered headgear which recalled the glories of Versailles.

Everything was torn and dirty, the dominoes were in rags, the Pierrot frills, mostly made up of paper, already hung in strips over the wearers' shoulders. But what mattered that?

The crowd pushed and jolted, shouted and laughed, the girls screamed as the men snatched a kiss here and there from willing or unwilling lips, or stole an arm round a gaily accoutred waist. The spirit of Old King Carnival was in the evening air — a spirit just awakened from a long Rip van Winkle-like sleep.

In the centre of the Place stood the guillotine, grim and gaunt with long, thin arms stretched out towards the sky, the last glimmer of waning light striking the triangular knife, there, where it was not rusty with stains of blood.

For weeks now Madame Guillotine had been much occupied plying her gruesome trade; she now stood there in the gloom, passive and immovable, seeming to wait placidly for the end of this holiday, ready to begin her work again on the morrow. She towered above these merry-makers, hoisted up on the platform whereon many an innocent foot had trodden, the tattered basket beside her, into which many an innocent head had rolled.

What cared they to-night for Madame Guillotine and the horrors of which she told? A crowd of Pierrots with floured faces and tattered neck-frills had just swarmed up the wooden steps, shouting and laughing, chasing each other round and round on the platform, until one of them lost his footing and fell into the basket, covering himself with bran and staining his clothes with blood.

"Ah! vogue la galere! We must be merry to-night!"

And all these people who for weeks past had been staring death and the guillotine in the face, had denounced each other with savage callousness in order to save themselves, or hidden for days in dark cellars to escape apprehension, now laughed, and danced and shrieked with gladness in a sudden, hysterical outburst of joy.

Close beside the guillotine stood the triumphal car of the Goddess of Reason, the special feature of this great national fete. It was only a rough market cart, painted by an unpractised hand with bright, crimson paint and adorned with huge clusters of autumn-tinted leaves, and the scarlet berries of mountain ash and rowan, culled from the town gardens, or the country side outside the city walls.

In the cart the goddess reclined on a crimson-draped seat, she, herself, swathed in white, and wearing a gorgeous necklace around her neck. Desiree Candaille, a little pale, a little apprehensive of all this noise, had obeyed the final dictates of her taskmaster. She had been the means of bringing the Scarlet Pimpernel to France and vengeance, she was to be honoured therefore above every other woman in France.

She sat in the car, vaguely thinking over the events of the past few days, whilst watching the throng of rowdy merry-makers seething around her. She thought of the noble-hearted, proud woman whom she had helped to bring from her beautiful English home to sorrow and humiliation in a dank French prison, she thought of the gallant English gentleman with his pleasant voice and courtly, debonnaire manners.

Chauvelin had roughly told her, only this morning, that both were now under arrest as English spies, and that their fate no longer concerned her. Later on the governor of the city had come to tell her that Citizen Chauvelin desired her to take part in the procession and the national fete, as the Goddess of Reason, and that the people of Boulogne were ready to welcome her as such. This had pleased Candaille's vanity, and all day, whilst arranging the finery which she meant to wear for the occasion, she had ceased to think of England and of Lady Blakeney.

But now, when she arrived on the Place de la Senechaussee, and mounting her car, found herself on a level with the platform of the guillotine, her memory flew back to England, to the lavish hospitality of Blakeney Manor, Marguerite's gentle voice, the pleasing grace of Sir Percy's manners, and she shuddered a little when that cruel glint of evening light caused the knife of the guillotine to glisten from out the gloom.

But anon her reflections were suddenly interrupted by loud and prolonged shouts of joy. A whole throng of Pierrots had swarmed into the Place from every side, carrying lighted torches and tall staves, on which were hung lanterns with many-coloured lights.

The procession was ready to start. A stentorian voice shouted out in resonant accents:

“En avant, la grosse caisse!”

A man now, portly and gorgeous in scarlet and blue, detached himself from out the crowd. His head was hidden beneath the monstrous mask of a cardboard lion, roughly painted in brown and yellow, with crimson for the widely open jaws and the corners of the eyes, to make them seem ferocious and bloodshot. His coat was of bright crimson cloth, with cuts and slashings in it, through which bunches of bright blue paper were made to protrude, in imitation of the costume of mediaeval times.

He had blue stockings on and bright scarlet slippers, and behind him floated a large strip of scarlet flannel, on which moons and stars of gold had been showered in plenty.

Upon his portly figure in front he was supporting the big drum, which was securely strapped round his shoulders with tarred cordages, the spoil of some fishing vessel.

There was a merciful slit in the jaw of the cardboard lion, through which the portly drummer puffed and spluttered as he shouted lustily:

“En avant!”

And wielding the heavy drumstick with a powerful arm, he brought it crashing down against the side of the mighty instrument.

“Hurrah! Hurrah! en avant les trompettes!”

A fanfare of brass instruments followed, lustily blown by twelve young men in motley coats of green, and tall, peaked hats adorned with feathers.

The drummer had begun to march, closely followed by the trumpeters. Behind them a bevy of Columbines in many-coloured tarlatan skirts and hair flying wildly in the breeze, giggling, pushing, exchanging ribald jokes with the men behind, and getting kissed or slapped for their pains.

Then the triumphal car of the goddess, with Demoiselle Candeille standing straight up in it, a tall gold wand in one hand, the other resting in a mass of scarlet berries. All round the car, helter-skelter, tumbling, pushing, came Pierrots and Pierrettes, carrying lanterns, and Harlequins bearing the torches.

And after the car the long line of more sober folk, the older fisherman, the women in caps and many-hued skirts, the serious townfolk who had scorned the travesty, yet would not be left out of the procession. They all began to march, to the tune of those noisy brass trumpets which were thundering forth snatches from the newly composed “Marseillaise.”

Above the sky became more heavy with clouds. Anon a few drops of rain began to fall, making the torches sizzle and splutter, and scatter grease and tar around and wetting the lightly-covered shoulders of tarlatan-clad Columbines. But no one cared! The glow of so much merrymaking kept the blood warm and the skin dry.

The flour all came off the Pierrots’ faces, the blue paper slashings of the drummer-in-chief hung in pulpy lumps against his gorgeous scarlet cloak. The trumpeters’ feathers became streaky and bedraggled.

But in the name of that good God who had ceased to exist, who in the world or out of it cared if it rained, or thundered and stormed! This was a national holiday, for an English spy was captured, and all natives of Boulogne were free of the guillotine to-night.

The revellers were making the circuit of the town, with lanterns fluttering in the wind, and flickering torches held up aloft illumining laughing faces, red with the glow of a drunken joy, young faces that only enjoyed the moment’s pleasure, serious ones that withheld a frown at thought of the morrow. The fitful light played on the grotesque masques of beasts and reptiles, on the diamond necklace of a very earthly goddess, on God’s glorious spoils from gardens and country-side, on smothered anxiety and repressed cruelty.

The crowd had turned its back on the guillotine, and the trumpets now changed the inspiring tune of the “Marseillaise” to the ribald vulgarity of the “Ca ira!”

Everyone yelled and shouted. Girls with flowing hair produced broomsticks, and astride on these, broke from the ranks and danced a mad and obscene saraband, a dance of witches in the weird glow of sizzling torches, to the accompaniment of raucous laughter and of coarse jokes.

Thus the procession passed on, a sight to gladden the eyes of those who had desired to smother all thought of the Infinite, of Eternity and of God in the minds of those to whom they had nothing to offer in return. A threat of death yesterday, misery, starvation and squalor! all the hideousness of a destroying anarchy, that had nothing to give save a national fete, a tinsel goddess, some shallow laughter and momentary intoxication, a travesty of clothes and of religion and a dance on the ashes of the past.

And there along the ramparts where the massive walls of the city encircled the frowning prisons of Gayole and the old Chateau, dark groups were crouching, huddled together in compact masses, which in the gloom seemed to vibrate with fear. Like hunted quarry seeking for shelter, sombre figures flattened themselves in the angles of the dank walls, as the noisy carousers drew nigh. Then as the torches and lanterns detached themselves from out the evening shadows, hand would clutch hand and hearts would beat with agonized suspense, whilst the dark and shapeless forms would try to appear smaller, flatter, less noticeable than before.

And when the crowd had passed noisily along, leaving behind it a trail of torn finery, of glittering tinsel and of scarlet berries, when the boom of the big drum and the grating noise of the brass trumpets had somewhat died away, wan faces, pale with anxiety, would peer from out the darkness, and nervous hands would grasp with trembling fingers the small bundles of poor belongings tied up hastily in view of flight.

At seven o’clock, so ’twas said, the cannon would boom from the old Beffroi. The guard would throw open the prison gates, and those who had something or somebody to hide, and those who had a great deal to fear, would be free to go whithersoever they chose.

And mothers, sisters, sweethearts stood watching by the gates, for loved ones to-night would be set free, all along of the capture of that English spy, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chapter XXXI: Final Dispositions

To Chauvelin the day had been one of restless inquietude and nervous apprehension.

Collot d'Herbois harassed him with questions and complaints intermixed with threats but thinly veiled. At his suggestion Gayole had been transformed into a fully-manned, well-garrisoned fortress. Troops were to be seen everywhere, on the stairs and in the passages, the guard-rooms and offices: picked men from the municipal guard, and the company which had been sent down from Paris some time ago.

Chauvelin had not resisted these orders given by his colleague. He knew quite well that Marguerite would make no attempt at escape, but he had long ago given up all hope of persuading a man of the type of Collot d'Herbois that a woman of her temperament would never think of saving her own life at the expense of others, and that Sir Percy Blakeney, in spite of his adoration for his wife, would sooner see her die before him, than allow the lives of innocent men and women to be the price of hers.

Collot was one of those brutish sots — not by any means infrequent among the Terrorists of that time — who, born in the gutter, still loved to wallow in his native element, and who measured all his fellow-creatures by the same standard which he had always found good enough for himself. In this man there was neither the enthusiastic patriotism of a Chauvelin, nor the ardent selflessness of a Danton. He served the revolution and fostered the anarchical spirit of the times only because these brought him a competence and a notoriety, which an orderly and fastidious government would obviously have never offered him.

History shows no more despicable personality than that of Collot d'Herbois, one of the most hideous products of that utopian Revolution, whose grandly conceived theories of a universal levelling of mankind only succeeded in dragging into prominence a number of half-brutish creatures who, revelling in their own abasement, would otherwise have remained content in inglorious obscurity.

Chauvelin tolerated and half feared Collot, knowing full well that if now the Scarlet Pimpernel escaped from his hands, he could expect no mercy from his colleagues.

The scheme by which he hoped to destroy not only the heroic leader but the entire League by bringing opprobrium and ridicule upon them, was wonderfully subtle in its refined cruelty, and Chauvelin, knowing by now something of Sir Percy Blakeney's curiously blended character, was never for a moment in doubt but that he would write the infamous letter, save his wife by sacrificing his honour, and then seek oblivion and peace in suicide.

With so much disgrace, so much mud cast upon their chief, the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel would cease to be. THAT had been Chauvelin's plan all along. For the end he had schemed and thought and planned, from the moment that Robespierre had given him the opportunity of redeeming his failure of last year. He had built up the edifice of his intrigue, bit by bit, from the introduction of his tool, Candaille, to Marguerite at the Richmond gala, to the arrest of Lady Blakeney in Boulogne. All that remained for him to see now, would be the attitude of Sir Percy Blakeney to-night, when, in exchange for the stipulated letter, he would see his wife set free.

All day Chauvelin had wondered how it would all go off. He had stage-managed everything, but he did not know how the chief actor would play his part.

From time to time, when his feeling of restlessness became quite unendurable, the ex-ambassador would wander round Fort Gayole and on some pretext or other demand to see one or the other of his prisoners. Marguerite, however, observed complete silence in his presence: she acknowledged his greeting with a slight inclination of the head, and in reply to certain perfunctory queries of his — which he put to her in order to justify his appearance — she either nodded or gave curt monosyllabic answers through partially closed lips.

"I trust that everything is arranged for your comfort, Lady Blakeney."

"I thank you, sir."

"You will be rejoining the 'Day-Dream' to-night. Can I send a messenger over to the yacht for you?"

"I thank you. No."

"Sir Percy is well. He is fast asleep, and hath not asked for your ladyship. Shall I let him know that you are well?"

A nod of acquiescence from Marguerite and Chauvelin's string of queries was at an end. He marvelled at her quietude and thought that she should have been as restless as himself.

Later on in the day, and egged on by Collot d'Herbois and by his own fears, he had caused Marguerite to be removed from No. 6.

This change he heralded by another brief visit to her, and his attitude this time was one of deferential apology.

"A matter of expediency, Lady Blakeney," he explained, "and I trust that the change will be for your comfort."

Again the same curt nod of acquiescence on her part, and a brief:

"As you command, Monsieur!"

But when he had gone, she turned with a sudden passionate outburst towards the Abbe Foucquet, her faithful companion through the past long, weary hours. She fell on her knees beside him and sobbed in an agony of grief.

"Oh! if I could only know... if I could only see him!... for a minute... a second!... if I could only know!..."

She felt as if the awful uncertainty would drive her mad.

If she could only know! If she could only know what he meant to do.

"The good God knows!" said the old man, with his usual simple philosophy, "and perhaps it is all for the best."

The room which Chauvelin had now destined for Marguerite was one which gave from the larger one, wherein last night he had had his momentous interview with her and with Sir Percy.

It was small, square and dark, with no window in it: only a small ventilating hole high up in the wall and heavily grated. Chauvelin, who desired to prove to her that there was no wish on his part to add physical discomfort to her mental tortures, had given orders that the little place should be made as habitable as possible. A thick, soft carpet had been laid on the ground; there was an easy chair and a comfortable-looking couch with a couple of pillows and a rug upon it, and oh, marvel! on the round central table, a vase with a huge bunch of many-coloured dahlias which seemed to throw a note as if of gladness into this strange and gloomy little room.

At the furthest corner, too, a construction of iron uprights and crossway bars had been hastily contrived and fitted with curtains, forming a small recess, behind which was a tidy washstand, fine clean towels and plenty of fresh water. Evidently the shops of Boulogne had been commandeered in order to render Marguerite's sojourn here outwardly agreeable.

But as the place was innocent of window, so was it innocent of doors. The one that gave into the large room had been taken out of its hinges, leaving only the frame, on each side of which stood a man from the municipal guard with fixed bayonet.

Chauvelin himself had conducted Marguerite to her new prison. She followed him — silent and apathetic — with not a trace of that awful torrent of emotion which had overwhelmed her but half-an-hour ago when she had fallen on her knees beside the old priest and sobbed her heart out in a passionate fit of weeping. Even the sight of the soldiers left her outwardly indifferent. As she stepped across the threshold she noticed that the door itself had been taken away: then she gave another quick glance at the soldiers, whose presence there would control her every movement.

The thought of Queen Marie Antoinette in the Conciergerie prison with the daily, hourly humiliation and shame which this constant watch imposed upon her womanly pride and modesty, flashed suddenly across Marguerite's mind, and a deep blush of horror rapidly suffused her pale cheeks, whilst an almost imperceptible shudder shook her delicate frame.

Perhaps, as in a flash, she had at this moment received an inkling of what the nature of that terrible "either — or" might be, with which Chauvelin was trying to force an English gentleman to dishonour. Sir Percy Blakeney's wife had been threatened with Marie Antoinette's fate.

"You see, Madame," said her cruel enemy's unctuous voice close to her ear, "that we have tried our humble best to make your brief sojourn here as agreeable as possible. May I express a hope that you will be quite comfortable in this room, until the time when Sir Percy will be ready to accompany you to the 'Day-Dream.'"

"I thank you, sir," she replied quietly.

"And if there is anything you require, I pray you to call. I shall be in the next room all day and entirely at your service."

A young orderly now entered bearing a small collation — eggs, bread, milk and wine — which he set on the central table. Chauvelin bowed low before Marguerite and withdrew. Anon he ordered the two sentinels to stand the other side of the doorway, against the wall of his own room, and well out of sight of Marguerite, so that, as she moved about her own narrow prison, if she ate or slept, she might have the illusion that she was unwatched.

The sight of the soldiers had had the desired effect on her. Chauvelin had seen her shudder and knew that she understood of that she guessed. He was now satisfied and really had no wish to harass her beyond endurance.

Moreover, there was always the proclamation which threatened the bread-winners of Boulogne with death if Marguerite Blakeney escaped, and which would be in full force until Sir Percy had written, signed and delivered into Chauvelin's hands the letter which was to be the signal for the general amnesty.

Chauvelin had indeed cause to be satisfied with his measures. There was no fear that his prisoners would attempt to escape.

Even Collot d'Herbois had to admit everything was well done. He had read the draft of the proposed letter and was satisfied with its contents. Gradually now into his loutish brain there had filtrated the conviction that Citizen Chauvelin was right, that that accursed Scarlet Pimpernel and his brood of English spies would be more effectually annihilated by all the dishonour and ridicule which such a letter written by the mysterious hero would heap upon them all, than they could ever be through the relentless work of the guillotine. His only anxiety now was whether the Englishman would write that letter.

"Bah! he'll do it," he would say whenever he thought the whole matter over: "Sacre tonnerre! but 'tis an easy means to save his own skin."

"You would sign such a letter without hesitation, eh, Citizen Collot," said Chauvelin, with well-concealed sarcasm, on one occasion when his colleague discussed the all-absorbing topic with him; "you would show no hesitation, if your life were at stake, and you were given the choice between writing that letter and... the guillotine?"

"Parbleu!" responded Collot with conviction.

"More especially," continued Chauvelin drily, "if a million francs were promised you as well?"

"Sacre Anglais!" swore Collot angrily, "you don't propose giving him that money, do you?"

"We'll place it ready to his hand, at any rate, so that it should appear as if he had actually taken it."

Collot looked up at his colleague in ungrudging admiration. Chauvelin had indeed left nothing undone, had thought everything out in this strangely conceived scheme for the destruction of the enemy of France.

"But in the name of all the dwellers in hell, Citizen," admonished Collot, "guard that letter well, once it is in your hands."

"I'll do better than that," said Chauvelin, "I will hand it over to you, Citizen Collot, and you shall ride with it to Paris at once."

"To-night!" assented Collot with a shout of triumph, as he brought his grimy fist crashing down on the table, "I'll have a horse ready saddled at this very gate, and an escort of mounted men... we'll ride like hell's own furies and not pause to breathe until that letter is in Citizen Robespierre's hands."

"Well thought of, Citizen," said Chauvelin approvingly. "I pray you give the necessary orders, that the horses be ready saddled, and the men bootied and spurred, and waiting at the Gayole gate, at seven o'clock this evening."

"I wish the letter were written and safely in our hands by now."

"Nay! the Englishman will have it ready by this evening, never fear. The tide is high at half-past seven, and he will be in haste for his wife to be aboard his yacht, ere the turn, even if he..."

He paused, savouring the thoughts which had suddenly flashed across his mind, and a look of intense hatred and cruel satisfaction for a moment chased away the studied impassiveness of his face.

"What do you mean, Citizen?" queried Collot anxiously, "even if he... what?..."

"Oh! nothing, nothing! I was only trying to make vague guesses as to what the Englishman will do AFTER he has written the letter," quoth Chauvelin reflectively.

"Morbleu! he'll return to his own accursed country... glad enough to have escaped with his skin.... I suppose," added Collot with sudden anxiety, "you have no fear that he will refuse at the last moment to write that letter?"

The two men were sitting in the large room, out of which opened the one which was now occupied by Marguerite. They were talking at the further end of it, close to the window, and though Chauvelin had mostly spoken in a whisper, Collot had oftentimes shouted, and the ex-ambassador was wondering how much Marguerite had heard.

Now at Collot's anxious query he gave a quick furtive glance in the direction of the further room wherein she sat, so silent and so still, that it seemed almost as if she must be sleeping.

"You don't think that the Englishman will refuse to write the letter?" insisted Collot with angry impatience.

"No!" replied Chauvelin quietly.

"But if he does?" persisted the other.

"If he does, I send the woman to Paris to-night and have him hanged as a spy in this prison yard without further formality or trial..." replied Chauvelin firmly; "so either way, you see, Citizen," he added in a whisper, "the Scarlet Pimpernel is done for.... But I think that he will write the letter."

"Parbleu! so do I!..." rejoined Collot with a coarse laugh.

Chapter XXXII: The Letter

Later on, when his colleague left him in order to see to the horses and to his escort for to-night, Chauvelin called Sergeant Hebert, his old and trusted familiar, to him and gave him some final orders.

"The Angelus must be rung at the proper hour, friend Hebert," he began with a grim smile.

"The Angelus, Citizen?" quoth the Sergeant, with complete stupefaction, "'tis months now since it has been rung. It was forbidden by a decree of the Convention, and I doubt me if any of our men would know how to set about it."

Chauvelin's eyes were fixed before him in apparent vacancy, while the same grim smile still hovered round his thin lips. Something of that irresponsible spirit of adventure which was the mainspring of all Sir Percy Blakeney's actions, must for the moment have pervaded the mind of his deadly enemy.

Chauvelin had thought out this idea of having the Angelus rung to-night, and was thoroughly pleased with the notion. This was the day when the duel was to have been fought; seven o'clock would have been the very hour, and the sound of the Angelus to have been the signal for combat, and there was something very satisfying in the thought, that that same Angelus should be rung, as a signal that the Scarlet Pimpernel was withered and broken at last.

In answer to Hebert's look of bewilderment Chauvelin said quietly:

"We must have some signal between ourselves and the guard at the different gates, also with the harbour officials: at a given moment the general amnesty must take effect and the harbour become a free port. I have a fancy that the signal shall be the ringing of the Angelus: the cannons at the gates and the harbour can boom in response; then the prisons can be thrown open and prisoners can either participate in the evening fete or leave the city immediately, as they choose. The Committee of Public Safety has promised the amnesty: it will carry out its promise to the full, and when Citizen Collot d'Herbois arrives in Paris with the joyful news, all natives of Boulogne in the prisons there will participate in the free pardon too."

"I understand all that, Citizen," said Hebert, still somewhat bewildered, "but not the Angelus."

"A fancy, friend Hebert, and I mean to have it."

"But who is to ring it, Citizen?"

"Morbieu! haven't you one calotin left in Boulogne whom you can press into doing this service?"

"Aye! calotins enough! there's the Abbe Foucquet in this very building... in No. 6 cell..."

"Sacre tonnerre!" ejaculated Chauvelin exultingly, "the very man! I know his dossier well! Once he is free, he will make straightway for England... he and his family... and will help to spread the glorious news of the dishonour and disgrace of the much-vaunted Scarlet Pimpernel!... The very man, friend Hebert!... Let him be stationed here... to see the letter written... to see the money handed over — for we will go through with that farce — and make him understand that the moment I give him the order, he can run over to his old church St. Joseph and ring the Angelus. ... The old fool will be delighted... more especially when he knows that he will thereby be giving the very signal which will set his own sister's children free.... You understand?..."

"I understand, Citizen."

"And you can make the old calotin understand?"

"I think so, Citizen.... You want him in this room.... At what time?"

"A quarter before seven."

"Yes. I'll bring him along myself, and stand over him, lest he play any pranks."

"Oh! he'll not trouble you," sneered Chauvelin, "he'll be deeply interested in the proceedings. The woman will be here too, remember," he added with a jerky movement of the hand in the direction of Marguerite's room, "the two might be made to stand together, with four of your fellows round them."

"I understand, Citizen. Are any of us to escort the Citizen Foucquet when he goes to St. Joseph?"

"Aye! two men had best go with him. There will be a crowd in the streets by then... How far is it from here to the church?"

"Less than five minutes."

"Good. See to it that the doors are opened and the bell ropes easy of access."

"It shall be seen to, Citizen. How many men will you have inside this room to-night?"

"Let the walls be lined with men whom you can trust. I anticipate neither trouble nor resistance. The whole thing is a simple formality to which the Englishman has already intimated his readiness to submit. If he changes his mind at the last moment there will be no Angelus rung, no booming of the cannons or opening of the prison doors: there will be no amnesty, and no free pardon. The woman will be at once conveyed to Paris, and... But he'll not change his mind, friend Hebert," he concluded in suddenly altered tones, and speaking quite lightly, "he'll not change his mind."

The conversation between Chauvelin and his familiar had been carried on in whispers: not that the Terrorist cared whether Marguerite overheard or not, but whispering had become a habit with this man, whose tortuous ways and subtle intrigues did not lend themselves to discussion in a loud voice.

Chauvelin was sitting at the central table, just where he had been last night when Sir Percy Blakeney's sudden advent broke in on his meditations. The table had been cleared of the litter of multitudinous papers which had encumbered it before. On it now there were only a couple of heavy pewter candlesticks, with the tallow candles fixed ready in them, a leather-pad, an ink-well, a sand-box and two or three quill pens: everything disposed, in fact, for the writing and signing of the letter.

Already in imagination, Chauvelin saw his impudent enemy, the bold and daring adventurer, standing there beside that table and putting his name to the consummation of his own infamy. The mental picture thus evoked brought a gleam of cruel satisfaction and of satiated lust into the keen, ferret-like face, and a smile of intense joy lit up the narrow, pale-coloured eyes.

He looked round the room where the great scene would be enacted: two soldiers were standing guard outside Marguerite's prison, two more at attention near the door which gave on the passage: his own half-dozen picked men were waiting his commands in the

corridor. Presently the whole room would be lined with troops, himself and Collot standing with eyes fixed on the principal actor of the drama! Hebert with specially selected troopers standing on guard over Marguerite!

No, no! he had left nothing to chance this time, and down below the horses would be ready saddled, that were to convey Collot and the precious document to Paris.

No! nothing was left to chance, and in either case he was bound to win. Sir Percy Blakeney would either write the letter in order to save his wife, and heap dishonour on himself, or he would shrink from the terrible ordeal at the last moment and let Chauvelin and the Committee of Public Safety work their will with her and him.

"In that case the pillory as a spy and summary hanging for you, my friend," concluded Chauvelin in his mind, "and for your wife... Bah, once you are out of the way, even she will cease to matter."

He left Hebert on guard in the room. An irresistible desire seized him to go and have a look at his discomfited enemy, and from the latter's attitude make a shrewd guess as to what he meant to do to-night.

Sir Percy had been given a room on one of the upper floors of the old prison. He had in no way been closely guarded, and the room itself had been made as comfortable as may be. He had seemed quite happy and contented when he had been conducted hither by Chauvelin, the evening before.

"I hope you quite understand, Sir Percy, that you are my guest here to-night," Chauvelin had said suavely, "and that you are free to come and go, just as you please."

"Lud love you, sir," Sir Percy had replied gaily, "but I verily believe that I am."

"It is only Lady Blakeney whom we have cause to watch until to-morrow," added Chauvelin with quiet significance. "Is that not so, Sir Percy?"

But Sir Percy seemed, whenever his wife's name was mentioned, to lapse into irresistible somnolence. He yawned now with his usual affectation, and asked at what hour gentlemen in France were wont to breakfast.

Since then Chauvelin had not seen him. He had repeatedly asked how the English prisoner was faring, and whether he seemed to be sleeping and eating heartily. The orderly in charge invariably reported that the Englishman seemed well, but did not eat much. On the other hand, he had ordered, and lavishly paid for, measure after measure of brandy and bottle after bottle of wine.

"Hm! how strange these Englishmen are!" mused Chauvelin; "this so-called hero is nothing but a wine-sodden brute, who seeks to nerve himself for a trying ordeal by drowning his faculties in brandy... Perhaps after all he doesn't care!..."

But the wish to have a look at that strangely complex creature — hero, adventurer or mere lucky fool — was irresistible, and Chauvelin in the latter part of the afternoon went up to the room which had been allotted to Sir Percy Blakeney.

He never moved now without his escort, and this time also two of his favourite bodyguards accompanied him to the upper floor. He knocked at the door, but received no answer, and after a second or two he bade his men wait in the corridor and, gently turning the latch, walked in.

There was an odour of brandy in the air; on the table two or three empty bottles of wine and a glass half filled with cognac testified to the truth of what the orderly had said, whilst sprawling across the camp bedstead, which obviously was too small for his long limbs, his head thrown back, his mouth open for a vigorous snore, lay the imperturbable Sir Percy fast asleep.

Chauvelin went up to the bedstead and looked down upon the reclining figure of the man who had oft been called the most dangerous enemy of Republican France.

Of a truth, a fine figure of a man, Chauvelin was ready enough to admit that; the long, hard limbs, the wide chest, and slender, white hands, all bespoke the man of birth, breeding and energy: the face too looked strong and clearly-cut in repose, now that the perpetually inane smile did not play round the firm lips, nor the lazy, indolent expression mar the seriousness of the straight brow. For one moment — it was a mere flash — Chauvelin felt almost sorry that so interesting a career should be thus ignominiously brought to a close.

The Terrorist felt that if his own future, his own honour and integrity were about to be so hopelessly crushed, he would have wandered up and down this narrow room like a caged beast, eating out his heart with self-reproach and remorse, and racking his nerves and brain for an issue out of the terrible alternative which meant dishonour or death.

But this man drank and slept.

"Perhaps he doesn't care!"

And as if in answer to Chauvelin's puzzled musing a deep snore escaped the sleeping adventurer's parted lips.

Chauvelin sighed, perplexed and troubled. He looked round the little room, then went up to a small side table which stood against the wall and on which were two or three quill pens and an ink-well, also some loosely scattered sheets of paper. These he turned over with a careless hand and presently came across a closely written page. — "Citizen Chauvelin: — In consideration of a further sum of one million francs..."

It was the beginning of the letter!... only a few words so far... with several corrections of misspelt words... and a line left out here and there which confused the meaning... a beginning made by the unsteady hand of that drunken fool... an attempt only at present....

But still... a beginning.

Close by was the draft of it as written out by Chauvelin, and which Sir Percy had evidently begun to copy.

He had made up his mind then.... He meant to subscribe with his own hand to his lasting dishonour... and meaning it, he slept!

Chauvelin felt the paper trembling in his hand. He felt strangely agitated and nervous, now that the issue was so near... so sure!...

"There's no demmed hurry for that, is there... er... Monsieur Chaubertin?..." came from the slowly wakening Sir Percy in somewhat thick, heavy accents, accompanied by a prolonged yawn. "I haven't got the demmed thing quite ready..."

Chauvelin had been so startled that the paper dropped from his hand. He stooped to pick it up.

"Nay! why should you be so scared, sir?" continued Sir Percy lazily, "did you think I was drunk?... I assure you, sir, on my honour, I am not so drunk as you think I am."

"I have no doubt, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin ironically, "that you have all your marvellous faculties entirely at your command.... I must apologize for disturbing your papers," he added, replacing the half-written page on the table, "I thought perhaps that if the letter was ready ..."

"It will be, sir... it will be... for I am not drunk, I assure you.... and can write with a steady hand... and do honour to my signature...."

"When will you have the letter ready, Sir Percy?"

"The 'Day-Dream' must leave the harbour at the turn of the tide," quoth Sir Percy thickly. "It'll be demmed well time by then... won't it, sir?..."

"About sundown, Sir Percy... not later..."

"About sundown... not later..." muttered Blakeney, as he once more stretched his long limbs along the narrow bed.

He gave a loud and hearty yawn.

"I'll not fail you..." he murmured, as he closed his eyes, and gave a final struggle to get his head at a comfortable angle, "the letter will be written in my best cali... calig.... Lud! but I'm not so drunk as you think I am. ..."

But as if to belie his own oft-repeated assertion, hardly was the last word out of his mouth than his stertorous and even breathing proclaimed the fact that he was once more fast asleep.

With a shrug of the shoulders and a look of unutterable contempt at his broken-down enemy, Chauvelin turned on his heel and went out of the room.

But outside in the corridor he called the orderly to him and gave strict commands that no more wine or brandy was to be served to the Englishman under any circumstances whatever.

"He has two hours in which to sleep off the effects of all that brandy which he had consumed," he mused as he finally went back to his own quarters, "and by that time he will be able to write with a steady hand."

Chapter XXXIII: The English Spy

And now at last the shades of evening were drawing in thick and fast. Within the walls of Fort Gayole the last rays of the setting sun had long ago ceased to shed their dying radiance, and through the thick stone embrasures and the dusty panes of glass, the grey light of dusk soon failed to penetrate.

In the large ground-floor room with its window opened upon the wide promenade of the southern ramparts, a silence reigned which was oppressive. The air was heavy with the fumes of the two tallow candles on the table, which smoked persistently.

Against the walls a row of figures in dark blue uniforms with scarlet facings, drab breeches and heavy riding boots, silent and immovable, with fixed bayonets like so many automatons lining the room all round; at some little distance from the central table and out of the immediate circle of light, a small group composed of five soldiers in the same blue and scarlet uniforms. One of these was Sergeant Hebert. In the centre of this group two persons were sitting: a woman and an old man.

The Abbe Foucquet had been brought down from his prison cell a few minutes ago, and told to watch what would go on around him, after which he would be allowed to go to his old church of St. Joseph and ring the Angelus once more before he and his family left Boulogne forever.

The Angelus would be the signal for the opening of all the prison gates in the town. Everyone to-night could come and go as they pleased, and having rung the Angelus, the abbe would be at liberty to join Francois and Felicite and their old mother, his sister, outside the purlieu of the town.

The Abbe Foucquet did not quite understand all this, which was very rapidly and roughly explained to him. It was such a very little while ago that he had expected to see the innocent children mounting up those awful steps which lead to the guillotine, whilst he himself was looking death quite near in the face, that all this talk of amnesty and of pardon had not quite fully reached his brain.

But he was quite content that it had all been ordained by le bon Dieu, and very happy at the thought of ringing the dearly-loved Angelus in his own old church once again. So when he was peremptorily pushed into the room and found himself close to Marguerite, with four or five soldiers standing round them, he quietly pulled his old rosary from his pocket and began murmuring gentle "Paters" and "Aves" under his breath.

Beside him sat Marguerite, rigid as a statue: her cloak thrown over her shoulders, so that its hood might hide her face. She could not now have said how that awful day had passed, how she had managed to survive the terrible, nerve-racking suspense, the agonizing doubt as to what was going to happen. But above all, what she had found most unendurable was the torturing thought that in this same grim and frowning building her husband was there... somewhere... how far or how near she could not say... but she knew that she was parted from him and perhaps would not see him again, not even at the hour of death.

That Percy would never write that infamous letter and LIVE, she knew. That he might write it in order to save her, she feared was possible, whilst the look of triumph on Chauvelin's face had aroused her most agonizing terrors.

When she was summarily ordered to go into the next room, she realized at once that all hope now was more than futile. The walls lined with troops, the attitude of her enemies, and above all that table with paper, ink and pens ready as it were for the accomplishment of the hideous and monstrous deed, all made her very heart numb, as if it were held within the chill embrace of death.

"If the woman moves, speaks or screams, gag her at once!" said Collot roughly the moment she sat down, and Sergeant Hebert stood over her, gag and cloth in hand, whilst two soldiers placed heavy hands on her shoulders.

But she neither moved nor spoke, not even presently when a loud and cheerful voice came echoing from a distant corridor, and anon the door opened and her husband came in, accompanied by Chauvelin.

The ex-ambassador was very obviously in a state of acute nervous tension; his hands were tightly clasped behind his back, and his movements were curiously irresponsible and jerky. But Sir Percy Blakeney looked a picture of calm unconcern: the lace bow at his throat was tied with scrupulous care, his eyeglass upheld at quite the correct angle, and his delicate-coloured caped coat was thrown back just sufficiently to afford a glimpse of the dainty cloth suit and exquisitely embroidered waistcoat beneath.

He was the perfect presentation of a London dandy, and might have been entering a royal drawing-room in company with an honoured guest. Marguerite's eyes were riveted on him as he came well within the circle of light projected by the candles, but not even with that acute sixth sense of a passionate and loving woman could she detect the slightest tremor in the aristocratic hands which held the gold-rimmed eyeglass, nor the faintest quiver of the firmly moulded lips.

This had occurred just as the bell of the old Beffroi chimed three-quarters after six. Now it was close on seven, and in the centre of the room and with his face and figure well lighted up by the candles, at the table pen in hand sat Sir Percy writing.

At his elbow just behind him stood Chauvelin on the one side and Collot d'Herbois on the other, both watching with fixed and burning eyes the writing of that letter.

Sir Percy seemed in no hurry. He wrote slowly and deliberately, carefully copying the draft of the letter which was propped up in front of him. The spelling of some of the French words seemed to have troubled him at first, for when he began he made many facetious and self-deprecatory remarks anent his own want of education, and carelessness in youth in acquiring the gentle art of speaking so elegant a language.

Presently, however, he appeared more at his ease, or perhaps less inclined to talk, since he only received curt monosyllabic answers to his pleasant sallies. Five minutes had gone by without any other sound, save the spasmodic creak of Sir Percy's pen upon the paper, the while Chauvelin and Collot watched every word he wrote.

But gradually from afar there had arisen in the stillness of evening a distant, rolling noise like that of surf breaking against the cliffs. Nearer and louder it grew, and as it increased in volume, so it gained now in diversity. The monotonous, roll-like, far-off thunder was just as continuous as before, but now shriller notes broke out from amongst the more remote sounds, a loud laugh seemed ever and anon to pierce the distance and to rise above the persistent hubbub, which became the mere accompaniment to these isolated tones.

The merry-makers of Boulogne, having started from the Place de la Senechaussee, were making the round of the town by the wide avenue which tops the ramparts. They were coming past the Fort Gayole, shouting, singing, brass trumpets in front, big drum ahead,

drenched, hot, and hoarse, but supremely happy.

Sir Percy looked up for a moment as the noise drew neared, then turned to Chauvelin and pointing to the letter, he said:

"I have nearly finished!"

The suspense in the smoke-laden atmosphere of this room was becoming unendurable, and four hearts at least were beating wildly with overpowering anxiety. Marguerite's eyes were fixed with tender intensity on the man she so passionately loved. She did not understand his actions or his motives, but she felt a wild longing in her, to drink in every line of that loved face, as if with this last, long look she was bidding an eternal farewell to all hopes of future earthly happiness.

The old priest had ceased to tell his beads. Feeling in his kindly heart the echo of the appalling tragedy which was being enacted before him, he had put out a fatherly, tentative hand towards Marguerite, and given her icy fingers a comforting pressure.

And in the hearts of Chauvelin and his colleague there was satisfied revenge, eager, exultant triumph and that terrible nerve-tension which immediately precedes the long-expected climax.

But who can say what went on within the heart of that bold adventurer, about to be brought to the lowest depths of humiliation which it is in the power of man to endure? What behind that smooth unruffled brow still bent laboriously over the page of writing?

The crowd was now on the Place Daumont; some of the foremost in the ranks were ascending the stone steps which lead to the southern ramparts. The noise had become incessant: Pierrots and Pierrettes, Harlequins and Columbines had worked themselves up into a veritable intoxication of shouts and laughter.

Now as they all swarmed up the steps and caught sight of the open window almost on a level with the ground, and of the large dimly-lighted room, they gave forth one terrific and voluminous "Hurrah!" for the paternal government up in Paris, who had given them cause for all this joy. Then they recollected how the amnesty, the pardon, the national fete, this brilliant procession had come about, and somebody in the crowd shouted:

"Allons! les us have a look at that English spy!..."

"Let us see the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"Yes! yes! let us see what he is like!"

They shouted and stamped and swarmed round the open window, swinging their lanterns and demanding in a loud tone of voice that the English spy be shown to them.

Faces wet with rain and perspiration tried to peep in at the window. Collot gave brief orders to the soldiers to close the shutters at once and to push away the crowd, but the crowd would not be pushed. It would not be gainsaid, and when the soldiers tried to close the window, twenty angry fists broke the panes of glass.

"I can't finish this writing in your lingo, sir, whilst this demmed row is going on," said Sir Percy placidly.

"You have not much more to write, Sir Percy," urged Chauvelin with nervous impatience, "I pray you, finish the matter now, and get you gone from out this city."

"Send that demmed lot away, then," rejoined Sir Percy calmly.

"They won't go.... They want to see you..."

Sir Percy paused a moment, pen in hand, as if in deep reflection.

"They want to see me," he said with a laugh. "Why, demn it all... then, why not let em?..."

And with a few rapid strokes of the pen, he quickly finished the letter, adding his signature with a bold flourish, whilst the crowd, pushing, jostling, shouting and cursing the soldiers, still loudly demanded to see the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chauvelin felt as if his heart would veritably burst with the wildness of its beating.

Then Sir Percy, with one hand lightly pressed on the letter, pushed his chair away and with his pleasant ringing voice, said once again:

"Well! demn it... let 'em see me!..."

With that he sprang to his feet and up to his full height, and as he did so he seized the two massive pewter candlesticks, one in each hand, and with powerful arms well outstretched he held them high above his head.

"The letter..." murmured Chauvelin in a hoarse whisper.

But even as he was quickly reaching out a hand, which shook with the intensity of his excitement, towards the letter on the table, Blakeney, with one loud and sudden shout, threw the heavy candlesticks onto the floor. They rattled down with a terrific crash, the lights were extinguished, and the whole room was immediately plunged in utter darkness.

The crowd gave a wild yell of fear: they had only caught sight for one instant of that gigantic figure — which, with arms outstretched had seemed supernaturally tall — weirdly illumined by the flickering light of the tallow candles and the next moment disappearing into utter darkness before their very gaze. Overcome with sudden superstitious fear, Pierrots and Pierrettes, drummer and trumpeters turned and fled in every direction.

Within the room all was wild confusion. The soldiers had heard a cry:

"La fenetre! La fenetre!"

Who gave it no one knew, no one could afterwards recollect: certain it is that with one accord the majority of the men made a rush for the open window, driven thither partly by the wild instinct of the chase after an escaping enemy, and partly by the same superstitious terror which had caused the crowd to flee. They clambered over the sill and dropped down on to the ramparts below, then started in wild pursuit.

But when the crash came, Chauvelin had given one frantic shout:

"The letter!!!!... Collot!!!!... A moi.... In his hand.... The letter!..."

There was the sound of a heavy thud, of a terrible scuffle there on the floor in the darkness and then a yell of victory from Collot d'Herbois.

"I have the letter! A Paris!"

"Victory!" echoed Chauvelin, exultant and panting, "victory!! The Angelus, friend Hebert! Take the calotin to ring the Angelus!!!"

It was instinct which caused Collot d'Herbois to find the door; he tore it open, letting in a feeble ray of light from the corridor. He stood in the doorway one moment, his slouchy, ungainly form distinctly outlined against the lighter background beyond, a look of exultant and malicious triumph, of deadly hate and cruelty distinctly imprinted on his face and with upraised hand wildly flourishing the precious document, the brand of dishonour for the enemy of France.

"A Paris!" shouted Chauvelin to him excitedly. "Into Robespierre's hands. ... The letter!..."

Then he fell back panting, exhausted on the nearest chair.

Collot, without looking again behind him, called wildly for the men who were to escort him to Paris. They were picked troopers, stalwart veterans from the old municipal guard. They had not broken their ranks throughout the turmoil, and fell into line in perfect order as they followed Citizen Collot out of the room.

Less than five minutes later there was the noise of stamping and champing of bits in the courtyard below, a shout from Collot, and the sound of a cavalcade galloping at break-neck speed towards the distant Paris gate.

Chapter XXXIV: The Angelus

And gradually all noises died away around the old Fort Gayole. The shouts and laughter of the merry-makers, who had quickly recovered from their fright, now came only as the muffled rumble of a distant storm, broken here and there by the shrill note of a girl's loud laughter, or a vigorous fanfare from the brass trumpets.

The room where so much turmoil had taken place, where so many hearts had beaten with torrent-like emotions, where the awesome tragedy of revenge and hate, of love and passion had been consummated, was now silent and at peace.

The soldiers had gone: some in pursuit of the revellers, some with Collot d'Herbois, others with Hebert and the calotin who was to ring the Angelus.

Chauvelin, overcome with the intensity of his exultation and the agony of the suspense which he had endured, sat, vaguely dreaming, hardly conscious, but wholly happy and content. Fearless, too, for his triumph was complete, and he cared not now if he lived or died.

He had lived long enough to see the complete annihilation and dishonour of his enemy.

What had happened to Sir Percy Blakeney now, what to Marguerite, he neither knew nor cared. No doubt the Englishman had picked himself up and got away through the window or the door: he would be anxious to get his wife out of the town as quickly as possible. The Angelus would ring directly, the gates would be opened, the harbour made free to everyone....

And Collot was a league outside Boulogne by now... a league nearer to Paris.

So what mattered the humbled wayside English flower? — the damaged and withered Scarlet Pimpernel?...

A slight noise suddenly caused him to start. He had been dreaming, no doubt, having fallen into some kind of torpor, akin to sleep, after the deadly and restless fatigue of the past four days. He certainly had been unconscious of everything around him, of time and of place. But now he felt fully awake.

And again he heard that slight noise, as if something or someone was moving in the room.

He tried to peer into the darkness, but could distinguish nothing. He rose and went to the door. It was still open, and close behind it against the wall a small oil lamp was fixed which lit up the corridor.

Chauvelin detached the lamp and came back with it into the room. Just as he did so there came to his ears the first sound of the little church bell ringing the Angelus.

He stepped into the room holding the lamp high above his head; its feeble rays fell full upon the brilliant figure of Sir Percy Blakeney.

He was smiling pleasantly, bowing slightly towards Chauvelin, and in his hand he held the sheathed sword, the blade of which had been fashioned in Toledo for Lorenzo Cenci, and the fellow of which was lying now — Chauvelin himself knew not where.

"The day and hour, Monsieur, I think," said Sir Percy with courtly grace, "when you and I are to cross swords together; those are the southern ramparts, meseems. Will you precede, sir? and I will follow."

At sight of this man, of his impudence and of his daring, Chauvelin felt an icy grip on his heart. His cheeks became ashen white, his thin lips closed with a snap, and the hand which held the lamp aloft trembled visibly. Sir Percy stood before him, still smiling and with a graceful gesture pointing towards the ramparts.

From the Church of St. Joseph the gentle, melancholy tones of the Angelus sounding the second Ave Maria came faintly echoing in the evening air.

With a violent effort Chauvelin forced himself to self-control, and tried to shake off the strange feeling of obsession which had overwhelmed him in the presence of this extraordinary man. He walked quite quietly up to the table and placed the lamp upon it. As in a flash recollection had come back to him... the past few minutes!... the letter! and Collot well on his way to Paris!

Bah! he had nothing to fear now, save perhaps death at the hand of this adventurer turned assassin in his misery and humiliation!

"A truce on this folly, Sir Percy," he said roughly, "as you well know, I had never any intention of fighting you with these poisoned swords of yours and..."

"I knew that, M. Chauvelin.... But do YOU know that I have the intention of killing you now... as you stand... like a dog!..."

And throwing down the sword with one of those uncontrolled outbursts of almost animal passion, which for one instant revealed the real, inner man, he went up to Chauvelin and towering above him like a great avenging giant, he savoured for one second the joy of looking down on that puny, slender figure which he could crush with sheer brute force, with one blow from his powerful hands.

But Chauvelin at this moment was beyond fear.

"And if you killed me now, Sir Percy," he said quietly and looking the man whom he so hated fully in the eyes, "you could not destroy that letter which my colleague is taking to Paris at this very moment."

As he had anticipated, his words seemed to change Sir Percy's mood in an instant. The passion in the handsome, aristocratic face faded in a trice, the hard lines round the jaw and lips relaxed, the fire of revenge died out from the lazy blue eyes, and the next moment a long, loud, merry laugh raised the dormant echoes of the old fort.

"Nay, Monsieur Chabertin," said Sir Percy gaily, "but this is marvellous... demmed marvellous... do you hear that, m'dear?... Gadzooks! but 'tis the best joke I have heard this past twelve-months.... Monsieur here thinks... Lud! but I shall die of laughing.... Monsieur here thinks... that 'twas that demmed letter which went to Paris... and that an English gentleman lay scuffling on the floor and allowed a letter to be filched from him..."

"Sir Percy!..." gasped Chauvelin, as an awful thought seemed suddenly to flash across his fevered brain.

"Lud, sir, you are astonishing!" said Sir Percy, taking a very much crumpled sheet of paper from the capacious pocket of his elegant caped coat, and holding it close to Chauvelin's horror-stricken gaze. "THIS is the letter which I wrote at that table yonder in order to gain time and in order to fool you.... But, by the Lord, you are a bigger demmed fool than ever I took you to be, if you thought it would serve any other purpose save that of my hitting you in the face with it."

And with a quick and violent gesture he struck Chauvelin full in the face with the paper.

"You would like to know, Monsieur Chaubertin, would you not?..." he added pleasantly, "what letter it is that your friend, Citizen Collot, is taking in such hot haste to Paris for you.... Well! the letter is not long and 'tis written in verse.... I wrote it myself upstairs to-day whilst you thought me sodden with brandy and three-parts asleep. But brandy is easily flung out of the window.... Did you think I drank it all?... Nay! as you remember, I told you that I was not so drunk as you thought?... Aye! the letter is writ in English verse, Monsieur, and it reads thus:

"We seek him here! we seek him there! Those Frenchies seek him everywhere! Is he in heaven? is he in hell? That demmed elusive Pimpernel?"

"A neat rhyme, I fancy, Monsieur, and one which will, if rightly translated, greatly please your friend and ruler, Citizen Robespierre.... Your colleague Citizen Collot is well on his way to Paris with it by now. ... No, no, Monsieur... as you rightly said just now... I really could not kill you... God having blessed me with the saving sense of humour..."

Even as he spoke the third Ave Maria of the Angelus died away on the morning air. From the harbour the old Chateau there came the loud boom of cannon.

The hour of the opening of the gates, of the general amnesty and free harbour was announced throughout Boulogne.

Chauvelin was livid with rage, fear and baffled revenge. He made a sudden rush for the door in a blind desire to call for help, but Sir Percy had toyed long enough with his prey. The hour was speeding on: Hebert and some of the soldiers might return, and it was time to think of safety and of flight. Quick as a hunted panther, he had interposed his tall figure between his enemy and the latter's chance of calling for aid, then, seizing the little man by the shoulders, he pushed him back into that portion of the room where Marguerite and the Abbe Foucquet had been lately sitting.

The gag, with cloth and cord, which had been intended for a woman were lying on the ground close by, just where Hebert had dropped them, when he marched the old Abbe off to the Church.

With quick and dexterous hands, Sir Percy soon reduced Chauvelin to an impotent and silent bundle. The ex-ambassador after four days of harrowing nerve-tension, followed by so awful a climax, was weakened physically and mentally, whilst Blakeney, powerful, athletic and always absolutely unperturbed, was fresh in body and spirit. He had slept calmly all the afternoon, having quietly thought out all his plans, left nothing to chance, and acted methodically and quickly, and invariably with perfect repose.

Having fully assured himself that the cords were well fastened, the gag secure and Chauvelin completely helpless, he took the now inert mass up in his arms and carried it into the adjoining room, where Marguerite for twelve hours had endured a terrible martyrdom.

He laid his enemy's helpless form upon the couch, and for one moment looked down on it with a strange feeling of pity quite unmingled with contempt. The light from the lamp in the further room struck vaguely upon the prostrate figure of Chauvelin. He seemed to have lost consciousness, for the eyes were closed, only the hands, which were tied securely to his body, had a spasmodic, nervous twitch in them.

With a good-natured shrug of the shoulders the imperturbable Sir Percy turned to go, but just before he did so, he took a scrap of paper from his waistcoat pocket, and slipped it between Chauvelin's trembling fingers. On the paper were scribbled the four lines of verse which in the next four and twenty hours Robespierre himself and his colleagues would read.

Then Blakeney finally went out of the room.

Chapter XXXV: Marguerite

As he re-entered the large room, she was standing beside the table, with one dainty hand resting against the back of the chair, her whole graceful figure bent forward as if in an agony of ardent expectation.

Never for an instant, in that supreme moment when his precious life was at stake, did she waver in courage or presence of mind. From the moment that he jumped up and took the candlesticks in his hands, her sixth sense showed her as in a flash what he meant to do and how he would wish her to act.

When the room was plunged in darkness she stood absolutely still; when she heard the scuffle on the floor she never trembled, for her passionate heart had already told her that he never meant to deliver that infamous letter into his enemies' hands. Then, when there was the general scramble, when the soldiers rushed away, when the room became empty and Chauvelin alone remained, she shrank quietly into the darkest corner of the room, hardly breathing, only waiting.... Waiting for a sign from him!

She could not see him, but she felt the beloved presence there, somewhere close to her, and she knew that he would wish her to wait.... She watched him silently... ready to help if he called... equally ready to remain still and to wait.

Only when the helpless body of her deadly enemy was well out of the way did she come from out the darkness, and now she stood with the full light of the lamp illumining her ruddy golden hair, the delicate blush on her cheek, the flame of love dancing in her glorious eyes.

Thus he saw her as he re-entered the room, and for one second he paused at the door, for the joy of seeing her there seemed greater than he could bear.

Forgotten was the agony of mind which he had endured, the humiliations and the dangers which still threatened: he only remembered that she loved him and that he worshipped her.

The next moment she lay clasped in his arms. All was still around them, save for the gentle patter-patter of the rain on the trees of the ramparts: and from very far away the echo of laughter and music from the distant revellers.

And then the cry of the sea-mew thrice repeated from just beneath the window.

Blakeney and Marguerite awoke from their brief dream: once more the passionate lover gave place to the man of action.

"'Tis Tony, an I mistake not," he said hurriedly, as with loving fingers still slightly trembling with suppressed passion, he readjusted the hood over her head.

"Lord Tony?" she murmured.

"Aye! with Hastings and one or two others. I told them to be ready for us to-night as soon as the place was quiet."

"You were so sure of success then, Percy?" she asked in wonderment.

"So sure," he replied simply.

Then he led her to the window, and lifted her onto the sill. It was not high from the ground and two pairs of willing arms were there ready to help her down.

Then he, too, followed, and quietly the little party turned to walk toward the gate. The ramparts themselves now looked strangely still and silent: the merrymakers were far away, only one or two passers-by hurried swiftly past here and there, carrying bundles, evidently bent on making use of that welcome permission to leave this dangerous soil.

The little party walked on in silence, Marguerite's small hand resting on her husband's arm. Anon they came upon a group of soldiers who were standing somewhat perfunctorily and irresolutely close by the open gate of the Fort.

"Tiens c'est l'Anglais!" said one.

"Morbleu! he is on his way back to England," commented another lazily.

The gates of Boulogne had been thrown open to everyone when the Angelus was rung and the cannon boomed. The general amnesty had been proclaimed, everyone had the right to come and go as they pleased, the sentinels had been ordered to challenge no one and to let everyone pass.

No one knew that the great and glorious plans for the complete annihilation of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his League had come to naught, that Collot was taking a mighty hoax to Paris, and that the man who had thought out and nearly carried through the most fiendishly cruel plan ever conceived for the destruction of an enemy, lay helpless, bound and gagged, within his own stronghold.

And so the little party, consisting of Sir Percy and Marguerite, Lord Anthony Dewhurst and my Lord Hastings, passed unchallenged through the gates of Boulogne.

Outside the precincts of the town they met my Lord Everingham and Sir Philip Glynde, who had met the Abbe Fouquet outside his little church and escorted him safely out of the city, whilst Francois and Felicite with their old mother had been under the charge of other members of the League.

"We were all in the procession, dressed up in all sorts of ragged finery, until the last moment," explained Lord Tony to Marguerite as the entire party now quickly made its way to the harbour. "We did not know what was going to happen.... All we knew was that we should be wanted about this time — the hour when the duel was to have been fought — and somewhere near here on the southern ramparts... and we always have strict orders to mix with the crowd if there happens to be one. When we saw Blakeney raise the candlesticks we guessed what was coming, and we each went to our respective posts. It was all quite simple."

The young man spoke gaily and lightly, but through the easy banter of his tone, there pierced the enthusiasm and pride of the soldier in the glory and daring of his chief.

Between the city walls and the harbour there was much bustle and agitation. The English packet-boat would lift anchor at the turn of the tide, and as every one was free to get aboard without leave or passport, there were a very large number of passengers, bound for the land of freedom.

Two boats from the "Day-Dream" were waiting in readiness for Sir Percy and my lady and those whom they would bring with them.

Silently the party embarked, and as the boats pushed off and the sailors from Sir Percy's yacht bent to their oars, the old Abbe Fouquet began gently droning a Pater and Ave to the accompaniment of his beads.

He accepted joy, happiness and safety with the same gentle philosophy as he would have accepted death, but Marguerite's keen and loving ears caught at the end of each "Pater" a gently murmured request to le bon Dieu to bless and protect our English rescuer.

Only once did Marguerite make allusion to that terrible time which had become the past.

They were wandering together down the chestnut alley in the beautiful garden at Richmond. It was evening, and the air was heavy with the rich odour of wet earth, of belated roses and dying mignonette. She had paused in the alley, and placed a trembling hand upon his arm, whilst raising her eyes filled with tears of tender passion up to his face.

"Percy!" she murmured, "have you forgiven me?"

"What, m'dear?"

"That awful evening in Boulogne... what that fiend demanded... his awful 'either — or'... I brought it all upon you... it was all my fault."

"Nay, my dear, for that 'tis I should thank you..."

"Thank me?"

"Aye," he said, whilst in the fast-gathering dusk she could only just perceive the sudden hardening of his face, the look of wild passion in his eyes, "but for that evening in Boulogne, but for that alternative which that devil placed before me, I might never have known how much you meant to me."

Even the recollection of all the sorrow, the anxiety, the torturing humiliations of that night seemed completely to change him; the voice became trenchant, the hands were tightly clenched. But Marguerite drew nearer to him; her two hands were on his breast; she murmured gently:

"And now?..."

He folded her in his arms, with an agony of joy, and said earnestly:

"Now I know."

THE WAY

Chapter I

At an angle of the Rue de la Monnaie where it is intersected by the narrow Passage des Fèves there stood at this time a large three-storied house, which exuded an atmosphere of past luxury and grandeur. Money had obviously been lavished on its decoration: the balconies were ornamented with elaborately carved balustrades, and a number of legendary personages and pagan deities reclined in more or less graceful attitudes in the spandrels round the arches of the windows and of the monumental doorway. The house had once been the home of a rich Austrian banker who had shown the country a clean pair of heels as soon as he felt the first gust of the revolutionary storm blowing across the Rue de la Monnaie. That was early in '89.

After that the mansion stood empty for a couple of years. Then, when the housing shortage became acute in Paris, the revolutionary government took possession of the building, erected partition walls in the great reception and ballrooms, turning them into small apartments and offices which it let to poor tenants and people in a small way of business. A concierge was put in charge. But during those two years for some reason or other the house had fallen into premature and rabid decay. Within a very few months an air of mustiness began to hand over the once palatial residence of the rich foreign financier. When he departed, bag and baggage, taking with him his family and his servants, his pictures and his furniture, it almost seemed as if he had left behind him an eerie trail of ghosts, who took to wandering in and out of the deserted rooms and up and down the monumental staircase, scattering an odour of dry-rot and mildew in their wake. And although, after a time, the lower floors were all let as offices to business people, and several families elected to drag out their more or less miserable lives in the apartments up above, that air of emptiness and of decay never ceased to hang about the building, and its walls never lost their musty smell of damp mortar and mildew.

A certain amount of life did, of course, go on inside the house. People came and went about their usual avocations: in one compartment a child was born, a wedding feast was held in another, old women gossiped and young men courted: but they did all this in a silent a furtive manner, as if afraid of rousing dormant echoes; voices were never raised above a whisper, laughter never rang along the corridors, nor did light feet run pattering up and down the stairs.

Far be it from any searcher after truth to suggest that this atmosphere of silence and of gloom was peculiar to the house in the Rue de la Monnaie. Times were getting hard all over France — very hard for most people, and hard times whenever they occur give rise to great silences and engender the desire for solitude. In Paris all the necessities of life — soap, sugar, milk — were not only very dear but difficult to get. Luxuries of the past were unobtainable save to those who, by inflammatory speeches, had fanned the passions of the ignorant and the needy, with promises of happiness and equality for all. Three years of this social upheaval and of the rule of the proletariat had brought throughout the country more misery than happiness. True! the rich — a good many of them — had been dragged down to poverty or exile, but the poor were more needy than they had been before. To see the King dispossessed of his throne, and the nobles and bourgeois either fleeing the country or brought to penury might satisfy a desire for retribution, but it did not warm the body in winter, feed the hungry or clothe the naked. The only equality that this glorious Revolution had brought about was that of wretchedness, and an ever-present dread of denunciation and of death. That is what people murmured in the privacy of their homes, but did not dare to speak of openly. No one dared speak openly these days, for there was always the fear that spies might be lurking about, that accusations of treason would follow, with the inevitable consequences of summary trial and the guillotine.

And so the women and the children suffered in silence, and the men suffered because they could do nothing to alleviate the misery of those they cared for. Some there were lucky enough to have got out of this hell upon earth, who had shaken the dust of their unfortunate country from their shoes in the early days of the Revolution, and had sought — if not happiness, at any rate peace and contentment in other lands. But there were countless others who had ties that bound them indissolubly to France — their profession, their business, or family ties — they could not go away: they were forced to remain in their native land and to watch hunger, penury and disease stalk the countryside, whilst the authors of all this misfortune lived a life of ease in the luxurious homes, sat round their well-filled tables, ate and drank their fill and spent their leisure hours in spouting of class-hatred and of their own patriotism and selflessness. The restaurants of the Rue St. Honoré were thronged with merry-makers night after night. The members of the proletarian government sat in the most expensive seats at the Opéra and the Comédie Française and drove in their barouches to the Bois, while flaunting their democratic ideals by attending the sittings of the National Assembly stockingless and in ragged shirts and breeches. Danton kept open house at d'Arcy-sur-Aube: St. Just and Desmoulins wore jabots of Mechlin lace, and coats of the finest English cloth: Chabot had a sumptuous apartment in the Rue d'Anjou. They say to it, these men, that privations and anxiety did not come nigh them. Privations were for the rabble, who was used to them, and for aristos and bourgeois, who had never known the meaning of want: but for them, who had hoisted the flag of Equality and Fraternity, who had freed the people of France from the tyranny of Kings and nobles, for them luxury had become a right, especially if it could be got at the expense of those who had enjoyed it in the past.

In this year 1792 Maître Bastien de Croissy rented a small set of offices in the three-storied house in the Rue de la Monnaie. He was at this time verging on middle age, with hair just beginning to turn grey, and still an exceptionally handsome man, despite the lines of care and anxiety round his sensitive mouth and the settled look of melancholy in his deep-set, penetrating eyes. Bastien de Croissy had been at one time one of the most successful and most respected members of the Paris bar. He had reckoned royal personages among his clients. Men and women, distinguished in art, politics or literature, had waited on him at his sumptuous office on the Quai de la Mégisserie. Rich, good-looking, well-born, the young advocate had been fêted and courted wherever he went: the King entrusted him with important financial transactions: the duc d'Ayen was his most intimate friend: the Princesse de Lamballe was godmother to his boy, Charles-Léon. His marriage to Louise de Vandeleur, the only daughter of the distinguished general, had been one of the social events of that season in Paris. He had been a great man, a favourite of fortune until the Revolution deprived him of his patrimony and of his income. The proletarian government laid ruthless hands on the former, by forcing him to farm out his lands to tenants who refused to pay him any rent. His income in a couple of years dwindled down to nothing. Most of his former clients had emigrated, all of them were now too poor to need legal or financial advice.

Maître de Croissy was forced presently to give up his magnificent house and sumptuous offices on the Quai. He installed his wife and child in a cheap apartment in the Rue Picpus, and carried on what legal business came his way in a set of rooms which had once

been the private apartments of the Austrian banker's valet. Thither he trudged on foot every morning, whatever the weather, and here he interviewed needy bourgeois, groaning under taxation, or out-at-elbows tradesmen on the verge of bankruptcy. He was no longer Maître de Croissy, only plain Citizen Croissy, thankful that men like Chabot or Bazire reposed confidence in him, or that the great Danton deigned to put some legal business in his way. Where six clerks had scarcely been sufficient to aid him in getting through the work of the day, he had only one now — the faithful Reversac — who had obstinately refused to take his congé, when all the others were dismissed.

"You would not throw me out into the street to starve, would you, Maître?" had been the young man's earnest plea.

"But you can find other work, Maurice," de Croissy had argued, not without reason, for Maurice Reversac was a fully qualified lawyer, he was young and active and of a surety he could always have made a living for himself. "And I cannot afford to pay you an adequate salary."

"Give me board and lodging, Maître," Reversac had entreated with obstinacy: "I want nothing else. I have a few louis put by: my clothes will last me three or four years, and by that time..."

"Yes! by that time..." Maître de Croissy sighed. He had been hopeful once that sanity would return presently to the people of France, that this era of chaos and cruelty, of persecution and oppression, could not possibly last. But of late he had become more and more despondent, more and more hopeless. When Frenchmen, after having deposed their anointed king, began to talk of putting him on his trial like a common criminal, it must mean that they had become possessed of the demon of insanity, a tenacious demon who would not easily be exorcised.

But Maurice Reversac got his way. He had board and lodging in the apartment of the Rue Picpus, and in the mornings, whatever the weather, he trudged over to the Rue de la Monnaie and aired, dusted and swept the dingy office of the great advocate. In the evenings the two men would almost invariably walk back together to the Rue Picpus. The cheap, exiguous apartment meant home for both of them, and in it they found what measure of happiness their own hearts helped them to attain. For Bastien de Croissy happiness meant home-life, his love for his wife and child. For Maurice Reversac it meant living under the same roof with Josette, seeing her every day, walking with her in the evenings under the chestnut trees of Cour de la Reine.

A little higher up the narrow Passage des Fèves there stood at this same time a small eating-house, frequented chiefly by the mechanics of the Government workshops close by. It bore the sign: "Aux Trois Singes." Two steps down from the street level gave access to it through a narrow doorway. Food and drink were as cheap here as anywhere, and the landlord, a man named Furet, had the great merit of being rather deaf, and having an impediment in his speech. Added to this was the fact that he had never learned to read or write. These three attributes made of Furet an ideal landlord in a place where men with empty bellies and empty pockets were wont to let themselves go in the matter of grumbling at the present state of affairs, and at the device "Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité" which by order of the revolutionary government was emblazoned outside and in every building to which the public had access.

Furet being deaf could not spy: being mute he could not denounce. Figuratively speaking men loosened their belts when they sat at one of the trestle tables inside the Cabaret des Trois Singes, sipped their sour wine and munched their meal of stale bread and boiled beans. They loosened their belts and talked of the slave-driving that went on in the Government workshops, the tyranny of the overseers, the ever-increasing cost of living, and the paucity of their wages, certain that Furet neither heard what they said nor would be able to repeat the little that he heard.

Inside the cabaret there were two tables that were considered privileged. They were no tables properly speaking, but just empty wine-casks, standing on end, each in a recess to right and left of the narrow doorway. A couple of three-legged stools accommodated two customers and two only in each recess, and those who wished to avail themselves of the privilege of sitting there were expected to order a bottle of Furet's best wine. This was one of those unwritten laws which no frequenter of the Three Monkeys every thought of ignoring. Furet, though an ideal landlord in so many respects, could turn nasty when he chose.

On a sultry evening in the late August of '92, two men were sitting in one of these privileged recesses in the Cabaret des Trois Singes. They had talked earnestly for the past hour, always sinking their voices to a whisper. A bottle of Citizen Furet's best wine stood on the cask between them, but though they had been in the place for over an hour, the bottle was still more than half full. They seemed too deeply engrossed in conversation to waste time in drink.

One of the men was short and thick-set with dark hair and marked Levantine features. He spoke French fluently but with a throaty accent which betrayed his German origin. Whenever he wished to emphasise a point he struck the top of the wine-stained cask with the palm of his fleshy hand.

The other man was Bastien de Croissy. Earlier in the day he had received an anonymous message requesting a private meeting in the Cabaret des Trois Singes. The matter, the message averred, concerned the welfare of France and the safety of the King. Bastien was no coward, and the wording of the message was a sure passport to his confidence. He sent Maurice Reversac home early and kept the mysterious tryst.

His anonymous correspondent introduced himself as a representative of Baron de Batz, well known to Bastien as they agent of the Austrian Government and confidant of the Emperor, whose intrigues and schemes for the overthrow of the revolutionary government of France had been as daring in conception as they were futile in execution.

"But this time," the man had declared with complete self-assurance, "with your help, cher maître, we are bound to succeed."

And he had elaborated the plan conceived in Vienna by de Batz. A wonderful plan! Neither more nor less than bribing with Austrian gold some of the more venal members of their own party, and the restoration of the monarchy.

Bastien de Croissy was sceptical. He did not believe that any of the more influential Terrorists would risk their necks in so daring an intrigue. Other ways — surer ways — ought to be found, and found quickly for the King's life was indeed in peril: not only the King's but the Queen's and the lives of all the Royal family. But the Austrian agent was obstinate.

"It is from inside the National Convention that M. le Baron wants help. That he must have. If he has the co-operation of half a dozen members of the Executive, he can do the rest, and guarantee success."

Then, as de Croissy still appeared to hesitate, he laid his fleshy hand on the advocate's arm.

"Voyons, cher maître," he said, "you have the overthrow of this abominable Government just as much at heart as M. le Baron, and we none of us question your loyalty to the dynasty."

"It is not want of loyalty," de Croissy retorted hotly, "that makes me hesitate."

"What then?"

"Prudence! lest by a false move we aggravate the peril of our King."

The other shrugged.

"Well! of course," he said, "we reckon that you, cher maître, know the men with whom we wish to deal."

"Yes!" Bastien admitted, "I certainly do."

"They are venal?"

"Yes!"

"Greedy?"

"Yes!"

"Ambitious?"

"For their own pockets, yes."

"Well then?"

There was a pause. A murmur of conversation was going on all round. Some of Furet's customers were munching noisily or drinking with a gurgling sound, others were knocking dominoes about. There was no fear of eavesdropping in this dark and secluded recess where two men were discussing the destinies of France. One was the emissary of a foreign Power, the other an ardent royalist. Both had the same object in view: to save the King and his family from death, and to overthrow a government of assassins, who contemplated adding the crime of regicide to their many malefactions.

"M. le Baron," the foreign agent resumed with increased persuasiveness after a slight pause, "I need not tell you what is their provenance. Our Emperor is not going to see his sister at the mercy of a horde of assassins. M. le Baron is in his council: he will pay twenty thousand louis each to any dozen men who will lend him a hand in this affair."

"A dozen?" de Croissy exclaimed, then added with disheartened sigh: "Where to find them!"

"We are looking to you, cher maître."

"I have no influence. Not now."

"But you know the right men," the agent argued, and added significantly: "You have been watched, you know."

"I guessed."

"We know that you have business relations with members of the Convention who can be very useful to us."

"Which of them had you thought of?"

"Well! there is Chabot, for instance: the unfrocked friar."

"God in Heaven!" de Croissy exclaimed: "what a tool."

"The end will justify the means, my friend," the other retorted drily. Then he added: "And Chabot's brother-in-law Bazire."

"Both these men," de Croissy admitted, "would sell their souls, if they possessed one."

"Then there's Fabre d'Eglantine, Danton's friend."

"You are well informed."

"What about Danton himself?"

The Austrian leaned over the table, eager, excited, conscious that the Frenchman was wavering. Clearly de Croissy's scepticism was on the point of giving way before the other's enthusiasm and certainty of success. It was such a wonderful vista that was being unfolded before him. France free from the tyranny of agitation! the King restored to his throne! the country once more happy and prosperous under a stable government as ordained by God! So thought de Croissy as he lent a more and more willing ear to the projects of de Batz. He himself mentioned several names of men who might prove useful in the scheme; names of men who might be willing to betray their party for Austrian gold. There were a good many of these: agitators who were corrupt and venal, who had incited the needy and the ignorant to all kinds of barbarous deeds, not from any striving after a humanitarian ideal, but for what they themselves could get out of the social upheaval and its attendant chaos.

"If I lend a hand in your scheme," de Croissy said presently with earnest emphasis, "it must be understood that their first aim is the restoration of our King to his throne."

"Of course, cher maître, of course," the other asserted equally forcibly. "Surely you can believe in M. le Baron's disinterested motives."

"What we'll have to do," he continued eagerly, "will be to promise the men whom you will have chosen for the purpose, a certain sum of money, to be paid to them as soon as all the members of the Royal family are safely out of France... we don't want one of the Royal Princesses to be detained as hostage, do we?... Then we can promise them a further and larger sum to be paid when their Majesties make their state re-entry into their capital."

There was no doubt by now that Maître de Croissy's enthusiasm was fully aroused. He was one of those men for whom dynasty and the right of Kings amounted to a religion. For him, all that he had suffered in the past in the way of privations and loss of wealth and prestige was as nothing compared with the horror which he felt at sight of the humiliations which miscreants had imposed upon his King. To save the King! to bring him back triumphant to the throne of his forbears, were thoughts and hopes that filled Bastien de Croissy's soul with intense excitement. It was only with half an ear that he listened to the foreign emissary's further scheme: the ultimate undoing of that herd of assassins. He did not care what happened once the great goal was attained. Let those corrupt knaves of whom the Austrian Emperor stood in need thrive and batten on their own villainy, Bastien de Croissy did not care.

"You see the idea, do you not, cher maître?" the emissary was saying.

"Yes! oh yes!" Bastien murmured vaguely.

"Get as much letter-writing as you can out of the black-guards. Let us have as much written proof of their venality as possible. Then if ever these jackals rear their heads again, we can proclaim their turpitude before the entire world, discredit them before their ignorant

dupes, and see them suffer humiliation and die the shameful death which they had planned for their King.”

The meeting between the two men lasted well into the night. In the dingy apartment of the Rue Picpus Louise de Croissy sat up, waiting anxiously for her husband. Maurice Reversac, whom she questioned repeatedly, could tell her nothing of Maître de Croissy’s whereabouts, beyond the fact that he was keeping a business appointment, made by a new client who desired to remain anonymous. When Bastien finally came home, he looked tired, but singularly excited. Never since the first dark days of the Revolution three years ago had Louise seen him with such flaming eyes, or heard such cheerful, not to say optimistic words from his lips. But he said nothing to her about his interview with the agent of Baron de Batz, he only talked of the brighter outlook in the future. God, he said, would soon tire of the wickedness of men: the present terrible conditions could not possibly last. The King would soon come into his own again.

Louise was quickly infused with some of his enthusiasm, but she did not worry him with questions. Hers was one of those easy-going dispositions that are willing to accept things as they come without probing into the whys and wherefores of events. She had a profound admiration for and deep trust in her clever husband: he appeared hopeful for the future — more hopeful than he had been for a long time, and that was enough for Louise. It was only to the faithful Maurice Reversac that de Croissy spoke of his interview with the Austrian emissary, and the young man tried very hard to show some enthusiasm over the scheme, and to share his employer’s optimism and hopes for the future. Maurice Reversac, though painstaking and a very capable lawyer, was not exactly brilliant: against that his love for his employer and his employers family was so genuine and so great that it gave him what amounted to intuition, almost a foreknowledge of any change, good or evil, that destiny had in store for them. And as he listened to Maître de Croissy’s earnest talk, he felt a strange foreboding that all would not be well with this scheme: that somehow or other it would lead to disaster, and all the while that he sat at his desk that day copying the letters which the advocate had dictated to him — letters which were in the nature of tentacles, stretched out to catch a set of knaves — he felt an overwhelming temptation to throw himself at his employer’s feet and beg him not to sully his hands by contact with this foreign intrigue.

But the temptation had to be resisted. Bastien de Croissy was not the type of man who could be swayed from his purpose by the vapourings of his young clerk, however devoted he might be. And so the letters were written — half a score in all — requests by Citizen Croissy of the Paris bar for private interviews with various influential members of the Convention on matters of urgency to the State.

Chapter II

More than a year had gone by since then, and Bastien de Croissy had seen all his fondly cherished hopes turn to despair one by one. There had been no break in the dark clouds of chaos and misery that enveloped the beautiful land of France. Indeed they had gathered, darker and more stormy than before. And now had come what appeared to be the darkest days of all — the autumn of 1793. The King, condemned to death by a majority of 48 in an Assembly of over 700 members, had paid with his life for all the errors, the weaknesses, the misunderstandings of the past: the unfortunate Queen, separated from her children and from all those she cared for, accused of the vilest crimes that distorted minds could invent, was awaiting trial and inevitable death.

The various political parties — the factions and the clubs — were vying with one another in ruthlessness and cruelty. Danton the lion and Robespierre the jackal were at one another's throats; it still meant the mere spin of a coin as to which would succeed in destroying the other. The houses of detention were filled to overflowing, while the guillotine did its grim work day by day, hour by hour, without distinction of rank or sex, or of age. The Law of the Suspect had just been passed, and it was no longer necessary for an unfortunate individual to do or say anything that the Committee of Public Safety might deem counter-revolutionary, it was sufficient to be suspected of such tendencies for denunciation to follow, then arrest and finally death with but the mockery of a trial, without pleading or defence. And while the Terrorists were intent on destroying one another the country was threatened by foes without and within. Famine and disease stalked in the wake of persecution. The countryside was devastated, there were not enough hands left to till the ground and the cities were a prey to epidemics. On the frontier the victorious allied armies were advancing on the sacred soil of France. The English were pouring in from Belgium, the Russians came across the Rhine, the Spaniards crossed the gorges of the Pyrenees, whilst the torch of civil war was blazing anew in La Vendée.

Danton's cry: "To arms!" and "La Patrie is in danger!" resounded from end to end of the land. It echoed through the deserted cities and over the barren fields, while three hundred thousand "Soldiers of Liberty" marched to the frontiers, ill-clothed, ill-shod, ill-fed, to drive back the foreign invader from the gates of France. An epic, what? Worthy of a holier cause.

Those who were left behind, who were old, or weak, or indispensable, had to bear their share in the defence of La Patrie. France was transformed into an immense camp of fighters and workers. The women sewed shirts and knitted socks, salted meat and stitched breeches, and looked after their children and their homes as best they could. France came first, the home was a bad second.

It was then that little Charles-Léon fell ill. That was the beginning of the tragedy. He had always been delicate, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that he was born during the days immediately preceding the Revolution, at the time when the entire world, such as Louise de Croissy had known it, was crumbling to dust at her feet. She never thought he would live, the dear, puny mite, the precious son, whom she and Bastien had longed for, prayed for, by year until this awful winter when food became scarce and poor, and milk was almost unobtainable.

Kind old Doctor Larousse said it was nothing serious, but the child must have change of air. Paris was too unhealthy these days for delicate children. Change of air? Heavens above! how was it to be got? Louise questioned old Citizen Larousse:

"Can you get me a permit, doctor? We still have a small house in the Isère district, not far from Grenoble. I could take my boy there."

"Yes. I can get you a permit for the child — at least, I think so — under the circumstances."

"And one for me?"

"Yes, one for you — to last a week."

"How do you mean to last a week?"

"Well, you can get the diligence to Grenoble. It takes a couple of days. Then you can stay in your house, say, forty-eight hours to see the child installed. Two days to come back by diligence..."

"But I couldn't come back."

"I'm afraid you'll have to. No one is allowed to be absent from permanent domicile more than seven days. You know that, Citizeness, surely."

"But I couldn't leave Charles-Léon."

"Why not? There is not very much the matter with him. And country air..."

Louise was losing her patience. How obtuse men are, even the best of them!

"But there is no one over there to look after him," she argued.

"Surely a respectable woman from the village would..."

This time she felt her temper rising. "And you suppose that I would leave this sick baby in the care of a stranger?"

"Haven't you a relation who would look after him? Mother? Sister?"

"My mother is dead. I have no sisters. Nor would I leave Charles-Léon in anyone's care but mine."

The doctor shrugged. He was very kind, but he had seen this sort of thing so often lately, and he was powerless to help.

"I am afraid..." he said.

"Citizen Larousse," Louise broke in firmly, "you must give me a certificate that my child is too ill to be separated from his mother."

"Impossible, Citizeness."

"Won't you try?"

"I have tried — for others — often, but it's no use. You know what the decrees of the Convention are these days... no one dares..."

"And I am to see my child perish for want of a scrap of paper?"

Again the old man shrugged. He was a busy man and there were others. Presently he took his leave: there was nothing that he could do, so why should he stay? Louise hardly noticed his going. She stood there like a block of stone, a carved image of despair. The wan cheeks of the sick child seemed less bloodless than hers.

"Louise!"

Josette Gravier had been standing beside the cot all this time. Charles-Léon's tiny hand had fastened round one of her fingers and she didn't like to move, but she had lost nothing of what was going on. Her eyes, those lovely deep blue eyes of hers that seemed to shine, to emit light when she was excited, were fixed on Louise de Croissy. She had loved her and served her ever since Louise's dying mother, Madame de Vadeleur, confided the care of her baby daughter to Madame Gravier, the farmer's wife, Josette's mother, who had just lost her own new-born baby, the same age as Louise. Josette, Ma'me Gravier's first-born, was three years old at the time and, oh! how she took the little new-comer to her heart! She and Louise grew up together like sisters. They shared childish joys and tears. The old farmhouse used to ring with their laughter and the patter of their tiny feet. Papa Gravier taught them to ride and to milk the nanny-goats; they had rabbits of their own, chickens and runner-ducks.

Together they went to the Convent school of the Visitation to learn everything that was desirable for young ladies to know, sewing and embroidery, calligraphy and recitation, a smattering of history and geography, and the art of letter-writing. For there was to be no difference in the education of Louise de Vadeleur, the motherless daughter of the distinguished general, aide-de-camp to His Majesty, and of Josette Gravier, the farmer's daughter.

When, in the course of time, Louise married Bastien de Croissy, the eminent advocate at the Paris bar, Josette nearly broke her heart at parting from her lifelong friend.

Then came the dark days of '89. Papa Gravier was killed during the revolutionary riots in Grenoble; maman died of a broken heart, and Louise begged Josette to come and live with her. The farm was sold, the girl had a small competence; she went up to Paris and continued to love and serve Louise as she had done in the past. She was her comfort and her help during those first terrible days of the Revolution: she was her moral support now that the shadow of the guillotine lay menacing over the household of the once successful lawyer. *La Patrie* in danger claimed so many hours of her day; she, too, had to sew shirts and stitch breeches for the "Soldiers of Liberty," but her evenings, her nights, her early mornings were her own, and these she devoted to the service of Louise and of Charles-Léon.

She had a tiny room in the apartment of the Rue Picpus, but to her loving little heart that room was paradise, for here, when she was at home, she had Charles-Léon to play with, she had his little clothes to wash and to iron, she saw his great dark eyes, so like his mother's fixed upon her while she told him tales of romance and of chivalry. The boy was only five at this time, but he was strangely precocious where such tales were concerned, he seemed to understand and appreciate the mighty deeds of Hector and Achilles, of Bayard and Joan of Arc, the stories of the Crusades, of Godfrey de Bouillon and Richard of the Lionheart. Perhaps it was because he felt himself to be weak and puny and knew with the unexplainable instinct of childhood that he would never be big enough or strong enough to emulate those deeds of valour, that he loved to hear Josette recount them to him with a wealth of detail supplied by her romantic imagination.

But if Charles-Léon loved to hear these stories of the past, far more eagerly did he listen to those of to-day, and in the recounting of heroic adventures which not only had happened recently, but went on almost every day, Josette's storehouse of hair-raising narratives was well-nigh inexhaustible. Through her impassioned rhetoric he first heard of the heroic deeds of that amazing Englishman who went by the curious name of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Josette told him about a number of gallant gentlemen who had taken such compassion on the sufferings of the innocent that they devoted their lives to rescuing those who were persecuted and oppressed by the tyrannical Government of the day. She told him how women and children, old or feeble men, dragged before a tribunal that knew of no issue save the sentence of death, were spirited away out of prison walls or from the very tumbrils that were taking them to the guillotine, spirited away as if by a miracle, and through the agency of this mysterious hero whose identity had always remained unknown, but whose deeds of self-sacrifice were surely writ large in the book of the Recording Angel.

And while Josette unfolded these tales of valour, and the boy listened to her awed and silent, her eyes would shine with unshed tears, and her lips quiver with enthusiasm. She had made a fetish of the Scarlet Pimpernel: had enshrined him in her heart like a demi-god, and this hero-worship grew all the more fervent within her as she found no response to her enthusiasm in the bosom of her adopted family, only in Charles-Léon. She was too gentle and timid to speak openly of this hero-worship to Maître de Croissy, and Louise, whom she adored, was wont to grow slightly sarcastic at the expense of Josette's imaginary hero. She did not believe in his existence at all, and thought that all the tales of miraculous rescues set down to his agency were either mere coincidence or just the product of a romantic girl's fantasy. As for Maurice Reversac — well! little Josette thought him too dull and unimaginative to appreciate the almost legendary personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, so, whenever a fresh tale got about the city of how a whole batch of innocent men, women and children had escaped out of France on the very eve of their arrest or condemnation to death, Josette kept the tale to herself, until she and Charles-Léon were alone in her little room, and she found response to her enthusiasm in the boy's glowing eyes and his murmur of passionate admiration.

When Charles-Léon's chronic weakness turned to actual, serious anemia, all the joy seemed to go out of Josette's life. Real joy, that is; for she went about outwardly just as gay as before, singing, crooning to the little invalid, cheering Louise and comforting Bastien, who spoke of her now as the angel in the house. Every minute that she could spare she spent by the side of Charles-Léon's little bed, and when no one was listening she would whisper into his ear some of the old stories which he loved. Then if the ghost of a smile came round the child's pallid lips, Josette would feel almost happy, even though she felt ready to burst into tears.

And now, as soon as the old doctor had gone, Josette disengaged her hand from the sick child's grasp and put her arms around Louise's shoulders.

"We must not lose heart, Louise chérie," she said. "There must be a way out of this impasse."

"A way out?" Louise murmured. "Oh, if I only knew!"

"Sit down here, chérie, and let me talk to you."

There was a measure of comfort even in Josette's voice. It was low and a trifle husky; such a voice as some women have whose mission in life is to comfort and to soothe. She made Louise sit down in the big armchair; then she knelt down in front of her, her little hands clasped together and resting in Louise's lap.

"Listen, Louise chérie," she said with great excitement.

Louise looked down on the beautiful eager face of her friend; the soft red lips were quivering with excitement; the large luminous eyes were aglow with a strange enthusiasm. She felt puzzled, for it was not in Josette's nature to show so much emotion. She was always deemed quiet and sensible. She never spoke at random, and never made a show of her fantastic dreams.

"Well, darling?" Louise said listlessly: "I am listening. What is it?"

Josette looked up, wide-eyed and eager, straight into her friend's face.

"What we must do, *chérie*," she said with earnest emphasis, "is to get in touch with those wonderful Englishmen. You know who I mean. They have already accomplished miracles on behalf of innocent men, women and children, of people who were in a worse plight than we are now."

Louise frowned. She knew well enough what Josette meant: she had often laughed at the girl's enthusiasm over this imaginary hero, who seemed to haunt her dreams. But just now she felt that there was something flippant and unseemly in talking such fantastic rubbish: dreams seemed out of place when reality was so heart-breaking. She tried to rise to push Josette away, but the girl clung to her and would not let her go.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Josette," Louise said coldly at last. "This is not the time for jest, or for talking of things that only exist in your imagination."

Josette shook her head.

"Why do you say that, Louise *chérie*? Why should you deliberately close your eyes and ears to facts — hard, sober, solid facts that everybody knows, that everybody admits to be true? I should have thought," the girl went on in her earnest, persuasive way, "that with this terrible thing hanging over you — Charles-Léon getting more and more ill, till there's no hope of his recovery..."

"Josette!! Don't!" Louise cried out in an agony of reproach.

"I must," Josette insisted with quiet force: "it is my duty to make you look straight at facts as they are; and I say, that with this terrible thing hanging over us, you must cast off foolish prejudices and open your mind to what is the truth and will be your salvation."

Louise looked down at the beautiful, eager face turned up to hers. She felt all of a sudden strangely moved. Of course Josette was talking nonsense. Dear, sensible, quiet little Josette! She was simple and not at all clever, but it was funny, to say the least of it, how persuasive she could be when she had set her mind on anything. Even over small things she would sometimes wax so eloquent that there was no resisting her. No! she was not clever, but she was extra-ordinarily shrewd where the welfare of those she loved was in question. And she adored Louise and worshipped Charles-Léon.

Since the doctor's visit Louise had felt herself floundering in such a torrent of grief that she was ready to clutch at any straw that would save her from despair. Josette was talking nonsense, of course. All the family were wont to chaff her over her adoration of the legendary hero, so much so, in fact, that the girl had ceased altogether to talk about him. But now her eyes were positively glowing with enthusiasm, and it seemed to Louise, as she gazed into them, that they radiated hope and trust. And Louise was so longing for a ray of hope.

"I suppose," she said with a wan smile, "that you are harping on your favourite string."

"I am," Josette admitted with fervour.

Then as Louise, still obstinate and unbelieving, gave a slight shrug and a sigh, the girl continued:

"Surely, Louise *chérie*, you have heard other people besides me — clever, distinguished, important people — talk of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I have," Louise admitted: "but only in a vague way."

"And what he did for the Maillys?"

"The general's widow, you mean?"

"Yes. She and her sister and the two children were simply snatched away from under the very noses of the guard who were taking them to execution."

"I did hear something about that," was Louise's dry comment; "but..."

"And of about the de Tournays?" Josette broke in eagerly.

"They are in England now. So I heard."

"They are. And who took them there? The Marquis was in hiding in the woods near his property: Mme. de Tournay and Suzanne were in terror for him and in fear for their lives. It was said openly that their arrest was imminent. And when the National Guard went to arrest them, Mm. de Tournay and Suzanne were gone, and the Marquis was never found. You've said it yourself, they are in England now."

"But Josette darling," Louise argued obstinately, "there's nothing to say in all those stories that any mysterious Englishman had aught to do with the Maillys and the Tournays."

"Who then?"

"It was the intervention of God."

Josette shook her pretty head somewhat sadly.

"God does not intervene directly these days, my darling," she said; "He chooses great and good men to do His bidding."

"And I don't see," Louise concluded with some impatience, "I don't see what the Maillys or the Tournays have to do with me and Charles-Léon."

But at this Josette's angelic temper very nearly forsook her.

"Don't be obtuse, Louise," she cried hotly. "We don't want to get in touch with the Maillys or the Tournays. I never suggested anything so ridiculous. All I mean was that they and hundreds — yes, hundreds — of others owe their life to the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Tears of vexation rose from her loving heart at Louise's obduracy. She it was who tried to rise now, but this time Louise held her down: Poor Louise! She did so long to believe — really believe. Hope is such a precious thing when the heart is full to bursting of anxiety and sorrow. And she longed for hope and for faith: the same hope that made Josette's eyes sparkle and gave a ring of sanguine expectation to her voice.

"Don't run away, Josette," she pleaded. "You don't know how I envy you your hero-worship and your trust. But listen, darling: even if your Scarlet Pimpernel does exist — see, I no longer say that he does not — even if he does, he knows nothing about us. How then can he interfere?"

Josette drew a sigh of relief. For the first time since the hot argument had started she felt that she was gaining ground. Her faith was going to prevail. Louise's scepticism had changed: the look of despair had gone and there was a light in her eyes which suggested that hope had crept at last into her heart. The zealot had vanquished the obstinacy of the sceptic, and Josette having gained her point could speak more calmly now.

She shook her head and smiled.

"Don't you believe it, chérie," she said gently.

"Believe what?"

"That the Scarlet Pimpernel knows nothing about you. He does. I am sure he does. All you have to do is just to invoke him in your heart."

"Nonsense, Josette," Louise protested. "You are not pretending, I suppose, that this Englishman is a supernatural being?"

"I don't know about that," said the young devotee, "but I do know that he is the bravest, finest man that ever lived. And I know also that wherever there is a great misfortune or a great sorrow he appears like a young god, and at once care and anxiety disappear, and grief is turned to joy."

"I wish I could have your faith in miracles, my Josette."

"You need not call it a miracle. The good deeds of the Scarlet Pimpernel are absolutely real."

"But even so, my dear, what can we do? We don't know where to find him. And if we did, what could he do for us — for Charles-Léon?"

"He can get you a permit to go into the country with Charles-Léon, and to remain with him until he is well again."

"I don't believe that. Nothing short of a miracle can accomplish that. You heard what the doctor said."

"Well, I say that the Scarlet Pimpernel can do anything! And I mean to get in touch with him."

"You are stupid, Josette."

"And you are a woman of little faith. Why don't you read your Bible, and see what it says there about faith?"

Louise shrugged. "The Bible," she said coolly, "tells us about moving mountains by faith, but nothing about finding a needle in a haystack or a mysterious Englishman in the streets of Paris."

But Josette was now proof against her friend's sarcasm. She jumped to her feet and put her arms round Louise.

"Well!" she rejoined, "my faith is going to find him, that's all I know. I wish," she went on with a comic little inflection of her voice, "that I had not wasted this past hour in trying to put some of that faith into you. And now I know that I shall have to spend at least another hour driving it into Maurice's wooden head."

Louise smiled. "Why Maurice?" she asked.

"For the same reason," the girl replied, "that I had to wear myself out in order to break your obstinacy. It will take me some time perhaps, as you say, to find the Scarlet Pimpernel in the streets of Paris. I shall have to be out and about a great deal, and if I had said nothing to any of you, you and Maurice and even Bastien would always have been asking me questions: where I had been? why did I go out? why was I late for dinner? And Maurice would have gone about looking like a bear with a sore head, whenever I refused to go for a walk with him. So of course," Josette concluded naïvely, "I shall have to tell him."

Louise said nothing more after that: she sat with clasped hands and eyes fixed into vacancy, thinking, hoping, or perhaps just praying for hope.

But Josette having had her say went across the room to Charles-Léon's little bed. She leaned over him and kissed him. He whispered her name and added feebly: "Tell me some more... about the Scarlet Pimpernel... when will he come... to take me away... to England?"

"Soon," Josette murmured in reply: "very soon. Do not doubt it, my precious. God will send him to you very soon."

Then without another word to Louise she ran quickly out of the room.

Chapter III

Josette had picked up her cape and slung it round her shoulders; she pulled the hood over her fair curls and ran swiftly down the stairs and out into the street. Thoughts of the Scarlet Pimpernel had a way of whipping up her blood. When she spoke of him she at once wanted to be up and doing. She wanted to be up and doing something that would emulate the marvellous deeds of that mysterious hero of romance — deeds which she had heard recounted with bated breath by her fellow-workers in the Government workshops where breeches were stitched and stockings knitted by the hundred for the “Soldiers of Liberty,” marching against the foreign foe.

Josette on this late afternoon had to put in a couple of hours at the workshop. At six o’clock when the light gave out she would be free; and at six o’clock Maurice Reversac would of a certainty be outside the gates of the workshop waiting to escort her first for a walk along the Quai or the Cour la Reine and then home to cook the family supper.

She came out of the workshop on this late afternoon with glowing eyes and flaming cheeks, and nearly ran past Maurice without seeing him as her mind was so full of other things. She was humming a tune as she ran. Maurice was waiting for her at the gate, and he called to her. He felt very happy all of a sudden because Josette seemed so pleased to see him.

“Maurice!” she cried, “I am so glad you have come.”

Maurice, being young and up to his eyes in love, did not think of asking her why she should be so glad. She was glad to see him and that was enough for any lover. He took hold of her by the elbow and led her through the narrow streets as far as the Quai and then over to Cour la Reine, where there were seats under the chestnut trees from which the big prickly burrs were falling fast, and split as they fell, revealing the lovely smooth surface of the chestnuts, in colour like Josette’s hair; and as the last glimmer of daylight faded into evening the sparrows in the trees kicked up a great shindy, which was like a paean of joy in complete accord with Maurice’s mood.

Nor did Maurice notice that Josette was absorbed; her eyes shone more brightly than usual, and her lips, which were so like ripe fruit, were slightly parted, and Maurice was just aching for a kiss.

He persuaded her to sit down: the air was so soft and balmy — lovely autumn evening with the scent of ripe fruit about; and those sparrows up in the chestnut trees did kick up such a shindy before tucking their little heads under their wings for the night. There were a few passers-by — not many — and this corner of old Paris appeared singularly peaceful, with a whole world of dreams and hope between it and the horrors of the Revolution. Yet this was the hour when the crowds that assembled daily on the Place de la Barrière du Trône to watch the guillotine at its dread work wandered, tired and silent, back to their homes, and when rattling carts bore their gruesome burdens to the public burying-place.

But what are social upheavals, revolutions or cataclysms to a lover absorbed in the contemplation of his beloved? Maurice Reversac sat beside Josette and could see her adorable profile with the small tip-tilted nose and the outline of her cheek so like a ripe peach. Josette sat silent and motionless at first, so Maurice felt emboldened to put out a timid hand and take hold of hers. She made no resistance and he thought of a surety that he would swoon with joy because she allowed that exquisite little hand to rest contented in his great rough palm. It felt just like a bird, soft and warm and fluttering, like those sparrows in up the trees.

“Josette,” Maurice ventured to murmur after a little while, “you are glad to see me... you said so... didn’t you, Josette?”

She was not looking at him, but he didn’t mind that, for though the twilight was fast drawing in he could still see her adorable profile — that delicious tip-tilted nose and the lashes that curled like a fringe of gold over her eyes. The hood had fallen back from her head and the soft evening breeze stirred the tendrils of her chestnut-coloured hair.

“You are so beautiful, Josette,” Maurice sighed, “and I am such a clumsy lout, but I would know how to make you happy. Happy! My God! I would make you as happy as the birds — without a care in the world. And all day you would just go about singing — singing — because you would have forgotten by then what sorrow was like.”

Encouraged by her silence he ventured to draw a little nearer to her.

“I have seen,” he murmured quite close to her ear, “an apartment that would be just the right setting for you, Josette darling: only three rooms and a little kitchen, but the morning sun comes pouring in through the big windows and there is a clump of chestnut trees in front in which the birds will sing in the spring from early dawn while you still lie in bed. I shall have got up by then and will be in the kitchen getting some hot milk for you; then I will bring you the warm milk, and while you drink it I shall sit and watch the sunshine play about in your hair.”

Never before had Maurice plucked up sufficient courage to talk at such length, usually when Josette was beside him he was so absorbed in looking at her and longing for her that his tongue refused him service; for these were days when true lovers were timid and la jeune fille was an almost sacred being, whose limpid soul no profane word dared disturb, and Maurice had been brought up by an adoring mother in these rigid principles. This cruel and godless Revolution had, indeed, shattered many ideals and toughened the fibres of men’s hearts and women’s sensibilities, else Maurice would never have dared thus to approach the object of his dreams — her whom he hoped one day to have for wife.

Josette’s silence had emboldened him, and the fact that she had allowed her hand to rest in his all this while. Now he actually dared to put out his arm and encircle her shoulders; he was, in fact, drawing her to him, feeling that he was on the point of stepping across the threshold of Paradise, when slowly she turned her face to him and looked him straight between the eyes. Her own appeared puzzled and there was a frown as of great perplexity between her brows.

“Maurice,” she asked, and there was no doubt that she was both puzzled and astonished, “are you, perchance, trying to make love to me?”

Then, as he remained silent and looked, in his turn, both bewildered and hurt, she gave a light laugh, gently disengaged her hand and patted him on the cheek.

“My poor Maurice!” she said, “I wish I had listened sooner, but I was thinking of other things....”

When a man had had the feeling that he has actually reached the gates of Paradise and that a kindly Saint Peter was already rattling his keys so as to let him in — when he has felt this for over half an hour and then, in a few seconds, is hurtled down into an abyss of disappointment, his first sensation is as if he had been stunned by a terrific blow on the head, and he becomes entirely tongue-tied.

Bewildered and dumb, all Maurice could do was to stare at the adorable vision of a golden-haired girl whom he worshipped and who, with a light heart and a gay laugh, had just dealt him the most cruel blow that any man had ever been called upon to endure.

The worst of it was that this adorable golden-haired girl had apparently no notion of how cruel had been the blow, for she prattled on about the other things of which she had been thinking quite oblivious of the subject-matter of poor Maurice's impassioned pleading.

"Maurice dear," she said, "listen to me and do not talk nonsense."

Nonsense!! Ye gods!

"You have got to help me, Maurice, to find the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Her beautiful eyes, which she turned full upon him, were aglow with enthusiasm — enthusiasm for something in which he had no share. Nor did he understand what she was talking about. All he knew was that she had dismissed his pleading as nonsense, and that with a curious smile on her lips she was just turning a knife round and round in his heart.

And, oh, how that hurt!

But she also said that she wanted his help, so he tried very hard to get at her meaning, though she seemed to be prattling on rather inconsequently.

"Charles-Léon," she said, "is very ill, you know, Maurice dear — that is, not so very ill, but the doctor says he must have change of air or he will perish in a decline."

"A doctor can always get a permit for a patient in extremis..." Maurice put in, assuming a judicial manner.

"Don't be stupid, Maurice!" she retorted impatiently. "We all know that the doctor can get a permit for Charles-Léon, but he can't get one for Louise or for me, and where is Charles-Léon to go with neither of us to look after him?"

"Then what's to be done?"

"Try and listen more attentively, Maurice," she retorted. "You are not really listening."

"I am," he protested, "I swear I am!"

"Really — really?"

"Really, Josette — with both ears and all the intelligence I've got."

"Very well, then. You have heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel, haven't you?"

"We all have — in a way."

"What do you mean by 'in a way'?"

"Well, no one is quite sure if he really exists, and..."

"Maurice, don't, in Heaven's name, be stupid! You must have brains or Maître de Croissy could not do with you as his confidential clerk. So do use your brains, Maurice, and tell me if the Scarlet Pimpernel does not exist, then how did the Maillys get away — and the Frontenacs — and the Tournays — and — and...? Oh, Maurice, I hate your being so stupid!"

"You have only got to tell me, Josette, what you wish me to do," poor Maurice put in very humbly, "and I will do it, of course."

"I want you to help me find the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Gladly will I help you, Josette; but won't it be like looking for a needle in a haystack?"

"Not at all," this intrepid little Joan of Arc asserted. "Listen, Maurice! In our workshop there is a girl, Agnes Minet, who was at one time in service with a Madame Carré, whose son Antoine was in hiding because he was threatened with arrest. His mother didn't dare write to him lest her letters be intercepted. Well, there was a public letter-writer who plied his trade at the corner of the Pont-Neuf — a funny old scarecrow he was — and Agnes, who cannot write, used sometimes to employ him to write to her fiancé who was away with the army. She says she doesn't know exactly how it all happened — so he thinks the old letter-writer must have questioned her very cleverly, or else have followed her home one day — but, anyway, she caught herself telling him all about Antoine Carré and took him and his mother safely out of France."

She paused a moment to draw breath, for she had spoken excitedly and all the time scarcely above a whisper, for the subject-matter was not one she would have liked some evil-wisher to hear. There were so many spies about these days eager for blood-money — the forty sous which could be earned for denouncing a "suspect."

Maurice, fully alive to this, made no immediate comment, but after a few seconds he suggested: "Shall we walk?" and took Josette by the elbow. It was getting dark now: the Cour la Reine was only poorly-lighted by a very few street lanterns placed at long intervals. They walked together in silence for a time, looking like young lovers intent on amorous effusions. The few passers-by, furtive and noiseless, took no notice of them.

"Antoine Carré's case is not the only one, Maurice," Josette resumed presently. "I could tell you dozens of others. The girls in the workshop talk about it all the time when the superintendent is out of the room."

Again she paused, and then went on firmly, stressing her command: "You have got to help me, you know, Maurice."

"Of course I will, Josette," Maurice murmured. "But how?"

"You must find the public letter-writer who used to have his pitch at the corner of the Pont-Neuf."

"There isn't one there now. I went past..."

"I know that. He has changed his pitch, that's all."

"How shall I know which is the right man? There are a number of public letter-writers in Paris."

"I shall be with you, Maurice, and I shall know, I am sure I shall know. There is something inside my heart which will make it beat faster as soon as the Scarlet Pimpernel is somewhere nigh. Besides..."

She checked herself, for involuntarily she had raised her voice, and at once Maurice tightened his hold on her arm. In the fast-gathering gloom a shuffling step had slid furtively past them. They could not clearly see the form of this passer-by, only the vague outline of a man stooping under a weight which he carried over his shoulders.

"We must be careful, Josette..." Maurice whispered softly.

"I know — I was carried away. But, Maurice, you will help me?"

"Of course," he said.

And though he did not feel very hopeful he said it fervently, for the prospect of roaming through the streets of Paris in the company of Josette in search of a person who might be mythical and who certainly would take a lot of finding, was of the rosiest. Indeed, Maurice hoped that the same mythical personage would so hide himself that it would be many days before he was ultimately found.

"And when we have found him," Josette continued glibly, once more speaking under her breath, "you shall tell him about Louise and Charles-Léon, and that Louise must have a permit to take the poor sick baby into the country and to remain with him until he is well."

"And you think...?"

"I don't think, Maurice," she said emphatically, "I know that the Scarlet Pimpernel will do the rest."

She was like a young devotee proclaiming the miracles of her patron saint. It was getting very dark now and at home Louise and Charles-Léon would be waiting for Josette, the angel in the house. Mechanically and a little sadly Maurice led the girl's footsteps in the direction of home. They spoke very little together after this: it seemed as if, having made her profession of faith, Josette took her loyal friend's co-operation for granted. She did not even now realise the cruelty of the blow which she had dealt to his fondest hopes. With the image of this heroic Scarlet Pimpernel so firmly fixed in her mind, Josette was not likely to listen to a declaration of love from a humble lawyer's clerk, who had neither deeds of valour nor a handsome presence wherewith to fascinate a young girl so romantically inclined.

Thus they wandered homewards in silence — she indulging in her dreams, and he nursing a sorrow that he felt would be eternal. Up above in the chestnut trees the sparrows had gone to roost. Their paeon of joy had ceased, only the many sounds of a great city not yet abed broke in silence of the night. Furtive footsteps still glided well-nigh soundlessly by; now and then there came a twitter, a fluttering of wings from above, or from far away the barking of a dog, the banging of a door, or the rattling of cart-wheels on the cobble-stones. And sometimes the evening breeze would give a great sigh that rose up into the evening air as if coming from hundreds of thousands of prisoners groaning under the tyranny of bloodthirsty oppressors, of a government that proclaimed Liberty and Fraternity from the steps of the guillotine.

And at home in the small apartment of the Rue Picpus, Josette and Maurice found that Louise had cried her eyes out until she had worked herself into a state of hysteria, while Maître de Croissy, silent and thoughtful, sat in dejection by the bedside of his sick child.

Chapter IV

The evening was spent — strangely enough — in silence and in gloom. Josette, who a few hours before had thought to have gained her point and to have brought both hope and faith into Louise's heart, found that her friend had fallen back into that state of dejection out of which nothing that Josette said could possibly drag her. Josette put this down to Bastien's influence. Bastien too had always been skeptical about the Scarlet Pimpernel, didn't believe in his existence at all. He somehow confused him in his mind with that Austrian agent Baron de Batz, of whom he had had such bitter experience. De Batz, too, had been full of schemes for rescuing the King, the Royal family, and many a persecuted noble, threatened with death, but months had gone by and nothing had been done. The mint of Austrian money promised by him was never forthcoming. De Batz himself was never on the spot when he wanted. In vain had Bastien de Croissy toiled and striven his hardest to bring negotiations to a head between a certain few members of the revolutionary government who were ready to accept bribes, and the Austrian emissaries who professed themselves ready to pay. Men like Chabot and Bazire, and Fabre d'Eglantine had been willing enough to negotiate, though their demands became more and more exorbitant as time went on and the King's peril more imminent: even Danton had thrown out hints that in these hard times a man must live, so why not on Austrian money, since French gold was so scarce? but somehow, when everything appeared to be ready, and greedy palms were already outstretched to receive the promised bribes, the money was never there, and de Batz, warned of his peril if he remained in France, had fled across the border.

And somehow the recollection of that intriguer was inextricably mixed up in de Croissy's mind with the legendary personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"Josette is quite convinced of his existence," Louise had said to her husband that afternoon, when they stood together in sorrow and tears beside the sick-bed of Charles-Léon, "and that he can and will get me the permit to take our darling away into the country."

But Bastien shook his head, sadly and obstinately.

"Don't lure yourself with false hopes, my dear," he said. "Josette is an angel, but she is also a child. She dreams and persuades herself that her dreams are realities. I have had experience of such dreams myself."

"I know," Louise rejoined with a sigh.

Hers was one of those yielding natures, gentle and affectionate, that can be swayed one way or the other by an event, sometimes by a mere word; and yet at times she would be strangely obstinate, with the obstinacy of the very weak, or of the feather-pillow that seems to yield at the touch only to regain its own shape the next moment.

A word from Bastien and all the optimism which Josette's ardour had implanted in her heart froze again into scepticism and discouragement.

"If we cannot save Charles-Léon," she said, "I shall die."

Twenty-four hours had gone by since then, and to-day Bastien de Croissy sat alone in the small musty office of the Rue de la Monnaie. He had sent his clerk, Maurice Reversac, off early because he was a kindly man and had not forgotten the days of his own courtship, and knew that the happiest hours of Maurice's day were those when he could meet Josette Gravier outside the gate of the Government workshop and take her out for a walk.

De Croissy had also sent Maurice away early because he wanted to be alone. A crisis had arisen in his life with which he desired to deal thoughtfully and dispassionately. His child was ill, would die, perhaps, unless he, the father, could contrive to send him out of Paris into the country under the care of his mother. The tyranny of this Government of Liberty and Fraternity had made this impossible; no man, woman or child was allowed to be absent from the permanent domicile without a special permit, which was seldom, if ever, granted; not unless some powerful leverage could be found to force those tyrants to grant the permit.

Now Bastien de Croissy was in possession of such a leverage. The question was: had the time come at last to make use of it? He now sat at his desk and a sheaf of letters were laid out before him. These letters, if rightly handled, would, he knew, put so much power into his hands that he could force some of the most influential members of the government to grant him anything he chose to ask.

"Get as much letter-writing as you can out of the black-guards," the Austrian emissary had said to him during that memorable interview in the Cabaret des Trois Singes, and de Croissy had acted on this advice. On one pretext or another he had succeeded in persuading at any rate three influential members of the existing Government to put their demands in writing. Bastien had naturally carefully preserved these letters. De Batz was going to use them for his own ends: as a means wherewith to discredit men who proclaimed their disinterestedness and patriotism from the housetops, and not only to discredit them, "but to make them suffer the same humiliation and the same shameful death which they had planned for their King." These also had been the emissary's words at that fateful interview; and de Croissy had kept the letters up to now, not with a view to using them for his own benefit, or for purposes of blackmail, but with the earnest hope that one day chance would enable him to use them for the overthrow and humiliation of tyrants and regicides.

But now events had suddenly taken a sharp turn. Charles-Léon might die if he was not taken out of the fever-infested city, and Louise, very rightly, would not trust the sick child in a stranger's hands. And if Charles-Léon were to die, Louise would quickly follow the child to his grave.

Bastien de Croissy sat for hours in front of his desk with those letters spread out before him. He picked them up one by one, read and re-read them and put them down again. He rested his weary head against his hand, for thoughts weighed heavily on his mind. To a man of integrity, a high-minded gentleman as he had always been, the alternative was a horrible one. On one side there was that hideous thing, blackmail, which was abhorrent to him, and on the other the life of his wife and child. Honour and conscience ruled one way, and every fibre of his heart the other.

The flickering light of tallow candles threw grotesque shadows on the whitewashed walls and cast fantastic gleams of light on the handsome face of the great lawyer, with its massive forehead and nobly sculptured profile, on the well-shaped hands and hair prematurely grey.

The letter which he now held in his hand was signed "François Chabot," once a Capuchin friar, now a member of the National Convention and one of Danton's closest friends, whose uncompromising patriotism had been proclaimed on the housetops both by himself and his colleagues.

And this is what François Chabot had written not much more than a year ago to Maître de Croissy, advocate:

"My friend, as I told you in our last interview, I am inclined to listen favourably to the proposals of B. If he really disposes of the funds of which he boasts, tell him that I can get C. out of his present impasse and put him once more in possession of the seat which he values. Further, I and the others can keep him in a guarantee that nothing shall happen (say) for five years to disturb him again. But you can also tell B. that his proposals are futile. I shall want twenty thousand on the day that C. enters his house in the park. moreover, your honorarium for carrying this matter through must be paid by B. My friends and I will not incur any expense in connection with it."

Bastien de Croissy now took up his pen and a sheet of paper, and after a moment's reflection he transcribed the somewhat enigmatic letter by substituting names for initials, and intelligible words for those that appeared ununderstandable. The letter so transcribed now began thus:

"My friend, as I told you in our last interview, I am inclined to listen favourably to the proposals of de Batz. If he really disposes of the funds of which he boasts, tell him that I can get the King out of his present impasse and put him once more in possession of his throne..."

The rest of the letter he transcribed in the same way: always substituting the words "the King" for "C." and "de Batz" for "B."; his house in the park Maître de Croissy transcribed as "Versailles."

The whole text would now be clear to anybody. Bastien then took up a number of other letters and transcribed these in the same way as he had done the first: then he made two separate packets of the whole correspondence; one of these contained the original letters, and these he slipped in the inside pocket of his coat, the other he tied loosely together and put it away with other papers in his desk. He then locked the desk and the strong box, turned out the lights in the office and finally went home.

His mind was definitely made up.

The same evening Bastien made a clean breast of all the circumstances to Louise. Maurice was there and Josette of course, and there was little Charles-Léon, who lay like a half-animate bird in his mother's arms.

For Maurice the story was not new. He had known of the first interview between de Croissy and the Austrian emissary, he had watched the intrigue developing step by step, through the good offices of the distinguished advocate. As a matter of fact he had more than once acted as messenger, taking letters to and fro between the dingy offices of the Rue de la Monnaie and the sumptuous apartments of the Representatives of the People. He had spoken to Chabot, the unfrocked friar who lived in unparalleled luxury in the Rue d'Anjou, dressed in town like a Beau Brummel, but attended the sittings of the National Convention in a tattered coat and shoes down at heel, his hair unkempt, his chin unshaven, his hands unwashed, in order to flaunt what he was pleased to call his democratic ideals. He saw Bazire, Chabot's brother-in-law, who hired a mudlark to enact the part of pretended assassin in order that he might raise the cry: "The royalists are murdering the patriots!" (As it happened, the pretended assassin did not turn up at the right moment, and Bazire had been left to wander alone up and down the dark cul-de-sac waiting to receive the stab that was to exalt him before the Convention as the victim of his ardent patriotism.) Maurice had interviewed Fabre d'Eglantine, Danton's most intimate friend, who was only too ready to see his palm greased with foreign gold, and even the ruthless and impeccable Danton had to Maurice's knowledge nibbled at the sweet biscuit held to his nose by the Austrian agent.

All these men Maurice Reversac had known, interviewed and despised. But he had also seen the clouds of bitterness and disappointment gather in Bastien de Croissy's face: he guessed more than he actually knew how one by one all the hopes born of that first interview in the Cabaret des Trois Singes had been laid to dust. The continued captivity of the Royal family, the severance of the Queen from her children had been the first heavy blows dealt to those fond hopes. The King's condemnation and death completely shattered them. Maurice dared not ask what the Austrian was doing, or what final preposterous demands had come from the Representatives of the People, which had caused the negotiations to be finally broken off. For months now the history of those negotiations had almost been forgotten. As far as Maurice was concerned he had ceased to think of them, he only remembered the letters that had passed during that time, as incidents that might have had wonderful consequences, but had since sunk into the limbo of forgetfulness.

To Louise and Josette, on the other hand, the story was entirely new. Each heard it with widely divergent feelings. Obviously to Louise it meant salvation. She listened to her husband with glowing eyes, her lips were parted, her breath came and went with almost feverish rapidity, and every now and then she pressed Charles-Léon closer and closer to her breast. Never for a moment did she appear in doubt that here was complete deliverance from every trouble and every anxiety. Indeed the only thing that seemed to trouble her was the fact that Bastien had withheld this wonderful secret from her for so long.

"We might have been free to leave this hell upon earth long before this," she exclaimed with passionate reproach when Bastien admitted that he had hesitated to use such a weapon for his own benefit.

"It looks so like blackmail," Bastien murmured feebly.

"Blackmail?" Louise retorted vehemently. "Would you call it murder if you killed a mad dog?"

Bastien gave a short, quick sigh. The letters were to have been the magic key wherewith to open the prison door for his King and Queen: the mystic wand that would clear the way for them to their throne.

"Is not Charles-Léon's life more precious than any King's?" Louise protested passionately.

And soon she embarked on plans for the future. She would take the child into the country, and presently, if things didn't get any better, they would join the band loyal émigrés who led a precarious but peaceful existence in Belgium or England; Josette and Maurice would come with them, and together they would all wait for those better times which could not now be very long in coming.

"There is nothing," she declared emphatically, "that these men would dare refuse us. By threatening to send those letters to the Moniteur or any other paper we can force them to grant us permits, passports, anything we choose. Oh, Bastien!" she added impetuously, "why did you not think of all this before?"

Josette alone was silent. She alone had hardly uttered a word the whole evening. In silence she had listened to Bastien's exposition of the case, and to Maurice's comments on the situation, and she remained silent while Louise talked and reproached and planned. She only spoke when Bastien, after he had read aloud some of the more important letters, gathered them all together and tied them once more into a packet. He was about to slip them into his coat pocket when Josette spoke up.

"Don't do that, Bastien," she said impulsively, and stretched out her hand for the packet.

"Don't do what, my dear?" de Croissy asked.

"Let Louise take charge of the letters," the girl pleaded, "until those treacherous devils are ready to give you the permits and safe-conducts in exchange for them. You can show your transcriptions to them at first: but they wouldn't be above sticking a knife into you in the course of conversation, and rifling your pockets if they knew you had the originals on you at the time."

Bastien couldn't help smiling at the girl's eagerness, but he put the packet of letters into her outstretched hand.

"You are right, Josette," he said: "you are always right. The angel in the house! What will you do with them?"

"Sew them into the lining of Louise's corsets," Josette replied.

And she never said another word after that.

Chapter V

Louise de Croissy stood by the window and watched her husband's tall massive figure as he strode down the street on his way to the Rue de la Monnaie. When he had finally disappeared out of her sight Louise turned to Josette.

Unconsciously almost, and certainly against her better judgement, Josette felt a strange misgiving about this affair. She hadn't slept all night for thinking about it. And this morning when Bastien had set off so gaily and Louise seemed so full of hope she still felt oppressed and vaguely frightened. There is no doubt that intense love does at times possess psychic powers, the power usually called "second sight." Josette's love for Louise and what she called her "little family" was maternal in its intensity and she always averred that she knew beforehand whenever a great joy was to come to them and also had a premonition of any danger that threatened them.

And somehow this morning she felt unable to shake off a consciousness of impending doom. She, too, had watched at the window while Bastien de Croissy started out in the direction of the Rue de la Monnaie, there to pick up the packet of transcriptions and then to go off on his fateful errand; and when he had turned the angle of the street and she could no longer see him she felt more than ever the approach of calamity.

These were the last days of September: summer had lingered on and it had been wonderfully sunny all along. In the woods the ash, the oak and the chestnut were still heavy with leaf and thrushes and blackbirds still sang gaily their evening melodies, but to-day the weather had turned sultry: there were heavy clouds up above that presaged a coming storm.

"Why, what's the matter, Josette chérie?" Louise asked anxiously, for the girl, as she gazed out into the dull grey light, shivered as if with cold and her pretty face appeared drawn and almost haggard. "Are you disappointed that your mythical Scarlet Pimpernel will not, after all, play his heroic rôle on our stage?"

Louise said this with a light laugh, meaning only to chaff, but Josette winced as if she had been stung, and tears gathered in her eyes.

"Josette!" Louise exclaimed, full of contrition and of tenderness. She felt happy, light-hearted, proud too, of what Bastien could do for them all. Though the morning was grey and dismal, though there were only scanty provisions in the house — ay! even though Charles-Léon lay limp and listless in his little bed, Louise felt that on this wonderful day she could busy herself about her poor dingy home, singing to herself with joy. She, like Bastien himself, had never wished to emigrate, but at times she had yearned passionately for the fields and the woods of the Dauphiné where her husband still owned the family château and where there was a garden in which Charles-Léon could run about, where the air was pure and wholesome so that the colour could once more tinge the poor lamb's wan cheeks.

She could not understand why Josette was not as happy as she was herself. Perhaps she was depressed by the weather, and sure enough soon after Bastien started the first lightning-flash shot across the sky, and after a few seconds there came the distant rumble of thunder. A few heavy drops fell on the cobble-stones and then the rain came down, a veritable cataract, as if the sluices of heaven had suddenly been opened. Within a few minutes the uneven pavements ran with muddy streams and an unfortunate passer-by, caught in the shower, buttoned up their coat collars and bolted for the nearest doorway. The wind howled down the chimneys and rattled the ill-fitting window-panes. No wonder that Josette's spirits were damped by this dismal weather!

Louise drew away from the window, sighing: "Thank God, I made Bastien put on his thick old coat!" Then she sat down and called Josette to her. "You know, chérie," she said, and put loving arms round the girl's shoulders, "I didn't mean anything unkind about your hero: I was only chaffing. I loved your enthusiasm and your belief in miracles; but I am more prosy than you are, chérie, and prefer to pin my faith on the sale of compromising letters rather than on deeds of valour performed by a mythical hero."

To please Louise, Josette made a great effort to appear cheerful; indeed, she chided herself for her ridiculous feeling of depression, which had no reason for its existence and only tended to upset Louise. She pleaded a headache after a sleepless night.

"I lay awake," she said, with an effort to appear light-hearted, "thinking of the happy time we would all have over in the Dauphiné. It is so lovely there in the late autumn when the leaves turn to gold."

The rest of the morning Josette was obliged to spend in the Government workshops sewing shirts for the "Soldiers of Liberty," so presently when the storm began to subside she put on her cloak and hood, gave Charles-Léon a last kiss and hurried off to work. She had hoped to get her allotted task done by twelve o'clock, when Maurice could meet her and they could sally forth together in search of fresh air under the trees of Cour la Reine. Unfortunately, as luck would have it, she was detained in the workshop along with a number of other girls until a special consignment of shirts was ready for packing. When she was finally able to leave the shop it was past one o'clock and Maurice was not waiting at the gate. She hurried home for her midday meal, only to hear from Louise that Bastien and Maurice had already been and gone. They had snatched a morsel of food and hurried away again, for they had important work to do at the office. Louise was full of enthusiasm and full of hope. Bastien, she said, had seen Fabre d'Eglantine, also Chabot and Bazire, and had already entered into negotiations with them for the exchange of the compromising letters against permits for himself and his family — which would, of course, include Josette and Maurice — to take up permanent domicile on his estate in the Dauphiné. Bastien and Maurice, after they had imparted this joyful news and had their hurried meal, had gone back to the office. It seems that after the three interviews were over and Bastien was back at the Rue de la Monnaie, François Chabot had called on him with a ponderous document which he desired put into legal jargon that same afternoon. "It will take them several hours to get through with the work," Louise went on to explain, "and when it is ready Maurice is to take the document to Citizen Chabot's apartment in Rue d'Anjou; so I don't suppose we shall see either of them before supper-time. Bastien says he was so amused when Chabot called at the office. His eyes were roaming round the room all the time. I am sure he was wondering in his mind where Bastien kept the letters, and I am so thankful, Josette darling, that we took your advice and have them here in safe-keeping. Do you know, Bastien declares that if those letters were published to-morrow Chabot and the lot of them, not even excepting the great Danton, would find themselves at the bar of the accused, and within the hour their heads would be off their shoulders? And serve them right, the murdering, hypocritical devils!" After which she unfolded to her darling Josette her plans for leaving this hateful Paris within the next twenty-four hours. Dreams and hopes! Louise was full of them just now: strange that to Josette the whole thing was like a nightmare.

Chapter VI

In the late afternoon Josette had again to go back to the workshop to put in a couple of hours' more sewing. She left Louise in the apartment, engrossed in sorting out the necessary clothes required for the journey, and singing merrily like a bird. Bastien and Maurice were not expected home for some hours. Charles-Léon was asleep.

It was past eight o'clock and quite dark when Josette finally returned home to the Rue Picpus for the evening. Under the big port-cochère of the apartment house she nearly fell into the arms of Maurice Reversac, who apparently was waiting for her.

"Oh, Maurice!" she cried, "how you frightened me!" And then, "What are you doing here?"

Instead of replying he took her by the wrist and drew her to the foot of the main staircase, away from the concierge's lodge, where in an angle of the wall they could be secure from prying ears and eyes. Here Maurice halted, but he still clung to her wrist, and leaned against the wall as if exhausted and breathless.

"Maurice, what is it?"

The staircase was in almost total darkness, only a feeble light filtrated down from an oil-lamp fixed on one of the landings above. Josette could not see her friend's face, but she felt the tremor that shook his arm and she heard the stertorous breath that struggled through his lips. The sense of doom, of some calamity that threatened them all, the nameless foreboding that had haunted her all day held her heart in an icy grip.

"Maurice!" she insisted.

At last he spoke; he murmured his employer's name.

"Maître de Croissy..."

Josette could scarcely repress a cry:

"Arrested?"

He shook his head.

"Not...? Dead...? When? How? What is it, Maurice? In God's name, tell me!"

"Murdered!"

"Murd-"

She clapped her hand to her mouth and dug her teeth into it to smother the scream which would have echoed up the well of the stairs. Louise's apartment was only up two flights. She would have heard.

"Tell me!" Josette gasped rather than spoke. She did not really understand. What Maurice had just said was so impossible. Inconceivable! She had expected a cataclysm.... Yes. All day she had felt like the dread hand of Doom hovering over them all. But not this! In Heaven's name, not this! Murdered? Bastien? Why, Maurice must be crazy! And she said it aloud, too.

"You are crazy, Maurice!"

"I thought I was just now."

"You've been dreaming," she insisted. For still she did not believe.

"Murdered, I tell you! Dead!"

"Where?"

"In the office...."

"Then let us go...."

She wanted to run... out... at once, but Maurice got hold of her and held her so that she could not go.

"Wait, Josette! Let me tell you first."

"Let me go, Maurice! I don't believe it. Let me go!"

Maurice had already pulled himself together. He had contrived to steady his voice, and now, with a perfectly firm grip, he pulled Josette's hand under his arm and led her out into the street. There would be no holding her back if she was determined to go. The rain-storm had turned to a nasty drizzle and it was very cold. The few passers-by who hurried along the narrow street had their coat collars buttoned closely round their necks. A very few lights glimmered here and there in the windows of the houses on either side. Street lamps were no longer lighted these days in the side streets for reasons of economy.

Out in the open Maurice put his arm round Josette's shoulder and instinctively she nestled against him. Almost paralysed with horror, she was shivering with cold and her teeth were chattering, but there was a feeling of comfort and of protection in Maurice's arm which seemed to steady her. Also she wanted to hear every word that he said, and he did not dare raise his voice above a whisper. They walked as fast as the unevenness of the cobble-stones allowed, and now and then they broke into a run; and all the while, in short jerky sentences, Maurice tried to tell the girl something of what had happened.

"Maître de Croissy," he said, "had an interview with Citizen Chabot in the morning.... While he was there Chabot sent for Bazire... and after that the three of them went together to Danton's lodgings..."

"You weren't with them?"

"No... I was waiting at the office. Presently Maître de Croissy came back alone. He was full of hope... the interview had gone off very well... better than he expected... Chabot and Bazire were obviously terrified out of their lives... Maître de Croissy had left them with Danton, and come on to the office..."

"Yes! and then?"

"About half an hour later, Chabot called at the office... alone... he brought a document with him... did Madame tell you?"

"Yes! yes!..."

"He stayed a little while talking... talking... explaining the document... a very long one... of which he wanted three copies made... with additions... and so on.... He wanted the papers back by evening..."

Maurice seemed to be gasping for breath. His voice was husky as if his throat were parched. It was difficult to talk coherently while threading one's way through the narrow streets, and once or twice he forced Josette to stand still for a moment or two, to rest against

the wall while she listened.

"We went home to dinner after Chabot had gone..." Maurice went on presently. "I can't tell you just how I felt then... a kind of foreboding you know..."

"Yes, I know," she said, "I felt it too... last night..."

"Something in that devil's eyes had frightened me... but you know Maître de Croissy... he won't listen... once he has made up his mind... and he laughed at me when I ventured on a word of warning... you know..."

"Oh, yes!" Josette sighed, "I know!"

"We went back to the office together after dinner. Maître de Croissy worked on the document all afternoon. It was ready just when the light gave out. He gave me the paper and told me to take it to Citizen Chabot. I went. Chabot kept me waiting, an hour or more. It was nearly eight o'clock when I got back to the office. The front door was ajar. I remember thinking this strange. I pushed open the door..."

He paused, and suddenly Josette said quite firmly:

"Don't tell me, Maurice. I can guess."

"What, Josette?"

"Those devils got you out of the way. They meant to filch the letters from Bastien. They killed him in order to get the letters."

"The two rooms," Maurice said, "looked as if they had been shattered by an earthquake."

"They broke everything so as to get the letters, and they killed him first."

They had reached the house in the Rue de la Monnaie. It looked no different than it had always done. Grim, grey, dilapidated. Inside the house there was that smell of damp and of mortar like in a vault. Apparently no one knew anything as yet about what had occurred on the second floor where Citizen Croissy, the lawyer, had his office. No one challenged the young man and the girl as they hurried up the stairs. Josette as she ran was trembling in every limb, but she knew that the time had come for calmness and for courage, and with a mighty effort she regained control over her nerves. She was determined to be a help rather than a hindrance, even though horror had gripped her like some live and savage beast by the throat so that she scarcely could breathe, and turned the dread in her heart to physical nausea.

Maurice had taken the precaution of locking the front door of the office, but he had the key in his pocket. Before inserting it in the keyhole he paused to take another look at Josette. If she had faltered the least bit in the world, if he had perceived the slightest swaying in her young firm body, he would have picked her up in his arms where she stood and carried her away — away from that awful scene behind the door.

He could not see her face, for the stairs were very dark, but through a dim and ghostly light he perceived the outline of her head and saw that she held it erect and her shoulders square. All he said was:

"Shall we go to the Commissariat first?"

But she shook her head. He opened the door and she followed him in. The small vestibule was in darkness, but the door into the office was open, and here the light from the oil-lamp which dangled from the ceiling revealed the prone figure of Bastien de Croissy on the floor, his torn clothing and the convulsive twist of his hands. A heavy crowbar lay close beside the body, and all around there was a litter of broken furniture, wood, glass, a smashed inkstand with the ink still flowing out of it and staining the bit of faded carpet; sand and debris of paper and of string and the smashed drawers of the bureau. The strong-box was also on the floor with its metal door broken open and money and papers scattered around. Indeed, the whole place did look as if it had been shattered by an earthquake.

But Josette did not look at all that. All she saw was Bastien lying there, his body rigid in the last convulsive twitching of death. She prayed to God for the strength to go near him, to kneel beside him and say the prayers for the dead which the Church demanded. Maurice knelt down beside her, and they drew the dead man's hands together over his breast, and Josette took her rosary from her pocket and wound it round the hands; then she and Maurice recited the prayers for the dead: she with eyes closed lest if she continued to look she fell into a swoon. She prayed for Bastien's soul, and she also prayed for guidance as to what she ought to do now that Bastien was gone: for Louise was not strong and after this she would have no one on whom to lean, only on her, Josette.

When she and Maurice had finished their prayers they sought among the debris for the two pewter candlesticks that used to stand on the bureau. Maurice found them presently; they were all twisted, but not broken, and close by there were the pieces of tallow candle that had fallen out of their sconces. He straightened them out, and with a screw of paper held to the lamp he lighted the candles and Josette placed them on the floor, one on each side of the dead man's head.

After which she tiptoed out of the room. Maurice extinguished the hanging lamp; he followed Josette out through the door and locked it behind him.

Then the two of them went silently and quickly down the stairs.

Chapter VII

Louise de Croissy lay on the narrow horse-hair sofa like a log. Since Josette had broken the terrible news to her, more than twenty-four hours ago, she had been almost like one dead: unable to speak, unable to eat or sleep. Even Charles-Léon's childish cajoleries could not rouse her from her apathy.

For twenty-four hours she had lain thus, silent and motionless, while Josette did her best to keep Charles-Léon amused and looked after his creature comforts as best she could. She adored Louise, but somehow at this crisis she could not help feeling impatient with the other woman's nervelessness and that devastating inertia. After all, there was Charles-Léon to think of; all the more now as the head of the family had gone. Josette still had her mind set on finding the Scarlet Pimpernel, who of a truth was the only person in the world who could save Louise and Charles-Léon now. Josette had no illusions on the score of the new danger which threatened these two. Bastien had been murdered by Terrorists because he would not give up the letters that compromised them without getting a quid pro quo. They had killed him and ransacked his rooms. They might have ordered his arrest — it was so easy these days to get an enemy arrested — but no doubt feared that he might have a chance of speaking during his trial and revealing what he knew. Only dead men tell no tales.

But the letters had not been found, and at this hour there was a clique of desperate men who knew that their necks were in peril if those letters were ever made public. Josette had no illusions. Sooner or later, within a few hours perhaps, those men would strike at Louise. There would be a perquisition, arrest probably, and possibly another murder. She wanted Louise to destroy the letters, they had been the cause of this awful cataclysm, but at the slightest hint Louise had clutched at her bosom with both hands as if she would guard the letters with her life. The next evening when Josette came home she found Louise already in bed; it was the first time she had moved from that narrow horse-hair sofa since the girl had broken the news to her. She had laid out her clothes on a chair, with her corsets ostentatiously spread out on the top of the other things as if to invite attention. The packet of letters was no longer inside the lining. Josette noticed this at once, also that Louise was feigning sleep and was watching her through half-closed lids.

With well-assumed indifference Josette went about her business in the house, smoothed Louise's pillow, kissed her and Charles-Léon good-night, and then got into bed. But she did not get much sleep, tired to death though she was. She foresaw the complications. Louise had some fixed idea about those letters, the result of shock no doubt, and was clinging to them with the obstinacy of the very weak. She had hidden them and meant to keep their hiding-place a secret, even from Josette. No doubt her nerves had to a certain extent given way, for in spite of her closed eyes as she lay on her bed there was that expression of cunning in her face which is peculiar to those whose minds are deranged.

Josette and Maurice had spent most of that day at the Commissariat of Police. It was a terrible ordeal from the first to the last. The airless room that smelt of dirt and humanity, the patient crowd of weary men and women waiting their turn to pass into the presence of the Commissary, the suspense of the present and the horror of the past nearly broke down Josette's fortitude. Nearly, but not quite; for she had Maurice with her, and it was wonderful what comfort she derived from his nearness. She had always been so self-reliant, so accustomed to watch over those she cared for, and cater for their creature comforts, that Maurice Reversac's somewhat diffident ways, his timid speech and dog-like devotion had tempered her genuine affection for him with a slight measure of contempt. She could not help but admire his loyalty to his employer and his disinterestedness and felt bound to admit that he was clever and learned in the law, else Bastien would not have placed reliance on his judgement, as he often did, but all the time she had the feeling that morally and physically he was a weakling, the ivy that clung rather than the oak that supported.

But since this awful trouble had come upon her, how different it all was. Josette felt just as self-reliant as in the past, for Louise and Charles-Léon were more dependent on her than ever before, but there was Maurice now, a different Maurice altogether, and he had become a force.

When their turn came to appear before the Commissary, Josette, having Maurice at her side, did not feel frightened. They both gave their names and address in a clear voice, showed their papers and identity, and gave a plain and sincere account of the terrible events of the day before. Citizen Croissy, the well-known advocate, had been foully murdered in his office in the Rue de la Monnaie. It was their duty as citizens of the Republic to report this terrible fact to the Commissariat of the section.

The Commissary listened, raised his eyebrows, toyed with a paper-knife; his face was a mask of complete incredulity.

"Why should you talk of murder?" he asked.

Maurice mentioned the crowbar, the ransacked room, the scattered papers, the broken strong-box. It was clearly a case of murder for purposes of robbery.

"Any money missing?" the Commissary asked.

"No!"

"Eh bien!" he remarked with a careless shrug. "You see?"

"The murder had a political motive, Citizen Commissary," Josette put in impulsively, "the assassins were not after money, but after certain papers..."

"Now you are talking nonsense," the Commissary broke in curtly. "Murder? What fool do you suppose would resort to murder nowadays?" He checked himself abruptly, for he was on the point of letting his tongue run away with him. What he had very nearly said, and certainly had implied, was that no fool would take the risk and trouble of murder these days when it was so easy to rid oneself of an enemy by denouncing him as "suspect of treason" before the local Committee of Public Safety. Arrest, trial, and the guillotine would then follow as a matter of course, and one got forty sous to boot as a reward for denouncing a traitor. Then why trouble to murder?

No wonder the Commissary checked himself in time before he had said all this: men in office had been degraded before now, if not worse, for daring to criticise the decrees of this paternal Government.

"I'll tell you what I will do, Citizeness," he said, speaking more particularly to Josette because her luminous blue eyes were fixed upon his, and he was a susceptible man; "I don't believe a word of your story, mind! but I will visit the scene of that supposed murder,

and listen on the spot to the depositions of witnesses. Then we'll see."

"There were no witnesses to the crime, Citizen Commissary," Josette declared.

Whereupon the Commissary swore loudly, blustered and threatened all false accusers with the utmost penalties the law could impose. Witnesses? There must be witnesses. The concierge of the house... the other lodgers... anyway he would see, and if in the end it was definitely proved that this tale of assassination and political crime was nothing but a cock-and-bull story, well! let all false witnesses look to their own necks... that was all.

"You will appear before me to-morrow," were the parting words with which the Commissary dismissed Maurice and Josette from his presence.

No wonder that after that long and wearisome day, Josette should have lain awake most of the night a-thinkin-g. It was very obvious that nothing would be done to bring the murderers of Bastien to justice. Perhaps she had been wrong after all to speak of "political motives" in connection with the crime: she had only moral proofs for her assertion, and those devils who had perpetrated the abominable deed would be all the more on the alert now, and Louise's peril would be greater even than before.

"Holy Virgin," she murmured naïvely in her prayers, "help me to find the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

On the following morning, Louise, though still listless and apathetic, rose and dressed herself without saying a word. Josette with an aching heart could not help noticing that her face still wore an expression of cunning and obstinacy, and that her eyes were still dry: Louise indeed had not shed a single tear since the awful truth had finally penetrated to her brain, and she had understood that Bastien had been foully murdered because of the letters.

With endearing words and infinite gentleness Josette did her best to soften the poor woman's mood. She drew her to Charles-Léon's bedside and murmured some of the naïve prayers which when they were children together they had learned at the Convent of the Visitation. Her own soulful blue eyes were bathed in tears.

"Don't try and make me cry, Josette," Louise said. These were the first words she had spoken for thirty-six hours, and her voice sounded rasping and harsh. "If I were to shed tears now I would go on crying and crying till my eyes could no longer see and then they would close in death."

"You must not talk of death, Louise," Josette admonished gently, "while you have Charles-Léon to think of."

"It is because I think of him," Louise retorted, "that I don't want to cry."

But of the letters not a word, though Josette, by hint and glance, asked more than one mute question.

"Bastien would rather have seen your tears, Louise," she said with a tone of sad reproach.

"Perhaps he will — from above — when I stand by his graveside... but not now — not yet."

Louise, however, never did stand by her husband's graveside; that morning when Maurice and Josette went to the Commissariat in order to obtain permission for the burial of Citizen Croissy, they were curtly informed that the burial had already taken place, and no amount of questioning, of entreaty and of petitions elected any further information, save that the body had been disposed of by order of what was vaguely designated as "the authorities"; which meant that it had probably been thrown in the fosse commune of the Jardin de Picpus — the old convent garden — the common grave where no cross or stone could mark the last resting-place of the once brilliant and wealthy advocate of the Paris bar. The reason, curtly given, for this summary procedure was that it was the usual one in the case of suicides.

Thus was the foul murder of the distinguished lawyer classed as a case of suicide. It was useless to protest and to argue; only harm would come to Louise and Charles-Léon if either Maurice or Josette entered into any discussion on the subject. As soon as they opened their mouths they were roughly ordered to hold their peace. Maurice Reversac was commanded to accompany the Citizen Substitute to the office of the Rue de la Monnaie, there to complete certain formalities in connection with the goods and chattels belonging to "the suicide," and then officially to give up the keys of the apartment.

Chapter VIII

Josette in her naïve little prayers had implored the Holy Virgin to aid her in finding the Scarlet Pimpernel. She was convinced that nothing could save Louise and Charles-Léon from Bastien's awful fate save the intervention of her mysterious hero, but the last two days had been so full of events that it had been quite impossible for her to begin her quest for the one man on whom in this dark hour she could pin her faith. Maurice, on the other hand, had promised that he would do his best, and this was all the more wonderful as he had not the same faith as Josette in the existence of the heroic Englishman. Nevertheless, in order to please and cheer her, and in the intervals of running from pillar to post, from the Rue de la Monnaie to the Commissariat and back again, he did seriously set to work to get on the track of the public letter-writer who was wont to ply his trade at the corner of the Pont-Neuf and who was supposed to be in touch with the Scarlet Pimpernel himself.

Maurice knew all the highways and by-ways of old Paris — the small eating-houses and estaminets where it was possible to enter into casual conversation with simple everyday folk who would suspect no harm in discreet inquiries. Thus he came quite by chance on the track of what he thought might be a clue. There was, it seems, in a distant quarter of the city near the Batignolles, a funny old scarecrow who had set up his tent and carried on his trade of letter-writing for those who were too illiterate or too prudent to put pen to paper themselves. Not that Maurice believed for a moment that the scarecrow in question had anything to do with a band of English aristos, but he thought that the running him to earth, the walk across Paris, even though the weather was at its vilest, would take Josette out of herself for an hour or so, and turn her thoughts into less gloomy channels.

Josette readily agreed, and while Maurice was away on his melancholy errand in the Rue de la Monnaie, she promised that she would wait for him at the Commissariat de Police, and then they could sally forth together in quest of the hero of her dreams.

The waiting-room of the Commissariat was large and square. The walls had at some remote time been white-washed; now they and the ceiling were of a dull grey colour, and all around there was a dado-line of dirt and grease made by the rubbing of innumerable shoulders against the lime. On the wooden benches ranged against the walls, patient, weary-looking women sat, some with shawls over their heads, others shivering in thin bodice and kirtle, and all hugging bundles or babies. One of them made room for Josette, who sat down beside her preparing to wait. There were a number of men, too, mostly in ragged breeches and tattered coats, who hung about in groups whispering and spitting on the floor, or sitting on the table: nearly all of them were either decrepit or maimed. A few children scrambled in the dirt, getting in everybody's way. The place was almost unendurably stuffy, with a mingled odour of boiled cabbage, wet clothes and damp mortar; only from time to time when the outside door was opened for someone to go in or out did a gust of cold air come sweeping through the room. Josette wished she had arranged to meet Maurice somewhere else; she didn't think she could wait much longer in this dank atmosphere. She felt very tired, too, and the want of air made her feel drowsy.

The sound of a familiar voice roused her from the state of semi-torpor into which she had fallen, blinking and rather dazed, she looked about her. Old Doctor Larousse had just come in. He had a bundle of papers in his hand and looked fussy and hurried.

"A dog's life!" he muttered in the face of anyone who listened to him. "All these papers to get signed and more than half an hour to wait, maybe, in this filthy hole!"

Josette at sight of him jumped up and intercepted him at the moment when two or three others tried to get a word with him. All day yesterday she had wished to get in touch with the old doctor, and again this morning, not so much because of Charles-Léon, but because she was getting seriously anxious about Louise. Citizen Larousse had been away from home for the past twenty-four hours: Josette had called at his rooms two or three times during the day, but always in vain.

Now she pulled the old man by the sleeve, forced him to listen to her.

"Citizen Doctor," she demanded, "at what hour can you come to the Rue Picpus and see Citizeness Croissy, who is seriously ill?"

Larousse shook her hand off his arm with unusual roughness: he was a kindly man, but apparently very harassed this morning.

"At what hour — at what hour?" he muttered petulantly. "Hark at your impudence, Citizeness! At no hour, let me tell you — not to-day, anyhow! I am off to Passy as soon as I can get these cursed papers signed."

"Citizen Doctor, think of the widow! Her mind is nearly deranged. She wants—"

"Many of us want things these days, little Citizeness," the old man said more gently, for Josette's deep blue eyes were fixed upon him and they were irresistible — would have been irresistible, that is, if he, Larousse, had not been quite so worried this morning. "I, for one, want to get to Passy, where my wife is ill with congestion of the lungs, and I shall not leave her bedside until she is well or..."

He shrugged his shoulders. He was a kind-hearted man really, but for two days he had been anxious about his wife. Josette Gravier was pretty, very pretty; she had large blue eyes that looked like a midnight sky in June when she was excited or eager or distressed, and there were delicate golden curls round her ears which always made old Larousse think of the days of his youth, of those summer afternoons when he was wont to wander out in the woods around Fontaine-bleau with his arm round a pretty girl's waist — just such a girl as Josette. But to-day? No, he was not in a mood to think of the days of his youth, and he had no use for pretty girls with large blue reproachable eyes. He was much too worried to be cajoled.

"You will have to find another doctor, little Citizeness," he concluded gruffly, "or else wait a day or two."

"How can I wait a day or two," she retorted, "with Citizeness Croissy nigh to losing her reason? Can't you imagine what she has gone through?"

The old man shrugged. He had seen so much misery, so much sorrow and pain, it was difficult to be compassionate to all. There had never been but One in this world who had compassion for the whole of humanity, and humanity repaid Him by nailing Him to a cross.

"We have to go through a lot these days, Citizeness," the old man said, "and I do not think that your friend will lose her reason. One is apt to let one's anxiety magnify such danger. I'll come as soon as I can."

"How soon?"

"Three or four days — I cannot tell."

"But in the meanwhile, Citizen Doctor, what shall I do?"

"Give her a soothing draught."

"To what purpose? She is calm — too calm—"

"Find another doctor."

"How can I? It takes days to obtain a permit to change one's doctor. You know that well enough, Citizen."

The girl now spoke with bitter dejection and the old man with growing impatience. He had freed himself quickly enough from the subtle spell of the girl's beauty: the weight of care and worry had again descended on him and hardened his heart. A queue had formed against the door which led to the Commissary's private office, and the old doctor feared that he would lose his turn if he did not immediately take his place in the queue. The papers had got to be signed and he was longing to get away to Passy, where his wife lay sick with congestion. He tried to shake off Josette's grip on his arm, but she would not let go.

"Can you get me a permit," she pleaded, "to change our doctor?"

Oh, those permits — those awful, tiresome, cruel permits, without which no citizen of this free Republic could do anything save die! Permit to move, permit for bread, permit for meat or milk, permit to call in a doctor, a midwife or an undertaker! Permits, permits all the time!

The crowd in the room, indifferent at first, had begun to take notice of this pretty girl's importunate demands. They were here, all of them, in quest of some permit or other, the granting of which depended on the mood of the official who sat at his desk the other side of the door. If the official was harassed and tired he would be disobliging, refuse permit after permit: to a sick woman to see a doctor, to an anaemic child to receive more milk, to a man to take work beyond a certain distance from his home. He could be disobliging if he chose, for full powers were vested in him. Such were the ways of the glorious Republic which had for its motto: Liberty and Fraternity. Such was the state of slavery into which the citizens of the free Republic had sunk. And as Josette insisted, still clinging to the doctor's arm, the men shrugged and some of them sneered. They knew that old Larousse could not get the permit for which she craved. It took days to obtain any kind of a permit: there were yards of red tape to measure out before anything of the sort could be obtained, even if the Commissary was in one of his best moods. They were all of them sorry for the girl in a way, chiefly because she was so pretty, but they thought her foolish to be so insistent. The women gazed on her and would have commiserated with her, only that they had so many troubles of their own. And they were all so tired, so tired of hanging about in this stuffy room and waiting their turn in the queue. It was so hard to worry over other people's affairs when one was tired and had countless worries of one's own.

Now someone came out of the inner room and the queue moved on. Josette was suddenly separated from the doctor, who was probably thankful to be rid of her; with a deep sigh of dejection she went back to her seat on the bench. A few glances of pity were still cast on her, but presently the queue was able to move on again and she was soon forgotten. No one took any more notice of her. The men whispered among themselves, the women, fagged and silent, stood waiting for their turn to go in. Only one man seemed to take an interest in Josette: a tall ugly fellow with one leg who was leaning against the wall with his crutches beside him. He was dressed in seedy black with somewhat soiled linen at throat and wrist, and his hair, which was long and lanky, was tied back at the nape of the neck with a frayed-out back ribbon. He wore no hat, his shoes were down at heel and his stockings were in holes. By the look of him he might have been a lawyer's clerk fallen on evil days.

Josette did not at first notice him, until presently she had that peculiar feeling which comes to one at times that a pair of eyes were fixed steadily upon her. She looked up and encountered the man's glance, then she frowned and quickly turned her head away, for the seedy-looking clerk was very ugly, and she did not like the intentness with which he regarded her. Much to her annoyance, however, she presently became conscious that he had gathered up his crutches and hobbled towards her. The crowd made way for him, and a few seconds later he stood before her, leaning upon his crutches.

"Your pardon, Citizeness," he said, and his voice was certainly more pleasing than his looks, "but I could not help hearing just now what you said to Citizen Larousse... about your friend who is sick... and your need of a doctor..."

He paused, and Josette looked up at him. He appeared timid and there certainly was not a suspicion of insolence in the way he addressed her, but he certainly was very ugly to look at. His face was the colour of yellow wax, and on his chin and cheeks there was a three days' growth of beard. His eyebrows were extraordinarily bushy and overshadowed his eyes, which were circled with purple as if from the effects of a blow. So much of his countenance did Josette take in at the first glance, but his voice had certainly sounded kindly, and poor little Josette was so devoured with anxiety just now that any show of kindness went straight to her heart.

"Then you must also have heard, Citizen," she said, "that Doctor Larousse could do nothing for my friend."

"That is why," the man rejoined, "I ventured to address you, Citizeness. I am not a doctor, only a humble apothecary, but I have some knowledge of medicine. Would you like me to see your friend?"

He had gradually dropped his voice until in the end he was hardly speaking above his breath. Josette felt strangely stirred. There was something in the way in which this man spoke which vaguely intrigued her and she couldn't make out why he should have spoken at all. She looked him straight in the eyes; her own were candid, puzzled, inquiring. If only he were less ugly, his skin less like parchment and his chin free from that stubby growth of a beard...

"I could come now," he said again. Then added with a light shrug, "I certainly could do your friend no harm just by seeing her, and I know of a cordial which works wonders on overstrung nerves."

Josette could never have told afterwards what it was that impelled her to rise then and to say:

"Very well, Citizen. Since you are so kind, will you come with me and see my sick friend?"

She made her way to the door and he followed her, working his way through the crowd across the room on his crutches. It was he who, despite his infirmities, opened the door and held it for the girl to pass through. It was close on midday. It had ceased raining and the air was milder, but heavy-laden clouds still hung overhead and the ill-paved streets ran with yellow-coloured mud.

Josette thought of Maurice as she started to walk in the direction of the Rue Picpus. She walked slowly because of the maimed man who hobbled behind her on his crutches, covering the ground in her wake, however, with extraordinary sureness and speed. She thought of Maurice, wondering what he would think of this adventure of hers, and whether he would approve. She was afraid that he would not. Maurice was cautious — more cautious than she was — and that very morning he had warned her to be very circumspect in everything she said and did, for Louise's sake and Charles-Léon's.

“Those devils,” he had said to her just before they left home, “are sure to have their eye on Madame de Croissy. They haven’t found the letters, but they know that they exist, and will of a surety have another try at getting possession of them.”

“We must try and leave Madame alone as seldom as possible,” he had said later on. “Unless I am detained over this awful business I will spend most of my day with her while you are at the workshop.”

Apparently Maurice had been detained by the authorities, so Josette imagined, for he should have come to meet her at the Commissariat before now, but when he got there presently and found her gone he would probably conclude that she had been tired of waiting and had already gone home — and he would surely follow.

All the while that Josette’s thoughts had run on Maurice, she had heard subconsciously the tap-tap of the man’s crutches half a dozen paces or so behind her; then her thoughts had gone a-roaming on the terrible past, the dismal present, the hopeless future. What, she thought, would become of Louise and Charles-Léon after this appalling tragedy? Maître de Croissy’s property in the Dauphiné brought in nothing: it was administered by a faithful soul who had been bailiff on the estate for close on half a century, and he just contrived to collect a sufficiency of money by the sale of timber and agricultural produce to pay for necessary repairs and stop the buildings and the land from going to rack and ruin, but there was nothing left over to pay as much as the rent of the miserable apartment in the Rue Picpus, let alone clothes and food. Maître de Croissy had been able to make a paltry income by his profession; but now? What was to become of his widow and of his child?

And Josette’s thoughts of the future had been so black, so dismal and so absorbing that she was very nearly knocked down by a passing cart. The curses of the driver and the shouts of the passers-by brought her back to present realities, and these included the nearness of her maimed companion. She turned to look for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. She stood by for quite a long time at the angle of the street, thinking perhaps that he had fallen behind and would presently overtake her. But she waited in vain. There was no sign of the strange creature in the seedy black with the one leg and the crutches, the ugly face and gentle voice.

Quite against her will and her better judgement Josette felt vaguely dismayed and disappointed. What could this sudden disappearance mean of a man who had certainly forced his companionship upon her? Why had he gone with her thus far and then vanished so unaccountably? Did he really intend to visit Louise, or was his interest in her only a blind so as to attach himself to Josette? But if so what could be his object? All these thoughts and conjectures were very disturbing. There was always the fear of spies and informers present in every man or woman’s mind these days, and Josette remembered Maurice’s warning to be very circumspect, and she wished now that she had insisted on waiting at the Commissariat for Maurice’s return before she embarked on this adventure with the mysterious stranger.

And then she suddenly remembered that just before coming up to the Pont-Neuf the maimed man had hobbled up close to her and asked:

“But whither are we going, Citizeness?”

And that she had replied:

“To No. 43, in the Rue Picpus, Citizen. My friend has an apartment there on the second floor.”

And now she wished she had not given a total stranger such explicit directions.

Chapter IX

The rest of the day dragged on in its weary monotony. Josette had spent an hour with Louise at dinner-time, when she had tried again, as she had done in the past ten days, to rouse the unfortunate woman from her apathy. She did not tell her about the seedy apothecary with the one leg, who had thrust himself into her company only to vanish as mysteriously as he had appeared. She was beginning to feel vaguely frightened about that man; his actions had been so very strange that the conviction grew upon her that he must be some sort of Government spy.

Maurice Reversac also came in for a hurried meal at midday, and Josette spoke to him about the man at the Commissariat who had insisted on coming with her to visit Louise and then disappeared as if the cobble-stones of the great city had swallowed him up. Maurice, who was always inclined to prudence, wished that Josette had not been quite so free in her talk with the stranger. He dreaded those Government spies who undoubtedly would be detailed to watch the family of the murdered man; but whatever fears assailed him he kept them buried in his heart and indeed did his best to reassure Josette. But he did beg her to be more than ordinarily cautious. He stayed talking with her for a little while and then went away.

It was too late now to trudge all the way to the Batignolles in search of the public letter-writer, and Maurice, well aware of Josette's impetuosity at the bare mention of the Scarlet Pimpernel, thought it best to say nothing to her to-night on the subject. He was trying to put what order he could in the affairs of the late advocate, and to save what could possibly be saved out of the wreckage of his fortune for the benefit of the widow and the child.

"I have been promised a permit," he said, "to go down into the Dauphiné for a day or two. I can then see the bailiff and perhaps make some arrangement with him by which he can send Madame a small revenue from the estate every month. Then, if they let me carry on the practice..."

"Do you think they will?"

Maurice shrugged.

"One never knows. It all depends if lawyers are scarce now that they have killed so many. There is always some litigation afoot."

Finally he added, with a great show of confidence which he was far from feeling:

"Don't lose heart, Josette chérie. Every moment of my life I will devote to making Madame and the boy comfortable because I know that is the way to make you happy."

But Josette found it difficult not to lose heart. She was convinced in her own mind that danger greater than ever now threatened Louise entirely because of her, Josette's, indiscretion, and that the maimed man of the Commissariat whom she had so foolishly trusted was nothing but a Government spy.

The truth did not dawn upon her, not until many hours later, after she had spent her afternoon as usual at the workshop and then came home in the late afternoon.

As soon as Josette entered the living-room she knew that the miracle had happened — the miracle to which she had pinned her faith, for which she had hoped and prayed and striven. She had left Louise lying like a log on the sofa, silent, dry-eyed, sullen, with Charles-Léon, quietly whimpering in his small bed. She found her transformed being with eyes bright and colour in her cheeks. But it was not this sudden transformation of her friend, nor yet Louise's cry: "Josette chérie! You were right and I was wrong to doubt." It was something more subtle, more intangible, that revealed to this ardent devotee that the hero of her dreams had filled the air with the radiance of his personality, that he had brought joy where sorrow reigned, and security and happiness where unknown danger threatened. Louise had run up to Josette as soon as she heard the turn of the latch-key in the door. She was laughing and crying, and after she had embraced Josette she ran back into the living-room and picked Charles-Léon up in her arms and hugged him to her breast.

"My baby," she murmured, "my baby! He will get strong and well and we shall be delivered from this hateful country."

Then she put Charles-Léon down, threw herself on the sofa, and burying her face in her arms she burst into tears. She cried and sobbed; her shoulders quivered convulsively. Josette made no movement towards her: it was best that she should cry for a time. The reaction from a state of dull despair had evidently been terrific, and the poor woman's over-wrought nerves would be all the better for this outlet of tears. How could Josette doubt for a moment that the miracle had happened?

As soon as she was a little more calm, Louise dried her eyes, then she drew a much-creased paper from the pocket of her skirt and without a word held it out to Josette. It was a letter written in a bold clear hand and was addressed to Citizeness Croissy at No. 43, Rue Picpus, on the second floor, and this is what it said:

"As soon as you receive this, believe that sincere friends are working for your safety. You must leave Paris and France immediately, not only for the boy's health's sake, but because very serious danger threatens you and him if you remain. This evening at eight o'clock take your boy in your arms and an empty market basket in your hand. Your concierge will probably challenge you; say that you are going to fetch your bread ration which you omitted to get this morning because of the bad weather. If the concierge makes a remark about your having the child with you, say that the Citizen Doctor ordered you to take him out as soon as the rain had ceased. Do not on any account hasten downstairs or through the porte-cochère, just walk quietly as if in truth you were going to the baker's shop. Then walk quietly along the street till you come to the district bakery. There will probably be a queue waiting for rations at the door. Take your place in the queue and go in and get your bread. In the crowd you will see a one-legged man dressed in seedy black. When he walks out of the shop, follow him. Divest yourself of all fear. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel will see you safely out of Paris and out of France to England or Belgium, whichever you wish. But the first condition for your safety and that of the child is implicit trust in the ability of the League to see you through, and, as a consequence of trust, implicit obedience."

The letter bore no signature, but in the corner there was a small device, a star-shaped flower drawn in red ink. Josette murmured under her breath:

"The Scarlet Pimpernel! I knew that he would come."

Had she been alone she would have raised the paper to her lips, that blessed paper on which her hero's hand had rested. As it was she just held it tight in her hot little palm, and hoped that in her excitement Louise would forget about it and leave it with her as a

precious relic.

"And of course you will come with me and Charles-Léon, Josette chérie."

Louise had to reiterate this more than once before the sense of it penetrated to Josette's inner consciousness. Even after the third repetition she still looked vague and understanding.

"Josette chérie, of course you will come."

"But, Louise, no! How can I?" the girl murmured.

"How do you mean, how can you?"

Josette held up the precious letter.

"He does not speak of me in this."

"The English League probably knows nothing about you, Josette."

"But he does."

"How do you know?"

Josette evaded the direct question. She quoted the last few words of the letter:

"As a consequence of trust, implicit obedience."

"That does not mean..."

"It means," Josette broke in firmly, "that you must follow the directions given you in this letter, word for word. It is the least you can do, and you must do it for the sake of Charles-Léon. I am in no danger here, and I would not go if I were. Maurice will be here to look after me."

"You are talking nonsense, chérie. You know I would not go without you."

"You would sacrifice Charles-Léon for me?"

Then as Louise made no reply — how could she? — Josette continued with simple determination and unshaken firmness:

"I assure you, Louise chérie, that I am in no danger. Maurice cannot go away while he has Bastien's affairs to look after. He wouldn't go if he could, and it would be cowardly to leave him all alone here to look after things."

"But, Josette..."

"Don't say anything more about it, Louise. I am in no danger and I am not going. And what's more," she added softly, "I know that the Scarlet Pimpernel will look after me. Don't be afraid, he knows all about me."

And not another word would she say.

Louise, no doubt, knew her of old. Josette was one of those dear, gentle creatures whom nothing in the world could move once she was set on a definite purpose — especially if that purpose had in it the elements of self-sacrifice. The time, too, was getting on. It was already past seven o'clock. Louise busied herself with Charles-Léon, putting on him all the warm bits of garments she still possessed. Josette was equally busy warming up some milk, the little there was over the fire in the tiny kitchen.

At eight o'clock precisely Louise was ready. She prepared to gather the child in her arms. Josette had a big shawl ready to wrap round them both: she thrust the empty market basket over Louise's arm. Her heart ached at thought of this parting. God alone knew when they would meet again. But it all had to be done, it all had to be endured for the sake of Charles-Léon. Louise had declared her intention of going to England rather than to Belgium. She would meet a greater number of friends there.

"I will try and write to you, Josette chérie," she said. "My heart is broken at parting from you, and I shall not know a happy hour until we are together again. But you know, ma chérie, that Bastien was always convinced that this abominable Revolution could not last much longer; and — who knows? — Charlets-Léon and I may be back in Paris before the year is out."

She was, perhaps, too excited to feel the sorrow of parting quite as deeply as did Josette. Indeed, Louise was in a high state of exultation, crying one moment and laughing the next, and the hand with which she clung to Josette was hot and dry as if burning with fever. Just at the last she was suddenly shaken with a fit of violent trembling, her teeth chattered and she sank into a chair, for her knees were giving way under her.

"Josette!" she gasped. "You do not think, perchance...?"

"What, chérie?"

"That this... this letter is all a hoax? And that we — Charles-Léon and I — are walking into a trap?"

But Josette, who still held the letter tightly clasped in her hand, was quite sure that it was not a hoax. She recalled the seedy apothecary at the Commissariat and his gentle voice when he spoke to her, and there had been a moment when his steady gaze had drawn her eyes to him. She had not thought about it much at the time, but since then she had reflected and remembered the brief but very strange spell which seemed to have been cast over her at the moment. No, the letter was not a hoax. Josette would have staked her life on it that it was dictated, or perhaps even written, by the hero of her dreams.

"It is not a trap, Louise," she said firmly, "but the work of the finest man that ever lived. I am as convinced as that I am alive that the one-legged man in seedy black whom you will see in the bakery is the Scarlet Pimpernel himself."

It was Josette who lifted Charles-Léon and placed him in Louise's arms. A final kiss to them both and they were gone. Josette stood in the middle of the room, motionless, hardly breathing, for she tried to catch the last sound of Louise's footsteps going down the stairs. It was only after she had heard the opening and closing of the outside door of the house that she at last gave way to tears.

Just like this Josette had cried when Louise, after her marriage to Bastien de Croissy, left the little farm in the Dauphiné in order to take up her position as a great lady in Paris society. The wedding had taken place in the small village church, and everything had been done very quietly because General de Vandeleur, Louise's father, had only been dead a year and Louise refused to be married from the house of one of her grand relations. Papa and Maman Gravier and Josette were the three people she had cared for most in all the world until Bastien came along, and she had the sentimental feeling that she wished to walk straight out of the one house where her happy girlhood had been passed into the arms of the man to whom she had given her heart.

The wedding had been beautiful and gay, with the whole village hung about with flags and garlands of flowers; and previous to it there had been all the excitement of getting Louise's trousseau together, and of journeys up to Paris in order to try on the wedding gown. And Josette had been determined that no tears or gloomy looks from her should cast a shadow over her friend's happiness. It

was when everything was over, when Louise drove away in the barouche en route for Paris, that Josette was suddenly overwhelmed with the sorrow which she had tried to hold in check for so long. Then as now she had thrown herself down on the sofa and cried out her eyes in self-pity for her loneliness. But what was the loneliness of that day in comparison with what it was now? In those days Josette still had her father and mother: there were the many interests of the farm, the dogs, the cows, haymaking, harvesting. Now there was nothing but dreariness ahead. Dreariness and loneliness. No one to look after, no one to fuss over. No Charles-Léon to listen to tales of heroism and adventure. Only the Government workshop, the girls there with their idle chatter and their reiterated complaints: only the getting up in the morning, the munching of stale food, the stitching of shirts, and the going to bed at night!

Josette thought of all this later on when bedtime came along, and she knelt beside Charles-Léon's empty cot and nearly cried her eyes out. Nearly but not quite, for presently Maurice came home. And it was wonderful how his presence put a measure of comfort in Josette's heart. Somehow the moment she heard the turn of his latchkey in the door, and his footsteps across the hall, her life no longer appeared quite so empty. There was someone left in Paris after all, who would need care and attention and fussing over when he was sick; his future would have to be planned, suitable lodgings would have to be found for him, and life generally re-ordained according to the new conditions.

And first of all there was the excitement of telling Maurice all about those new conditions.

Even before he came into the room Josette had jumped to her feet and hastily dried her eyes. But he saw in a moment that she had been crying.

"Josette!" he cried out, "what is it?"

"Take no notice, Maurice," Josette replied, still struggling with her tears, "I am not really crying... it is only because I am so... ever so happy!"

"Why? What has happened?"

"He came, Maurice," she said solemnly, "and they have gone."

Of course Maurice could not make head or tail of that.

"He? They?" he murmured frowning. "Who came, and who has gone?"

She made him sit down on the ugly horse-hair sofa and she sat down beside him and told him about everything. Her dreams had turned to reality, the Scarlet Pimpernel had come to take Louise and Charles-Léon away out of all this danger and all this misery: he had come to take them away to England where Louise would be safe, and Charles-Léon would get quite well and strong.

"And left you here!" Maurice exclaimed involuntarily, when Josette paused, out of breath, after she had imparted the great and glorious news: "gone to safety and left you here to face..."

But Josette with a peremptory gesture put her small hand across his mouth.

"Wait, Maurice," she said, "let me tell you."

She drew the precious letter from under her fichu — Louise, fortunately, had not demanded its return — and she read its contents aloud to Maurice.

"Now you see!" she concluded triumphantly, and fixed her glowing eyes on the young man.

"I only see," he retorted almost roughly, "that they had no right to leave you here... all alone."

"Not alone, Maurice," she replied; "are you not here... to take care of me?"

That, of course, was a heavenly moment in Maurice's life. Never had Josette — Josette who was so independent and self-reliant — spoken like this before, never had she looked quite like she did now, adorable always, but more so with that expression of dependence and appeal in her eyes. The moment was indeed so heavenly that Maurice felt unable to say anything. He was so afraid that the whole thing was not real, that he was only dreaming, and that if he spoke the present rapture would at once be dispelled. He felt alternately hot and cold, his temples throbbed. He tried to express with a glance all that went on in his heart. His silence and his looks did apparently satisfy Josette, for after a moment or two she explained to him just what her feelings were about the letter.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel demands trust and obedience, Maurice," she said with naïve earnestness. "Well! would that have been obedience if Louise had lugged me along with her? He doesn't mention me in the letter. If he had meant me to come, he would have said so."

With this pronouncement Maurice had perforce to be satisfied; but one thing more he wanted to know: what had become of the letters? But Josette couldn't tell him. Ever since Bastien's death, Louise had never spoken of them, or given the slightest hint of what she had done with them.

"Let's hope she has destroyed them," Maurice commented with a sigh.

The next day they spent in hunting for new lodgings for Maurice. Strange! Josette no longer felt lonely. She still grieved after Louise and Charles-Léon, but somehow life no longer seemed as dreary as she thought it would be.

Chapter X

Louise, in very truth, was much too excited to feel the pang of parting as keenly as did Josette, and ever since Charles-Léon had fallen sick she had taken a veritable hatred to Paris and her dingy apartment in the Rue Picpus. The horror of her husband's death had increased her abhorrence of the place, and now hatred amounted to loathing.

Therefore it was that she went downstairs with a light heart on that memorable evening of September. She had Charles-Léon in her arms and carried the empty market basket, with her ration card laid ostentatiously in it for anyone to see. The concierge was in the doorway of his lodge and asked her whither she was going. These were not days when one could tell a concierge to mind his own business, so Louise replied meekly:

"To the bakery, Citizen," and she showed the man her ration card.

"Very late," the concierge remarked drily.

"The weather has been so bad all day..."

"Too bad even now to take the child out, I imagine."

"It has left off raining," Louise said still gently, "and the poor cabbage must have some fresh air; the Citizen Doctor insisted on that."

She felt terribly impatient at the delay, but did not dare appear to be in a hurry, whilst the concierge seemed to derive amusement at keeping her standing beside his lodge. He knew her for an aristo, and many there were in these days who found pleasure in irritating or humiliating those who in the past had thought themselves their betters.

However, this ordeal, like so many others, did come to an end after a time; the concierge condescended to open the porte-cochère and Louise was able to slip out into the street. It had certainly left off raining, but it was very cold and damp underfoot. Louise trudged on as fast as she could, her thin shoes squelching through the mud. Fortunately the bakery was not far, and soon she was able to take her place in the queue outside the shop. There was no crowd at this hour: a score of people at the most, chiefly women. Louise's anxious glance swept quickly over them and at once her heart gave a jump, for she had caught sight of a maimed man on crutches, dressed in back as the mysterious letter had described. He was ahead of her in the queue, and she saw him quite distinctly when he entered the shop, and stood for a moment under the lantern which hung above the door. But his face she could not clearly see, for he wore a black hat with a wide brim: a hat as shabby as his clothes. Presently he disappeared inside the shop, and Louise did not see him again until she herself had been to the counter and been served with her ration of bread. Then she saw him just going out of the shop and she followed as soon as she could.

There were still a good many people in the street, and just over the road there were two men of the Republican Guard on duty, set there to watch over the queue outside the licensed bakeries. Some of the people there were still waiting their turn, others were walking away, some in one direction, some in another. But there was no sign anywhere of the one-legged man. Louise stood for a moment in the ill-lighted street, perturbed and anxious, wondering in which direction she ought to go; her heart seemed to sink into her shoes, and she was desperately tired, too, from standing so long with the child in her arms. But with those men of the Republican Guard watching her she did not like to hesitate too long and, thoroughly heart-sick now and nigh unto despair, she began to fear that the letter and all her hopes were only idle dreams. Almost faint with fatigue and disappointment she had just turned her weary footsteps towards home when suddenly she heard the distant tap-tap of crutches on the cobble-stones.

With a deep sigh of relief Louise started at once to walk in the direction whence came the welcome sound. The tap-tap kept on slightly ahead of her, so all she had to do was to follow as closely as she could. With Charles-Léon asleep in her arms she had trudged on thus for about ten minutes, turning out of one street and into another, when suddenly the tap-tap ceased. The maimed man had paused beside an open street door; when Louise came up with him he signed to her to enter.

She hadn't the least idea where she was, but from the direction in which she had gone she conjectured that it was somewhere near the Temple. There were not many people about, and though on the way she had gone past more than one patrol of the National Guard, the men had taken no notice of her; she was just a poor woman with a child in her arms and a ration of bread in her basket; nor had they paid any heed to the maimed, seedy-looking individual hobbling along on crutches.

Now as Louise passed through the open door her guide whispered rapidly to her:

"Go up two flights of stairs and knock at the door on your right."

Strangely enough, Louise had no hesitation in obeying; though she had no idea where she would find herself she felt no fear. Perhaps she was too tired to feel anything but a longing for rest. She went up the two flights of stairs and knocked at the door which her guide had indicated. It was opened by a rough-looking youngish man in ragged clothes, unshaved, unkempt, who blinked his eyes as if he had just been roused out of sleep.

"Is it Madame de Croissy?" he asked, and Louise noted that he spoke French with a foreign accent; also the word "Madame" was unusual these days. This, of course, reassured her. Her thoughts flew back to Josette and the girl's firm belief in the existence of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

The young man led the way through a narrow ill-lit passage to a room where Louise's aching eyes were greeted with the welcome sight of a table spread with a cloth on which were laid a knife and fork, a plate and a couple of mugs. There was also a couch in a corner of the room with a pillow on it and a rug. It was rather cold and a solitary tallow candle shed a feeble, vacillating light on the bare whitewashed walls and the blackened ceiling, but Louise thought little of all this; she sank down on a chair by the table, and the young man then said to her in his quaint stilted French:

"In one moment, Madame, I will bring you something to eat, for you must be very hungry; and we also have a little milk for the boy. I hope you won't mind waiting while I get everything ready for you."

He went out of the room before Louise had found sufficient energy to say "Thank you." She just sat there like a log, her purple-rimmed eyes staring into vacancy. Charles-Léon, who, luckily, had been asleep all this time, now woke and began to whimper. Louise hugged him to her bosom until the tousled young ruffian reappeared presently, carrying a tray on which there was a dish and a jug.

Louise felt almost like swooning when a delicious smell of hot food and steaming milk tickled her nostrils. The young man had poured out a mugful of milk for Charles-Léon, and while the child drank eagerly Louise made a great effort to murmur an adequate "Thank you."

"It is not to me, Madame," the man retorted, "that you owe thanks. I am here under orders. You, too, I am afraid," he went on with a smile, "will have to submit to the will of my chief."

"Give me the orders, sir," Louise rejoined meekly. "I will obey them."

"The orders are that you eat some supper now and then have a good rest until I call you in the early morning. You will have to leave here a couple of hours before the dawn."

"Charles-Léon and I will be ready, sir. Anything else?"

"Only that you get a good sleep, for to-morrow will be wearisome. Good-night, Madame."

Before Louise could say another word the young man had slipped out of the room.

Charles-Léon slept peacefully all night cuddled up against his mother, but Louise lay awake for hours, thinking of her amazing adventure. She was up betimes, and soon after a distant church clock struck half-past four there was a knock at the door. Her young friend of the evening before had come to fetch her; he looked as if he had been up all night, and certainly he had not taken off his clothes. Louise picked Charles-Léon up, and with him in her arms she followed her friend down the stairs. Outside she found herself in a narrow street: it was quite dark because the street lanterns had already been extinguished and there was not yet a sign of dawn in the sky. Through the darkness Louise perceived the vague silhouette of a covered cart such as the collectors of the city's refuse used for their filthy trade. A small donkey was harnessed to the cart and it was being driven apparently by a woman.

Neither the woman nor the young man spoke at the moment, but the latter intimated to Louise by a gesture that she must step into the cart. Only for a few seconds did she hesitate. The cart was indeed filthy and reeked of all sorts of horrible odours calculated to make any sensitive person sick. A kindly voice whispered in her ear:

"It cannot be helped, Madame, and you must forgive us: anyway, it is no worse than the inside of one of their prisons."

Her friend now took Charles-Léon from her, and summoning all her courage she stepped into the cart. The child was then handed back to her and she gathered herself and him into a heap under the awning. She wanted to assure her friend that not only was she prepared for anything, but that her heart was full of gratitude for all that was being done for her. But before she could speak a large piece of sacking was thrown right over her, and over the sacking a pile of things the nature of which the poor woman did not venture to guess. As she settled herself down, as comfortably as she could, she came in contact with what appeared to be a number of bottles.

A minute or two later with much creaking of wheels and many a jerk the cart was set in motion. It went jogging along over the cobble-stones of the streets of Paris at foot pace, while under the awning, smothered by a heap of all sorts of vegetable refuse, Louise de Croissy had sunk into a state of semi-consciousness.

Chapter XI

She was roused from her torpor by the loud cry of "Halte!" The cart came to a standstill and Louise, with sudden terror gripping her heart, realised that they had come to one of the gates of Paris where detachments of National Guard, officered by men eager for promotion, scrutinised every person who ventured in or out of the city.

The poor woman, crouching under a heap of odds and ends, heard the measured tramp of soldiers and a confused murmur of voices. Through a chink in the awning she could see that the grey light was breaking over this perilous crisis of her life. Presently a gruff commanding voice rose above the shrill croaky tones of a woman, whom Louise guessed to be the driver of the cart. The gruff voice when first it reached Louise's consciousness was demanding to see what there was underneath the awning. She could do nothing but hug the child closer to her breast, for she knew that within the next few seconds her life and his would tremble in the balance. She hardly dared to breathe; her whole body was bathed in a cold sweat. Heavy footsteps, accompanied by short, shuffling ones, came round to the back of the cart, and a few seconds later the end flap of the awning was thrust aside and a wave of cold air swept around inside the cart. Some of it penetrated to poor Louise's nostrils, but she hardly dared to breathe. She knew that her fate and that of Charles-Léon would be decided within the next few minutes perhaps.

The gruff voice was evidently that of one in authority.

"Anyone in there?" it demanded, and to the unfortunate woman it seemed as if the heap of rubbish on the top of her was being prodded with the point of a bayonet.

"No one now, Citizen Officer," a woman's shrill voice responded, obviously the voice of the old hag who was driving the cart: "that's my son there, holding the donkey's head. He can't speak, you know, Citizen... never could since birth... tongued-tied as the saying is. But a good lad... can't gossip, you see. And here's his passport and mine!"

There was some rustle of papers, one or two muttered words and then the woman spoke again:

"I'm picking up my daughter and her boy at Champperret presently," she said: "their passports and permits are all in order too, but I haven't got them here."

"Where are you going then all of you?" the gruff voice asked, and there was more rustle of papers and a tramping of feet. The passports were being taken into the guard-room to be duly stamped.

"Only as far as Clichy, Citizen Officer. It says so on the permit. See here, Citizen. 'Permit for Citizeness Ruffin and her son Pierre to proceed to Clichy for purposes of business!' That's all in order is it not, Citizen Officer?"

"Yes! yes! that's all in order all right. And now let's see what you have got inside the cart."

"All in order... of course it is..." the old woman went on, cackling like an old hen; "you don't catch Mère Ruffin out of order with authorities. Not her. Passports and permits, everything always in order, Citizen Officer. You ask any captain at the gates. They'll tell you. Mother Ruffin is always in order... always... in order..."

And all the while the old hag was shifting and pushing about the heap of rubbish that was lying on the top of the unfortunate Louise.

"It's not a pleasant business, mine, Citizen Officer," she continued with a doleful sigh; "but one must live, what? Citizen Arnould — you know him, don't you, Citizen? Over at the chemical works — he buys all my stuff from me."

"Filthy rubbish, I call it," the officer retorted; "but don't go wasting my time, mother. Just shift that bit of sacking, and you can take your stuff to the devil for aught I care."

Louise, trembling with fear and horror, still half-smothered under the pile of rubbish, was on the point of losing consciousness. Fortunately Charles-Léon was still asleep and she was able to keep her wits sufficiently about her to hold him tightly in her arms. Would the argument between the soldier and the old hag never come to an end?

"I am doing my best, Citizen Officer, but the stuff is heavy," the woman muttered; "and all my papers in order I should have thought... Mother Ruffin's papers always are in order, Citizen Officer.... Ask any captain of the guard... he'll tell you..."

"Nom d'un nom," the soldier broke in with an oath, "are you going to shift that sacking or shall I have to order the men to take you to the guard-room?"

"The guard-room? Me? Mère Ruffin, known all over the country as an honest patriot? You'd get a reprimand, Citizen Officer — that's what you would get for taking Mère Ruffin to the guard-room. Bien! bien! don't lose your temper, Citizen Officer... no harm meant.... Here! can't one of your men give me a hand?... But... I say..."

A click of glass against glass followed: Louise remembered the bottles that were piled up round her. After this ominous click there was a moment's silence. Sounds from the outside reached Louise's consciousness: men talking, the clatter of horses' hoofs, the rattle of wheels, challenge from the guard, cries of "Halte!" distant murmurs of people talking, moving, even laughing, whilst she, hugging Charles-Léon to her breast, marvelled at what precise moment she and her child would be discovered and dragged out of this noisome shelter to some equally noisome prison. The woman had ceased jabbering: the click of glass seemed to have paralysed her tongue; but only for a moment: a minute or so later her shrill voice could be heard again.

"You won't be hard on me will you, Citizen Officer?" she said dolefully.

"Hard?" the soldier retorted. "That'll depend on what you've got under there."

"Nothing to make a fuss over, Citizen Officer: a poor widow has got to live, and..."

There was another click of glass — several clicks, then a thud, the bottles tumbling one against the other, then the officer's harsh voice saying with a laugh:

"So! that's it! is it? Absinthe? What? You old reprobate! No wonder you didn't want me to look under that sacking."

"Citizen Officer, don't be hard on a poor widow..."

"Poor widow indeed? Where did you steal the stuff?"

"I didn't steal it, Citizen Officer... I swear I didn't."

"How many bottles have you got there?"

"Only a dozen, Citizen..."

"Out with them."

"Citizen Officer..."

"Out with them I say..."

"Yes, Citizen," the old woman said meekly with an audible snuffle.

She sprawled over the back of the cart, pushed some of the rubbish aside and Louise was conscious of the bottles being pulled out from round and under her. She heard the soldier say:

"Is that all?"

"One dozen, Citizen Sergeant. You can see for yourself."

The woman dropped down to the ground. Louise could hear her snuffling the other side of the awning. After which there came a terrible moment, almost the worst of this awful and protracted ordeal. The officer appeared to have given an order to one of the soldiers, who used the end of his bayonet for the purpose of ascertaining whether there were any more bottles under the sacking. What he did was to bang away with it on the pile of rubbish that still lay on the top of Louise; some of the bangs hit Louise on the legs: one blow fell heavily on one of her ankles. The courage with which she endured these blows motionless and in silence was truly heroic. Her life and Charles-Léon's depended on her remaining absolutely still. And she did remain quite still, hugging the child to her breast, outwardly just another pile of rubbish on the floor of the cart. The boy was positively wonderful, he seemed to know that he must not move or utter a sound. Though he must have been terrified, he never cried, but just clung to his mother, with eyes tightly closed. Louise in fact came to bless the very noisomeness of the refuse which lay on top of her, for obviously the soldier did not like to touch it with his hands.

"I get most of my stuff from the hospitals," Louise could hear the old hag talking volubly to the officer; "you can see for yourself, Citizen, it is mostly linen which has been used for bandages... sore legs you know and all that... Citizen Arnould over at the chemical works gives me good money for it. It seems they make paper out of the stuff. Paper out of linen I ask you... brown or red paper I should say, for you should see some of it... and all the fever they've got in the wards now... yellow fever if not worse..."

"There! that'll do, Mother Ruffin," the officer broke in roughly: "all your talk won't help you. You've got to pay for taking the stuff though, and you know it... and there'll be a fine for trying to smuggle..."

There followed a loud and long-winded protests on the part of the old hag; but apparently the officer was at the end of his tether and would listen to none of it, although he did seem to have a certain measure of tolerance for the woman's delinquency.

"You come along quietly, Mother," he said in the end, "it will save you trouble in the end."

He called to his men, and snuffling, cackling, protesting, the old woman apparently followed them quietly in the direction of the guard-room. At any rate Louise heard nothing more. For a long, long time she did not hear anything. The reaction after the terror of this past half hour was so great that she fell into a kind of torpor; the noises of the street only came to her ears through a kind of fog. The only feeling she was conscious of was that she must hold Charles-Léon closely to her breast.

How long this state of numbness lasted she did not know. She had lost count of time; and she had lost the use of her limbs. Her ankle where she had been hit with the flat of the soldier's bayonet had ached furiously at first: now she no longer felt the pain. Charles-Léon, she thought, must have gone to sleep, for she could just feel his even breathing against her breast.

Suddenly she was aroused by the sound, still distant, of the woman's shrill voice. It drew gradually nearer.

"Now then, Pierre, let's get on," the old hag was shrieking as she came along.

Pierre, whoever he was, had apparently remained at the donkey's head all this time. Louise from the first had suspected that he was none other than her friend of the tousled head; but who that awful old hag with the snuffle and the cackling voice she could not even conjecture. But she was content to leave it at that. Apparently those wonderful and heroic Englishmen employed strange tools in their work of mercy. At the moment she felt far too tired and too numb even to marvel at the amazing way in which that old woman had hoodwinked the officer of the guard. As Louise returned to consciousness she could hear vaguely in the distance the soldiers laughing and chaffing and the woman muttering and grumbling:

"Making a poor woman pay for an honest trading... a scandal I call it..."

"Ohé, la mère!" the soldiers shouted amidst loud laughter, "bring us some more of that absinthe to-morrow."

"Robbers! thieves! brigands!" the woman ejaculated shrilly, "catch me again coming this way..."

She apparently busied herself with putting the bottles — or some of them at any rate — back into the cart: after which the flap of the awning was again lowered: there was much creaking and shaking of the cart; soon it was once more set in motion; to the accompaniment of more laughter and many ribald jokes on the part of the soldiers, who stood watching the departure of the ramshackle vehicle and its scrubby driver.

Anon the creaking wheels resumed their jolting, axle-deep in mud, over the country roads riddled with ruts. But of this Louise de Croissy now knew little or nothing. She had mercifully once more ceased to think or feel.

Chapter XII

Days of strange adventures followed, adventures that never seemed real, only products of a long dream.

There was that halt on the wayside in the afternoon of the first day, with Paris a couple of leagues and more behind. The end flap of the awning was pulled aside and the horrible weight lifted from Louise's inert body. Glad of the relief and of the breath of clean air, she opened her eyes, then closed them again quickly at sight of the hideous old woman whose scarred and grimy face was grinning at her from the rear of the cart. A dream figure in very truth, or a nightmare! But was she not the angel in disguise who, by dint of a comedian's art, had hoodwinked the sergeant at the gate of Paris and passed through the jealously guarded barriers with as much ease as if her passengers in that filthy cart had been provided with the safest of passports?

Yet, strive how she might, Louise could see nothing in that ugly and ungainly figure before her that even remotely suggested a heroine or an angel. She gave up the attempt at fathoming the mystery, and allowed herself and Charles-Léon to be helped out of the cart and, with a great sigh of gladness, she sank down on the mossy bank by the roadside, and ate of the bread and cheese which the hag had placed beside her, together with a bottle of milk for the boy.

When she and Charles-Léon had eaten and drunk and she had taken in as much fresh country air as her lungs would hold, she looked about her, intending to thank that extraordinary old woman for her repeated kindness, but the latter was nowhere to be seen; also the donkey was no longer harnessed to the cart. Somewhere in the near distance there was a group of derelict cottages and, chancing to look that way, Louise saw the woman walking towards it and leading the donkey by the bridle.

She never again set eyes on that old hag. Presently, however, a rough fellow clad in a blue smock, who looked like a farm labourer, appeared upon the scene; he was leading a pony, and as soon as he caught Louise's glance he beckoned to her to get back into the cart. Mechanically she obeyed, and the man lifted Charles-Léon and placed him in his mother's arms. He harnessed the pony to the cart, and once more the tumble-down vehicle went lumbering along the muddy country lanes. Fortunately, though the sky was grey and the wind boisterous, the rain held off most of the time. For three days and nights they were on the road, sleeping when they could, eating whatever was procurable on the way. They never once touched the cities, but avoided them by circuitous ways; always a pony, or sometimes a donkey, was harnessed to the cart, but the same rough-looking farm labourer held the reins the whole time. Two or three times a day he would get down, always in the vicinity of some derelict building or other into which he would disappear, and presently he would emerge once more leading a fresh beast of burden. Once or twice he would be accompanied on those occasions by another man as rough-looking as himself, but for the most part he would attend to the pony or donkey alone.

There were some terrible moments during those days, moments when Louise felt that she must choke with terror. Her heart was in her mouth, for patrols of soldiers would come riding or marching down the road, and now and again there would be a cry of "Halt!" and a brief colloquy would follow between the Sergeant in command and the driver of the cart. But apparently — thank God for that — the cart and its rustic driver appeared too beggarly and insignificant to arouse suspicion or to engage for long the attention of the patrols.

The worst moment of all occurred in the late afternoon of the third day. The driver had turned the cart off the main road into a narrow lane which ran along the edge of a ploughed field. It was uphill work and the pony had done three hours' work already, dragging the rickety vehicle along muddy roads. Its pace got slower and slower. The wind blew straight from the north-east, and Louise felt very sick and cold, nor could she manage to keep Charles-Léon warm: the awning flapped about in the wind and let in gusts of icy draught all round.

When presently the driver pulled up and came round to see how she fared, she ventured to ask him timidly whether it wouldn't be possible to find some sheltered spot where they could all spend the night in comparative warmth for the child. At once the man promised to do his best to find some derelict barn or cottage. He turned into a ploughed field and soon disappeared from view. Louise remained shivering in the cart with Charles-Léon hugged closely to her under her shawl. She had indeed need of all her faith in the wonderful Scarlet Pimpernel to keep her heart warm, while her body was racked with cold.

She had no notion of time, of course; and sundown meant nothing when all day the sky had been just a sheet of heavy, slate-coloured clouds. A dim grey light still hung over the dreary landscape, while slowly the horizon veiled itself in mist. The driver had been gone some time when Louise's sensitive ears caught the distant sound of horses' hoofs splashing in the mud of the road. It was a sound that always terrified her. Up to now nothing serious had happened, but it was impossible to know when some meddling or officious Sergeant might with questions and suspicions shatter at one fell swoop all the poor woman's hopes of ultimate safety. The patrol — for such it certainly was — was coming at a fair speed along the main road. Perhaps, thought Louise, the soldiers would ride past the corner of the lane and either not see the cart or think it not worth investigating. Bitterly she reproached herself for her want of endurance. If she had not sent the driver off to go in search of a shelter for the night, he would have driven on at least another half kilometre and then surely the cart would not have been sighted from the road. And, what's more, she would not have been alone to face this awful contingency.

For contingency it certainly was. Anything — the very worst — might happen now, for the man was not there to answer harsh questions with gruff answers, he was not there with his ready response and his amazing knack of averting suspicions. Louise was alone and she heard the squad of soldiers turn into the lane. Her heart seemed to cease beating. A moment or two later the man in command cried "Halt!" and himself drew rein close to the rear of the cart.

"Anyone there?" he queried in a loud voice.

Oh! for an inspiration to know just what to say in reply!

"There's someone under there," the soldier went on peremptorily; "who is it?"

More dead than alive, Louise was unable to speak.

The Sergeant then gave the order! "Allons! just see who is in there; and," he added facetiously, "lets hear where the driver of this elegant barouche has hidden himself."

There was some clatter and jingle of metal: the sound of men dismounting, the pawing and snorting of horses. Through the chinks in the awning Louise could perceive the dim light of a couple of dark lanterns like two yellow eyes staring. Then the awning in the rear of the cart was raised, the lantern lit up the interior and Louise was discovered crouching in the distant corner on a pile of sacking, hugging Charles-Léon.

"Ohé! la petite mère!" the Sergeant called out not unkindly: "come out and let's have a look at you."

Louise crawled out of the darkness, still hugging Charles-Léon. The evening was drawing in. She wondered vaguely if anything in her appearance would betray that she was no rustic, but an unfortunate, fleeing the country. She looked wearied to death, dishevelled and grimy. The Sergeant leaning down from his saddle peered into her face.

"Who is in charge of your barouche, petite mère?" he asked.

"My — my — husband," Louise contrived to stammer through teeth that were chattering.

"Where is he?"

"Gone to the village... to see if we can get... a bed... for the night..."

"Hm!" said the Sergeant. And after a moment or two: "Suppose you let me see your papers."

"Papers?" Louise murmured.

"Yes! Your passports, what?"

"I haven't any papers."

"How do you mean you haven't any papers?" the Sergeant retorted, all the kindness gone out of his voice.

"My husband..." Louise stammered again.

"Oh! you mean your husband has got your papers?"

Louise, no longer able to utter a sound, merely nodded.

"And he's gone to the village?"

Another nod.

"Where is the village?"

Louise shook her head.

"You mean you don't know?"

The man paused for a moment or two. Clearly there was something unusual in this helpless creature stranded in the open country with a child in her arms, and no man in sight belonging to her.

"Well!" he said after a moment or two, during which he vainly tried to peer more closely in Louise's face, "you'll come along with us now, and when your husband finds the barouche gone he will know where to look for you."

"You get into your carriage, petite mère," he added; "one of the men will drive you."

So shaken and frightened was Louise that she could not move. Her knees were giving way under her. Two men lifted her and Charles-Léon into the cart. They were neither rough nor unkind — family men perhaps with children of their own — or just machines performing their duty. Louise could only wonder what would happen next. Crouching once more in the cart, she felt it give a lurch as one man scrambled into the driver's seat. He took the reins and clicked his tongue, and the pony had just answered to a flick of the whip when from the ploughed field there came loud cries of "Ohé!" coming right out of the evening mist. Louise didn't know if she could feel relief or additional terror when she heard that call. It was her rustic friend coming back at full speed. He was running, and came to a halt in the lane breathless and obviously exhausted.

"Sergeant," he cried, gasping for breath, "give a hand... on your life give a hand... a fortune, Sergeant, if we get him now."

The soldier, taken aback by the sudden appearance of this madman — he thought of him as such — fell to shouting: "What's all this?" and had much ado to hold his horse, which had shied and reared at the strident noise. The other soldiers — there were only four of them — were in a like plight, and for a moment or two there was a good deal of confusion which the quickly gathering darkness helped to intensify.

"What's all this?" the Sergeant queried again as soon as the confusion subsided. "Here! you!" he commanded: "are you the owner of this aristocratic vehicle?"

"I am," the man replied.

"And is that your wife and child inside?"

"They are. But in Satan's name, Sergeant..."

"Never mind about Satan now. You just get into your stylish vehicle and turn your pony's head round; you are coming along with me."

"Where to?"

"To Abbeville, parbleu. And if your papers are not in order..."

"If you go to Abbeville, Sergeant," the man declared, still panting with excitement, "you lose the chance of a lifetime... there's a fortune for you and me and these honest patriots waiting for us in the middle of this ploughed field."

"The man's mad," the Sergeant declared. "Allons, don't let's waste any more time. En avant!"

"But I tell you I saw him, Citizen Sergeant," the man protested.

"Saw whom? The devil?"

"Worse. The English spy."

It was the Sergeant's turn to gasp and to pant.

"The English spy?" he exclaimed.

"Him they call the Scarlet Pimpernel!" the man asserted hotly.

"Where?" the Sergeant cried. And the four men echoed excitedly! "Where?"

The man pointed towards the ploughed field.

"I went to look for a shelter for the night for my wife and child. I came to a barn. I heard voices. I drew near. I peeped in. Aristos I tell you. A dozen of them. All talking gibberish. English, what? And drinking. Drinking. Some of them were asleep on the straw. They

mean to spend the night there.”

He paused, breathless, and pressed his grimy hands against his chest as if every word he uttered caused him excruciating pain. The words came from his throat in short jerky sentences. Clearly he was on the verge of collapse. But now the Sergeant and his men were as eager, as excited as he was.

“Yes! yes! go on!” they urged.

“They are there still,” the man said, trying to speak clearly: “I saw them. Not ten minutes ago. I ran away, for I tell you they looked like devils. And one of them is tall... tall like a giant... and his eyes...”

“Never mind his eyes,” the Sergeant broke in gruffly: “I am after those English devils. There’s a reward of ten thousand livres for the capture of their chief... and promotion...” he added lustily.

He turned his horse round in the direction of the field, and called loudly “Allons!”

The driver halloed after him.

“But what about me, Citizen Sergeant?”

“You can follow. In what direction did you say?”

“Straight across,” the man replied. “See that light over there... keep it on your right... and then follow the track... and there’s a gap in the hedge...”

But the Sergeant was no longer listening. No doubt visions of ten thousand livres and fortune rising to giddy heights rose up before him out of the fast-gathering gloom. He was not going to waste time. The men followed him, as eager as the jingle of their accouterments, the creaking of damp leather, the horses snorting and pawing the wet earth. The flap of the awning had been lowered again: she couldn’t see anything, but she heard the welcome sounds, and no longer felt the cold.

“My baby, my baby,” she murmured, crooning to Charles-Léon, “I do believe that God is on our side.”

The cart moved along. She didn’t know in which direction. The pony was going at foot-pace: probably the driver was leading it, for the darkness now was intense — the welcome darkness that enveloped the wanderers as in a black shroud. At first Louise could not help thinking of that Sergeant and the soldiers. What would they do when they found that they had been hoodwinked? They would scour the countryside of course to find traces of the cart. Would they succeed in the darkness of the night? She dared not let her thoughts run on farther. All she could do was to press Charles-Léon closer and closer to her heart and to murmur over and over again: “I do believe that God is on our side.”

He was indeed, for the night passed by and there was no further sign of the patrol. After a time the cart came to a standstill and the driver came round, and helped her and Charles-Léon to descend. They all sheltered in the angle of a tumble-down wall which had once been part of a cottage. The man wrapped some sacking round Louise and the child and she supposed she slept, for she remembered nothing more until the light of dawn caused her to open her eyes.

The next day they came in sight of Calais. The driver pulled up and bade Louise and the child descend. Louise knew nothing of this part of France. It appeared to her unspeakably dreary and desolate. The earth was of a drab colour, so different to the rich reddish clay of the Dauphiné, and instead of the green pastures and golden cornfields, still scrubby grass grew in irregular tufts here and there. The sky was grey and there was a blustering wind which brought with it a smell of fish and salt water. The stunted trees, with their branches all tending away from the sea, had the mournful appearance of a number of attenuated human beings who were trying to run away and were held back by their fettered feet. Calais lay far away on the right, and there was only one habitation visible in this desolate landscape. This was a forlorn and dilapidated-looking cottage on the top of the cliff to the west: its roof was all crooked on the top like a hat that has been blown aside by the wind. The driver pointed to the cottage and said to Louise:

“That is our objective now, Madame, but I am afraid it has to be reached on foot. Can you do it?”

This was the first time that the man spoke directly to Louise. His voice was serious and kindly, nevertheless she was suddenly conscious of a strange pang of puzzlement and doubt — almost of awe: for the man spoke in perfect French, the language of a highly educated man. Yet he had the appearance of a rough country boor: his clothes were ragged, he wore neither shirt nor stockings: of course his unshaved cheeks and chin added to his look of scrubbiness and his face and hands were far from clean. At first, when he replaced the horrible old hag on the driver’s seat of the cart, Louise had concluded that he was one of that heroic band of Englishmen who were leading her and Charles-Léon to safety, but this conclusion was soon dispelled when the man spoke to the several patrols of soldiers who met them on the way. She had heard him talk to them, and also the night before, during those terrible moments in the lane; and he had spoken in the guttural patois peculiar to the peasantry of Northern France.

But now, that pleasant, cultured voice, the elegant diction of a Parisian! Louise did not know what to make of it. Had she detected the slightest trace of a foreign accent she would have understood, and gone back to her first conclusion, that here was one of those heroic Englishmen of whom Josette was wont to talk so ecstatically. But a French gentleman, masquerading in country clothes, what could it mean?

The poor woman’s nerves were so terribly on edge that one emotion would chase away another with unaccountable speed. For the past few hours she had felt completely reassured — almost happy — but now, just a few words uttered by this man whom she had learned to trust sent her back into a state of panic, and the vague fears which she had experienced when first she left her apartment in the Rue Picpus once more reared their ugly heads. It was stupid of course! A state bordering on madness! But Louise had not been quite normal since the tragic death of Bastien.

And suddenly she clutched at her skirt, in the inner pocket of which she had stowed the packet of letters which already had cost Bastien de Croissy his life. But the letters were no longer there. She searched and searched, but the packet had indubitably gone. Then she was seized with wild panic. Pressing the child to her bosom she turned as if to fly. Whither she knew not, but to fly before the hideous arms of those vengeful Terrorists were stretched out far enough to get hold of Charles-Léon.

But before she had advanced one step in this wild career a strange sound fell upon her ear, a sound that made her pause and look vaguely about her to find out how it was that le bon Dieu had sent this heaven-born protector to save her and the boy. The sound was just a pleasant mellow laugh, and then the same kindly voice of a moment ago said quietly:

“This is yours, I believe, Madame.”

Instinctively she turned like a frightened child, hardly daring to look. Her glance fell first on the packet of letters which she had missed and which was held out to her by a very grimy yet strangely beautiful hand: from the hand her eyes wandered upwards along the tattered sleeve and the bent shoulder to the face of the driver who had been the silent companion of her amazing three days' adventure. And out of that face a pair of lazy deep-set blue eyes regarded her with obvious amusement, whilst the aftermath of that pleasant mellow laugh still lingered round the firm lips.

With her eyes fixed upon that face, which seemed like a mask over a mystical entity, Louise took the packet of letters. Her trembling lips murmured an awed "Who are you?" whereat the strange personage replied lightly, "For the moment your servant, Madame, only anxious to see you safely housed in yonder cottage. Shall we proceed?"

All Louise could do was to nod and then set off as briskly as she could, so as to show this wonderful man how ready she was to follow him in all things. He had already taken the pony out of the cart and set Charles-Léon on its back. The cart he left by the roadside, and he walked beside the pony steadying Charles-Léon with his arm. Thus the little party climbed to the top of the cliff. It was very heavy going, for the ground was soft and Louise's feet sank deeply into the sand; but she dragged herself along bravely, although she felt like a somnambulist, moving in a dream-walk to some unknown, mysterious destination, a heaven peopled by heroic old hags and rough labourers with unshaven cheeks and merry, lazy eyes. The cottage on the cliff was not so dilapidated as it had appeared in the distance. The man brought the pony to a halt and pushed open the door. Louise lifted Charles-Léon down and followed her guide into the cottage. She found herself in a room in which there was a table, two or three chairs and benches, and an iron stove in which a welcome fire was burning. Two men were sitting by the fire and rose as Louise, half-fainting with fatigue, staggered into the room. Together they led her to an inner room where there was a couch, and on this she sank breathless and speechless. Charles-Léon was then laid beside her: the poor child looked ghastly, and Louise, with a pitiable moan, hugged him to her side. One of the men brought her food and milk, whilst the other placed a pillow to her head. Louise, though only half-conscious at this moment, felt that if only she had the strength she would have dragged herself down on her knees and kissed the hands of those rough-looking men in boundless gratitude.

She remained for some time in a state of torpor, lying on the couch holding the boy closely to her. The door between the two rooms was ajar: a welcome warmth from the iron stove penetrated to the tired woman's aching sinews. A vague murmur of voices reached her semi-consciousness. The three men whom she regarded as her saviours were talking together in whispers. They spoke in English, of which Louise understood a few sentences. Now and again that pleasant mellow laugh which she had already heard came to her ears, and somehow it produced in her a sense of comfort and of peace. One of the three men, the one with the mellow laugh, seemed to be in command of the others, for he was giving them directions of what they were to do with reference to a boat, a creek and a path down the side of a cliff, and also to a signal with which the others appeared to be familiar.

But the voices became more and more confused; the gentle murmur, the pleasant roar of the fire acted as a lullaby, and soon Louise fell into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter XIII

A pleasant, cultured voice, speaking French with a marked foreign accent, roused Louise out of her sleep. She opened her eyes still feeling dazed and not realising for the moment just where she was. One of the young men whom she had vaguely perceived the night before was standing under the lintel of the door.

"I hope I haven't frightened you, Madame," he now said, "but we ought to be getting on the way."

It was broad daylight, with a grey sky heavy with clouds that threatened rain, and a blustering wind that moaned dismally down the chimney. From the distance came the regular booming of the breakers against the cliffs. It was a sound Louise had never heard in her life before and she could not help feeling alarmed at the prospect of going on the sea with Charles-Léon so weak and ill, even though salvation and hospitable England lay on the other side. But she had made up her mind that however cowardly she felt in her heart of hearts, she would bear herself bravely before her heroic friends. As soon as the young man had gone, she made herself and the boy ready for the journey — the Great Unknown as she called it with a shudder of apprehension.

There was some warm milk and bread for her and Charles-Léon on the table in the other room. She managed to eat and drink and then said bravely: "We are quite ready now, Monsieur."

The young man guided her to the front door of the house. Here she expected to see once more the strange and mysterious man who had driven her all the way from Paris in the ramshackle vehicle and who throughout four long wearisome days and nights had never seemed to tire, and never lost his ready wit and resourcefulness in face of danger from the patrols of the National Guard.

Not seeing him or the cart she turned to her new friend.

"What has happened to our elegant barouche?" she asked with a smile, "and the pony?"

"They wouldn't be much use down the cliff-side, Madame," he replied; "I hope you are not too tired to walk..."

"No, no! of course not, but..."

"And one of us will carry the boy."

"I didn't mean that," she rejoined quickly.

"What then?"

"The... driver who brought us safely here... he was so kind... so... so wonderful... I would love to see him again... if only to thank him..."

The young man remained silent for a minute or two, then when Louise insisted, saying: "Surely I could speak to him before we go?" he said rather curtly, she thought: "I am afraid not, Madame."

She would have liked to have insisted still more urgently, thinking it strange that this young man should speak so curtly of one who deserved all the eulogy and all the recognition that anyone could give for his valour and ingenuity, but somehow she had the feeling that for some obscure reason or other the subject of that wonderful man was distasteful to her new friend, and that she had better not inquire further about him. Anyway, she was so surrounded by mysteries that one more or less did not seem to matter.

Just then she caught sight of another man who was coming up the side of the cliff. He kept his head bent against the force of the wind, which was very boisterous and made going against it very difficult. Soon he reached the top of the cliff. He greeted Louise with a pleasant "Bonjour, Madame," uttered with a marked English accent. Indeed to Louise he looked, just like the other, a fine, upstanding young foreigner, well-groomed despite the inclemency of the weather and the primitiveness of his surroundings. The two men exchanged a few words together which Louise did not understand, after which one of them said, "En route!" and the other added in moderately good French, "I hope you are feeling fit and well, Madame; you have another tiring day before you."

Louise assured him that she was prepared for any amount of fatigue; he then took Charles-Léon in his arms; his friend took hold of Louise by the elbow, and led the way down the cliff, carefully guiding her tottering footsteps.

At the foot of the cliff the little party came to a narrow creek, and Louise perceived a boat hidden in a shallow cave in the rock. Guided by her friends Louise crept into the cave, and stepped into the boat. The young men made her as comfortable as they could and gently laid Charles-Léon in her arms. Except for gentle words of encouragement to the little boy now and then, they spoke very little, and Louise, who by now was in a kind of somnambulistic state, could only nod her thanks when one or the other of them asked if she felt well, or offered her some scanty provisions for herself and Charles-Léon.

The party sat in the boat during the whole of the day, until it was quite dark. In this distance far out at sea Louise's aching eyes perceived from time to time ships riding on the waves. Charles-Léon was frightened at first, and crouched against his mother, and when the waves came tumbling against the rocks and booming loudly he hid his little head under her shawl. But after a time the reassuring voices of the young Englishmen coupled with boyish curiosity induced him to look at the ships; he listened to childish sea-faring yarns told by one or the other of them: soon he became interested and, like his mother, felt no longer afraid.

Poor Louise, was, of course, terribly ignorant of all matters connected with the sea, as she had never been as much as near it in her life. She only knew vaguely the meaning of the word tide, and when the young men spoke of "waiting for the tide" before putting out to sea, she did not know what they meant. She fell to wondering whether they would all presently cross La Manche in the tiny rowing boat which was not much bigger than those in which she and Josette with papa and maman Gravier were wont in the olden days to go out for picnics on the Isère. But she asked no questions. Indeed by now she felt that she had permanently lost the use of her tongue.

Soon the evening began to draw in. A long twilight slowly melted into the darkness of a moonless night. Looking towards the sea it seemed to Louise that she was looking straight at a heavy black curtain — like a solid mass of gloom. The wind continued unabated, and now that she could no longer see the sea, and only heard its continuous roar, Louise once more felt that hideous, cold fear grinding at her heart. Those terrifying waves seemed to come nearer and nearer to the sheltering cave, while the breakers broke on the stony beach with a sound like thunder. As was quite natural, her terror communicated itself to the child. He refused to be comforted, and though the two men did all they could to soothe him, and one of them knelt persistently beside Louise, whispering words of encouragement in the child's ear, poor little Charles-Léon continued to shiver with terror.

Through the dismal howling of the wind and the booming of the waves no other sound penetrated to Louise's ears. After a while the young men too remained quite silent: they were evidently waiting for the signal of which they had spoken together the night before.

What that signal was Louise did not know. She certainly heard no strange sound, but the men did evidently hear something, for, suddenly and without a word, they seized their oars and pushed the boat off and out of the cave. This was perhaps on the whole the most terrifying moment in Louise's extraordinary adventure. The boat seemed to be plunging straight into a wall of darkness. It rocked incessantly, and poor Louise felt horribly sick. Presently she felt that she was being lifted to her feet and held in a pair of strong arms which carried her upwards through the darkness, whither she knew not at the time, but a little while later it occurred to her that perhaps she had died of fright, and that as of a matter of fact she had not awakened in Paradise. She was lying between snow-white, lavender-scented sheets, her aching head rested on a downy pillow, and a kindly voice was persuading her to sip some hot-spiced wine, which she did. It certainly proved to be delicious.

And there was Charles-Léon sitting opposite to her on the knee of a ruddy-faced, tow-haired sailor who was holding a mug of warm milk to the child's trembling lips. All that and more did indeed confirm Louise's first impression that this was not the cruel, hard world with which she was all too familiar, but rather an outpost of Paradise — if not the blessed heavens themselves.

The movement of the ship, alas! made Louise feel rather sick after a time, and this was an unpleasant and wholly earthly sensation which caused her to doubt her being in the company of angels. But indeed she was so tired that soon she fell asleep, in spite of the many strange noises around and above her, the creaking of wood, the sighing of the wind and the lashing of the water against the side of the ship.

When she woke after several hours' sleep the pale rosy light of dawn came creeping in through the port-hole. It was in very truth a rosy dawn, an augury of the calm and beauty that was now in store for the long-suffering woman. She was in England at last, she and her child: together they were safe from those assassins who had done Bastien to death and would probably have torn Charles-Léon from her breast before they sent her to the guillotine.

Le Bon Dieu had indeed been on their side.

Chapter XIV

And while Louise lived through the palpitating events of those fateful days Josette Gravier was quietly taking up the threads of life again. They were not snapped; they had only slipped for a few hours out of her hands, and life, of course, had to go on just the same. She would be alone after this in the apartment of the Rue Picpus: the small rooms, the tiny kitchen seemed vast now that all those whom Josette had cared for had gone. Strangely enough she was not anxious about Louise's fate; her faith was so immense, her belief in the Scarlet Pimpernel so absolute that she was able to go through the days that followed in comparative peace of mind whilst looking forward to Maurice's return.

He had obtained a permit lasting six or seven days to visit the de Croissy estates in the Dauphiné. The permit had been granted before Louise's departure was known to the authorities, or probably she and Charles-Léon, as sole heirs of Bastien de Croissy, would have been classed as émigrés: all their property would then be automatically confiscated and no one but Government officials allowed to administer it. Maurice spent five days of his leave in the diligence between Paris and Grenoble, and one in consultation with the old bailiff on the Croissy estate, trying to extract from him a promise that he would send to Mademoiselle Gravier on behalf of Madame de Croissy a small sum of money every month for rent and the bare necessities of life. Maurice hoped that after Josette had paid the rent out of this money she would contrive to send the remainder over to England as soon as she knew where to find Louise.

Josette had a little money of her own which she kept in her stocking, and she also received a few sous daily pay for the work which she did in the Government shops — stitching, knitting, doing up parcels for the "Soldiers of Liberty" who were fighting on the frontiers against the whole of Europe and keeping the great armies of Prussia and Austria at bay. If the rent of the apartment could be paid with monies sent from the Croissy estate, Josette was quite sure that she could live on her meagre stipend. Penury in the big cities, and especially in Paris, was appalling just now. Sugar and soap were unobtainable, and the scarcity of bread was becoming more and more acute. Queues outside the bakeries began to assemble as early as four o'clock in the morning to wait for the distribution of two ounces of bread, which was all that was allowed per person per day; and the two ounces consisted for the most part of bran and water. The baker favoured Josette because of her pretty face, but she was obliged to go for her ration very early in the morning because she had to be at the workshop by eight o'clock, and if she queued up later in the day Citizen Loquin would sometimes run out of bread before all his customers were served.

When Maurice came back from Grenoble life for Josette became more cheerful. He had found a tiny room for himself under the roof of another house in the Rue Picpus and had at once fallen back into his old habit of calling for Josette in the late afternoon at the Government shop when the day's work was done, and together the two of them would go arm-in-arm for a walk up the Champs Élysées or sometimes as far as the Bois. Maurice would bring what meagre provisions they could afford for their supper, and they would sit under the chestnut trees, now almost shorn of leaves and munch sour bread and dig their young teeth into an apple. Sometimes they would stroll into the town to see the illuminations, for there were illuminations on more than one day every week. What the wretched poverty-stricken, tyrant-ridden citizens of Paris rejoiced for on those evenings heaven alone knew! Certain it is that though tallow and grease were scarce, innumerable candles and lamps were lit, time after time, on some pretext or other, such as the passing of some decree which had a momentary popularity, or the downfall of a particular member of the Convention who had — equally momentarily — become unpopular with the mob. Such occasions were marked, in addition to the brilliant lighting of the city, by a great deal of noise and cheering, as an ill-clad, ill-fed mob thronged the streets, cheering their Robespierre or their Danton, and booing all the poor wretches who had been decreed traitors to the Republic on that day, and whose trial, condemnation and death on the guillotine would — just as night inevitably follows day — follow within twenty-four hours.

Maurice and Josette, jostled by the crowd, neither booed nor cheered: they seldom knew what the rejoicings and illuminations were for, but the movement, the lights and the noise took them out of themselves and caused them to forget for an hour or two the ever-growing problem of how to go on living. Once or twice when Maurice had carried through successfully a bit of legal business, he would buy a couple of tickets for the theatre, and he and Josette would listen enthralled to the sonorous verses of Corneille or Racine as declaimed by Citizen Talma, or laugh their fill over the drolleries of Mascarille or Monsieur Jourdain.

Sunday had been officially abolished by decree of the Convention in the new calendar, but Decadi came once every ten days with a half-holiday for Josette; then, if the day was fine, the two of them would hire a boat and Maurice would row up the river as far as Suresnes, and he and Josette would munch their sour bread and their apples under the trees by the towpath, and watched the boats gliding up and down the Seine and long for the freedom to drift downstream away from the noise and turmoil of the city, and away from the daily horrors of the guillotine and countless deaths of innocents which would for ever remain a stain on the fair fame of the country which they loved.

Maurice had never spoken again of love to Josette. He was not an ordinary lover, for he had intuition, and his love was entirely unselfish. So few lovers have a direct apprehension of the right moment for declaring their feelings; those that have this supreme gift will often succeed where others less sensitive will fail because they have not approached the loved one when she was in a receptive mood. Maurice knew that his hour had not yet come. Josette was still in a dream-state of adoration for a hero whom she had never seen. She was too young and too unsophisticated to analyse her own feelings; too ignorant of men and of life to take Maurice altogether seriously. As a friend or a brother she cared for him more than she had ever cared for another living soul, not excepting Louise; she trusted him, she relied on him; had she not said on that never-to-be-forgotten occasion: "Are you not here to take care of me?" But for the time being her thoughts were too full of that other man's image to add idealism to her affection. And so even though these autumn days were calm and sweet, though the wood-pigeons still cooed in the forests and the black-birds whistled in the chestnut trees, Maurice did not speak of love to Josette; although at times he suffered so acutely from her ingenuousness that tears would well up to his eyes and the words which he forced himself not to utter nearly choked him; yet he did not tell her how he loved her, and how he ached with the longing to take her in his arms, to bury his face in her golden curls, or press his burning lips on her sweet, soft mouth.

He was happy in this, that he was in a measure working for her; all her little pleasure, all the small delicacies which he brought her, and which she munched with the relish of a young animal, came to her through his exertions. He had automatically slipped into his late employer's practice. It did not amount to much, but he was a fully qualified advocate, and as clerk to Citizen Croissy, had become known to the latter's clients. A part of the money which he earned he put by for madame because he considered that it was her due, but there was always a little over which Maurice set aside for the joy of giving Josette some small treat — tickets at the theatre, an excursion into the country, or an intimate little dinner at one of the cheap restaurants. Strange, indeed, that in the midst of the most awful social upheaval the world has ever known, life for many, like Josette Gravier and Maurice Reversac, could go on in such comparative calm.

Three weeks and more went by before Josette had any news of Louise. But one evening when she came home after her walk with Maurice she found that a letter had been thrust under the door of the apartment. It was from Louise.

"My Josette chérie (it said).

"We are in England, Charles-Léon and I, and the man who has wrought this miracle is none other than the mysterious hero of whom you have so often dreamed. I have received word that this letter will reach you. That word was signed with the device which stands for courage and self-sacrifice — a small scarlet flower, my Josette, the Scarlet Pimpernel. I am completely convinced now that I owe my salvation and that of Charles-Léon to your English hero. Here in England no one doubts it. He is the national hero, and people speak of him with bated breath as of a godlike creature, whom only the elect have been privileged to meet in the flesh. It is generally believed that he is a high-born English gentleman who devotes his life to saving the weak and the innocent from the murderous clutches of those awful Terrorists in France. He has a band of followers, nineteen in number, who obey his commands without question, and under his leadership constantly risk their precious lives in the cause of humanity. It is difficult to understand why they do this: some call it the sublimity of self-sacrifice, others the love of sport and adventure, innate in every Englishman. But God alone can judge of motives.

"My darling Josette, you will be happy to know that we are at peace and comfortable now, my poor lamb and I, though my heart is filled with sorrow at being parted from you. Daily do I pray to God that you may come to me some day soon. Remember me to Maurice. He is a brave and loyal soul. I will not tell you of the hopes which I nurse for your future and his. You will have guessed these long ago. I am afraid that he would refuse to come away from Paris just yet, but if you can, Josette, would join me here in England — and you can do that any day with the aid of the Scarlet Pimpernel — we could bide our time quietly until the awful turmoil has subsided, which, by God's will, it soon must, and then return to France, when you and Maurice could be happily united.

"As to my adventures from the moment when I left our apartment with Charles-Léon in my arms until the happy hour when we landed here in England I can tell you nothing. My lips are sealed under a promise of silence, and implicit obedience to the wishes of my heroic rescuers is the only outward token of my boundless gratitude that I can offer them.

"But I can tell you something of our arrival in Dover. I was still very sea-sick, but the feeling of nausea left me soon after I had set food on solid ground. We walked over to a delightful place, a kind of tavern it was, though not a bit like our cafés or restaurants. Later on when I was rested, I made a note of the sign which was painted on a shield outside the door; it was 'The Fisherman's Rest,' and, in English, such places are called inns. I have prayed God ever since I crossed that threshold that you, my Josette chérie might see it one day.

"Here for the first time since I left Paris I came in contact with people of my own sex. The maid who showed me to a room where I could wash and rest was a sight for sore eyes: so clean, so fresh, so happy! So different to our poor girls in France nowadays — underfed, ill-clothed, in constant terror of what the near future might bring. These little maids over here go about their work singing — singing, chérie! Just think of it! Of late I have never heard anyone sing except you!

"We spent the best part of the day at 'The Fisherman's Rest.' In the afternoon we posted to Maidstone, where we now are the guests of some perfectly charming English people. I cannot begin to tell you, chérie, of the kindness and hospitality of these English families who take us in, poor émigrés, feed us and clothe us and look after us until such time as we can get resources of our own. I wish our good Maurice could send me a remittance from time to time, but that, I know, is impossible. But I will try to get some needlework to do; you know how efficient I was always considered, even at the convent, in sewing and embroidery. I do not wish to be a burden longer than I can help to my over-kind hosts.

"How this letter will reach you I know not, but I know that it will reach you, because a day or two ago the post brought me a mysterious communication saying that any letter of mine sent to the Bureau des Émigrés, Fitzroy Square, London, will be delivered to any address in France. This is only one of the many wonderful happenings that have occurred since I left Paris. It seems such a long time ago now, and our little apartment in the Rue Picpus seems so far, so very far away. I have forgotten nothing. Josette chérie, even though my memory has been overclouded by all the strange events which have befallen me. So little have I forgotten that many a time and very bitterly have I reproached myself that I lent such an inattentive ear when you spoke to me about the mysterious English hero who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and of his no less heroic followers. Had I believed in you and them sooner, my Bastien might be beside me even now. The Scarlet Pimpernel, my Josette, is real, very real indeed. He and his nineteen lieutenants have saved the lives of hundreds of innocents: his name here is on everybody's lips, but no one knows who he is. He works in the dark, under that quaint appellation, and those of us who owe our lives to him have, so far as we know, never set eyes on him.

"Well! it is a problem the solution of which I shall probably never know. All I can do is to keep sacred in my heart the memory of all that that man has done for me.

"That is all, my Josette. I hope and pray to Almighty God that some day soon it may be your good fortune to come to me — to come to England under the tender care of the man whom you have almost deified. When that happy day comes you will find your Louise's arms stretched out in loving welcome.

"Your devoted friend.

Louise."

"P.S. — I still have the letters."

Josette could scarcely read the welcome missive to the end. Her eyes were dim with tears. She loved Louise as she had always done, and she adored Charles-Léon, and somehow this letter, coming from far-off England, quickened and accentuated the poignancy of parting: she spent many hours sitting at the table under the lamp with Louise's letter spread out before her. One sentence in it she read over and over again, for it expressed just what she herself felt in her heart for the hero of her dreams: "All I can do," Louise had written, "is to keep sacred the memory of all that that man has done for me."

Chapter XV

Josette had read on so late into the night and been so excited over what she read that sleep had quite gone out of her eyes. She could not get to sleep for thinking of Louise and her adventures, of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and also of Maurice Reversac. Poor Maurice! Whatever happened he would have his burden to bear here in Paris. For the sake of the dead, and because of Louise and Charles-Léon, he must carry on his work and trust to God to see him safely through.

That day, for the first time since his return from the Dauphiné, Maurice was not at his usual place outside the gate of the workshop, waiting for Josette to come out. Josette, slightly disappointed, knew, of course, that it must be the exigencies of business that had kept him away. But when the evening hour came and again no Maurice at the gate, Josette was anxious. Before she went home she went over to Maurice's lodgings down the street to inquire from the concierge if, perchance, Maurice was ill. She knew that nothing but illness could possibly have kept him from his evening walk with her, or from sending her a message. But the concierge had seen and heard nothing of Maurice since morning when he started off as usual for the office.

Nothing would do after that but Josette must go off, then and there, to the Rue de la Monnaie. She had not been near the place since that awful day when she saw Maître de Croissy lying dead in his devastated office; and when she turned the angle of the street and saw at a hundred paces farther along the porte-cochère of the house where the terrible tragedy had occurred, she was suddenly overcome with an awful prescience of doom. So powerful was this sense of forewarning that she could no longer stand on her feet, but was obliged to lean against the nearest wall while trying to conquer sheer physical nausea. A horrible, nameless terror assailed her: she was trembling in every limb. However, after a few moments she regained control over herself, chided herself for her weakness, and walked with comparative coolness to the porte-cochère, which had not yet been closed for the night.

Again that awful feeling of giddiness and nausea. The house had always worn that dismal air of desolation and decay with a pervading odour of damp mortar and putrid vegetables. Josette knew its history: she knew that it had once been the fine abode of a rich foreign banker who had fled the country at the first outbreak of the Revolution, that it had stood empty for two or three years, then been appropriated by the State, a concierge put in office, and the house let out in apartments and offices. She had often been to the house and always disliked the sight of it, its air of emptiness despite the fact that most of the apartments were inhabited: the courtyard and stairs looked to her as if they were peopled by ghosts.

Josette went up to the concierge's lodge and asked if Citizen Reversac were still in his office. The concierge eyed her with a quizzical glance. He had seen the pretty girl in the company of Citizen Reversac before now. His sweetheart, no doubt — ah, well! these things were of every-day occurrence these days. Mothers lost their sons, wives their husbands: it was no good grieving over other people's troubles or commiserating over their misfortunes.

"Citizen Reversac was here this morning, little Citizeness," the concierge said in response to Josette's reiterated question, "but... you know..."

"What?"

"He was arrested this morning—"

"Arr-?"

"Easy, easy, little Citizeness," the concierge rejoined quickly, and with outstretched hand steadied Josette, who looked as if she would measure her length outside his lodge. "These things," he added with a shrug, "happen every day. Why, my own sister less than a week ago..."

Josette did not hear what he said. He went rambling on about his sister whose only son had been arrested, and who was breaking her heart this very day because the boy had been guillotined.

"He was not a bad lad either, my nephew; and a good patriot; but there! one never knows."

"One never knows!" Josette murmured mechanically, stupidly, staring at the concierge with great unseeing eyes. The man felt really sorry for the girl. She was so very pretty, that mouth of hers had been fashioned for smiles, those blue eyes made only to shine with merriment, and those chestnut curls to tempt a man to sin. Ah, well, one never knows! These things happened every day!

Chapter XVI

How Josette reached home that evening she never knew. She seemed to have spent hours and hours in repeating to herself: "It cannot be true!" and "It must be a mistake."

"He has done nothing!" she murmured from time to time, and then: "In a few days they will set him free again! They must! He has done nothing! Such an innocent!"

But in her heart she knew that innocents suffered these days as often as the guilty. Only a short time ago she had been called on to fill the rôle comforter. She could not help thinking of Louise and of that awful tragedy which was the precursor of the present cataclysm. But now she had to face this trouble alone: there was no one in whom she could confide, no one who could give her a word of advice or comfort. And when she found herself alone at last in the apartment of the Rue Picpus, where every stick of furniture, every door and every wall reminded her of those whom she loved and proclaimed her present loneliness, she realised the immensity of that cataclysm. She felt that with Maurice gone she had nothing more to live for. The dreariness of days without his kindly voice to cheer her, his loving arm to guide her, was inconceivable. It looked before her like a terrifying nightmare. And she pictured to herself Maurice's surprise and indignation at his arrest, his protestations of innocence, his final courage in face of the inevitable. She thought of him in one of the squalid overcrowded prisons, thinking of her, linking his hands tightly together in a proud attempt to appear unconcerned, indifferent to his fate before his fellow-prisoners.

Maurice! Josette never knew till now how she cared for him. Love?... No! She did not know what love was, nor did she believe that the desperate ache which she had in her heart at thought of Maurice had anything to do with the love that poets and authors spoke about. On the contrary, she thought that what she felt for Maurice was far stronger and deeper than the thing people called "love." All she knew was that she suffered intensely at this moment, that his image haunted her in a way it had never done before. She recalled every moment that of late she had spent with him, every trick of his voice, every expression of his face: his kind grey eyes, the gentle smile around his lips, the quaint remarks he would make at times which had often made her laugh. Above all, she was haunted at this hour with the remembrance of a mellow late summer's evening when she chaffed him because he had spoken to her of love. How sad he was that evening, whilst she never thought for a moment that he had been serious.

"Maurice! Maurice!" she cried out in her heart; "if those devils take you from me I shall never know a happy hour again."

But it was not in Josette's nature to sit down and mope. Her instinct was to be up and doing, whatever happened and however undecipherable the riddle set by Fate might be. And so in this instance also. The arrest of Maurice was in truth the knock-down blow: at this juncture Josette could not have imagined a more overwhelming catastrophe. As she was alone in the apartment she indulged in the solace of tears. She cried and cried till her eyes were inflamed and her head ached furiously: she cried because of the intense feeling of loneliness and desolation that gave her such a violent pain in her heart which nothing but a flood of tears seemed able to still. But having had her cry, she pulled herself together, dried her tears, bathed her face, then sat down to think or, rather, to remember. With knitted brows and concentrated force of will she tried to recall all that Bastien de Croissy had said to Louise the evening when first he spoke of the letters and she, Josette suggested stitching the packet in the lining of Louise's corsets. These letters were more precious than any jewels on earth, for they were to be the leverage wherewith to force certain influential members of the Convention to grant Louise a permit to take her child into the country, to remain with him and nurse him back to health and strength. The possession of those letters had been the cause of Bastien de Croissy's terrible death. They were seriously compromising to certain influential representatives of the people, proofs probably of some black-hearted treason to their country. The possession of them was vitally important to their writers, so important that they chose the way of murder rather than risk revelation. A man on trial, a man condemned to death might have the chance of speaking. It is only the dead who cannot speak.

So now for the knowledge of who were the writers of the letters. And Josette, her head buried in her hands, tried to recall every word which Bastien had spoken the night before his death, while she, Josette, sat under the light of the lamp, stitching the precious packet into the lining of Louise's corsets. But unfortunately at one moment during the evening her mind, absorbed in the facts themselves, had been less retentive than usual. Certain it is that at this desperately critical moment she could not recall a single name that Bastien had mentioned, and after his death, Louise, with the obstinacy of the half-demented, had guarded the letters with a kind of fierce jealousy; she had taken them to England with her, with what object God only knew — probably none! Just obstinacy and without definite consciousness.

It was in the small hours of the morning that Josette had an inspiration. It was nothing less, and it so comforted her that she actually fell asleep, and as soon as she was washed and dressed ran out into the street. She ran all the way to the corner of the Pont des Arts, where vendors of old books and newspapers had their booths. She bought a bundle of back numbers of *Le Moniteur* and, hugging it under her cape, she ran back to the Rue Picpus.

The *Moniteur* gave the reports of the sittings of the Convention day by day, the debates, the speeches. Josette, whilst sitting by herself the night before with her mind still in a whirl with the terrible news of Maurice's arrest, had not been able to recall a single name mentioned by Bastien in connection with the letters, but with the back numbers of the *Moniteur* spread out before her, with the names of several members of the Convention staring at her in print, the task of reconstructing the conversation for that night became much easier. For instance, she did remember Louise exclaiming at one moment: "But he is Danton's most intimate friend!" and Bastien saying then: "All three of them are friends of Danton."

And shrewd little Josette concentrated on the *Moniteur* until she came upon the report of a debate in the Convention over a proposition put forward by Citizen Danton. Who were his friends? Who his supporters? he had a great number, for he was still at the height of his popularity: they agreed and debated and perorated, and Josette while she read, murmured their names repeatedly to herself: "Desmoulins, Desmoulins, Desmoulins — no! that wasn't it. Hérault, Hérault de Séchelles — no! Delacroix — no, again no! Chabot?... Chabot?...?" And slowly memory brought the name back to her mind — Chabot! That was one of the names! Chabot, Danton's friend. "Yes!" Bastien had said at one moment, "an unfrocked Capuchin friar!" and Louise had uttered an exclamation of horror. Chabot! that certainly was one of the names. And Josette read on; taxed her memory, forced it to serve her purpose. More

names which meant nothing, and then one that stood out! Fabre d'Eglantine — Danton's most intimate friend! Chabot and Fabre — two names! And then a third one — Bazire! Josette had paid no attention at the time. She had heard Bastien mention those names, but only vaguely, and her brain had only vaguely registered them; but now they came back. Memory had served her a good turn.

Fabre, Chabot, Bazire! Josette had no longer any doubt as to who the men were who had written the letters, letters that were the powerful leverage wherewith to force them to grant whatever might be asked of them: a permit for Louise, freedom for Maurice Reversac.

Josette had not been sufficiently care-free up to now to note that the weather was like, but now, with a sense almost of gladness in her heart, she threw open the window and looked up at the sky. She only had a small glimpse of it because the Rue Picpus was narrow and the houses opposite high, but she did have a glimpse of clear blue, the blue of which Paris among all the great cities of Europe can most justifiably boast, translucent and exhilarating. The air was mild. There was no trace of wintry weather, of rain or of cold. The sun was shining and she, Josette, was going to drag Maurice out of the talons of those revolutionary birds of prey.

From far away came the dismal sound of the bell of St. Germain, booming out the morning hour. Another day had broken over the unfortunate city, another day wherein men waged a war to the death one against the other, wherein they persecuted the innocent, heaped crime upon crime, injustice upon injustice, flouted religion and defied God; another day wherein ruled the devils of hate and dolour, of tribulation and of woe. But Josette did no longer think of devils or of sorrow. She was going to be the means of opening the prison gates for Maurice.

Chapter XVII

Since the day when Charlotte Corday forced her way into the apartment of Citizen Marat and plunged a dagger into the heart of that demagogue, the more prominent members of the revolutionary government were wont to take special precautions to guard their valuable lives.

Thus the conventionnel François Chabot in his magnificent apartment in the Rue d'Anjou made it a rule that every person desirous of an interview with him must be thoroughly searched for any possible concealed weapon before being admitted to his august presence. The unfrocked friar proclaimed loudly his patriotism, declared his readiness to die a martyr like Marat, but he was taking no risks. He had married a very rich and very beautiful young wife. Whilst professing in theory the most rigid sans-culottism, he lived in the greatest possible luxury, ate and drank only of the best, wore fine clothes, and surrounded himself with every comfort that his wife's money could buy.

Josette did indeed appear as a humble suppliant when, having mounted the carpeted stairs which led up to the first floor of that fine house in the Rue d'Anjou, she found herself face to face with a stalwart janitor at the door of François Chabot's apartment.

"Your business?" he demanded.

"To speak with Citizen Chabot," Josette replied.

"Does the Citizen expect you?"

"No, but when he knows of the business which has brought me here he will not refuse to see me."

"That is as it may be, but you cannot pass this door without stating your business."

"It is private, and for Citizen Chabot's private ear alone."

The stalwart looked down on the dainty figure before him. Being a man he looked down with considerable pleasure, for Josette in her neat kirtle and well-fitting bodice, her frilled muslin cap perched coquettishly on her chestnut curls, was exceedingly pleasant to look on. Her blue eyes did not so much as demand that her wish to speak with Citizen Chabot should not be peremptorily denied.

The janitor pulled himself up and his waistcoat down, passed his hand over his bristly cheek, hemmed and hawed and cleared his throat, then, unable apparently to resist the command of those shining eyes any longer, he said finally:

"I will see what can be done, Citizeness."

"That is brave of you," Josette said demurely, and then added: "Where shall I wait?" which translated into ordinary language meant: "You would not surely allow me to wait outside the door where any passer-by might behave in an unseemly manner towards me?"

At any rate this was how the janitor interpreted Josette's simple query. He opened the door on the thickly carpeted, richly furnished vestibule and said: "Wait here, Citizeness."

Josette went in. It was years since she had seen such beautiful furniture, such tall mirrors and rich gildings, years since she had trodden on such soft carpets, and these were the days when woman had to go shoeless, and children died for want of nourishment, whilst men like Chabot preached equality and fraternity, and loudly proclaimed the simplicity and abnegation of their lives. Josette's astonishment at all this luxury caused her to open wide her eyes, and when those blue eyes were opened wide, men, even the most stalwart, became like putty.

"Sit down there, Citizeness," the magnificent janitor said, "whilst I go and inquire if the Citizen Representative will see you."

Josette sat down and waited. Two or three minutes later the janitor returned. As soon as he caught sight of Josette he shook his head, then said:

"Not unless you will state your business. And," he added, "you know the rule: no one is admitted to speak with any Representatives of the People without being previously searched."

"Give me pen and paper," Josette rejoined, "that I may state my business in writing."

When the man brought her pen and paper she wrote:

"Dead men tell no tales, but the written words endure."

She folded the paper, then demanded wax and a seal. Presumably the man couldn't read, but one never knew. A seal was safer and Chabot himself would be grateful to her for having thought of it. A few moments later she found herself in a small room, bare of furniture or carpet, into which the janitor had ushered her after he had taken her written message to the Citizen Representative. A middle-aged woman, who was probably the housekeeper, passed her rough hands all over Josette's young body, dived into her shoes, under her muslin fichu, and even under her cap. Satisfied that there was no second Charlotte Corday intent on assassination, she called the janitor back and handed an indignant if silent Josette back to him. The audience could now be granted with safety.

Such were the formalities attendant upon a request for an audience with one of the representatives of the people in this glorious era of Equality and Fraternity.

Chapter XVIII

François Chabot was at this time about forty years of age. A small, thin, nervy-looking creature with long nose, thick lips, arched eyebrows above light brown eyes, and a quantity of curly hair which swept the top of his high coat-collar at the back, covering it with grease. He was dressed in the height of fashion, with a very short waist and long tails to his coat. His neck was swathed in a high stock collar, and his somewhat receding chin rested on a voluminous jabot of muslin and lace.

Josette, who had been ushered into his presence with so much ceremony, eyed him with curiosity, for she had heard it said of Representative Chabot that he affected to attend the sittings of the Convention in a tattered shirt, with bare legs and wearing a scarlet cap. In fact, it was said of him that he owed most of his popularity to this display of cynicism: also, that he, like his brother-in-law Bazire, had before now paid a hired assassin to dig a knife between his ribs in order to raise the cry among his friends in the Convention: "See! the counter-revolutionists are murdering the patriots. Marat first, now the incorruptible Chabot. Whose turn will it be next?"

But Josette, though remembering all this, was in no mood to smile. Did not this damnable hypocrite hold Maurice's life in his ugly hands? Those same hands — large, bony, with greyish nails and spatulated fingers — were toying with the written message which Josette had sent in to him. They were perhaps the hands that had dealt the fatal blow to Bastien de Croissy. Josette glanced on them with horror and then quickly drew her eyes away.

The janitor had motioned her to a seat, then he retired, closing the door behind him. Josette was alone with the Citizen Representative. He was sitting at a large desk which was littered with papers, and she sat opposite to him. He now raised his pale, shifty eyes to her, and she returned his searching glance fearlessly. He was obviously nervous; cleared his throat to give himself importance, and shifted his position once or twice. The paper which he held between two fingers and pointed towards Josette rustled audibly.

"Your name?" he asked curtly after a time.

"Josephine Gravier," she replied.

"And occupation?"

"Seamstress in the Government workshops. I was also companion and housekeeper in the household of Maître Croissy..."

"Ah!"

"...until the day of his death."

There was a pause. The man was as nervous as a cat. He made great efforts to appear at ease, and above all to control his voice, which after that first "Ah!" had sounded hoarse and choked.

The handsome Boule clock on the mantelpiece, obviously the spoils of a raid on a confiscated château, struck the hour with deliberate majesty. Chabot shifted his position again, crossed and uncrossed his legs, pushed his chair farther away from the bureau, and went on fidgeting with Josette's written message, crushing it between his fingers.

"Advocate Croissy," he said at last with an effort, "committed suicide, I understand."

"It was said so, Citizen."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing beyond what I said."

They were like duellists, these two, measuring their foils in a preliminary passage of arms. Chabot's glance had in it now something malevolent, cruel... the cruelty of a coward who is not sure yet of what it is he has to fear.

Suddenly he said, holding up the crumpled bit of paper:

"Why did you send me this?"

"To warn you, Citizen," Josette replied quite quietly.

"Of what?"

"That certain letters of which you and others are cognisant have not been destroyed."

"Letters?" Chabot demanded roughly. "What letters?"

"Letters written by you, Citizen Representative, to Maître de Croissy, which prove you to be a shameless hypocrite and a traitor to your country."

She had shot this arrow at random, but at once she had the satisfaction of knowing that the shaft had gone home. Chabot's sallowness had become the colour of lead, his thick lips quivered visibly. A slight scum appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"It's all a lie!" he protested, but his voice sounded forced and hollow. "An invention of that traitor Croissy."

"You know best, Citizen Representative," Josette retorted simply.

Chabot tried to put on an air of indifference.

"Croissy," he said as calmly as he could, "told you a deliberate lie if he said that certain letters of mine were anything but perfectly innocent. I personally should not care if anybody read them..."

He paused, then added: "If that is all you wished to tell me, my girl, the interview can end here."

"As you desire, Citizen," Josette said, and made as if to rise.

"Stay a moment," Chabot commanded. "Merely from idle curiosity I would like to know where those famous letters are. Can you perchance tell me?"

"Oh, yes," she replied. "They are in England and out of your reach, Citizen Representative."

"What do you mean by 'in England'?"

"Just what I say. When the widow of Maître de Croissy went to England with her boy she took the packet of letters with her."

"She fled from Paris, I know," Chabot retorted, still trying to control his fury. "I know it. I had the report. That cursed English spy...!" He checked himself; this girl's slightly mocking glance was making a havoc of his nerves.

"The letters, such as they are, are probably destroyed by now," he said as coolly as he could.

"They are not destroyed."

"How do you know?"

Josette shrugged. Would she be here if the letters had been destroyed?

"Why did the woman Croissy run away like a traitor?"

"Her child was sick. It was imperative he should leave Paris for a healthier spot."

"I know. Croissy told me that tale. I didn't then believe a word of it. It was just blackmail, nothing more." Then as Josette was once more silent he reiterated roughly: "Why did the woman Croissy leave Paris in such haste? Why should she have taken the letters with her? You say she did, but I don't believe it."

"Perhaps she was afraid, Citizen."

"Afraid of what? Only traitors need be afraid."

"Afraid of... committing suicide like her husband."

This shaft, too, went straight home. Every drop of blood seemed to ebb from the man's face and left it ashen grey. His pale eyes wandered all round in the room as if in search of a hiding-place from that straight accusing glance. For the next minute or two he affected to busy himself with the papers on his desk, whilst the priceless Boule clock on the mantelshelf ticked away several fateful seconds.

Then he said abruptly, with an attempt at unconcern:

"Ah, bah! little woman. You think yourself very shrewd, what? No doubt you have some nice little project of blackmail in that pretty head of yours. But if you really did know all about the letters you speak of so glibly, you would also be aware that I am the man least concerned in them. There are others whose names apparently are unknown to you and who..."

"Their names are not unknown to me, Citizen Representative," Josette broke in with unruffled calm.

"Then why the hell haven't you been to them! Is it because you know less than you pretend?"

"If you, Citizen, do not choose to bargain with me, I will certainly go to Citizen Bazire and Fabre d'Eglantine, but in that case..."

At mention of the two names Chabot had given a visible start: a nervous twitching of his lips showed how severely he had been hit. He still tried to bluster by reiterating gruffly:

"In that case?"

"I am treating separately with the writers of each individual letter," Josette said firmly. "Those who do not choose to bargain with me must accept the consequences."

"Which are?"

"Publication of the letters in the Moniteur, in Père Duchesne and other newspapers. They will make good reading, Citizen Representative."

"You little devil!"

He had jumped to his feet, and with clenched fists resting upon the bureau he leaned across, staring into her face. His pale brown eyes had glints in them now of cold, calculating cruelty. Had he dared he would have seized this weak woman by the throat and torn the life out of her, slowly, brutally, with hellish cunning until she begged for death.

"You devil!" he reiterated savagely. "You forget that I can make you suffer for this."

Josette gave her habitual shrug.

"You certainly can," she said calmly. "You can do the same to me as you did to Maître de Croissy. But not even a second murder will put you in possession of the letters."

Never for a moment had the girl lost her presence of mind. She knew well enough what she risked when she came to beard this hyena in his lair; but it was the only way to save Maurice. She had thought it all out and had deliberately chosen it. Throughout the interview she had remained perfectly calm and self-possessed; and now, when for the first time she had the feeling that she was winning the day, she still remained demure and apparently unmoved. But Chabot was pacing up and down the room like a caged beast, kicking savagely at anything that was in his way. At one moment it seemed as if he was on the point of giving way to his fury, of being willing to risk everything, even his own neck, for the satisfaction of his revenge. During that fateful moment Josette's life did indeed hang in the balance, for already the man's hand was on the bell-pull. Another second and he was ready to send for his stalwart and to order him to summon the men of the National Guard who were always on duty in the streets outside the dwellings of the Representatives of the People: to summon the guard and order this woman to be thrown into the most noisome prison of the city, where mental and physical torture would punish her for her presumption.

With his hand on the bell-pull Chabot looked round and encountered the cool, unconcerned glance of a pair of eyes as deeply blue as the midnight sky in June, and other thoughts and desires, more foul than the first, distorted his ugly face. Had he read aught in those eyes but contempt and self-confidence the dark spirits that haunted this house of evil would have had their way with him. But it was the girl's evident complete self-assurance that made him pause... pause long enough to gauge the depth of the abyss into which he would fall if those compromising letters were by some chance given publicity.

He let go of the bell-pull and came back to his place by the bureau. He sat down and, leaning back in his chair, he allowed a minute or two to go by while he regained control over himself. Knitting his bony hands together he twisted them until all the finger-joints cracked. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the cold sweat from his brow.

Then at last he spoke:

"You said just now, Citizeness," he rejoined with enforced calm, trying to emulate the girl's self-assurance and her show of contempt, "that when the widow Croissy ran away to England she took certain letters with her. Is that it?"

"Yes. She did."

"How do you know that?"

"She has told me so... in a letter."

"A letter from England?"

"Yes."

"And that's a lie! How could you get a letter from England? We are at war with that accursed country, and..."

"Do not let us discuss the point, Citizen Representative. Let me assure you that the letters in question are in England: the Citizeness Croissy has not destroyed them — she has told me so. If you agree to my terms I will bring you the letters, otherwise they will be sent to the *Moniteur* and other newspapers for publication. And that," Josette added firmly, "is my last word."

"What are your terms?"

"First, a safe-conduct to enable me to travel to England without molestation..."

Chabot gave a harsh, ironical laugh.

"To travel to England? Fine idea, in very truth! Go to England and stay in England, what? And from thence make long noses at François Chabot, what? who was fool enough to let you hoodwink him!"

"Had you not best listen to me, Citizen Representative, before you jump to conclusions?"

"I listen. Indeed, I am vastly interested in your naïve project, my engaging young friend."

"My price for placing letters, which you would give your fortune to possess, in your hands, Citizen, is the liberty and life of one, Maurice Reversac, who was clerk to Maître de Croissy."

Chabot sneered. "Your lover, I suppose."

"What you choose to suppose is nothing to me. I have named my price for the letters."

Chabot, his elbow resting on the table, his chin cupped in his hand, was apparently wrapped in thought. He was contemplating that greatly daring woman who had delivered her ultimatum with no apparent consciousness of her danger. He could silence her, of course: send her to the guillotine, her and her lover, Reversac; but she seemed so sure that he would not do this that her assurance became disconcerting. The same reason which had stayed his and his friends' hands when they discussed the advisability of having Bastien de Croissy summarily arrested held good in this girl's case also. There was always the possibility of her getting a word in during her trial — a word which might prove the undoing of them all. How far was she telling the truth at this moment? How far was she lying in order to save her lover? These were the questions which François Chabot was putting to himself while he contemplated the beautiful woman before him.

And whilst he gazed on her she seemed slowly to vanish from his vision, both she and his luxurious surroundings, the costly furniture, the carpets, all the paraphernalia of his sybaritic life. Instead of this there appeared to his mental consciousness the Place de la Barrière du Trône, with the guillotine towering above a sea of faces. He saw himself mounting the fatal steps; he saw the executioner, the glint on the death-dealing knife, the horrible basket into which great and noble heads had often rolled at his, Chabot's, bidding. He heard the roll of drums ordered by Sauterre, the cries of execration of the mob, the strident laugh of those horrible hags who sat knitting and jabbering while the knife worked up and down, up and down.... A hoarse cry nearly escaped him. He passed his bony fingers under his choker for he felt stifled and sick...

The vision vanished. The girl was still sitting opposite to him, demure and silent — curse her! — waiting for him to speak. And looking on her he knew that he must have those letters or he would never know a moment's peace again. Once he had them, once he felt entirely safe, he would have his revenge. Let her look to herself, the miserable trollop! She will have brought her fate upon herself.

He said! "I'll give you the safe-conduct. You can start for England to-day."

"I will start to-morrow," she rejoined coolly. "I still must speak with Citizens Fabre and Bazire."

"I can make that right with them. You need not see them."

"I must have their signatures on the safe-conduct as well as yours, Citizen Chabot."

"You shall have them."

He was searching among the litter on his desk for the paper which he wanted. These men always had forms of safe-conduct made out with blank spaces for the name of a relation or friend who happened to be in trouble and hoped to leave the country before trouble materialised. Chabot found what he wanted. The paper was headed:

"COMMISSARIAT DE POLICE DE LA Villieme
SECTION DE PARIS."

and

"Laissez passer."

"Your name?" he asked once more.

"Josephine Madeleine Marie Gravier."

And Chabot, with a shaking hand, wrote these names in the blank space left for the purpose.

"Your residence?"

"Forty-three Rue Picpus."

"Your age?"

"Twenty."

"The color of your eyes?"

She looked at him and in the blank space he wrote the word "Blue"; and farther on he made note that the hair was burnished copper, her chin small, her teeth even.

When he had filled in all the blank spaces he stewed the writing with sand; then he said, "You can come and fetch this this evening."

"It will be signed?"

"By myself and by Citizens Fabre and Bazire."

"Then I will start to-morrow."

"You have money?"

"Yes, I thank you."

"When do you return?"

"It will take me a week probably to get to England and a week or more to come back. It will be close on three weeks, Citizen Representative, before your mind is set at rest."

He shrugged and sneered:

“And in the meanwhile, your lover...”

“In the meanwhile, Citizen,” Josette broke in firmly, “See to it that Maurice Reversac is safe and well. If on my return he is not there to greet me, if, in fact, you play me false in any way, it is the Moniteur who will have the letters, not you.”

Chabot rose slowly from his chair. He stood for a moment quite still beside the desk, his spatulated fingers spread out upon the table-top. All his nervousness, his fury, his excitement seemed suddenly to drop away from him. His ugly face wore an air of cunning, almost of triumph, and there was a hideous leer around his thick lips. He appeared to be watching Josette intently while she rose, shook out her kirtle, smoothed down her fichu and straightened her cap. As she turned towards the door he said slowly:

“We shall see!” he added with mock courtesy, “Au revoir, little Citizeness.”

A few minutes later Josette was speeding up the street on her way home.

Chapter XIX

Later in the day a meeting took place in the bare white-washed room of the Clud des Cordeliers between three members of the National Convention — François Chabot, Claude Bazire and Fabre d'Eglantine — and an obscure member of the Committee of Public Safety named Armand Chauvelin. This man had at one time been highly influential in the councils of the revolutionary government; before the declaration of war he had been sent to England as secret envoy of the Republic; but conspicuous and repeated failures in various missions which had been entrusted to him had hopelessly ruined his prestige and hurled him down from his high position to one of almost ignoble dependence. Many there were who marvelled how it had come to pass that Armand Chauvelin had kept his head on his shoulders: "The Republic," Danton had thundered more than once from the tribune, "has no use for failures." It is to be supposed, therefore, that the man possessed certain qualities which made him useful to those in power: perhaps he was in possession of secrets which would have made his death undesirable. Be that as it may, Chauvelin, dressed in seedy black, his pale face scored with lines of anxiety, his appearance that of a humble servant of these popular Representatives of the People, sat at one end of the deal table, listening with almost obsequious deference to the words of command from the other three.

He only put in a word now and again, for he had been summoned in order to take orders, not to give advice.

"The girl," Chabot said to him, "lives at No. 43 in the Rue Picpus. She will leave Paris to-morrow. You will shadow her from the moment that she leaves the house: never lose sight of her as you value your life. She is going to England; you will follow her. You have been in England before, Citizen Chauvelin," he added with a sarcastic grin, "so I understand, and are acquainted with the English tongue."

"That is so, Citizen Representative."

Chauvelin's eyes were downcast; not one of the three caught the feline gleam of hate that shot through their pale depths.

"Your safe-conduct is all in order. The wench will probably make for Tréport and take boat there for one of the English ports. It is up to you to board the same ship as she does. You must assume what disguise seems most suitable at the time. Our friend here, Fabre d'Eglantine, has been the means of finding you an English safe-conduct which was taken from one of that accursed nation who was trying to cross over our frontier from Belgium: he was an English spy. Our men caught and shot him; his papers remained in their hands: one of these was a safe-conduct signed by the English Minister of Foreign Affairs. Those stupid English don't usually trouble about passports or safe-conducts. They welcome the émigrés from France, and often among those traitors one or other of our spies have got through. Still, this document will probably serve you well, and you can easily make up to appear like the description of the original holder. Here are the two passports. Examine them carefully first, then I or one of my friends will give you further instructions."

Chabot handed two papers to Chauvelin across the table. Chauvelin took them, and for the next few minutes was absorbed in a minute examination of them. One bore the signature of Fabre d'Eglantine, who was representative for a section of Paris: it was counter-signed by François Chabot (Seine et Loire) and by Claud Bazire (Côte d'Or). The second paper bore the seal of the English Foreign Office and was signed by Lord Grenville himself. It was made out in the name of Malcolm Russel Stone, and described the bearer of the safe-conduct as short and slight, with brown hair and a pale face — a description, in fact, which could apply to twenty men out of a hundred. It had the advantage of not being a forgery, but was a genuine passport issued to an unfortunate Secret Service man since dead. As Chabot had said, the English authorities cared little, if anything, about passports; nevertheless, the present one might prove useful.

Chauvelin folded the two papers and put them in the inside pocket of his coat.

"So far, so good," he said drily. "I await your further instructions, Citizen Representative."

Chabot was the spokesman of the party. He was, perhaps, sunk more deeply than the other two in the morass of treachery and veniality which threatened to engulf them all. He it was who had summoned this conference and who had thought of Armand Chauvelin as the man most likely to be useful in this terrible emergency.

"He has a character to redeem," he had said to his friends when first the question was mooted of setting a sleuth-hound on the girl's tracks: "he speaks English, he knows his way about over there..."

"He failed signally," Bazire objected, "over that affair of the English spies."

"You mean the man they call the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Yes!"

"Chauvelin has sworn to lay him by the heels."

"But has never succeeded."

"No; but Robespierre tells me that he is the most tenacious tracker of traitors they have on the Committees — a real bloodhound, what!"

Thus it was that Chauvelin had been called in to confer on the best means of circumventing a simple girl in the fateful undertaking she had in view. Four men to defeat one woman in her purpose! What chance would she have to accomplish it?

"It is on the return journey, my friend," Chabot was saying, "that your work will effectually begin. This wench, Josette Gravier, is going to England for the sole purpose of getting hold of a certain packet of letters — seven in all — which are now in the possession of a woman named Croissy, the widow of the lawyer Croissy who — er — committed suicide a month or so ago. You recollect?"

"I do recollect perfectly," Chauvelin remarked blandly.

Chabot cleared his throat, fidgeted in his usual nervous manner, but took good care not to encounter Chauvelin's quizzical glance.

"Those letters," he said after a moment or two, "were written by me and my two friends here in the strictest confidence to Croissy, who was acting as our lawyer at the time. None of us dreamed that he would turn traitor. Well, he did, and no doubt was subsequently stricken either with remorse or fright, for after threatening us all with the betrayal of our confidence he took his own miserable life."

Chabot paused, apparently highly satisfied with his peroration. Chauvelin, silent and with thin white hands folded in front of him, waited calmly for him to continue. But his pale steely eyes were no longer downcast: their glance, bitterly ironical, was fixed on the

speaker, and there was no mistaking the question which that glance implied. "Why do you take the trouble to tell me those lies?" those eyes seemed to ask. No wonder that none of the three blackguards dared to look him straight in the face!

"I think," Chabot resumed after a time with added pompousness, "that I have told you enough to make you appreciate the importance of the task which we propose to entrust to you. My friends and I must regain possession of those confidential letters, but we look to you, Citizen Chauvelin, to put us in possession of them and not to the wench Gravier — you understand?"

"Perfectly."

"She is nothing but a trollop and a baggage who has shamelessly resorted to blackmail in order to save her gallant from justice. She has put a dagger at my throat — at the throat of my two friends here — and her dagger is more deadly than the one with which the traitor Charlotte Corday pierced the noble heart of Marat..."

He would have continued in this eloquent strain had not his brother-in-law, Bazire, put a restraining hand on his shoulder. Armand Chauvelin, with his arms tightly clasped over his chest, his thin legs crossed, his pale eyes looking up at the ceiling, presented a perfect picture of irony and contempt. The others dared not resent this attitude. They had need of this man for the furtherance of their schemes. Revenge was what they were looking for now. The wench had indeed put a dagger to their throats, and for this they were determined to make her suffer; and there was no man alive with such a marvellous capacity for tracking an enemy and bringing him to book as Armand Chauvelin, in spite of the fact that he had failed so signally in bringing the greatest enemy of the revolutionary government to the guillotine. In this he certainly had failed. Not one of his colleagues, not one of the three who had need of his services now, knew how the recollection of that failure galled him. He was thankful for this mission which would take him to England once more. He had heart-breaking ill luck over his adventures with the Scarlet Pimpernel, but luck might take a turn at any time, and, anyway, he was the only man in his own country who had definitely identified the mysterious hero with that ballroom exquisite Sir Percy Blakeney. Given a modicum of luck it was still on the cards that he, Chauvelin, might yet be even with his arch-enemy whilst he was engaged in dogging the footsteps of Josette Gravier. That wench was just the type of "persecuted innocent" that would appeal to the chivalrous nature of the elusive Sir Percy.

Yes! on the whole Chauvelin felt satisfied with his immediate prospects, and as soon as Chabot had ceased perorating he put a few curt questions to him.

"When does the girl start?" he asked.

"To-morrow," Chabot replied. "I have told her to call at my house this evening for her safe-conduct."

"It is made out in the name of...?"

"Josephine Gravier."

"Josephine Gravier," Chauvelin iterated slowly; "and the safe-conduct is signed...?"

"By myself, by my friend Fabre and my brother-in-law Claude Bazire."

Chauvelin then rose and said: "That is all I need know for the moment." He paused a moment as if reflecting and then added: "Oh! by the way, I may need a man by me whom I can trust — a man who will give me a hand in an emergency, you understand; who will be discreet and above all obedient."

"I see no objection to that," Chabot said and turned to his colleagues: "do you?"

"No. None," they all agreed.

"Do you know the right sort of man?" one of them asked.

"Yes! Auguste Picard," was Chauvelin's reply: "a sturdy fellow, ready for any adventure. He is attached to the gendarmerie of the VIIIth section at the moment, but he can be spared — Picard would suit me well: he is never troubled with unnecessary scruples," he added with a curl of the lip.

"Auguste Picard. Why not?"

They all agreed as to the suitability of Auguste Picard as a satellite to their friend Chauvelin.

"So long as he is told nothing," one of them remarked.

"Why, of course," Chauvelin hastened to reassure them all. He then concluded with complacency: "You may rest assured, my friends, that in less than a month the letters will be in your hands."

Chabot and the others sighed in unison: "The devil speed you, friend Chauvelin." One of them said: "Not one of us will know a moment's peace until your return."

On which note of mutual confidence they parted. Chauvelin went his way; the other three stayed talking for a little while at the club; other members strolled in from time to time, Danton among them. The great man himself was none too easy over this affair of the letters which had been recounted to him by his satellite Fabre d'Eglantine. He was not dead sure whether his own name was mentioned or not in the correspondence between de Batz and Croissy. He had at the time been unpleasantly mixed up in those Austrian intrigues, and it was part of de Batz' game to compromise them and thus bring about the downfall of the revolutionary Government and the restoration of the King. Chabot, Fabre and Bazire were in it up to the neck, but the moment mud-slinging began, any of their friends might get spattered with the slime. Robespierre, the wily jackal, was only waiting for an opportunity to be at Danton's throat, to wrest from him that popularity which for the time being made him the master of the Convention. It would indeed be a strange freak of Destiny if the downfall of the great Danton — the lion of the Revolution — were brought about through the intervention of a woman, a chit of a girl more feeble even than Charlotte Corday, whose dagger had put an end to Marat's career.

"But we can leave all that with safety in Armand Chauvelin's hands," was the sum-total of the confabulation between the four men before they bade one another good-night.

Chapter XX

The small diligence which had left Les Andelys in the early morning rattled into the courtyard of the Auberge du Cheval Blanc in Rouen soon after seven o'clock in the evening. It had encountered bad weather the whole of the way: torrential rain lashed by gusty north-westerly winds made going difficult for the horses. The roads were fetlock-deep in mud: on the other hand, the load had been light — two passengers in the front compartment and only four in the rear, and very little luggage on top.

In the rear of the coach the four passengers had sat in silence for the greater part of the journey, the grey sky and dreary outlook not being conducive to conversation. The desolation of the country, due to lack of agricultural labour, was apparent even along the fertile stretch of Normandy. The orchard trees were already bare of leaves and bent their boughs to the fury of the blast; their naked branches, weighted with the rain, were stretched out against the wind like the great gaunt arms of skinny old men suffering from rheumatism and doing their best to run away.

Of the two female travellers one looked like the middle-aged wife of some prosperous shopkeeper. She had rings on her fingers and a gold brooch was pinned to her shawl. Her hands were folded above the handle of a wicker basket out of which she extracted, from time to time, miscellaneous provisions with which she regaled herself on the journey. At one moment when the other woman who sat next to her, overcome with sleep, fell up against her shoulder, she drew herself up with obvious disgust and eyed the presumptuous creature up and down with the air of one unaccustomed to any kind of familiarity.

This other woman was Josette Gravier, en route for England, all alone, unprotected, ignorant of the country she was going to, of the districts she would have to traverse, of the sea which she had never seen and of which she had a vague dread; but her courage kept up by the determination to get to England, to wrest the letters from Louise de Croissy and, with them in her hand, to force those influential Terrorists into granting life and liberty to Maurice. It was Josette Gravier who, overcome with sleep, had fallen against the shoulder of her fellow-traveller, but it was a very radically transformed Josette; not disguised, but transformed from the dainty, exquisite apparition she always was into an ugly, dowdy, uncouth-looking girl unlikely to attract the attention of those young gallants who are always ready for an adventure with any pretty woman they might meet on the way. She had dragged her hair out of curl, smeared it with grease till it hung in lankish strands down her cheeks and brows; over it she wore a black cap, frayed and green with age, and this she had tied under her chin with a tired bit of back ribbon. She had rubbed her little nose and held it out to the blast till the tip was blue: she hunched up her shoulders under a tattered shawl, and forced her pretty mouth to wear an expression of boredom and discontent. What she could not hide altogether was the glory of her eyes, but even so she contrived to dim their lustre by appearing to be half asleep the whole of the way. Like the other woman she kept her basket of provisions on her lap, and at different times she munched bits of stale bread and cheese and drank thin-looking wine out of a bottle, after which she passed the back of her hand over her mouth and nose and left marks of grease on her chin and cheeks.

Altogether she looked a most unattractive bit of goods, and this, apparently, was the opinion of the two male travellers who sat opposite, for after a quick survey of their fellow-passengers they each settled down in their respective corners and whiled away the dreary hours of the long day by sleep. They did not carry provisions with them, but jumped out of the diligence for refreshments whenever the driver pulled up outside some village hostelry on the way.

At the Auberge du Cheval Blanc in Rouen everyone had to get down. The diligence went no farther, but another would start early the next morning and, in all probability, would reach Tréport in the late afternoon. Josette, like the other travellers, was obliged to go to the Commissariat of the town for the examination of her papers before she could be allowed to hire a bed for the night. Her safe-conduct was in order, which seemed greatly to astonish the Chief Commissary, for he eyed with some curiosity this bedraggled, uncouth female who presented a permit signed by three of the most prominent members of the National Convention.

"Laissez passer la citoyenne Josephine Gravier âgée de vingt ans demeurant a Paris Villieme section Rue Picpus No. 43, etc., etc...."

It was all in order; the Commissary countersigned the safe-conduct, affixed the municipal seal to it and handed it back to Josette. She had been the last of the travellers to present her papers at the desk; she took them now from the Commissary and turned to go out of the narrow stuffy room when a man's voice spoke gently close to her:

"Can I direct you to a respectable hostelry, Citizeness?"

Josette glanced up and encountered a pair of light-coloured eyes that looked kindly and in no way provokingly at her: they were the eyes of one of her fellow-travellers who had entered the diligence at Les Andelys and had sat in the corner opposite to her, half asleep, taking no notice of anything or anybody. He was a small, thin man with pale cheeks and a sad, or perhaps discontented, expression round his thin lips: his hair was lank and plentifully streaked with grey. He was dressed in seedy black and looked quite insignificant and not at all the kind of man to scare a girl who was travelling alone.

Josette thanked him for his kindness:

"I have engaged a bed at the Cheval Blanc," she said, "which I am assured is a model of respectability: I shall be sharing a room with some of the maids at the hostelry, and the charge for this accommodation is not high. All the same," she added politely, "I thank you, sir, for your kind offer."

She was about to turn away when he spoke again:

"I am journeying to England, and if I can be of service there I pray you to command me."

It did not occur to Josette at the moment to wonder how this stranger came to know that she was journeying to England, but she could not help asking him who he was and why he should trouble about her.

"Before the war," he replied, "my business used often to take me to England and I was able to master its difficult language. Now, alas! my business is at an end, but I have friends over the water and, like yourself, I was lucky enough to obtain a permit to visit them."

Once more Josette thanked him: he seemed so very kind; but at the outset of her journey she had made up her mind very firmly not to enter into conversation with anyone, not to trust anyone, least of all one of her own nationality. She had no idea as yet of the difficulties which she might encounter when she landed in a strange country. Indeed, she had undertaken this journey without any

thought of possible failure, but wariness and discretion were the rules of conduct which she had imposed on herself and to which she was determined to adhere rigidly. Having thanked her amiable friend, she bade him Good-night and hastened back to the hostelry.

She didn't see him again on the following morning when she took ticket for the diligence that was to take her to Tréport. An altogether different set of people were her fellow-travellers on this stage of her journey: they were a noisy crowd — three men and two women besides herself in the rear compartment of the coach; so they were rather crowded and jammed up against one another. Josette, being small and unobtrusive, was pushed into a corner by the other women, who were large and stout and took up a lot of room. Talk was incessant, chiefly on the recent incidents at Nantes. Carrier, the abominable butcher, had been recalled, but his successors had carried on his infamous work. The war in the Vendée had drawn to its close: those who took part in it fell victims to their loyalty to the throne; their wives and children were murdered wholesale. Travellers who had come from those parts spoke of this with bated breath. Only a few had escaped butchery, and this through the agency of some English spies — so 'twas said — whose activities throughout Brittany had baffled the revolutionary government. One man especially, who went, it seems, by the strange name of a small scarlet flower, had been instrumental in effecting the escape of a number of women and children out of the plague-ridden prisons of Nantes, where such numbers of them died of disease and inanition even while the guillotine was being prepared for them.

Josette, huddled up in the corner of the compartment, listened to these tales with a beating heart. Ever since she had started on this fateful journey she had wondered in her mind whether somewhere or other, in a moment of distress or difficulty, she would suddenly find that unseen hand was there to succour or to help, whether she would hear a comforting voice to cheer her on her way, or catch unexpectedly a glance from eyes that, whilst revealing nothing to the uninitiated, would convey a world of meaning to her.

Now the tales that she heard dispelled any such hope. Women and children in greater distress than herself were claiming the aid and time of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel. It was sad and terribly disappointing that she would not see him as she had so confidently hoped. Only in her dreams would she see him as she had done hitherto. The rumble of the coach-wheels, the heavy atmosphere made her drowsy: she shrank farther still into her corner and slept and dreamed; she dreamed of the gallant English hero and also of Maurice — Maurice who was so unselfish, so self-effacing, who was suffering somewhere in a dingy prison, pining for his little friend Josette, wondering, perhaps, what had become of her, and eating his heart out with anxiety on her account. And somehow in her dream Josette saw the English hero less clearly than she used to do; his imaginary face and form slowly faded and grew dim and were presently merged in the presentment of Maurice Reversac, who looked sad and ill — so sad and ill that Josette's heart ached for him in her sleep, and that her lips murmured his name "Maurice!" with exquisite longing and tenderness.

Chapter XXI

Whenever Josette's thoughts in after years reverted to her memorable journey to England, she never felt that it had been real. It was all so like a dream: her start from Paris in the early morning; the diligence; the first halt at the barrier; the examination of the passports; and then the incessant rumble of wheels, the rain beating against the windows, the gusts of wind, the atmosphere reeking of stale provisions, of damp cloth and of leather; the murmur of voices; the halts outside village hostelrys; the nights in the auberge at Meulan and Les Andelys, at Rouen and Tréport; and her fellow-travellers. They were nothing but dream figures, and it was only when she closed her eyes very tight that Josette could vaguely recall their faces: the prosperous shopman's wife with her rings and her gold brooch and her wicker basket; the crowd in the diligence between Rouen and Tréport who chattered incessantly about the English spy and the horrors of Nantes; her neighbour, who squeezed her into a corner until she could hardly breathe; and then the small, thin man — he, surely, was nothing but a figure in a dream!

Dreams, dreams! they must all have been dreams! All those events, those happenings which memory had never properly recorded, they were surely only dreams; and all the way across the Channel she sat as in a dream: she saw other travellers being very seasick, and there was, indeed, a nasty gale blowing from the south-west, but it was a favourable wind for the packet-boat to Dover and she made excellent going, whilst to Josette the fresh sea air, the excitement of seeing the white cliffs of England looming out of the mist, the sense of contentment that she was nearing the end of her journey and that her efforts on behalf of Maurice would surely be crowned with success were all most welcome after the stuffiness and dreariness of those days passed in the diligence.

And how bright and lovely England seemed to her! It was indeed a dream world into which she had drifted. People looked happy and free! Yes, free! There was no look of furtiveness or terror on their faces; even children had shoes and stockings on their feet, and not one of them had that look of disease and hunger so prevalent — alas! — in revolutionary France. Peace and contentment reigned everywhere; ay! in spite of the war-clouds that hung over the land. And Josette's heart ached when she thought of her own beautiful country, her beloved France, which was all the more dear to all her children for the terrible time she was going through.

Poor little Josette! She felt very forlorn and very much alone when she stood on the quay at Dover with her modest little bundle and her wicker basket which contained all her worldly possessions. For the first time she realised the magnitude of the task which she had imposed on herself when all around her people talked and talked and she could not understand one word that was said. Never before had she been outside France, never before had she heard a language other than her native one. She felt as if she had been dropped down from somewhere into another world and knew not yet what would become of her, a stranger among its denizens. Frightened? Only a little, perhaps, was she frightened, but firm, nevertheless, in her resolve to succeed. But what had seemed like such a simple proposition in Paris looked distinctly complicated now.

She was forlorn and alone — and all round her people bustled and jostled; not that anyone was unkind — far from it — they but were all of them busy coming and going, collecting luggage, meeting friends, asking for information. She, Josette, was the only one who, perforce, was tongue-tied — a pathetic little figure in short kirtle, shawl and frayed-out black cap, with lanky hair and a red nose and a smear across one cheek, for much against her will tears would insist on coming to her eyes and they made the smear when they would roll down her face.

The crowd presently thinned out a bit. Josette could see these or those fellow-passengers hurrying hither or thither, either followed by a porter carrying luggage or shouldering their own valise. They all seemed to know where they were going; she alone was doubtful and ignorant. Indeed, she had never thought it would be as bad as this.

And suddenly a kind voice reached her ear:

"Can I be of service now, Mademoiselle? We all have to report at the constable's office, you know."

Just for the moment it seemed to Josette as if *le bon Dieu* had just taken pity on her and sent one of His angels to look after her. And yet it was only the thin little man in seedy black who had spoken, and there was nothing angelic about him. He had his papers in his hand and quite instinctively she took hers out from inside her bodice and gave them to him.

"Will you come with me, Mademoiselle," he went on to say, "in case there is a little difficulty about your safe-conduct being entirely made out by the French Government, with which the English are at war! They welcome the émigrés as a matter of course; still, there might be a little trouble. But if you will come with me I feel sure I can see you through."

Josette gave him a look of trust and of gratitude out of her blue eyes. How could she help fancying that here was one of those English heroes of whom she had always dreamed and who were known in the remotest corners of France as angels of rescue to those unfortunates who were forced to flee from their own country and take refuge in hospitable England? Dreams! dreams! Could Josette Gravier be blamed for thinking that here were her dreams coming true? When she felt miserable, helpless and forlorn, a hand was suddenly stretched out to help her over her difficulties. Of course she did not think that this pale-faced little man was the hero of her dreams — she had always thought of the Scarlet Pimpernel as magnificently tall and superbly handsome; but then she had also thought of him as mysterious and endowed with mystic powers that enabled him to assume any kind of personality at will. There was enough talk about him among the girls in the government workshops: how he had driven through the barriers of Paris disguised as an old hag in charge of a refuse-cart in which the Marquis de Tournay and his family lay hidden: and there were other tales more wonderful still. Then why could he not diminish his stature and become a pale-faced little man who spoke both English and French and conducted her, Josette, to an office where he exhibited an English passport which evidently satisfied the official in charge not only as to his own identity, but also as to that of the girl with him?

Who but a hero of romance would have the power so to protect the weak as to smooth out every difficulty that beset Josette Gravier's path after her landing in England, from the finding her a respectably hostelry where she could spend the night to guiding her the next morning to the Bureau des émigrés Français in Dover, where he obtained for her all the information she wanted about her beloved Louise? Louise, indeed, lived and worked not very far from Dover, in a town called Maidstone, to which a public coach plied that very day. And into this coach did Josette Gravier step presently in the company of her new guardian angel, the thin-faced, pale-eyed little man with the soft voice, whose mysterious hints and utterances, now that she fell into more intimate conversation with him, clearly indicated that if he was not actually the Scarlet Pimpernel himself, he was, at any rate, very closely connected with him.

Chapter XXII

Louise de Croissy was sitting in the bow-window of the small house in Milsom Street in the city of Maidstone when, looking up from her embroidery frame, she saw Josette Gravier coming down the street in the company of a little man in black who was evidently pointing out the way to her. Louise gave one cry of amazement, jumped up from her chair, and in less than half a minute was out in the street, with arms outstretched and a cry of "Josette! My darling one!" on her lips.

The next moment Josette was in her arms.

"Josette! My little Josette! I am not dreaming, am I? It really is you?"

But Josette, overcome with fatigue and emotion, could not yet speak. She let Louise lead her to the house. She appeared half-dazed; but when they came to the door she turned to look for the guiding angel who had brought her safely within sight of her beloved Louise. All she could see of him was his back in the seedy black coat a hundred yards away, hurrying down the street.

Louise was devoured with curiosity; question after question tumbled out of her mouth.

"Josette chérie, how did you come? And all alone? And who was that funny little man in black? What made you come? Why, why didn't you let me know?"

Josette had sunk into the armchair which Louise had dragged for her beside the fire — a lovely fire glowing with coal, the flames dancing as if with joy and putting life and warmth into the girl's stiffened limbs. And Louise, kneeling beside her, holding her little cold hands, went on excitedly:

"Of course you mustn't talk now, chérie, and you must not heed my silly questions. But imagine my amazement! I thought I was dreaming. I had been thinking of you, too, all these days... and to think of you here and now.... What will Charles-Léon say when he sees you?... He is getting so strong and well and..."

Then she jumped to her feet, struck her forehead with her hand and exclaimed:

"But what a fool I am to keep on chattering when you are so weary and cold, my darling!... Just wait a few minutes and close your eyes and I will get you some lovely hot tea. Everyone here in England drinks tea in the afternoon... At first I couldn't get used to it... I hadn't drunk tea for years, and then not often — only when I had a headache... but I soon got the way of it.... No, no! I won't chatter any more.... Just sit still, chérie, and I'll bring you something you'll like."

She trotted off, eager, excited and longing desperately to hear how Josette had come to travel alone all the way to England; through the instrumentality of that marvellous Scarlet Pimpernel, she decided within herself; and her active brain worked round and round, conjecturing, imagining all sorts of possibilities. "I wonder what has become of poor Maurice Reversac?" she mused at one moment.

She delighted on preparing the tea for Josette and prided herself in the way she made it — one spoonful of tea for each cup and one for the pot — and in the English way of making toast with butter on it. How Josette will love that! Darling, darling Josette! Life from now on would be just perfect; no more loneliness; no more anxiety for Charles-Léon. The angel of the house was present once more.

And in the little sitting-room, ensconced in the big winged chair, Josette Gravier sat with eyes closed, still living in her dream. Was it not marvellous how le bon Dieu had brought her safely to Louise; The events of her journey passed before her mental vision like a kaleidoscope of many shapes and colours. It seemed almost impossible to realise that all these things had truly happened to her, Josette Gravier, and that she was really here in England instead of in the dingy Rue Picpus or stitching away at the Government workshops. And thoughts of the workshop brought back a vision of Maurice, and terror gripped her heart because of what might be happening to him — terror, and then a great feeling of joy because she remembered what she was able to do for him. Maurice to her had become as a child, as Charles-Léon was to Louise, a being dependent on her for love and, in a sense, for protection.

It was a wonderful thing, in very truth, to be sitting in a large, comfortable easy-chair beside a lovely fire here in England, and to be drinking tea and eating pain grillé with delicious butter on it; and, above all, to have Louise sitting beside her and watching her with loving eyes whilst she ate and drank. Tea was lovely! Like Louise, she had not tasted it for years; it was a luxury unknown in France these terrible times, and even in the happy olden days in the farm by the Isère or in the convent school of the Visitation Josette had only been given tea when she had a headache.

After a little while she felt wonderfully comforted; she knew that Louise was consumed with curiosity and, in all conscience, she could not delay satisfying her.

"Can you not guess why I am here, Louise?" she asked abruptly.

"Of course I can, chérie!" Louise replied. "You came to England for the same reason that I did — to get away from those abominable murderers."

But Josette shook her head.

"Should I have run away," she asked, "and left Maurice out there alone?"

"I don't understand, chérie. Where is Maurice?"

"In prison."

"In...?"

"He was arrested two days before I left Paris."

"But on what grounds?"

Josette gave a sigh and a shrug; she stared dreamily into the fire.

"Does one ever know?" she murmured, and then added: "I suppose that Maurice's connection with Bastien disturbed the complacency of some of those devils. They didn't know how much he knew — about those letters."

"The letters?"

"Yes — the letters. You have still got them, Louise?"

"Of course."

A deep sigh of relief came from little Josette's anxious heart. She turned her large, luminous eyes on her friend.

"That is why I came to England, chérie — to fetch those letters."

"Josette!" Louise exclaimed, "what do you mean?"

"Just that. Maurice has been arrested — you know what that means: a week or a fortnight in some dank prison, then the mockery of a trial, and, finally, the guillotine..."

"But..."

"...so le bon Dieu inspired me and gave me courage. I thought of the letters. In order to try and get hold of them, men like Chabot and Fabre went to the length of murder. Fortunately you had taken them away with you. I thought and thought until I remembered the names of those black-guards who had written them and who had murdered Bastien. Then I went to call on them."

"You — my little timid Josette?"

"Yes. I went and I was no longer timid. I went, first of all, to that horrible man Chabot. I told him that those compromising letters of his were still in existence and that I knew where they were. Then I proposed by bargain: complete immunity for Maurice with a safe-conduct to enable him to leave France as soon as I had retrieved the letters and placed them in the hands of their writers."

"You did that, Josette?"

"I did it for Maurice."

"But that was just the bargain which my poor Bastien proposed to those same men, and in consequence of it..."

"...they murdered him in cold blood. I know that."

"Then how could you...?"

"I ran that risk, I know," Josette replied calmly; "but I also knew by then that possession of those letters had become a question of life and death to those assassins. I threatened them with the immediate publication of the letters in the *Moniteur* if anything happened to Maurice or to me. They didn't know where the letters were; all I told them was that they were in England and that you had kept them. Anyway, they gave me a safe-conduct to go to England and come back. And here I am, my Louise, and if you will give me the letters I will start on my journey back the day after to-morrow."

Louise made no immediate reply: she was staring at her little friend — the frail, modest girl who all alone and sustained only by her own courage had undertaken such a dangerous task for the sake of the man she loved. For, in truth, Louise was forced to the conclusion that Josette's heart, unbeknown to herself, had been touched at last by Maurice Reversac's devotion. Only a woman in love could accomplish what Josette Gravier had done, could so calmly face difficulties and dangers and be ready to face them again without rest or respite. Neither did Josette speak; she was once more staring into the fire, and the dancing flames showed her visions of Maurice suffering in prison and longing for her.

"Josette darling," Louise said after a time, "you cannot possibly start on another long journey just yet."

"Why not?"

"You must have a few days' rest. You are so tired..."

Josette gave a slight shrug.

"Oh! — tired..."

"I cannot imagine how you ever found me — I mean, so quickly. Did you go to London?"

"No, I didn't have to."

"Then, how...?"

"A kind friend helped me."

"A friend? Who was it?"

"I don't know. He was a fellow-passenger first in the diligence and then on board ship."

"A stranger?"

"Why, yes! but you cannot imagine how kind he was. When I landed on the quay at Dover I felt terribly lonely and helpless; indeed, I don't know what was to become of me. Everything was horribly strange, and then I couldn't understand a word anyone said..."

"I know. I felt just like that at first, although, of course, I was in the hands of friends. I told you — in my letter..."

"I thought of you, Louise, and of the wonderful friends who were looking after you. What were they like, darling?"

"It is not easy to describe people, and I was terribly over-wrought at the time, but the two friends whom we met in the cottage on the cliffs and who took us across the sea in that beautiful ship were good-looking young English gentlemen. One was fair, the other had brown hair, and..."

"Was not one of them quite small and thin, with a very pale face and light-coloured eyes...?"

"No, dear, nothing like that."

"That was what my friend looked like. He spoke to me first at Rouen, and then again at Dover when I felt so lost I didn't know what to do. He took me to a nice hostelry where I could hire a bed for the night. Then the next morning he went with me to the Bureau des émigrés, where they spoke French and where they looked up your name and told me where to find you. After that we took the coach for this town. My thin friend with the pale face arranged everything, and when we arrived in this city he walked through the streets with me to show me where you lived; and then — and then, while I ran to embrace you, darling, he hurried away. But I hope and pray that I may meet him again so that I can thank him properly for all the help he gave me."

"Do you think you will?"

"I think so. He told me that he would be in Dover for a couple of days and that a packet-boat would be leaving for Tréport on Thursday at two o'clock in the afternoon. That is the day after to-morrow. He said he would look out for me on the quay. So you see..."

"Josette darling," Louise exclaimed impulsively, "you must be wary of strangers!"

"But of course, Louise, I am wary — very wary. Whenever I spent the night in a hostelry, although I really had enough money to pay for a private room, I always chose to share one with other women or girls. I wouldn't sleep alone in a strange room for anything, although I did so long for privacy sometimes. But if you saw that insignificant little man, Louise, you would know that I had nothing to fear from him."

"I wonder who he is?"

"Sometimes I think..." Josette murmured.

“What, darling?”

“Oh, you will only laugh!”

“Not I. And I know what you were going to say.”

“What?”

“That you think he has some connection with the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“Well, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, dear. You see the members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel with whom I came in contact were all English.”

“My thin friend with the pale face might be a French member of the League. How otherwise can you explain his kindness to me?”

“I cannot explain it, chérie. Everything that happened to me was so wonderful that I am ready to accept all your theories of the supernatural powers of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. But now, darling, we have chatted quite long enough. You are tired and you must have a rest. After that we’ll have supper and you shall go to bed early, if you must leave me again so soon...”

“I must Louise, I must. And you understand, don’t you?”

“I suppose I do; but it will break my heart to part from you again.”

“I have to think of Maurice,” Josette said softly.

“You love him, Josette?”

“I don’t know,” the girl replied with a sigh. “At one time I thought that my heart and soul belonged to the mysterious hero whom perhaps I would never see; but since Maurice has been in danger I have realised...”

“What, chérie?”

“That he is dear, very dear to me.”

Chapter XXIII

It seemed so strange to be back in France once more, to hear again one's own tongue spoken and to understand everything that was said.

Josette, standing in the queue outside the Commissariat of Police at Rouen with the same little bundle and the same wicker basket in her hand, waiting to have her safe-conduct examined and stamped, was a very different person to the forlorn young creature who had felt so bewildered and so terribly lonely at Dover.

She had had two very happy days with Louise. Her arrival, her first sight of the beloved friend had been unalloyed joy; sitting by a cosy fire with Louise quite close to her and holding her hand brought back memories of the happiest days of her childhood. Then there was Charles-Léon looking so bright and bonny, with colour in his cheeks and all his pathetic listlessness gone. In a way, Josette had not altogether liked England; the grey clouds, the misty damp atmosphere were so unlike the brilliant blue skies of France and the sparkling clear air of her native Dauphiné that went to the head like wine; but, then, that atmosphere was pure and wholesome, Charles-Léon's bright eyes testified to that: he no longer suffered from the poisonous air of Pairs; and Louise, even in this short time, seemed to have recovered the elasticity of youth.

Yes! it had been a happy, a very happy time, brightened still further by thoughts of what she, Josette, was doing for Maurice. On the very first evening Louise had given her the sealed packet containing the precious letters: the precious, precious packet which would purchase Maurice's life and liberty. Josette turned it over and over in her hands, and gazed down on the seals and on the wrapper as if her eyes could pierce them.

"What are you looking at so intently, darling?" Louise asked with a smile.

"I didn't recognise the seals," Josette replied.

"It must be the one that Bastien used at the office. I never looked closely at the impress before."

"You've never opened the packet?"

"Never. And it never left me since the moment I left our apartment."

"You had it inside your corsets?"

"In the big pocket inside my skirt; and at night I always slipped it under my pillow, or under whatever happened to be my pillow."

"That is what I will do, of course."

"Only once," Louise resumed after a moment or two, "I had a bad scare: one of the last days of our journey. We had reached the desolate region of the Artois and I was terribly, terribly tired. I remembered that the night before I had slipped the letters into my pocket as usual, nevertheless, when we halted the next day and the driver helped me out of the cart, I felt for the packet and imagine my horror when I found it was gone! A wild panic seized me: I don't know why, but I just turned ready to run away. I was suddenly convinced that I had been lured to this lonely spot for the sake of the letters and that Charles-Léon and I would now be murdered. However, I hadn't gone far when the kindest voice imaginable, accompanied by a delicious soft laugh, called me back and, my dear Josette, imagine my joy and surprise when I saw our driver coolly holding the packet out to me!"

"The driver?"

"Yes! I will leave you to guess who he was, just as I did."

They talked by the fire half the day and late into the night, dreaming dreams of happy times to come when that awful revolutionary government would be forced to give way to a spirit of good-will, charity and order — the true birthright of the French nation. Indeed, it had all been a very happy time, and those two days at Maidstone went by like a dream. And now Josette was back, in France on the last stage but one of her journey to Paris. Within three, at most four days, Maurice would be free, and together they would come out to this fair land of England, for it would not be safe to remain in France any longer. Here they would wait for the happy days that were sure to come: Maurice would find work to do, for he was clever and brave, and he would surely earn enough to support himself; then, just as they had always done in Pairs, they would wander together in the English woods, those lovely woods about Maidstone of which Josette had had a passing glimpse. In a few short months spring would come and the birds in England, just like those in France, would all be nesting, and under the trees the ground would be carpeted with snowdrops and anemones just as it was at Fontainebleau. And if Maurice's heart was still unchanged, if the same words of love came to his lips which he had spoken before that awful tragedy had darkened both their lives, then she, Josette, would no longer laugh at him. She would listen silently and reverently to an avowal which she knew now would give her infinite happiness; and she would say "Yes!" to his request that she should become his wife, and together they would steal away in the very early morning to some little English church, and here before God's altar they would swear love and fealty to one another.

Dreams, dreams, which now of a surety would soon become a glowing reality; and all the way since she had left Maidstone in the coach and after she had cried her fill over parting from Louise, Josette had thoughts only of Maurice; and now and then her little hand went up to her bosom, where inside her corsets rested that precious packet; whereupon a look of real joy would gleam out of her eyes, and not even the devices wherewith she had contrived to make her pretty face seem almost ugly could altogether mar its beauty then.

Chapter XXIV

The little man with the pale sad face whom Josette looked on as a friend had been most kind and helpful at Dover. He had met Josette on the quay, helped her with her safe-conduct, saw her on the boat for Tréport, and promised that he would meet her again on the journey, probably at Rouen; he himself was bound for Calais, but he would be posting from there to Rouen, and if he was lucky he would get the diligence there for Paris.

Many a time during the next forty-eight hours had Josette longed for his company, not so much because she was lonely, but because the whole way from Dover she had been somewhat worried with the attentions of a stranger, and those attentions had filled her with vague mistrust. She had first caught sight of him on the packet-boat, striding up and down the deck with a swaggering, rolling gait. He was clad like a sailor and ogled all the women as he strode past them — Josette especially — and when he caught a woman's eye a hideous squint further disfigured his ugly face. Somehow she had felt uncomfortable under his glance. Then at Tréport he had seemed to keep an eye on her, and when she boarded the diligence he took a seat in the same compartment and sat opposite to her. He certainly did not molest her in any way, but she felt all the time conscious of his presence. He was very big and fat and entered into conversation with any of the other passengers who were willing to listen to him, telling tall sea yarns and expatiating on his own prowess in various adventures of which, according to his own showing, he was the hero. Oddly enough, he was a native of Nantes — so he informed one of his fellow-travellers — and had been in port there quite recently. Josette, at this, pricked up her ears, and, sure enough, the sailor had something to say about those English spies and their activity in helping aristos and other traitors to evade justice.

"Citizen Carrier," the man had gone on with a dry laugh which revealed some ugly gaps between his teeth, "grows livid with rage at the bare mention of English spies, and lashes about him with a horse-whip like an infuriated tiger with its tail. Only the other day..."

And there followed a long and involved story of how a whole family of aristos — an old man and his grand-children — were spirited away out of the prison of Le Bouffay, how and when nobody ever knew; and Carrier was in such a rage that he had an epileptic fit on the spot. To all this Josette listened eagerly; but all the same she couldn't bear that ugly fat sailor and was vaguely afraid of him.

Josette felt quite happy and relieved when at Rouen she caught sight once more of her pale-faced little friend. She had been lucky enough to fall in on the way with two pleasant women — a mother and daughter — who were ready to share a room with her in the Traverne du Cheval Blanc, and thither the three women repaired after the necessary visit at the Commissariat. It was here that Josette saw her friend again. He was standing in the little hall talking to a rough-looking fellow to whom he appeared to be giving instructions.

When he encountered Josette's glance, he gave her a nod and an encouraging smile.

Josette and the two women went into the public dining-room, where several of the smaller tables were already occupied. In the centre of the room there was one long table, and round it two people were sitting, waiting for supper to be served. They were for the most part a rough-looking crowd of men who were making a good deal of noise. The three women, however, were fortunate enough to find an unoccupied small table in a quiet corner where they could have their meal in comfort.

From where Josette sat she could see the door and watch the people coming in and going out. Two diligences had arrived in Rouen within the hour: the one from Tréport and the other from Paris, and a great number of weary and hungry travellers trooped into the public room, demanding supper. The big fat sailor was among these, and Josette was thankful that there was no seat available at her own table, for already she had seen the glance wherewith he had sought to catch her eye, and she had felt quite a cold wave of dread creep down her spine at sight of that ugly face with the leer and the hideous squint.

However, after that first searching glance round the room the fat sailor took no more notice of her; he lolled up to the centre table and sat down. He ate a hearty supper and continued to regale the rest of the company with his ridiculous tall yarns.

Half-way through supper Josette had the joy of seeing her small, pale-faced friend come into the room. He, too, gave a searching glance all round the room, and when he caught sight of Josette he gave her another of his pleasant smiles. Somehow at sight of him she felt comforted. Later on she could not help noticing with what deference everyone at the Cheval Blanc had welcomed the insignificant-looking little man. The landlord, his wife and daughter all came bustling into the room and, in a trice, had prepared and laid a separate table for him in a corner by the hearth. Though the table d'hôte supper was practically over by then, they brought him steaming hot soup and after that what was obviously a specially prepared dish. Some of the travellers remarked on this and whispered among themselves, but quite unconsciously, no doubt, the deference shown by the landlord and his family communicated itself to them, and the rowdy hilarity of awhile ago gave place to more sober and less noisy conversation.

Only the fat sailor tried for a time to foist his impossible tales on the company, but as no one appeared eager now to listen to him he subsided presently and remained silent and sulky, squinting at the new-coming and moodily picking his teeth. Josette could not help watching him — he was so very ugly and so very large, with his great loose paunch pressed against the table and the hideous black gaps in his mouth; and then those eyes which seemed to be looking both ways at once, one across the other and in no particular direction.

Presently he rose. Josette could not help watching him. She saw him pick up the pepper-pot and toy with it for a moment or two; then, with it in his hand, he lolled across to where Josette's little friend was quietly eating his supper. The latter didn't look up; continued to eat, even while that impudent sailor man stood looking down on him for a moment or two. On the part of a person of consideration this indifference would have seemed strange in the olden days, but now when mudlarks such as this ugly sailor were the virtual rulers of France it was never safe to resent their familiarity or even their impertinence.

The next moment, with slow deliberation, the sailor put the pepper-pot down in front of the stranger, and Josette saw her friend's pale eyes travel upwards from the pepper-pot to the ugly face leering down on him, and she could have sworn that he gave a start and that his thin hands were suddenly clenched convulsively round his knife and fork; also that his pale cheeks took on a kind of grey, ashen hue. No one apparently noticed any of this except Josette, who was watching the two men. She could only see the broad back of the sailor, saw him give a shrug and heard something like a mocking laugh ring across the room.

A second or two later the sailor had lolled out of the door, and Josette might have thought she had imagined the whole scene but for the expression on her little friend's face. It still looked ghastly, and suddenly he put down his knife and fork and strode very quickly

out of the room. What happened after that she didn't know, as her friend did not come back to finish his supper, and very soon the two women who were sharing a room with her gave the signal to go upstairs to bed.

The room which the three of them had secured for the night was at the top of the house under the roof. There were two beds in it: a large one in the far corner of the room which the mother and daughter claimed for themselves and a very small truckle bed for Josette which stood across the embrasure of the dormer window between it and the door. Josette, as was her wont, took the precaution of placing the precious packet of letters underneath her pillow; having said her prayers she slid between the coarse sheets and composed herself for sleep. Her room companions, who had the one and only candle by the side of their bed, soon put the light out, and presently their even breathing proclaimed that they had already travelled far in the land of Nod. At first it seemed pitch-dark in the room, for outside the weather was rough and no light whatever came through the dormer window; but presently a tiny gleam became apparent underneath the door. It came from the lamp which was kept alight all night in the vestibule down below for the convenience of belated travellers. Josette welcomed the little gleam; her eyes soon became accustomed to what had become semi-gloom; she felt secure and comforted, and after a few minutes she, too, was fast asleep.

What woke her so suddenly she did not know, but wake she did, and for a while she lay quite still, with eyes wide open, her heart pounding away inside her and her hand seeking the precious packet underneath her pillow. At the far end of the room the two women were obviously asleep: one of them snoring lustily. And suddenly Josette perceived that the narrow streak of light under the door had considerably widened and had become triangular in shape; indeed, it was widening even now; she also perceived that there was now an upright shaft of light which also widened and widened as slowly, very slowly, the door swung open.

Josette in an instant sat straight up in bed and gave a cry which roused her room mates out of their sleep. From where they lay they couldn't see the door, but they called out: "What is it?"

"The door!" Josette gasped in a hoarse whisper, and then, "The light! the light!"

The women had a tinder-box on a chair near their bed: they fumbled for it whilst Josette's wide, terror-filled eyes remained fixed on the door. It was half-open now, but by whose hand? impossible to say, for there was no one to be seen. But it seemed to Josette's terrified senses as if she heard a furtive footstep making its way across the narrow landing and down the rickety stairs.

The older woman from her bed asked rather crossly:

"What is it frightened you, little Citizeness?"

Her daughter was still trying to get a light from the tinder-box, which, as was very usual these days, refused to work.

Josette gave a gasp and murmured under her breath: "The door... someone opened it... I heard..."

"Did you see anyone?"

"I don't know... but the door is open and I heard..."

"The latch didn't go home," the woman said more testily. "That's what it was. I noticed last night it didn't look very safe. The draught blew the door open..."

She settled herself back on her pillow. Her daughter gave up trying to get a light and said as testily as her mother:

"Go and shut it, Citizeness; put a chair to hold it if you are frightened and let's get to sleep again."

For a few moments after that Josette remained silent, sitting up in bed, staring at the door. Some evil-doer, she was sure, had tried it and perhaps, scared by her cry and by the women talking, had slunk away again. Certainly there was no one behind the door now. For a time it remained half-open just as it was and then it swayed gently in the draught and creaked on its rusty hinges. The two women had already turned over and were snoring peaceably once more. What could Josette do but chide herself for her fears? But impossible, of course, to go to sleep again with one's nerves on edge and that door swinging and creaking all the time; so Josette crept out of bed and tiptoed across the floor with the intention of closing the door. She moved about as softly as she could so as not to wake the others again. With her hand on the latch she ventured to peep out on the landing. The feeble glimmer emitted by the lamp down below cast a dim yellowish light up the well of the stairs. The house appeared very still, save for the sounds of the stertorous breathings which came from one or other of the rooms on the various floors where tired travellers were sleeping. Outside a dog barked. Josette listened for a moment or two for that furtive footstep which she had heard before, but everything appeared perfectly peaceful and very still. She closed the door very gently and then she groped for a chair to prop against it, when suddenly there came a loud bang right behind her and a terrific current of air swept across the room; the door was once more torn open, quite wide this time, and continued to rattle and to creak. The chair fell out of Josette's hand and she remained standing in her shift, shivering with cold and fright, with her kirtle flapping about her bare legs and her hair blowing into her eyes. The women woke and grumbled, asked with obvious irritation why the Citizeness didn't go to bed and let others sleep in peace.

Josette's heart was beating so fast that she could neither speak nor move; the weather outside was fairly rough and the draught took her breath away.

"Close the window!" the younger woman shouted to Josette. "The wind has blown it open."

At last Josette was able to get her bearings; she turned to the window and saw that in effect it was wide open and that wind and rain were beating in. She had to climb over her bed in order to get to the window and to secure it.

"I call it sheer robbery," the older woman muttered, half-asleep, "to put honest women in such a ramshackle hole."

But neither she nor her daughter offered to lend a hand to Josette, who, buffeted by the rough weather, had great difficulty in fastening the window. When she had done that she had to climb over her bed again in order to close the door; thus several minutes went by before peace reigned once more in the attic room. Josette crept back to bed. Her first thought was for the precious packet: she slid her hand under the pillow to feel for it, but the packet was no longer there.

With an agonising sinking of the heart, in a state not so much of panic as of despair, she turned and ran just as she was in shift and kirtle without stockings or shoes out of the room and down the stairs, crying: "Thief! thief! thief!" She reached the bottom of the stairs without meeting anyone: she ran across the passage and the vestibule to the front door, tried to open it, but it was locked and bolted. She tore at the handle and at the bolts, still calling wildly: "Thief! thief!" in a voice broken by sobs.

Gradually the whole house was aroused. Doors were heard to open, testy voices wanted to know what all this noise was about. The night watchman came out of the public room, blinking his eyes. Mine host came along from his room down the passage, cursing and

swearing at all this disturbance.

"Name of a name! Who is the miscreant who dares to disturb the peace of this highly respectable hostelry?"

Then he caught sight of Josette, who was still fumbling with the door and crying, "Thief! thief!" in a tear-choked voice. Her bare arms and her shoulders were wet, her clothes were wet, her wet hair fell all over her face.

"Name of a dog, wench!" the landlord thundered, and seized the disturber of the peace by the wrist, "what are you doing here? And pray why aren't you in bed where every respectable person should be at this hour?"

It was a blessing in disguise that Josette should be held so firmly by the wrist else she would certainly have measured her length on the floor. Her senses were reeling. Through the gloom she saw angry faces glowering at her. Quite a small crowd had collected in the vestibule: a crowd of angry men roused from their slumbers, clad in whatever garments they happened to have slept in; the women for the most part did not venture beyond the doorway of their rooms, and peeped out thence with eyes heavy with sleep to see what was happening. At sight of Josette most of them murmured:

"A trollop no doubt, caught in some turpitude."

The irate landlord gave Josette's arm a shake: "What were you doing here?" he demanded, "little str—"

He was going to say an ugly word, but just at the moment Josette raised her eyes to his, and Josette's eyes were bathed in tears and they had such an expression of childlike innocence in them that the worthy landlord could think of nothing but of the Madonna whose lovely image had been banished from the village church where he had been baptised and had made his first Communion, and which was now closed because the good curé of the village had refused to conform to the mockery of religion which an impious Government was striving to force upon the people: and looking into Josette's eyes, the landlord's thoughts flew back to the Madonna, before whose picture he had worshipped as a child. How, then, could he speak an ugly word in this innocent angel's ear?

"You have got to tell me, you know," he said somewhat sheepishly, "why you are not in your room and asleep." He paused a moment while Josette made a great effort to collect her scattered senses; ashamed of her bare legs and shoulders she tried to get farther back into the gloom.

Someone in the crowd remarked: "Perhaps she is a sleep-walker and had a nightmare."

But at this suggestion Josette shook her head.

"Did something frighten you, little Citizeness?" the landlord asked quite kindly.

Josette now found her voice again.

"Yes!" she said slowly, swallowing hard, for the last thing she wanted to do was to cry before all these people. "I woke very suddenly. I could see the door. It was being pushed open slowly from outside. I cried out. Then I heard footsteps shuffling down the stairs."

"Impossible!" the landlord said.

"I heard nothing," commented someone.

"Nor I," added another.

"I did hear a bang," remarked a third, "not many minutes ago."

"There was a bang," Josette went on slowly. "While I was closing the door the window flew open behind me. I went to shut it. Then the door flew open, and I went to shut it too. When I crept back to bed I found — oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!"

"What is it? What happened?" they all asked.

"A packet of letters," she replied, "more precious to me than life itself..."

"Not stolen?"

"Yes — stolen."

"Where were they?"

"Underneath my pillow."

"And you say that when you went back to bed those letters..."

"Were not there."

"Impossible!" the landlord reiterated obstinately.

One of the men said, "The thief, whoever he was, must still be in the house then, since the front door is bolted on the inside."

"What about the back door?" another suggested.

Several of them, under the lead of the night watchman, went to investigate the back door. It was bolted and barred the same as the front door.

"I knew it was," the night watchman said somewhat illogically. "I pushed all the bolts in myself all over the house and saw to all the windows."

He felt that Josette's story reflected adversely upon his zeal.

"The thief must still be in the house," Josette murmured mechanically.

"Impossible!" the landlord reiterated for the third time.

The glances cast on Josette became anything but kind, and though the landlord and some of the men were under the influence of her innocent blue eyes, the women from their respective doorways had a good deal to say. One of them started the ball rolling by muttering:

"It's all a pack of lies."

After which the others went at it hammer and tongs. Women are like that. Let some vixen give a lead and there is no stopping the flow of evil tongues. Poor Josette felt this hostility growing around her. It added poignancy to her distress over the letters. Indeed, the little crowd had as usual behaved like sheep; after the first doubt had been cast on Josette's story hardly anyone believed her. The theory of her being a sleep-walker was incontinently rejected: she was just a little strumpet roaming through the house at night in search of adventure. In vain did she weep and protest; in vain did she beg that her room mates be questioned as to the truth of her story: those two women refused to leave their bed, where they lay with their heads smothered under the blanket, wishing to God they had never set foot in this abominable hostelry. Josette, overcome with misery and with shame, had shrunk back into a dark angle of the

vestibule, trying with all her might to overcome her terror of all these angry faces, and, above all, to swallow her tears. In her heart she prayed as she had never prayed before that le bon Dieu, her patron saint and her guardian angel might guide her with safety out of this awful pass. The landlord stood by, undecided, scratching his head.

"It is a matter for the police, I say." It was a woman who made this suggestion. It was quickly taken up by others, for, indeed, this seemed the easiest solution to the present difficulty; after which everybody would be able to go back to bed and go through the rest of the night in peace.

"I agree," one of the men said. "Let the wench be taken to the nearest Commissariat of Police."

And then a funny thing happened.

The suggestion that the disturber of the peace should be taken to the Commissariat of Police was received with approval, especially by the women. Some of the men were rather doubtful, and there ensued quite a considerable hubbub and a good deal of argument: the women holding to their opinion with loud, shrill voices, the men muttering and cursing.

The landlord stood by scratching his head, not knowing what to do: the casting vote as to Josette's fate would of course rest with him.

And suddenly a quiet vote broke in on the hubbub, saying authoritatively:

"Certainly not. Never shall it be said that a respectable citizeness of the Republic had been put to the indignity of being dragged before the police in the middle of the night."

It was the voice of one accustomed to command and to being obeyed — very quiet and low but peremptory. A small, thin man with pale face and hard penetrating eyes pressed his way through the small crowd. Unlike the rest of them he had slipped on his coat over his shirt, he had stockings on and shoes, and his hair was brushed back tidily. Under his coat and round his waist he wore a tricolour sash. The landlord gave a big sigh of relief: he was truly thankful that decision in this difficult case was taken out of his hands. The girl's story certainly sounded very lame... but, then, she had such lovely blue eyes... and her little mouth — well, well! Anyway, he would not have the unpleasant task of taking her to the police on an ugly charge. The others were all deeply impressed by the little man's authority and by his tricolour sash — badge of service under the Government. As for Josette, she just clasped her tiny hands together and gazed on that insignificant, pale-faced little man as would a devotee upon her favourite saint; her eyes were bathed in tears, her lips already murmured words of gratitude, but actually she was not yet able to speak.

"Where is your wife, landlord?" the little man went on to say in the same peremptory tone.

"At your service, Citizen," the woman replied for herself. She had slipped her bare feet into her shoes and she had on her kirtle and a shawl round her shoulders. Unlike the female guests of the hostelry, she felt that this matter concerned her, and she had dressed herself ready in case of an emergency.

"You will give Citizeness Gravier a bed in your daughter's room, where she will, I hope, spend the rest of the night in peace." So spake the little man with the tricolour sash, and it was marvellous with what alacrity his orders were obeyed. That tricolour sash did indeed work wonders! And now he added curtly: "Remember that the Citizeness is under the special protection of the Central Committee of Public Safety."

Josette could only stare at him with wide-open eyes that looked of a deep luminous blue in this half-light. The little man caught her glance and came over to her. He took her limp, moist hand in his and patted it gently:

"Try and get a little rest now, little woman," he said kindly. "You shall have your letters back, I promise you, even if," he added with a curious smile, "even if we have to set the whole machinery of the law going in order to recover them for you."

He said this so lightly and with so much confidence that Josette felt comforted and almost reassured; indeed, her unsophisticated heart was so full of gratitude that instinctively like a child she raised the thin, clawlike hand which patted her own to her lips. She was on the point of imprinting a kiss upon it when from somewhere in the house there resounded a tremendous crash as of falling furniture. It was immediately followed by loud and prolonged laughter. All the heads were turned towards the stairs as the noise seemed to have come from somewhere above.

"What in the world...?" and other expressions of amazement came to everyone's lips.

"I believe it's that drunken sailor," someone remarked.

"Let me get at him," the landlord said grimly, and pushed his way through the small crowd in the direction of the stairs.

"It can't be him," the night watchman asserted. "I let him out myself by the back door two hours ago and bolted the door after him."

But the little man with the tricolour scarf had snatched his hand out of Josette's grasp. For a moment it seemed as if he was about to join the landlord in his quest after the sailor, but apparently he thought better of it; probably he felt that it would be beneath the dignity of a Government official to chase a mudlark up and down the stairs of a tavern; besides which he well knew in his heart of hearts that no sailor or mudlark would be found inside the house. The laughter had come from outside — there must be an open window somewhere — and its ringing tone was only too familiar to this same Government official with the pale sad face and the badge of office round his waist: it came from a personage that had always proved elusive, whenever the utmost resources of his enemy's intelligence were set to work to run him to earth.

The only thing to do now in this present crisis — for crisis it certainly would prove to be — was to think things over very carefully, to lay plans so secretly and so carefully that no power on earth could counter them. The girl, Josette Gravier, was a magnificent pawn in the game that was to follow the events of this night, just the sort of pawn that would appeal to the so-called chivalry of those damnable English spies: a decoy — what?

So the little man, whose pale face reflected something of the inward rage that tortured him at this moment, turned fiercely on the small crowd of quidnuncs who still stood about quizzing and whispering, and with a peremptory wave of the arm ordered everyone off to bed. They immediately scattered like sheep. The landlord's wife took hold of Josette's hand.

"Come along, little girl," she said; "there is a nice couch in Annette's room: you'll sleep well on that."

"And remember, both of you," the little man said in the end when Josette meekly allowed herself to be led away, "that you are responsible with your lives — your lives," he iterated emphatically, "for the safety of Citizeness Gravier."

The man and woman both shuddered: their ruddy faces became sallow with terror. They understood the threat well enough, even though the amazing turn which the events of this night had taken was past their comprehension.

Silent and obedient the little crowd had dispersed. They all slunk back to bed, there to exchange surmises, conjectures, gossip with their respective room mates. Josette lay down on the couch in Annette's room. She could not sleep, for her brain was working all the time and her heart still beating with the many emotions to which she had succumbed this night. There were moments when, lying here in the darkness, she doubted and feared. That was because of the tricolour sash and the authority which her friend seemed to wield. Before his appearance in this new guise of authority she had almost persuaded herself that he was intimately connected with the hero of her dreams, but there was no reconciling the badge of officialdom of the Terrorist Government with the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Nevertheless, it was this same little man who had saved her from the ill-will of all those horrid people who said such awful things about her and threatened her with the police. It was he who had given her a solemn promise that the precious letters would be restored to her; so what was an ignorant, unsophisticated girl like Josette Gravier to make of all these mysteries? What she did do was to turn her thoughts to Maurice. Surely *le bon Dieu* would not be so cruel as to snatch from her the means by which she could demand his life and liberty. Surely not at this hour when she was so near her goal.

And in a private room on the floor above, Citizen Chauvelin was pacing up and down the floor, with hands clasped tightly behind his back, his pale face set, his thin lips murmuring over and over again:

"Now then, à nous deux once more, my gallant Scarlet Pimpernel."

After a time there came a knock at the door. In response to a peremptory "Entrez!" a rough-looking fellow in jersey and breeches undone at the knee came into the room. He had a sealed packet in his large, grimy hands, and this he handed to Chauvelin.

Neither of the men spoke for some time. The man had remained standing in the middle of the room waiting for the other to speak, while Chauvelin sat at the table, his thin delicate hands toying with the packet, his pale eyes hiding their expression of triumph behind their blue-veined lids.

The silence threatened to become oppressive. The newcomer was the first to break it. He pointed a grimy finger at the sealed packet in Chauvelin's hand.

"That is what you wanted," he asked, "was it not, Citizen?"

"Yes," the other replied curtly.

"It was difficult to get. If I had known..."

"Well!" Chauvelin broke in impatiently; "the wind and rain helped you, didn't they?"

"But if I had been caught..."

"You weren't. So why talk about it?"

"And I injured my knee climbing down again from that cursed window," Picard muttered with a surely glance at his employer.

"Your knee will mend," Chauvelin rejoined curtly; "and you have earned good money."

He gave a quiet chuckle at recollection of the night's events. He and Picard. The open door. The open window. The draught. Josette in her shift and kirtle struggling with the door while Picard stole in at the window, and he, Chauvelin, tip — toed noiselessly back down the stairs. Yes! the whole thing had worked wonderfully well, better even than he had hoped. It had been a perfect example of concerted action.

Picard was waiting for his money. Chauvelin gave him the promised two hundred livres — a large sum in these days. The man tried to grumble, but it was no use, and after a few moments he slouched, still grumbling, out of the room.

For close on half an hour after that did Chauvelin remain sitting at the table, toying with the stolen packet. There was a lighted candle on the table, its feeble light flickered in the draught. Chauvelin's pale, expressive eyes were fixed upon the seals. He did not break them, for it was part of the tortuous scheme which he had evolved that these seals should remain intact. He looked at them closely, wondering whose hand had fixed them there: Bastien de Croissy's probably, who had been murdered for his pains, or else the wife's before she entrusted the packet to Josette. The seals told him nothing, and he did not mean to break them: he laid the precious packet down on the table. Then he opened the table drawer. Out of it he took a small lump of soft wax. With the utmost care he took an impression of one of the seals: he examined his work when it was done and was satisfied that it was well done. He then returned the wax impression into the table drawer and locked it.

The stolen packet he slipped into the breast pocket of his coat, and he laid the coat under the mattress in the adjoining room. After which he went to bed.

Chapter XXV

The imaginative brain that invented the torment meted out to Damocles could not in very truth have invented torture more unendurable. Poor old Damocles! All he wanted was to taste for a time the splendour and joys of kingship, and Dionysius, the tyrant King of Sicily, thought to gratify his whim and his own sense of humour by giving the ambitious courtier charge of the kingdom for a while.

So good old Damocles ascended the throne which he had coveted and licked his chops in anticipation of all the luxury that was going to be his, until suddenly he perceived that a sword was hanging over his head by nothing but a hair from a horse's tail. Now we must take it, though legend doesn't say so, that this sword followed the poor man about wherever he went, else all he need have done was to wonder through his kingdom and avoid sitting immediately under that blessed sword. As to how the business of the horse's hair was accomplished, say in an open field, is perhaps a little difficult to imagine.

Be that as it may, three worthy Representatives of the People in the autumn of 1793 did in very truth go about their avocations with, figuratively speaking, a sword of doom hanging over their heads.

Three weeks had gone by since Chabot's memorable interview with Josette Gravier, and there was no news of her, no news of Armand Chauvelin, no news, alas! of those compromising letters which were enough to send the whole batch of them to the guillotine.

The Club of the Cordeliers had of late lost a great deal of its prestige, and consequently was not frequented by the most influential members of the Government: it was, therefore, an admirable meeting-place for those who desired to talk things over in the peace and quiet of the club's deserted rooms. Many a time in the past weeks did those three reprobates, quaking in their shoes, hold conclave among themselves, trying to infuse assurance and even hope into one another. Sometimes the great Danton would join them, knowing well that if his three satellites fell, he, too, would be involved in the general débâcle that would ensue. Late into the night they would sit and talk, wondering what had become of the little she-devil who had dared to threaten them, hoping against hope that one of the many accidents attendant on a voyage across France had put an end to her.

Then one day there came a letter from Citizen Chauvelin. It was sent to François Chabot, the unfrocked monk turned traitor, renegade and Terrorist, as being the most deeply involved in the affair of the compromising letters. With trembling fingers Chabot broke the seals of this welcome message, for he had already recognised the thin Italian calligraphy of the writer: he was alone in his luxuriously furnished study. At first he could hardly see what he was doing: the words of the letter danced before his eyes, the blood rushed up to his temples, and the paper rustled in his trembling hands. Then slowly he was able to decipher the writing. The first sentence that he read caused him to utter a gurgle of joy: "I have the girl here..."

That was good news indeed. Chabot closed his eyes so as to savour all the more thoroughly the intense joy produced to him by this message. With the girl in his power Chauvelin could have no possible difficulty in getting hold of the letters as well. Now Chabot came to think of it, it was strange that his colleague chose this enigmatic way of commencing his letter. The girl! Yes! the girl was well enough! But what about the letters? He suddenly felt uncomfortable... vaguely frightened of he knew not what. He blinked his eyes once or twice because they had become blurred, and beads of perspiration stood out at the roots of his hair and trickled down his nose. Then at last he settled down to read, and this is what Citizen Armand Chauvelin had written to him from Rouen:

"Citizen and Dear Colleague."

"I have the girl here under my eye, and by this you will gather that my mission has been successfully accomplished. I am now in Rouen at the hostelry of the Cheval Blanc, under the same roof as the little blackmailer. So for I have done nothing about the letters. I can get hold of them any moment, but there are other very grave matters that command my attention. Owing to the inclement weather the diligence cannot ply for some days, and this enforced delay suits my purpose admirably, for I do not wish to leave Rouen just now. The wench cannot in any case escape me and, if you will believe me, I have such high quarry close to my hand that I cannot leave this city until I have secured it. This is not a personal matter but one that affects the very safety of the Republic: how, then, could I risk that by deserting my post? You must try and read between the lines, and then explain the matter to all those who are involved in the affair of the Croissy letters. As I have already told you, I can, of course, get hold of the letters at any time, and I suggest that you give me leave in that case to destroy them before any further mischief is wrought. If you agree to this wise course, send me a courier immediately to the hostelry of the Cheval Blanc here in Rouen. But I beg of you not to delay. There are inimical powers at work here of which you can have no conception, and if, as I believe, the safety of the Republic is as dear to you as it is to me, you will be ready to fall in with my views."

François Chabot read and re-read this letter, which did certainly in some of its phrases appear ambiguous. What, for instance, did Chauvelin mean by the closing sentence? To Chabot it seemed to contain a veiled threat, and there were other points, too....

That evening the four men sat in a corner of the club-room in a very different mood to that of the past few weeks. There they were — François Chabot (Loire et Cher), Fabre d'Eglantine (Paris) and Claud Bazire (Côte d'Or), as unprincipled a lot of rascals as ever defamed the country of their birth. The great Danton had joined them at their earnest request — not so much a scoundrel he, as an infuriated wild animal, smarting under many wrongs, lashing out savagely against guilty and innocent alike, and with old ideals long since laid in the dust.

"I would not trust that old fox farther than I could see him," Danton had said as soon as the matter of Chauvelin's letter had been put before him.

"But he can get hold of the letters at any time — there's no doubt about that," one of the others remarked.

"He has probably got them inside his coat pocket by now," the great man retorted, "ready to sell them or use them for his own ends."

"Then what had one better do?"

"Let us send a courier over to Rouen," Fabre d'Eglantine suggested, "with orders to Citizen Chauvelin to come to Paris immediately."

"Suppose he refuses?" Danton said with a shrug.

“He wouldn’t dare....”

“And would you dare threaten him if he really has the letters and holds them over you?”

They were silent after that because they knew quite well — in fact had just realised it for the first time — that it was Armand Chauvelin now instead of Bastien de Croissy or Josette Gravier who held the sword of Damocles over their heads.

After a time Chabot murmured, looking to the great Danton for guidance now that the emergency appeared more fateful than before: “What shall we do, then?”

“If you take my advice,” Danton said, and strove to appear as if the whole matter did not greatly concern him, “if you take my advice, one of you will go straight to Rouen, see Citizen Chauvelin and get the packet of letters straight from the girl. After that the sooner the wretched things are destroyed the better.”

That seemed sound advice, and after discussion it was decided to act upon it, François Chabot declaring his willingness, in spite of the weather, to journey to Rouen by special coach on the morrow.

Chapter XXVI

From Meulon, where he spent the night, Chabot sent a courier with a letter over to Rouen to prepare Chauvelin for his arrival.

"Devoured with impatience," (he wrote) "I am coming in person to receive the precious letters from your hands and discuss with you the terms of your reward, which my friends and I are determined shall be as great as your service to our party."

An ironic smile twisted Chauvelin's thin lips when he read this short epistle. The events had not turned out any differently to what he had expected. Those cowardly fools over there were, in fact, playing into his hands.

He had been interrupted by the courier in an important work which had demanded a great deal of time and skill. Five days had gone by since poor little Josette had been robbed of her precious letters, and to-day Chauvelin was sitting at the table in the private room which he still occupied in the hostelry of the Cheval Blanc. Though it was daylight there was a lighted candle on the table, and when the courier arrived, Chauvelin's deft fingers had been busy making up a small parcel which looked like a packet of letters and which he had been engaged in sealing down with red wax and a brand-new seal.

When the courier was announced he blew out the candle and threw the packet into the table-drawer.

Now that he was alone again he took the packet out of the drawer, and then drew another out of the breast-pocket of his coat. The two packets now lay side by side on the table. Chauvelin applied himself sedulously to a final examination of them. To all intents and purposes they were exactly alike. None but a specially trained eye could detect the slightest difference in them. In shape, in size, in the soiled and crumpled appearance of the outside covering, in the disposition of the five seals they were absolutely interchangeable. It was only to Chauvelin's lynx-like eyes that the difference in the seals was apparent. A very minute difference indeed in the sharpness and clearness of the impress.

He gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. All was well. The work of die-sinking had been admirably done from the wax impression of the original, by a skilled workman of Rouen. Chauvelin could indeed be satisfied: his deep-laid scheme was working admirably: he could await the arrival of Chabot with absolute calm and the certainty that his own delicate hands held all the threads of as neat an intrigue as he had ever devised for the ultimate undoing of his own most bitter enemy.

He slipped the two packets inside his coat pockets; the original one stolen from under the pillow of Josette Gravier he thrust against his breast, the other he put into a side pocket. After which he settled his sharp features into an expression of kindliness and went in search of Josette.

He knew just where to find her, sitting on the bench under the chestnut trees — that beautiful avenue which had once formed part of the old convent garden of the Ursulines, driven away by the relentless edicts of the revolutionary government. The mediaeval building, still splendid in its desolation, showed already signs of decay. The garden was untended, the paths overgrown with weeds, the grass rank and covered with a carpet of fallen leaves, the statuary broken, but nothing could mar the beauty of the age-old trees, of the chestnuts already half-denuded of leaves. And the vista over the river was beautiful, with the two islands and the sleepy backwater, and the sight of the ships gliding with such stately majesty down-stream towards the sea. The place was not lonely, for the riverside was a favourite walk of the townsfolk, and on the quay boatmen plied their trade of letting pleasure boats out on hire. The convent itself had been turned into a communal school for the children of Rouennais soldiers who were fighting for their country, and, after school hours or during recreation time, crowds of children trooped out of the building and ran playing up and down the avenue. Indeed, Josette did not come here for solitude: she liked to watch the children and the passers-by and, anyway, it was nicer than sitting in that stuffy public room of the hostelry where prying eyes scanned her none too kindly.

Her pale-faced little friend had insisted that she should continue to share a room with the landlord's daughter: this room had no egress save through the larger one occupied by the landlord himself and his wife, and Josette was quite aware that her friend had made these people responsible for her safety as well as for her comfort. This, of course, had greatly reassured her, and his promise that he would get the letters back for her had cheered her up — especially for the first twenty-four hours. She had such implicit faith not only in his friendship, but also, since that fateful night, in his power; but for that tricolour sash she would have felt happier still, but somehow she didn't like to think of that kind, sad, gentle creature as a member of a government of assassins.

This was the fifth day that Josette had spent in Rouen, waiting and hoping almost against hope. Once or twice she had caught sight of her friend either in the garden or while he wandered along the riverside, with head bent, hands clasped behind his back, evidently wrapped in thought. When he passed by in front of Josette he always looked up and gave her an encouraging smile. And then, again, she saw him in the public room at meal-times, and always he gave her a smile and a nod.

Then yesterday, here in the old garden, he came and sat down beside her under the chestnut tree, and he was so gentle and so kind that she was tempted to confide in him. She told him about the contents of the stolen packet — about the letters, the possession of which had cost brave Bastien de Croissy his life, and about her own journey to England in order to get the letters from Louise. And as he listened with so much attention and sympathy she went so far as to tell him about Maurice, and how it had been the object of her journey — nay! the object of her life — to use the letters as Bastien had intended to use them: as a leverage to obtain what she desired more than anything in the world — the life and liberty of Maurice Reversac.

"I am not afraid of what I mean to do," she concluded. "I have already bearded Citizen Chabot once, and I know that I can get from him everything I want..." She paused and added with a sigh of longing, "if only I have those letters..."

Her friend had been more than kind after that, and so confident and reassuring that she slept that night more soundly and peacefully than she had done since she arrived in Rouen.

"Have no doubt whatever, little one," he had said in the end. "You shall have your precious letters back very soon."

And then, to-day, even while she sat at her accustomed place under the chestnut tree, and with dreamy glance watched the people coming and going up and down the riverside all intent on affairs of their own, heedless of this poor little waif with the gnawing anxiety in her heart, she suddenly caught sight of the little man coming towards her with a light, springy step. Somehow, directly she saw his face, she knew that he was the bearer of good news. And so it turned out to be. Even before he came close to her he thrust his hand into the side pocket of his coat and she guessed that he had the letters. She could not repress a cry of joy which caused the passers-by to

cast astonished glances at the pretty wench, but she paid no heed to them. She was so excited that she jumped up and ran to her friend. He had indeed drawn the sealed packet from the pocket of his coat, and now he actually put it into her hands. It was so wonderful — almost unbelievable. Josette pressed the packet against her cheek and her young palpitating bosom — the precious, precious packet! She was so happy, so marvellously, so completely happy! She didn't care who watched her; just like a child she spread out her arms and would have hugged that kind peerless friend to her breast only that he put up a warning hand, for, in truth, she was attracting too much attention from the quidnuncs on the quay. At once she asked his pardon for her vehemence.

"I am so happy," she murmured 'twixt laughter and tears, "so happy! I was forgetting..."

"I told you I would get the letters for you, didn't I?" he said, and with kindly indulgence patted her trembling little hands.

"And I shall pray God every day of my life," she responded, sinking her voice to a whisper, "to give you due reward."

"So long as you are happy, my child..."

"I could fall at your feet now," she murmured earnestly, "and thank you on my knees."

None but a hardened, stony heart as that which beat in the Terrorist's breast could have resisted the charm, the exquisite sentiment of this beautiful woman's gratitude. To his enduring shame, be it said that Chauvelin felt neither remorse nor pity as he looked on the lovely young face with the glowing eyes and tender mouth quivering with emotion. His tortuous schemes would presently land her on the hideous platform of the guillotine; that beautiful head with the soft chestnut curls would presently fall into the ghoulish basket which already had received so many lovely heads. What cared he? All these people — men, women, young and old — were so many pawns in the game which he had devised; and he, Chauvelin, was still engaged in moving the pieces: he still had his hold on the pawns. Away with them if they proved to be in the way or merely useless. It was more often than not a scramble as to which party would push the other up the steps of the guillotine.

Chauvelin sat himself down quite coolly on the bench and, with a sneer round his lips which he took care the girl should not see, he watched her as she tucked the precious packet away underneath her fichu.

"I have further good news for you, Citizeness," he said as soon as she had sat down beside him.

"More good news!" she exclaimed; then pulled herself together and turned big inquiring eyes on her friend: "I won't hear it," she said resolutely, "until I know your name."

He gave a light shrug and a laugh: "Suppose you call me Armand," he replied, "Citizen Armand."

"Is that your name?"

"Why, yes?"

Josette murmured the name once or twice to herself.

"It will be easier like this for me," she said with naïve seriousness, "when I pray to le bon Dieu for you. And now," she went on gaily, "Citizen Armand, I am ready for your news."

"It is just this: you won't need to go to Paris."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. A courier has just come from Meulon with news that François Chabot, representative of the people, will be in Rouen this evening."

"This — evening?"

"So you see..."

"Yes... I see," she murmured, awed at the prospect of this unexpected event.

"It all becomes so much safer," he hastened to reassure her. "I succeeded in getting that packet back for you this time, but I could not journey all the way to Paris with you, and you might have been robbed again."

"Oh, I see — I do see!" Josette sighed. "Isn't it wonderful?"

She felt rather bewildered. It was all so unexpected and not a little startling. Instinctively her hand sought the packet in the bosom of her gown. She drew it out. The outside wrapper was very soiled and crumpled — it had been through so many hands — but the seals were intact.

"I wouldn't break the seals if I were you, little girl," Chauvelin said. "It will be better for you, I think, also for your friend — what's his name? — Reversac, isn't that it? — if the Citizen Representative is allowed to think that you have not actually read those compromising letters. It will make him less ill-disposed towards you personally. Do you see what I mean?"

"I think I do, but even if I didn't," Josette added naïvely, "I should do as you tell me."

No compunction, no pity for this guileless child who trusted him! Chauvelin patted her on the shoulder:

"That's brave!" was all he said. He appeared ready to go, but Josette put a timid hand on his arm.

"Citizen Armand..."

"Yes? What is it now?"

"Shall I see you before..."

"Before the arrival of François Chabot?"

"Yes."

"I will certainly let you know, and see you if I can.... By the way," he added as if in after-thought, "would it not be wiser for you to leave the packet with me until this evening?... No?" he went on with a smile as Josette quickly crossed her little hands over her bosom as if some powerful instinct had suddenly prompted her not to part again from her precious possession. "No...? Well, just as you like, my child; but take care of them: those spies and thieves are still about, you know."

"Spies?"

"Of course. Surely you guessed that your letters were not stolen by ordinary thieves?"

"No, I did not. I just thought..."

"What?"

"That being a sealed packet a thief would think that it contained money."

"Enough to warrant such an elaborate plot," Chauvelin remarked drily, "and you so obviously not a wealthy traveller?"

"I hadn't thought of that. But, then, of course, Citizen Armand, you must know who stole the packet since..."

"Since I got it back for you? I do know, of course."

"Who was it?" Josette asked and gazed on Chauvelin with wide-open frightened eyes.

"If I were to tell you, you wouldn't understand."

"I think I would," she murmured. "Try me!"

"Well," he replied, sinking his voice to a whisper, "did you happen to notice on the first evening you arrived here a big man dressed as a sailor, who made himself conspicuous in the public room of the Cheval Blanc?"

"Yes, I did — a horrid man, I thought. But surely he..."

"That man, who I admit wore a clever disguise, is the head of an English organisation whose aim is the destruction of France."

"You don't mean..." she gasped.

Chauvelin nodded. "I see," he said, "that you have heard of those people. They call themselves the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and, under the pretence of chivalry and benevolence, are nothing but a pestilential pack of English spies who take money from both sides — their own Governments or ours whichever suits their pocket."

"I'll not believe it!" Josette protested hotly.

"Did you not notice that night as soon as I entered the room that the fat sailor beat a hasty retreat?"

"I noticed," she admitted, "that he did leave the public room soon after you sat down to supper."

"I sent the police after him then, but he had a marvellous faculty for disappearing when he is afraid for his own skin."

"I'll not believe it!" Josette protested again, thinking of Louise's letter and of the hero of her dreams. "Had it not been for the Scarlet Pimpernel..."

"Your friend Louise de Croissy," Chauvelin broke in with a sneer, "would have never reached England — I know that. Did I not tell you just now that pretence of chivalry is one of that man's stock-in-trade? No doubt he wanted to get Citizeness Croissy away, thinking that she would leave the letters with you: when he realised that you hadn't them and that you were journeying to England obviously in order to get them, he followed you. I know he did, and I did my best to circumvent him. I befriended you as far as I could, for he dared not approach you while I was on the watch."

"Oh, I know," Josette sighed, "you have been more than kind."

She felt as if she were floundering in a morass of doubt and misery, tortured by suspicion, wounded in her most cherished ideals. Ignorant, unsophisticated as she was, how could she escape out of this sea of trouble? How could she know whom to trust or in whom to believe? This friend had been so kind, so kind! The precious letters had been stolen from her and he had got them back. Without him where would she be at this hour? Without him she would have nothing wherewith to obtain life and liberty for Maurice. Tears welled up to her eyes; never, perhaps, had she felt quite so unhappy, because never before had she been brought up in such close contact with all that was most hideous in life — treachery and deceit. She turned her head away because she was half-ashamed of her tears. After all, what was the destruction of an illusion in these days when one saw all one's beliefs shattered, all one's ideals crumbled to dust? Josette had almost deified the Scarlet Pimpernel in her mind, and Louise's letter had confirmed her belief in his wonderful personality with the fascinating mystery that surrounded it and the almost legendary acts of bravery and chivalry which characterised it. If any other man had spoken about her hero in the way this pale-faced little friend of hers had done she would have dubbed him a liar and done battle for her ideal; but she owed so much to Citizen Armand, he had been such a wonderful friend, such a help in all her difficulties, and now, but for him, she would have been in the depths of despair.

He was wrong — Josette was certain that he was wrong — in his estimate of the Scarlet Pimpernel, but never for a moment did she doubt his sincerity. She owed him too much to think of doubting him. Whatever he said — and his words had been like cruel darts thrust into her heart — he had said because he was convinced of the truth, and he had spoken only because of his friendship for her. Even now he seemed to divine her thoughts and the reason of her tears.

"It is always sad," he said gently, "to see an illusion shattered; but think of it like this, my child: you have lost a — shall I say friend, though I do not like to misuse the word? — who in very truth had no existence save in your imagination; against that you have found one who, if I may venture to say so, has already proved his worth by restoring to you the magic key which will open the prison doors for the man you love. Am I not right in supposing that Maurice Reversac is that lucky man?"

Josette nodded and smiled up at the hypocrite through her tears.

"I hadn't meant to tell you so much," he said, rising ready to go, "only that I felt compelled to warn you. The man who stole your letters once will try to do so again, and I might not be able to recover them a second time."

It was getting late afternoon now, the shadows were deep under the trees, but on the river twilight lingered still. The girl sat with her head bent, her fingers interlocked and hot tears fell upon her hands. The kind friend who had done so much for her was still standing there about to go, and she could not find it in her heart to look up into his face and to speak the words of gratitude which his marvellous solicitude for her should have brought so readily to her lips. Her thoughts were far away with Louise in her pretty room in England, telling her story of the astounding prowess of the Scarlet Pimpernel, his resourcefulness, his devotion, the glamour that surrounded his mysterious personality in his own country; how could all that be true if this kind and devoted friend over here did not deceive himself and her? And if he did not, then were all the tales she had heard tell of the mystic hero nothing but legends or lies?

A confused hum of sounds was in her ears; the boatmen gossiping on the quay, the shuffling footsteps of passers-by the shrieks and laughter of children up and down the avenue and, suddenly through it all, a stentorian voice chanting the first strains of the Marseillaise completely out of tune. Josette felt rather than saw Citizen Armand give a distinct start: she looked up just in time to see him cross over rapidly to the quay. The ear-splitting song had come from that direction. The boatmen were all laughing and pointing to a boat just putting off the shore, in which a fat sailor in tattered coat and shiny black hat thrust at the back of his head was plying the oars. He it was who was singing so intolerably out of tune; his voice resounded right across the intervening space: even when he reached midstream and headed toward the islands, some of the stentorian notes echoed down the avenue. Josette couldn't help smiling. Was that the man who had stolen the letters from under her pillow — the dangerous spy whom it took all her friend's ingenuity to track?

Could, in fact, that ugly uncouth creature, with the lank hair, the tattered clothes and the toothless mouth, be the mysterious and redoubtable Scarlet Pimpernel?

Josette could not help laughing to herself at the very thought. Citizen Armand must indeed be moonstruck to think of connecting that buffoon with the most gallant figure of all times. She glanced anxiously about her to find her friend Armand, for she wanted to speak with him again, to convince him how wrong he was, how utterly mistaken he had been. All at once her big sea of troubles ebbed away. She felt happy and light-hearted once more. Her illusions were not shattered: she could still worship her ideal and yet retain her affection for the sad-faced and kindly man who had befriended her. She was happy — oh, so happy! — and her lips were ready now to speak the words of gratitude.

But look where she might, there was no longer any sign of Citizen Armand.

Chapter XXVII

It was now eight o'clock in the evening. An hour ago a post-chaise had driven into the courtyard of the Cheval Blanc and from it descended Citizen François Chabot, Representative of the People for the department of Loire et Cher. He had been received by the landlord of the tavern with all the honours due to his exalted station and to his influence, and had supped in the public room in the company of that pale-faced little man who had already created so much attention in the hostelry and who went by the name of Citizen Armand.

Josette sitting at another table in a dark angle of the room watched the two men with mixed feelings in her heart. She couldn't eat any supper, for inwardly she was terribly excited. The hour had come when all her efforts on behalf of Maurice would come to fruit. Her friend had sent her word that he would summon her when the Citizen Representative was ready to receive her, so she waited as patiently as she could. Watching Chabot she recalled every moment of her first interview with him; she had been perfectly calm and self-possessed then, and she would be calm now when she found herself once more face to face with him. Though ignorant and unsophisticated, Josette was no fool. She knew well what risk she ran by consenting to meet Chabot here in Rouen with the letters actually upon her person. Events had turned out differently from what she had planned. She had meant to meet Chabot in Paris on neutral ground, conducts for herself and Maurice safely put away. Here it was different.

Danger? There always was danger in coming in conflict with these men who ruled France by terror and the ever-present threat of the guillotine, but there was also that other danger, the risk of the precious letters being stolen again during the final stage of the journey, and no chance of getting them back a second time. Even so, Josette would perhaps have refused to meet Chabot till she could do so in Paris had it not been for Citizen Armand; but it never entered her mind that this faithful and powerful friend would not be there to protect her and to see fair play.

As on that other occasion in the luxurious room of the Rue d'Anjou she was not the least afraid: it was only the waiting that was so trying to her nerves. While she made pretence to eat her supper she tried to catch her friend's eye, but he was deeply absorbed in conversation with Chabot. Once or twice the latter glanced in her direction, then turned back to Armand with a sneer and a shrug.

After supper the two men went out of the room together, and Josette waited quietly for the summons from her friend. At last it came. Looking up, she saw him standing in the doorway: he beckoned to her and she followed him out of the room. She was absolutely calm now, as calm as she had been during the first interview when the precious letters were not yet in her possession. Now she felt the paper crackling against her bosom — the golden key her friend had called the packet, which would open the prison gates for Maurice.

Armand conducted her to a small room at the back of the house, one which had been put at the disposal of the Citizen Representative by the landlord, who probably used it in a general way as a place where he could receive his friends with the privacy which the public room could not offer. It was sparsely furnished with a deal table covered by a faded cloth, on which past libations had left a number of sticky stains: on the table a bottle of ink, a mangy quill pen, a jar of sand and a couple of pewter sconces in which flickered and guttered the tallow candles. There were a few chairs ranged about the place and a wooden bench, all somewhat rickety, covered in grime and innocent of polish. From a small iron stove in an angle of the room a wood fire shed a welcome glow. The only nice bit of furniture in the place was an old Normandy grandfather clock, standing against the wall and ticking away with solemn majesty. There was only one window, and that was shuttered and bolted. The walls had once been whitewashed: they were bare of ornament save for a cap of liberty roughly drawn in red just above the clock and below it the device of the Terrorist Government: "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." Recently a zealous hand had chalked up below this the additional words: "Ou la mort."

When Chauvelin ushered Josette into this room Chabot was sitting at the table. The girl came forward and without waiting to be asked she sat down opposite of Chabot and waited for him to speak. She looked him fearlessly in the face, and he returned her glance with an unmistakable sneer. Chauvelin, who had followed Josette into the room, now put the question:

"Shall I go, or would you like me to stay?"

Josette, looking up at him, did not know to whom he had addressed the question, but in case it was to her she hastened to say: "Do please stay, Citizen Armand."

Chauvelin then sat down on the bench against the wall behind Josette, but facing his colleague. For a minute or two no one spoke, and the only sound that broke the fateful silence was the solemn ticking of the old clock. Then Chabot said abruptly:

"Well, little baggage, so you've been in England, I understand."

"Yes, Citizen, I have," Josette replied coolly.

Chabot, his ugly head on one side, was eyeing her quizzically, his thick lips were curled in a sneer. He picked up the pen from the table and toyed with it: stroked his unshaven chin with the quill.

"Let me see," he went on slowly, "what exactly was the object of your journey?"

"To get certain letters, Citizen," she rejoined, unmoved by his attitude of contempt, "which you were anxious to possess."

"H'm!" was Chabot's curt comment. Then he added drily, "Ah! I was anxious to possess those letters, was I?"

"You certainly were, Citizen."

"And it was in order to relieve my anxiety that you travelled all the way to England, what?"

"We'll put it that way if you like, Citizen Representative."

The girl's coolness seemed to exasperate Chabot as it had done in their first interview. Even now at this hour when she was entirely in his power, when his scheme of vengeance against this impudent baggage had matured to such perfection, he could not control that feeling of irritation against his victim, and he envied his colleague over there who sat looking perfectly placid and entirely at his ease. Suddenly he said:

"Where are those letters, Citizeness?"

"I have them here," she answered with disconcerting coldness.

"Let's see them," he commanded.

But she was not to be moved into easy submission.

"You remember, Citizen," she said, "under what conditions I agreed to hand you over the letters?"

"Conditions?" he retorted with a harsh laugh. "Conditions? Say, I have forgotten those conditions. Will you be so gracious as to let me hear them again?"

"I told you, Citizen Representative," Josette proceeded wearily, for she was getting tired of this word play, "I told you at the time; I want a safe-conduct in the name of Maurice Reversac and one in mine to enable us both to quit this country and travel whither we please."

"Is that all?"

"Enough for my purpose. Shall we conclude, Citizen Representative? You must be as tired as I am of all this quibble."

"You are right there, you impudent trollop!" Chabot snapped at her with a short laugh. "Give me those letters!"

Then as she made no answer, only glanced at him with contempt and shrugged, he iterated hoarsely:

"Did you hear me? Give me those letters!"

"Not till I have the safe-conducts written out and signed by your hand."

"So that's it, is it?" Chabot snarled, and leaned right across the table, peering into her face. He looked hideous in the dim, unsteady light of the candles, with his thick lips quivering, a slight scum gathering at the corners of his mouth and his thin face bilious and sallow with rage. Thus he remained for the space of a minute, gloating over his triumph. The wench was in his power — nothing could save her now; the vengeance for which he had thirsted was his at last; but there was exquisite pleasure in the anticipation of it, in looking at that slender neck so soon to be severed by the knife of the guillotine, on that dainty head with its wealth of golden curls soon to fall into the gruesome basket while those luminous eyes were closed in death-agony.

"Ah!" he murmured hoarsely, "you thought you had François Chabot in your power, you little fool, you little idiot! You thought that you could frighten him, torture him with doubts and fears? You triple, triple fool!"

His voice rose to a shriek: he jumped to his feet and, thumping the table with the palm of his hand, he shouted: "Here! Guard! A moi!"

The door flew open: two men of the Republican Guard appeared under the lintel, and there were others standing in the passage. Josette saw it all. While Chabot was raving and spitting venom at her like an angry serpent she had kept hold on herself. She was not frightened because she knew that Armand, her friend, was close by and that Chabot, even though, or perhaps because he was a Representative of the People would not dare to commit a flagrant act of treachery before his colleague: would not dare to provoke her, Josette Gravier, into revealing the existence of letters compromising to himself here and now. But when the door flew open and she caught sight of the soldiers, she jumped to her feet and turned to the friend to whom she looked so confidently for protection. Chabot now was laughing loudly; with head thrown back he laughed as if his sides would split.

"You little fool!" he continued to snarl. "You egregious little idiot!" He paused, and then commanded: "Search her!" The two soldiers advanced. Josette stood quite still and did not utter a single cry. Her great eyes were fixed on her friend — the friend who was playing her false, who had already betrayed her. At first her glance had pleaded to him: "Save me!" Her dark blue eyes, dark as a midsummer's night, had seemed to say: "Are you not my friend?" But gradually entreaty gave place to horror and then to a stony stare; for Citizen Armand, the friend and protector who had wormed himself into her secrets, gained her trust and stolen her gratitude, sat there silent and unmoved, stroking his chin with his talon-like fingers, an enigmatic smile round his thin lips. Slowly Josette averted her gaze: she turned from the treacherous friend to the gloating enemy. The soldiers now stood one on each side of her — she could actually feel their breath upon her neck; the hand of one of them fell upon her shoulder. With a smothered cry of revolt she shook it off and deliberately took the packet of letters from inside her bodice and laid it on the table.

A hoarse sigh of satisfaction broke from Chabot's throat. His thick, coarse hand closed over the fateful packet; the soldiers stood by like wooden dummies, one on each side of Josette.

"Can I go now?" the girl asked.

Chabot threw her a mocking glance.

"Go?" he mimicked with a sneer. Then the sarcasm died on his lips, and his ugly face, which he thrust forward within an inch of hers, became distorted with a look of almost bestial rage. "Go? No, you evil-minded young jade — you are not going. Like a born idiot you have placed yourself in my power. For the past month you have been laughing at me and my friends in your sleeve, relishing like a debauched little glutton the torment which you were inflicting upon us. Well, it is our turn to laugh at you now, and laugh we will while you rot in gaol, you and your lover, aye! rot, until the day on which your heads fall under the guillotine will be welcomed by you as the happiest one of your lives."

Except that she recoiled with the feeling of physical disgust when the man's venom-laden breath fanned her cheeks, Josette had not departed for one moment from her attitude of absolute calm. The moment that earthly protection failed her and the friend whom she trusted proved to be a traitor, she knew that she and Maurice were lost. Nothing on earth could save either of them now from whatever fate these assassins chose to mete out to them. She prayed to le bon Dieu to give her courage to bear it all and, above all, she prayed for strength not to let this monster see what she suffered. The name of Maurice thrown at her with such cruelty had made her wince. It was indeed for Maurice's sake that she suffered most acutely. She had built such high hopes — such fond and foolish hopes apparently — on what she could do for him that the disappointment did for the moment seem greater than she could bear.

She no longer looked at the betrayer of her trust: in her innocent mind she thought that he must be overwhelmed with shame at his own cowardice. Le bon Dieu alone would know how to punish him.

At a sign from Chabot the soldiers each placed a hand once more upon the girl's shoulder. They waited for another sign to lead her away. Their officer was standing in the doorway: Chabot spoke to him.

"What accommodation have they got in this city," he asked with a leer at Josette and a refinement of cruelty worthy of the murderer of Bastien de Croissy, "for hardened criminals?"

"There is the town jail, Citizen," the man replied.

"Safe, I suppose?"

"Very well guarded, anyway. It is built underneath the town hall."

"Who is in charge?"

"I am, Citizen, with a score of men."

"And in the town hall?"

"There is a detachment of the National Guard under the command of Captain Favret."

"Quartered there?"

"Yes, Citizen."

Chabot gave another harsh laugh and a shrug.

"That should be enough to guard a wench," he said, "but one never knows — you men are such fools..."

While he spoke Chabot had been idly fingering the packet, breaking the seals one by one. Now the outside wrapper fell apart and disclosed a small bundle of letters — letters...? Letters? Chabot's hand shook as he took up each scrap of paper and unfolded it, and while he did so every drop of blood seemed to be drained from his ugly face and his bilious skin took on a grey ashen hue; for the packet contained only scraps of paper folded to look like letters with not a word on any of them. Chabot's eyes as he looked down on those empty scraps seemed to start out of his head: his face had been distorted before, now it seemed like a mask of death — grey, parchment-like, rigid. He raised his eyes and fixed them on Josette, while one by one the scraps of paper fluttered out of his hand.

But Josette herself was no longer the calm, self-possessed woman of a moment ago. When Chabot fingered the fateful packet and broke the seals one by one, when the outside wrapper fell apart and disclosed what should have been the famous letters, a cruel stab went through her heart at the thought of how different it would all have been if only the man she had trusted had not proved to be a Judas. Then suddenly she saw there here were no letters, only empty scraps of paper: her amazement was as great as that of her tormentor himself. She had received that packet from Louise: she had never parted from it since Louise placed it in her hands — never. But, of course... the last five days... the theft... the miraculous recovery... Oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! what did it all mean? Her brain was in a whirl. She could only stare and stare on those scraps of paper which fell out of Chabot's bony hands one by one.

No one spoke: the soldiers stood at attention, waiting for further orders. At the end of the room the old grandfather clock ticked away the minutes with slow and majestic monotony. At last a husky groan came from Chabot's quivering lips. He pointed a finger at Josette and then at the papers on the table.

"So," he murmured in a hoarse whisper, "you thought to fool me again?"

"No, no!" she protested involuntarily.

"You thought," he insisted in the same throaty voice, "to extract a safe-conduct from me and to fool me with these worthless scraps..."

He paused and then his voice rose to a shriek.

"Where are the letters?" he shouted stridently.

"I don't know," Josette protested. "I swear I do not know."

"Bring me those letters now," he iterated, "or by Satan..."

Once more he paused, for the words had died on his lips; indeed, how could he threaten his victim further when already he had promised her all the torments, mental and physical, that it was in his power to inflict. "Or by Satan..." What further threat could he utter? Jail? Death for her and her lover? What else was there?

"Bring me those letters!" he snarled, like a wild cat robbed of its prey, "or I'll have you branded, publicly whipped. I'll have you — I — I thank my stars that we've not given up in France all means of punishing hell-hounds like you."

"I cannot give you what I haven't got, Citizen," Josette declared calmly, "and I swear to you that I believed that the letters were in the packet which I have given you."

"You lie! You..."

Chabot turned to the officer-in-charge. "Take the strumpet away and remember..." He checked himself and for the next few moments swore and blasphemed; then suddenly changing his tone he said to Josette:

"Listen, little Citizeness; I was only trying to frighten you," and the tiger's snarl became a tabby's purr. "I can see that you are a clever wench. You thought you would fool poor old Chabot, did you not? Thought you would have a bit of a game with him, what?"

He tiptoed round the table till he stood close to Josette; he thrust his grimy finger under her chin, forced her to raise her head: "Pretty dear!" he ejaculated, and pursed his thick lips as if to frame a kiss. But it must be supposed that something in the girl's expression of face caused him to spare her this final outrage: or did he really wish to cajole her? Certain it is that he contented himself with leering at her and ogling the sweet pale face which would have stirred compassion in any heart but that of a fiend.

"So now you've had your fun," he resumed with an artful chuckle, "and we are where we were before, eh? You are going to give me the letters which you went all the way to England to fetch, and I will give you a perfectly bee-ee-autiful safe-conduct for yourself and that handsome young lover of yours — lucky dog! — so that you can go and cuddle and kiss each other wherever you like. Now, I suppose you have hidden those naughty letters somewhere in your pretty little bed and we'll just go there together to fetch them, what?"

Josette made no reply and no movement. What could she do or say? She had only listened with half an ear to that abominable hypocrite's cajoleries. She had no more idea than he had what had become of the letters, or how it was that a packet in appearance exactly like the one which Louise had given her came to be substituted for the original one. She guessed — but only in a vague way — that Citizen Armand had something to do with the substitution, but she could not imagine what his object could possibly have been. While she stood mute and in an absolute whirl of conjecture and of doubt, Chabot waxed impatient.

"Now then, you little baggage," he said, and already he had dropping his insinuating tone, "don't stand there like a wooden image. Do not force me to send you marching along between two soldiers. Lead the way to your room. My friend and I will follow."

"I have already told you, Citizen," Josette maintained firmly, "I know nothing about any packet except the one which I have given you."

"It's a lie!"

"The truth, so help me God! And," she added solemnly, "I do still believe in God."

"Tshah!"

It was just an ejaculation of baffled rage and disappointment. For the next few seconds Chabot, with his hands behind his back, paced up and down the narrow room like a caged panther. He came to a halt presently in front of his colleague.

"What would you do, friend Chauvelin," he asked him, "if you were in my shoes?"

Chauvelin, during all this time, had remained absolutely quiescent, sitting on the bench immediately behind Josette. It was difficult indeed to conjecture if he had taken in all the phases of the scene which had been enacted in this room in the last quarter of an hour: Chabot's violence, Josette's withering contempt had alike left him unmoved. At one time it almost looked as if he slept: his head was down on his breast, his arms were crossed, his eyes closed. But now when directly interpellated by his colleague he seemed to rouse himself and glanced up at the angry face before him.

"Eh?" he queried vaguely. "What did you say, Citizen Representative?"

"Don't go to sleep, man!" the other retorted furiously. "Your neck and mine are in jeopardy while that baggage is allowed to defy me. What shall I do with her?"

"Keep her under guard and perquisition in her room: 'tis simple enough." And Chauvelin's lips curled in a sarcastic smile.

"Perquisition? Why, yes of course! The simplest thing, is it not?" And Chabot turned to the officer once more. "Sergeant," he commanded, "some of you go find the landlord of this hostelry. Order him to conduct you to the room occupied by the girl Gravier. You will search that room and never leave it until you have found a sealed packet exactly like the one which she laid on the table just now. You understand?"

"Yes, Citizen."

"Then go; and remember," he added significantly, "that packet must be found or there'll be trouble for your for lack of zeal."

"There will be no trouble," the soldier retorted drily.

He turned on his heel and was about to march off with his men when Chauvelin said in a whisper to his friend:

"I would go with them if I were you. You'll want to see that the packet is given to you with the seals unbroken, what?"

"You are right, my friend," the other assented. He signalled to the sergeant, who stood at attention and waited for the distinguished Representative to go out of the room in front of him. In the doorway Chabot turned once more to Chauvelin:

"Look after the hussy while I'm gone," he said, and nodded in the direction of Josette. "I'm leaving some men outside to guard her."

"Have no fear," Chauvelin responded drily; "she'll not run away."

Chabot strode out of the room; the sergeant followed him, and some of the men fell into step and marched in their wake up the passage.

"You can wait outside, Citizen Soldiers!" Chauvelin said to the two men who were standing beside Josette. He had his tricolour scarf on, so there was no questioning his command: the soldiers fell back, turned and marched out of the room, closing the door behind them. And between those four white-washed walls Josette was now alone with Chauvelin.

Chapter XXVIII

"Was I not right, little one, to carry out that small deception?"

If at the moment when Mother Eve was driven out from the Garden of Eden she had suddenly heard the serpent's voice whispering: "Was I not right to suggest your eating that bit of apple?" she would not have been more astonished than was Josette when that gentle, insinuating voice reached her ears.

She woke as from a dream — from a kind of coma into which she had been plunged by despair. She turned and encountered the kindly familiar glance of Citizen Armand, sitting cross-legged, unmoved on the bench, his head propped against the wall. In the feeble light of the guttering candles he appeared if anything paler than usual, and very tired. Josette gazed on him tongue-tied and puzzled, indeed more puzzled than she had ever felt before during these last few days so full of unexplainable events. As she did not attempt to speak he continued after a moment's pause:

"But for the substitution which I thought it best to effect, your precious letters would now be in the hands of that rogue, and nothing in the world could have saved you and your friend Reversac from death." And again he continued: "The situation would be the same as now but we shouldn't have the letters."

He thrust his long thin hand into the inner pocket of his coat and half drew out a packet, wrapped and sealed just as was the other which had contained the pretended letters. Josette gave a gasp, and with her habitual, pathetic gesture pressed her hands against her heart. It had begun to beat furiously. She would have moved only that Armand put a finger quickly to his lips.

"Sh-sh!" he admonished, and slipped the packet back inside his coat.

There was a murmur of voices outside; one of the soldiers cleared his throat, others shuffled their feet. There were sounds of whisperings, of movements and heavy footsteps the other side of the closed door — reminders that watch was being kept there by order of the Citizen Representative. Josette sank her voice to a whisper:

"And you did that...? For me...? Whilst I..."

"Whilst you called me a traitor and a Judas in your heart," he concluded with a wan smile. "Let's say no more about it."

"You may forgive me... I cannot..."

"Don't let's talk of that," he resumed with a show of impatience. "I only wished you to know that the reason why I didn't interfere between Chabot and yourself was because in the existing state of our friend's temper my interference would have been not only useless but harmful to you and your friend. All I could do was to maneuver him into ordering the perquisition in your room and get him to superintend it so as to have the chance of saying these few words to you in private."

"You are right, as you always have been, Citizen Armand," Josette rejoined fervently. "I cannot imagine how I ever came to doubt you."

As if in response to her unspoken request he rose and came across the room to her, gave her the kindest and most gentle of smiles and patted her shoulder.

"Poor little girl!" he murmured softly.

She took hold of his hand and managed to imprint a kiss upon it before he snatched it away.

"You have been such a wonderful friend to me," she sighed. "I shall never doubt you again."

"Even though I were to put your trust to a more severe test than before?" he asked.

"Try me," she rejoined simply.

"Suppose I were to order your arrest... now?... It would only be for a few days," he hastened to assure her.

"I would not doubt you," she declared firmly.

"Only until I can order young Reversac to be brought here."

"Maurice?"

"Yes! For your ultimate release I must have you both here together. You understand?"

"I think I do."

"While one of you is here and the other in Paris, complications can so easily set in, and those fiends might still contrive to play us a trick. But with both of you here, and the letters in my hands, I can negotiate with Chabot for your release and for the necessary safe-conducts. After which you can take the diligence together to Tréport and be in England within three days."

"Yes! yes! I do understand," Josette reiterated, tears of happiness and gratitude welling to her eyes. "And I don't mind prison one little bit, dear Citizen Armand," she added naively. "Indeed I don't mind anything that you order me to do. I do trust you absolutely. Absolutely."

"I'll try and make it as easy for you as I can, and with luck I hope to have our friend Reversac here within the week."

Excited and happy, not the least bit frightened, and without the slightest suspicion, Josette saw Chauvelin go to the door, open it and call to the soldiers who were on guard in the passage. She heard him call: "Which of you is in command here?" She saw one of them step briskly forward; heard his smart reply: "I am, Citizen!" and finally her friend's curt command:

"Corporal, you will take this woman, Josephine Gravier, to the Commissariat of Police. You will give her in charge of the Chief Commissary with orders that she be kept under strict surveillance until further orders." He then came across to the table, took up the quill pen that was lying there and a printed paper out of his pocket, scribbled a few words, signed his name and strewed the writing with sand. The tallow candles had now guttered so low, and emitted such a column of black smoke, that he could hardly see: he tried to re-read what he had written and was apparently satisfied, for he handed the paper to the soldier, saying curtly:

"This will explain to the Chief Commissary that the order for this arrest is issued by a member of the Third Sectional Committee of Public Safety — Armand Chauvelin — and that I hereby denounce Josephine Gravier as suspect of treason against the Republic."

The corporal — a middle-aged man in somewhat shabby uniform — took the paper and stood at attention, while Chauvelin, with a peremptory gesture, beckoned to Josette to fall in with the men. Loyal and trusting until the end, the girl even forbore to throw a glance

on the treacherous friend who was playing her this cruel trick: she even went to the length of appearing overcome with terror, indeed she played to perfection the rôle of an unfortunate aristo confronted with treason and preparing for death.

"Now then, young woman," the corporal commanded curtly. Three men were waiting in the passage. With faltering steps and her face buried in her hands, Josette allowed herself to be led out of the room. The corporal was the last to go; the door fell to behind him with a bang. Chauvelin stood for a moment in the centre of the room, listening. He heard the brief word of command, the tramp of heavy feet along the passage in the direction of the front door, the shooting of bolts and rattle of chains. He rubbed his pale, talon-like hands together, and a curious smile played round his thin lips.

"You'll have your work cut out, my gallant Pimpernel," he murmured to himself, "to get the wench away. And even if you do, her lover is still in Paris, and what will you do about him? I think this time..." he added complacently.

Then he paused and once more lent an attentive ear to the sounds that came to him from the other side of the house; to the banging and stamping, the thuds and thunderings, the loud and strident shoutings and medley of angry voices, all gradually merging into a terrific uproar.

And as he listened the enigmatic smile on his lips turned to a contemptuous sneer.

Chapter XXIX

It was late in the evening by now and most of the clients of the hostelry had already retired for the night. Awakened by the terrible hubbub some of them had ventured outside their doors, only to find that the corridors and stairs were patrolled by soldiers, who promptly ordered them back into their rooms. On the downstairs floor the landlord and his wife, in the room adjoining the one on which their daughter had shared with Josette Gravier, had been rudely ordered to give up all keys and on peril of their lives not to interfere with the soldiers in the discharge of their duty. The Representative of the People, who had arrived at the hostelry that very evening, appeared to be in a towering rage: he it was who ordered a rigorous search of both the rooms, the landlord vaguely protesting against this outrage put upon his house.

He and his family were, however, soon reduced to silence, as were the guests on the floors above, and the stamping and the banging, the thuds and thunderings, the shouts and imprecations were confined to the two rooms in the house where a squad of soldiers, under the command of their sergeant and egged on by Chabot, carried on a perquisition with ruthless violence.

Within a quarter of an hour there was not a single article of furniture left whole in the place. The men had broken up the flooring, pulled open every drawer, smashed every lock; they had ripped up the mattresses and pillows and pulled the curtains down from their rods. Chabot, stalking about from one room to the other with great strides and arms akimbo, cursed the soldiers loudly for their lack of zeal.

"Did I not say," he bellowed like a raging bull, "that those letters must be found?"

The sergeant was at his wits' ends. The two rooms did, indeed, look in the feeble light of the hanging lamp above as if a Prussian cannon had exploded in their midst. The landlord with his wife and daughter cowered terror-stricken in a corner.

"Never," they protested with sobs, "never has such an indignity been put upon this house."

"You should not have taken in such baggage," Chabot retorted roughly.

"Citizen Chauvelin gave orders..."

"Never mind about Citizen Chauvelin. I am giving you orders, here and now."

He strode across the room and came to a halt in front of the three unfortunates. They struggled to their feet and clung to one another in terror before the fearsome Representative of the People. Indeed, Chabot at this moment, with face twisted into a mask of fury, with hair hanging in fantastic curls over his brow, with eyes bloodshot and curses spluttering out of his quivering lips, looked almost inhuman in his overwhelming rage.

"The hussy who slept here...?" he demanded.

"Yes, Citizen?"

"She had a sealed packet — a small packet about the size of my hand..."

"Yes, Citizen."

"What did she do with it?"

"It was stolen from her, Citizen Representative, the first night she slept in this house," the landlord explained, his voice quaking with fear.

"So she averred," the woman put in trembling.

"Did any of you see it?"

They all three shook their heads.

"The girl didn't sleep in this room that night, Citizen," the woman explained. "She shared a room with two female travellers who left the next day on the diligence. Citizen Chauvelin then gave orders for her to sleep in my daughter's room and made us responsible for her safety."

Chabot glanced over his shoulder at the sergeant.

"Find out in the morning," he commanded, "at the Commissariat all about the female travellers and whither they went, and report to me." He then turned back to the landlord. "And do you mean to tell me that none of you saw anything of that sealed packet supposed to have been stolen? Think again," he ordered roughly.

"I never set eyes on it, Citizen," the man declared.

"Nor I, I swear it!" both the two women averred.

Chabot kept the wretched family in suspense for a few minutes after that, gloating over their misery and their fear of him, while his bloodshot eyes glared into their faces. Behind him the sergeant now stood at attention, waiting for further orders. There was nothing to be done, since every nook and cranny had been ransacked, and short of pulling down the walls no further search was possible. But Chabot's lust of destruction was not satisfied. He had the feeling at this moment that he wanted to set fire to the house and see it burned to the ground, together with that elusive packet of letters which meant more than life to him.

"Sergeant!" he cried, and was on the point of giving the monstrous order when a quiet, dry voice suddenly broke in:

"There are other ways than fire and brimstone, my friend, of recovering what you desire to possess."

Chabot swung round with an angry snarl and saw Armand Chauvelin standing in the doorway, a placid, slender figure in sober black with inscrutable face and smooth unruffled hair.

"The hussy?" Chabot yelled, his voice husky with choler.

"She is safer than she was when you left her half an hour ago, for I've had her arrested and sent to the Commissary of the district under a denunciation from me. She is safe there for the present, but she certainly won't be for long if you spend your time raving and swearing and pulling the house down about our ears."

"What the devil do you mean — she won't be safe for long? Why not?"

"Because," Chauvelin replied with earnest significance, "there are influences at work about here which will be exerted to their utmost power to get the wench out of your clutches."

"I care nothing about the wench," Chabot muttered under his breath. "It's those accursed letters..."

"Exactly," Chauvelin broke in quietly, "the letters."

Chabot was silent for a moment or two, swallowing the blasphemies that forced themselves to his lips. He glared with mixed feelings of wrath and vague terror into those pale, deep-set eyes that regarded him with unconcealed contempt. Something in their glance seemed to hypnotise him and to weaken his will. After a time his own glance fell; he cleared his throat, tugged at his waistcoat and passed his grimy, moist palm over his curly hair. And in order to gain further control over his nerves he buried his hands in his breeches pockets and started once more to pace up and down the room. The soldiers had lined up the passage outside: their sergeant had stepped back against the doorway and was doing his best not to smile at the Citizen Representative's discomfiture.

"You are right," Chabot said at last to Chauvelin with a semblance of calm. "We must talk the matter of letters over before we can decide what we do with the baggage."

Then he turned to the sergeant.

"Which are the men who took the wench to the Commissariat?" he asked.

"I don't think they are back, Citizen," the sergeant replied.

"Don't think!" Chabot snarled. "Go and find out."

The man moved away and Chabot called after him:

"Report to me in the public room — you'll find me there."

He gave a sign to Chauvelin. "Let's go!" he said curtly. "The sight of this room makes me see red."

He did not throw another glance on the unfortunate landlord and his family, the victims of his unreasoning rage. They stood in the midst of their devastated room looking utterly forlorn, not knowing yet if they had anything more to fear. The house appeared singularly still after the uproar of a while ago, only the measured tread of soldiers patrolling the corridors echoed weirdly through the gloom.

Chabot stalked on ahead of his colleague and made his way to the public room. There he threw himself into a convenient chair and sprawled across the nearest table, ordering the man in charge to bring him a bottle of wine. Then he called loudly to his colleague to come and join him.

But Chauvelin did not respond to the call. He turned into the small private room where the fateful interview had just taken place. He closed the door, locked and bolted it. He then went across to the window and examined its shutter. It was barred as before. There was no fear that he would be interrupted in the task which now lay before him. The candles had burned down almost to their sockets: Chauvelin picked up the snuffers and trimmed the wicks. Then he sat down at the table and drew the original sealed packet out of his breast pocket.

The time had come to break the seals. There was no longer any reason to keep the packet intact. The first act in the drama which he had devised for his own advancement and the destruction of his powerful enemy had been a brilliant success. The wench Josette Gravier and her lover were both in prison — one in Rouen, the other in Paris. Such a situation would of a certainty arouse the sympathy of the Scarlet Pimpernel and induce him to exert that marvellous ingenuity of his for the rescue of the two young people. But this time Chauvelin was more accurately forewarned than he had ever been before. All he need do was keep a close eye on the wench; the English spy, however elusive he might be, must of necessity attempt to get in touch with the girl, and unless he had the power of rendering himself invisible, his capture was bound to follow. It may safely be said that no fear of failure assailed Chauvelin at this hour. He considered his enemy as good as captured already. It would be a triumph for his perseverance, his inventive genius and his patriotism! Once more he would become a power in the land, the master of these men — these venal cowardly fools — who would again fawn at his feet after this and suffer at his hands for all the humiliation they had heaped upon him these past two years.

The compromising letters would be an additional weapon wherewith to chastise these arrogant upstarts — not excluding the powerful Danton himself, perhaps not even Robespierre. Armand Chauvelin saw himself on the very pinnacle of popularity, the veritable ruler of France. To what height of supreme power could not he aspire, who had brought such an inveterate enemy of revolutionary France to death?

And all the while that these pleasant thoughts, these happy anticipations ran through Armand Chauvelin's mind, his delicate hands toyed with the packet of letters — the keystone that held together the edifice of his future. He fingered it lovingly as he had done many a time before. Here it was just as it had been when Picard placed it in his hands: he had never broken the seals, never seen its contents, never set eyes on the letters which caused men like Chabot, Bazire, and Fabre d'Eglantine and even the popular Danton to tremble for their lives. But now that the first act of the little comedy which he had devised had been successfully enacted in this very room, he felt that he could indulge his natural curiosity to probe into the secrets of these men. He felt eager and excited. These letters might reveal secrets that would be a still more powerful leverage than he had hoped for the fulfilment of his ambition.

His fingers shook slightly as they broke the seals. The wrapper fell apart just as that other had done in Chabot's hands, and the contents were revealed to Chauvelin's horror-filled gaze. For here were no letters either; like the wrapper and like the seals the contents were the same as those which had turned Citizen Chabot from a human being into a raging beast: scraps of paper made to appear like letters — nothing more!

Chauvelin stared at them and stared; his pale, deep-set eyes were aflame, his temples throbbed, his whole body shook as with ague. What did the whole thing mean? Where did this monstrous deception begin? What was the initial thread which bound this amazing conspiracy together? Did it have its origin in Bastien de Croissy's tortured brain — in that of his despairing widow? Or did that seemingly guileless girl after all...? But no! this, of course, was nonsense. Chauvelin passed his trembling hand over his burning forehead. He felt as if he had been stunned by a heavy blow on the head. Idly he allowed the scraps of paper to glide in and out between his fingers. There was not a word written on any of them. Mere empty scraps of paper!... All save one!... Mechanically Chauvelin picked that one up... it was soiled and creased, more so than the others. He passed his hand over it to smooth it out. The candles were guttering and smoking again... he could hardly see... his eyes, too, were dim — not with tears, of course; just with a kind of film which threw a crimson blur over everything. He was compelled to blink once or twice before he could decipher the words on that one scrap of paper. He did succeed in the end, but only read the first few words:

"We seek him here..."

That maddening doggerel, the sight of which had so often been to him the precursor of some awful disaster! For the first time in his career Chauvelin felt a sense of discouragement. He had been so full of hope only a few minutes ago — so full of certainty. This awful disappointment came like a terrific, physical crash upon his aching head. With arms stretched out upon the table, that one scrap of paper crushed in his hand, he thought of the many failures which had gradually brought him down from his exalted rank to one of humiliation. Calais, Boulogne, Paris, Nantes, and many more — and now this! He had felt it coming when his enemy had so impudently faced him in the public room of this hostelry. The big fat sailor — that unmistakable laugh — the pepper-pot to remind him of his greatest discomfiture over at the Chat Gris in Calais: these and more all seemed to flit past Chauvelin's fevered brain in this moment of bitter disappointment. He had even ceased to think of Josette, communing only with the past. The minutes sped by; the old Normandy clock ticked away, majestic and indifferent.

A few minutes later Chabot's clamorous voice broke in on the lonely man's meditations. He roused himself from his apathy, threw a quick glance around. Then as the familiar voice drew nearer and nearer he gathered the scraps of paper hastily together and thrust them in his pocket out of sight. He went to the door and opened it just in time to meet his colleague, whose walk was not as steady as it had been when rage alone had governed his movements. Since then a bottle of red wine and one of heady Normandy cider had gone to his head; his lips sagged and his eyes were bleary. Lurching forward he nearly fell into Chauvelin's arms.

"I have been waiting for you for half an hour," the latter said with a show of reproach. "What in the world have you been doing?"

"I was in a high fever," Chabot muttered thickly. "A raging thirst I had — must have a drink..."

"Sit down there," Chauvelin commanded, for the man could hardly stand. "We must have more light."

"Yes... more light... I hate this gloom..."

Chabot fell into a chair; he stretched his arms over the table and buried his head in the crook of his elbow, and was soon breathing audibly. Chauvelin looked down on him with bitter contempt. What a partner in this great undertaking which he already had in mind! However, there was nothing for it now... this drunken lout was the only man who could lend him a hand in this juncture. He clapped his hands, and after a moment or two the maid in charge appeared. Chauvelin ordered her to bring more candles and a jug of cold water.

Chabot was snoring. With scant ceremony Chauvelin dashed the water over his head. The maid retired, grinning.

"What in hell...?" Chabot cried out, thus rudely awakened from his slumbers.

The cold water had partially sobered him. He blinked for a time into the fluttering candle-light, the water dripping down the tousled strands of his hair and the furrows of his cheeks.

"We've got to review the situation," Chauvelin began drily.

He sat down opposite Chabot, leaning his elbows on the table, his thin veined hands tightly clasped together.

"The situation?" Chabot iterated dully. "Yes, by Satan!... that hussy... what?"

"Never mind about the hussy now! You are still anxious, I imagine, that certain letters which gravely compromise you and your party do not fall into the hands, say, of the Moniteur or the P^{ère} Duchesne for publication."

Chauvelin spoke slowly and deliberately so as to allow every word to sink into the consciousness of that sot. In this he succeeded, for at mention of those fateful letters the last cloud of drunkenness seemed to vanish from the man's sodden brain. Rage and fear had once more sole possession of him.

"You swore," he countered roughly, "that you would get those letters..."

"And so I will," Chauvelin returned calmly, "but you must do your best to help."

"You have allowed yourself to be hoodwinked by a young baggage — you..."

"If you take up that tone with me, my friend," Chauvelin suddenly said in a sharp, peremptory tone, fixing his colleague with a stern eye, "I will throw up the sponge at once and let the man who now has the letters do his damndest with them."

The threat had the same effect on Chabot as the douche of cold water. He swallowed his choler and said almost humbly:

"What is it you want me to do?"

"I'll tell you. First, about the packet of letters..."

"Yes!... the packet of letters — the real packet... Who has it — where is it?... I want to know..." And with each phrase he uttered Chabot beat on the table with the palm of his hand, while Chauvelin's quick brain was at work on the last phases of his tortuous scheme.

"I'll tell you," he replied quietly, "who stole the packet of letters from the girl Gravier. It was the English spy who is known under the name of 'The Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

"How do you know?"

"Never mind how I know: I do know. Let that be sufficient! But as true as that you and I are alive at this moment the Scarlet Pimpernel has those letters in his possession..."

"And he can send the lot of us to the guillotine?" Chabot interposed in a raucous whisper.

"He certainly will," Chauvelin retorted drily, "unless..."

"Unless what? Speak, man, unless you wish to see me fall dead at your feet!"

"...unless we can capture him, of course."

"But they say he is as elusive as a ghost. Why, you yourself..."

"I know that. He is not as elusive as you think. I have tried — and failed — that is true. But never before have I had the help of an influential man like you."

Chabot bridled at the implied flattery.

"I'll help you," he said, "of course."

"Then listen, Citizen. Although we have not got the letters, we hold what we might call the trump card in this game..."

"The trump card?"

"Yes, the girl Gravier. I told you I had ordered her arrest..."

"True, but..."

"She is at the present moment at the Commissariat, under strict surveillance..."

Chabot jumped to his feet, glared into his colleague's pale face and brought his heavy fist crashing down upon the table. "You lie!" he shrieked at the top of his voice. "She is not at the Commissariat."

Chauvelin shrugged.

"Where, then?" he asked coolly.

"The devil knows — I don't!"

It was Chauvelin's turn to stare into his colleague's eyes. Was the man still drunk, or had he gone mad?

"You'd oblige me, Citizen," he said coolly, "by not talking in riddles."

"Riddles?" the other mocked. "Tscha! I tell you that that bit of baggage whom you ordered to be taken to the Commissariat never got there at all."

"Never got there?" Chauvelin queried with a frown. "You are joking, Citizen."

"Joking, am I? Let me tell you this: the sergeant and the soldiers whom I sent to inquire after the wench came back half an hour ago and this is what they reported: neither the soldiers nor the hussy were seen at the Commissariat..."

"But where...?"

"Where the wench is no one knows. The Commissary at once sent out a patrol. They found the four soldiers in the public garden behind the St. Ouen, their legs tied together by their belts, their caps doing duty as gags in their mouths; but not a sign of the girl."

"Well — and?"

"The soldiers were interrogated. They are all under arrest now, the cowardly traitors! They declared that while they crossed the garden on their way to the Commissariat they were suddenly attacked from behind without any warning. They had seen no one and hadn't heard a sound: the place was pitch dark and entirely deserted. It seems that the lights have been abolished in this God-forsaken city every since oil and tallow got so dear, and the townsfolk avoid going through the garden, as it is the haunt of every evil-doer in Rouen. The men swore that they did their best to defend themselves, but that they were outnumbered and outclassed. Anyway, the miscreants, whoever they were, brought them down, bound and gagged them and then made off in the darkness, taking the wench with them."

"But didn't the men see anything? Were they footpads who attacked them, or — or...?"

"The devil only knows! Two of the soldiers declared that they were attacked by men in the same uniform that they wore themselves, and one thought that he recognised a sailor whom he had seen about on the quay the last day or two — a huge, powerful fellow, whose fist would fell an ox."

"Ah?"

"Anyway, the hell-hounds made off in the direction of the river."

"Ah?" Chauvelin remarked again.

"Why do you say 'Ah?' like that?" Chabot queried roughly. "Do you know anything of this affair?"

"No, but it does confirm what I said just now."

"What's that?"

"That those infernal English spies are at work here."

"Why do you say that?"

"Everything points to it: the mode of attack, the disappearance of the girl, the big sailor. Footpads would not have attacked soldiers with empty pockets, nor would they have carried off a girl who has neither friends nor relations to pay ransom for her."

"That's true."

"When did the sergeant tell you all this?"

"Not so long ago — might be a quarter of an hour..."

"Why didn't you let me know at once?"

"It was none of your business. I am here to give orders, not you."

"And what orders did you give? You didn't seem to be in a fit condition to give any orders at all."

"Rage at being baffled again went to my head. If you had not taken it upon yourself to order that girl's arrest..."

"You were about to tell me," Chauvelin broke in harshly, "what orders you gave to the sergeant."

"I ordered them to bring the four delinquents here, as I wish to interrogate them."

"Well — and are they here?"

"Wait, Citizen — all in good time! The sergeant had to go to the Commissariat — then he would have to..."

"I know all that," the other interrupted impatiently. He went to the door and opened it, clapped his hands and waited until the night-watchman came shuffling along the corridor.

"As soon as the sergeant returns," he said to the man, "bring him in here."

Chabot opened his mouth in order to protest; he was jealous of his prerogatives as a Representative of the People, a position of far greater authority than a mere member of the Committee of Public Safety. But there was something in Chauvelin's quiet assumption of command that overawed him and he felt shrunken and insignificant under the other's contemptuous glance. His ugly mouth closed with a snap, and he saw the watchman depart with a glowering look in his eyes. He sat down again by the table and stared stupidly into vacancy; his clumsy fingers toyed with the objects on the table; his thin legs were stretched straight out before him. Now and then he glanced towards the open door and listened to the several sounds which still resounded through the house.

Although the guests had been peremptorily ordered to keep to their rooms they could not be prevented from moving about and whispering among themselves, since sleep had become impossible. The uproar of a while ago, when furniture was being smashed and floors and walls were battered, had awakened them all from their first sleep. Since then vague terror and the ceaseless tramping of soldiers who patrolled the house had kept everyone on the alert. The unfortunate landlord and his family had taken refuge in a vacant room, but for them, more so than for any of their clients, sleep was impossible.

Thus, a constant, if subdued, hubbub reigned throughout the house. Chabot seemed to find a measure of comfort in listening to it all. Like so many persons who profess atheism, he was very superstitious, and all the talk about the mysterious spy, who worked in the

dark and was as elusive as a ghost, had exacerbated his nerves. Chauvelin, on the other hand, paced up and down the room; his thin hands were tightly clasped behind his back, his head was down on his chest. His busy mind was ceaselessly at work. Obviously he had lost the first round in this new game which he had engaged in against the Scarlet Pimpernel. And not only that: he had lost what he had so aptly termed the trump card in the game. Josette Gravier was just the type of female in distress who would appeal to the adventurous spirit of Sir Percy Blakeney: while she was a prisoner in Rouen the Scarlet Pimpernel would not vacate the field, and there would have been a good chance of laying him by the heels. There was none now that the girl was in safety, for Chauvelin knew from experience that there was no getting prisoners like her out of the clutches of the Scarlet Pimpernel, once that prince of adventures had them under his guard.

Indeed, the Terrorist would have felt completely baffled but for one fact — yet another trump card which he still held and which if judiciously played...

At this point his reflections were interrupted by the arrival of the sergeant, followed by the four delinquent soldiers. This time Chauvelin made no attempt to interfere. Let Chabot question the men if he wished. He, Chauvelin, knew everything they could possibly say. He listened with half an ear to the interrogatory, only catching a word or a phrase here and there: "We saw nothing... we heard nothing.... They were on us like a lightning flash.... Yes, we had our bayonets... impossible to use them.... It was dark as pitch.... They wore the uniform of the National Guard... the same as ours, at least as far as one could see in the dark.... All except one, and he looked like a boatman... a huge fellow with a powerful fist... I had seen him on the quay before... and here in the public room.... How could we use our bayonets?... They were dressed the same as we were.... They hit about with their fists... the big sailor felled me down... and me too... I saw stars.... So did I.... When I recovered my legs were tied together and my woollen cap was stuffed into my mouth..." and more in the same strain.

The city gates being closed after dark no one could possibly pass them before dawn on the morrow, but there was always the river and no end to the ingenuity and daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel. But there was that last trump card — the ace, Chauvelin fondly hoped.

When Chabot finally dismissed the soldiers the two men once more put their heads together.

"There is not much we can do about the girl Gravier," Chauvelin remarked drily. "Luckily, we hold the man Reversac. It is with him we can deal now."

"The girl's lover?" the other asked.

"Of course."

"I see what you mean."

"Lucky that you do," Chauvelin mocked. "You know where he is, I presume."

"In the Abbaye. I had him taken there myself. A stroke of genius, methinks," he added complacently, "to have the fellow arrested."

"Well, you have had a pretty free hand these last few weeks while that cursed English spy turned his attention to our friend Carrier at Nantes."

"I suppose the death of all those priests and women appealed to him.... As for me..."

"So did Josette Gravier as your victim appeal to him, and so will Maurice Reversac."

"Thank our friend Satan, we've got him safe enough!"

"Yes, he is our trump card," Chauvelin concluded, "and we must play him for all he is worth."

He renewed his pacing up and down the room, while Chabot, quite sober now but with not two ideas in his muddled brain, stared stupidly in front of him.

"Paris will not do," Chauvelin resumed after a little while, mumbling to himself rather than speaking to his colleague. That damned Pimpernel has too many spies and friends there and hidden lairs we know nothing about.

"Eh? What did you say?" Chabot queried tartly.

"I said that we must get Reversac away from Paris."

"Why? We've got him safe enough."

"You have not," Chauvelin asserted forcefully. He came to a halt the other side of the table, and fixing his pale eyes on Chabot asked him: "Have you ever asked Fouquier-Tinville how many prisoners have escaped from Paris alone through the agency of the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"No, but..."

"Considerably over two hundred since the beginning of this year."

"I don't believe it!"

"It's true, I tell you; and the same number from Nantes. Carrier is at his wits' end."

"Carrier is a fool."

"Perhaps. But you understand now why I want to get Reversac away from Paris. By dint of bribery if nothing else, the Scarlet Pimpernel will drag him out of your clutches."

Chabot reflected for a moment, and Chauvelin, guessing the workings of his mind, added with earnest significance:

"If we lose Reversac we shall have nothing to offer in exchange for the letters."

"The letters..." Chabot murmured vaguely.

"Yes," Chauvelin remarked drily: "you haven't found them, have you?"

By way of a reply Chabot uttered a savage oath.

"Where the girl is, there are the letters," the other went on, "get that into your head, and the letters are in the possession of the English spies. Now remember one thing, my friend: while we hold the girl's lover we can still get the letters, by offering a safe-conduct in exchange for them. And incidentally — don't forget that — we have the chance of laying our hands on the Scarlet Pimpernel, for whose capture there is a reward of ten thousand livres."

As Chabot had exhausted his vocabulary of curses he relieved his feelings this time by blaspheming.

"Ten thousand," he ejaculated.

"Not to mention the glory."

"Damn the glory! But I hate to let the baggage and her lover go."

"You need not."

"How do you mean — I need not? You've just mentioned safe-conducts..."

"So I did. But I can endorse those with a secret sign. It is known to every chief Commissary in France and nullifies every safe-conduct."

"Splendid!" Chabot exclaimed and beat the table with the palm of his hand. "Splendid!" he exclaimed and jumped to his feet. "Now I begin to understand."

The two men exchanged rôles for the moment. It was Chabot now who paced up and down the room, mumbling to himself, while Chauvelin sat down at the table and with idle hands toyed with the quill pen, the snuffers, or anything that was handy. Presently Chabot came to a standstill in front of him.

"You want to get Reversac away from Paris?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And bring him here?"

"Yes."

"The journey down will be dangerous if, as you say, the English spies are on the war-path."

"We must minimise the danger as far as we can."

"How?"

"A strong escort. And there will be the additional chance of capturing the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"You think he will be sure to try and get at Reversac?"

"Absolutely certain."

"And forewarned is forearmed, what?"

"Exactly."

"Splendid!" Chabot reiterated gleefully.

"And if we succeed in capturing one or more of those confounded spies, just think how marvellous our position will be with regard to the letters. We shall have something to bargain with, eh?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel himself?"

"The whole damned crowd of them, as well as the girl and her lover!"

"You can have the lot," Chabot ejaculated, "so long as I have the accursed letters!"

"If you follow my instructions, point by point," Chauvelin concluded, "I can safely promise you those."

They sat together for another hour after that, elaborating Chauvelin's plan, lingering over every detail, leaving nothing to chance, gloating over the victory which they felt was assured.

It was midnight before they finally went to bed. And at break of day Chabot was already posting for Paris armed with instructions from Chauvelin to the secret agents of the Committee of Public Safety.

Chapter XXX

Snow lay thick on the ground; it was heavy going up the hills and slippery coming down. In an ordinary way the diligence between Meulon and Rouen would have ceased to ply in weather as severe as this. Already at Meulon, when an early start was made, the clouds had looked threatening. "We'll have more snow, for sure," everyone had declared, the driver included, who muttered something about its being madness to attempt the journey with those leaden-coloured clouds hanging overhead.

But in spite of these protests and warnings a start was made in the early dawn. Such were the orders of Citizen Representative Chabot (Loire et Cher), who was travelling in the diligence, and his word, of course, was law. Outside the hostelry of the Mouton Blanc a small crowd had gathered despite the early hour, to watch the departure of the diligence. All along people, who stood about at a respectful distance because of the soldiers, declared that this was no ordinary diligence. Though it was one of the small ones with just the coupé and the rotonde, it was drawn by four horses with postilion and all the banquette behind the driver was unoccupied, although the awning was up, and this was odd, declared the gaffers, because the banquette places being the cheapest, three of four passengers usually crowded there, under the lee, too, of the luggage piled upon the top.

In the coupé sat the Citizen Representative himself, and he had that compartment entirely to himself. In the rotonde there was a young man sitting between two soldiers in uniform, and three other men were on the seats opposite. Moreover, and this was the most amazing circumstance of all, what looked at first sight like the usual pile of luggage on the top was no luggage at all, but three men lying huddled up under the tarpaulin, wrapped in greatcoats, for it was bitterly cold up there.

No! It decidedly was an ordinary diligence. And it was under strong escort, too: six mounted men under the command of an officer — a captain, what? So not only was the traveller in the coupé a great personage, but the prisoner must also be one of consequence, for no sooner was he installed with the soldiers in the rotonde than the blinds were at once drawn down, nor was anyone allowed to come nigh the vehicle after that. Naturally all this secrecy and the unusual proceedings created further amazement still, but those quidnucs who came as near as they dared were quickly and peremptorily ordered back by the soldiers: and later in the day, at Vernon outside the Boule d'Or, two boys, who had after the manner of such youngsters succeeded in crawling underneath the coach, were caught when on the point of stepping on the foot-board. The captain in command of the guards seized them both by the ears and ordered them to be soundly flogged then and there, which was done by a couple of soldiers with a will and the buckle end of their belts. The howls that ensued and the sudden report of a pistol-shot, discharged no one could ever tell whence, startled the horses into a panic. The leaders reared, the ostler unable to hold them fell, and fortunately rolled over unhurt in the snow. A more serious catastrophe was just averted through the presence of mind of a passer-by, a poor old vagabond shivering with cold, who did not look as if he had any vitality in him, let alone the pluck to seize the near leader by the bridle as he did and bring the frightened team to a standstill.

The driver and the postilion were having a drink of mulled cider at the moment that all this commotion was going on. They came rushing out of the hostelry just in time to witness the prowess of that miserable old man. The driver was gracious enough to murmur approbation, and even the captain of the guard had something pleasant to say.

It had been so very neatly done.

"I was a stud-groom once," the old man explained with a self-deprecating shrug, "in the house of aristos. 'Tis not much I don't know about horses."

The captain tendered him a few sous.

"This is for your pains, Citizen," he said, and nodded in the direction of the hostelry close by: "you'd better go in there and get a hot drink."

"Thank you kindly, Citizen Captain," the man rejoined as his thin hands, blue with cold, closed over the money. He seemed loth to go away from the horses. They were fine, strong beasts, relays just taken up here and very fresh. The poor man had evidently spoken the truth: there was not much he did not know about horses. One could see that from the way he looked at them and handled them, adjusting a buckle here and there, fondling the beasts' manes, their ears and velvety noses, inspecting their fetlocks and their shoes.

"Good smith's work here," he said approvingly, tapping one shoe after another.

"That's all right, my man," the Captain broke in impatiently. "We must be off now. You go and get your drink."

The vagabond demurred and looked down with a rueful glance on his ragged clothes.

"I can't go in there," he said with a woebegone shake of the head, "not in these rags. The landlord doesn't like it," he went on, "because of other customers...."

The Captain gave a shrug. He didn't really care what happened to that wretched caitiff. Indeed, he was anxious to get away as he had been ordered by the Citizen Representative to make Gaillon before dark. Citizen Chabot was not a man to be lightly disobeyed, and as he had suffered much from cold and discomfort his temper throughout this journey had been of the vilest. So losing no more time the Captain now turned on his heel and went to give orders to his men. The young postilion, more charitably disposed, perhaps, towards the poor wretch, or in less of a hurry to make a start, said:

"I'll bring you out a drink, old gaffer," and he ran back into the hostelry, leaving the driver and the whilom stud-groom to exchange reminiscences of past aristo stabling. He returned after a couple of minutes with a mug of steaming cider in his hand.

"Here you are, Citizen," he said.

The vagabond took the mug but seemed in no hurry to drink. He had a fit of coughing and swayed backwards and forwards on his long legs as if already he had a drop too much. The driver, in the meanwhile, took the opportunity of administering correction to the ostler for failing to hold the horses properly when they shied, and for rolling about in the snow when he should have held on tightly to the bridles.

"Call yourself a stableman," he said contemptuously while the postilion stood by, grinning: "why, look at this poor man here..."

But the "poor man here" seemed in a sorry plight just now. The coughing fit shook him so that the steaming cider squirted out of the mug.

"Let me hold the mug for you, old man," the postilion suggested.

"You drink it, Citizen," the man said between gasps. "I can't. It makes me sick."

Nothing loth, the postilion had a drink, was indeed on the point of draining the mug when the driver with a "Here! I say!" took the mug from him and drank the remainder of the cider down.

Chabot put his head out of the window: "Now then, over there!" he called out with a loud curse. And "En avant!" came in peremptory command from the captain of the guard. The driver made ready to climb up on the box when the old vagabond touched him on the shoulder: "You wouldn't give me a lift," he suggested timidly, "would you, Citizen?"

"Not I," the other retorted gruffly. "I daren't... not without orders." And he nodded in the direction of the captain.

"He wouldn't know," the poor man whispered. "When you move off I'll climb on the step. I'll keep close behind you and hide in the banquette under cover of the luggage. They couldn't see from the back.... My home is in Gaillon and it's three leagues to walk in this damnable weather!"

He looked so sick and so miserable that the driver hesitated. He was possessed of bowels of compassion, even though he was a paid servant of the most cruel, most ruthless government in the world. But despite his feelings of pity for a fellow-creature he would probably have refused point-blank to take up an extra passenger without permission but for the fact that he was not feeling very well just then. That last mugful of steaming cider, coupled with the action of the cold frosty air, had sent the blood up to his head. His temples began to throb furiously and he felt giddy; indeed he had some difficulty in climbing up to his box and never noticed that the vagabond was so close on his heels. Fortunately the Captain at the rear of the coach noticed nothing: he and the soldiers were busy getting to horse. As for Chabot, he had once more curled himself up in the corner of the coupé and was already fast asleep.

Once installed on the box with the reins in his hands the driver felt better, but even so he was comforted by the knowledge that the ex-stud-groom had installed himself behind him. The man was so handy with horses — far more handy than that young postilion — and if that giddy feeling were to return...

It did, about half a league beyond Vernon. That awful sense of giddiness and unconquerable drowsiness! And it was not a moment ago that he had noticed the postilion's strange antics on his horse, his swaying till he nearly fell, and the rolling of his head.

"What the devil can it be?" he muttered to himself when that nasty sick feeling seemed completely to master him. What a comfort it was to feel a pair of strong hands take the reins out of his. Whose those hands were he was too sleepy to guess, and it was so pleasant, so restful, to close one's eyes and to sleep. Daylight was fast drawing in, and with twilight down came the snow: not large, heavy, smooth flakes by nasty thin sleet, which a head wind drove straight into one's face, and which fretted and teased the horses already over-excited by certain judicious touches of the whip. As for the postilion, it was as much as he could do to keep his seat. It was only the instinct of self-preservation that kept him on the horse's back at all.

It was a bad time, too, for the soldiers. They had to keep their heads down against the wind and the driven snow, and to put spur to their horses at the same time, for the diligence, which had lumbered along slowly enough up to now, had taken on sudden speed, and the team galloped up every hill it came to in magnificent style.

Chabot once more thrust his head out of the window and shouted: "Holà!" He had been asleep ever since that halt at Vernon, but this abrupt lurching of the coach had not only wakened him but also frightened him.

"Why the hell are you driving like a fury?" he cried. But the head wind drowned his shouts and his reiterated cries of "Holà!"

The horses did not relax speed. Someone was holding the reins who knew how and when to urge them on, and the sensitive creatures responded with a will to the expert touch. It was as much as the mounted men could do to keep up with the coach.

It was not until the Captain chanced to look that way and caught sight of the Citizen Representative's head out of the coupé window, and of his arms gesticulating wildly, that he called out "Hâte-là!" whereupon the diligence came immediately to a standstill. Instinct caused driver and postilion to pull themselves together, for the Citizen Representative's voice, husky with rage and fear, was raised above the howling of the wind.

"Tell that fool," he yelled, "not to drive like a fury! He will have us in the ditch directly."

"It is getting dark," the driver made effort to retort, "and this infernal snow is fretting the horses. We must make Gaillon soon."

"At least you know your way, Citizen?" the captain asked.

"Know my way?" the other mumbled. "Haven't I been on this road for over fifteen years?"

"En avant, then!" the captain ordered once more.

The horses tossed their heads in the keen, cold air, and forward lurched the clumsy diligence. The driver clicked his tongue and made a feeble attempt at cracking his whip. It was not so much giddy that he felt now but more intolerably sleepy than before.

"Give me back the reins, Citizen," a soothing voice whispered in his ear. The driver thought it might be the devil who had spoken, for who else could it be in this infernal weather and this blinding snow? Who but a devil would want to drive this cursed diligence? But he really didn't care... devil or no he was too infernally sleepy to resist, and the reins were taken out of his hands as before and firmly held above his head. He ventured on a peep round under the awning of the banquette, but all he could see was a pair of legs, set wide apart, with the strong knees that looked as if chiselled in stone, and the powerful hands holding the reins. He remembered the vagabond who climbed up to the banquette behind him and had apparently escaped the officer's notice.

"That old vagabond," he muttered to himself, and then added grudgingly: "He does know how to handle horses."

Another three leagues at galloping speed. But twilight was now sinking into the arms of night. Whoever was holding the reins had the eyes of a cat, for the postilion was mouse. But surely Gaillon would not be far. From Vernon it was only a matter of three leagues altogether, and why was the river on the left and not on the right of the road? And why was it so narrow, more like the Eure than the Seine? Its slender winding ribbon gleamed through the bare branches of the willow trees, its icy surface defying the gloom.

"Where the hell..." the driver mumbled to himself from time to time as his bleary eyes roamed over the landscape. Some little way ahead a few cottages and a church with a square tower loomed out of the snow, the tiny windows blinking like sleepy eyes through the sparse intervening trees. But this was certainly not Gaillon. The driver rubbed his eyes. He was suddenly very wide awake. He snatched at the reins, held them tight and the team came to a halt, the steam rising like a cloud from their quivering cruppers. The captain swore and called loudly: "En avant!" and then: "Is this Gaillon?" He rode up abreast of the driver. "Is this Gaillon?" he iterated, pointing to the distant village.

"No, it's not," the driver replied. "At least..."

"Then where the devil are we?"

And the driver scratched his head and vowed he was damned if he knew!

"Must have taken the wrong turning," he said ruefully.

"You said you been on this road for over fifteen years."

"But not," the driver growled, "in such confounded weather." He went on muttering about the usual way of diligences... they did not ply in the winter, save in settled weather... sometimes one was caught in a snowstorm, but not often... and it was not fit for horses with all that snow on the ground... it had been madness to start from Mantes this morning and expect to make Gaillon by night-fall. And more to this effect, while the officer with eyes trying to pierce the gloom was evidently debating within himself whether he should beard the irate Representative of the People and rouse him from sleep.

"Where did you miss your road?" he asked roughly. And: "Can't we go back?"

"The only turning I know," the driver muttered, "is close to Vernon. We should have to go back three leagues..."

This time the captain blasphemed. Curses were no longer adequate.

"What's the name of that village?" he queried when he had exhausted most of his vocabulary. "Do you know?"

The driver did not.

"Is there a hostelry where we can commandeer shelter for the night?"

"Sure to be," the other rejoined.

"En avant, then!"

The driver did a good deal more muttering and grumbling and hard swearing when he heard the captain say finally: "The Citizen Representative will have something unpleasant to say to you about this delay."

Something unpleasant! Something unpleasant! He, too, would have something unpleasant to say to that old vagabond who did know all about horses and nothing about the way to Gaillon. Where they were now, the devil knew! He himself had been on the main road for fifteen years. Paris, Mantes, Vernon, Rouen, he knew all about them; and his home was in Paris; how, then could he be supposed to know anything of these country roads and God-forsaken villages? Le Roger it was, probably, in which case he, the driver, had vaguely heard of a dirty hole there where bed and supper might be found. As for stabling for all these horses.... If he dared he would denounce that old vagabond for getting them into this trouble, but he was afraid of the punishment which, of course, he deserved for having taken the man on board without permission.

But the time would come, and very soon too, when the shoulders of the old villain would smart under the whip, so thought the driver as he clutched that whip with special gusto, and then cracked it and clicked his tongue. And the team made another fresh start — in darkness this time and with the wind howling as the lumbering vehicle sped in the teeth of the gale. The snow swirled round the heads of men and beasts and stung their faces as with myraids of tiny whip-lashes. Another ten minutes of this intolerable going through the ever-increasing gloom, with heads bent against the storm and stiffened hands clutching at the sodden reins. Then at last the driver's eyes were gladdened by the sight of a scaffolded pole on which dangled the dismal creakings an iron lantern: its feeble light revealed the sign beneath: Le Bout du Monde.

The End of the World! An appropriate as well as a welcome sign. A desolate conglomeration of isolated cottages, two or three barns grouped at some distance round the tumble-down auberge seemed all there was of the village, with the ice-bound river winding around it and a background of snow-covered fields.

The driver pulled up and looked about him with misgivings and choler. It didn't seem as if a good supper and comfortable beds could be got in this God-forsaken hole. There was only one thing to look forward to with glee, and that was the castigation to be administered to that infernal vagabond. There was any amount of noise and confusion going on to drown the howls of the victim — what with the soldiers dismounting, the horses fretting and stamping, chains rattling, hinges creaking, doors banging, the Representative of the People yelling and cursing and calling for the landlord, a rushing and a running and a swearing as the landlord came racing out of the auberge.

The driver called over his shoulder: "Now then, down you get!"

But there came no sign or movement from the banquette. The driver peered through the darkness and under the awning, but of a certainty the miserable vagabond was not there. Down clambered the driver in double quick time; he paid no heed to the orders shouted at him, to the curses from the irate Representative of the People; he pushed his way through the crowd of soldiers, he jostled the prisoner and the passengers: he even fell up against the sacrosanct person of Citizen Representative Chabot. Like a lunatic he ran hither and thither, peering in every angle, every barn, behind every tree, but there was no sign of that old rogue who had sprung out of the snow at Vernon only to disappear in the darkness around the Bout du Monde.

The End of the World! In very truth, had not such an action been forbidden by decree of the National Convention, the driver, when he finally realised that the man had really and truly vanished, would of a certainty have crossed himself.

The devil couldn't do more, what?

Chapter XXXI

There was, of a truth, a great deal of confusion and any amount of cursing and swearing before men and beasts, not to mention the coach and saddlery, were housed under in this poverty-stricken village and wholly inadequate at the hostelry itself. There were close on a score of men all requiring bed and supper and eleven horses to stable and to feed. The resources of the Bout du Monde were nowhere near equal to such a strain.

The landlord, indeed, was profuse in apologies. Never, never before had his poor house been honoured by such distinguished company. Le Roger was right off the main Paris-Rouen road; seldom did a coach come through the village at all, let alone with so numerous an escort: as for a diligence with a team and postilion, such a thing hadn't been seen here within memory of the oldest inhabitant. Sometimes travellers on horse-back bound for Elboeuf chose this route rather than the longer one by Gaillon, but...

At this point Chabot, fuming with impatience, broke in on the landlord's topographical dissertation and curtly ordered him to prepare the best food the house could muster for himself and the captain of the guard, together with a large jug of mulled cider. As for the rest of the party, they would have to make shift with whatever there was.

The captain and the landlord then worked with a will. There was a large thatched barn at some distance from the Bout du Monde where all the horses were presently jostled in, and such hay and fodder as could be mustered in the village was all commandeered by the soldiers for the poor tired beasts. A couple of men were told off to watch over them. Under the roof of another small barn close by and open to the four winds the coach and saddlery was then stowed. So far, so good. As for the men, they swarmed all over the small hostelry, snatching at what food they could get, raiding the outhouse for wood wherewith to pile up a good fire in the public room, where presently, after their scanty meal of lean pork, hard bread and dry beans, they would finally curl themselves up on the floor in their military cloaks, hoping to get some sleep.

The wretched prisoner was among them. No one had troubled to give him any food or drink. As presumably he was being taken to Rouen in order to be guillotined there was not much object in feeding him. But orders were very strict as to keeping watch over him; and the soldiers of the guard were commanded to take it in turns, two by two, all through the night to keep an eye on him. At the slightest disturbance all the men were to be aroused, the prisoner's safety being a matter of life and death for them all. Having given these orders and uttered these threats, Representative Chabot, in company of the captain, followed the landlord up a flight of rickety stairs to the floor above, where they were served with supper in a private room under the sloping roof. In this room, which was not much more than a loft, there was a truckle bed hastily made up for the Citizen Representative, and in the corner a mattress and pillow for the Citizen Captain. This was the best the landlord could muster for the distinguished personages who were honouring his poor house, and anyway, a good fire was roaring in the iron stove, and the place was away from the noise and confusion of the overcrowded public room.

Chabot's temper was at its worst. Having eaten and drunk his fill, he lay down on the truckle bed and tried to get some sleep; but ne'er a wink did he get. All night he tossed about, furious with everything and everybody. From time to time he tumbled out of bed to throw a log on the fire, for it was very cold: he made as much noise as he could then and tramped heavily once or twice up and down the room so as to wake the captain, who was snoring lustily. During moments of fitful slumber he was haunted by a ghostlike procession of all those who had contributed to his present discomfort: he dreamed of the time, not far distant he hoped, when he would belabour them with tongue and whip-lash to his heart's content. There was the hussy Josette Gravier, who had dared to threaten and then to hoodwink him; there was her lover, Reversac, the wretched prisoner downstairs, who, luckily, could not possibly escape the guillotine; there was, too, that fool of a driver who had landed him, François Chabot, Representative of the People, in this God-forsaken hole, and the captain of the guard, whose persistent snoring chased away even the semblance of sleep. Even his colleague, Chauvelin, were he here, should not escape the trouncing.

The hours of the night went by leaden-footed. At the slightest noise Chabot would rouse himself from his hard pillow and sit up in bed, listening. The prisoner — that valuable hostage for the return of the letters — was well guarded, but the very importance of his safety further exacerbated Chabot's nerves. But nothing happened, and after a while the silence of the night fell on the Bout du Monde.

At last in the distance and through the silence a church clock struck six. It was still quite dark; only the fire in the iron stove shed a modicum of light with its glow into the room. The getting away of the coach with its mounted escort would certainly take some time and, anyway, as he, Chabot, could not sleep there was no reason why anyone else should. He jumped out of bed and roused the captain.

"Why, what's the time?" the latter queried, his eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Damn the time!" Chabot retorted roughly. "'Tis, anyway, late enough for you to stop snoring and begin to see to things."

Very ill-humoured, but not daring to murmur, the captain rose and pulled on his boots. One slept in one's clothes these days, especially on a journey like this; and there was, of course, no question of washing at the Bout du Monde save, perhaps, at the pump outside, and it was much too cold for that. The captain's toilet on this occasion meant slipping on his coat, fastening his belt and smoothing his hair; and it all had to be done in the dark. He peeped out of the window.

"The wind has dropped," he remarked, "but there's a lot more snow to come down."

"Anyway," Chabot rejoined, "we start whatever the weather."

He, too, had pulled on his boots, but was still in his shirt-sleeves, and his coarse curly hair stood out from his head in tufts like an ill-combed poodle dog. He took to marching up and down the room, striding about in the darkness and swearing hard when he barked his shins against a chair. As the captain went out of the room he called to him:

"Tell the landlord to bring candles and a large jug of hot cider with plenty of spice in it."

He resumed his walk up and down the room, varying his oaths with blasphemies, and spat on the floor in the intervals of picking his teeth. He went to the door once or twice and listened to the confused sounds which came from below. A score of men roused from sleep, the inevitable swearing and shouting and tramping up and down the passage. The dormer window in this room gave on the back of the house where it was comparatively quiet; but after a time Chabot heard the men's voices down there, the jingle of their spurs and their heavy footsteps as they went off evidently to see to the horses. The barn where the horses were stabled was at some little distance

in the village, and Chabot congratulated himself that he had roused that lazy lout of an officer in good time. He was hungry and cold in spite of the fire in the room, and swore copiously at the landlord when the latter brought him the jug of steaming cider and a couple of lighted candles. The remnants of last night's supper were still on the table; he pushed the dirty plates and dishes impatiently on one side, then poured himself out a mugful of hot drink while the landlord excused himself on the plea that he had such a lot to do with so big a crowd in his small house. Should his daughter come up and attend to the distinguished Representative's commands?

But Chabot was, above all, impatient to get away.

"We must make Rouen before dark," he said tartly, "and the days are so short. I want no attention. You go and speed up the men and give a hand with the horses so that we can make a start within the hour."

He drank the cider and felt a little better, but he could not sit still. After marching up and down the room again once or twice he went to the window and tried to peer out, but the small panes were thick with grime and framed in with snow and it was pitch-dark outside. His nerves were terribly on edge and he cursed Chauvelin for having expected him to undertake this uncomfortable journey alone. Then there was the responsibility about the prisoner and this perpetual talk of English spies. "Bah!" he muttered to himself as if to instill courage into himself: "a score of these louts I've got here can easily grapple with them."

Then why this agonising nervousness, this unconquerable feeling of impending danger? Suddenly he felt hot: the blood had rushed to his head, beads of perspiration gathered on his forehead. He went to the window and unlatched it, but the cold rush of air made him shiver. He feared that he was sickening for a fever. He tried to close the window again, but the latch was stiff with rust and his fingers soon became numb with the cold.

"Curse the blasted thing!" he swore between his teeth as he fumbled with the latch.

"Let me do it for you, Citizen," a pleasant voice said close to his ear.

Chabot swung round on his heel, smothering a cry of terror. A man — tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in sober black that fitted his magnificent figure to perfection — was in the act of closing the window. With firm dexterous fingers he got the latch into position.

"There! that's better now, is it not, my dear Monsieur? I forget your name," he said with a light laugh. Then added: "So now we can talk."

He brushed one slender hand against the other and with a lace-edged handkerchief flicked the dust off from his coat.

"Dirty place, this End of the World, what?" he remarked.

Chabot, tongue-tied and terror stricken, had collapsed upon the truckle bed. He gazed on this tall figure which he could only vaguely distinguish in the gloom. Like the driver of the diligence a while ago, he would have crossed himself if he dared, for this, of a surety, must be Lucifer: tall, slender, in black clothes that melted and merged into the surrounding darkness, allowing the flickering candlelight to play upon a touch of white at throat and wrist and on the highly polished leather of the boot.

"Who are you?" he gasped after a time, for the stranger had not moved, and Chabot felt that all the while a pair of eyes, cold and mocking, were fixed upon him from out of the gloom. "Who are you?" he reiterated under his breath.

"The devil you think I am," the other responded lightly, "but won't you come and sit down?"

He motioned towards a chair by the table.

"I haven't much time, I'm afraid; and," he went on lightly, "you'll be more comfortable than on that hard bed."

Then as Chabot made no effort to move, but sat there, one hand resting on the bed, the glow of the firelight upon him, the stranger remarked:

"Why, look at your hand, my dear Monsieur What's-your-name; it looks as if you had dipped it in a sanguinary mess."

Mechanically Chabot looked down on his hand to which the stranger was now pointing. In that crimson glow it certainly looked as if... Hastily he withdrew it and rubbed it against his coat. Then, as if impelled by some unknown force, he rose and made a movement towards the table, but stopped half-way and suddenly made a dash for the door. But the stranger forestalled him, had him by the wrist before he could seize the latch, and with a grip that was irresistible drew him back to the table and forced him down upon a chair. He sat down opposite to him on the other side of the table and reiterated quietly:

"Now we can talk."

Chabot up to this moment was absolutely convinced that this was the devil made manifest. His education, conducted within the narrow limits of a seminary, had in a way prepared him for such a possibility, and during the brief years which he spent as a Capuchin friar he had had every belief implanted into him of demons and evil spirits, and maternal hell and bottomless pit. Cold, terror, discomfort of every sort all helped to unnerve him. Fascinated, he watched that tall dark figure, pouring with white slender hand the mulled cider into a mug and handing it over to him.

"Drink this, man," came the mellow voice out of the darkness, "and pull yourself together. We have no time to lose."

Chabot took the mug, but set it down on the table untasted.

"Well," the stranger said lightly, "as you like; but try and listen to me. I am not a manifestation of your familiar as you suppose, only a plain English gentleman. I happen to have in my possession certain letters which in a moment of carelessness you were rash enough to write to a certain Bastien de Croissy..."

At mention of "letters" Chabot uttered a hoarse cry: his fingers went up to his necktie, for he suddenly felt as if he would choke. "You!" he murmured, "you...?"

"Yes! I, at your service; I know all about those letters, for that is what you were about to say, was it not?"

He held Chabot with his eyes, and Chabot was fascinated by that glance. The eyes held him and he tried to defy them, made a supreme effort to pull himself together. Slowly it dawned upon him that here was no devil made manifest, but rather an enemy who was trying to hit at him to hoodwink him about those letters as that young baggage had tried to do. Another of her lovers probably — yes! that was it: an English lover picked up in England recently: one of those spies, perhaps, of whom his friend Armand Chauvelin was often wont to talk, but certainly another lover, and if he, Chabot, was fool enough to bargain he would be made a fool of once more. This thought had the effect of soothing his nerves: he suddenly felt quite calm. That choking sensation was gone; he took up the mug of cider and drank it down. His hand was perfectly steady; and he was in no hurry. The captain would be back directly and

together they would laugh over the discomfiture of this fool when he found himself securely bound with cords in the company of the other prisoner, Maurice Reversac, the hussy's latest lover.

It was all very easy and very amusing. No! there was no hurry. In fact, this hour would have been very dull and very long but for this diversion. The candles were guttering and Chabot took the snuffers and used them very efficiently and deliberately. He pretended not to notice the stranger's nonchalant attitude, sitting there opposite to him, with his arms resting on the table and his very clean white hands interlocked.

"That wick would be all the better for another snick," he remarked; and Chabot tried to imitate his careless manner by saying: "You think so, Citizen?" and carefully trimmed the offending wick.

He really was enjoying every moment of this unexpected interview. How stupid he had been to be so scared! The devil, indeed! Just an English jackanape who had put his head in the lion's jaw previous to laying it under the knife of the guillotine; moreover, a spy could be shot without trial within the hour, in fact, and the captain could see to it that this one didn't talk. He, the captain, would be back directly, and, anyway, there were at least a dozen men in the public room down below, so what was there to fear when all was well and quite amusing?

The stranger had made no movement. Chabot leaned over the table, resting his head in his hand.

"You know, Mr. the Englishman," he said with a well-assumed unconcern, "that you have vastly interested me."

"I am glad," rejoined the other.

"About those letters, I mean."

"Indeed?"

"Now I should be very curious to know just how you came to be in possession of them."

"I will gratify your curiosity with all the pleasure in life," the stranger replied. "I took them out of the pocket of Madame de Croissy while she was asleep."

"Nonsense!" Chabot retorted with an assumption of indifference, although the name de Croissy had grated unpleasantly on his ear. "What in the world had the Widow Croissy got to do with any supposed letters of mine?"

"You forget, my dear sir," the Englishman retorted blandly, "that the letters were written by yourself to that lady's husband; that in order to obtain possession of them you murdered that unfortunate man in a peculiarly cruel and cowardly manner; the lady thereupon was persuaded for obvious reasons to leave for England, taking the letters with her."

"Bah! I've heard that story before."

"Have you now?" the stranger remarked with an engaging smile. "Isn't that funny?"

"Not nearly so funny as your lie that you took those letters — whatever they were — out of the woman's pocket, and that she never noticed the loss."

"How very clever of you to say that, my dear Citizen What's-your-name: a masterpiece, I call it, of skillful cross-examination. You would have made a wonderful advocate at any bar." He gave a short laugh, and Chabot spat like a cat that's being teased. "As a matter of fact," the stranger resumed, quite unperturbed, "the lady certainly might have noticed her loss. You were right there. But, you see, I took the precaution of substituting a sealed packet exactly similar to the one I had stolen and placed it in the lady's pocket."

Then as Chabot made no reply, was obviously thinking over what his next move should be in this singular encounter, the Englishman continued:

"In fact, you will observe, Sir, that my process was identical to the one employed by our mutual friend Chambertin when he stole what he thought was the precious packet of letters from little Josette Gravier and substituted for it another contrived by himself to look exactly similar. I am very fond really of Monsieur Chambertin; for a clever man he is sometimes such a silly fool, what?"

"Chambertin?" Chabot queried, frowning.

"Beg pardon — I should say Chauvelin."

"Do you pretend that it was he?"

"Why, of course. Who else?"

"And that he had those damned letters?"

"No, no, my dear Monsieur What-d'you-call-yourself," the stranger retorted with a light laugh. "I have those blessed — not damned — letters here, as I had the honour of explaining to you just now."

And with his elegant, slender hand he tapped the left breast of his coat. Chabot watched him for a moment or two under beetling brows. The man's coolness, his impudence had irritated him, and while he had thought that he was playing a cat's game with a mouse, somehow the rôles of cat and mouse had come to be reversed. But it had lasted too long already. It was time to put an end to it, and the moment was entirely opportune, for just then Chabot's ears were pleasantly tickled by the sound of the captain's voice down below ordering the landlord to bring him some hot cider. He had evidently returned from the barn, leaving the men to feed and saddle the horses.

Chabot chuckled at thought of the stranger's discomfiture when presently the caption would come tramping up the stairs, and, in anticipation of coming triumph, he fixed his antagonist with what he felt was a searching as well as an ironic glance.

"Suppose," he began slowly, "that before going any further you show me those supposed letters."

"With all the pleasure in life," the Englishman responded blandly. And to Chabot's intense amazement he drew out of his breast-pocket a small sealed packet exactly similarly in appearance to the one which poor little Josette Gravier had so trustingly kept in the bosom of her gown. Chabot chortled at sight of it.

"Will you break the seals, Monsieur the Englishman?" he queried with withering sarcasm, "or shall I?"

But already the stranger's finely shaped hands were busy with the seals. Chabot, his ugly face still wearing a sarcastic expression, drew the candles closer. Soon the seals were broken, the wrapper fell apart and displayed, not scraps of paper this time, but just a few letters, written by diverse hands. Chabot felt as if his eyes would drop out of his head as he gazed. The flickering candles illumined the topmost letter with its unmistakable signature — his own — François Chabot. And there were others: he remembered every one of them, gazed on the tell-tale signatures — his — Bazire's — Fabre's.

"Name of a dog!" he cried, and made a quick grab for the letters. But the stranger's hands, delicate and slender though they were, were extraordinarily firm and quick. In a moment he had the letters all together, the wrapper round them, a piece of twine, picked out of the devil knew whence, holding the packet once more securely together. Chabot could not take his eyes off him. He watched him as if hypnotised, mute, blind to all else save that calm, high-bred face with the firm lips and the humorous twinkle in the eyes. But when he saw the stranger on the point of putting the packet back inside his coat, he cried, hoarse with passion: "Give me those letters!"

"All in good time, my dear sir. First, as I have already had the honour to remark, we must have a good talk."

Chabot rose slowly to his feet. The captain's voice rising from the public room below, the tramp of the soldiers' feet, his whole surroundings recalled him to himself. Fool that he was to fear anything from this insolent nincompoop!

"I give you one last chance," he said very quietly, even though he could not disguise the tremor of his voice. "Either you give me those letters now — at once — in which case you can go from here a free man and to the devil if you choose; or..."

At this same moment the sound of several voices was wafted upwards. Some of the soldiers had apparently assembled somewhere underneath the window and were talking over some momentous happening. Chabot and the stranger could hear snatches of what they said:

"Luckily the horses were not..."

"The wind unfortunately..."

"The saddles are..."

"So is the coach..."

"What in the world are we going..."

"Better see what the Citizen Captain..."

And so on, until after a time they moved away to the front entrance of the house, which was right the other side. The stranger was smiling while he lent an attentive ear. But Chabot only thought of the fact that now the guard would soon be assembled inside the house. Twenty trained men to cope with this insolent spy. His pale yellow eyes gleamed in the dim light like those of a cat. He was gloating over his coming triumph, licking his chops like a greedy cur in sight of food.

"Or," he concluded between clenched teeth, "I'll call the captain of the guard and have you shot as a spy within the hour."

By way of reply the stranger rose slowly from the table. To Chabot's excited fancy he appeared immensely tall: terrifying in his air of power and physical strength, and instinctively this scrubby worm, this cowardly assassin, this unfrocked friar cowered before the tall, commanding figure of the stranger in abject terror of his own miserable life. He edged round the table, while the Englishman deliberately walked to the window; then he made a dart for the door, expecting every second to feel that steel-like grip once more upon his arm. With his hand already on the latch he looked over his shoulder at his enemy, who was at the moment engaged in opening the window. The gust of wind that ensued was so strong that Chabot could not pull the door open; moreover, his hands were shaking and his knees felt as if they were about to give way under him: only later did he become aware that the door was locked. He heard the stranger give a curious call, like that of sea-mews who are wont to circle about the Pont-Neuf in Paris when the winter is very severe. The call was responded to in the same way from below, whereupon the stranger flung the packet out of the window. Three words were wafted upwards, words with a foreign sound which Chabot could not understand. Subsequently he averred that one of those words sounded something like "Raït!" and the other like "Fouk's!" but of course that was nonsense.

The stranger then went back to the table and sat down. Once more he reiterated the irritating phrase which so exasperated the Terrorist: "Now we can talk."

Chabot fumbled with the door-knob. He had just heard the men trooping back into the house.

"No use, my friend," the stranger remarked drily. "I locked that door when I came in. And here's the key," he added, and put the rusty old key down on the table.

"Come and sit down," he resumed after a second or two as Chabot had not moved, had in fact seemed glued to that locked door; "or shall I have to come and fetch you?"

"You devil! You hound! You abominable..." Chabot muttered inarticulately. "Get me back those letters or..."

"Come and sit down," the other reiterated coolly. "You have exactly five minutes in which to save your skin. My friend is still outside, just under the window; if within the next five minutes he hears no signal from me he will speed to Paris with those letters, and three days after that they will be published in every newspaper in the city and shouted from every house-top in France."

"It's not true," Chabot muttered huskily. "He cannot do it. He couldn't pass the gates of Paris."

"Would you care to take your chance of that?" the stranger retorted blandly. "If so, here's the key... call your guard... do what you damn well like..."

He laughed, a pleasant infectious laugh, full of the joy of living through this perilous, exciting adventure, full of self-assurance, of arrogance, as you will, a laugh to gladden the hearts of the brave and to strike terror in those of the craven.

"One minute nearly gone," he renewed, and from his breeches pocket drew a jewelled watch attached to a fob, and this he held out for the other man to see.

Birds and rabbits, 'tis averred, are so attracted by the python which is about to gulp them down that they do not attempt to flee from him but become hypnotised, and of themselves draw nearer and nearer to the devouring jaws. In very truth there was nothing snake-like about the tall Englishman with the merry, lazy eyes and the firm mouth so often curled in a pleasant smile, but Chabot was just like a hypnotised rabbit. He crossed the room slowly, very slowly, and presently sat down opposite his tormentor.

"Nearly two minutes gone out of the five," the latter said, "and I verily believe I can hear your friend the captain's footfall in the hall below."

It was then that Chabot had an inspiration. In this moment of crushing humiliation and of real peril he remembered that his friend Chauvelin, saw him as in a vision sitting with him in the small private room of the Cheval Blanc at Rouen. What did he say when there was talk of the prisoner Reversac and his sweetheart Josette? Something about safe-conducts for them to be offered in exchange for the letters. Safe-conducts? And in his quiet, incisive voice Chauvelin had added, "I can endorse those with a secret sign. It is known to every Chief Commissary in France and nullifies every safe-conduct."

Yes, that was it: "Nullifies every safe-conduct." And Chauvelin knew the secret sign as did every Chief Commissary in France. So now to play one's cards carefully, and above all not to show fear; on no account to show that one was afraid.

And Chabot, sitting at the table, stroked his scrubby chin and said:

"I suppose what you want is a safe-conduct for some traitor or other, what?"

But the inspiration proved only to be a mirage and the sense of triumph very short-lived. The very next moment Chabot's fond hopes were rudely dashed to the ground, for the stranger replied, still smiling:

"No, my friend, I want no safe-conduct endorsed by you or your colleague with a secret sign to render them valueless."

And Chabot fell back in his chair; he was sweating at every pore. He marvelled if after all his first impression had not been the true one; since this man appeared to be a reader of thought was he not truly the devil incarnate?

"What is it you do want?" he uttered, choking and gasping.

"That you unlock that door — here's the key — and call to the gallant captain of the guard."

He held the key out to Chabot, who, fascinated, hypnotised, took it from him.

"Go and unlock that door, Monsieur What's-your-name, and call your friend the captain."

Slowly, as if moved by some unseen and compelling power, Chabot tottered towards the door. The stranger spoke to him over his shoulder: "When he comes you will tell him that you desire someone to go over to the village to the house of Citizen Pailleron with a message from you. Pailleron has a nice covered wagonette which he uses for the purpose of his trade as carrier between here and Elboeuf. Your messenger will explain to him that Citizen Representative François Chabot requires the wagonette immediately for his personal use. A sum in compensation will be given to him before a start is made."

Chabot made a final effort to turn on his tormentor: "This is madness!" he cried. "I'll not do it. If I call the captain it will be to have you shot..."

"Another minute gone," quoth the stranger blandly, "and I am sure the captain is coming up the stairs."

"You hellish fiend!"

"My friend down below will be wondering if he should speed for Paris or..."

The key grated in the lock. Chabot's trembling hands were fumbling with the latch.

"Come! that is wise," the Englishman said, "but for your own sake I entreat you to command your nerves. The captain is coming up. You will explain to him about the wagonette, also that you will be leaving here within the hour in the company of two friends, one of them being the young man, Maurice Reversac, at present detained through an unfortunate misunderstanding, and the other your humble servant."

Chabot was like a whipped cur with its tail between its legs. He slunk away from the door and came back across the room, and, like a whipped cur, he made a final effort to bite the hand that smote him.

"You must think me a fool..." he began, trying to swagger.

"I do," the other broke in blandly. "But that is not the point. The point is that I am looking to you to effect the ultimate rescue of two innocent young people out of your murderous clutches. Josette Gravier is in comparative safety for the moment, and Maurice Reversac is close at hand. I propose to convey them to Havre and see them safely on board an English ship en route for our shores, which you must admit are more hospitable than yours. For this expedition your help, my dear Monsieur What's-your-name, will be invaluable, so you are coming with us, my friend, in Citizen Pailleron's wagonette, and I myself will have the honour to drive you. And when we are challenged at the gates of any city, or commune, or at a bridge-head, you will show the guard your pretty face and reveal your identity as Representative of the People in the National Convention and stand upon your rights as such to free passage and no molestation for yourself, your driver and your son — we'll call Maurice Reversac your son for convenience' sake — and at Elboeuf, as well as at Dieppe, on the quay or at any barrier your pleasant countenance and your gentle, authoritative voice will command the obsequiousness they deserve. So I pray you," he concluded with perfect suavity, "call the captain of the guard and explain to him all that is necessary. We ought soon to be getting on the way."

He leaned back in his chair, gave a slight yawn, then rose, and from his magnificent height looked down on the cringing figure of the unfrocked friar. Chabot tried vainly to collect his thoughts, to make some plan, to think, to think, my God! to think of something, and above all to gather courage from the fact that this man, this abominable spy, this arrogant devil, was still in his power: now, at this moment, he could still hand him over to be shot at sight... or else at Rouen; with Chauvelin waiting for him, he could... he could...

But the other, as if divining his thoughts, broke in on them by saying: "You could do nothing at Rouen, my friend, for let me assure you that within twenty-four hours my friend who now has your letters in his possession will be on his way to Paris, there to deliver them at the offices of the Moniteur and of Père Duchêne, unless I myself desire him to hand them over to you."

"And if I yield to your cowardly threats," Chabot hissed between his teeth, "if I lend myself to this dastardly comedy, how shall I know that your associate, as vile a craven as yourself, will give me the letters in the end?"

"You can't know that, my friend," the other retorted simply, "for I cannot expect such as you to know the meaning of a word of honour spoken by an English gentleman."

"How shall I know if I do get the letters that none have been kept back?"

"That's just it: you can't know. But remember, my friend, that there is one thing you do know with absolute certainty, and that is, if my plan to save those two young people fails, if I do not myself request my friend to give up the letters to you, then as sure as we are both alive at this moment those letters will be published in every news-sheet throughout France; your name will become a byword for everything that is most treacherous and most vile, and not even the dirtiest mudrake in the country will care to take you by the hand."

The stranger had spoken with unwonted earnestness, all the more impressive for the flippant way in which he had carried on the conversation before. Chabot, always a bully, was nothing if not a coward. Any danger to himself reduced him to a wriggling worm. That his peril was great he knew well enough, and he had realised at last that there was no threat that he could utter which would shake that cursed English spy from his purpose.

There was a moment of tense silence in the room, whilst the captain's footsteps were heard slowly coming up the stairs. The stranger gave a gay little laugh and sat down once more opposite his writhing victim. He poured out two mugfuls of cider, and the

moment that the door was thrown open he was saying with easy familiarity:

"Your good health, my dear François, and to our proposed journey together."

He held the white-livered recreant with his magnetic eyes and made as if to raise the mug to his lips; then he paused and went on lightly:

"By the way, did you happen to see the Moniteur the day before yesterday? It had a scathing attack, inspired of certainty by Couthon, against Danton and some of his methods."

Chabot clenched his teeth. At this moment he would have sold his soul to the devil for the power to slay this over-weening rascal.

The captain, seeing the Citizen Representative in conversation with a friend, halted respectfully at the door. He stood at attention, until Chabot looked round at him with tired, bleary eyes.

"What is it, Citizen Captain?" he inquired in a thick, tired voice, while the stranger, as if suddenly aware of the officer's presence, rose courteously from the table.

"I have to report, Citizen Representative," the captain replied, "that during the night certain miscreants found their way to the coach and saddlery, to which they did a good deal of mischief."

"Mischief? What mischief?" Chabot muttered inarticulately, while the stranger gave a polite murmur of sympathy.

"They've cut the saddle-girths, the reins and the stirrup-leathers, and the spokes of two of the coach wheels are broken right across. The damage will take more than a day to repair."

"I hope, Citizen Captain," the stranger said affably, "that you have laid hands on the rascals."

"Alas, no! the mischief was done at night. The barn lies some way back from this house; no one heard anything. The ruffians got clean away."

Chabot was speechless; not only had the quantity of spiced cider got into his head, but rage and despair had made him dumb.

"My dear François," the Englishman commented with good-humoured urbanity, "this is indeed unfortunate for all these fine soldiers who will have to spend a day or two in this God-forsaken hole. I know what that means," he went on, turning once more to the captain, "as I have been through such experience before, travelling on my business in these outlying parts."

"Ah! You know Le Roger then, Citizen?" the captain asked.

"I have been here once before. I am a commercial traveller, you know, and go about the country a good deal. I only arrived last night from St. Pierre half an hour after you did, and was happy to hear that my old friend François Chabot was putting up for the night. Then luckily I happened to bespeak Citizen Pailleron's covered wagonette to take me on to-day to Louviers, but it will be a pleasure as well as an honour for me to drive the Citizen Representative to Rouen if he desires."

"It will be heavy going."

"Perhaps, but my friend Pailleron has excellent horses which he will let me have."

"This is indeed lucky," the captain assented.

Still he seemed to hesitate. As Chabot remained tongue-tied, the stranger touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"It is lucky, is it not, my dear François?" he asked.

Chabot looked up at his tormentor. "Go to hell!" he murmured under his breath.

"The Citizen Captain is waiting for orders, my friend."

"You give them, then."

The stranger gave a light laugh. "I am afraid the cider was rather heady," he explained to the officer. "Will you be so good, captain, as to send round to Citizen Pailleron and let him know that the Representative of the People is ready to start. I believe the snow has left off for the moment; we can make Louviers before noon."

There was nothing in this to rouse the captain's suspicions. The Citizen Representative, though suffering perhaps from an excess of hot, spiced drink, nodded his head as if to confirm the order given by his friend. That this tall stranger was his friend there could be no doubt; the two of them were conversing amicably when he, the captain, first entered the room. And it certainly was the most natural conclusion for any man to come to, that so distinguished a personage as the Representative of the People in the National Convention would not wish to remain snowed up in this desolate village for two days at least, but would gladly avail himself of the means of transit offered to him by a friend. And certainly whatever doubt the officer might have had in his mind was finally dissipated when the stranger spoke again to Citizen Chabot.

"My dear François," he said, once more touching the other on the shoulder, "you have forgotten to speak to our friend the captain about the young man, Reversac."

"The prisoner?" the captain asked.

"Even him."

"He is quite safe at this moment in the public room, and we..."

"That's just the point," the stranger rejoined; and, unseen by the captain, he tightened his grip on Chabot's shoulder. "Do, my dear François, explain to the Citizen Captain..."

Chabot winced under the grip, which seemed like a veritable strangle-hold upon his will-power. He had not an ounce of strength left in him, either moral or physical, to resist. It was as much as he could do to mutter a few words and to gaze with bleared vision on his smiling enemy.

"Do explain, my dear François," the latter insisted.

Chabot brought the palm of his hand down with a crash upon the table.

"Damn explanations!" he snapped savagely. "The prisoner Reversac comes with me. That's enough."

And as the captain, momentarily taken off his balance by this unexpected command, still stood by the door, Chabot shouted at him: "Get out!"

It was the stranger who, with perfect courtesy, went to the door and held it open for the officer to pass out.

“That cider was much too heady,” he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, “but the Citizen Representative will be all right when he gets into the cold air.” After which he added, “He does not wish to lose sight of the prisoner, and I shall be there to look after them both.”

“Well! It is not for me to make comment,” the soldier remarked drily, “so long as the Citizen Representative is satisfied...”

“Oh! He is quite satisfied, I do assure you. You are satisfied, are you not, you dear old François?”

But even while he asked this final question he quickly closed the door on the departing soldier, for in very truth the blasphemies which Chabot uttered after that would have polluted even the ears of an old Republican campaigner.

Chapter XXXII

Less than half an hour later a covered wagonette to which a couple of sturdy Normandy horses were harnessed drew up outside the front door of the Bout de Monde. The word had soon enough gone round the village and among the men that the Representative of the People was leaving Le Roger in company of a friend, taking the prisoner with him.

He came out of the hostelry wrapped in his big coat. He looked neither to right nor left, nor did he acknowledge the respectful salutes of the landlord and his family assembled at the door to bid him good-bye. The prisoner, hatless, coatless and shivering with cold, was close behind him. But it was the Representative's friend who created most attention. He was very tall and wore the finest of clothes. It was generally whispered among the quidnuncs that he was a commercial traveller who had made much money by smuggling French brandy into England.

While François Chabot and the prisoner stowed themselves away as best they could under the hood of the wagonette, the stranger climbed up on the box and took the reins. He clicked his tongue, tickled the horses with his whip, and the light vehicle bumped along the snow-covered road and was soon lost to sight.

Grey dawn was breaking just then; the sky was clear and gave promise of a fine sunny day. The men who had formed the escort for the diligence and those who had travelled inside in order to guard the prisoner sat around the fire in the public room in the intervals between scanty meals, and discussed the amazing adventures of the past twenty-four hours. They had begun, so it was universally admitted, with the mysterious report of a pistol outside the hostelry at Vernon and the strange appearance of the whilom stud-groom who looked such a miserable tramp. What happened on the road after that no one could aver with any certainty, for the driver, who knew himself to be heavily at fault, never said a word about having taken the tramp aboard on the banquette, and allowing the reins to slip out of his hands into the more capable ones of the stud-groom.

Indeed, while the others talked the driver seemed entrenched in complete dumbness. He drank copiously, and as he was known to become violent in his cups he was left severely alone. The damage done in the night to the coach and saddlery had further aggravated his ill-humour. He put it all down to spite directed against him by some power of evil made manifest in the person of that cursed vagabond. It was supposed that the villagers had set themselves the task to bring the miscreants to book, but the hours sped by and nothing was discovered that would lead to such a happy result. The snow all round the barn where coach and saddlery had been stowed had been trampled down so heavily that it was impossible to determine in which direction the rascallions had made good their escape.

Chapter XXXIII

To François Chabot the journey between Le Roger and the coast was nothing less than a nightmare. He was more virtually the prisoner of that impudent English spy than any aristo had ever been in the hands of Terrorists. And while thoughts and plans and useless desires went hammering through his fevered brain, the wagonette lumbered along on the snow-covered road, and on the driver's seat in front of him sat the man who was the cause of his humiliation and his despair. Oh, for the courage to end it all and plunge a knife into that broad back! But what was the good of wishing, for there was that terrible threat hanging over him of the letters to be published where all who wished could read, and the certainty of disgrace with the inevitable guillotine? Chabot could really thank his stars that he did not happen to have a knife handy. He might surely, in a moment of madness, have killed his tormentor and also the young man who sat squeezed beside him in the interior of the wagonette.

They reached Louvier's at noon. At the entrance to the city they were challenged by the sentry at the gate. The Englishman jumped down from the box. At a mere sign from him Chabot showed his papers of identity:-

"François Chabot, Representative of the People in the National Convention for the department of Loire et Cher..."

He declared the young man sitting next to him to be his son, and the other a friend under his own especial protection. The sentry stood at attention: the officer gave the word:

"Pass on in the name of the Republic!"

A nightmare, what? or else an outpost of hell!

They avoided Rouen, made a circuit of the town and turned into a country lane. Presently the driver pulled up outside a small, somewhat dilapidated house, which lay perdu in the midst of a garden all overgrown with weeds, and surrounded by a wall broken down in many places and with a low iron gate dividing it from the road. He jumped down from the box, fastened the reins to a ring in the wall; then, with his usual impudent glance, peeped underneath the hood of the wagonette. He thrust a parcel and a bottle into Chabot's lap and said curtly: "Eat and drink, my friend. Monsieur Reversac and I have business inside the house."

The whilom prisoner stepped out of the wagonette and together the two men went inside the house. One or two people passed by while Chabot sat shivering in the draughty vehicle. He ate and drank, for he was hungry and thirsty, but he had entirely ceased to think by now. He no longer felt that he was a real live man, but only an automaton made to move and to speak through the touch of a white slender hand and the glance of a pair of lazy deep-set blue eyes. Many minutes went by before he heard the rickety door of the old house creak upon its hinges. The two men came down the path towards the wagonette, but they were not alone. There was a girl with them, and Chabot uttered a hoarse cry as he recognised the baggage, Josette Gravier, who had made a fool of him and was now a witness of his humiliation. This, perhaps, was the most galling experience of all. He, the arrogant bully who had planned the destruction of these innocents, was now the means of their deliverance and their happiness. He closed his eyes so as not to see the triumph which he felt must be gleaming in theirs. How little he understood human nature! Josette and Maurice had no thought of their enemy, none of the terrible torments which they had endured; their thoughts were of one another, of their happiness in holding each other by the hand; above all, of their love. In the hours of sorrow and peril of death they had realised at last the magnitude of that love, the joy that would be theirs if it pleased God to unite them in the end. And this happiness they had now attained, and owed it to the brave man who had been the hero of Josette's dreams. When first she discovered his identity, when she knew that she owed her rescue to him, and when to-day he had suddenly walked into the old house where she had been patiently waiting for him under the care of a kindly farmer and his wife, she would gladly, if he had allowed it, have knelt at his feet and kissed his hands in boundless gratitude. For these two, also, the journey seemed like a dream, but it was a dream of earthly Paradise; hand in hand they sat and hardly were conscious of the presence of that ugly, ungainly creature huddled up, silent and motionless, in a corner of the wagonette. For them, too, he was just an automaton, moved at will by the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. He only bestirred himself when the wagonette was challenged at a bridge-head or the barriers of a commune; then, in answer to a demand from the sentry, he would poke his ugly head, toneless voice recite his name and quality. And Josette and Maurice invariably giggled when they heard themselves described as the son and daughter of that hideous man, and that tall, handsome stranger as his friend. The sentry then would give the word: "Pass on in the name of the Republic!" and the wagonette, driven by the mysterious stranger, would once more lumber along on its way. The journey was broken at a small hostelry, about half a league beyond Elboeuf. The food was scanty and ill-cooked, the beds were hard, the place squalid, the rooms cold; but the idea of sleeping under the same roof with Maurice made Josette in her narrow truckle-bed feel as if she were in heaven. When they neared the coast of the first tang of the sea coming to Josette's nostrils brought with it recollections of that former journey which she had undertaken all alone for Maurice's sake. And when, presently, they came into Havre, and after the usual formalities at the gates of the city were able to leave the wagonette, these recollections turned to vivid memories. Guided by the tall mysterious stranger, they walked along the quay, whilst the past unrolled itself before Josette's mental vision like an ever-changing kaleidoscope. She remembered Citizen Armand, heard again his suave, lying tongue, met his pale eyes with their treacherous, deceptive glance. And she snuggled up close to Maurice, and he put his arm round her to guide her down the bridge to the packet-boat, which was on the point of starting for England. To follow them thither were a sorry task. Many French men and women there were these days — Louise de Croissy and little Charles-Léon among them — who, fleeing from the terrors of a Government of assassins, found refuge in hospitable England. Helped by friends, made welcome by thousands of kindly hearts, the eked out their precarious existence by working in fields or factories until such time as the return of law and order in their own beautiful country enabled them to go back to their devastated homes. *Heureux la peuple qui n'a pas d'histoire.* Of Maurice and Josette Reversac there is nothing further to record, save the fulfilment of their love-dream and their happiness.

Chapter XXXIV

“And now we’ll go and get those blessed letters.”

Sir Percy Blakeney, known to the world as the Scarlet Pimpernel, had stood on the quay watching the packet-boat sailing down the mouth of the river. His arm was linked in that of François Chabot, once a Capuchin friar, now Representative of the People in the National Convention. He held Chabot by the arm, and Chabot stood beside him and also watched the boat gliding out of the range of his vision.

The nightmare was not yet ended, for there was the journey back to Rouen in the wagonette with himself, François Chabot, chained to the chariot wheel of his ruthless conqueror.

A halt was made on the road outside the same old house where they had picked up Josette Gravier. This time Sir Percy bade Chabot follow him into the house. How it all happened Chabot never knew. He never could remember how it came about that presently he found himself fingering those fateful letters: they were all there — three written by himself, two written by his brother-in-law, Bazire, and two by Fabre d’Eglantine — seven letters: mere scraps of paper; but what a price to pay for their possession! An immense wave of despair swept over the recreant. Perhaps at this hour the whole burden of his crimes weighed down his miserable soul and it received its first consciousness of inevitable retribution. The wretch spread his arms out on the table and, laying down his head, he burst into abject tears.

When the paroxysm of weeping was over and he looked about him the tall mysterious stranger was gone.

It was twilight of one of the most dismal days of the year. Looking up at the window, Chabot saw the leaden snow-laden clouds sweeping across the sky. Heavy flakes fell slowly, slowly. All round him absolute silence reigned. The house apparently was quite deserted. He staggered rather than walked to the door. He tramped across the path to the low gate in the wall. Here he stood for a moment looking up and down the narrow road and the heavy snowflakes covered his shoulders and his tufty, ill-kempt hair. There was no sign of the wagonette beyond the ruts made by the wheels in the snow, and for a long time not a soul came by. Presently, however, a couple of men — farm-labourers they were by the look of them — came along and Chabot asked them:

“Where are we?”

The men stopped and in the twilight peered curiously at this hatless man, half-covered with snow.

“What do you mean by ‘Where are we?’” one of them asked.

“Just what I am asking,” Chabot replied in that same dead tone of voice. “Which is the nearest town or village? I am stranded here and there is no one in this house.”

The men seemed surprised.

“No one there?”

“Not a soul.”

“Farmer Marron and his wife still live here,” one of the men said, “two days ago, and they had a wench with them for a little while.”

“They must have gone to Elboeuf where the old grandmother lives,” the other suggested. “I know they talked of it.”

“Elboeuf?” Chabot queried. “How far is that?”

A league and a quarter, and it was getting dark and snow was falling fast. It was so cold, so cold! and Chabot was very tired.

“Well, good-night, Citizen,” the men called out to him. “We are going part of the way to Elboeuf. Would you like to join us?”

A league and a quarter, and Chabot was so tired.

“No, thank you, Citizens,” he murmured feebly. “I’ll tramp thither to-morrow.”

He turned on his heel and went back into the lonely house. The arch-fiend who had brought him hither had seemingly left him some provisions and a bottle of sour wine. There was a fire in the room and upstairs in a room above there was a truckle bed and on it a couple of blankets.

Chabot curled himself up in these and fell into a fitful sleep.

The next day he tramped to Elboeuf and the day after that took coach for Rouen to meet his colleague Armand Chauvelin and give him the trouncing he deserved, for it was because of him, his intrigues and his wild talk of the Scarlet Pimpernel, that he, François Chabot, had been brought to humiliation and despair. The interview between the two men was brief and stormy. They parted deadly enemies.

A week later Chabot was back in his luxurious apartment in the Rue d’Anjou and a month later he perished on the guillotine. He had been denounced as suspect by Armand Chauvelin of the Committee of Public Safety for having on the 15 Frimaire an II de la République connived at the escape of two traitors condemned to death: Josette Gravier and Maurice Reversac, and for having failed to bring to justice the celebrated spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel

THE END

THE WIFE OF LORD TONY PROLOGUE

NANTES, 1789

I

“Tyrant! tyrant! tyrant!”

It was Pierre who spoke, his voice was hardly raised above a murmur, but there was such an intensity of passion expressed in his face, in the fingers of his hand which closed slowly and convulsively as if they were clutching the throat of a struggling viper, there was so much hate in those muttered words, so much power, such compelling and awesome determination that an ominous silence fell upon the village lads and the men who sat with him in the low narrow room of the auberge des Trois Vertus.

Even the man in the tattered coat and threadbare breeches, who — perched upon the centre table — had been haranguing the company on the subject of the Rights of Man, paused in his peroration and looked down on Pierre half afraid of that fierce flame of passionate hate which his own words had helped to kindle.

The silence, however, had only lasted a few moments, the next Pierre was on his feet, and a cry like that of a bull in a slaughter-house escaped his throat.

“In the name of God!” he shouted, “let us cease all that senseless talking. Haven’t we planned enough and talked enough to satisfy our puling consciences? The time has come to strike, mes amis, to strike I say, to strike at those cursed aristocrats, who have made us what we are — ignorant, wretched, downtrodden — senseless clods to work our fingers to the bone, our bodies till they break so that they may wallow in their pleasures and their luxuries! Strike, I say!” he reiterated while his eyes glowed and his breath came and went through his throat with a hissing sound. “Strike! as the men and women struck in Paris on that great day in July. To them the Bastille stood for tyranny, and they struck at it as they would at the head of a tyrant — and the tyrant cowered, cringed, made terms — he was frightened at the wrath of the people! That is what happened in Paris! That is what must happen in Nantes. The château of the duc de Kernogan is our Bastille! Let us strike at it to-night, and if the arrogant aristocrat resists, we’ll raze his house to the ground. The hour, the day, the darkness are all propitious. The arrangements hold good. The neighbours are ready. Strike, I say!”

He brought his hard fist crashing down upon the table, so that mugs and bottles rattled: his enthusiasm had fired all his hearers: his hatred and his lust of revenge had done more in five minutes than all the tirades of the agitators sent down from Paris to instil revolutionary ideas into the slow-moving brains of village lads.

“Who will give the signal?” queried one of the older men quietly.

“I will!” came a lusty response from Pierre.

He strode to the door, and all the men jumped to their feet, ready to follow him, dragged into this hot-headed venture by the mere force of one man’s towering passion. They followed Pierre like sheep — sheep that have momentarily become intoxicated — sheep that have become fierce — a strange sight truly — and yet one that the man in the tattered coat who had done so much speechifying lately, watched with eager interest and presently related with great wealth of detail to M. de Mirabeau the champion of the people.

“It all came about through the death of a pair of pigeons,” he said.

The death of the pigeons, however, was only the spark which set all these turbulent passions ablaze. They had been smouldering for half a century, and had been ready to burst into flames for the past decade.

Antoine Melun, the wheelwright, who was to have married Louise, Pierre’s sister, had trapped a pair of pigeons in the woods of M. le duc de Kernogan. He had done it to assert his rights as a man — he did not want the pigeons. Though he was a poor man, he was no poorer than hundreds of peasants for miles around: but he paid imposts and taxes until every particle of profit which he gleaned from his miserable little plot of land went into the hands of the collectors, whilst M. le duc de Kernogan paid not one sou towards the costs of the State, and he had to live on what was left of his own rye and wheat after M. le duc’s pigeons had had their fill of them.

Antoine Melun did not want to eat the pigeons which he had trapped, but he desired to let M. le duc de Kernogan know that God and Nature had never intended all the beasts and birds of the woods to be the exclusive property of one man, rather than another. So he trapped and killed two pigeons and M. le duc’s head-bailiff caught him in the act of carrying those pigeons home.

Whereupon Antoine was arrested for poaching and thieving: he was tried at Nantes under the presidency of M. le duc de Kernogan, and ten minutes ago, while the man in the tattered coat was declaiming to a number of peasant lads in the coffee-room of the auberge des Trois Vertus on the subject of their rights as men and citizens, some one brought the news that Antoine Melun had just been condemned to death and would be hanged on the morrow.

That was the spark which had fanned Pierre Adet’s hatred of the aristocrats to a veritable conflagration: the news of Antoine Melun’s fate was the bleat which rallied all those human sheep around their leader. For Pierre had naturally become their leader because his hatred of M. le duc was more tangible, more powerful than theirs. Pierre had had more education than they. His father, Jean Adet the miller, had sent him to a school in Nantes, and when Pierre came home M. le curé of Vertou took an interest in him and taught him all he knew himself — which was not much — in the way of philosophy and the classics. But later on Pierre took to reading the writings of M. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and soon knew the *Contrat Social* almost by heart. He had also read the articles in M. Marat’s newspaper *L’ami du Peuple!* and, like Antoine Melun, the wheelwright, he had got it into his head that it was not God, nor yet Nature who had intended one man to starve while another gorged himself on all the good things of this world.

He did not, however, speak of these matters, either to his father or to his sister or to M. le curé, but he brooded over them, and when the price of bread rose to four sous he muttered curses against M. le duc de Kernogan, and when famine prices ruled throughout the district those curses became overt threats; and by the time that the pinch of hunger was felt in Vertou Pierre’s passion of fury against the duc de Kernogan had turned to a frenzy of hate against the entire noblesse of France.

Still he said nothing to his father, nothing to his mother and sister. But his father knew. Old Jean would watch the storm-clouds which gathered on Pierre’s lowering brow; he heard the muttered curses which escaped from Pierre’s lips whilst he worked for the

liege-lord whom he hated. But Jean was a wise man and knew how useless it is to put out a feeble hand in order to stem the onrush of a torrent. He knew how useless are the words of wisdom from an old man to quell the rebellious spirit of the young.

Jean was on the watch. And evening after evening when the work on the farm was done, Pierre would sit in the small low room of the auberge with other lads from the village talking, talking of their wrongs, of the arrogance of the aristocrats, the sins of M. le duc and his family, the evil conduct of the King and the immorality of the Queen: and men in ragged coats and tattered breeches came in from Nantes, and even from Paris, in order to harangue these village lads and told them yet further tales of innumerable wrongs suffered by the people at the hands of the aristos, and stuffed their heads full of schemes for getting even once and for all with those men and women who fattened on the sweat of the poor and drew their luxury from the hunger and the toil of the peasantry.

Pierre sucked in these harangues through every pore: they were meat and drink to him. His hate and passions fed upon these effusions till his whole being was consumed by a maddening desire for reprisals, for vengeance — for the lust of triumph over those whom he had been taught to fear.

And in the low, narrow room of the auberge the fevered heads of village lads were bent together in conclave, and the ravings and shoutings of a while ago were changed to whisperings and low murmurings behind barred doors and shuttered windows. Men exchanged cryptic greetings when they met in the village street, enigmatical signs passed between them while they worked: strangers came and went at dead of night to and from the neighbouring villages. M. le duc's overseers saw nothing, heard nothing, guessed nothing. M. le curé saw much and old Jean Adet guessed a great deal, but they said nothing, for nothing then would have availed.

Then came the catastrophe.

II

Pierre pushed open the outer door of the auberge des Trois Vertus and stepped out under the porch. A gust of wind caught him in the face. The night, so the chronicles of the time tell us, was as dark as pitch: on ahead lay the lights of the city flickering in the gale: to the left the wide tawny ribbon of the river wound its turbulent course toward the ocean, the booming of the waters swollen by the recent melting of the snow sounded like the weird echoes of invisible cannons far away.

Without hesitation Pierre advanced. His little troop followed him in silence. They were a little sobered now that they came out into the open and that the fumes of cider and of hot, perspiring humanity no longer obscured their vision or inflamed their brain.

They knew whither Pierre was going. It had all been pre-arranged — throughout this past summer, in the musty parlour of the auberge, behind barred doors and shuttered windows — all they had to do was to follow Pierre, whom they had tacitly chosen as their leader. They walked on behind him, their hands buried in the pockets of their thin, tattered breeches, their heads bent forward against the fury of the gale.

Pierre made straight for the mill — his home — where his father lived and where Louise was even now crying her eyes out because Antoine Melun, her sweetheart, had been condemned to be hanged for killing two pigeons.

At the back of the mill was the dwelling house and beyond it a small farmery, for Jean Adet owned a little bit of land and would have been fairly well off if the taxes had not swallowed up all the money that he made out of the sale of his rye and his hay. Just here the ground rose sharply to a little hillock which dominated the flat valley of the Loire and commanded a fine view over the more distant villages.

Pierre skirted the mill and without looking round to see if the others followed him he struck squarely to the right up a narrow lane bordered by tall poplars, and which led upwards to the summit of the little hillock around which clustered the tumble-down barns of his father's farmery.

The gale lashed the straight, tall stems of the poplars until they bent nearly double, and each tiny bare twig sighed and whispered as if in pain. Pierre strode on and the others followed in silence. They were chilled to the bone under their scanty clothes, but they followed on with grim determination, set teeth, and anger and hate seething in their hearts.

The top of the rising ground was reached. It was pitch dark, and the men when they halted fell up against one another trying to get a foothold on the sodden ground. But Pierre seemed to have eyes like a cat. He only paused one moment to get his bearings, then — still without a word — he set to work. A large barn and a group of small circular straw ricks loomed like solid masses out of the darkness — black, silhouetted against the black of the stormy sky. Pierre turned toward the barn: those of his comrades who were in the forefront of the small crowd saw him disappearing inside one of those solid shadowy masses that looked so ghostlike in the night.

Anon those who watched and who happened to be facing the interior of the barn saw sparks from a tinder flying in every direction: the next moment they could see Pierre himself quite clearly. He was standing in the middle of the barn and intent on lighting a roughly-fashioned torch with his tinder: soon the resin caught a spark and Pierre held the torch inclined toward the ground so that the flames could lick their way up the shaft. The flickering light cast a weird glow and deep grotesque shadows upon the face and figure of the young man. His hair, lanky and dishevelled, fell over his eyes; his mouth and jaw, illumined from below by the torch, looked unnaturally large, and showed his teeth gleaming white, like the fangs of a beast of prey. His shirt was torn open at the neck, and the sleeves of his coat were rolled up to the elbow. He seemed not to feel either the cold from without or the scorching heat of the flaming torch in his hand. But he worked deliberately and calmly, without haste or febrile movements: grim determination held his excitement in check.

At last his work was done. The men who had pressed forward, in order to watch him, fell back as he advanced, torch in hand. They knew exactly what he was going to do, they had thought it all out, planned it, spoken of it till even their unimaginative minds had visualised this coming scene with absolutely realistic perception. And yet, now that the supreme hour had come, now that they saw Pierre — torch in hand — prepared to give the signal which would set ablaze the seething revolt of the countryside, their heart seemed to stop its beating within their body; they held their breath, their toil-worn hands went up to their throats as if to repress that awful choking sensation which was so like fear.

But Pierre had no such hesitations; if his breath seemed to choke him as it reached his throat, if it escaped through his set teeth with a strange whistling sound, it was because his excitement was that of a hungry beast who had sighted his prey and is ready to spring and

devour. His hand did not shake, his step was firm: the gusts of wind caught the flame of his torch till the sparks flew in every direction and scorched his hair and his hands, and while the others recoiled he strode on, to the straw-rick that was nearest.

For one moment he held the torch aloft. There was triumph now in his eyes, in his whole attitude. He looked out into the darkness far away which seemed all the more impenetrable beyond the restricted circle of flickering torchlight. It seemed as if he would wrest from that inky blackness all the secrets which it hid — all the enthusiasm, the excitement, the passions, the hatred which he would have liked to set ablaze as he would the straw-ricks anon.

“Are you ready, mes amis?” he called.

“Aye! aye!” they replied — not gaily, not lustily, but calmly and under their breath.

One touch of the torch and the dry straw began to crackle; a gust of wind caught the flame and whipped it into energy; it crept up the side of the little rick like a glowing python that wraps its prey in its embrace. Another gust of wind, and the flame leapt joyously up to the pinnacle of the rick, and sent forth other tongues to lick and to lick, to enfold the straw, to devour, to consume.

But Pierre did not wait to see the consummation of his work of destruction. Already with a few rapid strides he had reached his father’s second straw-rick, and this too he set alight, and then another and another, until six blazing furnaces sent their lurid tongues of flames, twisting and twirling, writhing and hissing through the stormy night.

Within the space of two minutes the whole summit of the hillock seemed to be ablaze, and Pierre, like a god of fire, torch in hand, seemed to preside over and command a multitude of ever-spreading flames to his will. Excitement had overmastered him now, the lust to destroy was upon him, and excitement had seized all the others too.

There was shouting and cursing, and laughter that sounded mirthless and forced, and calls to Pierre, and oaths of revenge. Memory, like an evil-intentioned witch, was riding invisibly in the darkness, and she touched each seething brain with her fever-giving wand. Every man had an outrage to remember, an injustice to recall, and strong, brown fists were shaken aloft in the direction of the château de Kernogan, whose lights glimmered feebly in the distance beyond the Loire.

“Death to the tyrant! A la lanterne les aristos! The people’s hour has come at last! No more starvation! No more injustice! Equality! Liberty! A mort les aristos!”

The shouts, the curses, the crackling flames, the howling of the wind, the soughing of the trees, made up a confusion of sounds which seemed hardly of this earth; the blazing ricks, the flickering, red light of the flames had finally transformed the little hillock behind the mill into another Brocken on whose summit witches and devils do of a truth hold their revels.

“A moi!” shouted Pierre again, and he threw his torch down upon the ground and once more made for the barn. The others followed him. In the barn were such weapons as these wretched, penniless peasants had managed to collect — scythes, poles, axes, saws, anything that would prove useful for the destruction of the château de Kernogan and the proposed brow-beating of M. le duc and his family. All the men trooped in in the wake of Pierre. The entire hillock was now a blaze of light — lurid and red and flickering — alternately teased and fanned and subdued by the gale, so that at times every object stood out clearly cut, every blade of grass, every stone in bold relief, and in the ruts and fissures, every tiny pool of muddy water shimmered like strings of fire-opals: whilst at others, a pall of inky darkness, smoke-laden and impenetrable would lie over the ground and erase the outline of farm-buildings and distant mill and of the pushing and struggling mass of humanity inside the barn.

But Pierre, heedless of light and darkness, of heat or of cold, proceeded quietly and methodically to distribute the primitive implements of warfare to this crowd of ignorant men, who were by now over ready for mischief: and with every weapon which he placed in willing hands, he found the right words for willing ears — words which would kindle passion and lust of vengeance most readily where they lay dormant, or would fan them into greater vigour where they smouldered.

“For thee this scythe, Hector Lebrun,” he would say to a tall, lanky youth whose emaciated arms and bony hands were stretched with longing toward the bright piece of steel; “remember last year’s harvest, the heavy tax thou wert forced to pay, so that not one sou of profit went into thy pocket, and thy mother starved whilst M. le duc and his brood feasted and danced, and shiploads of corn were sunk in the Loire lest abundance made bread too cheap for the poor!”

“For thee this pick-axe, Henri Meunier! Remember the new roof on thy hut, which thou didst build to keep the wet off thy wife’s bed, who was crippled with ague — and the heavy impost levied on thee by the tax-collector for this improvement to thy miserable hovel.

“This pole for thee, Charles Blanc! Remember the beating administered to thee by the duc’s bailiff for daring to keep a tame rabbit to amuse thy children!”

“Remember! Remember, mes amis!” he added exultantly, “remember every wrong you have endured, every injustice, every blow! remember your poverty and his wealth, your crusts of dry bread and his succulent meals, your rags and his silks and velvets, remember your starving children and ailing mother, your care-laden wife and toil-worn daughters! Forget nothing, mes amis, to-night, and at the gates of the château de Kernogan demand of its arrogant owner wrong for wrong and outrage for outrage.”

A deafening cry of triumph greeted this peroration, scythes and sickles and axes and poles were brandished in the air and several scores of hands were stretched out to Pierre and clasped in this newly-formed bond of vengeful fraternity.

III

Then it was that with vigorous play of the elbows, Jean Adet, the miller, forced his way through the crowd till he stood face to face with his son.

“Unfortunate!” he cried, “what is all this? What dost thou propose to do? Whither are ye all going?”

“To Kernogan!” they all shouted in response.

“En avant, Pierre! we follow!” cried some of them impatiently.

But Jean Adet — who was a powerful man despite his years — had seized Pierre by the arm and dragged him to a distant corner of the barn:

"Pierre!" he said in tones of command, "I forbid thee in the name of thy duty and the obedience which thou dost owe to me and to thy mother, to move another step in this hot-headed adventure. I was on the high-road, walking homewards, when that conflagration and the senseless cries of these poor lads warned me that some awful mischief was afoot. Pierre! my son! I command thee to lay that weapon down."

But Pierre — who in his normal state was a dutiful son and sincerely fond of his father — shook himself free from Jean Adet's grasp.

"Father!" he said loudly and firmly, "this is no time for interference. We are all of us men here and know our own minds. What we mean to do to-night we have thought on and planned for weeks and months. I pray you, father, let me be! I am not a child and I have work to do."

"Not a child?" exclaimed the old man as he turned appealingly to the lads who had stood by, silent and sullen during this little scene. "Not a child? But you are all only children, my lads. You don't know what you are doing. You don't know what terrible consequences this mad escapade will bring upon us all, upon the whole village, aye! and the country-side. Do you suppose for one moment that the château of Kernogan will fall at the mercy of a few ignorant unarmed lads like yourselves? Why! four hundred of you would not succeed in forcing your way even as far as the courtyard of the palace. M. le duc has had wind for some time of your turbulent meetings at the auberge: he has kept an armed guard inside his castle yard for weeks past, a company of artillery with two guns hoisted upon his walls. My poor lads! you are running straight to ruin! Go home, I beg of you! Forget this night's escapade! Nothing but misery to you and yours can result from it."

They listened quietly, if surlily, to Jean Adet's impassioned words. Far be it from their thoughts to flout or to mock him. Paternal authority commanded respect even among the most rough; but they all felt that they had gone too far now to draw back: the savour of anticipated revenge had been too sweet to be forgone quite so readily, and Pierre with his vigorous personality, his glowing eloquence, his compelling power had more influence over them than the sober counsels of prudence and the wise admonitions of old Jean Adet. Not one word was spoken, but with an instinctive gesture every man grasped his weapon more firmly and then turned to Pierre, thus electing him their spokesman.

Pierre too had listened in silence to all that his father said, striving to hide the burning anxiety which was gnawing at his heart, lest his comrades allowed themselves to be persuaded by the old man's counsels and their ardour be cooled by the wise dictates of prudence. But when Jean Adet had finished speaking, and Pierre saw each man thus grasping his weapon all the more firmly and in silence, a cry of triumph escaped his lips.

"It is all in vain, father," he cried, "our minds are made up. A host of angels from heaven would not bar our way now to victory and to vengeance."

"Pierre!" admonished the old man.

"It is too late, my father," said Pierre firmly, "en avant, lads!"

"Yes! en avant! en avant!" assented some, "we have wasted too much time as it is."

"But, unfortunate lads," admonished the old man, "what are you going to do? — a handful of you — where are you going?"

"We go straight to the cross-roads now, father," said Pierre, firmly. "The firing of your ricks — for which I humbly crave your pardon — is the preconcerted signal which will bring the lads from all the neighbouring villages — from Goulaine and les Sorinières and Doulon and Tourne-Bride to our meeting place. Never you fear! There will be more than four hundred of us and a company of paid soldiers is not like to frighten us. Eh, lads?"

"No! no! en avant!" they shouted and murmured impatiently, "there has been too much talking already and we have wasted precious time."

"Pierre!" entreated the miller.

But no one listened to the old man now. A general movement down the hillock had already begun and Pierre, turning his back on his father, had pushed his way to the front of the crowd and was now leading the way down the slope. Up on the summit the fire was already burning low; only from time to time an imprisoned tongue of flame would dart out of the dying embers and leap fitfully up into the night. A dull red glow illumined the small farmery and the mill and the slowly moving mass of men along the narrow road, whilst clouds of black, dense smoke were tossed about by the gale. Pierre walked with head erect. He ceased to think of his father and he never looked back to see if the others followed him. He knew that they did: like the straw-ricks a while ago, they had become the prey of a consuming fire: the fire of their own passion which had caught them and held them and would not leave them now until their ardour was consumed in victory or defeat.

IV

M. le duc de Kernogan had just finished dinner when Jacques Labrunière, his head-bailiff, came to him with the news that a rabble crowd, composed of the peasantry of Goulaine and Vertou and the neighbouring villages, had assembled at the cross-roads, there held revolutionary speeches, and was even now marching toward the castle still shouting and singing and brandishing a miscellaneous collection of weapons chiefly consisting of scythes and axes.

"The guard is under arms, I imagine," was M. le duc's comment on this not altogether unforeseen piece of news.

"Everything is in perfect order," replied the head-bailiff coolly, "for the defence of M. le duc and his property — and of Mademoiselle."

M. le duc, who had been lounging in one of the big armchairs in the stately hall of Kernogan, jumped to his feet at these words: his cheeks suddenly pallid, and a look of deadly fear in his eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he said hurriedly, "by G — d, Labrunière, I had forgotten — momentarily — —"

"M. le duc?" stammered the bailiff in anxious inquiry.

"Mademoiselle de Kernogan is on her way home — even now — she spent the day with Mme. le Marquise d'Herbignac — she was to return at about eight o'clock.... If those devils meet her carriage on the road...."

"There is no cause for anxiety, M. le duc," broke in Labrunière hurriedly. "I will see that half a dozen men get to horse at once and go and meet Mademoiselle and escort her home...."

"Yes ... yes ... Labrunière," murmured the duc, who seemed very much overcome with terror now that his daughter's safety was in jeopardy, "see to it at once. Quick! quick! I shall wax crazy with anxiety."

While Labrunière ran to make the necessary arrangements for an efficient escort for Mademoiselle de Kernogan and gave the sergeant in charge of the posse the necessary directions, M. le duc remained motionless, huddled up in the capacious armchair, his head buried in his hand, shivering in front of the huge fire which burned in the monumental hearth, himself the prey of nameless, overwhelming terror.

He knew — none better — the appalling hatred wherewith he and all his family and belongings were regarded by the local peasantry. Astride upon his manifold rights — feudal, territorial, seignorial rights — he had all his life ridden roughshod over the prejudices, the miseries, the undoubted rights of the poor people, who were little better than serfs in the possession of the high and mighty duc de Kernogan. He also knew — none better — that gradually, very gradually it is true, but with unerring certainty, those same downtrodden, ignorant, miserable and half-starved peasants were turning against their oppressors, that riots and outrages had occurred in many rural districts in the North and that the insidious poison of social revolution was gradually creeping toward the South and West, and had already infected the villages and small townships which were situated quite unpleasantly close to Nantes and to Kernogan.

For this reason he had kept a company of artillery at his own expense inside the precincts of his château, and with the aristocrat's open contempt for this peasantry which it had not yet learned to fear, he had disdained to take further measures for the repression of local gatherings, and would not pay the village rabble the compliment of being afraid of them in any way.

But with his daughter Yvonne in the open roadway on the very night when an assembly of that same rabble was obviously bent on mischief, matters became very serious. Insult, outrage or worse might befall the proud aristocrat's only child, and knowing that from these people, whom she had been taught to look upon as little better than beasts, she could expect neither mercy nor chivalry, the duc de Kernogan within his unassailable castle felt for his daughter's safety the most abject, the most deadly fear which hath ever unnerved any man.

Labrunière a few minutes later did his best to reassure his master.

"I have ordered the men to take the best horses out of the stables, M. le duc," he said, "and to cut across the fields toward la Gramoire so as to intercept Mademoiselle's coach ere it reach the cross-roads. I feel confident that there is no cause for alarm," he added emphatically.

"Pray God you are right, Labrunière," murmured the duc feebly. "Do you know how strong the rabble crowd is?"

"No, Monseigneur, not exactly. Camille the under-bailiff, who brought me the news, was riding homewards across the meadows about an hour ago when he saw a huge conflagration which seemed to come from the back of Adet's mill: the whole sky has been lit up by a lurid light for the past hour, and I fancied myself that Adet's straw must be on fire. But Camille pushed his horse up the rising ground which culminates at Adet's farmery. It seems that he heard a great deal of shouting which did not seem to be accompanied by any attempt at putting out the fire. So he dismounted and led his horse round the hillock skirting Adet's farm buildings so that he should not be seen. Under cover of darkness he heard and saw the old miller with his son Pierre engaged in distributing scythes, poles and axes to a crowd of youngsters and haranguing them wildly all the time. He also heard Pierre Adet speak of the conflagration as a preconcerted signal, and say that he and his mates would meet the lads of the neighbouring villages at the cross-roads ... and that four hundred of them would then march on Kernogan and pillage the castle."

"Bah!" quoth M. le duc in a voice hoarse with execration and contempt, "a lot of oafs who will give the hangman plenty of trouble to-morrow. As for that Adet and his son, they shall suffer for this ... I can promise them that.... If only Mademoiselle were home!" he added with a heartrending sigh.

V

Indeed, had M. le duc de Kernogan been gifted with second sight, the agony of mind which he was enduring would have been aggravated an hundredfold. At the very moment when the head-bailiff was doing his best to reassure his liege-lord as to the safety of Mlle. de Kernogan, her coach was speeding along from the château of Herbignac toward those same cross-roads where a couple of hundred hot-headed peasant lads were planning as much mischief as their unimaginative minds could conceive.

The fury of the gale had in no way abated, and now a heavy rain was falling — a drenching, sopping rain which in the space of half an hour had added five centimetres to the depth of the mud on the roads, and had in that same space of time considerably damped the enthusiasm of some of the poor lads. Three score or so had assembled from Goulaine, two score from les Sorinières, some three dozen from Doulon: they had rallied to the signal in hot haste, gathered their scythes and spades, very eager and excited, and had reached the cross-roads which were much nearer to their respective villages than to Jean Adet's farm and the mill, even while the old man was admonishing his son and the lads of Vertou on the summit of the blazing hillock. Here they had spent half an hour in cooling their heels and their tempers under the drenching rain — wet to the skin — fuming and fretting at the delay.

But even so — damped in ardour and chilled to the marrow — they were still a dangerous crowd and prudence ought to have dictated to Mademoiselle de Kernogan the wiser course of ordering her coachman Jean-Marie to head his horses back toward Herbignac the moment that the outrider reported that a mob, armed with scythes, spades and axes, held the cross-roads, and that it would be dangerous for the coach to advance any further.

Already for the past few minutes the sound of loud shouting had been heard even above the tramp of the horses and the clatter of the coach. Jean-Marie had pulled up and sent one of the outriders on ahead to see what was amiss: the man returned with very unpleasant tidings — in his opinion it certainly would be dangerous to go any further. The mob appeared bent on mischief: he had heard threats and curses all levelled against M. le duc de Kernogan — the conflagration up at Vertou was evidently a signal which would bring along a crowd of malcontents from all the neighbouring villages. He was for turning back forthwith. But Mademoiselle put her head out of

the window just then and asked what was amiss. On hearing that Jean-Marie and the postilion and outriders were inclined to be afraid of a mob of peasant lads who had assembled at the cross-roads, and were apparently threatening to do mischief, she chided them for their cowardice.

"Jean-Marie," she called scornfully to the old coachman, who had been in her father's service for close on half a century, "do you really mean to tell me that you are afraid of that rabble!"

"Why no! Mademoiselle, so please you," replied the old man, nettled in his pride by the taunt, "but the temper of the peasantry round here has been ugly of late, and 'tis your safety I have got to guard."

"'Tis my commands you have got to obey," retorted Mademoiselle with a gay little laugh which mitigated the peremptoriness of her tone. "If my father should hear that there's trouble on the road he will die of anxiety if I do not return: so whip up the horses, Jean-Marie. No one will dare to attack the coach."

"But Mademoiselle ——" remonstrated the old man.

"Ah ça!" she broke in more impatiently, "am I to be openly disobeyed? Best join that rabble, Jean-Marie, if you have no respect for my commands."

Thus twitted by Mademoiselle's sharp tongue, Jean-Marie could not help but obey. He tried to peer into the distance through the veil of blinding rain which beat against his face and stung the horses to restlessness. But the light from the coach lanterns prevented his seeing clearly into the darkness beyond. Still it seemed to him that on ahead a dense and solid mass was moving toward the coach, also that the sound of shouting and of excited humanity was considerably nearer than it had been before. No doubt the mob had perceived the lights of the coach, and was even now making towards it, with what intent Jean-Marie divined all too accurately.

But he had his orders, and, though he was an old and trusted servant, disobedience these days was not even to be thought of. So he did as he was bid. He whipped up his horses, which were high-spirited and answered to the lash with a bound and a plunge forward. Mlle. de Kernogan leaned back on the cushions of the coach. She was satisfied that Jean-Marie had done as he was told, and she was not in the least afraid.

But less than five minutes later she had a rude awakening. The coach gave a terrific lurch. The horses reared and plunged, there was a deafening clamour all around: men were shouting and cursing: there was the clash of wood and iron and the cracking of whips: the tramp of horses' hoofs in the soft ground, and the dull thud of human bodies falling in the mud, followed by loud cries of pain. There was the sudden crash of broken glass, the coach lanterns had been seized and broken: it seemed to Yvonne de Kernogan that out of the darkness faces distorted with fury were peering at her through the window-panes. But through all the confusion, the coach kept moving on. Jean-Marie stuck to his post, as did also the postilion and the four outriders, and with whip and tongue they urged their horses to break through the crowd regardless of human lives, knocking and trampling down men and lads heedless of curses and blasphemies which were hurled on them and on the occupants of the coach, whoever they might be.

The next moment, however, the coach came to a sudden halt, and a wild cry of triumph drowned the groans of the injured and the dying.

"Kernogan! Kernogan!" was shouted from every side.

"Adet! Adet!"

"You limbs of Satan," cried Jean-Marie, "you'll rue this night's work and weep tears of blood for the rest of your lives. Let me tell you that! Mademoiselle is in the coach. When M. le duc hears of this, there will be work for the hangman...."

"Mademoiselle in the coach," broke in a hoarse voice with a rough tone of command. "Let's look at her...."

"Aye! Aye! let's have a look at Mademoiselle," came with a volley of objurgations and curses from the crowd.

"You devils — you would dare?" protested Jean-Marie.

Within the coach Yvonne de Kernogan hardly dared to breathe. She sat bolt upright, her cape held tightly round her shoulders: her eyes dilated now with excitement, if not with fear, were fixed upon the darkness beyond the window-panes. She could see nothing, but she *felt* the presence of that hostile crowd who had succeeded in over-powering Jean-Marie and were intent on doing her harm.

But she belonged to a caste which never reckoned cowardice amongst its many faults. During these few moments when she knew that her life hung on the merest thread of chance, she neither screamed nor fainted but sat rigidly still, her heart beating in unison with the agonising seconds which went so fatefully by. And even now, when the carriage door was torn violently open and even through the darkness she discerned vaguely the forms of these avowed enemies close beside her, and anon felt a rough hand seize her wrist, she did not move, but said quite calmly, with hardly a tremor in her voice:

"Who are you? and what do you want?"

An outburst of harsh and ironical laughter came in response.

"Who are we, my fine lady?" said the foremost man in the crowd, he who had seized her wrist and was half in and half out of the coach at this moment, "we are the men who throughout our lives have toiled and starved whilst you and such as you travel in fine coaches and eat your fill. What we want? Why, just the spectacle of such a fine lady as you are being knocked down into the mud just as our wives and daughters are if they happen to be in the way when your coach is passing. Isn't that it, mes amis?"

"Aye! aye!" they replied, shouting lustily. "Into the mud with the fine lady. Out with her, Adet. Let's have a look at Mademoiselle how she will look with her face in the mud. Out with her, quick!"

But the man who was still half in and half out of the coach, and who had hold of Mademoiselle's wrist did not obey his mates immediately. He drew her nearer to him and suddenly threw his rough, begrimed arms round her, and with one hand pulled back her hood, then placing two fingers under her chin, he jerked it up till her face was level with his own.

Yvonne de Kernogan was certainly no coward, but at the loathsome contact of this infuriated and vengeful creature, she was overcome with such a hideous sense of fear that for the moment consciousness almost left her: not completely alas! for though she could not distinguish his face she could feel his hot breath upon her cheeks, she could smell the nauseating odour of his damp clothes, and she could hear his hoarse mutterings as for the space of a few seconds he held her thus close to him in an embrace which to her was far more awesome than that of death.

"And just to punish you, my fine lady," he said in a whisper which sent a shudder of horror right through her, "to punish you for what you are, the brood of tyrants, proud, disdainful, a budding tyrant yourself, to punish you for every misery my mother and sister have had to endure, for every luxury which you have enjoyed, I will kiss you on the lips and the cheeks and just between your white throat and chin and never as long as you live if you die this night or live to be an hundred will you be able to wash off those kisses showered upon you by one who hates and loathes you — a miserable peasant whom you despise and who in your sight is lower far than your dogs."

Yvonne, with eyes closed, hardly breathed, but through the veil of semi-consciousness which mercifully wrapped her senses, she could still hear those awful words, and feel the pollution of those loathsome kisses with which — true to his threat — this creature — half man, wholly devil, whom she could not see, but whom she hated and feared as she would Satan himself — now covered her face and throat.

After that she remembered nothing more. Consciousness mercifully forsook her altogether. When she recovered her senses, she was within the precincts of the castle: a confused murmur of voices reached her ears, and her father's arms were round her. Gradually she distinguished what was being said: she gathered the threads of the story which Jean-Marie and the postilion and outriders were hastily unravelling in response to M. le duc's commands.

These men of course knew nothing of the poignant little drama which had been enacted inside the coach. All they knew was that they had been surrounded by a rough crowd — a hundred or so strong — who brandished scythes and spades, that they had made valiant efforts to break through the crowd by whipping up their horses, but that suddenly some of those devils more plucky than the others seized the horses by their bits and rendered poor Jean-Marie quite helpless. He thought then that all would be up with the lot of them and was thinking of scrambling down from his box in order to protect Mademoiselle with his body, and the pistols which he had in the boot, when happily for every one concerned, he heard in the distance — above the clatter which that abominable rabble was making, the hurried tramp of horses. At once he jumped to the conclusion that these could be none other than a company of soldiers sent by M. le duc. This spurred him to a fresh effort, and gave him a new idea. To Carmail the postilion who had a pistol in his holster he gave the peremptory order to fire a shot into the air or into the crowd, Jean-Marie cared not which. This Carmail did, and at once the horses, already maddened by the crowd, plunged and reared wildly, shaking themselves free. Jean-Marie, however, had them well in hand, and from far away there came the cries of encouragement from the advancing horsemen who were bearing down on them full tilt. The next moment there was a general mêlée. Jean-Marie saw nothing save his horses' heads, but the outriders declared that men were trampled down like flies all around, while others vanished into the night.

What happened after that none of the men knew or cared. Jean-Marie galloped his horses all the way to the castle and never drew rein until the precincts were reached.

VI

Had M. de Kernogan had his way and a free hand to mete out retributive justice in the proportion that he desired, there is no doubt that the hangman of Nantes would have been kept exceedingly busy. As it was a number of arrests were effected the following day — half the manhood of the countryside was implicated in the aborted *Jacquerie* and the city prison was not large enough to hold it all.

A court of justice presided over by M. le duc, and composed of half a dozen men who were directly or indirectly in his employ, pronounced summary sentences on the rioters which were to have been carried out as soon as the necessary arrangements for such wholesale executions could be made. Nantes was turned into a city of wailing; peasant-women — mothers, sisters, daughters, wives of the condemned, trooped from their villages into the city, loudly calling on M. le duc for mercy, besieging the improvised court-house, the prison gates, the town residence of M. le duc, the palace of the bishop: they pushed their way into the courtyards and the very corridors of those buildings — flunkys could not cope with them — they fought with fists and elbows for the right to make a direct appeal to the liege-lord who had power of life and death over their men.

The municipality of Nantes held aloof from this distressful state of things, and the town councillors, the city functionaries and their families shut themselves up in their houses in order to avoid being a witness to the heartrending scenes which took place uninterruptedly round the court-house and the prison. The mayor himself was powerless to interfere, but it is averred that he sent a secret courier to Paris to M. de Mirabeau, who was known to be a personal friend of his, with a detailed account of the *Jacquerie* and of the terrible measures of reprisal contemplated by M. le duc de Kernogan, together with an earnest request that pressure from the highest possible quarters be brought to bear upon His Grace so that he should abate something of his vengeful rigours.

Poor King Louis, who in these days was being terrorised by the National Assembly and swept off his feet by the eloquence of M. de Mirabeau, was only too ready to make concessions to the democratic spirit of the day. He also desired his noblesse to be equally ready with such concessions. He sent a personal letter to M. le duc, not only asking him, but commanding him, to show grace and mercy to a lot of misguided peasant lads whose loyalty and adherence — he urged — might be won by a gracious and unexpected act of clemency.

The King's commands could not in the nature of things be disobeyed: the same stroke of the pen which was about to send half a hundred young countrymen to the gallows granted them M. le duc's gracious pardon and their liberty: the only exception to this general amnesty being Pierre Adet, the son of the miller. M. le duc's servants had deposed to seeing him pull open the door of the coach and stand for some time half in and half out of the carriage, obviously trying to terrorise Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle refused either to corroborate or to deny this statement, but she had arrived fainting at the gate of the château, and she had been very ill ever since. She had sustained a serious shock to her nerves, so the doctor hastily summoned from Paris had averred, and it was supposed that she had lost all recollection of the terrible incidents of that night.

But M. le duc was satisfied that it was Pierre Adet's presence inside the coach which had brought about his daughter's mysterious illness and that heartrending look of nameless horror which had dwelt in her eyes ever since. Therefore with regard to that man M. le duc remained implacable and as a concession to a father's outraged feelings both the mayor of Nantes and the city functionaries accepted Adet's condemnation without a murmur of dissent.

The sentence of death finally passed upon Pierre, the son of Jean Adet, miller of Vertou, could not, however, be executed, for the simple reason that Pierre had disappeared and that the most rigorous search instituted in the neighbourhood and for miles around failed to bring him to justice. One of the outriders who had been in attendance on Mademoiselle on that fateful night declared that when Jean-Marie finally whipped up his horses at the approach of the party of soldiers, Adet fell backwards from the step of the carriage and was run over by the hind wheels and instantly killed. But his body was never found among the score or so which were left lying there in the mud of the road until the women and old men came to seek their loved ones among the dead.

Pierre Adet had disappeared. But M. le duc's vengeance had need of a prey. The outrage which he was quite convinced had been perpetrated against his daughter must be punished by death — if not by the death of the chief offender, then by that of the one who stood nearest to him. Thus was Jean Adet the miller dragged from his home and cast into prison. Was he not implicated himself in the riots? Camille the bailiff had seen and heard him among the insurgents on the hillock that night. At first it was stated that he would be held as hostage for the reappearance of his son. But Pierre Adet had evidently fled the countryside: he was obviously ignorant of the terrible fate which his own folly had brought upon his father. Many thought that he had gone to seek his fortune in Paris where his talents and erudition would ensure him a good place in the present mad rush for equality amongst all men. Certain it is that he did not return and that with merciless hate and vengeful relentlessness M. le duc de Kernogan had Jean Adet hanged for a supposed crime said to be committed by his son.

Jean Adet died protesting his innocence. But the outburst of indignation and revolt aroused by this crying injustice was swamped by the torrent of the revolution which, gathering force by these very acts of tyranny and of injustice, soon swept innocent and guilty alike into a vast whirlpool of blood and shame and tears.

BOOK I
BATH
1793
CHAPTER I
THE MOOR

I

Silence. Loneliness. Desolation.

And the darkness of late afternoon in November, when the fog from the Bristol Channel has laid its pall upon moor and valley and hill: the last grey glimmer of a wintry sunset has faded in the west: earth and sky are wrapped in the gloomy veils of oncoming night. Some little way ahead a tiny light flickers feebly.

“Surely we cannot be far now.”

“A little more patience, Mounzeer. Twenty minutes and we be there.”

“Twenty minutes, mordieu. And I have ridden since the morning. And you tell me it was not far.”

“Not far, Mounzeer. But we be not ‘orzemen either of us. We doan’t travel very fast.”

“How can I ride fast on this heavy beast? And in this *satane* mud. My horse is up to his knees in it. And I am wet — ah! wet to my skin in this *sacré* fog of yours.”

The other made no reply. Indeed he seemed little inclined for conversation: his whole attention appeared to be riveted on the business of keeping in his saddle, and holding his horse’s head turned in the direction in which he wished it to go: he was riding a yard or two ahead of his companion, and it did not need any assurance on his part that he was no horseman: he sat very loosely in his saddle, his broad shoulders bent, his head thrust forward, his knees turned out, his hands clinging alternately to the reins and to the pommel with that ludicrous inconsequent gesture peculiar to those who are wholly unaccustomed to horse exercise.

His attitude, in fact, as well as the promiscuous set of clothes which he wore — a labourer’s smock, a battered high hat, threadbare corduroys and fisherman’s boots — at once suggested the loafer, the do-nothing who hangs round the yards of half-way houses and posting inns on the chance of earning a few coppers by an easy job which does not entail too much exertion on his part and which will not take him too far from his favourite haunts. When he spoke — which was not often — the soft burr in the pronunciation of the sibilants betrayed the Westcountryman.

His companion, on the other hand, was obviously a stranger: high of stature, and broadly built, his wide shoulders and large hands and feet, his square head set upon a short thick neck, all bespoke the physique of a labouring man, whilst his town-made clothes — his heavy caped coat, admirably tailored, his buckskin breeches and boots of fine leather — suggested, if not absolutely the gentleman, at any rate one belonging to the well-to-do classes. Though obviously not quite so inexperienced in the saddle as the other man appeared to be, he did not look very much at home in the saddle either: he held himself very rigid and upright and squared his shoulders with a visible effort at seeming at ease, like a townsman out for a constitutional on the fashionable promenade of his own city, or a cavalry subaltern but lately emerged from a riding school. He spoke English quite fluently, even colloquially at times, but with a marked Gallic accent.

II

The road along which the two cavaliers were riding was unspeakably lonely and desolate — an offshoot from the main Bath to Weston road. It had been quite a good secondary road once. The accounts of the county administration under date 1725 go to prove that it was completed in that year at considerable expense and with stone brought over for the purpose all the way from Draycott quarries, and for twenty years after that a coach used to ply along it between Chelwood and Redhill as well as two or three carriers, and of course there was all the traffic in connexion with the Stanton markets and the Norton Fairs. But that was nigh on fifty years ago now, and somehow — once the mail-coach was discontinued — it had never seemed worth while to keep the road in decent repair. It had gone from bad to worse since then, and travelling on it these days either ahorse or afoot had become very unpleasant. It was full of ruts and crevasses and knee-deep in mud, as the stranger had very appositely remarked, and the stone parapet which bordered it on either side, and which had once given it such an air of solidity and of value, was broken down in very many places and threatened soon to disappear altogether.

The country round was as lonely and desolate as the road. And that sense of desolation seemed to pervade the very atmosphere right through the darkness which had descended on upland and valley and hill. Though nothing now could be seen through the gloom and the mist, the senses were conscious that even in broad daylight there would be nothing to see. Loneliness dwelt in the air as well as upon the moor. There were no homesteads for miles around, no cattle grazing, no pastures, no hedges, nothing — just arid wasteland with here and there a group of stunted trees or an isolated yew, and tracts of rough, coarse grass not nearly good enough for cattle to eat.

There are vast stretches of upland equally desolate in many parts of Europe — notably in Northern Spain — but in England, where they are rare, they seem to gain an additional air of loneliness through the very life which pulsates in their vicinity. This bit of Somersetshire was one of them in this year of grace 1793. Despite the proximity of Bath and its fashionable life, its gaieties and vitality, distant only a little over twenty miles, and of Bristol distant less than thirty, it had remained wild and forlorn, almost savage in its grim isolation, primitive in the grandeur of its solitude.

III

The road at the point now reached by the travellers begins to slope in a gentle gradient down to the level of the Chew, a couple of miles further on: it was midway down this slope that the only sign of living humanity could be perceived in that tiny light which glimmered

persistently. The air itself under its mantle of fog had become very still, only the water of some tiny moorland stream murmured feebly in its stony bed ere it lost its entity in the bosom of the river far away.

"Five more minutes and we be at th' Bottom Inn," quoth the man who was ahead in response to another impatient ejaculation from his companion.

"If we don't break our necks meanwhile in this confounded darkness," retorted the other, for his horse had just stumbled and the inexperienced rider had been very nearly pitched over into the mud.

"I be as anxious to arrive as you are, Mounzeer," observed the countryman laconically.

"I thought you knew the way," muttered the stranger.

"Ave I not brought you safely through the darkness?" retorted the other; "you was pretty well ztranded at Chelwood, Mounzeer, or I be much mistaken. Who else would 'ave brought you out 'ere at this time o' night, I'd like to know — and in this weather too? You wanted to get to th' Bottom Inn and didn't know 'ow to zet about it: none o' the gaffers up to Chelwood 'peared eager to 'elp you when I come along. Well, I've brought you to th' Bottom Inn and.... Whoa! Whoa! my beauty! Whoa, confound you! Whoa!"

And for the next moment or two the whole of his attention had perforce to be concentrated on the business of sticking to his saddle whilst he brought his fagged-out, ill-conditioned nag to a standstill.

The little glimmer of light had suddenly revealed itself in the shape of a lanthorn hung inside the wooden porch of a small house which had loomed out of the darkness and the fog. It stood at an angle of the road where a narrow lane had its beginnings ere it plunged into the moor beyond and was swallowed up by the all-enveloping gloom. The house was small and ugly; square like a box and built of grey stone, its front flush with the road, its rear flanked by several small outbuildings. Above the porch hung a plain sign-board bearing the legend: "The Bottom Inn" in white letters upon a black ground: to right and left of the porch there was a window with closed shutters, and on the floor above two more windows — also shuttered — completed the architectural features of the Bottom Inn.

It was uncompromisingly ugly and uninviting, for beyond the faint glimmer of the lanthorn only one or two narrow streaks of light filtrated through the chinks of the shutters.

IV

The travellers, after some difference of opinion with their respective horses, contrived to pull up and to dismount without any untoward accident. The stranger looked about him, peering into the darkness. The place indeed appeared dismal and inhospitable enough: its solitary aspect suggested footpads and the abode of cut-throats. The silence of the moor, the pall of mist and gloom that hung over upland and valley sent a shiver through his spine.

"You are sure this is the place?" he queried.

"Can't ye zee the zign?" retorted the other gruffly.

"Can you hold the horses while I go in?"

"I doan't know as 'ow I can, Mounzeer. I've never 'eld two 'orzes all at once. Suppose they was to start kickin' or thought o' runnin' away?"

"Running away, you fool!" muttered the stranger, whose temper had evidently suffered grievously during the weary, cold journey from Chelwood. "I'll break your *satané* head if anything happens to the beasts. How can I get back to Bath save the way I came? Do you think I want to spend the night in this God-forsaken hole?"

Without waiting to hear any further protests from the lout, he turned into the porch and with his riding whip gave three consecutive raps against the door of the inn, followed by two more. The next moment there was the sound of a rattling of bolts and chains, the door was cautiously opened and a timid voice queried:

"Is it Mounzeer?"

"Pardieu! Who else?" growled the stranger. "Open the door, woman. I am perished with cold."

With an unceremonious kick he pushed the door further open and strode in. A woman was standing in the dimly lighted passage. As the stranger walked in she bobbed him a respectful curtesy.

"It is all right, Mounzeer," she said; "the Captain's in the coffee-room. He came over from Bristol early this afternoon."

"No one else here, I hope," he queried curtly.

"No one, zir. It ain't their hour not yet. You'll 'ave the 'ouse to yourself till after midnight. After that there'll be a bustle, I reckon. Two shiploads come into Watchet last night — brandy and cloth, Mounzeer, so the Captain says, and worth a mint o' money. The pack 'orzes will be through yere in the small hours."

"That's all right, then. Send me in a bite and a mug of hot ale."

"I'll see to it, Mounzeer."

"And stay — have you some sort of stabling where the man can put the two horses up for an hour's rest?"

"Aye, aye, zir."

"Very well then, see to that too: and see that the horses get a feed and a drink and give the man something to eat."

"Very good, Mounzeer. This way, zir. I'll see the man presently. Straight down the passage, zir. The coffee-room is on the right. The Captain's there, waiting for ye."

She closed the front door carefully, then followed the stranger to the door of the coffee-room. Outside an anxious voice was heard muttering a string of inconsequent and wholly superfluous "Whoa's!" Of a truth the two wearied nags were only too anxious for a little rest.

CHAPTER II

THE BOTTOM INN

I

A man was sitting, huddled up in the ingle-nook of the small coffee-room, sipping hot ale from a tankard which he had in his hand.

Anything less suggestive of a rough sea-faring life than his appearance it would be difficult to conceive; and how he came by the appellation "the Captain" must for ever remain a mystery. He was small and spare, with thin delicate face and slender hands: though dressed in very rough garments, he was obviously ill at ease in them; his narrow shoulders scarcely appeared able to bear the weight of the coarsely made coat, and his thin legs did not begin to fill the big fisherman's boots which reached midway up his lean thighs. His hair was lank and plentifully sprinkled with grey: he wore it tied at the nape of the neck with a silk bow which certainly did not harmonise with the rest of his clothing. A wide-brimmed felt hat something the shape of a sailor's, but with higher crown — of the shape worn by the peasantry in Brittany — lay on the bench beside him.

When the stranger entered he had greeted him curtly, speaking in French.

The room was inexpressibly stuffy, and reeked of the fumes of stale tobacco, stale victuals and stale beer; but it was warm, and the stranger, stiff to the marrow and wet to the skin, uttered an exclamation of well-being as he turned to the hearth, wherein a bright fire burned cheerily. He had put his hat down when first he entered and had divested himself of his big coat: now he held one foot and then the other to the blaze and tried to infuse new life into his numbed hands.

"The Captain" took scant notice of his comings and goings. He did not attempt to help him off with his coat, nor did he make an effort to add another log to the fire. He sat silent and practically motionless, save when from time to time he took a sip out of his mug of ale. But whenever the new-comer came within his immediate circle of vision he shot a glance at the latter's elegant attire — the well-cut coat, the striped waistcoat, the boots of fine leather — the glance was quick and comprehensive and full of scorn, a flash that lasted only an instant and was at once veiled again by the droop of the flaccid lids which hid the pale, keen eyes.

"When the woman has brought me something to eat and drink," the stranger said after a while, "we can talk. I have a good hour to spare, as those miserable nags must have some rest."

He too spoke in French and with an air of authority, not to say arrogance, which caused "the Captain's" glance of scorn to light up with an added gleam of hate and almost of cruelty. But he made no remark and continued to sip his ale in silence, and for the next half-hour the two men took no more notice of one another, just as if they had never travelled all those miles and come to this desolate spot for the sole purpose of speaking with one another. During the course of that half-hour the woman brought in a dish of mutton stew, a chunk of bread, a piece of cheese and a jug of spiced ale, and placed them on the table: all of these good things the stranger consumed with an obviously keen appetite. When he had eaten and drunk his fill, he rose from the table, drew a bench into the ingle-nook and sat down so that his profile only was visible to his friend "the Captain."

"Now, citizen Chauvelin," he said with an attempt at ease and familiarity not unmixed with condescension, "I am ready for your news."

II

Chauvelin had winced perceptibly both at the condescension and the familiarity. It was such a very little while ago that men had trembled at a look, a word from him: his silence had been wont to strike terror in quaking hearts. It was such a very little while ago that he had been president of the Committee of Public Safety, all powerful, the right hand of citizen Robespierre, the master sleuth-hound who could track an unfortunate "suspect" down to his most hidden lair, before whose keen, pale eyes the innermost secrets of a soul stood revealed, who guessed at treason ere it was wholly born, who scented treachery ere it was formulated. A year ago he had with a word sent scores of men, women and children to the guillotine — he had with a sign brought the whole machinery of the ruthless Committee to work against innocent or guilty alike on mere suspicion, or to gratify his own hatred against all those whom he considered to be the enemies of that bloody revolution which he had helped to make. Now his presence, his silence, had not even the power to ruffle the self-assurance of an upstart.

But in the hard school both of success and of failure through which he had passed during the last decade, there was one lesson which Armand once Marquis de Chauvelin had learned to the last letter, and that was the lesson of self-control. He had winced at the other's familiarity, but neither by word nor gesture did he betray what he felt.

"I can tell you," he merely said quite curtly, "all I have to say in far less time than it has taken you to eat and drink, citizen Adet...."

But suddenly, at sound of that name, the other had put a warning hand on Chauvelin's arm, even as he cast a rapid, anxious look all round the narrow room.

"Hush, man!" he murmured hurriedly, "you know quite well that that name must never be pronounced here in England. I am Martin-Roget now," he added, as he shook off his momentary fright with equal suddenness, and once more resumed his tone of easy condescension, "and try not to forget it."

Chauvelin without any haste quietly freed his arm from the other's grasp. His pale face was quite expressionless, only the thin lips were drawn tightly over the teeth now, and a curious hissing sound escaped faintly from them as he said:

"I'll try and remember, citizen, that here in England you are an aristo, the same as all these confounded English whom may the devil sweep into a bottomless sea."

Martin-Roget gave a short, complacent laugh.

"Ah," he said lightly, "no wonder you hate them, citizen Chauvelin. You too were an aristo here in England once — not so very long ago, I am thinking — special envoy to His Majesty King George, what? — until failure to bring one of these *satané* Britishers to book

made you ... er ... well, made you what you are now.”

He drew up his tall, broad figure as he spoke and squared his massive shoulders as he looked down with a fatuous smile and no small measure of scorn on the hunched-up little figure beside him. It had seemed to him that something in the nature of a threat had crept into Chauvelin’s attitude, and he, still flushed with his own importance, his immeasurable belief in himself, at once chose to measure his strength against this man who was the personification of failure and disgrace — this man whom so many people had feared for so long and whom it might not be wise to defy even now.

“No offence meant, citizen Chauvelin,” he added with an air of patronage which once more made the other wince. “I had no wish to wound your susceptibilities. I only desired to give you timely warning that what I do here is no one’s concern, and that I will brook interference and criticism from no man.”

And Chauvelin, who in the past had oft with a nod sent a man to the guillotine, made no reply to this arrogant taunt. His small figure seemed to shrink still further within itself: and anon he passed his thin, claw-like hand over his face as if to obliterate from its surface any expression which might war with the utter humility wherewith he now spoke.

“Nor was there any offence meant on my part, citizen Martin-Roget,” he said suavely. “Do we not both labour for the same end? The glory of the Republic and the destruction of her foes?”

Martin-Roget gave a sigh of satisfaction. The battle had been won: he felt himself strong again — stronger than before through that very act of deference paid to him by the once all-powerful Chauvelin. Now he was quite prepared to be condescending and jovial once again:

“Of course, of course,” he said pleasantly, as he once more bent his tall figure to the fire. “We are both servants of the Republic, and I may yet help you to retrieve your past failures, citizen, by giving you an active part in the work I have in hand. And now,” he added in a calm, business-like manner, the manner of a master addressing a servant who has been found at fault and is taken into favour again, “let me hear your news.”

“I have made all the arrangements about the ship,” said Chauvelin quietly.

“Ah! that is good news indeed. What is she?”

“She is a Dutch ship. Her master and crew are all Dutch....”

“That’s a pity. A Danish master and crew would have been safer.”

“I could not come across any Danish ship willing to take the risks,” said Chauvelin dryly.

“Well! And what about this Dutch ship then?”

“She is called the *Hollandia* and is habitually engaged in the sugar trade: but her master does a lot of contraband — more than fair trading, I imagine: anyway, he is willing for the sum you originally named to take every risk and incidentally to hold his tongue about the whole business.”

“For two thousand francs?”

“Yes.”

“And he will run the *Hollandia* into Le Croisic?”

“When you command.”

“And there is suitable accommodation on board her for a lady and her woman?”

“I don’t know what you call a lady,” said Chauvelin with a sarcastic tone, which the other failed or was unwilling to note, “and I don’t know what you call a lady. The accommodation available on board the *Hollandia* will be sufficient for two men and two women.”

“And her master’s name?” queried Martin-Roget.

“Some outlandish Dutch name,” replied Chauvelin. “It is spelt K U Y P E R. The devil only knows how it is pronounced.”

“Well! And does Captain K U Y P E R understand exactly what I want?”

“He says he does. The *Hollandia* will put into Portishead on the last day of this month. You and your guests can get aboard her any day after that you choose. She will be there at your disposal, and can start within an hour of your getting aboard. Her master will have all his papers ready. He will have a cargo of West Indian sugar on board — destination Amsterdam, consignee Mynheer van Smeer — everything perfectly straight and square. French aristos, *émigrés* on board on their way to join the army of the Princes. There will be no difficulty in England.”

“And none in Le Croisic. The man is running no risks.”

“He thinks he is. France does not make Dutch ships and Dutch crews exactly welcome just now, does she?”

“Certainly not. But in Le Croisic and with citizen Adet on board....”

“I thought that name was not to be mentioned here,” retorted Chauvelin dryly.

“You are right, citizen,” whispered the other, “it escaped me and....”

Already he had jumped to his feet, his face suddenly pale, his whole manner changed from easy, arrogant self-assurance to uncertainty and obvious dread. He moved to the window, trying to subdue the sound of his footsteps upon the uneven floor.

III

“Are you afraid of eavesdroppers, citizen Roget?” queried Chauvelin with a shrug of his narrow shoulders.

“No. There is no one there. Only a lout from Chelwood who brought me here. The people of the house are safe enough. They have plenty of secrets of their own to keep.”

He was obviously saying all this in order to reassure himself, for there was no doubt that his fears were on the alert. With a febrile gesture he unfastened the shutters, and pushed them open, peering out into the night.

“Hallo!” he called.

But he received no answer.

“It has started to rain,” he said more calmly. “I imagine that lout has found shelter in an outhouse with the horses.”

"Very likely," commented Chauvelin laconically.

"Then if you have nothing more to tell me," quoth Martin-Roget, "I may as well think about getting back. Rain or no rain, I want to be in Bath before midnight."

"Ball or supper-party at one of your duchesses?" queried the other with a sneer. "I know them."

To this Martin-Roget vouchsafed no reply.

"How are things at Nantes?" he asked.

"Splendid! Carrier is like a wild beast let loose. The prisons are over-full: the surplus of accused, condemned and suspect fills the cellars and warehouses along the wharf. Priests and suchlike trash are kept on disused galliots up stream. The guillotine is never idle, and friend Carrier fearing that she might give out — get tired, what? — or break down — has invented a wonderful way of getting rid of shoals of undesirable people at one magnificent swoop. You have heard tell of it no doubt."

"Yes. I have heard of it," remarked the other curtly.

"He began with a load of priests. Requisitioned an old barge. Ordered Baudet the shipbuilder to construct half a dozen portholes in her bottom. Baudet demurred: he could not understand what the order could possibly mean. But Foucaud and Lamberty — Carrier's agents — you know them — explained that the barge would be towed down the Loire and then up one of the smaller navigable streams which it was feared the royalists were preparing to use as a way for making a descent upon Nantes, and that the idea was to sink the barge in midstream in order to obstruct the passage of their army. Baudet, satisfied, put five of his men to the task. Everything was ready on the 16th of last month. I know the woman Pichot, who keeps a small tavern opposite La Sécherie. She saw the barge glide up the river toward the galliot where twenty-five priests of the diocese of Nantes had been living for the past two months in the company of rats and other vermin as noxious as themselves. Most lovely moonlight there was that night. The Loire looked like a living ribbon of silver. Foucaud and Lamberty directed operations, and Carrier had given them full instructions. They tied the calotins up two and two and transferred them from the galliot to the barge. It seems they were quite pleased to go. Had enough of the rats, I presume. The only thing they didn't like was being searched. Some had managed to secrete silver ornaments about their person when they were arrested. Crucifixes and such like. They didn't like to part with these, it seems. But Foucaud and Lamberty relieved them of everything but the necessary clothing, and they didn't want much of that, seeing whither they were going. Foucaud made a good pile, so they say. Self-seeking, avaricious brute! He'll learn the way to one of Carrier's barges too one day, I'll bet."

He rose and with quick footsteps moved to the table. There was some ale left in the jug which the woman had brought for Martin-Roget a while ago. Chauvelin poured the contents of it down his throat. He had talked uninterruptedly, in short, jerky sentences, without the slightest expression of horror at the atrocities which he recounted. His whole appearance had become transfigured while he spoke. Gone was the urbane manner which he had learnt at courts long ago, gone was the last instinct of the gentleman sunk to proletarianism through stress of circumstances, or financial straits or even political convictions. The erstwhile Marquis de Chauvelin — envoy of the Republic at the Court of St. James' — had become citizen Chauvelin in deed and in fact, a part of that rabble which he had elected to serve, one of that vile crowd of bloodthirsty revolutionaries who had sullied the pure robes of Liberty and of Fraternity by spattering them with blood. Now he smacked his lips, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and burying his hands in the pockets of his breeches he stood with legs wide apart and a look of savage satisfaction settled upon his pale face. Martin-Roget had made no comment upon the narrative. He had resumed his seat by the fire and was listening attentively. Now while the other drank and paused, he showed no sign of impatience, but there was something in the look of the bent shoulders, in the rigidity of the attitude, in the large, square hands tightly clasped together which suggested the deepest interest and an intentness that was almost painful.

"I was at the woman Pichot's tavern that night," resumed Chauvelin after a while. "I saw the barge — a moving coffin, what? — gliding down stream towed by the galliot and escorted by a small boat. The floating battery at La Samaritaine challenged her as she passed, for Carrier had prohibited all navigation up or down the Loire until further notice. Foucaud, Lamberty, Fouquet and O'Sullivan the armourer were in the boat: they rowed up to the pontoon and Vailly the chief gunner of the battery challenged them once more. However, they had some sort of written authorisation from Carrier, for they were allowed to pass. Vailly remained on guard. He saw the barge glide further down stream. It seems that the moon on that time was hidden by a cloud. But the night was not dark and Vailly watched the barge till she was out of sight. She was towed past Trentemoult and Chantenay into the wide reach of the river just below Cheviré where, as you know, the Loire is nearly two thousand feet wide."

Once more he paused, looking down with grim amusement on the bent shoulders of the other man.

"Well?"

Chauvelin laughed. The query sounded choked and hoarse, whether through horror, excitement or mere impatient curiosity it were impossible to say.

"Well!" he retorted with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "I was too far up stream to see anything and Vailly saw nothing either. But he heard. So did others who happened to be on the shore close by."

"What did they hear?"

"The hammering," replied Chauvelin curtly, "when the portholes were knocked open to let in the flood of water. And the screams and yells of five and twenty drowning priests."

"Not one of them escaped, I suppose?"

"Not one."

Once more Chauvelin laughed. He had a way of laughing — just like that — in a peculiar mirthless, derisive manner, as if with joy at another man's discomfiture, at another's material or moral downfall. There is only one language in the world which has a word to express that type of mirth; the word is *Schadenfreude*.

It was Chauvelin's turn to triumph now. He had distinctly perceived the signs of an inward shudder which had gone right through Martin-Roget's spine: he had also perceived through the man's bent shoulders, his silence, his rigidity that his soul was filled with horror at the story of that abominable crime which he — Chauvelin — had so blandly retailed and that he was afraid to show the horror which he felt. And the man who is afraid can never climb the ladder of success above the man who is fearless.

IV

There was silence in the low raftered room for awhile: silence only broken by the crackling and sizzling of damp logs in the hearth, and the tap-tapping of a loosely fastened shutter which sounded weird and ghoulish like the knocking of ghosts against the window-frame. Martin-Roget bending still closer to the fire knew that Chauvelin was watching him and that Chauvelin had triumphed, for — despite failure, despite humiliation and disgrace — that man's heart and will had never softened: he had remained as merciless, as fanatical, as before and still looked upon every sign of pity and humanity for a victim of that bloody revolution — which was his child, the thing of his creation, yet worshipped by him, its creator — as a crime against patriotism and against the Republic.

And Martin-Roget fought within himself lest something he might say or do, a look, a gesture should give the other man an indication that the horrible account of a hideous crime perpetrated against twenty-five defenceless men had roused a feeling of unspeakable horror in his heart. That was the punishment of these callous makers of a ruthless revolution — that was their hell upon earth, that they were doomed to hate and to fear one another; every man feeling that the other's hand was up against him as it had been against law and order, against the guilty and the innocent, the rebel and the defenceless; every man knowing that the other was always there on the alert, ready to pounce like a beast of prey upon any victim — friend, comrade, brother — who came within reach of his hand.

Like many men stronger than himself, Pierre Adet — or Martin-Roget as he now called himself — had been drawn into the vortex of bloodshed and of tyranny out of which now he no longer had the power to extricate himself. Nor had he any wish to extricate himself. He had too many past wrongs to avenge, too much injustice on the part of Fate and Circumstance to make good, to wish to draw back now that a newly-found power had been placed in the hands of men such as he through the revolt of an entire people. The sickening sense of horror which a moment ago had caused him to shudder and to turn away in loathing from Chauvelin was only like the feeble flicker of a light before it wholly dies down — the light of something purer, early lessons of childhood, former ideals, earlier aspirations, now smothered beneath the passions of revenge and of hate.

And he would not give Chauvelin the satisfaction of seeing him wince. He was himself ashamed of his own weakness. He had deliberately thrown in his lot with these men and he was determined not to fall a victim to their denunciations and to their jealousies. So now he made a great effort to pull himself together, to bring back before his mind those memory-pictures of past tyranny and oppression which had effectually killed all sense of pity in his heart, and it was in a tone of perfect indifference which gave no loophole to Chauvelin's sneers that he asked after awhile:

"And was citizen Carrier altogether pleased with the result of his patriotic efforts?"

"Oh, quite!" replied the other. "He has no one's orders to take. He is proconsul — virtual dictator in Nantes: and he has vowed that he will purge the city from all save its most deserving citizens. The cargo of priests was followed by one of malefactors, night-birds, cut-throats and such like. That is where Carrier's patriotism shines out in all its glory. It is not only priests and aristos, you see — other miscreants are treated with equal fairness."

"Yes! I see he is quite impartial," remarked Martin-Roget coolly.

"Quite," retorted Chauvelin, as he once more sat down in the ingle-nook. And, leaning his elbows upon his knees he looked straight and deliberately into the other man's face, and added slowly: "You will have no cause to complain of Carrier's want of patriotism when you hand over your bag of birds to him."

This time Martin-Roget had obviously winced, and Chauvelin had the satisfaction of seeing that his thrust had gone home: though Martin-Roget's face was in shadow, there was something now in his whole attitude, in the clasp and unclasp of his large, square hands which indicated that the man was labouring under the stress of a violent emotion. In spite of this he managed to say quite coolly: "What do you mean exactly by that, citizen Chauvelin?"

"Oh!" replied the other, "you know well enough what I mean — I am no fool, what?... or the Revolution would have no use for me. If after my many failures she still commands my services and employs me to keep my eyes and ears open, it is because she knows that she can count on me. I do keep my eyes and ears open, citizen Adet or Martin-Roget, whatever you like to call yourself, and also my mind — and I have a way of putting two and two together to make four. There are few people in Nantes who do not know that old Jean Adet, the miller, was hanged four years ago, because his son Pierre had taken part in some kind of open revolt against the tyranny of the ci-devant duc de Kernogan, and was not there to take his punishment himself. I knew old Jean Adet.... I was on the Place du Bouffay at Nantes when he was hanged...."

But already Martin-Roget had jumped to his feet with a muttered blasphemy.

"Have done, man," he said roughly, "have done!" And he started pacing up and down the narrow room like a caged panther, snarling and showing his teeth, whilst his rough, toil-worn hands quivered with the desire to clutch an unseen enemy by the throat and to squeeze the life out of him. "Think you," he added hoarsely, "that I need reminding of that?"

"No. I do not think that, citizen," replied Chauvelin calmly, "I only desired to warn you."

"Warn me? Of what?"

Nervous, agitated, restless, Martin-Roget had once more gone back to his seat: his hands were trembling as he held them up mechanically to the blaze and his face was the colour of lead. In contrast with his restlessness Chauvelin appeared the more calm and bland.

"Why should you wish to warn me?" asked the other querulously, but with an attempt at his former over-bearing manner. "What are my affairs to you — what do you know about them?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, citizen Martin-Roget," replied Chauvelin pleasantly, "I was only indulging the fancy I spoke to you about just now of putting two and two together in order to make four. The chartering of a smuggler's craft — aristos on board her — her ostensible destination Holland — her real objective Le Croisic.... Le Croisic is now the port for Nantes and we don't bring aristos into Nantes these days for the object of providing them with a feather-bed and a competence, what?"

"And," retorted Martin-Roget quietly, "if your surmises are correct, citizen Chauvelin, what then?"

"Oh, nothing!" replied the other indifferently. "Only ... take care, citizen ... that is all."

"Take care of what?"

"Of the man who brought me, Chauvelin, to ruin and disgrace."

"Oh! I have heard of that legend before now," said Martin-Roget with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. "The man they call the Scarlet Pimpernel you mean?"

"Why, yes!"

"What have I to do with him?"

"I don't know. But remember that I myself have twice been after that man here in England; that twice he slipped through my fingers when I thought I held him so tightly that he could not possibly escape and that twice in consequence I was brought to humiliation and to shame. I am a marked man now — the guillotine will soon claim me for her future use. Your affairs, citizen, are no concern of mine, but I have marked that Scarlet Pimpernel for mine own. I won't have any blunderings on your part give him yet another triumph over us all."

Once more Martin-Roget swore one of his favourite oaths.

"By Satan and all his brood, man," he cried in a passion of fury, "have done with this interference. Have done, I say. I have nothing to do, I tell you, with your *satané* Scarlet Pimpernel. My concern is with...."

"With the duc de Kernogan," broke in Chauvelin calmly, "and with his daughter; I know that well enough. You want to be even with them over the murder of your father. I know that too. All that is your affair. But beware, I tell you. To begin with, the secrecy of your identity is absolutely essential to the success of your plan. What?"

"Of course it is. But...."

"But nevertheless, your identity is known to the most astute, the keenest enemy of the Republic."

"Impossible," asserted Martin-Roget hotly.

"The duc de Kernogan...."

"Bah! He had never the slightest suspicion of me. Think you his High and Mightiness in those far-off days ever looked twice at a village lad so that he would know him again four years later? I came into this country as an *émigré* stowed away in a smuggler's ship like a bundle of contraband goods. I have papers to prove that my name is Martin-Roget and that I am a banker from Brest. The worthy bishop of Brest — denounced to the Committee of Public Safety for treason against the Republic — was given his life and a safe conduct into Spain on the condition that he gave me — Martin-Roget — letters of personal introduction to various high-born *émigrés* in Holland, in Germany and in England. Armed with these I am invulnerable. I have been presented to His Royal Highness the Regent, and to the élite of English society in Bath. I am the friend of M. le duc de Kernogan now and the accredited suitor for his daughter's hand."

"His daughter!" broke in Chauvelin with a sneer, and his pale, keen eyes had in them a spark of malicious mockery.

Martin-Roget made no immediate retort to the sneer. A curious hot flush had spread over his forehead and his ears, leaving his cheeks wan and livid.

"What about the daughter?" reiterated Chauvelin.

"Yvonne de Kernogan has never seen Pierre Adet the miller's son," replied the other curtly. "She is now the affianced wife of Martin-Roget the millionaire banker of Brest. To-night I shall persuade M. le duc to allow my marriage with his daughter to take place within the week. I shall plead pressing business in Holland and my desire that my wife shall accompany me thither. The duke will consent and Yvonne de Kernogan will not be consulted. The day after my wedding I shall be on board the *Hollandia* with my wife and father-in-law, and together we will be on our way to Nantes where Carrier will deal with them both."

"You are quite satisfied that this plan of yours is known to no one, that no one at the present moment is aware of the fact that Pierre Adet, the miller's son, and Martin-Roget, banker of Brest, are one and the same?"

"Quite satisfied," replied Martin-Roget emphatically.

"Very well, then, let me tell you this, citizen," rejoined Chauvelin slowly and deliberately, "that in spite of what you say I am as convinced as that I am here, alive, that your real identity will be known — if it is not known already — to a gentleman who is at this present moment in Bath, and who is known to you, to me, to the whole of France as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Martin-Roget laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible!" he retorted. "Pierre Adet no longer exists ... he never existed ... much.... Anyhow, he ceased to be on that stormy day in September, 1789. Unless your pet enemy is a wizard he cannot know."

"There is nothing that my pet enemy — as you call him — cannot ferret out if he has a mind to. Beware of him, citizen Martin-Roget. Beware, I tell you."

"How can I," laughed the other contemptuously, "if I don't know who he is?"

"If you did," retorted Chauvelin, "it wouldn't help you ... much. But beware of every man you don't know; beware of every stranger you meet; trust no one; above all, follow no one. He is there where you least expect him under a disguise you would scarcely dream of."

"Tell me who he is then — since you know him — so that I may duly beware of him."

"No," rejoined Chauvelin with the same slow deliberation, "I will not tell you who he is. Knowledge in this case would be a very dangerous thing."

"Dangerous? To whom?"

"To yourself probably. To me and to the Republic most undoubtedly. No! I will not tell you who the Scarlet Pimpernel is. But take my advice, citizen Martin-Roget," he added emphatically, "go back to Paris or to Nantes and strive there to serve your country rather than run your head into a noose by meddling with things here in England, and running after your own schemes of revenge."

"My own schemes of revenge!" exclaimed Martin-Roget with a hoarse cry that was like a snarl.... It seemed as if he wanted to say something more, but that the words choked him even before they reached his lips. The hot flush died down from his forehead and his face was once more the colour of lead. He took up a log from the corner of the hearth and threw it with a savage, defiant gesture into the fire.

Somewhere in the house a clock struck nine.

V

Martin-Roget waited until the last echo of the gong had died away, then he said very slowly and very quietly:

"Forgo my own schemes of revenge? Can you even remotely guess, citizen Chauvelin, what it would mean to a man of my temperament and of my calibre to give up that for which I have toiled and striven for the past four years? Think of what I was on that day when a conglomeration of adverse circumstances turned our proposed expedition against the château de Kernogan into a disaster for our village lads, and a triumph for the duc. I was knocked down and crushed all but to death by the wheels of Mlle. de Kernogan's coach. I managed to crawl in the mud and the cold and the rain, on my hands and knees, hurt, bleeding, half dead, as far as the presbytery of Vertou where the *curé* kept me hidden at risk of his own life for two days until I was able to crawl farther away out of sight. The *curé* did not know, I did not know then of the devilish revenge which the duc de Kernogan meant to wreak against my father. The news reached me when it was all over and I had worked my way to Paris with the few sous in my pocket which that good *curé* had given me, earning bed and bread as I went along. I was an ignorant lout when I arrived in Paris. I had been one of the *ci-devant* Kernogan's labourers — his chattel, what? — little better or somewhat worse off than a slave. There I heard that my father had been foully murdered — hung for a crime which I was supposed to have committed, for which I had not even been tried. Then the change in me began. For four years I starved in a garret, toiling like a galley-slave with my hands and muscles by day and at my books by night. And what am I now? I have worked at books, at philosophy, at science: I am a man of education. I can talk and discuss with the best of those *d — d aristos* who flaunt their caprices and their mincing manners in the face of the outraged democracy of two continents. I speak English — almost like a native — and Danish and German too. I can quote English poets and criticise M. de Voltaire. I am an aristo, what? For this I have worked, citizen Chauvelin — day and night — oh! those nights! how I have slaved to make myself what I now am! And all for the one object — the sole object without which existence would have been absolutely unendurable. That object guided me, helped me to bear and to toil, it cheered and comforted me! To be even one day with the duc de Kernogan and with his daughter! to be their master! to hold them at my mercy!... to destroy or pardon as I choose!... to be the arbiter of their fate!... I have worked for four years: now my goal is in sight, and you talk glibly of forgoing my own schemes of revenge! Believe me, citizen Chauvelin," he concluded, "it would be easier for me to hold my right hand into those flames until it hath burned to a cinder than to forgo the hope of that vengeance which has eaten into my soul. It would hurt much less."

He had spoken thus at great length, but with extraordinary restraint. Never once did he raise his voice or indulge in gesture. He spoke in even, monotonous tones, like one who is reciting a lesson; and he sat straight in front of the fire, his elbow on his knee, his chin resting in his hand and his eyes fixed upon the flames.

Chauvelin had listened in perfect silence. The scorn, the resentful anger, the ill-concealed envy of the fallen man for the successful upstart had died out of his glance. Martin-Roget's story, the intensity of feeling betrayed in that absolute, outward calm had caused a chord of sympathy to vibrate in the other's atrophied heart. How well he understood that vibrant passion of hate, that longing to exact an eye for an eye, an outrage for an outrage! Was not his own life given over now to just such a longing? — a mad aching desire to be even once with that hated enemy, that maddening, mocking, elusive Scarlet Pimpernel who had fooled and baffled him so often?

VI

Some few moments had gone by since Martin-Roget's harsh, monotonous voice had ceased to echo through the low raftered room: silence had fallen between the two men — there was indeed nothing more to say; the one had unburthened his over-full heart and the other had understood. They were of a truth made to understand one another, and the silence between them betokened sympathy.

Around them all was still, the stillness of a mist-laden night; in the house no one stirred: the shutter even had ceased to creak; only the crackling of the wood fire broke that silence which soon became oppressive.

Martin-Roget was the first to rouse himself from this trance-like state wherein memory was holding such ruthless sway: he brought his hands sharply down on his knees, turned to look for a moment on his companion, gave a short laugh and finally rose, saying briskly the while:

"And now, citizen, I shall have to bid you adieu and make my way back to Bath. The nags have had the rest they needed and I cannot spend the night here."

He went to the door and opening it called a loud "Hallo, there!"

The same woman who had waited on him on his arrival came slowly down the stairs in response.

"The man with the horses," commanded Martin-Roget peremptorily. "Tell him I'll be ready in two minutes."

He returned to the room and proceeded to struggle into his heavy coat, Chauvelin as before making no attempt to help him. He sat once more huddled up in the ingle-nook hugging his elbows with his thin white hands. There was a smile half scornful, but not wholly dissatisfied around his bloodless lips. When Martin-Roget was ready to go he called out quietly after him:

"The *Hollandia* remember! At Portishead on the last day of the month. Captain K U Y P E R."

"Quite right," replied Martin-Roget laconically. "I'm not like to forget."

He then picked up his hat and riding whip and went out.

VII

Outside in the porch he found the woman bending over the recumbent figure of his guide.

"He be asleep, Mounzeer," she said placidly, "fast asleep, I do believe."

"Asleep?" cried Martin-Roget roughly, "we'll soon see about waking him up."

He gave the man a violent kick with the toe of his boot. The man groaned, stretched himself, turned over and rubbed his eyes. The light of the swinging lanthorn showed him the wrathful face of his employer. He struggled to his feet very quickly after that.

"Stir yourself, man," cried Martin-Roget savagely, as he gripped the fellow by the shoulder and gave him a vigorous shaking. "Bring the horses along now, and don't keep me waiting, or there'll be trouble."

"All right, Mounzeer, all right," muttered the man placidly, as he shook himself free from the uncomfortable clutch on his shoulder and leisurely made his way out of the porch.

"Haven't you got a boy or a man who can give that lout a hand with those *sacré* horses?" queried Martin-Roget impatiently. "He hardly knows a horse's head from its tail."

"No, zir, I've no one to-night," replied the woman gently. "My man and my son they be gone down to Watchet to 'elp with the cargo and the pack-'orzes. They won't be 'ere neither till after midnight. But," she added more cheerfully, "I can straighten a saddle if you want it."

"That's all right then — but..."

He paused suddenly, for a loud cry of "Hallo! Well! I'm ..." rang through the night from the direction of the rear of the house. The cry expressed both surprise and dismay.

"What the —— is it?" called Martin-Roget loudly in response.

"The 'orzes!"

"What about them?"

To this there was no reply, and with a savage oath and calling to the woman to show him the way Martin-Roget ran out in the direction whence had come the cry of dismay. He fell straight into the arms of his guide, who promptly set up another cry, more dismal, more expressive of bewilderment than the first.

"They be gone," he shouted excitedly.

"Who have gone?" queried the Frenchman.

"The 'orzes!"

"The horses? What in —— do you mean?"

"The 'orzes have gone, Mounzeer. There was no door to the ztables and they be gone."

"You're a fool," growled Martin-Roget, who of a truth had not taken in as yet the full significance of the man's jerky sentences. "Horses don't walk out of the stables like that. They can't have done if you tied them up properly."

"I didn't tie them up," protested the man. "I didn't know 'ow to tie the beastly nags up, and there was no one to 'elp me. I didn't think they'd walk out like that."

"Well! if they're gone you'll have to go and get them back somehow, that's all," said Martin-Roget, whose temper by now was beyond his control, and who was quite ready to give the lout a furious thrashing.

"Get them back, Mounzeer," wailed the man, "'ow can I? In the dark, too. Besides, if I did come nose to nose wi' 'em I shouldn't know 'ow to get 'em. Would you, Mounzeer?" he added with bland impertinence.

"I shall know how to lay you out, you *satané* idiot," growled Martin-Roget, "if I have to spend the night in this hole."

He strode on in the darkness in the direction where a little glimmer of light showed the entrance to a wide barn which obviously was used as a rough stabling. He stumbled through a yard and over a miscellaneous lot of rubbish. It was hardly possible to see one's hands before one's eyes in the darkness and the fog. The woman followed him, offering consolation in the shape of a seat in the coffee-room whereon to pass the night, for indeed she had no bed to spare, and the man from Chelwood brought up the rear — still ejaculating cries of astonishment rather than distress.

"You are that careless, man!" the woman admonished him placidly, "and I give you a lanthorn and all for to look after your 'orzes properly."

"But you didn't give me a 'and for to tie 'em up in their stalls, and give 'em their feed. Drat 'em! I 'ate 'orzes and all to do with 'em."

"Didn't you give 'em the feed I give you for 'em then?"

"No, I didn't. Think you I'd go into one o' them narrow stalls and get kicked for my pains."

"Then they was 'ungry, pore things," she concluded, "and went out after the 'ay what's just outside. I don't know 'ow you'll ever get 'em back in this fog."

There was indeed no doubt that the nags had made their way out of the stables, in that irresponsible fashion peculiar to animals, and that they had gone astray in the dark. There certainly was no sound in the night to denote their presence anywhere near.

"We'll get 'em all right in the morning," remarked the woman with her exasperating placidity.

"To-morrow morning!" exclaimed Martin-Roget in a passion of fury. "And what the d —— I am I going to do in the meanwhile?"

The woman reiterated her offers of a seat by the fire in the coffee-room.

"The men won't mind ye, zir," she said, "heaps of 'em are Frenchies like yourself, and I'll tell 'em you ain't a spying on 'em."

"It's no more than five mile to Chelwood," said the man blandly, "and maybe you get a better shakedown there."

"A five-mile tramp," growled Martin-Roget, whose wrath seemed to have spent itself before the hopelessness of his situation, "in this fog and gloom, and knee-deep in mud.... There'll be a sovereign for you, woman," he added curtly, "if you can give me a clean bed for the night."

The woman hesitated for a second or two.

"Well! a zovereign is tempting, zir," she said at last. "You shall 'ave my son's bed. I know 'e'd rather 'ave the zovereign if 'e was ever zo tired. This way, zir," she added, as she once more turned toward the house, "mind them 'urdles there."

"And where am I goin' to zleep?" called the man from Chelwood after the two retreating figures.

"I'll look after the man for you, zir," said the woman; "for a matter of a shillin' 'e can sleep in the coffee-room, and I'll give 'im 'is breakfast too."

"Not one farthing will I pay for the idiot," retorted Martin-Roget savagely. "Let him look after himself."

He had once more reached the porch. Without another word, and not heeding the protests and curses of the unfortunate man whom he had left standing shelterless in the middle of the yard, he pushed open the front door of the house and once more found himself in

the passage outside the coffee-room.

But the woman had turned back a little before she followed her guest into the house, and she called out to the man in the darkness:

"You may zleep in any of them outhouses and welcome, and zure there'll be a bit o' porridge for ye in the mornin'!"

"Think ye I'll stop," came in a furious growl out of the gloom, "and conduct that d —— d frog-eater back to Chelwood? No fear. Five miles ain't nothin' to me, and 'e can keep the miserable shillin' 'e'd 'ave give me for my pains. Let 'im get 'is 'orzes back 'izelf and get to Chelwood as best 'e can. I'm off, and you can tell 'im zo from me. It'll make 'im sleep all the better, I reckon."

The woman was obviously not of a disposition that would ever argue a matter of this sort out. She had done her best, she reckoned, both for master and man, and if they chose to quarrel between themselves that was their business and not hers.

So she quietly went into the house again; barred and bolted the door, and finding the stranger still waiting for her in the passage she conducted him to a tiny room on the floor above.

"My son's room, Mounzeer," she said; "I 'ope as 'ow ye'll be comfortable."

"It will do all right," assented Martin-Roget. "Is 'the Captain' sleeping in the house to-night?" he added as with an afterthought.

"Only in the coffee-room, Mounzeer. I couldn't give 'im a bed. 'The Captain' will be leaving with the pack 'orzes a couple of hours before dawn. Shall I tell 'im you be 'ere?"

"No, no," he replied promptly. "Don't tell him anything. I don't want to see him again: and he'll be gone before I'm awake, I reckon."

"That 'e will, zir, most like. Good-night, zir."

"Good-night. And — mind — that lout gets the two horses back again for my use in the morning. I shall have to make my way to Chelwood as early as may be."

"Aye, aye, zir," assented the woman placidly. It were no use, she thought, to upset the Mounzeer's temper once more by telling him that his guide had decamped. Time enough in the morning, when she would be less busy.

"And my John can see 'im as far as Chelwood," she thought to herself as she finally closed the door on the stranger and made her way slowly down the creaking stairs.

CHAPTER III

THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS

I

The sigh of satisfaction was quite unmistakable.

It could be heard from end to end, from corner to corner of the building. It sounded above the din of the orchestra who had just attacked with vigour the opening bars of a schottische, above the brouhaha of moving dancers and the frou-frou of skirts: it travelled from the small octagon hall, through the central salon to the tea-room, the ball-room and the card-room: it reverberated from the gallery in the ball-room to the maids' gallery: it distracted the ladies from their gossip and the gentlemen from their cards.

It was a universal, heartfelt "Ah!" of intense and pleasurable satisfaction.

Sir Percy Blakeney and his lady had just arrived. It was close on midnight, and the ball had positively languished. What was a ball without the presence of Sir Percy? His Royal Highness too had been expected earlier than this. But it was not thought that he would come at all, despite his promise, if the spoilt pet of Bath society remained unaccountably absent; and the Assembly Rooms had worn an air of woe even in the face of the gaily dressed throng which filled every vast room in its remotest angle.

But now Sir Percy Blakeney had arrived, just before the clocks had struck midnight, and exactly one minute before His Royal Highness drove up himself from the Royal Apartments. Lady Blakeney was looking more radiant and beautiful than ever before, so everyone remarked, when a few moments later she appeared in the crowded ball-room on the arm of His Royal Highness and closely followed by my lord Anthony Dewhurst and by Sir Percy himself, who had the young Duchess of Flintshire on his arm.

"What do you mean, you incorrigible rogue," her Grace was saying with playful severity to her cavalier, "by coming so late to the ball? Another two minutes and you would have arrived after His Royal Highness himself: and how would you have justified such solecism, I would like to know."

"By swearing that thoughts of your Grace had completely addled my poor brain," he retorted gaily, "and that in the mental contemplation of such charms I forgot time, place, social duties, everything."

"Even the homage due to truth," she laughed. "Cannot you for once in your life be serious, Sir Percy?"

"Impossible, dear lady, whilst your dainty hand rests upon mine arm."

II

It was not often that His Royal Highness graced Bath with his presence, and the occasion was made the excuse for quite exceptional gaiety and brilliancy. The new fashions of this memorable year of 1793 had defied the declaration of war and filtrated through from Paris: London milliners had not been backward in taking the hint, and though most of the more starchy dowagers obstinately adhered to the pre-war fashions — the huge hooped skirts, stiff stomachers, pointed waists, voluminous panniers and monumental head erections — the young and smart matrons were everywhere to be seen in the new gracefully flowing skirts innocent of steel constructions, the high waist line, the pouter pigeon-like draperies over their pretty bosoms.

Her Grace of Flintshire looked ravishing with her curly fair hair entirely free from powder, and Lady Betty Draitune's waist seemed to be nestling under her arm-pits. Of course Lady Blakeney wore the very latest thing in striped silks and gossamer-like muslin and lace, and it was hard to enumerate all the pretty débutantes and young brides who fluttered about the Assembly Rooms this night.

And gliding through that motley throng, bright-plumaged like a swarm of butterflies, there were a few figures dressed in sober blacks and greys — the *émigrés* over from France — men, women, young girls and gilded youth from out that seething cauldron of revolutionary France — who had shaken the dust of that rampant demagogism from off their buckled shoes, taking away with them little else but their lives. Mostly chary of speech, grave in their demeanour, bearing upon their wan faces traces of that horror which had seized them when they saw all the traditions of their past tottering around them, the proletariat whom they had despised turning against them with all the fury of caged beasts let loose, their kindred and friends massacred, their King and Queen murdered. The shelter and security which hospitable England had extended to them, had not altogether removed from their hearts the awful sense of terror and of gloom.

Many of them had come to Bath because the more genial climate of the West of England consoled them for the inclemencies of London's fogs. Received with open arms and with that lavish hospitality which the refugees and the oppressed had already learned to look for in England, they had gradually allowed themselves to be drawn into the fashionable life of the gay little city. The Comtesse de Tournai was here and her daughter, Lady Ffoulkes, Sir Andrew's charming and happy bride, and M. Paul Déroulède and his wife — beautiful Juliette Déroulède with the strange, haunted look in her large eyes, as of one who has looked closely on death; and M. le duc de Kernogan with his exquisite daughter, whose pretty air of seriousness and of repose sat so quaintly upon her young face. But every one remarked as soon as M. le duc entered the rooms that M. Martin-Roget was not in attendance upon Mademoiselle, which was quite against the order of things; also that M. le duc appeared to keep a more sharp eye than usual upon his daughter in consequence, and that he asked somewhat anxiously if milor Anthony Dewhurst was in the room, and looked obviously relieved when the reply was in the negative.

At which trifling incident every one who was in the know smiled and whispered, for M. le duc made it no secret that he favoured his own compatriot's suit for Mademoiselle Yvonne's hand rather than that of my lord Tony — which — as old Euclid has it — is absurd.

III

But with the arrival of the royal party M. de Kernogan's troubles began. To begin with, though M. Martin-Roget had not arrived, my lord Tony undoubtedly had. He had come in, in the wake of Lady Blakeney, but very soon he began wandering round the room

obviously in search of some one. Immediately there appeared to be quite a conspiracy among the young folk in the ball-room to keep both Lord Tony's and Mlle. Yvonne's movements hidden from the prying eyes of M. le duc: and anon His Royal Highness, after a comprehensive survey of the ball-room and a few gracious words to his more intimate circle, wandered away to the card-room, and as luck would have it he claimed M. le duc de Kernogan for a partner at faro.

Now M. le duc was a courtier of the old régime: to have disobeyed the royal summons would in his eyes have been nothing short of a crime. He followed the royal party to the card-room, and on his way thither had one gleam of comfort in that he saw Lady Blakeney sitting on a sofa in the octagon hall engaged in conversation with his daughter, whilst Lord Anthony Dewhurst was nowhere in sight.

However, the gleam of comfort was very brief, for less than a quarter of an hour after he had sat down at His Highness' table, Lady Blakeney came into the card-room and stood thereafter for some little while close beside the Prince's chair. The next hour after that was one of special martyrdom for the anxious father, for he knew that his daughter was in all probability sitting out in a specially secluded corner in the company of my lord Tony.

If only Martin-Roget were here!

IV

Martin-Roget with the eagle eyes and the airs of an accredited suitor would surely have intervened when my lord Tony in the face of the whole brilliant assembly in the ball-room, drew Mlle. de Kernogan into the seclusion of the recess underneath the gallery.

My lord Tony was never very glib of tongue. That peculiar dignified shyness which is one of the chief characteristics of well-bred Englishmen caused him to be tongue-tied when he had most to say. It was just with gesture and an appealing pressure of his hand upon her arm that he persuaded Yvonne de Kernogan to sit down beside him on the sofa in the remotest and darkest corner of the recess, and there she remained beside him silent and grave for a moment or two, and stole timid glances from time to time through the veil of her lashes at the finely-chiselled, expressive face of her young English lover.

He was pining to put a question to her, and so great was his excitement that his tongue refused him service, and she, knowing what was hovering on his lips, would not help him out, but a humorous twinkle in her dark eyes, and a faint smile round her lips lit up the habitual seriousness of her young face.

"Mademoiselle ..." he managed to stammer at last. "Mademoiselle Yvonne ... you have seen Lady Blakeney?"

"Yes," she replied demurely, "I have seen Lady Blakeney."

"And ... and ... she told you?"

"Yes. Lady Blakeney told me many things."

"She told you that ... that.... In God's name, Mademoiselle Yvonne," he added desperately, "do help me out — it is cruel to tease me! Can't you see that I'm nearly crazy with anxiety?"

Then she looked up at him, her dark eyes glowing and brilliant, her face shining with the light of a great tenderness.

"Nay, milor," she said earnestly, "I had no wish to tease you. But you will own 'tis a grave and serious step which Lady Blakeney suggested that I should take. I have had no time to think ... as yet."

"But there is no time for thinking, Mademoiselle Yvonne," he said naïvely. "If you will consent.... Oh! you will consent, will you not?" he pleaded.

She made no immediate reply, but gradually her hand which rested upon the sofa stole nearer and then nearer to his; and with a quiver of exquisite happiness his hand closed upon hers. The tips of his fingers touched the smooth warm palm and poor Lord Tony had to close his eyes for a moment as his sense of superlative ecstasy threatened to make him faint. Slowly he lifted that soft white hand to his lips.

"Upon my word, Yvonne," he said with quiet fervour, "you will never have cause to regret that you have trusted me."

"I know that well, milor," she replied demurely.

She settled down a shade or two closer to him still.

They were now like two birds in a cosy nest — secluded from the rest of the assembly, who appeared to them like dream-figures flitting in some other world that had nothing to do with their happiness. The strains of the orchestra who had struck the measure of the first figure of a contredanse sounded like fairy-music, distant, unreal in their ears. Only their love was real, their joy in one another's company, their hands clasped closely together!

"Tell me," she said after awhile, "how it all came about. It is all so terribly sudden ... so exquisitely sudden. I was prepared of course ... but not so soon ... and certainly not to-night. Tell me just how it happened."

She spoke English quite fluently, with just a charming slight accent, which he thought the most adorable thing he had ever heard.

"You see, dear heart," he replied, and there was a quiver of intense feeling in his voice as he spoke, "there is a man who not only is the friend whom I love best in all the world, but is also the one whom I trust absolutely, more than myself. Two hours ago he sent for me and told me that grave danger threatened you — threatened our love and our happiness, and he begged me to urge you to consent to a secret marriage ... at once ... to-night."

"And you think this ... this friend knew?"

"I know," he replied earnestly, "that he knew, or he would not have spoken to me as he did. He knows that my whole life is in your exquisite hands — he knows that our happiness is somehow threatened by that man Martin-Roget. How he obtained that information I could not guess ... he had not the time or the inclination to tell me. I flew to make all arrangements for our marriage to-night and prayed to God — as I have never prayed in my life before — that you, dear heart, would deign to consent."

"How could I refuse when Lady Blakeney advised? She is the kindest and dearest friend I possess. She and your friend ought to know one another. Will you not tell me who he is?"

"I will present him to you, dear heart, as soon as we are married," he replied with awkward evasiveness. Then suddenly he exclaimed with boyish enthusiasm: "I can't believe it! I can't believe it! It is the most extraordinary thing in the world...."

"What is that, milor?" she asked.

"That you should have cared for me at all. For of course you must care, or you wouldn't be sitting here with me now ... you would not have consented ... would you?"

"You know that I do care, milor," she said in her grave quiet way. "How could it be otherwise?"

"But I am so stupid and so slow," he said naïvely. "Why! look at me now. My heart is simply bursting with all that I want to say to you, but I just can't find the words, and I do nothing but talk rubbish and feel how you must despise me."

Once more that humorous little smile played for a moment round Yvonne de Kernogan's serious mouth. She didn't say anything just then, but her delicate fingers gave his hand an expressive squeeze.

"You are not frightened?" he asked abruptly.

"Frightened? Of what?" she rejoined.

"At the step you are going to take?"

"Would I take it," she retorted gently, "if I had any misgivings?"

"Oh! if you had.... Do you know that even now ..." he continued clumsily and haltingly, "now that I have realised just what it will mean to have you ... and just what it would mean to me, God help me — if I were to lose you ... well!... that even now I would rather go through that hell than that you should feel the least bit doubtful or unhappy about it all."

Again she smiled, gently, tenderly up into his eager, boyish face.

"The only unhappiness," she said gravely, "that could ever overtake me in the future would be parting from you, milor."

"Oh! God bless you for that, my dear! God bless you for that! But for pity's sake turn your dear eyes away from me or I vow I shall go crazy with joy. Men do go crazy with joy sometimes, you know, and I feel that in another moment I shall stand up and shout at the top of my voice to all the people in the room that within the next few hours the loveliest girl in all the world is going to be my wife."

"She certainly won't be that, if you do shout it at the top of your voice, milor, for father would hear you and there would be an end to our beautiful adventure."

"It will be a beautiful adventure, won't it?" he sighed with unconcealed ecstasy.

"So beautiful, my dear lord," she replied with gentle earnestness, "so perfect, in fact, that I am almost afraid something must happen presently to upset it all."

"Nothing can happen," he assured her. "M. Martin-Roget is not here, and His Royal Highness is even now monopolising M. le duc de Kernogan so that he cannot get away."

"Your friend must be very clever to manipulate so many strings on our behalf?"

"It is long past midnight now, sweetheart," he said with sudden irrelevance.

"Yes, I know. I have been watching the time: and I have already thought everything out for the best. I very often go home from balls and routs in the company of Lady Ffoulkes and sleep in her house those nights. Father is always quite satisfied, when I do that, and to-night he will be doubly satisfied feeling that I shall be taken away from your society. Lady Ffoulkes is in the secret, of course, so Lady Blakeney told me, and she will be ready for me in a few minutes now: she'll take me home with her and there I will change my dress and rest for awhile, waiting for the happy hour. She will come to the church with me and then ... oh then! Oh! my dear milor!" she added suddenly with a deep sigh whilst her whole face became irradiated with a light of intense happiness, "as you say it is the most wonderful thing in all the world — this — our beautiful adventure together."

"The parson will be ready at half-past six, dear heart, it was the earliest hour that I could secure ... after that we go at once to your church and the priest will tie up any loose threads which our English parson failed to make tight. After those two ceremonies we shall be very much married, shan't we?... and nothing can come between us, dear heart, can it?" he queried with a look of intense anxiety on his young face.

"Nothing," she replied. Then she added with a short sigh: "Poor father!"

"Dear heart, he will only fret for a little while. I don't believe he can really want you to marry that man Martin-Roget. It is just obstinacy on his part. He can't have anything against me really ... save of course that I am not clever and that I shall never do anything very big in the world ... except to love you, Yvonne, with my whole heart and soul and with every fibre and muscle in me.... Oh! I'll do that," he added with boyish enthusiasm, "better than anyone else in all the world could do! And your father will, I'll be bound, forgive me for stealing you, when he sees that you are happy, and contented, and have everything you want and ... and...."

As usual Lord Tony's eloquence was not equal to all that it should have expressed. He blushed furiously and with a quaint, shy gesture, passed his large, well-shaped hand over his smooth, brown hair. "I am not much, I know," he continued with a winning air of self-deprecation, "and you are far above me as the stars — you are so wonderful, so clever, so accomplished and I am nothing at all ... but ... but I have plenty of high-born connexions, and I have plenty of money and influential friends ... and ... and Sir Percy Blakeney, who is the most accomplished and finest gentleman in England, calls me his friend."

She smiled at his eagerness. She loved him for his clumsy little ways, his halting speech, that big loving heart of his which was too full of fine and noble feelings to find vent in mere words.

"Have you ever met a finer man in all the world?" he added enthusiastically.

Yvonne de Kernogan smiled once more. Her recollections of Sir Percy Blakeney showed her an elegant man of the world, whose mind seemed chiefly occupied on the devising and the wearing of exquisite clothes, in the uttering of lively witticisms for the entertainment of his royal friend and the ladies of his entourage: it showed her a man of great wealth and vast possessions who seemed willing to spend both in the mere pursuit of pleasures. She liked Sir Percy Blakeney well enough, but she could not understand clever and charming Marguerite Blakeney's adoration for her inane and foppish husband, nor the whole-hearted admiration openly lavished upon him by men like Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, my lord Hastings, and others. She would gladly have seen her own dear milor choose a more sober and intellectual friend. But then she loved him for his marvellous power of whole-hearted friendship, for his loyalty to those he cared for, for everything in fact that made up the sum total of his winning personality, and she pinned her faith on that other mysterious friend whose individuality vastly intrigued her.

"I am more interested in your anonymous friend," she said quaintly, "than in Sir Percy Blakeney. But he too is kindness itself and Lady Blakeney is an angel. I like to think that the happiest days of my life — our honeymoon, my dear lord — will be spent in their

house."

"Blakeney has lent me Combwich Hall for as long as we like to stay there. We'll drive thither directly after the service, dear heart, and then we'll send a courier to your father and ask for his blessing and his forgiveness."

"Poor father!" sighed Yvonne again. But evidently compassion for the father whom she had elected to deceive did not weigh over heavily in the balance of her happiness. Her little hand once more stole like a timid and confiding bird into the shelter of his firm grasp.

V

In the card-room at His Highness' table Sir Percy Blakeney was holding the bank and seemingly luck was dead against him. Around the various tables the ladies stood about, chattering and hindering the players. Nothing appeared serious to-night, not even the capricious chances of hazard.

His Royal Highness was in rare good humour, for he was winning prodigiously.

Her Grace of Flintshire placed her perfumed and beringed hand upon Sir Percy Blakeney's shoulder; she stood behind his chair, chattering incessantly in a high flutey treble just like a canary. Blakeney vowed that she was so ravishing that she had put Dame Fortune to flight.

"You have not yet told us, Sir Percy," she said roguishly, "how you came to arrive so late at the ball."

"Alas, madam," he sighed dolefully, "'twas the fault of my cravat."

"Your cravat?"

"Aye indeed! You see I spent the whole of to-day in perfecting my new method for tying a butterfly bow, so as to give the neck an appearance of utmost elegance with a minimum of discomfort. Lady Blakeney will bear me out when I say that I set my whole mind to my task. Was I not busy all day m'dear?" he added, making a formal appeal to Marguerite, who stood immediately behind His Highness' chair, and with her luminous eyes, full of merriment and shining with happiness fixed upon her husband.

"You certainly spent a considerable time in front of the looking-glass," she said gaily, "with two valets in attendance and my lord Tony an interested spectator in the proceedings."

"There now!" rejoined Sir Percy triumphantly, "her ladyship's testimony thoroughly bears me out. And now you shall see what Tony says on the matter. Tony! Where's Tony!" he added as his lazy grey eyes sought the brilliant crowd in the card-room. "Tony, where the devil are you?"

There was no reply, and anon Sir Percy's merry gaze encountered that of M. le duc de Kernogan who, dressed in sober black, looked strangely conspicuous in the midst of this throng of bright-coloured butterflies, and whose grave eyes, as they rested on the gorgeous figure of the English exquisite, held a world of contempt in their glance.

"Ah! M. le duc," continued Blakeney, returning that scornful look with his habitual good-humoured one, "I had not noticed that mademoiselle Yvonne was not with you, else I had not thought of inquiring so loudly for my friend Tony."

"My lord Antoine is dancing with my daughter, Sir Percy," said the other man gravely, in excellent if somewhat laboured English, "he had my permission to ask her."

"And is a thrice happy man in consequence," retorted Blakeney lightly, "though I fear me M. Martin-Roget's wrath will descend upon my poor Tony's head with unexampled vigour in consequence."

"M. Martin-Roget is not here this evening," broke in the Duchess, "and methought," she added in a discreet whisper, "that my lord Tony was all the happier for his absence. The two young people have spent a considerable time together under the shadow of the gallery in the ball-room, and, if I mistake not, Lord Tony is making the most of his time."

She talked very volubly and with a slight North-country brogue which no doubt made it a little difficult for the stranger to catch her every word. But evidently M. le duc had understood the drift of what she said, for now he rejoined with some acerbity:

"Mlle. de Kernogan is too well educated, I hope, to allow the attentions of any gentleman, against her father's will."

"Come, come, M. de Kernogan," here interposed His Royal Highness with easy familiarity, "Lord Anthony Dewhurst is the son of my old friend the Marquis of Atiltone: one of our most distinguished families in this country, who have helped to make English history. He has moreover inherited a large fortune from his mother, who was a Cruche of Crewkerne and one of the richest heiresses in the land. He is a splendid fellow — a fine sportsman, a loyal gentleman. His attentions to any young lady, however high-born, can be but flattering — and I should say welcome to those who have her future welfare at heart."

But in response to this gracious tirade, M. le duc de Kernogan bowed gravely, and his stern features did not relax as he said coldly:

"Your Royal Highness is pleased to take an interest in the affairs of my daughter. I am deeply grateful."

There was a second's awkward pause, for every one felt that despite his obvious respect and deference M. le duc de Kernogan had endeavoured to inflict a snub upon the royal personage, and one or two hot-headed young fops in the immediate entourage even muttered the word: "Impertinence!" inaudibly through their teeth. Only His Royal Highness appeared not to notice anything unusual or disrespectful in M. le duc's attitude. It seemed as if he was determined to remain good-humoured and pleasant. At any rate he chose to ignore the remark which had offended the ears of his entourage. Only those who stood opposite to His Highness, on the other side of the card table, declared afterwards that the Prince had frowned and that a haughty rejoinder undoubtedly hovered on his lips.

Be that as it may, he certainly did not show the slightest sign of ill-humour: quite gaily and unconcernedly he scooped up his winnings which Sir Percy Blakeney, who held the Bank, was at this moment pushing towards him.

"Don't go yet, M. de Kernogan," he said as the Frenchman made a movement to work his way out of the crowd, feeling no doubt that the atmosphere round him had become somewhat frigid if not exactly inimical, "don't go yet, I beg of you. *Pardi!* Can't you see that you have been bringing me luck? As a rule Blakeney, who can so well afford to lose, has the devil's own good fortune, but to-night I have succeeded in getting some of my own back from him. Do not, I entreat you, break the run of my luck by going."

"Oh, Monseigneur," rejoined the old courtier suavely, "how can my poor presence influence the gods, who of a surety always preside over your Highness' fortunes?"

"Don't attempt to explain it, my dear sir," quoth the Prince gaily. "I only know that if you go now, my luck may go with you and I shall blame you for my losses."

"Oh! in that case, Monseigneur..."

"And with all that, Blakeney," continued His Highness, once more taking up the cards and turning to his friend, "remember that we still await your explanation as to your coming so late to the ball."

"An omission, your Royal Highness," rejoined Blakeney, "an absence of mind brought about by your severity, and that of Her Grace. The trouble was that all my calculations with regard to the exact adjustment of the butterfly bow were upset when I realised that the set of the present day waistcoat would not harmonise with it. Less than two hours before I was due to appear at this ball my mind had to make a complete *volte-face* in the matter of cravats. I became bewildered, lost, utterly confused. I have only just recovered, and one word of criticism on my final efforts would plunge me now into the depths of despair."

"Blakeney, you are absolutely incorrigible," retorted His Highness with a laugh. "M. le duc," he added, once more turning to the grave Frenchman with his wonted graciousness, "I pray you do not form your judgment on the gilded youth of England by the example of my friend Blakeney. Some of us can be serious when occasion demands, you know."

"Your Highness is pleased to jest," said M. de Kernogan stiffly. "What greater occasion for seriousness can there be than the present one. True, England has never suffered as France is suffering now, but she has engaged in a conflict against the most powerful democracy the world has ever known, she has thrown down the gauntlet to a set of human beasts of prey who are as determined as they are ferocious. England will not emerge victorious from this conflict, Monseigneur, if her sons do not realise that war is not mere sport and that victory can only be attained by the sacrifice of levity and of pleasure."

He had dropped into French in response to His Highness' remark, in order to express his thoughts more accurately. The Prince — a little bored no doubt — seemed disinclined to pursue the subject. Nevertheless, it seemed as if once again he made a decided effort not to show ill-humour. He even gave a knowing wink — a wink! — in the direction of his friend Blakeney and of Her Grace as if to beg them to set the ball of conversation rolling once more along a smoother — a less boring — path. He was obviously quite determined not to release M. de Kernogan from attendance near his royal person.

VI

As usual Sir Percy threw himself in the breach, filling the sudden pause with his infectious laugh:

"La!" he said gaily, "how beautifully M. le duc does talk. Ffoulkes," he added, addressing Sir Andrew, who was standing close by, "I'll wager you ten pounds to a pinch of snuff that you couldn't deliver yourself of such splendid sentiments, even in your own native lingo."

"I won't take you, Blakeney," retorted Sir Andrew with a laugh. "I'm no good at peroration."

"You should hear our distinguished guest M. Martin-Roget on the same subject," continued Sir Percy with mock gravity. "By Gad! can't he talk? I feel a d — d worm when he talks about our national levity, our insane worship of sport, our ... our ... M. le duc," he added with becoming seriousness and in atrocious French, "I appeal to you. Does not M. Martin-Roget talk beautifully?"

"M. Martin-Roget," replied the duc gravely, "is a man of marvellous eloquence, fired by overwhelming patriotism. He is a man who must command respect wherever he goes."

"You have known him long, M. le duc?" queried His Royal Highness graciously.

"Indeed not very long, Monseigneur. He came over as an *émigré* from Brest some three months ago, hidden in a smuggler's ship. He had been denounced as an aristocrat who was furthering the cause of the royalists in Brittany by helping them plentifully with money, but he succeeded in escaping, not only with his life, but also with the bulk of his fortune."

"Ah! M. Martin-Roget is rich?"

"He is sole owner of a rich banking business in Brest, Monseigneur, which has an important branch in America and correspondents all over Europe. Monseigneur the Bishop of Brest recommended him specially to my notice in a very warm letter of introduction, wherein he speaks of M. Martin-Roget as a gentleman of the highest patriotism and integrity. Were I not quite satisfied as to M. Martin-Roget's antecedents and present connexions I would not have ventured to present him to your Highness."

"Nor would you have accepted him as a suitor for your daughter, M. le duc, *c'est entendu!*" concluded His Highness urbanely. "M. Martin-Roget's wealth will no doubt cover his lack of birth."

"There are plenty of high-born gentlemen devoted to the royalist cause, Monseigneur," rejoined the duc in his grave, formal manner. "But the most just and purest of causes must at times be helped with money. The Vendéens in Brittany, the Princes at Coblenz are all sorely in need of funds..."

"And M. Martin-Roget son-in-law of M. le duc de Kernogan is more likely to feed those funds than M. Martin-Roget the plain business man who has no aristocratic connexions," concluded His Royal Highness dryly. "But even so, M. le duc," he added more gravely, "surely you cannot be so absolutely certain as you would wish that M. Martin-Roget's antecedents are just as he has told you. Monseigneur the Bishop of Brest may have acted in perfect good faith..."

"Monseigneur the Bishop of Brest, your Highness, is a man who has our cause, the cause of our King and of our Faith, as much at heart as I have myself. He would know that on his recommendation I would trust any man absolutely. He was not like to make careless use of such knowledge."

"And you are quite satisfied that the worthy Bishop did not act under some dire pressure ...?"

"Quite satisfied, Monseigneur," replied the duc firmly. "What pressure could there be that would influence a prelate of such high integrity as Monseigneur the Bishop of Brest?"

VII

There was silence for a moment or two, during which the heavy bracket clock over the door struck the first hour after midnight. His Royal Highness looked round at Lady Blakeney, and she gave him a smile and an almost imperceptible nod. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had in the meanwhile quietly slipped away.

"I understand," said His Royal Highness quite gravely, turning back to M. le duc, "and I must crave your pardon, sir, for what must have seemed to you an indiscretion. You have given me a very clear exposé of the situation. I confess that until to-night it had seemed to me — and to all your friends, Monsieur, a trifle obscure. In fact, it had been my intention to intercede with you in favour of my young friend Lord Anthony Dewhurst, who of a truth is deeply enamoured of your daughter."

"Though your Highness' wishes are tantamount to a command, yet would I humbly assert that my wishes with regard to my daughter are based upon my loyalty and my duty to my Sovereign King Louis XVII, whom may God guard and protect, and that therefore it is beyond my power now to modify them."

"May God trounce you for an obstinate fool," murmured His Highness in English, and turning his head away so that the other should not hear him. But aloud and with studied graciousness he said:

"M. le duc, will you not take a hand at hazard? My luck is turning, and I have faith in yours. We must fleece Blakeney to-night. He has had Satan's own luck these past few weeks. Such good fortune becomes positively revolting."

There was no more talk of Mlle. de Kernogan after that. Indeed her father felt that her future had already been discussed far too freely by all these well-wishers who of a truth were not a little indiscreet. He thought that the manners and customs of good society were very peculiar here in this fog-ridden England. What business was it of all these high-born ladies and gentlemen — of His Royal Highness himself for that matter — what plans he had made for Yvonne's future? Martin-Roget was *bourgeois* by birth, but he was vastly rich and had promised to pour a couple of millions into the coffers of the royalist army if Mlle. de Kernogan became his wife. A couple of millions with more to follow, no doubt, and a loyal adherence to the royalist cause was worth these days all the blue blood that flowed in my lord Anthony Dewhurst's veins.

So at any rate thought M. le duc this night, while His Royal Highness kept him at cards until the late hours of the morning

CHAPTER IV

THE FATHER

I

It was close on ten o'clock now in the morning on the following day, and M. le duc de Kernogan was at breakfast in his lodgings in Laura Place, when a courier was announced who was the bearer of a letter for M. le duc.

He thought the man must have been sent by Martin-Roget, who mayhap was sick, seeing that he had not been present at the Assembly Rooms last night, and the duc took the letter and opened it without misgivings. He read the address on the top of the letter: "Combwich Hall" — a place unknown to him, and the first words of the letter: "Dear father!" And even then he had no misgivings.

In fact he had to read the letter through three times before the full meaning of its contents had penetrated into his brain. Whilst he read, he sat quite still, and even the hand which held the paper had not the slightest tremor. When he had finished he spoke quite quietly to his valet:

"Give the courier a glass of ale, Frédérick," he said, "and tell him he can go; there is no answer. And — stay," he added, "I want you to go round at once to M. Martin-Roget's lodgings and ask him to come and speak with me as early as possible."

The valet left the room, and M. le duc deliberately read through the letter from end to end for the fourth time. There was no doubt, no possible misapprehension. His daughter Yvonne de Kernogan had eloped clandestinely with my lord Anthony Dewhurst and had been secretly married to him in the small hours of the morning in the Protestant church of St. James, and subsequently before a priest of her own religion in the Priory Church of St. John the Evangelist.

She apprised her father of this fact in a few sentences which purported to be dictated by profound affection and filial respect, but in which M. de Kernogan failed to detect the slightest trace of contrition. Yvonne! his Yvonne! the sole representative now of the old race — eloped like a kitchen-wench! Yvonne! his daughter! his asset for the future! his thing! his fortune! that which he meant with perfect egoism to sacrifice on the altar of his own beliefs and his own loyalty to the kingship of France! Yvonne had taken her future in her own hands! She knew that her hand, her person, were the purchase price of so many millions to be poured into the coffers of the royalist cause, and she had disposed of both, in direct defiance of her father's will and of her duty to her King and to his cause!

Yvonne de Kernogan was false to her traditions, false to her father! false to her King and country! In the years to come when the chroniclers of the time came to write the histories of the great families that had rallied round their King in the hour of his deadly peril, the name of Kernogan would be erased from those glorious pages. The Kernogans will have failed in their duty, failed in their loyalty! Oh! the shame of it all! The shame!!

The duc was far too proud a gentleman to allow his valet to see him under the stress of violent emotion, but now that he was alone his thin, hard face — with that air of gravity which he had transmitted to his daughter — became distorted with the passion of unbridled fury; he tore the letter up into a thousand little pieces and threw the fragments into the fire. On the bureau beside him there stood a miniature of Yvonne de Kernogan painted by Hall three years ago, and framed in a circlet of brilliants. M. le duc's eyes casually fell upon it; he picked it up and with a violent gesture of rage threw it on the floor and stamped upon it with his heel, destroying in this paroxysm of silent fury a work of art worth many hundred pounds.

His daughter had deceived him. She had also upset all his plans whereby the army of M. le Prince de Condé would have been enriched by a couple of million francs. In addition to the shame upon her father, she had also brought disgrace upon herself and her good name, for she was a minor and this clandestine marriage, contracted without her father's consent, was illegal in France, illegal everywhere: save perhaps in England — of this M. de Kernogan was not quite sure, but he certainly didn't care. And in this solemn moment he registered a vow that never as long as he lived would he be reconciled to that English nincompoop who had dared to filch his daughter from him, and never — as long as he lived — would he by his consent render the marriage legal, and the children born of that wedlock legitimate in the eyes of his country's laws.

A calm akin to apathy had followed his first outbreak of fury. He sat down in front of the fire, and buried his chin in his hand. Something of course must be done to get his daughter back. If only Martin-Roget were here, he would know better how to act. Would Martin-Roget stick to his bargain and accept the girl for wife, now that her fame and honour had been irretrievably tarnished? There was the question which the next half-hour would decide. M. de Kernogan cast a feverish, anxious look on the clock. Half an hour had gone by since Frédérick went to seek Martin-Roget, and the latter had not yet appeared.

Until he had seen Martin-Roget and spoken with Martin-Roget M. de Kernogan could decide nothing. For one brief, mad moment, the project had formed itself in his disordered brain to rush down to Combwich Hall and provoke that impudent Englishman who had stolen his daughter: to kill him or be killed by him; in either case Yvonne would then be parted from him for ever. But even then, the thought of Martin-Roget brought more sober reflection. Martin-Roget would see to it. Martin-Roget would know what to do. After all, the outrage had hit the accredited lover just as hard as the father.

But why in the name of — did Martin-Roget not come?

II

It was past midday when at last Martin-Roget knocked at the door of M. le duc's lodgings in Laura Place. The older man had in the meanwhile gone through every phase of overwhelming emotions. The outbreak of unreasoning fury — when like a maddened beast that bites and tears he had broken his daughter's miniature and trampled it under foot — had been followed by a kind of dull apathy, when for close upon an hour he had sat staring into the flames, trying to grapple with an awful reality which seemed to elude him all the time. He could not believe that this thing had really happened: that Yvonne, his well-bred dutiful daughter, who had shown such marvellous courage and presence of mind when the necessity of flight and of exile had first presented itself in the wake of the awful

massacres and wholesale executions of her own friends and kindred, that she should have eloped — like some flirtatious wench — and outraged her father in this monstrous fashion, by a clandestine marriage with a man of alien race and of a heretical religion! M. de Kernogan could not realise it. It passed the bounds of possibility. The very flames in the hearth seemed to dance and to mock the bare suggestion of such an atrocious transgression.

To this gloomy numbing of the senses had succeeded the inevitable morbid restlessness: the pacing up and down the narrow room, the furtive glances at the clock, the frequent orders to Frédéric to go out and see if M. Martin-Roget was not yet home. For Frédéric had come back after his first errand with the astounding news that M. Martin-Roget had left his lodgings the previous day at about four o'clock, and had not been seen or heard of since. In fact his landlady was very anxious about him and was sorely tempted to see the town-crier on the subject.

Four times did Frédéric have to go from Laura Place to the Bear Inn in Union Street, where M. Martin-Roget lodged, and three times he returned with the news that nothing had been heard of Mounzeer yet. The fourth time — it was then close on midday — he came back running — thankful to bring back the good tidings, since he was tired of that walk from Laura Place to the Bear Inn. M. Martin-Roget had come home. He appeared very tired and in rare ill-humour; but Frédéric had delivered the message from M. le duc, whereupon M. Martin-Roget had become most affable and promised that he would come round immediately. In fact he was even then treading hard on Frédéric's heels.

III

"My daughter has gone! She left the ball clandestinely last night, and was married to Lord Anthony Dewhurst in the small hours of the morning. She is now at a place called Combwich Hall — with him!"

M. le duc de Kernogan literally threw these words in Martin-Roget's face, the moment the latter had entered the room, and Frédéric had discreetly closed the door.

"What? What?" stammered the other vaguely. "I don't understand. What do you mean?" he added, bewildered at the duc's violence, tired after his night's adventure and the long ride in the early morning, irritable with want of sleep and decent food. He stared, uncomprehending, at the duc, who had once more started pacing up and down the room, like a caged beast, with hands tightly clenched behind his back, his eyes glowering both at the new-comer and at the imaginary presence of his most bitter enemy — the man who had dared to come between him and his projects for his daughter.

Martin-Roget passed his hand across his brow like a man who is not yet fully awake.

"What do you mean?" he reiterated hazily.

"Just what I say," retorted the other roughly. "Yvonne has eloped with that nincompoop Lord Anthony Dewhurst. They have gone through some sort of marriage ceremony together. And she writes me a letter this morning to tell me that she is quite happy and contented and spending her honeymoon at a place called Combwich Hall. Honeymoon!" he repeated savagely, as if to lash his fury up anew, "Tsha!"

Martin-Roget on the other hand was not the man to allow himself to fall into a state of frenzy, which would necessarily interfere with calm consideration.

He had taken the fact in now. Yvonne's elopement with his English rival, the clandestine marriage, everything. But he was not going to allow his inward rage to obscure his vision of the future. He did not spend the next precious seconds — as men of his race are wont to do — in smashing things around him, in raving and fuming and gesticulating. No. That was not the temper M. Martin-Roget was in at this moment when Fate and a girl's folly were ranging themselves against his plans. His friend, citizen Chauvelin, would have envied him his calm in the face of this disaster.

Whilst M. le duc still stormed and raved, Martin-Roget sat down quietly in front of the fire, rested his chin in his hand and waited for a lull in the other man's paroxysm ere he spoke.

"From your attitude, M. le duc," he then said quietly, hiding obvious sarcasm behind a veil of studied deference, "from your attitude I gather that your wishes with regard to Mlle. de Kernogan have undergone no modification. You would still honour me by desiring that she should become my wife?"

"I am not in the habit of changing my mind," said M. le duc gruffly. He desired the marriage, he coveted Martin-Roget's millions for the royalist cause, but he had no love for the man. All the pride of the Kernogans, their long line of ancestry, rebelled against the thought of a fair descendant of this glorious race being allied to a *roturier* — a *bourgeois* — a tradesman, what? and the cause of King and country counted few greater martyrdoms than that of the duc de Kernogan whenever he met the banker Martin-Roget on an equal social footing.

"Then there is not much harm done," rejoined the latter coolly; "the marriage is not a legal one. It need not even be dissolved — Mademoiselle de Kernogan is still Mademoiselle de Kernogan and I her humble and faithful adorer."

M. le duc paused in his restless walk.

"You would ..." he stammered, then checked himself, turning abruptly away. He had some difficulty in hiding the scorn wherewith he regarded the other's coolness. Bourgeois blood was not to be gainsaid. The tradesman — or banker, whatever he was — who hankered after an alliance with Mademoiselle de Kernogan, and was ready to lay down a couple of millions for the privilege — was not to be deterred from his purpose by any considerations of pride or of honour. M. le duc was satisfied and re-assured, but he despised the man for his leniency for all that.

"The marriage is no marriage at all according to the laws of France," reiterated Martin-Roget calmly.

"No, it is not," assented the Duke roughly.

For a while there was silence: Martin-Roget seemed immersed in his own thoughts and not to notice the febrile comings and goings of the other man.

"What we have to do, M. le duc," he said after a while, "is to induce Mlle. de Kernogan to return here immediately."

"How are you going to accomplish that?" sneered the Duke.

“Oh! I was not suggesting that I should appear in the matter at all,” rejoined Martin-Roget with a shrug of the shoulders.

“Then how can I ...?”

“Surely ...” argued the younger man tentatively.

“You mean ...?”

Martin-Roget nodded. Despite these ambiguous half-spoken sentences the two men had understood one another.

“We must get her back, of course,” assented the Duke, who had suddenly become as calm as the other man.

“There is no harm done,” reiterated Martin-Roget with slow and earnest emphasis.

Whereupon the Duke, completely pacified, drew a chair close to the hearth and sat down, leaning his elbows on his knees and holding his fine, aristocratic hands to the blaze.

Frédérick came in half an hour later to ask if M. le duc would have his luncheon. He found the two gentlemen sitting quite close together over the dying embers of a fire that had not been fed for close upon an hour: and that prince of valets was glad to note that M. le duc’s temper had quite cooled down and that he was talking calmly and very affably to M. Martin-Roget.

CHAPTER V

THE NEST

I

There are lovely days in England sometimes in November or December, days when the departing year strives to make us forget that winter is nigh, and autumn smiles, gentle and benignant, caressing with a still tender kiss the last leaves of the scarlet oak which linger on the boughs, and touching up with a vivid brush the evergreen verdure of bay trees, of ilex and of yew. The sky is of that pale, translucent blue which dwellers in the South never see, with the soft transparency of an aquamarine as it fades into the misty horizon at midday. And at dusk the thrushes sing: "Kiss me quick! kiss me quick! kiss me quick" in the naked branches of old acacias and chestnuts, and the robins don their crimson waistcoats and dart in and out among the coppice and through the feathery arms of larch and pine. And the sun which tips the prickly points of holly leaves with gold, joins in this merry make-believe that winter is still a very, very long way off, and that mayhap he has lost his way altogether, and is never coming to this balmy beautiful land again.

Just such a day was the penultimate one of November, 1793, when Lady Anthony Dewhurst sat at a desk in the wide bay window of the drawing-room in Combwich Hall, trying to put into a letter to Lady Blakeney all that her heart would have wished to express of love and gratitude and happiness.

Three whole days had gone by since that exciting night, when before break of day in the dimly-lighted old church, in the presence of two or three faithful friends, she had plighted her troth to Lord Anthony: even whilst other kind friends — including His Royal Highness — formed part of the little conspiracy which kept her father occupied and, if necessary, would have kept M. Martin-Roget out of the way. Since then her life had been one continuous dream of perfect bliss. From the moment when after the second religious ceremony in the Roman Catholic church she found herself alone in the carriage with milor, and felt his arms — so strong and yet so tender — closing round her and his lips pressed to hers in the first masterful kiss of complete possession, until this hour when she saw his tall, elegant figure hurrying across the garden toward the gate and suddenly turning toward the window whence he knew that she was watching him, every hour and every minute had been nothing but unalloyed happiness.

Even there where she had looked for sorrow and difficulty her path had been made smooth for her. Her father, who she had feared would prove hard and irreconcilable, had been tender and forgiving to such an extent that tears almost of shame would gather in her eyes whenever she thought of him.

As soon as she arrived at Combwich Hall she had written a long and deeply affectionate letter to her father, imploring his forgiveness for the deception and unfilial conduct which on her part must so deeply have grieved him. She pleaded for her right to happiness in words of impassioned eloquence, she pleaded for her right to love and to be loved, for her right to a home, which a husband's devotion would make a paradise for her.

This letter she had sent by special courier to her father and the very next day she had his reply. She had opened the letter with trembling fingers, fearful lest her father's harshness should mar the perfect serenity of her life. She was afraid of what he would say, for she knew her father well: knew his faults as well as his qualities, his pride, his obstinacy, his unswerving determination and his loyalty to the King's cause — all of which must have been deeply outraged by his daughter's high-handed action. But as she began to read, astonishment, amazement at once filled her soul: she could hardly trust her comprehension, hardly believe that what she read could indeed be reality, and not just the continuance of the happy dream wherein she was dwelling these days.

Her father — gently reproachful — had not one single harsh word to utter. He would not, he said, at the close of his life, after so many bitter disappointments, stand in the way of his daughter's happiness: "You should have trusted me, my child," he wrote: and indeed Yvonne could not believe her eyes. "I had no idea that your happiness was at stake in this marriage, or I should never have pressed the claims of my own wishes in the matter. I have only you in the world left, now that misery and exile are to be my portion! Is it likely that I would allow any personal desires to weigh against my love for you?"

Happy as she was Yvonne cried — cried bitterly with remorse and shame when she read that letter. How could she have been so blind, so senseless as to misjudge her father so? Her young husband found her in tears, and had much ado to console her: he too read the letter and was deeply touched by the kind reference to himself contained therein: "My lord Anthony is a gallant gentleman," wrote M. le duc de Kernogan, "he will make you happy, my child, and your old father will be more than satisfied. All that grieves me is that you did not trust me sooner. A clandestine marriage is not worthy of a daughter of the Kernogans."

"I did speak most earnestly to M. le duc," said Lord Tony reflectively, "when I begged him to allow me to pay my addresses to you. But then," he added cheerfully, "I am such a clumsy lout when I have to talk at any length — and especially clumsy when I have to plead my own cause. I suppose I put my case so badly before your father, m'dear, that he thought me three parts an idiot and would not listen to me."

"I too begged and entreated him, dear," she said with a smile, "but he was very determined then and vowed that I should marry M. Martin-Roget despite my tears and protestations. Dear father! I suppose he didn't realise that I was in earnest."

"He has certainly accepted the inevitable very gracefully," was my lord Tony's final comment.

II

Then they read the letter through once more, sitting close together, he with one arm round her shoulder, she nestling against his chest, her hair brushing against his lips and with the letter in her hands which she could scarcely read for the tears of joy which filled her eyes.

"I don't feel very well to-day," the letter concluded; "the dampness and the cold have got into my bones: moreover you two young love birds will not desire company just yet, but to-morrow if the weather is more genial I will drive over to Combwich in the afternoon,

and perhaps you will give me supper and a bed for the night. Send me word by the courier who will forthwith return to Bath if this will be agreeable to you both."

Could anything be more adorable, more delightful? It was just the last drop that filled Yvonne's cup of happiness right up to the brim.

III

The next afternoon she sat at her desk in order to tell Lady Blakeney all about it. She made out a copy of her father's letter and put that in with her own, and begged dear Lady Blakeney to see Lady Ffoulkes forthwith and tell her all that had happened. She herself was expecting her father every minute and milor Tony had gone as far as the gate to see if the barouche was in sight.

Half an hour later M. de Kernogan had arrived and his daughter lay in his arms, happy, beyond the dreams of men. He looked rather tired and wan and still complained that the cold had got into his bones: evidently he was not very well and Yvonne after the excitement of the meeting felt not a little anxious about him. As the evening wore on he became more and more silent; he hardly would eat anything and soon after eight o'clock he announced his desire to retire to bed.

"I am not ill," he said as he kissed his daughter and bade her a fond "Good-night," "only a little wearied ... with emotion no doubt. I shall be better after a night's rest."

He had been quite cordial with my lord Tony, though not effusive, which was only natural — he was at all times a very reserved man, and — unlike those of his race — never demonstrative in his manner: but with his daughter he had been singularly tender, with a wistful affection which almost suggested remorse, even though it was she who, on his arrival, had knelt down before him and had begged for his blessing and his forgiveness.

IV

But the following morning he appeared to be really ill: his cheeks looked sunken, almost livid, his eyes dim and hollow. Nevertheless he would not hear of staying on another day or so.

"No, no," he declared emphatically, "I shall be better in Bath. It is more sheltered there, here the north winds would drive me to my bed very quickly. I shall take a course of baths at once. They did me a great deal of good before, you remember, Yvonne — in September, when I caught a chill ... they soon put me right. That is all that ails me now.... I've caught a chill."

He did his best to reassure his daughter, but she was far from satisfied: more especially as he hardly would touch the cup of chocolate which she had prepared for him with her own hands.

"I shall be quite myself again in Bath," he declared, "and in a day or two when you can spare the time — or when milor can spare you — perhaps you will drive over to see how the old father is getting on, eh?"

"Indeed," she said firmly, "I shall not allow you to go to Bath alone. If you will go, I shall accompany you."

"Nay!" he protested, "that is foolishness, my child. The barouche will take me back quite comfortably. It is less than two hours' drive and I shall be quite safe and comfortable."

"You will be quite safe and comfortable in my company," she retorted with a tender, anxious glance at his pale face and the nervous tremor of his hands. "I have consulted with my dear husband and he has given his consent that I should accompany you."

"But you can't leave milor like that, my child," he protested once more. "He will be lonely and miserable without you."

"Yes. I think he will," she said wistfully. "But he will be all the happier when you are well again, and I can return to Combwich satisfied."

Whereupon M. le duc yielded. He kissed and thanked his daughter and seemed even relieved at the prospect of her company. The barouche was ordered for eleven o'clock, and a quarter of an hour before that time Lord Tony had his young wife in his arms, bidding her a sad farewell.

"I hate your going from me, sweetheart," he said as he kissed her eyes, her hair, her lips. "I cannot bear you out of my sight even for an hour ... let alone a couple of days."

"Yet I must go, dear heart," she retorted, looking up with that sweet, grave smile of hers into his eager young face. "I could not let him travel alone ... could I?"

"No, no," he assented somewhat dubiously, "but remember, dear heart, that you are infinitely precious and that I shall scarce live for sheer anxiety until I have you here, safe, once more in my arms."

"I'll send you a courier this evening," she rejoined, as she extricated herself gently from his embrace, "and if I can come back tomorrow...."

"I'll ride over to Bath in any case in the morning so that I may escort you back if you really can come."

"I will come if I am reassured about father. Oh, my dear lord," she added with a wistful little sigh, "I knew yesterday morning that I was too happy, and that something would happen to mar the perfect felicity of these last few days."

"You are not seriously anxious about M. le duc's health, dear heart?"

"No, not seriously anxious. Farewell, milor. It is *au revoir* ... a few hours and we'll resume our dream."

V

There was nothing in all that to arouse my lord Tony's suspicions. All day he was miserable and forlorn because Yvonne was not there — but he was not suspicious.

Fate had a blow in store for him, from which he was destined never wholly to recover, but she gave him no warning, no premonition. He spent the day in making up arrears of correspondence, for he had a large private fortune to administer — trust funds on behalf of brothers and sisters who were minors — and he always did it conscientiously and to the best of his ability. The last few days he had lived in a dream and there was an accumulation of business to go through. In the evening he expected the promised

courier, who did not arrive: but his was not the sort of disposition that would fret and fume because of a contretemps which might be attributable to the weather — it had rained heavily since afternoon — or to sundry trifling causes which he at Combwich, ten or a dozen miles from Bath, could not estimate. He had no suspicions even then. How could he have? How could he guess? Nevertheless when he ultimately went to bed, it was with the firm resolve that he would in any case go over to Bath in the morning and remain there until Yvonne was able to come back with him.

Combwich without her was anyhow unendurable.

VI

He started for Bath at nine o'clock in the morning. It was still raining hard. It had rained all night and the roads were very muddy. He started out without a groom. A little after half-past ten, he drew rein outside his house in Chandos Buildings, and having changed his clothes he started to walk to Laura Place. The rain had momentarily left off, and a pale wintry sun peeped out through rolling banks of grey clouds. He went round by way of Saw Close and the Upper Borough Walls, as he wanted to avoid the fashionable throng that crowded the neighbourhood of the Pump Room and the Baths. His intention was to seek out the Blakeney's at their residence in the Circus after he had seen Yvonne and obtained news of M. le duc.

He had no suspicions. Why should he have?

The Abbey clock struck a quarter-past eleven when finally he knocked at the house in Laura Place. Long afterwards he remembered how just at that moment a dense grey mist descended into the valley. He had not noticed it before, now he saw that it had enveloped this part of the city so that he could not even see clearly across the Place.

A woman came to open the door. Lord Tony then thought this strange considering how particular M. le duc always was about everything pertaining to the management of his household: "The house of a poor exile," he was wont to say, "but nevertheless that of a gentleman."

"Can I go straight up?" he asked the woman, who he thought was standing ostentatiously in the hall as if to bar his way. "I desire to see M. le duc."

"Ye can walk upstairs, zir," said the woman, speaking with a broad Somersetshire accent, "but I doubt me if ye'll see 'is Grace the Duke. 'Es been gone these two days."

Tony had paid no heed to her at first; he had walked across the narrow hall to the oak staircase, and was half-way up the first flight when her last words struck upon his ear ... quite without meaning for the moment ... but nevertheless he paused, one foot on one tread, and the other two treads below ... and he turned round to look at the woman, a swift frown across his smooth forehead.

"Gone these two days," he repeated mechanically; "what do you mean?"

"Well! 'Is Grace left the day afore yesterday — Thursday it was.... 'Is man went yesterday afternoon with luggage and sich ... 'e went by coach 'e did.... Leave off," she cried suddenly; "what are ye doin'? Ye're 'urtin' me."

For Lord Tony had rushed down the stairs again and was across the hall, gripping the unoffending woman by the wrist and glaring into her expressionless face until she screamed with fright.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly as he released her wrist: all the instincts of the courteous gentleman arrayed against his loss of control. "I ... I forgot myself for the moment," he stammered; "would you mind telling me again ... what ... what you said just now?"

The woman was prepared to put on the airs of outraged dignity, she even glanced up at the malapert with scorn expressed in her small beady eyes. But at sight of his face her anger and her fears both fell away from her. Lord Tony was white to the lips, his cheeks were the colour of dead ashes, his mouth trembled, his eyes alone glowed with ill-repressed anxiety.

"'Is Grace," she said with slow emphasis, for of a truth she thought that the young gentleman was either sick or daft, "'Is Grace left this 'ouse the day afore yesterday in a hired barouche. 'Is man — Frederick — went yesterday afternoon with the liggage. 'E caught the Bristol coach at two o'clock. I was 'Is Grace's 'ousekeeper and I am to look after the 'ouse and the zervants until I 'ear from 'Is Grace again. Them's my orders. I know no more than I'm tellin' ye."

"But His Grace returned here yesterday forenoon," argued Lord Tony calmly, mechanically, as one who would wish to convince an obstinate child. "And my lady ... Mademoiselle Yvonne, you know ... was with him."

"Noa! Noa!" said the woman placidly. "'Is Grace 'asn't been near this 'ouse come Thursday afternoon, and 'is man left yesterday wi' th' liggage. Why!" she added confidentially, "'e ain't gone far. It was all zettled that zuddint I didn't know nothing about it myzelf till I zeed Mr. Frederick start off wi' th' liggage. Not much liggage neither it wasn't. Sure but 'Is Grace'll be 'ome zoon. 'E can't 'ave gone far. Not wi' that bit o' liggage. Zure."

"But my lady ... Mademoiselle Yvonne...."

"Lor, zir, didn't ye know? Why 'twas all over th' town o' Tuesday as 'ow Mademozell 'ad eloped with my lord Anthony Dew'urst, and...."

"Yes! yes! But you have seen my lady since?"

"Not clapped eyes on 'er, zir, since she went to the ball come Monday evenin'. An' a picture she looked in 'er white gown...."

"And ... did His Grace leave no message ... for ... for anyone?... no letter?"

"Ah, yes, now you come to mention it, zir. Mr. Frederick 'e give me a letter yesterday. "'Is Grace,' sez 'e, 'left this yere letter on 'is desk. I just found it,' sez 'e. 'If my lord Anthony Dew'urst calls,' sez 'e, 'give it to 'im.' I've got the letter zomewhere, zir. What may your name be?"

"I am Lord Anthony Dewhurst," replied the young man mechanically.

"Your pardon, my lord, I'll go fetch th' letter."

VII

Lord Tony never moved while the woman shuffled across the passage and down the back stairs. He was like a man who has received a knock-out blow and has not yet had time to recover his scattered senses. At first when the woman spoke, his mind had jumped to fears of some awful accident ... runaway horses ... a broken barouche ... or a sudden aggravation of the duc's ill-health. But soon he was forced to reject what now would have seemed a consoling thought: had there been an accident, he would have heard — a rumour would have reached him — Yvonne would have sent a courier. He did not know yet what to think, his mind was like a slate over which a clumsy hand had passed a wet sponge — impressions, recollections, above all a hideous, nameless fear, were all blurred and confused within his brain.

The woman came back carrying a letter which was crumpled and greasy from a prolonged sojourn in the pocket of her apron. Lord Tony took the letter and broke its heavy seal. The woman watched him, curiously, pityingly now, for he was good to look on, and she scented the significance of the tragedy which she had been the means of revealing to him. But he had become quite unconscious of her presence, of everything in fact save those few sentences, written in French, in a cramped hand, and which seemed to dance a wild saraband before his eyes:

“Milor, —

“You tried to steal my daughter from me, but I have taken her from you now. By the time this reaches you we shall be on the high seas on our way to Holland, thence to Coblenz, where Mademoiselle de Kernogan will in accordance with my wishes be united in lawful marriage to M. Martin-Roget whom I have chosen to be her husband. She is not and never was your wife. As far as one may look into the future, I can assure you that you will never in life see her again.”

And to this monstrous document of appalling callousness and cold-blooded cruelty there was appended the signature of André Dieudonné Duc de Kernogan.

But unlike the writer thereof Lord Anthony Dewhurst neither stormed nor raged: he did not even tear the execrable letter into an hundred fragments. His firm hand closed over it with one convulsive clutch, and that was all. Then he slipped the crumpled paper into his pocket. Quite deliberately he took out some money and gave a piece of silver to the woman.

“I thank you very much,” he said somewhat haltingly. “I quite understand everything now.”

The woman curtsied and thanked him; tears were in her eyes, for it seemed to her that never had she seen such grief depicted upon any human face. She preceded him to the hall door and held it open for him, while he passed out. After the brief gleam of sunshine it had started to rain again, but he didn't seem to care. The woman suggested fetching a hackney coach, but he refused quite politely, quite gently; he even lifted his hat as he went out. Obviously he did not know what he was doing. Then he went out into the rain and strode slowly across the Place.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

I

Instinct kept him away from the more frequented streets — and instinct after awhile drew him in the direction of his friend's house at the corner of The Circus. Sir Percy Blakeney had not gone out fortunately: the lacquey who opened the door to my lord Tony stared astonished and almost paralysed for the moment at the extraordinary appearance of his lordship. Rain dropped down from the brim of his hat on to his shoulders: his boots were muddy to the knees, his clothes wringing wet. His eyes were wild and hazy and there was a curious tremor round his mouth.

The lacquey declared with a knowing wink afterwards that his lordship must 'ave been drinkin'!

But at the moment his sense of duty urged him to show my lord — who was his master's friend — into the library, whatever condition he was in. He took his dripping coat and hat from him and marshalled him across the large, square hall.

Sir Percy Blakeney was sitting at his desk, writing, when Lord Tony was shown in. He looked up and at once rose and went to his friend.

"Sit down, Tony," he said quietly, "while I get you some brandy."

He forced the young man down gently into a chair in front of the fire and threw another log into the blaze. Then from a cupboard he fetched a flask of brandy and a glass, poured some out and held it to Tony's lips. The latter drank — unresisting — like a child. Then as some warmth penetrated into his bones, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. Blakeney waited quietly, sitting down opposite to him, until his friend should be able to speak.

"And after all that you told me on Monday night!" were the first words which came from Tony's quivering lips, "and the letter you sent me over on Tuesday! Oh! I was prepared to mistrust Martin-Roget. Why! I never allowed her out of my sight!... But her father!... How could I guess?"

"Can you tell me exactly what happened?"

Lord Tony drew himself up, and staring vacantly into the fire told his friend the events of the past four days. On Wednesday the courier with M. de Kernogan's letter, breathing kindness and forgiveness. On Thursday his arrival and seeming ill-health, on Friday his departure with Yvonne. Tony spoke quite calmly. He had never been anything but calm since first, in the house in Laura Place, he had received that awful blow.

"I ought to have known," he concluded dully, "I ought to have guessed. Especially since you warned me."

"I warned you that Martin-Roget was not the man he pretended to be," said Blakeney gently, "I warned you against him. But I too failed to suspect the duc de Kernogan. We are Britishers, you and I, my dear Tony," he added with a quaint little laugh, "our minds will never be quite equal to the tortuous ways of these Latin races. But we are not going to waste time now talking about the past. We have got to find your wife before those brutes have time to wreak their devilries against her."

"On the high seas ... on the way to Holland ... thence to Coblenz ..." murmured Tony, "I have not yet shown you the duc's letter to me."

He drew from his pocket the crumpled, damp piece of paper on which the ink had run into patches and blotches, and which had become almost undecipherable now. Sir Percy took it from him and read it through:

"The duc de Kernogan and Lady Anthony Dewhurst are not on their way to Holland and to Coblenz," he said quietly as he handed the letter back to Lord Tony.

"Not on their way to Holland?" queried the young man with a puzzled frown. "What do you mean?"

Blakeney drew his chair closer to his friend: a marvellous and subtle change had suddenly taken place in his individuality. Only a few moments ago he was the polished, elegant man of the world, then the kindly and understanding friend — self-contained, reserved, with a perfect manner redolent of sympathy and dignity. Suddenly all that was changed. His manner was still perfect and outwardly calm, his gestures scarce, his speech deliberate, but the compelling power of the leader — which is the birth-right of such men — glowed and sparkled now in his deep-set eyes: the spirit of adventure and reckless daring was awake — insistent and rampant — and subtle effluvia of enthusiasm and audacity emanated from his entire personality.

Sir Percy Blakeney had sunk his individuality in that of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"I mean," he said, returning his friend's anxious look with one that was inspiring in its unshakable confidence, "I mean that on Monday last, the night before your wedding — when I urged you to obtain Yvonne de Kernogan's consent to an immediate marriage — I had followed Martin-Roget to a place called 'The Bottom Inn' on Goblin Combe — a place well known to every smuggler in the county."

"You, Percy!" exclaimed Tony in amazement.

"Yes, I," laughed the other lightly. "Why not? I had had my suspicions of him for some time. As luck would have it he started off on the Monday afternoon by hired coach to Chelwood. I followed. From Chelwood he wanted to go on to Redhill: but the roads were axle deep in mud, and evening was gathering in very fast. Nobody would take him. He wanted a horse and a guide. I was on the spot — as disreputable a bar-loafer as you ever saw in your life. I offered to take him. He had no choice. He had to take me. No one else had offered. I took him to the Bottom Inn. There he met our esteemed friend M. Chauvelin...."

"Chauvelin!" cried Tony, suddenly roused from the dull apathy of his immeasurable grief, at sound of that name which recalled so many exciting adventures, such mad, wild, hair-breadth escapes. "Chauvelin! What in the world is he doing here in England?"

"Brewing mischief, of course," replied Blakeney dryly. "In disgrace, discredited, a marked man — what you will — my friend M. Chauvelin has still an infinite capacity for mischief. Through the interstices of a badly fastened shutter I heard two blackguards

devising infinite devilry. That is why, Tony," he added, "I urged an immediate marriage as the only real protection for Yvonne de Kernogan against those blackguards."

"Would to God you had been more explicit!" exclaimed Tony with a bitter sigh.

"Would to God I had," rejoined the other, "but there was so little time, with licences and what not all to arrange for, and less than an hour to do it in. And would you have suspected the Duc himself of such execrable duplicity even if you had known, as I did then, that the so-called Martin-Roget hath name Adet, and that he matures thoughts of deadly revenge against the duc de Kernogan and his daughter?"

"Martin-Roget? the banker — the exiled royalist who...."

"He may be a banker now ... but he certainly is no royalist — he is the son of a peasant who was unjustly put to death four years ago by the duc de Kernogan."

"Ye gods!"

"He came over to England plentifully supplied with money — I could not gather if the money is his or if it has been entrusted to him by the revolutionary government for purposes of spying and corruption — but he came to England in order to ingratiate himself with the duc de Kernogan and his daughter, and then to lure them back to France, for what purpose you may well imagine."

"Good God, man ... you can't mean ...?"

"He has chartered a smuggler's craft — or rather Chauvelin has done it for him. Her name is the *Hollandia*, her master hath name Kuyper. She was to be in Portishead harbour on the last day of November: all her papers in order. Cargo of West India sugar, destination Amsterdam, consignee some Mynheer over there. But Martin-Roget, or whatever his name may be, and no doubt our friend Chauvelin too, were to be aboard her, and also M. le duc de Kernogan and his daughter. And the *Hollandia* is to put into Le Croisic for Nantes, whose revolutionary proconsul, that infamous Carrier, is of course Chauvelin's bosom friend."

Sir Percy Blakeney finished speaking. Lord Tony had listened to him quietly and in silence: now he rose and turned resolutely to his friend. There was no longer any trace in him of that stunned apathy which had been the primary result of the terrible blow. His young face was still almost unrecognisable from the lines of grief and horror which marred its habitual fresh, boyish look. He looked twenty years older than he had done a few hours ago, but there was also in his whole attitude now the virility of more mature manhood, its determination and unswerving purpose.

"And what can I do now?" he asked simply, knowing that he could trust his friend and leader with what he held dearest in all the world. "Without you, Blakeney, I am of course impotent and lost. I haven't the head to think. I haven't sufficient brains to pit against those cunning devils. But if you will help me...."

Then he checked himself abruptly, and the look of hopeless despair once more crept into his eyes.

"I am mad, Percy," he said with a self-deprecating shrug of the shoulders, "gone crazy with grief, I suppose, or I shouldn't talk of asking your help, of risking your life in my cause."

"Tony, if you talk that rubbish, I shall be forced to punch your head," retorted Blakeney with his light laugh. "Why man," he added gaily, "can't you see that I am aching to have at my old friend Chauvelin again?"

And indeed the zest of adventure, the zest to fight, never dormant, was glowing with compelling vigour now in those lazy eyes of his which were resting with such kindness upon his stricken friend. "Go home, Tony!" he added, "go, you rascal, and collect what things you want, while I send for Hastings and Ffoulkes, and see that four good horses are ready for us within the hour. To-night we sleep at Portishead, Tony. The *Day-Dream* is lying off there, ready to sail at any hour of the day or night. The *Hollandia* has twenty-four hour's start of us, alas! and we cannot overtake her now: but we'll be in Nantes ere those devils can do much mischief: and once in Nantes!... Why, Tony man! think of the glorious escapes we've had together, you and I! Think of the gay, mad rides across the north of France, with half-fainting women and swooning children across our saddle-bows! Think of the day when we smuggled the de Tournais out of Calais harbour, the day we snatched Juliette Déroulède and her Paul out of the tumbril and tore across Paris with that howling mob at our heels! Think! think, Tony! of all the happiest, merriest moments of your life and they will seem dull and lifeless beside what is in store for you, when with your dear wife's arms clinging round your neck, we'll fly along the quays of Nantes on the road to liberty! Ah, Tony lad! were it not for the anxiety which I know is gnawing at your heart, I would count this one of the happiest hours of my happy life!"

He was so full of enthusiasm, so full of vitality, that life itself seemed to emanate from him and to communicate itself to the very atmosphere around. Hope lit up my lord Tony's wan face: he believed in his friend as mediæval ascetics believed in the saints whom they adored. Enthusiasm had crept into his veins, dull despair fell away from him like a mantle.

"God bless you, Percy," he exclaimed as his firm and loyal hand grasped that of the leader whom he revered.

"Nay!" retorted Blakeney with sudden gravity. "He hath done that already. Pray for His help to-day, lad, as you have never prayed before."

CHAPTER VII

MARGUERITE

I

Lord Tony had gone, and for the space of five minutes Sir Percy Blakeney stood in front of the hearth staring into the fire. Something lay before him, something had to be done now, which represented the heavy price that had to be paid for those mad and happy adventures, for that reckless daring, aye for that selfless supreme sacrifice which was as the very breath of life to the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And in the dancing flames he could see Marguerite's blue eyes, her ardent hair, her tender smile all pleading with him not to go. She had so much to give him — so much happiness, such an infinity of love, and he was all that she had in the world! It seemed to him as if he could feel her arms around him even now, as if he could hear her voice whispering appealingly: "Do not go! Am I nothing to you that thoughts of others should triumph over my pleading? that the need of others should outweigh mine own most pressing need? I want you, Percy! aye! even I! You have done so much for others — it is my turn now."

But even as in a kind of trance those words seemed to reach his strained senses, he knew that he must go, that he must tear himself away once more from the clinging embrace of her dear arms and shut his eyes to the tears which anon would fill her own. Destiny demanded that he should go. He had chosen his path in life himself, at first only in a spirit of wild recklessness, a mad tossing of his life into the scales of Fate. But now that same destiny which he had chosen had become his master: he no longer could draw back. What he had done once, twenty times, an hundred times, that he must do again, all the while that the weak and the defenceless called mutely to him from across the seas, all the while that innocent women suffered and orphaned children cried.

And to-day it was his friend, his comrade, who had come to him in his distress: the young wife whom he idolised was in the most dire peril that could possibly threaten any woman: she was at the mercy of a man who, driven by the passion of revenge, meant to show her no mercy, and the devil alone knew these days to what lengths of infamy a man so driven would go.

The minutes sped on. Blakeney's eyes grew hot and wearied from staring into the fire. He closed them for a moment and then quietly turned to go.

II

All those who knew Marguerite Blakeney these days marvelled if she was ever unhappy. Lady Ffoulkes, who was her most trusted friend, vowed that she was not. She had moments — days — sometimes weeks of intense anxiety, which amounted to acute agony. Whenever she saw her husband start on one of those expeditions to France wherein every minute, every hour, he risked his life and more in order to snatch yet another threatened victim from the awful clutches of those merciless Terrorists, she endured soul-torture such as few women could have withstood who had not her splendid courage and her boundless faith. But against such crushing sorrow she had to set off the happiness of those reunions with the man whom she loved so passionately — happiness which was so great, that it overrode and conquered the very memory of past anxieties.

Marguerite Blakeney suffered terribly at times — at others she was overwhelmingly happy — the measure of her life was made up of the bitter dregs of sorrow and the sparkling wine of joy! No! she was not altogether unhappy: and gradually that enthusiasm which irradiated from the whole personality of the valiant Scarlet Pimpernel, which dominated his every action, entered into Marguerite Blakeney's blood too. His vitality was so compelling, those impulses which carried him headlong into unknown dangers were so generous and were actuated by such pure selflessness, that the noble-hearted woman whose very soul was wrapped up in the idolised husband, allowed herself to ride by his side on the buoyant waves of his enthusiasm and of his desires: she smothered every expression of anxiety, she swallowed her tears, she learned to say the word "Good-bye" and forgot the word "Stay!"

III

It was half an hour after midday when Percy knocked at the door of her boudoir. She had just come in from a walk in the meadows round the town and along the bank of the river: the rain had overtaken her and she had come in very wet, but none the less exhilarated by the movement and the keen, damp, salt-laden air which came straight over the hills from the Channel. She had taken off her hat and her mantle and was laughing gaily with her maid who was shaking the wet out of a feather. She looked round at her husband when he entered, and with a quick gesture ordered the maid out of the room.

She had learned to read every line on Percy's face, every expression of his lazy, heavy-lidded eyes. She saw that he was dressed with more than his usual fastidiousness, but in dark clothes and travelling mantle. She knew, moreover, by that subtle instinct which had become a second nature and which warned her whenever he meant to go.

Nor did he announce his departure to her in so many words. As soon as the maid had gone, he took his beloved in his arms.

"They have stolen Tony's wife from him," he said with that light, quaint laugh of his. "I told you that the man Martin-Roget had planned some devilish mischief — well! he has succeeded so far, thanks to that unspeakable fool the duc de Kernogan."

He told her briefly the history of the past few days.

"Tony did not take my warning seriously enough," he concluded with a sigh; "he ought never to have allowed his wife out of his sight."

Marguerite had not interrupted him while he spoke. At first she just lay in his arms, quiescent and listening, nerving herself by a supreme effort not to utter one sigh of misery or one word of appeal. Then, as her knees shook under her, she sank back into a chair by the hearth and he knelt beside her with his arms clasped tightly round her shoulders, his cheek pressed against hers. He had no need to tell her that duty and friendship called, that the call of honour was once again — as it so often has been in the world — louder than that of love.

She understood and she knew, and he, with that supersensitive instinct of his, understood the heroic effort which she made.

“Your love, dear heart,” he whispered, “will draw me back safely home as it hath so often done before. You believe that, do you not?”

And she had the supreme courage to murmur: “Yes!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE ROAD TO PORTISHEAD

I

It was not until Bath had very obviously been left behind that Yvonne de Kernogan — Lady Anthony Dewhurst — realised that she had been trapped.

During the first half-hour of the journey her father had lain back against the cushions of the carriage with eyes closed, his face pale and wan as if with great suffering. Yvonne, her mind a prey to the gravest anxiety, sat beside him, holding his limp cold hand in hers. Once or twice she ventured on a timid question as to his health and he invariably murmured a feeble assurance that he felt well, only very tired and disinclined to talk. Anon she suggested — diffidently, for she did not mean to disturb him — that the driver did not appear to know his way into Bath, he had turned into a side road which she felt sure was not the right one. M. le duc then roused himself for a moment from his lethargy. He leaned forward and gazed out of the window.

"The man is quite right, Yvonne," he said quietly, "he knows his way. He brought me along this road yesterday. He gets into Bath by a slight détour but it is pleasanter driving."

This reply satisfied her. She was a stranger in the land, and knew little or nothing of the environs of Bath. True, last Monday morning after the ceremony of her marriage she had driven out to Combeville, but dawn was only just breaking then, and she had lain for the most part — wearied and happy — in her young husband's arms. She had taken scant note of roads and signposts.

A few minutes later the coach came to a halt and Yvonne, looking through the window, saw a man who was muffled up to the chin and enveloped in a huge travelling cape, mount swiftly up beside the driver.

"Who is that man?" she queried sharply.

"Some friend of the coachman's, no doubt," murmured her father in reply, "to whom he is giving a lift as far as Bath."

The barouche had moved on again.

Yvonne could not have told you why, but at her father's last words she had felt a sudden cold grip at her heart — the first since she started. It was neither fear nor yet suspicion, but a chill seemed to go right through her. She gazed anxiously through the window, and then looked at her father with eyes that challenged and that doubted. But M. le duc would not meet her gaze. He had once more closed his eyes and sat quite still, pale and haggard, like a man who is suffering acutely.

II

"Father we are going back to Bath, are we not?"

The query came out trenchant and hard from her throat which now felt hoarse and choked. Her whole being was suddenly pervaded by a vast and nameless fear. Time had gone on, and there was no sign in the distance of the great city. M. de Kernogan made no reply, but he opened his eyes and a curious glance shot from them at the terror-stricken face of his daughter.

Then she knew — knew that she had been tricked and trapped — that her father had played a hideous and complicated rôle of hypocrisy and duplicity in order to take her away from the husband whom she idolised.

Fear and her love for the man of her choice gave her initiative and strength. Before M. de Kernogan could realise what she was doing, before he could make a movement to stop her, she had seized the handle of the carriage door, wrenched the door open and jumped out into the road. She fell on her face in the mud, but the next moment she picked herself up again and started to run — down the road which the carriage had just traversed, on and on as fast as she could go. She ran on blindly, unreasoningly, impelled by a purely physical instinct to escape, not thinking how childish, how futile such an attempt was bound to be.

Already after the first few minutes of this swift career over the muddy road, she heard quick, heavy footsteps behind her. Her father could not run like that — the coachman could not have thus left his horses — but still she could hear those footsteps at a run — a quicker run than hers — and they were gaining on her — every minute, every second. The next, she felt two powerful arms suddenly seizing her by the shoulders. She stumbled and would once more have fallen, but for those same strong arms which held her close.

"Let me go! Let me go!" she cried, panting.

But she was held and could no longer move. She looked up into the face of Martin-Roget, who without any hesitation or compunction lifted her up as if she had been a bale of light goods and carried her back toward the coach. She had forgotten the man who had been picked up on the road awhile ago, and had been sitting beside the coachman since.

He deposited her in the barouche beside her father, then quietly closed the door and once more mounted to his seat on the box. The carriage moved on again. M. de Kernogan was no longer lethargic, he looked down on his daughter's inert form beside him, and not one look of tenderness or compassion softened the hard callousness of his face.

"Any resistance, my child," he said coldly, "will as you see be useless as well as undignified. I deplore this necessary violence, but I should be forced once more to requisition M. Martin-Roget's help if you attempted such foolish tricks again. When you are a little more calm, we will talk openly together."

For the moment she was lying back against the cushions of the carriage; her nerves having momentarily given way before this appalling catastrophe which had overtaken her and the hideous outrage to which she was being subjected by her own father. She was sobbing convulsively. But in the face of his abominable callousness, she made a great effort to regain her self-control. Her pride, her dignity came to the rescue. She had had time in those few seconds to realise that she was indeed more helpless than any bird in a fowler's net, and that only absolute calm and presence of mind could possibly save her now.

If indeed there was the slightest hope of salvation.

She drew herself up and resolutely dried her eyes and readjusted her hair and her hood and mantle.

"We can talk openly at once, sir," she said coldly. "I am ready to hear what explanation you can offer for this monstrous outrage."

"I owe you no explanation, my child," he retorted calmly. "Presently when you are restored to your own sense of dignity and of self-respect you will remember that a lady of the house of Kernogan does not elope in the night with a stranger and a heretic like some kitchen-wench. Having so far forgotten herself my daughter must, alas! take the consequences, which I deplore, of her own sins and lack of honour."

"And no doubt, father," she retorted, stung to the quick by his insults, "that you too will anon be restored to your own sense of self-respect and remember that hitherto no gentleman of the house of Kernogan has acted the part of a liar and of a hypocrite!"

"Silence!" he commanded sternly.

"Yes!" she reiterated wildly, "it was the rôle of a liar and of a hypocrite that you played from the moment when you sat down to pen that letter full of protestations of affection and forgiveness, until like a veritable Judas you betrayed your own daughter with a kiss. Shame on you, father!" she cried. "Shame!"

"Enough!" he said, as he seized her wrist so roughly that the cry of pain which involuntarily escaped her effectually checked the words in her mouth. "You are mad, beside yourself, a thoughtless, senseless creature whom I shall have to coerce more effectually if you do not cease your ravings. Do not force me to have recourse once again to M. Martin-Roget's assistance to keep your undignified outburst in check."

The name of the man whom she had learned to hate and fear more than any other human being in the world was sufficient to restore to her that measure of self-control which had again threatened to leave her.

"Enough indeed," she said more calmly; "the brain that could devise and carry out such infamy in cold blood is not like to be influenced by a defenceless woman's tears. Will you at least tell me whither you are taking me?"

"We go to a place on the coast now," he replied coldly, "the outlandish name of which has escaped me. There we embark for Holland, from whence we shall join their Royal Highnesses at Coblenz. It is at Coblenz that your marriage with M. Martin-Roget will take place, and...."

"Stay, father," she broke in, speaking quite as calmly as he did, "ere you go any further. Understand me clearly, for I mean every word that I say. In the sight of God — if not in that of the laws of France — I am the wife of Lord Anthony Dewhurst. By everything that I hold most sacred and most dear I swear to you that I will never become Martin-Roget's wife. I would die first," she added with burning but resolutely suppressed passion.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Pshaw, my child," he said quietly, "many a time since the world began have women registered such solemn and sacred vows, only to break them when force of circumstance and their own good sense made them ashamed of their own folly."

"How little you know me, father," was all that she said in reply.

III

Indeed, Yvonne de Kernogan — Yvonne Dewhurst as she was now in sight of God and men — had far too much innate dignity and self-respect to continue this discussion, seeing that in any case she was physically the weaker, and that she was absolutely helpless and defenceless in the hands of two men, one of whom — her own father — who should have been her protector, was leagued with her bitterest enemy against her.

That Martin-Roget was her enemy — aye and her father's too — she had absolutely no doubt. Some obscure yet keen instinct was working in her heart, urging her to mistrust him even more wholly than she had done before. Just now, when he laid ruthless hands on her and carried her, inert and half-swooning, back into the coach, and she lay with closed eyes, her very soul in revolt against this contact with him, against the feel of his arms around her, a vague memory surcharged with horror and with dread stirred within her brain: and over the vista of the past few years she looked back upon an evening in the autumn — a rough night with the wind from the Atlantic blowing across the lowlands of Poitou and sighing in the willow trees that bordered the Loire — she seemed to hear the tumultuous cries of enraged human creatures dominating the sound of the gale, she felt the crowd of evil-intentioned men around the closed carriage wherein she sat, calm and unafraid. Darkness then was all around her. She could not see. She could only hear and feel. And she heard the carriage door being wrenched open, and she felt the cold breath of the wind upon her cheek, and also the hot breath of a man in a passion of fury and of hate.

She had seen nothing then, and mercifully semi-unconsciousness had dulled her aching senses, but even now her soul shrunk with horror at the vague remembrance of that ghostlike form — the spirit of hate and of revenge — of its rough arms encircling her shoulders, its fingers under her chin — and then that awful, loathsome, contaminating kiss which she thought then would have smirched her for ever. It had taken all the pure, sweet kisses of a brave and loyal man whom she loved and revered, to make her forget that hideous, indelible stain: and in the arms of her dear milord she had forgotten that one terrible moment, when she had felt that the embrace of death must be more endurable than that of this unknown and hated man.

It was the memory of that awful night which had come back to her as in a flash while she lay passive and broken in Martin-Roget's arms. Of course for the moment she had no thought of connecting the rich banker from Brest, the enthusiastic royalist and *émigré*, with one of those turbulent, uneducated peasant lads who had attacked her carriage that night: all that she was conscious of was that she was outraged by his presence, just as she had been outraged then, and that the contact of his hands, of his arms, was absolutely unendurable.

To fight against the physical power which held her a helpless prisoner in the hands of the enemy was sheer impossibility. She knew that, and was too proud to make feeble and futile efforts which could only end in defeat and further humiliation. She felt hideously wretched and lonely — thoughts of her husband, who at this hour was still serenely unconscious of the terrible catastrophe which had befallen him, brought tears of acute misery to her eyes. What would he do when — to-morrow, perhaps — he realised that his bride had been stolen from him, that he had been fooled and duped as she had been too. What could he do when he knew?

She tried to solace her own soul-agony by thinking of his influential friends who, of course, would help him as soon as they knew. There was that mysterious and potent friend of whom he spoke so little, who already had warned him of coming danger and urged on the secret marriage which should have proved a protection. There was Sir Percy Blakeney, of whom he spoke much, who was enormously rich, independent, the most intimate friend of the Regent himself. There was....

But what was the use of clinging even for one instant to those feeble cords of Hope's broken lyre? By the time her dear lord knew that she was gone, she would be on the high seas, far out of his reach.

And she had not even the solace of tears — heart-broken sobs rose in her throat, but she resolutely kept them back. Her father's cold, impassive face, the callous glitter in his eyes told her that every tear would be in vain, her most earnest appeal an object for his sneers.

IV

As to how long the journey in the coach lasted after that Yvonne Dewhurst could not have said. It may have been a few hours, it may have been a cycle of years. She had been young — a happy bride, a dutiful daughter — when she left Combwich Hall. She was an old woman now, a supremely unhappy one, parted from the man she loved without hope of ever seeing him again in life, and feeling nothing but hatred and contempt for the father who had planned such infamy against her.

She offered no resistance whatever to any of her father's commands. After the first outburst of revolt and indignation she had not even spoken to him.

There was a halt somewhere on the way, when in the low-raftered room of a posting-inn, she had to sit at table with the two men who had compassed her misery. She was thirsty, feverish and weak: she drank some milk in silence. She felt ill physically as well as mentally, and the constant effort not to break down had helped to shatter her nerves. As she had stepped out of the barouche without a word, so she stepped into it again when it stood outside, ready with a fresh relay of horses to take her further, still further, away from the cosy little nest where even now her young husband was waiting longingly for her return. The people of the inn — a kindly-looking woman, a portly middle-aged man, one or two young ostlers and serving-maids were standing about in the yard when her father led her to the coach. For a moment the wild idea rushed to her mind to run to these people and demand their protection, to proclaim at the top of her voice the infamous act which was dragging her away from her husband and her home, and lead her a helpless prisoner to a fate that was infinitely worse than death. She even ran to the woman who looked so benevolent and so kind, she placed her small quivering hand on the other's rough toil-worn one and in hurried, appealing words begged for her help and the shelter of a home till she could communicate with her husband.

The woman listened with a look of kindly pity upon her homely face, she patted the small, trembling hand and stroked it gently, tears of compassion gathered in her eyes:

"Yes, yes, my dear," she said soothingly, speaking as she would to a sick woman or to a child, "I quite understand. I wouldna' fret if I was you. I would jess go quietly with your pore father: 'e knows what's best for you, that 'e do. You come 'long wi' me," she added as she drew Yvonne's hands through her arm, "I'll see ye're comfortable in the coach."

Yvonne, bewildered, could not at first understand either the woman's sympathy or her obvious indifference to the pitiable tale, until — Oh! the shame of it! — she saw the two young serving-maids looking on her with equal pity expressed in their round eyes, and heard one of them whispering to the other:

"Pore lady! so zad ain't it? I'm that zorry for the pore father!"

And the girl with a significant gesture indicated her own forehead and glanced knowingly at her companion. Yvonne felt a hot flush rise to the very roots of her hair. So her father and Martin-Roget had thought of everything, and had taken every precaution to cut the ground from under her feet. Wherever a halt was necessary, wherever the party might come in contact with the curious or the indifferent, it would be given out that the poor young lady was crazed, that she talked wildly, and had to be kept under restraint.

Yvonne as she turned away from that last faint glimmer of hope, encountered Martin-Roget's glance of triumph and saw the sneer which curled his full lips. Her father came up to her just then and took her over from the kindly hostess, with the ostentatious manner of one who has charge of a sick person, and must take every precaution for her welfare.

"Another loss of dignity, my child," he said to her in French, so that none but Martin-Roget could catch what he said. "I guessed that you would commit some indiscretion, you see, so M. Martin-Roget and myself warned all the people at the inn the moment we arrived. We told them that I was travelling with a sick daughter who had become crazed through the death of her lover, and believed herself — like most crazed persons do — to be persecuted and oppressed. You have seen the result. They pitied you. Even the serving-maids smiled. It would have been wiser to remain silent."

Whereupon he handed her into the barouche with loving care, a crowd of sympathetic onlookers gazing with obvious compassion on the poor crazed lady and her sorely tried father.

After this episode Yvonne gave up the struggle.

No one but God could help her, if He chose to perform a miracle.

V

The rest of the journey was accomplished in silence. Yvonne gazed, unseeing, through the carriage window as the barouche rattled on the cobble-stones of the streets of Bristol. She marvelled at the number of people who went gaily by along the streets, unheeding, unknowing that the greatest depths of misery to which any human being could sink had been probed by the unfortunate young girl who wide-eyed, mute and broken-hearted gazed out upon the busy world without.

Portishead was reached just when the grey light of day turned to a gloomy twilight. Yvonne unresisting, insentient, went whither she was bidden to go. Better that, than to feel Martin-Roget's coercive grip on her arm, or to hear her father's curt words of command.

She walked along the pier and anon stepped into a boat, hardly knowing what she was doing: the twilight was welcome to her, for it hid much from her view and her eyes — hot with unshed tears — ached for the restful gloom. She realised that the boat was being rowed along for some little way down the stream, that Frédéric, who had come she knew not how or whence, was in the boat too with some luggage which she recognised as being familiar: that another woman was there whom she did not know, but who appeared to look after her comforts, wrapped a shawl closer round her knees and drew the hood of her mantle closer round her neck. But it was all like an ugly dream: the voices of her father and of Martin-Roget, who were talking in monosyllables, the sound of the oars as they struck the water, or creaked in their rowlocks, came to her as from an ever-receding distance.

A couple of hours later she came back to complete consciousness. She was in a narrow place, which at first appeared to her like a cupboard: the atmosphere was both cold and stuffy and reeked of tar and of oil. She was lying on a hard bed with her mantle and a shawl wrapped round her. It was very dark save where the feeble glimmer of a lamp threw a circle of light around. Above her head there was a constant and heavy tramping of feet, and the sound of incessant and varied creakings and groanings of wood, cordage and metal filled the night air with their weird and dismal sounds. A slow feeling of movement coupled with a gentle oscillation confirmed the unfortunate girl's first waking impression that she was on board a ship. How she had got there she did not know. She must ultimately have fainted in the small boat and been carried aboard. She raised herself slightly on her elbow and peered round her into the dark corners of the cabin: opposite to her upon a bench, also wrapped up in shawl and mantle, lay the woman who had been in attendance on her in the boat.

The woman's heavy breathing indicated that she was fast asleep.

Loneliness! Misery! Desolation encompassed the happy bride of yesterday. With a moan of exquisite soul-agony she fell back against the hard cushions, and for the first time this day a convulsive flow of tears eased the superacuteness of her misery.

CHAPTER IX

THE COAST OF FRANCE

I

The whole of that wretched mournful day Yvonne Dewhurst spent upon the deck of the ship which was bearing her away every hour, every minute, further and still further from home and happiness. She seldom spoke: she ate and drank when food was brought to her: she was conscious neither of cold nor of wet, of well-being or ill. She sat upon a pile of cordages in the stern of the ship leaning against the taffrail and in imagination seeing the coast of England fade into illimitable space.

Part of the time it rained, and then she sat huddled up in the shawls and tarpaulins which the woman placed about her: then, when the sun came out, she still sat huddled up, closing her eyes against the glare.

When daylight faded into dusk, and then twilight into night she gazed into nothingness as she had gazed on water and sky before, thinking, thinking, thinking! This could not be the end — it could not. So much happiness, such pure love, such perfect companionship as she had had with the young husband whom she idolised could not all be wrenched from her like that, without previous foreboding and without some warning from Fate. This miserable, sordid, wretched journey to an unknown land could not be the epilogue to the exquisite romance which had suddenly changed the dreary monotony of her life into one long, glowing dream of joy and of happiness! This could not be the end!

And gazing into the immensity of the far horizon she thought and thought and racked her memory for every word, every look which she had had from her dear milor. And upon the grey background of sea and sky she seemed to perceive the vague and dim outline of that mysterious friend — the man who knew everything — who foresaw everything, even and above all the dangers that threatened those whom he loved. He had foreseen this awful danger too! Oh! if only milor and she herself had realised its full extent! But now surely! surely! he would help, he would know what to do. Milor was wont to speak of him as being omniscient and having marvellous powers.

Once or twice during the day M. le duc de Kernogan came to sit beside his daughter and tried to speak a few words of comfort and of sympathy. Of a truth — here on the open sea — far both from home and kindred and from the new friends he had found in hospitable England — his heart smote him for all the wrong he had done to his only child. He dared not think of the gentle and patient wife who lay at rest in the churchyard of Kernogan, for he feared that with his thoughts he would conjure up her pale, avenging ghost who would demand an account of what he had done with her child.

Cold and exposure — the discomfort of the long sea-journey in this rough trading ship had somewhat damped M. de Kernogan's pride and obstinacy: his loyalty to the cause of his King had paled before the demands of a father's duty toward his helpless daughter.

II

It was close on six o'clock and the night, after the turbulent and capricious alternations of rain and sunshine, promised to be beautifully clear, though very cold. The pale crescent of the moon had just emerged from behind the thick veil of cloud and mist which still hung threateningly upon the horizon: a fitful sheen of silver danced upon the waves.

M. le duc stood beside his daughter. He had inquired after her health and well-being and received her monosyllabic reply with an impatient sigh. M. Martin-Roget was pacing up and down the deck with restless and vigorous strides: he had just gone by and made a loud and cheery comment on the weather and the beauty of the night.

Could Yvonne Dewhurst have seen her father's face now, or had she cared to study it, she would have perceived that he was gazing out to sea in the direction to which the schooner was heading with an intent look of puzzlement, and that there was a deep furrow between his brows. Half an hour went by and he still stood there, silent and absorbed: then suddenly a curious exclamation escaped his lips: he stooped and seized his daughter by the wrist.

"Yvonne!" he said excitedly, "tell me! am I dreaming, or am I crazed?"

"What is it?" she asked coldly.

"Out there! Look! Just tell me what you see?"

He appeared so excited and his pressure on her wrist was so insistent that she dragged herself to her feet and looked out to sea in the direction to which he was pointing.

"Tell me what you see," he reiterated with ever-growing excitement, and she felt that the hand which held her wrist trembled violently.

"The light from a lighthouse, I think," she said.

"And besides that?"

"Another light — a much smaller one — considerably higher up. It must be perched up on some cliffs."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. There are lights dotted about here and there. Some village on the coast."

"On the coast?" he murmured hoarsely, "and we are heading towards it."

"So it appears," she said indifferently. What cared she to what shore she was being taken: every land save England was exile to her now.

Just at this moment M. Martin-Roget in his restless wanderings once more passed by.

"M. Martin-Roget!" called the duc.

And vaguely Yvonne wondered why his voice trembled so.

"At your service, M. le duc," replied the other as he came to a halt, and then stood with legs wide apart firmly planted upon the deck, his hands buried in the pockets of his heavy mantle, his head thrown back, as if defiantly, his whole attitude that of a master condescending to talk with slaves.

"What are those lights over there, ahead of us?" asked M. le duc quietly.

"The lighthouse of Le Croisic, M. le duc," replied Martin-Roget dryly, "and of the guard-house above and the harbour below. All at your service," he added, with a sneer.

"Monsieur..." exclaimed the duc.

"Eh? what?" queried the other blandly.

"What does this mean?"

In the vague, dim light of the moon Yvonne could just distinguish the two men as they stood confronting one another. Martin-Roget, tall, massive, with arms now folded across his breast, shrugging his broad shoulders at the duc's impassioned query — and her father who suddenly appeared to have shrunk within himself, who raised one trembling hand to his forehead and with the other sought with pathetic entreaty the support of his daughter's arm.

"What does this mean?" he murmured again.

"Only," replied Martin-Roget with a laugh, "that we are close to the coast of France and that with this unpleasant but useful north-westerly wind we shall be in Nantes two hours before midnight."

"In Nantes?" queried the duc vaguely, not understanding, speaking tonelessly like a somnambulist or a man in a trance. He was leaning heavily now on his daughter's arm, and she with that motherly instinct which is ever present in a good woman's heart even in the presence of her most cruel enemy, drew him tenderly towards her, gave him the support he needed, not quite understanding herself yet what it was that had befallen them both.

"Yes, in Nantes, M. le duc," reiterated Martin-Roget with a sneer.

"But 'twas to Holland we were going."

"To Nantes, M. le duc," retorted the other with a ringing note of triumph in his voice, "to Nantes, from which you fled like a coward when you realised that the vengeance of an outraged people had at last overtaken you and your kind."

"I do not understand," stammered the duc, and mechanically now — instinctively — father and daughter clung to one another as if each was striving to protect the other from the raving fury of this madman. Never for a moment did they believe that he was sane. Excitement, they thought, had turned his brain: he was acting and speaking like one possessed.

"I dare say it would take far longer than the next four hours while we glide gently along the Loire, to make such as you understand that your arrogance and your pride are destined to be humbled at last and that you are now in the power of those men who awhile ago you did not deem worthy to lick your boots. I dare say," he continued calmly, "you think that I am crazed. Well! perhaps I am, but sane enough anyhow, M. le duc, to enjoy the full flavour of revenge."

"Revenge?... what have we done?... what has my daughter done?..." stammered the duc incoherently. "You swore you loved her ... desired to make her your wife ... I consented ... she..."

Martin-Roget's harsh laugh broke in on his vague murmurings.

"And like an arrogant fool you fell into the trap," he said with calm irony, "and you were too blind to see in Martin-Roget, suitor for your daughter's hand, Pierre Adet, the son of the victim of your execrable tyranny, the innocent man murdered at your bidding."

"Pierre Adet ... I don't understand."

"'Tis but little meseems that you do understand, M. le duc," sneered the other. "But turn your memory back, I pray you, to the night four years ago when a few hot-headed peasant lads planned to give you a fright in your castle of Kernogan ... the plan failed and Pierre Adet, the leader of that unfortunate band, managed to fly the country, whilst you, like a crazed and blind tyrant, administered punishment right and left for the fright which you had had. Just think of it! those boors! those louts! that swinish herd of human cattle had dared to raise a cry of revolt against you! To death with them all! to death! Where is Pierre Adet, the leader of those hogs? to him an exemplary punishment must be meted! a deterrent against any other attempt at revolt. Well, M. le duc, do you remember what happened then? Pierre Adet, severely injured in the mêlée, had managed to crawl away into safety. While he lay betwixt life and death, first in the presbytery of Vertou, then in various ditches on his way to Paris, he knew nothing of what happened at Nantes. When he returned to consciousness and to active life he heard that his father, Jean Adet the miller, who was innocent of any share in the revolt, had been hanged by order of M. le duc de Kernogan."

He paused awhile and a curious laugh — half-convulsive and not unmixed with sobs — shook his broad shoulders. Neither the duc nor Yvonne made any comment on what they heard: the duc felt like a fly caught in a death-dealing web. He was dazed with the horror of his position, dazed above all with the rush of bitter remorse which had surged up in his heart and mind, when he realised that it was his own folly, his obstinacy — aye! and his heartlessness which had brought this awful fate upon his daughter. And Yvonne felt that whatever she might endure of misery and hopelessness was nothing in comparison with what her father must feel with the addition of bitter self-reproach.

"Are you beginning to understand the position better now, M. le duc?" queried Martin-Roget after awhile.

The duc sank back nerveless upon the pile of cordages close by. Yvonne was leaning with her back against the taffrail, her two arms outstretched, the north-west wind blowing her soft brown hair about her face whilst her eyes sought through the gloom to read the lines of cruelty and hatred which must be distorting Martin-Roget's face now.

"And," she said quietly after awhile, "you have waited all these years, Monsieur, nursing thoughts of revenge and of hate against us. Ah! believe me," she added earnestly, "though God knows my heart is full of misery at this moment, and though I know that at your bidding death will so soon claim me and my father as his own, yet would I not change my wretchedness for yours."

"And I, citizenship," he said roughly, addressing her for the first time in the manner prescribed by the revolutionary government, "would not change places with any king or other tyrant on earth. Yes," he added as he came a step or two closer to her, "I have waited all these years. For four years I have thought and striven and planned, planned to be even with your father and with you one day. You had fled the country — like cowards, bah! — ready to lend your arms to the foreigner against your own country in order to re-establish

a tyrant upon the throne whom the whole of the people of France loathed and detested. You had fled, but soon I learned whither you had gone. Then I set to work to gain access to you.... I learned English.... I too went to England ... under an assumed name ... with the necessary introductions so as to gain a footing in the circles in which you moved. I won your father's condescension — almost his friendship!... The rich banker from Brest should be fleeced in order to provide funds for the armies that were to devastate France — and the rich banker of Brest refused to be fleeced unless he was lured by the promise of Mlle. de Kernogan's hand in marriage."

"You need not, Monsieur," rejoined Yvonne coldly, while Martin-Roget paused in order to draw breath, "you need not, believe me, take the trouble to recount all the machinations which you carried through in order to gain your ends. Enough that my father was so foolish as to trust you, and that we are now completely in your power, but...."

"There is no 'but,'" he broke in gruffly, "you are in my power and will be made to learn the law of the talion which demands an eye for an eye, a life for a life: that is the law which the people are applying to that herd of aristos who were arrogant tyrants once and are shrinking, cowering slaves now. Oh! you were very proud that night, Mademoiselle Yvonne de Kernogan, when a few peasant lads told you some home truths while you sat disdainful and callous in your carriage, but there is one fact that you can never efface from your memory, strive how you may, and that is that for a few minutes I held you in my arms and that I kissed you, my fine lady, ay! kissed you like I would any pert kitchen wench, even I, Pierre Adet, the miller's son."

He drew nearer and nearer to her as he spoke; she, leaning against the taffrail, could not retreat any further from him. He laughed.

"If you fall over into the water, I shall not complain," he said, "it will save our proconsul the trouble, and the guillotine some work. But you need not fear. I am not trying to kiss you again. You are nothing to me, you and your father, less than nothing. Your death in misery and wretchedness is all I want, whether you find a dishonoured grave in the Loire or by suicide I care less than nothing. But let me tell you this," he added, and his voice came now like a hissing sound through his set teeth, "that there is no intention on my part to make glorious martyrs of you both. I dare say you have heard some pretty stories over in England of aristos climbing the steps of the guillotine with an ecstatic look of martyrdom upon their face: and tales of the tumbrils of Paris laden with men and women going to their death and shouting "God save the King" all the way. That is not the sort of paltry revenge which would satisfy me. My father was hanged by yours as a malefactor — hanged, I say, like a common thief! he, a man who had never wronged a single soul in the whole course of his life, who had been an example of fine living, of hard work, of noble courage through many adversities. My mother was left a widow — not the honoured widow of an honourable man — but a pariah, the relict of a malefactor who had died of the hangman's rope — my sister was left an orphan — dishonoured — without hope of gaining the love of a respectable man. All that I and my family owe to ci-devant M. le duc de Kernogan, and therefore I tell you, that both he and his daughter shall not die like martyrs but like malefactors too — shamed — dishonoured — loathed and execrated even by their own kindred! Take note of that, M. le duc de Kernogan! You have sown shame, shame shall you reap! and the name of which you are so proud will be dragged in the mire until it has become a by-word in the land for all that is despicable and base."

Perhaps at no time of his life had Martin-Roget, erstwhile Pierre Adet, spoken with such an intensity of passion, even though he was at all times turbulent and a ready prey to his own emotions. But all that he had kept hidden in the inmost recesses of his heart, ever since as a young stripling he had chafed at the social conditions of his country, now welled forth in that wild harangue. For the first time in his life he felt that he was really master of those who had once despised and oppressed him. He held them and was the arbiter of their fate. The sense of possession and of power had gone to his head like wine: he was intoxicated with his own feeling of triumphant revenge, and this impassioned rhetoric flowed from his mouth like the insentient babble of a drunken man.

The duc de Kernogan, sitting on the coil of cordages with his elbows on his knees and his head buried in his hands, had no thought of breaking in on the other man's ravings. The bitterness of remorse paralysed his thinking faculties. Martin-Roget's savage words struck upon his senses like blows from a sledge-hammer. He knew that nothing but his own folly was the cause of Yvonne's and his own misfortune. Yvonne had been safe from all evil fortune under the protection of her fine young English husband; he — the father who should have been her chief protector — had dragged her by brute force away from that husband's care and had landed her ... where?... A shudder like acute agony went through the unfortunate man's whole body as he thought of the future.

Nor did Yvonne Dewhurst attempt to make reply to her enemy's delirious talk. She would not give him even the paltry satisfaction of feeling that he had stung her into a retort. She did not fear him — she hated him too much for that — but like her father she had no illusions as to his power over them both. While he stormed and raved she kept her eyes steadily fixed upon him. She could only just barely distinguish him in the gloom, and he no doubt failed to see the expression of lofty indifference wherewith she contrived to regard him: but he *felt* her contempt, and but for the presence of the sailors on the deck he probably would have struck her.

As it was when, from sheer lack of breath, he had to pause, he gave one last look of hate on the huddled figure of the duc, and the proud, upstanding one of Yvonne, then with a laugh which sounded like that of a fiend — so cruel, so callous was it, he turned on his heel, and as he strode away towards the bow his tall figure was soon absorbed in the surrounding gloom.

III

The duc de Kernogan and his daughter saw little or nothing of Martin-Roget after that. For awhile longer they caught sight of him from time to time as he walked up and down the deck with ceaseless restlessness and in the company of another man, who was much shorter and slimmer than himself and whom they had not noticed hitherto. Martin-Roget talked most of the time in a loud and excited voice, the other appearing to listen to him with a certain air of deference. Whether the conversation between these two was actually intended for the ears of the two unfortunates, or whether it was merely chance which brought certain phrases to their ears when the two men passed closely by, it were impossible to say. Certain it is that from such chance phrases they gathered that the barque would not put into Nantes, as the navigation of the Loire was suspended for the nonce by order of Proconsul Carrier. He had need of the river for his awesome and nefarious deeds. Yvonne's ears were regaled with tales — told with loud ostentation — of the terrible *noyades*, the wholesale drowning of men, women and children, malefactors and traitors, so as to ease the burden of the guillotine.

After three bells it got so bitterly cold that Yvonne, fearing that her father would become seriously ill, suggested their going down to their stuffy cabins together. After all, even the foul and shut-up atmosphere of these close, airless cupboards was preferable to the

propinquity of those two human fiends up on deck and the tales of horror and brutality which they loved to tell.

And for two hours after that, father and daughter sat in the narrow cell-like place, locked in each other's arms. She had everything to forgive, and he everything to atone for: but Yvonne suffered so acutely, her misery was so great that she found it in her heart to pity the father whose misery must have been even greater than hers. The supreme solace of bestowing love and forgiveness and of easing the racking paroxysms of remorse which brought the unfortunate man to the verge of dementia, warmed her heart towards him and brought surcease to her own sorrow.

BOOK II
NANTES
DECEMBER 1793
CHAPTER I
THE TIGER'S LAIR

I

Nantes is in the grip of the tiger. Representative Carrier — with powers as of a proconsul — has been sent down to stamp out the lingering remnants of the counter-revolution. La Vendée is temporarily subdued; the army of the royalists driven back across the Loire; but traitors still abound — this the National Convention in Paris hath decreed — there are traitors everywhere. They were not *all* massacred at Cholet and Savenay. Disbanded, yes! but not exterminated, and wolves must not be allowed to run loose, lest they band again, and try to devour the flocks. Therefore extermination is the order of the day. Every traitor or would-be traitor — every son and daughter and father and mother of traitors must be destroyed ere they do more mischief. And Carrier — Carrier the coward who turned tail and bolted at Cholet — is sent to Nantes to carry on the work of destruction. Wolves and wolflings all! Let none survive. Give them fair trial, of course. As traitors they have deserved death — have they not taken up arms against the Republic and against the Will and the Reign of the People? But let a court of justice sit in Nantes town; let the whole nation know how traitors are dealt with: let the nation see that her rulers are both wise and just. Let wolves and wolflings be brought up for trial, and set up the guillotine on Place du Bouffay with four executioners appointed to do her work. There would be too much work for two, or even three. Let there be four — and let the work of extermination be complete. And Carrier — with powers as of a proconsul — arrives in Nantes town and sets to work to organise his household. Civil and military — with pomp and circumstance — for the son of a small farmer, destined originally for the Church and for obscurity is now virtual autocrat in one of the great cities of France. He has power of life and death over thousands of citizens — under the direction of justice, of course! So now he has citizens of the bedchamber, and citizens of the household, he has a guard of honour and a company of citizens of the guard. And above all he has a crowd of spies around him — servants of the Committee of Public Safety so they are called — they style themselves “La Compagnie Marat” in honour of the great patriot who was foully murdered by a female wolfling. So la Compagnie Marat is formed — they wear red bonnets on their heads — no stockings on their feet — short breeches to display their bare shins: their captain, Fleury, has access at all times to the person of the proconsul, to make report on the raids which his company effect at all hours of the day or night. Their powers are supreme too. In and out of houses — however private — up and down the streets — through shops, taverns and warehouses, along the quays and the yards — everywhere they go. Everywhere they have the right to go! to ferret and to spy, to listen, to search, to interrogate — the red-capped Company is paid for what it can find. Piece-work, what? Work for the guillotine! And they it is who keep the guillotine busy. Too busy in fact. And the court of justice sitting in the Hôtel du Département is overworked too. Carrier gets impatient. Why waste the time of patriots by so much paraphernalia of justice? Wolves and wolflings can be exterminated so much more quickly, more easily than that. It only needs a stroke of genius, one stroke, and Carrier has it. He invents the Noyades! The Drownages we may call them! They are so simple! An old flat-bottomed barge. The work of two or three ship’s carpenters! Portholes below the water-line and made to open at a given moment. All so very, very simple. Then a journey downstream as far as Belle Isle or la Maréchale, and “sentence of deportation” executed without any trouble on a whole crowd of traitors— “vertical deportation” Carrier calls it facetiously and is mightily proud of his invention and of his witticism too.

The first attempt was highly successful. Ninety priests, and not one escaped. Think of the work it would have entailed on the guillotine — and on the friends of Carrier who sit in justice in the Hôtel du Département! Ninety heads! Bah! That old flat-bottomed barge is the most wonderful labour-saving machine.

After that the “Drownages” become the order of the day. The red-capped Company recruits victims for the hecatomb, and over Nantes Town there hangs a pall of unspeakable horror. The prisons are not vast enough to hold all the victims, so the huge entrepôt, the bonded warehouse on the quay, is converted: instead of chests of coffee it is now encumbered with human freight: into it pell-mell are thrown all those who are destined to assuage Carrier’s passion for killing: ten thousand of them: men, women, and young children, counter-revolutionists, innocent tradesmen, thieves, aristocrats, criminals and women of evil fame — they are herded together like cattle, without straw whereon to lie, without water, without fire, with barely food enough to keep up the last attenuated thread of a miserable existence.

And when the warehouse gets over full, to the Loire with them! — a hundred or two at a time! Pestilence, dysentery decimates their numbers. Under pretence of hygienic requirements two hundred are flung into the river on the 14th day of December. Two hundred — many of them women — crowds of children and a batch of parish priests.

Some there are among Carrier’s colleagues — those up in Paris — who protest! Such wholesale butchery will not redound to the credit of any revolutionary government — it even savours of treachery — it is unpatriotic! There are the emissaries of the National Convention, deputed from Paris to supervise and control — they protest as much as they dare — but such men are swept off their feet by the torrent of Carrier’s gluttony for blood. Carrier’s mission is to “purge the political body of every evil that infests it.” Vague and yet precise! He reckons that he has full powers and thinks he can flaunt those powers in the face of those sent to control him. He does it too for three whole months ere he in his turn meets his doom. But for the moment he is omnipotent. He has to make report every week to the Committee of Public Safety, and he sends brief, garbled versions of his doings. “He is pacifying La Vendée! he is stamping out the remnants of the rebellion! he is purging the political body of every evil that infests it.” Anon he succeeds in getting the emissaries of the National Convention recalled. He is impatient of control. “They are weak, pusillanimous, unpatriotic! He must have freedom to act for the best.”

After that he remains virtual dictator, with none but obsequious, terrified myrmidons around him: these are too weak to oppose him in any way. And the municipality dare not protest either — nor the district council — nor the departmental. They are merely sheep who watch others of their flock being sent to the slaughter.

After that from within his lair the man tiger decides that it is a pity to waste good barges on the cattle: “Fling them out!” he cries. “Fling them out! Tie two and two together. Man and woman! criminal and aristo! the thief with the ci-devant duke’s daughter! the ci-devant marquis with the slut from the streets! Fling them all out together into the Loire and pour a hail of grape shot above them until the last struggler has disappeared!” “Equality!” he cries, “Equality for all! Fraternity! Unity in death!”

His friends call this new invention of his: “Marriage R publicain!” and he is pleased with the *mot*.

And Republican marriages become the order of the day.

II

Nantes itself now is akin to a desert — a desert wherein the air is filled with weird sounds of cries and of moans, of furtive footsteps scurrying away into dark and secluded byways, of musketry and confused noises, of sorrow and of lamentations.

Nantes is a city of the dead — a city of sleepers. Only Carrier is awake — thinking and devising and planning shorter ways and swifter, for the extermination of traitors.

In the H tel de la Villestreux the tiger has built his lair: at the apex of the island of Feydeau, with the windows of the hotel facing straight down the Loire. From here there is a magnificent view downstream upon the quays which are now deserted and upon the once prosperous port of Nantes.

The staircase of the hotel which leads up to the apartments of the proconsul is crowded every day and all day with suppliants and with petitioners, with the citizens of the household and the members of the Compagnie Marat.

But no one has access to the person of the dictator. He stands aloof, apart, hidden from the eyes of the world, a mysterious personality whose word sends hundreds to their death, whose arbitrary will has reduced a once flourishing city to abject poverty and squalor. No tyrant has ever surrounded himself with a greater paraphernalia of pomp and circumstance — no aristo has ever dwelt in greater luxury: the spoils of churches and chateaux fill the H tel de la Villestreux from attic to cellar, gold and silver plate adorn his table, priceless works of art hang upon his walls, he lolls on couches and chairs which have been the resting-place of kings. The wholesale spoliation of the entire country-side has filled the demagogue’s abode with all that is most sumptuous in the land.

And he himself is far more inaccessible than was *le Roi Soleil* in the days of his most towering arrogance, than were the Popes in the glorious days of medi val Rome. Jean Baptiste Carrier, the son of a small farmer, the obscure deputy for Cantal in the National Convention, dwells in the H tel de la Villestreux as in a stronghold. No one is allowed near him save a few — a very few — intimates: his valet, two or three women, Fleury the commander of the Marats, and that strange and abominable youngster, Jacques Lalou t, about whom the chroniclers of that tragic epoch can tell us so little — a cynical young braggart, said to be a cousin of Robespierre and the son of a midwife of Nantes, beardless, handsome and vicious: the only human being — so we are told — who had any influence over the sinister proconsul: mere hanger-on of Carrier or spy of the National Convention, no one can say — a malignant personality which has remained an enigma and a mystery to this hour.

None but these few are ever allowed now inside the inner sanctuary wherein dwells and schemes the dictator. Even Lamberty, Fouquet and the others of the staff are kept at arm’s length. Martin-Roget, Chauvelin and other strangers are only allowed as far as the ante-room. The door of the inner chamber is left open and they hear the proconsul’s voice and see his silhouette pass and repass in front of them, but that is all.

Fear of assassination — the inevitable destiny of the tyrant — haunts the man-tiger even within the fastnesses of his lair. Day and night a carriage with four horses stands in readiness on La Petite Hollande, the great, open, tree-bordered Place at the extreme end of the Isle Feydeau and on which give the windows of the H tel de la Villestreux. Day and night the carriage is ready — with coachman on the box and postillion in the saddle, who are relieved every two hours lest they get sleepy or slack — with luggage in the boot and provisions always kept fresh inside the coach; everything always ready lest something — a warning from a friend or a threat from an enemy, or merely a sudden access of unreasoning terror, the haunting memory of a bloody act — should decide the tyrant at a moment’s notice to fly from the scenes of his brutalities.

III

Carrier in the small room which he has fitted up for himself as a sumptuous boudoir, paces up and down just like a wild beast in its cage: and he rubs his large bony hands together with the excitement engendered by his own cruelties, by the success of this wholesale butchery which he has invented and carried through.

There never was an uglier man than Carrier, with that long hatchet-face of his, those abnormally high cheekbones, that stiff, lanky hair, that drooping, flaccid mouth and protruding underlip. Nature seemed to have set herself the task of making the face a true mirror of the soul — the dark and hideous soul on which of a surety Satan had already set his stamp. But he is dressed with scrupulous care — not to say elegance — and with a display of jewelry the provenance of which is as unjustifiable as that of the works of art which fill his private sanctum in every nook and cranny.

In front of the tall window, heavy curtains of crimson damask are drawn closely together, in order to shut out the light of day: the room is in all but total darkness: for that is the proconsul’s latest caprice: that no one shall see him save in semi-obscurity.

Captain Fleury has stumbled into the room, swearing lustily as he barks his shins against the angle of a priceless Louis XV bureau. He has to make report on the work done by the Compagnie Marat. Fifty-three priests from the department of Anjou who have refused to take the new oath of obedience to the government of the Republic. The red-capped Company who tracked them down and arrested them, vow that all these *calotins* have precious objects — money, jewelry, gold plate — concealed about their persons. What is to be done about these things? Are the *calotins* to be allowed to keep them or to dispose of them for their own profit?

Carrier is highly delighted. What a haul!
"Confiscate everything," he cries, "then ship the whole crowd of that pestilential rabble, and don't let me hear another word about them."
Fleury goes. And that same night fifty-three priests are "shipped" in accordance with the orders of the proconsul, and Carrier, still rubbing his large bony hands contentedly together, exclaims with glee:
"What a torrent, eh! What a torrent! What a revolution!"
And he sends a letter to Robespierre. And to the Committee of Public Safety he makes report:
"Public spirit in Nantes," he writes, "is magnificent: it has risen to the most sublime heights of revolutionary ideals."

IV

After the departure of Fleury, Carrier suddenly turned to a slender youth, who was standing close by the window, gazing out through the folds of the curtain on the fine vista of the Loire and the quays which stretched out before him.

"Introduce citizen Martin-Roget into the ante-room now, Lalouët," he said loftily. "I will hear what he has to say, and citizen Chauvelin may present himself at the same time."

Young Lalouët lolled across the room, smothering a yawn.

"Why should you trouble about all that rabble?" he said roughly, "it is nearly dinner-time and you know that the chef hates the soup to be kept waiting."

"I shall not trouble about them very long," replied Carrier, who had just started picking his teeth with a tiny gold tool. "Open the door, boy, and let the two men come."

Lalouët did as he was told. The door through which he passed he left wide open, he then crossed the ante-room to a further door, threw it open and called in a loud voice:

"Citizen Chauvelin! Citizen Martin-Roget!"

For all the world like the ceremonious audiences at Versailles in the days of the great Louis.

There was sound of eager whisperings, of shuffling of feet, of chairs dragged across the polished floor. Young Lalouët had already and quite unconcernedly turned his back on the two men who, at his call, had entered the room.

Two chairs were placed in front of the door which led to the private sanctuary — still wrapped in religious obscurity — where Carrier sat enthroned. The youth curtly pointed to the two chairs, then went back to the inner room. The two men advanced. The full light of midday fell upon them from the tall window on their right — the pale, grey, colourless light of December. They bowed slightly in the direction of the audience chamber where the vague silhouette of the proconsul was alone visible.

The whole thing was a farce. Martin-Roget held his lips tightly closed together lest a curse or a sneer escaped them. Chauvelin's face was impenetrable — but it is worthy of note that just one year later when the half-demented tyrant was in his turn brought before the bar of the Convention and sentenced to the guillotine, it was citizen Chauvelin's testimony which weighed most heavily against him.

There was silence for a time: Martin-Roget and Chauvelin were waiting for the dictator's word. He sat at his desk with the scanty light, which filtrated between the curtains, immediately behind him, his ungainly form with the high shoulders and mop-like, shaggy hair half swallowed up by the surrounding gloom. He was deliberately keeping the other two men waiting and busied himself with turning over desultorily the papers and writing tools upon his desk, in the intervals of picking at his teeth and muttering to himself all the time as was his wont. Young Lalouët had resumed his post beside the curtained window and he was giving sundry signs of his growing impatience.

At last Carrier spoke:

"And now, citizen Martin-Roget," he said in tones of that lofty condescension which he loved to affect, "I am prepared to hear what you have to tell me with regard to the cattle which you brought into our city the other day. Where are the aristos now? and why have they not been handed over to commandant Fleury?"

"The girl," replied Martin-Roget, who had much ado to keep his vehement temper in check, and who chose for the moment to ignore the second of Carrier's peremptory queries, "the girl is in lodgings in the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie. The house is kept by my sister, whose lover was hanged four years ago by the ci-devant duc de Kernogan for trapping two pigeons. A dozen or so lads from our old village — men who worked with my father and others who were my friends — lodge in my sister's house. They keep a watchful eye over the wench for the sake of the past, for my sake and for the sake of my sister Louise. The ci-devant Kernogan woman is well-guarded. I am satisfied as to that."

"And where is the ci-devant duc?"

"In the house next door — a tavern at the sign of the Rat Mort — a place which is none too reputable, but the landlord — Lemoine — is a good patriot and he is keeping a close eye on the aristo for me."

"And now will you tell me, citizen," rejoined Carrier with that unctuous suavity which always veiled a threat, "will you tell me how it comes that you are keeping a couple of traitors alive all this while at the country's expense?"

"At mine," broke in Martin-Roget curtly.

"At the country's expense," reiterated the proconsul inflexibly. "Bread is scarce in Nantes. What traitors eat is stolen from good patriots. If you can afford to fill two mouths at your expense, I can supply you with some that have never done aught but proclaim their adherence to the Republic. You have had those two aristos inside the city nearly a week and — —"

"Only three days," interposed Martin-Roget, "and you must have patience with me, citizen Carrier. Remember I have done well by you, by bringing such high game to your bag — —"

"Your high game will be no use to me," retorted the other with a harsh laugh, "if I am not to have the cooking of it. You have talked of disgrace for the rabble and of your own desire for vengeance over them, but — —"

"Wait, citizen," broke in Martin-Roget firmly, "let us understand one another. Before I embarked on this business you gave me your promise that no one — not even you — would interfere between me and my booty."

"And no one has done so hitherto to my knowledge, citizen," rejoined Carrier blandly. "The Kernogan rabble has been yours to do with what you like — er — so far," he added significantly. "I said that I would not interfere and I have not done so up to now, even though the pestilential crowd stinks in the nostrils of every good patriot in Nantes. But I don't deny that it was a bargain that you should have a free hand with them ... for a time, and Jean Baptiste Carrier has never yet gone back on a given word."

Martin-Roget made no comment on this peroration. He shrugged his broad shoulders and suddenly fell to contemplating the distant landscape. He had turned his head away in order to hide the sneer which curled his lips at the recollection of that "bargain" struck with the imperious proconsul. It was a matter of five thousand francs which had passed from one pocket to the other and had bound Carrier down to a definite promise.

After a brief while Carrier resumed: "At the same time," he said, "my promise was conditional, remember. I want that cattle out of Nantes — I want the bread they eat — I want the room they occupy. I can't allow you to play fast and loose with them indefinitely — a week is quite long enough —"

"Three days," corrected Martin-Roget once more.

"Well! three days or eight," rejoined the other roughly. "Too long in any case. I must be rid of them out of this city or I shall have all the spies of the Convention about mine ears. I am beset with spies, citizen Martin-Roget, yes, even I — Jean Baptiste Carrier — the most selfless the most devoted patriot the Republic has ever known! Mine enemies up in Paris send spies to dog my footsteps, to watch mine every action. They are ready to pounce upon me at the slightest slip, to denounce me, to drag me to their bar — they have already whetted the knife of the guillotine which is to lay low the head of the finest patriot in France —"

"Hold on! hold on, Jean Baptiste my friend," here broke in young Lalouët with a sneer, "we don't want protestations of your patriotism just now. It is nearly dinner time."

Carrier had been carried away by his own eloquence. At Lalouët's mocking words he pulled himself together: murmured: "You young viper!" in tones of tigerish affection, and then turned back to Martin-Roget and resumed more calmly:

"They'll be saying that I harbour aristos in Nantes if I keep that Kernogan rabble here any longer. So I must be rid of them, citizen Martin-Roget ... say within the next four-and-twenty hours...." He paused for a moment or two, then added drily: "That is my last word, and you must see to it. What is it you do want to do with them enfin?"

"I want their death," replied Martin-Roget with a curse, and he brought his heavy fist crashing down upon the arm of his chair, "but not a martyr's death, understand? I don't want the pathetic figure of Yvonne Kernogan and her father to remain as a picture of patient resignation in the hearts and minds of every other aristo in the land. I don't want it to excite pity or admiration. Death is nothing for such as they! they glory in it! they are proud to die. The guillotine is their final triumph! What I want for them is shame ... degradation ... a sensational trial that will cover them with dishonour.... I want their name dragged in the mire — themselves an object of derision or of loathing. I want articles in the *Moniteur* giving account of the trial of the ci-devant duc de Kernogan and his daughter for something that is ignominious and base. I want shame and mud slung at them — noise and beating of drums to proclaim their dishonour. Noise! noise! that will reach every corner of the land, aye that will reach Coblenz and Germany and England. It is that which they would resent — the shame of it — the disgrace to their name!"

"Tshaw!" exclaimed Carrier. "Why don't you marry the wench, citizen Martin-Roget? That would be disgrace enough for her, I'll warrant," he added with a loud laugh, enchanted at his witticism.

"I would to-morrow," replied the other, who chose to ignore the coarse insult, "if she would consent. That is why I have kept her at my sister's house these three days."

"Bah! you have no need of a traitor's consent. My consent is sufficient.... I'll give it if you like. The laws of the Republic permit, nay desire every good patriot to ally himself with an aristo, if he have a mind. And the Kernogan wench face to face with the guillotine — or worse — would surely prefer your embraces, citizen, what?"

A deep frown settled between Martin-Roget's glowering eyes, and gave his face a sinister expression.

"I wonder ..." he muttered between his teeth.

"Then cease wondering, citizen," retorted Carrier cynically, "and try our Republican marriage on your Kernogans ... thief linked to aristo, cut-throat to a proud wench ... and then the Loire! Shame? Dishonour? Fal lal I say! Death, swift and sure and unerring. Nothing better has yet been invented for traitors."

Martin-Roget shrugged his shoulders.

"You have never known," he said quietly, "what it is to hate."

Carrier uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"Bah!" he said, "that is all talk and nonsense. Theories, what? Citizen Chauvelin is a living example of the futility of all that rubbish. He too has an enemy it seems whom he hates more thoroughly than any good patriot has ever hated the enemies of the Republic. And hath this deadly hatred availed him, forsooth? He too wanted the disgrace and dishonour of that confounded Englishman whom I would simply have tossed into the Loire long ago, without further process. What is the result? The Englishman is over in England, safe and sound, making long noses at citizen Chauvelin, who has much ado to keep his own head out of the guillotine."

Martin-Roget once more was silent: a look of sullen obstinacy had settled upon his face.

"You may be right, citizen Carrier," he muttered after awhile.

"I am always right," broke in Carrier curtly.

"Exactly ... but I have your promise."

"And I'll keep it, as I have said, for another four and twenty hours. Curse you for a mulish fool," added the proconsul with a snarl, "what in the d ——— I's name do you want to do? You have talked a vast deal of rubbish but you have told me nothing of your plans. Have you any ... that are worthy of my attention?"

Martin-Roget rose from his seat and began pacing up and down the narrow room. His nerves were obviously on edge. It was difficult for any man — let alone one of his temperament and half-tutored disposition — to remain calm and deferential in face of the overbearance of this brutal Jack-in-office, Martin-Roget — himself an upstart — loathed the offensive self-assertion of that uneducated and bestial parvenu, who had become all-powerful through the sole might of his savagery, and it cost him a mighty effort to keep a violent retort from escaping his lips — a retort which probably would have cost him his head.

Chauvelin, on the other hand, appeared perfectly unconcerned. He possessed the art of outward placidity to a masterly degree. Throughout all this while he had taken no part in the discussion. He sat silent and all but motionless, facing the darkened room in front of him, as if he had done nothing else in all his life but interview great dictators who chose to keep their sacred persons in the dark. Only from time to time did his slender fingers drum a tattoo on the arm of his chair.

Carrier had resumed his interesting occupation of picking his teeth: his long, thin legs were stretched out before him; from beneath his flaccid lids he shot swift glances upwards, whenever Martin-Roget in his restless pacing crossed and recrossed in front of the open door. But anon, when the latter came to a halt under the lintel and with his foot almost across the threshold, young Lalouët was upon him in an instant, barring the way to the inner sanctum.

“Keep your distance, citizen,” he said drily, “no one is allowed to enter here.”

Instinctively Martin-Roget had drawn back — suddenly awed despite himself by the air of mystery which hung over that darkened room, and by the dim silhouette of the sinister tyrant who at his approach had with equal suddenness cowered in his lair, drawing his limbs together and thrusting his head forward, low down over the desk, like a leopard crouching for a spring. But this spell of awe only lasted a few seconds, during which Martin-Roget’s unsteady gaze encountered the half-mocking, wholly supercilious glance of young Lalouët.

The next, he had recovered his presence of mind. But this crowning act of audacious insolence broke the barrier of his self-restraint. An angry oath escaped him.

“Are we,” he exclaimed roughly, “back in the days of Capet, the tyrant, and of Versailles, that patriots and citizens are treated like menials and obtrusive slaves? Pardieu, citizen Carrier, let me tell you this....”

“Pardieu, citizen Martin-Roget,” retorted Carrier with a growl like that of a savage dog, “let *me* tell *you* that for less than two pins I’ll throw you into the next barge that will float with open portholes down the Loire. Get out of my presence, you swine, ere I call Fleury to throw you out.”

Martin-Roget at the insult and the threat had become as pale as the linen at his throat: a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead and he passed his hand two or three times across his brow like a man dazed with a sudden and violent blow. His nerves, already overstrained and very much on edge, gave way completely. He staggered and would have measured his length across the floor, but that his hand encountered the back of his chair and he just contrived to sink into it, sick and faint, horror-struck and pallid.

A low cackle — something like a laugh — broke from Chauvelin’s thin lips. As usual he had witnessed the scene quite unmoved.

“My friend Martin-Roget forgot himself for the moment, citizen Carrier,” he said suavely, “already he is ready to make amends.”

Jacques Lalouët looked down for a moment with infinite scorn expressed in his fine eyes, on the presumptuous creature who had dared to defy the omnipotent representative of the People. Then he turned on his heel, but he did not go far this time: he remained standing close beside the door — the terrier guarding his master.

Carrier laughed loud and long. It was a hideous, strident laugh which had not a tone of merriment in it.

“Wake up, friend Martin-Roget,” he said harshly, “I bear no malice: I am a good dog when I am treated the right way. But if anyone pulls my tail or treads on my paws, why! I snarl and growl of course. If the offence is repeated ... I bite ... remember that; and now let us resume our discourse, though I confess I am getting tired of your Kernogan rabble.”

While the great man spoke, Martin-Roget had succeeded in pulling himself together. His throat felt parched, his hands hot and moist: he was like a man who had been stumbling along a road in the dark and been suddenly pulled up on the edge of a yawning abyss into which he had all but fallen. With a few harsh words, with a monstrous insult Carrier had made him feel the gigantic power which could hurl any man from the heights of self-assurance and of ambition to the lowest depths of degradation: he had shown him the glint of steel upon the guillotine.

He had been hit as with a sledge-hammer — the blow hurt terribly, for it had knocked all his self-esteem into nothingness and pulverised his self-conceit. It had in one moment turned him into a humble and cringing sycophant.

“I had no mind,” he began tentatively, “to give offence. My thoughts were bent on the Kernogans. They are a fine haul for us both, citizen Carrier, and I worked hard and long to obtain their confidence over in England and to induce them to come with me to Nantes.”

“No one denies that you have done well,” retorted Carrier gruffly and not yet wholly pacified. “If the haul had not been worth having you would have received no help from me.”

“I have shown my gratitude for your help, citizen Carrier. I would show it again ... more substantially if you desire....”

He spoke slowly and quite deferentially but the suggestion was obvious. Carrier looked up into his face: the light of measureless cupidity — the cupidity of the coarse-grained, enriched peasant — glittered in his pale eyes. It was by a great effort of will that he succeeded in concealing his eagerness beneath his habitual air of lofty condescension:

“Eh? What?” he queried airily.

“If another five thousand francs is of any use to you....”

“You seem passing rich, citizen Martin-Roget,” sneered Carrier.

“I have slaved and saved for four years. What I have amassed I will sacrifice for the completion of my revenge.”

“Well!” rejoined Carrier with an expressive wave of the hand, “it certainly is not good for a pure-minded republican to own too much wealth. Have we not fought,” he continued with a grandiloquent gesture, “for equality of fortune as well as of privileges....”

A sardonic laugh from young Lalouët broke in on the proconsul’s eloquent effusion.

Carrier swore as was his wont, but after a second or two he began again more quietly:

"I will accept a further six thousand francs from you, citizen Martin-Roget, in the name of the Republic and all her needs. The Republic of France is up in arms against the entire world. She hath need of men, of arms, of...."

"Oh! cut that," interposed young Lalouët roughly.

But the over-vain, high and mighty despot who was ready to lash out with unbridled fury against the slightest show of disrespect on the part of any other man, only laughed at the boy's impudence.

"Curse you, you young viper," he said with that rude familiarity which he seemed to reserve for the boy, "you presume too much on my forbearance. These children you know, citizen.... Name of a dog!" he added roughly, "we are wasting time! What was I saying ...?"

"That you would take six thousand francs," replied Martin-Roget curtly, "in return for further help in the matter of the Kernogans."

"Why, yes!" rejoined Carrier blandly, "I was forgetting. But I'll show you what a good dog I am. I'll help you with those Kernogans ... but you mistook my words, citizen: 'tis ten thousand francs you must pour into the coffers of the Republic, for her servants will have to be placed at the disposal of your private schemes of vengeance."

"Ten thousand francs is a large sum," said Martin-Roget. "Let me hear what you will do for me for that."

He had regained something of his former complacency. The man who buys — be it goods, consciences or services — is always for the moment master of the man who sells. Carrier, despite his dictatorial ways, felt this disadvantage, no doubt, for his tone was more bland, his manner less curt. Only young Jacques Lalouët stood by — like a snarling terrier — still arrogant and still disdainful — the master of the situation — seeing that neither schemes of vengeance nor those of corruption had ruffled his self-assurance. He remained beside the door, ready to pounce on either of the two intruders if they showed the slightest sign of forgetting the majesty of the great proconsul.

VI

"I told you just now, citizen Martin-Roget," resumed Carrier after a brief pause, "and I suppose you knew it already, that I am surrounded with spies."

"Spies, citizen?" murmured Martin-Roget, somewhat taken aback by this sudden irrelevance. "I didn't know ... I imagine.... Any one in your position...."

"That's just it," broke in Carrier roughly. "My position is envied by those who are less competent, less patriotic than I am. Nantes is swarming with spies. Mine enemies in Paris are working against me. They want to undermine the confidence which the National Convention reposes in her accredited representative."

"Preposterous," ejaculated young Lalouët solemnly.

"Well!" rejoined Carrier with a savage oath, "you would have thought that the Convention would be only too thankful to get a strong man at the head of affairs in this hotbed of treason and of rebellion. You would have thought that it was no one's affair to interfere with the manner in which I administer the powers that have been given me. I command in Nantes, what? Yet some busybodies up in Paris, some fools, seem to think that we are going too fast in Nantes. They have become weaklings over there since Marat has gone. It seems that they have heard rumours of our flat-bottomed barges and of our fine Republican marriages: apparently they disapprove of both. They don't realise that we have to purge an entire city of every kind of rabble — traitors as well as criminals. They don't understand my aspirations, my ideals," he added loftily and with a wide, sweeping gesture of his arm, "which is to make Nantes a model city, to free her from the taint of crime and of treachery, and...."

An impatient exclamation from young Lalouët once again broke in on Carrier's rhetoric, and Martin-Roget was able to slip in the query which had been hovering on his lips:

"And is this relevant, citizen Carrier," he asked, "to the subject which we have been discussing?"

"It is," replied Carrier drily, "as you will see in a moment. Learn then, that it has been my purpose for some time to silence mine enemies by sending to the National Convention a tangible reply to all the accusations which have been levelled against me. It is my purpose to explain to the Assembly my reasons for mine actions in Nantes, my Drownages, my Republican marriages, all the coercive measures which I have been forced to take in order to purge the city from all that is undesirable."

"And think you, citizen Carrier," queried Martin-Roget without the slightest trace of a sneer, "that up in Paris they will understand your explanations?"

"Yes! they will — they must when they realise that everything that I have done has been necessitated by the exigencies of public safety."

"They will be slow to realise that," mused the other. "The National Convention to-day is not what the Constitutional Assembly was in '92. It has become soft and sentimental. Many there are who will disapprove of your doings.... Robespierre talks loftily of the dignity of the Republic ... her impartial justice.... The Girondins...."

Carrier interposed with a coarse imprecation. He suddenly leaned forward, sprawling right across the desk. A shaft of light from between the damask curtains caught the end of his nose and the tip of his protruding chin, distorting his face and making it seem grotesque as well as hideous in the dim light. He appeared excited and inflated with vanity. He always gloried in the atrocities which he committed, and though he professed to look with contempt on every one of his colleagues, he was always glad of an opportunity to display his inventive powers before them, and to obtain their fulsome eulogy.

"I know well enough what they talk about in Paris," he said, "but I have an answer — a substantial, definite answer for all their rubbish. Dignity of the Republic? Bah! Impartial justice? 'Tis force, strength, Spartan vigour that we want ... and I'll show them.... Listen to my plan, citizen Martin-Roget, and see how it will work in with yours. My idea is to collect together all the most disreputable and notorious evil-doers of this city ... there are plenty in the entrepôt at the present moment, and there are plenty more still at large in the streets of Nantes — thieves, malefactors, forgers of State bonds, assassins and women of evil fame ... and to send them in a batch to Paris to appear before the Committee of Public Safety, whilst I will send to my colleagues there a letter couched in terms of gentle reproach: 'See! I shall say, 'what I have to contend with in Nantes. See! the moral pestilence that infests the city. These evil-doers are but a few among the hundreds and thousands of whom I am vainly trying to purge this city which you have entrusted to my care!' They

won't know how to deal with the rabble," he continued with his harsh strident laugh. "They may send them to the guillotine wholesale or deport them to Cayenne, and they will have to give them some semblance of a trial in any case. But they will have to admit that my severe measures are justified, and in future, I imagine, they will leave me more severely alone."

"If as you say," urged Martin-Roget, "the National Convention give your crowd a trial, you will have to produce some witnesses."

"So I will," retorted Carrier cynically. "So I will. Have I not said that I will round up all the most noted evil-doers in the town? There are plenty of them I assure you. Lately, my Company Marats have not greatly troubled about them. After Savenay there was such a crowd of rebels to deal with, there was no room in our prisons for malefactors as well. But we can easily lay our hands on a couple of hundred or so, and members of the municipality or of the district council, or tradespeople of substance in the city will only be too glad to be rid of them, and will testify against those that were actually caught red-handed. Not one but has suffered from the pestilential rabble that has infested the streets at night, and lately I have been pestered with complaints of all these night-birds — men and women and...."

Suddenly he paused. He had caught Martin-Roget's feverish gaze fixed excitedly upon him. Whereupon he leaned back in his chair, threw his head back and broke into loud and immoderate laughter.

"By the devil and all his myrmidons, citizen!" he said, as soon as he had recovered his breath, "meseems you have tumbled to my meaning as a pig into a heap of garbage. Is not ten thousand francs far too small a sum to pay for such a perfect realisation of all your dreams? We'll send the Kernogan girl and her father to Paris with the herd, what?... I promise you that such filth and mud will be thrown on them and on their precious name that no one will care to bear it for centuries to come."

Martin-Roget of a truth had much ado to control his own excitement. As the proconsul unfolded his infamous plan, he had at once seen as in a vision the realisation of all his hopes. What more awful humiliation, what more dire disgrace could be devised for proud Kernogan and his daughter than being herded together with the vilest scum that could be gathered together among the flotsam and jetsam of the population of a seaport town? What more perfect retaliation could there be for the ignominious death of Jean Adet the miller?

Martin-Roget leaned forward in his chair. The hideous figure of Carrier was no longer hideous to him. He saw in that misshapen, gawky form the very embodiment of the god of vengeance, the wielder of the flail of retributive justice which was about to strike the guilty at last.

"You are right, citizen Carrier," he said, and his voice was thick and hoarse with excitement. He rested his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. He hammered his nails against his teeth. "That was exactly in my mind while you spoke."

"I am always right," retorted Carrier loftily. "No one knows better than I do how to deal with traitors."

"And how is the whole thing to be accomplished? The wench is in my sister's house at present ... the father is in the Rat Mort...."

"And the Rat Mort is an excellent place.... I know of none better. It is one of the worst-famed houses in the whole of Nantes ... the meeting-place of all the vagabonds, the thieves and the cut-throats of the city."

"Yes! I know that to my cost. My sister's house is next door to it. At night the street is not safe for decent females to be abroad: and though there is a platoon of Marats on guard at Le Bouffay close by, they do nothing to free the neighbourhood of that pest."

"Bah!" retorted Carrier with cynical indifference, "they have more important quarry to net. Rebels and traitors swarm in Nantes, what? Commandant Fleury has had no time hitherto to waste on mere cut-throats, although I had thoughts before now of razing the place to the ground. Citizen Lamberty has his lodgings on the other side and he does nothing but complain of the brawls that go on there o' nights. Sure it is that while a stone of the Rat Mort remains standing all the night-hawks of Nantes will congregate around it and brew mischief there which is no good to me and no good to the Republic."

"Yes! I know all about the Rat Mort. I found a night's shelter there four years ago when...."

"When the ci-devant duc de Kernogan was busy hanging your father — the miller — for a crime which he never committed. Well then, citizen Martin-Roget," continued Carrier with one of his hideous leers, "since you know the Rat Mort so well what say you to your fair and stately Yvonne de Kernogan and her father being captured there in the company of the lowest scum of the population of Nantes?"

"You mean?" murmured Martin-Roget, who had become livid with excitement.

"I mean that my Marats have orders to raid some of the haunts of our Nantese cut-throats, and that they may as well begin to-night and with the Rat Mort. They will make a descent on the house and a thorough perquisition, and every person — man, woman and child — found on the premises will be arrested and sent with a batch of malefactors to Paris, there to be tried as felons and criminals and deported to Cayenne where they will, I trust, rot as convicts in that pestilential climate. Think you," concluded the odious creature with a sneer, "that when put face to face with the alternative, your Kernogan wench will still refuse to become the wife of a fine patriot like yourself?"

"I don't know," murmured Martin-Roget. "I ... I...."

"But I do know," broke in Carrier roughly, "that ten thousand francs is far too little to pay for so brilliant a realisation of all one's hopes. Ten thousand francs? 'Tis an hundred thousand you should give to show your gratitude."

Martin-Roget rose and stretched his large, heavy figure to its full height. He was at great pains to conceal the utter contempt which he felt for the abominable wretch before whom he was forced to cringe.

"You shall have ten thousand francs, citizen Carrier," he said slowly; "it is all that I possess in the world now — the last remaining fragment of a sum of twenty-five thousand francs which I earned and scraped together for the past four years. You have had five thousand francs already. And you shall have the other ten. I do not grudge it. If twenty years of my life were any use to you, I would give you that, in exchange for the help you are giving me in what means far more than life to me."

The proconsul laughed and shrugged his shoulders — of a truth he thought citizen Martin-Roget an awful fool.

"Very well then," he said, "we will call the matter settled. I confess that it amuses me, although remember that I have warned you. With all these aristos, I believe in the potency of my barges rather than in your elaborate schemes. Still! it shall never be said that Jean Baptiste Carrier has left a friend in the lurch."

"I am grateful for your help, citizen Carrier," said Martin-Roget coldly. Then he added slowly, as if reviewing the situation in his own mind: "To-night, you say?"

"Yes. To-night. My Marats under the command of citizen Fleury will make a descent upon the Rat Mort. Those shall be my orders. The place will be swept clean of every man, woman and child who is inside. If your two Kernogans are there ... well!" he said with a cynical laugh and a shrug of his shoulders, "they can be sent up to Paris with the rest of the herd."

"The dinner bell has gone long ago," here interposed young Lalouët drily, "the soup will be stone-cold and the chef red-hot with anger."

"You are right, citizen Lalouët," said Carrier as he leaned back in his chair once more and stretched out his long legs at his ease. "We have wasted far too much time already over the affairs of a couple of aristos, who ought to have been at the bottom of the Loire a week ago. The audience is ended," he added airily, and he made a gesture of overweening condescension, for all the world like the one wherewith the *Grand Monarque* was wont to dismiss his courtiers.

Chauvelin rose too and quietly turned to the door. He had not spoken a word for the past half-hour, ever since in fact he had put in a conciliatory word on behalf of his impetuous colleague. Whether he had taken an active interest in the conversation or not it were impossible to say. But now, just as he was ready to go, and young Lalouët prepared to close the doors of the audience chamber, something seemed suddenly to occur to him and he called somewhat peremptorily to the young man.

"One moment, citizen," he said.

"What is it now?" queried the youth insolently, and from his fine eyes there shot a glance of contempt on the meagre figure of the once powerful Terrorist.

"About the Kernogan wench," continued Chauvelin. "She will have to be conveyed some time before night to the tavern next door. There may be agencies at work on her behalf..."

"Agencies?" broke in the boy gruffly. "What agencies?"

"Oh!" said Chauvelin vaguely, "we all know that aristos have powerful friends these days. It will not be over safe to take the girl across after dark from one house to another ... the alley is badly lighted: the wench will not go willingly. She might scream and create a disturbance and draw ... er ... those same unknown agencies to her rescue. I think a body of Marats should be told off to convey her to the Rat Mort..."

Young Lalouët shrugged his shoulders.

"That's your affair," he said curtly. "Eh, Carrier?" And he glanced over his shoulder at the proconsul, who at once assented.

Martin-Roget — struck by his colleague's argument — would have interposed, but Carrier broke in with one of his uncontrolled outbursts of fury.

"Ah ça," he exclaimed, "enough of this now. Citizen Lalouët is right and I have done enough for you already. If you want the Kernogan wench to be at the Rat Mort, you must see to getting her there yourself. She is next door, what? I won't have anything to do with it and I won't have my Marats implicated in the affair either. Name of a dog! have I not told you that I am beset with spies? It would of a truth be a climax if I was denounced as having dragged aristos to a house of ill-fame and then had them arrested there as malefactors! Now out with you! I have had enough of this! If your rabble is at the Rat Mort to-night, they shall be arrested with all the other cut-throats. That is my last word. The rest is your affair. Lalouët! the door!"

And without another word, and without listening to further protests from Martin-Roget or Chauvelin, Jacques Lalouët closed the doors of the audience chamber in their face.

VII

Outside on the landing, Martin-Roget swore a violent, all comprehensive oath.

"To think that we are under the heel of that skunk!" he said.

"And that in the pursuit of our own ends we have need of his help!" added Chauvelin with a sigh.

"If it were not for that.... And even now," continued Martin-Roget moodily, "I doubt what I can do. Yvonne de Kernogan will not follow me willingly either to the Rat Mort or elsewhere, and if I am not to have her conveyed by the guard...."

He paused and swore again. His companion's silence appeared to irritate him.

"What do you advise me to do, citizen Chauvelin?" he asked.

"For the moment," replied Chauvelin imperturbably, "I should advise you to join me in a walk along the quay as far as Le Bouffay. I have work to see to inside the building and the north-westerly wind is sure to be of good counsel."

An angry retort hovered on Martin-Roget's lips, but after a second or two he succeeded in holding his irascible temper in check. He gave a quick sigh of impatience.

"Very well," he said curtly. "Let us to Le Bouffay by all means. I have much to think on, and as you say the north-westerly wind may blow away the cobwebs which for the nonce do o'ercloud my brain."

And the two men wrapped their mantles closely round their shoulders, for the air was keen. Then they descended the staircase of the hotel and went out into the street.

CHAPTER II

LE BOUFFAY

I

In the centre of the Place the guillotine stood idle — the paint had worn off her sides — she looked weatherbeaten and forlorn — stern and forbidding still, but in a kind of sullen loneliness, with the ugly stains of crimson on her, turned to rust and grime.

The Place itself was deserted, in strange contrast to the bustle and the movement which characterised it in the days when the death of men, women and children was a daily spectacle here for the crowd. Then a constant stream of traffic, of carts and of tumbrils, of soldiers and gaffers encumbered it in every corner, now a few tumble-down booths set up against the frontage of the grim edifice — once the stronghold of the Dukes of Brittany, now little else but a huge prison — a few vendors and still fewer purchasers of the scanty wares displayed under their ragged awnings, one or two idlers loafing against the mud-stained walls, one or two urchins playing in the gutters were the only signs of life. Martin-Roget with his colleague Chauvelin turned into the Place from the quay — they walked rapidly and kept their mantles closely wrapped under their chin, for the afternoon had turned bitterly cold. It was then close upon five o'clock — a dark, moonless, starless night had set in with only a suspicion of frost in the damp air; but a blustering north-westerly wind blowing down the river and tearing round the narrow streets and the open Place, caused passers-by to muffle themselves, shivering, yet tighter in their cloaks.

Martin-Roget was talking volubly and excitedly, his tall, broad figure towering above the slender form of his companion. From time to time he tossed his mantle aside with an impatient, febrile gesture and then paused in the middle of the Place, with one hand on the other man's shoulder, marking a point in his discourse or emphasising his argument with short staccato sentences and brief, emphatic words. Chauvelin — placid and impenetrable as usual — listened much and talked little. He was ready to stand still or to walk along just as his colleague's mood demanded; in the darkness, and with the collar of a large mantle pulled tightly up to his ears, it was impossible to guess by any sign in his face what was going on in his mind.

They were a strange contrast these two men — temperamentally as well as physically — even though they had so much in common and were both the direct products of that same social upheaval which was shaking the archaic dominion of France to its very foundations. Martin-Roget, tall, broad-shouldered, bull-necked, the typical self-educated peasant, with square jaw and flat head, with wide bony hands and spatulated fingers: and Chauvelin — the aristocrat turned demagogue, thin and frail-looking, bland of manner and suave of speech, with delicate hands and pale, almost ascetic face.

The one represented all that was most brutish and sensual in this fight of one caste against the other, the thirst for the other's blood, the human beast that has been brought to bay through wrongs perpetrated against it by others and has turned upon its oppressors, lashing out right and left with blind and lustful fury at the crowd of tyrants that had kept him in subjection for so long. Whilst Chauvelin was the personification of the spiritual side of this bloody Revolution — the spirit of cool and calculating reprisals that would demand an eye for an eye and see that it got two. The idealist who dreams of the righteousness of his own cause and the destruction of its enemies, but who leaves to others the accomplishment of all the carnage and the bloodshed which his idealism has demanded, and which his reason has appraised as necessary for the triumph of which he dreams. Chauvelin was the man of thought and Martin-Roget the man of action. With the one, revenge and reprisals were selfish desires, the avenging of wrongs done to himself or to his caste, hatred for those who had injured him or his kindred. The other had no personal feelings of hatred: he had no personal wrongs to avenge: his enemies were the enemies of his party, the erstwhile tyrants who in the past had oppressed an entire people. Every man, woman or child who was not satisfied with the present Reign of Terror, who plotted or planned for its overthrow, who was not ready to see husband, father, wife or child sacrificed for the ultimate triumph of the Revolution was in Chauvelin's sight a noxious creature, fit only to be trodden under heel and ground into subjection or annihilation as a danger to the State.

Martin-Roget was the personification of sans-culottism, of rough manners and foul speech — he chafed against the conventions which forced him to wear decent clothes and boots on his feet — he would gladly have seen every one go about the streets half-naked, unwashed, a living sign of that downward levelling of castes which he and his friends stood for, and for which they had fought and striven and committed every crime which human passions let loose could invent. Chauvelin, on the other hand, was one of those who wore fine linen and buckled shoes and whose hands were delicately washed and perfumed whilst they signed decrees which sent hundreds of women and children to a violent and cruel death.

The one trod in the paths of Danton: the other followed in the footsteps of Robespierre.

II

Together the two men mounted the outside staircase which leads up past the lodge of the concierge and through the clerk's office to the interior of the stronghold. Outside the monumental doors they had to wait a moment or two while the clerk examined their permits to enter.

"Will you come into my office with me?" asked Chauvelin of his companion; "I have a word or two to add to my report for the Paris courier to-night. I won't be long."

"You are still in touch with the Committee of Public Safety then?" asked Martin-Roget.

"Always," replied the other curtly.

Martin-Roget threw a quick, suspicious glance on his companion. Darkness and the broad brim of his sugar-loaf hat effectually concealed even the outlines of Chauvelin's face, and Martin-Roget fell to musing over one or two things which Carrier had blurted out awhile ago. The whole of France was overrun with spies these days — every one was under suspicion, every one had to be on his guard. Every word was overheard, every glance seen, every sign noted.

What was this man Chauvelin doing here in Nantes? What reports did he send up to Paris by special courier? He, the miserable failure who had ceased to count was nevertheless in constant touch with that awful Committee of Public Safety which was wont to strike at all times and unexpectedly in the dark. Martin-Roget shivered beneath his mantle. For the first time since his schemes of vengeance had wholly absorbed his mind he regretted the freedom and safety which he had enjoyed in England, and he marvelled if the miserable game which he was playing would be worth the winning in the end. Nevertheless he had followed Chauvelin without comment. The man appeared to exercise a fascination over him — a kind of subtle power, which emanated from his small shrunken figure, from his pale keen eyes and his well-modulated, suave mode of speech.

III

The clerk had handed the two men their permits back. They were allowed to pass through the gates.

In the hall some half-dozen men were nominally on guard — nominally, because discipline was not over strict these days, and the men sat or lolled about the place; two of them were intent on a game of dominoes, another was watching them, whilst the other three were settling some sort of quarrel among themselves which necessitated vigorous and emphatic gestures and the copious use of expletives. One man, who appeared to be in command, divided his time impartially between the domino-players and those who were quarrelling.

The vast place was insufficiently lighted by a chandelier which hung from the ceiling and a couple of small oil-lamps placed in the circular niches in the wall opposite the front door.

No one took any notice of Martin-Roget or of Chauvelin as they crossed the hall, and presently the latter pushed open a door on the left of the main gates and held it open for his colleague to pass through.

“You are sure that I shall not be disturbing you?” queried Martin-Roget.

“Quite sure,” replied the other curtly. “And there is something which I must say to you ... where I know that I shall not be overheard.”

Then he followed Martin-Roget into the room and closed the door behind him. The room was scantily furnished with a square deal table in the centre, two or three chairs, a broken-down bureau leaning against one wall and an iron stove wherein a meagre fire sent a stream of malodorous smoke through sundry cracks in its chimney-pipe. From the ceiling there hung an oil-lamp the light of which was thrown down upon the table, by a large green shade made of cardboard.

Chauvelin drew a chair to the bureau and sat down; he pointed to another and Martin-Roget took a seat beside the table. He felt restless and excited — his nerves all on the jar: his colleague’s calm, sardonic glance acted as a further irritant to his temper.

“What is it that you wished to say to me, citizen Chauvelin?” he asked at last.

“Just a word, citizen,” replied the other in his quiet urbane manner. “I have accompanied you faithfully on your journey to England: I have placed my feeble powers at your disposal: awhile ago I stood between you and the proconsul’s wrath. This, I think, has earned me the right of asking what you intend to do.”

“I don’t know about the right,” retorted Martin-Roget gruffly, “but I don’t mind telling you. As you remarked awhile ago the North-West wind is wont to be of good counsel. I have thought the matter over whilst I walked with you along the quay and I have decided to act on Carrier’s suggestion. Our eminent proconsul said just now that it was the duty of every true patriot to marry an aristo, an he be free and Chance puts a comely wench in his way. I mean,” he added with a cynical laugh, “to act on that advice and marry Yvonne de Kernogan ... if I can.”

“She has refused you up to now?”

“Yes ... up to now.”

“You have threatened her — and her father?”

“Yes — both. Not only with death but with shame.”

“And still she refuses?”

“Apparently,” said Martin-Roget with ever-growing irritation.

“It is often difficult,” rejoined Chauvelin meditatively, “to compel these aristos. They are obstinate....”

“Oh! don’t forget that I am in a position now to bring additional pressure on the wench. That lout Carrier has splendid ideas — a brute, what? but clever and full of resource. That suggestion of his about the Rat Mort is splendid....”

“You mean to try and act on it?”

“Of course I do,” said Martin-Roget roughly. “I am going over presently to my sister’s house to see the Kernogan wench again, and to have another talk with her. Then if she still refuses, if she still chooses to scorn the honourable position which I offer her, I shall act on Carrier’s suggestion. It will be at the Rat Mort to-night that she and I will have our final interview, and there when I dangle the prospect of Cayenne and the convict’s brand before her, she may not prove so obdurate as she has been up to now.”

“H’m! That is as may be,” was Chauvelin’s dry comment. “Personally I am inclined to agree with Carrier. Death, swift and sure — the Loire or the guillotine — is the best that has yet been invented for traitors and aristos. But we won’t discuss that again. I know your feelings in the matter and in a measure I respect them. But if you will allow me I would like to be present at your interview with the *soi-disant* Lady Anthony Dewhurst. I won’t disturb you and I won’t say a word ... but there is something I would like to make sure of....”

“What is that?”

“Whether the wench has any hopes ...” said Chauvelin slowly, “whether she has received a message or has any premonition ... whether in short she thinks that outside agencies are at work on her behalf.”

“Tshaw!” exclaimed Martin-Roget impatiently, “you are still harping on that Scarlet Pimpernel idea.”

“I am,” retorted the other drily.

“As you please. But understand, citizen Chauvelin, that I will not allow you to interfere with my plans, whilst you go off on one of those wild-goose chases which have already twice brought you into disrepute.”

"I will not interfere with your plans, citizen," rejoined Chauvelin with unwonted gentleness, "but let me in my turn impress one thing upon you, and that is that unless you are as wary as the serpent, as cunning as the fox, all your precious plans will be upset by that interfering Englishman whom you choose to disregard."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know him — to my cost — and you do not. But you will, and I am not gravely mistaken, make acquaintance with him ere your great adventure with these Kernogan people is successfully at an end. Believe me, citizen Martin-Roget," he added impressively, "you would have been far wiser to accept Carrier's suggestion and let him fling that rabble into the Loire for you."

"Pshaw! you are not childish enough to imagine, citizen Chauvelin, that your Englishman can spirit away that wench from under my sister's eyes? Do you know what my sister suffered at the hands of the Kernogans? Do you think that she is like to forget my father's ignominious death any more than I am? And she mourns a lover as well as a father — she mourns her youth, her happiness, the mother whom she worshipped. Think you a better gaoler could be found anywhere? And there are friends of mine — lads of our own village, men who hate the Kernogans as bitterly as I do myself — who are only too ready to lend Louise a hand in case of violence. And after that — suppose your magnificent Scarlet Pimpernel succeeded in hoodwinking my sister and in evading the vigilance of a score of determined village lads, who would sooner die one by one than see the Kernogan escape — suppose all that, I say, there would still be the guard at every city gate to challenge. No! no! it couldn't be done, citizen Chauvelin," he added with a complacent laugh. "Your Englishman would need the help of a legion of angels, what? to get the wench out of Nantes this time."

Chauvelin made no comment on his colleague's impassioned harangue. Memory had taken him back to that one day in September in Boulogne when he too had set one prisoner to guard a precious hostage: it brought back to his mind a vision of a strangely picturesque figure as it appeared to him in the window-embrasure of the old castle-hall: it brought back to his ears the echo of that quaint, irresponsible laughter, of that lazy, drawling speech, of all that had acted as an irritant on his nerves ere he found himself baffled, foiled, eating out his heart with vain reproach at his own folly.

"I see you are unconvinced, citizen Martin-Roget," he said quietly, "and I know that it is the fashion nowadays among young politicians to sneer at Chauvelin — the living embodiment of failure. But let me just add this. When you and I talked matters over together at the Bottom Inn, in the wilds of Somersetshire, I warned you that not only was your identity known to the man who calls himself the Scarlet Pimpernel, but also that he knew every one of your plans with regard to the Kernogan wench and her father. You laughed at me then ... do you remember?... you shrugged your shoulders and jeered at what you call my far-fetched ideas ... just as you do now. Well! will you let me remind you of what happened within four-and-twenty hours of that warning which you chose to disregard? ... Yvonne de Kernogan was married to Lord Anthony Dewhurst and..."

"I know all that, man," broke in Martin-Roget impatiently. "It was all a mere coincidence ... the marriage must have been planned long before that ... your Scarlet Pimpernel could not possibly have had anything to do with it."

"Perhaps not," rejoined Chauvelin drily. "But mark what has happened since. Just now when we crossed the Place I saw in the distance a figure flitting past — the gorgeous figure of an exquisite who of a surety is a stranger in Nantes: and carried upon the wings of the north-westerly wind there came to me the sound of a voice which, of late, I have only heard in my dreams. On my soul, citizen Martin-Roget," he added with earnest emphasis, "I assure you that the Scarlet Pimpernel is in Nantes at the present moment, that he is scheming, plotting, planning to rescue the Kernogan wench out of your clutches. He will not leave her in your power, on this I would stake my life; she is the wife of one of his dearest friends: he will not abandon her, not while he keeps that resourceful head of his on his shoulders. Unless you are desperately careful he will outwit you; of that I am as convinced as that I am alive."

"Bah! you have been dreaming, citizen Chauvelin," rejoined Martin-Roget with a laugh and shrugging his broad shoulders; "your mysterious Englishman in Nantes? Why man! the navigation of the Loire has been totally prohibited these last fourteen days — no carriage, van or vehicle of any kind is allowed to enter the city — no man, woman or child to pass the barriers without special permit signed either by the proconsul himself or by Fleury the captain of the Marats. Why! even I, when I brought the Kernogans in overland from Le Croisic, I was detained two hours outside Nantes while my papers were sent in to Carrier for inspection. You know that, you were with me."

"I know it," replied Chauvelin drily, "and yet..."

He paused, with one claw-like finger held erect to demand attention. The door of the small room in which they sat gave on the big hall where the half-dozen Marats were stationed, the single window at right angles to the door looked out upon the Place below. It was from there that suddenly there came the sound of a loud peal of laughter — quaint and merry — somewhat inane and affected, and at the sound Chauvelin's pale face took on the hue of ashes and even Martin-Roget felt a strange sensation of cold creeping down his spine.

For a few seconds the two men remained quite still, as if a spell had been cast over them through that light-hearted peal of rippling laughter. Then equally suddenly the younger man shook himself free of the spell; with a few long strides he was already at the door and out in the vast hall; Chauvelin following closely on his heels.

IV

The clock in the tower of the edifice was even then striking five. The Marats in the hall looked up with lazy indifference at the two men who had come rushing out in such an abrupt and excited manner.

"Any stranger been through here?" queried Chauvelin peremptorily of the sergeant in command.

"No," replied the latter curtly. "How could they, without a permit?"

He shrugged his shoulders and the men resumed their game and their argument. Martin-Roget would have parleyed with them but Chauvelin had already crossed the hall and was striding past the clerk's office and the lodge of the concierge out toward the open. Martin-Roget, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

The Place was wrapped in gloom. From the platform of the guillotine an oil-lamp hoisted on a post threw a small circle of light around. Small pieces of tallow candle, set in pewter sconces, glimmered feebly under the awnings of the booths, and there was a street-

lamp affixed to the wall of the old château immediately below the parapet of the staircase, and others at the angles of the Rue de la Monnaie and the narrow Ruelle des Jacobins.

Chauvelin's keen eyes tried to pierce the surrounding darkness. He leaned over the parapet and peered into the remote angles of the building and round the booths below him.

There were a few people on the Place, some walking rapidly across from one end to the other, intent on business, others pausing in order to make purchases at the booths. Up and down the steps of the guillotine a group of street urchins were playing hide-and-seek. Round the angles of the narrow streets the vague figures of passers-by flitted to and fro, now easily discernible in the light of the street lanterns, anon swallowed up again in the darkness beyond. Whilst immediately below the parapet two or three men of the Company Marat were lounging against the walls. Their red bonnets showed up clearly in the flickering light of the street lamps, as did their bare shins and the polished points of their sabots. But of an elegant, picturesque figure such as Chauvelin had described awhile ago there was not a sign.

Martin-Roget leaned over the parapet and called peremptorily:

"Hey there! citizens of the Company Marat!"

One of the red-capped men looked up leisurely.

"Your desire, citizen?" he queried with insolent deliberation, for they were mighty men, this bodyguard of the great proconsul, his spies and tools in the awesome work of frightfulness which he carried on so ruthlessly.

"Is that you Paul Friche?" queried Martin-Roget in response.

"At your service, citizen," came the glib reply, delivered not without mock deference.

"Then come up here. I wish to speak with you."

"I can't leave my post, nor can my mates," retorted the man who had answered to the name of Paul Friche. "Come down, citizen, and you desire to speak with us."

Martin-Roget swore lustily.

"The insolence of that rabble ..." he murmured.

"Hush! I'll go," interposed Chauvelin quickly. "Do you know that man Friche? Is he trustworthy?"

"Yes, I know him. As for being trustworthy ..." added Martin-Roget with a shrug of the shoulders. "He is a corporal in the Marats and high in favour with commandant Fleury."

Every second was of value, and Chauvelin was not the man to waste time in useless parleyings. He ran down the stairs at the foot of which one of the red-capped gentry deigned to speak with him.

"Have you seen any strangers across the Place just now?" he queried in a whisper.

"Yes," replied the man Friche. "Two!"

Then he spat upon the ground and added spitefully: "Aristos, what? In fine clothes — like yourself, citizen...."

"Which way did they go?"

"Down the Ruelle des Jacobins."

"When?"

"Two minutes ago."

"Why did you not follow them?... Aristos and...."

"I would have followed," retorted Paul Friche with studied insolence; "'twas you called me away from my duty."

"After them then!" urged Chauvelin peremptorily. "They cannot have gone far. They are English spies, and remember, citizen, that there's a reward for their apprehension."

The man grunted an eager assent. The word "reward" had fired his zeal. In a trice he had called to his mates and the three Marats soon sped across the Place and down the Ruelle des Jacobins where the surrounding gloom quickly swallowed them up.

Chauvelin watched them till they were out of sight, then he rejoined his colleague on the landing at the top of the stairs. For a second or two longer the click of the men's sabots upon the stones resounded on the adjoining streets and across the Place, and suddenly that same quaint, merry, somewhat inane laugh woke the echoes of the grim buildings around and caused many a head to turn inquiringly, marvelling who it could be that had the heart to laugh these days in the streets of Nantes.

V

Five minutes or so later the three Marats could vaguely be seen recrossing the Place and making their way back to Le Bouffay, where Martin-Roget and Chauvelin still stood on the top of the stairs excited and expectant. At sight of the men Chauvelin ran down the steps to meet them.

"Well?" he queried in an eager whisper.

"We never saw them," replied Paul Friche gruffly, "though we could hear them clearly enough, talking, laughing and walking very rapidly toward the quay. Then suddenly the earth or the river swallowed them up. We saw and heard nothing more."

Chauvelin swore and a curious hissing sound escaped his thin lips.

"Don't be too disappointed, citizen," added the man with a coarse laugh, "my mate picked this up at the corner of the Ruelle, when, I fancy, we were pressing the aristos pretty closely."

He held out a small bundle of papers tied together with a piece of red ribbon: the bundle had evidently rolled in the mud, for the papers were covered with grime. Chauvelin's thin, claw-like fingers had at once closed over them.

"You must give me back those papers, citizen," said the man, "they are my booty. I can only give them up to citizen-captain Fleury."

"I'll give them to the citizen-captain myself," retorted Chauvelin. "For the moment you had best not leave your post of duty," he added more peremptorily, seeing that the man made as he would follow him.

"I take orders from no one except ..." protested the man gruffly.

"You will take them from me now," broke in Chauvelin with a sudden assumption of command and authority which sat with weird strangeness upon his thin shrunken figure. "Go back to your post at once, ere I lodge a complaint against you for neglect of duty, with the citizen proconsul."

He turned on his heel and, without paying further heed to the man and his mutterings, he remounted the stone stairs.

"No success, I suppose?" queried Martin-Roget.

"None," replied Chauvelin curtly.

He had the packet of papers tightly clasped in his hand. He was debating in his mind whether he would speak of them to his colleague or not.

"What did Friche say?" asked the latter impatiently.

"Oh! very little. He and his mates caught sight of the strangers and followed them as far as the quays. But they were walking very fast and suddenly the Marats lost their trace in the darkness. It seemed, according to Paul Friche, as if the earth or the night had swallowed them up."

"And was that all?"

"Yes. That was all."

"I wonder," added Martin-Roget with a light laugh and a careless shrug of his wide shoulders, "I wonder if you and I, citizen Chauvelin — and Paul Friche too for that matter — have been the victims of our nerves."

"I wonder," assented Chauvelin drily. And — quite quietly — he slipped the packet of papers in the pocket of his coat.

"Then we may as well adjourn. There is nothing else you wish to say to me about that enigmatic Scarlet Pimpernel of yours?"

"No — nothing."

"And you still would like to hear what the Kernogan wench will say and see how she will look when I put my final proposal before her?"

"If you will allow me."

"Then come," said Martin-Roget. "My sister's house is close by."

FOOTNOTES:

This adventure is recorded in *The Elusive Pimpernel*.

CHAPTER III

THE FOWLERS

I

In order to reach the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie the two men had to skirt the whole edifice of Le Bouffay, walk a little along the quay and turn up the narrow alley opposite the bridge. They walked on in silence, each absorbed in his own thoughts.

The house occupied by the citizeness Adet lay back a little from the others in the street. It was one of an irregular row of mean, squalid, tumble-down houses, some of them little more than lean-to sheds built into the walls of Le Bouffay. Most of them had overhanging roofs which stretched out like awnings more than half way across the road, and even at midday shut out any little ray of sunshine which might have a tendency to peep into the street below.

In this year II of the Republic the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie was unpaved, dark and evil-smelling. For two thirds of the year it was ankle-deep in mud: the rest of the time the mud was baked into cakes and emitted clouds of sticky dust under the shuffling feet of the passers-by. At night it was dimly lighted by one or two broken-down lanterns which were hung on transverse chains overhead from house to house. These lanterns only made a very small circle of light immediately below them: the rest of the street was left in darkness, save for the faint glimmer which filtrated through an occasional ill-fitting doorway or through the chinks of some insecurely fastened shutter.

The Carrefour de la Poissonnerie was practically deserted in the daytime; only a few children — miserable little atoms of humanity showing their meagre, emaciated bodies through the scanty rags which failed to cover their nakedness — played weird, mirthless games in the mud and filth of the street. But at night it became strangely peopled with vague and furtive forms that were wont to glide swiftly by, beneath the hanging lanterns, in order to lose themselves again in the welcome obscurity beyond: men and women — ill-clothed and unshod, with hands buried in pockets or beneath scanty shawls — their feet, oft-times bare, making no sound as they went squishing through the mud. A perpetual silence used to reign in this kingdom of squalor and of darkness, where night-hawks alone fluttered their wings; only from time to time a joyless greeting of boon-companions, or the hoarse cough of some wretched consumptive would wake the dormant echoes that lingered in the gloom.

II

Martin-Roget knew his way about the murky street well enough. He went up to the house which lay a little back from the others. It appeared even more squalid than the rest, not a sound came from within — hardly a light — only a narrow glimmer found its way through the chink of a shutter on the floor above. To right and left of it the houses were tall, with walls that reeked of damp and of filth: from one of these — the one on the left — an iron sign dangled and creaked dismally as it swung in the wind. Just above the sign there was a window with partially closed shutters: through it came the sound of two husky voices raised in heated argument.

In the open space in front of Louise Adet's house vague forms standing about or lounging against the walls of the neighbouring houses were vaguely discernible in the gloom. Martin-Roget and Chauvelin as they approached were challenged by a raucous voice which came to them out of the inky blackness around.

"Halt! who goes there?"

"Friends!" replied Martin-Roget promptly. "Is citizeness Adet within?"

"Yes! she is!" retorted the man bluntly; "excuse me, friend Adet — I did not know you in this confounded darkness."

"No harm done," said Martin-Roget. "And it is I who am grateful to you all for your vigilance."

"Oh!" said the other with a laugh, "there's not much fear of your bird getting out of its cage. Have no fear, friend Adet! That Kernogan rabble is well looked after."

The small group dispersed in the darkness and Martin-Roget rapped against the door of his sister's house with his knuckles.

"That is the Rat Mort," he said, indicating the building on his left with a nod of the head. "A very unpleasant neighbourhood for my sister, and she has oft complained of it — but name of a dog! won't it prove useful this night?"

Chauvelin had as usual followed his colleague in silence, but his keen eyes had not failed to note the presence of the village lads of whom Martin-Roget had spoken. There are no eyes so watchful as those of hate, nor is there aught so incorruptible. Every one of these men here had an old wrong to avenge, an old score to settle with those ci-devant Kernogans who had once been their masters and who were so completely in their power now. Louise Adet had gathered round her a far more efficient bodyguard than even the proconsul could hope to have.

A moment or two later the door was opened, softly and cautiously, and Martin-Roget asked: "Is that you, Louise?" for of a truth the darkness was almost deeper within than without, and he could not see who it was that was standing by the door.

"Yes! it is," replied a weary and querulous voice. "Enter quickly. The wind is cruel, and I can't keep myself warm. Who is with you, Pierre?"

"A friend," said Martin-Roget drily. "We want to see the aristo."

The woman without further comment closed the door behind the new-comers. The place now was as dark as pitch, but she seemed to know her way about like a cat, for her shuffling footsteps were heard moving about unerringly. A moment or two later she opened another door opposite the front entrance, revealing an inner room — a sort of kitchen — which was lighted by a small lamp.

"You can go straight up," she called curtly to the two men.

The narrow, winding staircase was divided from this kitchen by a wooden partition. Martin-Roget, closely followed by Chauvelin, went up the stairs. On the top of these there was a tiny landing with a door on either side of it. Martin-Roget without any ceremony pushed open the door on his right with his foot.

A tallow candle fixed in a bottle and placed in the centre of a table in the middle of the room flickered in the draught as the door flew open. It was bare of everything save a table and a chair, and a bundle of straw in one corner. The tiny window at right angles to the door was innocent of glass, and the north-westerly wind came in an icy stream through the aperture. On the table, in addition to the candle, there was a broken pitcher half-filled with water, and a small chunk of brown bread blotched with stains of mould.

On the chair beside the table and immediately facing the door sat Yvonne Lady Dewhurst. On the wall above her head a hand unused to calligraphy had traced in clumsy characters the words: "Liberté! Fraternité! Egalité!" and below that "ou la Mort."

III

The men entered the narrow room and Chauvelin carefully closed the door behind him. He at once withdrew into a remote corner of the room and stood there quite still, wrapped in his mantle, a small, silent, mysterious figure on which Yvonne fixed dark, inquiring eyes.

Martin-Roget, restless and excited, paced up and down the small space like a wild animal in a cage. From time to time exclamations of impatience escaped him and he struck one fist repeatedly against his open palm. Yvonne followed his movements with a quiet, uninterested glance, but Chauvelin paid no heed whatever to him.

He was watching Yvonne ceaselessly, and closely.

Three days' incarceration in this wind-swept attic, the lack of decent food and of warmth, the want of sleep and the horror of her present position all following upon the soul-agony which she had endured when she was forcibly torn away from her dear milor, had left their mark on Yvonne Dewhurst's fresh young face. The look of gravity which had always sat so quaintly on her piquant features had now changed to one of deep and abiding sorrow; her large dark eyes were circled and sunk; they had in them the unnatural glow of fever, as well as the settled look of horror and of pathetic resignation. Her soft brown hair had lost its lustre; her cheeks were drawn and absolutely colourless.

Martin-Roget paused in his restless walk. For a moment he stood silent and absorbed, contemplating by the flickering light of the candle all the havoc which his brutality had wrought upon Yvonne's dainty face.

But Yvonne after a while ceased to look at him — she appeared to be unconscious of the gaze of these two men, each of whom was at this moment only thinking of the evil which he meant to inflict upon her — each of whom only thought of her as a helpless bird whom he had at last ensnared and whom he could crush to death as soon as he felt so inclined.

She kept her lips tightly closed and her head averted. She was gazing across at the unglazed window into the obscurity beyond, marvelling in what direction lay the sea and the shores of England.

Martin-Roget crossed his arms over his broad chest and clutched his elbows with his hands with an obvious effort to keep control over his movements and his temper in check. The quiet, almost indifferent attitude of the girl was exasperating to his over-strung nerves.

"Look here, my girl," he said at last, roughly and peremptorily, "I had an interview with the proconsul this afternoon. He chides me for my leniency toward you. Three days he thinks is far too long to keep traitors eating the bread of honest citizens and taking up valuable space in our city. Yesterday I made a proposal to you. Have you thought on it?"

Yvonne made no reply. She was still gazing out into nothingness and just at that moment she was very far away from the narrow, squalid room and the company of these two inhuman brutes. She was thinking of her dear milor and of that lovely home at Combech where in she had spent three such unforgettable days. She was remembering how beautiful had been the colour of the bare twigs in the chestnut coppice when the wintry sun danced through and in between them and drew fantastic patterns of living gold upon the carpet of dead leaves; and she remembered too how exquisite were the tints of russet and blue on the distant hills, and how quaintly the thrushes had called: "Kiss me quick!" She saw again those trembling leaves of a delicious faintly crimson hue which still hung upon the branches of the scarlet oak, and the early flowering heath which clothed the moors with a gorgeous mantle of rosy amethyst.

Martin-Roget's harsh voice brought her abruptly back to the hideous reality of the moment.

"Your obstinacy will avail you nothing," he said, speaking quietly, even though a note of intense irritation was distinctly perceptible in his voice. "The proconsul has given me a further delay wherein to deal leniently with you and with your father if I am so minded. You know what I have proposed to you: Life with me as my wife — in which case your father will be free to return to England or to go to the devil as he pleases — or the death of a malefactor for you both in the company of all the thieves and evil-doers who are mouldering in the prisons of Nantes at this moment. Another delay wherein to choose between an honourable life and a shameful death. The proconsul waits. But to-night he must have his answer."

Then Yvonne turned her head slowly and looked calmly on her enemy.

"The tyrant who murders innocent men, women and children," she said, "can have his answer now. I choose death which is inevitable in preference to a life of shame."

"You seem," he retorted, "to have lost sight of the fact that the law gives me the right to take by force that which you so obstinately refuse."

"Have I not said," she replied, "that death is my choice? Life with you would be a life of shame."

"I can get a priest to marry us without your consent: and your religion forbids you to take your own life," he said with a sneer.

To this she made no reply, but he knew that he had his answer. Smothering a curse, he resumed after a while:

"So you prefer to drag your father to death with you? Yet he has begged you to consider your decision and to listen to reason. He has given his consent to our marriage."

"Let me see my father," she retorted firmly, "and hear him say that with his own lips."

"Ah!" she added quickly, for at her words Martin-Roget had turned his head away and shrugged his shoulders with well-assumed indifference, "you cannot and dare not let me see him. For three days now you have kept us apart and no doubt fed us both up with your lies. My father is duc de Kernogan, Marquis de Trentemoult," she added proudly, "he would far rather die side by side with his daughter than see her wedded to a criminal."

"And you, my girl," rejoined Martin-Roget coldly, "would you see your father branded as a malefactor, linked to a thief and sent to perish in the Loire?"

"My father," she retorted, "will die as he has lived, a brave and honourable gentleman. The brand of a malefactor cannot cling to his name. Sorrow we are ready to endure — death is less than nothing to us — we will but follow in the footsteps of our King and of our Queen and of many whom we care for and whom you and your proconsul and your colleagues have brutally murdered. Shame cannot touch us, and our honour and our pride are so far beyond your reach that your impious and blood-stained hands can never sully them."

She had spoken very slowly and very quietly. There were no heroics about her attitude. Even Martin-Roget — callous brute though he was — felt that she had only spoken just as she felt, and that nothing that he might say, no plea that he might urge, would ever shake her determination.

"Then it seems to me," he said, "that I am only wasting my time by trying to make you see reason and common-sense. You look upon me as a brute. Well! perhaps I am. At any rate I am that which your father and you have made me. Four years ago, when you had power over me and over mine, you brutalised us. To-day we — the people — are your masters and we make you suffer, not for all — that were impossible — but for part of what you made us suffer. That, after all, is only bare justice. By making you my wife I would have saved you from death — not from humiliation, for that you must endure, and at my hands in a full measure — but I would have made you my wife because I still have pleasant recollections of that kiss which I snatched from you on that never-to-be-forgotten night and in the darkness — a kiss for which you would gladly have seen me hang then, if you could have laid hands on me."

He paused, trying to read what was going on behind those fine eyes of hers, with their vacant, far-seeing gaze which seemed like another barrier between her and him. At this rough allusion to that moment of horror and of shame, she had not moved a muscle, nor did her gaze lose its fixity.

He laughed.

"It is an unpleasant recollection, eh, my proud lady? The first kiss of passion was not implanted on your exquisite lips by that fine gentleman whom you deemed worthy of your hand and your love, but by Pierre Adet, the miller's son, what? a creature not quite so human as your horse or your pet dog. Neither you nor I are like to forget that methinks...."

Yvonne vouchsafed no reply to the taunt, and for a moment there was silence in the room, until Chauvelin's thin, suave voice broke in quite gently:

"Do not lose your patience with the wench, citizen Martin-Roget. Your time is too precious to be wasted in useless recriminations."

"I have finished with her," retorted the other sullenly. "She shall be dealt with now as I think best. I agree with citizen Carrier. He is right after all. To the Loire with the lot of that foul brood!"

"Nay!" here rejoined Chauvelin with placid urbanity, "are you not a little harsh, citizen, with our fair Yvonne? Remember! Women have moods and megrims. What they indignantly refuse to yield to us one day, they will grant with a smile the next. Our beautiful Yvonne is no exception to this rule, I'll warrant."

Even while he spoke he threw a glance of warning on his colleague. There was something enigmatic in his manner at this moment, in the strange suavity wherewith he spoke these words of conciliation and of gentleness. Martin-Roget was as usual ready with an impatient retort. He was in a mood to bully and to brutalise, to heap threat upon threat, to win by frightfulness that which he could not gain by persuasion. Perhaps that at this moment he desired Yvonne de Kernogan for wife, more even than he desired her death. At any rate his headstrong temper was ready to chafe against any warning or advice. But once again Chauvelin's stronger mentality dominated over his less resolute colleague. Martin-Roget — the fowler — was in his turn caught in the net of a keener snarer than himself, and whilst — with the obstinacy of the weak — he was making mental resolutions to rebuke Chauvelin for his interference later on, he had already fallen in with the latter's attitude.

"The wench has had three whole days wherein to alter her present mood," he said more quietly, "and you know yourself, citizen, that the proconsul will not wait after to-day."

"The day is young yet," rejoined Chauvelin. "It still hath six hours to its credit.... Six hours.... Three hundred and sixty minutes!" he continued with a pleasant little laugh; "time enough for a woman to change her mind three hundred and sixty times. Let me advise you, citizen, to leave the wench to her own meditations for the present, and I trust that she will accept the advice of a man who has a sincere regard for her beauty and her charms and who is old enough to be her father, and seriously think the situation over in a conciliatory spirit. M. le duc de Kernogan will be grateful to her, for of a truth he is not over happy either at the moment ... and will be still less happy in the dépôt to-morrow: it is over-crowded, and typhus, I fear me, is rampant among the prisoners. He has, I am convinced — in spite of what the citizeness says to the contrary — a rooted objection to being hurled into the Loire, or to be arraigned before the bar of the Convention, not as an aristocrat and a traitor but as an unit of an undesirable herd of criminals sent up to Paris for trial, by an anxious and harried proconsul. There! there!" he added benignly, "we will not worry our fair Yvonne any longer, will we, citizen? I think she has grasped the alternative and will soon realise that marriage with an honourable patriot is not such an untoward fate after all."

"And now, citizen Martin-Roget," he concluded, "I pray you allow me to take my leave of the fair lady and to give you the wise recommendation to do likewise. She will be far better alone for awhile. Night brings good counsel, so they say."

He watched the girl keenly while he spoke. Her impassivity had not deserted her for a single moment: but whether her calmness was of hope or of despair he was unable to decide. On the whole he thought it must be the latter: hope would have kindled a spark in those dark, purple-rimmed eyes, it would have brought moisture to the lips, a tremor to the hand.

The Scarlet Pimpernel was in Nantes — that fact was established beyond a doubt — but Chauvelin had come to the conclusion that so far as Yvonne Dewhurst herself was concerned, she knew nothing of the mysterious agencies that were working on her behalf.

Chauvelin's hand closed with a nervous contraction over the packet of papers in his pocket. Something of the secret of that enigmatic English adventurer lay revealed within its folds. Chauvelin had not yet had the opportunity of examining them: the interview with Yvonne had been the most important business for the moment.

From somewhere in the distance a city clock struck six. The afternoon was wearing on. The keenest brain in Europe was on the watch to drag one woman and one man from the deadly trap which had been so successfully set for them. A few hours more and

Chauvelin in his turn would be pitting his wits against the resources of that intricate brain, and he felt like a war-horse scenting blood and battle. He was aching to get to work — aching to form his plans — to lay his snares — to dispose his trap so that the noble English quarry should not fail to be caught within its meshes.

He gave a last look to Yvonne, who was still sitting quite impassive, gazing through the squalid walls into some beautiful distance, the reflection of which gave to her pale, wan face an added beauty.

"Let us go, citizen Martin-Roget," he said peremptorily. "There is nothing else that we can do here."

And Martin-Roget, the weaker morally of the two, yielded to the stronger personality of his colleague. He would have liked to stay on for awhile, to gloat for a few moments longer over the helplessness of the woman who to him represented the root of every evil which had ever befallen him and his family. But Chauvelin commanded and he felt impelled to obey. He gave one long, last look on Yvonne — a look that was as full of triumph as of mockery — he looked round the four dank walls, the unglazed window, the broken pitcher, the mouldy bread. Revenge was of a truth the sweetest emotion of the human heart. Pierre Adet — son of the miller who had been hanged by orders of the Duc de Kernogan for a crime which he had never committed — would not at this moment have changed places with Fortune's Benjamin.

IV

Downstairs in Louise Adet's kitchen, Martin-Roget seized his colleague by the arm.

"Sit down a moment, citizen," he said persuasively, "and tell me what you think of it all."

Chauvelin sat down at the other's invitation. All his movements were slow, deliberate, perfectly calm.

"I think," he said drily, "as far as your marriage with the wench is concerned, that you are beaten, my friend."

"Tshaw!" The exclamation, raucous and surcharged with hate came from Louise Adet. She, too, like Pierre — more so than Pierre mayhap — had cause to hate the Kernogans. She, too, like Pierre had lived the last three days in the full enjoyment of the thought that Fate and Chance were about to level things at last between herself and those detested aristos. Silent and sullen she was shuffling about in the room, among her pots and pans, but she kept an eye upon her brother's movements and an ear on what he said. Men were apt to lose grit where a pretty wench was concerned. It takes a woman's rancour and a woman's determination to carry a scheme of vengeance against another to a successful end.

Martin-Roget rejoined more calmly:

"I knew that she would still be obstinate," he said. "If I forced her into a marriage, which I have the right to do, she might take her own life and make me look a fool. So I don't want to do that. I believe in the persuasiveness of the Rat Mort to-night," he added with a cynical laugh, "and if that fails.... Well! I was never really in love with the fair Yvonne, and now she has even ceased to be desirable.... If the Rat Mort fails to act on her sensibilities as I would wish, I can easily console myself by following Carrier's herd to Paris. Louise shall come with me — eh, little sister? — and we'll give ourselves the satisfaction of seeing M. le duc de Kernogan and his exquisite daughter stand in the felon's dock — tried for malpractices and for evil living. We'll see them branded as convicts and packed off like so much cattle to Cayenne. That will be a sight," he concluded with a deep sigh of satisfaction, "which will bring rest to my soul."

He paused: his face looked sullen and evil under the domination of that passion which tortured him.

Louise Adet had shuffled up close to her brother. In one hand she held the wooden spoon wherewith she had been stirring the soup: with the other she brushed away the dark, lank hair which hung in strands over her high, pale forehead. In appearance she was a woman immeasurably older than her years. Her face had the colour of yellow parchment, her skin was stretched tightly over her high cheekbones — her lips were colourless and her eyes large, wide-open, were pale in hue and circled with red. Just now a deep frown of puzzlement between her brows added a sinister expression to her cadaverous face:

"The Rat Mort?" she queried in that tired voice of hers, "Cayenne? What is all that about?"

"A splendid scheme of Carrier's, my Louise," replied Martin-Roget airily. "We convey the Kernogan woman to the Rat Mort. To-night a descent will be made on that tavern of ill-fame by a company of Marats and every man, woman and child within it will be arrested and sent to Paris as undesirable inhabitants of this most moral city: in Paris they will be tried as malefactors or evil-doers — cut throats, thieves, what? and deported as convicts to Cayenne, or else sent to the guillotine. The Kernogans among that herd! What sayest thou to that, little sister? Thy father, thy lover, hung as thieves! M. le Duc and Mademoiselle branded as convicts! 'Tis pleasant to think on, eh?"

Louise made no reply. She stood looking at her brother, her pale, red-rimmed eyes seemed to drink in every word that he uttered, while her bony hand wandered mechanically across and across her forehead as if in a pathetic endeavour to clear the brain from everything save of the satisfying thoughts which this prospect of revenge had engendered.

Chauvelin's gentle voice broke in on her meditations.

"In the meanwhile," he said placidly, "remember my warning, citizen Martin-Roget. There are passing clever and mighty agencies at work, even at this hour, to wrest your prey from you. How will you convey the wench to the Rat Mort? Carrier has warned you of spies — but I have warned you against a crowd of English adventurers far more dangerous than an army of spies. Three pairs of eyes — probably more, and one pair the keenest in Europe — will be on the watch to seize upon the woman and to carry her off under your very nose."

Martin-Roget uttered a savage oath.

"That brute Carrier has left me in the lurch," he said roughly. "I don't believe in your nightmares and your English adventurers, still it would have been better if I could have had the woman conveyed to the tavern under armed escort."

"Armed escort has been denied you, and anyway it would not be much use. You and I, citizen Martin-Roget, must act independently of Carrier. Your friends down there," he added, indicating the street with a jerk of the head, "must redouble their watchfulness. The village lads of Vertou are of a truth no match intellectually with our English adventurers, but they have vigorous fists in case there is an attack on the wench while she walks across to the Rat Mort."

"It would be simpler," here interposed Louise roughly, "if we were to knock the wench on the head and then let the lads carry her across."

"It would not be simpler," retorted Chauvelin drily, "for Carrier might at any moment turn against us. Commandant Fleury with half a company of Marats will be posted round the Rat Mort, remember. They may interfere with the lads and arrest them and snatch the wench from us, when all our plans may fall to the ground ... one never knows what double game Carrier may be playing. No! no! the girl must not be dragged or carried to the Rat Mort. She must walk into the trap of her own free will."

"But name of a dog! how is it to be done?" ejaculated Martin-Roget, and he brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table. "The woman will not follow me — or Louise either — anywhere willingly."

"She must follow a stranger then — or one whom she thinks a stranger — some one who will have gained her confidence...."

"Impossible."

"Oh! nothing is impossible, citizen," rejoined Chauvelin blandly.

"Do you know a way then?" queried the other with a sneer.

"I think I do. If you will trust me that is — —"

"I don't know that I do. Your mind is so intent on those English adventurers, you are like as not to let the aristos slip through your fingers."

"Well, citizen," retorted Chauvelin imperturbably, "will you take the risk of conveying the fair Yvonne to the Rat Mort by twelve o'clock to-night? I have very many things to see to, I confess that I should be glad if you will ease me from that responsibility."

"I have already told you that I see no way," retorted Martin-Roget with a snarl.

"Then why not let me act?"

"What are you going to do?"

"For the moment I am going for a walk on the quay and once more will commune with the North-West wind."

"Tshaw!" ejaculated Martin-Roget savagely.

"Nay, citizen," resumed Chauvelin blandly, "the winds of heaven are excellent counsellors. I told you so just now and you agreed with me. They blow away the cobwebs of the mind and clear the brain for serious thinking. You want the Kernogan girl to be arrested inside the Rat Mort and you see no way of conveying her thither save by the use of violence, which for obvious reasons is to be deprecated: Carrier, for equally obvious reasons, will not have her taken to the place by force. On the other hand you admit that the wench would not follow you willingly — Well, citizen, we must find a way out of that impasse, for it is too unimportant an one to stand in the way of our plans: for this I must hold a consultation with the North-West wind."

"I won't allow you to do anything without consulting me."

"Am I likely to do that? To begin with I shall have need of your co-operation and that of the citizeness."

"In that case ..." muttered Martin-Roget grudgingly. "But remember," he added with a return to his usual self-assured manner, "remember that Yvonne and her father belong to me and not to you. I brought them into Nantes for mine own purposes — not for yours. I will not have my revenge jeopardised so that your schemes may be furthered."

"Who spoke of my schemes, citizen Martin-Roget?" broke in Chauvelin with perfect urbanity. "Surely not I? What am I but an humble tool in the service of the Republic?... a tool that has proved useless — a failure, what? My only desire is to help you to the best of my abilities. Your enemies are the enemies of the Republic: my ambition is to help you in destroying them."

For a moment longer Martin-Roget hesitated: he abominated this suggestion of becoming a mere instrument in the hands of this man whom he still would have affected to despise — had he dared. But here came the difficulty: he no longer dared to despise Chauvelin. He felt the strength of the man — the clearness of his intellect, and though he — Martin-Roget — still chose to disregard every warning in connexion with the English spies, he could not wholly divest his mind from the possibility of their presence in Nantes. Carrier's scheme was so magnificent, so satisfying, that the ex-miller's son was ready to humble his pride and set his arrogance aside in order to see it carried through successfully.

So after a moment or two, despite the fact that he positively ached to shut Chauvelin out of the whole business, Martin-Roget gave a grudging assent to his proposal.

"Very well!" he said, "you see to it. So long as it does not interfere with my plans...."

"It can but help them," rejoined Chauvelin suavely. "If you will act as I shall direct I pledge you my word that the wench will walk to the Rat Mort of her free will and at the hour when you want her. What else is there to say?"

"When and where shall we meet again?"

"Within the hour I will return here and explain to you and to the citizeness what I want you to do. We will get the aristos inside the Rat Mort, never fear; and after that I think that we may safely leave Carrier to do the rest, what?"

He picked up his hat and wrapped his mantle round him. He took no further heed of Martin-Roget or of Louise, for suddenly he had felt the crackling of crisp paper inside the breast-pocket of his coat and in a moment the spirit of the man had gone a-roaming out of the narrow confines of this squalid abode. It had crossed the English Channel and wandered once more into a brilliantly-lighted ball-room where an exquisitely dressed dandy declaimed inanities and doggerel rhymes for the delectation of a flippant assembly: it heard once more the lazy, drawling speech, the inane, affected laugh, it caught the glance of a pair of lazy, grey eyes fixed mockingly upon him. Chauvelin's thin claw-like hand went back to his pocket: it felt that packet of papers, it closed over it like a vulture's talon does upon a prey. He no longer heard Martin-Roget's obstinate murmurings, he no longer felt himself to be the disgraced, humiliated servant of the State: rather did he feel once more the master, the leader, the successful weaver of an hundred clever intrigues. The enemy who had baffled him so often had chosen once more to throw down the glove of mocking defiance. So be it! The battle would be fought this night — a decisive one — and long live the Republic and the power of the people!

With a curt nod of the head Chauvelin turned on his heel and without waiting for Martin-Roget to follow him, or for Louise to light him on his way, he strode from the room, and out of the house, and had soon disappeared in the darkness in the direction of the quay.

Once more free from the encumbering companionship of Martin-Roget, Chauvelin felt free to breathe and to think. He, the obscure and impassive servant of the Republic, the cold-blooded Terrorist who had gone through every phrase of an exciting career without moving a muscle of his grave countenance, felt as if every one of his arteries was on fire. He strode along the quay in the teeth of the north-westerly wind, grateful for the cold blast which lashed his face and cooled his throbbing temples.

The packet of papers inside his coat seemed to sear his breast.

Before turning to go along the quay he paused, hesitating for a moment what he would do. His very humble lodgings were at the far end of the town, and every minute of time was precious. Inside Le Bouffay, where he had a small room allotted to him as a minor representative in Nantes of the Committee of Public Safety, there was the ever present danger of prying eyes.

On the whole — since time was so precious — he decided on returning to Le Bouffay. The concierge and the clerk fortunately let him through without those official delays which he — Chauvelin — was wont to find so galling ever since his disgrace had put a bar against the opening of every door at the bare mention of his name or the display of his tricolour scarf.

He strode rapidly across the hall: the men on guard eyed him with lazy indifference as he passed. Once inside his own sanctum he looked carefully around him; he drew the curtain closer across the window and dragged the table and a chair well away from the range which might be covered by an eye at the keyhole. It was only when he had thoroughly assured himself that no searching eye or inquisitive ear could possibly be watching over him that he at last drew the precious packet of papers from his pocket. He undid the red ribbon which held it together and spread the papers out on the table before him. Then he examined them carefully one by one.

As he did so an exclamation of wrath or of impatience escaped him from time to time, once he laughed — involuntarily — aloud.

The examination of the papers took him some time. When he had finished he gathered them all together again, retied the bit of ribbon round them and slipped the packet back into the pocket of his coat. There was a look of grim determination on his face, even though a bitter sigh escaped his set lips.

“Oh! for the power,” he muttered to himself, “which I had a year ago! for the power to deal with mine enemy myself. So you have come to Nantes, my valiant Sir Percy Blakeney?” he added while a short, sardonic laugh escaped his thin, set lips: “and you are determined that I shall know how and why you came! Do you reckon, I wonder, that I have no longer the power to deal with you? Well!...”

He sighed again but with more satisfaction this time.

“Well!...” he reiterated with obvious complacency. “Unless that oaf Carrier is a bigger fool than I imagine him to be I think I have you this time, my elusive Scarlet Pimpernel.”

CHAPTER IV

THE NET

I

It was not an easy thing to obtain an audience of the great proconsul at this hour of the night, nor was Chauvelin, the disgraced servant of the Committee of Public Safety, a man to be considered. Carrier, with his love of ostentation and of tyranny, found great delight in keeping his colleagues waiting upon his pleasure, and he knew that he could trust young Jacques Lalouët to be as insolent as any tyrant's flunkey of yore.

"I must speak with the proconsul at once," had been Chauvelin's urgent request of Fleury, the commandant of the great man's bodyguard.

"The proconsul dines at this hour," had been Fleury's curt reply.

"'Tis a matter which concerns the welfare and the safety of the State!"

"The proconsul's health is the concern of the State too, and he dines at this hour and must not be disturbed."

"Commandant Fleury!" urged Chauvelin, "you risk being implicated in a disaster. Danger and disgrace threaten the proconsul and all his adherents. I must speak with citizen Carrier at once."

Fortunately for Chauvelin there were two keys which, when all else failed, were apt to open the doors of Carrier's stronghold: the key of fear and that of cupidity. He tried both and succeeded. He bribed and he threatened: he endured Fleury's brutality and Lalouët's impertinence but he got his way. After an hour's weary waiting and ceaseless parleyings he was once more ushered into the antechamber where he had sat earlier in the day. The doors leading to the inner sanctuary were open. Young Jacques Lalouët stood by them on guard. Carrier, fuming and raging at having been disturbed, vented his spleen and ill-temper on Chauvelin.

"If the news that you bring me is not worth my consideration," he cried savagely, "I'll send you to moulder in Le Bouffay or to drink the waters of the Loire."

Chauvelin silent, self-effaced, allowed the flood of the great man's wrath to spend itself in threats. Then he said quietly:

"Citizen proconsul I have come to tell you that the English spy, who is called the Scarlet Pimpernel, is now in Nantes. There is a reward of twenty thousand francs for his capture and I want your help to lay him by the heels."

Carrier suddenly paused in his ravings. He sank into a chair and a livid hue spread over his face.

"It's not true!" he murmured hoarsely.

"I saw him — not an hour ago...."

"What proof have you?"

"I'll show them to you — but not across this threshold. Let me enter, citizen proconsul, and close your sanctuary doors behind me rather than before. What I have come hither to tell you, can only be said between four walls."

"I'll make you tell me," broke in Carrier in a raucous voice, which excitement and fear caused almost to choke in his throat. "I'll make you ... curse you for the traitor that you are.... Curse you!" he cried more vigorously, "I'll make you speak. Will you shield a spy by your silence, you miserable traitor? If you do I'll send you to rot in the mud of the Loire with other traitors less accursed than yourself."

"If you only knew," was Chauvelin's calm rejoinder to the other's ravings, "how little I care for life. I only live to be even one day with an enemy whom I hate. That enemy is now in Nantes, but I am like a bird of prey whose wings have been clipped. If you do not help me mine enemy will again go free — and death in that case matters little or nothing to me."

For a moment longer Carrier hesitated. Fear had gripped him by the throat. Chauvelin's earnestness seemed to vouch for the truth of his assertion, and if this were so — if those English spies were indeed in Nantes — then his own life was in deadly danger. He — like every one of those bloodthirsty tyrants who had misused the sacred names of Fraternity and of Equality — had learned to dread the machinations of those mysterious Englishmen and of their unconquerable leader. Popular superstition had it that they were spies of the English Government and that they were not only bent on saving traitors from well-merited punishment but that they were hired assassins paid by Mr. Pitt to murder every faithful servant of the Republic. The name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, so significantly uttered by Chauvelin, had turned Carrier's sallow cheeks to a livid hue. Sick with terror now he called Lalouët to him. He clung to the boy with both arms as to the one being in this world whom he trusted.

"What shall we do, Jacques?" he murmured hoarsely, "shall we let him in?"

The boy roughly shook himself free from the embrace of the great proconsul.

"If you want twenty thousand francs," he said with a dry laugh, "I should listen quietly to what citizen Chauvelin has to say."

Terror and rapacity were ranged on one side against inordinate vanity. The thought of twenty thousand francs made Carrier's ugly mouth water. Money was ever scarce these days: also the fear of assassination was a spectre which haunted him at all hours of the day and night. On the other hand he positively worshipped the mystery wherewith he surrounded himself. It had been his boast for some time now that no one save the chosen few had crossed the threshold of his private chamber: and he was miserably afraid not only of Chauvelin's possible evil intentions, but also that this despicable ex-aristo and equally despicable failure would boast in the future of an ascendancy over him.

He thought the matter over for fully five minutes, during which there was dead silence in the two rooms — silence only broken by the stertorous breathing of that wretched coward, and the measured ticking of the fine Buhl clock behind him. Chauvelin's pale eyes were fixed upon the darkness, through which he could vaguely discern the uncouth figure of the proconsul, sprawling over his desk. Which way would his passions sway him? Chauvelin as he watched and waited felt that his habitual self-control was perhaps more severely taxed at this moment than it had ever been before. Upon the swaying of those passions, the passions of a man infinitely craven

and infinitely base, depended all his — Chauvelin's — hopes of getting even at last with a daring and resourceful foe. Terror and rapacity were the counsellors which ranged themselves on the side of his schemes, but mere vanity and caprice fought a hard battle too.

In the end it was rapacity that gained the victory. An impatient exclamation from young Lalouët roused Carrier from his sombre brooding and hastened on a decision which was destined to have such momentous consequences for the future of both these men.

"Introduce citizen Chauvelin in here, Lalouët," said the proconsul grudgingly. "I will listen to what he has to say."

II

Chauvelin crossed the threshold of the tyrant's sanctuary, in no way awed by the majesty of that dreaded presence or confused by the air of mystery which hung about the room.

He did not even bestow a glance on the multitudinous objects of art and the priceless furniture which littered the tiger's lair. His pale face remained quite expressionless as he bowed solemnly before Carrier and then took the chair which was indicated to him. Young Lalouët fetched a candelabra from the ante-room and carried it into the audience chamber: then he closed the communicating doors. The candelabra he placed on a console-table immediately behind Carrier's desk and chair, so that the latter's face remained in complete shadow, whilst the light fell full upon Chauvelin.

"Well! what is it?" queried the proconsul roughly. "What is this story of English spies inside Nantes? How did they get here? Who is responsible for keeping such rabble out of our city? Name of a dog, but some one has been careless of duty! and carelessness these days is closely allied to treason."

He talked loudly and volubly — his inordinate terror causing the words to come tumbling, almost incoherently, out of his mouth. Finally he turned on Chauvelin with a snarl like an angry cat:

"And how comes it, citizen," he added savagely, "that you alone here in Nantes are acquainted with the whereabouts of those dangerous spies?"

"I caught sight of them," rejoined Chauvelin calmly, "this afternoon after I left you. I knew we should have them here, the moment citizen Martin-Roget brought the Kernogans into the city. The woman is the wife of one of them."

"Curse that blundering fool Martin-Roget for bringing that rabble about our ears, and those assassins inside our gates."

"Nay! Why should you complain, citizen proconsul," rejoined Chauvelin in his blandest manner. "Surely you are not going to let the English spies escape this time? And if you succeed in laying them by the heels — there where every one else has failed — you will have earned twenty thousand francs and the thanks of the entire Committee of Public Safety."

He paused: and young Lalouët interposed with his impudent laugh:

"Go on, citizen Chauvelin," he said, "if there is twenty thousand francs to be made out of this game, I'll warrant that the proconsul will take a hand in it — eh, Carrier?"

And with the insolent familiarity of a terrier teasing a grizzly he tweaked the great man's ear.

Chauvelin in the meanwhile had drawn the packet of papers from his pocket and untied the ribbon that held them together. He now spread the papers out on the desk.

"What are these?" queried Carrier.

"A few papers," replied Chauvelin, "which one of your Marats, Paul Friche by name, picked up in the wake of the Englishmen. I caught sight of them in the far distance, and sent the Marats after them. For awhile Paul Friche kept on their track, but after that they disappeared in the darkness."

"Who were the senseless louts," growled Carrier, "who allowed a pack of foreign assassins to escape? I'll soon make them disappear ... in the Loire."

"You will do what you like about that, citizen Carrier," retorted Chauvelin drily; "in the meanwhile you would do well to examine these papers."

He sorted these out, examined them one by one, then passed them across to Carrier. Lalouët, impudent and inquisitive, sat on the corner of the desk, dangling his legs. With scant ceremony he snatched one paper after another out of Carrier's hands and examined them curiously.

"Can you understand all this gibberish?" he asked airily. "Jean Baptiste, my friend, how much English do you know?"

"Not much," replied the proconsul, "but enough to recognise that abominable doggerel rhyme which has gone the round of the Committees of Public Safety throughout the country."

"I know it by heart," rejoined young Lalouët. "I was in Paris once, when citizen Robespierre received a copy of it. Name of a dog!" added the youngster with a coarse laugh, "how he cursed!"

It is doubtful however if citizen Robespierre did on that occasion curse quite so volubly as Carrier did now.

"If I only knew why that *satane* Englishman throws so much calligraphy about," he said, "I would be easier in my mind. Now this senseless rhyme ... I don't see..."

"Its importance?" broke in Chauvelin quietly. "I dare say not. On the face of it, it appears foolish and childish: but it is intended as a taunt and is really a poor attempt at humour. They are a queer people these English. If you knew them as I do, you would not be surprised to see a man scribbling off a cheap joke before embarking on an enterprise which may cost him his head."

"And this inane rubbish is of that sort," concluded young Lalouët. And in his thin high treble he began reciting:

"We seek him here; We seek him there! Those Frenchies seek him everywhere. Is he in heaven? Is he in h — II? That demmed elusive Pimpernel?"

"Pointless and offensive," he said as he tossed the paper back on the table.

"A cursed aristo that Englishman of yours," growled Carrier. "Oh! when I get him..."

He made an expressive gesture which made Lalouët laugh.

"What else have we got in the way of documents, citizen Chauvelin?" he asked.

"There is a letter," replied the latter.

“Read it,” commanded Carrier. “Or rather translate it as you read. I don’t understand the whole of the gibberish.”

And Chauvelin, taking up a sheet of paper which was covered with neat, minute writing, began to read aloud, translating the English into French as he went along:

““Here we are at last, my dear Tony! Didn’t I tell you that we can get in anywhere despite all precautions taken against us!””

“The impudent devils!” broke in Carrier.

—”Did you really think that they could keep us out of Nantes while Lady Anthony Dewhurst is a prisoner in their hands?””

“Who is that?”

“The Kernogan woman. As I told you just now, she is married to an Englishman who is named Dewhurst and who is one of the members of that thrice cursed League.”

Then he continued to read:

““And did you really suppose that they would spot half a dozen English gentlemen in the guise of peat-gatherers, returning at dusk and covered with grime from their work? Not like, friend Tony! Not like! If you happen to meet mine engaging friend M. Chambertin before I have that privilege myself, tell him I pray you, with my regards, that I am looking forward to the pleasure of making a long nose at him once more. Calais, Boulogne, Paris — now Nantes — the scenes of his triumphs multiply exceedingly.””

“What in the devil’s name does all this mean?” queried Carrier with an oath.

“You don’t understand it?” rejoined Chauvelin quietly.

“No. I do not.”

“Yet I translated quite clearly.”

“It is not the language that puzzles me. The contents seem to me such drivel. The man wants secrecy, what? He is supposed to be astute, resourceful, above all mysterious and enigmatic. Yet he writes to his friend — matter of no importance between them, recollections of the past, known to them both — and threats for the future, equally futile and senseless. I cannot reconcile it all. It puzzles me.”

“And it would puzzle me,” rejoined Chauvelin, while the ghost of a smile curled his thin lips, “did I not know the man. Futile? Senseless, you say? Well, he does futile and senseless things one moment and amazing deeds of personal bravery and of astuteness the next. He is three parts a braggart too. He wanted you, me — all of us to know how he and his followers succeeded in eluding our vigilance and entered our closely-guarded city in the guise of grimy peat-gatherers. Now I come to think of it, it was easy enough for them to do that. Those peat-gatherers who live inside the city boundaries return from their work as the night falls in. Those cursed English adventurers are passing clever at disguise — they are born mountebanks the lot of them. Money and impudence they have in plenty. They could easily borrow or purchase some filthy rags from the cottages on the dunes, then mix with the crowd on its return to the city. I dare say it was cleverly done. That Scarlet Pimpernel is just a clever adventurer and nothing more. So far his marvellous good luck has carried him through. Now we shall see.”

Carrier had listened in silence. Something of his colleague’s calm had by this time communicated itself to him too. He was no longer raving like an infuriated bull — his terror no longer made a half-cringing, wholly savage brute of him. He was sprawling across the desk — his arms folded, his deep-set eyes studying closely the well-nigh inscrutable face of Chauvelin. Young Lalouët too had lost something of his impudence. That mysterious spell which seemed to emanate from the elusive personality of the bold English adventurer had been cast over these two callous, bestial natures, humbling their arrogance and making them feel that here was no ordinary situation to be dealt with by smashing, senseless hitting and the spilling of innocent blood. Both felt instinctively too that this man Chauvelin, however wholly he may have failed in the past, was nevertheless still the only man who might grapple successfully with the elusive and adventurous foe.

“Are you assuming, citizen Chauvelin,” queried Carrier after awhile, “that this packet of papers was dropped purposely by the Englishman, so that it might get into our hands?”

“There is always such a possibility,” replied Chauvelin drily. “With that type of man one must be prepared to meet the unexpected.”

“Then go on, citizen Chauvelin. What else is there among those *satané* papers?”

“Nothing further of importance. There is a map of Nantes, and one of the coast and of Le Croisic. There is a cutting from *Le Moniteur* dated last September, and one from the *London Gazette* dated three years ago. The *Moniteur* makes reference to the production of *Athalie* at the Théâtre Molière, and the *London Gazette* to the sale of fat cattle at an Agricultural Show. There is a receipted account from a London tailor for two hundred pounds worth of clothes supplied, and one from a Lyons mercer for an hundred francs worth of silk cravats. Then there is the one letter which alone amidst all this rubbish appears to be of any consequence....”

He took up the last paper; his hand was still quite steady.

“Read the letter,” said Carrier.

“It is addressed in the English fashion to Lady Anthony Dewhurst,” continued Chauvelin slowly, “the Kernogan woman, you know, citizen. It says:

““Keep up your courage. Your friends are inside the city and on the watch. Try the door of your prison every evening at one hour before midnight. Once you will find it yield. Slip out and creep noiselessly down the stairs. At the bottom a friendly hand will be stretched out to you. Take it with confidence — it will lead you to safety and to freedom. Courage and secrecy.””

Lalouët had been looking over his shoulder while he read: now he pointed to the bottom of the letter.

“And there is the device,” he said, “we have heard so much about of late — a five-petalled flower drawn in red ink ... the Scarlet Pimpernel, I presume.”

“Aye! the Scarlet Pimpernel,” murmured Chauvelin, “as you say! Braggadocio on his part or accident, his letters are certainly in our hands now and will prove — must prove, the tool whereby we can be even with him once and for all.”

“And you, citizen Chauvelin,” interposed Carrier with a sneer, “are mighty lucky to have me to help you this time. I am not going to be fooled, as Candeille and you were fooled last September, as you were fooled in Calais and Héron in Paris. I shall be seeing this time

to the capture of those English adventurers.”

“And that capture should not be difficult,” added Lalouët with a complacent laugh. “Your famous adventurer’s luck hath deserted him this time: an all-powerful proconsul is pitted against him and the loss of his papers hath destroyed the anonymity on which he reckons.”

Chauvelin paid no heed to the fatuous remarks.

How little did this flippant young braggart and this coarse-grained bully understand the subtle workings of that same adventurer’s brain! He himself — one of the most astute men of the day — found it difficult. Even now — the losing of those letters in the open streets of Nantes — it was part of a plan. Chauvelin could have staked his head on that — a part of a plan for the liberation of Lady Anthony Dewhurst — but what plan? — what plan?

He took up the letter which his colleague had thrown down: he fingered it, handled it, letting the paper crackle through his fingers, as if he expected it to yield up the secret which it contained. The time had come — of that he felt no doubt — when he could at last be even with his enemy. He had endured more bitter humiliation at the hands of this elusive Pimpernel than he would have thought himself capable of bearing a couple of years ago. But the time had come at last — if only he kept his every faculty on the alert, if Fate helped him and his own nerves stood the strain. Above all if this blundering, self-satisfied Carrier could be reckoned on!...

There lay the one great source of trouble! He — Chauvelin — had no power: he was disgraced — a failure — a nonentity to be sneered at. He might protest, entreat, wring his hands, weep tears of blood and not one man would stir a finger to help him: this brute who sprawled here across his desk would not lend him half a dozen men to enable him to lay by the heels the most powerful enemy the Government of the Terror had ever known. Chauvelin inwardly ground his teeth with rage at his own impotence, at his own dependence on this clumsy lout, who was at this moment possessed of powers which he himself would give half his life to obtain.

But on the other hand he did possess a power which no one could take from him — the power to use others for the furtherance of his own aims — to efface himself while others danced as puppets to his piping. Carrier had the power: he had spies, Marats, prison-guards at his disposal. He was greedy for the reward, and cupidity and fear would make of him a willing instrument. All that Chauvelin need do was to use that instrument for his own ends. One would be the head to direct, the other — a mere insentient tool.

From this moment onwards every minute, every second and every fraction of a second would be full of portent, full of possibilities. Sir Percy Blakeney was in Nantes with at least three or four members of his League: he was at this very moment taxing every fibre of his resourceful brain in order to devise a means whereby he could rescue his friend’s wife from the fate which was awaiting her: to gain this end he would dare everything, risk everything — risk and dare a great deal more than he had ever dared and risked before.

Chauvelin was finding a grim pleasure in reviewing the situation, in envisaging the danger of failure which he knew lay in wait for him, unless he too was able to call to his aid all the astuteness, all the daring, all the resource of his own fertile brain. He studied his colleague’s face keenly — that sullen, savage expression in it, the arrogance, the blundering vanity. It was terrible to have to humour and fawn to a creature of that stamp when all one’s hopes, all one’s future, one’s ideals and the welfare of one’s country were at stake.

But this additional difficulty only served to whet the man’s appetite for action. He drew in a long breath of delight, like a captive who first after many days and months of weary anguish scents freedom and ozone. He straightened out his shoulders. A gleam of triumph and of hope shot out of his keen pale eyes. He studied Carrier and he studied Lalouët and he felt that he could master them both — quietly, diplomatically, with subtle skill that would not alarm the proconsul’s rampant self-esteem: and whilst this coarse-fibred brute gloated in anticipatory pleasure over the handling of a few thousand francs, and whilst Martin-Roget dreamed of a clumsy revenge against one woman and one man who had wronged him four years ago, he — Chauvelin — would pursue his work of striking at the enemy of the Revolution — of bringing to his knees the man who spent life and fortune in combating its ideals and in frustrating its aims. The destruction of such a foe was worthy a patriot’s ambition.

On the other hand some of Carrier’s bullying arrogance had gone. He was terrified to the very depths of his cowardly heart, and for once he was turning away from his favourite Jacques Lalouët and inclined to lean on Chauvelin for advice. Robespierre had been known to tremble at sight of that small scarlet device, how much more had he — Carrier — cause to be afraid. He knew his own limitations and he was terrified of the assassin’s dagger. As Marat had perished, so he too might end his days, and the English spies were credited with murderous intentions and superhuman power. In his innermost self Carrier knew that despite countless failures Chauvelin was mentally his superior, and though he never would own to this and at this moment did not attempt to shed his overbearing manner, he was watching the other keenly and anxiously, ready to follow the guidance of an intellect stronger than his own.

III

At last Carrier elected to speak.

“And now, citizen Chauvelin,” he said, “we know how we stand. We know that the English assassins are in Nantes. The question is how are we going to lay them by the heels.”

Chauvelin gave him no direct reply. He was busy collecting his precious papers together and thrusting them back into the pocket of his coat. Then he said quietly:

“It is through the Kernogan woman that we can get hold of him.”

“How?”

“Where she is, there will the Englishmen be. They are in Nantes for the sole purpose of getting the woman and her father out of your clutches....”

“Then it will be a fine haul inside the Rat Mort,” ejaculated Carrier with a chuckle. “Eh, Jacques, you young scamp? You and I must go and see that, what? You have been complaining that life was getting monotonous. Drownages — Republican marriages! They have all palled in their turn on your jaded appetite.... But the capture of the English assassins, eh?... of that League of the Scarlet Pimpernel which has even caused citizen Robespierre much uneasiness — that will stir up your sluggish blood, you lazy young vermin!... Go on, go on, citizen Chauvelin, I am vastly interested!”

He rubbed his dry, bony hands together and cackled with glee. Chauvelin interposed quietly:

"Inside the Rat Mort, eh, citizen?" he queried.

"Why, yes. Citizen Martin-Roget means to convey the Kernogan woman to the Rat Mort, doesn't he?"

"He does."

"And you say that where the Kernogan woman is there the Englishmen will be...."

"The inference is obvious."

"Which means ten thousand francs from that fool Martin-Roget for having the wench and her father arrested inside the Rat Mort! and twenty thousand for the capture of the English spies.... Have you forgotten, citizen Chauvelin," he added with a raucous cry of triumph, "that commandant Fleury has my orders to make a raid on the Rat Mort this night with half a company of my Marats, and to arrest every one whom they find inside?"

"The Kernogan wench is not at the Rat Mort yet," quoth Chauvelin drily, "and you have refused to lend a hand in having her conveyed thither."

"I can't do it, my little Chauvelin," rejoined Carrier, somewhat sobered by this reminder. "I can't do it ... you understand ... my Marats taking an aristo to a house of ill-fame where presently I have her arrested ... it won't do ... it won't do ... you don't know how I am spied upon just now.... It really would not do.... I can't be mixed up in that part of the affair. The wench must go to the Rat Mort of her own free will, or the whole plan falls to the ground.... That fool Martin-Roget must think of a way ... it's his affair, after all. He must see to it.... Or you can think of a way," he added, assuming the coaxing ways of a tiger-cat; "you are so clever, my little Chauvelin."

"Yes," replied Chauvelin quietly, "I can think of a way. The Kernogan wench shall leave the house of citizeness Adet and walk into the tavern of the Rat Mort of her own free will. Your reputation, citizen Carrier," he added without the slightest apparent trace of a sneer, "your reputation shall be safeguarded in this matter. But supposing that in the interval of going from the one house to the other the English adventurer succeeds in kidnapping her...."

"Pah! is that likely?" quoth Carrier with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Exceedingly likely, citizen; and you would not doubt it if you knew this Scarlet Pimpernel as I do. I have seen him at his nefarious work. I know what he can do. There is nothing that he would not venture ... there are few ventures in which he does not succeed. He is as strong as an ox, as agile as a cat. He can see in the dark and he can always vanish in a crowd. Here, there and everywhere, you never know where he will appear. He is a past master in the art of disguise and he is a born mountebank. Believe me, citizen, we shall want all the resources of our joint intellects to frustrate the machinations of such a foe."

Carrier mused for a moment in silence.

"H'm!" he said after awhile, and with a sardonic laugh. "You may be right, citizen Chauvelin. You have had experience with the rascal ... you ought to know him. We won't leave anything to chance — don't be afraid of that. My Marats will be keen on the capture. We'll promise commandant Fleury a thousand francs for himself and another thousand to be distributed among his men if we lay hands on the English assassins to-night. We'll leave nothing to chance," he reiterated with an oath.

"In which case, citizen Carrier, you must on your side agree to two things," rejoined Chauvelin firmly.

"What are they?"

"You must order Commandant Fleury to place himself and half a company of his Marats at my disposal."

"What else?"

"You must allow them to lend a hand if there is an attempt to kidnap the Kernogan wench while she is being conveyed to the Rat Mort...."

Carrier hesitated for a second or two, but only for form's sake: it was his nature whenever he was forced to yield to do so grudgingly.

"Very well!" he said at last. "I'll order Fleury to be on the watch and to interfere if there is any street-brawling outside or near the Rat Mort. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly. I shall be on the watch too — somewhere close by.... I'll warn commandant Fleury if I suspect that the English are making ready for a coup outside the tavern. Personally I think it unlikely — because the duc de Kernogan will be inside the Rat Mort all the time, and he too will be the object of the Englishmen's attacks on his behalf. Citizen Martin-Roget too has about a score or so of his friends posted outside his sister's house: they are lads from his village who hate the Kernogans as much as he does himself. Still! I shall feel easier in my mind now that I am certain of commandant Fleury's co-operation."

"Then it seems to me that we have arranged everything satisfactorily, what?"

"Everything, except the exact moment when Commandant Fleury shall advance with his men to the door of the tavern and demand admittance in the name of the Republic."

"Yes, he will have to make quite sure that the whole of our quarry is inside the net, eh?... before he draws the strings ... or all our pretty plans fall to nought."

"As you say," rejoined Chauvelin, "we must make sure. Supposing therefore that we get the wench safely into the tavern, that we have her there with her father, what we shall want will be some one in observation — some one who can help us to draw our birds into the snare just when we are ready for them. Now there is a man whom I have in my mind: he hath name Paul Friche and is one of your Marats — a surly, ill-conditioned giant ... he was on guard outside Le Bouffay this afternoon.... I spoke to him ... he would suit our purpose admirably."

"What do you want him to do?"

"Only to make himself look as like a Nantese cut-throat as he can...."

"He looks like one already," broke in Jacques Lalouët with a laugh.

"So much the better. He'll excite no suspicion in that case in the minds of the frequenters of the Rat Mort. Then I'll instruct him to start a brawl — a fracas — soon after the arrival of the Kernogan wench. The row will inevitably draw the English adventurers hot-haste to the spot, either in the hope of getting the Kernogans away during the *mêlée* or with a view to protecting them. As soon as they have appeared upon the scene, the half company of the Marats will descend on the house and arrest every one inside it."

"It all sounds remarkably simple," rejoined Carrier, and with a leer of satisfaction he turned to Jacques Lalouët.

"What think you of it, citizen?" he asked.

"That it sounds so remarkably simple," replied young Lalouët, "that personally I should be half afraid...."

"Of what?" queried Chauvelin blandly.

"If you fail, citizen Chauvelin...."

"Impossible!"

"If the Englishmen do not appear?"

"Even so the citizen proconsul will have lost nothing. He will merely have failed to gain the twenty thousand francs. But the Kernogans will still be in his power and citizen Martin-Roget's ten thousand francs are in any case assured."

"Friend Jean-Baptiste," concluded Lalouët with his habitual insolent familiarity, "you had better do what citizen Chauvelin wants. Ten thousand francs are good ... and thirty better still. Our privy purse has been empty far too long, and I for one would like the handling of a few brisk notes."

"It will only be twenty-eight, citizen Lalouët," interposed Chauvelin blandly, "for commandant Fleury will want one thousand francs and his men another thousand to stimulate their zeal. Still! I imagine that these hard times twenty-eight thousand francs are worth fighting for."

"You seem to be fighting and planning and scheming for nothing, citizen Chauvelin," retorted young Lalouët with a sneer. "What are you going to gain, I should like to know, by the capture of that dare-devil Englishman?"

"Oh!" replied Chauvelin suavely, "I shall gain the citizen proconsul's regard, I hope — and yours too, citizen Lalouët. I want nothing more except the success of my plan."

Young Lalouët jumped down to his feet. He shrugged his shoulders and through his fine eyes shot a glance of mockery and scorn on the thin, shrunken figure of the Terrorist.

"How you do hate that Englishman, citizen Chauvelin," he said with a light laugh.

IV

Carrier having fully realised that he in any case stood to make a vast sum of money out of the capture of the band of English spies, gave his support generously to Chauvelin's scheme. Fleury, summoned into his presence, was ordered to place himself and half a company of Marats at the disposal of citizen Chauvelin. He demurred and growled like a bear with a sore head at being placed under the orders of a civilian, but it was not easy to run counter to the proconsul's will. A good deal of swearing, one or two overt threats and the citizen commandant was reduced to submission. The promise of a thousand francs, when the reward for the capture of the English spies was paid out by a grateful Government, overcame his last objections.

"I think you should rid yourself of that obstinate oaf," was young Lalouët's cynical comment, when Fleury had finally left the audience chamber; "he is too argumentative for my taste."

Chauvelin smiled quietly to himself. He cared little what became of every one of these Nantese louts once his great object had been attained.

"I need not trouble you further, citizen Carrier," he said as he finally rose to take his leave. "I shall have my hands full until I myself lay that meddlesome Englishman bound and gagged at your feet."

The phrase delighted Carrier's insensate vanity. He was overgracious to Chauvelin now.

"You shall do that at the Rat Mort, citizen Chauvelin," he said with marked affability, "and I myself will commend you for your zeal to the Committee of Public Safety."

"Always supposing," interposed Jacques Lalouët with his cynical laugh, "that citizen Chauvelin does not let the whole rabble slip through his fingers."

"If I do," concluded Chauvelin drily, "you may drag the Loire for my body to-morrow."

"Oh!" laughed Carrier, "we won't trouble to do that. *Au revoir*, citizen Chauvelin," he added with one of his grandiloquent gestures of dismissal, "I wish you luck at the Rat Mort to-night."

Jacques Lalouët ushered Chauvelin out. When he was finally left standing alone at the head of the stairs and young Lalouët's footsteps had ceased to resound across the floors of the rooms beyond, he remained quite still for awhile, his eyes fixed into vacancy, his face set and expressionless; and through his lips there came a long-drawn-out sigh of intense satisfaction.

"And now, my fine Scarlet Pimpernel," he murmured softly, "once more *à nous deux*."

Then he ran swiftly down the stairs and a moment later was once more speeding toward Le Bouffay.

CHAPTER V

THE MESSAGE OF HOPE

I

After Martin-Roget and Chauvelin had left her, Yvonne had sat for a long time motionless, almost unconscious. It seemed as if gradually, hour by hour, minute by minute, her every feeling of courage and of hope were deserting her. Three days now she had been separated from her father — three days she had been under the constant supervision of a woman who had not a single thought of compassion or of mercy for the “aristocrat” whom she hated so bitterly.

At night, curled up on a small bundle of dank straw Yvonne had made vain efforts to snatch a little sleep. Ever since the day when she had been ruthlessly torn away from the protection of her dear milor, she had persistently clung to the belief that he would find the means to come to her, to wrest her from the cruel fate which her pitiless enemies had devised for her. She had clung to that hope throughout that dreary journey from dear England to this abominable city. She had clung to it even whilst her father knelt at her feet in an agony of remorse. She had clung to hope while Martin-Roget alternately coaxed and terrorised her, while her father was dragged away from her, while she endured untold misery, starvation, humiliation at the hands of Louise Adet: but now — quite unaccountably — that hope seemed suddenly to have fled from her, leaving her lonely and inexpressibly desolate. That small, shrunken figure which, wrapped in a dark mantle, had stood in the corner of the room watching her like a serpent watches its prey, had seemed like the forerunner of the fate with which Martin-Roget, gloating over her helplessness, had already threatened her.

She knew, of course, that neither from him, nor from the callous brute who governed Nantes, could she expect the slightest justice or mercy. She had been brought here by Martin-Roget not only to die, but to suffer grievously at his hands in return for a crime for which she personally was in no way responsible. To hope for mercy from him at the eleventh hour were worse than futile. Her already overburdened heart ached at thought of her father: he suffered all that she suffered, and in addition he must be tortured with anxiety for her and with remorse. Sometimes she was afraid that under the stress of desperate soul-agony he might perhaps have been led to suicide. She knew nothing of what had happened to him, where he was, nor whether privations and lack of food or sleep, together with Martin-Roget's threats, had by now weakened his morale and turned his pride into humiliating submission.

II

A distant tower-clock struck the evening hours one after the other. Yvonne for the past three days had only been vaguely conscious of time. Martin-Roget had spoken of a few hours' respite only, of the proconsul's desire to be soon rid of her. Well! this meant no doubt that the morrow would see the end of it all — the end of her life which such a brief while ago seemed so full of delight, of love and of happiness.

The end of her life! She had hardly begun to live and her dear milor had whispered to her such sweet promises of endless vistas of bliss.

Yvonne shivered beneath her thin gown. The north-westerly blast came in cruel gusts through the unglazed window and a vague instinct of self-preservation caused Yvonne to seek shelter in the one corner of the room where the icy draught did not penetrate quite so freely.

Eight, nine and ten struck from the tower-clock far away: she heard these sounds as in a dream. Tired, cold and hungry her vitality at that moment was at its lowest ebb — and, with her back resting against the wall she fell presently into a torpor-like sleep.

Suddenly something roused her, and in an instant she sat up — wide-awake and wide-eyed, every one of her senses conscious and on the alert. Something had roused her — at first she could not say what it was — or remember. Then presently individual sounds detached themselves from the buzzing in her ears. Hitherto the house had always been so still; except on the isolated occasions when Martin-Roget had come to visit her and his heavy tread had caused every loose board in the tumble-down house to creak, it was only Louise Adet's shuffling footsteps which had roused the dormant echoes, when she crept upstairs either to her own room, or to throw a piece of stale bread to her prisoner.

But now — it was neither Martin-Roget's heavy footfall nor the shuffling gait of Louise Adet which had roused Yvonne from her trance-like sleep. It was a gentle, soft, creeping step which was slowly, cautiously mounting the stairs. Yvonne crouching against the wall could count every tread — now and then a board creaked — now and then the footsteps halted.

Yvonne, wide-eyed, her heart stirred by a nameless terror was watching the door.

The piece of tallow-candle flickered in the draught. Its feeble light just touched the remote corner of the room. And Yvonne heard those soft, creeping footsteps as they reached the landing and came to a halt outside the door.

Every drop of blood in her seemed to be frozen by terror: her knees shook: her heart almost stopped its beating.

Under the door something small and white had just been introduced — a scrap of paper; and there it remained — white against the darkness of the unwashed boards — a mysterious message left here by an unknown hand, whilst the unknown footsteps softly crept down the stairs again.

For awhile longer Yvonne remained as she was — cowering against the wall — like a timid little animal, fearful lest that innocent-looking object hid some unthought-of danger. Then at last she gathered courage. Trembling with excitement she raised herself to her knees and then on hands and knees — for she was very weak and faint — she crawled up to that mysterious piece of paper and picked it up.

Her trembling hand closed over it. With wide staring terror-filled eyes she looked all round the narrow room, ere she dared cast one more glance on that mysterious scrap of paper. Then she struggled to her feet and tottered up to the table. She sat down and with fingers numbed with cold she smoothed out the paper and held it close to the light, trying to read what was written on it.

Her sight was blurred. She had to pull herself resolutely together, for suddenly she felt ashamed of her weakness and her overwhelming terror yielded to feverish excitement.

The scrap of paper contained a message — a message addressed to her in that name of which she was so proud — the name which she thought she would never be allowed to bear again: Lady Anthony Dewhurst. She reiterated the words several times, her lips clinging lovingly to them — and just below them there was a small device, drawn in red ink ... a tiny flower with five petals....

Yvonne frowned and murmured, vaguely puzzled — no longer frightened now: “A flower ... drawn in red ... what can it mean?”

And as a vague memory struggled for expression in her troubled mind she added half aloud: “Oh! if it should be ...!”

But now suddenly all her fears fell away from her. Hope was once more knocking at the gates of her heart — vague memories had taken definite shape ... the mysterious letter ... the message of hope ... the red flower ... all were gaining significance. She stooped low to read the letter by the feeble light of the flickering candle. She read it through with her eyes first — then with her lips in a soft murmur, while her mind gradually took in all that it meant for her.

“Keep up your courage. Your friends are inside the city and on the watch. Try the door of your prison every evening at one hour before midnight. Once you will find it yield. Slip out and creep noiselessly down the stairs. At the bottom a friendly hand will be stretched out for you. Take it with confidence — it will lead you to safety and to freedom. Courage and secrecy.”

When she had finished reading, her eyes were swimming in tears. There was no longer any doubt in her mind about the message now, for her dear milor had so often spoken to her about the brave Scarlet Pimpernel who had risked his precious life many a time ere this, in order to render service to the innocent and the oppressed. And now, of a surety, this message came from him: from her dear milor and from his gallant chief. There was the small device — the little red flower which had so often brought hope to despairing hearts. And it was more than hope that it brought to Yvonne. It brought certitude and happiness, and a sweet, tender remorse that she should ever have doubted. She ought to have known all along that everything would be for the best: she had no right ever to have given way to despair. In her heart she prayed for forgiveness from her dear absent milor.

How could she ever doubt him? Was it likely that he would abandon her? — he and that brave friend of his whose powers were indeed magical. Why! she ought to have done her best to keep up her physical as well as her mental faculties — who knows? But perhaps physical strength might be of inestimable value both to herself and to her gallant rescuers presently.

She took up the stale brown bread and ate it resolutely. She drank some water and then stamped round the room to get some warmth into her limbs.

A distant clock had struck ten awhile ago — and if possible she ought to get an hour's rest before the time came for her to be strong and to act: so she shook up her meagre straw paillassé and lay down, determined if possible to get a little sleep — for indeed she felt that that was just what her dear milor would have wished her to do.

Thus time went by — waking or dreaming, Yvonne could never afterwards have said in what state she waited during that one long hour which separated her from the great, blissful moment. The bit of candle burnt low and presently died out. After that Yvonne remained quite still upon the straw, in total darkness: no light came in through the tiny window, only the cold north-westerly wind blew in in gusts. But of a surety the prisoner who was within sight of freedom felt neither cold nor fatigue now.

The tower-clock in the distance struck the quarters with dreary monotony.

III

The last stroke of eleven ceased to vibrate through the stillness of the winter's night.

Yvonne roused herself from the torpor-like state into which she had fallen. She tried to struggle to her feet, but intensity of excitement had caused a strange numbness to invade her limbs. She could hardly move. A second or two ago it had seemed to her that she heard a gentle scraping noise at the door — a drawing of bolts — the grating of a key in the lock — then again, soft, shuffling footsteps that came and went and that were not those of Louise Adet.

At last Yvonne contrived to stand on her feet; but she had to close her eyes and to remain quite still for awhile after that, for her ears were buzzing and her head swimming: she thought that she must fall if she moved and mayhap lose consciousness.

But this state of weakness only lasted a few seconds: the next she had groped her way to the door and her hand had found the iron latch. It yielded. Then she waited, calling up all her strength — for the hour had come wherein she must not only think and act for herself, but think of every possibility which might occur, and act as she imagined her dear lord would require it of her.

She pressed the clumsy iron latch further: it yielded again, and anon she was able to push open the door.

Excited yet confident she tip-toed out of the room. The darkness — like unto pitch — was terribly disconcerting. With the exception of her narrow prison Yvonne had only once seen the interior of the house and that was when, half fainting, she had been dragged across its threshold and up the stairs. She had therefore only a very vague idea as to where the stairs lay and how she was to get about without stumbling.

Slowly and cautiously she crept a few paces forward, then she turned and carefully closed the door behind her. There was not a sound inside the house: everything was silent around her: neither footfall nor whisperings reached her straining ears. She felt about her with her hands, she crouched down on her knees: anon she discovered the head of the stairs.

Then suddenly she drew back, like a frightened hare conscious of danger. All the blood rushed back to her heart, making it beat so violently that she once more felt sick and faint. A sound — gentle as a breath — had broken that absolute and dead silence which up to now had given her confidence. She felt suddenly that she was no longer alone in the darkness — that somewhere close by there was some one — friend or foe — who was lying in watch for her — that somewhere in the darkness something moved and breathed.

The crackling of the paper inside her kerchief served to remind her that her dear milor was on the watch and that the blessed message had spoken of a friendly hand which would be stretched out to her and which she was enjoined to take with confidence. Reassured she crept on again, and anon a softly murmured: “Hush — sh! — sh!” — reached her ear. It seemed to come from down below — not very far — and Yvonne, having once more located the head of the stairs with her hands, began slowly to creep downstairs

— softly as a mouse — step by step — but every time that a board creaked she paused, terrified, listening for Louise Adet's heavy footstep, for a sound that would mean the near approach of danger.

"Hush — sh — sh" came again as a gentle murmur from below and the something that moved and breathed in the darkness seemed to draw nearer to Yvonne.

A few more seconds of soul-racking suspense, a few more steps down the creaking stairs and she felt a strong hand laid upon her wrist and heard a muffled voice whisper in English:

"All is well! Trust me! Follow me!"

She did not recognise the voice, even though there was something vaguely familiar in its intonation. Yvonne did not pause to conjecture: she had been made happy by the very sound of the language which stood to her for every word of love she had ever heard: it restored her courage and her confidence in their fullest measure.

Obedying the whispered command, Yvonne was content now to follow her mysterious guide who had hold of her hand. The stairs were steep and winding — at a turn she perceived a feeble light at their foot down below. Up against this feeble light the form of her guide was silhouetted in a broad, dark mass. Yvonne could see nothing of him beyond the square outline of his shoulders and that of his sugar-loaf hat. Her mind now was thrilled with excitement and her fingers closed almost convulsively round his hand. He led her across Louise Adet's back kitchen. It was from here that the feeble light came — from a small oil lamp which stood on the centre table. It helped to guide Yvonne and her mysterious friend to the bottom of the stairs, then across the kitchen to the front door, where again complete darkness reigned. But soon Yvonne — who was following blindly whithersoever she was led — heard the click of a latch and the grating of a door upon its hinges: a cold current of air caught her straight in the face. She could see nothing, for it seemed to be as dark out of doors as in: but she had the sensation of that open door, of a threshold to cross, of freedom and happiness beckoning to her straight out of the gloom. Within the next second or two she would be out of this terrible place, its squalid and dank walls would be behind her. On ahead in that thrice welcome obscurity her dear milor and his powerful friend were beckoning to her to come boldly on — their protecting arms were already stretched out for her; it seemed to her excited fancy as if the cold night-wind brought to her ears the echo of their endearing words.

She filled her lungs with the keen winter air: hope, happiness, excitement thrilled her every nerve.

"A short walk, my lady," whispered the guide, still speaking in English; "you are not cold?"

"No, no, I am not cold," she whispered in reply. "I am conscious of nothing save that I am free."

"And you are not afraid?"

"Indeed, indeed I am not afraid," she murmured fervently. "May God reward you, sir, for what you do."

Again there had been that certain something — vaguely familiar — in the way the man spoke which for the moment piqued Yvonne's curiosity. She did not, of a truth, know English well enough to detect the very obvious foreign intonation; she only felt that sometime in the dim and happy past she had heard this man speak. But even this vague sense of puzzlement she dismissed very quickly from her mind. Was she not taking everything on trust? Indeed hope and confidence had a very firm hold on her at last.

CHAPTER VI

THE RAT MORT

I

The guide had stepped out of the house into the street, Yvonne following closely on his heels. The night was very dark and the narrow little Carrefour de la Poissonnerie very sparsely lighted. Somewhere overhead on the right, something groaned and creaked persistently in the wind. A little further on a street lanthorn was swinging aloft, throwing a small circle of dim, yellowish light on the unpaved street below. By its fitful glimmer Yvonne could vaguely perceive the tall figure of her guide as he stepped out with noiseless yet firm tread, his shoulder brushing against the side of the nearest house as he kept closely within the shadow of its high wall. The sight of his broad back thrilled her. She had fallen to imagining whether this was not perchance that gallant and all-powerful Scarlet Pimpernel himself: the mysterious friend of whom her dear milor so often spoke with an admiration that was akin to worship. He too was probably tall and broad — for English gentlemen were usually built that way; and Yvonne's over-excited mind went galloping on the wings of fancy, and in her heart she felt that she was glad that she had suffered so much, and then lived through such a glorious moment as this.

Now from the narrow unpaved yard in front of the house the guide turned sharply to the right. Yvonne could only distinguish outlines. The streets of Nantes were familiar to her, and she knew pretty well where she was. The lanthorn inside the clock tower of Le Bouffay guided her — it was now on her right — the house wherein she had been kept a prisoner these past three days was built against the walls of the great prison house. She knew that she was in the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie.

She felt neither fatigue nor cold, for she was wildly excited. The keen north-westerly wind searched all the weak places in her worn clothing and her thin shoes were wet through. But her courage up to this point had never once forsaken her. Hope and the feeling of freedom gave her marvellous strength, and when her guide paused a moment ere he turned the angle of the high wall and whispered hurriedly: "You have courage, my lady?" she was able to answer serenely: "In plenty, sir."

She tried to peer into the darkness in order to realise whither she was being led. The guide had come to a halt in front of the house which was next to that of Louise Adet: it projected several feet in front of the latter: the thing that had creaked so weirdly in the wind turned out to be a painted sign, which swung out from an iron bracket fixed into the wall. Yvonne could not read the writing on the sign, but she noticed that just above it there was a small window dimly lighted from within.

What sort of a house it was Yvonne could not, of course, see. The frontage was dark save for narrow streaks of light which peeped through the interstices of the door and through the chinks of ill-fastened shutters on either side. Not a sound came from within, but now that the guide had come to a halt it seemed to Yvonne — whose nerves and senses had become preternaturally acute — that the whole air around her was filled with muffled sounds, and when she stood still and strained her ears to listen she was conscious right through the inky blackness of vague forms — shapeless and silent — that glided past her in the gloom.

II

"Your friends will meet you here," the guide whispered as he pointed to the door of the house in front of him. "The door is on the latch. Push it open and walk in boldly. Then gather up all your courage, for you will find yourself in the company of poor people, whose manners are somewhat rougher than those to which you have been accustomed. But though the people are uncouth, you will find them kind. Above all you will find that they will pay no heed to you. So I entreat you do not be afraid. Your friends would have arranged for a more refined place wherein to come and find you, but as you may well imagine they had no choice."

"I quite understand, sir," said Yvonne quietly, "and I am not afraid."

"Ah! that's brave!" he rejoined. "Then do as I tell you. I give you my word that inside that house you will be perfectly safe until such time as your friends are able to get to you. You may have to wait an hour, or even two; you must have patience. Find a quiet place in one of the corners of the room and sit there quietly, taking no notice of what goes on around you. You will be quite safe, and the arrival of your friends is only a question of time."

"My friends, sir?" she said earnestly, and her voice shook slightly as she spoke, "are you not one of the most devoted friends I can ever hope to have? I cannot find the words now wherewith to thank you, but...."

"I pray you do not thank me," he broke in gruffly, "and do not waste time in parleying. The open street is none too safe a place for you just now. The house is."

His hand was on the latch and he was about to push open the door, when Yvonne stopped him with a word.

"My father?" she whispered with passionate entreaty. "Will you help him too?"

"M. le duc de Kernogan is as safe as you are, my lady," he replied. "He will join you anon. I pray you have no fears for him. Your friends are caring for him in the same way as they care for you."

"Then I shall see him ... soon?"

"Very soon. And in the meanwhile," he added, "I pray you to sit quite still and to wait events ... despite anything you may see or hear. Your father's safety and your own — not to speak of that of your friends — hangs on your quiescence, your silence, your obedience."

"I will remember, sir," rejoined Yvonne quietly. "I in my turn entreat you to have no fears for me."

Even while she said this, the man pushed the door open.

III

Yvonne had meant to be brave. Above all she had meant to be obedient. But even so, she could not help recoiling at sight of the place where she had just been told she must wait patiently and silently for an hour, or even two.

The room into which her guide now gently urged her forward was large and low, only dimly lighted by an oil-lamp which hung from the ceiling and emitted a thin stream of black smoke and evil smell. Such air as there was, was foul and reeked of the fumes of alcohol and charcoal, of the smoking lamp and of rancid grease. The walls had no doubt been whitewashed once, now they were of a dull greyish tint, with here and there hideous stains of red or the marks of a set of greasy fingers. The plaster was hanging in strips and lumps from the ceiling; it had fallen away in patches from the walls where it displayed the skeleton laths beneath. There were two doors in the wall immediately facing the front entrance, and on each side of the latter there was a small window, both insecurely shuttered. To Yvonne the whole place appeared unspeakably squalid and noisome. Even as she entered her ears caught the sound of hideous muttered blasphemy, followed by quickly suppressed hoarse and mirthless laughter and the piteous cry of an infant at the breast.

There were perhaps sixteen to twenty people in the room — amongst them a goodly number of women, some of whom had tiny, miserable atoms of humanity clinging to their ragged skirts. A group of men in tattered shirts, bare shins and sabots stood in the centre of the room and had apparently been in conclave when the entrance of Yvonne and her guide caused them to turn quickly to the door and to scan the new-comers with a furtive, suspicious look which would have been pathetic had it not been so full of evil intent. The muttered blasphemy had come from this group; one or two of the men spat upon the ground in the direction of the door, where Yvonne instinctively had remained rooted to the spot.

As for the women, they only betrayed their sex by the ragged clothes which they wore: there was not a face here which had on it a single line of softness or of gentleness: they might have been old women or young: their hair was of a uniform, nondescript colour, lank and unkempt, hanging in thin strands over their brows; their eyes were sunken, their cheeks either flaccid or haggard — there was no individuality amongst them — just one uniform sisterhood of wretchedness which had already gone hand in hand with crime.

Across one angle of the room there was a high wooden counter like a bar, on which stood a number of jugs and bottles, some chunks of bread and pieces of cheese, and a collection of pewter mugs. An old man and a fat, coarse-featured, middle-aged woman stood behind it and dispensed various noxious-looking liquors. Above their heads upon the grimy, tumble-down wall the Republican device “Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité!” was scrawled in charcoal in huge characters, and below it was scribbled the hideous doggerel which an impious mind had fashioned last autumn on the subject of the martyred Queen.

IV

Yvonne had closed her eyes for a moment as she entered; now she turned appealingly toward her guide.

“Must it be in here?” she asked.

“I am afraid it must,” he replied with a sigh. “You told me that you would be brave.”

She pulled herself together resolutely. “I will be brave,” she said quietly.

“Ah! that’s better,” he rejoined. “I give you my word that you will be absolutely safe in here until such time as your friends can get to you. I entreat you to gather up your courage. I assure you that these wretched people are not unkind: misery — not unlike that which you yourself have endured — has made them what they are. No doubt we should have arranged for a better place for you wherein to await your friends if we had the choice. But you will understand that your safety and our own had to be our paramount consideration, and we had no choice.”

“I quite understand, sir,” said Yvonne valiantly, “and am already ashamed of my fears.”

And without another word of protest she stepped boldly into the room.

For a moment or two the guide remained standing on the threshold, watching Yvonne’s progress. She had already perceived an empty bench in the furthest angle of the room, up against the door opposite, where she hoped or believed that she could remain unmolested while she waited patiently and in silence as she had been ordered to do. She skirted the groups of men in the centre of the room as she went, but even so she felt more than she heard that muttered insults accompanied the furtive and glowering looks wherewith she was regarded. More than one wretch spat upon her skirts on the way.

But now she was in no sense frightened, only wildly excited; even her feeling of horror she contrived to conquer. The knowledge that her own attitude, and above all her obedience, would help her gallant rescuers in their work gave her enduring strength. She felt quite confident that within an hour or two she would be in the arms of her dear milor who had risked his life in order to come to her. It was indeed well worth while to have suffered as she had done, to endure all that she might yet have to endure, for the sake of the happiness which was in store for her.

She turned to give a last look at her guide — a look which was intended to reassure him completely as to her courage and her obedience: but already he had gone and had closed the door behind him, and quite against her will the sudden sense of loneliness and helplessness clutched at her heart with a grip that made it ache. She wished that she had succeeded in catching sight of the face of so valiant a friend: the fact that she was safely out of Louise Adet’s vengeful clutches was due to the man who had just disappeared behind that door. It would be thanks to him presently if she saw her father again. Yvonne felt more convinced than ever that he was the Scarlet Pimpernel — milor’s friend — who kept his valiant personality a mystery, even to those who owed their lives to him. She had seen the outline of his broad figure, she had felt the touch of his hand. Would she recognise these again when she met him in England in the happy days that were to come? In any case she thought that she would recognise the voice and the manner of speaking, so unlike that of any English gentleman she had known.

V

The man who had so mysteriously led Yvonne de Kernogan from the house of Louise Adet to the Rat Mort, turned away from the door of the tavern as soon as it had closed on the young girl, and started to go back the way he came.

At the angle formed by the high wall of the tavern he paused; a moving form had detached itself from the surrounding gloom and hailed him with a cautious whisper.

"Hist! citizen Martin-Roget, is that you?"

"Yes."

"Everything just as we anticipated?"

"Everything."

"And the wench safely inside?"

"Quite safely."

The other gave a low cackle, which might have been intended for a laugh.

"The simplest means," he said, "are always the best."

"She never suspected me. It was all perfectly simple. You are a magician, citizen Chauvelin," added Martin-Roget grudgingly. "I never would have thought of such a clever ruse."

"You see," rejoined Chauvelin drily, "I graduated in the school of a master of all ruses — a master of daring and a past master in the art of mimicry. And hope was our great ally — the hope that never forsakes a prisoner — that of getting free. Your fair Yvonne had boundless faith in the power of her English friends, therefore she fell into our trap like a bird."

"And like a bird she shall struggle in vain after this," said Martin-Roget slowly. "Oh! that I could hasten the flight of time — the next few minutes will hang on me like hours. And I wish too it were not so bitterly cold," he added with a curse; "this north-westerly wind has got into my bones."

"On to your nerves, I imagine, citizen," retorted Chauvelin with a laugh; "for my part I feel as warm and comfortable as on a lovely day in June."

"Hark! Who goes there?" broke in the other man abruptly, as a solitary moving form detached itself from the surrounding inky blackness and the sound of measured footsteps broke the silence of the night.

"Quite in order, citizen!" was the prompt reply.

The shadowy form came a step or two further forward.

"Is it you, citizen Fleury?" queried Chauvelin.

"Himself, citizen," replied the other.

The men had spoken in a whisper. Fleury now placed his hand on Chauvelin's arm.

"We had best not stand so close to the tavern," he said, "the night hawks are already about and we don't want to scare them."

He led the others up the yard, then into a very narrow passage which lay between Louise Adet's house and the Rat Mort and was bordered by the high walls of the houses on either side.

"This is a blind alley," he whispered. "We have the wall of Le Bouffay in front of us: the wall of the Rat Mort is on one side and the house of the citizeness Adet on the other. We can talk here undisturbed."

Overhead there was a tiny window dimly lighted from within. Chauvelin pointed up to it.

"What is that?" he asked.

"An aperture too small for any human being to pass through," replied Fleury drily. "It gives on a small landing at the foot of the stairs. I told Friche to try and manœuvre so that the wench and her father are pushed in there out of the way while the worst of the fracas is going on. That was your suggestion, citizen Chauvelin."

"It was. I was afraid the two aristos might get spirited away while your men were tackling the crowd in the tap-room. I wanted them put away in a safe place."

"The staircase is safe enough," rejoined Fleury; "it has no egress save that on the tap-room and only leads to the upper story and the attic. The house has no back entrance — it is built against the wall of Le Bouffay."

"And what about your Marats, citizen commandant?"

"Oh! I have them all along the street — entirely under cover but closely on the watch — half a company and all keen after the game. The thousand francs you promised them has stimulated their zeal most marvellously, and as soon as Paul Friche in there has whipped up the tempers of the frequenters of the Rat Mort, we shall be ready to rush the place and I assure you, citizen Chauvelin, that only a disembodied ghost — if there be one in the place — will succeed in evading arrest."

"Is Paul Friche already at his post then?"

"And at work — or I'm much mistaken," replied Fleury as he suddenly gripped Chauvelin by the arm.

For just at this moment the silence of the winter's night was broken by loud cries which came from the interior of the Rat Mort — voices were raised to hoarse and raucous cries — men and women all appeared to be shrieking together, and presently there was a loud crash as of overturned furniture and broken glass.

"A few minutes longer, citizen Fleury," said Chauvelin, as the commandant of the Marats turned on his heel and started to go back to the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie.

"Oh yes!" whispered the latter, "we'll wait awhile longer to give the Englishmen time to arrive on the scene. The coast is clear for them — my Marats are hidden from sight behind the doorways and shop-fronts of the houses opposite. In about three minutes from now I'll send them forward."

"And good luck to your hunting, citizen," whispered Chauvelin in response.

Fleury very quickly disappeared in the darkness and the other two men followed in his wake. They hugged the wall of the Rat Mort as they went along and its shadow enveloped them completely: their shoes made no sound on the unpaved ground. Chauvelin's nostrils quivered as he drew the keen, cold air into his lungs and faced the north-westerly blast which at this moment also lashed the face of his enemy. His keen eyes tried to pierce the gloom, his ears were strained to hear that merry peal of laughter which in the unforgettable past had been wont to proclaim the presence of the reckless adventurer. He knew — he felt — as certainly as he felt the air which he breathed, that the man whom he hated beyond everything on earth was somewhere close by, wrapped in the murkiness of the night —

thinking, planning, intriguing, pitting his sharp wits, his indomitable pluck, his impudent dare-devilry against the sure and patient trap which had been set for him.

Half a company of Marats in front — the walls of Le Bouffay in the rear! Chauvelin rubbed his thin hands together!

“You are not a disembodied ghost, my fine Scarlet Pimpernel,” he murmured, “and this time I really think — —”

CHAPTER VII

THE FRACAS IN THE TAVERN

I

Yvonne had settled herself in a corner of the tap-room on a bench and had tried to lose consciousness of her surroundings.

It was not easy! Glances charged with rancour were levelled at her dainty appearance — dainty and refined despite the look of starvation and of weariness on her face and the miserable state of her clothing — and not a few muttered insults waited on those glances.

As soon as she was seated Yvonne noticed that the old man and the coarse, fat woman behind the bar started an animated conversation together, of which she was very obviously the object, for the two heads — the lean and the round — were jerked more than once in her direction. Presently the man — it was George Lemoine, the proprietor of the Rat Mort — came up to where she was sitting: his lank figure was bent so that his lean back formed the best part of an arc, and an expression of mock deference further distorted his ugly face.

He came up quite close to Yvonne and she found it passing difficult not to draw away from him, for the leer on his face was appalling: his eyes, which were set very near to his hooked nose, had a horrible squint, his lips were thick and moist, and his breath reeked of alcohol.

“What will the noble lady deign to drink?” he now asked in an oily, suave voice.

And Yvonne, remembering the guide’s admonitions, contrived to smile unconcernedly into the hideous face.

“I would very much like some wine,” she said cheerfully, “but I am afraid that I have no money wherewith to pay you for it.”

The creature with a gesture of abject humility rubbed his greasy hands together.

“And may I respectfully ask,” he queried blandly, “what are the intentions of the noble lady in coming to this humble abode, if she hath no desire to partake of refreshments?”

“I am expecting friends,” replied Yvonne bravely; “they will be here very soon, and will gladly repay you lavishly for all the kindness which you may be inclined to show to me the while.”

She was very brave indeed and looked this awful misshapen specimen of a man quite boldly in the face: she even contrived to smile, though she was well aware that a number of men and women — perhaps a dozen altogether — had congregated in front of her in a compact group around the landlord, that they were nudging one another and pointing derisively — malevolently — at her. It was impossible, despite all attempts at valour, to mistake the hostile attitude of these people. Some of the most obscene words, coined during these last horrible days of the Revolution, were freely hurled at her, and one woman suddenly cried out in a shrill treble:

“Throw her out, citizen Lemoine! We don’t want spies in here!”

“Indeed, indeed,” said Yvonne as quietly as she could, “I am no spy. I am poor and wretched like yourselves! and desperately lonely, save for the kind friends who will meet me here anon.”

“Aristos like yourself!” growled one of the men. “This is no place for you or for them.”

“No! No! This is no place for aristos,” cried one of the women in a voice which many excesses and many vices had rendered hoarse and rough. “Spy or not, we don’t want you in here. Do we?” she added as with arms akimbo she turned to face those of her own sex, who behind the men had come up in order to see what was going on.

“Throw her out, Lemoine,” reiterated a man who appeared to be an oracle amongst the others.

“Please! please let me stop here!” pleaded Yvonne; “if you turn me out I shall not know what to do: I shall not know where to meet my friends....”

“Pretty story about those friends,” broke in Lemoine roughly. “How do I know if you’re lying or not?”

From the opposite angle of the room, the woman behind the bar had been watching the little scene with eyes that glistened with cupidity. Now she emerged from behind her stronghold of bottles and mugs and slowly waddled across the room. She pushed her way unceremoniously past her customers, elbowing men, women and children vigorously aside with a deft play of her large, muscular arms. Having reached the forefront of the little group she came to a standstill immediately in front of Yvonne, and crossing her mighty arms over her ponderous chest she eyed the “aristo” with unconcealed malignity.

“We do know that the slut is lying — that is where you make the mistake, Lemoine. A slut, that’s what she is — and the friend whom she’s going to meet ...? Well!” she added, turning with an ugly leer toward the other women, “we all know what sort of friend that one is likely to be, eh, mesdames? Bringing evil fame on this house, that’s what the wench is after ... so as to bring the police about our ears ... I wouldn’t trust her, not another minute. Out with you and at once — do you hear?... this instant ... Lemoine has parleyed quite long enough with you already!”

Despite all her resolutions Yvonne was terribly frightened. While the hideous old hag talked and screamed and waved her coarse, red arms about, the unfortunate young girl with a great effort of will, kept repeating to herself: “I am not frightened — I must not be frightened. He assured me that these people would do me no harm....” But now when the woman had ceased speaking there was a general murmur of:

“Throw her out! Spy or aristo we don’t want her here!” whilst some of the men added significantly: “I am sure that she is one of Carrier’s spies and in league with his Marats! We shall have those devils in here in a moment if we don’t look out! Throw her out before she can signal to the Marats!”

Ugly faces charged with hatred and virulence were thrust threateningly forward — one or two of the women were obviously looking forward to joining in the scramble, when this “stuck-up wench” would presently be hurled out into the street.

“Now then, my girl, out you get,” concluded the woman Lemoine, as with an expressive gesture she proceeded to roll her sleeves higher up her arm. She was about to lay her dirty hands on Yvonne, and the poor girl was nearly sick with horror, when one of the men

— a huge, coarse giant, whose muscular torso, covered with grease and grime showed almost naked through a ragged shirt which hung from his shoulders in strips — seized the woman Lemoine by the arm and dragged her back a step or two away from Yvonne.

“Don’t be a fool, *petite mère*,” he said, accompanying this admonition with a blasphemous oath. “Slut or no, the wench may as well pay you something for the privilege of staying here. Look at that cloak she’s wearing — the shoe-leather on her feet. Aren’t they worth a bottle of your sour wine?”

“What’s that to you, Paul Friche?” retorted the woman roughly, as with a vigorous gesture she freed her arm from the man’s grasp. “Is this my house or yours?”

“Yours, of course,” replied the man with a coarse laugh and a still coarser jest, “but this won’t be the first time that I have saved you from impulsive folly. Yesterday you were for harbouring a couple of rogues who were Marats in disguise: if I hadn’t given you warning, you would now have swallowed more water from the Loire than you would care to hold. But for me two days ago you would have received the goods pinched by Ferté out of Balaze’s shop, and been thrown to the fishes in consequence for the entertainment of the proconsul and his friends. You must admit that I’ve been a good friend to you before now.”

“And if you have, Paul Friche,” retorted the hag obstinately, “I paid you well for your friendship, both yesterday and the day before, didn’t I?”

“You did,” assented Friche imperturbably. “That’s why I want to serve you again to-night.”

“Don’t listen to him, *petite mère*,” interposed one of two out of the crowd. “He is a white-livered skunk to talk to you like that.”

“Very well! Very well!” quoth Paul Friche, and he spat vigorously on the ground in token that henceforth he divested himself from any responsibility in this matter, “don’t listen to me. Lose a benefit of twenty, perhaps forty francs for the sake of a bit of fun. Very well! Very well!” he continued as he turned and slouched out of the group to the further end of the room, where he sat down on a barrel. He drew the stump of a clay pipe out of the pocket of his breeches, stuffed it into his mouth, stretched his long legs out before him and sucked away at his pipe with complacent detachment. “I didn’t know,” he added with biting sarcasm by way of a parting shot, “that you and Lemoine had come into a fortune recently and that forty or fifty francs are nothing to you now.”

“Forty or fifty? Come! come!” protested Lemoine feebly.

II

Yvonne’s fate was hanging in the balance. The attitude of the small crowd was no less threatening than before, but immediate action was withheld while the Lemoines obviously debated in their minds what was best to be done. The instinct to “have at” an aristo with all the accumulated hatred of many generations was warring with the innate rapacity of the Breton peasant.

“Forty or fifty?” reiterated Paul Friche emphatically. “Can’t you see that the wench is an aristo escaped out of Le Bouffay or the entrepôt?” he added contemptuously.

“I know that she is an aristo,” said the woman, “that’s why I want to throw her out.”

“And get nothing for your pains,” retorted Friche roughly. “If you wait for her friends we may all of us get as much as twenty francs each to hold our tongues.”

“Twenty francs each....” The murmur was repeated with many a sigh of savage gluttony, by every one in the room — and repeated again and again — especially by the women.

“You are a fool, Paul Friche ...” commented Lemoine.

“A fool am I?” retorted the giant. “Then let me tell you, that ’tis you who are a fool and worse. I happen to know,” he added, as he once more rose and rejoined the group in the centre of the room, “I happen to know that you and every one here is heading straight for a trap arranged by the Committee of Public Safety, whose chief emissary came into Nantes awhile ago and is named Chauvelin. It is a trap which will land you all in the criminal dock first and on the way to Cayenne or the guillotine afterwards. This place is surrounded with Marats, and orders have been issued to them to make a descent on this place, as soon as papa Lemoine’s customers are assembled. There are two members of the accursed company amongst us at the present moment....”

He was standing right in the middle of the room, immediately beneath the hanging lamp. At his words — spoken with such firm confidence, as one who knows and is therefore empowered to speak — a sudden change came over the spirit of the whole assembly. Everything was forgotten in the face of this new danger — two Marats, the sleuth-hounds of the proconsul — here present, as spies and as informants! Every face became more haggard — every cheek more livid. There was a quick and furtive scurrying toward the front door.

“Two Marats here?” shouted one man, who was bolder than the rest. “Where are they?”

Paul Friche, who towered above his friends, stood at this moment quite close to a small man, dressed like the others in ragged breeches and shirt, and wearing the broad-brimmed hat usually affected by the Breton peasantry.

“Two Marats? Two spies?” screeched a woman. “Where are they?”

“Here is one,” replied Paul Friche with a loud laugh: and with his large grimy hand he lifted the hat from his neighbour’s head and threw it on the ground; “and there,” he added as with long, bony finger he pointed to the front door, where another man — a square-built youngster with tow-coloured hair somewhat resembling a shaggy dog — was endeavouring to effect a surreptitious exit, “there is the other; and he is on the point of slipping quietly away in order to report to his captain what he has seen and heard at the Rat Mort. One moment, citizen,” he added, and with a couple of giant strides he too had reached the door; his large rough hand had come down heavily on the shoulder of the youth with the tow-coloured hair, and had forced him to veer round and to face the angry, gesticulating crowd.

“Two Marats! Two spies!” shouted the men. “Now we’ll soon settle their little business for them!”

“Marat yourself,” cried the small man who had first been denounced by Friche. “I am no Marat, as a good many of you here know. Maman Lemoine,” he added pleading, “you know me. Am I a Marat?”

But the Lemoines — man and wife — at the first suggestion of police had turned a deaf ear to all their customers. Their own safety being in jeopardy they cared little what happened to anybody else. They had retired behind their counter and were in close consultation

together, no doubt as to the best means of escape if indeed the man Paul Friche spoke the truth.

"I know nothing about him," the woman was saying, "but he certainly was right last night about those two men who came ferreting in here — and last week too...."

"Am I a Marat, maman Lemoine?" shouted the small man as he hammered his fists upon the counter. "For ten years and more I have been a customer in this place and...."

"Am I a Marat?" shouted the youth with the tow-coloured hair addressing the assembly indiscriminately. "Some of you here know me well enough. Jean Paul, you know — Ledouble, you too...."

"Of course! Of course I know you well enough, Jacques Leroux," came with a loud laugh from one of the crowd. "Who said you were a Marat?"

"Am I a Marat, maman Lemoine?" reiterated the small man at the counter.

"Oh! leave me alone with your quarrels," shouted the woman Lemoine in reply. "Settle them among yourselves."

"Then if Jacques Leroux is not a Marat," now came in a bibulous voice from a distant corner of the room, "and this compeer here is known to maman Lemoine, where are the real Marats who according to this fellow Friche, whom we none of us know, are spying upon us?"

"Yes! where are they?" suggested another. "Show 'em to us, Paul Friche, or whatever your accursed name happens to be."

"Tell us where you come from yourself," screamed the woman with the shrill treble, "it seems to me quite possible that you're a Marat yourself."

This suggestion was at once taken up.

"Marat yourself!" shouted the crowd, and the two men who a moment ago had been accused of being spies in disguise shouted louder than the rest: "Marat yourself!"

III

After that, pandemonium reigned.

The words "police" and "Marats" had aroused the terror of all these night-hawks, who were wont to think themselves immune inside their lair: and terror is at all times an evil counsellor. In the space of a few seconds confusion held undisputed sway. Every one screamed, waved arms, stamped feet, struck out with heavy bare fists at his nearest neighbour. Every one's hand was against every one else.

"Spy! Marat! Informer!" were the three words that detached themselves most clearly from out the babel of vituperations freely hurled from end to end of the room.

The children screamed, the women's shrill or hoarse treble mingled with the cries and imprecations of the men.

Paul Friche had noted that the turn of the tide was against him, long before the first naked fist had been brandished in his face. Agile as a monkey he had pushed his way through to the bar, and placing his two hands upon it, with a swift leap he had taken up a sitting position in the very middle of the table amongst the jugs and bottles, which he promptly seized and used as missiles and weapons, whilst with his dangling feet encased in heavy sabots he kicked out vigorously and unceasingly against the shins of his foremost assailants.

He had the advantage of position and used it cleverly. In his right hand he held a pewter mug by the handle and used it as a swivel against his aggressors with great effect.

"The Loire for you — you blackmailer! liar! traitor!" shouted some of the women who, bolder than the men, thrust shaking fists at Paul Friche as closely as that pewter mug would allow.

"Break his jaw before he can yell for the police," admonished one of the men from the rear, "before he can save his own skin."

But those who shouted loudest had only their fists by way of weapon and Paul Friche had mugs and bottles, and those sabots of his kicked out with uncomfortable agility.

"Break my jaw, will you," he shouted every time that a blow from the mug went home, "a spy am I? Very well then, here's for you, Jacques Leroux; go and nurse your cracked skull at home. You want a row," he added hitting at a youth who brandished a heavy fist in his face, "well! you shall have it and as much of it as you like! as much of it as will bring the patrols of police comfortably about your ears."

Bang! went the pewter mug crashing against a man's hard skull! Bang went Paul Friche's naked fist against the chest of another. He was a hard hitter and swift.

The Lemoines from behind their bar shouted louder than the rest, doing as much as their lungs would allow them in the way of admonishing, entreating, protesting — cursing every one for a set of fools who were playing straight into the hands of the police.

"Now then! Now then, children, stop that bellowing, will you? There are no spies here. Paul Friche was only having his little joke! We all know one another, what?"

"Camels!" added Lemoine more forcibly. "They'll bring the patrols about our ears for sure."

Paul Friche was not by any means the only man who was being vigorously attacked. After the first two or three minutes of this kingdom of pandemonium, it was difficult to say who was quarrelling with whom. Old grudges were revived, old feuds taken up there, where they had previously been interrupted. Accusations of spying were followed by abuse for some past wrong of black-legging or cheating a confrère. The temperature of the room became suffocating. All these violent passions seething within these four walls seemed to become tangible and to mingle with the atmosphere already surcharged with the fumes of alcohol, of tobacco and of perspiring humanity. There was many a black-eye already, many a contusion: more than one knife — surreptitiously drawn — was already stained with red.

IV

There was also a stampede for the door. One man gave the signal. Seeing that his mates were wasting precious time by venting their wrath against Paul Friche and then quarrelling among themselves, he hoped to effect an escape ere the police came to stop the noise. No one believed in the place being surrounded. Why should it be? The Marats were far too busy hunting up rebels and aristos to trouble much about the Rat Mort and its customers, but it was quite possible that a brawl would bring a patrol along, and then 'ware the *police correctionnelle* and the possibility of deportation or worse. Retreat was undoubtedly safer while there was time. One man first: then one or two more on his heels, and those among the women who had children in their arms or clinging to their skirts: they turned stealthily to the door — almost ashamed of their cowardice, ashamed lest they were seen abandoning the field of combat.

It was while confusion reigned unchecked that Yvonne — who was cowering, frankly terrified at last, in the corner of the room, became aware that the door close beside her — the door situated immediately opposite the front entrance — was surreptitiously opened. She turned quickly to look — for she was like a terror-stricken little animal now — one that scents and feels and fears danger from every quarter round. The door was being pushed open very slowly by what was still to Yvonne an unseen hand. Somehow that opening door fascinated her: for the moment she forgot the noise and the confusion around her.

Then suddenly with a great effort of will she checked the scream which had forced itself up to her throat.

"Father!" was all that she contrived to say in a hoarse and passionate murmur.

Fortunately as he peered cautiously round the room, M. le duc caught sight of his daughter. She was staring at him — wide-eyed, her lips bloodless, her cheeks the colour of ashes. He looked but the ghost now of that proud aristocrat who little more than a week ago was the centre of a group of courtiers round the person of the heir to the English throne. Starved, emaciated, livid, he was the shadow of his former self, and there was a haunted look in his purple-rimmed eyes which spoke with pathetic eloquence of sleepless nights and of a soul tortured with remorse.

Just for the moment no one took any notice of him — every one was shrieking, every one was quarrelling, and M. le duc, placing a finger to his lips, stole cautiously round to his daughter. The next instant they were clinging to one another, these two, who had endured so much together — he the father who had wrought such an unspeakable wrong, and she the child who was so lonely, so forlorn and almost happy in finding some one who belonged to her, some one to whom she could cling.

"Father, dear! what shall we do?" Yvonne murmured, for she felt the last shred of her fictitious courage oozing out of her, in face of this awful lawlessness which literally paralysed her thinking faculties.

"Sh! dear!" whispered M. le duc in reply. "We must get out of this loathsome place while this hideous row is going on. I heard it all from the filthy garret up above, where those devils have kept me these three days. The door was not locked.... I crept downstairs.... No one is paying heed to us.... We can creep out. Come."

But at the suggestion, Yvonne's spirits, which had been stunned by the events of the past few moments, revived with truly mercurial rapidity.

"No! no! dear," she urged. "We must stay here.... You don't know.... I have had a message — from my own dear milor — my husband ... he sent a friend to take me out of the hideous prison where that awful Pierre Adet was keeping me — a friend who assured me that my dear milor was watching over me ... he brought me to this place — and begged me not to be frightened ... but to wait patiently ... and I must wait, dear ... I must wait!"

She spoke rapidly in whispers and in short jerky sentences. M. le duc listened to her wide-eyed, a deep line of puzzlement between his brows. Sorrow, remorse, starvation, misery had in a measure numbed his mind. The thought of help, of hope, of friends could not penetrate into his brain.

"A message," he murmured inanely, "a message. No! no! my girl, you must trust no one.... Pierre Adet.... Pierre Adet is full of evil tricks — he will trap you ... he means to destroy us both ... he has brought you here so that you should be murdered by these ferocious devils."

"Impossible, father dear," she said, still striving to speak bravely. "We have both of us been all this while in the power of Pierre Adet; he could have had no object in bringing me here to-night."

But the father who had been an insentient tool in the schemes of that miserable intriguer, who had been the means of bringing his only child to this terrible and deadly pass — the man who had listened to the lying counsels and proposals of his own most bitter enemy, could only groan now in terror and in doubt.

"Who can probe the depths of that abominable villain's plans?" he murmured vaguely.

In the meanwhile the little group who had thought prudence the better part of valour had reached the door. The foremost man amongst them opened it and peered cautiously out into the darkness. He turned back to those behind him, put a finger to his lip and beckoned to them to follow him in silence.

"Yvonne, let us go!" whispered the duc, who had seized his daughter by the hand.

"But father...."

"Let us go!" he reiterated pitifully. "I shall die if we stay here!"

"It won't be for long, father dear," she entreated; "if milor should come with his friend, and find us gone, we should be endangering his life as well as our own."

"I don't believe it," he rejoined with the obstinacy of weakness. "I don't believe in your message ... how could milor or anyone come to your rescue, my child?... No one knows that you are here, in this hell in Nantes."

Yvonne clung to him with the strength of despair. She too was as terrified as any human creature could be and live, but terror had not altogether swept away her belief in that mysterious message, in that tall guide who had led her hither, in that scarlet device — the five-petalled flower which stood for everything that was most gallant and most brave.

She desired with all her might to remain here — despite everything, despite the awful brawl that was raging round her and which sickened her, despite the horror of the whole thing — to remain here and to wait. She put her arms round her father: she dragged him back every time that he tried to move. But a sort of unnatural strength seemed to have conquered his former debility. His attempts to get away became more and more determined and more and more febrile.

"Come, Yvonne! we must go!" he continued to murmur intermittently and with ever-growing obstinacy. "No one will notice us.... I heard the noise from my garret upstairs.... I crept down.... I knew no one would notice me.... Come — we must go ... now is our time."

"Father, dear, whither could we go? Once in the streets of Nantes what would happen to us?"

"We can find our way to the Loire!" he retorted almost brutally. He shook himself free from her restraining arms and gripped her firmly by the hand. He tried to drag her toward the door, whilst she still struggled to keep him back. He had just caught sight of the group of men and women at the front door: their leader was standing upon the threshold and was still peering out into the darkness.

But the next moment they all came to a halt: what their leader had perceived through the darkness did not evidently quite satisfy him: he turned and held a whispered consultation with the others. M. le duc strove with all his might to join in with that group. He felt that in its wake would lie the road to freedom. He would have struck Yvonne for standing in the way of her own safety.

"Father dear," she contrived finally to say to him, "if you go hence, you will go alone. Nothing will move me from here, because I know that milor will come."

"Curse you for your obstinacy," retorted the duc, "you jeopardise my life and yours."

Then suddenly from the angle of the room where wrangling and fighting were at their fiercest, there came a loud call:

"Look out, père Lemoine, your aristos are running away. You are losing your last chance of those fifty francs."

It was Paul Friche who had shouted. His position on the table was giving him a commanding view over the heads of the threatening, shouting, perspiring crowd, and he had just caught sight of M. le duc dragging his daughter by force toward the door.

"The authors of all this pother," he added with an oath, "and they will get away whilst we have the police about our ears."

"Name of a name of a dog," swore Lemoine from behind his bar, "that shall not be. Come along, maman, let us bring those aristos along here. Quick now."

It was all done in a second. Lemoine and his wife, with the weight and authority of the masters of the establishment, contrived to elbow their way through the crowd. The next moment Yvonne felt herself forcibly dragged away from her father.

"This way, my girl, and no screaming," a bibulous voice said in her ear, "no screaming, or I'll smash some of those front teeth of yours. You said some rich friends were coming along for you presently. Well then! come and wait for them out of the crowd!"

Indeed Yvonne had no desire to struggle or to scream. Salvation she thought had come to her and to her father in this rough guise. In another moment mayhap he would have forced her to follow him, to leave milor in the lurch, to jeopardise for ever every chance of safety.

"It is all for the best, father dear," she managed to cry out over her shoulder, for she had just caught sight of him being seized round the shoulders by Lemoine and heard him protesting loudly:

"I'll not go! I'll not go! Let me go!" he shouted hoarsely. "My daughter! Yvonne! Let me go! You devil!"

But Lemoine had twice the vigour of the duc de Kernogan, nor did he care one jot about the other's protests. He hated all this row inside his house, but there had been rows in it before and he was beginning to hope that nothing serious would come of it. On the other hand, Paul Friche might be right about these aristos; there might be forty or fifty francs to be made out of them, and in any case they had one or two things upon their persons which might be worth a few francs — and who knows? they might even have something in their pockets worth taking.

This hope and thought gave Lemoine additional strength, and seeing that the aristo struggled so desperately, he thought to silence him by bringing his heavy fist with a crash upon the old man's head.

"Yvonne! *A moi!*" shouted M. le duc ere he fell back senseless.

That awful cry, Yvonne heard it as she was being dragged through the noisome crowd. It mingled in her ear with the other awful sounds — the oaths and blasphemies which filled the air with their hideousness. It died away just as a formidable crash against the entrance door suddenly silenced every cry within.

"All hands up!" came with a peremptory word of command from the doorway.

"Mercy on us!" murmured the woman Lemoine, who still had Yvonne by the hand, "we are undone this time."

There was a clatter and grounding of arms — a scurrying of bare feet and sabots upon the floor, the mingled sounds of men trying to fly and being caught in the act and hurled back: screams of terror from the women, one or two pitiable calls, a few shrill cries from frightened children, a few dull thuds as of human bodies falling.... It was all so confused, so unspeakably horrible. Yvonne was hardly conscious. Near her some one whispered hurriedly:

"Put the aristos away somewhere, maman Lemoine ... the whole thing may only be a scare ... the Marats may only be here about the aristos ... they will probably leave you alone if you give them up ... perhaps you'll get a reward.... Put them away till some of this row subsides ... I'll talk to commandant Fleury if I can."

Yvonne felt her knees giving way under her. There was nothing more to hope for now — nothing. She felt herself lifted from the ground — she was too sick and faint to realise what was happening: through the din which filled her ears she vainly tried to distinguish her father's voice again.

V

A moment or two later she found herself squatting somewhere on the ground. How she got here she did not know — where she was she knew still less. She was in total darkness. A fusty, close smell of food and wine gave her a wretched feeling of nausea — her head ached intolerably, her eyes were hot, her throat dry: there was a constant buzzing in her ears.

The terrible sounds of fighting and screaming and cursing, the crash of broken glass and overturned benches came to her as through a partition — close by but muffled.

In the immediate nearness all was silence and darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ENGLISH ADVENTURERS

I

It was with that muffled din still ringing in her ear and with the conception of all that was going on, on the other side of the partition, standing like an awesome spectre of evil before her mind, that Yvonne woke to the consciousness that her father was dead.

He lay along the last half-dozen steps of a narrow wooden staircase which had its base in the narrow, cupboard-like landing on to which the Lemoines had just thrust them both. Through a small heart-shaped hole cut in the door of the partition-wall, a shaft of feeble light struck straight across to the foot of the stairs: it lit up the recumbent figure of the last of the ducs de Kernogan, killed in a brawl in a house of evil fame.

Weakened by starvation, by the hardships of the past few days, his constitution undermined by privations and mayhap too by gnawing remorse, he had succumbed to the stunning blow dealt to him by a half drunken brute. His cry: "Yvonne! *A moi!*" was the last despairing call of a soul racked with remorse to the daughter whom he had so cruelly wronged.

When first that feeble shaft of light had revealed to her the presence of that inert form upon the steps, she had struggled to her feet and — dazed — had tottered up to it. Even before she had touched the face, the hands, before she had bent her ear to the half-closed mouth and failed to catch the slightest breath, she knew the full extent of her misery. The look in the wide-open eyes did not terrify her, but they told her the truth, and since then she had cowered beside her dead father on the bottom step of the narrow stairs, her fingers tightly closed over that one hand which never would be raised against her.

An unspeakable sense of horror filled her soul. The thought that he — the proud father, the haughty aristocrat, should lie like this and in such a spot, dragged in and thrown down — no doubt by Lemoine — like a parcel of rubbish and left here to be dragged away again and thrown again like a dog into some unhallowed ground — that thought was so horrible, so monstrous, that at first it dominated even sorrow. Then came the heartrending sense of loneliness. Yvonne Dewhurst had endured so much these past few days that awhile ago she would have affirmed that nothing could appal her in the future. But this was indeed the awful and overwhelming climax to what had already been a surfeit of misery.

This! she, Yvonne, cowering beside her dead father, with no one to stand between her and any insult, any outrage which might be put upon her, with nothing now but a few laths between her and that yelling, screeching mob outside.

Oh! the loneliness! the utter, utter loneliness!

She kissed the inert hand, the pale forehead: with gentle, reverent fingers she tried to smooth out those lines of horror and of fear which gave such a pitiful expression to the face. Of all the wrongs which her father had done her she never thought for a moment. It was he who had brought her to this terrible pass: he who had betrayed her into the hands of her deadliest enemy: he who had torn her from the protecting arms of her dear milor and flung her and himself at the mercy of a set of inhuman wretches who knew neither compunction nor pity.

But all this she forgot, as she knelt beside the lifeless form — the last thing on earth that belonged to her — the last protection to which she might have clung.

II

Out of the confusion of sounds which came — deadened by the intervening partition — to her ear, it was impossible to distinguish anything very clearly. All that Yvonne could do, as soon as she had in a measure collected her scattered senses, was to try and piece together the events of the last few minutes — minutes which indeed seemed like days and even years to her.

Instinctively she gave to the inert hand which she held an additional tender touch. At any rate her father was out of it all. He was at rest and at peace. As for the rest, it was in God's hands. Having only herself to think of now, she ceased to care what became of her. He was out of it all: and those wretches after all could not do more than kill her. A complete numbness of senses and of mind had succeeded the feverish excitement of the past few hours: whether hope still survived at this moment in Yvonne Dewhurst's mind it were impossible to say. Certain it is that it lay dormant — buried beneath the overwhelming misery of her loneliness.

She took the fichu from her shoulders and laid it reverently over the dead man's face: she folded the hands across the breast. She could not cry: she could only pray, and that quite mechanically.

The thought of her dear milor, of his clever friend, of the message which she had received in prison, of the guide who had led her to this awful place, was relegated — almost as a memory — in the furthestmost cell of her brain.

III

But after awhile outraged nature, still full of vitality and of youth, re-asserted itself. She felt numb and cold and struggled to her feet. From somewhere close to her a continuous current of air indicated the presence of some sort of window. Yvonne, faint with the close and sickly smell, which even that current failed to disperse, felt her way all round the walls of the narrow landing.

The window was in the wall between the partition and the staircase, it was small and quite low down. It was crossed with heavy iron bars. Yvonne leaned up against it, grateful for the breath of pure air.

For awhile yet she remained unconscious of everything save the confused din which still went on inside the tavern, and at first the sounds which came through the grated window mingled with those on the other side of the partition. But gradually as she contrived to fill her lungs with the cold breath of heaven, it seemed as if a curtain was being slowly drawn away from her atrophied senses.

Just below the window two men were speaking. She could hear them quite distinctly now — and soon one of the voices — clearer than the other — struck her ear with unmistakable familiarity.

"I told Paul Friche to come out here and speak to me," Yvonne heard that same voice say.
 "Then he should be here," replied the other, "and if I am not mistaken...."
 There was a pause, and then the first voice was raised again.
 "Halt! Is that Paul Friche?"
 "At your service, citizen," came in reply.
 "Well! Is everything working smoothly inside?"
 "Quite smoothly; but your Englishmen are not there."
 "How do you know?"
 "Bah! I know most of the faces that are to be found inside the Rat Mort at this hour: there are no strangers among them."
 The voice that had sounded so familiar to Yvonne was raised now in loud and coarse laughter.
 "Name of a dog! I never for a moment thought that there were any Englishmen about. Citizen Chauvelin was suffering from nightmare."
 "It is early yet," came in response from a gentle bland voice, "you must have patience, citizen."
 "Patience? Bah!" ejaculated the other roughly. "As I told you before 'tis but little I care about your English spies. 'Tis the Kernogans I am interested in. What have you done with them, citizen?"
 "I got that blundering fool Lemoine to lock them up on the landing at the bottom of the stairs."
 "Is that safe?"
 "Absolutely. It has no egress save into the tap-room and up the stairs, to the rooms above. Your English spies if they came now would have to fly in and out of those top windows ere they could get to the aristos."
 "Then in Satan's name keep them there awhile," urged the more gentle, insinuating voice, "until we can make sure of the English spies."
 "Tshaw! What foolery!" interjected the other, who appeared to be in a towering passion. "Bring them out at once, citizen Friche ... bring them out ... right into the middle of the rabble in the tap-room.... Commandant Fleury is directing the perquisition — he is taking down the names of all that cattle which he is arresting inside the premises — let the ci-devant duc de Kernogan and his exquisite daughter figure among the vilest cut-throats of Nantes."
 "Citizen, let me urge on you once more ..." came in earnest persuasive accents from that gentle voice.
 "Nothing!" broke in the other savagely. "To h ——— ll with your English spies. It is the Kernogans that I want."
 Yvonne, half-crazed with horror, had heard the whole of this abominable conversation wherein she had not failed to recognise the voice of Martin-Roget or Pierre-Adet, as she now knew him to be. Who the other two men were she could easily conjecture. The soft bland voice she had heard twice during these past few days, which had been so full of misery, of terror and of surprise: once she had heard it on board the ship which had taken her away from England and once again a few hours since, inside the narrow room which had been her prison. The third man who had subsequently arrived on the scene was that coarse and grimy creature who had seemed to be the moving evil spirit of that awful brawl in the tavern.
 What the conversation meant to her she could not fail to guess. Pierre Adet had by what he said made the whole of his abominable intrigue against her palpably clear. Her father had been right, after all. It was Pierre Adet who through some clever trickery had lured her to this place of evil. How it was all done she could not guess. The message ... the device ... her walk across the street ... the silence ... the mysterious guide ... which of these had been the trickery?... which had been concocted by her enemy?... which devised by her dear milor?
 Enough that the whole thing was a trap, a trap all the more hideous as she, Yvonne, who would have given her heart's blood for her beloved, was obviously the bait wherewith these friends meant to capture him and his noble chief. They knew evidently of the presence of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel and his band of heroes here in Nantes — they seemed to expect their appearance at this abominable place to-night. She, Yvonne, was to be the decoy which was to lure to this hideous lair those noble eagles who were still out of reach.
 And if that was so — if indeed her beloved and his valiant friends had followed her hither, then some part of the message of hope must have come from them or from their chief ... and milor and his friend must even now be somewhere close by, watching their opportunity to come to her rescue ... heedless of the awful danger which lay in wait for them ... ignorant mayhap of the abominable trap which had been so cunningly set for them by these astute and ferocious brutes.
 Yvonne a prisoner in this narrow space, clinging to the bars of what was perhaps the most cruel prison in which she had yet been confined, bruised her hands and arms against those bars in a wild desire to get out. She longed with all her might to utter one long, loud and piercing cry of warning to her dear milor not to come nigh her now, to fly, to run while there was yet time; and all the while she knew that if she did utter such a cry he would hurry hot-haste to her side. One moment she would have had him near — another she wished him an hundred miles away.

IV

In the tap-room a more ordered medley of sounds had followed on the wild pandemonium of awhile ago. Brief, peremptory words of command, steady tramping of feet, loud harsh questions and subdued answers, occasionally a moan or a few words of protest quickly suppressed, came through the partition to Yvonne's straining ears.

"Your name?"

"Where do you live?"

"Your occupation?"

"That's enough. Silence. The next."

"Your name?"

"Where do you live?"

Men, women and even children were being questioned, classified, packed off, God knew whither. Sometimes a child would cry, a man utter an oath, a woman shriek: then would come harsh orders delivered in a gruff voice, more swearing, the grounding of arms and more often than not a dull, flat sound like a blow struck against human flesh, followed by a volley of curses, or a cry of pain.

"Your name?"

"George Amédé Lemoine."

"Where do you live?"

"In this house."

"Your occupation?"

"I am the proprietor of the tavern, citizen. I am an honest man and a patriot. The Republic...."

"That's enough."

"But I protest."

"Silence. The next."

All with dreary, ceaseless monotony: and Yvonne like a trapped bird was bruising her wings against the bars of her cage. Outside the window Chauvelin and Martin-Roget were still speaking in whispers: the fowlers were still watching for their prey. The third man had apparently gone away. What went on beyond the range of her prison window — out in the darkness of the night which Yvonne's aching eyes could not pierce — she, the miserable watcher, the bait set here to catch the noble game, could not even conjecture. The window was small and her vision was further obstructed by heavy bars. She could see nothing — hear nothing save those two men talking in whispers. Now and again she caught a few words:

"A little while longer, citizen ... you lose nothing by waiting. Your Kernogans are safe enough. Paul Friche has assured you that the landing where they are now has no egress save through the tap-room, and to the floor above. Wait at least until commandant Fleury has got the crowd together, after which he will send his Marats to search the house. It won't be too late then to lay hands on your aristos, if in the meanwhile...."

"'Tis futile to wait," here interrupted Martin-Roget roughly, "and you are a fool, citizen, if you think that those Englishmen exist elsewhere than in your imagination."

"Hark!" broke in the gentle voice abruptly and with forceful command.

And as Yvonne too in instinctive response to that peremptory call was further straining her every sense in order to listen, there came from somewhere, not very far away, right through the stillness of the night, a sound which caused her pulses to still their beating and her throat to choke with the cry which rose from her breast.

It was only the sound of a quaint and drawly voice saying loudly and in English:

"Egad, Tony! ain't you getting demmed sleepy?"

Just for the space of two or three seconds Yvonne had remained quite still while this unexpected sound sent its dulcet echo on the wings of the north-westerly blast. The next — stumbling in the dark — she had run to the stairs even while she heard Martin-Roget calling loudly and excitedly to Paul Friche.

One reverent pause beside her dead father, one mute prayer commending his soul to the mercy of his Maker, one agonised entreaty to God to protect her beloved and his friend, and then she ran swiftly up the winding steps.

At the top of the stairs, immediately in front of her, a door — slightly ajar — showed a feeble light through its aperture. Yvonne pushed the door further open and slipped into the room beyond. She did not pause to look round but went straight to the window and throwing open the rickety sash she peeped out. For the moment she felt that she would gladly have bartered away twenty years of her life to know exactly whence had come that quaint and drawling voice. She leaned far out of the window trying to see. It gave on the side of the Rat Mort over against Louise Adet's house — the space below seemed to her to be swarming with men: there were hurried and whispered calls — orders were given to stand at close attention, whilst Martin-Roget had apparently been questioning Paul Friche, for Yvonne heard the latter declare emphatically:

"I am certain that it came either from inside the house or from the roof. And with your permission, citizen, I would like to make assurance doubly sure."

Then one of the men must suddenly have caught sight of the vague silhouette leaning out of the window, for Martin-Roget and Friche uttered a simultaneous cry, whilst Chauvelin said hurriedly:

"You are right, citizen, something is going on inside the house."

"What can we do?" queried Martin-Roget excitedly.

"Nothing for the moment but wait. The Englishmen are caught sure enough like rats in their holes."

"Wait!" ejaculated Martin-Roget with a savage oath, "wait! always wait! while the quarry slips through one's fingers."

"It shall not slip through mine," retorted Paul Friche. "I was a steeple-jack by trade in my day: it won't be the first time that I have climbed the side of a house by the gutter-pipe. *A moi Jean-Pierre*," he added, "and may I be drowned in the Loire if between us two we do not lay those cursed English spies low."

"An hundred francs for each of you," called Chauvelin lustily, "if you succeed."

Yvonne did not think to close the window again. Vigorous shouting and laughter from below testified that that hideous creature Friche and his mate had put their project in immediate execution; she turned and ran down the stairs — feeling now like an animal at bay; by the time that she had reached the bottom, she heard a prolonged, hoarse cry of triumph from below and guessed that Paul Friche and his mate had reached the window-sill: the next moment there was a crash overhead of broken window-glass and of furniture kicked from one end of the room to the other, immediately followed by the sound of heavy footsteps running helter-skelter down the stairs.

Yvonne, half-crazed with terror, faint and sick, fell unconscious over the body of her father.

Inside the tap-room commandant Fleury was still at work.

"Your name?"

"Where do you live?"

"Your occupation?"

The low room was filled to suffocation: the walls lined with Marats, the doors and windows which were wide open were closely guarded, whilst in the corner of the room, huddled together like bales of rubbish, was the human cattle that had been driven together, preparatory to being sent for a trial to Paris in vindication of Carrier's brutalities against the city.

Fleury for form's sake made entries in a notebook — the whole thing was a mere farce — these wretched people were not likely to get a fair trial — what did the whole thing matter? Still! the commandant of the Marats went solemnly through the farce which Carrier had invented with a view to his own justification.

Lemoine and his wife had protested and been silenced: men had struggled and women had fought — some of them like wild cats — in trying to get away. Now there were only half a dozen or so more to docket. Fleury swore, for he was tired and hot.

"This place is like a pest-house," he said.

Just then came the sound of that lusty cry of triumph from outside, followed by all the clatter and the breaking of window glass.

"What's that?" queried Fleury.

The heavy footsteps running down the stairs caused him to look up from his work and to call briefly to a sergeant of the Marats who stood beside his chair:

"Go and see what that *sacré* row is about," he commanded. "In there," he added as he indicated the door of the landing with a jerk of the head.

But before the man could reach the door, it was thrown open from within with a vigorous kick from the point of a sabot, and Paul Friche appeared under the lintel with the aristo wench thrown over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, his thick, muscular arms encircling her knees. His scarlet bonnet was cocked over one eye, his face was smeared with dirt, his breeches were torn at the knees, his shirt hung in strips from his powerful shoulders. Behind him his mate — who had climbed up the gutter-pipe into the house in his wake — was tottering under the load of the *ci-devant* duc de Kernogan's body which he had slung across his back and was holding on to by the wrists.

Fleury jumped to his feet — the appearance of these two men, each with his burden, caused him to frown with anger and to demand peremptorily: "What is the meaning of this?"

"The aristos," said Paul Friche curtly; "they were trying to escape."

He strode into the room, carrying the unconscious form of the girl as if it were a load of feathers. He was a huge, massive-looking giant: the girl's shoulders nearly touched the low ceiling as he swung forward facing the angry commandant.

"How did you get into the house? and by whose orders?" demanded Fleury roughly.

"Climbed in by the window, *pardi*," retorted the man, "and by the orders of citizen Martin-Roget."

"A corporal of the Company Marat takes orders only from me; you should know that, citizen Friche."

"Nay!" interposed the sergeant quickly, "this man is not a corporal of the Company Marat, citizen commandant. As for Corporal Friche, why! he was taken to the infirmary some hours ago with a cracked skull, he...."

"Not Corporal Friche," exclaimed Fleury with an oath, "then who in the devil's name is this man?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel, at your service, citizen commandant," came loudly and with a merry laugh from the pseudo Friche.

And before either Fleury or the sergeant or any of the Marats could even begin to realise what was happening, he had literally bounded across the room, and as he did so he knocked against the hanging lamp which fell with a crash to the floor, scattering oil and broken glass in every direction and by its fall plunging the place into total darkness. At once there arose a confusion and medley of terrified screams, of piercing shrieks from the women and the children, and of loud imprecations from the men. These mingled with the hasty words of command, with quick orders from Fleury and the sergeant, with the grounding of arms and the tramping of many feet, and with the fall of human bodies that happened to be in the way of the reckless adventurer and his flight.

"He is through the door," cried the men who had been there on guard.

"After him then!" shouted Fleury. "Curse you all for cowards and for fools."

The order had no need to be repeated. The confusion, though great, had only been momentary. Within a second or less, Fleury and his sergeant had fought their way through to the door, urging the men to follow.

"After him ... quick! ... he is heavily loaded ... he cannot have got far ..." commanded Fleury as soon as he had crossed the threshold. "Sergeant, keep order within, and on your life see that no one else escapes."

CHAPTER IX

THE PROCONSUL

I

From round the angle of the house Martin-Roget and Chauvelin were already speeding along at a rapid pace.

“What does it all mean?” queried the latter hastily.

“The Englishman — with the wench on his back? have you seen him?”

“Malediction! what do you mean?”

“Have you seen him?” reiterated Fleury hoarsely.

“No.”

“He couldn’t have passed you?”

“Impossible.”

“Then unless some of us here have eyes like cats that limb of Satan will get away. On to him, my men,” he called once more. “Can you see him?”

The darkness outside was intense. The north-westerly wind was whistling down the narrow street, drowning the sound of every distant footfall: it tore mercilessly round the men’s heads, snatching the bonnets from off their heads, dragging at their loose shirts and breeches, adding to the confusion which already reigned.

“He went this way ...” shouted one.

“No! that!” cried another.

“There he is!” came finally in chorus from several lusty throats. “Just crossing the bridge.”

“After him,” cried Fleury, “an hundred francs to the man who first lays hands on that devil.”

Then the chase began. The Englishman on ahead was unmistakable with that burden on his shoulder. He had just reached the foot of the bridge where a street lantern fixed on a tall bracket on the corner stone had suddenly thrown him into bold relief. He had less than an hundred metres start of his pursuers and with a wild cry of excitement they started in his wake.

He was now in the middle of the bridge — an unmistakable figure of a giant vaguely silhouetted against the light from the lanterns on the further end of the bridge — seeming preternaturally tall and misshapen with that hump upon his back.

From right and left, from under the doorways of the houses in the Carrefour de la Poissonnerie the Marats who had been left on guard in the street now joined in the chase. Overhead windows were thrown open — the good burghers of Nantes, awakened from their sleep, forgetful for the nonce of all their anxieties, their squalor and their miseries, leaned out to see what this new kind of din might mean. From everywhere — it almost seemed as if some sprang out of the earth — men, either of the town-guard or Marats on patrol duty, or merely idlers and night hawks who happened to be about, yielded to that primeval instinct of brutality which causes men as well as beasts to join in a pursuit against a fellow creature.

Fleury was in the rear of his posse. Martin-Roget and Chauvelin, walking as rapidly as they could by his side, tried to glean some information out of the commandant’s breathless and scrappy narrative:

“What happened exactly?”

“It was the man Paul Friche ... with the aristo wench on his back ... and another man carrying the ci-devant aristo ... they were the English spies ... in disguise ... they knocked over the lamp ... and got away....”

“Name of a....”

“No use swearing, citizen Martin-Roget,” retorted Fleury as hotly as his agitated movements would allow. “You and citizen Chauvelin are responsible for the affair. It was you, citizen Chauvelin, who placed Paul Friche inside that tavern in observation — you told him what to do....”

“Well?”

“Paul Friche — the real Paul Friche — was taken to the infirmary some hours ago ... with a cracked skull, dealt him by your Englishman, I’ve no doubt....”

“Impossible,” reiterated Chauvelin with a curse.

“Impossible? why impossible?”

“The man I spoke to outside Le Bouffay....”

“Was not Paul Friche.”

“He was on guard in the Place with two other Marats.”

“He was not Paul Friche — the others were not Marats.”

“Then the man who was inside the tavern?... ”

“Was not Paul Friche.”

“... who climbed the gutter pipe ...?”

“Malediction!”

And the chase continued — waxing hotter every minute. The hare had gained slightly on the hounds — there were more than a hundred hot on the trail by now — having crossed the bridge he was on the Isle Feydeau, and without hesitating a moment he plunged at once into the network of narrow streets which cover the island in the rear of La Petite Hollande and the Hôtel de le Villestreux, where lodged Carrier, the representative of the people. The hounds after him had lost some ground by halting — if only for a second or two — first at the head of the bridge, then at the corners of the various streets, while they peered into the darkness to see which way had gone that fleet-footed hare.

"Down this way!"

"No! That!"

"There he goes!"

It always took a few seconds to decide, during which the man on ahead with his burden on his shoulder had time mayhap to reach the end of a street and to turn a corner and once again to plunge into darkness and out of sight. The street lanthorns were few in this squalid corner of the city, and it was only when perforce the running hare had to cross a circle of light that the hounds were able to keep hot on the trail.

"To the bridges for your lives!" now shouted Fleury to the men nearest to him. "Leave him to wander on the island. He cannot come off it, unless he jumps into the Loire."

The Marats — intelligent and ferociously keen on the chase — had already grasped the importance of this order: with the bridges guarded that fleet-footed Englishman might run as much as he liked, he was bound to be run to earth like a fox in his burrow. In a moment they had dispersed along the quays, some to one bridge-head, some to another — the Englishman could not double back now, and if he had already crossed to the Isle Gloriette, which was not joined to the left bank of the river by any bridge, he would be equally caught like a rat in a trap.

"Unless he jumps into the Loire," reiterated Fleury triumphantly.

"The proconsul will have more excitement than he hoped for," he added with a laugh. "He was looking forward to the capture of the English spy, and in deadly terror lest he escaped. But now meseems that we shall run our fox down in sight of the very gates of la Villestreux."

Martin-Roget's thoughts ran on Yvonne and the duc.

"You will remember, citizen commandant," he contrived to say to Fleury, "that the ci-devant Kernogans were found inside the Rat Mort."

Fleury uttered an exclamation of rough impatience. What did he, what did anyone care at this moment for a couple of aristos more or less when the noblest game that had ever fallen to the bag of any Terrorist was so near being run to earth? But Chauvelin said nothing. He walked on at a brisk pace, keeping close to commandant Fleury's side, in the immediate wake of the pursuit. His lips were pressed tightly together and a hissing breath came through his wide-open nostrils. His pale eyes were fixed into the darkness and beyond it, where the most bitter enemy of the cause which he loved was fighting his last battle against Fate.

II

"He cannot get off the island!" Fleury had said awhile ago. Well! there was of a truth little or nothing now between the hunted hare and capture. The bridges were well guarded: the island swarming with hounds, the Marats at their posts and the Loire an impassable barrier all round.

And Chauvelin, the most tenacious enemy man ever had, Fleury keen on a reward and Martin-Roget with a private grudge to pay off, all within two hundred yards behind him.

True for the moment the Englishman had disappeared. Burden and all, the gloom appeared to have swallowed him up. But there was nowhere he could go; mayhap he had taken refuge under a doorway in one of the narrow streets and hoped perhaps under cover of the darkness to allow his pursuers to slip past him and then to double back.

Fleury was laughing in the best of humours. He was gradually collecting all the Marats together and sending them to the bridge-heads under the command of their various sergeants. Let the Englishman spend the night on the islands if he had a mind. There was a full company of Marats here to account for him as soon as he attempted to come out in the open.

The idlers and night hawks as well as the municipal town guard continued to run excitedly up and down the streets — sometimes there would come a lusty cry from a knot of pursuers who thought they spied the Englishman through the darkness, at others there would be a call of halt, and feverish consultation held at a street corner as to the best policy to adopt.

The town guard, jealous of the Marats, were pining to lay hands on the English spy for the sake of the reward. Fleury, coming across their provost, called him a fool for his pains.

"My Marats will deal with the English spies, citizen," he said roughly, "he is no concern of yours."

The provost demurred: an altercation might have ensued when Chauvelin's suave voice poured oil on the troubled waters.

"Why not," he said, "let the town guard continue their search on the island, citizen commandant? The men may succeed in digging our rat out of his hole and forcing him out into the open all the sooner. Your Marats will have him quickly enough after that."

To this suggestion the provost gave a grudging assent. The reward when the English spy was caught could be fought for later on. For the nonce he turned unceremoniously on his heel, and left Fleury cursing him for a meddling busybody.

"So long as he and his rabble does not interfere with my Marats," growled the commandant.

"Will you see your sergeants, citizen?" queried Chauvelin tentatively. "They will have to keep very much on the alert, and will require constant prodding to their vigilance. If I can be of any service...."

"No," retorted Fleury curtly, "you and citizen Martin-Roget had best try and see the proconsul and tell him what we have done."

"He'll be half wild with terror when he hears that the English spy is at large upon the island."

"You must pacify him as best you can. Tell him I have a score of Marats at every bridge head and that I am looking personally to every arrangement. There is no escape for the devil possible save by drowning himself and the wench in the Loire."

III

Chauvelin and Martin-Roget turned from the quay on to the Petite Hollande — the great open ground with its converging row of trees which ends at the very apex of the Isle of Feydeau. Opposite to them at the further corner of the Place was the Hôtel de la Villestreux. One or two of the windows in the hotel were lighted from within. No doubt the proconsul was awake, trembling in the remotest angle

of his lair, with the spectre of assassination rampant before him — aroused by the continued disturbance of the night, by the feverishness of this man-hunt carried on almost at his gates.

Even through the darkness it was easy to perceive groups of people either rushing backwards and forwards on the Place or congregating in groups under the trees. Excitement was in the air. It could be felt and heard right through the southing of the north-westerly wind which caused the bare branches of the trees to groan and to crackle, and the dead leaves, which still hung on the twigs, to fly wildly through the night.

In the centre of the Place, two small lights, gleaming like eyes in the midst of the gloom, betrayed the presence of the proconsul's coach, which stood there as always, ready to take him away to a place of safety — away from this city where he was mortally hated and dreaded — whenever the spectre of terror became more insistent than usual, and drove him hence out of his stronghold. The horses were pawing the frozen ground and champing their bits — the steam from their nostrils caught the rays of the carriage lamps, which also lit up with a feeble flicker the vague outline of the coachman on his box and of the postilion rigid in his saddle.

The citizens of Nantes were never tired of gaping at the carriage — a huge C-sprung barouche — at the coachman's fine caped coat of bottle-green cloth and at the horses with their handsome harness set off with heavy brass bosses: they never tired of bandying words with the successive coachmen as they mounted their box and gathered up the reins, or with the postilions who loved to crack their whips and to appear smart and well-groomed, in the midst of the squalor which reigned in the terror-stricken city. They were the guardians of the mighty proconsul: on their skill, quickness and presence of mind might depend his precious life.

Even when the shadow of death hangs over an entire community, there will be some who will stand and gape and crack jokes at an uncommon sight.

And now when the pall of night hung over the abode of the man-tiger and his lair, and wrapped in its embrace the hunted and the hunters, there still was a knot of people standing round the carriage — between it and the hotel — gazing with lack-lustre eyes on the costly appurtenances wherewith the representative of a wretched people loved to surround himself. They could only see the solid mass of the carriage and of the horses, but they could hear the coachman clicking with his tongue and the postilion cracking his whip, and these sights broke the absolute dreary monotony of their lives.

It was from behind this knot of gaffers that there rose gradually a tumult as of a man calling out in wrath and lashing himself into a fury. Chauvelin and Martin-Roget were just then crossing La Petite Hollande from one bank of the river to the other: they were walking rapidly towards the hotel, when they heard the tumult which presently culminated in a hoarse cry and a volley of oaths.

"My coach! my coach at once.... Lalouët, don't leave me.... Curse you all for a set of cowardly oafs.... My coach I say...."

"The proconsul," murmured Chauvelin as he hastened forward, Martin-Roget following closely on his heels.

By the time that they had come near enough to the coach to distinguish vaguely in the gloom what was going on, people came rushing to the same spot from end to end of the Place. In a moment there was quite a crowd round the carriage, and the two men had much ado to push their way through by a vigorous play of their elbows.

"Citizen Carrier!" cried Chauvelin at the top of his voice, trying to dominate the hubbub, "one minute ... I have excellent news for you.... The English spy...."

"Curse you for a set of blundering fools," came with a husky cry from out the darkness, "you have let that English devil escape ... I knew it ... I knew it ... the assassin is at large ... the murderer ... my coach at once ... my coach.... Lalouët — do not leave me."

Chauvelin had by this time succeeded in pushing his way to the forefront of the crowd: Martin-Roget, tall and powerful, had effectually made a way for him. Through the dense gloom he could see the misshapen form of the proconsul, wildly gesticulating with one arm and with the other clinging convulsively to young Lalouët who already had his hand on the handle of the carriage door.

With a quick, resolute gesture Chauvelin stepped between the door and the advancing proconsul.

"Citizen Carrier," he said with calm determination, "on my oath there is no cause for alarm. Your life is absolutely safe.... I entreat you to return to your lodgings...."

To emphasise his words he had stretched out a hand and firmly grasped the proconsul's coat sleeve. This gesture, however, instead of pacifying the apparently terror-stricken maniac, seemed to have the effect of further exasperating his insensate fear. With a loud oath he tore himself free from Chauvelin's grasp.

"Ten thousand devils," he cried hoarsely, "who is this fool who dares to interfere with me? Stand aside man ... stand aside or...."

And before Chauvelin could utter another word or Martin-Roget come to his colleague's rescue, there came the sudden sharp report of a pistol; the horses reared, the crowd was scattered in every direction, Chauvelin was knocked over by a smart blow on the head whilst a vigorous drag on his shoulder alone saved him from falling under the wheels of the coach.

Whilst confusion was at its highest, the carriage door was closed to with a bang and there was a loud, commanding cry hurled through the window at the coachman on his box.

"*En avant*, citizen coachman! Drive for your life! through the Savenay gate. The English assassins are on our heels."

The postilion cracked his whip. The horses, maddened by the report, by the pushing, jostling crowd and the confused cries and screams around, plunged forward, wild with excitement. Their hoofs clattered on the hard road. Some of the crowd ran after the coach across the Place, shouting lustily: "The proconsul! the proconsul!"

Chauvelin — dazed and bruised — was picked up by Martin-Roget.

"The cowardly brute!" was all that he said between his teeth, "he shall rue this outrage as soon as I can give my mind to his affairs. In the meanwhile...."

The clatter of the horses' hoofs was already dying away in the distance. For a few seconds longer the rattle of the coach was still accompanied by cries of "The proconsul! the proconsul!" Fleury at the bridge head, seeing and hearing its approach, had only just time to order his Marats to stand at attention. A salvo should have been fired when the representative of the people, the high and mighty proconsul, was abroad, but there was no time for that, and the coach clattered over the bridge at breakneck speed, whilst Carrier with his head out of the window was hurling anathemas and insults at Fleury for having allowed the paid spies of that cursed British Government to threaten the life of a representative of the people.

"I go to Savenay," he shouted just at the last, "until that assassin has been thrown in the Loire. But when I return ... look to yourself commandant Fleury."

Then the carriage turned down the Quai de la Fosse and a few minutes later was swallowed up by the gloom.

IV

Chauvelin, supported by Martin-Roget, was hobbling back across the Place. The crowd was still standing about, vaguely wondering why it had got so excited over the departure of the proconsul and the rattle of a coach and pair across the bridge, when on the island there was still an assassin at large — an English spy, the capture of whom would be one of the great events in the chronicles of the city of Nantes.

"I think," said Martin-Roget, "that we may as well go to bed now, and leave the rest to commandant Fleury. The Englishman may not be captured for some hours, and I for one am over-fatigued."

"Then go to bed as you desire, citizen Martin-Roget," retorted Chauvelin drily, "I for one will stay here until I see the Englishman in the hands of commandant Fleury."

"Hark," interposed Martin-Roget abruptly. "What was that?"

Chauvelin had paused even before Martin-Roget's restraining hand had rested on his arm. He stood still in the middle of the Place and his knees shook under him so that he nearly fell prone to the ground.

"What is it?" reiterated Martin-Roget with vague puzzlement. "It sounds like young Lalouët's voice."

Chauvelin said nothing. He had forgotten his bruises: he no longer hobbled — he ran across the Place to the front of the hotel whence the voice had come which was so like that of young Lalouët.

The youngster — it was undoubtedly he — was standing at the angle of the hotel: above him a lantern threw a dim circle of light on his bare head with its mass of dark curls, and on a small knot of idlers with two or three of the town guard amongst them. The first words spoken by him which Chauvelin distinguished quite clearly were:

"You are all mad ... or else drunk.... The citizen proconsul is upstairs in his room.... He has just sent me down to hear what news there is of the English spies...."

V

No one made reply. It seemed as if some giant and spectral hand had passed over this mass of people and with its magic touch had stilled their turbulent passions, silenced their imprecations and cooled their ardour — and left naught but a vague fear, a subtle sense of awe as when something unexplainable and supernatural has manifested itself before the eyes of men.

From far away the roll of coach wheels rapidly disappearing in the distance alone broke the silence of the night.

"Is there no one here who will explain what all this means?" queried young Lalouët, who alone had remained self-assured and calm, for he alone knew nothing of what had happened. "Citizen Fleury, are you there?"

Then as once again he received no reply, he added peremptorily:

"Hey! some one there! Are you all louts and oafs that not one of you can speak?"

A timid voice from the rear ventured on explanation.

"The citizen proconsul was here a moment ago.... We all saw him, and you citizen Lalouët were with him...."

An imprecation from young Lalouët silenced the timid voice for the nonce ... and then another resumed the halting narrative.

"We all could have sworn that we saw you, citizen Lalouët, also the citizen proconsul.... He got into his coach with you ... you ... that is ... they have driven off...."

"This is some awful and treacherous hoax," cried the youngster now in a towering passion; "the citizen proconsul is upstairs in bed, I tell you ... and I have only just come out of the hotel ...! Name of a name of a dog! am I standing here or am I not?"

Then suddenly he bethought himself of the many events of the day which had culminated in this gigantic feat of leger-de-main.

"Chauvelin!" he exclaimed. "Where in the name of h ——— is citizen Chauvelin?"

But Chauvelin for the moment could nowhere be found. Dazed, half-unconscious, wholly distraught, he had fled from the scene of his discomfiture as fast as his trembling knees would allow. Carrier searched the city for him high and low, and for days afterwards the soldiers of the Compagnie Marat gave aristos and rebels a rest: they were on the look-out for a small, wizened figure of a man — the man with the pale, keen eyes who had failed to recognise in the pseudo-Paul Friche, in the dirty, out-at-elbows *sans-culotte* — the most exquisite dandy that had ever graced the salons of Bath and of London: they were searching for the man with the acute and sensitive brain who had failed to scent in the pseudo-Carrier and the pseudo-Lalouët his old and arch enemy Sir Percy Blakeney and the charming wife of my lord Anthony Dewhurst.

CHAPTER X

LORD TONY

I

A quarter of an hour later citizen-commandant Fleury was at last ushered into the presence of the proconsul and received upon his truly innocent head the full torrent of the despot's wrath. But Martin-Roget had listened to the counsels of prudence: for obvious reasons he desired to avoid any personal contact for the moment with Carrier, whom fear of the English spies had made into a more abject and more craven tyrant than ever before. At the same time he thought it wisest to try and pacify the brute by sending him the ten thousand francs — the bribe agreed upon for his help in the undertaking which had culminated in such a disastrous failure.

At the self-same hour whilst Carrier — fuming and swearing — was for the hundredth time uttering that furious “How?” which for the hundredth time had remained unanswered, two men were taking leave of one another at the small postern gate which gives on the cemetery of St. Anne. The taller and younger one of the two had just dropped a heavy purse into the hand of the other. The latter stooped and kissed the kindly hand.

“Milor,” he said, “I swear to you most solemnly that M. le duc de Kernogan will rest in peace in hallowed ground. M. le curé de Vertou — ah! he is a saint and a brave man, milor — comes over whenever he can prudently do so and reads the offices for the dead — over those who have died as Christians, and there is a piece of consecrated ground out here in the open which those fiends of Terrorists have not discovered yet.”

“And you will bury M. le duc immediately,” admonished the younger man, “and apprise M. le curé of what has happened.”

“Aye! aye! I’ll do that, milor, within the hour. Though M. le duc was never a very kind master to me in the past, I cannot forget that I served him and his family for over thirty years as coachman. I drove Mlle. Yvonne in the first pony-cart she ever possessed. I drove her — ah! that was a bitter day! — her and M. le duc when they left Kernogan never to return. I drove Mlle. Yvonne on that memorable night when a crowd of miserable peasants attacked her coach, and that brute Pierre Adet started to lead a rabble against the château. That was the beginning of things, milor. God alone knows what has happened to Pierre Adet. His father Jean was hanged by order of M. le duc. Now M. le duc is destined to lie in a forgotten grave. I serve this abominable Republic by digging graves for her victims. I would be happier, I think, if I knew what had become of Mlle. Yvonne.”

“Mlle. Yvonne is my wife, old friend,” said the younger man softly. “Please God she has years of happiness before her, if I succeed in making her forget all that she has suffered.”

“Amen to that, milor!” rejoined the man fervently. “Then I pray you tell the noble lady to rest assured. Jean-Marie — her old coachman whom she used to trust implicitly in the past — will see that M. le duc de Kernogan is buried as a gentleman and a Christian should be.”

“You are not running too great a risk by this, I hope, my good Jean-Marie,” quoth Lord Tony gently.

“No greater risk, milor,” replied Jean-Marie earnestly, “than the one which you ran by carrying my old master’s dead body on your shoulders through the streets of Nantes.”

“Bah! that was simple enough,” said the younger man, “the hue and cry is after higher quarry to-night. Pray God the hounds have not run the noble game to earth.”

Even as he spoke there came from far away through the darkness the sound of a fast trotting pair of horses and the rumble of coach-wheels on the unpaved road.

“There they are, thank God!” exclaimed Lord Tony, and the tremor in his voice alone betrayed the torturing anxiety which he had been enduring, ever since he had seen the last both of his adored young wife and of his gallant chief in the squalid tap-room of the Rat Mort.

With the dead body of Yvonne’s father on his back he had quietly worked his way out of the tavern in the wake of his chief. He had his orders, and for the members of that gallant League of the Scarlet Pimpernel there was no such word as “disobedience” and no such word as “fail.” Through the darkness and through the tortuous streets of Nantes Lord Anthony Dewhurst — the young and wealthy exquisite, the hero of an hundred fêtes and galas in Bath, in London — staggered under the weight of a burden imposed upon him only by his loyalty and a noble sense of self-prescribed discipline — and that burden the dead body of the man who had done him an unforgivable wrong. Without a thought of revolt he had obeyed — and risked his life and worse in the obedience.

The darkness of the night was his faithful handmaiden, and the excitement of the chase after the other quarry had fortunately drawn every possible enemy from his track. He had set his teeth and accomplished his task, and even the deathly anxiety for the wife whom he idolised had been crushed, under the iron heel of a grim resolve. Now his work was done, and from far away he heard the rattle of the coach wheels which were bringing his beloved nearer and nearer to him.

Five minutes longer and the coach came to a halt. A cheery voice called out gaily:

“Tony! are you there?”

“Percy!” exclaimed the young man.

Already he knew that all was well. The gallant leader, the loyal and loving friend, had taxed every resource of a boundlessly fertile brain in order to win yet another wreath of immortal laurels for the League which he commanded, and the very tone of his merry voice proclaimed the triumph which had crowned his daring scheme.

The next moment Yvonne lay in the arms of her dear milor. He had stepped into the carriage, even while Sir Percy climbed nimbly on the box and took the reins from the bewildered coachman’s hands.

“Citizen proconsul ...” murmured the latter, who of a truth thought that he was dreaming.

“Get off the box, you old noodle,” quoth the pseudo-proconsul peremptorily. “Thou and thy friend the postilion will remain here in the road, and on the morrow you’ll explain to whomsoever it may concern that the English spy made a murderous attack on you both

and left you half dead outside the postern gate of the cemetery of Ste. Anne. Here,” he added as he threw a purse down to the two men — who half-dazed and overcome by superstitious fear had indeed scrambled down, one from his box, the other from his horse— “there’s a hundred francs for each of you in there, and mind you drink to the health of the English spy and the confusion of your brutish proconsul.”

There was no time to lose: the horses — still very fresh — were fretting to start.

“Where do we pick up Hastings and Ffoulkes?” asked Sir Percy Blakeney finally as he turned toward the interior of the barouche, the hood of which hid its occupants from view.

“At the corner of the rue de Gigan,” came the quick answer. “It is only two hundred metres from the city gate. They are on the look out for you.”

“Ffoulkes shall be postilion,” rejoined Sir Percy with a laugh, “and Hastings sit beside me on the box. And you will see how at the city gate and all along the route soldiers of the guard will salute the equipage of the all-powerful proconsul of Nantes. By Gad!” he added under his breath, “I’ve never had a merrier time in all my life — not even when....”

He clicked his tongue and gave the horses their heads — and soon the coachman and the postilion and Jean-Marie the gravedigger of the cemetery of Ste. Anne were left gaping out into the night in the direction where the barouche had so quickly disappeared.

“Now for Le Croisic and the *Day-Dream*,” sighed the daring adventurer contentedly, “... and for Marguerite!” he added wistfully.

II

Under the hood of the barouche Yvonne, wearied but immeasurably happy, was doing her best to answer all her dear milor’s impassioned questions and to give him a fairly clear account of that terrible chase and flight through the streets of the Isle Feydeau.

“Ah, milor, how can I tell you what I felt when I realised that I was being carried along in the arms of the valiant Scarlet Pimpernel? A word from him and I understood. After that I tried to be both resourceful and brave. When the chase after us was at its hottest we slipped into a ruined and deserted house. In a room at the back there were several bundles of what looked like old clothes. ‘This is my store-house,’ milor said to me; ‘now that we have reached it we can just make long noses at the whole pack of bloodhounds.’ He made me slip into some boy’s clothes which he gave me, and whilst I donned these he disappeared. When he returned I truly did not recognise him. He looked horrible, and his voice ...! After a moment or two he laughed, and then I knew him. He explained to me the rôle which I was to play, and I did my best to obey him in everything. But oh! I hardly lived while we once more emerged into the open street and then turned into the great Place which was full — oh full! — of people. I felt that at every moment we might be suspected. Figure to yourself, my dear milor....”

What Yvonne Dewhurst was about to say next will never be recorded. My lord Tony had closed her lips with a kiss.

EL DORADO PART I

CHAPTER I IN THE THEATRE NATIONAL

And yet people found the opportunity to amuse themselves, to dance and to go to the theatre, to enjoy music and open-air cafes and promenades in the Palais Royal. New fashions in dress made their appearance, milliners produced fresh "creations," and jewellers were not idle. A grim sense of humour, born of the very intensity of ever-present danger, had dubbed the cut of certain tunics "tete tranche," or a favourite ragout was called "a la guillotine."

On three evenings only during the past memorable four and a half years did the theatres close their doors, and these evenings were the ones immediately following that terrible 2nd of September the day of the butchery outside the Abbaye prison, when Paris herself was aghast with horror, and the cries of the massacred might have drowned the calls of the audience whose hands upraised for plaudits would still be dripping with blood. On all other evenings of these same four and a half years the theatres in the Rue de Richelieu, in the Palais Royal, the Luxembourg, and others, had raised their curtains and taken money at their doors. The same audience that earlier in the day had whiled away the time by witnessing the ever-recurrent dramas of the Place de la Revolution assembled here in the evenings and filled stalls, boxes, and tiers, laughing over the satires of Voltaire or weeping over the sentimental tragedies of persecuted Romeos and innocent Juliets. Death knocked at so many doors these days! He was so constant a guest in the houses of relatives and friends that those who had merely shaken him by the hand, those on whom he had smiled, and whom he, still smiling, had passed indulgently by, looked on him with that subtle contempt born of familiarity, shrugged their shoulders at his passage, and envisaged his probable visit on the morrow with lighthearted indifference. Paris — despite the horrors that had stained her walls had remained a city of pleasure, and the knife of the guillotine did scarce descend more often than did the drop-scenes on the stage. On this bitterly cold evening of the 27th Nivose, in the second year of the Republic — or, as we of the old style still persist in calling it, the 16th of January, 1794 — the auditorium of the Theatre National was filled with a very brilliant company. The appearance of a favourite actress in the part of one of Moliere's volatile heroines had brought pleasure-loving Paris to witness this revival of "Le Misanthrope," with new scenery, dresses, and the aforesaid charming actress to add piquancy to the master's mordant wit. The Moniteur, which so impartially chronicles the events of those times, tells us under that date that the Assembly of the Convention voted on that same day a new law giving fuller power to its spies, enabling them to effect domiciliary searches at their discretion without previous reference to the Committee of General Security, authorising them to proceed against all enemies of public happiness, to send them to prison at their own discretion, and assuring them the sum of thirty-five livres "for every piece of game thus beaten up for the guillotine."

Under that same date the Moniteur also puts it on record that the Theatre National was filled to its utmost capacity for the revival of the late citizen Moliere's comedy. The Assembly of the Convention having voted the new law which placed the lives of thousands at the mercy of a few human bloodhounds, adjourned its sitting and proceeded to the Rue de Richelieu. Already the house was full when the fathers of the people made their way to the seats which had been reserved for them. An awed hush descended on the throng as one by one the men whose very names inspired horror and dread filed in through the narrow gangways of the stalls or took their places in the tiny boxes around. Citizen Robespierre's neatly bewigged head soon appeared in one of these; his bosom friend St. Just was with him, and also his sister Charlotte. Danton, like a big, shaggy-coated lion, elbowed his way into the stalls, whilst Sauterre, the handsome butcher and idol of the people of Paris, was loudly acclaimed as his huge frame, gorgeously clad in the uniform of the National Guard, was sighted on one of the tiers above. The public in the parterre and in the galleries whispered excitedly; the awe-inspiring names flew about hither and thither on the wings of the overheated air. Women craned their necks to catch sight of heads which mayhap on the morrow would roll into the gruesome basket at the foot of the guillotine. In one of the tiny avant-scene boxes two men had taken their seats long before the bulk of the audience had begun to assemble in the house. The inside of the box was in complete darkness, and the narrow opening which allowed but a sorry view of one side of the stage helped to conceal rather than display the occupants. The younger one of these two men appeared to be something of a stranger in Paris, for as the public men and the well-known members of the Government began to arrive he often turned to his companion for information regarding these notorious personalities. "Tell me, de Batz," he said, calling the other's attention to a group of men who had just entered the house, "that creature there in the green coat — with his hand up to his face now — who is he?"

"Where? Which do you mean?"

"There! He looks this way now, and he has a playbill in his hand. The man with the protruding chin and the convex forehead, a face like a marmoset, and eyes like a jackal. What?"

The other leaned over the edge of the box, and his small, restless eyes wandered over the now closely-packed auditorium.

"Oh!" he said as soon as he recognised the face which his friend had pointed out to him, "that is citizen Fouquier-Tinville."

"The Public Prosecutor?"

"Himself. And Heron is the man next to him."

"Heron?" said the younger man interrogatively.

"Yes. He is chief agent to the Committee of General Security now."

"What does that mean?"

Both leaned back in their chairs, and their sombrely-clad figures were once more merged in the gloom of the narrow box. Instinctively, since the name of the Public Prosecutor had been mentioned between them, they had allowed their voices to sink to a

whisper.

The older man — a stoutish, florid-looking individual, with small, keen eyes, and skin pitted with small-pox — shrugged his shoulders at his friend's question, and then said with an air of contemptuous indifference:

"It means, my good St. Just, that these two men whom you see down there, calmly conning the programme of this evening's entertainment, and preparing to enjoy themselves to-night in the company of the late M. de Moliere, are two hell-hounds as powerful as they are cunning."

"Yes, yes," said St. Just, and much against his will a slight shudder ran through his slim figure as he spoke. "Fouquier-Tinville I know; I know his cunning, and I know his power — but the other?"

"The other?" retorted de Batz lightly. "Heron? Let me tell you, my friend, that even the might and lust of that damned Public Prosecutor pale before the power of Heron!"

"But how? I do not understand."

"Ah! you have been in England so long, you lucky dog, and though no doubt the main plot of our hideous tragedy has reached your ken, you have no cognisance of the actors who play the principal parts on this arena flooded with blood and carpeted with hate. They come and go, these actors, my good St. Just — they come and go. Marat is already the man of yesterday, Robespierre is the man of to-morrow. To-day we still have Danton and Fouquier-Tinville; we still have Pere Duchesne, and your own good cousin Antoine St. Just, but Heron and his like are with us always."

"Spies, of course?"

"Spies," assented the other. "And what spies! Were you present at the sitting of the Assembly to-day?"

"I was. I heard the new decree which already has passed into law. Ah! I tell you, friend, that we do not let the grass grow under our feet these days. Robespierre wakes up one morning with a whim; by the afternoon that whim has become law, passed by a servile body of men too terrified to run counter to his will, fearful lest they be accused of moderation or of humanity — the greatest crimes that can be committed nowadays."

"But Danton?"

"Ah! Danton? He would wish to stem the tide that his own passions have let loose; to muzzle the raging beasts whose fangs he himself has sharpened. I told you that Danton is still the man of to-day; to-morrow he will be accused of moderation. Danton and moderation! — ye gods! Eh? Danton, who thought the guillotine too slow in its work, and armed thirty soldiers with swords, so that thirty heads might fall at one and the same time. Danton, friend, will perish to-morrow accused of treachery against the Revolution, of moderation towards her enemies; and curs like Heron will feast on the blood of lions like Danton and his crowd."

He paused a moment, for he dared not raise his voice, and his whispers were being drowned by the noise in the auditorium. The curtain, timed to be raised at eight o'clock, was still down, though it was close on half-past, and the public was growing impatient. There was loud stamping of feet, and a few shrill whistles of disapproval proceeded from the gallery.

"If Heron gets impatient," said de Batz lightly, when the noise had momentarily subsided, "the manager of this theatre and mayhap his leading actor and actress will spend an unpleasant day to-morrow."

"Always Heron!" said St. Just, with a contemptuous smile.

"Yes, my friend," rejoined the other imperturbably, "always Heron. And he has even obtained a longer lease of existence this afternoon."

"By the new decree?"

"Yes. The new decree. The agents of the Committee of General Security, of whom Heron is the chief, have from to-day powers of domiciliary search; they have full powers to proceed against all enemies of public welfare. Isn't that beautifully vague? And they have absolute discretion; every one may become an enemy of public welfare, either by spending too much money or by spending too little, by laughing to-day or crying to-morrow, by mourning for one dead relative or rejoicing over the execution of another. He may be a bad example to the public by the cleanliness of his person or by the filth upon his clothes, he may offend by walking to-day and by riding in a carriage next week; the agents of the Committee of General Security shall alone decide what constitutes enmity against public welfare. All prisons are to be opened at their bidding to receive those whom they choose to denounce; they have henceforth the right to examine prisoners privately and without witnesses, and to send them to trial without further warrants; their duty is clear — they must 'beat up game for the guillotine.' Thus is the decree worded; they must furnish the Public Prosecutor with work to do, the tribunals with victims to condemn, the Place de la Revolution with death-scenes to amuse the people, and for their work they will be rewarded thirty-five livres for every head that falls under the guillotine. Ah! if Heron and his like and his myrmidons work hard and well they can make a comfortable income of four or five thousand livres a week. We are getting on, friend St. Just — we are getting on."

He had not raised his voice while he spoke, nor in the recounting of such inhuman monstrosity, such vile and bloodthirsty conspiracy against the liberty, the dignity, the very life of an entire nation, did he appear to feel the slightest indignation; rather did a tone of amusement and even of triumph strike through his speech; and now he laughed good-humouredly like an indulgent parent who is watching the naturally cruel antics of a spoilt boy.

"Then from this hell let loose upon earth," exclaimed St. Just hotly, "must we rescue those who refuse to ride upon this tide of blood?"

His cheeks were glowing, his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. He looked very young and very eager. Armand St. Just, the brother of Lady Blakeney, had something of the refined beauty of his lovely sister, but the features though manly — had not the latent strength expressed in them which characterised every line of Marguerite's exquisite face. The forehead suggested a dreamer rather than a thinker, the blue-grey eyes were those of an idealist rather than of a man of action.

De Batz's keen piercing eyes had no doubt noted this, even whilst he gazed at his young friend with that same look of good-humoured indulgence which seemed habitual to him.

"We have to think of the future, my good St. Just," he said after a slight pause, and speaking slowly and decisively, like a father rebuking a hot-headed child, "not of the present. What are a few lives worth beside the great principles which we have at stake?"

"The restoration of the monarchy — I know," retorted St. Just, still unsobered, "but, in the meanwhile—"

“In the meanwhile,” rejoined de Batz earnestly, “every victim to the lust of these men is a step towards the restoration of law and order — that is to say, of the monarchy. It is only through these violent excesses perpetrated in its name that the nation will realise how it is being fooled by a set of men who have only their own power and their own advancement in view, and who imagine that the only way to that power is over the dead bodies of those who stand in their way. Once the nation is sickened by these orgies of ambition and of hate, it will turn against these savage brutes, and gladly acclaim the restoration of all that they are striving to destroy. This is our only hope for the future, and, believe me, friend, that every head snatched from the guillotine by your romantic hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, is a stone laid for the consolidation of this infamous Republic.”

“I’ll not believe it,” protested St. Just emphatically.

De Batz, with a gesture of contempt indicative also of complete self-satisfaction and unalterable self-belief, shrugged his broad shoulders. His short fat fingers, covered with rings, beat a tattoo upon the ledge of the box.

Obviously, he was ready with a retort. His young friend’s attitude irritated even more than it amused him. But he said nothing for the moment, waiting while the traditional three knocks on the floor of the stage proclaimed the rise of the curtain. The growing impatience of the audience subsided as if by magic at the welcome call; everybody settled down again comfortably in their seats, they gave up the contemplation of the fathers of the people, and turned their full attention to the actors on the boards.

CHAPTER II. WIDELY DIVERGENT AIMS

This was Armand St. Just's first visit to Paris since that memorable day when first he decided to sever his connection from the Republican party, of which he and his beautiful sister Marguerite had at one time been amongst the most noble, most enthusiastic followers. Already a year and a half ago the excesses of the party had horrified him, and that was long before they had degenerated into the sickening orgies which were culminating to-day in wholesale massacres and bloody hecatombs of innocent victims.

With the death of Mirabeau the moderate Republicans, whose sole and entirely pure aim had been to free the people of France from the autocratic tyranny of the Bourbons, saw the power go from their clean hands to the grimy ones of lustful demagogues, who knew no law save their own passions of bitter hatred against all classes that were not as self-seeking, as ferocious as themselves.

It was no longer a question of a fight for political and religious liberty only, but one of class against class, man against man, and let the weaker look to himself. The weaker had proved himself to be, firstly, the man of property and substance, then the law-abiding citizen, lastly the man of action who had obtained for the people that very same liberty of thought and of belief which soon became so terribly misused.

Armand St. Just, one of the apostles of liberty, fraternity, and equality, soon found that the most savage excesses of tyranny were being perpetrated in the name of those same ideals which he had worshipped.

His sister Marguerite, happily married in England, was the final temptation which caused him to quit the country the destinies of which he no longer could help to control. The spark of enthusiasm which he and the followers of Mirabeau had tried to kindle in the hearts of an oppressed people had turned to raging tongues of unquenchable flames. The taking of the Bastille had been the prelude to the massacres of September, and even the horror of these had since paled beside the holocausts of to-day.

Armand, saved from the swift vengeance of the revolutionaries by the devotion of the Scarlet Pimpernel, crossed over to England and enrolled himself under the banner of the heroic chief. But he had been unable hitherto to be an active member of the League. The chief was loath to allow him to run foolhardy risks. The St. Justs — both Marguerite and Armand — were still very well-known in Paris. Marguerite was not a woman easily forgotten, and her marriage with an English "aristo" did not please those republican circles who had looked upon her as their queen. Armand's secession from his party into the ranks of the emigres had singled him out for special reprisals, if and whenever he could be got hold of, and both brother and sister had an unusually bitter enemy in their cousin Antoine St. Just — once an aspirant to Marguerite's hand, and now a servile adherent and imitator of Robespierre, whose ferocious cruelty he tried to emulate with a view to ingratiating himself with the most powerful man of the day.

Nothing would have pleased Antoine St. Just more than the opportunity of showing his zeal and his patriotism by denouncing his own kith and kin to the Tribunal of the Terror, and the Scarlet Pimpernel, whose own slender fingers were held on the pulse of that reckless revolution, had no wish to sacrifice Armand's life deliberately, or even to expose it to unnecessary dangers.

Thus it was that more than a year had gone by before Armand St. Just — an enthusiastic member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel — was able to do aught for its service. He had chafed under the enforced restraint placed upon him by the prudence of his chief, when, indeed, he was longing to risk his life with the comrades whom he loved and beside the leader whom he revered.

At last, in the beginning of '94 he persuaded Blakeney to allow him to join the next expedition to France. What the principal aim of that expedition was the members of the League did not know as yet, but what they did know was that perils — graver even than hitherto — would attend them on their way.

The circumstances had become very different of late. At first the impenetrable mystery which had surrounded the personality of the chief had been a full measure of safety, but now one tiny corner of that veil of mystery had been lifted by two rough pairs of hands at least; Chauvelin, ex-ambassador at the English Court, was no longer in any doubt as to the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, whilst Collot d'Herbois had seen him at Boulogne, and had there been effectually foiled by him.

Four months had gone by since that day, and the Scarlet Pimpernel was hardly ever out of France now; the massacres in Paris and in the provinces had multiplied with appalling rapidity, the necessity for the selfless devotion of that small band of heroes had become daily, hourly more pressing. They rallied round their chief with unbounded enthusiasm, and let it be admitted at once that the sporting instinct — inherent in these English gentlemen — made them all the more keen, all the more eager now that the dangers which beset their expeditions were increased tenfold.

At a word from the beloved leader, these young men — the spoilt darlings of society — would leave the gaities, the pleasures, the luxuries of London or of Bath, and, taking their lives in their hands, they placed them, together with their fortunes, and even their good names, at the service of the innocent and helpless victims of merciless tyranny. The married men — Ffoulkes, my Lord Hastings, Sir Jeremiah Wallescourt — left wife and children at a call from the chief, at the cry of the wretched. Armand — unattached and enthusiastic — had the right to demand that he should no longer be left behind.

He had only been away a little over fifteen months, and yet he found Paris a different city from the one he had left immediately after the terrible massacres of September. An air of grim loneliness seemed to hang over her despite the crowds that thronged her streets; the men whom he was wont to meet in public places fifteen months ago — friends and political allies — were no longer to be seen; strange faces surrounded him on every side — sullen, glowering faces, all wearing a certain air of horrified surprise and of vague, terrified wonder, as if life had become one awful puzzle, the answer to which must be found in the brief interval between the swift passages of death.

Armand St. Just, having settled his few simple belongings in the squalid lodgings which had been assigned to him, had started out after dark to wander somewhat aimlessly through the streets. Instinctively he seemed to be searching for a familiar face, some one who would come to him out of that merry past which he had spent with Marguerite in their pretty apartment in the Rue St. Honore.

For an hour he wandered thus and met no one whom he knew. At times it appeared to him as if he did recognise a face or figure that passed him swiftly by in the gloom, but even before he could fully make up his mind to that, the face or figure had already disappeared, gliding furtively down some narrow unlighted by-street, without turning to look to right or left, as if dreading fuller recognition. Armand felt a total stranger in his own native city.

The terrible hours of the execution on the Place de la Revolution were fortunately over, the tumbrils no longer rattled along the uneven pavements, nor did the death-cry of the unfortunate victims resound through the deserted streets. Armand was, on this first day of his arrival, spared the sight of this degradation of the once lovely city; but her desolation, her general appearance of shamefaced indigence and of cruel aloofness struck a chill in the young man's heart.

It was no wonder, therefore, when anon he was wending his way slowly back to his lodging he was accosted by a pleasant, cheerful voice, that he responded to it with alacrity. The voice, of a smooth, oily timbre, as if the owner kept it well greased for purposes of amiable speech, was like an echo of the past, when jolly, irresponsible Baron de Batz, erst-while officer of the Guard in the service of the late King, and since then known to be the most inveterate conspirator for the restoration of the monarchy, used to amuse Marguerite by his vapid, senseless plans for the overthrow of the newly-risen power of the people.

Armand was quite glad to meet him, and when de Batz suggested that a good talk over old times would be vastly agreeable, the younger man gladly acceded. The two men, though certainly not mistrustful of one another, did not seem to care to reveal to each other the place where they lodged. De Batz at once proposed the avant-scene box of one of the theatres as being the safest place where old friends could talk without fear of spying eyes or ears.

"There is no place so safe or so private nowadays, believe me, my young friend," he said "I have tried every sort of nook and cranny in this accursed town, now riddled with spies, and I have come to the conclusion that a small avant-scene box is the most perfect den of privacy there is in the entire city. The voices of the actors on the stage and the hum among the audience in the house will effectually drown all individual conversation to every ear save the one for whom it is intended."

It is not difficult to persuade a young man who feels lonely and somewhat forlorn in a large city to while away an evening in the companionship of a cheerful talker, and de Batz was essentially good company. His vapourings had always been amusing, but Armand now gave him credit for more seriousness of purpose; and though the chief had warned him against picking up acquaintances in Paris, the young man felt that that restriction would certainly not apply to a man like de Batz, whose hot partisanship of the Royalist cause and hare-brained schemes for its restoration must make him at one with the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Armand accepted the other's cordial invitation. He, too, felt that he would indeed be safer from observation in a crowded theatre than in the streets. Among a closely packed throng bent on amusement the sombrely-clad figure of a young man, with the appearance of a student or of a journalist, would easily pass unperceived.

But somehow, after the first ten minutes spent in de Batz' company within the gloomy shelter of the small avant-scene box, Armand already repented of the impulse which had prompted him to come to the theatre to-night, and to renew acquaintanceship with the ex-officer of the late King's Guard. Though he knew de Batz to be an ardent Royalist, and even an active adherent of the monarchy, he was soon conscious of a vague sense of mistrust of this pompous, self-complacent individual, whose every utterance breathed selfish aims rather than devotion to a forlorn cause.

Therefore, when the curtain rose at last on the first act of Moliere's witty comedy, St. Just turned deliberately towards the stage and tried to interest himself in the wordy quarrel between Philinte and Alceste.

But this attitude on the part of the younger man did not seem to suit his newly-found friend. It was clear that de Batz did not consider the topic of conversation by any means exhausted, and that it had been more with a view to a discussion like the present interrupted one that he had invited St. Just to come to the theatre with him to-night, rather than for the purpose of witnessing Mlle. Lange's debut in the part of Celimene.

The presence of St. Just in Paris had as a matter of fact astonished de Batz not a little, and had set his intriguing brain busy on conjectures. It was in order to turn these conjectures into certainties that he had desired private talk with the young man.

He waited silently now for a moment or two, his keen, small eyes resting with evident anxiety on Armand's averted head, his fingers still beating the impatient tattoo upon the velvet-covered cushion of the box. Then at the first movement of St. Just towards him he was ready in an instant to re-open the subject under discussion.

With a quick nod of his head he called his young friend's attention back to the men in the auditorium.

"Your good cousin Antoine St. Just is hand and glove with Robespierre now," he said. "When you left Paris more than a year ago you could afford to despise him as an empty-headed windbag; now, if you desire to remain in France, you will have to fear him as a power and a menace."

"Yes, I knew that he had taken to herding with the wolves," rejoined Armand lightly. "At one time he was in love with my sister. I thank God that she never cared for him."

"They say that he herds with the wolves because of this disappointment," said de Batz. "The whole pack is made up of men who have been disappointed, and who have nothing more to lose. When all these wolves will have devoured one another, then and then only can we hope for the restoration of the monarchy in France. And they will not turn on one another whilst prey for their greed lies ready to their jaws. Your friend the Scarlet Pimpernel should feed this bloody revolution of ours rather than starve it, if indeed he hates it as he seems to do."

His restless eyes peered with eager interrogation into those of the younger man. He paused as if waiting for a reply; then, as St. Just remained silent, he reiterated slowly, almost in the tones of a challenge:

"If indeed he hates this bloodthirsty revolution of ours as he seems to do."

The reiteration implied a doubt. In a moment St. Just's loyalty was up in arms.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel," he said, "cares naught for your political aims. The work of mercy that he does, he does for justice and for humanity."

"And for sport," said de Batz with a sneer, "so I've been told."

"He is English," assented St. Just, "and as such will never own to sentiment. Whatever be the motive, look at the result!"

"Yes! a few lives stolen from the guillotine."

"Women and children — innocent victims — would have perished but for his devotion."

"The more innocent they were, the more helpless, the more pitiable, the louder would their blood have cried for reprisals against the wild beasts who sent them to their death."

St. Just made no reply. It was obviously useless to attempt to argue with this man, whose political aims were as far apart from those of the Scarlet Pimpernel as was the North Pole from the South.

"If any of you have influence over that hot-headed leader of yours," continued de Batz, unabashed by the silence of his friend, "I wish to God you would exert it now."

"In what way?" queried St. Just, smiling in spite of himself at the thought of his or any one else's control over Blakeney and his plans.

It was de Batz' turn to be silent. He paused for a moment or two, then he asked abruptly:

"Your Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris now, is he not?"

"I cannot tell you," replied Armand.

"Bah! there is no necessity to fence with me, my friend. The moment I set eyes on you this afternoon I knew that you had not come to Paris alone."

"You are mistaken, my good de Batz," rejoined the young man earnestly; "I came to Paris alone."

"Clever parrying, on my word — but wholly wasted on my unbelieving ears. Did I not note at once that you did not seem overpleased to-day when I accosted you?"

"Again you are mistaken. I was very pleased to meet you, for I had felt singularly lonely all day, and was glad to shake a friend by the hand. What you took for displeasure was only surprise."

"Surprise? Ah, yes! I don't wonder that you were surprised to see me walking unmolested and openly in the streets of Paris — whereas you had heard of me as a dangerous conspirator, eh? — and as a man who has the entire police of his country at his heels — on whose head there is a price — what?"

"I knew that you had made several noble efforts to rescue the unfortunate King and Queen from the hands of these brutes."

"All of which efforts were unsuccessful," assented de Batz imperturbably, "every one of them having been either betrayed by some d — d confederate or ferreted out by some astute spy eager for gain. Yes, my friend, I made several efforts to rescue King Louis and Queen Marie Antoinette from the scaffold, and every time I was foiled, and yet here I am, you see, unscathed and free. I walk about the streets boldly, and talk to my friends as I meet them."

"You are lucky," said St. Just, not without a tinge of sarcasm.

"I have been prudent," retorted de Batz. "I have taken the trouble to make friends there where I thought I needed them most — the mammon of unrighteousness, you know-what?"

And he laughed a broad, thick laugh of perfect self-satisfaction.

"Yes, I know," rejoined St. Just, with the tone of sarcasm still more apparent in his voice now. "You have Austrian money at your disposal."

"Any amount," said the other complacently, "and a great deal of it sticks to the grimy fingers of these patriotic makers of revolutions. Thus do I ensure my own safety. I buy it with the Emperor's money, and thus am I able to work for the restoration of the monarchy in France."

Again St. Just was silent. What could he say? Instinctively now, as the fleshy personality of the Gascon Royalist seemed to spread itself out and to fill the tiny box with his ambitious schemes and his far-reaching plans, Armand's thoughts flew back to that other plotter, the man with the pure and simple aims, the man whose slender fingers had never handled alien gold, but were ever there ready stretched out to the helpless and the weak, whilst his thoughts were only of the help that he might give them, but never of his own safety.

De Batz, however, seemed blandly unconscious of any such disparaging thoughts in the mind of his young friend, for he continued quite amiably, even though a note of anxiety seemed to make itself felt now in his smooth voice:

"We advance slowly, but step by step, my good St. Just," he said. "I have not been able to save the monarchy in the person of the King or the Queen, but I may yet do it in the person of the Dauphin."

"The Dauphin," murmured St. Just involuntarily.

That involuntary murmur, scarcely audible, so soft was it, seemed in some way to satisfy de Batz, for the keenness of his gaze relaxed, and his fat fingers ceased their nervous, intermittent tattoo on the ledge of the box.

"Yes! the Dauphin," he said, nodding his head as if in answer to his own thoughts, "or rather, let me say, the reigning King of France — Louis XVII, by the grace of God — the most precious life at present upon the whole of this earth."

"You are right there, friend de Batz," assented Armand fervently, "the most precious life, as you say, and one that must be saved at all costs."

"Yes," said de Batz calmly, "but not by your friend the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Why not?"

Scarce were those two little words out of St. Just's mouth than he repented of them. He bit his lip, and with a dark frown upon his face he turned almost defiantly towards his friend.

But de Batz smiled with easy bonhomie.

"Ah, friend Armand," he said, "you were not cut out for diplomacy, nor yet for intrigue. So then," he added more seriously, "that gallant hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, has hopes of rescuing our young King from the clutches of Simon the cobbler and of the herd of hyenas on the watch for his attenuated little corpse, eh?"

"I did not say that," retorted St. Just sullenly.

"No. But I say it. Nay! nay! do not blame yourself, my over-loyal young friend. Could I, or any one else, doubt for a moment that sooner or later your romantic hero would turn his attention to the most pathetic sight in the whole of Europe — the child-martyr in the Temple prison? The wonder were to me if the Scarlet Pimpernel ignored our little King altogether for the sake of his subjects. No, no; do not think for a moment that you have betrayed your friend's secret to me. When I met you so luckily today I guessed at once that you were here under the banner of the enigmatical little red flower, and, thus guessing, I even went a step further in my conjecture. The Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris now in the hope of rescuing Louis XVII from the Temple prison."

"If that is so, you must not only rejoice but should be able to help."

"And yet, my friend, I do neither the one now nor mean to do the other in the future," said de Batz placidly. "I happen to be a Frenchman, you see."

"What has that to do with such a question?"

"Everything; though you, Armand, despite that you are a Frenchman too, do not look through my spectacles. Louis XVII is King of France, my good St. Just; he must owe his freedom and his life to us Frenchmen, and to no one else."

"That is sheer madness, man," retorted Armand. "Would you have the child perish for the sake of your own selfish ideas?"

"You may call them selfish if you will; all patriotism is in a measure selfish. What does the rest of the world care if we are a republic or a monarchy, an oligarchy or hopeless anarchy? We work for ourselves and to please ourselves, and I for one will not brook foreign interference."

"Yet you work with foreign money!"

"That is another matter. I cannot get money in France, so I get it where I can; but I can arrange for the escape of Louis XVII is King of France, my good St. Just; he must of France should belong the honour and glory of having saved our King."

For the third time now St. Just allowed the conversation to drop; he was gazing wide-eyed, almost appalled at this impudent display of well-nigh ferocious selfishness and vanity. De Batz, smiling and complacent, was leaning back in his chair, looking at his young friend with perfect contentment expressed in every line of his pock-marked face and in the very attitude of his well-fed body. It was easy enough now to understand the remarkable immunity which this man was enjoying, despite the many foolhardy plots which he hatched, and which had up to now invariably come to naught.

A regular braggart and empty windbag, he had taken but one good care, and that was of his own skin. Unlike other less fortunate Royalists of France, he neither fought in the country nor braved dangers in town. He played a safer game — crossed the frontier and constituted himself agent of Austria; he succeeded in gaining the Emperor's money for the good of the Royalist cause, and for his own most especial benefit.

Even a less astute man of the world than was Armand St. Just would easily have guessed that de Batz' desire to be the only instrument in the rescue of the poor little Dauphin from the Temple was not actuated by patriotism, but solely by greed. Obviously there was a rich reward waiting for him in Vienna the day that he brought Louis XVII safely into Austrian territory; that reward he would miss if a meddlesome Englishman interfered in this affair. Whether in this wrangle he risked the life of the child-King or not mattered to him not at all. It was de Batz who was to get the reward, and whose welfare and prosperity mattered more than the most precious life in Europe.

CHAPTER III. THE DEMON CHANCE

St. Just would have given much to be back in his lonely squalid lodgings now. Too late did he realise how wise had been the dictum which had warned him against making or renewing friendships in France.

Men had changed with the times. How terribly they had changed! Personal safety had become a fetish with most — a goal so difficult to attain that it had to be fought for and striven for, even at the expense of humanity and of self-respect.

Selfishness — the mere, cold-blooded insistence for self-advancement — ruled supreme. De Batz, surfeited with foreign money, used it firstly to ensure his own immunity, scattering it to right and left to still the ambition of the Public Prosecutor or to satisfy the greed of innumerable spies.

What was left over he used for the purpose of pitting the bloodthirsty demagogues one against the other, making of the National Assembly a gigantic bear-den, wherein wild beasts could rend one another limb from limb.

In the meanwhile, what cared he — he said it himself — whether hundreds of innocent martyrs perished miserably and uselessly? They were the necessary food whereby the Revolution was to be satiated and de Batz' schemes enabled to mature. The most precious life in Europe even was only to be saved if its price went to swell the pockets of de Batz, or to further his future ambitions.

Times had indeed changed an entire nation. St. Just felt as sickened with this self-seeking Royalist as he did with the savage brutes who struck to right or left for their own delectation. He was meditating immediate flight back to his lodgings, with a hope of finding there a word for him from the chief — a word to remind him that men did live nowadays who had other aims besides their own advancement — other ideals besides the deification of self.

The curtain had descended on the first act, and traditionally, as the works of M. de Moliere demanded it, the three knocks were heard again without any interval. St. Just rose ready with a pretext for parting with his friend. The curtain was being slowly drawn up on the second act, and disclosed Alceste in wrathful conversation with Celimene.

Alceste's opening speech is short. Whilst the actor spoke it Armand had his back to the stage; with hand outstretched, he was murmuring what he hoped would prove a polite excuse for thus leaving his amiable host while the entertainment had only just begun.

De Batz — vexed and impatient — had not by any means finished with his friend yet. He thought that his specious arguments — delivered with boundless conviction — had made some impression on the mind of the young man. That impression, however, he desired to deepen, and whilst Armand was worrying his brain to find a plausible excuse for going away, de Batz was racking his to find one for keeping him here.

Then it was that the wayward demon Chance intervened. Had St. Just risen but two minutes earlier, had his active mind suggested the desired excuse more readily, who knows what unspeakable sorrow, what heartrending misery, what terrible shame might have been spared both him and those for whom he cared? Those two minutes — did he but know it — decided the whole course of his future life. The excuse hovered on his lips, de Batz reluctantly was preparing to bid him good-bye, when Celimene, speaking common-place words enough in answer to her quarrelsome lover, caused him to drop the hand which he was holding out to his friend and to turn back towards the stage.

It was an exquisite voice that had spoken — a voice mellow and tender, with deep tones in it that betrayed latent power. The voice had caused Armand to look, the lips that spoke forged the first tiny link of that chain which riveted him forever after to the speaker.

It is difficult to say if such a thing really exists as love at first sight. Poets and romancists will have us believe that it does; idealists swear by it as being the only true love worthy of the name.

I do not know if I am prepared to admit their theory with regard to Armand St. Just. Mlle. Lange's exquisite voice certainly had charmed him to the extent of making him forget his mistrust of de Batz and his desire to get away. Mechanically almost he sat down again, and leaning both elbows on the edge of the box, he rested his chin in his hand, and listened. The words which the late M. de Moliere puts into the mouth of Celimene are trite and flippant enough, yet every time that Mlle. Lange's lips moved Armand watched her, entranced.

There, no doubt, the matter would have ended: a young man fascinated by a pretty woman on the stage — 'tis a small matter, and one from which there doth not often spring a weary trail of tragic circumstances. Armand, who had a passion for music, would have worshipped at the shrine of Mlle. Lange's perfect voice until the curtain came down on the last act, had not his friend de Batz seen the keen enchantment which the actress had produced on the young enthusiast.

Now de Batz was a man who never allowed an opportunity to slip by, if that opportunity led towards the furtherance of his own desires. He did not want to lose sight of Armand just yet, and here the good demon Chance had given him an opportunity for obtaining what he wanted.

He waited quietly until the fall of the curtain at the end of Act II.; then, as Armand, with a sigh of delight, leaned back in his chair, and closing his eyes appeared to be living the last half-hour all over again, de Batz remarked with well-assumed indifference:

"Mlle. Lange is a promising young actress. Do you not think so, my friend?"

"She has a perfect voice — it was exquisite melody to the ear," replied Armand. "I was conscious of little else."

"She is a beautiful woman, nevertheless," continued de Batz with a smile. "During the next act, my good St. Just, I would suggest that you open your eyes as well as your ears."

Armand did as he was bidden. The whole appearance of Mlle. Lange seemed in harmony with her voice. She was not very tall, but eminently graceful, with a small, oval face and slender, almost childlike figure, which appeared still more so above the wide hoops and draped panniers of the fashions of Moliere's time.

Whether she was beautiful or not the young man hardly knew. Measured by certain standards, she certainly was not so, for her mouth was not small, and her nose anything but classical in outline. But the eyes were brown, and they had that half-veiled look in them — shaded with long lashes that seemed to make a perpetual tender appeal to the masculine heart: the lips, too, were full and moist, and the teeth dazzling white. Yes! — on the whole we might easily say that she was exquisite, even though we did not admit that she was beautiful.

Painter David has made a sketch of her; we have all seen it at the Musee Carnavalet, and all wondered why that charming, if irregular, little face made such an impression of sadness.

There are five acts in "Le Misanthrope," during which Celimene is almost constantly on the stage. At the end of the fourth act de Batz said casually to his friend:

"I have the honour of personal acquaintanceship with Mlle. Lange. An you care for an introduction to her, we can go round to the green room after the play."

Did prudence then whisper, "Desist"? Did loyalty to the leader murmur, "Obey"? It were indeed difficult to say. Armand St. Just was not five-and-twenty, and Mlle. Lange's melodious voice spoke louder than the whisperings of prudence or even than the call of duty.

He thanked de Batz warmly, and during the last half-hour, while the misanthropical lover spurned repentant Celimene, he was conscious of a curious sensation of impatience, a tingling of his nerves, a wild, mad longing to hear those full moist lips pronounce his name, and have those large brown eyes throw their half-veiled look into his own.

CHAPTER IV. MADEMOISELLE LANGE

The green-room was crowded when de Batz and St. Just arrived there after the performance. The older man cast a hasty glance through the open door. The crowd did not suit his purpose, and he dragged his companion hurriedly away from the contemplation of Mlle. Lange, sitting in a far corner of the room, surrounded by an admiring throng, and by innumerable floral tributes offered to her beauty and to her success.

De Batz without a word led the way back towards the stage. Here, by the dim light of tallow candles fixed in sconces against the surrounding walls, the scene-shifters were busy moving drop-scenes, back cloths and wings, and paid no heed to the two men who strolled slowly up and down silently, each wrapped in his own thoughts.

Armand walked with his hands buried in his breeches pockets, his head bent forward on his chest; but every now and again he threw quick, apprehensive glances round him whenever a firm step echoed along the empty stage or a voice rang clearly through the now deserted theatre.

"Are we wise to wait here?" he asked, speaking to himself rather than to his companion.

He was not anxious about his own safety; but the words of de Batz had impressed themselves upon his mind: "Heron and his spies we have always with us."

From the green-room a separate foyer and exit led directly out into the street. Gradually the sound of many voices, the loud laughter and occasional snatches of song which for the past half-hour had proceeded from that part of the house, became more subdued and more rare. One by one the friends of the artists were leaving the theatre, after having paid the usual banal compliments to those whom they favoured, or presented the accustomed offering of flowers to the brightest star of the night.

The actors were the first to retire, then the older actresses, the ones who could no longer command a court of admirers round them. They all filed out of the greenroom and crossed the stage to where, at the back, a narrow, rickety wooden stairs led to their so-called dressing-rooms — tiny, dark cubicles, ill-lighted, unventilated, where some half-dozen of the lesser stars tumbled over one another while removing wigs and grease-paint.

Armand and de Batz watched this exodus, both with equal impatience. Mlle. Lange was the last to leave the green-room. For some time, since the crowd had become thinner round her, Armand had contrived to catch glimpses of her slight, elegant figure. A short passage led from the stage to the green-room door, which was wide open, and at the corner of this passage the young man had paused from time to time in his walk, gazing with earnest admiration at the dainty outline of the young girl's head, with its wig of powdered curls that seemed scarcely whiter than the creamy brilliance of her skin.

De Batz did not watch Mlle. Lange beyond casting impatient looks in the direction of the crowd that prevented her leaving the green-room. He did watch Armand, however — noted his eager look, his brisk and alert movements, the obvious glances of admiration which he cast in the direction of the young actress, and this seemed to afford him a considerable amount of contentment.

The best part of an hour had gone by since the fall of the curtain before Mlle. Lange finally dismissed her many admirers, and de Batz had the satisfaction of seeing her running down the passage, turning back occasionally in order to bid gay "good-nights" to the loiterers who were loath to part from her. She was a child in all her movements, quite unconscious of self or of her own charms, but frankly delighted with her success. She was still dressed in the ridiculous hoops and panniers pertaining to her part, and the powdered peruke hid the charm of her own hair; the costume gave a certain stilted air to her unaffected personality, which, by this very sense of contrast, was essentially fascinating.

In her arms she held a huge sheaf of sweet-scented narcissi, the spoils of some favoured spot far away in the South. Armand thought that never in his life had he seen anything so winsome or so charming.

Having at last said the positively final adieu, Mlle. Lange with a happy little sigh turned to run down the passage.

She came face to face with Armand, and gave a sudden little gasp of terror. It was not good these days to come on any loiterer unawares.

But already de Batz had quickly joined his friend, and his smooth, pleasant voice, and podgy, beringed hand extended towards Mlle. Lange, were sufficient to reassure her.

"You were so surrounded in the green-room, mademoiselle," he said courteously, "I did not venture to press in among the crowd of your admirers. Yet I had the great wish to present my respectful congratulations in person."

"Ah! c'est ce cher de Batz!" exclaimed mademoiselle gaily, in that exquisitely rippling voice of hers. "And where in the world do you spring from, my friend?"

"Hush-sh-sh!" he whispered, holding her small bemitted hand in his, and putting one finger to his lips with an urgent entreaty for discretion; "not my name, I beg of you, fair one."

"Bah!" she retorted lightly, even though her full lips trembled now as she spoke and belied her very words. "You need have no fear whilst you are in this part of the house. It is an understood thing that the Committee of General Security does not send its spies behind the curtain of a theatre. Why, if all of us actors and actresses were sent to the guillotine there would be no play on the morrow. Artistes are not replaceable in a few hours; those that are in existence must perforce be spared, or the citizens who govern us now would not know where to spend their evenings."

But though she spoke so airily and with her accustomed gaiety, it was easily perceived that even on this childish mind the dangers which beset every one these days had already imprinted their mark of suspicion and of caution.

"Come into my dressing-room," she said. "I must not tarry here any longer, for they will be putting out the lights. But I have a room to myself, and we can talk there quite agreeably."

She led the way across the stage towards the wooden stairs. Armand, who during this brief colloquy between his friend and the young girl had kept discreetly in the background, felt undecided what to do. But at a peremptory sign from de Batz he, too, turned in the wake of the gay little lady, who ran swiftly up the rickety steps, humming snatches of popular songs the while, and not turning to see if indeed the two men were following her.

She had the sheaf of narcissi still in her arms, and the door of her tiny dressing-room being open, she ran straight in and threw the flowers down in a confused, sweet-scented mass upon the small table that stood at one end of the room, littered with pots and bottles, letters, mirrors, powder-puffs, silk stockings, and cambric handkerchiefs.

Then she turned and faced the two men, a merry look of unalterable gaiety dancing in her eyes.

"Shut the door, mon ami," she said to de Batz, "and after that sit down where you can, so long as it is not on my most precious pot of unguent or a box of costliest powder."

While de Batz did as he was told, she turned to Armand and said with a pretty tone of interrogation in her melodious voice:

"Monsieur?"

"St. Just, at your service, mademoiselle," said Armand, bowing very low in the most approved style obtaining at the English Court.

"St. Just?" she repeated, a look of puzzlement in her brown eyes. "Surely—"

"A kinsman of citizen St. Just, whom no doubt you know, mademoiselle," he exclaimed.

"My friend Armand St. Just," interposed de Batz, "is practically a new-comer in Paris. He lives in England habitually."

"In England?" she exclaimed. "Oh! do tell me all about England. I would love to go there. Perhaps I may have to go some day. Oh! do sit down, de Batz," she continued, talking rather volubly, even as a delicate blush heightened the colour in her cheeks under the look of obvious admiration from Armand St. Just's expressive eyes.

She swept a handful of delicate cambric and silk from off a chair, making room for de Batz' portly figure. Then she sat upon the sofa, and with an inviting gesture and a call from the eyes she bade Armand sit down next to her. She leaned back against the cushions, and the table being close by, she stretched out a hand and once more took up the bunch of narcissi, and while she talked to Armand she held the snow-white blooms quite close to her face — so close, in fact, that he could not see her mouth and chin, only her dark eyes shone across at him over the heads of the blossoms.

"Tell me all about England," she reiterated, settling herself down among the cushions like a spoilt child who is about to listen to an oft-told favourite story.

Armand was vexed that de Batz was sitting there. He felt he could have told this dainty little lady quite a good deal about England if only his pompous, fat friend would have had the good sense to go away.

As it was, he felt unusually timid and gauche, not quite knowing what to say, a fact which seemed to amuse Mlle. Lange not a little.

"I am very fond of England," he said lamely; "my sister is married to an Englishman, and I myself have taken up my permanent residence there."

"Among the society of emigres?" she queried.

Then, as Armand made no reply, de Batz interposed quickly:

"Oh! you need not fear to admit it, my good Armand; Mademoiselle Lange, has many friends among the emigres — have you not, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, of course," she replied lightly; "I have friends everywhere. Their political views have nothing to do with me. Artistes, I think, should have naught to do with politics. You see, citizen St. Just, I never inquired of you what were your views. Your name and kinship would proclaim you a partisan of citizen Robespierre, yet I find you in the company of M. de Batz; and you tell me that you live in England."

"He is no partisan of citizen Robespierre," again interposed de Batz; "in fact, mademoiselle, I may safely tell you, I think, that my friend has but one ideal on this earth, whom he has set up in a shrine, and whom he worships with all the ardour of a Christian for his God."

"How romantic!" she said, and she looked straight at Armand. "Tell me, monsieur, is your ideal a woman or a man?"

His look answered her, even before he boldly spoke the two words:

"A woman."

She took a deep draught of sweet, intoxicating scent from the narcissi, and his gaze once more brought blushes to her cheeks. De Batz' good-humoured laugh helped her to hide this unwonted access of confusion.

"That was well turned, friend Armand," he said lightly; "but I assure you, mademoiselle, that before I brought him here to-night his ideal was a man."

"A man!" she exclaimed, with a contemptuous little pout. "Who was it?"

"I know no other name for him but that of a small, insignificant flower — the Scarlet Pimpernel," replied de Batz.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" she ejaculated, dropping the flowers suddenly, and gazing on Armand with wide, wondering eyes. "And do you know him, monsieur?"

He was frowning despite himself, despite the delight which he felt at sitting so close to this charming little lady, and feeling that in a measure his presence and his personality interested her. But he felt irritated with de Batz, and angered at what he considered the latter's indiscretion. To him the very name of his leader was almost a sacred one; he was one of those enthusiastic devotees who only care to name the idol of their dreams with bated breath, and only in the ears of those who would understand and sympathise.

Again he felt that if only he could have been alone with mademoiselle he could have told her all about the Scarlet Pimpernel, knowing that in her he would find a ready listener, a helping and a loving heart; but as it was he merely replied tamely enough:

"Yes, mademoiselle, I do know him."

"You have seen him?" she queried eagerly; "spoken to him?"

"Yes."

"Oh! do tell me all about him. You know quite a number of us in France have the greatest possible admiration for your national hero. We know, of course, that he is an enemy of our Government — but, oh! we feel that he is not an enemy of France because of that. We are a nation of heroes, too, monsieur," she added with a pretty, proud toss of the head; "we can appreciate bravery and resource, and we love the mystery that surrounds the personality of your Scarlet Pimpernel. But since you know him, monsieur, tell me what is he like?"

Armand was smiling again. He was yielding himself up wholly to the charm which emanated from this young girl's entire being, from her gaiety and her unaffectedness, her enthusiasm, and that obvious artistic temperament which caused her to feel every sensation with superlative keenness and thoroughness.

"What is he like?" she insisted.

"That, mademoiselle," he replied, "I am not at liberty to tell you."

"Not at liberty to tell me!" she exclaimed; "but monsieur, if I command you—"

"At risk of falling forever under the ban of your displeasure, mademoiselle, I would still remain silent on that subject."

She gazed on him with obvious astonishment. It was quite an unusual thing for this spoilt darling of an admiring public to be thus openly thwarted in her whims.

"How tiresome and pedantic!" she said, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders and a moue of discontent. "And, oh! how ungallant! You have learnt ugly, English ways, monsieur; for there, I am told, men hold their womenkind in very scant esteem. There!" she added, turning with a mock air of hopelessness towards de Batz, "am I not a most unlucky woman? For the past two years I have used my best endeavours to catch sight of that interesting Scarlet Pimpernel; here do I meet monsieur, who actually knows him (so he says), and he is so ungallant that he even refuses to satisfy the first cravings of my just curiosity."

"Citizen St. Just will tell you nothing now, mademoiselle," rejoined de Batz with his good-humoured laugh; "it is my presence, I assure you, which is setting a seal upon his lips. He is, believe me, aching to confide in you, to share in your enthusiasm, and to see your beautiful eyes glowing in response to his ardour when he describes to you the exploits of that prince of heroes. En tete-a-tete one day, you will, I know, worm every secret out of my discreet friend Armand."

Mademoiselle made no comment on this — that is to say, no audible comment — but she buried the whole of her face for a few seconds among the flowers, and Armand from amongst those flowers caught sight of a pair of very bright brown eyes which shone on him with a puzzled look.

She said nothing more about the Scarlet Pimpernel or about England just then, but after awhile she began talking of more indifferent subjects: the state of the weather, the price of food, the discomforts of her own house, now that the servants had been put on perfect equality with their masters.

Armand soon gathered that the burning questions of the day, the horrors of massacres, the raging turmoil of politics, had not affected her very deeply as yet. She had not troubled her pretty head very much about the social and humanitarian aspect of the present seething revolution. She did not really wish to think about it at all. An artiste to her finger-tips, she was spending her young life in earnest work, striving to attain perfection in her art, absorbed in study during the day, and in the expression of what she had learnt in the evenings.

The terrors of the guillotine affected her a little, but somewhat vaguely still. She had not realised that any dangers could assail her whilst she worked for the artistic delectation of the public.

It was not that she did not understand what went on around her, but that her artistic temperament and her environment had kept her aloof from it all. The horrors of the Place de la Revolution made her shudder, but only in the same way as the tragedies of M. Racine or of Sophocles which she had studied caused her to shudder, and she had exactly the same sympathy for poor Queen Marie Antoinette as she had for Mary Stuart, and shed as many tears for King Louis as she did for Polyeucte.

Once de Batz mentioned the Dauphin, but mademoiselle put up her hand quickly and said in a trembling voice, whilst the tears gathered in her eyes:

"Do not speak of the child to me, de Batz. What can I, a lonely, hard-working woman, do to help him? I try not to think of him, for if I did, knowing my own helplessness, I feel that I could hate my countrymen, and speak my bitter hatred of them across the footlights; which would be more than foolish," she added naively, "for it would not help the child, and I should be sent to the guillotine. But oh sometimes I feel that I would gladly die if only that poor little child-martyr were restored to those who love him and given back once more to joy and happiness. But they would not take my life for his, I am afraid," she concluded, smiling through her tears. "My life is of no value in comparison with his."

Soon after this she dismissed her two visitors. De Batz, well content with the result of this evening's entertainment, wore an urbane, bland smile on his rubicund face. Armand, somewhat serious and not a little in love, made the hand-kiss with which he took his leave last as long as he could.

"You will come and see me again, citizen St. Just?" she asked after that preliminary leave-taking.

"At your service, mademoiselle," he replied with alacrity.

"How long do you stay in Paris?"

"I may be called away at any time."

"Well, then, come to-morrow. I shall be free towards four o'clock. Square du Roule. You cannot miss the house. Any one there will tell you where lives citizeness Lange."

"At your service, mademoiselle," he replied.

The words sounded empty and meaningless, but his eyes, as they took final leave of her, spoke the gratitude and the joy which he felt.

CHAPTER V. THE TEMPLE PRISON

It was close on midnight when the two friends finally parted company outside the doors of the theatre. The night air struck with biting keenness against them when they emerged from the stuffy, overheated building, and both wrapped their caped cloaks tightly round their shoulders. Armand — more than ever now — was anxious to rid himself of de Batz. The Gascon's platitudes irritated him beyond the bounds of forbearance, and he wanted to be alone, so that he might think over the events of this night, the chief event being a little lady with an enchanting voice and the most fascinating brown eyes he had ever seen.

Self-reproach, too, was fighting a fairly even fight with the excitement that had been called up by that same pair of brown eyes. Armand for the past four or five hours had acted in direct opposition to the earnest advice given to him by his chief; he had renewed one friendship which had been far better left in oblivion, and he had made an acquaintance which already was leading him along a path that he felt sure his comrade would disapprove. But the path was so profusely strewn with scented narcissi that Armand's sensitive conscience was quickly lulled to rest by the intoxicating fragrance.

Looking neither to right nor left, he made his way very quickly up the Rue Richelieu towards the Montmartre quarter, where he lodged.

De Batz stood and watched him for as long as the dim lights of the street lamps illumined his slim, soberly-clad figure; then he turned on his heel and walked off in the opposite direction.

His florid, pock-marked face wore an air of contentment not altogether unmixed with a kind of spiteful triumph.

"So, my pretty Scarlet Pimpernel," he muttered between his closed lips, "you wish to meddle in my affairs, to have for yourself and your friends the credit and glory of snatching the golden prize from the clutches of these murderous brutes. Well, we shall see! We shall see which is the wildest — the French ferret or the English fox."

He walked deliberately away from the busy part of the town, turning his back on the river, stepping out briskly straight before him, and swinging his gold-beaded cane as he walked.

The streets which he had to traverse were silent and deserted, save occasionally where a drinking or an eating house had its swing-doors still invitingly open. From these places, as de Batz strode rapidly by, came sounds of loud voices, rendered raucous by outdoor oratory; volleys of oaths hurled irreverently in the midst of impassioned speeches; interruptions from rowdy audiences that vied with the speaker in invectives and blasphemies; wordy war-fares that ended in noisy vituperations; accusations hurled through the air heavy with tobacco smoke and the fumes of cheap wines and of raw spirits.

De Batz took no heed of these as he passed, anxious only that the crowd of eating-house politicians did not, as often was its wont, turn out pele-mele into the street, and settle its quarrel by the weight of fists. He did not wish to be embroiled in a street fight, which invariably ended in denunciations and arrests, and was glad when presently he had left the purlieu of the Palais Royal behind him, and could strike on his left toward the lonely Faubourg du Temple.

From the dim distance far away came at intervals the mournful sound of a roll of muffled drums, half veiled by the intervening hubbub of the busy night life of the great city. It proceeded from the Place de la Revolution, where a company of the National Guard were on night watch round the guillotine. The dull, intermittent notes of the drum came as a reminder to the free people of France that the watchdog of a vengeful revolution was alert night and day, never sleeping, ever wakeful, "beating up game for the guillotine," as the new decree framed to-day by the Government of the people had ordered that it should do.

From time to time now the silence of this lonely street was broken by a sudden cry of terror, followed by the clash of arms, the inevitable volley of oaths, the call for help, the final moan of anguish. They were the ever-recurring brief tragedies which told of denunciations, of domiciliary search, of sudden arrests, of an agonising desire for life and for freedom — for life under these same horrible conditions of brutality and of servitude, for freedom to breathe, if only a day or two longer, this air, polluted by filth and by blood.

De Batz, hardened to these scenes, paid no heed to them. He had heard it so often, that cry in the night, followed by death-like silence; it came from comfortable bourgeois houses, from squalid lodgings, or lonely cul-de-sac, wherever some hunted quarry was run to earth by the newly-organised spies of the Committee of General Security.

Five and thirty livres for every head that falls trunkless into the basket at the foot of the guillotine! Five and thirty pieces of silver, now as then, the price of innocent blood. Every cry in the night, every call for help, meant game for the guillotine, and five and thirty livres in the hands of a Judas.

And de Batz walked on unmoved by what he saw and heard, swinging his cane and looking satisfied. Now he struck into the Place de la Victoire, and looked on one of the open-air camps that had recently been established where men, women, and children were working to provide arms and accoutrements for the Republican army that was fighting the whole of Europe.

The people of France were up in arms against tyranny; and on the open places of their mighty city they were encamped day and night forging those arms which were destined to make them free, and in the meantime were bending under a yoke of tyranny more complete, more grinding and absolute than any that the most despotic kings had ever dared to inflict.

Here by the light of resin torches, at this late hour of the night, raw lads were being drilled into soldiers, half-naked under the cutting blast of the north wind, their knees shaking under them, their arms and legs blue with cold, their stomachs empty, and their teeth chattering with fear; women were sewing shirts for the great improvised army, with eyes straining to see the stitches by the flickering light of the torches, their throats parched with the continual inhaling of smoke-laden air; even children, with weak, clumsy little fingers, were picking rags to be woven into cloth again all, all these slaves were working far into the night, tired, hungry, and cold, but working unceasingly, as the country had demanded it: "the people of France in arms against tyranny!" The people of France had to set to work to make arms, to clothe the soldiers, the defenders of the people's liberty.

And from this crowd of people — men, women, and children — there came scarcely a sound, save raucous whispers, a moan or a sigh quickly suppressed. A grim silence reigned in this thickly-peopled camp; only the crackling of the torches broke that silence now and then, or the flapping of canvas in the wintry gale. They worked on sullen, desperate, and starving, with no hope of payment save

the miserable rations wrung from poor tradespeople or miserable farmers, as wretched, as oppressed as themselves; no hope of payment, only fear of punishment, for that was ever present.

The people of France in arms against tyranny were not allowed to forget that grim taskmaster with the two great hands stretched upwards, holding the knife which descended mercilessly, indiscriminately on necks that did not bend willingly to the task.

A grim look of gratified desire had spread over de Batz' face as he skirted the open-air camp. Let them toil, let them groan, let them starve! The more these clouts suffer, the more brutal the heel that grinds them down, the sooner will the Emperor's money accomplish its work, the sooner will these wretches be clamoring for the monarchy, which would mean a rich reward in de Batz' pockets.

To him everything now was for the best: the tyranny, the brutality, the massacres. He gloated in the holocausts with as much satisfaction as did the most bloodthirsty Jacobin in the Convention. He would with his own hands have wielded the guillotine that worked too slowly for his ends. Let that end justify the means, was his motto. What matter if the future King of France walked up to his throne over steps made of headless corpses and rendered slippery with the blood of martyrs?

The ground beneath de Batz' feet was hard and white with the frost. Overhead the pale, wintry moon looked down serene and placid on this giant city wallowing in an ocean of misery.

There, had been but little snow as yet this year, and the cold was intense. On his right now the Cimetiere des SS. Innocents lay peaceful and still beneath the wan light of the moon. A thin covering of snow lay evenly alike on grass mounds and smooth stones. Here and there a broken cross with chipped arms still held pathetically outstretched, as if in a final appeal for human love, bore mute testimony to senseless excesses and spiteful desire for destruction.

But here within the precincts of the dwelling of the eternal Master a solemn silence reigned; only the cold north wind shook the branches of the yew, causing them to send forth a melancholy sigh into the night, and to shed a shower of tiny crystals of snow like the frozen tears of the dead.

And round the precincts of the lonely graveyard, and down narrow streets or open places, the night watchmen went their rounds, lantern in hand, and every five minutes their monotonous call rang clearly out in the night:

"Sleep, citizens! everything is quiet and at peace!"

We may take it that de Batz did not philosophise over-much on what went on around him. He had walked swiftly up the Rue St. Martin, then turning sharply to his right he found himself beneath the tall, frowning walls of the Temple prison, the grim guardian of so many secrets, such terrible despair, such unspeakable tragedies.

Here, too, as in the Place de la Revolution, an intermittent roll of muffled drums proclaimed the ever-watchful presence of the National Guard. But with that exception not a sound stirred round the grim and stately edifice; there were no cries, no calls, no appeals around its walls. All the crying and wailing was shut in by the massive stone that told no tales.

Dim and flickering lights shone behind several of the small windows in the facade of the huge labyrinthine building. Without any hesitation de Batz turned down the Rue du Temple, and soon found himself in front of the main gates which gave on the courtyard beyond. The sentinel challenged him, but he had the pass-word, and explained that he desired to have speech with citizen Heron.

With a surly gesture the guard pointed to the heavy bell-pull up against the gate, and de Batz pulled it with all his might. The long clang of the brazen bell echoed and re-echoed round the solid stone walls. Anon a tiny judas in the gate was cautiously pushed open, and a peremptory voice once again challenged the midnight intruder.

De Batz, more peremptorily this time, asked for citizen Heron, with whom he had immediate and important business, and a glimmer of a piece of silver which he held up close to the judas secured him the necessary admittance.

The massive gates slowly swung open on their creaking hinges, and as de Batz passed beneath the archway they closed again behind him.

The concierge's lodge was immediately on his left. Again he was challenged, and again gave the pass-word. But his face was apparently known here, for no serious hindrance to proceed was put in his way.

A man, whose wide, lean frame was but ill-covered by a threadbare coat and ragged breeches, and with soleless shoes on his feet, was told off to direct the citizen to citizen Heron's rooms. The man walked slowly along with bent knees and arched spine, and shuffled his feet as he walked; the bunch of keys which he carried rattled ominously in his long, grimy hands; the passages were badly lighted, and he also carried a lantern to guide himself on the way.

Closely followed by de Batz, he soon turned into the central corridor, which is open to the sky above, and was spectrally alight now with flag-stones and walls gleaming beneath the silvery sheen of the moon, and throwing back the fantastic elongated shadows of the two men as they walked.

On the left, heavily barred windows gave on the corridor, as did here and there the massive oaken doors, with their gigantic hinges and bolts, on the steps of which squatted groups of soldiers wrapped in their cloaks, with wild, suspicious eyes beneath their capotes, peering at the midnight visitor as he passed.

There was no thought of silence here. The very walls seemed alive with sounds, groans and tears, loud wails and murmured prayers; they exuded from the stones and trembled on the frost-laden air.

Occasionally at one of the windows a pair of white hands would appear, grasping the heavy iron bar, trying to shake it in its socket, and mayhap, above the hands, the dim vision of a haggard face, a man's or a woman's, trying to get a glimpse of the outside world, a final look at the sky, before the last journey to the place of death to-morrow. Then one of the soldiers, with a loud, angry oath, would struggle to his feet, and with the butt-end of his gun strike at the thin, wan fingers till their hold on the iron bar relaxed, and the pallid face beyond would sink back into the darkness with a desperate cry of pain.

A quick, impatient sigh escaped de Batz' lips. He had skirted the wide courtyard in the wake of his guide, and from where he was he could see the great central tower, with its tiny windows lighted from within, the grim walls behind which the descendant of the world's conquerors, the bearer of the proudest name in Europe, and wearer of its most ancient crown, had spent the last days of his brilliant life in abject shame, sorrow, and degradation. The memory had swiftly surged up before him of that night when he all but rescued King Louis and his family from this same miserable prison: the guard had been bribed, the keeper corrupted, everything had been prepared, save the reckoning with the one irresponsible factor — chance!

He had failed then and had tried again, and again had failed; a fortune had been his reward if he had succeeded. He had failed, but even now, when his footsteps echoed along the flagged courtyard, over which an unfortunate King and Queen had walked on their way to their last ignominious Calvary, he hugged himself with the satisfying thought that where he had failed at least no one else had succeeded.

Whether that meddlesome English adventurer, who called himself the Scarlet Pimpernel, had planned the rescue of King Louis or of Queen Marie Antoinette at any time or not — that he did not know; but on one point at least he was more than ever determined, and that was that no power on earth should snatch from him the golden prize offered by Austria for the rescue of the little Dauphin.

“I would sooner see the child perish, if I cannot save him myself,” was the burning thought in this man’s tortuous brain. “And let that accursed Englishman look to himself and to his d — d confederates,” he added, muttering a fierce oath beneath his breath.

A winding, narrow stone stair, another length or two of corridor, and his guide’s shuffling footsteps paused beside a low iron-studded door let into the solid stone. De Batz dismissed his ill-clothed guide and pulled the iron bell-handle which hung beside the door.

The bell gave forth a dull and broken clang, which seemed like an echo of the wails of sorrow that peopled the huge building with their weird and monotonous sounds.

De Batz — a thoroughly unimaginative person — waited patiently beside the door until it was opened from within, and he was confronted by a tall stooping figure, wearing a greasy coat of snuff-brown cloth, and holding high above his head a lanthorn that threw its feeble light on de Batz’ jovial face and form.

“It is even I, citizen Heron,” he said, breaking in swiftly on the other’s ejaculation of astonishment, which threatened to send his name echoing the whole length of corridors and passages, until round every corner of the labyrinthine house of sorrow the murmur would be borne on the wings of the cold night breeze: “Citizen Heron is in parley with ci-devant Baron de Batz!”

A fact which would have been equally unpleasant for both these worthies.

“Enter!” said Heron curtly.

He banged the heavy door to behind his visitor; and de Batz, who seemed to know his way about the place, walked straight across the narrow landing to where a smaller door stood invitingly open.

He stepped boldly in, the while citizen Heron put the lanthorn down on the floor of the couloir, and then followed his nocturnal visitor into the room.

CHAPTER VI. THE COMMITTEE'S AGENT

It was a narrow, ill-ventilated place, with but one barred window that gave on the courtyard. An evil-smelling lamp hung by a chain from the grimy ceiling, and in a corner of the room a tiny iron stove shed more unpleasant vapour than warm glow around.

There was but little furniture: two or three chairs, a table which was littered with papers, and a corner-cupboard — the open doors of which revealed a miscellaneous collection — bundles of papers, a tin saucepan, a piece of cold sausage, and a couple of pistols. The fumes of stale tobacco-smoke hovered in the air, and mingled most unpleasantly with those of the lamp above, and of the mildew that penetrated through the walls just below the roof.

Heron pointed to one of the chairs, and then sat down on the other, close to the table, on which he rested his elbow. He picked up a short-stemmed pipe, which he had evidently laid aside at the sound of the bell, and having taken several deliberate long-drawn puffs from it, he said abruptly:

"Well, what is it now?"

In the meanwhile de Batz had made himself as much at home in this uncomfortable room as he possibly could. He had deposited his hat and cloak on one rickety rush-bottomed chair, and drawn another close to the fire. He sat down with one leg crossed over the other, his podgy be-ringed hand wandering with loving gentleness down the length of his shapely calf.

He was nothing if not complacent, and his complacency seemed highly to irritate his friend Heron.

"Well, what is it?" reiterated the latter, drawing his visitor's attention roughly to himself by banging his fist on the table. "Out with it! What do you want? Why have you come at this hour of the night to compromise me, I suppose — bring your own d — d neck and mine into the same noose — what?"

"Easy, easy, my friend," responded de Batz imperturbably; "waste not so much time in idle talk. Why do I usually come to see you? Surely you have had no cause to complain hitherto of the unprofitableness of my visits to you?"

"They will have to be still more profitable to me in the future," growled the other across the table. "I have more power now."

"I know you have," said de Batz suavely. "The new decree? What? You may denounce whom you please, search whom you please, arrest whom you please, and send whom you please to the Supreme Tribunal without giving them the slightest chance of escape."

"Is it in order to tell me all this that you have come to see me at this hour of the night?" queried Heron with a sneer.

"No; I came at this hour of the night because I surmised that in the future you and your hell-hounds would be so busy all day 'beating up game for the guillotine' that the only time you would have at the disposal of your friends would be the late hours of the night. I saw you at the theatre a couple of hours ago, friend Heron; I didn't think to find you yet abed."

"Well, what do you want?"

"Rather," retorted de Batz blandly, "shall we say, what do YOU want, citizen Heron?"

"For what?"

"For my continued immunity at the hands of yourself and your pack?"

Heron pushed his chair brusquely aside and strode across the narrow room deliberately facing the portly figure of de Batz, who with head slightly inclined on one side, his small eyes narrowed till they appeared mere slits in his pockmarked face, was steadily and quite placidly contemplating this inhuman monster who had this very day been given uncontrolled power over hundreds of thousands of human lives.

Heron was one of those tall men who look mean in spite of their height. His head was small and narrow, and his hair, which was sparse and lank, fell in untidy strands across his forehead. He stooped slightly from the neck, and his chest, though wide, was hollow between the shoulders. But his legs were big and bony, slightly bent at the knees, like those of an ill-conditioned horse.

The face was thin and the cheeks sunken; the eyes, very large and prominent, had a look in them of cold and ferocious cruelty, a look which contrasted strangely with the weakness and petty greed apparent in the mouth, which was flabby, with full, very red lips, and chin that sloped away to the long thin neck.

Even at this moment as he gazed on de Batz the greed and the cruelty in him were fighting one of those battles the issue of which is always uncertain in men of his stamp.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "that I am prepared to treat with you any longer. You are an intolerable bit of vermin that has annoyed the Committee of General Security for over two years now. It would be excessively pleasant to crush you once and for all, as one would a buzzing fly."

"Pleasant, perhaps, but immeasurably foolish," rejoined de Batz coolly; "you would only get thirty-five livres for my head, and I offer you ten times that amount for the self-same commodity."

"I know, I know; but the whole thing has become too dangerous."

"Why? I am very modest. I don't ask a great deal. Let your hounds keep off my scent."

"You have too many d — d confederates."

"Oh! Never mind about the others. I am not bargaining about them. Let them look after themselves."

"Every time we get a batch of them, one or the other denounces you."

"Under torture, I know," rejoined de Batz placidly, holding his podgy hands to the warm glow of the fire. "For you have started torture in your house of Justice now, eh, friend Heron? You and your friend the Public Prosecutor have gone the whole gamut of devilry — eh?"

"What's that to you?" retorted the other gruffly.

"Oh, nothing, nothing! I was even proposing to pay you three thousand five hundred livres for the privilege of taking no further interest in what goes on inside this prison!"

"Three thousand five hundred!" ejaculated Heron involuntarily, and this time even his eyes lost their cruelty; they joined issue with the mouth in an expression of hungering avarice.

"Two little zeros added to the thirty-five, which is all you would get for handing me over to your accursed Tribunal," said de Batz, and, as if thoughtlessly, his hand wandered to the inner pocket of his coat, and a slight rustle as of thin crisp paper brought drops of moisture to the lips of Heron.

"Leave me alone for three weeks and the money is yours," concluded de Batz pleasantly.

There was silence in the room now. Through the narrow barred window the steely rays of the moon fought with the dim yellow light of the oil lamp, and lit up the pale face of the Committee's agent with its lines of cruelty in sharp conflict with those of greed.

"Well! is it a bargain?" asked de Batz at last in his usual smooth, oily voice, as he half drew from out his pocket that tempting little bundle of crisp printed paper. "You have only to give me the usual receipt for the money and it is yours."

Heron gave a vicious snarl.

"It is dangerous, I tell you. That receipt, if it falls into some cursed meddler's hands, would send me straight to the guillotine."

"The receipt could only fall into alien hands," rejoined de Batz blandly, "if I happened to be arrested, and even in that case they could but fall into those of the chief agent of the Committee of General Security, and he hath name Heron. You must take some risks, my friend. I take them too. We are each in the other's hands. The bargain is quite fair."

For a moment or two longer Heron appeared to be hesitating whilst de Batz watched him with keen intentness. He had no doubt himself as to the issue. He had tried most of these patriots in his own golden crucible, and had weighed their patriotism against Austrian money, and had never found the latter wanting.

He had not been here to-night if he were not quite sure. This inveterate conspirator in the Royalist cause never took personal risks. He looked on Heron now, smiling to himself the while with perfect satisfaction.

"Very well," said the Committee's agent with sudden decision, "I'll take the money. But on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you leave little Capet alone."

"The Dauphin!"

"Call him what you like," said Heron, taking a step nearer to de Batz, and from his great height glowering down in fierce hatred and rage upon his accomplice; "call the young devil what you like, but leave us to deal with him."

"To kill him, you mean? Well, how can I prevent it, my friend?"

"You and your like are always plotting to get him out of here. I won't have it. I tell you I won't have it. If the brat disappears I am a dead man. Robespierre and his gang have told me as much. So you leave him alone, or I'll not raise a finger to help you, but will lay my own hands on your accursed neck."

He looked so ferocious and so merciless then, that despite himself, the selfish adventurer, the careless self-seeking intriguer, shuddered with a quick wave of unreasoning terror. He turned away from Heron's piercing gaze, the gaze of a hyena whose prey is being snatched from beneath its nails. For a moment he stared thoughtfully into the fire.

He heard the other man's heavy footsteps cross and re-cross the narrow room, and was conscious of the long curved shadow creeping up the mildewed wall or retreating down upon the carpetless floor.

Suddenly, without any warning he felt a grip upon his shoulder. He gave a start and almost uttered a cry of alarm which caused Heron to laugh. The Committee's agent was vastly amused at his friend's obvious access of fear. There was nothing that he liked better than that he should inspire dread in the hearts of all those with whom he came in contact.

"I am just going on my usual nocturnal round," he said abruptly. "Come with me, citizen de Batz."

A certain grim humour was apparent in his face as he proffered this invitation, which sounded like a rough command. As de Batz seemed to hesitate he nodded peremptorily to him to follow. Already he had gone into the hall and picked up his lanthorn. From beneath his waistcoat he drew forth a bunch of keys, which he rattled impatiently, calling to his friend to come.

"Come, citizen," he said roughly. "I wish to show you the one treasure in this house which your d — d fingers must not touch."

Mechanically de Batz rose at last. He tried to be master of the terror which was invading his very bones. He would not own to himself even that he was afraid, and almost audibly he kept murmuring to himself that he had no cause for fear.

Heron would never touch him. The spy's avarice, his greed of money were a perfect safeguard for any man who had the control of millions, and Heron knew, of course, that he could make of this inveterate plotter a comfortable source of revenue for himself. Three weeks would soon be over, and fresh bargains could be made time and again, while de Batz was alive and free.

Heron was still waiting at the door, even whilst de Batz wondered what this nocturnal visitation would reveal to him of atrocity and of outrage. He made a final effort to master his nervousness, wrapped his cloak tightly around him, and followed his host out of the room.

CHAPTER VII. THE MOST PRECIOUS LIFE IN EUROPE

Once more he was being led through the interminable corridors of the gigantic building. Once more from the narrow, barred windows close by him he heard the heart-breaking sighs, the moans, the curses which spoke of tragedies that he could only guess.

Heron was walking on ahead of him, preceding him by some fifty metres or so, his long legs covering the distances more rapidly than de Batz could follow them. The latter knew his way well about the old prison. Few men in Paris possessed that accurate knowledge of its intricate passages and its network of cells and halls which de Batz had acquired after close and persevering study.

He himself could have led Heron to the doors of the tower where the little Dauphin was being kept imprisoned, but unfortunately he did not possess the keys that would open all the doors which led to it. There were sentinels at every gate, groups of soldiers at each end of every corridor, the great — now empty — courtyards, thronged with prisoners in the daytime, were alive with soldiery even now. Some walked up and down with fixed bayonet on shoulder, others sat in groups on the stone copings or squatted on the ground, smoking or playing cards, but all of them were alert and watchful.

Heron was recognised everywhere the moment he appeared, and though in these days of equality no one presented arms, nevertheless every guard stood aside to let him pass, or when necessary opened a gate for the powerful chief agent of the Committee of General Security.

Indeed, de Batz had no keys such as these to open the way for him to the presence of the martyred little King.

Thus the two men wended their way on in silence, one preceding the other. De Batz walked leisurely, thought-fully, taking stock of everything he saw — the gates, the barriers, the positions of sentinels and warders, of everything in fact that might prove a help or a hindrance presently, when the great enterprise would be hazarded. At last — still in the wake of Heron — he found himself once more behind the main entrance gate, underneath the archway on which gave the guichet of the concierge.

Here, too, there seemed to be an unnecessary number of soldiers: two were doing sentinel outside the guichet, but there were others in a file against the wall.

Heron rapped with his keys against the door of the concierge's lodge, then, as it was not immediately opened from within, he pushed it open with his foot.

"The concierge?" he queried peremptorily.

From a corner of the small panelled room there came a grunt and a reply:

"Gone to bed, quoi!"

The man who previously had guided de Batz to Heron's door slowly struggled to his feet. He had been squatting somewhere in the gloom, and had been roused by Heron's rough command. He slouched forward now still carrying a boot in one hand and a blacking brush in the other.

"Take this lantern, then," said the chief agent with a snarl directed at the sleeping concierge, "and come along. Why are you still here?" he added, as if in after-thought.

"The citizen concierge was not satisfied with the way I had done his boots," muttered the man, with an evil leer as he spat contemptuously on the floor; "an aristo, quoi? A hell of a place this... twenty cells to sweep out every day... and boots to clean for every aristo of a concierge or warder who demands it.... Is that work for a free born patriot, I ask?"

"Well, if you are not satisfied, citizen Dupont," retorted Heron dryly, "you may go when you like, you know there are plenty of others ready to do your work..."

"Nineteen hours a day, and nineteen sous by way of payment.... I have had fourteen days of this convict work..."

He continued to mutter under his breath, whilst Heron, paying no further heed to him, turned abruptly towards a group of soldiers stationed outside.

"En avant, corporal!" he said; "bring four men with you... we go up to the tower."

The small procession was formed. On ahead the lantern-bearer, with arched spine and shaking knees, dragging shuffling footsteps along the corridor, then the corporal with two of his soldiers, then Heron closely followed by de Batz, and finally two more soldiers bringing up the rear.

Heron had given the bunch of keys to the man Dupont. The latter, on ahead, holding the lantern aloft, opened one gate after another. At each gate he waited for the little procession to file through, then he re-locked the gate and passed on.

Up two or three flights of winding stairs set in the solid stone, and the final heavy door was reached.

De Batz was meditating. Heron's precautions for the safe-guarding of the most precious life in Europe were more complete than he had anticipated. What lavish liberality would be required! what superhuman ingenuity and boundless courage in order to break down all the barriers that had been set up round that young life that flickered inside this grim tower!

Of these three requisites the corpulent, complacent intriguer possessed only the first in a considerable degree. He could be exceedingly liberal with the foreign money which he had at his disposal. As for courage and ingenuity, he believed that he possessed both, but these qualities had not served him in very good stead in the attempts which he had made at different times to rescue the unfortunate members of the Royal Family from prison. His overwhelming egotism would not admit for a moment that in ingenuity and pluck the Scarlet Pimpernel and his English followers could outdo him, but he did wish to make quite sure that they would not interfere with him in the highly remunerative work of saving the Dauphin.

Heron's impatient call roused him from these meditations. The little party had come to a halt outside a massive iron-studded door.

At a sign from the chief agent the soldiers stood at attention. He then called de Batz and the lantern-bearer to him.

He took a key from his breeches pocket, and with his own hand unlocked the massive door. He curtly ordered the lantern-bearer and de Batz to go through, then he himself went in, and finally once more re-locked the door behind him, the soldiers remaining on guard on the landing outside.

Now the three men were standing in a square antechamber, dank and dark, devoid of furniture save for a large cupboard that filled the whole of one wall; the others, mildewed and stained, were covered with a greyish paper, which here and there hung away in strips.

Heron crossed this ante-chamber, and with his knuckles rapped against a small door opposite.

"Hola!" he shouted, "Simon, mon vieux, tu es la?"

From the inner room came the sound of voices, a man's and a woman's, and now, as if in response to Heron's call, the shrill tones of a child. There was some shuffling, too, of footsteps, and some pushing about of furniture, then the door was opened, and a gruff voice invited the belated visitors to enter.

The atmosphere in this further room was so thick that at first de Batz was only conscious of the evil smells that pervaded it; smells which were made up of the fumes of tobacco, of burning coke, of a smoky lamp, and of stale food, and mingling through it all the pungent odour of raw spirits.

Heron had stepped briskly in, closely followed by de Batz. The man Dupont with a mutter of satisfaction put down his lanthorn and curled himself up in a corner of the antechamber. His interest in the spectacle so favoured by citizen Heron had apparently been exhausted by constant repetition.

De Batz looked round him with keen curiosity with which disgust was ready enough to mingle.

The room itself might have been a large one; it was almost impossible to judge of its size, so crammed was it with heavy and light furniture of every conceivable shape and type. There was a monumental wooden bedstead in one corner, a huge sofa covered in black horsehair in another. A large table stood in the centre of the room, and there were at least four capacious armchairs round it. There were wardrobes and cabinets, a diminutive washstand and a huge pier-glass, there were innumerable boxes and packing-cases, cane-bottomed chairs and what-nots every-where. The place looked like a depot for second-hand furniture.

In the midst of all the litter de Batz at last became conscious of two people who stood staring at him and at Heron. He saw a man before him, somewhat fleshy of build, with smooth, mouse-coloured hair brushed away from a central parting, and ending in a heavy curl above each ear; the eyes were wide open and pale in colour, the lips unusually thick and with a marked downward droop. Close beside him stood a youngish-looking woman, whose unwieldy bulk, however, and pallid skin revealed the sedentary life and the ravages of ill-health.

Both appeared to regard Heron with a certain amount of awe, and de Batz with a vast measure of curiosity.

Suddenly the woman stood aside, and in the far corner of the room there was displayed to the Gascon Royalist's cold, calculating gaze the pathetic figure of the uncrowned King of France.

"How is it Capet is not yet in bed?" queried Heron as soon as he caught sight of the child.

"He wouldn't say his prayers this evening," replied Simon with a coarse laugh, "and wouldn't drink his medicine. Bah!" he added with a snarl, "this is a place for dogs and not for human folk."

"If you are not satisfied, mon vieux," retorted Heron curtly, "you can send in your resignation when you like. There are plenty who will be glad of the place."

The ex-cobbler gave another surly growl and expectorated on the floor in the direction where stood the child.

"Little vermin," he said, "he is more trouble than man or woman can bear."

The boy in the meanwhile seemed to take but little notice of the vulgar insults put upon him by his guardian. He stood, a quaint, impassive little figure, more interested apparently in de Batz, who was a stranger to him, than in the three others whom he knew. De Batz noted that the child looked well nourished, and that he was warmly clad in a rough woollen shirt and cloth breeches, with coarse grey stockings and thick shoes; but he also saw that the clothes were indescribably filthy, as were the child's hands and face. The golden curls, among which a young and queenly mother had once loved to pass her slender perfumed fingers, now hung bedraggled, greasy, and lank round the little face, from the lines of which every trace of dignity and of simplicity had long since been erased.

There was no look of the martyr about this child now, even though, mayhap, his small back had often smarted under his vulgar tutor's rough blows; rather did the pale young face wear the air of sullen indifference, and an abject desire to please, which would have appeared heart-breaking to any spectator less self-seeking and egotistic than was this Gascon conspirator.

Madame Simon had called him to her while her man and the citizen Heron were talking, and the child went readily enough, without any sign of fear. She took the corner of her coarse dirty apron in her hand, and wiped the boy's mouth and face with it.

"I can't keep him clean," she said with an apologetic shrug of the shoulders and a look at de Batz. "There now," she added, speaking once more to the child, "drink like a good boy, and say your lesson to please maman, and then you shall go to bed."

She took a glass from the table, which was filled with a clear liquid that de Batz at first took to be water, and held it to the boy's lips. He turned his head away and began to whimper.

"Is the medicine very nasty?" queried de Batz.

"Mon Dieu! but no, citizen," exclaimed the woman, "it is good strong eau de vie, the best that can be procured. Capet likes it really — don't you, Capet? It makes you happy and cheerful, and sleep well of nights. Why, you had a glassful yesterday and enjoyed it. Take it now," she added in a quick whisper, seeing that Simon and Heron were in close conversation together; "you know it makes papa angry if you don't have at least half a glass now and then."

The child wavered for a moment longer, making a quaint little grimace of distaste. But at last he seemed to make up his mind that it was wisest to yield over so small a matter, and he took the glass from Madame Simon.

And thus did de Batz see the descendant of St. Louis quaffing a glass of raw spirit at the bidding of a rough cobbler's wife, whom he called by the fond and foolish name sacred to childhood, *maman*!

Selfish egoist though he was, de Batz turned away in loathing.

Simon had watched the little scene with obvious satisfaction. He chuckled audibly when the child drank the spirit, and called Heron's attention to him, whilst a look of triumph lit up his wide, pale eyes.

"And now, mon petit," he said jovially, "let the citizen hear you say your prayers!"

He winked toward de Batz, evidently anticipating a good deal of enjoyment for the visitor from what was coming. From a heap of litter in a corner of the room he fetched out a greasy red bonnet adorned with a tricolour cockade, and a soiled and tattered flag, which had once been white, and had golden fleur-de-lys embroidered upon it.

The cap he set on the child's head, and the flag he threw upon the floor.

"Now, Capet — your prayers!" he said with another chuckle of amusement.

All his movements were rough, and his speech almost ostentatiously coarse. He banged against the furniture as he moved about the room, kicking a footstool out of the way or knocking over a chair. De Batz instinctively thought of the perfumed stillness of the rooms at Versailles, of the army of elegant high-born ladies who had ministered to the wants of this child, who stood there now before him, a cap on his yellow hair, and his shoulder held up to his ear with that gesture of careless indifference peculiar to children when they are sullen or uncared for.

Obediently, quite mechanically it seemed, the boy trod on the flag which Henri IV had borne before him at Ivry, and le Roi Soleil had flaunted in the face of the armies of Europe. The son of the Bourbons was spitting on their flag, and wiping his shoes upon its tattered folds. With shrill cracked voice he sang the Carmagnole, "Ca ira! ca ira! les aristos a la lanterne!" until de Batz himself felt inclined to stop his ears and to rush from the place in horror.

Louis XVII, whom the hearts of many had proclaimed King of France by the grace of God, the child of the Bourbons, the eldest son of the Church, was stepping a vulgar dance over the flag of St. Louis, which he had been taught to defile. His pale cheeks glowed as he danced, his eyes shone with the unnatural light kindled in them by the intoxicating liquor; with one slender hand he waved the red cap with the tricolour cockade, and shouted "Vive la Republique!"

Madame Simon was clapping her hands, looking on the child with obvious pride, and a kind of rough maternal affection. Simon was gazing on Heron for approval, and the latter nodded his head, murmuring words of encouragement and of praise.

"Thy catechism now, Capet — thy catechism," shouted Simon in a hoarse voice.

The boy stood at attention, cap on head, hands on his hips, legs wide apart, and feet firmly planted on the fleur-de-lys, the glory of his forefathers.

"Thy name?" queried Simon.

"Louis Capet," replied the child in a clear, high-pitched voice.

"What art thou?"

"A citizen of the Republic of France."

"What was thy father?"

"Louis Capet, ci-devant king, a tyrant who perished by the will of the people!"

"What was thy mother?"

"A — —"

De Batz involuntarily uttered a cry of horror. Whatever the man's private character was, he had been born a gentleman, and his every instinct revolted against what he saw and heard. The scene had positively sickened him. He turned precipitately towards the door.

"How now, citizen?" queried the Committee's agent with a sneer. "Are you not satisfied with what you see?"

"Mayhap the citizen would like to see Capet sitting in a golden chair," interposed Simon the cobbler with a sneer, "and me and my wife kneeling and kissing his hand — what?"

"'Tis the heat of the room," stammered de Batz, who was fumbling with the lock of the door; "my head began to swim."

"Spit on their accursed flag, then, like a good patriot, like Capet," retorted Simon gruffly. "Here, Capet, my son," he added, pulling the boy by the arm with a rough gesture, "get thee to bed; thou art quite drunk enough to satisfy any good Republican."

By way of a caress he tweaked the boy's ear and gave him a prod in the back with his bent knee. He was not wilfully unkind, for just now he was not angry with the lad; rather was he vastly amused with the effect Capet's prayer and Capet's recital of his catechism had had on the visitor.

As to the lad, the intensity of excitement in him was immediately followed by an overwhelming desire for sleep. Without any preliminary of undressing or of washing, he tumbled, just as he was, on to the sofa. Madame Simon, with quite pleasing solicitude, arranged a pillow under his head, and the very next moment the child was fast asleep.

"'Tis well, citizen Simon," said Heron in his turn, going towards the door. "I'll report favourably on you to the Committee of Public Security. As for the citoyenne, she had best be more careful," he added, turning to the woman Simon with a snarl on his evil face. "There was no cause to arrange a pillow under the head of that vermin's spawn. Many good patriots have no pillows to put under their heads. Take that pillow away; and I don't like the shoes on the brat's feet; sabots are quite good enough."

Citoyenne Simon made no reply. Some sort of retort had apparently hovered on her lips, but had been checked, even before it was uttered, by a peremptory look from her husband. Simon the cobbler, snarling in speech but obsequious in manner, prepared to accompany the citizen agent to the door.

De Batz was taking a last look at the sleeping child; the uncrowned King of France was wrapped in a drunken sleep, with the last spoken insult upon his dead mother still hovering on his childish lips.

CHAPTER VIII. ARCADES AMBO

"That is the way we conduct our affairs, citizen," said Heron gruffly, as he once more led his guest back into his office.

It was his turn to be complacent now. De Batz, for once in his life cowed by what he had seen, still wore a look of horror and disgust upon his florid face.

"What devils you all are!" he said at last.

"We are good patriots," retorted Heron, "and the tyrant's spawn leads but the life that hundreds of thousands of children led whilst his father oppressed the people. Nay! what am I saying? He leads a far better, far happier life. He gets plenty to eat and plenty of warm clothes. Thousands of innocent children, who have not the crimes of a despot father upon their conscience, have to starve whilst he grows fat."

The leer in his face was so evil that once more de Batz felt that eerie feeling of terror creeping into his bones. Here were cruelty and bloodthirsty ferocity personified to their utmost extent. At thought of the Bourbons, or of all those whom he considered had been in the past the oppressors of the people, Heron was nothing but a wild and ravenous beast, hungering for revenge, longing to bury his talons and his fangs into the body of those whose heels had once pressed on his own neck.

And de Batz knew that even with millions or countless money at his command he could not purchase from this carnivorous brute the life and liberty of the son of King Louis. No amount of bribery would accomplish that; it would have to be ingenuity pitted against animal force, the wiliness of the fox against the power of the wolf.

Even now Heron was darting savagely suspicious looks upon him.

"I shall get rid of the Simons," he said; "there's something in that woman's face which I don't trust. They shall go within the next few hours, or as soon as I can lay my hands upon a better patriot than that mealy-mouthed cobbler. And it will be better not to have a woman about the place. Let me see — to-day is Thursday, or else Friday morning. By Sunday I'll get those Simons out of the place. Methought I saw you ogling that woman," he added, bringing his bony fist crashing down on the table so that papers, pen, and inkhorn rattled loudly; "and if I thought that you—"

De Batz thought it well at this point to finger once more nonchalantly the bundle of crisp paper in the pocket of his coat.

"Only on that one condition," reiterated Heron in a hoarse voice; "if you try to get at Capet, I'll drag you to the Tribunal with my own hands."

"Always presuming that you can get me, my friend," murmured de Batz, who was gradually regaining his accustomed composure.

Already his active mind was busily at work. One or two things which he had noted in connection with his visit to the Dauphin's prison had struck him as possibly useful in his schemes. But he was disappointed that Heron was getting rid of the Simons. The woman might have been very useful and more easily got at than a man. The avarice of the French bourgeoisie would have proved a promising factor. But this, of course, would now be out of the question. At the same time it was not because Heron raved and stormed and uttered cries like a hyena that he, de Batz, meant to give up an enterprise which, if successful, would place millions into his own pocket.

As for that meddling Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and his crack-brained followers, they must be effectually swept out of the way first of all. De Batz felt that they were the real, the most likely hindrance to his schemes. He himself would have to go very cautiously to work, since apparently Heron would not allow him to purchase immunity for himself in that one matter, and whilst he was laying his plans with necessary deliberation so as to ensure his own safety, that accursed Scarlet Pimpernel would mayhap snatch the golden prize from the Temple prison right under his very nose.

When he thought of that the Gascon Royalist felt just as vindictive as did the chief agent of the Committee of General Security.

While these thoughts were coursing through de Batz' head, Heron had been indulging in a volley of vituperation.

"If that little vermin escapes," he said, "my life will not be worth an hour's purchase. In twenty-four hours I am a dead man, thrown to the guillotine like those dogs of aristocrats! You say I am a night-bird, citizen. I tell you that I do not sleep night or day thinking of that brat and the means to keep him safely under my hand. I have never trusted those Simons—"

"Not trusted them!" exclaimed de Batz; "surely you could not find anywhere more inhuman monsters!"

"Inhuman monsters?" snarled Heron. "Bah! they don't do their business thoroughly; we want the tyrant's spawn to become a true Republican and a patriot — aye! to make of him such a one that even if you and your cursed confederates got him by some hellish chance, he would be no use to you as a king, a tyrant to set above the people, to set up in your Versailles, your Louvre, to eat off golden plates and wear satin clothes. You have seen the brat! By the time he is a man he should forget how to eat save with his fingers, and get roaring drunk every night. That's what we want! — to make him so that he shall be no use to you, even if you did get him away; but you shall not! You shall not, not if I have to strangle him with my own hands."

He picked up his short-stemmed pipe and pulled savagely at it for awhile. De Batz was meditating.

"My friend," he said after a little while, "you are agitating yourself quite unnecessarily, and gravely jeopardising your prospects of getting a comfortable little income through keeping your fingers off my person. Who said I wanted to meddle with the child?"

"You had best not," growled Heron.

"Exactly. You have said that before. But do you not think that you would be far wiser, instead of directing your undivided attention to my unworthy self, to turn your thoughts a little to one whom, believe me, you have far greater cause to fear?"

"Who is that?"

"The Englishman."

"You mean the man they call the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Himself. Have you not suffered from his activity, friend Heron? I fancy that citizen Chauvelin and citizen Collot would have quite a tale to tell about him."

"They ought both to have been guillotined for that blunder last autumn at Boulogne."

"Take care that the same accusation be not laid at your door this year, my friend," commented de Batz placidly.

"Bah!"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris even now."

"The devil he is!"

"And on what errand, think you?"

There was a moment's silence, and then de Batz continued with slow and dramatic emphasis:

"That of rescuing your most precious prisoner from the Temple."

"How do you know?" Heron queried savagely.

"I guessed."

"How?"

"I saw a man in the Theatre National to-day..."

"Well?"

"Who is a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"D — him! Where can I find him?"

"Will you sign a receipt for the three thousand five hundred livres, which I am pining to hand over to you, my friend, and I will tell you?"

"Where's the money?"

"In my pocket."

Without further words Heron dragged the inkhorn and a sheet of paper towards him, took up a pen, and wrote a few words rapidly in a loose, scrawly hand. He strewed sand over the writing, then handed it across the table to de Batz.

"Will that do?" he asked briefly.

The other was reading the note through carefully.

"I see you only grant me a fortnight," he remarked casually.

"For that amount of money it is sufficient. If you want an extension you must pay more."

"So be it," assented de Batz coolly, as he folded the paper across. "On the whole a fortnight's immunity in France these days is quite a pleasant respite. And I prefer to keep in touch with you, friend Heron. I'll call on you again this day fortnight."

He took out a letter-case from his pocket. Out of this he drew a packet of bank-notes, which he laid on the table in front of Heron, then he placed the receipt carefully into the letter-case, and this back into his pocket.

Heron in the meanwhile was counting over the banknotes. The light of ferocity had entirely gone from his eyes; momentarily the whole expression of the face was one of satisfied greed.

"Well!" he said at last when he had assured himself that the number of notes was quite correct, and he had transferred the bundle of crisp papers into an inner pocket of his coat — "well, what about your friend?"

"I knew him years ago," rejoined de Batz coolly; "he is a kinsman of citizen St. Just. I know that he is one of the confederates of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Where does he lodge?"

"That is for you to find out. I saw him at the theatre, and afterwards in the green-room; he was making himself agreeable to the citizeness Lange. I heard him ask for leave to call on her to-morrow at four o'clock. You know where she lodges, of course!"

He watched Heron while the latter scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, then he quietly rose to go. He took up his cloak and once again wrapped it round his shoulders. There was nothing more to be said, and he was anxious to go.

The leave-taking between the two men was neither cordial nor more than barely courteous. De Batz nodded to Heron, who escorted him to the outside door of his lodging, and there called loudly to a soldier who was doing sentinel at the further end of the corridor.

"Show this citizen the way to the guichet," he said curtly. "Good-night, citizen," he added finally, nodding to de Batz.

Ten minutes later the Gascon once more found himself in the Rue du Temple between the great outer walls of the prison and the silent little church and convent of St. Elizabeth. He looked up to where in the central tower a small grated window lighted from within showed the place where the last of the Bourbons was being taught to desecrate the traditions of his race, at the bidding of a mender of shoes — a naval officer cashiered for misconduct and fraud.

Such is human nature in its self-satisfied complacency that de Batz, calmly ignoring the vile part which he himself had played in the last quarter of an hour of his interview with the Committee's agent, found it in him to think of Heron with loathing, and even of the cobbler Simon with disgust.

Then with a self-righteous sense of duty performed, and an indifferent shrug of the shoulders, he dismissed Heron from his mind.

"That meddling Scarlet Pimpernel will find his hands over-full to-morrow, and mayhap will not interfere in my affairs for some time to come," he mused; "meseems that that will be the first time that a member of his precious League has come within the clutches of such unpleasant people as the sleuth-hounds of my friend Heron!"

CHAPTER IX. WHAT LOVE CAN DO

"Yesterday you were unkind and ungallant. How could I smile when you seemed so stern?"

"Yesterday I was not alone with you. How could I say what lay next my heart, when indifferent ears could catch the words that were meant only for you?"

"Ah, monsieur, do they teach you in England how to make pretty speeches?"

"No, mademoiselle, that is an instinct that comes into birth by the fire of a woman's eyes."

Mademoiselle Lange was sitting upon a small sofa of antique design, with cushions covered in faded silks heaped round her pretty head. Armand thought that she looked like that carved cameo which his sister Marguerite possessed.

He himself sat on a low chair at some distance from her. He had brought her a large bunch of early violets, for he knew that she was fond of flowers, and these lay upon her lap, against the opalescent grey of her gown.

She seemed a little nervous and agitated, his obvious admiration bringing a ready blush to her cheeks.

The room itself appeared to Armand to be a perfect frame for the charming picture which she presented. The furniture in it was small and old; tiny tables of antique Vernis-Martin, softly faded tapestries, a pale-toned Aubusson carpet. Everything mellow and in a measure pathetic. Mademoiselle Lange, who was an orphan, lived alone under the duennaship of a middle-aged relative, a penniless hanger-on of the successful young actress, who acted as her chaperone, housekeeper, and maid, and kept unseemly or over-bold gallants at bay.

She told Armand all about her early life, her childhood in the backshop of Maitre Meziere, the jeweller, who was a relative of her mother's; of her desire for an artistic career, her struggles with the middle-class prejudices of her relations, her bold defiance of them, and final independence.

She made no secret of her humble origin, her want of education in those days; on the contrary, she was proud of what she had accomplished for herself. She was only twenty years of age, and already held a leading place in the artistic world of Paris.

Armand listened to her chatter, interested in everything she said, questioning her with sympathy and discretion. She asked him a good deal about himself, and about his beautiful sister Marguerite, who, of course, had been the most brilliant star in that most brilliant constellation, the Comedie Francaise. She had never seen Marguerite St. Just act, but, of course, Paris still rang with her praises, and all art-lovers regretted that she should have married and left them to mourn for her.

Thus the conversation drifted naturally back to England. Mademoiselle professed a vast interest in the citizen's country of adoption.

"I had always," she said, "thought it an ugly country, with the noise and bustle of industrial life going on everywhere, and smoke and fog to cover the landscape and to stunt the trees."

"Then, in future, mademoiselle," he replied, "must you think of it as one carpeted with verdure, where in the spring the orchard trees covered with delicate blossom would speak to you of fairyland, where the dewy grass stretches its velvety surface in the shadow of ancient monumental oaks, and ivy-covered towers rear their stately crowns to the sky."

"And the Scarlet Pimpernel? Tell me about him, monsieur."

"Ah, mademoiselle, what can I tell you that you do not already know? The Scarlet Pimpernel is a man who has devoted his entire existence to the benefit of suffering mankind. He has but one thought, and that is for those who need him; he hears but one sound the cry of the oppressed."

"But they do say, monsieur, that philanthropy plays but a sorry part in your hero's schemes. They aver that he looks on his own efforts and the adventures through which he goes only in the light of sport."

"Like all Englishmen, mademoiselle, the Scarlet Pimpernel is a little ashamed of sentiment. He would deny its very existence with his lips, even whilst his noble heart brimmed over with it. Sport? Well! mayhap the sporting instinct is as keen as that of charity — the race for lives, the tussle for the rescue of human creatures, the throwing of a life on the hazard of a die."

"They fear him in France, monsieur. He has saved so many whose death had been decreed by the Committee of Public Safety."

"Please God, he will save many yet."

"Ah, monsieur, the poor little boy in the Temple prison!"

"He has your sympathy, mademoiselle?"

"Of every right-minded woman in France, monsieur. Oh!" she added with a pretty gesture of enthusiasm, clasping her hands together, and looking at Armand with large eyes filled with tears, "if your noble Scarlet Pimpernel will do aught to save that poor innocent lamb, I would indeed bless him in my heart, and help him with all my humble might if I could."

"May God's saints bless you for those words, mademoiselle," he said, whilst, carried away by her beauty, her charm, her perfect femininity, he stooped towards her until his knee touched the carpet at her feet. "I had begun to lose my belief in my poor misguided country, to think all men in France vile, and all women base. I could thank you on my knees for your sweet words of sympathy, for the expression of tender motherliness that came into your eyes when you spoke of the poor forsaken Dauphin in the Temple."

She did not restrain her tears; with her they came very easily, just as with a child, and as they gathered in her eyes and rolled down her fresh cheeks they in no way marred the charm of her face. One hand lay in her lap fingering a diminutive bit of cambric, which from time to time she pressed to her eyes. The other she had almost unconsciously yielded to Armand.

The scent of the violets filled the room. It seemed to emanate from her, a fitting attribute of her young, wholly unsophisticated girlhood. The citizen was goodly to look at; he was kneeling at her feet, and his lips were pressed against her hand.

Armand was young and he was an idealist. I do not for a moment imagine that just at this moment he was deeply in love. The stronger feeling had not yet risen up in him; it came later when tragedy encompassed him and brought passion to sudden maturity. Just now he was merely yielding himself up to the intoxicating moment, with all the abandonment, all the enthusiasm of the Latin race. There was no reason why he should not bend the knee before this exquisite little cameo, that by its very presence was giving him an hour of perfect pleasure and of aesthetic joy.

Outside the world continued its hideous, relentless way; men butchered one another, fought and hated. Here in this small old-world salon, with its faded satins and bits of ivory-tinted lace, the outer universe had never really penetrated. It was a tiny world — quite apart from the rest of mankind, perfectly peaceful and absolutely beautiful.

If Armand had been allowed to depart from here now, without having been the cause as well as the chief actor in the events that followed, no doubt that Mademoiselle Lange would always have remained a charming memory with him, an exquisite bouquet of violets pressed reverently between the leaves of a favourite book of poems, and the scent of spring flowers would in after years have ever brought her dainty picture to his mind.

He was murmuring pretty words of endearment; carried away by emotion, his arm stole round her waist; he felt that if another tear came like a dewdrop rolling down her cheek he must kiss it away at its very source. Passion was not sweeping them off their feet — not yet, for they were very young, and life had not as yet presented to them its most unsolvable problem.

But they yielded to one another, to the springtime of their life, calling for Love, which would come presently hand in hand with his grim attendant, Sorrow.

Even as Armand's glowing face was at last lifted up to hers asking with mute lips for that first kiss which she already was prepared to give, there came the loud noise of men's heavy footsteps tramping up the old oak stairs, then some shouting, a woman's cry, and the next moment Madame Belhomme, trembling, wide-eyed, and in obvious terror, came rushing into the room.

"Jeanne! Jeanne! My child! It is awful! It is awful! Mon Dieu — mon Dieu! What is to become of us?"

She was moaning and lamenting even as she ran in, and now she threw her apron over her face and sank into a chair, continuing her moaning and her lamentations.

Neither Mademoiselle nor Armand had stirred. They remained like graven images, he on one knee, she with large eyes fixed upon his face. They had neither of them looked on the old woman; they seemed even now unconscious of her presence. But their ears had caught the sound of that measured tramp of feet up the stairs of the old house, and the halt upon the landing; they had heard the brief words of command:

"Open, in the name of the people!"

They knew quite well what it all meant; they had not wandered so far in the realms of romance that reality — the grim, horrible reality of the moment — had not the power to bring them back to earth.

That peremptory call to open in the name of the people was the prologue these days to a drama which had but two concluding acts: arrest, which was a certainty; the guillotine, which was more than probable. Jeanne and Armand, these two young people who but a moment ago had tentatively lifted the veil of life, looked straight into each other's eyes and saw the hand of death interposed between them: they looked straight into each other's eyes and knew that nothing but the hand of death would part them now. Love had come with its attendant, Sorrow; but he had come with no uncertain footsteps. Jeanne looked on the man before her, and he bent his head to imprint a glowing kiss upon her hand.

"Aunt Marie!"

It was Jeanne Lange who spoke, but her voice was no longer that of an irresponsible child; it was firm, steady and hard. Though she spoke to the old woman, she did not look at her; her luminous brown eyes rested on the bowed head of Armand St. Just.

"Aunt Marie!" she repeated more peremptorily, for the old woman, with her apron over her head, was still moaning, and unconscious of all save an overmastering fear.

"Open, in the name of the people!" came in a loud harsh voice once more from the other side of the front door.

"Aunt Marie, as you value your life and mine, pull yourself together," said Jeanne firmly.

"What shall we do? Oh! what shall we do?" moaned Madame Belhomme. But she had dragged the apron away from her face, and was looking with some puzzlement at meek, gentle little Jeanne, who had suddenly become so strange, so dictatorial, all unlike her habitual somewhat diffident self.

"You need not have the slightest fear, Aunt Marie, if you will only do as I tell you," resumed Jeanne quietly; "if you give way to fear, we are all of us undone. As you value your life and mine," she now repeated authoritatively, "pull yourself together, and do as I tell you."

The girl's firmness, her perfect quietude had the desired effect. Madame Belhomme, though still shaken up with sobs of terror, made a great effort to master herself; she stood up, smoothed down her apron, passed her hand over her ruffled hair, and said in a quaking voice:

"What do you think we had better do?"

"Go quietly to the door and open it."

"But — the soldiers—"

"If you do not open quietly they will force the door open within the next two minutes," interposed Jeanne calmly. "Go quietly and open the door. Try and hide your fears, grumble in an audible voice at being interrupted in your cooking, and tell the soldiers at once that they will find mademoiselle in the boudoir. Go, for God's sake!" she added, whilst suppressed emotion suddenly made her young voice vibrate; "go, before they break open that door!"

Madame Belhomme, impressed and cowed, obeyed like an automaton. She turned and marched fairly straight out of the room. It was not a minute too soon. From outside had already come the third and final summons:

"Open, in the name of the people!"

After that a crowbar would break open the door.

Madame Belhomme's heavy footsteps were heard crossing the ante-chamber. Armand still knelt at Jeanne's feet, holding her trembling little hand in his.

"A love-scene," she whispered rapidly, "a love-scene — quick — do you know one?"

And even as he had tried to rise she held him back, down on his knees.

He thought that fear was making her distracted.

"Mademoiselle—" he murmured, trying to soothe her.

"Try and understand," she said with wonderful calm, "and do as I tell you. Aunt Marie has obeyed. Will you do likewise?"

"To the death!" he whispered eagerly.

"Then a love-scene," she entreated. "Surely you know one. Rodrigue and Chimene! Surely — surely," she urged, even as tears of anguish rose into her eyes, "you must — you must, or, if not that, something else. Quick! The very seconds are precious!"

They were indeed! Madame Belhomme, obedient as a frightened dog, had gone to the door and opened it; even her well-feigned grumblings could now be heard and the rough interrogations from the soldiery.

"Citizeness Lange!" said a gruff voice.

"In her boudoir, quoi!"

Madame Belhomme, braced up apparently by fear, was playing her part remarkably well.

"Bothering good citizens! On baking day, too!" she went on grumbling and muttering.

"Oh, think — think!" murmured Jeanne now in an agonised whisper, her hot little hand grasping his so tightly that her nails were driven into his flesh. "You must know something, that will do — anything — for dear life's sake.... Armand!"

His name — in the tense excitement of this terrible moment — had escaped her lips.

All in a flash of sudden intuition he understood what she wanted, and even as the door of the boudoir was thrown violently open Armand — still on his knees, but with one hand pressed to his heart, the other stretched upwards to the ceiling in the most approved dramatic style, was loudly declaiming:

"Pour venger son honneur il perdit son amour,

Pour venger sa maitresse il a quitte le jour!"

Whereupon Mademoiselle Lange feigned the most perfect impatience.

"No, no, my good cousin," she said with a pretty moue of disdain, "that will never do! You must not thus emphasise the end of every line; the verses should flow more evenly, as thus...."

Heron had paused at the door. It was he who had thrown it open — he who, followed by a couple of his sleuth-hounds, had thought to find here the man denounced by de Batz as being one of the followers of that irrepressible Scarlet Pimpernel. The obviously Parisian intonation of the man kneeling in front of citizeness Lange in an attitude no ways suggestive of personal admiration, and coolly reciting verses out of a play, had somewhat taken him aback.

"What does this mean?" he asked gruffly, striding forward into the room and glaring first at mademoiselle, then at Armand.

Mademoiselle gave a little cry of surprise.

"Why, if it isn't citizen Heron!" she cried, jumping up with a dainty movement of coquetry and embarrassment. "Why did not Aunt Marie announce you?... It is indeed remiss of her, but she is so ill-tempered on baking days I dare not even rebuke her. Won't you sit down, citizen Heron? And you, cousin," she added, looking down airily on Armand, "I pray you maintain no longer that foolish attitude."

The febrileness of her manner, the glow in her cheeks were easily attributable to natural shyness in face of this unexpected visit. Heron, completely bewildered by this little scene, which was so unlike what he expected, and so unlike those to which he was accustomed in the exercise of his horrible duties, was practically speechless before the little lady who continued to prattle along in a simple, unaffected manner.

"Cousin," she said to Armand, who in the meanwhile had risen to his knees, "this is citizen Heron, of whom you have heard me speak. My cousin Belhomme," she continued, once more turning to Heron, "is fresh from the country, citizen. He hails from Orleans, where he has played leading parts in the tragedies of the late citizen Corneille. But, ah me! I fear that he will find Paris audiences vastly more critical than the good Orleanese. Did you hear him, citizen, declaiming those beautiful verses just now? He was murdering them, say I — yes, murdering them — the gaby!"

Then only did it seem as if she realised that there was something amiss, that citizen Heron had come to visit her, not as an admirer of her talent who would wish to pay his respects to a successful actress, but as a person to be looked on with dread.

She gave a quaint, nervous little laugh, and murmured in the tones of a frightened child:

"La, citizen, how glum you look! I thought you had come to compliment me on my latest success. I saw you at the theatre last night, though you did not afterwards come to see me in the green-room. Why! I had a regular ovation! Look at my flowers!" she added more gaily, pointing to several bouquets in vases about the room. "Citizen Danton brought me the violets himself, and citizen Santerre the narcissi, and that laurel wreath — is it not charming? — that was a tribute from citizen Robespierre himself."

She was so artless, so simple, and so natural that Heron was completely taken off his usual mental balance. He had expected to find the usual setting to the dramatic episodes which he was wont to conduct — screaming women, a man either at bay, sword in hand, or hiding in a linen cupboard or up a chimney.

Now everything puzzled him. De Batz — he was quite sure — had spoken of an Englishman, a follower of the Scarlet Pimpernel; every thinking French patriot knew that all the followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel were Englishmen with red hair and prominent teeth, whereas this man....

Armand — who deadly danger had primed in his improvised role — was striding up and down the room declaiming with ever-varying intonations:

"Joignez tous vos efforts contre un espoir si doux

Pour en venir a bout, c'est trop peu que de vous."

"No! no!" said mademoiselle impatiently; "you must not make that ugly pause midway in the last line: 'pour en venir a bout, c'est trop peu que de vous!'"

She mimicked Armand's diction so quaintly, imitating his stride, his awkward gesture, and his faulty phraseology with such funny exaggeration that Heron laughed in spite of himself.

"So that is a cousin from Orleans, is it?" he asked, throwing his lanky body into an armchair, which creaked dismally under his weight.

"Yes! a regular gaby — what?" she said archly. "Now, citizen Heron, you must stay and take coffee with me. Aunt Marie will be bringing it in directly. Hector," she added, turning to Armand, "come down from the clouds and ask Aunt Marie to be quick."

This certainly was the first time in the whole of his experience that Heron had been asked to stay and drink coffee with the quarry he was hunting down. Mademoiselle's innocent little ways, her desire for the prolongation of his visit, further addled his brain. De Batz had undoubtedly spoken of an Englishman, and the cousin from Orleans was certainly a Frenchman every inch of him.

Perhaps had the denunciation come from any one else but de Batz, Heron might have acted and thought more circumspectly; but, of course, the chief agent of the Committee of General Security was more suspicious of the man from whom he took a heavy bribe than of any one else in France. The thought had suddenly crossed his mind that mayhap de Batz had sent him on a fool's errand in order to get him safely out of the way of the Temple prison at a given hour of the day.

The thought took shape, crystallised, caused him to see a rapid vision of de Batz sneaking into his lodgings and stealing his keys, the guard being slack, careless, inattentive, allowing the adventurer to pass barriers that should have been closed against all comers.

Now Heron was sure of it; it was all a conspiracy invented by de Batz. He had forgotten all about his theories that a man under arrest is always safer than a man that is free. Had his brain been quite normal, and not obsessed, as it always was now by thoughts of the Dauphin's escape from prison, no doubt he would have been more suspicious of Armand, but all his worst suspicions were directed against de Batz. Armand seemed to him just a fool, an actor *quoi?* and so obviously not an Englishman.

He jumped to his feet, curtly declining mademoiselle's offers of hospitality. He wanted to get away at once. Actors and actresses were always, by tacit consent of the authorities, more immune than the rest of the community. They provided the only amusement in the intervals of the horrible scenes around the scaffolds; they were irresponsible, harmless creatures who did not meddle in politics.

Jeanne the while was gaily prattling on, her luminous eyes fixed upon the all-powerful enemy, striving to read his thoughts, to understand what went on behind those cruel, prominent eyes, the chances that Armand had of safety and of life.

She knew, of course, that the visit was directed against Armand — some one had betrayed him, that odious de Batz mayhap — and she was fighting for Armand's safety, for his life. Her armoury consisted of her presence of mind, her cool courage, her self-control; she used all these weapons for his sake, though at times she felt as if the strain on her nerves would snap the thread of life in her. The effort seemed more than she could bear.

But she kept up her part, rallying Heron for the shortness of his visit, begging him to tarry for another five minutes at least, throwing out — with subtle feminine intuition — just those very hints anent little Capet's safety that were most calculated to send him flying back towards the Temple.

"I felt so honoured last night, citizen," she said coquettishly, "that you even forgot little Capet in order to come and watch my debut as Celimene."

"Forget him!" retorted Heron, smothering a curse, "I never forget the vermin. I must go back to him; there are too many cats nosing round my mouse. Good day to you, citizeness. I ought to have brought flowers, I know; but I am a busy man — a harassed man."

"Je te crois," she said with a grave nod of the head; "but do come to the theatre to-night. I am playing Camille — such a fine part! one of my greatest successes."

"Yes, yes, I'll come — mayhap, mayhap — but I'll go now — glad to have seen you, citizeness. Where does your cousin lodge?" he asked abruptly.

"Here," she replied boldly, on the spur of the moment.

"Good. Let him report himself to-morrow morning at the Conciergerie, and get his certificate of safety. It is a new decree, and you should have one, too."

"Very well, then. Hector and I will come together, and perhaps Aunt Marie will come too. Don't send us to *maman guillotine* yet awhile, citizen," she said lightly; "you will never get such another Camille, nor yet so good a Celimene."

She was gay, artless to the last. She accompanied Heron to the door herself, chaffing him about his escort.

"You are an aristo, citizen," she said, gazing with well-feigned admiration on the two sleuth-hounds who stood in wait in the anteroom; "it makes me proud to see so many citizens at my door. Come and see me play Camille — come to-night, and don't forget the green-room door — it will always be kept invitingly open for you."

She bobbed him a curtsey, and he walked out, closely followed by his two men; then at last she closed the door behind them. She stood there for a while, her ear glued against the massive panels, listening for their measured tread down the oak staircase. At last it rang more sharply against the flagstones of the courtyard below; then she was satisfied that they had gone, and went slowly back to the boudoir.

CHAPTER X. SHADOWS

The tension on her nerves relaxed; there was the inevitable reaction. Her knees were shaking under her, and she literally staggered into the room.

But Armand was already near her, down on both his knees this time, his arms clasping the delicate form that swayed like the slender stems of narcissi in the breeze.

"Oh! you must go out of Paris at once — at once," she said through sobs which no longer would be kept back.

"He'll return — I know that he will return — and you will not be safe until you are back in England."

But he could not think of himself or of anything in the future. He had forgotten Heron, Paris, the world; he could only think of her.

"I owe my life to you!" he murmured. "Oh, how beautiful you are — how brave! How I love you!"

It seemed that he had always loved her, from the moment that first in his boyish heart he had set up an ideal to worship, and then, last night, in the box of the theatre — he had his back turned toward the stage, and was ready to go — her voice had called him back; it had held him spellbound; her voice, and also her eyes.... He did not know then that it was Love which then and there had enchained him. Oh, how foolish he had been! for now he knew that he had loved her with all his might, with all his soul, from the very instant that his eyes had rested upon her.

He babbled along — incoherently — in the intervals of covering her hands and the hem of her gown with kisses. He stooped right down to the ground and kissed the arch of her instep; he had become a devotee worshipping at the shrine of his saint, who had performed a great and a wonderful miracle.

Armand the idealist had found his ideal in a woman. That was the great miracle which the woman herself had performed for him. He found in her all that he had admired most, all that he had admired in the leader who hitherto had been the only personification of his ideal. But Jeanne possessed all those qualities which had roused his enthusiasm in the noble hero whom he revered. Her pluck, her ingenuity, her calm devotion which had averted the threatened danger from him!

What had he done that she should have risked her own sweet life for his sake?

But Jeanne did not know. She could not tell. Her nerves now were somewhat unstrung, and the tears that always came so readily to her eyes flowed quite unchecked. She could not very well move, for he held her knees imprisoned in his arms, but she was quite content to remain like this, and to yield her hands to him so that he might cover them with kisses.

Indeed, she did not know at what precise moment love for him had been born in her heart. Last night, perhaps... she could not say ... but when they parted she felt that she must see him again... and then today... perhaps it was the scent of the violets... they were so exquisitely sweet... perhaps it was his enthusiasm and his talk about England... but when Heron came she knew that she must save Armand's life at all cost... that she would die if they dragged him away to prison.

Thus these two children philosophised, trying to understand the mystery of the birth of Love. But they were only children; they did not really understand. Passion was sweeping them off their feet, because a common danger had bound them irrevocably to one another. The womanly instinct to save and to protect had given the young girl strength to bear a difficult part, and now she loved him for the dangers from which she had rescued him, and he loved her because she had risked her life for him.

The hours sped on; there was so much to say, so much that was exquisite to listen to. The shades of evening were gathering fast; the room, with its pale-toned hangings and faded tapestries, was sinking into the arms of gloom. Aunt Marie was no doubt too terrified to stir out of her kitchen; she did not bring the lamps, but the darkness suited Armand's mood, and Jeanne was glad that the gloaming effectually hid the perpetual blush in her cheeks.

In the evening air the dying flowers sent their heady fragrance around. Armand was intoxicated with the perfume of violets that clung to Jeanne's fingers, with the touch of her satin gown that brushed his cheek, with the murmur of her voice that quivered through her tears.

No noise from the ugly outer world reached this secluded spot. In the tiny square outside a street lamp had been lighted, and its feeble rays came peeping in through the lace curtains at the window. They caught the dainty silhouette of the young girl, playing with the loose tendrils of her hair around her forehead, and outlining with a thin band of light the contour of neck and shoulder, making the satin of her gown shimmer with an opalescent glow.

Armand rose from his knees. Her eyes were calling to him, her lips were ready to yield.

"Tu m'aimes?" he whispered.

And like a tired child she sank upon his breast.

He kissed her hair, her eyes, her lips; her skin was fragrant as the flowers of spring, the tears on her cheeks glistened like morning dew.

Aunt Marie came in at last, carrying the lamp. She found them sitting side by side, like two children, hand in hand, mute with the eloquence which comes from boundless love. They were under a spell, forgetting even that they lived, knowing nothing except that they loved.

The lamp broke the spell, and Aunt Marie's still trembling voice:

"Oh, my dear! how did you manage to rid yourself of those brutes?"

But she asked no other question, even when the lamp showed up quite clearly the glowing cheeks of Jeanne and the ardent eyes of Armand. In her heart, long since atrophied, there were a few memories, carefully put away in a secret cell, and those memories caused the old woman to understand.

Neither Jeanne nor Armand noticed what she did; the spell had been broken, but the dream lingered on; they did not see Aunt Marie putting the room tidy, and then quietly tiptoeing out by the door.

But through the dream, reality was struggling for recognition. After Armand had asked for the hundredth time: "Tu m'aimes?" and Jeanne for the hundredth time had replied mutely with her eyes, her fears for him suddenly returned.

Something had awakened her from her trance — a heavy footstep, mayhap, in the street below, the distant roll of a drum, or only the clash of steel saucepans in Aunt Marie's kitchen. But suddenly Jeanne was alert, and with her alertness came terror for the beloved.

"Your life," she said — for he had called her his life just then, "your life — and I was forgetting that it is still in danger... your dear, your precious life!"

"Doubly dear now," he replied, "since I owe it to you."

"Then I pray you, I entreat you, guard it well for my sake — make all haste to leave Paris... oh, this I beg of you!" she continued more earnestly, seeing the look of demur in his eyes; "every hour you spend in it brings danger nearer to your door."

"I could not leave Paris while you are here."

"But I am safe here," she urged; "quite, quite safe, I assure you. I am only a poor actress, and the Government takes no heed of us mimes. Men must be amused, even between the intervals of killing one another. Indeed, indeed, I should be far safer here now, waiting quietly for awhile, while you make preparations to go... My hasty departure at this moment would bring disaster on us both."

There was logic in what she said. And yet how could he leave her? now that he had found this perfect woman — this realisation of his highest ideals, how could he go and leave her in this awful Paris, with brutes like Heron forcing their hideous personality into her sacred presence, threatening that very life he would gladly give his own to keep inviolate?

"Listen, sweetheart," he said after awhile, when presently reason struggled back for first place in his mind. "Will you allow me to consult with my chief, with the Scarlet Pimpernel, who is in Paris at the present moment? I am under his orders; I could not leave France just now. My life, my entire person are at his disposal. I and my comrades are here under his orders, for a great undertaking which he has not yet unfolded to us, but which I firmly believe is framed for the rescue of the Dauphin from the Temple."

She gave an involuntary exclamation of horror.

"No, no!" she said quickly and earnestly; "as far as you are concerned, Armand, that has now become an impossibility. Some one has betrayed you, and you are henceforth a marked man. I think that odious de Batz had a hand in Heron's visit of this afternoon. We succeeded in putting these spies off the scent, but only for a moment... within a few hours — less perhaps — Heron will repent him of his carelessness; he'll come back — I know that he will come back. He may leave me, personally, alone; but he will be on your track; he'll drag you to the Conciergerie to report yourself, and there your true name and history are bound to come to light. If you succeed in evading him, he will still be on your track. If the Scarlet Pimpernel keeps you in Paris now, your death will be at his door."

Her voice had become quite hard and trenchant as she said these last words; womanlike, she was already prepared to hate the man whose mysterious personality she had hitherto admired, now that the life and safety of Armand appeared to depend on the will of that elusive hero.

"You must not be afraid for me, Jeanne," he urged. "The Scarlet Pimpernel cares for all his followers; he would never allow me to run unnecessary risks."

She was unconvinced, almost jealous now of his enthusiasm for that unknown man. Already she had taken full possession of Armand; she had purchased his life, and he had given her his love. She would share neither treasure with that nameless leader who held Armand's allegiance.

"It is only for a little while, sweetheart," he reiterated again and again. "I could not, anyhow, leave Paris whilst I feel that you are here, maybe in danger. The thought would be horrible. I should go mad if I had to leave you."

Then he talked again of England, of his life there, of the happiness and peace that were in store for them both.

"We will go to England together," he whispered, "and there we will be happy together, you and I. We will have a tiny house among the Kentish hills, and its walls will be covered with honeysuckle and roses. At the back of the house there will be an orchard, and in May, when the fruit-blossom is fading and soft spring breezes blow among the trees, showers of sweet-scented petals will envelop us as we walk along, falling on us like fragrant snow. You will come, sweetheart, will you not?"

"If you still wish it, Armand," she murmured.

Still wish it! He would gladly go to-morrow if she would come with him. But, of course, that could not be arranged. She had her contract to fulfil at the theatre, then there would be her house and furniture to dispose of, and there was Aunt Marie.... But, of course, Aunt Marie would come too.... She thought that she could get away some time before the spring; and he swore that he could not leave Paris until she came with him.

It seemed a terrible deadlock, for she could not bear to think of him alone in those awful Paris streets, where she knew that spies would always be tracking him. She had no illusions as to the impression which she had made on Heron; she knew that it could only be a momentary one, and that Armand would henceforth be in daily, hourly danger.

At last she promised him that she would take the advice of his chief; they would both be guided by what he said. Armand would confide in him to-night, and if it could be arranged she would hurry on her preparations and, mayhap, be ready to join him in a week.

"In the meanwhile, that cruel man must not risk your dear life," she said. "Remember, Armand, your life belongs to me. Oh, I could hate him for the love you bear him!"

"Sh — sh — sh!" he said earnestly. "Dear heart, you must not speak like that of the man whom, next to your perfect self, I love most upon earth."

"You think of him more than of me. I shall scarce live until I know that you are safely out of Paris."

Though it was horrible to part, yet it was best, perhaps, that he should go back to his lodgings now, in case Heron sent his spies back to her door, and since he meant to consult with his chief. She had a vague hope that if the mysterious hero was indeed the noble-hearted man whom Armand represented him to be, surely he would take compassion on the anxiety of a sorrowing woman, and release the man she loved from bondage.

This thought pleased her and gave her hope. She even urged Armand now to go.

"When may I see you to-morrow?" he asked.

"But it will be so dangerous to meet," she argued.

"I must see you. I could not live through the day without seeing you."

"The theatre is the safest place."

"I could not wait till the evening. May I not come here?"

"No, no. Heron's spies may be about."

"Where then?"

She thought it over for a moment.

"At the stage-door of the theatre at one o'clock," she said at last. "We shall have finished rehearsal. Slip into the guichet of the concierge. I will tell him to admit you, and send my dresser to meet you there; she will bring you along to my room, where we shall be undisturbed for at least half an hour."

He had perforce to be content with that, though he would so much rather have seen her here again, where the faded tapestries and soft-toned hangings made such a perfect background for her delicate charm. He had every intention of confiding in Blakeney, and of asking his help for getting Jeanne out of Paris as quickly as may be.

Thus this perfect hour was past; the most pure, the fullest of joy that these two young people were ever destined to know. Perhaps they felt within themselves the consciousness that their great love would rise anon to yet greater, fuller perfection when Fate had crowned it with his halo of sorrow. Perhaps, too, it was that consciousness that gave to their kisses now the solemnity of a last farewell.

CHAPTER XI. THE LEAGUE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

Armand never could say definitely afterwards whither he went when he left the Square du Roule that evening. No doubt he wandered about the streets for some time in an absent, mechanical way, paying no heed to the passers-by, none to the direction in which he was going.

His mind was full of Jeanne, her beauty, her courage, her attitude in face of the hideous bloodhound who had come to pollute that charming old-world boudoir by his loathsome presence. He recalled every word she uttered, every gesture she made.

He was a man in love for the first time — wholly, irremediably in love.

I suppose that it was the pangs of hunger that first recalled him to himself. It was close on eight o'clock now, and he had fed on his imaginings — first on anticipation, then on realisation, and lastly on memory — during the best part of the day. Now he awoke from his day-dream to find himself tired and hungry, but fortunately not very far from that quarter of Paris where food is easily obtainable.

He was somewhere near the Madeleine — a quarter he knew well. Soon he saw in front of him a small eating-house which looked fairly clean and orderly. He pushed open its swing-door, and seeing an empty table in a secluded part of the room, he sat down and ordered some supper.

The place made no impression upon his memory. He could not have told you an hour later where it was situated, who had served him, what he had eaten, or what other persons were present in the dining-room at the time that he himself entered it.

Having eaten, however, he felt more like his normal self — more conscious of his actions. When he finally left the eating-house, he realised, for instance, that it was very cold — a fact of which he had for the past few hours been totally unaware. The snow was falling in thin close flakes, and a biting north-easterly wind was blowing those flakes into his face and down his collar. He wrapped his cloak tightly around him. It was a good step yet to Blakeney's lodgings, where he knew that he was expected.

He struck quickly into the Rue St. Honore, avoiding the great open places where the grim horrors of this magnificent city in revolt against civilisation were displayed in all their grim nakedness — on the Place de la Revolution the guillotine, on the Carrousel the open-air camps of workers under the lash of slave-drivers more cruel than the uncivilised brutes of the Far West.

And Armand had to think of Jeanne in the midst of all these horrors. She was still a petted actress to-day, but who could tell if on the morrow the terrible law of the "suspect" would not reach her in order to drag her before a tribunal that knew no mercy, and whose sole justice was a condemnation?

The young man hurried on; he was anxious to be among his own comrades, to hear his chief's pleasant voice, to feel assured that by all the sacred laws of friendship Jeanne henceforth would become the special care of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his league.

Blakeney lodged in a small house situated on the Quai de l'Ecole, at the back of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, from whence he had a clear and uninterrupted view across the river, as far as the irregular block of buildings of the Chatelet prison and the house of Justice.

The same tower-clock that two centuries ago had tolled the signal for the massacre of the Huguenots was even now striking nine. Armand slipped through the half-open porte cochere, crossed the narrow dark courtyard, and ran up two flights of winding stone stairs. At the top of these, a door on his right allowed a thin streak of light to filtrate between its two folds. An iron bell handle hung beside it; Armand gave it a pull.

Two minutes later he was amongst his friends. He heaved a great sigh of content and relief. The very atmosphere here seemed to be different. As far as the lodging itself was concerned, it was as bare, as devoid of comfort as those sort of places — so-called *chambres garnies* — usually were in these days. The chairs looked rickety and uninviting, the sofa was of black horsehair, the carpet was threadbare, and in places in actual holes; but there was a certain something in the air which revealed, in the midst of all this squalor, the presence of a man of fastidious taste.

To begin with, the place was spotlessly clean; the stove, highly polished, gave forth a pleasing warm glow, even whilst the window, slightly open, allowed a modicum of fresh air to enter the room. In a rough earthenware jug on the table stood a large bunch of Christmas roses, and to the educated nostril the slight scent of perfumes that hovered in the air was doubly pleasing after the fetid air of the narrow streets.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was there, also my Lord Tony, and Lord Hastings. They greeted Armand with whole-hearted cheeriness.

"Where is Blakeney?" asked the young man as soon as he had shaken his friends by the hand.

"Present!" came in loud, pleasant accents from the door of an inner room on the right.

And there he stood under the lintel of the door, the man against whom was raised the giant hand of an entire nation — the man for whose head the revolutionary government of France would gladly pay out all the savings of its Treasury — the man whom human bloodhounds were tracking, hot on the scent — for whom the nets of a bitter revenge and relentless reprisals were constantly being spread.

Was he unconscious of it, or merely careless? His closest friend, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, could not say. Certain it is that, as he now appeared before Armand, picturesque as ever in perfectly tailored clothes, with priceless lace at throat and wrists, his slender fingers holding an enamelled snuff-box and a handkerchief of delicate cambric, his whole personality that of a dandy rather than a man of action, it seemed impossible to connect him with the foolhardy escapades which had set one nation glowing with enthusiasm and another clamouring for revenge.

But it was the magnetism that emanated from him that could not be denied; the light that now and then, swift as summer lightning, flashed out from the depths of the blue eyes usually veiled by heavy, lazy lids, the sudden tightening of firm lips, the setting of the square jaw, which in a moment — but only for the space of a second — transformed the entire face, and revealed the born leader of men.

Just now there was none of that in the debonnaire, easy-going man of the world who advanced to meet his friend. Armand went quickly up to him, glad to grasp his hand, slightly troubled with remorse, no doubt, at the recollection of his adventure of to-day. It almost seemed to him that from beneath his half-closed lids Blakeney had shot a quick inquiring glance upon him. The quick flash seemed to light up the young man's soul from within, and to reveal it, naked, to his friend.

It was all over in a moment, and Armand thought that maybe his conscience had played him a trick: there was nothing apparent in him — of this he was sure — that could possibly divulge his secret just yet.

"I am rather late, I fear," he said. "I wandered about the streets in the late afternoon and lost my way in the dark. I hope I have not kept you all waiting."

They all pulled chairs closely round the fire, except Blakeney, who preferred to stand. He waited awhile until they were all comfortably settled, and all ready to listen, then:

"It is about the Dauphin," he said abruptly without further preamble.

They understood. All of them had guessed it, almost before the summons came that had brought them to Paris two days ago. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had left his young wife because of that, and Armand had demanded it as a right to join hands in this noble work. Blakeney had not left France for over three months now. Backwards and forwards between Paris, or Nantes, or Orleans to the coast, where his friends would meet him to receive those unfortunates whom one man's whole-hearted devotion had rescued from death; backwards and forwards into the very hearts of those cities wherein an army of sleuth-hounds were on his track, and the guillotine was stretching out her arms to catch the foolhardy adventurer.

Now it was about the Dauphin. They all waited, breathless and eager, the fire of a noble enthusiasm burning in their hearts. They waited in silence, their eyes fixed on the leader, lest one single word from him should fail to reach their ears.

The full magnetism of the man was apparent now. As he held these four men at this moment, he could have held a crowd. The man of the world — the fastidious dandy — had shed his mask; there stood the leader, calm, serene in the very face of the most deadly danger that had ever encompassed any man, looking that danger fully in the face, not striving to belittle it or to exaggerate it, but weighing it in the balance with what there was to accomplish: the rescue of a martyred, innocent child from the hands of fiends who were destroying his very soul even more completely than his body.

"Everything, I think, is prepared," resumed Sir Percy after a slight pause. "The Simons have been summarily dismissed; I learned that to-day. They remove from the Temple on Sunday next, the nineteenth. Obviously that is the one day most likely to help us in our operations. As far as I am concerned, I cannot make any hard-and-fast plans. Chance at the last moment will have to dictate. But from every one of you I must have co-operation, and it can only be by your following my directions implicitly that we can even remotely hope to succeed."

He crossed and recrossed the room once or twice before he spoke again, pausing now and again in his walk in front of a large map of Paris and its environs that hung upon the wall, his tall figure erect, his hands behind his back, his eyes fixed before him as if he saw right through the walls of this squalid room, and across the darkness that overhung the city, through the grim bastions of the mighty building far away, where the descendant of an hundred kings lived at the mercy of human fiends who worked for his abasement.

The man's face now was that of a seer and a visionary; the firm lines were set and rigid as those of an image carved in stone — the statue of heart-whole devotion, with the self-imposed task beckoning sternly to follow, there where lurked danger and death.

"The way, I think, in which we could best succeed would be this," he resumed after a while, sitting now on the edge of the table and directly facing his four friends. The light from the lamp which stood upon the table behind him fell full upon those four glowing faces fixed eagerly upon him, but he himself was in shadow, a massive silhouette broadly cut out against the light-coloured map on the wall beyond.

"I remain here, of course, until Sunday," he said, "and will closely watch my opportunity, when I can with the greatest amount of safety enter the Temple building and take possession of the child. I shall, of course choose the moment when the Simons are actually on the move, with their successors probably coming in at about the same time. God alone knows," he added earnestly, "how I shall contrive to get possession of the child; at the moment I am just as much in the dark about that as you are."

He paused a moment, and suddenly his grave face seemed flooded with sunshine, a kind of lazy merriment danced in his eyes, effacing all trace of solemnity within them.

"La!" he said lightly, "on one point I am not at all in the dark, and that is that His Majesty King Louis XVII will come out of that ugly house in my company next Sunday, the nineteenth day of January in this year of grace seventeen hundred and ninety-four; and this, too, do I know — that those murderous blackguards shall not lay hands on me whilst that precious burden is in my keeping. So I pray you, my good Armand, do not look so glum," he added with his pleasant, merry laugh; "you'll need all your wits about you to help us in our undertaking."

"What do you wish me to do, Percy?" said the young man simply.

"In one moment I will tell you. I want you all to understand the situation first. The child will be out of the Temple on Sunday, but at what hour I know not. The later it will be the better would it suit my purpose, for I cannot get him out of Paris before evening with any chance of safety. Here we must risk nothing; the child is far better off as he is now than he would be if he were dragged back after an abortive attempt at rescue. But at this hour of the night, between nine and ten o'clock, I can arrange to get him out of Paris by the Villette gate, and that is where I want you, Ffoulkes, and you, Tony, to be, with some kind of covered cart, yourselves in any disguise your ingenuity will suggest. Here are a few certificates of safety; I have been making a collection of them for some time, as they are always useful."

He dived into the wide pocket of his coat and drew forth a number of cards, greasy, much-fingered documents of the usual pattern which the Committee of General Security delivered to the free citizens of the new republic, and without which no one could enter or leave any town or country commune without being detained as "suspect." He glanced at them and handed them over to Ffoulkes.

"Choose your own identity for the occasion, my good friend," he said lightly; "and you too, Tony. You may be stonemasons or coal-carriers, chimney-sweeps or farm-labourers, I care not which so long as you look sufficiently grimy and wretched to be unrecognisable, and so long as you can procure a cart without arousing suspicions, and can wait for me punctually at the appointed spot."

Ffoulkes turned over the cards, and with a laugh handed them over to Lord Tony. The two fastidious gentlemen discussed for awhile the respective merits of a chimney-sweep's uniform as against that of a coal-carrier.

"You can carry more grime if you are a sweep," suggested Blakeney; "and if the soot gets into your eyes it does not make them smart like coal does."

"But soot adheres more closely," argued Tony solemnly, "and I know that we shan't get a bath for at least a week afterwards."

"Certainly you won't, you sybarite!" asserted Sir Percy with a laugh.

"After a week soot might become permanent," mused Sir Andrew, wondering what, under the circumstance, my lady would say to him.

"If you are both so fastidious," retorted Blakeney, shrugging his broad shoulders, "I'll turn one of you into a reddleman, and the other into a dyer. Then one of you will be bright scarlet to the end of his days, as the reddle never comes off the skin at all, and the other will have to soak in turpentine before the dye will consent to move.... In either case... oh, my dear Tony!... the smell...."

He laughed like a schoolboy in anticipation of a prank, and held his scented handkerchief to his nose. My Lord Hastings chuckled audibly, and Tony punched him for this unseemly display of mirth.

Armand watched the little scene in utter amazement. He had been in England over a year, and yet he could not understand these Englishmen. Surely they were the queerest, most inconsequent people in the world. Here were these men, who were engaged at this very moment in an enterprise which for cool-headed courage and foolhardy daring had probably no parallel in history. They were literally taking their lives in their hands, in all probability facing certain death; and yet they now sat chaffing and fighting like a crowd of third-form schoolboys, talking utter, silly nonsense, and making foolish jokes that would have shamed a Frenchman in his teens. Vaguely he wondered what fat, pompous de Batz would think of this discussion if he could overhear it. His contempt, no doubt, for the Scarlet Pimpernel and his followers would be increased tenfold.

Then at last the question of the disguise was effectually dismissed. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Anthony Dewhurst had settled their differences of opinion by solemnly agreeing to represent two over-grimy and overheated coal-heavers. They chose two certificates of safety that were made out in the names of Jean Lepetit and Achille GrosPierre, labourers.

"Though you don't look at all like an Achille, Tony," was Blakeney's parting shot to his friend.

Then without any transition from this schoolboy nonsense to the serious business of the moment, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes said abruptly:

"Tell us exactly, Blakeney, where you will want the cart to stand on Sunday."

Blakeney rose and turned to the map against the wall, Ffoulkes and Tony following him. They stood close to his elbow whilst his slender, nervy hand wandered along the shiny surface of the varnished paper. At last he placed his finger on one spot.

"Here you see," he said, "is the Villette gate. Just outside it a narrow street on the right leads down in the direction of the canal. It is just at the bottom of that narrow street at its junction with the tow-path there that I want you two and the cart to be. It had better be a coal-car by the way; they will be unloading coal close by there to-morrow," he added with one of his sudden irrepressible outbursts of merriment. "You and Tony can exercise your muscles coal-heaving, and incidentally make yourselves known in the neighbourhood as good if somewhat grimy patriots."

"We had better take up our parts at once then," said Tony. "I'll take a fond farewell of my clean shirt to-night."

"Yes, you will not see one again for some time, my good Tony. After your hard day's work to-morrow you will have to sleep either inside your cart, if you have already secured one, or under the arches of the canal bridge, if you have not."

"I hope you have an equally pleasant prospect for Hastings," was my Lord Tony's grim comment.

It was easy to see that he was as happy as a schoolboy about to start for a holiday. Lord Tony was a true sportsman. Perhaps there was in him less sentiment for the heroic work which he did under the guidance of his chief than an inherent passion for dangerous adventures. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, on the other hand, thought perhaps a little less of the adventure, but a great deal of the martyred child in the Temple. He was just as buoyant, just as keen as his friend, but the leaven of sentiment raised his sporting instincts to perhaps a higher plane of self-devotion.

"Well, now, to recapitulate," he said, in turn following with his finger the indicated route on the map. "Tony and I and the coal-cart will await you on this spot, at the corner of the towpath on Sunday evening at nine o'clock."

"And your signal, Blakeney?" asked Tony.

"The usual one," replied Sir Percy, "the seamew's cry thrice repeated at brief intervals. But now," he continued, turning to Armand and Hastings, who had taken no part in the discussion hitherto, "I want your help a little further afield."

"I thought so," nodded Hastings.

"The coal-cart, with its usual miserable nag, will carry us a distance of fifteen or sixteen kilometres, but no more. My purpose is to cut along the north of the city, and to reach St. Germain, the nearest point where we can secure good mounts. There is a farmer just outside the commune; his name is Achard. He has excellent horses, which I have borrowed before now; we shall want five, of course, and he has one powerful beast that will do for me, as I shall have, in addition to my own weight, which is considerable, to take the child with me on the pillion. Now you, Hastings and Armand, will have to start early to-morrow morning, leave Paris by the Neuilly gate, and from there make your way to St. Germain by any conveyance you can contrive to obtain. At St. Germain you must at once find Achard's farm; disguised as labourers you will not arouse suspicion by so doing. You will find the farmer quite amenable to money, and you must secure the best horses you can get for our own use, and, if possible, the powerful mount I spoke of just now. You are both excellent horse-men, therefore I selected you amongst the others for this special errand, for you two, with the five horses, will have to come and meet our coal-cart some seventeen kilometres out of St. Germain, to where the first sign-post indicates the road to Courbevoie. Some two hundred metres down this road on the right there is a small spinney, which will afford splendid shelter for yourselves and your horses. We hope to be there at about one o'clock after midnight of Monday morning. Now, is all that quite clear, and are you both satisfied?"

"It is quite clear," exclaimed Hastings placidly; "but I, for one, am not at all satisfied."

"And why not?"

"Because it is all too easy. We get none of the danger."

"Oho! I thought that you would bring that argument forward, you incorrigible grumbler," laughed Sir Percy good-humouredly. "Let me tell you that if you start to-morrow from Paris in that spirit you will run your head and Armand's into a noose long before you reach the gate of Neuilly. I cannot allow either of you to cover your faces with too much grime; an honest farm labourer should not look over-dirty, and your chances of being discovered and detained are, at the outset, far greater than those which Ffoulkes and Tony will run—"

Armand had said nothing during this time. While Blakeney was unfolding his plan for him and for Lord Hastings — a plan which practically was a command — he had sat with his arms folded across his chest, his head sunk upon his breast. When Blakeney had asked if they were satisfied, he had taken no part in Hastings' protest nor responded to his leader's good-humoured banter.

Though he did not look up even now, yet he felt that Percy's eyes were fixed upon him, and they seemed to scorch into his soul. He made a great effort to appear eager like the others, and yet from the first a chill had struck at his heart. He could not leave Paris before he had seen Jeanne.

He looked up suddenly, trying to seem unconcerned; he even looked his chief fully in the face.

"When ought we to leave Paris?" he asked calmly.

"You MUST leave at daybreak," replied Blakeney with a slight, almost imperceptible emphasis on the word of command. "When the gates are first opened, and the work-people go to and fro at their work, that is the safest hour. And you must be at St. Germain as soon as may be, or the farmer may not have a sufficiency of horses available at a moment's notice. I want you to be spokesman with Achard, so that Hastings' British accent should not betray you both. Also you might not get a conveyance for St. Germain immediately. We must think of every eventuality, Armand. There is so much at stake."

Armand made no further comment just then. But the others looked astonished. Armand had but asked a simple question, and Blakeney's reply seemed almost like a rebuke — so circumstantial too, and so explanatory. He was so used to being obeyed at a word, so accustomed that the merest wish, the slightest hint from him was understood by his band of devoted followers, that the long explanation of his orders which he gave to Armand struck them all with a strange sense of unpleasant surprise.

Hastings was the first to break the spell that seemed to have fallen over the party.

"We leave at daybreak, of course," he said, "as soon as the gates are open. We can, I know, get one of the carriers to give us a lift as far as St. Germain. There, how do we find Achard?"

"He is a well-known farmer," replied Blakeney. "You have but to ask."

"Good. Then we bespeak five horses for the next day, find lodgings in the village that night, and make a fresh start back towards Paris in the evening of Sunday. Is that right?"

"Yes. One of you will have two horses on the lead, the other one. Pack some fodder on the empty saddles and start at about ten o'clock. Ride straight along the main road, as if you were making back for Paris, until you come to four cross-roads with a sign-post pointing to Courbevoie. Turn down there and go along the road until you meet a close spinney of fir-trees on your right. Make for the interior of that. It gives splendid shelter, and you can dismount there and give the horses a feed. We'll join you one hour after midnight. The night will be dark, I hope, and the moon anyhow will be on the wane."

"I think I understand. Anyhow, it's not difficult, and we'll be as careful as may be."

"You will have to keep your heads clear, both of you," concluded Blakeney.

He was looking at Armand as he said this; but the young man had not made a movement during this brief colloquy between Hastings and the chief. He still sat with arms folded, his head falling on his breast.

Silence had fallen on them all. They all sat round the fire buried in thought. Through the open window there came from the quay beyond the hum of life in the open-air camp; the tramp of the sentinels around it, the words of command from the drill-sergeant, and through it all the moaning of the wind and the beating of the sleet against the window-panes.

A whole world of wretchedness was expressed by those sounds! Blakeney gave a quick, impatient sigh, and going to the window he pushed it further open, and just then there came from afar the muffled roll of drums, and from below the watchman's cry that seemed such dire mockery:

"Sleep, citizens! Everything is safe and peaceful."

"Sound advice," said Blakeney lightly. "Shall we also go to sleep? What say you all — eh?"

He had with that sudden rapidity characteristic of his every action, already thrown off the serious air which he had worn a moment ago when giving instructions to Hastings. His usual debonnair manner was on him once again, his laziness, his careless insouciance. He was even at this moment deeply engaged in flicking off a grain of dust from the immaculate Mechlin ruff at his wrist. The heavy lids had fallen over the tell-tale eyes as if weighted with fatigue, the mouth appeared ready for the laugh which never was absent from it very long.

It was only Ffoulkes's devoted eyes that were sharp enough to pierce the mask of light-hearted gaiety which enveloped the soul of his leader at the present moment. He saw — for the first time in all the years that he had known Blakeney — a frown across the habitually smooth brow, and though the lips were parted for a laugh, the lines round mouth and chin were hard and set.

With that intuition born of whole-hearted friendship Sir Andrew guessed what troubled Percy. He had caught the look which the latter had thrown on Armand, and knew that some explanation would have to pass between the two men before they parted to-night. Therefore he gave the signal for the breaking up of the meeting.

"There is nothing more to say, is there, Blakeney?" he asked.

"No, my good fellow, nothing," replied Sir Percy. "I do not know how you all feel, but I am demmed fatigued."

"What about the rags for to-morrow?" queried Hastings.

"You know where to find them. In the room below. Ffoulkes has the key. Wigs and all are there. But don't use false hair if you can help it — it is apt to shift in a scrimmage."

He spoke jerkily, more curtly than was his wont. Hastings and Tony thought that he was tired. They rose to say good night. Then the three men went away together, Armand remaining behind.

CHAPTER XII. WHAT LOVE IS

"Well, now, Armand, what is it?" asked Blakeney, the moment the footsteps of his friends had died away down the stone stairs, and their voices had ceased to echo in the distance.

"You guessed, then, that there was... something?" said the younger man, after a slight hesitation.

"Of course."

Armand rose, pushing the chair away from him with an impatient nery gesture. Burying his hands in the pockets of his breeches, he began striding up and down the room, a dark, troubled expression in his face, a deep frown between his eyes.

Blakeney had once more taken up his favourite position, sitting on the corner of the table, his broad shoulders interposed between the lamp and the rest of the room. He was apparently taking no notice of Armand, but only intent on the delicate operation of polishing his nails.

Suddenly the young man paused in his restless walk and stood in front of his friend — an earnest, solemn, determined figure.

"Blakeney," he said, "I cannot leave Paris to-morrow."

Sir Percy made no reply. He was contemplating the polish which he had just succeeded in producing on his thumbnail.

"I must stay here for a while longer," continued Armand firmly. "I may not be able to return to England for some weeks. You have the three others here to help you in your enterprise outside Paris. I am entirely at your service within the compass of its walls."

Still no comment from Blakeney, not a look from beneath the fallen lids. Armand continued, with a slight tone of impatience apparent in his voice:

"You must want some one to help you here on Sunday. I am entirely at your service... here or anywhere in Paris... but I cannot leave this city... at any rate, not just yet..."

Blakeney was apparently satisfied at last with the result of his polishing operations. He rose, gave a slight yawn, and turned toward the door.

"Good night, my dear fellow," he said pleasantly; "it is time we were all abed. I am so demmed fatigued."

"Percy!" exclaimed the young man hotly.

"Eh? What is it?" queried the other lazily.

"You are not going to leave me like this — without a word?"

"I have said a great many words, my good fellow. I have said 'good night,' and remarked that I was demmed fatigued."

He was standing beside the door which led to his bedroom, and now he pushed it open with his hand.

"Percy, you cannot go and leave me like this!" reiterated Armand with rapidly growing irritation.

"Like what, my dear fellow?" queried Sir Percy with good-humoured impatience.

"Without a word — without a sign. What have I done that you should treat me like a child, unworthy even of attention?"

Blakeney had turned back and was now facing him, towering above the slight figure of the younger man. His face had lost none of its gracious air, and beneath their heavy lids his eyes looked down not unkindly on his friend.

"Would you have preferred it, Armand," he said quietly, "if I had said the word that your ears have heard even though my lips have not uttered it?"

"I don't understand," murmured Armand defiantly.

"What sign would you have had me make?" continued Sir Percy, his pleasant voice falling calm and mellow on the younger man's supersensitive consciousness: "That of branding you, Marguerite's brother, as a liar and a cheat?"

"Blakeney!" retorted the other, as with flaming cheeks and wrathful eyes he took a menacing step toward his friend; "had any man but you dared to speak such words to me—"

"I pray to God, Armand, that no man but I has the right to speak them."

"You have no right."

"Every right, my friend. Do I not hold your oath?... Are you not prepared to break it?"

"I'll not break my oath to you. I'll serve and help you in every way you can command... my life I'll give to the cause... give me the most dangerous — the most difficult task to perform.... I'll do it — I'll do it gladly."

"I have given you an over-difficult and dangerous task."

"Bah! To leave Paris in order to engage horses, while you and the others do all the work. That is neither difficult nor dangerous."

"It will be difficult for you, Armand, because your head is not sufficiently cool to foresee serious eventualities and to prepare against them. It is dangerous, because you are a man in love, and a man in love is apt to run his head — and that of his friends — blindly into a noose."

"Who told you that I was in love?"

"You yourself, my good fellow. Had you not told me so at the outset," he continued, still speaking very quietly and deliberately and never raising his voice, "I would even now be standing over you, dog-whip in hand, to thrash you as a defaulting coward and a perjurer Bah!" he added with a return to his habitual bonhomie, "I would no doubt even have lost my temper with you. Which would have been purposeless and excessively bad form. Eh?"

A violent retort had sprung to Armand's lips. But fortunately at that very moment his eyes, glowing with anger, caught those of Blakeney fixed with lazy good-nature upon his. Something of that irresistible dignity which pervaded the whole personality of the man checked Armand's hotheaded words on his lips.

"I cannot leave Paris to-morrow," he reiterated more calmly.

"Because you have arranged to see her again?"

"Because she saved my life to-day, and is herself in danger."

"She is in no danger," said Blakeney simply, "since she saved the life of my friend."

"Percy!"

The cry was wrung from Armand St. Just's very soul. Despite the tumult of passion which was raging in his heart, he was conscious again of the magnetic power which bound so many to this man's service. The words he had said — simple though they were — had sent a thrill through Armand's veins. He felt himself disarmed. His resistance fell before the subtle strength of an unbendable will; nothing remained in his heart but an overwhelming sense of shame and of impotence.

He sank into a chair and rested his elbows on the table, burying his face in his hands. Blakeney went up to him and placed a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"The difficult task, Armand," he said gently.

"Percy, cannot you release me? She saved my life. I have not thanked her yet."

"There will be time for thanks later, Armand. Just now over yonder the son of kings is being done to death by savage brutes."

"I would not hinder you if I stayed."

"God knows you have hindered us enough already."

"How?"

"You say she saved your life... then you were in danger... Heron and his spies have been on your track; your track leads to mine, and I have sworn to save the Dauphin from the hands of thieves.... A man in love, Armand, is a deadly danger among us.... Therefore at daybreak you must leave Paris with Hastings on your difficult and dangerous task."

"And if I refuse?" retorted Armand.

"My good fellow," said Blakeney earnestly, "in that admirable lexicon which the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel has compiled for itself there is no such word as refuse."

"But if I do refuse?" persisted the other.

"You would be offering a tainted name and tarnished honour to the woman you pretend to love."

"And you insist upon my obedience?"

"By the oath which I hold from you."

"But this is cruel — inhuman!"

"Honour, my good Armand, is often cruel and seldom human. He is a godlike taskmaster, and we who call ourselves men are all of us his slaves."

"The tyranny comes from you alone. You could release me and you would."

"And to gratify the selfish desire of immature passion, you would wish to see me jeopardise the life of those who place infinite trust in me."

"God knows how you have gained their allegiance, Blakeney. To me now you are selfish and callous."

"There is the difficult task you craved for, Armand," was all the answer that Blakeney made to the taunt — "to obey a leader whom you no longer trust."

But this Armand could not brook. He had spoken hotly, impetuously, smarting under the discipline which thwarted his desire, but his heart was loyal to the chief whom he had revered for so long.

"Forgive me, Percy," he said humbly; "I am distracted. I don't think I quite realised what I was saying. I trust you, of course ... implicitly... and you need not even fear... I shall not break my oath, though your orders now seem to me needlessly callous and selfish.... I will obey... you need not be afraid."

"I was not afraid of that, my good fellow."

"Of course, you do not understand... you cannot. To you, your honour, the task which you have set yourself, has been your only fetish.... Love in its true sense does not exist for you.... I see it now... you do not know what it is to love."

Blakeney made no reply for the moment. He stood in the centre of the room, with the yellow light of the lamp falling full now upon his tall powerful frame, immaculately dressed in perfectly-tailored clothes, upon his long, slender hands half hidden by filmy lace, and upon his face, across which at this moment a heavy strand of curly hair threw a curious shadow. At Armand's words his lips had imperceptibly tightened, his eyes had narrowed as if they tried to see something that was beyond the range of their focus.

Across the smooth brow the strange shadow made by the hair seemed to find a reflex from within. Perhaps the reckless adventurer, the careless gambler with life and liberty, saw through the walls of this squalid room, across the wide, ice-bound river, and beyond even the gloomy pile of buildings opposite, a cool, shady garden at Richmond, a velvety lawn sweeping down to the river's edge, a bower of clematis and roses, with a carved stone seat half covered with moss. There sat an exquisitely beautiful woman with great sad eyes fixed on the far-distant horizon. The setting sun was throwing a halo of gold all round her hair, her white hands were clasped idly on her lap.

She gazed out beyond the river, beyond the sunset, toward an unseen bourne of peace and happiness, and her lovely face had in it a look of utter hopelessness and of sublime self-abnegation. The air was still. It was late autumn, and all around her the russet leaves of beech and chestnut fell with a melancholy hush-sh-sh about her feet.

She was alone, and from time to time heavy tears gathered in her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

Suddenly a sigh escaped the man's tightly-pressed lips. With a strange gesture, wholly unusual to him, he passed his hand right across his eyes.

"Mayhap you are right, Armand," he said quietly; "mayhap I do not know what it is to love."

Armand turned to go. There was nothing more to be said. He knew Percy well enough by now to realise the finality of his pronouncements. His heart felt sore, but he was too proud to show his hurt again to a man who did not understand. All thoughts of disobedience he had put resolutely aside; he had never meant to break his oath. All that he had hoped to do was to persuade Percy to release him from it for awhile.

That by leaving Paris he risked to lose Jeanne he was quite convinced, but it is nevertheless a true fact that in spite of this he did not withdraw his love and trust from his chief. He was under the influence of that same magnetism which enchained all his comrades to the will of this man; and though his enthusiasm for the great cause had somewhat waned, his allegiance to its leader was no longer tottering.

But he would not trust himself to speak again on the subject.

"I will find the others downstairs," was all he said, "and will arrange with Hastings for to-morrow. Good night, Percy."

"Good night, my dear fellow. By the way, you have not told me yet who she is."

"Her name is Jeanne Lange," said St. Just half reluctantly. He had not meant to divulge his secret quite so fully as yet.

"The young actress at the Theatre National?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"Only by name."

"She is beautiful, Percy, and she is an angel.... Think of my sister Marguerite... she, too, was an actress.... Good night, Percy."

"Good night."

The two men grasped one another by the hand. Armand's eyes proffered a last desperate appeal. But Blakeney's eyes were impassive and unrelenting, and Armand with a quick sigh finally took his leave.

For a long while after he had gone Blakeney stood silent and motionless in the middle of the room. Armand's last words lingered in his ear:

"Think of Marguerite!"

The walls had fallen away from around him — the window, the river below, the Temple prison had all faded away, merged in the chaos of his thoughts.

Now he was no longer in Paris; he heard nothing of the horrors that even at this hour of the night were raging around him; he did not hear the call of murdered victims, of innocent women and children crying for help; he did not see the descendant of St. Louis, with a red cap on his baby head, stamping on the fleur-de-lys, and heaping insults on the memory of his mother. All that had faded into nothingness.

He was in the garden at Richmond, and Marguerite was sitting on the stone seat, with branches of the rambler roses twining themselves in her hair.

He was sitting on the ground at her feet, his head pillowed in her lap, lazily dreaming whilst at his feet the river wound its graceful curves beneath overhanging willows and tall stately elms.

A swan came sailing majestically down the stream, and Marguerite, with idle, delicate hands, threw some crumbs of bread into the water. Then she laughed, for she was quite happy, and anon she stooped, and he felt the fragrance of her lips as she bent over him and savoured the perfect sweetness of her caress. She was happy because her husband was by her side. He had done with adventures, with risking his life for others' sake. He was living only for her.

The man, the dreamer, the idealist that lurked behind the adventurous soul, lived an exquisite dream as he gazed upon that vision. He closed his eyes so that it might last all the longer, so that through the open window opposite he should not see the great gloomy walls of the labyrinthine building packed to overflowing with innocent men, women, and children waiting patiently and with a smile on their lips for a cruel and unmerited death; so that he should not see even through the vista of houses and of streets that grim Temple prison far away, and the light in one of the tower windows, which illumined the final martyrdom of a boy-king.

Thus he stood for fully five minutes, with eyes deliberately closed and lips tightly set. Then the neighbouring tower-clock of St. Germain l'Auxerrois slowly tolled the hour of midnight. Blakeney woke from his dream. The walls of his lodging were once more around him, and through the window the ruddy light of some torch in the street below fought with that of the lamp.

He went deliberately up to the window and looked out into the night. On the quay, a little to the left, the outdoor camp was just breaking up for the night. The people of France in arms against tyranny were allowed to put away their work for the day and to go to their miserable homes to gather rest in sleep for the morrow. A band of soldiers, rough and brutal in their movements, were hustling the women and children. The little ones, weary, sleepy, and cold, seemed too dazed to move. One woman had two little children clinging to her skirts; a soldier suddenly seized one of them by the shoulders and pushed it along roughly in front of him to get it out of the way. The woman struck the soldier in a stupid, senseless, useless way, and then gathered her trembling chicks under her wing, trying to look defiant.

In a moment she was surrounded. Two soldiers seized her, and two more dragged the children away from her. She screamed and the children cried, the soldiers swore and struck out right and left with their bayonets. There was a general melee, calls of agony rent the air, rough oaths drowned the shouts of the helpless. Some women, panic-stricken, started to run.

And Blakeney from his window looked down upon the scene. He no longer saw the garden at Richmond, the lazily-flowing river, the bowers of roses; even the sweet face of Marguerite, sad and lonely, appeared dim and far away.

He looked across the ice-bound river, past the quay where rough soldiers were brutalising a number of wretched defenceless women, to that grim Chatelet prison, where tiny lights shining here and there behind barred windows told the sad tale of weary vigils, of watches through the night, when dawn would bring martyrdom and death.

And it was not Marguerite's blue eyes that beckoned to him now, it was not her lips that called, but the wan face of a child with matted curls hanging above a greasy forehead, and small hands covered in grime that had once been fondled by a Queen.

The adventurer in him had chased away the dream.

"While there is life in me I'll cheat those brutes of prey," he murmured.

CHAPTER XIII. THEN EVERYTHING WAS DARK

The night that Armand St. Just spent tossing about on a hard, narrow bed was the most miserable, agonising one he had ever passed in his life. A kind of fever ran through him, causing his teeth to chatter and the veins in his temples to throb until he thought that they must burst.

Physically he certainly was ill; the mental strain caused by two great conflicting passions had attacked his bodily strength, and whilst his brain and heart fought their battles together, his aching limbs found no repose.

His love for Jeanne! His loyalty to the man to whom he owed his life, and to whom he had sworn allegiance and implicit obedience!

These superacute feelings seemed to be tearing at his very heartstrings, until he felt that he could no longer lie on the miserable palliasse which in these squalid lodgings did duty for a bed.

He rose long before daybreak, with tired back and burning eyes, but unconscious of any pain save that which tore at his heart.

The weather, fortunately, was not quite so cold — a sudden and very rapid thaw had set in; and when after a hurried toilet Armand, carrying a bundle under his arm, emerged into the street, the mild south wind struck pleasantly on his face.

It was then pitch dark. The street lamps had been extinguished long ago, and the feeble January sun had not yet tinged with pale colour the heavy clouds that hung over the sky.

The streets of the great city were absolutely deserted at this hour. It lay, peaceful and still, wrapped in its mantle of gloom. A thin rain was falling, and Armand's feet, as he began to descend the heights of Montmartre, sank ankle deep in the mud of the road. There was but scanty attempt at pavements in this outlying quarter of the town, and Armand had much ado to keep his footing on the uneven and intermittent stones that did duty for roads in these parts. But this discomfort did not trouble him just now. One thought — and one alone — was clear in his mind: he must see Jeanne before he left Paris.

He did not pause to think how he could accomplish that at this hour of the day. All he knew was that he must obey his chief, and that he must see Jeanne. He would see her, explain to her that he must leave Paris immediately, and beg her to make her preparations quickly, so that she might meet him as soon as maybe, and accompany him to England straight away.

He did not feel that he was being disloyal by trying to see Jeanne. He had thrown prudence to the winds, not realising that his imprudence would and did jeopardise, not only the success of his chief's plans, but also his life and that of his friends. He had before parting from Hastings last night arranged to meet him in the neighbourhood of the Neuilly Gate at seven o'clock; it was only six now. There was plenty of time for him to rouse the concierge at the house of the Square du Roule, to see Jeanne for a few moments, to slip into Madame Belhomme's kitchen, and there into the labourer's clothes which he was carrying in the bundle under his arm, and to be at the gate at the appointed hour.

The Square du Roule is shut off from the Rue St. Honore, on which it abuts, by tall iron gates, which a few years ago, when the secluded little square was a fashionable quarter of the city, used to be kept closed at night, with a watchman in uniform to intercept midnight prowlers. Now these gates had been rudely torn away from their sockets, the iron had been sold for the benefit of the ever-empty Treasury, and no one cared if the homeless, the starving, or the evil-doer found shelter under the porticoes of the houses, from whence wealthy or aristocratic owners had long since thought it wise to flee.

No one challenged Armand when he turned into the square, and though the darkness was intense, he made his way fairly straight for the house where lodged Mademoiselle Lange.

So far he had been wonderfully lucky. The foolhardiness with which he had exposed his life and that of his friends by wandering about the streets of Paris at this hour without any attempt at disguise, though carrying one under his arm, had not met with the untoward fate which it undoubtedly deserved. The darkness of the night and the thin sheet of rain as it fell had effectually wrapped his progress through the lonely streets in their beneficent mantle of gloom; the soft mud below had drowned the echo of his footsteps. If spies were on his track, as Jeanne had feared and Blakeney prophesied, he had certainly succeeded in evading them.

He pulled the concierge's bell, and the latch of the outer door, manipulated from within, duly sprang open in response. He entered, and from the lodge the concierge's voice emerging, muffled from the depths of pillows and blankets, challenged him with an oath directed at the unseemliness of the hour.

"Mademoiselle Lange," said Armand boldly, as without hesitation he walked quickly past the lodge making straight for the stairs.

It seemed to him that from the concierge's room loud vituperations followed him, but he took no notice of these; only a short flight of stairs and one more door separated him from Jeanne.

He did not pause to think that she would in all probability be still in bed, that he might have some difficulty in rousing Madame Belhomme, that the latter might not even care to admit him; nor did he reflect on the glaring imprudence of his actions. He wanted to see Jeanne, and she was the other side of that wall.

"He, citizen! Hola! Here! Curse you! Where are you?" came in a gruff voice to him from below.

He had mounted the stairs, and was now on the landing just outside Jeanne's door. He pulled the bell-handle, and heard the pleasing echo of the bell that would presently wake Madame Belhomme and bring her to the door.

"Citizen! Hola! Curse you for an aristo! What are you doing there?"

The concierge, a stout, elderly man, wrapped in a blanket, his feet thrust in slippers, and carrying a guttering tallow candle, had appeared upon the landing.

He held the candle up so that its feeble flickering rays fell on Armand's pale face, and on the damp cloak which fell away from his shoulders.

"What are you doing there?" reiterated the concierge with another oath from his prolific vocabulary.

"As you see, citizen," replied Armand politely, "I am ringing Mademoiselle Lange's front door bell."

"At this hour of the morning?" queried the man with a sneer.

"I desire to see her."

"Then you have come to the wrong house, citizen," said the concierge with a rude laugh.

"The wrong house? What do you mean?" stammered Armand, a little bewildered.

"She is not here — quoi!" retorted the concierge, who now turned deliberately on his heel. "Go and look for her, citizen; it'll take you some time to find her."

He shuffled off in the direction of the stairs. Armand was vainly trying to shake himself free from a sudden, an awful sense of horror.

He gave another vigorous pull at the hell, then with one bound he overtook the concierge, who was preparing to descend the stairs, and gripped him peremptorily by the arm.

"Where is Mademoiselle Lange?" he asked.

His voice sounded quite strange in his own ear; his throat felt parched, and he had to moisten his lips with his tongue before he was able to speak.

"Arrested," replied the man.

"Arrested? When? Where? How?"

"When — late yesterday evening. Where? — here in her room. How? — by the agents of the Committee of General Security. She and the old woman! Basta! that's all I know. Now I am going back to bed, and you clear out of the house. You are making a disturbance, and I shall be reprimanded. I ask you, is this a decent time for rousing honest patriots out of their morning sleep?"

He shook his arm free from Armand's grasp and once more began to descend.

Armand stood on the landing like a man who has been stunned by a blow on the head. His limbs were paralysed. He could not for the moment have moved or spoken if his life had depended on a sign or on a word. His brain was reeling, and he had to steady himself with his hand against the wall or he would have fallen headlong on the floor. He had lived in a whirl of excitement for the past twenty-four hours; his nerves during that time had been kept at straining point. Passion, joy, happiness, deadly danger, and moral fights had worn his mental endurance threadbare; want of proper food and a sleepless night had almost thrown his physical balance out of gear. This blow came at a moment when he was least able to bear it.

Jeanne had been arrested! Jeanne was in the hands of those brutes, whom he, Armand, had regarded yesterday with insurmountable loathing! Jeanne was in prison — she was arrested — she would be tried, condemned, and all because of him!

The thought was so awful that it brought him to the verge of mania. He watched as in a dream the form of the concierge shuffling his way down the oak staircase; his portly figure assumed Gargantuan proportions, the candle which he carried looked like the dancing flames of hell, through which grinning faces, hideous and contorted, mocked at him and leered.

Then suddenly everything was dark. The light had disappeared round the bend of the stairs; grinning faces and ghoulish visions vanished; he only saw Jeanne, his dainty, exquisite Jeanne, in the hands of those brutes. He saw her as he had seen a year and a half ago the victims of those bloodthirsty wretches being dragged before a tribunal that was but a mockery of justice; he heard the quick interrogatory, and the responses from her perfect lips, that exquisite voice of hers veiled by tones of anguish. He heard the condemnation, the rattle of the tumbrel on the ill-paved streets — saw her there with hands clasped together, her eyes —

Great God! he was really going mad!

Like a wild creature driven forth he started to run down the stairs, past the concierge, who was just entering his lodge, and who now turned in surly anger to watch this man running away like a lunatic or a fool, out by the front door and into the street. In a moment he was out of the little square; then like a hunted hare he still ran down the Rue St. Honore, along its narrow, interminable length. His hat had fallen from his head, his hair was wild all round his face, the rain weighted the cloak upon his shoulders; but still he ran.

His feet made no noise on the muddy pavement. He ran on and on, his elbows pressed to his sides, panting, quivering, intent but upon one thing — the goal which he had set himself to reach.

Jeanne was arrested. He did not know where to look for her, but he did know whither he wanted to go now as swiftly as his legs would carry him.

It was still dark, but Armand St. Just was a born Parisian, and he knew every inch of this quarter, where he and Marguerite had years ago lived. Down the Rue St. Honore, he had reached the bottom of the interminably long street at last. He had kept just a sufficiency of reason — or was it merely blind instinct? — to avoid the places where the night patrols of the National Guard might be on the watch. He avoided the Place du Carrousel, also the quay, and struck sharply to his right until he reached the facade of St. Germain l'Auxerrois.

Another effort; round the corner, and there was the house at last. He was like the hunted creature now that has run to earth. Up the two flights of stone stairs, and then the pull at the bell; a moment of tense anxiety, whilst panting, gasping, almost choked with the sustained effort and the strain of the past half-hour, he leaned against the wall, striving not to fall.

Then the well-known firm step across the rooms beyond, the open door, the hand upon his shoulder.

After that he remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XIV. THE CHIEF

He had not actually fainted, but the exertion of that long run had rendered him partially unconscious. He knew now that he was safe, that he was sitting in Blakeney's room, and that something hot and vivifying was being poured down his throat.

"Percy, they have arrested her!" he said, panting, as soon as speech returned to his paralysed tongue.

"All right. Don't talk now. Wait till you are better."

With infinite care and gentleness Blakeney arranged some cushions under Armand's head, turned the sofa towards the fire, and anon brought his friend a cup of hot coffee, which the latter drank with avidity.

He was really too exhausted to speak. He had contrived to tell Blakeney, and now Blakeney knew, so everything would be all right. The inevitable reaction was asserting itself; the muscles had relaxed, the nerves were numbed, and Armand lay back on the sofa with eyes half closed, unable to move, yet feeling his strength gradually returning to him, his vitality asserting itself, all the feverish excitement of the past twenty-four hours yielding at last to a calmer mood.

Through his half-closed eyes he could see his brother-in-law moving about the room. Blakeney was fully dressed. In a sleepy kind of way Armand wondered if he had been to bed at all; certainly his clothes set on him with their usual well-tailored perfection, and there was no suggestion in his brisk step and alert movements that he had passed a sleepless night.

Now he was standing by the open window. Armand, from where he lay, could see his broad shoulders sharply outlined against the grey background of the hazy winter dawn. A wan light was just creeping up from the east over the city; the noises of the streets below came distinctly to Armand's ear.

He roused himself with one vigorous effort from his lethargy, feeling quite ashamed of himself and of this breakdown of his nervous system. He looked with frank admiration on Sir Percy, who stood immovable and silent by the window — a perfect tower of strength, serene and impassive, yet kindly in distress.

"Percy," said the young man, "I ran all the way from the top of the Rue St. Honore. I was only breathless. I am quite all right. May I tell you all about it?"

Without a word Blakeney closed the window and came across to the sofa; he sat down beside Armand, and to all outward appearances he was nothing now but a kind and sympathetic listener to a friend's tale of woe. Not a line in his face or a look in his eyes betrayed the thoughts of the leader who had been thwarted at the outset of a dangerous enterprise, or of the man, accustomed to command, who had been so flagrantly disobeyed.

Armand, unconscious of all save of Jeanne and of her immediate need, put an eager hand on Percy's arm.

"Heron and his hell-hounds went back to her lodgings last night," he said, speaking as if he were still a little out of breath. "They hoped to get me, no doubt; not finding me there, they took her. Oh, my God!"

It was the first time that he had put the whole terrible circumstance into words, and it seemed to gain in reality by the recounting. The agony of mind which he endured was almost unbearable; he hid his face in his hands lest Percy should see how terribly he suffered.

"I knew that," said Blakeney quietly. Armand looked up in surprise.

"How? When did you know it?" he stammered.

"Last night when you left me. I went down to the Square du Roule. I arrived there just too late."

"Percy!" exclaimed Armand, whose pale face had suddenly flushed scarlet, "you did that? — last night you—"

"Of course," interposed the other calmly; "had I not promised you to keep watch over her? When I heard the news it was already too late to make further inquiries, but when you arrived just now I was on the point of starting out, in order to find out in what prison Mademoiselle Lange is being detained. I shall have to go soon, Armand, before the guard is changed at the Temple and the Tuileries. This is the safest time, and God knows we are all of us sufficiently compromised already."

The flush of shame deepened in St. Just's cheek. There had not been a hint of reproach in the voice of his chief, and the eyes which regarded him now from beneath the half-closed lids showed nothing but lazy bonhomie.

In a moment now Armand realised all the harm which his recklessness had done, was still doing to the work of the League. Every one of his actions since his arrival in Paris two days ago had jeopardised a plan or endangered a life: his friendship with de Batz, his connection with Mademoiselle Lange, his visit to her yesterday afternoon, the repetition of it this morning, culminating in that wild run through the streets of Paris, when at any moment a spy lurking round a corner might either have barred his way, or, worse still, have followed him to Blakeney's door. Armand, without a thought of any one save of his beloved, might easily this morning have brought an agent of the Committee of General Security face to face with his chief.

"Percy," he murmured, "can you ever forgive me?"

"Pshaw, man!" retorted Blakeney lightly; "there is naught to forgive, only a great deal that should no longer be forgotten; your duty to the others, for instance, your obedience, and your honour."

"I was mad, Percy. Oh! if you only could understand what she means to me!"

Blakeney laughed, his own light-hearted careless laugh, which so often before now had helped to hide what he really felt from the eyes of the indifferent, and even from those of his friends.

"No! no!" he said lightly, "we agreed last night, did we not? that in matters of sentiment I am a cold-blooded fish. But will you at any rate concede that I am a man of my word? Did I not pledge it last night that Mademoiselle Lange would be safe? I foresaw her arrest the moment I heard your story. I hoped that I might reach her before that brute Heron's return; unfortunately he forestalled me by less than half an hour. Mademoiselle Lange has been arrested, Armand; but why should you not trust me on that account? Have we not succeeded, I and the others, in worse cases than this one? They mean no harm to Jeanne Lange," he added emphatically; "I give you my word on that. They only want her as a decoy. It is you they want. You through her, and me through you. I pledge you my honour that she will be safe. You must try and trust me, Armand. It is much to ask, I know, for you will have to trust me with what is most precious in the world to you; and you will have to obey me blindly, or I shall not be able to keep my word."

"What do you wish me to do?"

"Firstly, you must be outside Paris within the hour. Every minute that you spend inside the city now is full of danger — oh, no! not for you," added Blakeney, checking with a good-humoured gesture Armand's words of protestation, "danger for the others — and for our scheme tomorrow."

"How can I go to St. Germain, Percy, knowing that she—"

"Is under my charge?" interposed the other calmly. "That should not be so very difficult. Come," he added, placing a kindly hand on the other's shoulder, "you shall not find me such an inhuman monster after all. But I must think of the others, you see, and of the child whom I have sworn to save. But I won't send you as far as St. Germain. Go down to the room below and find a good bundle of rough clothes that will serve you as a disguise, for I imagine that you have lost those which you had on the landing or the stairs of the house in the Square du Roule. In a tin box with the clothes downstairs you will find the packet of miscellaneous certificates of safety. Take an appropriate one, and then start out immediately for Villette. You understand?"

"Yes, yes!" said Armand eagerly. "You want me to join Ffoulkes and Tony."

"Yes! You'll find them probably unloading coal by the canal. Try and get private speech with them as early as may be, and tell Tony to set out at once for St. Germain, and to join Hastings there, instead of you, whilst you take his place with Ffoulkes."

"Yes, I understand; but how will Tony reach St. Germain?"

"La, my good fellow," said Blakeney gaily, "you may safely trust Tony to go where I send him. Do you but do as I tell you, and leave him to look after himself. And now," he added, speaking more earnestly, "the sooner you get out of Paris the better it will be for us all. As you see, I am only sending you to La Villette, because it is not so far, but that I can keep in personal touch with you. Remain close to the gates for an hour after nightfall. I will contrive before they close to bring you news of Mademoiselle Lange."

Armand said no more. The sense of shame in him deepened with every word spoken by his chief. He felt how untrustworthy he had been, how undeserving of the selfless devotion which Percy was showing him even now. The words of gratitude died on his lips; he knew that they would be unwelcome. These Englishmen were so devoid of sentiment, he thought, and his brother-in-law, with all his unselfish and heroic deeds, was, he felt, absolutely callous in matters of the heart.

But Armand was a noble-minded man, and with the true sporting instinct in him, despite the fact that he was a creature of nerves, highly strung and imaginative. He could give ungrudging admiration to his chief, even whilst giving himself up entirely to the sentiment for Jeanne.

He tried to imbue himself with the same spirit that actuated my Lord Tony and the other members of the League. How gladly would he have chaffed and made senseless schoolboy jokes like those which — in face of their hazardous enterprise and the dangers which they all ran — had horrified him so much last night.

But somehow he knew that jokes from him would not ring true. How could he smile when his heart was brimming over with his love for Jeanne, and with solicitude on her account? He felt that Percy was regarding him with a kind of indulgent amusement; there was a look of suppressed merriment in the depths of those lazy blue eyes.

So he braced up his nerves, trying his best to look cool and unconcerned, but he could not altogether hide from his friend the burning anxiety which was threatening to break his heart.

"I have given you my word, Armand," said Blakeney in answer to the unspoken prayer; "cannot you try and trust me — as the others do? Then with sudden transition he pointed to the map behind him.

"Remember the gate of Villette, and the corner by the towpath. Join Ffoulkes as soon as may be and send Tony on his way, and wait for news of Mademoiselle Lange some time to-night."

"God bless you, Percy!" said Armand involuntarily. "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, my dear fellow. Slip on your disguise as quickly as you can, and be out of the house in a quarter of an hour."

He accompanied Armand through the ante-room, and finally closed the door on him. Then he went back to his room and walked up to the window, which he threw open to the humid morning air. Now that he was alone the look of trouble on his face deepened to a dark, anxious frown, and as he looked out across the river a sigh of bitter impatience and disappointment escaped his lips.

CHAPTER XV. THE GATE OF LA VILLETTE

And now the shades of evening had long since yielded to those of night. The gate of La Villette, at the northeast corner of the city, was about to close. Armand, dressed in the rough clothes of a labouring man, was leaning against a low wall at the angle of the narrow street which abuts on the canal at its further end; from this point of vantage he could command a view of the gate and of the life and bustle around it.

He was dog-tired. After the emotions of the past twenty-four hours, a day's hard manual toil to which he was unaccustomed had caused him to ache in every limb. As soon as he had arrived at the canal wharf in the early morning he had obtained the kind of casual work that ruled about here, and soon was told off to unload a cargo of coal which had arrived by barge overnight. He had set-to with a will, half hoping to kill his anxiety by dint of heavy bodily exertion. During the course of the morning he had suddenly become aware of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and of Lord Anthony Dewhurst working not far away from him, and as fine a pair of coalheavers as any shipper could desire.

It was not very difficult in the midst of the noise and activity that reigned all about the wharf for the three men to exchange a few words together, and Armand soon communicated the chief's new instructions to my Lord Tony, who effectually slipped away from his work some time during the day. Armand did not even see him go, it had all been so neatly done.

Just before five o'clock in the afternoon the labourers were paid off. It was then too dark to continue work. Armand would have liked to talk to Sir Andrew, if only for a moment. He felt lonely and desperately anxious. He had hoped to tire out his nerves as well as his body, but in this he had not succeeded. As soon as he had given up his tools, his brain began to work again more busily than ever. It followed Percy in his peregrinations through the city, trying to discover where those brutes were keeping Jeanne.

That task had suddenly loomed up before Armand's mind with all its terrible difficulties. How could Percy — a marked man if ever there was one — go from prison to prison to inquire about Jeanne? The very idea seemed preposterous. Armand ought never to have consented to such an insensate plan. The more he thought of it, the more impossible did it seem that Blakeney could find anything out.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was nowhere to be seen. St. Just wandered about in the dark, lonely streets of this outlying quarter vainly trying to find the friend in whom he could confide, who, no doubt, would reassure him as to Blakeney's probable movements in Paris. Then as the hour approached for the closing of the city gates Armand took up his stand at an angle of the street from whence he could see both the gate on one side of him and the thin line of the canal intersecting the street at its further end.

Unless Percy came within the next five minutes the gates would be closed and the difficulties of crossing the barrier would be increased a hundredfold. The market gardeners with their covered carts filed out of the gate one by one; the labourers on foot were returning to their homes; there was a group of stonemasons, a few road-makers, also a number of beggars, ragged and filthy, who herded somewhere in the neighbourhood of the canal.

In every form, under every disguise, Armand hoped to discover Percy. He could not stand still for very long, but strode up and down the road that skirts the fortifications at this point.

There were a good many idlers about at this hour; some men who had finished their work, and meant to spend an hour or so in one of the drinking shops that abounded in the neighbourhood of the wharf; others who liked to gather a small knot of listeners around them, whilst they discoursed on the politics of the day, or rather raged against the Convention, which was all made up of traitors to the people's welfare.

Armand, trying manfully to play his part, joined one of the groups that stood gaping round a street orator. He shouted with the best of them, waved his cap in the air, and applauded or hissed in unison with the majority. But his eyes never wandered for long away from the gate whence Percy must come now at any moment — now or not at all.

At what precise moment the awful doubt took birth in his mind the young man could not afterwards have said. Perhaps it was when he heard the roll of drums proclaiming the closing of the gates, and witnessed the changing of the guard.

Percy had not come. He could not come now, and he (Armand) would have the night to face without news of Jeanne. Something, of course, had detained Percy; perhaps he had been unable to get definite information about Jeanne; perhaps the information which he had obtained was too terrible to communicate.

If only Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had been there, and Armand had had some one to talk to, perhaps then he would have found sufficient strength of mind to wait with outward patience, even though his nerves were on the rack.

Darkness closed in around him, and with the darkness came the full return of the phantoms that had assailed him in the house of the Square du Roule when first he had heard of Jeanne's arrest. The open place facing the gate had transformed itself into the Place de la Revolution, the tall rough post that held a flickering oil lamp had become the gaunt arm of the guillotine, the feeble light of the lamp was the knife that gleamed with the reflection of a crimson light.

And Armand saw himself, as in a vision, one of a vast and noisy throng — they were all pressing round him so that he could not move; they were brandishing caps and tricolour flags, also pitchforks and scythes. He had seen such a crowd four years ago rushing towards the Bastille. Now they were all assembled here around him and around the guillotine.

Suddenly a distant rattle caught his subconscious ear: the rattle of wheels on rough cobble-stones. Immediately the crowd began to cheer and to shout; some sang the "Ca ira!" and others screamed:

"Les aristos! a la lanterne! a mort! a mort! les aristos!"

He saw it all quite plainly, for the darkness had vanished, and the vision was more vivid than even reality could have been. The rattle of wheels grew louder, and presently the cart debouched on the open place.

Men and women sat huddled up in the cart; but in the midst of them a woman stood, and her eyes were fixed upon Armand. She wore her pale-grey satin gown, and a white kerchief was folded across her bosom. Her brown hair fell in loose soft curls all round her head. She looked exactly like the exquisite cameo which Marguerite used to wear. Her hands were tied with cords behind her back, but between her fingers she held a small bunch of violets.

Armand saw it all. It was, of course, a vision, and he knew that it was one, but he believed that the vision was prophetic. No thought of the chief whom he had sworn to trust and to obey came to chase away these imaginings of his fevered fancy. He saw Jeanne, and only Jeanne, standing on the tumbril and being led to the guillotine. Sir Andrew was not there, and Percy had not come. Armand believed that a direct message had come to him from heaven to save his beloved.

Therefore he forgot his promise — his oath; he forgot those very things which the leader had entreated him to remember — his duty to the others, his loyalty, his obedience. Jeanne had first claim on him. It were the act of a coward to remain in safety whilst she was in such deadly danger.

Now he blamed himself severely for having quitted Paris. Even Percy must have thought him a coward for obeying quite so readily. Maybe the command had been but a test of his courage, of the strength of his love for Jeanne.

A hundred conjectures flashed through his brain; a hundred plans presented themselves to his mind. It was not for Percy, who did not know her, to save Jeanne or to guard her. That task was Armand's, who worshipped her, and who would gladly die beside her if he failed to rescue her from threatened death.

Resolution was not slow in coming. A tower clock inside the city struck the hour of six, and still no sign of Percy.

Armand, his certificate of safety in his hand, walked boldly up to the gate.

The guard challenged him, but he presented the certificate. There was an agonising moment when the card was taken from him, and he was detained in the guard-room while it was being examined by the sergeant in command.

But the certificate was in good order, and Armand, covered in coal-dust, with the perspiration streaming down his face, did certainly not look like an aristocrat in disguise. It was never very difficult to enter the great city; if one wished to put one's head in the lion's mouth, one was welcome to do so; the difficulty came when the lion thought fit to close his jaws.

Armand, after five minutes of tense anxiety, was allowed to cross the barrier, but his certificate of safety was detained. He would have to get another from the Committee of General Security before he would be allowed to leave Paris again.

The lion had thought fit to close his jaws.

CHAPTER XVI. THE WEARY SEARCH

Blakeney was not at his lodgings when Armand arrived there that evening, nor did he return, whilst the young man haunted the precincts of St. Germain l'Auxerrois and wandered along the quays hours and hours at a stretch, until he nearly dropped under the portico of a house, and realised that if he loitered longer he might lose consciousness completely, and be unable on the morrow to be of service to Jeanne.

He dragged his weary footsteps back to his own lodgings on the heights of Montmartre. He had not found Percy, he had no news of Jeanne; it seemed as if hell itself could hold no worse tortures than this intolerable suspense.

He threw himself down on the narrow palliasse and, tired nature asserting herself, at last fell into a heavy, dreamless torpor, like the sleep of a drunkard, deep but without the beneficent aid of rest.

It was broad daylight when he awoke. The pale light of a damp, wintry morning filtered through the grimy panes of the window. Armand jumped out of bed, aching of limb but resolute of mind. There was no doubt that Percy had failed in discovering Jeanne's whereabouts; but where a mere friend had failed a lover was more likely to succeed.

The rough clothes which he had worn yesterday were the only ones he had. They would, of course, serve his purpose better than his own, which he had left at Blakeney's lodgings yesterday. In half an hour he was dressed, looking a fairly good imitation of a labourer out of work.

He went to a humble eating house of which he knew, and there, having ordered some hot coffee with a hunk of bread, he set himself to think.

It was quite a usual thing these days for relatives and friends of prisoners to go wandering about from prison to prison to find out where the loved ones happened to be detained. The prisons were over full just now; convents, monasteries, and public institutions had all been requisitioned by the Government for the housing of the hundreds of so-called traitors who had been arrested on the barest suspicion, or at the mere denunciation of an evil-wisher.

There were the Abbaye and the Luxembourg, the erstwhile convents of the Visitation and the Sacre-Coeur, the cloister of the Oratorians, the Salpetriere, and the St. Lazare hospitals, and there was, of course, the Temple, and, lastly, the Conciergerie, to which those prisoners were brought whose trial would take place within the next few days, and whose condemnation was practically assured.

Persons under arrest at some of the other prisons did sometimes come out of them alive, but the Conciergerie was only the ante-chamber of the guillotine.

Therefore Armand's idea was to visit the Conciergerie first. The sooner he could reassure himself that Jeanne was not in immediate danger the better would he be able to endure the agony of that heart-breaking search, that knocking at every door in the hope of finding his beloved.

If Jeanne was not in the Conciergerie, then there might be some hope that she was only being temporarily detained, and through Armand's excited brain there had already flashed the thought that mayhap the Committee of General Security would release her if he gave himself up.

These thoughts, and the making of plans, fortified him mentally and physically; he even made a great effort to eat and drink, knowing that his bodily strength must endure if it was going to be of service to Jeanne.

He reached the Quai de l'Horloge soon after nine. The grim, irregular walls of the Chatelet and the house of Justice loomed from out the mantle of mist that lay on the river banks. Armand skirted the square clock-tower, and passed through the monumental gateways of the house of Justice.

He knew that his best way to the prison would be through the halls and corridors of the Tribunal, to which the public had access whenever the court was sitting. The sittings began at ten, and already the usual crowd of idlers were assembling — men and women who apparently had no other occupation save to come day after day to this theatre of horrors and watch the different acts of the heartrending dramas that were enacted here with a kind of awful monotony.

Armand mingled with the crowd that stood about the courtyard, and anon moved slowly up the gigantic flight of stone steps, talking lightly on indifferent subjects. There was quite a goodly sprinkling of workmen amongst this crowd, and Armand in his toil-stained clothes attracted no attention.

Suddenly a word reached his ear — just a name flippantly spoken by spiteful lips — and it changed the whole trend of his thoughts. Since he had risen that morning he had thought of nothing but of Jeanne, and — in connection with her — of Percy and his vain quest of her. Now that name spoken by some one unknown brought his mind back to more definite thoughts of his chief.

"Capet!" the name — intended as an insult, but actually merely irrelevant — whereby the uncrowned little King of France was designated by the revolutionary party.

Armand suddenly recollected that to-day was Sunday, the 19th of January. He had lost count of days and of dates lately, but the name, "Capet," had brought everything back: the child in the Temple; the conference in Blakeney's lodgings; the plans for the rescue of the boy. That was to take place to-day — Sunday, the 19th. The Simons would be moving from the Temple, at what hour Blakeney did not know, but it would be today, and he would be watching his opportunity.

Now Armand understood everything; a great wave of bitterness swept over his soul. Percy had forgotten Jeanne! He was busy thinking of the child in the Temple, and whilst Armand had been eating out his heart with anxiety, the Scarlet Pimpernel, true only to his mission, and impatient of all sentiment that interfered with his schemes, had left Jeanne to pay with her life for the safety of the uncrowned King.

But the bitterness did not last long; on the contrary, a kind of wild exultation took its place. If Percy had forgotten, then Armand could stand by Jeanne alone. It was better so! He would save the loved one; it was his duty and his right to work for her sake. Never for a moment did he doubt that he could save her, that his life would be readily accepted in exchange for hers.

The crowd around him was moving up the monumental steps, and Armand went with the crowd. It lacked but a few minutes to ten now; soon the court would begin to sit. In the olden days, when he was studying for the law, Armand had often wandered about at will

along the corridors of the house of Justice. He knew exactly where the different prisons were situated about the buildings, and how to reach the courtyards where the prisoners took their daily exercise.

To watch those aristos who were awaiting trial and death taking their recreation in these courtyards had become one of the sights of Paris. Country cousins on a visit to the city were brought hither for entertainment. Tall iron gates stood between the public and the prisoners, and a row of sentinels guarded these gates; but if one was enterprising and eager to see, one could glue one's nose against the ironwork and watch the ci-devant aristocrats in threadbare clothes trying to cheat their horror of death by acting a farce of light-heartedness which their wan faces and tear-dimmed eyes effectually belied.

All this Armand knew, and on this he counted. For a little while he joined the crowd in the Salle des Pas Perdus, and wandered idly up and down the majestic colonnaded hall. He even at one time formed part of the throng that watched one of those quick tragedies that were enacted within the great chamber of the court. A number of prisoners brought in, in a batch; hurried interrogations, interrupted answers, a quick indictment, monstrous in its flaring injustice, spoken by Fouquier-Tinville, the public prosecutor, and listened to in all seriousness by men who dared to call themselves judges of their fellows.

The accused had walked down the Champs Elysees without wearing a tricolour cockade; the other had invested some savings in an English industrial enterprise; yet another had sold public funds, causing them to depreciate rather suddenly in the market!

Sometimes from one of these unfortunates led thus wantonly to butchery there would come an excited protest, or from a woman screams of agonised entreaty. But these were quickly silenced by rough blows from the butt-ends of muskets, and condemnations — wholesale sentences of death — were quickly passed amidst the cheers of the spectators and the howls of derision from infamous jury and judge.

Oh! the mockery of it all — the awful, the hideous ignominy, the blot of shame that would forever sully the historic name of France. Armand, sickened with horror, could not bear more than a few minutes of this monstrous spectacle. The same fate might even now be awaiting Jeanne. Among the next batch of victims to this sacrilegious butchery he might suddenly spy his beloved with her pale face and cheeks stained with her tears.

He fled from the great chamber, keeping just a sufficiency of presence of mind to join a knot of idlers who were drifting leisurely towards the corridors. He followed in their wake and soon found himself in the long Galerie des Prisonniers, along the flagstones of which two days ago de Batz had followed his guide towards the lodgings of Heron.

On his left now were the arcades shut off from the courtyard beyond by heavy iron gates. Through the ironwork Armand caught sight of a number of women walking or sitting in the courtyard. He heard a man next to him explaining to his friend that these were the female prisoners who would be brought to trial that day, and he felt that his heart must burst at the thought that mayhap Jeanne would be among them.

He elbowed his way cautiously to the front rank. Soon he found himself beside a sentinel who, with a good-humoured jest, made way for him that he might watch the aristos. Armand leaned against the grating, and his every sense was concentrated in that of sight.

At first he could scarcely distinguish one woman from another amongst the crowd that thronged the courtyard, and the close ironwork hindered his view considerably. The women looked almost like phantoms in the grey misty air, gliding slowly along with noiseless tread on the flag-stones.

Presently, however, his eyes, which mayhap were somewhat dim with tears, became more accustomed to the hazy grey light and the moving figures that looked so like shadows. He could distinguish isolated groups now, women and girls sitting together under the colonnaded arcades, some reading, others busy, with trembling fingers, patching and darning a poor, torn gown. Then there were others who were actually chatting and laughing together, and — oh, the pity of it! the pity and the shame! — a few children, shrieking with delight, were playing hide and seek in and out amongst the columns.

And, between them all, in and out like the children at play, unseen, yet familiar to all, the spectre of Death, scythe and hour-glass in hand, wandered, majestic and sure.

Armand's very soul was in his eyes. So far he had not yet caught sight of his beloved, and slowly — very slowly — a ray of hope was filtering through the darkness of his despair.

The sentinel, who had stood aside for him, chaffed him for his intentness.

"Have you a sweetheart among these aristos, citizen?" he asked. "You seem to be devouring them with your eyes."

Armand, with his rough clothes soiled with coal-dust, his face grimy and streaked with sweat, certainly looked to have but little in common with the ci-devant aristos who formed the hulk of the groups in the courtyard. He looked up; the soldier was regarding him with obvious amusement, and at sight of Armand's wild, anxious eyes he gave vent to a coarse jest.

"Have I made a shrewd guess, citizen?" he said. "Is she among that lot?"

"I do not know where she is," said Armand almost involuntarily.

"Then why don't you find out?" queried the soldier.

The man was not speaking altogether unkindly. Armand, devoured with the maddening desire to know, threw the last fragment of prudence to the wind. He assumed a more careless air, trying to look as like a country bumpkin in love as he could.

"I would like to find out," he said, "but I don't know where to inquire. My sweetheart has certainly left her home," he added lightly; "some say that she has been false to me, but I think that, mayhap, she has been arrested."

"Well, then, you gaby," said the soldier good-humouredly, "go straight to La Tournelle; you know where it is?"

Armand knew well enough, but thought it more prudent to keep up the air of the ignorant lout.

"Straight down that first corridor on your right," explained the other, pointing in the direction which he had indicated, "you will find the guichet of La Tournelle exactly opposite to you. Ask the concierge for the register of female prisoners — every freeborn citizen of the Republic has the right to inspect prison registers. It is a new decree framed for safeguarding the liberty of the people. But if you do not press half a livre in the hand of the concierge," he added, speaking confidentially, "you will find that the register will not be quite ready for your inspection."

"Half a livre!" exclaimed Armand, striving to play his part to the end. "How can a poor devil of a labourer have half a livre to give away?"

“Well! a few sous will do in that case; a few sous are always welcome these hard times.”

Armand took the hint, and as the crowd had drifted away momentarily to a further portion of the corridor, he contrived to press a few copper coins into the hand of the obliging soldier.

Of course, he knew his way to La Tournelle, and he would have covered the distance that separated him from the guichet there with steps flying like the wind, but, commending himself for his own prudence, he walked as slowly as he could along the interminable corridor, past the several minor courts of justice, and skirting the courtyard where the male prisoners took their exercise.

At last, having struck sharply to his left and ascended a short flight of stairs, he found himself in front of the guichet — a narrow wooden box, wherein the clerk in charge of the prison registers sat nominally at the disposal of the citizens of this free republic.

But to Armand's almost overwhelming chagrin he found the place entirely deserted. The guichet was closed down; there was not a soul in sight. The disappointment was doubly keen, coming as it did in the wake of hope that had refused to be gainsaid. Armand himself did not realise how sanguine he had been until he discovered that he must wait and wait again — wait for hours, all day mayhap, before he could get definite news of Jeanne.

He wandered aimlessly in the vicinity of that silent, deserted, cruel spot, where a closed trapdoor seemed to shut off all his hopes of a speedy sight of Jeanne. He inquired of the first sentinels whom he came across at what hour the clerk of the registers would be back at his post; the soldiers shrugged their shoulders and could give no information. Then began Armand's aimless wanderings round La Tournelle, his fruitless inquiries, his wild, excited search for the hide-bound official who was keeping from him the knowledge of Jeanne.

He went back to his sentinel well-wisher by the women's courtyard, but found neither consolation nor encouragement there.

“It is not the hour — quoi?” the soldier remarked with laconic philosophy.

It apparently was not the hour when the prison registers were placed at the disposal of the public. After much fruitless inquiry, Armand at last was informed by a bon bourgeois, who was wandering about the house of Justice and who seemed to know its multifarious rules, that the prison registers all over Paris could only be consulted by the public between the hours of six and seven in the evening.

There was nothing for it but to wait. Armand, whose temples were throbbing, who was footsore, hungry, and wretched, could gain nothing by continuing his aimless wanderings through the labyrinthine building. For close upon another hour he stood with his face glued against the ironwork which separated him from the female prisoners' courtyard. Once it seemed to him as if from its further end he caught the sound of that exquisitely melodious voice which had rung forever in his ear since that memorable evening when Jeanne's dainty footsteps had first crossed the path of his destiny. He strained his eyes to look in the direction whence the voice had come, but the centre of the courtyard was planted with a small garden of shrubs, and Armand could not see across it. At last, driven forth like a wandering and lost soul, he turned back and out into the streets. The air was mild and damp. The sharp thaw had persisted through the day, and a thin, misty rain was falling and converting the ill-paved roads into seas of mud.

But of this Armand was wholly unconscious. He walked along the quay holding his cap in his hand, so that the mild south wind should cool his burning forehead.

How he contrived to kill those long, weary hours he could not afterwards have said. Once he felt very hungry, and turned almost mechanically into an eating-house, and tried to eat and drink. But most of the day he wandered through the streets, restlessly, unceasingly, feeling neither chill nor fatigue. The hour before six o'clock found him on the Quai de l'Horloge in the shadow of the great towers of the Hall of Justice, listening for the clang of the clock that would sound the hour of his deliverance from this agonising torture of suspense.

He found his way to La Tournelle without any hesitation. There before him was the wooden box, with its guichet open at last, and two stands upon its ledge, on which were placed two huge leather-bound books.

Though Armand was nearly an hour before the appointed time, he saw when he arrived a number of people standing round the guichet. Two soldiers were there keeping guard and forcing the patient, long-suffering inquirers to stand in a queue, each waiting his or her turn at the books.

It was a curious crowd that stood there, in single file, as if waiting at the door of the cheaper part of a theatre; men in substantial cloth clothes, and others in ragged blouse and breeches; there were a few women, too, with black shawls on their shoulders and kerchiefs round their wan, tear-stained faces.

They were all silent and absorbed, submissive under the rough handling of the soldiery, humble and deferential when anon the clerk of the registers entered his box, and prepared to place those fateful books at the disposal of those who had lost a loved one — father, brother, mother, or wife — and had come to search through those cruel pages.

From inside his box the clerk disputed every inquirer's right to consult the books; he made as many difficulties as he could, demanding the production of certificates of safety, or permits from the section. He was as insolent as he dared, and Armand from where he stood could see that a continuous if somewhat thin stream of coppers flowed from the hands of the inquirers into those of the official.

It was quite dark in the passage where the long queue continued to swell with amazing rapidity. Only on the ledge in front of the guichet there was a guttering tallow candle at the disposal of the inquirers.

Now it was Armand's turn at last. By this time his heart was beating so strongly and so rapidly that he could not have trusted himself to speak. He fumbled in his pocket, and without unnecessary preliminaries he produced a small piece of silver, and pushed it towards the clerk, then he seized on the register marked “Femmes” with voracious avidity.

The clerk had with stolid indifference pocketed the half-livre; he looked on Armand over a pair of large bone-rimmed spectacles, with the air of an old hawk that sees a helpless bird and yet is too satiated to eat. He was apparently vastly amused at Armand's trembling hands, and the clumsy, aimless way with which he fingered the book and held up the tallow candle.

“What date?” he asked curtly in a piping voice.

“What date?” reiterated Armand vaguely.

"What day and hour was she arrested?" said the man, thrusting his beak-like nose closer to Armand's face. Evidently the piece of silver had done its work well; he meant to be helpful to this country lout.

"On Friday evening," murmured the young man.

The clerk's hands did not in character gainsay the rest of his appearance; they were long and thin, with nails that resembled the talons of a hawk. Armand watched them fascinated as from above they turned over rapidly the pages of the book; then one long, grimy finger pointed to a row of names down a column.

"If she is here," said the man curtly, "her name should be amongst these."

Armand's vision was blurred. He could scarcely see. The row of names was dancing a wild dance in front of his eyes; perspiration stood out on his forehead, and his breath came in quick, stertorous gasps.

He never knew afterwards whether he actually saw Jeanne's name there in the book, or whether his fevered brain was playing his aching senses a cruel and mocking trick. Certain it is that suddenly amongst a row of indifferent names hers suddenly stood clearly on the page, and to him it seemed as if the letters were writ out in blood.

582. Belhomme, Louise, aged sixty. Discharged.

And just below, the other entry:

583. Lange, Jeanne, aged twenty, actress. Square du Roule

No. 5. Suspected of harbouring traitors and ci-devants.

Transferred 29th Nivose to the Temple, cell 29.

He saw nothing more, for suddenly it seemed to him as if some one held a vivid scarlet veil in front of his eyes, whilst a hundred claw-like hands were tearing at his heart and at his throat.

"Clear out now! it is my turn — what? Are you going to stand there all night?"

A rough voice seemed to be speaking these words; rough hands apparently were pushing him out of the way, and some one snatched the candle out of his hand; but nothing was real. He stumbled over a corner of a loose flagstone, and would have fallen, but something seemed to catch hold of him and to lead him away for a little distance, until a breath of cold air blew upon his face.

This brought him back to his senses.

Jeanne was a prisoner in the Temple; then his place was in the prison of the Temple, too. It could not be very difficult to run one's head into the noose that caught so many necks these days. A few cries of "Vive le roi!" or "A bas la republique!" and more than one prison door would gape invitingly to receive another guest.

The hot blood had rushed into Armand's head. He did not see clearly before him, nor did he hear distinctly. There was a buzzing in his ears as of myriads of mocking birds' wings, and there was a veil in front of his eyes — a veil through which he saw faces and forms flitting ghost-like in the gloom, men and women jostling or being jostled, soldiers, sentinels; then long, interminable corridors, more crowd and more soldiers, winding stairs, courtyards and gates; finally the open street, the quay, and the river beyond.

An incessant hammering went on in his temples, and that veil never lifted from before his eyes. Now it was lurid and red, as if stained with blood; anon it was white like a shroud but it was always there.

Through it he saw the Pont-au-Change, which he crossed, then far down on the Quai de l'Ecole to the left the corner house behind St. Germain l'Auxerrois, where Blakeney lodged — Blakeney, who for the sake of a stranger had forgotten all about his comrade and Jeanne.

Through it he saw the network of streets which separated him from the neighbourhood of the Temple, the gardens of ruined habitations, the closely-shuttered and barred windows of ducal houses, then the mean streets, the crowded drinking bars, the tumble-down shops with their dilapidated awnings.

He saw with eyes that did not see, heard the tumult of daily life round him with ears that did not hear. Jeanne was in the Temple prison, and when its grim gates closed finally for the night, he — Armand, her chevalier, her lover, her defender — would be within its walls as near to cell No. 29 as bribery, entreaty, promises would help him to attain.

Ah! there at last loomed the great building, the pointed bastions cut through the surrounding gloom as with a sable knife.

Armand reached the gate; the sentinels challenged him; he replied:

"Vive le roi!" shouting wildly like one who is drunk.

He was hatless, and his clothes were saturated with moisture. He tried to pass, but crossed bayonets barred the way. Still he shouted:

"Vive le roi!" and "A bas la republique!"

"Allons! the fellow is drunk!" said one of the soldiers.

Armand fought like a madman; he wanted to reach that gate. He shouted, he laughed, and he cried, until one of the soldiers in a fit of rage struck him heavily on the head.

Armand fell backwards, stunned by the blow; his foot slipped on the wet pavement. Was he indeed drunk, or was he dreaming? He put his hand up to his forehead; it was wet, but whether with the rain or with blood he did not know; but for the space of one second he tried to collect his scattered wits.

"Citizen St. Just!" said a quiet voice at his elbow.

Then, as he looked round dazed, feeling a firm, pleasant grip on his arm, the same quiet voice continued calmly:

"Perhaps you do not remember me, citizen St. Just. I had not the honour of the same close friendship with you as I had with your charming sister. My name is Chauvelin. Can I be of any service to you?"

CHAPTER XVII. CHAUVELIN

Chauvelin! The presence of this man here at this moment made the events of the past few days seem more absolutely like a dream. Chauvelin! — the most deadly enemy he, Armand, and his sister Marguerite had in the world. Chauvelin! — the evil genius that presided over the Secret Service of the Republic. Chauvelin — the aristocrat turned revolutionary, the diplomat turned spy, the baffled enemy of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

He stood there vaguely outlined in the gloom by the feeble rays of an oil lamp fixed into the wall just above. The moisture on his sable clothes glistened in the flickering light like a thin veil of crystal; it clung to the rim of his hat, to the folds of his cloak; the ruffles at his throat and wrist hung limp and soiled.

He had released Armand's arm, and held his hands now underneath his cloak; his pale, deep-set eyes rested gravely on the younger man's face.

"I had an idea, somehow," continued Chauvelin calmly, "that you and I would meet during your sojourn in Paris. I heard from my friend Heron that you had been in the city; he, unfortunately, lost your track almost as soon as he had found it, and I, too, had begun to fear that our mutual and ever enigmatical friend, the Scarlet Pimpernel, had spirited you away, which would have been a great disappointment to me."

Now he once more took hold of Armand by the elbow, but quite gently, more like a comrade who is glad to have met another, and is preparing to enjoy a pleasant conversation for a while. He led the way back to the gate, the sentinel saluting at sight of the tricolour scarf which was visible underneath his cloak. Under the stone rampart Chauvelin paused.

It was quiet and private here. The group of soldiers stood at the further end of the archway, but they were out of hearing, and their forms were only vaguely discernible in the surrounding darkness.

Armand had followed his enemy mechanically like one bewitched and irresponsible for his actions. When Chauvelin paused he too stood still, not because of the grip on his arm, but because of that curious numbing of his will.

Vague, confused thoughts were floating through his brain, the most dominant one among them being that Fate had effectually ordained everything for the best. Here was Chauvelin, a man who hated him, who, of course, would wish to see him dead. Well, surely it must be an easier matter now to barter his own life for that of Jeanne; she had only been arrested on suspicion of harbouring him, who was a known traitor to the Republic; then, with his capture and speedy death, her supposed guilt would, he hoped, be forgiven. These people could have no ill-will against her, and actors and actresses were always leniently dealt with when possible. Then surely, surely, he could serve Jeanne best by his own arrest and condemnation, than by working to rescue her from prison.

In the meanwhile Chauvelin shook the damp from off his cloak, talking all the time in his own peculiar, gently ironical manner.

"Lady Blakeney?" he was saying— "I hope that she is well!"

"I thank you, sir," murmured Armand mechanically.

"And my dear friend, Sir Percy Blakeney? I had hoped to meet him in Paris. Ah! but no doubt he has been busy very busy; but I live in hopes — I live in hopes. See how kindly Chance has treated me," he continued in the same bland and mocking tones. "I was taking a stroll in these parts, scarce hoping to meet a friend, when, passing the postern-gate of this charming hostelry, whom should I see but my amiable friend St. Just striving to gain admission. But, la! here am I talking of myself, and I am not re-assured as to your state of health. You felt faint just now, did you not? The air about this building is very dank and close. I hope you feel better now. Command me, pray, if I can be of service to you in any way."

Whilst Chauvelin talked he had drawn Armand after him into the lodge of the concierge. The young man now made a great effort to pull himself vigorously together and to steady his nerves.

He had his wish. He was inside the Temple prison now, not far from Jeanne, and though his enemy was older and less vigorous than himself, and the door of the concierge's lodge stood wide open, he knew that he was in-deed as effectually a prisoner already as if the door of one of the numerous cells in this gigantic building had been bolted and barred upon him.

This knowledge helped him to recover his complete presence of mind. No thought of fighting or trying to escape his fate entered his head for a moment. It had been useless probably, and undoubtedly it was better so. If he only could see Jeanne, and assure himself that she would be safe in consequence of his own arrest, then, indeed, life could hold no greater happiness for him.

Above all now he wanted to be cool and calculating, to curb the excitement which the Latin blood in him called forth at every mention of the loved one's name. He tried to think of Percy, of his calmness, his easy banter with an enemy; he resolved to act as Percy would act under these circumstances.

Firstly, he steadied his voice, and drew his well-knit, slim figure upright. He called to mind all his friends in England, with their rigid manners, their impassiveness in the face of trying situations. There was Lord Tony, for instance, always ready with some boyish joke, with boyish impertinence always hovering on his tongue. Armand tried to emulate Lord Tony's manner, and to borrow something of Percy's calm impudence.

"Citizen Chauvelin," he said, as soon as he felt quite sure of the steadiness of his voice and the calmness of his manner, "I wonder if you are quite certain that that light grip which you have on my arm is sufficient to keep me here walking quietly by your side instead of knocking you down, as I certainly feel inclined to do, for I am a younger, more vigorous man than you."

"H'm!" said Chauvelin, who made pretence to ponder over this difficult problem; "like you, citizen St. Just, I wonder—"

"It could easily be done, you know."

"Fairly easily," rejoined the other; "but there is the guard; it is numerous and strong in this building, and—"

"The gloom would help me; it is dark in the corridors, and a desperate man takes risks, remember—"

"Quite so! And you, citizen St. Just, are a desperate man just now."

"My sister Marguerite is not here, citizen Chauvelin. You cannot barter my life for that of your enemy."

"No! no! no!" rejoined Chauvelin blandly; "not for that of my enemy, I know, but—"

Armand caught at his words like a drowning man at a reed.

"For hers!" he exclaimed.

"For hers?" queried the other with obvious puzzlement.

"Mademoiselle Lange," continued Armand with all the egoistic ardour of the lover who believes that the attention of the entire world is concentrated upon his beloved.

"Mademoiselle Lange! You will set her free now that I am in your power."

Chauvelin smiled, his usual suave, enigmatical smile.

"Ah, yes!" he said. "Mademoiselle Lange. I had forgotten."

"Forgotten, man? — forgotten that those murderous dogs have arrested her? — the best, the purest, this vile, degraded country has ever produced. She sheltered me one day just for an hour. I am a traitor to the Republic — I own it. I'll make full confession; but she knew nothing of this. I deceived her; she is quite innocent, you understand? I'll make full confession, but you must set her free."

He had gradually worked himself up again to a state of feverish excitement. Through the darkness which hung about in this small room he tried to peer in Chauvelin's impassive face.

"Easy, easy, my young friend," said the other placidly; "you seem to imagine that I have something to do with the arrest of the lady in whom you take so deep an interest. You forget that now I am but a discredited servant of the Republic whom I failed to serve in her need. My life is only granted me out of pity for my efforts, which were genuine if not successful. I have no power to set any one free."

"Nor to arrest me now, in that case!" retorted Armand.

Chauvelin paused a moment before he replied with a deprecating smile:

"Only to denounce you, perhaps. I am still an agent of the Committee of General Security."

"Then all is for the best!" exclaimed St. Just eagerly. "You shall denounce me to the Committee. They will be glad of my arrest, I assure you. I have been a marked man for some time. I had intended to evade arrest and to work for the rescue of Mademoiselle Lange; but I will give up all thought of that — I will deliver myself into your hands absolutely; nay, more, I will give you my most solemn word of honour that not only will I make no attempt at escape, but that I will not allow any one to help me to do so. I will be a passive and willing prisoner if you, on the other hand, will effect Mademoiselle Lange's release."

"H'm!" mused Chauvelin again, "it sounds feasible."

"It does! it does!" rejoined Armand, whose excitement was at fever-pitch. "My arrest, my condemnation, my death, will be of vast deal more importance to you than that of a young and innocent girl against whom unlikely charges would have to be tricked up, and whose acquittal mayhap public feeling might demand. As for me, I shall be an easy prey; my known counter-revolutionary principles, my sister's marriage with a foreigner—"

"Your connection with the Scarlet Pimpernel," suggested Chauvelin blandly.

"Quite so. I should not defend myself—"

"And your enigmatical friend would not attempt your rescue. C'est entendu," said Chauvelin with his wonted blandness. "Then, my dear, enthusiastic young friend, shall we adjourn to the office of my colleague, citizen Heron, who is chief agent of the Committee of General Security, and will receive your — did you say confession? — and note the conditions under which you place yourself absolutely in the hands of the Public Prosecutor and subsequently of the executioner. Is that it?"

Armand was too full of schemes, too full of thoughts of Jeanne to note the tone of quiet irony with which Chauvelin had been speaking all along. With the unreasoning egoism of youth he was quite convinced that his own arrest, his own affairs were as important to this entire nation in revolution as they were to himself. At moments like these it is difficult to envisage a desperate situation clearly, and to a young man in love the fate of the beloved never seems desperate whilst he himself is alive and ready for every sacrifice for her sake. "My life for hers" is the sublime if often foolish battle-cry that has so often resulted in whole-sale destruction. Armand at this moment, when he fondly believed that he was making a bargain with the most astute, most unscrupulous spy this revolutionary Government had in its pay — Armand just then had absolutely forgotten his chief, his friends, the league of mercy and help to which he belonged.

Enthusiasm and the spirit of self-sacrifice were carrying him away. He watched his enemy with glowing eyes as one who looks on the arbiter of his fate.

Chauvelin, without another word, beckoned to him to follow. He led the way out of the lodge, then, turning sharply to his left, he reached the wide quadrangle with the covered passage running right round it, the same which de Batz had traversed two evenings ago when he went to visit Heron.

Armand, with a light heart and springy step, followed him as if he were going to a feast where he would meet Jeanne, where he would kneel at her feet, kiss her hands, and lead her triumphantly to freedom and to happiness.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE REMOVAL

Chauvelin no longer made any pretence to hold Armand by the arm. By temperament as well as by profession a spy, there was one subject at least which he had mastered thoroughly: that was the study of human nature. Though occasionally an exceptionally complex mental organisation baffled him — as in the case of Sir Percy Blakeney — he prided himself, and justly, too, on reading natures like that of Armand St. Just as he would an open book.

The excitable disposition of the Latin races he knew out and out; he knew exactly how far a sentimental situation would lead a young Frenchman like Armand, who was by disposition chivalrous, and by temperament essentially passionate. Above all things, he knew when and how far he could trust a man to do either a sublime action or an essentially foolish one.

Therefore he walked along contentedly now, not even looking back to see whether St. Just was following him. He knew that he did.

His thoughts only dwelt on the young enthusiast — in his mind he called him the young fool — in order to weigh in the balance the mighty possibilities that would accrue from the present sequence of events. The fixed idea ever working in the man's scheming brain had already transformed a vague belief into a certainty. That the Scarlet Pimpernel was in Paris at the present moment Chauvelin had now become convinced. How far he could turn the capture of Armand St. Just to the triumph of his own ends remained to be seen.

But this he did know: the Scarlet Pimpernel — the man whom he had learned to know, to dread, and even in a grudging manner to admire — was not like to leave one of his followers in the lurch. Marguerite's brother in the Temple would be the surest decoy for the elusive meddler who still, and in spite of all care and precaution, continued to baffle the army of spies set upon his track.

Chauvelin could hear Armand's light, elastic footsteps resounding behind him on the flagstones. A world of intoxicating possibilities surged up before him. Ambition, which two successive dire failures had atrophied in his breast, once more rose up buoyant and hopeful. Once he had sworn to lay the Scarlet Pimpernel by the heels, and that oath was not yet wholly forgotten; it had lain dormant after the catastrophe of Boulogne, but with the sight of Armand St. Just it had re-awakened and confronted him again with the strength of a likely fulfilment.

The courtyard looked gloomy and deserted. The thin drizzle which still fell from a persistently leaden sky effectually held every outline of masonry, of column, or of gate hidden as beneath a shroud. The corridor which skirted it all round was ill-lighted save by an occasional oil-lamp fixed in the wall.

But Chauvelin knew his way well. Heron's lodgings gave on the second courtyard, the Square du Nazaret, and the way thither led past the main square tower, in the top floor of which the uncrowned King of France eked out his miserable existence as the plaything of a rough cobbler and his wife.

Just beneath its frowning bastions Chauvelin turned back towards Armand. He pointed with a careless hand up-wards to the central tower.

"We have got little Capet in there," he said dryly. "Your chivalrous Scarlet Pimpernel has not ventured in these precincts yet, you see."

Armand was silent. He had no difficulty in looking unconcerned; his thoughts were so full of Jeanne that he cared but little at this moment for any Bourbon king or for the destinies of France.

Now the two men reached the postern gate. A couple of sentinels were standing by, but the gate itself was open, and from within there came the sound of bustle and of noise, of a good deal of swearing, and also of loud laughter.

The guard-room gave on the left of the gate, and the laughter came from there. It was brilliantly lighted, and Armand, peering in, in the wake of Chauvelin, could see groups of soldiers sitting and standing about. There was a table in the centre of the room, and on it a number of jugs and pewter mugs, packets of cards, and overturned boxes of dice.

But the bustle did not come from the guard-room; it came from the landing and the stone stairs beyond.

Chauvelin, apparently curious, had passed through the gate, and Armand followed him. The light from the open door of the guard-room cut sharply across the landing, making the gloom beyond appear more dense and almost solid. From out the darkness, fitfully intersected by a lanthorn apparently carried to and fro, moving figures loomed out ghost-like and weirdly gigantic. Soon Armand distinguished a number of large objects that encumbered the landing, and as he and Chauvelin left the sharp light of the guard-room behind them, he could see that the large objects were pieces of furniture of every shape and size; a wooden bedstead — dismantled — leaned against the wall, a black horsehair sofa blocked the way to the tower stairs, and there were numberless chairs and several tables piled one on the top of the other.

In the midst of this litter a stout, flabby-cheeked man stood, apparently giving directions as to its removal to persons at present unseen.

"Hola, Papa Simon!" exclaimed Chauvelin jovially; "moving out to-day? What?"

"Yes, thank the Lord! — if there be a Lord!" retorted the other curtly. "Is that you, citizen Chauvelin?"

"In person, citizen. I did not know you were leaving quite so soon. Is citizen Heron anywhere about?"

"Just left," replied Simon. "He had a last look at Capet just before my wife locked the brat up in the inner room. Now he's gone back to his lodgings."

A man carrying a chest, empty of its drawers, on his back now came stumbling down the tower staircase. Madame Simon followed close on his heels, steadying the chest with one hand.

"We had better begin to load up the cart," she called to her husband in a high-pitched querulous voice; "the corridor is getting too much encumbered."

She looked suspiciously at Chauvelin and at Armand, and when she encountered the former's bland, unconcerned gaze she suddenly shivered and drew her black shawl closer round her shoulders.

"Bah!" she said, "I shall be glad to get out of this God-forsaken hole. I hate the very sight of these walls."

"Indeed, the citizeness does not look over robust in health," said Chauvelin with studied politeness. "The stay in the tower did not, mayhap, bring forth all the fruits of prosperity which she had anticipated."

The woman eyed him with dark suspicion lurking in her hollow eyes.

"I don't know what you mean, citizen," she said with a shrug of her wide shoulders.

"Oh! I meant nothing," rejoined Chauvelin, smiling. "I am so interested in your removal; busy man as I am, it has amused me to watch you. Whom have you got to help you with the furniture?"

"Dupont, the man-of-all-work, from the concierge," said Simon curtly. "Citizen Heron would not allow any one to come in from the outside."

"Rightly too. Have the new commissaries come yet?"

"Only citizen Cochefer. He is waiting upstairs for the others."

"And Capet?"

"He is all safe. Citizen Heron came to see him, and then he told me to lock the little vermin up in the inner room. Citizen Cochefer had just arrived by that time, and he has remained in charge."

During all this while the man with the chest on his back was waiting for orders. Bent nearly double, he was grumbling audibly at his uncomfortable position.

"Does the citizen want to break my back?" he muttered.

"We had best get along — quoi?"

He asked if he should begin to carry the furniture out into the street.

"Two sous have I got to pay every ten minutes to the lad who holds my nag," he said, muttering under his breath; "we shall be all night at this rate."

"Begin to load then," commanded Simon gruffly. "Here! — begin with this sofa."

"You'll have to give me a hand with that," said the man. "Wait a bit; I'll just see that everything is all right in the cart. I'll be back directly."

"Take something with you then as you are going down," said Madame Simon in her querulous voice.

The man picked up a basket of linen that stood in the angle by the door. He hoisted it on his back and shuffled away with it across the landing and out through the gate.

"How did Capet like parting from his papa and maman?" asked Chauvelin with a laugh.

"H'm!" growled Simon laconically. "He will find out soon enough how well off he was under our care."

"Have the other commissaries come yet?"

"No. But they will be here directly. Citizen Cochefer is upstairs mounting guard over Capet."

"Well, good-bye, Papa Simon," concluded Chauvelin jovially. "Citizeness, your servant!"

He bowed with unconcealed irony to the cobbler's wife, and nodded to Simon, who expressed by a volley of motley oaths his exact feelings with regard to all the agents of the Committee of General Security.

"Six months of this penal servitude have we had," he said roughly, "and no thanks or pension. I would as soon serve a ci-devant aristo as your accursed Committee."

The man Dupont had returned. Stolidly, after the fashion of his kind, he commenced the removal of citizen Simon's goods. He seemed a clumsy enough creature, and Simon and his wife had to do most of the work themselves.

Chauvelin watched the moving forms for a while, then he shrugged his shoulders with a laugh of indifference, and turned on his heel.

CHAPTER XIX. IT IS ABOUT THE DAUPHIN

Heron was not at his lodgings when, at last, after vigorous pulls at the bell, a great deal of waiting and much cursing, Chauvelin, closely followed by Armand, was introduced in the chief agent's office.

The soldier who acted as servant said that citizen Heron had gone out to sup, but would surely be home again by eight o'clock. Armand by this time was so dazed with fatigue that he sank on a chair like a log, and remained there staring into the fire, unconscious of the flight of time.

Anon Heron came home. He nodded to Chauvelin, and threw but a cursory glance on Armand.

"Five minutes, citizen," he said, with a rough attempt at an apology. "I am sorry to keep you waiting, but the new commissaries have arrived who are to take charge of Capet. The Simons have just gone, and I want to assure myself that everything is all right in the Tower. Cochefer has been in charge, but I like to cast an eye over the brat every day myself."

He went out again, slamming the door behind him. His heavy footsteps were heard treading the flagstones of the corridor, and gradually dying away in the distance. Armand had paid no heed either to his entrance or to his exit. He was only conscious of an intense weariness, and would at this moment gladly have laid his head on the scaffold if on it he could find rest.

A white-faced clock on the wall ticked off the seconds one by one. From the street below came the muffled sounds of wheeled traffic on the soft mud of the road; it was raining more heavily now, and from time to time a gust of wind rattled the small windows in their dilapidated frames, or hurled a shower of heavy drops against the panes.

The heat from the stove had made Armand drowsy; his head fell forward on his chest. Chauvelin, with his hands held behind his back, paced ceaselessly up and down the narrow room.

Suddenly Armand started — wide awake now. Hurried footsteps on the flagstones outside, a hoarse shout, a banging of heavy doors, and the next moment Heron stood once more on the threshold of the room. Armand, with wide-opened eyes, gazed on him in wonder. The whole appearance of the man had changed. He looked ten years older, with lank, dishevelled hair hanging matted over a moist forehead, the cheeks ashen-white, the full lips bloodless and hanging, flabby and parted, displaying both rows of yellow teeth that shook against each other. The whole figure looked bowed, as if shrunk within itself.

Chauvelin had paused in his restless walk. He gazed on his colleague, a frown of puzzlement on his pale, set face.

"Capet!" he exclaimed, as soon as he had taken in every detail of Heron's altered appearance, and seen the look of wild terror that literally distorted his face.

Heron could not speak; his teeth were chattering in his mouth, and his tongue seemed paralysed. Chauvelin went up to him. He was several inches shorter than his colleague, but at this moment he seemed to be towering over him like an avenging spirit. He placed a firm hand on the other's bowed shoulders.

"Capet has gone — is that it?" he queried peremptorily.

The look of terror increased in Heron's eyes, giving its mute reply.

"How? When?"

But for the moment the man was speechless. An almost maniacal fear seemed to hold him in its grip. With an impatient oath Chauvelin turned away from him.

"Brandy!" he said curtly, speaking to Armand.

A bottle and glass were found in the cupboard. It was St. Just who poured out the brandy and held it to Heron's lips. Chauvelin was once more pacing up and down the room in angry impatience.

"Pull yourself together, man," he said roughly after a while, "and try and tell me what has occurred."

Heron had sunk into a chair. He passed a trembling hand once or twice over his forehead.

"Capet has disappeared," he murmured; "he must have been spirited away while the Simons were moving their furniture. That accused Cochefer was completely taken in."

Heron spoke in a toneless voice, hardly above a whisper, and like one whose throat is dry and mouth parched. But the brandy had revived him somewhat, and his eyes lost their former glassy look.

"How?" asked Chauvelin curtly.

"I was just leaving the Tower when he arrived. I spoke to him at the door. I had seen Capet safely installed in the room, and gave orders to the woman Simon to let citizen Cochefer have a look at him, too, and then to lock up the brat in the inner room and install Cochefer in the antechamber on guard. I stood talking to Cochefer for a few moments in the antechamber. The woman Simon and the man-of-all-work, Dupont — whom I know well — were busy with the furniture. There could not have been any one else concealed about the place — that I'll swear. Cochefer, after he took leave of me, went straight into the room; he found the woman Simon in the act of turning the key in the door of the inner chamber. I have locked Capet in there,' she said, giving the key to Cochefer; 'he will be quite safe until to-night; when the other commissaries come.'

"Didn't Cochefer go into the room and ascertain whether the woman was lying?"

"Yes, he did! He made the woman re-open the door and peeped in over her shoulder. She said the child was asleep. He vows that he saw the child lying fully dressed on a rug in the further corner of the room. The room, of course, was quite empty of furniture and only lighted by one candle, but there was the rug and the child asleep on it. Cochefer swears he saw him, and now — when I went up—"

"Well?"

"The commissaries were all there — Cochefer and Lasniere, Lorinet and Legrand. We went into the inner room, and I had a candle in my hand. We saw the child lying on the rug, just as Cochefer had seen him, and for a while we took no notice of it. Then some one — I think it was Lorinet — went to have a closer look at the brat. He took up the candle and went up to the rug. Then he gave a cry, and we all gathered round him. The sleeping child was only a bundle of hair and of clothes, a dummy — what?"

There was silence now in the narrow room, while the white-faced clock continued to tick off each succeeding second of time. Heron had once more buried his head in his hands; a trembling — like an attack of ague — shook his wide, bony shoulders. Armand had

listened to the narrative with glowing eyes and a beating heart. The details which the two Terrorists here could not probably understand he had already added to the picture which his mind had conjured up.

He was back in thought now in the small lodging in the rear of St. Germain l'Auxerrois; Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was there, and my Lord Tony and Hastings, and a man was striding up and down the room, looking out into the great space beyond the river with the eyes of a seer, and a firm voice said abruptly:

"It is about the Dauphin!"

"Have you any suspicions?" asked Chauvelin now, pausing in his walk beside Heron, and once more placing a firm, peremptory hand on his colleague's shoulder.

"Suspicions!" exclaimed the chief agent with a loud oath. "Suspicions! Certainties, you mean. The man sat here but two days ago, in that very chair, and bragged of what he would do. I told him then that if he interfered with Capet I would wring his neck with my own hands."

And his long, talon-like fingers, with their sharp, grimy nails, closed and unclosed like those of feline creatures when they hold the coveted prey.

"Of whom do you speak?" queried Chauvelin curtly.

"Of whom? Of whom but that accursed de Batz? His pockets are bulging with Austrian money, with which, no doubt, he has bribed the Simons and Cochefer and the sentinels—"

"And Lorinet and Lasniere and you," interposed Chauvelin dryly.

"It is false!" roared Heron, who already at the suggestion was foaming at the mouth, and had jumped up from his chair, standing at bay as if prepared to fight for his life.

"False, is it?" retorted Chauvelin calmly; "then be not so quick, friend Heron, in slashing out with senseless denunciations right and left. You'll gain nothing by denouncing any one just now. This is too intricate a matter to be dealt with a sledge-hammer. Is any one up in the Tower at this moment?" he asked in quiet, business-like tones.

"Yes. Cochefer and the others are still there. They are making wild schemes to cover their treachery. Cochefer is aware of his own danger, and Lasniere and the others know that they arrived at the Tower several hours too late. They are all at fault, and they know it. As for that de Batz," he continued with a voice rendered raucous with bitter passion, "I swore to him two days ago that he should not escape me if he meddled with Capet. I'm on his track already. I'll have him before the hour of midnight, and I'll torture him — yes! I'll torture him — the Tribunal shall give me leave. We have a dark cell down below here where my men know how to apply tortures worse than the rack — where they know just how to prolong life long enough to make it unendurable. I'll torture him! I'll torture him!"

But Chauvelin abruptly silenced the wretch with a curt command; then, without another word, he walked straight out of the room.

In thought Armand followed him. The wild desire was suddenly born in him to run away at this moment, while Heron, wrapped in his own meditations, was paying no heed to him. Chauvelin's footsteps had long ago died away in the distance; it was a long way to the upper floor of the Tower, and some time would be spent, too, in interrogating the commissaries. This was Armand's opportunity. After all, if he were free himself he might more effectually help to rescue Jeanne. He knew, too, now where to join his leader. The corner of the street by the canal, where Sir Andrew Ffoulkes would be waiting with the coal-cart; then there was the spinney on the road to St. Germain. Armand hoped that, with good luck, he might yet overtake his comrades, tell them of Jeanne's plight, and entreat them to work for her rescue.

He had forgotten that now he had no certificate of safety, that undoubtedly he would be stopped at the gates at this hour of the night; that his conduct proving suspect he would in all probability be detained, and, mayhap, be brought back to this self-same place within an hour. He had forgotten all that, for the primeval instinct for freedom had suddenly been aroused. He rose softly from his chair and crossed the room. Heron paid no attention to him. Now he had traversed the antechamber and unlatched the outer door.

Immediately a couple of bayonets were crossed in front of him, two more further on ahead scintillated feebly in the flickering light. Chauvelin had taken his precautions. There was no doubt that Armand St. Just was effectually a prisoner now.

With a sigh of disappointment he went back to his place beside the fire. Heron had not even moved whilst he had made this futile attempt at escape. Five minutes later Chauvelin re-entered the room.

CHAPTER XX. THE CERTIFICATE OF SAFETY

"You can leave de Batz and his gang alone, citizen Heron," said Chauvelin, as soon as he had closed the door behind him; "he had nothing to do with the escape of the Dauphin."

Heron growled out a few words of incredulity. But Chauvelin shrugged his shoulders and looked with unutterable contempt on his colleague. Armand, who was watching him closely, saw that in his hand he held a small piece of paper, which he had crushed into a shapeless mass.

"Do not waste your time, citizen," he said, "in raging against an empty wind-bag. Arrest de Batz if you like, or leave him alone as you please — we have nothing to fear from that braggart."

With nervous, slightly shaking fingers he set to work to smooth out the scrap of paper which he held. His hot hands had soiled it and pounded it until it was a mere rag and the writing on it illegible. But, such as it was, he threw it down with a blasphemous oath on the desk in front of Heron's eyes.

"It is that accursed Englishman who has been at work again," he said more calmly; "I guessed it the moment I heard your story. Set your whole army of sleuth-hounds on his track, citizen; you'll need them all."

Heron picked up the scrap of torn paper and tried to decipher the writing on it by the light from the lamp. He seemed almost dazed now with the awful catastrophe that had befallen him, and the fear that his own wretched life would have to pay the penalty for the disappearance of the child.

As for Armand — even in the midst of his own troubles, and of his own anxiety for Jeanne, he felt a proud exultation in his heart. The Scarlet Pimpernel had succeeded; Percy had not failed in his self-imposed undertaking. Chauvelin, whose piercing eyes were fixed on him at that moment, smiled with contemptuous irony.

"As you will find your hands overfull for the next few hours, citizen Heron," he said, speaking to his colleague and nodding in the direction of Armand, "I'll not trouble you with the voluntary confession this young citizen desired to make to you. All I need tell you is that he is an adherent of the Scarlet Pimpernel — I believe one of his most faithful, most trusted officers."

Heron roused himself from the maze of gloomy thoughts that were again paralysing his tongue. He turned bleary, wild eyes on Armand.

"We have got one of them, then?" he murmured incoherently, babbling like a drunken man.

"M'yes!" replied Chauvelin lightly; "but it is too late now for a formal denunciation and arrest. He cannot leave Paris anyhow, and all that your men need to do is to keep a close look-out on him. But I should send him home to-night if I were you."

Heron muttered something more, which, however, Armand did not understand. Chauvelin's words were still ringing in his ear. Was he, then, to be set free to-night? Free in a measure, of course, since spies were to be set to watch him — but free, nevertheless? He could not understand Chauvelin's attitude, and his own self-love was not a little wounded at the thought that he was of such little account that these men could afford to give him even this provisional freedom. And, of course, there was still Jeanne.

"I must, therefore, bid you good-night, citizen," Chauvelin was saying in his bland, gently ironical manner. "You will be glad to return to your lodgings. As you see, the chief agent of the Committee of General Security is too much occupied just now to accept the sacrifice of your life which you were prepared so generously to offer him."

"I do not understand you, citizen," retorted Armand coldly, "nor do I desire indulgence at your hands. You have arrested an innocent woman on the trumped-up charge that she was harbouring me. I came here to-night to give myself up to justice so that she might be set free."

"But the hour is somewhat late, citizen," rejoined Chauvelin urbanely. "The lady in whom you take so fervent an interest is no doubt asleep in her cell at this hour. It would not be fitting to disturb her now. She might not find shelter before morning, and the weather is quite exceptionally unpropitious."

"Then, sir," said Armand, a little bewildered, "am I to understand that if I hold myself at your disposition Mademoiselle Lange will be set free as early to-morrow morning as may be?"

"No doubt, sir — no doubt," replied Chauvelin with more than his accustomed blandness; "if you will hold yourself entirely at our disposition, Mademoiselle Lange will be set free to-morrow. I think that we can safely promise that, citizen Heron, can we not?" he added, turning to his colleague.

But Heron, overcome with the stress of emotions, could only murmur vague, unintelligible words.

"Your word on that, citizen Chauvelin?" asked Armand.

"My word on it as you will accept it."

"No, I will not do that. Give me an unconditional certificate of safety and I will believe you."

"Of what use were that to you?" asked Chauvelin.

"I believe my capture to be of more importance to you than that of Mademoiselle Lange," said Armand quietly.

"I will use the certificate of safety for myself or one of my friends if you break your word to me as to Mademoiselle Lange."

"H'm! the reasoning is not illogical, citizen," said Chauvelin, whilst a curious smile played round the corners of his thin lips. "You are quite right. You are a more valuable asset to us than the charming lady who, I hope, will for many a day and year to come delight pleasure-loving Paris with her talent and her grace."

"Amen to that, citizen," said Armand fervently.

"Well, it will all depend on you, sir! Here," he added, coolly running over some papers on Heron's desk until he found what he wanted, "is an absolutely unconditional certificate of safety. The Committee of General Security issue very few of these. It is worth the cost of a human life. At no barrier or gate of any city can such a certificate be disregarded, nor even can it be detained. Allow me to hand it to you, citizen, as a pledge of my own good faith."

Smiling, urbane, with a curious look that almost expressed amusement lurking in his shrewd, pale eyes, Chauvelin handed the momentous document to Armand.

The young man studied it very carefully before he slipped it into the inner pocket of his coat.

"How soon shall I have news of Mademoiselle Lange?" he asked finally.

"In the course of to-morrow. I myself will call on you and redeem that precious document in person. You, on the other hand, will hold yourself at my disposition. That's understood, is it not?"

"I shall not fail you. My lodgings are—"

"Oh! do not trouble," interposed Chauvelin, with a polite bow; "we can find that out for ourselves."

Heron had taken no part in this colloquy. Now that Armand prepared to go he made no attempt to detain him, or to question his colleague's actions. He sat by the table like a log; his mind was obviously a blank to all else save to his own terrors engendered by the events of this night.

With bleary, half-veiled eyes he followed Armand's progress through the room, and seemed unaware of the loud slamming of the outside door. Chauvelin had escorted the young man past the first line of sentry, then he took cordial leave of him.

"Your certificate will, you will find, open every gate to you. Good-night, citizen. A demain."

"Good-night."

Armand's slim figure disappeared in the gloom. Chauvelin watched him for a few moments until even his footsteps had died away in the distance; then he turned back towards Heron's lodgings.

"A nous deux," he muttered between tightly clenched teeth; "a nous deux once more, my enigmatical Scarlet Pimpernel."

CHAPTER XXI. BACK TO PARIS

It was an exceptionally dark night, and the rain was falling in torrents. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, wrapped in a piece of sacking, had taken shelter right underneath the coal-cart; even then he was getting wet through to the skin.

He had worked hard for two days coal-heaving, and the night before he had found a cheap, squalid lodging where at any rate he was protected from the inclemencies of the weather; but to-night he was expecting Blakeney at the appointed hour and place. He had secured a cart of the ordinary ramshackle pattern used for carrying coal. Unfortunately there were no covered ones to be obtained in the neighbourhood, and equally unfortunately the thaw had set in with a blustering wind and diving rain, which made waiting in the open air for hours at a stretch and in complete darkness excessively unpleasant.

But for all these discomforts Sir Andrew Ffoulkes cared not one jot. In England, in his magnificent Suffolk home, he was a confirmed sybarite, in whose service every description of comfort and luxury had to be enrolled. Here tonight in the rough and tattered clothes of a coal-heaver, drenched to the skin, and crouching under the body of a cart that hardly sheltered him from the rain, he was as happy as a schoolboy out for a holiday.

Happy, but vaguely anxious.

He had no means of ascertaining the time. So many of the church-bells and clock towers had been silenced recently that not one of those welcome sounds penetrated to the dreary desolation of this canal wharf, with its abandoned carts standing ghostlike in a row. Darkness had set in very early in the afternoon, and the heavens had given up work soon after four o'clock.

For about an hour after that a certain animation had still reigned round the wharf, men crossing and going, one or two of the barges moving in or out alongside the quay. But for some time now darkness and silence had been the masters in this desolate spot, and that time had seemed to Sir Andrew an eternity. He had hobbled and tethered his horse, and stretched himself out at full length under the cart. Now and again he had crawled out from under this uncomfortable shelter and walked up and down in ankle-deep mud, trying to restore circulation in his stiffened limbs; now and again a kind of torpor had come over him, and he had fallen into a brief and restless sleep. He would at this moment have given half his fortune for knowledge of the exact time.

But through all this weary waiting he was never for a moment in doubt. Unlike Armand St. Just, he had the simplest, most perfect faith in his chief. He had been Blakeney's constant companion in all these adventures for close upon four years now; the thought of failure, however vague, never once entered his mind.

He was only anxious for his chief's welfare. He knew that he would succeed, but he would have liked to have spared him much of the physical fatigue and the nerve-racking strain of these hours that lay between the daring deed and the hope of safety. Therefore he was conscious of an acute tingling of his nerves, which went on even during the brief patches of fitful sleep, and through the numbness that invaded his whole body while the hours dragged wearily and slowly along.

Then, quite suddenly, he felt wakeful and alert; quite a while — even before he heard the welcome signal — he knew, with a curious, subtle sense of magnetism, that the hour had come, and that his chief was somewhere near by, not very far.

Then he heard the cry — a seamew's call — repeated thrice at intervals, and five minutes later something loomed out of the darkness quite close to the hind wheels of the cart.

"Hist! Ffoulkes!" came in a soft whisper, scarce louder than the wind.

"Present!" came in quick response.

"Here, help me to lift the child into the cart. He is asleep, and has been a dead weight on my arm for close on an hour now. Have you a dry bit of sacking or something to lay him on?"

"Not very dry, I am afraid."

With tender care the two men lifted the sleeping little King of France into the rickety cart. Blakeney laid his cloak over him, and listened for awhile to the slow regular breathing of the child.

"St. Just is not here — you know that?" said Sir Andrew after a while.

"Yes, I knew it," replied Blakeney curtly.

It was characteristic of these two men that not a word about the adventure itself, about the terrible risks and dangers of the past few hours, was exchanged between them. The child was here and was safe, and Blakeney knew the whereabouts of St. Just — that was enough for Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, the most devoted follower, the most perfect friend the Scarlet Pimpernel would ever know.

Ffoulkes now went to the horse, detached the nose-bag, and undid the nooses of the hobble and of the tether.

"Will you get in now, Blakeney?" he said; "we are ready."

And in unbroken silence they both got into the cart; Blakeney sitting on its floor beside the child, and Ffoulkes gathering the reins in his hands.

The wheels of the cart and the slow jog-trot of the horse made scarcely any noise in the mud of the roads, what noise they did make was effectually drowned by the sighing of the wind in the bare branches of the stunted acacia trees that edged the towpath along the line of the canal.

Sir Andrew had studied the topography of this desolate neighbourhood well during the past twenty-four hours; he knew of a detour that would enable him to avoid the La Villette gate and the neighbourhood of the fortifications, and yet bring him out soon on the road leading to St. Germain.

Once he turned to ask Blakeney the time.

"It must be close on ten now," replied Sir Percy. "Push your nag along, old man. Tony and Hastings will be waiting for us."

It was very difficult to see clearly even a metre or two ahead, but the road was a straight one, and the old nag seemed to know it almost as well and better than her driver. She shambled along at her own pace, covering the ground very slowly for Ffoulkes's burning impatience. Once or twice he had to get down and lead her over a rough piece of ground. They passed several groups of dismal, squalid houses, in some of which a dim light still burned, and as they skirted St. Ouen the church clock slowly tolled the hour of midnight.

But for the greater part of the way derelict, uncultivated spaces of terrains vagues, and a few isolated houses lay between the road and the fortifications of the city. The darkness of the night, the late hour, the souging of the wind, were all in favour of the adventurers; and a coal-cart slowly trudging along in this neighbourhood, with two labourers sitting in it, was the least likely of any vehicle to attract attention.

Past Clichy, they had to cross the river by the rickety wooden bridge that was unsafe even in broad daylight. They were not far from their destination now. Half a dozen kilometres further on they would be leaving Courbevoie on their left, and then the sign-post would come in sight. After that the spinney just off the road, and the welcome presence of Tony, Hastings, and the horses. Ffoulkes got down in order to make sure of the way. He walked at the horse's head now, fearful lest he missed the cross-roads and the sign-post.

The horse was getting over-tired; it had covered fifteen kilometres, and it was close on three o'clock of Monday morning.

Another hour went by in absolute silence. Ffoulkes and Blakeney took turns at the horse's head. Then at last they reached the cross-roads; even through the darkness the sign-post showed white against the surrounding gloom.

"This looks like it," murmured Sir Andrew. He turned the horse's head sharply towards the left, down a narrower road, and leaving the sign-post behind him. He walked slowly along for another quarter of an hour, then Blakeney called a halt.

"The spinney must be sharp on our right now," he said.

He got down from the cart, and while Ffoulkes remained beside the horse, he plunged into the gloom. A moment later the cry of the seamew rang out three times into the air. It was answered almost immediately.

The spinney lay on the right of the road. Soon the soft sounds that to a trained ear invariably betray the presence of a number of horses reached Ffoulkes' straining senses. He took his old nag out of the shafts, and the shabby harness from off her, then he turned her out on the piece of waste land that faced the spinney. Some one would find her in the morning, her and the cart with the shabby harness laid in it, and, having wondered if all these things had perchance dropped down from heaven, would quietly appropriate them, and mayhap thank much-maligned heaven for its gift.

Blakeney in the meanwhile had lifted the sleeping child out of the cart. Then he called to Sir Andrew and led the way across the road and into the spinney.

Five minutes later Hastings received the uncrowned King of France in his arms.

Unlike Ffoulkes, my Lord Tony wanted to hear all about the adventure of this afternoon. A thorough sportsman, he loved a good story of hairbreadth escapes, of dangers cleverly avoided, risks taken and conquered.

"Just in ten words, Blakeney," he urged entreatingly; "how did you actually get the boy away?"

Sir Percy laughed — despite himself — at the young man's eagerness.

"Next time we meet, Tony," he begged; "I am so demmed fatigued, and there's this beastly rain—"

"No, no — now! while Hastings sees to the horses. I could not exist long without knowing, and we are well sheltered from the rain under this tree."

"Well, then, since you will have it," he began with a laugh, which despite the weariness and anxiety of the past twenty-four hours had forced itself to his lips, "I have been sweeper and man-of-all-work at the Temple for the past few weeks, you must know—"

"No!" ejaculated my Lord Tony lustily. "By gum!"

"Indeed, you old sybarite, whilst you were enjoying yourself heaving coal on the canal wharf, I was scrubbing floors, lighting fires, and doing a number of odd jobs for a lot of demmed murdering villains, and" — he added under his breath — "incidentally, too, for our league. Whenever I had an hour or two off duty I spent them in my lodgings, and asked you all to come and meet me there."

"By Gad, Blakeney! Then the day before yesterday? — when we all met—"

"I had just had a bath — sorely needed, I can tell you. I had been cleaning boots half the day, but I had heard that the Simons were removing from the Temple on the Sunday, and had obtained an order from them to help them shift their furniture."

"Cleaning boots!" murmured my Lord Tony with a chuckle. "Well! and then?"

"Well, then everything worked out splendidly. You see by that time I was a well-known figure in the Temple. Heron knew me well. I used to be his lantern-bearer when at nights he visited that poor mite in his prison. It was 'Dupont, here! Dupont there!' all day long. 'Light the fire in the office, Dupont! Dupont, brush my coat! Dupont, fetch me a light!' When the Simons wanted to move their household goods they called loudly for Dupont. I got a covered laundry cart, and I brought a dummy with me to substitute for the child. Simon himself knew nothing of this, but Madame was in my pay. The dummy was just splendid, with real hair on its head; Madame helped me to substitute it for the child; we laid it on the sofa and covered it over with a rug, even while those brutes Heron and Cochefer were on the landing outside, and we stuffed His Majesty the King of France into a linen basket. The room was badly lighted, and any one would have been deceived. No one was suspicious of that type of trickery, so it went off splendidly. I moved the furniture of the Simons out of the Tower. His Majesty King Louis XVII was still concealed in the linen basket. I drove the Simons to their new lodgings — the man still suspects nothing — and there I helped them to unload the furniture — with the exception of the linen basket, of course. After that I drove my laundry cart to a house I knew of and collected a number of linen baskets, which I had arranged should be in readiness for me. Thus loaded up I left Paris by the Vincennes gate, and drove as far as Bagnolet, where there is no road except past the octroi, where the officials might have proved unpleasant. So I lifted His Majesty out of the basket and we walked on hand in hand in the darkness and the rain until the poor little feet gave out. Then the little fellow — who has been wonderfully plucky throughout, indeed, more a Capet than a Bourbon — snuggled up in my arms and went fast asleep, and — and — well, I think that's all, for here we are, you see."

"But if Madame Simon had not been amenable to bribery?" suggested Lord Tony after a moment's silence.

"Then I should have had to think of something else."

"If during the removal of the furniture Heron had remained resolutely in the room?"

"Then, again, I should have had to think of something else; but remember that in life there is always one supreme moment when Chance — who is credited to have but one hair on her head — stands by you for a brief space of time; sometimes that space is infinitesimal — one minute, a few seconds — just the time to seize Chance by that one hair. So I pray you all give me no credit in this or any other matter in which we all work together, but the quickness of seizing Chance by the hair during the brief moment when she

stands by my side. If Madame Simon had been un-amenable, if Heron had remained in the room all the time, if Cochefer had had two looks at the dummy instead of one — well, then, something else would have helped me, something would have occurred; something — I know not what — but surely something which Chance meant to be on our side, if only we were quick enough to seize it — and so you see how simple it all is.”

So simple, in fact, that it was sublime. The daring, the pluck, the ingenuity and, above all, the super-human heroism and endurance which rendered the hearers of this simple narrative, simply told, dumb with admiration.

Their thoughts now were beyond verbal expression.

“How soon was the hue and cry for the child about the streets?” asked Tony, after a moment’s silence.

“It was not out when I left the gates of Paris,” said Blakeney meditatively; “so quietly has the news of the escape been kept, that I am wondering what devilry that brute Heron can be after. And now no more chattering,” he continued lightly; “all to horse, and you, Hastings, have a care. The destinies of France, mayhap, will be lying asleep in your arms.”

“But you, Blakeney?” exclaimed the three men almost simultaneously.

“I am not going with you. I entrust the child to you. For God’s sake guard him well! Ride with him to Mantes. You should arrive there at about ten o’clock. One of you then go straight to No.9 Rue la Tour. Ring the bell; an old man will answer it. Say the one word to him, ‘Enfant’; he will reply, ‘De roi!’ Give him the child, and may Heaven bless you all for the help you have given me this night!”

“But you, Blakeney?” reiterated Tony with a note of deep anxiety in his fresh young voice.

“I am straight for Paris,” he said quietly.

“Impossible!”

“Therefore feasible.”

“But why? Percy, in the name of Heaven, do you realise what you are doing?”

“Perfectly.”

“They’ll not leave a stone unturned to find you — they know by now, believe me, that your hand did this trick.”

“I know that.”

“And yet you mean to go back?”

“And yet I am going back.”

“Blakeney!”

“It’s no use, Tony. Armand is in Paris. I saw him in the corridor of the Temple prison in the company of Chauvelin.”

“Great God!” exclaimed Lord Hastings.

The others were silent. What was the use of arguing? One of themselves was in danger. Armand St. Just, the brother of Marguerite Blakeney! Was it likely that Percy would leave him in the lurch.

“One of us will stay with you, of course?” asked Sir Andrew after awhile.

“Yes! I want Hastings and Tony to take the child to Mantes, then to make all possible haste for Calais, and there to keep in close touch with the Day-Dream; the skipper will contrive to open communication. Tell him to remain in Calais waters. I hope I may have need of him soon.

“And now to horse, both of you,” he added gaily. “Hastings, when you are ready, I will hand up the child to you. He will be quite safe on the pillion with a strap round him and you.”

Nothing more was said after that. The orders were given, there was nothing to do but to obey; and the uncrowned King of France was not yet out of danger. Hastings and Tony led two of the horses out of the spinney; at the roadside they mounted, and then the little lad for whose sake so much heroism, such selfless devotion had been expended, was hoisted up, still half asleep, on the pillion in front of my Lord Hastings.

“Keep your arm round him,” admonished Blakeney; “your horse looks quiet enough. But put on speed as far as Mantes, and may Heaven guard you both!”

The two men pressed their heels to their horses’ flanks, the beasts snorted and pawed the ground anxious to start. There were a few whispered farewells, two loyal hands were stretched out at the last, eager to grasp the leader’s hand.

Then horses and riders disappeared in the utter darkness which comes before the dawn.

Blakeney and Ffoulkes stood side by side in silence for as long as the pawing of hoofs in the mud could reach their ears, then Ffoulkes asked abruptly:

“What do you want me to do, Blakeney?”

“Well, for the present, my dear fellow, I want you to take one of the three horses we have left in the spinney, and put him into the shafts of our old friend the coal-cart; then I am afraid that you must go back the way we came.”

“Yes?”

“Continue to heave coal on the canal wharf by La Villette; it is the best way to avoid attention. After your day’s work keep your cart and horse in readiness against my arrival, at the same spot where you were last night. If after having waited for me like this for three consecutive nights you neither see nor hear anything from me, go back to England and tell Marguerite that in giving my life for her brother I gave it for her!”

“Blakeney — I!”

“I spoke differently to what I usually do, is that it?” he interposed, placing his firm hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I am degenerating, Ffoulkes — that’s what it is. Pay no heed to it. I suppose that carrying that sleeping child in my arms last night softened some nerves in my body. I was so infinitely sorry for the poor mite, and vaguely wondered if I had not saved it from one misery only to plunge it in another. There was such a fateful look on that wan little face, as if destiny had already writ its veto there against happiness. It came on me then how futile were our actions, if God chooses to interpose His will between us and our desires.”

Almost as he left off speaking the rain ceased to patter down against the puddles in the road. Overhead the clouds flew by at terrific speed, driven along by the blustering wind. It was less dark now, and Sir Andrew, peering through the gloom, could see his leader’s

face. It was singularly pale and hard, and the deep-set lazy eyes had in them just that fateful look which he himself had spoken of just now.

"You are anxious about Armand, Percy?" asked Ffoulkes softly.

"Yes. He should have trusted me, as I had trusted him. He missed me at the Villette gate on Friday, and without a thought left me — left us all in the lurch; he threw himself into the lion's jaws, thinking that he could help the girl he loved. I knew that I could save her. She is in comparative safety even now. The old woman, Madame Belhomme, had been freely released the day after her arrest, but Jeanne Lange is still in the house in the Rue de Charonne. You know it, Ffoulkes. I got her there early this morning. It was easy for me, of course: 'Hola, Dupont! my boots, Dupont!' 'One moment, citizen, my daughter—' 'Curse thy daughter, bring me my boots!' and Jeanne Lange walked out of the Temple prison her hand in that of that lout Dupont."

"But Armand does not know that she is in the Rue de Charonne?"

"No. I have not seen him since that early morning on Saturday when he came to tell me that she had been arrested. Having sworn that he would obey me, he went to meet you and Tony at La Villette, but returned to Paris a few hours later, and drew the undivided attention of all the committees on Jeanne Lange by his senseless, foolish inquiries. But for his action throughout the whole of yesterday I could have smuggled Jeanne out of Paris, got her to join you at Villette, or Hastings in St. Germain. But the barriers were being closely watched for her, and I had the Dauphin to think of. She is in comparative safety; the people in the Rue de Charonne are friendly for the moment; but for how long? Who knows? I must look after her of course. And Armand! Poor old Armand! The lion's jaws have snapped over him, and they hold him tight. Chauvelin and his gang are using him as a decoy to trap me, of course. All that had not happened if Armand had trusted me."

He sighed a quick sigh of impatience, almost of regret. Ffoulkes was the one man who could guess the bitter disappointment that this had meant. Percy had longed to be back in England soon, back to Marguerite, to a few days of unalloyed happiness and a few days of peace.

Now Armand's actions had retarded all that; they were a deliberate bar to the future as it had been mapped out by a man who foresaw everything, who was prepared for every eventuality.

In this case, too, he had been prepared, but not for the want of trust which had brought on disobedience akin to disloyalty. That absolutely unforeseen eventuality had changed Blakeney's usual irresponsible gaiety into a consciousness of the inevitable, of the inexorable decrees of Fate.

With an anxious sigh, Sir Andrew turned away from his chief and went back to the spinney to select for his own purpose one of the three horses which Hastings and Tony had unavoidably left behind.

"And you, Blakeney — how will you go back to that awful Paris?" he said, when he had made his choice and was once more back beside Percy.

"I don't know yet," replied Blakeney, "but it would not be safe to ride. I'll reach one of the gates on this side of the city and contrive to slip in somehow. I have a certificate of safety in my pocket in case I need it.

"We'll leave the horses here," he said presently, whilst he was helping Sir Andrew to put the horse in the shafts of the coal-cart; "they cannot come to much harm. Some poor devil might steal them, in order to escape from those vile brutes in the city. If so, God speed him, say I. I'll compensate my friend the farmer of St. Germain for their loss at an early opportunity. And now, good-bye, my dear fellow! Some time to-night, if possible, you shall hear direct news of me — if not, then to-morrow or the day after that. Good-bye, and Heaven guard you!"

"God guard you, Blakeney!" said Sir Andrew fervently.

He jumped into the cart and gathered up the reins. His heart was heavy as lead, and a strange mist had gathered in his eyes, blurring the last dim vision which he had of his chief standing all alone in the gloom, his broad, magnificent figure looking almost weirdly erect and defiant, his head thrown back, and his kind, lazy eyes watching the final departure of his most faithful comrade and friend.

CHAPTER XXII. OF THAT THERE COULD BE NO QUESTION

Blakeney had more than one pied-a-terre in Paris, and never stayed longer than two or three days in any of these. It was not difficult for a single man, be he labourer or bourgeois, to obtain a night's lodging, even in these most troublous times, and in any quarter of Paris, provided the rent — out of all proportion to the comfort and accommodation given — was paid ungrudgingly and in advance.

Emigration and, above all, the enormous death-roll of the past eighteen months, had emptied the apartment houses of the great city, and those who had rooms to let were only too glad of a lodger, always providing they were not in danger of being worried by the committees of their section.

The laws framed by these same committees now demanded that all keepers of lodging or apartment houses should within twenty-four hours give notice at the bureau of their individual sections of the advent of new lodgers, together with a description of the personal appearance of such lodgers, and an indication of their presumed civil status and occupation. But there was a margin of twenty-four hours, which could on pressure be extended to forty-eight, and, therefore, any one could obtain shelter for forty-eight hours, and have no questions asked, provided he or she was willing to pay the exorbitant sum usually asked under the circumstances.

Thus Blakeney had no difficulty in securing what lodgings he wanted when he once more found himself inside Paris at somewhere about noon of that same Monday.

The thought of Hastings and Tony speeding on towards Mantes with the royal child safely held in Hastings' arms had kept his spirits buoyant and caused him for a while to forget the terrible peril in which Armand St. Just's thoughtless egoism had placed them both.

Blakeney was a man of abnormal physique and iron nerve, else he could never have endured the fatigues of the past twenty-four hours, from the moment when on the Sunday afternoon he began to play his part of furniture-remover at the Temple, to that when at last on Monday at noon he succeeded in persuading the sergeant at the Maillot gate that he was an honest stonemason residing at Neuilly, who was come to Paris in search of work.

After that matters became more simple. Terribly foot-sore, though he would never have admitted it, hungry and weary, he turned into an unpretentious eating-house and ordered some dinner. The place when he entered was occupied mostly by labourers and workmen, dressed very much as he was himself, and quite as grimy as he had become after having driven about for hours in a laundry-cart and in a coal-cart, and having walked twelve kilometres, some of which he had covered whilst carrying a sleeping child in his arms.

Thus, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the friend and companion of the Prince of Wales, the most fastidious fop the salons of London and Bath had ever seen, was in no way distinguishable outwardly from the tattered, half-starved, dirty, and out-at-elbows products of this fraternising and equalising Republic.

He was so hungry that the ill-cooked, badly-served meal tempted him to eat; and he ate on in silence, seemingly more interested in boiled beef than in the conversation that went on around him. But he would not have been the keen and daring adventurer that he was if he did not all the while keep his ears open for any fragment of news that the desultory talk of his fellow-diners was likely to yield to him.

Politics were, of course, discussed; the tyranny of the sections, the slavery that this free Republic had brought on its citizens. The names of the chief personages of the day were all mentioned in turns Focquier-Tinville, Santerre, Danton, Robespierre. Heron and his sleuth-hounds were spoken of with execrations quickly suppressed, but of little Capet not one word.

Blakeney could not help but infer that Chauvelin, Heron and the commissaries in charge were keeping the escape of the child a secret for as long as they could.

He could hear nothing of Armand's fate, of course. The arrest — if arrest there had been — was not like to be bruited abroad just now. Blakeney having last seen Armand in Chauvelin's company, whilst he himself was moving the Simons' furniture, could not for a moment doubt that the young man was imprisoned, — unless, indeed, he was being allowed a certain measure of freedom, whilst his every step was being spied on, so that he might act as a decoy for his chief.

At thought of that all weariness seemed to vanish from Blakeney's powerful frame. He set his lips firmly together, and once again the light of irresponsible gaiety danced in his eyes.

He had been in as tight a corner as this before now; at Boulogne his beautiful Marguerite had been used as a decoy, and twenty-four hours later he had held her in his arms on board his yacht the Day-Dream. As he would have put it in his own forcible language:

"Those d — d murderers have not got me yet."

The battle mayhap would this time be against greater odds than before, but Blakeney had no fear that they would prove overwhelming.

There was in life but one odd that was overwhelming, and that was treachery.

But of that there could be no question.

In the afternoon Blakeney started off in search of lodgings for the night. He found what would suit him in the Rue de l'Arcade, which was equally far from the House of Justice as it was from his former lodgings. Here he would be safe for at least twenty-four hours, after which he might have to shift again. But for the moment the landlord of the miserable apartment was over-willing to make no fuss and ask no questions, for the sake of the money which this aristo in disguise dispensed with a lavish hand.

Having taken possession of his new quarters and snatched a few hours of sound, well-deserved rest, until the time when the shades of evening and the darkness of the streets would make progress through the city somewhat more safe, Blakeney sallied forth at about six o'clock having a threefold object in view.

Primarily, of course, the threefold object was concentrated on Armand. There was the possibility of finding out at the young man's lodgings in Montmartre what had become of him; then there were the usual inquiries that could be made from the registers of the various prisons; and, thirdly, there was the chance that Armand had succeeded in sending some kind of message to Blakeney's former lodgings in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois.

On the whole, Sir Percy decided to leave the prison registers alone for the present. If Armand had been actually arrested, he would almost certainly be confined in the Chatelet prison, where he would be closer to hand for all the interrogatories to which, no doubt, he would be subjected.

Blakeney set his teeth and murmured a good, sound, British oath when he thought of those interrogatories. Armand St. Just, highly strung, a dreamer and a bundle of nerves — how he would suffer under the mental rack of questions and cross-questions, cleverly-laid traps to catch information from him unawares!

His next objective, then, was Armand's former lodging, and from six o'clock until close upon eight Sir Percy haunted the slopes of Montmartre, and more especially the neighbourhood of the Rue de la Croix Blanche, where Armand had lodged these former days. At the house itself he could not inquire as yet; obviously it would not have been safe; tomorrow, perhaps, when he knew more, but not tonight. His keen eyes had already spied at least two figures clothed in the rags of out-of-work labourers like himself, who had hung with suspicious persistence in this same neighbourhood, and who during the two hours that he had been in observation had never strayed out of sight of the house in the Rue de la Croix Blanche.

That these were two spies on the watch was, of course, obvious; but whether they were on the watch for St. Just or for some other unfortunate wretch it was at this stage impossible to conjecture.

Then, as from the Tour des Dames close by the clock solemnly struck the hour of eight, and Blakeney prepared to wend his way back to another part of the city, he suddenly saw Armand walking slowly up the street.

The young man did not look either to right or left; he held his head forward on his chest, and his hands were hidden underneath his cloak. When he passed immediately under one of the street lamps Blakeney caught sight of his face; it was pale and drawn. Then he turned his head, and for the space of two seconds his eyes across the narrow street encountered those of his chief. He had the presence of mind not to make a sign or to utter a sound; he was obviously being followed, but in that brief moment Sir Percy had seen in the young man's eyes a look that reminded him of a hunted creature.

"What have those brutes been up to with him, I wonder?" he muttered between clenched teeth.

Armand soon disappeared under the doorway of the same house where he had been lodging all along. Even as he did so Blakeney saw the two spies gather together like a pair of slimy lizards, and whisper excitedly one to another. A third man, who obviously had been dogging Armand's footsteps, came up and joined them after a while.

Blakeney could have sworn loudly and lustily, had it been possible to do so without attracting attention. The whole of Armand's history in the past twenty-four hours was perfectly clear to him. The young man had been made free that he might prove a decoy for more important game.

His every step was being watched, and he still thought Jeanne Lange in immediate danger of death. The look of despair in his face proclaimed these two facts, and Blakeney's heart ached for the mental torture which his friend was enduring. He longed to let Armand know that the woman he loved was in comparative safety.

Jeanne Lange first, and then Armand himself; and the odds would be very heavy against the Scarlet Pimpernel! But that Marguerite should not have to mourn an only brother, of that Sir Percy made oath.

He now turned his steps towards his own former lodgings by St. Germain l'Auxerrois. It was just possible that Armand had succeeded in leaving a message there for him. It was, of course, equally possible that when he did so Heron's men had watched his movements, and that spies would be stationed there, too, on the watch.

But that risk must, of course, be run. Blakeney's former lodging was the one place that Armand would know of to which he could send a message to his chief, if he wanted to do so. Of course, the unfortunate young man could not have known until just now that Percy would come back to Paris, but he might guess it, or wish it, or only vaguely hope for it; he might want to send a message, he might long to communicate with his brother-in-law, and, perhaps, feel sure that the latter would not leave him in the lurch.

With that thought in his mind, Sir Percy was not likely to give up the attempt to ascertain for himself whether Armand had tried to communicate with him or not. As for spies — well, he had dodged some of them often enough in his time — the risks that he ran to-night were no worse than the ones to which he had so successfully run counter in the Temple yesterday.

Still keeping up the slouchy gait peculiar to the out-at-elbows working man of the day, hugging the houses as he walked along the streets, Blakeney made slow progress across the city. But at last he reached the facade of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, and turning sharply to his right he soon came in sight of the house which he had only quitted twenty-four hours ago.

We all know that house — all of us who are familiar with the Paris of those terrible days. It stands quite detached — a vast quadrangle, facing the Quai de l'Ecole and the river, backing on the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois, and shouldering the Carrefour des Trois Manes. The porte-cochere, so-called, is but a narrow doorway, and is actually situated in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois.

Blakeney made his way cautiously right round the house; he peered up and down the quay, and his keen eyes tried to pierce the dense gloom that hung at the corners of the Pont Neuf immediately opposite. Soon he assured himself that for the present, at any rate, the house was not being watched.

Armand presumably had not yet left a message for him here; but he might do so at any time now that he knew that his chief was in Paris and on the look-out for him.

Blakeney made up his mind to keep this house in sight. This art of watching he had acquired to a masterly extent, and could have taught Heron's watch-dogs a remarkable lesson in it. At night, of course, it was a comparatively easy task. There were a good many unlighted doorways along the quay, whilst a street lamp was fixed on a bracket in the wall of the very house which he kept in observation.

Finding temporary shelter under various doorways, or against the dank walls of the houses, Blakeney set himself resolutely to a few hours' weary waiting. A thin, drizzly rain fell with unpleasant persistence, like a damp mist, and the thin blouse which he wore soon became wet through and clung hard and chilly to his shoulders.

It was close on midnight when at last he thought it best to give up his watch and to go back to his lodgings for a few hours' sleep; but at seven o'clock the next morning he was back again at his post.

The porte-cochere of his former lodging-house was not yet open; he took up his stand close beside it. His woollen cap pulled well over his forehead, the grime cleverly plastered on his hair and face, his lower jaw thrust forward, his eyes looking lifeless and bleary, all gave him an expression of sly villainy, whilst the short clay pipe struck at a sharp angle in his mouth, his hands thrust into the pockets of his ragged breeches, and his bare feet in the mud of the road, gave the final touch to his representation of an out-of-work, ill-conditioned, and supremely discontented loafer.

He had not very long to wait. Soon the porte-cochere of the house was opened, and the concierge came out with his broom, making a show of cleaning the pavement in front of the door. Five minutes later a lad, whose clothes consisted entirely of rags, and whose feet and head were bare, came rapidly up the street from the quay, and walked along looking at the houses as he went, as if trying to decipher their number. The cold grey dawn was just breaking, dreary and damp, as all the past days had been. Blakeney watched the lad as he approached, the small, naked feet falling noiselessly on the cobblestones of the road. When the boy was quite close to him and to the house, Blakeney shifted his position and took the pipe out of his mouth.

"Up early, my son!" he said gruffly.

"Yes," said the pale-faced little creature; "I have a message to deliver at No. 9 Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois. It must be somewhere near here."

"It is. You can give me the message."

"Oh, no, citizen!" said the lad, into whose pale, circled eyes a look of terror had quickly appeared. "It is for one of the lodgers in No. 9. I must give it to him."

With an instinct which he somehow felt could not err at this moment, Blakeney knew that the message was one from Armand to himself; a written message, too, since — instinctively when he spoke — the boy clutched at his thin shirt, as if trying to guard something precious that had been entrusted to him.

"I will deliver the message myself, sonny," said Blakeney gruffly. "I know the citizen for whom it is intended. He would not like the concierge to see it."

"Oh! I would not give it to the concierge," said the boy. "I would take it upstairs myself."

"My son," retorted Blakeney, "let me tell you this. You are going to give that message up to me and I will put five whole livres into your hand."

Blakeney, with all his sympathy aroused for this poor pale-faced lad, put on the airs of a ruffianly bully. He did not wish that message to be taken indoors by the lad, for the concierge might get hold of it, despite the boy's protests and tears, and after that Blakeney would perforce have to disclose himself before it would be given up to him. During the past week the concierge had been very amenable to bribery. Whatever suspicions he had had about his lodger he had kept to himself for the sake of the money which he received; but it was impossible to gauge any man's trend of thought these days from one hour to the next. Something — for aught Blakeney knew — might have occurred in the past twenty-four hours to change an amiable and accommodating lodging-house keeper into a surly or dangerous spy.

Fortunately, the concierge had once more gone within; there was no one abroad, and if there were, no one probably would take any notice of a burly ruffian brow-beating a child.

"Allons!" he said gruffly, "give me the letter, or that five livres goes back into my pocket."

"Five livres!" exclaimed the child with pathetic eagerness. "Oh, citizen!"

The thin little hand fumbled under the rags, but it reappeared again empty, whilst a faint blush spread over the hollow cheeks.

"The other citizen also gave me five livres," he said humbly. "He lodges in the house where my mother is concierge. It is in the Rue de la Croix Blanche. He has been very kind to my mother. I would rather do as he bade me."

"Bless the lad," murmured Blakeney under his breath; "his loyalty redeems many a crime of this God-forsaken city. Now I suppose I shall have to bully him, after all."

He took his hand out of his breeches pocket; between two very dirty fingers he held a piece of gold. The other hand he placed quite roughly on the lad's chest.

"Give me the letter," he said harshly, "or—"

He pulled at the ragged blouse, and a scrap of soiled paper soon fell into his hand. The lad began to cry.

"Here," said Blakeney, thrusting the piece of gold into the thin small palm, "take this home to your mother, and tell your lodger that a big, rough man took the letter away from you by force. Now run, before I kick you out of the way."

The lad, terrified out of his poor wits, did not wait for further commands; he took to his heels and ran, his small hand clutching the piece of gold. Soon he had disappeared round the corner of the street.

Blakeney did not at once read the paper; he thrust it quickly into his breeches pocket and slouched away slowly down the street, and thence across the Place du Carrousel, in the direction of his new lodgings in the Rue de l'Arcade.

It was only when he found himself alone in the narrow, squalid room which he was occupying that he took the scrap of paper from his pocket and read it slowly through. It said:

Percy, you cannot forgive me, nor can I ever forgive myself, but if you only knew what I have suffered for the past two days you would, I think, try and forgive. I am free and yet a prisoner; my every footstep is dogged. What they ultimately mean to do with me I do not know. And when I think of Jeanne I long for the power to end mine own miserable existence. Percy! she is still in the hands of those fiends.... I saw the prison register; her name written there has been like a burning brand on my heart ever since. She was still in prison the day that you left Paris; to-morrow, to-night mayhap, they will try her, condemn her, torture her, and I dare not go to see you, for I would only be bringing spies to your door. But will you come to me, Percy? It should be safe in the hours of the night, and the concierge is devoted to me. To-night at ten o'clock she will leave the porte-cochere unlatched. If you find it so, and if on the ledge of the window immediately on your left as you enter you find a candle alight, and beside it a scrap of paper with your initials S. P. traced on it, then it will be quite safe for you to come up to my room. It is on the second landing — a door on your right — that too I will leave on the latch. But in the name of the woman you love best in all the world come at once to me then, and bear in mind, Percy, that the woman I love is threatened with immediate death, and that I am powerless to save her. Indeed, believe me, I would gladly die even

now but for the thought of Jeanne, whom I should be leaving in the hands of those fiends. For God's sake, Percy, remember that Jeanne is all the world to me.

"Poor old Armand," murmured Blakeney with a kindly smile directed at the absent friend, "he won't trust me even now. He won't trust his Jeanne in my hands. Well," he added after a while, "after all, I would not entrust Marguerite to anybody else either."

CHAPTER XXIII. THE OVERWHELMING ODDS

At half-past ten that same evening, Blakeney, still clad in a workman's tattered clothes, his feet bare so that he could tread the streets unheard, turned into the Rue de la Croix Blanche.

The porte-cochere of the house where Armand lodged had been left on the latch; not a soul was in sight. Peering cautiously round, he slipped into the house. On the ledge of the window, immediately on his left when he entered, a candle was left burning, and beside it there was a scrap of paper with the initials S. P. roughly traced in pencil. No one challenged him as he noiselessly glided past it, and up the narrow stairs that led to the upper floor. Here, too, on the second landing the door on the right had been left on the latch. He pushed it open and entered.

As is usual even in the meanest lodgings in Paris houses, a small antechamber gave between the front door and the main room. When Percy entered the antechamber was unlighted, but the door into the inner room beyond was ajar. Blakeney approached it with noiseless tread, and gently pushed it open.

That very instant he knew that the game was up; he heard the footsteps closing up behind him, saw Armand, deathly pale, leaning against the wall in the room in front of him, and Chauvelin and Heron standing guard over him.

The next moment the room and the antechamber were literally alive with soldiers — twenty of them to arrest one man.

It was characteristic of that man that when hands were laid on him from every side he threw back his head and laughed — laughed mirthfully, light-heartedly, and the first words that escaped his lips were:

"Well, I am d — d!"

"The odds are against you, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin to him in English, whilst Heron at the further end of the room was growling like a contented beast.

"By the Lord, sir," said Percy with perfect sang-froid, "I do believe that for the moment they are."

"Have done, my men — have done!" he added, turning good-humouredly to the soldiers round him. "I never fight against overwhelming odds. Twenty to one, eh? I could lay four of you out easily enough, perhaps even six, but what then?"

But a kind of savage lust seemed to have rendered these men temporarily mad, and they were being egged on by Heron. The mysterious Englishman, about whom so many eerie tales were told! Well, he had supernatural powers, and twenty to one might be nothing to him if the devil was on his side. Therefore a blow on his forearm with the butt-end of a bayonet was useful for disabling his right hand, and soon the left arm with a dislocated shoulder hung limp by his side. Then he was bound with cords.

The vein of luck had given out. The gambler had staked more than usual and had lost; but he knew how to lose, just as he had always known how to win.

"Those d — d brutes are trussing me like a fowl," he murmured with irrepressible gaiety at the last.

Then the wrench on his bruised arms as they were pulled roughly back by the cords caused the veil of unconsciousness to gather over his eyes.

"And Jeanne was safe, Armand," he shouted with a last desperate effort; "those devils have lied to you and tricked you into this ... Since yesterday she is out of prison... in the house... you know...."

After that he lost consciousness.

And this occurred on Tuesday, January 21st, in the year 1794, or, in accordance with the new calendar, on the 2nd Pluviose, year II of the Republic.

It is chronicled in the Moniteur of the 3rd Pluviose that, "on the previous evening, at half-past ten of the clock, the Englishman known as the Scarlet Pimpernel, who for three years has conspired against the safety of the Republic, was arrested through the patriotic exertions of citizen Chauvelin, and conveyed to the Conciergerie, where he now lies — sick, but closely guarded. Long live the Republic!"

PART II

CHAPTER XXIV THE NEWS

The grey January day was falling, drowsy, and dull into the arms of night. Marguerite, sitting in the dusk beside the fire in her small boudoir, shivered a little as she drew her scarf closer round her shoulders. Edwards, the butler, entered with the lamp. The room looked peculiarly cheery now, with the delicate white panelling of the wall glowing under the soft kiss of the flickering firelight and the steadier glow of the rose-shaded lamp. "Has the courier not arrived yet, Edwards?" asked Marguerite, fixing the impassive face of the well-drilled servant with her large purple-rimmed eyes.

"Not yet, m'lady," he replied placidly.

"It is his day, is it not?"

"Yes, m'lady. And the forenoon is his time. But there have been heavy rains, and the roads must be rare muddy. He must have been delayed, m'lady."

"Yes, I suppose so," she said listlessly. "That will do, Edwards. No, don't close the shutters. I'll ring presently."

The man went out of the room as automatically as he had come. He closed the door behind him, and Marguerite was once more alone.

She picked up the book which she had fingered idly before the light gave out. She tried once more to fix her attention on this tale of love and adventure written by Mr. Fielding; but she had lost the thread of the story, and there was a mist between her eyes and the printed pages.

With an impatient gesture she threw down the book and passed her hand across her eyes, then seemed astonished to find that her hand was wet.

She rose and went to the window. The air outside had been singularly mild all day; the thaw was persisting, and a south wind came across the Channel — from France.

Marguerite threw open the casement and sat down on the wide sill, leaning her head against the window-frame, and gazing out into the fast gathering gloom. From far away, at the foot of the gently sloping lawns, the river murmured softly in the night; in the borders to the right and left a few snowdrops still showed like tiny white specks through the surrounding darkness. Winter had begun the process of slowly shedding its mantle, coquetting with Spring, who still lingered in the land of Infinity. Gradually the shadows drew closer and closer; the reeds and rushes on the river bank were the first to sink into their embrace, then the big cedars on the lawn, majestic and defiant, but yielding still unconquered to the power of night.

The tiny stars of snowdrop blossoms vanished one by one, and at last the cool, grey ribbon of the river surface was wrapped under the mantle of evening.

Only the south wind lingered on, sighing gently in the drowsy reeds, whispering among the branches of the cedars, and gently stirring the tender corollas of the sleeping snowdrops.

Marguerite seemed to open out her lungs to its breath. It had come all the way from France, and on its wings had brought something of Percy — a murmur as if he had spoken — a memory that was as intangible as a dream.

She shivered again, though of a truth it was not cold. The courier's delay had completely unsettled her nerves. Twice a week he came especially from Dover, and always he brought some message, some token which Percy had contrived to send from Paris. They were like tiny scraps of dry bread thrown to a starving woman, but they did just help to keep her heart alive — that poor, aching, disappointed heart that so longed for enduring happiness which it could never get.

The man whom she loved with all her soul, her mind and her body, did not belong to her; he belonged to suffering humanity over there in terror-stricken France, where the cries of the innocent, the persecuted, the wretched called louder to him than she in her love could do.

He had been away three months now, during which time her starving heart had fed on its memories, and the happiness of a brief visit from him six weeks ago, when — quite unexpectedly — he had appeared before her... home between two desperate adventures that had given life and freedom to a number of innocent people, and nearly cost him his — and she had lain in his arms in a swoon of perfect happiness.

But he had gone away again as suddenly as he had come, and for six weeks now she had lived partly in anticipation of the courier with messages from him, and partly on the fitful joy engendered by these messages. To-day she had not even that, and the disappointment seemed just now more than she could bear.

She felt unaccountably restless, and could she but have analysed her feelings — had she dared so to do — she would have realised that the weight which oppressed her heart so that she could hardly breathe, was one of vague yet dark foreboding.

She closed the window and returned to her seat by the fire, taking up her book with the strong resolution not to allow her nerves to get the better of her. But it was difficult to pin one's attention down to the adventures of Master Tom Jones when one's mind was fully engrossed with those of Sir Percy Blakeney.

The sound of carriage wheels on the gravelled forecourt in the front of the house suddenly awakened her drowsy senses. She threw down the book, and with trembling hands clutched the arms of her chair, straining her ears to listen. A carriage at this hour — and on this damp winter's evening! She racked her mind wondering who it could be.

Lady Ffoulkes was in London, she knew. Sir Andrew, of course, was in Paris. His Royal Highness, ever a faithful visitor, would surely not venture out to Richmond in this inclement weather — and the courier always came on horseback.

There was a murmur of voices; that of Edwards, mechanical and placid, could be heard quite distinctly saying:

"I'm sure that her ladyship will be at home for you, m'lady. But I'll go and ascertain."

Marguerite ran to the door and with joyful eagerness tore it open.

"Suzanne!" she called "my little Suzanne! I thought you were in London. Come up quickly! In the boudoir — yes. Oh! what good fortune hath brought you?"

Suzanne flew into her arms, holding the friend whom she loved so well close and closer to her heart, trying to hide her face, which was wet with tears, in the folds of Marguerite's kerchief.

"Come inside, my darling," said Marguerite. "Why, how cold your little hands are!"

She was on the point of turning back to her boudoir, drawing Lady Ffoulkes by the hand, when suddenly she caught sight of Sir Andrew, who stood at a little distance from her, at the top of the stairs.

"Sir Andrew!" she exclaimed with unstinted gladness.

Then she paused. The cry of welcome died on her lips, leaving them dry and parted. She suddenly felt as if some fearful talons had gripped her heart and were tearing at it with sharp, long nails; the blood flew from her cheeks and from her limbs, leaving her with a sense of icy numbness.

She backed into the room, still holding Suzanne's hand, and drawing her in with her. Sir Andrew followed them, then closed the door behind him. At last the word escaped Marguerite's parched lips:

"Percy! Something has happened to him! He is dead?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Sir Andrew quickly.

Suzanne put her loving arms round her friend and drew her down into the chair by the fire. She knelt at her feet on the hearthrug, and pressed her own burning lips on Marguerite's icy-cold hands. Sir Andrew stood silently by, a world of loving friendship, of heart-broken sorrow, in his eyes.

There was silence in the pretty white-panelled room for a while. Marguerite sat with her eyes closed, bringing the whole armoury of her will power to bear her up outwardly now.

"Tell me!" she said at last, and her voice was toneless and dull, like one that came from the depths of a grave—"tell me — exactly — everything. Don't be afraid. I can bear it. Don't be afraid."

Sir Andrew remained standing, with bowed head and one hand resting on the table. In a firm, clear voice he told her the events of the past few days as they were known to him. All that he tried to hide was Armand's disobedience, which, in his heart, he felt was the primary cause of the catastrophe. He told of the rescue of the Dauphin from the Temple, the midnight drive in the coal-cart, the meeting with Hastings and Tony in the spinney. He only gave vague explanations of Armand's stay in Paris which caused Percy to go back to the city, even at the moment when his most daring plan had been so successfully carried through.

"Armand, I understand, has fallen in love with a beautiful woman in Paris, Lady Blakeney," he said, seeing that a strange, puzzled look had appeared in Marguerite's pale face. "She was arrested the day before the rescue of the Dauphin from the Temple. Armand could not join us. He felt that he could not leave her. I am sure that you will understand."

Then as she made no comment, he resumed his narrative:

"I had been ordered to go back to La Villette, and there to resume my duties as a labourer in the day-time, and to wait for Percy during the night. The fact that I had received no message from him for two days had made me somewhat worried, but I have such faith in him, such belief in his good luck and his ingenuity, that I would not allow myself to be really anxious. Then on the third day I heard the news."

"What news?" asked Marguerite mechanically.

"That the Englishman who was known as the Scarlet Pimpernel had been captured in a house in the Rue de la Croix Blanche, and had been imprisoned in the Conciergerie."

"The Rue de la Croix Blanche? Where is that?"

"In the Montmartre quarter. Armand lodged there. Percy, I imagine, was working to get him away; and those brutes captured him."

"Having heard the news, Sir Andrew, what did you do?"

"I went into Paris and ascertained its truth."

"And there is no doubt of it?"

"Alas, none! I went to the house in the Rue de la Croix Blanche. Armand had disappeared. I succeeded in inducing the concierge to talk. She seems to have been devoted to her lodger. Amidst tears she told me some of the details of the capture. Can you bear to hear them, Lady Blakeney?"

"Yes — tell me everything — don't be afraid," she reiterated with the same dull monotony.

"It appears that early on the Tuesday morning the son of the concierge — a lad about fifteen — was sent off by her lodger with a message to No. 9 Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois. That was the house where Percy was staying all last week, where he kept disguises and so on for us all, and where some of our meetings were held. Percy evidently expected that Armand would try and communicate with him at that address, for when the lad arrived in front of the house he was accosted — so he says — by a big, rough workman, who browbeat him into giving up the lodger's letter, and finally pressed a piece of gold into his hand. The workman was Blakeney, of course. I imagine that Armand, at the time that he wrote the letter, must have been under the belief that Mademoiselle Lange was still in prison; he could not know then that Blakeney had already got her into comparative safety. In the letter he must have spoken of the terrible plight in which he stood, and also of his fears for the woman whom he loved. Percy was not the man to leave a comrade in the lurch! He would not be the man whom we all love and admire, whose word we all obey, for whose sake we would gladly all of us give our life — he would not be that man if he did not brave even certain dangers in order to be of help to those who call on him. Armand called and Percy went to him. He must have known that Armand was being spied upon, for Armand, alas! was already a marked man, and the watch-dogs of those infernal committees were already on his heels. Whether these sleuth-hounds had followed the son of the concierge and seen him give the letter to the workman in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois, or whether the concierge in the Rue de la Croix Blanche was nothing but a spy of Heron's, or, again whether the Committee of General Security kept a company of soldiers in constant alert in that house, we shall, of course, never know. All that I do know is that Percy entered that fatal house at half-past ten, and that a quarter of an hour later the concierge saw some of the soldiers descending the stairs, carrying a heavy burden. She peeped out of her lodge, and by the light in the corridor she saw that the heavy burden was the body of a man bound closely with ropes: his eyes were closed, his clothes were stained with blood. He was seemingly unconscious. The next day the official organ of the Government proclaimed the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and there was a public holiday in honour of the event."

Marguerite had listened to this terrible narrative dry-eyed and silent. Now she still sat there, hardly conscious of what went on around her — of Suzanne's tears, that fell unceasingly upon her fingers — of Sir Andrew, who had sunk into a chair, and buried his head in his hands. She was hardly conscious that she lived; the universe seemed to have stood still before this awful, monstrous cataclysm.

But, nevertheless, she was the first to return to the active realities of the present.

"Sir Andrew," she said after a while, "tell me, where are my Lords Tony and Hastings?"

"At Calais, madam," he replied. "I saw them there on my way hither. They had delivered the Dauphin safely into the hands of his adherents at Mantes, and were awaiting Blakeney's further orders, as he had commanded them to do."

"Will they wait for us there, think you?"

"For us, Lady Blakeney?" he exclaimed in puzzlement.

"Yes, for us, Sir Andrew," she replied, whilst the ghost of a smile flitted across her drawn face; "you had thought of accompanying me to Paris, had you not?"

"But Lady Blakeney—"

"Ah! I know what you would say, Sir Andrew. You will speak of dangers, of risks, of death, mayhap; you will tell me that I as a woman can do nothing to help my husband — that I could be but a hindrance to him, just as I was in Boulogne. But everything is so different now. Whilst those brutes planned his capture he was clever enough to outwit them, but now they have actually got him, think you they'll let him escape? They'll watch him night and day, my friend, just as they watched the unfortunate Queen; but they'll not keep him months, weeks, or even days in prison — even Chauvelin now will no longer attempt to play with the Scarlet Pimpernel. They have him, and they will hold him until such time as they take him to the guillotine."

Her voice broke in a sob; her self-control was threatening to leave her. She was but a woman, young and passionately in love with the man who was about to die an ignominious death, far away from his country, his kindred, his friends.

"I cannot let him die alone, Sir Andrew; he will be longing for me, and — and, after all, there is you, and my Lord Tony, and Lord Hastings and the others; surely — surely we are not going to let him die, not like that, and not alone."

"You are right, Lady Blakeney," said Sir Andrew earnestly; "we are not going to let him die, if human agency can do aught to save him. Already Tony, Hastings and I have agreed to return to Paris. There are one or two hidden places in and around the city known only to Percy and to the members of the League where he must find one or more of us if he succeeds in getting away. All the way between Paris and Calais we have places of refuge, places where any of us can hide at a given moment; where we can find disguises when we want them, or horses in an emergency. No! no! we are not going to despair, Lady Blakeney; there are nineteen of us prepared to lay down our lives for the Scarlet Pimpernel. Already I, as his lieutenant, have been selected as the leader of as determined a gang as has ever entered on a work of rescue before. We leave for Paris to-morrow, and if human pluck and devotion can destroy mountains then we'll destroy them. Our watchword is: 'God save the Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

He knelt beside her chair and kissed the cold fingers which, with a sad little smile, she held out to him.

"And God bless you all!" she murmured.

Suzanne had risen to her feet when her husband knelt; now he stood up beside her. The dainty young woman hardly more than a child — was doing her best to restrain her tears.

"See how selfish I am," said Marguerite. "I talk calmly of taking your husband from you, when I myself know the bitterness of such partings."

"My husband will go where his duty calls him," said Suzanne with charming and simple dignity. "I love him with all my heart, because he is brave and good. He could not leave his comrade, who is also his chief, in the lurch. God will protect him, I know. I would not ask him to play the part of a coward."

Her brown eyes glowed with pride. She was the true wife of a soldier, and with all her dainty ways and childlike manners she was a splendid woman and a staunch friend. Sir Percy Blakeney had saved her entire family from death, the Comte and Comtesse de Tournai, the Vicomte, her brother, and she herself all owed their lives to the Scarlet Pimpernel.

This she was not like to forget.

"There is but little danger for us, I fear me," said Sir Andrew lightly; "the revolutionary Government only wants to strike at a head, it cares nothing for the limbs. Perhaps it feels that without our leader we are enemies not worthy of persecution. If there are any dangers, so much the better," he added; "but I don't anticipate any, unless we succeed in freeing our chief; and having freed him, we fear nothing more."

"The same applies to me, Sir Andrew," rejoined Marguerite earnestly. "Now that they have captured Percy, those human fiends will care naught for me. If you succeed in freeing Percy I, like you, will have nothing more to fear, and if you fail—"

She paused and put her small, white hand on Sir Andrew's arm.

"Take me with you, Sir Andrew," she entreated; "do not condemn me to the awful torture of weary waiting, day after day, wondering, guessing, never daring to hope, lest hope deferred be more hard to bear than dreary hopelessness."

Then as Sir Andrew, very undecided, yet half inclined to yield, stood silent and irresolute, she pressed her point, gently but firmly insistent.

"I would not be in the way, Sir Andrew; I would know how to efface myself so as not to interfere with your plans. But, oh!" she added, while a quivering note of passion trembled in her voice, "can't you see that I must breathe the air that he breathes else I shall stifle or mayhap go mad?"

Sir Andrew turned to his wife, a mute query in his eyes.

"You would do an inhuman and a cruel act," said Suzanne with seriousness that sat quaintly on her baby face, "if you did not afford your protection to Marguerite, for I do believe that if you did not take her with you to-morrow she would go to Paris alone."

Marguerite thanked her friend with her eyes. Suzanne was a child in nature, but she had a woman's heart. She loved her husband, and, therefore, knew and understood what Marguerite must be suffering now.

Sir Andrew no longer could resist the unfortunate woman's earnest pleading. Frankly, he thought that if she remained in England while Percy was in such deadly peril she ran the grave risk of losing her reason before the terrible strain of suspense. He knew her to be a woman of courage, and one capable of great physical endurance; and really he was quite honest when he said that he did not believe there would be much danger for the headless League of the Scarlet Pimpernel unless they succeeded in freeing their chief. And if they did succeed, then indeed there would be nothing to fear, for the brave and loving wife who, like every true woman does, and has done in like circumstances since the beginning of time, was only demanding with passionate insistence the right to share the fate, good or ill, of the man whom she loved.

CHAPTER XXV. PARIS ONCE MORE

Sir Andrew had just come in. He was trying to get a little warmth into his half-frozen limbs, for the cold had set in again, and this time with renewed vigour, and Marguerite was pouring out a cup of hot coffee which she had been brewing for him. She had not asked for news. She knew that he had none to give her, else he had not worn that wearied, despondent look in his kind face.

"I'll just try one more place this evening," he said as soon as he had swallowed some of the hot coffee—"a restaurant in the Rue de la Harpe; the members of the Cordeliers' Club often go there for supper, and they are usually well informed. I might glean something definite there."

"It seems very strange that they are so slow in bringing him to trial," said Marguerite in that dull, toneless voice which had become habitual to her. "When you first brought me the awful news that... I made sure that they would bring him to trial at once, and was in terror lest we arrived here too late to — to see him."

She checked herself quickly, bravely trying to still the quiver of her voice.

"And of Armand?" she asked.

He shook his head sadly.

"With regard to him I am at a still greater loss," he said: "I cannot find his name on any of the prison registers, and I know that he is not in the Conciergerie. They have cleared out all the prisoners from there; there is only Percy—"

"Poor Armand!" she sighed; "it must be almost worse for him than for any of us; it was his first act of thoughtless disobedience that brought all this misery upon our heads."

She spoke sadly but quietly. Sir Andrew noted that there was no bitterness in her tone. But her very quietude was heart-breaking; there was such an infinity of despair in the calm of her eyes.

"Well! though we cannot understand it all, Lady Blakeney," he said with forced cheerfulness, "we must remember one thing — that whilst there is life there is hope."

"Hope!" she exclaimed with a world of pathos in her sigh, her large eyes dry and circled, fixed with indescribable sorrow on her friend's face.

Ffoulkes turned his head away, pretending to busy himself with the coffee-making utensils. He could not bear to see that look of hopelessness in her face, for in his heart he could not find the wherewithal to cheer her. Despair was beginning to seize on him too, and this he would not let her see.

They had been in Paris three days now, and it was six days since Blakeney had been arrested. Sir Andrew and Marguerite had found temporary lodgings inside Paris, Tony and Hastings were just outside the gates, and all along the route between Paris and Calais, at St. Germain, at Mantes, in the villages between Beauvais and Amiens, wherever money could obtain friendly help, members of the devoted League of the Scarlet Pimpernel lay in hiding, waiting to aid their chief.

Ffoulkes had ascertained that Percy was kept a close prisoner in the Conciergerie, in the very rooms occupied by Marie Antoinette during the last months of her life. He left poor Marguerite to guess how closely that elusive Scarlet Pimpernel was being guarded, the precautions surrounding him being even more minute than those which had made the unfortunate Queen's closing days a martyrdom for her.

But of Armand he could glean no satisfactory news, only the negative probability that he was not detained in any of the larger prisons of Paris, as no register which he, Ffoulkes, so laboriously consulted bore record of the name of St. Just.

Haunting the restaurants and drinking booths where the most advanced Jacobins and Terrorists were wont to meet, he had learned one or two details of Blakeney's incarceration which he could not possibly impart to Marguerite. The capture of the mysterious Englishman known as the Scarlet Pimpernel had created a great deal of popular satisfaction; but it was obvious that not only was the public mind not allowed to associate that capture with the escape of little Capet from the Temple, but it soon became clear to Ffoulkes that the news of that escape was still being kept a profound secret.

On one occasion he had succeeded in spying on the Chief Agent of the Committee of General Security, whom he knew by sight, while the latter was sitting at dinner in the company of a stout, florid man with pock-marked face and podgy hands covered with rings.

Sir Andrew marvelled who this man might be. Heron spoke to him in ambiguous phrases that would have been unintelligible to any one who did not know the circumstances of the Dauphin's escape and the part that the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had played in it. But to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, who — cleverly disguised as a farrier, grimy after his day's work — was straining his ears to listen whilst apparently consuming huge slabs of boiled beef, it soon became clear that the chief agent and his fat friend were talking of the Dauphin and of Blakeney.

"He won't hold out much longer, citizen," the chief agent was saying in a confident voice; "our men are absolutely unremitting in their task. Two of them watch him night and day; they look after him well, and practically never lose sight of him, but the moment he tries to get any sleep one of them rushes into the cell with a loud banging of bayonet and sabre, and noisy tread on the flagstones, and shouts at the top of his voice: 'Now then, aristo, where's the brat? Tell us now, and you shall be down and go to sleep.' I have done it myself all through one day just for the pleasure of it. It's a little tiring for you to have to shout a good deal now, and sometimes give the cursed Englishman a good shake-up. He has had five days of it, and not one wink of sleep during that time — not one single minute of rest — and he only gets enough food to keep him alive. I tell you he can't last. Citizen Chauvelin had a splendid idea there. It will all come right in a day or two."

"H'm!" grunted the other sulkily; "those Englishmen are tough."

"Yes!" retorted Heron with a grim laugh and a leer of savagery that made his gaunt face look positively hideous—"you would have given out after three days, friend de Batz, would you not? And I warned you, didn't I? I told you if you tampered with the brat I would make you cry in mercy to me for death."

"And I warned you," said the other imperturbably, "not to worry so much about me, but to keep your eyes open for those cursed Englishmen."

"I am keeping my eyes open for you, nevertheless, my friend. If I thought you knew where the vermin's spawn was at this moment I would—"

"You would put me on the same rack that you or your precious friend, Chauvelin, have devised for the Englishman. But I don't know where the lad is. If I did I would not be in Paris."

"I know that," assented Heron with a sneer; "you would soon be after the reward — over in Austria, what? — but I have your movements tracked day and night, my friend. I dare say you are as anxious as we are as to the whereabouts of the child. Had he been taken over the frontier you would have been the first to hear of it, eh? No," he added confidently, and as if anxious to reassure himself, "my firm belief is that the original idea of these confounded Englishmen was to try and get the child over to England, and that they alone know where he is. I tell you it won't be many days before that very withered Scarlet Pimpernel will order his followers to give little Capet up to us. Oh! they are hanging about Paris some of them, I know that; citizen Chauvelin is convinced that the wife isn't very far away. Give her a sight of her husband now, say I, and she'll make the others give the child up soon enough."

The man laughed like some hyena gloating over its prey. Sir Andrew nearly betrayed himself then. He had to dig his nails into his own flesh to prevent himself from springing then and there at the throat of that wretch whose monstrous ingenuity had invented torture for the fallen enemy far worse than any that the cruelties of medieval Inquisitions had devised.

So they would not let him sleep! A simple idea born in the brain of a fiend. Heron had spoken of Chauvelin as the originator of the devilry; a man weakened deliberately day by day by insufficient food, and the horrible process of denying him rest. It seemed inconceivable that human, sentient beings should have thought of such a thing. Perspiration stood up in beads on Sir Andrew's brow when he thought of his friend, brought down by want of sleep to — what? His physique was splendidly powerful, but could it stand against such racking torment for long? And the clear, the alert mind, the scheming brain, the reckless daring — how soon would these become enfeebled by the slow, steady torture of an utter want of rest?

Ffoulkes had to smother a cry of horror, which surely must have drawn the attention of that fiend on himself had he not been so engrossed in the enjoyment of his own devilry. As it is, he ran out of the stuffy eating-house, for he felt as if its fetid air must choke him.

For an hour after that he wandered about the streets, not daring to face Marguerite, lest his eyes betrayed some of the horror which was shaking his very soul.

That was twenty-four hours ago. To-day he had learnt little else. It was generally known that the Englishman was in the Conciergerie prison, that he was being closely watched, and that his trial would come on within the next few days; but no one seemed to know exactly when. The public was getting restive, demanding that trial and execution to which every one seemed to look forward as to a holiday. In the meanwhile the escape of the Dauphin had been kept from the knowledge of the public; Heron and his gang, fearing for their lives, had still hopes of extracting from the Englishman the secret of the lad's hiding-place, and the means they employed for arriving at this end was worthy of Lucifer and his host of devils in hell.

From other fragments of conversation which Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had gleaned that same evening, it seemed to him that in order to hide their defalcations Heron and the four commissaries in charge of little Capet had substituted a deaf and dumb child for the escaped little prisoner. This miserable small wreck of humanity was reputed to be sick and kept in a darkened room, in bed, and was in that condition exhibited to any member of the Convention who had the right to see him. A partition had been very hastily erected in the inner room once occupied by the Simons, and the child was kept behind that partition, and no one was allowed to come too near to him. Thus the fraud was succeeding fairly well. Heron and his accomplices only cared to save their skins, and the wretched little substitute being really ill, they firmly hoped that he would soon die, when no doubt they would bruit abroad the news of the death of Capet, which would relieve them of further responsibility.

That such ideas, such thoughts, such schemes should have engendered in human minds it is almost impossible to conceive, and yet we know from no less important a witness than Madame Simon herself that the child who died in the Temple a few weeks later was a poor little imbecile, a deaf and dumb child brought hither from one of the asylums and left to die in peace. There was nobody but kindly Death to take him out of his misery, for the giant intellect that had planned and carried out the rescue of the uncrowned King of France, and which alone might have had the power to save him too, was being broken on the rack of enforced sleeplessness.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE BITTEREST FOE

That same evening Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, having announced his intention of gleaning further news of Armand, if possible, went out shortly after seven o'clock, promising to be home again about nine.

Marguerite, on the other hand, had to make her friend a solemn promise that she would try and eat some supper which the landlady of these miserable apartments had agreed to prepare for her. So far they had been left in peaceful occupation of these squalid lodgings in a tumble-down house on the Quai de la Ferraille, facing the house of Justice, the grim walls of which Marguerite would watch with wide-open dry eyes for as long as the grey wintry light lingered over them.

Even now, though the darkness had set in, and snow, falling in close, small flakes, threw a thick white veil over the landscape, she sat at the open window long after Sir Andrew had gone out, watching the few small flicks of light that blinked across from the other side of the river, and which came from the windows of the Chatelet towers. The windows of the Conciergerie she could not see, for these gave on one of the inner courtyards; but there was a melancholy consolation even in the gazing on those walls that held in their cruel, grim embrace all that she loved in the world.

It seemed so impossible to think of Percy — the laughter-loving, irresponsible, light-hearted adventurer — as the prey of those fiends who would revel in their triumph, who would crush him, humiliate him, insult him — ye gods alive! even torture him, perhaps — that they might break the indomitable spirit that would mock them even on the threshold of death.

Surely, surely God would never allow such monstrous infamy as the deliverance of the noble soaring eagle into the hands of those preying jackals! Marguerite — though her heart ached beyond what human nature could endure, though her anguish on her husband's account was doubled by that which she felt for her brother — could not bring herself to give up all hope. Sir Andrew said it rightly; while there was life there was hope. While there was life in those vigorous limbs, spirit in that daring mind, how could puny, rampant beasts gain the better of the immortal soul? As for Armand — why, if Percy were free she would have no cause to fear for Armand.

She sighed a sigh of deep, of passionate regret and longing. If she could only see her husband; if she could only look for one second into those laughing, lazy eyes, wherein she alone knew how to fathom the infinity of passion that lay within their depths; if she could but once feel his — ardent kiss on her lips, she could more easily endure this agonising suspense, and wait confidently and courageously for the issue.

She turned away from the window, for the night was getting bitterly cold. From the tower of St. Germain l'Auxerrois the clock slowly struck eight. Even as the last sound of the historic bell died away in the distance she heard a timid knocking at the door.

"Enter!" she called unthinkingly.

She thought it was her landlady, come up with more wood, mayhap, for the fire, so she did not turn to the door when she heard it being slowly opened, then closed again, and presently a soft tread on the threadbare carpet.

"May I crave your kind attention, Lady Blakeney?" said a harsh voice, subdued to tones of ordinary courtesy.

She quickly repressed a cry of terror. How well she knew that voice! When last she heard it it was at Boulogne, dictating that infamous letter — the weapon wherewith Percy had so effectually foiled his enemy. She turned and faced the man who was her bitterest foe — hers in the person of the man she loved.

"Chauvelin!" she gasped.

"Himself at your service, dear lady," he said simply.

He stood in the full light of the lamp, his trim, small figure boldly cut out against the dark wall beyond. He wore the usual sable-coloured clothes which he affected, with the primly-folded jabot and cuffs edged with narrow lace.

Without waiting for permission from her he quietly and deliberately placed his hat and cloak on a chair. Then he turned once more toward her, and made a movement as if to advance into the room; but instinctively she put up a hand as if to ward off the calamity of his approach.

He shrugged his shoulders, and the shadow of a smile, that had neither mirth nor kindness in it, hovered round the corners of his thin lips.

"Have I your permission to sit?" he asked.

"As you will," she replied slowly, keeping her wide-open eyes fixed upon him as does a frightened bird upon the serpent whom it loathes and fears.

"And may I crave a few moments of your undivided attention, Lady Blakeney?" he continued, taking a chair, and so placing it beside the table that the light of the lamp when he sat remained behind him and his face was left in shadow.

"Is it necessary?" asked Marguerite.

"It is," he replied curtly, "if you desire to see and speak with your husband — to be of use to him before it is too late."

"Then, I pray you, speak, citizen, and I will listen."

She sank into a chair, not heeding whether the light of the lamp fell on her face or not, whether the lines in her haggard cheeks, or her tear-dimmed eyes showed plainly the sorrow and despair that had traced them. She had nothing to hide from this man, the cause of all the tortures which she endured. She knew that neither courage nor sorrow would move him, and that hatred for Percy — personal deadly hatred for the man who had twice foiled him — had long crushed the last spark of humanity in his heart.

"Perhaps, Lady Blakeney," he began after a slight pause and in his smooth, even voice, "it would interest you to hear how I succeeded in procuring for myself this pleasure of an interview with you?"

"Your spies did their usual work, I suppose," she said coldly.

"Exactly. We have been on your track for three days, and yesterday evening an unguarded movement on the part of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes gave us the final clue to your whereabouts."

"Of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes?" she asked, greatly puzzled.

"He was in an eating-house, cleverly disguised, I own, trying to glean information, no doubt as to the probable fate of Sir Percy Blakeney. As chance would have it, my friend Heron, of the Committee of General Security, chanced to be discussing with

reprehensible openness — er — certain — what shall I say? — certain measures which, at my advice, the Committee of Public Safety have been forced to adopt with a view to—”

“A truce on your smooth-tongued speeches, citizen Chauvelin,” she interposed firmly. “Sir Andrew Ffoulkes has told me naught of this — so I pray you speak plainly and to the point, if you can.”

He bowed with marked irony.

“As you please,” he said. “Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, hearing certain matters of which I will tell you anon, made a movement which betrayed him to one of our spies. At a word from citizen Heron this man followed on the heels of the young farrier who had shown such interest in the conversation of the Chief Agent. Sir Andrew, I imagine, burning with indignation at what he had heard, was perhaps not quite so cautious as he usually is. Anyway, the man on his track followed him to this door. It was quite simple, as you see. As for me, I had guessed a week ago that we would see the beautiful Lady Blakeney in Paris before long. When I knew where Sir Andrew Ffoulkes lodged, I had no difficulty in guessing that Lady Blakeney would not be far off.”

“And what was there in citizen Heron’s conversation last night,” she asked quietly, “that so aroused Sir Andrew’s indignation?”

“He has not told you?” “Oh! it is very simple. Let me tell you, Lady Blakeney, exactly how matters stand. Sir Percy Blakeney — before lucky chance at last delivered him into our hands — thought fit, as no doubt you know, to meddle with our most important prisoner of State.”

“A child. I know it, sir — the son of a murdered father whom you and your friends were slowly doing to death.”

“That is as it may be, Lady Blakeney,” rejoined Chauvelin calmly; “but it was none of Sir Percy Blakeney’s business. This, however, he chose to disregard. He succeeded in carrying little Capet from the Temple, and two days later we had him under lock, and key.”

“Through some infamous and treacherous trick, sir,” she retorted.

Chauvelin made no immediate reply; his pale, inscrutable eyes were fixed upon her face, and the smile of irony round his mouth appeared more strongly marked than before.

“That, again, is as it may be,” he said suavely; “but anyhow for the moment we have the upper hand. Sir Percy is in the Conciergerie, guarded day and night, more closely than Marie Antoinette even was guarded.”

“And he laughs at your bolts and bars, sir,” she rejoined proudly. “Remember Calais, remember Boulogne. His laugh at your discomfiture, then, must resound in your ear even to-day.”

“Yes; but for the moment laughter is on our side. Still we are willing to forego even that pleasure, if Sir Percy will but move a finger towards his own freedom.”

“Again some infamous letter?” she asked with bitter contempt; “some attempt against his honour?”

“No, no, Lady Blakeney,” he interposed with perfect blandness. “Matters are so much simpler now, you see. We hold Sir Percy at our mercy. We could send him to the guillotine to-morrow, but we might be willing — remember, I only say we might — to exercise our prerogative of mercy if Sir Percy Blakeney will on his side accede to a request from us.”

“And that request?”

“Is a very natural one. He took Capet away from us, and it is but credible that he knows at the present moment exactly where the child is. Let him instruct his followers — and I mistake not, Lady Blakeney, there are several of them not very far from Paris just now — let him, I say, instruct these followers of his to return the person of young Capet to us, and not only will we undertake to give these same gentlemen a safe conduct back to England, but we even might be inclined to deal somewhat less harshly with the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel himself.”

She laughed a harsh, mirthless, contemptuous laugh.

“I don’t think that I quite understand,” she said after a moment or two, whilst he waited calmly until her out-break of hysterical mirth had subsided. “You want my husband — the Scarlet Pimpernel, citizen — to deliver the little King of France to you after he has risked his life to save the child out of your clutches? Is that what you are trying to say?”

“It is,” rejoined Chauvelin complacently, “just what we have been saying to Sir Percy Blakeney for the past six days, madame.”

“Well! then you have had your answer, have you not?”

“Yes,” he replied slowly; “but the answer has become weaker day by day.”

“Weaker? I don’t understand.”

“Let me explain, Lady Blakeney,” said Chauvelin, now with measured emphasis. He put both elbows on the table and leaned well forward, peering into her face, lest one of its varied expressions escaped him. “Just now you taunted me with my failure in Calais, and again at Boulogne, with a proud toss of the head, which I own is excessive becoming; you threw the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel in my face like a challenge which I no longer dare to accept. ‘The Scarlet Pimpernel,’ you would say to me, ‘stands for loyalty, for honour, and for indomitable courage. Think you he would sacrifice his honour to obtain your mercy? Remember Boulogne and your discomfiture!’ All of which, dear lady, is perfectly charming and womanly and enthusiastic, and I, bowing my humble head, must own that I was fooled in Calais and baffled in Boulogne. But in Boulogne I made a grave mistake, and one from which I learned a lesson, which I am putting into practice now.”

He paused a while as if waiting for her reply. His pale, keen eyes had already noted that with every phrase he uttered the lines in her beautiful face became more hard and set. A look of horror was gradually spreading over it, as if the icy-cold hand of death had passed over her eyes and cheeks, leaving them rigid like stone.

“In Boulogne,” resumed Chauvelin quietly, satisfied that his words were hitting steadily at her heart — “in Boulogne Sir Percy and I did not fight an equal fight. Fresh from a pleasant sojourn in his own magnificent home, full of the spirit of adventure which puts the essence of life into a man’s veins, Sir Percy Blakeney’s splendid physique was pitted against my feeble powers. Of course I lost the battle. I made the mistake of trying to subdue a man who was in the zenith of his strength, whereas now—”

“Yes, citizen Chauvelin,” she said, “whereas now—”

“Sir Percy Blakeney has been in the prison of the Conciergerie for exactly one week, Lady Blakeney,” he replied, speaking very slowly, and letting every one of his words sink individually into her mind. “Even before he had time to take the bearings of his cell or

to plan on his own behalf one of those remarkable escapes for which he is so justly famous, our men began to work on a scheme which I am proud to say originated with myself. A week has gone by since then, Lady Blakeney, and during that time a special company of prison guard, acting under the orders of the Committee of General Security and of Public Safety, have questioned the prisoner unremittingly — unremittingly, remember — day and night. Two by two these men take it in turns to enter the prisoner's cell every quarter of an hour — lately it has had to be more often — and ask him the one question, 'Where is little Capet?' Up to now we have received no satisfactory reply, although we have explained to Sir Percy that many of his followers are honouring the neighbourhood of Paris with their visit, and that all we ask for from him are instructions to those gallant gentlemen to bring young Capet back to us. It is all very simple, unfortunately the prisoner is somewhat obstinate. At first, even, the idea seemed to amuse him; he used to laugh and say that he always had the faculty of sleeping with his eyes open. But our soldiers are untiring in their efforts, and the want of sleep as well as of a sufficiency of food and of fresh air is certainly beginning to tell on Sir Percy Blakeney's magnificent physique. I don't think that it will be very long before he gives way to our gentle persuasions; and in any case now, I assure you, dear lady, that we need not fear any attempt on his part to escape. I doubt if he could walk very steadily across this room—"

Marguerite had sat quite silent and apparently impassive all the while that Chauvelin had been speaking; even now she scarcely stirred. Her face expressed absolutely nothing but deep puzzlement. There was a frown between her brows, and her eyes, which were always of such liquid blue, now looked almost black. She was trying to visualise that which Chauvelin had put before her: a man harassed day and night, unceasingly, unremittingly, with one question allowed neither respite nor sleep — his brain, soul, and body fagged out at every hour, every moment of the day and night, until mind and body and soul must inevitably give way under anguish ten thousand times more unendurable than any physical torment invented by monsters in barbaric times.

That man thus harassed, thus fagged out, thus martyred at all hours of the day and night, was her husband, whom she loved with every fibre of her being, with every throb of her heart.

Torture? Oh, no! these were advanced and civilised times that could afford to look with horror on the excesses of medieval days. This was a revolution that made for progress, and challenged the opinion of the world. The cells of the Temple of La Force or the Conciergerie held no secret inquisition with iron maidens and racks and thumbscrews; but a few men had put their tortuous brains together, and had said one to another: "We want to find out from that man where we can lay our hands on little Capet, so we won't let him sleep until he has told us. It is not torture — oh, no! Who would dare to say that we torture our prisoners? It is only a little horseplay, worrying to the prisoner, no doubt; but, after all, he can end the unpleasantness at any moment. He need but to answer our question, and he can go to sleep as comfortably as a little child. The want of sleep is very trying, the want of proper food and of fresh air is very weakening; the prisoner must give way sooner or later—"

So these fiends had decided it between them, and they had put their idea into execution for one whole week. Marguerite looked at Chauvelin as she would on some monstrous, inscrutable Sphinx, marveling if God — even in His anger — could really have created such a fiendish brain, or, having created it, could allow it to wreak such devilry unpunished.

Even now she felt that he was enjoying the mental anguish which he had put upon her, and she saw his thin, evil lips curled into a smile.

"So you came to-night to tell me all this?" she asked as soon as she could trust herself to speak. Her impulse was to shriek out her indignation, her horror of him, into his face. She longed to call down God's eternal curse upon this fiend; but instinctively she held herself in check. Her indignation, her words of loathing would only have added to his delight.

"You have had your wish," she added coldly; "now, I pray you, go."

"Your pardon, Lady Blakeney," he said with all his habitual blandness; "my object in coming to see you tonight was twofold. Methought that I was acting as your friend in giving you authentic news of Sir Percy, and in suggesting the possibility of your adding your persuasion to ours."

"My persuasion? You mean that I—"

"You would wish to see your husband, would you not, Lady Blakeney?"

"Yes."

"Then I pray you command me. I will grant you the permission whenever you wish to go."

"You are in the hope, citizen," she said, "that I will do my best to break my husband's spirit by my tears or my prayers — is that it?"

"Not necessarily," he replied pleasantly. "I assure you that we can manage to do that ourselves, in time."

"You devil!" The cry of pain and of horror was involuntarily wrung from the depths of her soul. "Are you not afraid that God's hand will strike you where you stand?"

"No," he said lightly; "I am not afraid, Lady Blakeney. You see, I do not happen to believe in God. Come!" he added more seriously, "have I not proved to you that my offer is disinterested? Yet I repeat it even now. If you desire to see Sir Percy in prison, command me, and the doors shall be open to you."

She waited a moment, looking him straight and quite dispassionately in the face; then she said coldly:

"Very well! I will go."

"When?" he asked.

"This evening."

"Just as you wish. I would have to go and see my friend Heron first, and arrange with him for your visit."

"Then go. I will follow in half an hour."

"C'est entendu. Will you be at the main entrance of the Conciergerie at half-past nine? You know it, perhaps — no? It is in the Rue de la Barillerie, immediately on the right at the foot of the great staircase of the house of Justice."

"Of the house of Justice!" she exclaimed involuntarily, a world of bitter contempt in her cry. Then she added in her former matter-of-fact tones:

"Very good, citizen. At half-past nine I will be at the entrance you name."

"And I will be at the door prepared to escort you."

He took up his hat and coat and bowed ceremoniously to her. Then he turned to go. At the door a cry from her — involuntarily enough, God knows! — made him pause.

“My interview with the prisoner,” she said, vainly trying, poor soul! to repress that quiver of anxiety in her voice, “it will be private?”

“Oh, yes! Of course,” he replied with a reassuring smile. “Au revoir, Lady Blakeney! Half-past nine, remember—”

She could no longer trust herself to look on him as he finally took his departure. She was afraid — yes, absolutely afraid that her fortitude would give way — meanly, despicably, uselessly give way; that she would suddenly fling herself at the feet of that sneering, inhuman wretch, that she would pray, implore — Heaven above! what might she not do in the face of this awful reality, if the last lingering shred of vanishing reason, of pride, and of courage did not hold her in check?

Therefore she forced herself not to look on that departing, sable-clad figure, on that evil face, and those hands that held Percy’s fate in their cruel grip; but her ears caught the welcome sound of his departure — the opening and shutting of the door, his light footstep echoing down the stone stairs.

When at last she felt that she was really alone she uttered a loud cry like a wounded doe, and falling on her knees she buried her face in her hands in a passionate fit of weeping. Violent sobs shook her entire frame; it seemed as if an overwhelming anguish was tearing at her heart — the physical pain of it was almost unendurable. And yet even through this paroxysm of tears her mind clung to one root idea: when she saw Percy she must be brave and calm, be able to help him if he wanted her, to do his bidding if there was anything that she could do, or any message that she could take to the others. Of hope she had none. The last lingering ray of it had been extinguished by that fiend when he said, “We need not fear that he will escape. I doubt if he could walk very steadily across this room now.”

CHAPTER XXVII. IN THE CONCIERGERIE

Marguerite, accompanied by Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, walked rapidly along the quay. It lacked ten minutes to the half hour; the night was dark and bitterly cold. Snow was still falling in sparse, thin flakes, and lay like a crisp and glittering mantle over the parapets of the bridges and the grim towers of the Chatelet prison.

They walked on silently now. All that they had wanted to say to one another had been said inside the squalid room of their lodgings when Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had come home and learned that Chauvelin had been.

"They are killing him by inches, Sir Andrew," had been the heartrending cry which burst from Marguerite's oppressed heart as soon as her hands rested in the kindly ones of her best friend. "Is there aught that we can do?"

There was, of course, very little that could be done. One or two fine steel files which Sir Andrew gave her to conceal beneath the folds of her kerchief; also a tiny dagger with sharp, poisoned blade, which for a moment she held in her hand hesitating, her eyes filling with tears, her heart throbbing with unspeakable sorrow.

Then slowly — very slowly — she raised the small, death-dealing instrument to her lips, and reverently kissed the narrow blade.

"If it must be!" she murmured, "God in His mercy will forgive!"

She sheathed the dagger, and this, too, she hid in the folds of her gown.

"Can you think of anything else, Sir Andrew, that he might want?" she asked. "I have money in plenty, in case those soldiers—"

Sir Andrew sighed, and turned away from her so as to hide the hopelessness which he felt. Since three days now he had been exhausting every conceivable means of getting at the prison guard with bribery and corruption. But Chauvelin and his friends had taken excellent precautions. The prison of the Conciergerie, situated as it was in the very heart of the labyrinthine and complicated structure of the Chatelet and the house of Justice, and isolated from every other group of cells in the building, was inaccessible save from one narrow doorway which gave on the guard-room first, and thence on the inner cell beyond. Just as all attempts to rescue the late unfortunate Queen from that prison had failed, so now every attempt to reach the imprisoned Scarlet Pimpernel was equally doomed to bitter disappointment.

The guard-room was filled with soldiers day and night; the windows of the inner cell, heavily barred, were too small to admit of the passage of a human body, and they were raised twenty feet from the corridor below. Sir Andrew had stood in the corridor two days ago, he had looked on the window behind which he knew that his friend must be eating out his noble heart in a longing for liberty, and he had realised then that every effort at help from the outside was foredoomed to failure.

"Courage, Lady Blakeney," he said to Marguerite, when anon they had crossed the Pont au Change, and were wending their way slowly along the Rue de la Barillerie; "remember our proud dictum: the Scarlet Pimpernel never fails! and also this, that whatever messages Blakeney gives you for us, whatever he wishes us to do, we are to a man ready to do it, and to give our lives for our chief. Courage! Something tells me that a man like Percy is not going to die at the hands of such vermin as Chauvelin and his friends."

They had reached the great iron gates of the house of Justice. Marguerite, trying to smile, extended her trembling hand to this faithful, loyal comrade.

"I'll not be far," he said. "When you come out do not look to the right or left, but make straight for home; I'll not lose sight of you for a moment, and as soon as possible will overtake you. God bless you both."

He pressed his lips on her cold little hand, and watched her tall, elegant figure as she passed through the great gates until the veil of falling snow hid her from his gaze. Then with a deep sigh of bitter anguish and sorrow he turned away and was soon lost in the gloom.

Marguerite found the gate at the bottom of the monumental stairs open when she arrived. Chauvelin was standing immediately inside the building waiting for her.

"We are prepared for your visit, Lady Blakeney," he said, "and the prisoner knows that you are coming."

He led the way down one of the numerous and interminable corridors of the building, and she followed briskly, pressing her hand against her bosom there where the folds of her kerchief hid the steel files and the precious dagger.

Even in the gloom of these ill-lighted passages she realised that she was surrounded by guards. There were soldiers everywhere; two had stood behind the door when first she entered, and had immediately closed it with a loud clang behind her; and all the way down the corridors, through the half-light engendered by feebly flickering lamps, she caught glimpses of the white facings on the uniforms of the town guard, or occasionally the glint of steel of a bayonet. Presently Chauvelin paused beside a door, which he had just reached. His hand was on the latch, for it did not appear to be locked, and he turned toward Marguerite.

"I am very sorry, Lady Blakeney," he said in simple, deferential tones, "that the prison authorities, who at my request are granting you this interview at such an unusual hour, have made a slight condition to your visit."

"A condition?" she asked. "What is it?"

"You must forgive me," he said, as if purposely evading her question, "for I give you my word that I had nothing to do with a regulation that you might justly feel was derogatory to your dignity. If you will kindly step in here a wardress in charge will explain to you what is required."

He pushed open the door, and stood aside ceremoniously in order to allow her to pass in. She looked on him with deep puzzlement and a look of dark suspicion in her eyes. But her mind was too much engrossed with the thought of her meeting with Percy to worry over any trifle that might — as her enemy had inferred — offend her womanly dignity.

She walked into the room, past Chauvelin, who whispered as she went by:

"I will wait for you here. And, I pray you, if you have aught to complain of summon me at once."

Then he closed the door behind her. The room in which Marguerite now found herself was a small unventilated quadrangle, dimly lighted by a hanging lamp. A woman in a soiled cotton gown and lank grey hair brushed away from a parchment-like forehead rose from the chair in which she had been sitting when Marguerite entered, and put away some knitting on which she had apparently been engaged.

"I was to tell you, citizeness," she said the moment the door had been closed and she was alone with Marguerite, "that the prison authorities have given orders that I should search you before you visit the prisoner."

She repeated this phrase mechanically like a child who has been taught to say a lesson by heart. She was a stoutish middle-aged woman, with that pasty, flabby skin peculiar to those who live in want of fresh air; but her small, dark eyes were not unkindly, although they shifted restlessly from one object to another as if she were trying to avoid looking the other woman straight in the face.

"That you should search me!" reiterated Marguerite slowly, trying to understand.

"Yes," replied the woman. "I was to tell you to take off your clothes, so that I might look them through and through. I have often had to do this before when visitors have been allowed inside the prison, so it is no use your trying to deceive me in any way. I am very sharp at finding out if any one has papers, or files or ropes concealed in an underpetticoat. Come," she added more roughly, seeing that Marguerite had remained motionless in the middle of the room; "the quicker you are about it the sooner you will be taken to see the prisoner."

These words had their desired effect. The proud Lady Blakeney, inwardly revolting at the outrage, knew that resistance would be worse than useless. Chauvelin was the other side of the door. A call from the woman would bring him to her assistance, and Marguerite was only longing to hasten the moment when she could be with her husband.

She took off her kerchief and her gown and calmly submitted to the woman's rough hands as they wandered with sureness and accuracy to the various pockets and folds that might conceal prohibited articles. The woman did her work with peculiar stolidity; she did not utter a word when she found the tiny steel files and placed them on a table beside her. In equal silence she laid the little dagger beside them, and the purse which contained twenty gold pieces. These she counted in front of Marguerite and then replaced them in the purse. Her face expressed neither surprise, nor greed nor pity. She was obviously beyond the reach of bribery — just a machine paid by the prison authorities to do this unpleasant work, and no doubt terrorised into doing it conscientiously.

When she had satisfied herself that Marguerite had nothing further concealed about her person, she allowed her to put her dress on once more. She even offered to help her on with it. When Marguerite was fully dressed she opened the door for her. Chauvelin was standing in the passage waiting patiently. At sight of Marguerite, whose pale, set face betrayed nothing of the indignation which she felt, he turned quick, inquiring eyes on the woman.

"Two files, a dagger and a purse with twenty louis," said the latter curtly.

Chauvelin made no comment. He received the information quite placidly, as if it had no special interest for him. Then he said quietly:

"This way, citizeness!"

Marguerite followed him, and two minutes later he stood beside a heavy nail-studded door that had a small square grating let into one of the panels, and said simply:

"This is it."

Two soldiers of the National Guard were on sentry at the door, two more were pacing up and down outside it, and had halted when citizen Chauvelin gave his name and showed his tricolour scarf of office. From behind the small grating in the door a pair of eyes peered at the newcomers.

"Qui va là?" came the quick challenge from the guard-room within.

"Citizen Chauvelin of the Committee of Public Safety," was the prompt reply.

There was the sound of grounding of arms, of the drawing of bolts and the turning of a key in a complicated lock. The prison was kept locked from within, and very heavy bars had to be moved ere the ponderous door slowly swung open on its hinges.

Two steps led up into the guard-room. Marguerite mounted them with the same feeling of awe and almost of reverence as she would have mounted the steps of a sacrificial altar.

The guard-room itself was more brilliantly lighted than the corridor outside. The sudden glare of two or three lamps placed about the room caused her momentarily to close her eyes that were aching with many shed and unshed tears. The air was rank and heavy with the fumes of tobacco, of wine and stale food. A large barred window gave on the corridor immediately above the door.

When Marguerite felt strong enough to look around her, she saw that the room was filled with soldiers. Some were sitting, others standing, others lay on rugs against the wall, apparently asleep. There was one who appeared to be in command, for with a word he checked the noise that was going on in the room when she entered, and then he said curtly:

"This way, citizeness!"

He turned to an opening in the wall on the left, the stone-lintel of a door, from which the door itself had been removed; an iron bar ran across the opening, and this the sergeant now lifted, nodding to Marguerite to go within.

Instinctively she looked round for Chauvelin.

But he was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE CAGED LION

Was there some instinct of humanity left in the soldier who allowed Marguerite through the barrier into the prisoner's cell? Had the wan face of this beautiful woman stirred within his heart the last chord of gentleness that was not wholly atrophied by the constant cruelties, the excesses, the mercilessness which his service under this fraternising republic constantly demanded of him?

Perhaps some recollection of former years, when first he served his King and country, recollection of wife or sister or mother pleaded within him in favour of this sorely-stricken woman with the look of unspeakable sorrow in her large blue eyes.

Certain it is that as soon as Marguerite passed the barrier he put himself on guard against it with his back to the interior of the cell and to her.

Marguerite had paused on the threshold.

After the glaring light of the guard-room the cell seemed dark, and at first she could hardly see. The whole length of the long, narrow cubicle lay to her left, with a slight recess at its further end, so that from the threshold of the doorway she could not see into the distant corner. Swift as a lightning flash the remembrance came back to her of proud Marie Antoinette narrowing her life to that dark corner where the insolent eyes of the rabble soldiery could not spy her every movement.

Marguerite stepped further into the room. Gradually by the dim light of an oil lamp placed upon a table in the recess she began to distinguish various objects: one or two chairs, another table, and a small but very comfortable-looking camp bedstead.

Just for a few seconds she only saw these inanimate things, then she became conscious of Percy's presence.

He sat on a chair, with his left arm half-stretched out upon the table, his head hidden in the bend of the elbow.

Marguerite did not utter a cry; she did not even tremble. Just for one brief instant she closed her eyes, so as to gather up all her courage before she dared to look again. Then with a steady and noiseless step she came quite close to him. She knelt on the flagstones at his feet and raised reverently to her lips the hand that hung nerveless and limp by his side.

He gave a start; a shiver seemed to go right through him; he half raised his head and murmured in a hoarse whisper:

"I tell you that I do not know, and if I did—"

She put her arms round him and pillowed her head upon his breast. He turned his head slowly toward her, and now his eyes — hollowed and rimmed with purple — looked straight into hers.

"My beloved," he said, "I knew that you would come." His arms closed round her. There was nothing of lifelessness or of weariness in the passion of that embrace; and when she looked up again it seemed to her as if that first vision which she had had of him with weary head bent, and wan, haggard face was not reality, only a dream born of her own anxiety for him, for now the hot, ardent blood coursed just as swiftly as ever through his veins, as if life — strong, tenacious, pulsating life — throbbed with unabated vigour in those massive limbs, and behind that square, clear brow as though the body, but half subdued, had transferred its vanishing strength to the kind and noble heart that was beating with the fervour of self-sacrifice.

"Percy," she said gently, "they will only give us a few moments together. They thought that my tears would break your spirit where their devilry had failed."

He held her glance with his own, with that close, intent look which binds soul to soul, and in his deep blue eyes there danced the restless flames of his own undying mirth:

"La! little woman," he said with enforced lightness, even whilst his voice quivered with the intensity of passion engendered by her presence, her nearness, the perfume of her hair, "how little they know you, eh? Your brave, beautiful, exquisite soul, shining now through your glorious eyes, would defy the machinations of Satan himself and his horde. Close your dear eyes, my love. I shall go mad with joy if I drink their beauty in any longer."

He held her face between his two hands, and indeed it seemed as if he could not satiate his soul with looking into her eyes. In the midst of so much sorrow, such misery and such deadly fear, never had Marguerite felt quite so happy, never had she felt him so completely her own. The inevitable bodily weakness, which of necessity had invaded even his splendid physique after a whole week's privations, had made a severe breach in the invincible barrier of self-control with which the soul of the inner man was kept perpetually hidden behind a mask of indifference and of irresponsibility.

And yet the agony of seeing the lines of sorrow so plainly writ on the beautiful face of the woman he worshipped must have been the keenest that the bold adventurer had ever experienced in the whole course of his reckless life. It was he — and he alone — who was making her suffer; her for whose sake he would gladly have shed every drop of his blood, endured every torment, every misery and every humiliation; her whom he worshipped only one degree less than he worshipped his honour and the cause which he had made his own.

Yet, in spite of that agony, in spite of the heartrending pathos of her pale wan face, and through the anguish of seeing her tears, the ruling passion — strong in death — the spirit of adventure, the mad, wild, devil-may-care irresponsibility was never wholly absent.

"Dear heart," he said with a quaint sigh, whilst he buried his face in the soft masses of her hair, "until you came I was so d — d fatigued."

He was laughing, and the old look of boyish love of mischief illumined his haggard face.

"Is it not lucky, dear heart," he said a moment or two later, "that those brutes do not leave me unshaved? I could not have faced you with a week's growth of beard round my chin. By dint of promises and bribery I have persuaded one of that rabble to come and shave me every morning. They will not allow me to handle a razor my-self. They are afraid I should cut my throat — or one of theirs. But mostly I am too d — d sleepy to think of such a thing."

"Percy!" she exclaimed with tender and passionate reproach.

"I know — I know, dear," he murmured, "what a brute I am! Ah, God did a cruel thing the day that He threw me in your path. To think that once — not so very long ago — we were drifting apart, you and I. You would have suffered less, dear heart, if we had continued to drift."

Then as he saw that his bantering tone pained her, he covered her hands with kisses, entreating her forgiveness.

"Dear heart," he said merrily, "I deserve that you should leave me to rot in this abominable cage. They haven't got me yet, little woman, you know; I am not yet dead — only d — d sleepy at times. But I'll cheat them even now, never fear."

"How, Percy — how?" she moaned, for her heart was aching with intolerable pain; she knew better than he did the precautions which were being taken against his escape, and she saw more clearly than he realised it himself the terrible barrier set up against that escape by ever encroaching physical weakness.

"Well, dear," he said simply, "to tell you the truth I have not yet thought of that all-important 'how.' I had to wait, you see, until you came. I was so sure that you would come! I have succeeded in putting on paper all my instructions for Ffoulkes and the others. I will give them to you anon. I knew that you would come, and that I could give them to you; until then I had but to think of one thing, and that was of keeping body and soul together. My chance of seeing you was to let them have their will with me. Those brutes were sure, sooner or later, to bring you to me, that you might see the caged fox worn down to imbecility, eh? That you might add your tears to their persuasion, and succeed where they have failed."

He laughed lightly with an unstrained note of gaiety, only Marguerite's sensitive ears caught the faint tone of bitterness which rang through the laugh.

"Once I know that the little King of France is safe," he said, "I can think of how best to rob those d — d murderers of my skin."

Then suddenly his manner changed. He still held her with one arm closely to him, but the other now lay across the table, and the slender, emaciated hand was tightly clenched. He did not look at her, but straight ahead; the eyes, unnaturally large now, with their deep purple rims, looked far ahead beyond the stone walls of this grim, cruel prison.

The passionate lover, hungering for his beloved, had vanished; there sat the man with a purpose, the man whose firm hand had snatched men and women and children from death, the reckless enthusiast who tossed his life against an ideal.

For a while he sat thus, while in his drawn and haggard face she could trace every line formed by his thoughts — the frown of anxiety, the resolute setting of the lips, the obstinate look of will around the firm jaw. Then he turned again to her.

"My beautiful one," he said softly, "the moments are very precious. God knows I could spend eternity thus with your dear form nestling against my heart. But those d — d murderers will only give us half an hour, and I want your help, my beloved, now that I am a helpless cur caught in their trap. Will you listen attentively, dear heart, to what I am going to say?"

"Yes, Percy, I will listen," she replied.

"And have you the courage to do just what I tell you, dear?"

"I would not have courage to do aught else," she said simply.

"It means going from hence to-day, dear heart, and perhaps not meeting again. Hush-sh-sh, my beloved," he said, tenderly placing his thin hand over her mouth, from which a sharp cry of pain had well-nigh escaped; "your exquisite soul will be with me always. Try — try not to give way to despair. Why! your love alone, which I see shining from your dear eyes, is enough to make a man cling to life with all his might. Tell me! will you do as I ask you?"

And she replied firmly and courageously:

"I will do just what you ask, Percy."

"God bless you for your courage, dear. You will have need of it."

CHAPTER XXIX. FOR THE SAKE OF THAT HELPLESS INNOCENT

The next instant he was kneeling on the floor and his hands were wandering over the small, irregular flagstones immediately underneath the table. Marguerite had risen to her feet; she watched her husband with intent and puzzled eyes; she saw him suddenly pass his slender fingers along a crevice between two flagstones, then raise one of these slightly and from beneath it extract a small bundle of papers, each carefully folded and sealed. Then he replaced the stone and once more rose to his knees.

He gave a quick glance toward the doorway. That corner of his cell, the recess wherein stood the table, was invisible to any one who had not actually crossed the threshold. Reassured that his movements could not have been and were not watched, he drew Marguerite closer to him.

"Dear heart," he whispered, "I want to place these papers in your care. Look upon them as my last will and testament. I succeeded in fooling those brutes one day by pretending to be willing to accede to their will. They gave me pen and ink and paper and wax, and I was to write out an order to my followers to bring the Dauphin hither. They left me in peace for one quarter of an hour, which gave me time to write three letters — one for Armand and the other two for Ffoulkes, and to hide them under the flooring of my cell. You see, dear, I knew that you would come and that I could give them to you then."

He paused, and that, ghost of a smile once more hovered round his lips. He was thinking of that day when he had fooled Heron and Chauvelin into the belief that their devilry had succeeded, and that they had brought the reckless adventurer to his knees. He smiled at the recollection of their wrath when they knew that they had been tricked, and after a quarter of an hour's anxious waiting found a few sheets of paper scribbled over with incoherent words or satirical verse, and the prisoner having apparently snatched ten minutes' sleep, which seemingly had restored to him quite a modicum of his strength.

But of this he told Marguerite nothing, nor of the insults and the humiliation which he had had to bear in consequence of that trick. He did not tell her that directly afterwards the order went forth that the prisoner was to be kept on bread and water in the future, nor that Chauvelin had stood by laughing and jeering while...

No! he did not tell her all that; the recollection of it all had still the power to make him laugh; was it not all a part and parcel of that great gamble for human lives wherein he had held the winning cards himself for so long?

"It is your turn now," he had said even then to his bitter enemy.

"Yes!" Chauvelin had replied, "our turn at last. And you will not bend my fine English gentleman, we'll break you yet, never fear."

It was the thought of it all, of that hand to hand, will to will, spirit to spirit struggle that lighted up his haggard face even now, gave him a fresh zest for life, a desire to combat and to conquer in spite of all, in spite of the odds that had martyred his body but left the mind, the will, the power still unconquered.

He was pressing one of the papers into her hand, holding her fingers tightly in his, and compelling her gaze with the ardent excitement of his own.

"This first letter is for Ffoulkes," he said. "It relates to the final measures for the safety of the Dauphin. They are my instructions to those members of the League who are in or near Paris at the present moment. Ffoulkes, I know, must be with you — he was not likely, God bless his loyalty, to let you come to Paris alone. Then give this letter to him, dear heart, at once, to-night, and tell him that it is my express command that he and the others shall act in minute accordance with my instructions."

"But the Dauphin surely is safe now," she urged. "Ffoulkes and the others are here in order to help you."

"To help me, dear heart?" he interposed earnestly. "God alone can do that now, and such of my poor wits as these devils do not succeed in crushing out of me within the next ten days."

Ten days!

"I have waited a week, until this hour when I could place this packet in your hands; another ten days should see the Dauphin out of France — after that, we shall see."

"Percy," she exclaimed in an agony of horror, "you cannot endure this another day — and live!"

"Nay!" he said in a tone that was almost insolent in its proud defiance, "there is but little that a man cannot do an he sets his mind to it. For the rest, 'tis in God's hands!" he added more gently. "Dear heart! you swore that you would be brave. The Dauphin is still in France, and until he is out of it he will not really be safe; his friends wanted to keep him inside the country. God only knows what they still hope; had I been free I should not have allowed him to remain so long; now those good people at Mantes will yield to my letter and to Ffoulkes' earnest appeal — they will allow one of our League to convey the child safely out of France, and I'll wait here until I know that he is safe. If I tried to get away now, and succeeded — why, Heaven help us! the hue and cry might turn against the child, and he might be captured before I could get to him. Dear heart! dear, dear heart! try to understand. The safety of that child is bound with mine honour, but I swear to you, my sweet love, that the day on which I feel that that safety is assured I will save mine own skin — what there is left of it — if I can!"

"Percy!" she cried with a sudden outburst of passionate revolt, "you speak as if the safety of that child were of more moment than your own. Ten days! — but, God in Heaven! have you thought how I shall live these ten days, whilst slowly, inch by inch, you give your dear, your precious life for a forlorn cause?"

"I am very tough, m'dear," he said lightly; "'tis not a question of life. I shall only be spending a few more very uncomfortable days in this d — d hole; but what of that?"

Her eyes spoke the reply; her eyes veiled with tears, that wandered with heart-breaking anxiety from the hollow circles round his own to the lines of weariness about the firm lips and jaw. He laughed at her solicitude.

"I can last out longer than these brutes have any idea of," he said gaily.

"You cheat yourself, Percy," she rejoined with quiet earnestness. "Every day that you spend immured between these walls, with that ceaseless nerve-racking torment of sleeplessness which these devils have devised for the breaking of your will — every day thus spent diminishes your power of ultimately saving yourself. You see, I speak calmly — dispassionately — I do not even urge my claims upon your life. But what you must weigh in the balance is the claim of all those for whom in the past you have already staked your life,

whose lives you have purchased by risking your own. What, in comparison with your noble life, is that of the puny descendant of a line of decadent kings? Why should it be sacrificed — ruthlessly, hopelessly sacrificed that a boy might live who is as nothing to the world, to his country — even to his own people?”

She had tried to speak calmly, never raising her voice beyond a whisper. Her hands still clutched that paper, which seemed to sear her fingers, the paper which she felt held writ upon its smooth surface the death-sentence of the man she loved.

But his look did not answer her firm appeal; it was fixed far away beyond the prison walls, on a lonely country road outside Paris, with the rain falling in a thin drizzle, and leaden clouds overhead chasing one another, driven by the gale.

“Poor mite,” he murmured softly; “he walked so bravely by my side, until the little feet grew weary; then he nestled in my arms and slept until we met Ffoulkes waiting with the cart. He was no King of France just then, only a helpless innocent whom Heaven aided me to save.”

Marguerite bowed her head in silence. There was nothing more that she could say, no plea that she could urge. Indeed, she had understood, as he had begged her to understand. She understood that long ago he had mapped out the course of his life, and now that that course happened to lead up a Calvary of humiliation and of suffering he was not likely to turn back, even though, on the summit, death already was waiting and beckoning with no uncertain hand; not until he could murmur, in the wake of the great and divine sacrifice itself, the sublime words:

“It is accomplished.”

“But the Dauphin is safe enough now,” was all that she said, after that one moment’s silence when her heart, too, had offered up to God the supreme abnegation of self, and calmly faced a sorrow which threatened to break it at last.

“Yes!” he rejoined quietly, “safe enough for the moment. But he would be safer still if he were out of France. I had hoped to take him one day with me to England. But in this plan damnable Fate has interfered. His adherents wanted to get him to Vienna, and their wish had best be fulfilled now. In my instructions to Ffoulkes I have mapped out a simple way for accomplishing the journey. Tony will be the one best suited to lead the expedition, and I want him to make straight for Holland; the Northern frontiers are not so closely watched as are the Austrian ones. There is a faithful adherent of the Bourbon cause who lives at Delft, and who will give the shelter of his name and home to the fugitive King of France until he can be conveyed to Vienna. He is named Nauudorff. Once I feel that the child is safe in his hands I will look after myself, never fear.”

He paused, for his strength, which was only factitious, born of the excitement that Marguerite’s presence had called forth, was threatening to give way. His voice, though he had spoken in a whisper all along, was very hoarse, and his temples were throbbing with the sustained effort to speak.

“If those friends had only thought of denying me food instead of sleep,” he murmured involuntarily, “I could have held out until—”

Then with characteristic swiftness his mood changed in a moment. His arms closed round Marguerite once more with a passion of self-reproach.

“Heaven forgive me for a selfish brute,” he said, whilst the ghost of a smile once more lit up the whole of his face. “Dear soul, I must have forgotten your sweet presence, thus brooding over my own troubles, whilst your loving heart has a graver burden — God help me! — than it can possibly bear. Listen, my beloved, for I don’t know how many minutes longer they intend to give us, and I have not yet spoken to you about Armand—”

“Armand!” she cried.

A twinge of remorse had gripped her. For fully ten minutes now she had relegated all thoughts of her brother to a distant cell of her memory.

“We have no news of Armand,” she said. “Sir Andrew has searched all the prison registers. Oh! were not my heart atrophied by all that it has endured this past sennight it would feel a final throb of agonising pain at every thought of Armand.”

A curious look, which even her loving eyes failed to interpret, passed like a shadow over her husband’s face. But the shadow lifted in a moment, and it was with a reassuring smile that he said to her:

“Dear heart! Armand is comparatively safe for the moment. Tell Ffoulkes not to search the prison registers for him, rather to seek out Mademoiselle Lange. She will know where to find Armand.”

“Jeanne Lange!” she exclaimed with a world of bitterness in the tone of her voice, “the girl whom Armand loved, it seems, with a passion greater than his loyalty. Oh! Sir Andrew tried to disguise my brother’s folly, but I guessed what he did not choose to tell me. It was his disobedience, his want of trust, that brought this unspeakable misery on us all.”

“Do not blame him overmuch, dear heart. Armand was in love, and love excuses every sin committed in its name. Jeanne Lange was arrested and Armand lost his reason temporarily. The very day on which I rescued the Dauphin from the Temple I had the good fortune to drag the little lady out of prison. I had given my promise to Armand that she should be safe, and I kept my word. But this Armand did not know — or else—”

He checked himself abruptly, and once more that strange, enigmatical look crept into his eyes.

“I took Jeanne Lange to a place of comparative safety,” he said after a slight pause, “but since then she has been set entirely free.”

“Free?”

“Yes. Chauvelin himself brought me the news,” he replied with a quick, mirthless laugh, wholly unlike his usual light-hearted gaiety. “He had to ask me where to find Jeanne, for I alone knew where she was. As for Armand, they’ll not worry about him whilst I am here. Another reason why I must bide a while longer. But in the meanwhile, dear, I pray you find Mademoiselle Lange; she lives at No. 5 Square du Roule. Through her I know that you can get to see Armand. This second letter,” he added, pressing a smaller packet into her hand, “is for him. Give it to him, dear heart; it will, I hope, tend to cheer him. I fear me the poor lad frets; yet he only sinned because he loved, and to me he will always be your brother — the man who held your affection for all the years before I came into your life. Give him this letter, dear; they are my instructions to him, as the others are for Ffoulkes; but tell him to read them when he is all alone. You will do that, dear heart, will you not?”

“Yes, Percy,” she said simply. “I promise.”

Great joy, and the expression of intense relief, lit up his face, whilst his eyes spoke the gratitude which he felt.

"Then there is one thing more," he said. "There are others in this cruel city, dear heart, who have trusted me, and whom I must not fail — Marie de Marmontel and her brother, faithful servants of the late queen; they were on the eve of arrest when I succeeded in getting them to a place of comparative safety; and there are others there, too all of these poor victims have trusted me implicitly. They are waiting for me there, trusting in my promise to convey them safely to England. Sweetheart, you must redeem my promise to them. You will? — you will? Promise me that you will—"

"I promise, Percy," she said once more.

"Then go, dear, to-morrow, in the late afternoon, to No. 98, Rue de Charonne. It is a narrow house at the extreme end of that long street which abuts on the fortifications. The lower part of the house is occupied by a dealer in rags and old clothes. He and his wife and family are wretchedly poor, but they are kind, good souls, and for a consideration and a minimum of risk to themselves they will always render service to the English milors, whom they believe to be a band of inveterate smugglers. Ffoulkes and all the others know these people and know the house; Armand by the same token knows it too. Marie de Marmontel and her brother are there, and several others; the old Comte de Lezardiére, the Abbe de Firmont; their names spell suffering, loyalty, and hopelessness. I was lucky enough to convey them safely to that hidden shelter. They trust me implicitly, dear heart. They are waiting for me there, trusting in my promise to them. Dear heart, you will go, will you not?"

"Yes, Percy," she replied. "I will go; I have promised."

"Ffoulkes has some certificates of safety by him, and the old clothes dealer will supply the necessary disguises; he has a covered cart which he uses for his business, and which you can borrow from him. Ffoulkes will drive the little party to Achard's farm in St. Germain, where other members of the League should be in waiting for the final journey to England. Ffoulkes will know how to arrange for everything; he was always my most able lieutenant. Once everything is organised he can appoint Hastings to lead the party. But you, dear heart, must do as you wish. Achard's farm would be a safe retreat for you and for Ffoulkes: if... I know — I know, dear," he added with infinite tenderness. "See I do not even suggest that you should leave me. Ffoulkes will be with you, and I know that neither he nor you would go even if I commanded. Either Achard's farm, or even the house in the Rue de Charonne, would be quite safe for you, dear, under Ffoulkes's protection, until the time when I myself can carry you back — you, my precious burden — to England in mine own arms, or until... Hush-sh-sh, dear heart," he entreated, smothering with a passionate kiss the low moan of pain which had escaped her lips; "it is all in God's hands now; I am in a tight corner — tighter than ever I have been before; but I am not dead yet, and those brutes have not yet paid the full price for my life. Tell me, dear heart, that you have understood — that you will do all that I asked. Tell me again, my dear, dear love; it is the very essence of life to hear your sweet lips murmur this promise now."

And for the third time she reiterated firmly:

"I have understood every word that you said to me, Percy, and I promise on your precious life to do what you ask."

He sighed a deep sigh of satisfaction, and even at that moment there came from the guard-room beyond the sound of a harsh voice, saying peremptorily:

"That half-hour is nearly over, sergeant; 'tis time you interfered."

"Three minutes more, citizen," was the curt reply.

"Three minutes, you devils," murmured Blakeney between set teeth, whilst a sudden light which even Marguerite's keen gaze failed to interpret leapt into his eyes. Then he pressed the third letter into her hand.

Once more his close, intent gaze compelled hers; their faces were close one to the other, so near to him did he draw her, so tightly did he hold her to him. The paper was in her hand and his fingers were pressed firmly on hers.

"Put this in your kerchief, my beloved," he whispered. "Let it rest on your exquisite bosom where I so love to pillow my head. Keep it there until the last hour when it seems to you that nothing more can come between me and shame.... Hush-sh-sh, dear," he added with passionate tenderness, checking the hot protest that at the word "shame" had sprung to her lips, "I cannot explain more fully now. I do not know what may happen. I am only a man, and who knows what subtle devilry those brutes might not devise for bringing the untamed adventurer to his knees. For the next ten days the Dauphin will be on the high roads of France, on his way to safety. Every stage of his journey will be known to me. I can from between these four walls follow him and his escort step by step. Well, dear, I am but a man, already brought to shameful weakness by mere physical discomfort — the want of sleep — such a trifle after all; but in case my reason tottered — God knows what I might do — then give this packet to Ffoulkes — it contains my final instructions — and he will know how to act. Promise me, dear heart, that you will not open the packet unless — unless mine own dishonour seems to you imminent — unless I have yielded to these brutes in this prison, and sent Ffoulkes or one of the others orders to exchange the Dauphin's life for mine; then, when mine own handwriting hath proclaimed me a coward, then and then only, give this packet to Ffoulkes. Promise me that, and also that when you and he have mastered its contents you will act exactly as I have commanded. Promise me that, dear, in your own sweet name, which may God bless, and in that of Ffoulkes, our loyal friend."

Through the sobs that well-nigh choked her she murmured the promise he desired.

His voice had grown hoarser and more spent with the inevitable reaction after the long and sustained effort, but the vigour of the spirit was untouched, the fervour, the enthusiasm.

"Dear heart," he murmured, "do not look on me with those dear, scared eyes of yours. If there is aught that puzzles you in what I said, try and trust me a while longer. Remember, I must save the Dauphin at all costs; mine honour is bound with his safety. What happens to me after that matters but little, yet I wish to live for your dear sake."

He drew a long breath which had naught of weariness in it. The haggard look had completely vanished from his face, the eyes were lighted up from within, the very soul of reckless daring and immortal gaiety illumined his whole personality.

"Do not look so sad, little woman," he said with a strange and sudden recrudescence of power; "those d — d murderers have not got me yet — even now."

Then he went down like a log.

The effort had been too prolonged — weakened nature reasserted her rights and he lost consciousness. Marguerite, helpless and almost distraught with grief, had yet the strength of mind not to call for assistance. She pillowed the loved one's head upon her breast, she kissed the dear, tired eyes, the poor throbbing temples. The unutterable pathos of seeing this man, who was always the

personification of extreme vitality, energy, and boundless endurance and pluck, lying thus helpless, like a tired child, in her arms, was perhaps the saddest moment of this day of sorrow. But in her trust she never wavered for one instant. Much that he had said had puzzled her; but the word “shame” coming from his own lips as a comment on himself never caused her the slightest pang of fear. She had quickly hidden the tiny packet in her kerchief. She would act point by point exactly as he had ordered her to do, and she knew that Ffoulkes would never waver either.

Her heart ached well-nigh to breaking point. That which she could not understand had increased her anguish tenfold. If she could only have given way to tears she could have borne this final agony more easily. But the solace of tears was not for her; when those loved eyes once more opened to consciousness they should see hers glowing with courage and determination.

There had been silence for a few minutes in the little cell. The soldiery outside, inured to their hideous duty, thought no doubt that the time had come for them to interfere. The iron bar was raised and thrown back with a loud crash, the butt-ends of muskets were grounded against the floor, and two soldiers made noisy irruption into the cell.

“Holla, citizen! Wake up,” shouted one of the men; “you have not told us yet what you have done with Capet!”

Marguerite uttered a cry of horror. Instinctively her arms were interposed between the unconscious man and these inhuman creatures, with a beautiful gesture of protecting motherhood.

“He has fainted,” she said, her voice quivering with indignation. “My God! are you devils that you have not one spark of manhood in you?”

The men shrugged their shoulders, and both laughed brutally. They had seen worse sights than these, since they served a Republic that ruled by bloodshed and by terror. They were own brothers in callousness and cruelty to those men who on this self-same spot a few months ago had watched the daily agony of a martyred Queen, or to those who had rushed into the Abbaye prison on that awful day in September, and at a word from their infamous leaders had put eighty defenceless prisoners — men, women, and children — to the sword.

“Tell him to say what he has done with Capet,” said one of the soldiers now, and this rough command was accompanied with a coarse jest that sent the blood flaring up into Marguerite’s pale cheeks.

The brutal laugh, the coarse words which accompanied it, the insult flung at Marguerite, had penetrated to Blakeney’s slowly returning consciousness. With sudden strength, that appeared almost supernatural, he jumped to his feet, and before any of the others could interfere he had with clenched fist struck the soldier a full blow on the mouth.

The man staggered back with a curse, the other shouted for help; in a moment the narrow place swarmed with soldiers; Marguerite was roughly torn away from the prisoner’s side, and thrust into the far corner of the cell, from where she only saw a confused mass of blue coats and white belts, and — towering for one brief moment above what seemed to her fevered fancy like a veritable sea of heads — the pale face of her husband, with wide dilated eyes searching the gloom for hers.

“Remember!” he shouted, and his voice for that brief moment rang out clear and sharp above the din.

Then he disappeared behind the wall of glistening bayonets, of blue coats and uplifted arms; mercifully for her she remembered nothing more very clearly. She felt herself being dragged out of the cell, the iron bar being thrust down behind her with a loud clang. Then in a vague, dreamy state of semi-unconsciousness she saw the heavy bolts being drawn back from the outer door, heard the grating of the key in the monumental lock, and the next moment a breath of fresh air brought the sensation of renewed life into her.

CHAPTER XXX. AFTERWARDS

"I am sorry, Lady Blakeney," said a harsh, dry voice close to her; "the incident at the end of your visit was none of our making, remember."

She turned away, sickened with horror at thought of contact with this wretch. She had heard the heavy oaken door swing to behind her on its ponderous hinges, and the key once again turn in the lock. She felt as if she had suddenly been thrust into a coffin, and that clods of earth were being thrown upon her breast, oppressing her heart so that she could not breathe.

Had she looked for the last time on the man whom she loved beyond everything else on earth, whom she worshipped more ardently day by day? Was she even now carrying within the folds of her kerchief a message from a dying man to his comrades?

Mechanically she followed Chauvelin down the corridor and along the passages which she had traversed a brief half-hour ago. From some distant church tower a clock tolled the hour of ten. It had then really only been little more than thirty brief minutes since first she had entered this grim building, which seemed less stony than the monsters who held authority within it; to her it seemed that centuries had gone over her head during that time. She felt like an old woman, unable to straighten her back or to steady her limbs; she could only dimly see some few paces ahead the trim figure of Chauvelin walking with measured steps, his hands held behind his back, his head thrown up with what looked like triumphant defiance.

At the door of the cubicle where she had been forced to submit to the indignity of being searched by a wardress, the latter was now standing, waiting with characteristic stolidity. In her hand she held the steel files, the dagger and the purse which, as Marguerite passed, she held out to her.

"Your property, citizeness," she said placidly.

She emptied the purse into her own hand, and solemnly counted out the twenty pieces of gold. She was about to replace them all into the purse, when Marguerite pressed one of them back into her wrinkled hand.

"Nineteen will be enough, citizeness," she said; "keep one for yourself, not only for me, but for all the poor women who come here with their heart full of hope, and go hence with it full of despair."

The woman turned calm, lack-lustre eyes on her, and silently pocketed the gold piece with a grudgingly muttered word of thanks.

Chauvelin during this brief interlude, had walked thoughtlessly on ahead. Marguerite, peering down the length of the narrow corridor, spied his sable-clad figure some hundred metres further on as it crossed the dim circle of light thrown by one of the lamps.

She was about to follow, when it seemed to her as if some one was moving in the darkness close beside her. The wardress was even now in the act of closing the door of her cubicle, and there were a couple of soldiers who were disappearing from view round one end of the passage, whilst Chauvelin's retreating form was lost in the gloom at the other.

There was no light close to where she herself was standing, and the blackness around her was as impenetrable as a veil; the sound of a human creature moving and breathing close to her in this intense darkness acted weirdly on her overwrought nerves.

"Qui va la?" she called.

There was a more distinct movement among the shadows this time, as of a swift tread on the flagstones of the corridor. All else was silent round, and now she could plainly hear those footsteps running rapidly down the passage away from her. She strained her eyes to see more clearly, and anon in one of the dim circles of light on ahead she spied a man's figure — slender and darkly clad — walking quickly yet furtively like one pursued. As he crossed the light the man turned to look back. It was her brother Armand.

Her first instinct was to call to him; the second checked that call upon her lips.

Percy had said that Armand was in no danger; then why should he be sneaking along the dark corridors of this awful house of Justice if he was free and safe?

Certainly, even at a distance, her brother's movements suggested to Marguerite that he was in danger of being seen. He cowered in the darkness, tried to avoid the circles of light thrown by the lamps in the passage. At all costs Marguerite felt that she must warn him that the way he was going now would lead him straight into Chauvelin's arms, and she longed to let him know that she was close by.

Feeling sure that he would recognise her voice, she made pretence to turn back to the cubicle through the door of which the wardress had already disappeared, and called out as loudly as she dared:

"Good-night, citizeness!"

But Armand — who surely must have heard — did not pause at the sound. Rather was he walking on now more rapidly than before. In less than a minute he would be reaching the spot where Chauvelin stood waiting for Marguerite. That end of the corridor, however, received no light from any of the lamps; strive how she might, Marguerite could see nothing now either of Chauvelin or of Armand.

Blindly, instinctively, she ran forward, thinking only to reach Armand, and to warn him to turn back before it was too late; before he found himself face to face with the most bitter enemy he and his nearest and dearest had ever had. But as she at last came to a halt at the end of the corridor, panting with the exertion of running and the fear for Armand, she almost fell up against Chauvelin, who was standing there alone and imperturbable, seemingly having waited patiently for her. She could only dimly distinguish his face, the sharp features and thin cruel mouth, but she felt — more than she actually saw — his cold steely eyes fixed with a strange expression of mockery upon her.

But of Armand there was no sign, and she — poor soul! — had difficulty in not betraying the anxiety which she felt for her brother. Had the flagstones swallowed him up? A door on the right was the only one that gave on the corridor at this point; it led to the concierge's lodge, and thence out into the courtyard. Had Chauvelin been dreaming, sleeping with his eyes open, whilst he stood waiting for her, and had Armand succeeded in slipping past him under cover of the darkness and through that door to safety that lay beyond these prison walls?

Marguerite, miserably agitated, not knowing what to think, looked somewhat wild-eyed on Chauvelin; he smiled, that inscrutable, mirthless smile of his, and said blandly:

"Is there aught else that I can do for you, citizeness? This is your nearest way out. No doubt Sir Andrew will be waiting to escort you home."

Then as she — not daring either to reply or to question — walked straight up to the door, he hurried forward, prepared to open it for her. But before he did so he turned to her once again:

“I trust that your visit has pleased you, Lady Blakeney,” he said suavely. “At what hour do you desire to repeat it to-morrow?”

“To-morrow?” she reiterated in a vague, absent manner, for she was still dazed with the strange incident of Armand’s appearance and his flight.

“Yes. You would like to see Sir Percy again to-morrow, would you not? I myself would gladly pay him a visit from time to time, but he does not care for my company. My colleague, citizen Heron, on the other hand, calls on him four times in every twenty-four hours; he does so a few moments before the changing of the guard, and stays chatting with Sir Percy until after the guard is changed, when he inspects the men and satisfies himself that no traitor has crept in among them. All the men are personally known to him, you see. These hours are at five in the morning and again at eleven, and then again at five and eleven in the evening. My friend Heron, as you see, is zealous and assiduous, and, strangely enough, Sir Percy does not seem to view his visit with any displeasure. Now at any other hour of the day, Lady Blakeney, I pray you command me and I will arrange that citizen Heron grant you a second interview with the prisoner.”

Marguerite had only listened to Chauvelin’s lengthy speech with half an ear; her thoughts still dwelt on the past half-hour with its bitter joy and its agonising pain; and fighting through her thoughts of Percy there was the recollection of Armand which so disquieted her. But though she had only vaguely listened to what Chauvelin was saying, she caught the drift of it.

Madly she longed to accept his suggestion. The very thought of seeing Percy on the morrow was solace to her aching heart; it could feed on hope to-night instead of on its own bitter pain. But even during this brief moment of hesitancy, and while her whole being cried out for this joy that her enemy was holding out to her, even then in the gloom ahead of her she seemed to see a vision of a pale face raised above a crowd of swaying heads, and of the eyes of the dreamer searching for her own, whilst the last sublime cry of perfect self-devotion once more echoed in her ear:

“Remember!”

The promise which she had given him, that would she fulfil. The burden which he had laid on her shoulders she would try to bear as heroically as he was bearing his own. Aye, even at the cost of the supreme sorrow of never resting again in the haven of his arms.

But in spite of sorrow, in spite of anguish so terrible that she could not imagine Death itself to have a more cruel sting, she wished above all to safeguard that final, attenuated thread of hope which was wound round the packet that lay hidden on her breast.

She wanted, above all, not to arouse Chauvelin’s suspicions by markedly refusing to visit the prisoner again — suspicions that might lead to her being searched once more and the precious packet filched from her. Therefore she said to him earnestly now:

“I thank you, citizen, for your solicitude on my behalf, but you will understand, I think, that my visit to the prisoner has been almost more than I could bear. I cannot tell you at this moment whether to-morrow I should be in a fit state to repeat it.”

“As you please,” he replied urbanely. “But I pray you to remember one thing, and that is—”

He paused a moment while his restless eyes wandered rapidly over her face, trying, as it were, to get at the soul of this woman, at her innermost thoughts, which he felt were hidden from him.

“Yes, citizen,” she said quietly; “what is it that I am to remember?”

“That it rests with you, Lady Blakeney, to put an end to the present situation.”

“How?”

“Surely you can persuade Sir Percy’s friends not to leave their chief in durance vile. They themselves could put an end to his troubles to-morrow.”

“By giving up the Dauphin to you, you mean?” she retorted coldly.

“Precisely.”

“And you hoped — you still hope that by placing before me the picture of your own fiendish cruelty against my husband you will induce me to act the part of a traitor towards him and a coward before his followers?”

“Oh!” he said deprecatingly, “the cruelty now is no longer mine. Sir Percy’s release is in your hands, Lady Blakeney — in that of his followers. I should only be too willing to end the present intolerable situation. You and your friends are applying the last turn of the thumbscrew, not I—”

She smothered the cry of horror that had risen to her lips. The man’s cold-blooded sophistry was threatening to make a breach in her armour of self-control.

She would no longer trust herself to speak, but made a quick movement towards the door.

He shrugged his shoulders as if the matter were now entirely out of his control. Then he opened the door for her to pass out, and as her skirts brushed against him he bowed with studied deference, murmuring a cordial “Good-night!”

“And remember, Lady Blakeney,” he added politely, “that should you at any time desire to communicate with me at my rooms, 19, Rue Dupuy, I hold myself entirely at your service.”

Then as her tall, graceful figure disappeared in the outside gloom he passed his thin hand over his mouth as if to wipe away the last lingering signs of triumphant irony:

“The second visit will work wonders, I think, my fine lady,” he murmured under his breath.

CHAPTER XXXI. AN INTERLUDE

It was close on midnight now, and still they sat opposite one another, he the friend and she the wife, talking over that brief half-hour that had meant an eternity to her.

Marguerite had tried to tell Sir Andrew everything; bitter as it was to put into actual words the pathos and misery which she had witnessed, yet she would hide nothing from the devoted comrade whom she knew Percy would trust absolutely. To him she repeated every word that Percy had uttered, described every inflection of his voice, those enigmatical phrases which she had not understood, and together they cheated one another into the belief that hope lingered somewhere hidden in those words.

"I am not going to despair, Lady Blakeney," said Sir Andrew firmly; "and, moreover, we are not going to disobey. I would stake my life that even now Blakeney has some scheme in his mind which is embodied in the various letters which he has given you, and which — Heaven help us in that case! — we might thwart by disobedience. Tomorrow in the late afternoon I will escort you to the Rue de Charonne. It is a house that we all know well, and which Armand, of course, knows too. I had already inquired there two days ago to ascertain whether by chance St. Just was not in hiding there, but Lucas, the landlord and old-clothes dealer, knew nothing about him."

Marguerite told him about her swift vision of Armand in the dark corridor of the house of Justice.

"Can you understand it, Sir Andrew?" she asked, fixing her deep, luminous eyes inquiringly upon him.

"No, I cannot," he said, after an almost imperceptible moment of hesitancy; "but we shall see him to-morrow. I have no doubt that Mademoiselle Lange will know where to find him; and now that we know where she is, all our anxiety about him, at any rate, should soon be at an end."

He rose and made some allusion to the lateness of the hour. Somehow it seemed to her that her devoted friend was trying to hide his innermost thoughts from her. She watched him with an anxious, intent gaze.

"Can you understand it all, Sir Andrew?" she reiterated with a pathetic note of appeal.

"No, no!" he said firmly. "On my soul, Lady Blakeney, I know no more of Armand than you do yourself. But I am sure that Percy is right. The boy frets because remorse must have assailed him by now. Had he but obeyed implicitly that day, as we all did—"

But he could not frame the whole terrible proposition in words. Bitterly as he himself felt on the subject of Armand, he would not add yet another burden to this devoted woman's heavy load of misery.

"It was Fate, Lady Blakeney," he said after a while. "Fate! a damnable fate which did it all. Great God! to think of Blakeney in the hands of those brutes seems so horrible that at times I feel as if the whole thing were a nightmare, and that the next moment we shall both wake hearing his merry voice echoing through this room."

He tried to cheer her with words of hope that he knew were but chimeras. A heavy weight of despondency lay on his heart. The letter from his chief was hidden against his breast; he would study it anon in the privacy of his own apartment so as to commit every word to memory that related to the measures for the ultimate safety of the child-King. After that it would have to be destroyed, lest it fell into inimical hands.

Soon he bade Marguerite good-night. She was tired out, body and soul, and he — her faithful friend — vaguely wondered how long she would be able to withstand the strain of so much sorrow, such unspeakable misery.

When at last she was alone Marguerite made brave efforts to compose her nerves so as to obtain a certain modicum of sleep this night. But, strive how she might, sleep would not come. How could it, when before her wearied brain there rose constantly that awful vision of Percy in the long, narrow cell, with weary head bent over his arm, and those friends shouting persistently in his ear:

"Wake up, citizen! Tell us, where is Capet?"

The fear obsessed her that his mind might give way; for the mental agony of such intense weariness must be well-nigh impossible to bear. In the dark, as she sat hour after hour at the open window, looking out in the direction where through the veil of snow the grey walls of the Chatelet prison towered silent and grim, she seemed to see his pale, drawn face with almost appalling reality; she could see every line of it, and could study it with the intensity born of a terrible fear.

How long would the ghostly glimmer of merriment still linger in the eyes? When would the hoarse, mirthless laugh rise to the lips, that awful laugh that proclaims madness? Oh! she could have screamed now with the awfulness of this haunting terror. Ghouls seemed to be mocking her out of the darkness, every flake of snow that fell silently on the window-sill became a grinning face that taunted and derided; every cry in the silence of the night, every footstep on the quay below turned to hideous jeers hurled at her by tormenting fiends.

She closed the window quickly, for she feared that she would go mad. For an hour after that she walked up and down the room making violent efforts to control her nerves, to find a glimmer of that courage which she promised Percy that she would have.

CHAPTER XXXII. SISTERS

The morning found her fagged out, but more calm. Later on she managed to drink some coffee, and having washed and dressed, she prepared to go out.

Sir Andrew appeared in time to ascertain her wishes.

"I promised Percy to go to the Rue de Charonne in the late afternoon," she said. "I have some hours to spare, and mean to employ them in trying to find speech with Mademoiselle Lange."

"Blakeney has told you where she lives?"

"Yes. In the Square du Roule. I know it well. I can be there in half an hour."

He, of course, begged to be allowed to accompany her, and anon they were walking together quickly up toward the Faubourg St. Honore. The snow had ceased falling, but it was still very cold, but neither Marguerite nor Sir Andrew were conscious of the temperature or of any outward signs around them. They walked on silently until they reached the torn-down gates of the Square du Roule; there Sir Andrew parted from Marguerite after having appointed to meet her an hour later at a small eating-house he knew of where they could have some food together, before starting on their long expedition to the Rue de Charonne.

Five minutes later Marguerite Blakeney was shown in by worthy Madame Belhomme, into the quaint and pretty drawing-room with its soft-toned hangings and old-world air of faded grace. Mademoiselle Lange was sitting there, in a capacious armchair, which encircled her delicate figure with its frame-work of dull old gold.

She was ostensibly reading when Marguerite was announced, for an open book lay on a table beside her; but it seemed to the visitor that mayhap the young girl's thoughts had played truant from her work, for her pose was listless and apathetic, and there was a look of grave trouble upon the childlike face.

She rose when Marguerite entered, obviously puzzled at the unexpected visit, and somewhat awed at the appearance of this beautiful woman with the sad look in her eyes.

"I must crave your pardon, mademoiselle," said Lady Blakeney as soon as the door had once more closed on Madame Belhomme, and she found herself alone with the young girl. "This visit at such an early hour must seem to you an intrusion. But I am Marguerite St. Just, and—"

Her smile and outstretched hand completed the sentence.

"St. Just!" exclaimed Jeanne.

"Yes. Armand's sister!"

A swift blush rushed to the girl's pale cheeks; her brown eyes expressed unadulterated joy. Marguerite, who was studying her closely, was conscious that her poor aching heart went out to this exquisite child, the far-off innocent cause of so much misery.

Jeanne, a little shy, a little confused and nervous in her movements, was pulling a chair close to the fire, begging Marguerite to sit. Her words came out all the while in short jerky sentences, and from time to time she stole swift shy glances at Armand's sister.

"You will forgive me, mademoiselle," said Marguerite, whose simple and calm manner quickly tended to soothe Jeanne Lange's confusion; "but I was so anxious about my brother — I do not know where to find him."

"And so you came to me, madame?"

"Was I wrong?"

"Oh, no! But what made you think that — that I would know?"

"I guessed," said Marguerite with a smile. "You had heard about me then?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Through whom? Did Armand tell you about me?"

"No, alas! I have not seen him this past fortnight, since you, mademoiselle, came into his life; but many of Armand's friends are in Paris just now; one of them knew, and he told me."

The soft blush had now overspread the whole of the girl's face, even down to her graceful neck. She waited to see Marguerite comfortably installed in an armchair, then she resumed shyly:

"And it was Armand who told me all about you. He loves you so dearly."

"Armand and I were very young children when we lost our parents," said Marguerite softly, "and we were all in all to each other then. And until I married he was the man I loved best in all the world."

"He told me you were married — to an Englishman."

"Yes?"

"He loves England too. At first he always talked of my going there with him as his wife, and of the happiness we should find there together."

"Why do you say 'at first'?"

"He talks less about England now."

"Perhaps he feels that now you know all about it, and that you understand each other with regard to the future."

"Perhaps."

Jeanne sat opposite to Marguerite on a low stool by the fire. Her elbows were resting on her knees, and her face just now was half-hidden by the wealth of her brown curls. She looked exquisitely pretty sitting like this, with just the suggestion of sadness in the listless pose. Marguerite had come here to-day prepared to hate this young girl, who in a few brief days had stolen not only Armand's heart, but his allegiance to his chief, and his trust in him. Since last night, when she had seen her brother sneak silently past her like a thief in the night, she had nurtured thoughts of ill-will and anger against Jeanne.

But hatred and anger had melted at the sight of this child. Marguerite, with the perfect understanding born of love itself, had soon realised the charm which a woman like Mademoiselle Lange must of necessity exercise over a chivalrous, enthusiastic nature like Armand's. The sense of protection — the strongest perhaps that exists in a good man's heart — would draw him irresistibly to this

beautiful child, with the great, appealing eyes, and the look of pathos that pervaded the entire face. Marguerite, looking in silence on the — dainty picture before her, found it in her heart to forgive Armand for disobeying his chief when those eyes beckoned to him in a contrary direction.

How could he, how could any chivalrous man endure the thought of this delicate, fresh flower lying crushed and drooping in the hands of monsters who respected neither courage nor purity? And Armand had been more than human, or mayhap less, if he had indeed consented to leave the fate of the girl whom he had sworn to love and protect in other hands than his own.

It seemed almost as if Jeanne was conscious of the fixity of Marguerite's gaze, for though she did not turn to look at her, the flush gradually deepened in her cheeks.

"Mademoiselle Lange," said Marguerite gently, "do you not feel that you can trust me?"

She held out her two hands to the girl, and Jeanne slowly turned to her. The next moment she was kneeling at Marguerite's feet, and kissing the beautiful kind hands that had been stretched out to her with such sisterly love.

"Indeed, indeed, I do trust you," she said, and looked with tear-dimmed eyes in the pale face above her. "I have longed for some one in whom I could confide. I have been so lonely lately, and Armand—"

With an impatient little gesture she brushed away the tears which had gathered in her eyes.

"What has Armand been doing?" asked Marguerite with an encouraging smile.

"Oh, nothing to grieve me!" replied the young girl eagerly, "for he is kind and good, and chivalrous and noble. Oh, I love him with all my heart! I loved him from the moment that I set eyes on him, and then he came to see me — perhaps you know! And he talked so beautiful about England, and so nobly about his leader the Scarlet Pimpernel — have you heard of him?"

"Yes," said Marguerite, smiling. "I have heard of him."

"It was that day that citizen Heron came with his soldiers! Oh! you do not know citizen Heron. He is the most cruel man in France. In Paris he is hated by every one, and no one is safe from his spies. He came to arrest Armand, but I was able to fool him and to save Armand. And after that," she added with charming naivete, "I felt as if, having saved Armand's life, he belonged to me — and his love for me had made me his."

"Then I was arrested," she continued after a slight pause, and at the recollection of what she had endured then her fresh voice still trembled with horror.

"They dragged me to prison, and I spent two days in a dark cell, where—"

She hid her face in her hands, whilst a few sobs shook her whole frame; then she resumed more calmly:

"I had seen nothing of Armand. I wondered where he was, and I knew that he would be eating out his heart with anxiety for me. But God was watching over me. At first I was transferred to the Temple prison, and there a kind creature — a sort of man-of-all work in the prison took compassion on me. I do not know how he contrived it, but one morning very early he brought me some filthy old rags which he told me to put on quickly, and when I had done that he bade me follow him. Oh! he was a very dirty, wretched man himself, but he must have had a kind heart. He took me by the hand and made me carry his broom and brushes. Nobody took much notice of us, the dawn was only just breaking, and the passages were very dark and deserted; only once some soldiers began to chaff him about me: 'C'est ma fille — quoi?' he said roughly. I very nearly laughed then, only I had the good sense to restrain myself, for I knew that my freedom, and perhaps my life, depended on my not betraying myself. My grimy, tattered guide took me with him right through the interminable corridors of that awful building, whilst I prayed fervently to God for him and for myself. We got out by one of the service stairs and exit, and then he dragged me through some narrow streets until we came to a corner where a covered cart stood waiting. My kind friend told me to get into the cart, and then he bade the driver on the box take me straight to a house in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois. Oh! I was infinitely grateful to the poor creature who had helped me to get out of that awful prison, and I would gladly have given him some money, for I am sure he was very poor; but I had none by me. He told me that I should be quite safe in the house in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois, and begged me to wait there patiently for a few days until I heard from one who had my welfare at heart, and who would further arrange for my safety."

Marguerite had listened silently to this narrative so naively told by this child, who obviously had no idea to whom she owed her freedom and her life. While the girl talked, her mind could follow with unspeakable pride and happiness every phase of that scene in the early dawn, when that mysterious, ragged man-of-all-work, unbeknown even to the woman whom he was saving, risked his own noble life for the sake of her whom his friend and comrade loved.

"And did you never see again the kind man to whom you owe your life?" she asked.

"No!" replied Jeanne. "I never saw him since; but when I arrived at the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois I was told by the good people who took charge of me that the ragged man-of-all-work had been none other than the mysterious Englishman whom Armand reveres, he whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"But you did not stay very long in the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois, did you?"

"No. Only three days. The third day I received a communique from the Committee of General Security, together with an unconditional certificate of safety. It meant that I was free — quite free. Oh! I could scarcely believe it. I laughed and I cried until the people in the house thought that I had gone mad. The past few days had been such a horrible nightmare."

"And then you saw Armand again?"

"Yes. They told him that I was free. And he came here to see me. He often comes; he will be here anon."

"But are you not afraid on his account and your own? He is — he must be still — 'suspect'; a well-known adherent of the Scarlet Pimpernel, he would be safer out of Paris."

"No! oh, no! Armand is in no danger. He, too, has an unconditional certificate of safety."

"An unconditional certificate of safety?" asked Marguerite, whilst a deep frown of grave puzzlement appeared between her brows. "What does that mean?"

"It means that he is free to come and go as he likes; that neither he nor I have anything to fear from Heron and his awful spies. Oh! but for that sad and careworn look on Armand's face we could be so happy; but he is so unlike himself. He is Armand and yet another; his look at times quite frightens me."

"Yet you know why he is so sad," said Marguerite in a strange, toneless voice which she seemed quite unable to control, for that tonelessness came from a terrible sense of suffocation, of a feeling as if her heart-strings were being gripped by huge, hard hands.

"Yes, I know," said Jeanne half hesitatingly, as if knowing, she was still unconvinced.

"His chief, his comrade, the friend of whom you speak, the Scarlet Pimpernel, who risked his life in order to save yours, mademoiselle, is a prisoner in the hands of those that hate him."

Marguerite had spoken with sudden vehemence. There was almost an appeal in her voice now, as if she were trying not to convince Jeanne only, but also herself, of something that was quite simple, quite straightforward, and yet which appeared to be receding from her, an intangible something, a spirit that was gradually yielding to a force as yet unborn, to a phantom that had not yet emerged from out chaos.

But Jeanne seemed unconscious of all this. Her mind was absorbed in Armand, the man whom she loved in her simple, whole-hearted way, and who had seemed so different of late.

"Oh, yes!" she said with a deep, sad sigh, whilst the ever-ready tears once more gathered in her eyes, "Armand is very unhappy because of him. The Scarlet Pimpernel was his friend; Armand loved and revered him. Did you know," added the girl, turning large, horror-filled eyes on Marguerite, "that they want some information from him about the Dauphin, and to force him to give it they — they—"

"Yes, I know," said Marguerite.

"Can you wonder, then, that Armand is unhappy. Oh! last night, after he went from me, I cried for hours, just because he had looked so sad. He no longer talks of happy England, of the cottage we were to have, and of the Kentish orchards in May. He has not ceased to love me, for at times his love seems so great that I tremble with a delicious sense of fear. But oh! his love for me no longer makes him happy."

Her head had gradually sunk lower and lower on her breast, her voice died down in a murmur broken by heartrending sighs. Every generous impulse in Marguerite's noble nature prompted her to take that sorrowing child in her arms, to comfort her if she could, to reassure her if she had the power. But a strange icy feeling had gradually invaded her heart, even whilst she listened to the simple unsophisticated talk of Jeanne Lange. Her hands felt numb and clammy, and instinctively she withdrew away from the near vicinity of the girl. She felt as if the room, the furniture in it, even the window before her were dancing a wild and curious dance, and that from everywhere around strange whistling sounds reached her ears, which caused her head to whirl and her brain to reel.

Jeanne had buried her head in her hands. She was crying — softly, almost humbly at first, as if half ashamed of her grief; then, suddenly it seemed, as if she could not contain herself any longer, a heavy sob escaped her throat and shook her whole delicate frame with its violence. Sorrow no longer would be gainsaid, it insisted on physical expression — that awful tearing of the heart-strings which leaves the body numb and panting with pain.

In a moment Marguerite had forgotten; the dark and shapeless phantom that had knocked at the gate of her soul was relegated back into chaos. It ceased to be, it was made to shrivel and to burn in the great seething cauldron of womanly sympathy. What part this child had played in the vast cataclysm of misery which had dragged a noble-hearted enthusiast into the dark torture-chamber, whence the only outlet led to the guillotine, she — Marguerite Blakeney — did not know; what part Armand, her brother, had played in it, that she would not dare to guess; all that she knew was that here was a loving heart that was filled with pain — a young, inexperienced soul that was having its first tussle with the grim realities of life — and every motherly instinct in Marguerite was aroused.

She rose and gently drew the young girl up from her knees, and then closer to her; she pillowed the grief-stricken head against her shoulder, and murmured gentle, comforting words into the tiny ear.

"I have news for Armand," she whispered, "that will comfort him, a message — a letter from his friend. You will see, dear, that when Armand reads it he will become a changed man; you see, Armand acted a little foolishly a few days ago. His chief had given him orders which he disregarded — he was so anxious about you — he should have obeyed; and now, mayhap, he feels that his disobedience may have been the — the innocent cause of much misery to others; that is, no doubt, the reason why he is so sad. The letter from his friend will cheer him, you will see."

"Do you really think so, madame?" murmured Jeanne, in whose tear-stained eyes the indomitable hopefulness of youth was already striving to shine.

"I am sure of it," assented Marguerite.

And for the moment she was absolutely sincere. The phantom had entirely vanished. She would even, had he dared to re-appear, have mocked and derided him for his futile attempt at turning the sorrow in her heart to a veritable hell of bitterness.

CHAPTER XXXIII. LITTLE MOTHER

The two women, both so young still, but each of them with a mark of sorrow already indelibly graven in her heart, were clinging to one another, bound together by the strong bond of sympathy. And but for the sadness of it all it were difficult to conjure up a more beautiful picture than that which they presented as they stood side by side; Marguerite, tall and stately as an exquisite lily, with the crown of her ardent hair and the glory of her deep blue eyes, and Jeanne Lange, dainty and delicate, with the brown curls and the child-like droop of the soft, moist lips.

Thus Armand saw them when, a moment or two later, entered unannounced. He had pushed open the door and looked on the two women silently for a second or two; on the girl whom he loved so dearly, for whose sake he had committed the great, the unpardonable sin which would send him forever henceforth, Cain-like, a wanderer on the face of the earth; and the other, his sister, her whom a Judas act would condemn to lonely sorrow and widowhood.

He could have cried out in an agony of remorse, and it was the groan of acute soul anguish which escaped his lips that drew Marguerite's attention to his presence.

Even though many things that Jeanne Lange had said had prepared her for a change in her brother, she was immeasurably shocked by his appearance. He had always been slim and rather below the average in height, but now his usually upright and trim figure seemed to have shrunk within itself; his clothes hung baggy on his shoulders, his hands appeared waxen and emaciated, but the greatest change was in his face, in the wide circles round the eyes, that spoke of wakeful nights, in the hollow cheeks, and the mouth that had wholly forgotten how to smile.

Percy after a week's misery immured in a dark and miserable prison, deprived of food and rest, did not look such a physical wreck as did Armand St. Just, who was free.

Marguerite's heart reproached her for what she felt had been neglect, callousness on her part. Mutely, within herself, she craved his forgiveness for the appearance of that phantom which should never have come forth from out that chaotic hell which had engendered it.

"Armand!" she cried.

And the loving arms that had guided his baby footsteps long ago, the tender hands that had wiped his boyish tears, were stretched out with unalterable love toward him.

"I have a message for you, dear," she said gently—"a letter from him. Mademoiselle Jeanne allowed me to wait here for you until you came."

Silently, like a little shy mouse, Jeanne had slipped out of the room. Her pure love for Armand had ennobled every one of her thoughts, and her innate kindness and refinement had already suggested that brother and sister would wish to be alone. At the door she had turned and met Armand's look. That look had satisfied her; she felt that in it she had read the expression of his love, and to it she had responded with a glance that spoke of hope for a future meeting.

As soon as the door had closed on Jeanne Lange, Armand, with an impulse that refused to be checked, threw himself into his sister's arms. The present, with all its sorrows, its remorse and its shame, had sunk away; only the past remained — the unforgettable past, when Marguerite was "little mother" — the soother, the comforter, the healer, the ever-willing receptacle wherein he had been wont to pour the burden of his childish griefs, of his boyish escapades.

Conscious that she could not know everything — not yet, at any rate — he gave himself over to the rapture of this pure embrace, the last time, mayhap, that those fond arms would close round him in unmixed tenderness, the last time that those fond lips would murmur words of affection and of comfort.

To-morrow those same lips would, perhaps, curse the traitor, and the small hand be raised in wrath, pointing an avenging finger on the Judas.

"Little mother," he whispered, babbling like a child, "it is good to see you again."

"And I have brought you a message from Percy," she said, "a letter which he begged me to give you as soon as may be."

"You have seen him?" he asked.

She nodded silently, unable to speak. Not now, not when her nerves were strung to breaking pitch, would she trust herself to speak of that awful yesterday. She groped in the folds of her gown and took the packet which Percy had given her for Armand. It felt quite bulky in her hand.

"There is quite a good deal there for you to read, dear," she said. "Percy begged me to give you this, and then to let you read it when you were alone."

She pressed the packet into his hand. Armand's face was ashen pale. He clung to her with strange, nervous tenacity; the paper which he held in one hand seemed to sear his fingers as with a branding-iron.

"I will slip away now," she said, for strangely enough since Percy's message had been in Armand's hands she was once again conscious of that awful feeling of iciness round her heart, a sense of numbness that paralysed her very thoughts.

"You will make my excuses to Mademoiselle Lange," she said, trying to smile. "When you have read, you will wish to see her alone."

Gently she disengaged herself from Armand's grasp and made for the door. He appeared dazed, staring down at that paper which was scorching his fingers. Only when her hand was on the latch did he seem to realise that she was going.

"Little mother," came involuntarily to his lips.

She came straight back to him and took both his wrists in her small hands. She was taller than he, and his head was slightly bent forward. Thus she towered over him, loving but strong, her great, earnest eyes searching his soul.

"When shall I see you again, little mother?" he asked.

"Read your letter, dear," she replied, "and when you have read it, if you care to impart its contents to me, come to-night to my lodgings, Quai de la Ferraille, above the saddler's shop. But if there is aught in it that you do not wish me to know, then do not come; I

shall understand. Good-bye, dear.”

She took his head between her two cold hands, and as it was still bowed she placed a tender kiss, as of a long farewell, upon his hair.

Then she went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXIV. THE LETTER

Armand sat in the armchair in front of the fire. His head rested against one hand; in the other he held the letter written by the friend whom he had betrayed.

Twice he had read it now, and already was every word of that minute, clear writing graven upon the innermost fibres of his body, upon the most secret cells of his brain.

Armand, I know. I knew even before Chauvelin came to me, and stood there hoping to gloat over the soul-agony a man who finds that he has been betrayed by his dearest friend. But that d — d reprobate did not get that satisfaction, for I was prepared. Not only do I know, Armand, but I UNDERSTAND. I, who do not know what love is, have realised how small a thing is honour, loyalty, or friendship when weighed in the balance of a loved one's need.

To save Jeanne you sold me to Heron and his crowd. We are men, Armand, and the word forgiveness has only been spoken once these past two thousand years, and then it was spoken by Divine lips. But Marguerite loves you, and mayhap soon you will be all that is left her to love on this earth. Because of this she must never know.... As for you, Armand — well, God help you! But meseems that the hell which you are enduring now is ten thousand times worse than mine. I have heard your furtive footsteps in the corridor outside the grated window of this cell, and would not then have exchanged my hell for yours. Therefore, Armand, and because Marguerite loves you, I would wish to turn to you in the hour that I need help. I am in a tight corner, but the hour may come when a comrade's hand might mean life to me. I have thought of you, Armand partly because having taken more than my life, your own belongs to me, and partly because the plan which I have in my mind will carry with it grave risks for the man who stands by me.

I swore once that never would I risk a comrade's life to save mine own; but matters are so different now... we are both in hell, Armand, and I in striving to get out of mine will be showing you a way out of yours.

Will you retake possession of your lodgings in the Rue de la Croix Blanche? I should always know then where to find you in an emergency. But if at any time you receive another letter from me, be its contents what they may, act in accordance with the letter, and send a copy of it at once to Ffoulkes or to Marguerite. Keep in close touch with them both. Tell her I so far forgave your disobedience (there was nothing more) that I may yet trust my life and mine honour in your hands.

I shall have no means of ascertaining definitely whether you will do all that I ask; but somehow, Armand, I know that you will.

For the third time Armand read the letter through.

"But, Armand," he repeated, murmuring the words softly under his breath, "I know that you will."

Prompted by some indefinable instinct, moved by a force that compelled, he allowed himself to glide from the chair on to the floor, on to his knees.

All the pent-up bitterness, the humiliation, the shame of the past few days, surged up from his heart to his lips in one great cry of pain.

"My God!" he whispered, "give me the chance of giving my life for him."

Alone and unwatched, he gave himself over for a few moments to the almost voluptuous delight of giving free rein to his grief. The hot Latin blood in him, tempestuous in all its passions, was firing his heart and brain now with the glow of devotion and of self-sacrifice.

The calm, self-centred Anglo-Saxon temperament — the almost fatalistic acceptance of failure without reproach yet without despair, which Percy's letter to him had evidenced in so marked a manner — was, mayhap, somewhat beyond the comprehension of this young enthusiast, with pure Gallic blood in his veins, who was ever wont to allow his most elemental passions to sway his actions. But though he did not altogether understand, Armand St. Just could fully appreciate. All that was noble and loyal in him rose triumphant from beneath the devastating ashes of his own shame.

Soon his mood calmed down, his look grew less wan and haggard. Hearing Jeanne's discreet and mouselike steps in the next room, he rose quickly and hid the letter in the pocket of his coat.

She came in and inquired anxiously about Marguerite; a hurriedly expressed excuse from him, however, satisfied her easily enough. She wanted to be alone with Armand, happy to see that he held his head more erect to-day, and that the look as of a hunted creature had entirely gone from his eyes.

She ascribed this happy change to Marguerite, finding it in her heart to be grateful to the sister for having accomplished what the fiancée had failed to do.

For awhile they remained together, sitting side by side, speaking at times, but mostly silent, seeming to savour the return of truant happiness. Armand felt like a sick man who has obtained a sudden surcease from pain. He looked round him with a kind of melancholy delight on this room which he had entered for the first time less than a fortnight ago, and which already was so full of memories.

Those first hours spent at the feet of Jeanne Lange, how exquisite they had been, how fleeting in the perfection of their happiness! Now they seemed to belong to a far distant past, evanescent like the perfume of violets, swift in their flight like the winged steps of youth. Blakeney's letter had effectually taken the bitter sting from out his remorse, but it had increased his already over-heavy load of inconsolable sorrow.

Later in the day he turned his footsteps in the direction of the river, to the house in the Quai de la Ferraille above the saddler's shop. Marguerite had returned alone from the expedition to the Rue de Charonne. Whilst Sir Andrew took charge of the little party of fugitives and escorted them out of Paris, she came back to her lodgings in order to collect her belongings, preparatory to taking up her quarters in the house of Lucas, the old-clothes dealer. She returned also because she hoped to see Armand.

"If you care to impart the contents of the letter to me, come to my lodgings to-night," she had said.

All day a phantom had haunted her, the phantom of an agonising suspicion.

But now the phantom had vanished never to return. Armand was sitting close beside her, and he told her that the chief had selected him amongst all the others to stand by him inside the walls of Paris until the last.

"I shall mayhap," thus closed that precious document, "have no means of ascertaining definitely whether you will act in accordance with this letter. But somehow, Armand, I know that you will."

"I know that you will, Armand," reiterated Marguerite fervently.

She had only been too eager to be convinced; the dread and dark suspicion which had been like a hideous poisoned sting had only vaguely touched her soul; it had not gone in very deeply. How could it, when in its death-dealing passage it encountered the rampart of tender, almost motherly love?

Armand, trying to read his sister's thoughts in the depths of her blue eyes, found the look in them limpid and clear. Percy's message to Armand had reassured her just as he had intended that it should do. Fate had dealt over harshly with her as it was, and Blakeney's remorse for the sorrow which he had already caused her, was scarcely less keen than Armand's. He did not wish her to bear the intolerable burden of hatred against her brother; and by binding St. Just close to him at the supreme hour of danger he hoped to prove to the woman whom he loved so passionately that Armand was worthy of trust.

PART III

CHAPTER XXXV. THE LAST PHASE

“Well? How is it now?”

“The last phase, I think.”

“He will yield?”

“He must.”

“Bah! you have said it yourself often enough; those English are tough.”

“It takes time to hack them to pieces, perhaps. In this case even you, citizen Chauvelin, said that it would take time. Well, it has taken just seventeen days, and now the end is in sight.”

It was close on midnight in the guard-room which gave on the innermost cell of the Conciergerie. Heron had just visited the prisoner as was his wont at this hour of the night. He had watched the changing of the guard, inspected the night-watch, questioned the sergeant in charge, and finally he had been on the point of retiring to his own new quarters in the house of Justice, in the near vicinity of the Conciergerie, when citizen Chauvelin entered the guard-room unexpectedly and detained his colleague with the peremptory question:

“How is it now?”

“If you are so near the end, citizen Heron,” he now said, sinking his voice to a whisper, “why not make a final effort and end it to-night?”

“I wish I could; the anxiety is wearing me out more’n him,” added with a jerky movement of the head in direction of the inner cell.

“Shall I try?” rejoined Chauvelin grimly.

“Yes, an you wish.”

Citizen Heron’s long limbs were sprawling on a guard-room chair. In this low narrow room he looked like some giant whose body had been carelessly and loosely put together by a ‘prentice hand in the art of manufacture. His broad shoulders were bent, probably under the weight of anxiety to which he had referred, and his head, with the lank, shaggy hair overshadowing the brow, was sunk deep down on his chest.

Chauvelin looked on his friend and associate with no small measure of contempt. He would no doubt have preferred to conclude the present difficult transaction entirely in his own way and alone; but equally there was no doubt that the Committee of Public Safety did not trust him quite so fully as it used to do before the fiasco at Calais and the blunders of Boulogne. Heron, on the other hand, enjoyed to its outermost the confidence of his colleagues; his ferocious cruelty and his callousness were well known, whilst physically, owing to his great height and bulky if loosely knit frame, he had a decided advantage over his trim and slender friend.

As far as the bringing of prisoners to trial was concerned, the chief agent of the Committee of General Security had been given a perfectly free hand by the decree of the 27th Nivose. At first, therefore, he had experienced no difficulty when he desired to keep the Englishman in close confinement for a time without hurrying on that summary trial and condemnation which the populace had loudly demanded, and to which they felt that they were entitled to as a public holiday. The death of the Scarlet Pimpernel on the guillotine had been a spectacle promised by every demagogue who desired to purchase a few votes by holding out visions of pleasant doings to come; and during the first few days the mob of Paris was content to enjoy the delights of expectation.

But now seventeen days had gone by and still the Englishman was not being brought to trial. The pleasure-loving public was waxing impatient, and earlier this evening, when citizen Heron had shown himself in the stalls of the national theatre, he was greeted by a crowded audience with decided expressions of disapproval and open mutterings of:

“What of the Scarlet Pimpernel?”

It almost looked as if he would have to bring that accursed Englishman to the guillotine without having wrested from him the secret which he would have given a fortune to possess. Chauvelin, who had also been present at the theatre, had heard the expressions of discontent; hence his visit to his colleague at this late hour of the night.

“Shall I try?” he had queried with some impatience, and a deep sigh of satisfaction escaped his thin lips when the chief agent, wearied and discouraged, had reluctantly agreed.

“Let the men make as much noise as they like,” he added with an enigmatical smile. “The Englishman and I will want an accompaniment to our pleasant conversation.”

Heron growled a surly assent, and without another word Chauvelin turned towards the inner cell. As he stepped in he allowed the iron bar to fall into its socket behind him. Then he went farther into the room until the distant recess was fully revealed to him. His tread had been furtive and almost noiseless. Now he paused, for he had caught sight the prisoner. For a moment he stood quite still, with hands clasped behind his back in his wonted attitude — still save for a strange, involuntary twitching of his mouth, and the nervous clasping and interlocking of his fingers behind his back. He was savouring to its utmost fulsomeness the supremest joy which animal man can ever know — the joy of looking on a fallen enemy.

Blakeney sat at the table with one arm resting on it, the emaciated hand tightly clutched, the body leaning forward, the eyes looking into nothingness.

For the moment he was unconscious of Chauvelin’s presence, and the latter could gaze on him to the full content of his heart.

Indeed, to all outward appearances there sat a man whom privations of every sort and kind, the want of fresh air, of proper food, above all, of rest, had worn down physically to a shadow. There was not a particle of colour in cheeks or lips, the skin was grey in hue, the eyes looked like deep caverns, wherein the glow of fever was all that was left of life.

Chauvelin looked on in silence, vaguely stirred by something that he could not define, something that right through his triumphant satisfaction, his hatred and final certainty of revenge, had roused in him a sense almost of admiration.

He gazed on the noiseless figure of the man who had endured so much for an ideal, and as he gazed it seemed to him as if the spirit no longer dwelt in the body, but hovered round in the dank, stuffy air of the narrow cell above the head of the lonely prisoner, crowning it with glory that was no longer of this earth.

Of this the looker-on was conscious despite himself, of that and of the fact that stare as he might, and with perception rendered doubly keen by hate, he could not, in spite of all, find the least trace of mental weakness in that far-seeing gaze which seemed to pierce the prison walls, nor could he see that bodily weakness had tended to subdue the ruling passions.

Sir Percy Blakeney — a prisoner since seventeen days in close, solitary confinement, half-starved, deprived of rest, and of that mental and physical activity which had been the very essence of life to him hitherto — might be outwardly but a shadow of his former brilliant self, but nevertheless he was still that same elegant English gentleman, that prince of dandies whom Chauvelin had first met eighteen months ago at the most courtly Court in Europe. His clothes, despite constant wear and the want of attention from a scrupulous valet, still betrayed the perfection of London tailoring; he had put them on with meticulous care, they were free from the slightest particle of dust, and the filmy folds of priceless Mechlin still half-veiled the delicate whiteness of his shapely hands.

And in the pale, haggard face, in the whole pose of body and of arm, there was still the expression of that indomitable strength of will, that reckless daring, that almost insolent challenge to Fate; it was there untamed, uncrushed. Chauvelin himself could not deny to himself its presence or its force. He felt that behind that smooth brow, which looked waxlike now, the mind was still alert, scheming, plotting, striving for freedom, for conquest and for power, and rendered even doubly keen and virile by the ardour of supreme self-sacrifice.

Chauvelin now made a slight movement and suddenly Blakeney became conscious of his presence, and swift as a flash a smile lit up his wan face.

“Why! if it is not my engaging friend Monsieur Chambertin,” he said gaily.

He rose and stepped forward in the most approved fashion prescribed by the elaborate etiquette of the time. But Chauvelin smiled grimly and a look of almost animal lust gleamed in his pale eyes, for he had noted that as he rose Sir Percy had to seek the support of the table, even whilst a dull film appeared to gather over his eyes.

The gesture had been quick and cleverly disguised, but it had been there nevertheless — that and the livid hue that overspread the face as if consciousness was threatening to go. All of which was sufficient still further to assure the looker-on that that mighty physical strength was giving way at last, that strength which he had hated in his enemy almost as much as he had hated the thinly veiled insolence of his manner.

“And what procures me, sir, the honour of your visit?” continued Blakeney, who had — at any rate, outwardly soon recovered himself, and whose voice, though distinctly hoarse and spent, rang quite cheerfully across the dank narrow cell.

“My desire for your welfare, Sir Percy,” replied Chauvelin with equal pleasantry.

“La, sir; but have you not gratified that desire already, to an extent which leaves no room for further solicitude? But I pray you, will you not sit down?” he continued, turning back toward the table. “I was about to partake of the lavish supper which your friends have provided for me. Will you not share it, sir? You are most royally welcome, and it will mayhap remind you of that supper we shared together in Calais, eh? when you, Monsieur Chambertin, were temporarily in holy orders.”

He laughed, offering his enemy a chair, and pointed with inviting gesture to the hunk of brown bread and the mug of water which stood on the table.

“Such as it is, sir,” he said with a pleasant smile, “it is yours to command.”

Chauvelin sat down. He held his lower lip tightly between his teeth, so tightly that a few drops of blood appeared upon its narrow surface. He was making vigorous efforts to keep his temper under control, for he would not give his enemy the satisfaction of seeing him resent his insolence. He could afford to keep calm now that victory was at last in sight, now that he knew that he had but to raise a finger, and those smiling, impudent lips would be closed forever at last.

“Sir Percy,” he resumed quietly, “no doubt it affords you a certain amount of pleasure to aim your sarcastic shafts at me. I will not begrudge you that pleasure; in your present position, sir, your shafts have little or no sting.”

“And I shall have but few chances left to aim them at your charming self,” interposed Blakeney, who had drawn another chair close to the table and was now sitting opposite his enemy, with the light of the lamp falling full on his own face, as if he wished his enemy to know that he had nothing to hide, no thought, no hope, no fear.

“Exactly,” said Chauvelin dryly. “That being the case, Sir Percy, what say you to no longer wasting the few chances which are left to you for safety? The time is getting on. You are not, I imagine, quite as hopeful as you were even a week ago,... you have never been over-comfortable in this cell, why not end this unpleasant state of affairs now — once and for all? You’ll not have cause to regret it. My word on it.”

Sir Percy leaned back in his chair. He yawned loudly and ostentatiously.

“I pray you, sir, forgive me,” he said. “Never have I been so d — d fatigued. I have not slept for more than a fortnight.”

“Exactly, Sir Percy. A night’s rest would do you a world of good.”

“A night, sir?” exclaimed Blakeney with what seemed like an echo of his former inimitable laugh. “La! I should want a week.”

“I am afraid we could not arrange for that, but one night would greatly refresh you.”

“You are right, sir, you are right; but those d — d fellows in the next room make so much noise.”

“I would give strict orders that perfect quietude reigned in the guard-room this night,” said Chauvelin, murmuring softly, and there was a gentle purr in his voice, “and that you were left undisturbed for several hours. I would give orders that a comforting supper be served to you at once, and that everything be done to minister to your wants.”

“That sounds d — d alluring, sir. Why did you not suggest this before?”

“You were so — what shall I say — so obstinate, Sir Percy?”

“Call it pig-headed, my dear Monsieur Chambertin,” retorted Blakeney gaily, “truly you would oblige me.”

“In any case you, sir, were acting in direct opposition to your own interests.”

“Therefore you came,” concluded Blakeney airily, “like the good Samaritan to take compassion on me and my troubles, and to lead me straight away to comfort, a good supper and a downy bed.”

“Admirably put, Sir Percy,” said Chauvelin blandly; “that is exactly my mission.”

“How will you set to work, Monsieur Chambertin?”

"Quite easily, if you, Sir Percy, will yield to the persuasion of my friend citizen Heron."

"Ah!"

"Why, yes! He is anxious to know where little Capet is. A reasonable whim, you will own, considering that the disappearance of the child is causing him grave anxiety."

"And you, Monsieur Chambertin?" queried Sir Percy with that suspicion of insolence in his manner which had the power to irritate his enemy even now. "And yourself, sir; what are your wishes in the matter?"

"Mine, Sir Percy?" retorted Chauvelin. "Mine? Why, to tell you the truth, the fate of little Capet interests me but little. Let him rot in Austria or in our prisons, I care not which. He'll never trouble France overmuch, I imagine. The teachings of old Simon will not tend to make a leader or a king out of the puny brat whom you chose to drag out of our keeping. My wishes, sir, are the annihilation of your accursed League, and the lasting disgrace, if not the death, of its chief."

He had spoken more hotly than he had intended, but all the pent-up rage of the past eighteen months, the recollections of Calais and of Boulogne, had all surged up again in his mind, because despite the closeness of these prison walls, despite the grim shadow of starvation and of death that beckoned so close at hand, he still encountered a pair of mocking eyes, fixed with relentless insolence upon him.

Whilst he spoke Blakeney had once more leaned forward, resting his elbows upon the table. Now he drew nearer to him the wooden platter on which reposed that very uninviting piece of dry bread. With solemn intentness he proceeded to break the bread into pieces; then he offered the platter to Chauvelin.

"I am sorry," he said pleasantly, "that I cannot offer you more dainty fare, sir, but this is all that your friends have supplied me with to-day."

He crumbled some of the dry bread in his slender fingers, then started munching the crumbs with apparent relish. He poured out some water into the mug and drank it. Then he said with a light laugh:

"Even the vinegar which that ruffian Brogard served us at Calais was preferable to this, do you not imagine so, my good Monsieur Chambertin?"

Chauvelin made no reply. Like a feline creature on the prowl, he was watching the prey that had so nearly succumbed to his talons. Blakeney's face now was positively ghastly. The effort to speak, to laugh, to appear unconcerned, was apparently beyond his strength. His cheeks and lips were livid in hue, the skin clung like a thin layer of wax to the bones of cheek and jaw, and the heavy lids that fell over the eyes had purple patches on them like lead.

To a system in such an advanced state of exhaustion the stale water and dusty bread must have been terribly nauseating, and Chauvelin himself callous and thirsting for vengeance though he was, could hardly bear to look calmly on the martyrdom of this man whom he and his colleagues were torturing in order to gain their own ends.

An ashen hue, which seemed like the shadow of the hand of death, passed over the prisoner's face. Chauvelin felt compelled to avert his gaze. A feeling that was almost akin to remorse had stirred a hidden chord in his heart. The feeling did not last — the heart had been too long atrophied by the constantly recurring spectacles of cruelties, massacres, and wholesale hecatombs perpetrated in the past eighteen months in the name of liberty and fraternity to be capable of a sustained effort in the direction of gentleness or of pity. Any noble instinct in these revolutionaries had long ago been drowned in a whirlpool of exploits that would forever sully the records of humanity; and this keeping of a fellow-creature on the rack in order to wring from him a Judas-like betrayal was but a complement to a record of infamy that had ceased by its very magnitude to weigh upon their souls.

Chauvelin was in no way different from his colleagues; the crimes in which he had had no hand he had condoned by continuing to serve the Government that had committed them, and his ferocity in the present case was increased a thousandfold by his personal hatred for the man who had so often fooled and baffled him.

When he looked round a second or two later that ephemeral fit of remorse did its final vanishing; he had once more encountered the pleasant smile, the laughing if ashen-pale face of his unconquered foe.

"Only a passing giddiness, my dear sir," said Sir Percy lightly. "As you were saying—"

At the airily-spoken words, at the smile that accompanied them, Chauvelin had jumped to his feet. There was something almost supernatural, weird, and impish about the present situation, about this dying man who, like an impudent schoolboy, seemed to be mocking Death with his tongue in his cheek, about his laugh that appeared to find its echo in a widely yawning grave.

"In the name of God, Sir Percy," he said roughly, as he brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table, "this situation is intolerable. Bring it to an end to-night!"

"Why, sir?" retorted Blakeney, "methought you and your kind did not believe in God."

"No. But you English do."

"We do. But we do not care to hear His name on your lips."

"Then in the name of the wife whom you love—"

But even before the words had died upon his lips, Sir Percy, too, had risen to his feet.

"Have done, man — have done," he broke in hoarsely, and despite weakness, despite exhaustion and weariness, there was such a dangerous look in his hollow eyes as he leaned across the table that Chauvelin drew back a step or two, and — vaguely fearful — looked furtively towards the opening into the guard-room. "Have done," he reiterated for the third time; "do not name her, or by the living God whom you dared to invoke I'll find strength yet to smite you in the face."

But Chauvelin, after that first moment of almost superstitious fear, had quickly recovered his sang-froid.

"Little Capet, Sir Percy," he said, meeting the other's threatening glance with an imperturbable smile, "tell me where to find him, and you may yet live to savour the caresses of the most beautiful woman in England."

He had meant it as a taunt, the final turn of the thumb-screw applied to a dying man, and he had in that watchful, keen mind of his well weighed the full consequences of the taunt.

The next moment he had paid to the full the anticipated price. Sir Percy had picked up the pewter mug from the table — it was half-filled with brackish water — and with a hand that trembled but slightly he hurled it straight at his opponent's face.

The heavy mug did not hit citizen Chauvelin; it went crashing against the stone wall opposite. But the water was trickling from the top of his head all down his eyes and cheeks. He shrugged his shoulders with a look of benign indulgence directed at his enemy, who had fallen back into his chair exhausted with the effort.

Then he took out his handkerchief and calmly wiped the water from his face.

"Not quite so straight a shot as you used to be, Sir Percy," he said mockingly.

"No, sir — apparently — not."

The words came out in gasps. He was like a man only partly conscious. The lips were parted, the eyes closed, the head leaning against the high back of the chair. For the space of one second Chauvelin feared that his zeal had outrun his prudence, that he had dealt a death-blow to a man in the last stage of exhaustion, where he had only wished to fan the flickering flame of life. Hastily — for the seconds seemed precious — he ran to the opening that led into the guard-room.

"Brandy — quick!" he cried.

Heron looked up, roused from the semi-somnolence in which he had lain for the past half-hour. He disentangled his long limbs from out the guard-room chair.

"Eh?" he queried. "What is it?"

"Brandy," reiterated Chauvelin impatiently; "the prisoner has fainted."

"Bah!" retorted the other with a callous shrug of the shoulders, "you are not going to revive him with brandy, I imagine."

"No. But you will, citizen Heron," rejoined the other dryly, "for if you do not he'll be dead in an hour!"

"Devils in hell!" exclaimed Heron, "you have not killed him? You — you d — d fool!"

He was wide awake enough now; wide awake and shaking with fury. Almost foaming at the mouth and uttering volleys of the choicest oaths, he elbowed his way roughly through the groups of soldiers who were crowding round the centre table of the guard-room, smoking and throwing dice or playing cards. They made way for him as hurriedly as they could, for it was not safe to thwart the citizen agent when he was in a rage.

Heron walked across to the opening and lifted the iron bar. With scant ceremony he pushed his colleague aside and strode into the cell, whilst Chauvelin, seemingly not resenting the other's ruffianly manners and violent language, followed close upon his heel.

In the centre of the room both men paused, and Heron turned with a surly growl to his friend.

"You vowed he would be dead in an hour," he said reproachfully.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"It does not look like it now certainly," he said dryly.

Blakeney was sitting — as was his wont — close to the table, with one arm leaning on it, the other, tightly clenched, resting upon his knee. A ghost of a smile hovered round his lips.

"Not in an hour, citizen Heron," he said, and his voice flow was scarce above a whisper, "nor yet in two."

"You are a fool, man," said Heron roughly. "You have had seventeen days of this. Are you not sick of it?"

"Heartily, my dear friend," replied Blakeney a little more firmly.

"Seventeen days," reiterated the other, nodding his shaggy head; "you came here on the 2nd of Pluviose, today is the 19th."

"The 19th Pluviose?" interposed Sir Percy, and a strange gleam suddenly flashed in his eyes. "Demn it, sir, and in Christian parlance what may that day be?"

"The 7th of February at your service, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin quietly.

"I thank you, sir. In this d — d hole I had lost count of time."

Chauvelin, unlike his rough and blundering colleague, had been watching the prisoner very closely for the last moment or two, conscious of a subtle, undefinable change that had come over the man during those few seconds while he, Chauvelin, had thought him dying. The pose was certainly the old familiar one, the head erect, the hand clenched, the eyes looking through and beyond the stone walls; but there was an air of listlessness in the stoop of the shoulders, and — except for that one brief gleam just now — a look of more complete weariness round the hollow eyes! To the keen watcher it appeared as if that sense of living power, of unconquered will and defiant mind was no longer there, and as if he himself need no longer fear that almost supersensual thrill which had a while ago kindled in him a vague sense of admiration — almost of remorse.

Even as he gazed, Blakeney slowly turned his eyes full upon him. Chauvelin's heart gave a triumphant bound.

With a mocking smile he met the wearied look, the pitiable appeal. His turn had come at last — his turn to mock and to exult. He knew that what he was watching now was no longer the last phase of a long and noble martyrdom; it was the end — the inevitable end — that for which he had schemed and striven, for which he had schooled his heart to ferocity and callousness that were devilish in their intensity. It was the end indeed, the slow descent of a soul from the giddy heights of attempted self-sacrifice, where it had striven to soar for a time, until the body and the will both succumbed together and dragged it down with them into the abyss of submission and of irreparable shame.

CHAPTER XXXVI. SUBMISSION

Silence reigned in the narrow cell for a few moments, whilst two human jackals stood motionless over their captured prey.

A savage triumph gleamed in Chauvelin's eyes, and even Heron, dull and brutal though he was, had become vaguely conscious of the great change that had come over the prisoner.

Blakeney, with a gesture and a sigh of hopeless exhaustion had once more rested both his elbows on the table; his head fell heavy and almost lifeless downward in his arms.

"Curse you, man!" cried Heron almost involuntarily. "Why in the name of hell did you wait so long?"

Then, as the prisoner made no reply, but only raised his head slightly, and looked on the other two men with dulled, wearied eyes, Chauvelin interposed calmly:

"More than a fortnight has been wasted in useless obstinacy, Sir Percy. Fortunately it is not too late."

"Capet?" said Heron hoarsely, "tell us, where is Capet?"

He leaned across the table, his eyes were bloodshot with the keenness of his excitement, his voice shook with the passionate desire for the crowning triumph.

"If you'll only not worry me," murmured the prisoner; and the whisper came so laboriously and so low that both men were forced to bend their ears close to the scarcely moving lips; "if you will let me sleep and rest, and leave me in peace—"

"The peace of the grave, man," retorted Chauvelin roughly; "if you will only speak. Where is Capet?"

"I cannot tell you; the way is long, the road — intricate."

"Bah!"

"I'll lead you to him, if you will give me rest."

"We don't want you to lead us anywhere," growled Heron with a smothered curse; "tell us where Capet is; we'll find him right enough."

"I cannot explain; the way is intricate; the place off the beaten track, unknown except to me and my friends."

Once more that shadow, which was so like the passing of the hand of Death, overspread the prisoner's face; his head rolled back against the chair.

"He'll die before he can speak," muttered Chauvelin under his breath. "You usually are well provided with brandy, citizen Heron."

The latter no longer demurred. He saw the danger as clearly as did his colleague. It had been hell's own luck if the prisoner were to die now when he seemed ready to give in. He produced a flask from the pocket of his coat, and this he held to Blakeney's lips.

"Beastly stuff," murmured the latter feebly. "I think I'd sooner faint — than drink."

"Capet? where is Capet?" reiterated Heron impatiently. "One — two — three hundred leagues from here."

I must let one of my friends know; he'll communicate with the others; they must be prepared," replied the prisoner slowly.

Heron uttered a blasphemous oath.

"Where is Capet? Tell us where Capet is, or—"

He was like a raging tiger that had thought to hold its prey and suddenly realised that it was being snatched from him. He raised his fist, and without doubt the next moment he would have silenced forever the lips that held the precious secret, but Chauvelin fortunately was quick enough to seize his wrist.

"Have a care, citizen," he said peremptorily; "have a care! You called me a fool just now when you thought I had killed the prisoner. It is his secret we want first; his death can follow afterwards."

"Yes, but not in this d — d hole," murmured Blakeney.

"On the guillotine if you'll speak," cried Heron, whose exasperation was getting the better of his self-interest, "but if you'll not speak then it shall be starvation in this hole — yes, starvation," he growled, showing a row of large and uneven teeth like those of some mongrel cur, "for I'll have that door walled in to-night, and not another living soul shall cross this threshold again until your flesh has rotted on your bones and the rats have had their fill of you."

The prisoner raised his head slowly, a shiver shook him as if caused by ague, and his eyes, that appeared almost sightless, now looked with a strange glance of horror on his enemy.

"I'll die in the open," he whispered, "not in this d — d hole."

"Then tell us where Capet is."

"I cannot; I wish to God I could. But I'll take you to him, I swear I will. I'll make my friends give him up to you. Do you think that I would not tell you now, if I could?"

Heron, whose every instinct of tyranny revolted against this thwarting of his will, would have continued to heckle the prisoner even now, had not Chauvelin suddenly interposed with an authoritative gesture.

"You'll gain nothing this way, citizen," he said quietly; "the man's mind is wandering; he is probably quite unable to give you clear directions at this moment."

"What am I to do, then?" muttered the other roughly.

"He cannot live another twenty-four hours now, and would only grow more and more helpless as time went on."

"Unless you relax your strict regime with him."

"And if I do we'll only prolong this situation indefinitely; and in the meanwhile how do we know that the brat is not being spirited away out of the country?"

The prisoner, with his head once more buried in his arms, had fallen into a kind of torpor, the only kind of sleep that the exhausted system would allow. With a brutal gesture Heron shook him by the shoulder.

"He," he shouted, "none of that, you know. We have not settled the matter of young Capet yet."

Then, as the prisoner made no movement, and the chief agent indulged in one of his favourite volleys of oaths, Chauvelin placed a peremptory hand on his colleague's shoulder.

"I tell you, citizen, that this is no use," he said firmly. "Unless you are prepared to give up all thoughts of finding Capet, you must try and curb your temper, and try diplomacy where force is sure to fail."

"Diplomacy?" retorted the other with a sneer. "Bah! it served you well at Boulogne last autumn, did it not, citizen Chauvelin?"

"It has served me better now," rejoined the other imperturbably. "You will own, citizen, that it is my diplomacy which has placed within your reach the ultimate hope of finding Capet."

"H'm!" muttered the other, "you advised us to starve the prisoner. Are we any nearer to knowing his secret?"

"Yes. By a fortnight of weariness, of exhaustion and of starvation, you are nearer to it by the weakness of the man whom in his full strength you could never hope to conquer."

"But if the cursed Englishman won't speak, and in the meanwhile dies on my hands—"

"He won't do that if you will accede to his wish. Give him some good food now, and let him sleep till dawn."

"And at dawn he'll defy me again. I believe now that he has some scheme in his mind, and means to play us a trick."

"That, I imagine, is more than likely," retorted Chauvelin dryly; "though," he added with a contemptuous nod of the head directed at the huddled-up figure of his once brilliant enemy, "neither mind nor body seem to me to be in a sufficiently active state just now for hatching plot or intrigue; but even if — vaguely floating through his clouded mind — there has sprung some little scheme for evasion, I give you my word, citizen Heron, that you can thwart him completely, and gain all that you desire, if you will only follow my advice."

There had always been a great amount of persuasive power in citizen Chauvelin, ex-envoy of the revolutionary Government of France at the Court of St. James, and that same persuasive eloquence did not fail now in its effect on the chief agent of the Committee of General Security. The latter was made of coarser stuff than his more brilliant colleague. Chauvelin was like a wily and sleek panther that is furtive in its movements, that will lure its prey, watch it, follow it with stealthy footsteps, and only pounce on it when it is least wary, whilst Heron was more like a raging bull that tosses its head in a blind, irresponsible fashion, rushes at an obstacle without gauging its resisting powers, and allows its victim to slip from beneath its weight through the very clumsiness and brutality of its assault.

Still Chauvelin had two heavy black marks against him — those of his failures at Calais and Boulogne. Heron, rendered cautious both by the deadly danger in which he stood and the sense of his own incompetence to deal with the present situation, tried to resist the other's authority as well as his persuasion.

"Your advice was not of great use to citizen Collot last autumn at Boulogne," he said, and spat on the ground by way of expressing both his independence and his contempt.

"Still, citizen Heron," retorted Chauvelin with unruffled patience, "it is the best advice that you are likely to get in the present emergency. You have eyes to see, have you not? Look on your prisoner at this moment. Unless something is done, and at once, too, he will be past negotiating with in the next twenty-four hours; then what will follow?"

He put his thin hand once more on his colleague's grubby coat-sleeve, he drew him closer to himself away from the vicinity of that huddled figure, that captive lion, wrapped in a torpid somnolence that looked already so like the last long sleep.

"What will follow, citizen Heron?" he reiterated, sinking his voice to a whisper; "sooner or later some meddlesome busybody who sits in the Assembly of the Convention will get wind that little Capet is no longer in the Temple prison, that a pauper child was substituted for him, and that you, citizen Heron, together with the commissaries in charge, have thus been fooling the nation and its representatives for over a fortnight. What will follow then, think you?"

And he made an expressive gesture with his outstretched fingers across his throat.

Heron found no other answer but blasphemy.

"I'll make that cursed Englishman speak yet," he said with a fierce oath.

"You cannot," retorted Chauvelin decisively. "In his present state he is incapable of it, even if he would, which also is doubtful."

"Ah! then you do think that he still means to cheat us?"

"Yes, I do. But I also know that he is no longer in a physical state to do it. No doubt he thinks that he is. A man of that type is sure to overvalue his own strength; but look at him, citizen Heron. Surely you must see that we have nothing to fear from him now."

Heron now was like a voracious creature that has two victims lying ready for his gluttonous jaws. He was loath to let either of them go. He hated the very thought of seeing the Englishman being led out of this narrow cell, where he had kept a watchful eye over him night and day for a fortnight, satisfied that with every day, every hour, the chances of escape became more improbable and more rare; at the same time there was the possibility of the recapture of little Capet, a possibility which made Heron's brain reel with the delightful vista of it, and which might never come about if the prisoner remained silent to the end.

"I wish I were quite sure," he said sullenly, "that you were body and soul in accord with me."

"I am in accord with you, citizen Heron," rejoined the other earnestly — "body and soul in accord with you. Do you not believe that I hate this man — aye! hate him with a hatred ten thousand times more strong than yours? I want his death — Heaven or hell alone know how I long for that — but what I long for most is his lasting disgrace. For that I have worked, citizen Heron — for that I advised and helped you. When first you captured this man you wanted summarily to try him, to send him to the guillotine amidst the joy of the populace of Paris, and crowned with a splendid halo of martyrdom. That man, citizen Heron, would have baffled you, mocked you, and fooled you even on the steps of the scaffold. In the zenith of his strength and of insurmountable good luck you and all your myrmidons and all the assembled guard of Paris would have had no power over him. The day that you led him out of this cell in order to take him to trial or to the guillotine would have been that of your hopeless discomfiture. Having once walked out of this cell hale, hearty and alert, be the escort round him ever so strong, he never would have re-entered it again. Of that I am as convinced as that I am alive. I know the man; you don't. Mine are not the only fingers through which he has slipped. Ask citizen Collot d'Herbois, ask Sergeant Bibot at the barrier of Menilmontant, ask General Santerre and his guards. They all have a tale to tell. Did I believe in God or the devil, I should also believe that this man has supernatural powers and a host of demons at his beck and call."

"Yet you talk now of letting him walk out of this cell to-morrow?"

"He is a different man now, citizen Heron. On my advice you placed him on a regime that has counteracted the supernatural power by simple physical exhaustion, and driven to the four winds the host of demons who no doubt fled in the face of starvation."

"If only I thought that the recapture of Capet was as vital to you as it is to me," said Heron, still unconvinced.

"The capture of Capet is just as vital to me as it is to you," rejoined Chauvelin earnestly, "if it is brought about through the instrumentality of the Englishman."

He paused, looking intently on his colleague, whose shifty eyes encountered his own. Thus eye to eye the two men at last understood one another.

"Ah!" said Heron with a snort, "I think I understand."

"I am sure that you do," responded Chauvelin dryly. "The disgrace of this cursed Scarlet Pimpernel and his League is as vital to me, and more, as the capture of Capet is to you. That is why I showed you the way how to bring that meddlesome adventurer to his knees; that is why I will help you now both to find Capet and with his aid and to wreak what reprisals you like on him in the end."

Heron before he spoke again cast one more look on the prisoner. The latter had not stirred; his face was hidden, but the hands, emaciated, nerveless and waxen, like those of the dead, told a more eloquent tale, mayhap, than the eyes could do. The chief agent of the Committee of General Security walked deliberately round the table until he stood once more close beside the man from whom he longed with passionate ardour to wrest an all-important secret. With brutal, grimy hand he raised the head that lay, sunken and inert, against the table; with callous eyes he gazed attentively on the face that was then revealed to him, he looked on the waxen flesh, the hollow eyes, the bloodless lips; then he shrugged his wide shoulders, and with a laugh that surely must have caused joy in hell, he allowed the wearied head to fall back against the outstretched arms, and turned once again to his colleague.

"I think you are right, citizen Chauvelin," he said; "there is not much supernatural power here. Let me hear your advice."

CHAPTER XXXVII. CHAUVELIN'S ADVICE

Citizen Chauvelin had drawn his colleague with him to the end of the cell that was farthest away from the recess, and the table at which the prisoner was sitting.

Here the noise and hubbub that went on constantly in the guard room would effectually drown a whispered conversation. Chauvelin called to the sergeant to hand him a couple of chairs over the barrier. These he placed against the wall opposite the opening, and beckoning Heron to sit down, he did likewise, placing himself close to his colleague.

From where the two men now sat they could see both into the guard-room opposite them and into the recess at the furthest end of the cell.

"First of all," began Chauvelin after a while, and sinking his voice to a whisper, "let me understand you thoroughly, citizen Heron. Do you want the death of the Englishman, either to-day or to-morrow, either in this prison or on the guillotine? For that now is easy of accomplishment; or do you want, above all, to get hold of little Capet?"

"It is Capet I want," growled Heron savagely under his breath. "Capet! Capet! My own neck is dependent on my finding Capet. Curse you, have I not told you that clearly enough?"

"You have told it me very clearly, citizen Heron; but I wished to make assurance doubly sure, and also make you understand that I, too, want the Englishman to betray little Capet into your hands. I want that more even than I do his death."

"Then in the name of hell, citizen, give me your advice."

"My advice to you, citizen Heron, is this: Give your prisoner now just a sufficiency of food to revive him — he will have had a few moments' sleep — and when he has eaten, and, mayhap, drunk a glass of wine, he will, no doubt, feel a recrudescence of strength, then give him pen and ink and paper. He must, as he says, write to one of his followers, who, in his turn, I suppose, will communicate with the others, bidding them to be prepared to deliver up little Capet to us; the letter must make it clear to that crowd of English gentlemen that their beloved chief is giving up the uncrowned King of France to us in exchange for his own safety. But I think you will agree with me, citizen Heron, that it would not be over-prudent on our part to allow that same gallant crowd to be forewarned too soon of the proposed doings of their chief. Therefore, I think, we'll explain to the prisoner that his follower, whom he will first apprise of his intentions, shall start with us to-morrow on our expedition, and accompany us until its last stage, when, if it is found necessary, he may be sent on ahead, strongly escorted of course, and with personal messages from the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel to the members of his League."

"What will be the good of that?" broke in Heron viciously. "Do you want one of his accursed followers to be ready to give him a helping hand on the way if he tries to slip through our fingers?"

"Patience, patience, my good Heron!" rejoined Chauvelin with a placid smile. "Hear me out to the end. Time is precious. You shall offer what criticism you will when I have finished, but not before."

"Go on, then. I listen."

"I am not only proposing that one member of the Scarlet Pimpernel League shall accompany us to-morrow," continued Chauvelin, "but I would also force the prisoner's wife — Marguerite Blakeney — to follow in our train."

"A woman? Bah! What for?"

"I will tell you the reason of this presently. In her case I should not let the prisoner know beforehand that she too will form a part of our expedition. Let this come as a pleasing surprise for him. She could join us on our way out of Paris."

"How will you get hold of her?"

"Easily enough. I know where to find her. I traced her myself a few days ago to a house in the Rue de Charonne, and she is not likely to have gone away from Paris while her husband was at the Conciergerie. But this is a digression, let me proceed more consecutively. The letter, as I have said, being written to-night by the prisoner to one of his followers, I will myself see that it is delivered into the right hands. You, citizen Heron, will in the meanwhile make all arrangements for the journey. We ought to start at dawn, and we ought to be prepared, especially during the first fifty leagues of the way, against organised attack in case the Englishman leads us into an ambush."

"Yes. He might even do that, curse him!" muttered Heron.

"He might, but it is unlikely. Still it is best to be prepared. Take a strong escort, citizen, say twenty or thirty men, picked and trained soldiers who would make short work of civilians, however well-armed they might be. There are twenty members — including the chief — in that Scarlet Pimpernel League, and I do not quite see how from this cell the prisoner could organise an ambuscade against us at a given time. Anyhow, that is a matter for you to decide. I have still to place before you a scheme which is a measure of safety for ourselves and our men against ambush as well as against trickery, and which I feel sure you will pronounce quite adequate."

"Let me hear it, then!"

"The prisoner will have to travel by coach, of course. You can travel with him, if you like, and put him in irons, and thus avert all chances of his escaping on the road. But" — and here Chauvelin made a long pause, which had the effect of holding his colleague's attention still more closely — "remember that we shall have his wife and one of his friends with us. Before we finally leave Paris tomorrow we will explain to the prisoner that at the first attempt to escape on his part, at the slightest suspicion that he has tricked us for his own ends or is leading us into an ambush — at the slightest suspicion, I say — you, citizen Heron, will order his friend first, and then Marguerite Blakeney herself, to be summarily shot before his eyes."

Heron gave a long, low whistle. Instinctively he threw a furtive, backward glance at the prisoner, then he raised his shifty eyes to his colleague.

There was unbounded admiration expressed in them. One blackguard had met another — a greater one than himself — and was proud to acknowledge him as his master.

"By Lucifer, citizen Chauvelin," he said at last, "I should never have thought of such a thing myself."

Chauvelin put up his hand with a gesture of self-deprecation.

"I certainly think that measure ought to be adequate," he said with a gentle air of assumed modesty, "unless you would prefer to arrest the woman and lodge her here, keeping her here as an hostage."

"No, no!" said Heron with a gruff laugh; "that idea does not appeal to me nearly so much as the other. I should not feel so secure on the way.... I should always be thinking that that cursed woman had been allowed to escape.... No! no! I would rather keep her under my own eye — just as you suggest, citizen Chauvelin... and under the prisoner's, too," he added with a coarse jest. "If he did not actually see her, he might be more ready to try and save himself at her expense. But, of course, he could not see her shot before his eyes. It is a perfect plan, citizen, and does you infinite credit; and if the Englishman tricked us," he concluded with a fierce and savage oath, "and we did not find Capet at the end of the journey, I would gladly strangle his wife and his friend with my own hands."

"A satisfaction which I would not begrudge you, citizen," said Chauvelin dryly. "Perhaps you are right... the woman had best be kept under your own eye... the prisoner will never risk her safety on that, I would stake my life. We'll deliver our final 'either — or' the moment that she has joined our party, and before we start further on our way. Now, citizen Heron, you have heard my advice; are you prepared to follow it?"

"To the last letter," replied the other.

And their two hands met in a grasp of mutual understanding — two hands already indelibly stained with much innocent blood, more deeply stained now with seventeen past days of inhumanity and miserable treachery to come.

CHAPTER XXXVIII. CAPITULATION

What occurred within the inner cell of the Conciergerie prison within the next half-hour of that 16th day of Pluviose in the year II of the Republic is, perhaps, too well known to history to need or bear overfull repetition.

Chroniclers intimate with the inner history of those infamous days have told us how the chief agent of the Committee of General Security gave orders one hour after midnight that hot soup, white bread and wine be served to the prisoner, who for close on fourteen days previously had been kept on short rations of black bread and water; the sergeant in charge of the guard-room watch for the night also received strict orders that that same prisoner was on no account to be disturbed until the hour of six in the morning, when he was to be served with anything in the way of breakfast that he might fancy.

All this we know, and also that citizen Heron, having given all necessary orders for the morning's expedition, returned to the Conciergerie, and found his colleague Chauvelin waiting for him in the guard-room.

"Well?" he asked with febrile impatience—"the prisoner?"

"He seems better and stronger," replied Chauvelin.

"Not too well, I hope?"

"No, no, only just well enough."

"You have seen him — since his supper?"

"Only from the doorway. It seems he ate and drank hardly at all, and the sergeant had some difficulty in keeping him awake until you came."

"Well, now for the letter," concluded Heron with the same marked feverishness of manner which sat so curiously on his uncouth personality. "Pen, ink and paper, sergeant!" he commanded.

"On the table, in the prisoner's cell, citizen," replied the sergeant.

He preceded the two citizens across the guard-room to the doorway, and raised for them the iron bar, lowering it back after them.

The next moment Heron and Chauvelin were once more face to face with their prisoner.

Whether by accident or design the lamp had been so placed that as the two men approached its light fell full upon their faces, while that of the prisoner remained in shadow. He was leaning forward with both elbows on the table, his thin, tapering fingers toying with the pen and ink-horn which had been placed close to his hand.

"I trust that everything has been arranged for your comfort, Sir Percy?" Chauvelin asked with a sarcastic little smile.

"I thank you, sir," replied Blakeney politely.

"You feel refreshed, I hope?"

"Greatly so, I assure you. But I am still demmed sleepy; and if you would kindly be brief—"

"You have not changed your mind, sir?" queried Chauvelin, and a note of anxiety, which he vainly tried to conceal, quivered in his voice.

"No, my good M. Chambertin," replied Blakeney with the same urbane courtesy, "I have not changed my mind."

A sigh of relief escaped the lips of both the men. The prisoner certainly had spoken in a clearer and firmer voice; but whatever renewed strength wine and food had imparted to him he apparently did not mean to employ in renewed obstinacy. Chauvelin, after a moment's pause, resumed more calmly:

"You are prepared to direct us to the place where little Capet lies hidden?"

"I am prepared to do anything, sir, to get out of this d—d hole."

"Very well. My colleague, citizen Heron, has arranged for an escort of twenty men picked from the best regiment of the Garde de Paris to accompany us — yourself, him and me — to wherever you will direct us. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You must not imagine for a moment that we, on the other hand, guarantee to give you your life and freedom even if this expedition prove unsuccessful."

"I would not venture on suggesting such a wild proposition, sir," said Blakeney placidly.

Chauvelin looked keenly on him. There was something in the tone of that voice that he did not altogether like — something that reminded him of an evening at Calais, and yet again of a day at Boulogne. He could not read the expression in the eyes, so with a quick gesture he pulled the lamp forward so that its light now fell full on the face of the prisoner.

"Ah! that is certainly better, is it not, my dear M. Chambertin?" said Sir Percy, beaming on his adversary with a pleasant smile.

His face, though still of the same ashen hue, looked serene if hopelessly wearied; the eyes seemed to mock. But this Chauvelin decided in himself must have been a trick of his own overwrought fancy. After a brief moment's pause he resumed dryly:

"If, however, the expedition turns out successful in every way — if little Capet, without much trouble to our escort, falls safe and sound into our hands — if certain contingencies which I am about to tell you all fall out as we wish — then, Sir Percy, I see no reason why the Government of this country should not exercise its prerogative of mercy towards you after all."

"An exercise, my dear M. Chambertin, which must have wearied through frequent repetition," retorted Blakeney with the same imperturbable smile.

"The contingency at present is somewhat remote; when the time comes we'll talk this matter over.... I will make no promise... and, anyhow, we can discuss it later."

"At present we are but wasting our valuable time over so trifling a matter.... If you'll excuse me, sir... I am so demmed fatigued—"

"Then you will be glad to have everything settled quickly, I am sure."

"Exactly, sir."

Heron was taking no part in the present conversation. He knew that his temper was not likely to remain within bounds, and though he had nothing but contempt for his colleague's courtly manners, yet vaguely in his stupid, blundering way he grudgingly admitted that mayhap it was better to allow citizen Chauvelin to deal with the Englishman. There was always the danger that if his own violent

temper got the better of him, he might even at this eleventh hour order this insolent prisoner to summary trial and the guillotine, and thus lose the final chance of the more important capture.

He was sprawling on a chair in his usual slouching manner with his big head sunk between his broad shoulders, his shifty, prominent eyes wandering restlessly from the face of his colleague to that of the other man.

But now he gave a grunt of impatience.

"We are wasting time, citizen Chauvelin," he muttered. "I have still a great deal to see to if we are to start at dawn. Get the d — d letter written, and—"

The rest of the phrase was lost in an indistinct and surly murmur. Chauvelin, after a shrug of the shoulders, paid no further heed to him; he turned, bland and urbane, once more to the prisoner.

"I see with pleasure, Sir Percy," he said, "that we thoroughly understand one another. Having had a few hours' rest you will, I know, feel quite ready for the expedition. Will you kindly indicate to me the direction in which we will have to travel?"

"Northwards all the way."

"Towards the coast?"

"The place to which we must go is about seven leagues from the sea."

"Our first objective then will be Beauvais, Amiens, Abbeville, Crecy, and so on?"

"Precisely."

"As far as the forest of Boulogne, shall we say?"

"Where we shall come off the beaten track, and you will have to trust to my guidance."

"We might go there now, Sir Percy, and leave you here."

"You might. But you would not then find the child. Seven leagues is not far from the coast. He might slip through your fingers."

"And my colleague Heron, being disappointed, would inevitably send you to the guillotine."

"Quite so," rejoined the prisoner placidly. "Methought, sir, that we had decided that I should lead this little expedition? Surely," he added, "it is not so much the Dauphin whom you want as my share in this betrayal."

"You are right as usual, Sir Percy. Therefore let us take that as settled. We go as far as Crecy, and thence place ourselves entirely in your hands."

"The journey should not take more than three days, sir."

"During which you will travel in a coach in the company of my friend Heron."

"I could have chosen pleasanter company, sir; still, it will serve."

"This being settled, Sir Percy. I understand that you desire to communicate with one of your followers."

"Some one must let the others know... those who have the Dauphin in their charge."

"Quite so. Therefore I pray you write to one of your friends that you have decided to deliver the Dauphin into our hands in exchange for your own safety."

"You said just now that this you would not guarantee," interposed Blakeney quietly.

"If all turns out well," retorted Chauvelin with a show of contempt, "and if you will write the exact letter which I shall dictate, we might even give you that guarantee."

"The quality of your mercy, sir, passes belief."

"Then I pray you write. Which of your followers will have the honour of the communication?"

"My brother-in-law, Armand St. Just; he is still in Paris, I believe. He can let the others know."

Chauvelin made no immediate reply. He paused awhile, hesitating. Would Sir Percy Blakeney be ready — if his own safety demanded it — to sacrifice the man who had betrayed him? In the momentous "either — or" that was to be put to him, by-and-by, would he choose his own life and leave Armand St. Just to perish? It was not for Chauvelin — or any man of his stamp — to judge of what Blakeney would do under such circumstances, and had it been a question of St. Just alone, mayhap Chauvelin would have hesitated still more at the present juncture.

But the friend as hostage was only destined to be a minor leverage for the final breaking-up of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel through the disgrace of its chief. There was the wife — Marguerite Blakeney — sister of St. Just, joint and far more important hostage, whose very close affection for her brother might prove an additional trump card in that handful which Chauvelin already held.

Blakeney paid no heed seemingly to the other's hesitation. He did not even look up at him, but quietly drew pen and paper towards him, and made ready to write.

"What do you wish me to say?" he asked simply.

"Will that young blackguard answer your purpose, citizen Chauvelin?" queried Heron roughly.

Obviously the same doubt had crossed his mind. Chauvelin quickly re-assured him.

"Better than any one else," he said firmly. "Will you write at my dictation, Sir Percy?"

"I am waiting to do so, my dear sir."

"Begin your letter as you wish, then; now continue."

And he began to dictate slowly, watching every word as it left Blakeney's pen.

"I cannot stand my present position any longer. Citizen Heron, and also M. Chauvelin—' Yes, Sir Percy, Chauvelin, not Chambertin ... C, H, A, U, V, E, L, I, N.... That is quite right— 'have made this prison a perfect hell for me.'"

Sir Percy looked up from his writing, smiling.

"You wrong yourself, my dear M. Chambertin!" he said; "I have really been most comfortable."

"I wish to place the matter before your friends in as indulgent a manner as I can," retorted Chauvelin dryly.

"I thank you, sir. Pray proceed."

"... a perfect hell for me," resumed the other. "Have you that? ... 'and I have been forced to give way. To-morrow we start from here at dawn; and I will guide citizen Heron to the place where he can find the Dauphin. But the authorities demand that one of my

followers, one who has once been a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, shall accompany me on this expedition. I therefore ask you' — or 'desire you' or 'beg you' — whichever you prefer, Sir Percy..."

"'Ask you' will do quite nicely. This is really very interesting, you know."

"... 'to be prepared to join the expedition. We start at dawn, and you would be required to be at the main gate of the house of Justice at six o'clock precisely. I have an assurance from the authorities that your life should be in-violate, but if you refuse to accompany me, the guillotine will await me on the morrow.'"

"'The guillotine will await me on the morrow.' That sounds quite cheerful, does it not, M. Chambertin?" said the prisoner, who had not evinced the slightest surprise at the wording of the letter whilst he wrote at the other's dictation. "Do you know, I quite enjoyed writing this letter; it so reminded me of happy days in Boulogne."

Chauvelin pressed his lips together. Truly now he felt that a retort from him would have been undignified, more especially as just at this moment there came from the guard room the sound of men's voices talking and laughing, the occasional clang of steel, or of a heavy boot against the tiled floor, the rattling of dice, or a sudden burst of laughter — sounds, in fact, that betokened the presence of a number of soldiers close by.

Chauvelin contented himself with a nod in the direction of the guard-room.

"The conditions are somewhat different now," he said placidly, "from those that reigned in Boulogne. But will you not sign your letter, Sir Percy?"

"With pleasure, sir," responded Blakeney, as with an elaborate flourish of the pen he appended his name to the missive.

Chauvelin was watching him with eyes that would have shamed a lynx by their keenness. He took up the completed letter, read it through very carefully, as if to find some hidden meaning behind the very words which he himself had dictated; he studied the signature, and looked vainly for a mark or a sign that might convey a different sense to that which he had intended. Finally, finding none, he folded the letter up with his own hand, and at once slipped it in the pocket of his coat.

"Take care, M. Chambertin," said Blakeney lightly; "it will burn a hole in that elegant vest of yours."

"It will have no time to do that, Sir Percy," retorted Chauvelin blandly; "an you will furnish me with citizen St. Just's present address, I will myself convey the letter to him at once."

"At this hour of the night? Poor old Armand, he'll be abed. But his address, sir, is No. 32, Rue de la Croix Blanche, on the first floor, the door on your right as you mount the stairs; you know the room well, citizen Chauvelin; you have been in it before. And now," he added with a loud and ostentatious yawn, "shall we all to bed? We start at dawn, you said, and I am so d — d fatigued."

Frankly, he did not look it now. Chauvelin himself, despite his matured plans, despite all the precautions that he meant to take for the success of this gigantic scheme, felt a sudden strange sense of fear creeping into his bones. Half an hour ago he had seen a man in what looked like the last stage of utter physical exhaustion, a hunched up figure, listless and limp, hands that twitched nervously, the face as of a dying man. Now those outward symptoms were still there certainly; the face by the light of the lamp still looked livid, the lips bloodless, the hands emaciated and waxen, but the eyes! — they were still hollow, with heavy lids still purple, but in their depths there was a curious, mysterious light, a look that seemed to see something that was hidden to natural sight.

Citizen Chauvelin thought that Heron, too, must be conscious of this, but the Committee's agent was sprawling on a chair, sucking a short-stemmed pipe, and gazing with entire animal satisfaction on the prisoner.

"The most perfect piece of work we have ever accomplished, you and I, citizen Chauvelin," he said complacently.

"You think that everything is quite satisfactory?" asked the other with anxious stress on his words.

"Everything, of course. Now you see to the letter. I will give final orders for to-morrow, but I shall sleep in the guard-room."

"And I on that inviting bed," interposed the prisoner lightly, as he rose to his feet. "Your servant, citizens!"

He bowed his head slightly, and stood by the table whilst the two men prepared to go. Chauvelin took a final long look at the man whom he firmly believed he had at last brought down to abject disgrace.

Blakeney was standing erect, watching the two retreating figures — one slender hand was on the table. Chauvelin saw that it was leaning rather heavily, as if for support, and that even whilst a final mocking laugh sped him and his colleague on their way, the tall figure of the conquered lion swayed like a stalwart oak that is forced to bend to the mighty fury of an all-compelling wind.

With a sigh of content Chauvelin took his colleague by the arm, and together the two men walked out of the cell.

CHAPTER XXXIX. KILL HIM!

Two hours after midnight Armand St. Just was wakened from sleep by a peremptory pull at his bell. In these days in Paris but one meaning could as a rule be attached to such a summons at this hour of the night, and Armand, though possessed of an unconditional certificate of safety, sat up in bed, quite convinced that for some reason which would presently be explained to him he had once more been placed on the list of the "suspect," and that his trial and condemnation on a trumped-up charge would follow in due course.

Truth to tell, he felt no fear at the prospect, and only a very little sorrow. The sorrow was not for himself; he regretted neither life nor happiness. Life had become hateful to him since happiness had fled with it on the dark wings of dishonour; sorrow such as he felt was only for Jeanne! She was very young, and would weep bitter tears. She would be unhappy, because she truly loved him, and because this would be the first cup of bitterness which life was holding out to her. But she was very young, and sorrow would not be eternal. It was better so. He, Armand St. Just, though he loved her with an intensity of passion that had been magnified and strengthened by his own overwhelming shame, had never really brought his beloved one single moment of unalloyed happiness.

From the very first day when he sat beside her in the tiny boudoir of the Square du Roule, and the heavy foot fall of Heron and his bloodhounds broke in on their first kiss, down to this hour which he believed struck his own death-knell, his love for her had brought more tears to her dear eyes than smiles to her exquisite mouth.

Her he had loved so dearly, that for her sweet sake he had sacrificed honour, friendship and truth; to free her, as he believed, from the hands of impious brutes he had done a deed that cried Cain-like for vengeance to the very throne of God. For her he had sinned, and because of that sin, even before it was committed, their love had been blighted, and happiness had never been theirs.

Now it was all over. He would pass out of her life, up the steps of the scaffold, tasting as he mounted them the most entire happiness that he had known since that awful day when he became a Judas.

The peremptory summons, once more repeated, roused him from his meditations. He lit a candle, and without troubling to slip any of his clothes on, he crossed the narrow ante-chamber, and opened the door that gave on the landing.

"In the name of the people!"

He had expected to hear not only those words, but also the grounding of arms and the brief command to halt. He had expected to see before him the white facings of the uniform of the Garde de Paris, and to feel himself roughly pushed back into his lodging preparatory to the search being made of all his effects and the placing of irons on his wrists.

Instead of this, it was a quiet, dry voice that said without undue harshness:

"In the name of the people!"

And instead of the uniforms, the bayonets and the scarlet caps with tricolour cockades, he was confronted by a slight, sable-clad figure, whose face, lit by the flickering light of the tallow candle, looked strangely pale and earnest.

"Citizen Chauvelin!" gasped Armand, more surprised than frightened at this unexpected apparition.

"Himself, citizen, at your service," replied Chauvelin with his quiet, ironical manner. "I am the bearer of a letter for you from Sir Percy Blakeney. Have I your permission to enter?"

Mechanically Armand stood aside, allowing the other man to pass in. He closed the door behind his nocturnal visitor, then, taper in hand, he preceded him into the inner room.

It was the same one in which a fortnight ago a fighting lion had been brought to his knees. Now it lay wrapped in gloom, the feeble light of the candle only lighting Armand's face and the white frill of his shirt. The young man put the taper down on the table and turned to his visitor.

"Shall I light the lamp?" he asked.

"Quite unnecessary," replied Chauvelin curtly. "I have only a letter to deliver, and after that to ask you one brief question."

From the pocket of his coat he drew the letter which Blakeney had written an hour ago.

"The prisoner wrote this in my presence," he said as he handed the letter over to Armand. "Will you read it?"

Armand took it from him, and sat down close to the table; leaning forward he held the paper near the light, and began to read. He read the letter through very slowly to the end, then once again from the beginning. He was trying to do that which Chauvelin had wished to do an hour ago; he was trying to find the inner meaning which he felt must inevitably lie behind these words which Percy had written with his own hand.

That these bare words were but a blind to deceive the enemy Armand never doubted for a moment. In this he was as loyal as Marguerite would have been herself. Never for a moment did the suspicion cross his mind that Blakeney was about to play the part of a coward, but he, Armand, felt that as a faithful friend and follower he ought by instinct to know exactly what his chief intended, what he meant him to do.

Swiftly his thoughts flew back to that other letter, the one which Marguerite had given him — the letter full of pity and of friendship which had brought him hope and a joy and peace which he had thought at one time that he would never know again. And suddenly one sentence in that letter stood out so clearly before his eyes that it blurred the actual, tangible ones on the paper which even now rustled in his hand.

But if at any time you receive another letter from me — be its contents what they may — act in accordance with the letter, but send a copy of it at once to Ffoulkes or to Marguerite.

Now everything seemed at once quite clear; his duty, his next actions, every word that he would speak to Chauvelin. Those that Percy had written to him were already indelibly graven on his memory.

Chauvelin had waited with his usual patience, silent and imperturbable, while the young man read. Now when he saw that Armand had finished, he said quietly:

"Just one question, citizen, and I need not detain you longer. But first will you kindly give me back that letter? It is a precious document which will for ever remain in the archives of the nation."

But even while he spoke Armand, with one of those quick intuitions that come in moments of acute crisis, had done just that which he felt Blakeney would wish him to do. He had held the letter close to the candle. A corner of the thin crisp paper immediately caught fire, and before Chauvelin could utter a word of anger, or make a movement to prevent the conflagration, the flames had licked up fully one half of the letter, and Armand had only just time to throw the remainder on the floor and to stamp out the blaze with his foot.

"I am sorry, citizen," he said calmly; "an accident."

"A useless act of devotion," interposed Chauvelin, who already had smothered the oath that had risen to his lips. "The Scarlet Pimpernel's actions in the present matter will not lose their merited publicity through the foolish destruction of this document."

"I had no thought, citizen," retorted the young man, "of commenting on the actions of my chief, or of trying to deny them that publicity which you seem to desire for them almost as much as I do."

"More, citizen, a great deal more! The impeccable Scarlet Pimpernel, the noble and gallant English gentleman, has agreed to deliver into our hands the uncrowned King of France — in exchange for his own life and freedom. Methinks that even his worst enemy would not wish for a better ending to a career of adventure, and a reputation for bravery unequalled in Europe. But no more of this, time is pressing, I must help citizen Heron with his final preparations for his journey. You, of course, citizen St. Just, will act in accordance with Sir Percy Blakeney's wishes?"

"Of course," replied Armand.

"You will present yourself at the main entrance of the house of Justice at six o'clock this morning."

"I will not fail you."

"A coach will be provided for you. You will follow the expedition as hostage for the good faith of your chief."

"I quite understand."

"H'm! That's brave! You have no fear, citizen St. Just?"

"Fear of what, sir?"

"You will be a hostage in our hands, citizen; your life a guarantee that your chief has no thought of playing us false. Now I was thinking of — of certain events — which led to the arrest of Sir Percy Blakeney."

"Of my treachery, you mean," rejoined the young man calmly, even though his face had suddenly become pale as death. "Of the damnable lie wherewith you cheated me into selling my honour, and made me what I am — a creature scarce fit to walk upon this earth."

"Oh!" protested Chauvelin blandly.

"The damnable lie," continued Armand more vehemently, "that hath made me one with Cain and the Iscariot. When you goaded me into the hellish act, Jeanne Lange was already free."

"Free — but not safe."

"A lie, man! A lie! For which you are thrice accursed. Great God, is it not you that should have cause for fear? Methinks were I to strangle you now I should suffer less of remorse."

"And would be rendering your ex-chief but a sorry service," interposed Chauvelin with quiet irony. "Sir Percy Blakeney is a dying man, citizen St. Just; he'll be a dead man at dawn if I do not put in an appearance by six o'clock this morning. This is a private understanding between citizen Heron and myself. We agreed to it before I came to see you."

"Oh, you take care of your own miserable skin well enough! But you need not be afraid of me — I take my orders from my chief, and he has not ordered me to kill you."

"That was kind of him. Then we may count on you? You are not afraid?"

"Afraid that the Scarlet Pimpernel would leave me in the lurch because of the immeasurable wrong I have done to him?" retorted Armand, proud and defiant in the name of his chief. "No, sir, I am not afraid of that; I have spent the last fortnight in praying to God that my life might yet be given for his."

"H'm! I think it most unlikely that your prayers will be granted, citizen; prayers, I imagine, so very seldom are; but I don't know, I never pray myself. In your case, now, I should say that you have not the slightest chance of the Deity interfering in so pleasant a manner. Even were Sir Percy Blakeney prepared to wreak personal revenge on you, he would scarcely be so foolish as to risk the other life which we shall also hold as hostage for his good faith."

"The other life?"

"Yes. Your sister, Lady Blakeney, will also join the expedition to-morrow. This Sir Percy does not yet know; but it will come as a pleasant surprise for him. At the slightest suspicion of false play on Sir Percy's part, at his slightest attempt at escape, your life and that of your sister are forfeit; you will both be summarily shot before his eyes. I do not think that I need be more precise, eh, citizen St. Just?"

The young man was quivering with passion. A terrible loathing for himself, for his crime which had been the precursor of this terrible situation, filled his soul to the verge of sheer physical nausea. A red film gathered before his eyes, and through it he saw the grinning face of the inhuman monster who had planned this hideous, abominable thing. It seemed to him as if in the silence and the hush of the night, above the feeble, flickering flame that threw weird shadows around, a group of devils were surrounding him, and were shouting, "Kill him! Kill him now! Rid the earth of this hellish brute!"

No doubt if Chauvelin had exhibited the slightest sign of fear, if he had moved an inch towards the door, Armand, blind with passion, driven to madness by agonising remorse more even than by rage, would have sprung at his enemy's throat and crushed the life out of him as he would out of a venomous beast. But the man's calm, his immobility, recalled St. Just to himself. Reason, that had almost yielded to passion again, found strength to drive the enemy back this time, to whisper a warning, an admonition, even a reminder. Enough harm, God knows, had been done by tempestuous passion already. And God alone knew what terrible consequences its triumph now might bring in its trial, and striking on Armand's buzzing ears Chauvelin's words came back as a triumphant and mocking echo:

"He'll be a dead man at dawn if I do not put in an appearance by six o'clock."

The red film lifted, the candle flickered low, the devils vanished, only the pale face of the Terrorist gazed with gentle irony out of the gloom.

"I think that I need not detain you any longer, citizen, St. Just," he said quietly; "you can get three or four hours' rest yet before you need make a start, and I still have a great many things to see to. I wish you good-night, citizen."

"Good-night," murmured Armand mechanically.

He took the candle and escorted his visitor back to the door. He waited on the landing, taper in hand, while Chauvelin descended the narrow, winding stairs.

There was a light in the concierge's lodge. No doubt the woman had struck it when the nocturnal visitor had first demanded admittance. His name and tricolour scarf of office had ensured him the full measure of her attention, and now she was evidently sitting up waiting to let him out.

St. Just, satisfied that Chauvelin had finally gone, now turned back to his own rooms.

CHAPTER XL. GOD HELP US ALL

He carefully locked the outer door. Then he lit the lamp, for the candle gave but a flickering light, and he had some important work to do.

Firstly, he picked up the charred fragment of the letter, and smoothed it out carefully and reverently as he would a relic. Tears had gathered in his eyes, but he was not ashamed of them, for no one saw them; but they eased his heart, and helped to strengthen his resolve. It was a mere fragment that had been spared by the flame, but Armand knew every word of the letter by heart.

He had pen, ink and paper ready to his hand, and from memory wrote out a copy of it. To this he added a covering letter from himself to Marguerite:

This — which I had from Percy through the hands of Chauvelin — I neither question nor understand.... He wrote the letter, and I have no thought but to obey. In his previous letter to me he enjoined me, if ever he wrote to me again, to obey him implicitly, and to communicate with you. To both these commands do I submit with a glad heart. But of this must I give you warning, little mother — Chauvelin desires you also to accompany us to-morrow.... Percy does not know this yet, else he would never start. But those fiends fear that his readiness is a blind... and that he has some plan in his head for his own escape and the continued safety of the Dauphin.... This plan they hope to frustrate through holding you and me as hostages for his good faith. God only knows how gladly I would give my life for my chief... but your life, dear little mother... is sacred above all.... I think that I do right in warning you. God help us all.

Having written the letter, he sealed it, together with the copy of Percy's letter which he had made. Then he took up the candle and went downstairs.

There was no longer any light in the concierge's lodge, and Armand had some difficulty in making himself heard. At last the woman came to the door. She was tired and cross after two interruptions of her night's rest, but she had a partiality for her young lodger, whose pleasant ways and easy liberality had been like a pale ray of sunshine through the squalor of every-day misery.

"It is a letter, citoyenne," said Armand, with earnest entreaty, "for my sister. She lives in the Rue de Charonne, near the fortifications, and must have it within an hour; it is a matter of life and death to her, to me, and to another who is very dear to us both."

The concierge threw up her hands in horror.

"Rue de Charonne, near the fortifications," she exclaimed, "and within an hour! By the Holy Virgin, citizen, that is impossible. Who will take it? There is no way."

"A way must be found, citoyenne," said Armand firmly, "and at once; it is not far, and there are five golden louis waiting for the messenger!"

Five golden louis! The poor, hardworking woman's eyes gleamed at the thought. Five louis meant food for at least two months if one was careful, and —

"Give me the letter, citizen," she said, "time to slip on a warm petticoat and a shawl, and I'll go myself. It's not fit for the boy to go at this hour."

"You will bring me back a line from my sister in reply to this," said Armand, whom circumstances had at last rendered cautious. "Bring it up to my rooms that I may give you the five louis in exchange."

He waited while the woman slipped back into her room. She heard him speaking to her boy; the same lad who a fortnight ago had taken the treacherous letter which had lured Blakeney to the house into the fatal ambuscade that had been prepared for him. Everything reminded Armand of that awful night, every hour that he had since spent in the house had been racking torture to him. Now at last he was to leave it, and on an errand which might help to ease the load of remorse from his heart.

The woman was soon ready. Armand gave her final directions as to how to find the house; then she took the letter and promised to be very quick, and to bring back a reply from the lady.

Armand accompanied her to the door. The night was dark, a thin drizzle was falling; he stood and watched until the woman's rapidly walking figure was lost in the misty gloom.

Then with a heavy sigh he once more went within.

CHAPTER XLI. WHEN HOPE WAS DEAD

In a small upstairs room in the Rue de Charonne, above the shop of Lucas the old-clothes dealer, Marguerite sat with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. Armand's letter, with its message and its warning, lay open on the table between them, and she had in her hand the sealed packet which Percy had given her just ten days ago, and which she was only to open if all hope seemed to be dead, if nothing appeared to stand any longer between that one dear life and irretrievable shame.

A small lamp placed on the table threw a feeble yellow light on the squalid, ill-furnished room, for it lacked still an hour or so before dawn. Armand's concierge had brought her lodger's letter, and Marguerite had quickly despatched a brief reply to him, a reply that held love and also encouragement.

Then she had summoned Sir Andrew. He never had a thought of leaving her during these days of dire trouble, and he had lodged all this while in a tiny room on the top-most floor of this house in the Rue de Charonne.

At her call he had come down very quickly, and now they sat together at the table, with the oil-lamp illumining their pale, anxious faces; she the wife and he the friend holding a consultation together in this most miserable hour that preceded the cold wintry dawn.

Outside a thin, persistent rain mixed with snow pattered against the small window panes, and an icy wind found out all the crevices in the worm-eaten woodwork that would afford it ingress to the room. But neither Marguerite nor Ffoulkes was conscious of the cold. They had wrapped their cloaks round their shoulders, and did not feel the chill currents of air that caused the lamp to flicker and to smoke.

"I can see now," said Marguerite in that calm voice which comes so naturally in moments of infinite despair—"I can see now exactly what Percy meant when he made me promise not to open this packet until it seemed to me — to me and to you, Sir Andrew — that he was about to play the part of a coward. A coward! Great God!" She checked the sob that had risen to her throat, and continued in the same calm manner and quiet, even voice:

"You do think with me, do you not, that the time has come, and that we must open this packet?"

"Without a doubt, Lady Blakeney," replied Ffoulkes with equal earnestness. "I would stake my life that already a fortnight ago Blakeney had that same plan in his mind which he has now matured. Escape from that awful Conciergerie prison with all the precautions so carefully taken against it was impossible. I knew that alas! from the first. But in the open all might yet be different. I'll not believe it that a man like Blakeney is destined to perish at the hands of those curs."

She looked on her loyal friend with tear-dimmed eyes through which shone boundless gratitude and heart-broken sorrow.

He had spoken of a fortnight! It was ten days since she had seen Percy. It had then seemed as if death had already marked him with its grim sign. Since then she had tried to shut away from her mind the terrible visions which her anguish constantly conjured up before her of his growing weakness, of the gradual impairing of that brilliant intellect, the gradual exhaustion of that mighty physical strength.

"God bless you, Sir Andrew, for your enthusiasm and for your trust," she said with a sad little smile; "but for you I should long ago have lost all courage, and these last ten days — what a cycle of misery they represent — would have been maddening but for your help and your loyalty. God knows I would have courage for everything in life, for everything save one, but just that, his death; that would be beyond my strength — neither reason nor body could stand it. Therefore, I am so afraid, Sir Andrew," she added piteously.

"Of what, Lady Blakeney?"

"That when he knows that I too am to go as hostage, as Armand says in his letter, that my life is to be guarantee his, I am afraid that he will draw back — that he will — my God!" she cried with sudden fervour, "tell me what to do!"

"Shall we open the packet?" asked Ffoulkes gently, "and then just make up our minds to act exactly as Blakeney has enjoined us to do, neither more nor less, but just word for word, deed for deed, and I believe that that will be right — whatever may betide — in the end."

Once more his quiet strength, his earnestness and his faith comforted her. She dried her eyes and broke open the seal. There were two separate letters in the packet, one unaddressed, obviously intended for her and Ffoulkes, the other was addressed to M. le baron Jean de Batz, 15, Rue St. Jean de Latran a Paris.

"A letter addressed to that awful Baron de Batz," said Marguerite, looking with puzzled eyes on the paper as she turned it over and over in her hand, "to that bombastic windbag! I know him and his ways well! What can Percy have to say to him?"

Sir Andrew too looked puzzled. But neither of them had the mind to waste time in useless speculations. Marguerite unfolded the letter which was intended for her, and after a final look on her friend, whose kind face was quivering with excitement, she began slowly to read aloud:

I need not ask either of you two to trust me, knowing that you will. But I could not die inside this hole like a rat in a trap — I had to try and free myself, at the worst to die in the open beneath God's sky. You two will understand, and understanding you will trust me to the end. Send the enclosed letter at once to its address. And you, Ffoulkes, my most sincere and most loyal friend, I beg with all my soul to see to the safety of Marguerite. Armand will stay by me — but you, Ffoulkes, do not leave her, stand by her. As soon as you read this letter — and you will not read it until both she and you have felt that hope has fled and I myself am about to throw up the sponge — try and persuade her to make for the coast as quickly as may be.... At Calais you can open up communications with the Day-Dream in the usual way, and embark on her at once. Let no member of the League remain on French soil one hour longer after that. Then tell the skipper to make for Le Portel — the place which he knows — and there to keep a sharp outlook for another three nights. After that make straight for home, for it will be no use waiting any longer. I shall not come. These measures are for Marguerite's safety, and for you all who are in France at this moment. Comrade, I entreat you to look on these measures as on my dying wish. To de Batz I have given rendezvous at the Chapelle of the Holy Sepulchre, just outside the park of the Chateau d'Ourde. He will help me to save the Dauphin, and if by good luck he also helps me to save myself I shall be within seven leagues of Le Portel, and with the Liane frozen as she is I could reach the coast.

But Marguerite's safety I leave in your hands, Ffoulkes. Would that I could look more clearly into the future, and know that those devils will not drag her into danger. Beg her to start at once for Calais immediately you have both read this. I only beg, I do not

command. I know that you, Ffoulkes, will stand by her whatever she may wish to do. God's blessing be for ever on you both.

Marguerite's voice died away in the silence that still lay over this deserted part of the great city and in this squalid house where she and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had found shelter these last ten days. The agony of mind which they had here endured, never doubting, but scarcely ever hoping, had found its culmination at last in this final message, which almost seemed to come to them from the grave.

It had been written ten days ago. A plan had then apparently formed in Percy's mind which he had set forth during the brief half-hour's respite which those fiends had once given him. Since then they had never given him ten consecutive minutes' peace; since then ten days had gone by how much power, how much vitality had gone by too on the leaden wings of all those terrible hours spent in solitude and in misery?

"We can but hope, Lady Blakeney," said Sir Andrew Ffoulkes after a while, "that you will be allowed out of Paris; but from what Armand says—"

"And Percy does not actually send me away," she rejoined with a pathetic little smile.

"No. He cannot compel you, Lady Blakeney. You are not a member of the League."

"Oh, yes, I am!" she retorted firmly; "and I have sworn obedience, just as all of you have done. I will go, just as he bids me, and you, Sir Andrew, you will obey him too?"

"My orders are to stand by you. That is an easy task."

"You know where this place is?" she asked— "the Chateau d'Ourde?"

"Oh, yes, we all know it! It is empty, and the park is a wreck; the owner fled from it at the very outbreak of the revolution; he left some kind of steward nominally in charge, a curious creature, half imbecile; the chateau and the chapel in the forest just outside the grounds have oft served Blakeney and all of us as a place of refuge on our way to the coast."

"But the Dauphin is not there?" she said.

"No. According to the first letter which you brought me from Blakeney ten days ago, and on which I acted, Tony, who has charge of the Dauphin, must have crossed into Holland with his little Majesty to-day."

"I understand," she said simply. "But then — this letter to de Batz?"

"Ah, there I am completely at sea! But I'll deliver it, and at once too, only I don't like to leave you. Will you let me get you out of Paris first? I think just before dawn it could be done. We can get the cart from Lucas, and if we could reach St. Germain before noon, I could come straight back then and deliver the letter to de Batz. This, I feel, I ought to do myself; but at Achard's farm I would know that you were safe for a few hours."

"I will do whatever you think right, Sir Andrew," she said simply; "my will is bound up with Percy's dying wish. God knows I would rather follow him now, step by step, — as hostage, as prisoner — any way so long as I can see him, but—"

She rose and turned to go, almost impassive now in that great calm born of despair.

A stranger seeing her now had thought her indifferent. She was very pale, and deep circles round her eyes told of sleepless nights and days of mental misery, but otherwise there was not the faintest outward symptom of that terrible anguish which was rending her heartstrings. Her lips did not quiver, and the source of her tears had been dried up ten days ago.

"Ten minutes and I'll be ready, Sir Andrew," she said. "I have but few belongings. Will you the while see Lucas about the cart?"

He did as she desired. Her calm in no way deceived him; he knew that she must be suffering keenly, and would suffer more keenly still while she would be trying to efface her own personal feelings all through that coming dreary journey to Calais.

He went to see the landlord about the horse and cart, and a quarter of an hour later Marguerite came downstairs ready to start. She found Sir Andrew in close converse with an officer of the Garde de Paris, whilst two soldiers of the same regiment were standing at the horse's head.

When she appeared in the doorway Sir Andrew came at once up to her.

"It is just as I feared, Lady Blakeney," he said; "this man has been sent here to take charge of you. Of course, he knows nothing beyond the fact that his orders are to convey you at once to the guard-house of the Rue Ste. Anne, where he is to hand you over to citizen Chauvelin of the Committee of Public Safety."

Sir Andrew could not fail to see the look of intense relief which, in the midst of all her sorrow, seemed suddenly to have lighted up the whole of Marguerite's wan face. The thought of wending her own way to safety whilst Percy, mayhap, was fighting an uneven fight with death had been well-nigh intolerable; but she had been ready to obey without a murmur. Now Fate and the enemy himself had decided otherwise. She felt as if a load had been lifted from her heart.

"I will at once go and find de Batz," Sir Andrew contrived to whisper hurriedly. "As soon as Percy's letter is safely in his hands I will make my way northwards and communicate with all the members of the League, on whom the chief has so strictly enjoined to quit French soil immediately. We will proceed to Calais first and open up communication with the Day-Dream in the usual way. The others had best embark on board her, and the skipper shall then make for the known spot of Le Portel, of which Percy speaks in his letter. I myself will go by land to Le Portel, and thence, if I have no news of you or of the expedition, I will slowly work southwards in the direction of the Chateau d'Ourde. That is all that I can do. If you can contrive to let Percy or even Armand know my movements, do so by all means. I know that I shall be doing right, for, in a way, I shall be watching over you and arranging for your safety, as Blakeney begged me to do. God bless you, Lady Blakeney, and God save the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

He stooped and kissed her hand, and she intimated to the officer that she was ready. He had a hackney coach waiting for her lower down the street. To it she walked with a firm step, and as she entered it she waved a last farewell to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes.

CHAPTER XLII. THE GUARD-HOUSE OF THE RUE STE. ANNE

The little cortege was turning out of the great gates of the house of Justice. It was intensely cold; a bitter north-easterly gale was blowing from across the heights of Montmartre, driving sleet and snow and half-frozen rain into the faces of the men, and finding its way up their sleeves, down their collars and round the knees of their threadbare breeches.

Armand, whose fingers were numb with the cold, could scarcely feel the reins in his hands. Chauvelin was riding close beside him, but the two men had not exchanged one word since the moment when the small troop of some twenty mounted soldiers had filed up inside the courtyard, and Chauvelin, with a curt word of command, had ordered one of the troopers to take Armand's horse on the lead.

A hackney coach brought up the rear of the cortege, with a man riding at either door and two more following at a distance of twenty paces. Heron's gaunt, ugly face, crowned with a battered, sugar-loaf hat, appeared from time to time at the window of the coach. He was no horseman, and, moreover, preferred to keep the prisoner closely under his own eye. The corporal had told Armand that the prisoner was with citizen Heron inside the coach — in irons. Beyond that the soldiers could tell him nothing; they knew nothing of the object of this expedition. Vaguely they might have wondered in their dull minds why this particular prisoner was thus being escorted out of the Conciergerie prison with so much paraphernalia and such an air of mystery, when there were thousands of prisoners in the city and the provinces at the present moment who anon would be bundled up wholesale into carts to be dragged to the guillotine like a flock of sheep to the butchers.

But even if they wondered they made no remarks among themselves. Their faces, blue with the cold, were the perfect mirrors of their own unconquerable stolidity.

The tower clock of Notre Dame struck seven when the small cavalcade finally moved slowly out of the monumental gates. In the east the wan light of a February morning slowly struggled out of the surrounding gloom. Now the towers of many churches loomed ghostlike against the dull grey sky, and down below, on the right, the frozen river, like a smooth sheet of steel, wound its graceful curves round the islands and past the facade of the Louvres palace, whose walls looked grim and silent, like the mausoleum of the dead giants of the past.

All around the great city gave signs of awakening; the business of the day renewed its course every twenty-four hours, despite the tragedies of death and of dishonour that walked with it hand in hand. From the Place de La Revolution the intermittent roll of drums came from time to time with its muffled sound striking the ear of the passer-by. Along the quay opposite an open-air camp was already astir; men, women, and children engaged in the great task of clothing and feeding the people of France, armed against tyranny, were bending to their task, even before the wintry dawn had spread its pale grey tints over the narrower streets of the city.

Armand shivered under his cloak. This silent ride beneath the laden sky, through the veil of half-frozen rain and snow, seemed like a dream to him. And now, as the outriders of the little cavalcade turned to cross the Pont au Change, he saw spread out on his left what appeared like the living panorama of these three weeks that had just gone by. He could see the house of the Rue St. Germain l'Auxerrois where Percy had lodged before he carried through the rescue of the little Dauphin. Armand could even see the window at which the dreamer had stood, weaving noble dreams that his brilliant daring had turned into realities, until the hand of a traitor had brought him down to — to what? Armand would not have dared at this moment to look back at that hideous, vulgar hackney coach wherein that proud, reckless adventurer, who had defied Fate and mocked Death, sat, in chains, beside a loathsome creature whose very propinquity was an outrage.

Now they were passing under the very house on the Quai de La Ferraille, above the saddler's shop, the house where Marguerite had lodged ten days ago, whither Armand had come, trying to fool himself into the belief that the love of "little mother" could be deceived into blindness against his own crime. He had tried to draw a veil before those eyes which he had scarcely dared encounter, but he knew that that veil must lift one day, and then a curse would send him forth, outlawed and homeless, a wanderer on the face of the earth.

Soon as the little cortege wended its way northwards it filed out beneath the walls of the Temple prison; there was the main gate with its sentry standing at attention, there the archway with the guichet of the concierge, and beyond it the paved courtyard. Armand closed his eyes deliberately; he could not bear to look.

No wonder that he shivered and tried to draw his cloak closer around him. Every stone, every street corner was full of memories. The chill that struck to the very marrow of his bones came from no outward cause; it was the very hand of remorse that, as it passed over him, froze the blood in his veins and made the rattle of those wheels behind him sound like a hellish knell.

At last the more closely populated quarters of the city were left behind. On ahead the first section of the guard had turned into the Rue St. Anne. The houses became more sparse, intersected by narrow pieces of terrains vagues, or small weed-covered bits of kitchen garden.

Then a halt was called.

It was quite light now. As light as it would ever be beneath this leaden sky. Rain and snow still fell in gusts, driven by the blast.

Some one ordered Armand to dismount. It was probably Chauvelin. He did as he was told, and a trooper led him to the door of an irregular brick building that stood isolated on the right, extended on either side by a low wall, and surrounded by a patch of uncultivated land, which now looked like a sea of mud.

On ahead was the line of fortifications dimly outlined against the grey of the sky, and in between brown, sodden earth, with here and there a detached house, a cabbage patch, a couple of windmills deserted and desolate.

The loneliness of an unpopulated outlying quarter of the great mother city, a useless limb of her active body, an ostracised member of her vast family.

Mechanically Armand had followed the soldier to the door of the building. Here Chauvelin was standing, and bade him follow. A smell of hot coffee hung in the dark narrow passage in front. Chauvelin led the way to a room on the left.

Still that smell of hot coffee. Ever after it was associated in Armand's mind with this awful morning in the guard-house of the Rue Ste. Anne, when the rain and snow beat against the windows, and he stood there in the low guard-room shivering and half-numbed with cold.

There was a table in the middle of the room, and on it stood cups of hot coffee. Chauvelin bade him drink, suggesting, not unkindly, that the warm beverage would do him good. Armand advanced further into the room, and saw that there were wooden benches all round against the wall. On one of these sat his sister Marguerite.

When she saw him she made a sudden, instinctive movement to go to him, but Chauvelin interposed in his usual bland, quiet manner.

"Not just now, citizeness," he said.

She sat down again, and Armand noted how cold and stony seemed her eyes, as if life within her was at a stand-still, and a shadow that was almost like death had atrophied every emotion in her.

"I trust you have not suffered too much from the cold, Lady Blakeney," resumed Chauvelin politely; "we ought not to have kept you waiting here for so long, but delay at departure is sometimes inevitable."

She made no reply, only acknowledging his reiterated inquiry as to her comfort with an inclination of the head.

Armand had forced himself to swallow some coffee, and for the moment he felt less chilled. He held the cup between his two hands, and gradually some warmth crept into his bones.

"Little mother," he said in English, "try and drink some of this, it will do you good."

"Thank you, dear," she replied. "I have had some. I am not cold."

Then a door at the end of the room was pushed open, and Heron stalked in.

"Are we going to be all day in this confounded hole?" he queried roughly.

Armand, who was watching his sister very closely, saw that she started at the sight of the wretch, and seemed immediately to shrink still further within herself, whilst her eyes, suddenly luminous and dilated, rested on him like those of a captive bird upon an approaching cobra.

But Chauvelin was not to be shaken out of his suave manner.

"One moment, citizen Heron," he said; "this coffee is very comforting. Is the prisoner with you?" he added lightly.

Heron nodded in the direction of the other room.

"In there," he said curtly.

"Then, perhaps, if you will be so good, citizen, to invite him thither, I could explain to him his future position and our own."

Heron muttered something between his fleshy lips, then he turned back towards the open door, solemnly spat twice on the threshold, and nodded his gaunt head once or twice in a manner which apparently was understood from within.

"No, sergeant, I don't want you," he said gruffly; "only the prisoner."

A second or two later Sir Percy Blakeney stood in the doorway; his hands were behind his back, obviously hand-cuffed, but he held himself very erect, though it was clear that this caused him a mighty effort. As soon as he had crossed the threshold his quick glance had swept right round the room.

He saw Armand, and his eyes lit up almost imperceptibly.

Then he caught sight of Marguerite, and his pale face took on suddenly a more ashen hue.

Chauvelin was watching him with those keen, light-coloured eyes of his. Blakeney, conscious of this, made no movement, only his lips tightened, and the heavy lids fell over the hollow eyes, completely hiding their glance.

But what even the most astute, most deadly enemy could not see was that subtle message of understanding that passed at once between Marguerite and the man she loved; it was a magnetic current, intangible, invisible to all save to her and to him. She was prepared to see him, prepared to see in him all that she had feared; the weakness, the mental exhaustion, the submission to the inevitable. Therefore she had also schooled her glance to express to him all that she knew she would not be allowed to say — the reassurance that she had read his last letter, that she had obeyed it to the last word, save where Fate and her enemy had interfered with regard to herself.

With a slight, imperceptible movement — imperceptible to every one save to him, she had seemed to handle a piece of paper in her kerchief, then she had nodded slowly, with her eyes — steadfast, reassuring — fixed upon him, and his glance gave answer that he had understood.

But Chauvelin and Heron had seen nothing of this. They were satisfied that there had been no communication between the prisoner and his wife and friend.

"You are no doubt surprised, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin after a while, "to see Lady Blakeney here. She, as well as citizen St. Just, will accompany our expedition to the place where you will lead us. We none of us know where that place is — citizen Heron and myself are entirely in your hands — you might be leading us to certain death, or again to a spot where your own escape would be an easy matter to yourself. You will not be surprised, therefore, that we have thought fit to take certain precautions both against any little ambuscade which you may have prepared for us, or against your making one of those daring attempts at escape for which the noted Scarlet Pimpernel is so justly famous."

He paused, and only Heron's low chuckle of satisfaction broke the momentary silence that followed. Blakeney made no reply. Obviously he knew exactly what was coming. He knew Chauvelin and his ways, knew the kind of tortuous conception that would find origin in his brain; the moment that he saw Marguerite sitting there he must have guessed that Chauvelin once more desired to put her precious life in the balance of his intrigues.

"Citizen Heron is impatient, Sir Percy," resumed Chauvelin after a while, "so I must be brief. Lady Blakeney, as well as citizen St. Just, will accompany us on this expedition to whithersoever you may lead us. They will be the hostages which we will hold against your own good faith. At the slightest suspicion — a mere suspicion perhaps — that you have played us false, at a hint that you have led us into an ambush, or that the whole of this expedition has been but a trick on your part to effect your own escape, or if merely our hope of finding Capet at the end of our journey is frustrated, the lives of our two hostages belong to us, and your friend and your wife will be summarily shot before your eyes."

Outside the rain pattered against the window-panes, the gale whistled mournfully among the stunted trees, but within this room not a sound stirred the deadly stillness of the air, and yet at this moment hatred and love, savage lust and sublime self-abnegation — the

most power full passions the heart of man can know — held three men here enchained; each a slave to his dominant passion, each ready to stake his all for the satisfaction of his master. Heron was the first to speak.

“Well!” he said with a fierce oath, “what are we waiting for? The prisoner knows how he stands. Now we can go.”

“One moment, citizen,” interposed Chauvelin, his quiet manner contrasting strangely with his colleague’s savage mood. “You have quite understood, Sir Percy,” he continued, directly addressing the prisoner, “the conditions under which we are all of us about to proceed on this journey?”

“All of us?” said Blakeney slowly. “Are you taking it for granted then that I accept your conditions and that I am prepared to proceed on the journey?”

“If you do not proceed on the journey,” cried Heron with savage fury, “I’ll strangle that woman with my own hands — now!”

Blakeney looked at him for a moment or two through half-closed lids, and it seemed then to those who knew him well, to those who loved him and to the man who hated him, that the mighty sinews almost cracked with the passionate desire to kill. Then the sunken eyes turned slowly to Marguerite, and she alone caught the look — it was a mere flash, of a humble appeal for pardon.

It was all over in a second; almost immediately the tension on the pale face relaxed, and into the eyes there came that look of acceptance — nearly akin to fatalism — an acceptance of which the strong alone are capable, for with them it only comes in the face of the inevitable.

Now he shrugged his broad shoulders, and once more turning to Heron he said quietly:

“You leave me no option in that case. As you have remarked before, citizen Heron, why should we wait any longer? Surely we can now go.”

CHAPTER XLIII. THE DREARY JOURNEY

Rain! Rain! Rain! Incessant, monotonous and dreary! The wind had changed round to the southwest. It blew now in great gusts that sent weird, sighing sounds through the trees, and drove the heavy showers into the faces of the men as they rode on, with heads bent forward against the gale.

The rain-sodden bridles slipped through their hands, bringing out sores and blisters on their palms; the horses were fidgety, tossing their heads with wearying persistence as the wet trickled into their ears, or the sharp, intermittent hailstones struck their sensitive noses.

Three days of this awful monotony, varied only by the halts at wayside inns, the changing of troops at one of the guard-houses on the way, the reiterated commands given to the fresh squad before starting on the next lap of this strange, momentous way; and all the while, audible above the clatter of horses' hoofs, the rumbling of coach-wheels — two closed carriages, each drawn by a pair of sturdy horses; which were changed at every halt. A soldier on each box urged them to a good pace to keep up with the troopers, who were allowed to go at an easy canter or light jog-trot, whatever might prove easiest and least fatiguing. And from time to time Heron's shaggy, gaunt head would appear at the window of one of the coaches, asking the way, the distance to the next city or to the nearest wayside inn; cursing the troopers, the coachman, his colleague and every one concerned, blaspheming against the interminable length of the road, against the cold and against the wet.

Early in the evening on the second day of the journey he had met with an accident. The prisoner, who presumably was weak and weary, and not over steady on his feet, had fallen up against him as they were both about to re-enter the coach after a halt just outside Amiens, and citizen Heron had lost his footing in the slippery mud of the road. His head came in violent contact with the step, and his right temple was severely cut. Since then he had been forced to wear a bandage across the top of his face, under his sugar-loaf hat, which had added nothing to his beauty, but a great deal to the violence of his temper. He wanted to push the men on, to force the pace, to shorten the halts; but Chauvelin knew better than to allow slackness and discontent to follow in the wake of over-fatigue.

The soldiers were always well rested and well fed, and though the delay caused by long and frequent halts must have been just as irksome to him as it was to Heron, yet he bore it imperturbably, for he would have had no use on this momentous journey for a handful of men whose enthusiasm and spirit had been blown away by the roughness of the gale, or drowned in the fury of the constant downpour of rain.

Of all this Marguerite had been conscious in a vague, dreamy kind of way. She seemed to herself like the spectator in a moving panoramic drama, unable to raise a finger or to do aught to stop that final, inevitable ending, the cataclysm of sorrow and misery that awaited her, when the dreary curtain would fall on the last act, and she and all the other spectators — Armand, Chauvelin, Heron, the soldiers — would slowly wend their way home, leaving the principal actor behind the fallen curtain, which never would be lifted again.

After that first halt in the guard-room of the Rue Ste. Anne she had been bidden to enter a second hackney coach, which, followed the other at a distance of fifty metres or so, and was, like that other, closely surrounded by a squad of mounted men.

Armand and Chauvelin rode in this carriage with her; all day she sat looking out on the endless monotony of the road, on the drops of rain that pattered against the window-glass, and ran down from it like a perpetual stream of tears.

There were two halts called during the day — one for dinner and one midway through the afternoon — when she and Armand would step out of the coach and be led — always with soldiers close around them — to some wayside inn, where some sort of a meal was served, where the atmosphere was close and stuffy and smelt of onion soup and of stale cheese.

Armand and Marguerite would in most cases have a room to themselves, with sentinels posted outside the door, and they would try and eat enough to keep body and soul together, for they would not allow their strength to fall away before the end of the journey was reached.

For the night halt — once at Beauvais and the second night at Abbeville — they were escorted to a house in the interior of the city, where they were accommodated with moderately clean lodgings. Sentinels, however, were always at their doors; they were prisoners in all but name, and had little or no privacy; for at night they were both so tired that they were glad to retire immediately, and to lie down on the hard beds that had been provided for them, even if sleep fled from their eyes, and their hearts and souls were flying through the city in search of him who filled their every thought.

Of Percy they saw little or nothing. In the daytime food was evidently brought to him in the carriage, for they did not see him get down, and on those two nights at Beauvais and Abbeville, when they caught sight of him stepping out of the coach outside the gates of the barracks, he was so surrounded by soldiers that they only saw the top of his head and his broad shoulders towering above those of the men.

Once Marguerite had put all her pride, all her dignity by, and asked citizen Chauvelin for news of her husband.

"He is well and cheerful, Lady Blakeney," he had replied with his sarcastic smile. "Ah!" he added pleasantly, "those English are remarkable people. We, of Gallic breed, will never really understand them. Their fatalism is quite Oriental in its quiet resignation to the decree of Fate. Did you know, Lady Blakeney, that when Sir Percy was arrested he did not raise a hand. I thought, and so did my colleague, that he would have fought like a lion. And now, that he has no doubt realised that quiet submission will serve him best in the end, he is as calm on this journey as I am myself. In fact," he concluded complacently, "whenever I have succeeded in peeping into the coach I have invariably found Sir Percy Blakeney fast asleep."

"He—" she murmured, for it was so difficult to speak to this callous wretch, who was obviously mocking her in her misery—"he — you — you are not keeping him in irons?"

"No! Oh no!" replied Chauvelin with perfect urbanity. "You see, now that we have you, Lady Blakeney, and citizen St. Just with us we have no reason to fear that that elusive Pimpernel will spirit himself away."

A hot retort had risen to Armand's lips. The warm Latin blood in him rebelled against this intolerable situation, the man's sneers in the face of Marguerite's anguish. But her restraining, gentle hand had already pressed his. What was the use of protesting, of insulting this brute, who cared nothing for the misery which he had caused so long as he gained his own ends?

And Armand held his tongue and tried to curb his temper, tried to cultivate a little of that fatalism which Chauvelin had said was characteristic of the English. He sat beside his sister, longing to comfort her, yet feeling that his very presence near her was an outrage and a sacrilege. She spoke so seldom to him, even when they were alone, that at times the awful thought which had more than once found birth in his weary brain became crystallised and more real. Did Marguerite guess? Had she the slightest suspicion that the awful cataclysm to which they were tending with every revolution of the creaking coach-wheels had been brought about by her brother's treacherous hand?

And when that thought had lodged itself quite snugly in his mind he began to wonder whether it would not be far more simple, far more easy, to end his miserable life in some manner that might suggest itself on the way. When the coach crossed one of those dilapidated, parapetless bridges, over abysses fifty metres deep, it might be so easy to throw open the carriage door and to take one final jump into eternity.

So easy — but so damnably cowardly.

Marguerite's near presence quickly brought him back to himself. His life was no longer his own to do with as he pleased; it belonged to the chief whom he had betrayed, to the sister whom he must endeavour to protect.

Of Jeanne now he thought but little. He had put even the memory of her by — tenderly, like a sprig of lavender pressed between the faded leaves of his own happiness. His hand was no longer fit to hold that of any pure woman — his hand had on it a deep stain, immutable, like the brand of Cain.

Yet Marguerite beside him held his hand and together they looked out on that dreary, dreary road and listened to of the patter of the rain and the rumbling of the wheels of that other coach on ahead — and it was all so dismal and so horrible, the rain, the souging of the wind in the stunted trees, this landscape of mud and desolation, this eternally grey sky.

CHAPTER XLIV. THE HALT AT CRECY

"Now, then, citizen, don't go to sleep; this is Crecy, our last halt!"

Armand woke up from his last dream. They had been moving steadily on since they left Abbeville soon after dawn; the rumble of the wheels, the swaying and rocking of the carriage, the interminable patter of the rain had lulled him into a kind of wakeful sleep.

Chauvelin had already alighted from the coach. He was helping Marguerite to descend. Armand shook the stiffness from his limbs and followed in the wake of his sister. Always those miserable soldiers round them, with their dank coats of rough blue cloth, and the red caps on their heads! Armand pulled Marguerite's hand through his arm, and dragged her with him into the house.

The small city lay damp and grey before them; the rough pavement of the narrow street glistened with the wet, reflecting the dull, leaden sky overhead; the rain beat into the puddles; the slate-roofs shone in the cold wintry light.

This was Crecy! The last halt of the journey, so Chauvelin had said. The party had drawn rein in front of a small one-storied building that had a wooden verandah running the whole length of its front.

The usual low narrow room greeted Armand and Marguerite as they entered; the usual mildewed walls, with the colour wash flowing away in streaks from the unsympathetic beam above; the same device, "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite!" scribbled in charcoal above the black iron stove; the usual musty, close atmosphere, the usual smell of onion and stale cheese, the usual hard straight benches and central table with its soiled and tattered cloth.

Marguerite seemed dazed and giddy; she had been five hours in that stuffy coach with nothing to distract her thoughts except the rain-sodden landscape, on which she had ceaselessly gazed since the early dawn.

Armand led her to the bench, and she sank down on it, numb and inert, resting her elbows on the table and her head in her hands.

"If it were only all over!" she sighed involuntarily. "Armand, at times now I feel as if I were not really sane — as if my reason had already given way! Tell me, do I seem mad to you at times?"

He sat down beside her and tried to chafe her little cold hands.

There was a knock at the door, and without waiting for permission Chauvelin entered the room.

"My humble apologies to you, Lady Blakeney," he said in his usual suave manner, "but our worthy host informs me that this is the only room in which he can serve a meal. Therefore I am forced to intrude my presence upon you."

Though he spoke with outward politeness, his tone had become more peremptory, less bland, and he did not await Marguerite's reply before he sat down opposite to her and continued to talk airily.

"An ill-conditioned fellow, our host," he said — "quite reminds me of our friend Brogard at the Chat Gris in Calais. You remember him, Lady Blakeney?"

"My sister is giddy and over-tired," interposed Armand firmly. "I pray you, citizen, to have some regard for her."

"All regard in the world, citizen St. Just," protested Chauvelin jovially. "Methought that those pleasant reminiscences would cheer her. Ah! here comes the soup," he added, as a man in blue blouse and breeches, with sabots on his feet, slouched into the room, carrying a tureen which he incontinently placed upon the table. "I feel sure that in England Lady Blakeney misses our excellent croutes-au-pot, the glory of our bourgeois cookery — Lady Blakeney, a little soup?"

"I thank you, sir," she murmured.

"Do try and eat something, little mother," Armand whispered in her ear; "try and keep up your strength for his sake, if not for mine."

She turned a wan, pale face to him, and tried to smile.

"I'll try, dear," she said.

"You have taken bread and meat to the citizens in the coach?" Chauvelin called out to the retreating figure of mine host.

"H'm!" grunted the latter in assent.

"And see that the citizen soldiers are well fed, or there will be trouble."

"H'm!" grunted the man again. After which he banged the door to behind him.

"Citizen Heron is loath to let the prisoner out of his sight," explained Chauvelin lightly, "now that we have reached the last, most important stage of our journey, so he is sharing Sir Percy's mid-day meal in the interior of the coach."

He ate his soup with a relish, ostentatiously paying many small attentions to Marguerite all the time. He ordered meat for her — bread, butter — asked if any dainties could be got. He was apparently in the best of tempers.

After he had eaten and drunk he rose and bowed ceremoniously to her.

"Your pardon, Lady Blakeney," he said, "but I must confer with the prisoner now, and take from him full directions for the continuance of our journey. After that I go to the guard-house, which is some distance from here, right at the other end of the city. We pick up a fresh squad here, twenty hardened troopers from a cavalry regiment usually stationed at Abbeville. They have had work to do in this town, which is a hot-bed of treachery. I must go inspect the men and the sergeant who will be in command. Citizen Heron leaves all these inspections to me; he likes to stay by his prisoner. In the meanwhile you will be escorted back to your coach, where I pray you to await my arrival, when we change guard first, then proceed on our way."

Marguerite was longing to ask him many questions; once again she would have smothered her pride and begged for news of her husband, but Chauvelin did not wait. He hurried out of the room, and Armand and Marguerite could hear him ordering the soldiers to take them forthwith back to the coach.

As they came out of the inn they saw the other coach some fifty metres further up the street. The horses that had done duty since leaving Abbeville had been taken out, and two soldiers in ragged shirts, and with crimson caps set jauntily over their left ear, were leading the two fresh horses along. The troopers were still mounting guard round both the coaches; they would be relieved presently.

Marguerite would have given ten years of her life at this moment for the privilege of speaking to her husband, or even of seeing him — of seeing that he was well. A quick, wild plan sprang up in her mind that she would bribe the sergeant in command to grant her wish

while citizen Chauvelin was absent. The man had not an unkind face, and he must be very poor — people in France were very poor these days, though the rich had been robbed and luxurious homes devastated ostensibly to help the poor.

She was about to put this sudden thought into execution when Heron's hideous face, doubly hideous now with that bandage of doubtful cleanliness cutting across his brow, appeared at the carriage window.

He cursed violently and at the top of his voice.

"What are those d — d aristos doing out there?" he shouted.

"Just getting into the coach, citizen," replied the sergeant promptly.

And Armand and Marguerite were immediately ordered back into the coach.

Heron remained at the window for a few moments longer; he had a toothpick in his hand which he was using very freely.

"How much longer are we going to wait in this cursed hole?" he called out to the sergeant.

"Only a few moments longer, citizen. Citizen Chauvelin will be back soon with the guard."

A quarter of an hour later the clatter of cavalry horses on the rough, uneven pavement drew Marguerite's attention. She lowered the carriage window and looked out. Chauvelin had just returned with the new escort. He was on horseback; his horse's bridle, since he was but an indifferent horseman, was held by one of the troopers.

Outside the inn he dismounted; evidently he had taken full command of the expedition, and scarcely referred to Heron, who spent most of his time cursing at the men or the weather when he was not lying half-asleep and partially drunk in the inside of the carriage.

The changing of the guard was now accomplished quietly and in perfect order. The new escort consisted of twenty mounted men, including a sergeant and a corporal, and of two drivers, one for each coach. The cortege now was filed up in marching order; ahead a small party of scouts, then the coach with Marguerite and Armand closely surrounded by mounted men, and at a short distance the second coach with citizen Heron and the prisoner equally well guarded.

Chauvelin superintended all the arrangements himself. He spoke for some few moments with the sergeant, also with the driver of his own coach. He went to the window of the other carriage, probably in order to consult with citizen Heron, or to take final directions from the prisoner, for Marguerite, who was watching him, saw him standing on the step and leaning well forward into the interior, whilst apparently he was taking notes on a small tablet which he had in his hand.

A small knot of idlers had congregated in the narrow street; men in blouses and boys in ragged breeches lounged against the verandah of the inn and gazed with inexpressive, stolid eyes on the soldiers, the coaches, the citizen who wore the tricolour scarf. They had seen this sort of thing before now — aristos being conveyed to Paris under arrest, prisoners on their way to or from Amiens. They saw Marguerite's pale face at the carriage window. It was not the first woman's face they had seen under like circumstances, and there was no special interest about this aristo. They were smoking or spitting, or just lounging idly against the balustrade. Marguerite wondered if none of them had wife, sister, or mother, or child; if every sympathy, every kind of feeling in these poor wretches had been atrophied by misery or by fear.

At last everything was in order and the small party ready to start.

"Does any one here know the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, close by the park of the Chateau d'Ourde?" asked Chauvelin, vaguely addressing the knot of gaffers that stood closest to him.

The men shook their heads. Some had dimly heard of the Chateau d'Ourde; it was some way in the interior of the forest of Boulogne, but no one knew about a chapel; people did not trouble about chapels nowadays. With the indifference so peculiar to local peasantry, these men knew no more of the surrounding country than the twelve or fifteen league circle that was within a walk of their sleepy little town.

One of the scouts on ahead turned in his saddle and spoke to citizen Chauvelin:

"I think I know the way pretty well; citizen Chauvelin," he said; "at any rate, I know it as far as the forest of Boulogne."

Chauvelin referred to his tablets.

"That's good," he said; "then when you reach the mile-stone that stands on this road at the confine of the forest, bear sharply to your right and skirt the wood until you see the hamlet of — Le — something. Le — Le — yes — Le Crocq — that's it in the valley below."

"I know Le Crocq, I think," said the trooper.

"Very well, then; at that point it seems that a wide road strikes at right angles into the interior of the forest; you follow that until a stone chapel with a colonnaded porch stands before you on your left, and the walls and gates of a park on your right. That is so, is it not, Sir Percy?" he added, once more turning towards the interior of the coach.

Apparently the answer satisfied him, for he gave the quick word of command, "En avant!" then turned back towards his own coach and finally entered it.

"Do you know the Chateau d'Ourde, citizen St. Just?" he asked abruptly as soon as the carriage began to move.

Armand woke — as was habitual with him these days — from some gloomy reverie.

"Yes, citizen," he replied. "I know it."

"And the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre?"

"Yes. I know it too."

Indeed, he knew the chateau well, and the little chapel in the forest, whither the fisher-folk from Portel and Boulogne came on a pilgrimage once a year to lay their nets on the miracle-working relic. The chapel was disused now. Since the owner of the chateau had fled no one had tended it, and the fisher-folk were afraid to wander out, lest their superstitious faith be counted against them by the authorities, who had abolished le bon Dieu.

But Armand had found refuge there eighteen months ago, on his way to Calais, when Percy had risked his life in order to save him — Armand — from death. He could have groaned aloud with the anguish of this recollection. But Marguerite's aching nerves had thrilled at the name.

The Chateau d'Ourde! The Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre! That was the place which Percy had mentioned in his letter, the place where he had given rendezvous to de Batz. Sir Andrew had said that the Dauphin could not possibly be there, yet Percy was leading his enemies thither, and had given the rendezvous there to de Batz. And this despite that whatever plans, whatever hopes, had been born in

his mind when he was still immured in the Conciergerie prison must have been set at naught by the clever counter plot of Chauvelin and Heron.

“At the merest suspicion that you have played us false, at a hint that you have led us into an ambush, or if merely our hopes of finding Capet at the end of the journey are frustrated, the lives of your wife and of your friend are forfeit to us, and they will both be shot before your eyes.”

With these words, with this precaution, those cunning fiends had effectually not only tied the schemer’s hands, but forced him either to deliver the child to them or to sacrifice his wife and his friend.

The impasse was so horrible that she could not face it even in her thoughts. A strange, fever-like heat coursed through her veins, yet left her hands icy-cold; she longed for, yet dreaded, the end of the journey — that awful grappling with the certainty of coming death. Perhaps, after all, Percy, too, had given up all hope. Long ago he had consecrated his life to the attainment of his own ideals; and there was a vein of fatalism in him; perhaps he had resigned himself to the inevitable, and his only desire now was to give up his life, as he had said, in the open, beneath God’s sky, to draw his last breath with the storm-clouds tossed through infinity above him, and the murmur of the wind in the trees to sing him to rest.

Crecy was gradually fading into the distance, wrapped in a mantle of damp and mist. For a long while Marguerite could see the sloping slate roofs glimmering like steel in the grey afternoon light, and the quaint church tower with its beautiful lantern, through the pierced stonework of which shone patches of the leaden sky.

Then a sudden twist of the road hid the city from view; only the outlying churchyard remained in sight, with its white monuments and granite crosses, over which the dark yews, wet with the rain and shaken by the gale, sent showers of diamond-like sprays.

CHAPTER XLV. THE FOREST OF BOULOGNE

Progress was not easy, and very slow along the muddy road; the two coaches moved along laboriously, with wheels creaking and sinking deeply from time to time in the quagmire.

When the small party finally reached the edge of the wood the greyish light of this dismal day had changed in the west to a dull reddish glow — a glow that had neither brilliance nor incandescence in it; only a weird tint that hung over the horizon and turned the distance into lines of purple.

The nearness of the sea made itself already felt; there was a briny taste in the damp atmosphere, and the trees all turned their branches away in the same direction against the onslaught of the prevailing winds.

The road at this point formed a sharp fork, skirting the wood on either side, the forest lying like a black close mass of spruce and firs on the left, while the open expanse of country stretched out on the right. The south-westerly gale struck with full violence against the barrier of forest trees, bending the tall crests of the pines and causing their small dead branches to break and fall with a sharp, crisp sound like a cry of pain.

The squad had been fresh at starting; now the men had been four hours in the saddle under persistent rain and gusty wind; they were tired, and the atmosphere of the close, black forest so near the road was weighing upon their spirits.

Strange sounds came to them from out the dense network of trees — the screeching of night-birds, the weird call of the owls, the swift and furtive tread of wild beasts on the prowl. The cold winter and lack of food had lured the wolves from their fastnesses — hunger had emboldened them, and now, as gradually the grey light fled from the sky, dismal howls could be heard in the distance, and now and then a pair of eyes, bright with the reflection of the lurid western glow, would shine momentarily out of the darkness like tiny glow-worms, and as quickly vanish away.

The men shivered — more with vague superstitious fear than with cold. They would have urged their horses on, but the wheels of the coaches stuck persistently in the mud, and now and again a halt had to be called so that the spokes and axles might be cleared.

They rode on in silence. No one had a mind to speak, and the mournful sighing of the wind in the pine-trees seemed to check the words on every lip. The dull thud of hoofs in the soft road, the clang of steel bits and buckles, the snorting of the horses alone answered the wind, and also the monotonous creaking of the wheels ploughing through the ruts.

Soon the ruddy glow in the west faded into soft-toned purple and then into grey; finally that too vanished. Darkness was drawing in on every side like a wide, black mantle pulled together closer and closer overhead by invisible giant hands.

The rain still fell in a thin drizzle that soaked through caps and coats, made the bridles slimy and the saddles slippery and damp. A veil of vapour hung over the horses' cruppers, and was rendered fuller and thicker every moment with the breath that came from their nostrils. The wind no longer blew with gusty fury — its strength seemed to have been spent with the grey light of day — but now and then it would still come sweeping across the open country, and dash itself upon the wall of forest trees, lashing against the horses' ears, catching the corner of a mantle here, an ill-adjusted cap there, and wreaking its mischievous freak for a while, then with a sigh of satisfaction die, murmuring among the pines.

Suddenly there was a halt, much shouting, a volley of oaths from the drivers, and citizen Chauvelin thrust his head out of the carriage window.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The scouts, citizen," replied the sergeant, who had been riding close to the coach door all this while; "they have returned."

"Tell one man to come straight to me and report."

Marguerite sat quite still. Indeed, she had almost ceased to live momentarily, for her spirit was absent from her body, which felt neither fatigue, nor cold, nor pain. But she heard the snorting of the horse close by as its rider pulled him up sharply beside the carriage door.

"Well?" said Chauvelin curtly.

"This is the cross-road, citizen," replied the man; "it strikes straight into the wood, and the hamlet of Le Crocq lies down in the valley on the right."

"Did you follow the road in the wood?"

"Yes, citizen. About two leagues from here there is a clearing with a small stone chapel, more like a large shrine, nestling among the trees. Opposite to it the angle of a high wall with large wrought-iron gates at the corner, and from these a wide drive leads through a park."

"Did you turn into the drive?"

"Only a little way, citizen. We thought we had best report first that all is safe."

"You saw no one?"

"No one."

"The chateau, then, lies some distance from the gates?"

"A league or more, citizen. Close to the gates there are outhouses and stabling, the disused buildings of the home farm, I should say."

"Good! We are on the right road, that is clear. Keep ahead with your men now, but only some two hundred metres or so. Stay!" he added, as if on second thoughts. "Ride down to the other coach and ask the prisoner if we are on the right track."

The rider turned his horse sharply round. Marguerite heard the clang of metal and the sound of retreating hoofs.

A few moments later the man returned.

"Yes, citizen," he reported, "the prisoner says it is quite right. The Chateau d'Ourde lies a full league from its gates. This is the nearest road to the chapel and the chateau. He says we should reach the former in half an hour. It will be very dark in there," he added with a significant nod in the direction of the wood.

Chauvelin made no reply, but quietly stepped out of the coach. Marguerite watched him, leaning out of the window, following his small trim figure as he pushed his way past the groups of mounted men, catching at a horse's bit now and then, or at a bridle, making a way for himself amongst the restless, champing animals, without the slightest hesitation or fear.

Soon his retreating figure lost its sharp outline silhouetted against the evening sky. It was enfolded in the veil of vapour which was blown out of the horses' nostrils or rising from their damp cruppers; it became more vague, almost ghost-like, through the mist and the fast-gathering gloom.

Presently a group of troopers hid him entirely from her view, but she could hear his thin, smooth voice quite clearly as he called to citizen Heron.

"We are close to the end of our journey now, citizen," she heard him say. "If the prisoner has not played us false little Capet should be in our charge within the hour."

A growl not unlike those that came from out the mysterious depths of the forest answered him.

"If he is not," and Marguerite recognised the harsh tones of citizen Heron— "if he is not, then two corpses will be rotting in this wood tomorrow for the wolves to feed on, and the prisoner will be on his way back to Paris with me."

Some one laughed. It might have been one of the troopers, more callous than his comrades, but to Marguerite the laugh had a strange, familiar ring in it, the echo of something long since past and gone.

Then Chauvelin's voice once more came clearly to her ear:

"My suggestion, citizen," he was saying, "is that the prisoner shall now give me an order — couched in whatever terms he may think necessary — but a distinct order to his friends to give up Capet to me without any resistance. I could then take some of the men with me, and ride as quickly as the light will allow up to the chateau, and take possession of it, of Capet, and of those who are with him. We could get along faster thus. One man can give up his horse to me and continue the journey on the box of your coach. The two carriages could then follow at foot pace. But I fear that if we stick together complete darkness will overtake us and we might find ourselves obliged to pass a very uncomfortable night in this wood."

"I won't spend another night in this suspense — it would kill me," growled Heron to the accompaniment of one of his choicest oaths. "You must do as you think right — you planned the whole of this affair — see to it that it works out well in the end."

"How many men shall I take with me? Our advance guard is here, of course."

"I couldn't spare you more than four more men — I shall want the others to guard the prisoners."

"Four men will be quite sufficient, with the four of the advance guard. That will leave you twelve men for guarding your prisoners, and you really only need to guard the woman — her life will answer for the others."

He had raised his voice when he said this, obviously intending that Marguerite and Armand should hear.

"Then I'll ahead," he continued, apparently in answer to an assent from his colleague. "Sir Percy, will you be so kind as to scribble the necessary words on these tablets?"

There was a long pause, during which Marguerite heard plainly the long and dismal cry of a night bird that, mayhap, was seeking its mate. Then Chauvelin's voice was raised again.

"I thank you," he said; "this certainly should be quite effectual. And now, citizen Heron, I do not think that under the circumstances we need fear an ambushade or any kind of trickery — you hold the hostages. And if by any chance I and my men are attacked, or if we encounter armed resistance at the chateau, I will despatch a rider back straightway to you, and — well, you will know what to do."

His voice died away, merged in the sighing of the wind, drowned by the clang of metal, of horses snorting, of men living and breathing. Marguerite felt that beside her Armand had shuddered, and that in the darkness his trembling hand had sought and found hers.

She leaned well out of the window, trying to see. The gloom had gathered more closely in, and round her the veil of vapour from the horses' steaming cruppers hung heavily in the misty air. In front of her the straight lines of a few fir trees stood out dense and black against the greyness beyond, and between these lines purple tints of various tones and shades mingled one with the other, merging the horizon line with the sky. Here and there a more solid black patch indicated the tiny houses of the hamlet of Le Crocq far down in the valley below; from some of these houses small lights began to glimmer like blinking yellow eyes. Marguerite's gaze, however, did not rest on the distant landscape — it tried to pierce the gloom that hid her immediate surroundings; the mounted men were all round the coach — more closely round her than the trees in the forest. But the horses were restless, moving all the time, and as they moved she caught glimpses of that other coach and of Chauvelin's ghostlike figure, walking rapidly through the mist. Just for one brief moment she saw the other coach, and Heron's head and shoulders leaning out of the window. If his sugar-loaf hat was on his head, and the bandage across his brow looked like a sharp, pale streak below it.

"Do not doubt it, citizen Chauvelin," he called out loudly in his harsh, raucous voice, "I shall know what to do; the wolves will have their meal to-night, and the guillotine will not be cheated either."

Armand put his arm round his sister's shoulders and gently drew her back into the carriage.

"Little mother," he said, "if you can think of a way whereby my life would redeem Percy's and yours, show me that way now."

But she replied quietly and firmly:

"There is no way, Armand. If there is, it is in the hands of God."

CHAPTER XLVI. OTHERS IN THE PARK

Chauvelin and his picked escort had in the meanwhile detached themselves from the main body of the squad. Soon the dull thud of their horses' hoofs treading the soft ground came more softly — then more softly still as they turned into the wood, and the purple shadows seemed to enfold every sound and finally to swallow them completely.

Armand and Marguerite from the depth of the carriage heard Heron's voice ordering his own driver now to take the lead. They sat quite still and watched, and presently the other coach passed them slowly on the road, its silhouette standing out ghostly and grim for a moment against the indigo tones of the distant country.

Heron's head, with its battered sugar-loaf hat, and the soiled bandage round the brow, was as usual out of the carriage window. He leered across at Marguerite when he saw the outline of her face framed by the window of the carriage.

"Say all the prayers you have ever known, citizeness," he said with a loud laugh, "that my friend Chauvelin may find Capet at the chateau, or else you may take a last look at the open country, for you will not see the sun rise on it to-morrow. It is one or the other, you know."

She tried not to look at him; the very sight of him filled her with horror — that blotched, gaunt face of his, the fleshy lips, that hideous bandage across his face that hid one of his eyes! She tried not to see him and not to hear him laugh.

Obviously he too laboured under the stress of great excitement. So far everything had gone well; the prisoner had made no attempt at escape, and apparently did not mean to play a double game. But the crucial hour had come, and with it darkness and the mysterious depths of the forest with their weird sounds and sudden flashes of ghostly lights. They naturally wrought on the nerves of men like Heron, whose conscience might have been dormant, but whose ears were nevertheless filled with the cries of innocent victims sacrificed to their own lustful ambitions and their blind, unreasoning hates.

He gave sharp orders to the men to close up round the carriages, and then gave the curt word of command:

"En avant!"

Marguerite could but strain her ears to listen. All her senses, all her faculties had merged into that of hearing, rendering it doubly keen. It seemed to her that she could distinguish the faint sound — that even as she listened grew fainter and fainter yet — of Chauvelin and his squad moving away rapidly into the thickness of the wood some distance already ahead.

Close to her there was the snorting of horses, the clanging and noise of moving mounted men. Heron's coach had taken the lead; she could hear the creaking of its wheels, the calls of the driver urging his beasts.

The diminished party was moving at foot-pace in the darkness that seemed to grow denser at every step, and through that silence which was so full of mysterious sounds.

The carriage rolled and rocked on its springs; Marguerite, giddy and overtired, lay back with closed eyes, her hand resting in that of Armand. Time, space and distance had ceased to be; only Death, the great Lord of all, had remained; he walked on ahead, scythe on skeleton shoulder, and beckoned patiently, but with a sure, grim hand.

There was another halt, the coach-wheels groaned and creaked on their axles, one or two horses reared with the sudden drawing up of the curb.

"What is it now?" came Heron's hoarse voice through the darkness.

"It is pitch-dark, citizen," was the response from ahead. "The drivers cannot see their horses' ears. They wait to know if they may light their lanterns and then lead their horses."

"They can lead their horses," replied Heron roughly, "but I'll have no lanterns lighted. We don't know what fools may be lurking behind trees, hoping to put a bullet through my head — or yours, sergeant — we don't want to make a lighted target of ourselves — what? But let the drivers lead their horses, and one or two of you who are riding greys might dismount too and lead the way — the greys would show up perhaps in this cursed blackness."

While his orders were being carried out, he called out once more:

"Are we far now from that confounded chapel?"

"We can't be far, citizen; the whole forest is not more than six leagues wide at any point, and we have gone two since we turned into it."

"Hush!" Heron's voice suddenly broke in hoarsely. "What was that? Silence, I say. Damn you — can't you hear?"

There was a hush — every ear straining to listen; but the horses were not still — they continued to champ their bits, to paw the ground, and to toss their heads, impatient to get on. Only now and again there would come a lull even through these sounds — a second or two, mayhap, of perfect, unbroken silence — and then it seemed as if right through the darkness a mysterious echo sent back those same sounds — the champing of bits, the pawing of soft ground, the tossing and snorting of animals, human life that breathed far out there among the trees.

"It is citizen Chauvelin and his men," said the sergeant after a while, and speaking in a whisper.

"Silence — I want to hear," came the curt, hoarsely-whispered command.

Once more every one listened, the men hardly daring to breathe, clinging to their bridles and pulling on their horses' mouths, trying to keep them still, and again through the night there came like a faint echo which seemed to throw back those sounds that indicated the presence of men and of horses not very far away.

"Yes, it must be citizen Chauvelin," said Heron at last; but the tone of his voice sounded as if he were anxious and only half convinced; "but I thought he would be at the chateau by now."

"He may have had to go at foot-pace; it is very dark, citizen Heron," remarked the sergeant.

"En avant, then," quoth the other; "the sooner we come up with him the better."

And the squad of mounted men, the two coaches, the drivers and the advance section who were leading their horses slowly restarted on the way. The horses snorted, the bits and stirrups clanged, and the springs and wheels of the coaches creaked and groaned dismally as the ramshackle vehicles began once more to plough the carpet of pine-needles that lay thick upon the road.

But inside the carriage Armand and Marguerite held one another tightly by the hand.

"It is de Batz — with his friends," she whispered scarce above her breath.

"De Batz?" he asked vaguely and fearfully, for in the dark he could not see her face, and as he did not understand why she should suddenly be talking of de Batz he thought with horror that mayhap her prophecy anent herself had come true, and that her mind wearied and over-wrought — had become suddenly unhinged.

"Yes, de Batz," she replied. "Percy sent him a message, through me, to meet him — here. I am not mad, Armand," she added more calmly. "Sir Andrew took Percy's letter to de Batz the day that we started from Paris."

"Great God!" exclaimed Armand, and instinctively, with a sense of protection, he put his arms round his sister. "Then, if Chauvelin or the squad is attacked — if—"

"Yes," she said calmly; "if de Batz makes an attack on Chauvelin, or if he reaches the chateau first and tries to defend it, they will shoot us... Armand, and Percy."

"But is the Dauphin at the Chateau d'Ourde?"

"No, no! I think not."

"Then why should Percy have invoked the aid of de Batz? Now, when—"

"I don't know," she murmured helplessly. "Of course, when he wrote the letter he could not guess that they would hold us as hostages. He may have thought that under cover of darkness and of an unexpected attack he might have saved himself had he been alone; but now — now that you and I are here — Oh! it is all so horrible, and I cannot understand it all."

"Hark!" broke in Armand, suddenly gripping her arm more tightly.

"Halt!" rang the sergeant's voice through the night.

This time there was no mistaking the sound; already it came from no far distance. It was the sound of a man running and panting, and now and again calling out as he ran.

For a moment there was stillness in the very air, the wind itself was hushed between two gusts, even the rain had ceased its incessant pattering. Heron's harsh voice was raised in the stillness.

"What is it now?" he demanded.

"A runner, citizen," replied the sergeant, "coming through the wood from the right."

"From the right?" and the exclamation was accompanied by a volley of oaths; "the direction of the chateau? Chauvelin has been attacked; he is sending a messenger back to me. Sergeant — sergeant, close up round that coach; guard your prisoners as you value your life, and—"

The rest of his words were drowned in a yell of such violent fury that the horses, already over-nervous and fidgety, reared in mad terror, and the men had the greatest difficulty in holding them in. For a few minutes noisy confusion prevailed, until the men could quieten their quivering animals with soft words and gentle pattings.

Then the troopers obeyed, closing up round the coach wherein brother and sister sat huddled against one another.

One of the men said under his breath:

"Ah! but the citizen agent knows how to curse! One day he will break his gullet with the fury of his oaths."

In the meanwhile the runner had come nearer, always at the same breathless speed.

The next moment he was challenged:

"Qui va là?"

"A friend!" he replied, panting and exhausted. "Where is citizen Heron?"

"Here!" came the reply in a voice hoarse with passionate excitement. "Come up, damn you. Be quick!"

"A lantern, citizen," suggested one of the drivers.

"No — no — not now. Here! Where the devil are we?"

"We are close to the chapel on our left, citizen," said the sergeant.

The runner, whose eyes were no doubt accustomed to the gloom, had drawn nearer to the carriage.

"The gates of the chateau," he said, still somewhat breathlessly, "are just opposite here on the right, citizen. I have just come through them."

"Speak up, man!" and Heron's voice now sounded as if choked with passion. "Citizen Chauvelin sent you?"

"Yes. He bade me tell you that he has gained access to the chateau, and that Capet is not there."

A series of citizen Heron's choicest oaths interrupted the man's speech. Then he was curtly ordered to proceed, and he resumed his report.

"Citizen Chauvelin rang at the door of the chateau; after a while he was admitted by an old servant, who appeared to be in charge, but the place seemed otherwise absolutely deserted — only—"

"Only what? Go on; what is it?"

"As we rode through the park it seemed to us as if we were being watched, and followed. We heard distinctly the sound of horses behind and around us, but we could see nothing; and now, when I ran back, again I heard. There are others in the park to-night besides us, citizen."

There was silence after that. It seemed as if the flood of Heron's blasphemous eloquence had spent itself at last.

"Others in the park!" And now his voice was scarcely above a whisper, hoarse and trembling. "How many? Could you see?"

"No, citizen, we could not see; but there are horsemen lurking round the chateau now. Citizen Chauvelin took four men into the house with him and left the others on guard outside. He bade me tell you that it might be safer to send him a few more men if you could spare them. There are a number of disused farm buildings quite close to the gates, and he suggested that all the horses be put up there for the night, and that the men come up to the chateau on foot; it would be quicker and safer, for the darkness is intense."

Even while the man spoke the forest in the distance seemed to wake from its solemn silence, the wind on its wings brought sounds of life and movement different from the prowling of beasts or the screeching of night-birds. It was the furtive advance of men, the

quick whispers of command, of encouragement, of the human animal preparing to attack his kind. But all in the distance still, all muffled, all furtive as yet.

“Sergeant!” It was Heron’s voice, but it too was subdued, and almost calm now; “can you see the chapel?”

“More clearly, citizen,” replied the sergeant. “It is on our left; quite a small building, I think.”

“Then dismount, and walk all round it. See that there are no windows or door in the rear.”

There was a prolonged silence, during which those distant sounds of men moving, of furtive preparations for attack, struck distinctly through the night.

Marguerite and Armand, clinging to one another, not knowing what to think, nor yet what to fear, heard the sounds mingling with those immediately round them, and Marguerite murmured under her breath:

“It is de Batz and some of his friends; but what can they do? What can Percy hope for now?”

But of Percy she could hear and see nothing. The darkness and the silence had drawn their impenetrable veil between his unseen presence and her own consciousness. She could see the coach in which he was, but Heron’s hideous personality, his head with its battered hat and soiled bandage, had seemed to obtrude itself always before her gaze, blotting out from her mind even the knowledge that Percy was there not fifty yards away from her.

So strong did this feeling grow in her that presently the awful dread seized upon her that he was no longer there; that he was dead, worn out with fatigue and illness brought on by terrible privations, or if not dead that he had swooned, that he was unconscious — his spirit absent from his body. She remembered that frightful yell of rage and hate which Heron had uttered a few minutes ago. Had the brute vented his fury on his helpless, weakened prisoner, and stilled forever those lips that, mayhap, had mocked him to the last?

Marguerite could not guess. She hardly knew what to hope. Vaguely, when the thought of Percy lying dead beside his enemy floated through her aching brain, she was almost conscious of a sense of relief at the thought that at least he would be spared the pain of the final, inevitable cataclysm.

CHAPTER XLVII. THE CHAPEL OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE

The sergeant's voice broke in upon her misery.

The man had apparently done as the citizen agent had ordered, and had closely examined the little building that stood on the left — a vague, black mass more dense than the surrounding gloom.

"It is all solid stone, citizen," he said; "iron gates in front, closed but not locked, rusty key in the lock, which turns quite easily; no windows or door in the rear."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite certain, citizen; it is plain, solid stone at the back, and the only possible access to the interior is through the iron gate in front."

"Good."

Marguerite could only just hear Heron speaking to the sergeant. Darkness enveloped every form and deadened every sound. Even the harsh voice which she had learned to loathe and to dread sounded curiously subdued and unfamiliar. Heron no longer seemed inclined to storm, to rage, or to curse. The momentary danger, the thought of failure, the hope of revenge, had apparently cooled his temper, strengthened his determination, and forced his voice down to a little above a whisper. He gave his orders clearly and firmly, and the words came to Marguerite on the wings of the wind with strange distinctness, borne to her ears by the darkness itself, and the hush that lay over the wood.

"Take half a dozen men with you, sergeant," she heard him say, "and join citizen Chauvelin at the chateau. You can stable your horses in the farm buildings close by, as he suggests and run to him on foot. You and your men should quickly get the best of a handful of midnight prowlers; you are well armed and they only civilians. Tell citizen Chauvelin that I in the meanwhile will take care of our prisoners. The Englishman I shall put in irons and lock up inside the chapel, with five men under the command of your corporal to guard him, the other two I will drive myself straight to Crecy with what is left of the escort. You understand?"

"Yes, citizen."

"We may not reach Crecy until two hours after midnight, but directly I arrive I will send citizen Chauvelin further reinforcements, which, however, I hope may not be necessary, but which will reach him in the early morning. Even if he is seriously attacked, he can, with fourteen men he will have with him, hold out inside the castle through the night. Tell him also that at dawn two prisoners who will be with me will be shot in the courtyard of the guard-house at Crecy, but that whether he has got hold of Capet or not he had best pick up the Englishman in the chapel in the morning and bring him straight to Crecy, where I shall be awaiting him ready to return to Paris. You understand?"

"Yes, citizen."

"Then repeat what I said."

"I am to take six men with me to reinforce citizen Chauvelin now."

"Yes."

"And you, citizen, will drive straight back to Crecy, and will send us further reinforcements from there, which will reach us in the early morning."

"Yes."

"We are to hold the chateau against those unknown marauders if necessary until the reinforcements come from Crecy. Having routed them, we return here, pick up the Englishman whom you will have locked up in the chapel under a strong guard commanded by Corporal Cassard, and join you forthwith at Crecy."

"This, whether citizen Chauvelin has got hold of Capet or not."

"Yes, citizen, I understand," concluded the sergeant imperturbably; "and I am also to tell citizen Chauvelin that the two prisoners will be shot at dawn in the courtyard of the guard-house at Crecy."

"Yes. That is all. Try to find the leader of the attacking party, and bring him along to Crecy with the Englishman; but unless they are in very small numbers do not trouble about the others. Now en avant; citizen Chauvelin might be glad of your help. And — stay — order all the men to dismount, and take the horses out of one of the coaches, then let the men you are taking with you each lead a horse, or even two, and stable them all in the farm buildings. I shall not need them, and could not spare any of my men for the work later on. Remember that, above all, silence is the order. When you are ready to start, come back to me here."

The sergeant moved away, and Marguerite heard him transmitting the citizen agent's orders to the soldiers. The dismounting was carried on in wonderful silence — for silence had been one of the principal commands — only one or two words reached her ears.

"First section and first half of second section fall in, right wheel. First section each take two horses on the lead. Quietly now there; don't tug at his bridle — let him go."

And after that a simple report:

"All ready, citizen!"

"Good!" was the response. "Now detail your corporal and two men to come here to me, so that we may put the Englishman in irons, and take him at once to the chapel, and four men to stand guard at the doors of the other coach."

The necessary orders were given, and after that there came the curt command:

"En avant!"

The sergeant, with his squad and all the horses, was slowly moving away in the night. The horses' hoofs hardly made a noise on the soft carpet of pine-needles and of dead fallen leaves, but the champing of the bits was of course audible, and now and then the snorting of some poor, tired horse longing for its stable.

Somehow in Marguerite's fevered mind this departure of a squad of men seemed like the final flitting of her last hope; the slow agony of the familiar sounds, the retreating horses and soldiers moving away amongst the shadows, took on a weird significance.

Heron had given his last orders. Percy, helpless and probably unconscious, would spend the night in that dank chapel, while she and Armand would be taken back to Crecy, driven to death like some insentient animals to the slaughter.

When the grey dawn would first begin to peep through the branches of the pines Percy would be led back to Paris and the guillotine, and she and Armand will have been sacrificed to the hatred and revenge of brutes.

The end had come, and there was nothing more to be done. Struggling, fighting, scheming, could be of no avail now; but she wanted to get to her husband; she wanted to be near him now that death was so imminent both for him and for her.

She tried to envisage it all, quite calmly, just as she knew that Percy would wish her to do. The inevitable end was there, and she would not give to these callous wretches here the gratuitous spectacle of a despairing woman fighting blindly against adverse Fate.

But she wanted to go to her husband. She felt that she could face death more easily on the morrow if she could but see him once, if she could but look once more into the eyes that had mirrored so much enthusiasm, such absolute vitality and whole-hearted self-sacrifice, and such an intensity of love and passion; if she could but kiss once more those lips that had smiled through life, and would smile, she knew, even in the face of death.

She tried to open the carriage door, but it was held from without, and a harsh voice cursed her, ordering her to sit still.

But she could lean out of the window and strain her eyes to see. They were by now accustomed to the gloom, the dilated pupils taking in pictures of vague forms moving like ghouls in the shadows. The other coach was not far, and she could hear Heron's voice, still subdued and calm, and the curses of the men. But not a sound from Percy.

"I think the prisoner is unconscious," she heard one of the men say.

"Lift him out of the carriage, then," was Heron's curt command; "and you go and throw open the chapel gates."

Marguerite saw it all. The movement, the crowd of men, two vague, black forms lifting another one, which appeared heavy and inert, out of the coach, and carrying it staggering up towards the chapel.

Then the forms disappeared, swallowed up by the more dense mass of the little building, merged in with it, immovable as the stone itself.

Only a few words reached her now.

"He is unconscious."

"Leave him there, then; he'll not move!"

"Now close the gates!"

There was a loud clang, and Marguerite gave a piercing scream. She tore at the handle of the carriage door.

"Armand, Armand, go to him!" she cried; and all her self-control, all her enforced calm, vanished in an outburst of wild, agonising passion. "Let me get to him, Armand! This is the end; get me to him, in the name of God!"

"Stop that woman screaming," came Heron's voice clearly through the night. "Put her and the other prisoner in irons — quick!"

But while Marguerite expended her feeble strength in a mad, pathetic effort to reach her husband, even now at this last hour, when all hope was dead and Death was so nigh, Armand had already wrenched the carriage door from the grasp of the soldier who was guarding it. He was of the South, and knew the trick of charging an unsuspecting adversary with head thrust forward like a bull inside a ring. Thus he knocked one of the soldiers down and made a quick rush for the chapel gates.

The men, attacked so suddenly and in such complete darkness, did not wait for orders. They closed in round Armand; one man drew his sabre and hacked away with it in aimless rage.

But for the moment he evaded them all, pushing his way through them, not heeding the blows that came on him from out the darkness. At last he reached the chapel. With one bound he was at the gate, his numb fingers fumbling for the lock, which he could not see.

It was a vigorous blow from Heron's fist that brought him at last to his knees, and even then his hands did not relax their hold; they gripped the ornamental scroll of the gate, shook the gate itself in its rusty hinges, pushed and pulled with the unreasoning strength of despair. He had a sabre cut across his brow, and the blood flowed in a warm, trickling stream down his face. But of this he was unconscious; all that he wanted, all that he was striving for with agonising heart-beats and cracking sinews, was to get to his friend, who was lying in there unconscious, abandoned — dead, perhaps.

"Curse you," struck Heron's voice close to his ear. "Cannot some of you stop this raving maniac?"

Then it was that the heavy blow on his head caused him a sensation of sickness, and he fell on his knees, still gripping the ironwork.

Stronger hands than his were forcing him to loosen his hold; blows that hurt terribly rained on his numbed fingers; he felt himself dragged away, carried like an inert mass further and further from that gate which he would have given his lifeblood to force open.

And Marguerite heard all this from the inside of the coach where she was imprisoned as effectually as was Percy's unconscious body inside that dark chapel. She could hear the noise and scramble, and Heron's hoarse commands, the swift sabre strokes as they cut through the air.

Already a trooper had clapped irons on her wrists, two others held the carriage doors. Now Armand was lifted back into the coach, and she could not even help to make him comfortable, though as he was lifted in she heard him feebly moaning. Then the carriage doors were banged to again.

"Do not allow either of the prisoners out again, on peril of your lives!" came with a vigorous curse from Heron.

After which there was a moment's silence; whispered commands came spasmodically in deadened sound to her ear.

"Will the key turn?"

"Yes, citizen."

"All secure?"

"Yes, citizen. The prisoner is groaning."

"Let him groan."

"The empty coach, citizen? The horses have been taken out."

"Leave it standing where it is, then; citizen Chauvelin will need it in the morning."

"Armand," whispered Marguerite inside the coach, "did you see Percy?"

"It was so dark," murmured Armand feebly; "but I saw him, just inside the gates, where they had laid him down. I heard him groaning. Oh, my God!"

"Hush, dear!" she said. "We can do nothing more, only die, as he lived, bravely and with a smile on our lips, in memory of him."

"Number 35 is wounded, citizen," said one of the men.

"Curse the fool who did the mischief," was the placid response. "Leave him here with the guard."

"How many of you are there left, then?" asked the same voice a moment later.

"Only two, citizen; if one whole section remains with me at the chapel door, and also the wounded man."

"Two are enough for me, and five are not too many at the chapel door." And Heron's coarse, cruel laugh echoed against the stone walls of the little chapel. "Now then, one of you get into the coach, and the other go to the horses' heads; and remember, Corporal Cassard, that you and your men who stay here to guard that chapel door are answerable to the whole nation with your lives for the safety of the Englishman."

The carriage door was thrown open, and a soldier stepped in and sat down opposite Marguerite and Armand. Heron in the meanwhile was apparently scrambling up the box. Marguerite could hear him muttering curses as he groped for the reins, and finally gathered them into his hand.

The springs of the coach creaked and groaned as the vehicle slowly swung round; the wheels ploughed deeply through the soft carpet of dead leaves.

Marguerite felt Armand's inert body leaning heavily against her shoulder.

"Are you in pain, dear?" she asked softly.

He made no reply, and she thought that he had fainted. It was better so; at least the next dreary hours would flit by for him in the blissful state of unconsciousness. Now at last the heavy carriage began to move more evenly. The soldier at the horses' heads was stepping along at a rapid pace.

Marguerite would have given much even now to look back once more at the dense black mass, blacker and denser than any shadow that had ever descended before on God's earth, which held between its cold, cruel walls all that she loved in the world.

But her wrists were fettered by the irons, which cut into her flesh when she moved. She could no longer lean out of the window, and she could not even hear. The whole forest was hushed, the wind was lulled to rest; wild beasts and night-birds were silent and still. And the wheels of the coach creaked in the ruts, bearing Marguerite with every turn further and further away from the man who lay helpless in the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre.

CHAPTER XLVIII. THE WANING MOON

Armand had wakened from his attack of faintness, and brother and sister sat close to one another, shoulder touching shoulder. That sense of nearness was the one tiny spark of comfort to both of them on this dreary, dreary way.

The coach had lumbered on unceasingly since all eternity — so it seemed to them both. Once there had been a brief halt, when Heron's rough voice had ordered the soldier at the horses' heads to climb on the box beside him, and once — it had been a very little while ago — a terrible cry of pain and terror had rung through the stillness of the night. Immediately after that the horses had been put at a more rapid pace, but it had seemed to Marguerite as if that one cry of pain had been repeated by several others which sounded more feeble and soon appeared to be dying away in the distance behind.

The soldier who sat opposite to them must have heard the cry too, for he jumped up, as if wakened from sleep, and put his head out of the window.

"Did you hear that cry, citizen?" he asked.

But only a curse answered him, and a peremptory command not to lose sight of the prisoners by poking his head out of the window.

"Did you hear the cry?" asked the soldier of Marguerite as he made haste to obey.

"Yes! What could it be?" she murmured.

"It seems dangerous to drive so fast in this darkness," muttered the soldier.

After which remark he, with the stolidity peculiar to his kind, figuratively shrugged his shoulders, detaching himself, as it were, of the whole affair.

"We should be out of the forest by now," he remarked in an undertone a little while later; "the way seemed shorter before."

Just then the coach gave an unexpected lurch to one side, and after much groaning and creaking of axles and springs it came to a standstill, and the citizen agent was heard cursing loudly and then scrambling down from the box.

The next moment the carriage-door was pulled open from without, and the harsh voice called out peremptorily:

"Citizen soldier, here — quick! — quick! — curse you! — we'll have one of the horses down if you don't hurry!"

The soldier struggled to his feet; it was never good to be slow in obeying the citizen agent's commands. He was half-asleep and no doubt numb with cold and long sitting still; to accelerate his movements he was suddenly gripped by the arm and dragged incontinently out of the coach.

Then the door was slammed to again, either by a rough hand or a sudden gust of wind, Marguerite could not tell; she heard a cry of rage and one of terror, and Heron's raucous curses. She cowered in the corner of the carriage with Armand's head against her shoulder, and tried to close her ears to all those hideous sounds.

Then suddenly all the sounds were hushed and all around everything became perfectly calm and still — so still that at first the silence oppressed her with a vague, nameless dread. It was as if Nature herself had paused, that she might listen; and the silence became more and more absolute, until Marguerite could hear Armand's soft, regular breathing close to her ear.

The window nearest to her was open, and as she leaned forward with that paralyzing sense of oppression a breath of pure air struck full upon her nostrils and brought with it a briny taste as if from the sea.

It was not quite so dark; and there was a sense as of open country stretching out to the limits of the horizon. Overhead a vague greyish light suffused the sky, and the wind swept the clouds in great rolling banks right across that light.

Marguerite gazed upward with a more calm feeling that was akin to gratitude. That pale light, though so wan and feeble, was thrice welcome after that inky blackness wherein shadows were less dark than the lights. She watched eagerly the bank of clouds driven by the dying gale.

The light grew brighter and faintly golden, now the banks of clouds — storm-tossed and fleecy — raced past one another, parted and reunited like veils of unseen giant dancers waved by hands that controlled infinite space — advanced and rushed and slackened speed again — united and finally torn asunder to reveal the waning moon, honey-coloured and mysterious, rising as if from an invisible ocean far away.

The wan pale light spread over the wide stretch of country, throwing over it as it spread dull tones of indigo and of blue. Here and there sparse, stunted trees with fringed gaunt arms bending to prevailing winds proclaimed the neighbourhood of the sea.

Marguerite gazed on the picture which the waning moon had so suddenly revealed; but she gazed with eyes that knew not what they saw. The moon had risen on her right — there lay the east — and the coach must have been travelling due north, whereas Crecy...

In the absolute silence that reigned she could perceive from far, very far away, the sound of a church clock striking the midnight hour; and now it seemed to her supersensitive senses that a firm footstep was treading the soft earth, a footstep that drew nearer — and then nearer still.

Nature did pause to listen. The wind was hushed, the night-birds in the forest had gone to rest. Marguerite's heart beat so fast that its throbbings choked her, and a dizziness clouded her consciousness.

But through this state of torpor she heard the opening of the carriage door, she felt the onrush of that pure, briny air, and she felt a long, burning kiss upon her hands.

She thought then that she was really dead, and that God in His infinite love had opened to her the outer gates of Paradise.

"My love!" she murmured.

She was leaning back in the carriage and her eyes were closed, but she felt that firm fingers removed the irons from her wrists, and that a pair of warm lips were pressed there in their stead.

"There, little woman, that's better so — is it not? Now let me get hold of poor old Armand!"

It was Heaven, of course, else how could earth hold such heavenly joy?

"Percy!" exclaimed Armand in an awed voice.

"Hush, dear!" murmured Marguerite feebly; "we are in Heaven you and I—"

Whereupon a ringing laugh woke the echoes of the silent night.

"In Heaven, dear heart!" And the voice had a delicious earthly ring in its whole-hearted merriment. "Please God, you'll both be at Portel with me before dawn."

Then she was indeed forced to believe. She put out her hands and groped for him, for it was dark inside the carriage; she groped, and felt his massive shoulders leaning across the body of the coach, while his fingers busied themselves with the irons on Armand's wrist.

"Don't touch that brute's filthy coat with your dainty fingers, dear heart," he said gaily. "Great Lord! I have worn that wretch's clothes for over two hours; I feel as if the dirt had penetrated to my bones."

Then with that gesture so habitual to him he took her head between his two hands, and drawing her to him until the wan light from without lit up the face that he worshipped, he gazed his fill into her eyes.

She could only see the outline of his head silhouetted against the wind-tossed sky; she could not see his eyes, nor his lips, but she felt his nearness, and the happiness of that almost caused her to swoon.

"Come out into the open, my lady fair," he murmured, and though she could not see, she could feel that he smiled; "let God's pure air blow through your hair and round your dear head. Then, if you can walk so far, there's a small half-way house close by here. I have knocked up the none too amiable host. You and Armand could have half an hour's rest there before we go further on our way."

"But you, Percy? — are you safe?"

"Yes, m'dear, we are all of us safe until morning-time enough to reach Le Portel, and to be aboard the Day-Dream before mine amiable friend M. Chambertin has discovered his worthy colleague lying gagged and bound inside the chapel of the Holy Sepulchre. By Gad! how old Heron will curse — the moment he can open his mouth!"

He half helped, half lifted her out of the carriage. The strong pure air suddenly rushing right through to her lungs made her feel faint, and she almost fell. But it was good to feel herself falling, when one pair of arms amongst the millions on the earth were there to receive her.

"Can you walk, dear heart?" he asked. "Lean well on me — it is not far, and the rest will do you good."

"But you, Percy—"

He laughed, and the most complete joy of living seemed to resound through that laugh. Her arm was in his, and for one moment he stood still while his eyes swept the far reaches of the country, the mellow distance still wrapped in its mantle of indigo, still untouched by the mysterious light of the waning moon.

He pressed her arm against his heart, but his right hand was stretched out towards the black wall of the forest behind him, towards the dark crests of the pines in which the dying wind sent its last mournful sighs.

"Dear heart," he said, and his voice quivered with the intensity of his excitement, "beyond the stretch of that wood, from far away over there, there are cries and moans of anguish that come to my ear even now. But for you, dear, I would cross that wood to-night and re-enter Paris to-morrow. But for you, dear — but for you," he reiterated earnestly as he pressed her closer to him, for a bitter cry had risen to her lips.

She went on in silence. Her happiness was great — as great as was her pain. She had found him again, the man whom she worshipped, the husband whom she thought never to see again on earth. She had found him, and not even now — not after those terrible weeks of misery and suffering unspeakable — could she feel that love had triumphed over the wild, adventurous spirit, the reckless enthusiasm, the ardour of self-sacrifice.

CHAPTER XLIX. THE LAND OF ELDORADO

It seems that in the pocket of Heron's coat there was a letter-case with some few hundred francs. It was amusing to think that the brute's money helped to bribe the ill-tempered keeper of the half-way house to receive guests at midnight, and to ply them well with food, drink, and the shelter of a stuffy coffee-room.

Marguerite sat silently beside her husband, her hand in his. Armand, opposite to them, had both elbows on the table. He looked pale and wan, with a bandage across his forehead, and his glowing eyes were resting on his chief.

"Yes! you demmed young idiot," said Blakeney merrily, "you nearly upset my plan in the end, with your yelling and screaming outside the chapel gates."

"I wanted to get to you, Percy. I thought those brutes had got you there inside that building."

"Not they!" he exclaimed. "It was my friend Heron whom they had trussed and gagged, and whom my amiable friend M. Chambertin will find in there to-morrow morning. By Gad! I would go back if only for the pleasure of hearing Heron curse when first the gag is taken from his mouth."

"But how was it all done, Percy? And there was de Batz—"

"De Batz was part of the scheme I had planned for mine own escape before I knew that those brutes meant to take Marguerite and you as hostages for my good behaviour. What I hoped then was that under cover of a tussle or a fight I could somehow or other contrive to slip through their fingers. It was a chance, and you know my belief in bald-headed Fortune, with the one solitary hair. Well, I meant to grab that hair; and at the worst I could but die in the open and not caged in that awful hole like some noxious vermin. I knew that de Batz would rise to the bait. I told him in my letter that the Dauphin would be at the Chateau d'Ourde this night, but that I feared the revolutionary Government had got wind of this fact, and were sending an armed escort to bring the lad away. This letter Ffoulkes took to him; I knew that he would make a vigorous effort to get the Dauphin into his hands, and that during the scuffle that one hair on Fortune's head would for one second only, mayhap, come within my reach. I had so planned the expedition that we were bound to arrive at the forest of Boulogne by nightfall, and night is always a useful ally. But at the guard-house of the Rue Ste. Anne I realised for the first time that those brutes had pressed me into a tighter corner than I had pre-conceived."

He paused, and once again that look of recklessness swept over his face, and his eyes — still hollow and circled — shone with the excitement of past memories.

"I was such a weak, miserable wretch, then," he said, in answer to Marguerite's appeal. "I had to try and build up some strength, when — Heaven forgive me for the sacrilege — I had unwittingly risked your precious life, dear heart, in that blind endeavour to save mine own. By Gad! it was no easy task in that jolting vehicle with that noisome wretch beside me for sole company; yet I ate and I drank and I slept for three days and two nights, until the hour when in the darkness I struck Heron from behind, half-strangled him first, then gagged him, and finally slipped into his filthy coat and put that loathsome bandage across my head, and his battered hat above it all. The yell he gave when first I attacked him made every horse rear — you must remember it — the noise effectually drowned our last scuffle in the coach. Chauvelin was the only man who might have suspected what had occurred, but he had gone on ahead, and bald-headed Fortune had passed by me, and I had managed to grab its one hair. After that it was all quite easy. The sergeant and the soldiers had seen very little of Heron and nothing of me; it did not take a great effort to deceive them, and the darkness of the night was my most faithful friend. His raucous voice was not difficult to imitate, and darkness always muffles and changes every tone. Anyway, it was not likely that those loutish soldiers would even remotely suspect the trick that was being played on them. The citizen agent's orders were promptly and implicitly obeyed. The men never even thought to wonder that after insisting on an escort of twenty he should drive off with two prisoners and only two men to guard them. If they did wonder, it was not theirs to question. Those two troopers are spending an uncomfortable night somewhere in the forest of Boulogne, each tied to a tree, and some two leagues apart one from the other. And now," he added gaily, "en voiture, my fair lady; and you, too, Armand. 'Tis seven leagues to Le Portel, and we must be there before dawn."

"Sir Andrew's intention was to make for Calais first, there to open communication with the Day-Dream and then for Le Portel," said Marguerite; "after that he meant to strike back for the Chateau d'Ourde in search of me."

"Then we'll still find him at Le Portel — I shall know how to lay hands on him; but you two must get aboard the Day-Dream at once, for Ffoulkes and I can always look after ourselves."

It was one hour after midnight when — refreshed with food and rest — Marguerite, Armand and Sir Percy left the half-way house. Marguerite was standing in the doorway ready to go. Percy and Armand had gone ahead to bring the coach along.

"Percy," whispered Armand, "Marguerite does not know?"

"Of course she does not, you young fool," retorted Percy lightly. "If you try and tell her I think I would smash your head."

"But you—" said the young man with sudden vehemence; "can you bear the sight of me? My God! when I think—"

"Don't think, my good Armand — not of that anyway. Only think of the woman for whose sake you committed a crime — if she is pure and good, woo her and win her — not just now, for it were foolish to go back to Paris after her, but anon, when she comes to England and all these past days are forgotten — then love her as much as you can, Armand. Learn your lesson of love better than I have learnt mine; do not cause Jeanne Lange those tears of anguish which my mad spirit brings to your sister's eyes. You were right, Armand, when you said that I do not know how to love!"

But on board the Day-Dream, when all danger was past, Marguerite felt that he did.

MAM'ZELLE GUILLOTINE

BOOK I

Chapter I: 1789: THE DAWN OF REVOLUTION

“Arms! Arms! Give us arms!”

France to-day is desperate. Her people are starving. Women and children cry for bread; famine, injustice and oppression have made slaves of the men. But the time has come at last when the cry for freedom and for justice has drowned the wails of hungry children. It is Sunday the twelfth of July. Camille Desmoulins the fiery young demagogue is here, standing on a table in the Palais Royal, a pistol in each hand, with a herd of gaunt and hollow-eyed men around him. “Friends,” he demands vehemently, “shall our children die like sheep? Shall we continue to plead for ears that will not hear and appeal to hearts that are made of stone? Shall we labour to feed the welled-filled and see our wives and daughters starve? Frenchmen! The hour has come: the hour of our deliverance. To arms, friends! to arms! Let our oppressors look to themselves. Let them come to grips with us, the oppressed, and see if brutal force can conquer justice.”

With burning hearts and quivering lips they listened to him for a while, some in silence, others muttering incoherent words. But soon they took up the echo of the impassioned call: “To arms!” and in a few moments what had been a tentative murmur became a delirious shout: “To arms! To arms!” Throughout the long afternoon, until dusk and nightfall, and thereafter the call to arms like the roar of ocean waves breaking on a rocky shore resounded from one end of Paris to the other. And all night long men in threadbare suits and wooden shoes roamed about the streets, gesticulating, forming groups, talking, arguing, shouting. Shouting always their rallying cry: “To arms!”

By dawn the next day the herd of gaunt, hollowed-eyed men has become a raging multitude. The call for arms has become a vociferous demand: “Give us arms!” Right to-day must be at grips with might. The oppressed shall rise against the oppressor. But the oppressed must have arms wherewith to smite the tyrant, the extortioner, the relentless task-master of the poor. And so they march, these hungry, wan-faced men, at first in their hundreds but soon in their thousands. They march to the Town Hall demanding arms. “Arms! Arms! Give us arms!”

It is Monday morning but all the shops are shut: neither cobblers, nor weavers, barbers nor venders of miscellaneous goods have taken down their shutters. Labourers and scavengers are idle, for every worker to-day has become a fighter. Alone the bakers and the vintners ply their trade, for fighting men must eat and drink. And the smiths are set to work to forge pikes as fast as they can, and the women up in their attics to sew cockades. Red and blue which are the municipal colours are tacked on to the constitutional white, thus making of the Tricolour the badge of France in revolt. The rest of Paris continues to roam the streets demanding arms: first at the Hôtel de Ville, the Town Hall where provost and aldermen are forced to admit they have no arms: not in any quantity, only a few antiquated firelocks, which are immediately seized upon. Then they go, those hungry thousands, to the Arsenal, where they only find rubbish and bits of rusty iron which they hurl into the streets, often wounding others who had remained, expectant, outside. Next to the King’s warehouse where there are plenty of gewgaws, tapestries, pictures, a gilded sword or two and suits of antiquated armour, also the cannon, silver mounted and coated with grime, which a grateful King of Siam once sent as a present to Louis XIV, but nothing useful, nothing serviceable. No matter! A Siamese cannon is better than none. It is trundled along the streets of Paris to the Debtors’ prison, to the Chatelet, to the House of Correction where prisoners are liberated and made to swell the throng. News of all this tumult soon wakens the complacent and the luxurious from their slumbers. They tumble out of bed wanting to know what “those brigands” were up to. The “brigands” it seems were in possession of the barriers, had seized the carts which conveyed food into the city for the rich. They were marching through Paris, yelling, and roaring, wearing strange cockades. The tocsin was pealing from every church steeple. Every smith in the town was forging pikes; fifty thousand it was asserted had been forged in twenty-four hours, and still the “brigands” demanded more. So what were the complacent and the luxurious to do but make haste to depart from this Paris with its strange cockades and its unseemly tumult? There were some quick packings-up and calls for coaches, tumbrils, anything whereon to pile up furniture, silver and provisions and hurry to the nearest barrier. But already Paris in revolt had posted its scrubby hordes at all the gates, with orders to stop every vehicle from going through and to drag every person who attempted to leave the city, willy-nilly to the Town Hall. And the complacent and the luxurious, driven back into Paris which they wished to quit, desire to know what the commandant of the city, M. le baron Pierre Victor de Besenval is doing about it. They demand to know what is being done for their safety. Well! M. de Besenval has sent courier after courier to Versailles asking for orders, or at least for guidance. But all that he gets in reply to his most urgent messages are a few vague words from His Majesty saying that he has called a Council of his Ministers who will decide what is to be done, and in the meanwhile let M. le baron do his duty as beseems an officer loyal to his King. Besenval in his turn calls a Council of his Officers. His troops are deserting in their hundreds, taking their arms with them. Two of his Colonels declare that their men will not fight. Later in the afternoon three thousand six hundred Gardes Françaises ordered to march against the insurgents go over to them in a body with their guns and their gunners, their arms and accoutrements. Gardes Françaises no longer, they are re-named Gardes Nationales, and enrolled in the fastgrowing Paris Militia, which is like to number forty — eight thousand soon, and by to-morrow nearer one hundred thousand. If only it had arms, the Paris Militia would be unconquerable. And now it is Tuesday, the fourteenth of July, a date destined to remain for all time the most momentous in the annals of France, a date on which century-old institutions shall totter and fall, not only in France, but in the course of time, throughout the civilized world, and archaic systems shall perish that have taken root and gathered power since might became right in the days of cave-dwelling man. Still no definite orders from Versailles. The Council of Ministers continues to deliberate. Hoary-headed Senators decide to sit in unbroken session, while Commandant Besenval in Paris does his duty as a soldier loyal to his King. But what can Besenval do, even though he be a soldier and loyal to his King? He may be loyal but the men are not. Their Colonels declare that the troops will not fight. Who then can stem that army of National Volunteers, now grown to a hundred and fifty thousand, as they march with their rallying cry “To arms!” and roll like a flood to the Hôtel des Invalides? “There are arms there. Why had we not thought of that before?” On they roll, scale the containing wall and demand entrance. The Invalides, old soldiers, veterans of the Seven Years’ War stand by; the gates are opened, the Garde Nationale march in, but the veterans still stand by without firing a shot. Their Commandant tries to parley with the insurgents, but they push past him and his bodyguards; they swarm all over the building rummaging through every room and every closet from attic to cellar. And in the cellar the arms are found. Thousands of firelocks soon find their way on the shoulders of the National Guard. What indeed can Commandant Besenval do, even though he be a soldier and loyal to his King?

Chapter II: PARIS IN REVOLT

And now to the Bastille, to that monument of arrogance and power, with its drawbridges, its bastions and eight grim towers, which has reared its massive pile of masonry above the "swinish multitude" for over four hundred years. Tyranny frowning down on Impotence. Power holding the weak in bondage. Here it stands on this fourteenth day of July, bloated with pride and, conscious of its impregnability, it seems to mock that chaotic horde which invades its purlieus, swarms round its ditches and its walls, and with a roaring like that of a tempestuous sea, raises the defiant cry: "Surrender!"

A tumult such as Dante in his visions of hell never dreamed of, rises from one hundred and fifty thousand throats. Floods of humanity come pouring into the Place from the outlying suburbs. Paris in revolt has arms now: One hundred thousand muskets, fifty thousand pikes: one hundred and fifty thousand hungry, frenzied men. No longer do these call out with the fury of despair: "Arms! Give us arms!" Rather do they shout: "We'll not yield while stone remains on stone of that cursed fortress."

And the walls of the Bastille are nine feet thick. Can they be as much as shaken, even by a hurricane of grapeshot and the roaring of a Siamese cannon? Commandant de Launay laughs the very suggestion to scorn. He has less than a hundred and twenty men to defend what is impregnable. Eighty or so veterans, old soldiers who fought in the Seven Years' War, and not more than thirty young Swiss. He has cannons concealed up on the battlements, and piles of missiles and ammunition. Very few victuals, it is true, but that is no matter. As soon as he opens fire on that undisciplined mob, it will scatter as autumn leaves scatter in the wind. And "No Surrender!" has already been his answer to a deputation which came to him from the Town Hall in the early morning, suggesting parley with the men of the National Guard, the disciplined leaders of this riotous mob. "No surrender!" he reiterates with emphasis; "rather will I hurl myself down from these battlements into the ditch three feet below, or blow up the fortress sky-high and half Paris along with it."

And to show that he will be as good as his word, he takes up a taper and stands for a time within arm's length of the powder magazine. Only for a time, for poor old de Launay never did do what he said he would. All he did just then was to survey the tumultuous crowd below. They have begun the attack. Paris in revolt opens fire on the "accursed stronghold" with volley after volley of musket-fire from every corner of the Place and from every surrounding window. De Launay thrusts the taper away, and turns to his small garrison of veterans and young Swiss. Will they fire on the mob if he gives the order? He has plied them with drink, but feels doubtful of their temper. Anyway, the volley of musket-fire cannot damage walls that are nine feet thick. "We'll wait and see what happens," thinks Commandant de Launay, but he does not rekindle the taper. Just then a couple of stalwarts down below start an attack on the outer drawbridge. De Launay knows them both for old soldiers, one is a smith, the other a wheelwright, both of them resolute and strong as Hercules. They climb on the roof of the guard-room and with heavy axes strike against the chains of the drawbridge, heedless of the rain of grapeshot around them. They strike and strike again, with such force and such persistence that the chain must presently break, seeing which de Launay turns to his veterans and orders fire. The cannon gives one roar from the battlements, and does mighty damage down below. Paris in revolt has shed its first blood and reaches the acme of its frenzy. The chains of the outer drawbridge yield and break and down comes the bridge with a terrific clatter. This first tangible sign of victory is greeted with a delirious shout, and an umber of insurgents headed by men of the National Guard swarm over the drawbridge and into the outer court. Here they are met by Thuriot, second in command, with a small bodyguard. He tries to parley with them. No use of course. Paris now is no longer in revolt. It is in revolution. The insurgents hustle and bustle Thuriot and his bodyguard out of the way. They surge all over the outer court, up to the ditch and the inner drawbridge. De Launay up on the battlements can only guess what is happening down there. His veterans and young Swiss stand by. Shall they fire, or wait till fired on? Indecision is clearly written on their faces. De Launay picks up a taper again, takes up his position once more within arm's length of the powder magazine. Will he, after all, be as good as his word and along with the impregnable stronghold blow half Paris up sky-high? He might have done it. He said he would rather than surrender, but he doesn't do it. Why not? Who shall say? Was it destiny that stayed his arm? Destiny which no doubt aeons ago had decreed the downfall of this monument of autocratic sovereignty on his fourteenth day of July, 1789. All that de Launay does is to order the veterans to fire once more, and the cannons scatter death and mutilation among the aggressors, whilst all kinds of missiles, pavingstones, old iron, granite blocks are hurled down into the ditch, till it too is littered with dead and dying. The wounded in the Place are carried to safety into adjoining streets, but so much blood has let a veritable Bedlam loose. A cartload of straw is trundled over the outer drawbridge into the court. Fire! Conflagration! Paris in revolution had not thought before of this way of subduing that "cursed fortress", but now fire! Fire everywhere! The Bastille has not surrendered yet. Soon the guard-room is set ablaze, and the veterans' mess-room. The fire spreads to one of the inner courts. De Launay still hovers on the battlements, still declares that he will blow up half Paris rather than surrender his fortress. But he doesn't do it, and a hundred feet below the conflagration is threatening his last entrenchments. The flames lick upwards ready to do the work which old de Launay had sworn that he would do. Inside the dungeons of the Bastille the prisoners, lifewearied and indifferent, dream that a series of earthquakes are shaking Paris. But what do they care? If these walls nine feet thick should totter and fall and bury them under their ruins, it would only mean for them the happy release of death. For hours has this hellish din been going on. In the inner courtyard the big clock continues to tick on; the seconds, the minutes, the hours go by: five hours, perhaps six, and still the Bastille stands. Up on the battlements the garrison is getting weary. The veterans have been prone on the ground for over four hours making the cannons roar, but now they are tired. They struggle to their feet and stand sullen, with reversed muskets, whilst an old bearded sergeant picks up a a tattered white flag and waves it in the commandant's face. The Swiss down below do better than that. They open a porthole in the inner drawbridge, and one man thrusts out a hand, grasping a paper. It is seized upon by one of the National Guard. "Terms of Surrender," the Swiss cry as with one voice. The insurgents press forward shouting: "What are they?"

"Immunity for all," is the reply. "Will you accept?"

"On the word of an officer we will."

It is an officer of the National Guard who says this. Two days ago he was officer in the Gardes Françaises. His word must be believed. And so the last drawbridge is lowered and Paris in delirious joy rushes into the citadel crying: "Victory! The Bastille is ours!"

Chapter III: ONE OF THE DERELICTS

It is best not to remember what followed. The word of an officer, once of the Gardes Françaises, was not kept. Old veterans and young Swiss fell victims to the fury of frenzied conquerors. Paris in revolution, drunk with its triumph, plunged through the labyrinthine fortress, wreaking vengeance for its dead.

The prisoners were dragged out of their dungeons where some had spent a quarter of a century and more in a living death. They were let loose in a world they knew nothing of, a world that had forgotten them. That miserable old de Launay and his escort of officers were dragged to the Town Hall. But they never got there; hustled by a yelling, hooting throng, the officers fell by the wayside and were trampled to death in the gutters. Seeing which de Launay cried pitiably: "O friends, kill me fast." He had his wish, the poor old weakling, and all of him that reached the Town Hall was his head carried aloft on a pike.

To the credit of the Gardes Nationales, once the Royal Regiment of Gardes Françaises, be it said that they marched back to their barracks in perfect order and discipline; it was this same Garde Nationale who plied hoses on the conflagration inside the fortress and averted an explosion which would have wrecked more than a third of the city.

But no one took any notice of the liberated prisoners. A dozen or so of them were let loose in this World-Bedlam, left to roam about the streets, trying all in vain to gather up threads of life long since turned to dust. The fall of the mighty fortress put to light many of its grim secrets, some horrible, others infinitely pathetic, some carved in the stone of a dank dungeon, others scribbled on scraps of mouldy paper.

"If for my consolation" [was the purport of one of these] "Monseigneur would grant me for the sake of God and the Blessed Trinity, that I could have news of my dear wife: were it only her name on a card to show that she is alive. It were the greatest consolation I could receive, and I would for ever bless the greatness of Monseigneur."

The letter is dated "A la Bastille le 7 Octobre 1752" and signed Quéret-Démery. Thirty-seven years spent in a dark dugeon with no hope of reunion with that dear wife, news of whom would have been a solace to the broken heart. History has no record of one Quéret-Démery who spent close on half a century in the "cursed fortress." What he had done to merit his fate no one will ever know. He was: that is all we know and that he spent a lifetime in agonized longing and ever-shrinking hope.

One can picture him now on this evening of July 14th turned out from that prison which had become his only home, the shelter of his old age, and wandering with mind impaired and memory gone, through the streets of a city he hardly knew again. Wandering with only one fixed aim: to find the old home where he had known youth and happiness, and the love of his dear wife. Dead or Alive? Did he find her? History has no record. Quéret-Démery was just an obscure, forgotten victim of an autocratic rule, sending his humble petition which was never delivered, to "Monseigneur." Monseigneur who? Imagination is lost in conjecture. The profligate Philippe d'Orleans or one of his like? Who can tell?

The attempt to follow the adventures or misadventures of those thirteen prisoners let loose in the midst of Paris in revolution, would be vain. There were thirteen, it seems. An unlucky number. Again history is silent as to what became to twelve of their number. Only one stands out among the thirteen in subsequent chronicles of the times: a woman. The only woman among the lot. Her name was Gabrielle Damiens. At least that is the name she went by later on, but she never spoke publicly either of her origin or of her parentage. She had forgotten; so she often said. One does forget things when one has spent sixteen years — one's best years — living a life that is so like death. She certainly forgot what she did that night after she had been turned out into the world: she must have wandered through the streets as did the others, trying to find her way to a place somewhere in the city, which had once been her home. But where she slept then, and for many nights after that she never knew, until the day when she found herself opposite a house in the Boulevard Saint-Germain: a majestic house with an elaborate coronet and coat of arms carved in stone, surmounting the monumental entrance door: and the device also carved in stone: "N'oublie jamais." Seeing which Gabrielle's wanderings came to a sudden halt, and she stood quite still in the gutter opposite the house, staring up at the coronet, the coat of arms and the device. "N'oublie jamais," she murmured. "Jamais!" she reiterated with a curious throaty sound which was neither a cry nor a laugh, but was both in one. "No, Monsieur le Marquis de Saint-Lucque de Tourville," she continued to murmur to herself, "Gabrielle Damiens will see to it that you and your brood never shall forget."

There was a bench opposite the house under the trees of the boulevard and Gabrielle sat down not because she was tired but because she had a good view of the coronet and the device over the front door. Desultory crowds paraded the boulevard laughing and shouting "Victory!" Most of them had been standing for hours in queues outside the bakers' shops, but not everyone had been served with bread. There was not enough to go round, hence the reason why with the cry of "Victory!" there mingled one which sounded like an appeal, and also like a threat:

"Bread! Give us bread!"

Gabrielle watched them unseeing. She too had stood for the past few days in queues, getting what food she could. She had a little money. Where it came from she didn't know. She had a vague recollection of scrubbing floors and washing dishes, so perhaps the money came from that, or a charitable person may have had pity on her: anyway she was neither hungry nor tired, and she was willing to remain here on this bench for an indefinite length of time trying to piece together the fragments of the past from out the confused storehouse of memory.

She saw herself as a child, living almost as a pariah on the charity of relatives who never allowed her to forget her father's crime or his appalling fate. They always spoke of him as "that abominable regicide," which he certainly was not. François Damiens was just a misguided fool, a religious fanatic who saw in the profligate, dissolute monarch, the enemy of France, and struck at him not, he asserted, with a view to murdering his King but just to frighten him and to warn him of the people's growing resentment against his life of immorality. Madness of course. His assertion was obviously true since the weapon which he used was an ordinary pocketknife and did no more than scratch the royal shoulder. But he had struck at the King and royal blood had flown from the scratch, staining the royal shirt. In punishment for this sacrilege, Damiens was hung, drawn and quartered, but to the end, in spite of abominable tortures which he bore stoically, he maintained steadfastly that he had no accomplice and had acted entirely on his own initiative.

François Damiens had left his motherless daughter in the care of a married sister Ursule and her husband Anatole Desèze, a cabinet-maker, who earned a precarious livelihood and begrudged the child every morsel she ate. Gabrielle from earliest childhood had known what hunger meant and the bitter cold of a Paris of winter, often without a fire, always without sufficient clothing. She had relaxation only in sleep and never any kind of childish amusement. The only interests she had in life was to gaze up at an old box fashioned of carved wood, which stood on a shelf in the living-room, high up against the wall, out of her reach. This box for some unknown reason, chiefly because she had never been allowed to touch it, had always fascinated her. It excited her childish curiosity to that extent that on one occasion when her uncle and aunt were out of the house, she managed to drag the table close to the wall, to hoist a chair upon the table, to climb up on the chair and to stretch her little arms out in a vain attempt to reach the tempting box. The attempt was a complete fiasco. The chair slid away from under her on the polished table, and she fell with a clatter and a crash to the floor, bruised all over her body and her head swimming after it had struck against the edge of the table. To make matters worse, she felt so queer and giddy that she had not the strength at once to put the table and chair back in their accustomed places. Aunt and uncle came back and at once guessed the cause of the catastrophe, with the result that in addition to bruises and an aching head Gabrielle got a sound beating and was threatened with a more severe one still if she ever dared to try and interfere with the mysterious box again. She was ten years old when this disastrous incident occurred. Cowed and fearful she never made a second attempt to satisfy her curiosity. She drilled herself into avoiding to cast the merest glance up on the shelf. But though she was able to control her eyes, she could not control her mind, and her mind continued to dwell on the mystery of that fatal box.

It was not until she reached the age of sixteen that she lost something of her terror of another beating. She was a strapping girl by then, strong and tall for her age and unusually good-looking inspite of poor food and constant overwork. Her second attempt was entirely successful. Uncle and aunt were out of the way, table and chair were easily moved and Gabrielle was now tall enough to reach the shelf and lift down the box. It was locked, but after a brief struggle with the aid of an old kitchen knife the lid fell back and revealed — what? A few old papers tied up in three small bundles. One of these bundles was marked with the name “Saint-Lucque,” a name quite unknown to Gabrielle. She turned these papers — they were letters apparently — over and over, conscious of an intense feeling of disappointment. What she had expected to find she didn’t know but it certainly wasn’t this.

The girl however, was no fool. Soon her wits got to work. They told her that, obviously, if these old letters were of no importance to her, Aunt Ursule would not have kept them all these years out of her reach. As time was getting on and uncle and aunt might be back at any moment, she made haste to replace the box on the shelf, carefully disguising the damage done by the kitchen knife. Chair and table she put back in their accustomed places and the old letters she tucked away under the folds of her fichu. By this time she had worked herself up into a fever of conjecture, but she had sufficient control over herself to await with apparent calm the moment when she could pursue the letters in the privacy of her own room. She had never been allowed to have a candle in the evenings, because there was a street-lamp opposite the window which, as Aunt Ursule said, was quite light enough to go to bed by. Gabrielle hated that street-lamp because as there were no curtains to the window, the glare often prevented her getting to sleep, but on this never-to-be-forgotten night she blessed it. Far into the next morning sitting by the open window, did the daughter of François Damiens read and re-read those old letters by the flickering light of the street-lamp. When the lamp was extinguished she still remained sitting by the window scheming and dreaming until the pale light of dawn enabled her to read and read again. For what did those old letters reveal? They revealed the fact that her unfortunate father who had been sent to his death as a regicide had not been alone in his design against the King. The crime — for so it was called — had been instigated and aided by a body of noble gentlemen who like himself saw in the profligate monarch the true enemy of France. But whilst Damiens bore loyally and in silence the brunt of this conspiracy, whilst he endured torture and went to his death like a hero, those noble gentlemen had remained immune and left their miserable tool to his fate.

All this Gabrielle Damiens learned during those wakeful hours of the night. A great deal of it was of course mere inference; the letters were all addressed to her father apparently by three gentlemen, two of whom with commendable prudence had refrained from appending their signature. But there was one name “Saint-Lucque” which appeared at the foot of some letters more damning than most. Before the rising sun had flooded the towers of Notre Dame with gold Gabrielle had committed these to memory.

Yes! Memory was reawakened now, and busy after all these years unravelling the tangled skein of the past. Sitting here on the boulevard opposite the stately mansion with the coat of arms and the device “N’oublie Jamais” carved in stone above its portal, Gabrielle saw herself as she was during the three years following her fateful discovery. Her first task had been to make a copy of the letters in a clean and careful hand, after which there were the days spent in establishing the identity of “Saint-Lucque” and tracing his whereabouts. M. le Marquis de Saint-Lucque turned out to be one of the greatest gentlemen in France, attached to the Court of His Majesty King Louis XV. He lived in a palatial mansion on the Boulevard Saint-Germain and was a widower with one son. His association with François Damiens had seemingly never been found out. Presumably the whole episode was forgotten by now.

Then there came the great day when Gabrielle first called on Monsieur le Marquis. It was not easy for a girl of her class to obtain an interview with so noble a gentleman, and at once Gabrielle was confronted with a regular barrage of lackeys, all intent apparently on preventing her access to their master. “No, certainly not,” was the final pronouncement of the major-domo, a very great gentleman indeed in this lordly establishment, “you cannot present yourself before Monsieur le Marquis, he will not see you.” Gabrielle conscious of her personal charm tried blandishments, but these were of no avail, and undoubtedly she would have failed in her purpose had not Monsieur le Vicomte, son and heir of Monsieur le Marquis, come unexpectedly upon the scene. He was in riding kit. An exceptionally handsome young man, and apparently more impressionable than the severe major-domo. Here was a lovely girl whose glance was nothing less than a challenge, and she wanted something which was being denied her by a lot of louts. Whatever it was, thought the handsome Vicomte, she must have her wish; preliminary, he added to himself with an appraising look directed at the pretty creature, to his getting what he would want in return for his kind offices. There was an exchange of glances between the two young people and a few moments later Gabrielle was ushered into the presence of Monsieur le Marquis de Saint-Lucque by a humbled and bewildered major-domo. Monsieur le Vicomte had given the order, and there was no disobeying him. “I’ll wait for you here,” he whispered in the girl’s ear, indicating a door on the same landing. She lowered her eyes, put on the airs of a demure country wench, and disappeared within the forbidden precincts.

The first interview with the old aristocrat was distinctly stormy. There was a great deal of shouting at first on his part. A stick was raised. A bell was rung. But Gabrielle held her grounds: very calmly, produced the copy of a damnatory letter, and presently the shouting ceased, the stick was lowered, and the lackey dismissed who came in answer to the bell. The letter doubtless brought up vivid and most unpleasant memories of the past. Presently a bargain was struck, money passed from hand to hand — quite a good deal of money, more than Gabrielle had ever seen in all her life, and the interview ended with a promise on her part to destroy all the original letters. She was to bring them to Monsieur le Marquis the next day and burn them before his eyes. She trotted off with the money safely tucked away in the fold of her fichu. The handsome Vicomte was waiting for her, and she duly paid the tribute which he demanded of her. But she did not call on the old the old Marquis either the next day, or the day after that, or ever again, because a week later Monsieur le Marquis de Saint-Lucque had a paralytic stroke, and thereafter remained bedridden for over four years until the day when he was laid to rest among his ancestors in the family mausoleum in Artois.

In the meantime Gabrielle Damiens's relationship with Vicomte Fernand de Saint-Lucque had become very tender. He was for the time being entirely under the charm of the fascinating blackmailer, unaware of the ugly role she had been playing against his father. He had fitted up what he called a love-nest for her in a rustic chalet in the environs of Versailles and here she lived in the greatest luxury, visited constantly by the Vicomte, who loaded her with money and jewellery to such an extent that she forgot all about her contemplated source of revenue through the medium of the compromising letters.

Everything then was going on very well with the daughter of François Damiens. Her uncle and aunt with the philosophy peculiar to *hoc genus omne* of their country were only too ready to approve of a situation which contributed largely to their well-being, for Gabrielle, ready to forget the cavalier way in which she had been treated in the past, was not only generous but lavish in her gifts to them. And all went well indeed for nearly three years until the day when Fernand de Saint-Lucque became weary of the tie which bound him to the rather common and exacting beauty and gave her a decisive if somewhat curt congé, together with a goodly sum of money which he considered sufficient as a solace to her wounded vanity. The blow fell so unexpectedly that at first Gabrielle felt absolutely stunned. It came at a moment when, deluded into believing that she had completely enslaved her highborn lover, she saw visions of being herself one day Vicomtesse and subsequently Marquise de Saint-Lucque de Tourville, received at Court, the queen and leader of Paris society.

She certainly did not look upon the Vicomte's partin gift as sufficient solace for her disappointment. It would not do much more than pay her debts to dressmakers, milliners and jewellers. With the prodigality peculiar to her kind she had spent money as freely and easily as she had earned it. She had, of course, some valuable jewellery, but this she would not sell, and the future, as she presently surveyed it, looked anything but cheerful. Soon, however, her sound common sense came to the rescue. She took, as it were, stock of her resources, and in the process remembered the letters on which she had counted three years ago as the foundation of her fortunes. She turned her back without a pang on the rustic chalet, no longer a love-nest now, and returned to her uncle and aunt, in whom she now felt compelled to confide the secret of her disappointment in the present and of her hopes of the future.

She made a fresh attempt to see the old Marquis. Then only did she learn of his sickness and the hopeless state of mind and body in which he now was. But this did not daunt Gabrielle Damiens. Her scheme of blackmail could no longer be successfully directed against the father, but there was the son, the once enamoured Vicomte, her adoring slave, now nothing but an arrogant aristocrat, treating the humble little bourgeoisie as if she were dirt and dismissing her out of his life with nothing but a miserable pittance. Well! He should pay for it, pay so heavily that not only his fortune but also his life would be wrecked in the process. Moreover, she, the daughter of that same François Damiens, who had been dubbed the regicide and died a horrible death, would see her ambition fulfilled and herself paid court to and the hem of herment kissed by obsequious courtiers, when she was Madame la Marquise de Saint-Lucque de Tourville.

She started on her campaign without delay. A humble request for an interview with M. le Vicomte was at first curtly refused, but when it was renewed with certain veiled threats it was conceded. Armed with the copies of the damnatory letters Gabrielle demanded money first and then marriage. Yes! no less a thing than marriage to the hier of one of the greatest names in France, failing which the letters would be sent to the Comte de Meaurevaisre, Chief of the Secret Police of His Majesty the King. Well! When Fernand de Saint-Lucque had dismissed her, Gabrielle, with a curt word of farewell, he had dealt her a blow which had completely knocked her over. But it was her turn now to retaliate. He tried to carry off the affair in his usual high-handed manner. He began with sarcasm, went with bravado, and ended with threats. Gabrielle stood as she had done three years ago before the old Marquis. Already she felt conscious of victory, because she had seen the look almost like a death-mask which had come over Fernand de Saint-Lucque's face when he took in the contents of this the first of the fateful letters. When she held it out to him he had waved her hand aside with disdain. She placed it on the table, and waited until natural curiosity impelled him to pick it up. He did it with a contemptuous shrug, held it as if it were filth.

But the look so like a death-mask soon spread over his face. He did his best to disguise it, but Gabrielle had seen it and felt convinced that victory was already in sight. She left, not taking any money away with her, not exacting any promise at the moment save that her victim — he was her victim already — would see her once more. He had commanded her to bring the letters: "Not the copies remember! The originals!" which the Vicomte declared with all his old arrogance did not exist save in the imagination of a cinderwench.

For days and weeks after that first interview did Gabrielle Damines keep the Vicomte de Saint-Lucque on tednerhooks without going near him. The old Marquis was still alive, slowly sinking, with one foot in the grave, and Gabrielle hugged herself with thoughts of the hier of that great name writhing under the threat of disgrace to the head of the house, disgrace followed by confiscation of all his goods, exile from court and country, his name for ever branded with the stigma of regicide: disgrace which would redound on his heir and on all his family, and migh even be the stepping stone to an ignominious death.

When Gabrielle felt that Fernand had suffered long enough she sent him a harsh command for another interview. Devoured with anxiety, he was only too ready to accede. She came this time in a mood as arrogant as his own, exacting writtenpromise of marriage: the date of the wedding to be fixed here and now. She did not bring the original letters with her. They would, she said curtly, be handed over to him when she, Gabrielle Damines, was incontestably Vicomtesse de Saint-Lucque de Tourville.

Fernand at his wits' end did not know what to do. He tried pretence: a softened manner as if he was prepared to yield. Quite gently and persuasively he explained to her that whatever his ultimate decision might be — and he gave her to understand that it certainly

would be favourable — he was compelled at the moment to ask for a few days delay. He had been, he said, paying court to a lady, at His Majesty's express wish, had in fact become officially engaged, and all he needed was a little time for the final breaking off of his obligations. In the meanwhile he was ready, he said, to give her a written promise of marriage duly signed, the wedding to take place within the next three months.

As usual Gabrielle's common sense warned her of a possible trap. The Vicomte had made a very sudden volte-face and had become extraordinarily suave and engaging. He even went to length of assuring her that he never ceased to love her, and that it was only at the King's command that he had become engaged to the lady in question. The breaking off of that engagement, he declared in conclusion, would cause him no heartache. A little doubtful, inclined to mistrust this plausible dissembler, Gabrielle remained impervious to his blandishments, even when she suddenly found herself in his arms, under the once potent spell of his kisses. No longer potent now. She smiled back into his glowing eyes, accepted the written promise of marriage and endured his kisses while keeping her wits about her. When she finally freed herself from his arms she merely assured him that the compromising letters would be returned to him when she had become his lawful wife.

She trotted home that afternoon happy and triumphant with the written promise of marriage duly signed "Fernand de Saint-Lucque de Tourville" safely tucked away in the folds of her fichu. Aunt Ursule and Uncle Desèze congratulated her on her triumph, and the three of them sat up half the night making plans for a golden future. Aunt and uncle would have a farm with cows and horses and pigs, a beautiful garden and plenty of money to give themselves every luxury.

"You need never be afraid of the future," Gabrielle declared proudly. "I'll never be such a fool as to give up the original letters. Even when I am Marquise de Saint-Lucque I will always keep that hold over my husband."

There ensued four days of perfect bliss, unmarred by doubts or fears. They were destined to be the last moments of happiness the blackmailer was ever to know in life. Saint-Lucque, whose engagement to Mademoiselle de Nesle had not only been approved of but actually desired by the King, was nearly crazy with terror at the awful sword of Damocles hanging over his head. Not knowing where to turn or what to do he finally made up his mind to confide the whole of the miserable story to his future mother-in-law, the person most likely to be both discreet and helpful. Madame de Nesle was just then in high favour with the King, whose daughter Mademoiselle was reputed to be, and she was just as anxious as was His Majesty to see the girl married to the bearer of a great name who would secure for her the entrée to the most exclusive circles of aristocratic France. One could not, Madame declared emphatically, allow a dirty blackmailer to come athwart the royal plans, and at once she suggested a *lettre de cachet*, one of those abominable sealed orders which consigned any person accused of an offence against the King to lifelong imprisonment, without the formality of a trial. She was confident that she could obtain anything she desired from her adoring Louis, and anyhow incarceration in the Bastille was the only way of silencing that audacious malefactor.

And Madame was as good as her word. Four days later Gabrielle Damiens saw herself cast into a cell in the Bastille. All her possessions were seized by the men who came to arrest her. Pinioned between two of them she watched the other two turning out her table drawers, and pocket everything they found there, including the precious letters, the promise of marriage and the pieces of jewellery which she had saved from the débâcle of the love-nest. Neither tears, nor protest, nor blandishments were of any avail. Her demands for a trial were met with stolid silence, her questions were not answered. She had become a mere chattel cast into a dungeon, there to remain till she was carried out, feet first, to be thrown into an unknown grave. She never knew what had become of her aunt and uncle, nor did she ever hear the name of Saint-Lucque mentioned again while she spent her best years in a living death.

Gabrielle Damiens was nineteen years old when this catastrophe occurred. Sixteen years had gone by since then.

BOOK II

Chapter IV. London 1794

"Tell me more about that young woman, Blakeney. She interests me."

It was the Prince of Wales who spoke. He was honouring Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney with his presence at dinner in their beautiful home in Richmond. The dinner was over; the ladies had retired leaving the men to enjoy their port and their gossip. It had been a small and intimate dinner-party and after the ladies had gone only half a dozen men were left sitting round the table. In addition to the host and the royal guest, there were present on this occasion four of the more prominent members of that heroic organization known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel: Lord Anthony Dewhurst, my Lord Hastings and Sir Philip Glynde, also Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, his chief's right hand and loyal lieutenant, newly wed to Mademoiselle Suzanne de Tournay, one of the fortunate ones whom the League had succeeded in rescuing from the horrors of revolutionary France. Without waiting for a reply to his command, His Royal Highness went on meditatively: "I suppose Paris is like hell just now."

"With the lid off, sir," was Blakeney's caustic comment.

"And not only Paris," Sir Andrew added; "Nantes under that fiendish Carrier runs it close."

"As for the province of Artois—" mused my Lord Hastings.

"That is where that interesting young woman takes a hand in the devilish work, isn't that it, Blakeney?" the Prince interposed.

"You

were about to tell us something more about her. I confess there is something that thrills one in that story in spite of oneself. The idea of a woman—"

His Highness broke off and resumed after a moment or two:

"Is she young and good-looking?"

"Young? No sir," Blakeney answered. "Nearer forty than thirty, I should say."

"And not good-looking?"

"She must have been at one time. But sixteen years in the Bastille has modified all that."

"Sixteen years!" His Highness ejaculated. "What in the world had she done?"

"It has been a little difficult to get to the bottom of her story. But I was interested. So were we all, weren't we, Ffoulkes? As you say, sir, there is something thrilling-horrible really-in the idea of a woman performing the revolting task of a public executioner. For that is Gabrielle Damiens's calling at the moment."

"Damiens?" His Highness mused; "the name sounds vaguely familiar."

"Perhaps you will remember sir, that some twenty-five years ago a kind of religious maniac named François Damiens created a sensation by slashing the late King with a penknife, without doing real harm, of course; but for this so-called crime he was condemned to death, hung, drawn and quartered. He maintained to the end, even under torture, that he had acted entirely on his own and that he never had any accomplice."

"Yes! I remember the story now. And this female executioner is his daughter?"

"His only child. She was only a baby at the time. As far as we have been able to unravel the tangled skein of this extraordinary tragi-comedy, Damiens bequeathed her a packet of old letters which involved the old Marquis de Saint-Lucque—the father of the present man-in that ridiculous conspiracy. Armed with these the girl—she was only sixteen at the time—started a campaign of blackmail, first against the old Marquis and, when he became bedridden, against his son, who, I understand, was deeply in love with her at one time."

"What a complication! But go on, man. Your story is as interesting as a novel by that French fellow Voltaire. Well!" His Highness continued, "and what happened to the blackmailer?"

"The usual thing sir. Saint-Lucque got tired of his liaison, broke it off, became engaged to Mademoiselle de Nesle . . ."

"Good old Louis's daughter, what?"

"Supposed to be," Blakeney replied curtly.

"I remember Madame de Nesle," His Highness mused. A beautiful woman! She even made the du Barry jealous. I was in Paris at the time. And her daughter married Saint-Lucque, of course . . . I remember!"

"Then you can guess the rest of the story, sir. Madame de Nesle wanted her daughter's marriage to take place. She had great influence over the King, and obtained from him one of those damnable lettres de cachet which did effectually silence the blackmailer by keeping her locked up in the Bastille without trial and without a chance of appeal. There she would have ended her days had not the revolutionaries captured the Bastille and liberated the prisoners."

"Most interesting! Most interesting! And how did the blackmailer become the executioner?"

"By easy stages, sir."

"What was she like when she came out, one wonders?"

"Like a raging tigress."

"Naturally."

"Vowing before anyone who cared to listen that she would make Saint-Lucque and all his brood pay eye for eye and tooth for tooth."

"That was inevitable, of course," the Prince mused, "and not difficult to accomplish these days. I suppose," he went on, "that this Gabrielle Damiens has already got herself mixed up with the worst of the revolutionary rabble."

"She certainly has. She began by joining in the crowd of ten thousand women who marched to Versailles demanding food. She seized a drum from one of the guard-rooms in the suburb where she lived, and paraded the streets beating the Generale and shouting: 'Bread! we must have bread! . . .' and 'Come, mothers, with your starving children . . .' and so on."

"You weren't there, were you, Blakeney?"

"I was, sir. Tony, Ffoulkes and I were the guests of the King that day at Versailles. We saw it all. It was the queerest crowd, wasn't it, Tony?"

"It certainly was," my Lord Tony agreed lightly; "fat fishwives from the Halles, chambermaids shouldering their brooms, pale-faced milliners and apple-cheeked country wenches. All sorts and conditions."

"And this Damiens woman was among them?"

"She led them, sir," Blakeney replied, "with her drum. The whole thing was really pathetic. Food in Paris was very scarce and very dear and there were many cases of actual starvation. The trouble was, too, that the Queen had chosen to give a huge banquet the day before to the officers of the army of Flanders who came over to take the place of certain disloyal regiments. Three hundred and fifty guests sat down to a Gargantuan feast, ate and drank till the small hours of the morning. It was most injudicious to say the least."

"Wretched woman!" the Prince put in with a sigh; "she always seemed to do the wrong thing even in those days."

"And did so to the end, poor woman," one of the others observed.

"Was that the banquet you told me about, Blakeney, where you first met your adorable wife?"

"It was, sir," Blakeney replied, while a wonderfully soft look came into his lazy blue eyes, as it always did when Marguerite's name was as much as mentioned. It was only a flash, however. The next moment he added casually:

"And where I first saw Mam'zelle Guillotine."

"Such a funny name," His Highness remarked. "As a rule they speak of Madame Guillotine over there."

"Gabrielle deserves the name, sir, odious as it sounds. I have been told that she has guillotined over a hundred men and women and even a number of children with her own hands."

Then as they all remained silent, unable to pass any remark on this horrible statement, Sir Percy went on:

"After the march on Versailles she became more and more prominent in the revolutionary movement. Marat became her close friend and gave her all the publicity she wanted in his paper *L'ami du Peuple*. I know for a fact that she actually took a hand in the wholesale massacre of prisoners the September before last. Robespierre thinks all the world of her oratory, and she has spoken more than once at the Club des Jacobins and at the Cordeliers. I listened on several occasions to the harangues which she likes to deliver in the Palais Royal Gardens, standing on a table with a pistol in each hand as Camille Desmoulins used to do. They were the most inflammatory speeches I ever heard. And clever, too. The sixteen years she spent in the Bastille did not dull her wits seemingly. Finally," Blakeney concluded, "Robespierre got her appointed last year, at her own request, public executioner in his native province of Artois, and there she has been active ever since."

There was silence round the festive board after that. They were all men here who had seen much of the seamy side of life. Even His Highness had had experiences which do not usually come in the way of royal personages, and he was the only non-member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel who knew the identity of its heroic chief. His eyes now rested with an expression of ill-concealed affection and admiration on that chief, whom he honoured with his especial friendship.

He raised his glass of port and sipped it thoughtfully before he spoke again, then he said with an attempt at gaiety:

"I know what you are thinking at this moment, Blakeney."

"Yes, your Highness?" Sir Percy retorted.

"That Mam'zelle Guillotine will soon be . . . what shall we say? . . . lying in the arms of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

This sally made everybody laugh, and conversation presently drifted into other channels.

Chapter V: A SOCIAL EVENT

There are many records extant to-day of the wonderful rout offered to the élite of French and English society in London by Her Grace the Duchesse de Roncevaux in her sumptuous house in St. James's Square. The date I believe was somewhere in January, 1794. The decorations, the flowers, the music, the banquet-supper surpassed in magnificence, it is asserted by chroniclers of the time, anything that had ever been seen in the ultra-fashionable world.

The Duchesse, as everybody knows, was English by birth, daughter of Reuben Meyer, the banker, and immensely rich. His Grace the Duc de Roncevaux, first cousin to the royal house of Bourbon, married her not only for her wealth but principally because he was genuinely in love with her. His name and popularity at court secured for his wife a brilliant position in Paris society during the declining years of the monarchy, whilst his charming personality and always deferential love-making brought her a full measure of domestic happiness. He left her an inconsolable widow after five years of married bliss. The revolutionary storm was by then already gathering over France. The English-born Duchesse thought it best to return to her own country, before the cloud-burst which appeared more and more threatening every day. She chose London as her principal home, and here with the aid of her wealth and a heart overflowing with the milk of human kindness she did her best to gather round her those more fortunate French families who had somehow contrived to escape from the murderous clutches of the revolutionary government of France. Thus a delightful set of charming cultured people could always be met with in the Duchesse de Roncevaux's luxurious salons. Here one rubbed shoulders with some of the members of the old French aristocracy now dispossessed of most if not all their wealth, but bringing into the somewhat free-and-easy tone of eighteenth-century London something of their perfect manners, their old-world courtesy and that atmosphere of high-breeding and distinction handed down to them by generations of courtiers. The Comte de Tournay with Madame his wife and their son the young Vicomte were often to be seen at these social gatherings. Mademoiselle de Tournay had recently married Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, the handsome young leader of fashion, who was credited with being a member of the heroic League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. There was Félicien Lézenne, who had been chairman of the Club des Fils du Royaume, his young wife and Monsieur de Lucines, his father-in-law, who were actually known to have been saved from the guillotine by that mysterious and elusive person the Scarlet Pimpernel himself.

There were others, of course, for the list of refugees from revolutionary France waxed longer day by day and all found a welcome in the Duchesse de Roncevaux's hospitable mansion; and not only did they find a welcome but also a measure of gaiety! for the daughter of Reuben Meyer the Jewish banker had understanding as well as social ambition. Her aim was to make her salon the most attractive one in town, and what society could be more attractive than that of those French aristocrats, most of whom had palpitating stories to tell of past horrors, of dangers of death, and, above all, of those almost phenomenal rescues of condemned innocents sometimes under the very shadow of the guillotine, effected by that heroic organization known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and its lion-hearted chief.

To hear one of those deeds of unparalleled courage recounted by one of those who owed their lives to that intriguing personality was voted unanimously to be far more exciting than a melodrama at Drury Lane, and the Duchesse de Roncevaux could always be relied on to provide her guests with one of those soul-stirring narrations which caused every velvet cheek to flush with enthusiasm and every bright eye to glow with hero-worship. There were other entertainments too to be enjoyed in the sumptuous mansion in St. James's Square, there were operas, ballets, comedies, concerts: young musicians often made their first formal bow before a discriminating company which often included the Prince of Wales himself and the élite of English society, and more than one disciple of the late Mr. Garrick first tasted the sweets of success in the Duchesse's salon. But none of these entertainments had the power to excite interest as did the relation of one of those hair-raising exploits of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, told with fervour and a charming French accent by whoever happened to be the honoured guest of the evening.

On this occasion it was the abbé Prud'hon, lately come from France in the company of Monsieur le Marquis de Saint-Lucque and the young Vicomte. The arrival of Monsieur de Saint-Lucque had been a real event in the chronicle of London society. He was known to have been saved from death by the hero of the hour: in fact, he and the abbé had proclaimed this openly, and everybody — the men as well as the ladies — had been on tenterhooks to hear the true version of their amazing rescue. All sorts of rumours had been afloat, as they always were whenever a French family came to join the colony of recent émigrés who had found refuge in hospitable England. Everyone was agog to know how they had been smuggled out of France, for that was what it amounted to. Men, women and children, the old, the infirm, whenever innocent seemed literally to have been snatched from under the very noses of the revolutionary guard, and this led to all sorts of tales, medieval in their superstitious extravagance, of direct interference from the clouds or of a supernatural being, of unearthly appearance and abnormal strength who scattered revolutionary soldiers before him as easily as he would a swarm of flies.

There was a first-class sensation in fashionable circles when Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux issued invitations for one of her popular routs. The invitation promised a concert by the London String Band, a playlet to be performed by His Majesty's mummers, and a supper prepared by Monsieur Haon formerly cook-in-chief to Madame de Pompadour. But all these attractions paled in interest before the one brief announcement: "Guest of Honour: M. l'Abbé Prud'hon." Everyone in town knew by now that M. l'Abbé Prud'hon was tutor to the young Vicomte de Saint-Lucque and had been summarily arrested along with him and M. le Marquis by the revolutionary government under the usual futile pretext of having plotted against the safety of the Republic.

The salons of Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux were thronged on this occasion as they had never been before, and there was such a chattering up and down the monumental staircase as the guests filed up to greet their hostess, as in an aviary of love-birds.

"My dear, isn't it too wonderful?"

"I declare I am so excited, I don't know if I am standing on my head or on my heels."

"I know I shall scream if that London String Band goes on too long."

"I call it cruel to put them on before we have heard M. l'Abbé."

"Hush! you mustn't say that. The dear Duchesse had them only in order to bring our blood to boiling point."

"Mine has been over boiling point all day, and I am on the verge of spontaneous combustion."

By ten o'clock all the guests had arrived, and the hostess, wearied after standing for over an hour at the head of the staircase receiving the company, had retired to the rose-coloured boudoir where His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney, Sir Andrew and Lady Ffoulkes and a small number of the more privileged guests were discussing the coming event somewhat more soberly than did the gaily plumaged birds in the adjoining ball-room. M. l'Abbé was there too, a pathetic figure in his well-worn soutane: his cheeks, once round and full, were pale and wan now, showing signs of the many privations, the lack of food and warmth, which he had suffered recently. He looked ill and very weary. It was only his eyes, tired-looking and red-rimmed though they were, that retained within their depths a merry twinkle which every now and then came to the fore, when his inward glance came to rest on a memory less cruel than most: that merry twinkle was the expression of a keen sense of humour which no amount of sorrow and suffering had the power wholly to eradicate.

At the moment he certainly seemed to have thrown off some of his lassitude; finding himself the centre of interest in a sympathetic crowd, all anxious to make him forget what he had suffered, and to make him feel at home in this land of freedom and of orderly government, his whole being seemed to expand in response. A warm glow came into his eyes and the smiles so freely bestowed on him by the ladies found their reflection round his pale, drooping lips. Everyone was charming to him. The Prince of Wales was most gracious, and his hostess lavish in delicate attentions. He had had an excellent dinner, and a couple of glasses of fine old Burgundy had put heart into him.

"Ah, Monsieur l'Abbé," sighed lovely Lady Lauriston, "you will tell us, won't you, the true, unvarnished facts about your wonderful escape."

"Of course I will, dear lady," the old priest replied; "nothing could make me happier than to let the whole world hear, if it were possible, the story of one of the most valorous deeds ever accomplished on this earth. I have seen men and women, especially recently, show amazing pluck and endurance under the terrible circumstances which alas obtain in my poor country these days, but never did I witness anything like the courage and resourcefulness displayed by that noble gentleman who rescued us from certain death at risk of his life."

The abbé had spoken so earnestly and in a voice quivering with such depth of emotion, that instinctively the chatter around him died down, and for a few moments there was silence in the pretty rose-coloured boudoir, whilst the old priest and several of the ladies surreptitiously wiped away a tear. Everyone felt thrilled, emotional; even the men responded readily to that feeling of pride in the display of courage and endurance, those virtues which make such a strong appeal to the finest of their sex.

It was the hostess who first broke the silence. She asked:

"And you do not know who your rescuer was, M. l'Abbé?"

"Alas, no, Madame la Duchesse. Monsieur de Saint-Lucque, the Vicomte and I were locked up inside the coach which was conveying us to Paris for trial and, of course, execution. It was very dark. To my sorrow I saw nothing, no one. And that is a sorrow I shall take with me to my grave. To touch the hand of the most gallant man on earth would be an infinite joy to me. And I know that Monsieur le Marquis thinks as I do over that."

"How is Monsieur le Marquis, by the way?" His Royal Highness enquired.

The abbé shook his head and drew a deep sigh.

"Sadly, I am afraid. He is heart-broken with anxiety about his wife and the other two children: and he keeps on reproaching himself for being safe and free while they are still in danger."

"Don't let him break his heart over that, M. l'Abbé. Didn't you tell us the other day that the Scarlet Pimpernel had pledged you his word to bring Madame de Saint-Lucque and her two little girls safely to England?"

It was Lady Blakeney who spoke. She was sitting on the sofa near the old priest and while she said those comforting words she put her hand on his arm. She was the most beautiful woman there, easily the queen among this bevy of loveliness. The abbé turned to her and met those wonderful luminous eyes of hers so full of confidence and encouragement. He raised her hand to his old lips.

"Yes," he said; "we did get that marvellous pledge, Monsieur de Saint-Lucque and I. How it came to us is another of the many miracles that occurred during those awful times after we were arrested and incarcerated in the local gaol. There was a funny old fellow, dirty and bedraggled, whom we caught sight of one day through the grated window of our prison-cell. He was stumping up and down the corridor outside singing the Marseillaise very much out of tune. Two days later we saw him again, and this time as he stumped along he recited in a cracked voice that awful blasphemous doggerel: 'Ça ira!' It was then that the miracle occurred, for after he had gone by we saw a crumpled wad of paper on the floor, just beneath the window."

Here the abbé's narration was suddenly broken into by a shrill little cry of distress.

"Sir Percy, I entreat, do hold my hand. I vow I shall swoon if you do not."

The cry broke the tension which was keeping the small company in the boudoir hanging on the words of the old priest. All eyes were turned to the dainty lady who had uttered the pitiful appeal. The Lady Blanche Crewkerne had edged closer and closer to the sofa where sat the abbé; her eyes were glowing, her lips quivered; she was in a regular state of flurry. As soon as she had attracted all the attention she coveted to her engaging personality she raised a perfumed handkerchief to her tip-tilted nose, fluttered her eyelids, closed her eyes and finally tottered backwards as if in very truth she was on the point of losing consciousness. From all around there came an exclamation of concern until a pair of masculine arms was stretched out to receive the swooning beauty, whereupon concern turned to laughter, loud and prolonged laughter while Lady Blanche opened her eyes, thinking to find herself reclining against the magnificent waistcoat of the Prince of Dandies. They encountered the timid glance of old Sir Martin Cheverill, who felt very much embarrassed in the chivalrous role of supporter to a lady in distress thus unexpectedly thrust upon him. Nor did the lady make any effort to conceal her mortification. Already she had recovered her senses, as well as her poise. With nervy movements she plied her fan vigorously and remarked somewhat tartly:

"Methought Sir Percy Blakeney was standing somewhere near."

There was more laughter after this, and old Lady Portarles who never missed an opportunity of putting in a spiteful word where the younger ladies were concerned, interposed mockingly:

"Sir Percy, my dear Blanche? Why, he has been fast asleep this last half-hour."

And picking up her ample train she swept across the room to where a rose-coloured portière was drawn across the archway of a recess. Lady Portarles drew the curtain aside with a dramatic gesture and there of a truth across a satin-covered sofa, his head reclining against a cushion, fast asleep, lay the Prince of Dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart. An exclamation of horror, amounting to a groan, went round the room. Such disgraceful behaviour surpassed any that that privileged person had ever been guilty of. Had it been anyone else . . .

The groan, the exclamation of horror, had quickly roused the delinquent from his slumbers. He struggled to his feet and looking round on the indignant faces turned on him he had the good grace to look thoroughly embarrassed.

"Ladies, a thousand pardons," he stammered shame-facedly. "His Royal Highness deigned to keep me at hazard the whole afternoon and . . ."

But it was no use appealing to His Highness for protection against the irate ladies. He was sitting back in his chair roaring with laughter.

"Blakeney," he said between his guffaws, "you'll be the death of me one day."

And after a time he added: "It is to Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon that you owe an abject apology."

"Monsieur l'Abbé . . ." Sir Percy began in tones of the deepest humility, "to do wrong is human. I have done wrong, I confess. To forgive is divine. Will you exercise your privilege and pronounce absolution on the repentant sinner?"

His manner was so engaging, his diction so suave, and he really did seem so completely ashamed of himself that the kind old priest who had a keen sense of humour was quite ready to forgive the offence.

"On one condition, Sir Percy," he said lightly.

"I am at your mercy, M. l'Abbé."

"That you listen to me — without once going to sleep, mind you — while I narrate to Madame la Duchesse's guests the full story of how Monsieur de Saint-Lucque and his son as well as my own insignificant self were spirited away out of the very jaws of death, and at the risk of his own precious life, by that greatest of living heroes the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I am at your mercy, M. l'Abbé," Sir Percy reiterated ruefully.

"And now I pray you, Sir Percy," the Lady Blanche resumed, and gave a playful tap with her fan on Sir Percy's sleeve, "to hold my hand. I am still on the point of swooning, you know," she added archly.

She held out her pretty hand to Blakeney, who raised it to his lips, then turning to the Prince of Wales he pleaded: "Will your Royal Highness pronounce this painful incident closed and command Monsieur l'Abbé to give us the story of what he is pleased to call a miracle."

"Monsieur l'Abbé . . ." His Highness responded, turning to the old priest, "since you have been gracious enough to forgive . . ."

"I will continue, c'est entendu," Monsieur l'Abbé readily agreed. And once more the ladies crowded round him the better to listen to a tale that had their beau idéal for its hero. Nor were the men backward in their desire to hear of the prowess of a man whose identity remained as incomprehensible as were the methods which he employed for getting in touch with those persecuted innocents whom he had pledged himself to save.

"And what was written on that scrap of paper, M. l'Abbé?" His Highness asked.

"Only a few words, your Highness," the priest replied. "It said: We who are working for your safety do pledge you our word of honour that Madame de Saint-Lucque and her two children will land safely in England before long," and in the corner there was a drawing of a small flower roughly tinted in red chalk."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" The three magic words coming from a score of exquisitely rouged lips had the sound of a deep-drawn sigh. It was followed by a tense silence while the abbé mopped his streaming forehead.

"Your pardon, ladies," he murmured. "I always feel overcome with emotion when I think of those horrible and amazing days."

Chapter VI: THE PRINCE OF DANDIES

Thus was the incident closed. The hostess rose somewhat in a flurry.

"In my excitement to hear you, M. l'Abbé," she said, "I am forgetting my guests. Will your Royal Highness deign to excuse me?"

"I'll follow you in a moment, dear lady. Your guests I am sure are dying with impatience. And," he added, turning with a smile to the other ladies, "all the best seats will soon be occupied."

It seemed like a hint, which from royal lips was akin to a command. Lady Lauriston, Lady Portarles and the other ladies followed in the wake of Madame la Duchesse. Only at a sign from His Royal Highness did a privileged few remain in the boudoir: they were Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and his young wife, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon and two or three others.

The Prince turned to the old priest and asked:

"And M. de Saint-Lucque you say, reverend, sir, could find no trace of the whereabouts of his wife and daughters?"

"None, monseigneur," the abbé replied. "When M. de Saint-Lucque did me the honour of seeking shelter under my roof with Monsieur le Vicomte, he entrusted his wife and daughters to the care of a worthy couple named Guidal, who had a small farm a league or so from Rocroi. They had both been in the service of old M. le Marquis, who had loaded them with kindness, and I for one could have sworn that they were loyalty itself. The night before our summary arrest — we already knew that we were under suspicion — the woman Guidal came to my presbytery. She was in tears. I questioned her and through her sobs she contrived to convey to me the terrible news that her husband fearing for his own arrest had talked of denouncing Madame la Marquise to the police; that she herself had entreated and protested in the name of humanity and past loyalty to the family, but terror of the guillotine had got a grip over him and he wouldn't listen. The woman went on to say that Madame la Marquise had unfortunately overheard the discussion and in the early dawn before she and her husband were awake had left the farm with her two little girls going she knew not whither. "Your Highness may well imagine," the old man went on, "how completely heart-broken Monsieur de Saint-Lucque was and has been ever since. At times since then I have even feared for his reason. Had it not been for his son he would I feel sure have done away with himself, but never for one moment would I allow M. le Vicomte to be away from his father. This was not difficult as the guard put over us during our captivity and in the coach that was taking us to Paris kept the three of us forcibly together. The first ray of light that came to us through this abysmal horror," the abbé now concluded, mastering the emotion which had seized him while he told his pitiable story, "were the few lines written on the scrap of paper which a dirty and be-draggled scavenger threw in to us through the grated window of our prison-cell: 'We who are working for your safety do pledge you our word that Madame de Saint-Lucque and her two children will land in England before long.'"

"And you may rest assured, M. l'Abbé, that that pledged word will never be broken."

It was Marguerite Blakeney who said this, breaking the tense silence which had reigned in the gay little boudoir when the old priest had concluded his narrative. She put her hand on his, giving it a comforting pressure and the old man raised it to his lips.

"God bless you!" he murmured. "God bless England and you all who belong to this great country." He rose to his feet and added fervently: "And, above all, God bless the selfless hero of whom you are so justly proud and to whom so many of us owe life and happiness: your mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel."

"God bless him!" they all murmured in unison.

Over in the ball-room the London String Band had finished playing the last item on their programme and the final chords of the Magic Flute followed by a round of applause came floating in on the perfumed air of the rose-coloured boudoir.

"Your Royal Highness," came in meek accents from Sir Percy Blakeney, "will you deign to remember that I am forbidden to go to sleep until Monsieur l'Abbé has told us a lot more about that shadowy Scarlet Pimpernel, and frankly I am dead sick of the demmed fellow already."

The Prince had already regained his habitual insouciance.

"Nor do we wish," he said, and gave the signal for every one to rise and follow him, "to miss another moment of M. le Abbé's interesting talk. But I'll warrant, my friend," he added, with a chuckle, "that you won't get to sleep till after you have completely atoned for your abominable conduct."

He shook an admonishing finger at Sir Percy Blakeney, the darling of society, the pattern of the perfect gentleman, caught in flagrante delicto of bad manners, and finally led the way into the adjoining ball-room. It was crowded with an ultra-fashionable throng. The elite of English society was present in full force as well as a goodly contingent of French émigrés. Lady Lockroy was there with her two pretty daughters. The old Earl of Mainbron had brought his charming young wife, and the Countess of Lauriston, acknowledged to be next to Lady Blakeney the best-dressed woman in town, had donned one of the new-fashioned dresses of clinging material and high waist said to be the latest mode in Vienna. And many others, of course. When His Highness entered the ball-room and the ladies swept their ceremonial courtesy to him down to the ground, there was such a rustling of silks and satins as if a swarm of bees had suddenly been let loose. His Highness had Lady Blakeney on his arm, and immediately behind him came Sir Percy with young Lady Ffoulkes. The Prince was in the best of humours.

"Ladies! Ladies!" he said gaily; "you have missed such a scandal as London has not witnessed for many a day. Has not our charming hostess told you?"

The select company who had trooped out of the boudoir in the wake of His Highness tittered as the word "scandal" went round the big ball-room in varied tones of horror or suspense.

"Your Highness, I entreat," Sir Percy whispered in the ear of his royal friend.

But the Prince solemnly shook his head and made to look very serious.

"No good your appealing to me, Blakeney," he said with mock severity. "The ladies must hear of your abominable behaviour. Monsieur l'Abbé has been most kind and forbearing, but our royal patience has been sorely tried, and we have decreed that your

punishment shall fit your crime, and that you shall be pilloried before all these ladies as the most ill-mannered man in London. What say you, ladies? Lady Blakeney, have I your permission to proceed?"

The ladies with one accord begged His Highness to go on, whilst Lady Blakeney, smiling at her discomfited lord, shrugged her pretty shoulders and said deferentially:

"As your Royal Highness desires."

"Then we will depute Lady Portarles to tell the awful tale." His Highness concluded, and deposited his bulky person in a capacious armchair. He begged his hostess to sit on one side of him and Lady Blakeney on the other. The story of how the Prince of Dandies had gone to sleep while M. l'Abbé Prud'hon was relating one of the miracles accomplished by the heroic Scarlet Pimpernel was told with obvious gusto and a suspicion of malice by Lady Portarles, who, by the way, was known in society as the queen of scandal-mongers. The story lost nothing in the telling and as the horrifying recital of his misdeed progressed, Sir Percy Blakeney became the target of a hundred frowning looks and was forced to listen to a veritable uproar of censure of "Shame on you, Sir Percy!" and "Would you believe it, my dear?" or "Did you ever hear the like?" The whole thing, of course, in a spirit of fun, for there was no more popular man in the whole of England than Sir Percy Blakeney.

Lady Blakeney sat by smiling sweetly whilst His Royal Highness obviously enjoyed the discomfiture of his friend. Protests on Sir Percy's part were of no avail. His Highness had decreed that he should be pilloried — and he was.

"I have often noticed," one of the ladies now remarked, "that Sir Percy makes a point of going to sleep whenever the rest of us are thrilled by one of those marvellous exploits of our beloved Scarlet Pimpernel related here in this very room by those who owe their life to him."

"I seem to have noticed the same thing," mused pretty Lady Blanche, "on more than one occasion."

"My belief," put in Lady Portarles, in a voice that dominated the din of conversation, "my firm belief, I may say, is that our Prince of Dandies is jealous of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"He is! He is!" came in a loud chorus from everyone around.

"Own to it, Sir Percy, that you are jealous of our wonderful hero."

Sir Percy no longer protested.

"I will own to it at your command, fair ones," he said ruefully. "What can a poor man say when the innermost workings of his heart are read like a book by a whole bevy of lovely ladies. How can I help being jealous of that demmed elusive fellow who monopolises your thoughts and conversations at all hours of the day? That, begad, shadow deprives us mere mortals of your attention when we would desire to lay our homage at your feet."

While this merry interlude went on, the servants had been busy arranging the chairs and putting the room generally in order for the hearing of Monsieur l'Abbé's recital. Now everything was ready. Heavy curtains masked the dais where the String Band had discoursed sweet music, leaving a semicircular alcove in the centre of which the major domo had placed a chair behind a table with a carafe of water and a glass. And gradually chattering and laughter ceased. There was a little whispering here and there, a few discreet ripples of laughter quickly suppressed, when Sir Percy after he had seen Madame la Duchesse to her seat, took up his stand with an air of resignation against the nearest window embrasure. Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon now mounted the few steps that led up to the dais whilst the company sat down, the ladies in the front displaying their brocaded gowns to the best advantage, and the men standing in compact groups all round them.

No actor of note or learned lecturer could have boasted of a more attentive audience than had this old Frenchman in the shabby soutane with the wan cheeks and the twinkling eyes. He sat down in the framework of the alcove, and once or twice passed his hand across his brow as if to collect his thoughts.

"Monseigneur," he began, "Mesdames et Messieurs." He spoke in French throughout. Most of the company which consisted exclusively of cultured, well-educated persons, understood every word he said, for his diction was of the clearest, and he spoke his own language with the exquisite purity of the Touraine district. It was Madame Descazes, wife of the eminent advocate at the Paris bar, who being an erudite as well as a meticulous lady, made copious notes of what Monsieur l'Abbé related to the elegant company assembled in the salon of Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux on that never-to-be-forgotten evening in the winter of 1794; and it is on these notes that all records of the event are based, for Madame Descazes very kindly allowed her intimate friends to study her notes and make a translation of them if they had a mind.

"I am so thankful, my dear, that I learned French at school," the Countess of Mainbron whispered to her neighbour while the abbé paused for breath.

"I wish I had done better with it," the latter responded. "Luckily, the dear old man speaks very slowly, and I shall not miss much."

"I can understand every word he says," the youngest Miss Lockroy put in glibly.

"Hush! Hush over there!" Lady Portarles admonished. "We can't have any chattering or we may miss something."

For Monsieur l'Abbé, after a few preliminaries, had now embarked on the most palpitating point in his narrative.

"The great miracle, for I must call it that," he was saying, "occurred on a steep bit of road which cuts across the forest of Mézières. It was mid-afternoon and very dull and dark. We could see nothing inside the carriage for the windows were veiled by a curtain of misty rain which had fallen in a drizzle ever since early morning. We sat huddled up against one another. Monsieur le Marquis and I had the young Vicomte between us, trying to keep him warm, for as the shades of evening began to draw in, the cold grew intense, and the poor lad had been half starved ever since our arrest eight days before."

"As I say, we could see very little of what went on outside; only the dim outline of horses trotting on each side of the carriage. We were being strongly guarded. You must know, ladies, that Monsieur le Marquis and all his family are the special targets of an insane hatred on the part of the revolutionary government and of a cruel woman, whom may God forgive, who seems to have vast influence with them all."

"You mean the woman they call Mam'zelle Guillotine?" His Royal Highness here put in.

"Your Highness knows?" the hostess asked.

"We heard her life-story a little while ago," the Prince replied. "It is one of the most extraordinary ones we had ever heard."

"What has always remained a puzzle," the abbé continued after this slight interruption, "in the minds of those of us who have had the good fortune of coming in personal contact with the Scarlet Pimpernel is how he comes to be always in close touch with those who presently may have need of his help. I have heard it argued among some of my English friends that on most occasions luck entered largely in the success of his plans. There never was a more false or more unjust suggestion. Let me assure you that certainly as far as we wretched prisoners were concerned it was pluck and pluck only, the courage and resourcefulness of one man, that saved the three of us from death."

From the elegant assembly, from those society ladies peacocking it in their silks and satins, from the men, some of whom spent the best part of their day at the gambling-tables, there came a sound like the intaking of one breath, a deep sigh which proclaimed more eloquently than words could do the admiration amounting almost to reverence laid at the shrine of the bravest of the brave. The sigh died down and a tense silence followed. Nothing was heard for a moment or two, save the faint rustle here and there of stiff brocade, or the flutter of a fan, until suddenly the silence was broken by a pleasant voice saying lightly:

"Surely not one man, Monsieur l'Abbé. I have it from M. de Saint-Lucque himself that there were at least three if not more of the rescuing party . . . and that your Scarlet Pimpernel did no more than . . ."

"Hush! Silence!" came in indignant protest from the ladies at this attempted disparagement of their hero.

"Sir Percy, you are impossible!" one of them declared resolutely, whilst another begged His Royal Highness to intervene.

"Jealousy carried to that point," concluded Lady Portarles, "amounts to a scandal. Your Royal Highness, we entreat . . ."

"Nay, ladies," His Highness responded with his cheery laugh. "Since you ladies have failed in inculcating hero-worship into this flippant courtier of mine, what can I do? . . . a mere man!"

There were few things the Prince enjoyed more than the badgering of his friend over this question of the Scarlet Pimpernel, while he yielded it to none in his admiration for the man's superhuman courage and spirit of self-sacrifice.

"Lady Blakeney," one of the younger ladies pleaded, "have you no influence over Sir Percy? His flippant remarks cut most of us to the quick."

Marguerite Blakeney turned smiling to the speaker.

"I have no influence, my dear, over Sir Percy," she said, "but I am sure that he would sooner remain silent the rest of the evening rather than distress any of you."

"You have heard what her ladyship says, you incorrigible person," His Highness put in. "It amounts to a command which we feel obliged to second."

"What can I do," Blakeney responded humbly, "but bow my diminished head? Lady Blakeney is quite right when she asserts that I would rather remain for ever dumb than bring one tear of distress to so many lovely eyes. It was only a sense of fair play that caused me to say what I did."

"Fair play?"

"Why, yes. Fair play. In your over-estimation of one man's prowess, you, dear ladies, are apt to forget that there are other equally gallant English gentlemen, without whose courage and loyalty your Scarlet Pimpernel would probably by now have fallen into the hands of those murdering devils over in France. Now, I know for a fact, and I am sure that Monsieur l'Abbé will bear my story out, that in this case . . ."

But the mere suggestion that the Scarlet Pimpernel might possibly one day fall into the hands of the Terrorists in France, raised such a storm of indignation from the entire assembly that Sir Percy was unable to proceed. He gave an audible sigh of resignation and thereafter leaned back once more in silence against the window embrasure. His eyes remained fixed on his beautiful wife. She was obviously smiling to herself. It was a mischievous little smile for she, too, like the Prince of Wales, enjoyed the good-humoured chaff to which her husband was invariably exposed when the subject of the Scarlet Pimpernel was on the tapis. She was sitting beside His Royal Highness now and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes sat next to her. There was no more ardent worshipper of his chief than Sir Andrew, the most faithful and loyal lieutenant a leader ever had, and an evening like the present one gave him a measure of happiness almost as great as that experienced by Marguerite Blakeney herself. She was looking radiant and her luminous eyes had a glow in them which had its counterpart in those of her friend. They were made to understand one another, these two, and now, unseen by the rest of the company, he raised her hand to his lips.

Chapter VII: A VALOROUS DEED

After this brief interval the old abbé was allowed to resume his narrative.

"I am quite prepared to admit," he now went on, "that Nature helped our rescuers all she could. It would have been more difficult, of course, had the afternoon been fine and clear. But even so, I am sure that the leader of that gallant league would have found some other means to save us. As it was, the drizzle mixed with sleet and driven by a cutting wind fretted the horses, and the driver had much ado to keep them in hand: a difficult task, as he himself was obliged to keep his head down and his hat pulled well over his eyes. So we went on for what seemed to me an eternity. I had completely lost count of time. We went on and on or rather were being dragged along in the jolting vehicle on the rough, muddy road until we wondered whether body and soul could bear the strain any longer, and would presently disintegrate, be forced to break apart and lose cohesion through the violence of those agonising shocks.

"A slight respite from this torture came presently when the road began to rise sharply, and the horses, sweating and panting, were put at foot-pace while they dragged the heavy coach up the incline, still in squelching mud. As I put it to you just now, I had lost count of time altogether; so, I know, had Monsieur le Marquis. The child was asleep in my arms, his curly head resting against my shoulder. His lips were parted and through them came at regular intervals a gentle, pathetic moan. The shades of evening were drawing in by now, darkness closed in around us; we were prisoners inside that jolting vehicle, aching in every limb, unable to see, unable to move, hearing nothing but the creaking of axles and of damp leather, and the squelching of horses' hoofs in the mud of the road.

"And suddenly out of the gloom there rang the report of a pistol-shot, followed immediately by a loud call: 'Stand and deliver!'"

At which palpitating point in the abbé's narrative one of the ladies gave a shrill cry, another exclaimed, breathless: "Oh, mon Dieu!" and there was a peremptory chorus of "Hush!" in which the men also joined.

"The first pistol-shot was followed by another and then by a third," Monsieur l'Abbé resumed. "The horses must then have reared and plunged wildly, for we were shaken right out of our seats and found ourselves on the floor of the coach in a tumbled heap one on the top of the other. We could hear a great deal of shouting, hoarse words of command from the officer in charge of our escort, and throughout it all a confused jumble of sounds, the jingle of harness, the stamping and plunging of the horses maddened by the noise, the creaking of the carriage wheels, dragged forwards and then backwards by their restless movements, and the constant lashing of wind and sleet beating against the carriage windows. Everything around the coach did, in fact, add to the confusion. We in the meanwhile did our best to extricate ourselves from our unpleasant position and had just succeeded in regaining our seats, when the carriage door was suddenly opened and the figure of a man appeared in the framework. He had a lantern in his hand which he swung about, lighting up the inside of the coach as well as our scared faces. The man wore a mask, and for all the world looked the very picture of a highway-man. The poor little Vicomte huddled up against me and began to whimper. I remember that at the moment my thoughts were busy with conjecture as to what would be preferable under these circumstances: to continue our fateful journey to Paris or to fall into the hands of highway robbers. Before I could make up my mind as to that, the man with the lantern said quite pleasantly: 'As you value your lives, keep as still as you can. There are four of us here working for your safety.'

"And before we had recovered from the shock — the happy shock, I may tell you — which his words had brought to our nerves, the pseudo-highwayman had vanished and closed the carriage door behind him. We were left to marvel at this miracle which the good God had deigned to perform for our salvation. Monsieur le Marquis murmured faintly: 'It is surely that wonderful English gentleman they call the Scarlet Pimpernel who is working for us,' and after a time he sighed and said: 'If only my dear wife and my darling girls could have been here too.' But somehow I felt wonderfully elated. I had said my prayers of thankfulness to God, and after that I was granted the power to comfort our dear little Vicomte, by putting my arms round him and making him rest his head against my shoulder, and also to speak words of encouragement to M. le Marquis. Next to the good God himself, I felt in my very soul complete belief in the Scarlet Pimpernel and trust in his courage and his ability to save us."

The old man paused for a moment or two and mopped his streaming forehead. He had spoken at some length amidst breathless silence on the part of his hearers. Someone poured out a glass of water for him, and he drank this down eagerly. After this he resumed:

"As to what happened subsequently we knew nothing for certain till some days afterwards when we were on board an English ship and saw the shores of France receding from our gaze. Then it was that the details of our amazing rescue were related to me by one of the brave followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I believe that it was just boundless enthusiasm for his chief that caused him to speak to me as he did. He was not the Scarlet Pimpernel himself but was, I am sure, the leader's right-hand man. Let me tell you at once that I have pledged my word of honour that I would never reveal his identity under any circumstances whatever. As a matter of fact, he was the pseudo-highwayman who came to comfort us when we were nearly scared to death. What he ultimately told us was in substance this: that the whole surprise attack was the foundation of an ingenious plan devised by his chief. It took no more than a few minutes to carry through. Surprise and swiftness were, as my informant said, the keynote of success. Had there been the slightest slackening of speed, a word of command wrongly interpreted, a mere second of hesitancy and the whole plan would certainly have failed. It was swift action that won the victory, because it brought about a confusion during which — can you believe it? — the Scarlet Pimpernel and his three followers were down on their knees in the squelching mud of the road, engaged in cutting the saddle-girths under the bellies of the troopers' horses. Imagine what pluck, what coolness such an action demanded in view of the fact that our brave rescuers were outnumbered three to one. It is, so I understand, a well-known form of attack practised in the East, fraught with deadly danger even when attackers are numerically stronger than their enemy. In our case I imagine that a kind of superstitious terror on the part of the revolutionary guard must also have played into the hands of those brave English gentlemen. The soldiers had no elbow-room for a good fight. The road was narrow, the afternoon light growing more and more dim. And with it all the constant cracking of pistol-shots, the snorting and terror of their horses, the confusion, the mêlée and the gathering gloom hindered the men from using what arms they had for fear of wounding their comrades or injuring their horses.

"We, of course, kept as quiet as our nerves would allow, marvelling what was happening and repeating our prayers to the good God for mercy and divine help. As a matter of fact, what was happening unbeknown to us remains to my mind the most wonderful act of audacity and contempt of danger I for one have ever heard of. It seems that at a given moment the Scarlet Pimpernel scrambled up the

box-seat of the coach, snatched the reins out of the driver's hands and in less time than it takes an old man to tell you of it he had calmed the poor horses down. This, of course, as I say, we did not know at the time, but it thrilled us poor prisoners, I can tell you, when we heard a voice, a wonderful, cheery and yet commanding voice speak the one word: 'Ready.'

"Was it intuition or inspiration, I know not; certain it is that I knew in my innermost soul, that the voice I heard at that moment, was that of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I can't tell you how I knew, but I did know, and I have often talked this over with Monsieur le Marquis and it seems that he too had the same conviction that I had. You must remember that we inside the coach know nothing of what was happening, and yet there we were suddenly convinced that the hour of our deliverance had come. Often since that fateful moment have I been stirred to the soul by the mere recollection of that voice speaking the word: 'Ready!' It was his voice, my friends! I believe I should know it again among thousands, or in the midst of the loudest uproar."

The priest had indeed no cause to complain of a want of attention on the part of his audience. Men and women alike hung upon every word he uttered. They held their breath, their glowing eyes were fixed upon the old man's face.

"But, M. l'Abbé . . ." one lady was heard gasping through the breathless silence that hung on this vast assembly.

"Yes, dear lady?" the abbé responded.

"As you say you would know the voice of the Scarlet Pimpernel again . . ."

"I should . . . anywhere . . ." he assented.

"Then you are the one to identify our mysterious hero . . . to tell us who he is and where, oh where, we are to find him."

This raised a wave of agitation, and a murmur of excitement. But Monsieur l'Abbé only shrugged.

"Alas!" he said. "I have not heard that voice again — only in my dreams."

"If you do not proceed, Monsieur l'Abbé," here interposed Sir Percy Blakeney with a genial laugh, "a number of ladies here will faint on the spot."

"Oh, yes, do go on, we beg of you, Monsieur l'Abbé," the ladies pleaded, and one of them added lightly:

"See, even Sir Percy, the arch scoffer, hangs upon your lips."

"There is not much more to relate," the priest now resumed. "I understand that the word 'Ready' was a command from the chief to his followers to take immediate cover, which they did, whilst he himself with one light click of the tongue whipped up the team, which plunged down the incline at breakneck speed."

"My informant, bless him, cowering with his two friends in the gloom of the thicket, told me that one of the most thrilling moments in the day's adventure was to see the revolutionary soldiers trying to give chase. Had they been circus-riders they might have given a good account of themselves, but never having learned how to sit a horse with their saddle-girths severed, they did not get very far. The three lieutenants of your gallant hero did not stay to see the rest of the fun. They had their orders and made their way to the place assigned to them by their chief. As to the rest of our journey it has always seemed both to Monsieur le Marquis and to me nothing but a dream. I remember — but only vaguely — the dash down the forest road, and subsequently several halts for the night in wayside huts. I remember the three of us being ordered at one time to don the tattered garb of road-menders, and being jolted along interminable roads in a rickety cart driven by an old hunchback who appeared dumb as well as deaf; and I remembering staggering with surprise when I saw that same old mudlark straighten out his back and throw a purse of money to one of his own kind, who after that drove the rickety cart all the way to the coast."

"Many less important events do I remember also. We were I reckoned five days on the way, five days during which I was haunted by a clear, commanding voice calling 'Ready' and by the vision of an out-at-elbows' hunchback whose body presently appeared as tall and as straight as that of a young god, and who threw a purse of gold about as if it were dross."

"And that, your Royal Highness, my lords and ladies," the abbé now concluded, "is all that I can tell you of the great miracle accomplished on our behalf and under the guidance of God by the finest and bravest man that ever walked this earth."

"Marvellous!"

"Prodigious!"

"Incredible!"

"Quite uncanny!"

These were some of the words that flew from mouth to mouth. It had been a glorious story, told with the simplicity of truth. The audience rose soon after that and separate groups were formed, groups in which the palpitating tale of a man's heroism drove from the most flippant minds all desire for frivolous chatter. The Prince of Wales held Monsieur l'Abbé in earnest conversation. There were many here present this evening who vowed that His Royal Highness was deep in the secrets of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and could if he had a mind reveal the identity of the popular hero. Lady Ffoulkes had edged up close to Lady Blakeney and these two beautiful women, wives of two brave English gentlemen, exchanged glances not only of pride but also of anxiety for those precious lives so valiantly and constantly risked in the defence of the helpless and the innocent.

At the other end of the room a group of ladies were trying to remember the famous doggerel which that inimitable dandy, Sir Percy Blakeney, as great a poet as he was a sportsman, had conceived while tying his cravat.

"It went thus," Lady Blanche declared: "They seek him in England, they . . ."

"No! no! no," broke in the eldest Miss Lockroy. "I am sure there was no word about England . . . or France . . ."

"Yes, there was," asserted pretty Miss Norreys; "I remember the word England very distinctly."

"Besides, it stands to reason," argued another fashionable beauty, "they are seeking him in England, aren't they?"

"Wouldn't it be simpler, ladies," one of the men suggested, "to settle the argument by referring it to the author of the deathless rhyme?"

"Yes! Yes! Of course," the ladies agreed.

"Sir Percy! Where is Sir Percy?"

All eyes were turned to the window embrasure against which the darling of society had last been seen reclining with an air of resignation. "Sir Percy!" the ladies reiterated. "Where is Sir Percy?" But they looked for him in vain. That Prince of Dandies had, incontinently, it seems, taken his elegant self off to a more congenial atmosphere.

Chapter VIII: A ROYAL FRIEND

Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux was preparing to bid good night to her guests. They were all standing in a wide semicircle at one end of the ball-room waiting for His Royal Highness to give the signal for departure before they in their turn took their leave. This he did raising his hostess's hand to his lips.

"We have spent a delightful evening in your charming house, Madame," he said graciously; "one that none of our friends will, I warrant, ever forget."

The frou-frou of brocaded skirts once more swept the parquet floor with a sound like the buzzing of bees; it came as an accompaniment to His Highness's departure. After he had taken final leave of Madame la Duchesse the Prince turned to Sir Percy Blakeney, who with Marguerite on his arm was also ready to take his leave.

"Nay, man," he said jovially. "I won't let you go quite so easily. You are coming with us for we want a turn at hazard."

He gave a gracious nod to Blakeney, who murmured obediently:

"As Your Highness commands."

"I vow," the Prince went on, "I was so thrilled by Monsieur l'Abbé's narration I must do something to take my mind off those horrors that go on continually the other side of the Channel. Come, man, I'll challenge you. The best of five throws, with doubles or quits a time. Lady Blakeney," he went on, addressing Marguerite, "will you honour my poor house by accompanying us? I feel I shall be in luck to-night and win some of that rogue's fortune which is far to great for the needs of any man. The Goddess of Fortune and the Goddess of Love have him under their special care, he cannot expect Dame Chance to favour him also."

Thus chattering with his wonted good humour, His Royal Highness offered his arm to Marguerite who took it and led the way down the monumental staircase closely followed by Sir Percy. After he and his immediate entourage had left, the party broke up. There was a general rush for cloaks and mantles, calls outside for chaises and coaches, endless chattering and shrill little cries as in an aviary of love-birds.

Soon the whole company had dispersed, coaches and calèches rattled over the cobblestones of old London in this or that direction, and the magnificent mansion in St. James's Square was shuttered and presently was wrapped in sleep.

The Prince of Wales who had Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney with him, was being driven round in the royal equipage to Carlton House Terrace. Not a word was spoken during the drive. It was quite a short one. All three occupants of the carriage were absorbed in thought.

Half an hour later the royal host and his two privileged visitors were closeted in the small library adjoining the enfilade of reception-rooms. Attendants and servants had been dismissed and three chairs disposed in front of the mantelpiece in which blazed a cheerful fire of logs. In one of these reclined the rotund form of the future King of England; Lady Blakeney sat beside him, her luminous eyes fixed on the fitful play of the flames. Sir Percy was standing behind these two, close to a table on which was placed a steaming bowl of punch. He was intent on ladling out the hot liquid into a glass which he then placed at the elbow of his royal host. The latter took a long draught, smacked his lips and pronounced the drink to be first-rate.

"There is one thing, Lady Blakeney," he said jovially, "that this scapegrace of a husband of yours can do to perfection and that is to brew a night-cap. This punch is superlatively good."

He had another drink, cleared his throat, and fidgeted with his lace-edged handkerchief. Obviously he had something to say and knew not how to begin.

"You have guessed, gracious lady, I'm sure," he began at last, "the reason why I have asked you to come here to-night knowing well how tired and anxious you must be."

Marguerite murmured: "Yes!" almost inaudibly. She seemed unable to speak.

"I desired your presence while I gave a serious talking to this mauvais sujet."

He then turned to Sir Percy.

"Blakeney," he commanded, "come hither and stand before me while I impart to you our royal behest."

Blakeney smiling and indifferent at once came forward and, leaning against the tall mantelpiece, stood facing His Royal Highness who then resumed:

"While we held converse with M. l'Abbé Prud'hon and afterwards when he gave us such a graphic account of the heroic way in which . . ."

He broke off with a jovial guffaw for Blakeney had made a sign of obvious impatience and put up a hand in protest.

"All right, all right man!" he said good-humouredly, "but don't forget that I who represent the King my father am speaking to you now and I forbid you to interrupt. I was going to say that while our friend the emotional old priest was talking I watched your face, and I may say that this gracious lady here, your wife, did the same, and we both came to the conclusion that you were then and there making up your mind to go back to France in order to effect the rescue of Madame de Saint-Lucque and her children. That is so, is it not?"

He looked up enquiringly at Blakeney, trying to read in his somewhat clumsy way what went on behind those deep-set blue eyes with their far-away look of absorption in one single overwhelming purpose. How could he tell? How could anyone guess the workings of this self-centred mind intent on one thing and one only: the fulfillment of that one purpose? Indeed Blakeney's gaze at this moment, though fixed on his royal friend, was obviously unseeing. It took in nothing of these luxurious surroundings in happy England, the ease, the comfort and the peace. It had come to rest far away over there in France where a helpless woman and two innocent children would soon be facing death unless . . . And at the thought a happy smile came curling round his lips, and a great sigh not only of longing but of resolve rose from out the depths of his heart. The smile lingered until he saw Marguerite's lovely face turned appealingly up to his, saw her sweet mouth a-quiver with silent anguish and her lovely eyes shining with unshed tears. Then the smile faded from his lips, and a kind of grey veil seemed to spread right over his face. For one moment only. Just a few seconds and that look

was gone, the grey veil lifted by some ghostly hand. Back came the smile and with it the merry laugh which proclaimed high animal spirits and a carefree heart.

"Blakeney, are you listening?" the Prince demanded sternly.

"At Your Highness's commands."

"My commands are these, man, and note the word 'command.' I am not asking or suggesting. I am ordering you to accompany us to Bath to-morrow where we desire to spend the next month in taking the waters necessary for our health."

A few second's silence and Blakeney put in with seeming irrelevance:

"The thaw has set in, sir. They have resumed hunting in the Shires."

"Well! You may hunt till the frost begins again if you like. But it is Bath or the Shires, understand."

"Your Highness would not forbid me to hunt then?"

"Certainly not."

"Yet you would forbid me to go after a deadlier quarry than the fox. You deign to tell me that I may hunt till the frost begins again. And I will obey you, sir, and run a pack of wolves to earth who are after an unfortunate woman and two defenceless children. I will hunt them down and redeem my solemn word to a man who is breaking his heart at thought of what his wife and little children must endure in the hands of inhuman brutes. You would not forbid me to hunt the fox, sir. He has done nothing more heinous than rob a hen-roost or two. Then why should I run him to earth and let the wolves have their way?"

"Sport, man, sport!" His Highness broke in impatiently; "Fox-hunting is the noblest sport on earth, and methought you were a sportsman."

"And I'll back my favourite sport against any that has ever been invented for whipping up the blood of a man and making him feel akin to the gods. And now in winter with the keen air fanning one's cheeks, with the night wrapping you round with its sable mantle, with woman or child clinging to you, their weak arms holding tightly to your waist, with human wolves behind you, while you ride for dear life through unknown country, riding, riding, not knowing where you may land, out of one death-trap into another, that, Your Highness, is the sport for me. I have tasted of it and so I know. Ask Ffoulkes, ask Tony, ask any of the others, heroes they, every one of them. Fine men all, brave men, and all of them obeying my slightest command. Sport, sir! Had you but tasted it once, you would never ask me to forgo it again!"

Never once did Blakeney raise his voice while he spoke. It never even shook. But the words came tumbling out of his mouth with the rapidity of running water. His voice while it was pitched low and as if muffled, became more sonorous, more vibrant, compelling attention with the overwhelming force of the passion within. He was looking straight out before him, with head thrown back, seeing as it were the vision which he had invoked: the loneliness, the blackness of the night, and those weak arms clinging round his waist. Hearing the thunder of hoofs behind him, scenting the hot breath of wolves in pursuit, and the approach of death which mayhap had marked him for its own. Ride on, thou gay adventurer! Ride on! For dear life, not your own but theirs, the weak, the innocent, the helpless. Ride on! Ride on! while beneficent darkness still lingers and the first grey streak of dawn tinges the east with its light. Ride! gaily ride while the thunder of hoofs behind you grows weaker and slowly dies away, and the breath of human wolves thirsting for blood is lost in the odour of the frosty air. Yes! here was the adventurer born, the reckless gambler, ready to toss his life against any odds of chance, forgetting everything save the thrill of the moment when even love is compelled to yield to the unconquerable spirit of dare-devilment in the name of mercy and the call of the oppressed for self-sacrifice.

Even the Prince, sybarite though he was, was held in thrall by the fascination of this extraordinary personality: courtier, lover, prince of dandies and king of adventurers. Less than an hour ago he had seen him in a ball-room dressed in the latest fashion, with priceless lace at throat and wrists, bandying inanities with brainless women, the butt and darling of society, the maker of merriment and laughter. How difficult it was to imagine this same man in rough and scanty clothing, unwashed, unshorn, dwelling in derelict huts on vermin-infested boards, or cowering in the scrub like some wild animal in its lair.

He, the Prince of Wales, the future King of England, had listened to that man in silence realising how futile his royal commands must sound after the inspired words of this visionary. And when Sir Percy had finished speaking, the silence still persisted. Any comment after this would almost seem like sacrilege. There was a mission here expounded that must surely have its inspiration from the God of Love Himself.

After a time the silence, broken only by the solemn ticking of a monumental clock over the mantelpiece, became strangely oppressive. It seemed as if Fate had taken her stand at the gambler's elbow and defied the two opponents — the wife, the friend — who pitted their weakness against her strength. Blakeney himself was the first to break in with his shy laugh and a quaint ejaculation:

"Good Lord! It must be that demmed punch getting into my head. Will Your Highness forgive me?"

"Forgive you? What have I to forgive?"

"Disobedience to royal commands for one thing, sir. The way I've made a fool of myself for another."

"You are determined to go then?"

"Would Your Highness have an English gentleman break his solemn word?"

"The risks are too great, my friend," the Prince insisted. "You are getting too well known over there. And you will be up against a woman this time, remember."

"Marvellous thought, isn't it, sir?"

"And women have sharper vision than men."

"I hope this one has. If she is as stupid as my old friend Chauvelin she won't give us a good run for our money."

"Percy," the Prince protested, "you are incorrigible."

And thus was the incident closed, the interview at an end. Soon Blakeney begged permission to take his leave. He had ordered his coach to be brought round to Carlton House Terrace for he knew that there was nothing Marguerite loved better than a drive through the night air after ball or rout in a stuffy atmosphere.

The major-domo was summoned to see that the coach was duly at the gate. For a few minutes while Sir Percy went to have a last look at his horses Marguerite was left alone with the Prince of Wales. He took hold of her hand and raised it deferentially to his lips.

"I have done my best, Lady Blakeney," he pleaded.

"I am eternally grateful, Your Highness," she murmured.

He went on with unusual solemnity:

"I am not a religious man, gracious lady, but to-night I will implore the good God on my knees to guard your husband from any kind of danger."

After Blakeney and his wife had left, the Prince of Wales remained for a long time absorbed in a kind of contemplation. He had seldom if ever been so moved as he had been to-night by the stripping naked of a soul — the soul of his friend whom he had never truly understood until now. And he, the voluptuary, the hedonist, felt for the first — perhaps the only time in his life — a vague longing, almost an envy of that spirit which animated the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and gave to him with all the hardships and selflessness necessary for the fulfilment of a self-imposed duty an overflowing cup of happiness and of joy.

"God grant her persuasive eloquence," he murmured to himself, when the time came to retire for the night. He was thinking of Marguerite, and the futile appeal she, poor woman, would also make to keep her beloved from fulfilling that duty which in this case might so easily lead to his death: one mistake, one slight mischance and one of the most precious lives in the land would be sacrificed on the altar of an ideal.

Chapter IX: THE BITTER LESSON

Marguerite had hardly spoken a word during the interview between her husband and his royal friend. She had sat by gazing into the fitful flames of the log-fire and listening, listening while torturing anxiety went on gnawing at her heart. Nor did she speak during the drive back to their home in Richmond. She loved the drive and to-night the air — which was damp and soft and had brought about the thaw — was sweet and invigorating. The four greys seemed to have the devil in their legs and Percy had another in his sensitive hands. He drove at breakneck speed over the cobblestones of suburban London, and over the squelchy road by the river.

An hour or so later Marguerite, having taken off her brocaded gown, donned a comfortable wrap and dismissed her maids, went to find her husband in the library where she knew he would be sitting now working away and elaborating the plan which he had formed for the rescue of Madame de Saint-Lucque and her children.

The evening in the salon of the Duchesse de Roncevaux had been torture to Marguerite, for while the abbé spoke so eloquently of the Scarlet Pimpernel she had detected every change in Percy's face. Others present only saw in him the fashionable dandy, the fop, the nincompoop who readily allowed himself to be the butt of empty-headed women, but she, his wife, knew just what was going on in his mind: she saw every subtle expression in the eyes, the flicker of the lids, the almost imperceptible set of his firm lips, and clenching of his hand.

But she never questioned him about his plans. She had learned the bitter lesson of waiting. She knew that no power on earth — not even his love for her — could move him once he had heard the call of innocents in distress.

Just when she reached the bottom of the stairs, the library door was thrown open by Percy's confidential valet. She heard Percy's voice from inside the room saying in French: "I will give you further instructions in the morning." A voice, unknown to her, replied: "At your commands, milor."

A small, spare man dressed in sober black came out of the room followed by the valet, who remained at attention whilst Marguerite, in her turn, passed into the library.

Percy was sitting at his desk with a map of Northern France spread out before him. He appeared to be tracing with one finger a route which he had marked out on it. At sight of that map and of Percy's obvious absorption, a pitiful cry was wrung from the poor woman's aching heart. She put her arms round him and murmured in a desperate appeal:

"If you love me, do not go!"

It was useless, of course. She knew that well enough. All he did was to take hold of her hands and press her soft palms against his lips. But his eyes soon wandered back to his desk. He picked up a paper on which were written a few lines in a small foreign-looking hand.

"Listen to this, m'dear," he said softly. "Our loyal friend Chartier of the Comédie Française has sent me the report I asked him for by special courier. You know how well informed he always is. He has such marvellous opportunities in the theatre and out of it. And this is what he says:

"Chauvelin has been summoned back to Paris. Is not expected to return to Mézières for some time. Has reported to the C. of P.S. on the subject of the St. L's. Committee is sending their most famous spy to track down the woman and her two children. His name is André Renaud. He will arrive in M., so I understand, sometime in February. Up to the hour of writing no trace has been found of the woman and children, but believed to be still in the province not far from M."

He read the letter through quite slowly, as if he meant her to weigh every word. He then folded up the paper and slipped it in the inner pocket of his coat, murmuring softly the while:

"A stage coach plies between Barlemont in Belgium over the frontier to Mézières. That will be the best route for us to follow."

"Percy," she entreated, her voice choked with sobs.

Once again he pressed her soft palms to his lips.

"Light of my life," he said in a whisper close to her ear, "pray to God that I may not get there too late."

"Percy," she reiterated with infinite tenderness, "do not go."

She sank down on her knees. His arm rested on the arm of his chair. She laid her head down on it. Her hair fell in soft golden ripples all over her neck and shoulders. She felt his hand gently stroking her hair.

"Have no fear for me, my beloved," he said lightly, "those devils will never get me, I'll swear. But I am sorry," he added with a rueful smile, "that I shall not come to grips with my friend Chauvelin this time. This André Renaud won't be nearly so amusing. As for Mam'zelle Guillotine . . . Well! A nous deux, Mam'zelle."

He paused, gave a light-hearted laugh and then said with sudden earnestness:

"Joy of my heart! Have I not pledged my word to Saint-Lucque?"

Yes! he had pledged his word. Marguerite knew that well enough, also that he had proudly asserted: "The Scarlet Pimpernel never fails."

Nor would he fail, of that Marguerite was convinced. Strange as it may seem she knew within herself even at this hour of torturing anxiety, that Madame de Saint-Lucque and the two little girls would be brought safely to England — and that very soon. But it was his life, his precious life, that was more and more certainly in jeopardy every time he went over to France. His anonymity was no longer absolute. Putting his arch-enemy Chauvelin aside, there must be quite a number of others who would recognise him as the Scarlet Pimpernel directly they saw him. Had he not spent weeks in the Conciergerie prison, when those devils tried to starve him into revealing the whereabouts of the unfortunate Dauphin? His warders and tormentors saw him day after day: any one of them would know him again, would even, perhaps, be able to pierce his cleverest disguise. And there were others! So many, many others and all of them on the look-out for the big reward promised for the capture of the English spy.

Useless? Of course it was useless. To-morrow or perhaps the next day he would steal away in the night, and she, Marguerite, would be left to mourn and to wait. Her arms tightened round him and she murmured in his ear:

"If you go, I go with you."

Before he could move or utter another word she had passed soundlessly out of the room.

And the day after next the social chronicle contained the announcement that Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney had left Richmond on a visit to friends in Leicestershire where they intended staying while the mild weather lasted. For the next twenty-four hours this somewhat sudden departure of these two leaders of fashion gave ample food for gossip over the coffee-cups. But everyone agreed that Sir Percy was eccentric. No one really knew how to take him, or Lady Blakeney for the matter of that. And then there were other matters to gossip about: the probable marriage of the Prince of Wales in the near future for one thing; the last phase of the trial of Warren Hastings for another.

And of course the Prince of Dandies and his lady would soon be back, for the thaw was not likely to last.

BOOK III

Chapter X: A UNIQUE PERSONAGE

There is actually no authentic portrayal in existence of Gabrielle Damiens, the daughter of the “regicide,” who was known during the early days of the revolution throughout the province of Artois as “Mam’zelle Guillotine.” The only inkling one has of what she probably looked like comes from a sketch attributed to Louis David, at that time Director of Fine Arts and member of the National Convention. It is without doubt, like all David’s work, an idealised representation of that odious, if remarkable woman. Even through the artist’s pure and classical treatment of his subject, the woman’s coarseness, not to say brutality, is apparent in the low forehead, the wide flat nostrils, the prominent eyes beneath the heavy brows, and above all in the full thick lips slightly parted, displaying a row of teeth sharp and long like the fangs of a wolf. Nevertheless, one or two intimate chronicles of the time assert that Gabrielle Damiens had une beauté de diable. Thus might a Queen of Darkness be beautiful. Her figure was tall and well-proportioned suggesting great physical strength, and though her dark eyes seldom betrayed any emotion save of fury or hatred, her coarse lips would sometimes part in a smile, not of joy but of sensual pleasure which fascinated when it did not repel. Women, even the most ignoble harpies of this revolutionary period hated and feared her, but men like Marat and Danton looked upon her as the arch-fiend of the revolution and worshipped her as those of their kind worshipped the devil. It was said of that inhuman monster Marat that he had been passionately in love with her. Gabrielle Damiens occupied an apartment in what had been until a year ago the episcopal palace in Mézières. The bishop was now deposed. He was in hiding, so it was thought, somewhere in the forest, looked after surreptitiously by a few faithful peasants of the district, who did this act of charity at risk of their lives. The revolutionary government took over the palace, stripped it of everything of value that happened to be in it, desecrated the chapel and converted the fine reception-rooms on the ground floor into offices for the use of the local Committee of Public Safety, which now held its sittings in what had been the bishop’s private oratory. The floor above was assigned to Citizeness Gabrielle Damiens at her special request for her private residence. It was her friend Maximilien Robespierre, one of the most prominent members in the Convention who had obtained for her the position of Public Executioner in his native Province of Artois. The story of how a woman came to be appointed to such an odious post was a curious one. When Gabrielle Damiens was liberated from the Bastille after sixteen years’ incarceration, and when full recollection came to her of how and by whose influence she came to be arrested, her one dominating thought was Revenge. Her mind, which had always been active, concentrated on schemes to accomplish that one supreme object. All sorts of different plans presented themselves before her in turn — spying, denunciations, underground work of every sort and kind — she rejected them all. Her diabolic temperament thirsted not for revenge only but for the actual blood of her enemies, of Saint-Lucque, who had engineered her incarceration in the Bastille, a living tomb in which she spent the best sixteen years of her life. And Saint-Lucque, it seems, was married and happy with his wife and young children. At thought of them Gabrielle Damiens became like those legendary vampires thirsting for the life-blood of the entire brood. But how to attain her heart’s desire? Gabrielle thought and thought and gradually a plan formed itself in her mind. A scheme. Only a vision at first but with the possibility of becoming a realisation, more wonderful, more stupendous than anything that had ever been done before. She saw herself like Sanson of Paris or Carrier of Nantes, the promoter and artisan of her own desires. She saw her hands, those large hands of hers with the short spatulate finger-tips dealing out death not vicariously but actually; deaths which she had for years madly longed to witness. The guillotine! Why not? What a vision! What if it became a reality? She foresaw difficulties, of course. Even in these topsy-turvy times a female wielder of the guillotine had not yet been thought of. But Robespierre was her friend and so was Marat. They were men of influence and both had the same kind of temperament as herself, cruel, vengeful and unscrupulous. It is to them that she turned. They whom she presently consulted, whose prestige she invoked. She was sure of Robespierre’s approval. And Marat . . .? Well, Marat would come to heel like a snarling dog whatever she demanded of him. A flash of her eyes, a touch of her hand and he became her slave. She sent for those two men one day. There was a short recess in the sittings of the Convention at the time and Robespierre had taken the opportunity of going down to his native province of Artois on business of his own, whilst Marat at Gabrielle’s summons posted at once from Paris as he would have done from the furthest confines of France if she had called to him. And so they came to her apartment which had once been a saintly bishop’s oratory, and Gabrielle Damiens, “the regicide’s daughter,” stood before them, tall, spare, admirably poised. She was dressed like a man in crimson shirt and breeches: the sleeves of her shirt were rolled up to display her muscular arms, her bare feet were thrust into sabots. “Do I not look like a man?” she challenged them. Robespierre nodded assent. Marat measured her with a tigerish glance.

“Mam’zelle Guillotine, what?” he murmured raucously.

“You call me Gabriel Damiens,” the woman went on, “and you will present me to your committees as the son, not the daughter of François Damiens who was tortured and put to death by cowardly aristos to conceal their own misdeeds. You will explain that I was imprisoned in the Bastille for sixteen years for being my father’s son. A good story eh?” she concluded defiantly.

“Excellent!” was Maximilien Robespierre’s curt comment whilst Marat looked her up and down and gave a harsh laugh.

“You’ll get found out pretty soon, ma belle,” he said.

The woman shrugged: “Would that matter?” she retorted. “If I do my work well, which I certainly will, they will be satisfied and not care whether I am man or woman.”

And so it came to pass that the Province of Artois boasted of that unique personage, a female executioner. She did not get found out till after those awful days in September when two hundred helpless prisoners were massacred in the prisons of Paris and in the surging crowd the murderers had their clothes torn off their backs. “Gabriel Damiens,” summoned from Artois by Danton to give a hand in the butchery, accomplished, they said, the prodigies of patriotic ardour, by slaying no fewer than twenty women with “his” own hand. The revolutionary government, overruled at the time by the Extremists, desired to reward those who had served it well on that horrible occasion and Gabrielle Damiens had her reward by seeing her appointment confirmed as Public Executioner in the Province of Artois,

despite her sex. She had not overestimated her valor when she said to her friends: "I'll do my work well! They will be satisfied with me."

And they were. Gabrielle Damiens, whenever the guillotine in the Province happened to be idle, filled in her time with public speaking. The days were already dawning when the tigers of the revolution were ready to devour one another. Denunciation against one party was eagerly listened to by the other. Extremists were at the throats of the Moderates. Failing them they were at one another's. Not one man who had been foolhardy enough to throw himself into the vortex of public life felt that his head was safe upon his shoulders and the daughter of François Damiens "the regicide" saw to it that those who were avowedly or covertly her enemies became the victims of those who were her friends.

She had a caustic tongue and great power of oratory. Inflamed by her passions of hate and revenge she knew how to sway the populace by fierce attacks on those who had incurred her wrath. She would stand, as Camille Desmoulins had done four years before in Paris, on a table in the public park, holding a pistol in each hand; her harsh voice would ring out above the heads of the crowd gathered round her improvised rostrum. She knew, none better, how to pillory aristos and capitalists in the face of this poor, half-starved multitude, as potential assassins ready to sell the Republic to foreign usurers for gold. They would listen spell-bound, shivering under their miserable rags, a prey to a nameless fear of coming events which would mean death for them, and probably starvation for their wives and children.

And Gabrielle, feeling that she held these people by the magic of her eloquence, would stand there with flashing eyes, her cropped hair standing up on end around her head like a disordered mane, a blood-red flush covering her face like a veil. To the men her fascination soon became irresistible. When she spoke she could do with them what she liked, twist them round her little finger. Her face had in it at times an almost demoniac expression. She was no longer young, and loneliness, semi-starvation for sixteen years in the Bastille had robbed her of any charm she may have had in youth, but there was no denying that she had an extraordinary and compelling personality; and that her very brutishness had a certain attraction for these half-crazed revolutionists.

Chapter XI: BAFFLED

Close upon a year had gone by since Gabrielle Damiens had donned male attire, and exercised the gruesome profession of Public Executioner. A year during which her hatred for an entire caste must — one would have thought — have been appeased to a certain extent, for in the Province of Artois, through its proximity to the capital where the storm of revolution raged more furiously than elsewhere, the guillotine wielded by her hand had been at work day after day, and noble heads, intellectual and saintly heads, had fallen like corn under the harvester's scythe. But Gabrielle's blood-lust knew no appeasement yet. Her desire for vengeance demanded the death of those who had ruined her life and made of it for sixteen years a real hell upon earth. It was Saint-Lucque now Marquis of that name, it was his wife and his children on whom Gabrielle had concentrated the full venom of her wrath. It was for their blood that her very soul had thirsted ever since she had been turned out of the Bastille a free woman, physically free, but an abject slave to her passions. Ever since that day she had worked for their destruction, had put spies on their track when they left their chateau in Artois and became wanderers on the face of France as so many of their kindred had done. At last the spies had run the head of the house to earth, he and his son, a boy of fourteen, who were hiding in the little village of Orcival close to Rocroi, under the protection of the old curé of the parish who had not yet been dispossessed of his benefice owing to the affection in which he was held by the village folk.

The old man had been expecting dispossession, with it arrest and the inevitable guillotine. It was the usual fate of those servants of God who were prepared to give up their lives rather than fail in their spiritual duties to their flock. He had been tutor to the young Vicomte de Saint-Lucque, and had gladly given shelter under his roof to Monsieur le Marquis and the boy, while Madame la Marquise and the two little girls remained in hiding in another corner of the province not far from the Belgian frontier. The blow fell with such suddenness that neither Monsieur le Marquis and his son, nor the priest himself were able to escape arrest: they were incarcerated in the police commissariat of Mézières and the following day found them on the way to Paris for trial on a charge of high treason against the Republic. This was for Gabrielle Damiens the happiest day she had experienced for the past twenty years. Trusting in her powers of persuasion, she had no doubt that she could induce the authorities up in Paris to allow the execution of the three aristos to take place in Mézières. "It would," she argued in a letter which she wrote to the Public Prosecutor, "help to quell certain subversive tendencies in the province, and demonstrate as nothing else could do the power and the determination of the Republic to deal mercilessly with traitors and counter-revolutionists."

Twenty-four hours later the blow came crashing down over her fondest hopes. The coach which conveyed the aristos to Paris was held up by highwaymen in the late afternoon in the forest of Mézières. The brigands had commenced operations by cutting the saddle-girths under the bellies of the soldiers' horses, had held a pistol at the driver's head and driven away the coach under cover of the gathering night. The aristos had vanished. What the brigands had done with them was not yet known. But Gabrielle was not deceived by the story. She knew well enough that the pseudo-highwaymen were none other than the gang of English spies who were the avowed enemies of revolutionary France and spent their time in endeavouring to cheat the Republic of her right to punish the traitors who had conspired against her safety. In that endeavour be it said those abominable spies always succeeded. The escape of the *ci-devant* aristos and of the priest Prud'hon was a case in point.

Fuming with rage like a wild beast baffled and foiled of its prey, Gabrielle Damiens appeared before the local Committee of Public Safety, in sitting the morning after the outrage, spouting forth invective and abuse, coupled with threats which caused every man there to put his hand up to his cravat. Every member of the august assembly endeavored to fasten the responsibility of the affair on his nearest neighbour, and tempers ran high while Gabrielle raged and stormed like a harpy.

The sergeant who had been in charge of the escort received a full measure of censure and vituperation. He had given a detailed account as far as he was able of the extraordinary event from the moment when the first pistol-shot was fired and the words "Halt and deliver!" rang suddenly out of the gloom. This was immediately followed by a general *mêlée*, and when a few minutes later the coach was incontinently driven away and he and the troopers were on the point of re-mounting they found that their saddle-girths had been tampered with and they, not being circus-riders were unable to give chase.

"With that infernal din going on," the unfortunate man went on to explain, "with pistols cracking all the time, with hoarse words of command from the unseen foe, with the plunging and rearing of horses and the creaking of coach-wheels, I could not get my men to hear me. They had drawn their sabres but found that in the narrow road, with the thicket on either side and with the fast gathering gloom they could not use their arms without fear of wounding their horses or their comrades. Not one of us had actually seen the attackers, they seemed to have emerged out of the ground, and at once to have vanished again. Rain and sleet were lashed into our faces by the wind. It was hell and pandemonium, I assure you, citizens. You may send me to the guillotine, but all I could say before my judges would be to repeat the story that I have told you now, which is the truth."

The sergeant was not sent to the guillotine for the simple reason that revolutionary France, now at war with half Europe, had need of all the man-power she could muster. High-placed officers might be put to death without compunction for they were aristos and therefore traitors to the Republic, but men like this wretched sergeant were trained soldiers, and they were of the people, nor could they very well be spared. The man, then, was kept in gaol for a week: he was browbeaten and kept in constant fear of death, until the Committee of Public Safety was satisfied that his spirit was sufficiently broken, after which he was sent with written orders to the General commanding the revolutionary troops in the eastern provinces that he be put in the thickest of the fight so that he might have a chance of showing his mettle and redeeming by outstanding bravery his tarnished reputation.

So much for him. It is to be supposed that out there on the Belgian front he spent many a sleepless night brooding over the extraordinary events of that memorable afternoon, and that the story of the mysterious English spies and their legendary chief was told and retold many a time round the bivouac fires, together with several additions and improvements to make it more palpitating than it already was!

Chapter XII: CHAUVELIN TAKES A HAND

A few days later in the luxurious apartment on the first floor of the episcopal palace Gabrielle Damiens was pacing up and down the floor like a hungry panther that has been cheated of its prey. Her dark hair, still innocent of grey, stood out all round her head in a crazy tangle, for she had been pulling at it with both hands whenever a fresh access of rage got beyond her control. Hoarse ejaculations found their way from time to time through her quivering lips. She would then pause by the centre table, pick up a bottle and pour some of its contents into a glass. The liquid was clear like water. But it was water only in name: eau de vie, water of life, Gabrielle drank it down at one gulp.

"The fools!" she muttered thickly after she had drunk; "the cowards!"

And then she went on: "If I had my way with them . . ."

"You would deprive the armies of the Republic of a number of good soldiers," a quiet voice here broke in. "Is that it?"

"Bah!" the woman retorted, "the armies have no use for cowards!"

The man who had spoken was sitting by the table, with elbows resting thereon. His long claw-like fingers were interlocked and made a support for his chin. He was a small spare man who would have appeared insignificant but for his pale, sunken eyes, which now and then flashed with a cold, glittering light like those of a cat on the prowl in the night. He was dressed in sober black and wore his dark hair tied at the nape of the neck with a black bow.

"It is not like you, Citizeness Damiens," he went on, with a sarcastic curl of his thin lips, "to brood over the past."

The woman shrugged.

"I would have liked to have the handling of that sergeant's head," she admitted.

"Of course you would," the man responded, with a note of irony in his even voice. He paused for a moment or two, his pale eyes fixed on Gabrielle and then went on coolly:

"But you would rather have the handling of the ci-devant Marquise de Saint-Lucque and her daughters. Am I not right?"

Gabrielle made no immediate response to this. She had come to a halt in the middle of the room with a half-filled glass of eau de vie in her hand, which she was on the point of conveying to her lips. At the name, Saint-Lucque, she suddenly became as if petrified. She stood absolutely still with the glass in her hand half-way up to her lips, rigid as a granite statue. Her face was entirely expressionless, like a death-mask, her eyes were entirely glassy, her lips were pressed tightly together. The man noted all this and smiled. It was a complacent, satisfied kind of smile, and his head nodded up and down once or twice.

"I am right, am I not, citizeness?" he reiterated after a moment or two.

Gabrielle drank down the eau de vie. Life appeared to come back into her eyes. She put the glass down and sank into a chair as if exhausted, passed her outspread fingers through her tousled hair, gave a deep sigh and said finally:

"Chauvelin, if you mention that woman again, I believe I should strangle you."

Chauvelin gave a dry chuckle.

"As bad as that, citizeness?" he queried.

"And worse," she retorted.

"And useless, shall we say?" the man went on flippantly. "My death would serve no purpose as far as you are concerned, and it would be good old Sanson of Paris who would have the handling of your handsome head."

He paused a moment, his pale eyes fixed on the woman as a snake fixes its eyes on the prey it covets. She said nothing either. Her mouth was set in a line of obstinacy and her eyes still glowered with fury. And so there was silence between these two, while up on the wall the old white-faced clock ticked away the seconds of time with irritating monotony. Chauvelin picked up a long quill, held it between two claw-like fingers and toyed with it, tap-tapping it against the table. He never took his eyes off her, noted every quiver of her over-strung nerves, and the power of his own self-control over her unruly temper. As soon as he was satisfied that he had obtained a certain mastery over her he resumed:

"Do not let us quarrel, citizeness," he said, with smooth urbanity, "or bandy empty threats. We have need of one another, you and I, as I will presently show you . . . if you will listen to me."

And as she still remained obstinately silent he added more insistently:

"Will you listen, citizeness?"

Whereupon she replied sullenly:

"I am listening. What is it you want?"

"Nothing but your attention for the moment."

"Well? Go on."

"I am about to give you sound advice, and I know that you do not usually take advice kindly. But will you make an exception in my favour, circumstances being what they are?"

"Well!" she rejoined with a shrug; "I sent for you, didn't I? It wasn't in order to get you to make love to me."

Chauvelin ignored the gibe and went on placidly:

"The escape of the three aristos through the agency of those damnable English spies is a nasty blow, not only for you personally, citizeness, but a blow to the prestige of all the local authorities of this province. That is so, is it not?"

As she gave no reply, he continued in the same suave, urbane tone:

"You will also admit, citizeness, that a repetition of such an incident would gravely compromise the reputation, not to say the lives of all the members of your local government."

He paused for a moment or two, and then added with ironic emphasis:

"Including yours, Mam'zelle Guillotine."

He no longer waited for her to speak. He could read the workings of her mind as he would an open book, knew that she cared for nothing at this moment, except the satisfaction of her vengeful hate, and that he would get nothing out of her until he had finally

succeeded in persuading her that her interests and her desires were identical with his. And so he went on:

"That is why, citizeness, you and I must become allies — not enemies. Your one desire in life, now that Saint-Lucque himself has escaped you, is to bring the rest of the family — the wife and the two remaining children — to justice. My one aim so long as I have breath in my body left will be to lay the English spies and their chief, the Scarlet Pimpernel, by the heels."

Gabrielle gave a shrug. "Pshaw!" she muttered contemptuously. What cared she about Chauvelin's grudge against the English spies? Give her the Saint-Lucque woman and her two brats and let Chauvelin deal with that legendary Scarlet Pimpernel as best he could. She for one did not believe in his existence at all.

"I care nothing about your English spies," she said presently. "Give me the Saint-Lucque brood . . ."

"You'll never get them, citizeness," he retorted with firm emphasis, "while the Scarlet Pimpernel is alive."

"Bah!"

"Never!" he reiterated forcibly.

"Well! You have tried often enough to get him, my good man, and you have failed every time, haven't you?"

"I know it. The man is a genius. A devil, if you like. So far he has baffled me. I am willing to admit my many failures. But I'll not fail this time if you, citizeness, will help me."

Gabrielle broke into a loud, prolonged, mirthless laugh.

"So that's it, is it?" she rapped out harshly. "I am to be the tool of your selfish intrigues."

She jumped to her feet, and brought her clenched fist banging down upon the table.

"It is not for me," she went on, hurling vituperation upon vituperation on the silent, smooth-tongued man, who sat quietly by allowing the flood of her wrath to pass unchallenged over his head: "it is not for me and my just cause that you are setting your crooked mind at work. Allies indeed! Friends! You care nothing for the punishment of traitors like that Saint-Lucques brood; all you think of is your petty revenge on the man who has made a fool of you, that creature of your own imagination — the Scarlet Pimpernel."

She sank back into the chair, pausing for want of breath, for she had gradually raised her voice to a strident pitch, screaming at Chauvelin, who for once in his life was completely dumbfounded. He had not expected this outburst, had apparently not read quite deeply enough into the workings of this half-demented woman's mind, a woman whom, by the way, he heartily despised but whom he believed to have so completely mastered that she would be as putty in his hands. In point of fact, she was right when she said that he cared nothing about the Saint-Lucque women, except as a means to his ends. It was the Scarlet Pimpernel he wanted to destroy and he had set his brain to work to devise a trap into which that chivalrous dandy would be fated to fall.

For the moment, however, he allowed the full flood of Gabrielle's vituperations to flow unchecked over his head. He was not the man to be intimidated by the fury of any woman, not even of this one who had the reputation of always getting the better of those who were bold enough to oppose her. He remained silent for the moment, with pale eyes fixed upon the irate harpy, his long, thin fingers drumming a tattoo upon the table-top. Soon, however, a thin, sarcastic smile curled around his lips, and when Gabrielle came to a halt, panting with exhaustion, he put in calmly:

"Are you not rather unjust towards me now, citizeness? You accuse me of scheming for the destruction of the Scarlet Pimpernel rather than for the punishment of three aristos. But let me remind you that while that audacious spy and his accursed league are at large they will never allow the Saint-Lucque women to be tried and condemned either here or in Paris. Never! They will plan their rescue, wherever they may be, and the will succeed in snatching them from under your nose, whatever you may do, even from the very steps of your guillotine."

He paused, letting his words sink into the woman's consciousness, and he had the satisfaction of noting that comprehension of his point of view did gradually filtrate into her mind. The look of rage slowly faded out of her eyes and her breath came and went more slowly through her parted lips. Presently she said with amazing calm:

"Yes! I see what you mean, and I dare say you are right. It would be the death of me if those women slipped through my fingers in the end."

"They won't," Chauvelin rejoined decisively, "once you have those English spies out of the way, and do not forget, citizeness, that the capture and death of the Scarlet Pimpernel will be a political event of the first magnitude and that you will reap as rich a reward as has ever been bestowed on any man or woman before."

He could no longer be in doubt now that he held her attention. Her expressive face showed plainly that she was listening, listening eagerly, and that it rested with him to hold her attention to the end and to force his will upon her. His will! She must bow to it. She must! His plan was so fine, so perfect! So certain of success. But he must have her co-operation. Without it he could not succeed. What a humiliation for this master-sleuth, this incomparable tracker of spies, to see himself dependent on a woman's whim for what meant his whole future, probably his life!

Ah, well! Ends had justified the means in many intrigues before now. Mentally, Chauvelin had counted his cards and could well be satisfied that he held the ace of trumps. Leaning well forward, with forearms resting on the table and hands clasped, he took as it were a final survey of this woman on whom so much depended. She sat opposite to him, lounging in an armchair, one leg crossed over the other, her hands thrust in the pockets of her breeches. She was the first to speak.

"Well!" she said, "what about that wonderful scheme of yours? Your tongue does not seem to be as glib as usual, I am thinking."

"I want to put the matter as briefly as I can before you, citizeness," Chauvelin gave answer; "but first of all, tell me, do you know where the Saint-Lucque women are hiding?"

"No, I don't," she replied curtly.

"Why not?"

"Because I am surrounded by fools and cowards" traitors I call them. . . . The committee and their sleuths are all alike. . . . Dolts, I tell you."

"Obviously then, if your own people cannot track those aristos we have got to find someone who can."

"I won't have a stranger meddling here, you know," Gabrielle snapped out quickly; "I sent for you because it is you I want. Why cannot you . . .?"

Chauvelin gravely shook his head.

"Impossible, citizeness."

"Why?"

"I have been summoned back to Paris, and I must return immediately. It is a matter connected with the arrest of a ci-devant sewing-maid who was intimately acquainted with the Capet family. The Committee of Public Safety fear the intervention of the English spies on her behalf. They have sent for me," he reiterated solemnly, "and I must go."

"I can arrange that," she retorted with her usual arrogance.

He shook his head once again.

"It would be the guillotine for us both," he rejoined, "if owing to any failure on my part or to any interference from you, the ci-devant sewing-maid were spirited away by the Scarlet Pimpernel."

He gave a short dry laugh and added:

"I don't know what you feel about it, citizeness, but there are one or two things I want to do before my unworthy head rolls into old Sanson's basket."

Gabrielle swore under her breath.

"I hate strangers," she reassured, muttering hoarsely through her teeth: "I will not have a stranger here."

"The man I have in my mind, citizeness, is one of the finest trackers of aristos in the country."

"I hate strangers," she reiterated sullenly.

"Yet, you admit that you cannot trust your own spies to track the Saint-Lucque women to their hiding-place."

Gabrielle gave no reply to that and for a few minutes there was absolute silence in this room where two minds were busy scheming for the death of a helpless woman and her innocent children. Absolute silence, but the white-faced clock ticked on marking the passage of time towards eternity.

"What's the man's name?" Gabrielle queried at last.

"André Renaud, one of the ablest men on the staff of the Chief Commissariat in Paris," was Chauvelin's glib answer.

"And you are sure," she insisted, "that he can run that hateful brood to earth?"

"Quite sure. He will bring his own subordinates with him and within three days you will know where the three women are in hiding."

"And twenty-four hours later we have them under lock and key," she concluded with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Ready for conveyance to Paris. . . ."

But Gabrielle wouldn't have that.

"Don't be a fool, Chauvelin," she snapped out at him; "haven't I told you that I want the handling of those three cursed women myself. Isn't my guillotine good enough for that vermin? I tell you I will not have them sent to Paris."

"And they won't be. Not all the way, at any rate."

"I don't understand what you mean by 'not all the way.' I wish you wouldn't talk in riddles."

"It is quite simple, citizeness. As soon as the aristos are under arrest, let the fact be bruited abroad far and wide. The ci-devant Saint-Lucques are, I understand, very well known in the province and their arrest is sure to cause a sensation. In fact the greater the sensation the better it will suit my . . . our plan. After that let it be also known that the three women will be conveyed to Paris on a given day, for trial and summary condemnation. Surely you can guess what will inevitably follow?"

"You mean that the English spies . . .?"

"Exactly. Flushed with their recent success, they will at once be on the warpath, devising a plan for the rescue of these so-called innocent victims of our wicked revolution."

"Go on, man! Go on! I am getting interested."

"For the journey to Paris — do not interrupt me again I pray you — you must choose just such another day as served the English spies so well in the case of the other Saint-Lucques and the priest — you want a mist or thin drizzle, lashing wind or driven rain. Do not have too big an escort: four to six men will suffice. Having settled on the day you will have a diligence ready in the earliest dawn shuttered so that no one can get so much as a peep into the interior."

"You don't want the crowd to see the prisoners inside the coach?"

"The prisoners will not be in the coach, citizeness."

"What do you mean? . . . not in the coach?"

"In the coach, citizeness, there will be a half a dozen picked men of your own local gendarmerie armed with pistols, ready to meet the surprise attack, which those English spies will of a certainty have engineered for the rescue of the aristos."

Gabrielle now was sitting quite still, with elbows on the table, her head resting against her hand. Her eyes were aglow gazing straight out before her as if she were already seeing a vision of the drama which Chauvelin had so graphically foreshadowed.

"I see it all," she murmured after a minute or two.

"You can rely on the Chief Commissary here, I suppose," Chauvelin added.

"He is my friend," she replied curtly; "he will do what I want."

"That's good, as we must have his co-operation. Will you tell him to order the driver, who had best be a trained soldier, to arrange a breakdown at twilight on the loneliest bit of road in the forest."

"That's simple enough as you say, providing . . ."

"Providing what?" Chauvelin threw a quick anxious glance at Gabrielle. Her manner had suddenly undergone a change. A moment ago her enthusiasm had seemed at fever-pitch. The scheme was grand and certain of success. She saw it all in a series of mental visions. The coach coming to a halt, the spies on the watch. The sudden attack on the diligence filled with stalwarts armed to the teeth. Yes! armed to the teeth. Six to one or more. All very well, providing they had to deal with an ordinary human being, say an eccentric

Englishman. Or the usual type of adventurous spy, out for money or promotion. But this man — this legendary creature with his impenetrable anonymity — the Scarlet Pimpernel . . .

Instinctively she shrugged, obviously in doubt, her expressive face showing an inkling almost of fear. Chauvelin was sharp enough to note all this. Her doubts, her fears, and the reason for both. He gave a harsh mocking laugh and said in direct answer to her thoughts:

“Those misgivings which I can see have reared their ugly heads in your mind are unworthy of you, citizeness. I know that people in this country have talked of the Scarlet Pimpernel as if he were some kind of superhuman being bearing a charmed life, and those fools over in England are inclined to foster that belief. Now I know the man. I have seen him and spoken with him and I give you my word that there is nothing unearthly about him except his unfailing luck and . . . well, yes! . . . his physical courage. But let me assure you once more, citizeness, that the aristos whom you hate will never be sent to the guillotine while the Scarlet Pimpernel is alive. Never.”

Chauvelin had risen from the table while he gave Gabrielle this assurance. She made no movement while he picked up his hat and cape and made a move towards the door, but he was quite shrewd enough to note that at last his solemn words of warning had their desired effect. His hand had already hold of the latch when she spoke abruptly:

“Where are you going, Chauvelin?”

“To interview the Chief Commissary of your section . . . with your permission that is . . . By the way, what is his name?”

“Lescar.”

“Well! I’ll go and have a talk with Citizen Lescar. I shan’t have the same difficulty with him as I had with you, citizeness,” he went on with a wry smile. “There is a reward of ten thousand livres for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, if taken alive. The largest share of that will go to the Chief Commissary of the district in which the capture has taken place. I imagine that our friend Lescar will not be lacking in zeal.”

“No,” Gabrielle returned with a mocking laugh; “money is the goad which moves you all.”

“Perhaps,” Chauvelin was willing to admit. After which he asked: “Is there anything else you wish me to do, citizeness?”

“No,” she replied at first and then said: “Yes!”

“At your service, citizeness.”

“You can tell those dolts up in Paris to send their sleuth down at once. We’ll see what he can do.”

Chapter XIII: The English Spy

The whole Province of Artois was seething by now with the wrath at the audacity of the English spies, and during the long winter evenings, round homely firesides or cabaret tables, that masterstroke accomplished in the forest of Mézières was discussed and commented on in all its aspects.

Just think on it! Three aristos who were being sent to Paris for trial were absolutely spirited away from under the very nose of the highly efficient police administration of the province. Spirited away! There was no other word for it! And the whole thing was obviously the work of those abominable English, who were emissaries of the devil, for no flesh and blood human creature could have engineered so damnable a trick and then disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them up.

No wonder that the good Artesians looked upon this hoodwinking of their Chief Commissary as the work of the devil, and their desire for revenge of the impudent spy was roused to positive fury. The very name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the leader of that gang of brigands, had but to be mentioned to make the entire population of the province see red.

That barefaced, insolent Englishman and his equally brazen followers must be laid by the heels and handed over to the tender mercies of the citizeness Damiens who would have her quick way with them. Everyone was contemplating with joy the prospect of seeing those blonde heads — they must be blonde since they were English, drop one by one into the basket of Mam’zelle Guillotine. “Not before she had slapped their ugly faces for them,” was the express wish formulated by the women, who, as usual, were more rabid than the men.

The intensity of public feeling in Artois against the English spy soon became known in the capital, and Chauvelin, as soon as he arrived in Paris, did his best to magnify every incident that went to prove that the Artesians would be heart and soul in any enterprise directed against the Scarlet Pimpernel. In spite of his many failures in the direction of that elusive personage, he still had the ear of the Committee of Public Safety who did not undervalue his real worth, and though, at the special sitting convened for the purpose, several members were inclined to scoff when Chauvelin expounded his plan for the capture of the spies — seeing the number of times that his masterstrokes had ended in failures — nevertheless when it was put to the vote, the majority decided in favour of the plan being carried through, starting with the arrest of the Saint-Lucque woman and her two daughters. They were to be the bait that must inevitably draw that league of dare-devils into the clever trap laid for them.

Citizen Renaud who had earned his spurs as the most astute sleuth in the service of the Committee, second only to Citizen Chauvelin himself, was the man finally selected for this preliminary work. The three aristos were in hiding somewhere between Mézières and the Belgian frontier, where picked men of the revolutionary guard were on duty night and day as a living barrier against the escape of traitors over the border. Commissioned and non-commissioned officers were one and all ready to swear that no women had crossed the frontier into Belgium since last the aristos took flight from their old home and became wanderers in the land. The *cit-devant* Marquis and his son, together with a priest, had in due course been arrested, rescued and taken to England, while the three women had disappeared.

Chapter XIV: LE PARC AUX DAIMS

In these days travellers whose calling or business took them through Arras and Mézières to the Belgian frontier could not fail to note the derelict piece of land situated off the main road some two or three leagues before coming to Rocroi. The land still showed signs of having once been an extensive park surrounding a small château. The château in this year of the Republic was falling into ruins. It had been abandoned close on ten years ago, when the then owners, scenting the fast approaching revolutionary storm tried to sell it, failed after repeated efforts, and finally abandoned it, taking themselves and their goods over to their native Flanders and leaving Mother Nature in possession of the house and the park, hoping no doubt to return after the storm had broken or blown over, and to find the château, if not the garden, very much as they had left it.

But Mother Nature is notworthily the worst care-taker in the world. Civilisation and man's handiwork are needed to fight rust and decay. The park was first to go back to the wild. Flower-beds quickly became weed-beds; shrubs and fruit trees died for lack of pruning and of water, garden statuary split and broke in the course of two severe winters, and lay on the ground, pedestal and all beneath a blanket of fungus and of moss. After three years under Mother Nature's régime le Parc aux Daims près Rocroi, dans la province d'Artois, was nothing but a piece of derelict land and its château a mere mass of brick and crumbling plaster, broken woodwork and leaky roof, through the cracked tiles of which rain quickly found its devastating way.

Soon the place got the reputation of being haunted. Country folk avoided going near it. At first, when the family had gone, leaving no one to look after the place, enterprising schoolboys would roam through the orchard in quest of apples, and thrifty housewives tried to raise cabbages and spinach on what had once been the vegetable garden. But after a time strange noises were heard to proceed from the château on dark winter nights, while certain mysterious lights were seen through the windows to be moving erratically to and fro, to flicker and presently to die out, only to reappear later or else on the next dark night. The enterprising schoolboys were scared out of their wits one evening in November, when unseen feet trod over the rough ground, making a noise like the crackling of firewood, although there was no firewood lying about; thrifty housewives had seen to that. After this mysterious episode apples hung unheeded on the old trees, and in due course fell to the ground and lay there rotting until the next season, and housewives gave the vegetable garden a wide berth, fearing the bane of cabbage grown on unhallowed soil.

And here in the derelict Parc aux Daims there was enacted in the year three of the Republic — corresponding with our 1794 — a quiet little idyll of loyalty on the one hand and of courage on the other.

At the earnest entreaty of his wife, and the advice of devoted friends, Monsieur de Saint-Lucque, taking his young son with him, had sought shelter in Abbé Prud'hon's presbytery, situated in a village in the vicinity of Rocroi; he confided his wife and two little daughters to the care of an old couple on whose loyalty he would have staked his life. The Guidals had been faithful servants of his family for close on half a century. They owned a small farm in the next village and were people to whom the unfortunate Saint-Lucque felt he could entrust with the utmost confidence those three women so dear to him. This occurred in the early autumn of 1793, and for time everything went well both in the presbytery and in the farm near Rocroi. But the trouble was that communication between the two places was fraught with so much danger that it had to be discontinued chiefly at the demand of old man Guidal.

Weeks and months went by while the unfortunate Saint-Lucque nearly broke his heart with anxiety over his beloved wife and daughters and Madame de Saint-Lucque was equally distraught with grief at being parted from her husband and only son. Matters, however, unfortunate though they were, might have gone on a little while longer, had not Christmas come along. The kind hearted abbé determined on that solemn occasion to carry a message through to the farm.

The inevitable happened. The old priest was waylaid by spies of the local Committee of Public Safety and caught in the act of carrying about with him papers of a suspicious nature. The immediate result of his well-meant action was a perquisition in the presbytery, followed by the arrest of Monsieur de Saint-Lucque with his young son, and also of the abbé himself; the latter on a charge of harbouring aristos who were traitors to the Republic.

But the cruel hand of fate had not done with striking at the unhappy Saint-Lucques yet. The law of the Suspect — that most iniquitous of all the edicts passed by the National Convention — had just come into force. By its enactment the very fact that a man or woman or even a child, was as much as suspected of treason, made them liable to summary arrest and more often than not to the sentence of death.

Guidal, a worthy and timorous peasant, was terrified of the guillotine. He flatly refused to allow Madame de Saint-Lucque and her children to remain at the farm any longer. How did he know when he might become suspect of harbouring aristos? He had not the pluck to say this to the unfortunate lady himself, but deputed his wife for this very unpleasant task. The woman, genuinely horrified at what she called the act of an ingrate and a coward, argued and protested, but the old farmer was adamant. There is no worse counsellor or tempter in the world than fear, and Guidal was frightened to death.

At first, no doubt, he had been actuated by loyalty to his former employers, but as times got more and more troublous and the revolutionary waves rose higher and higher, when they broke over the countryside, it became more and more dangerous to aid aristos to escape from justice. To harbour them was reckoned to be a capital offence punishable by death.

And now this awful Law of the Suspect! Guidal was loyal, he was good and honest, but he was not going to risk his neck for anybody. In the end he told his wife, Marianne, that if Madame de Saint-Lucque did not leave the farm within twenty-four hours, he would himself denounce her and her children to the Commissary of Police.

With her heart beating well-nigh to suffocation, Eve de Saint-Lucque overheard the discussion that was going on. Her fate and that of her little girls were being debated by these two poor ignorant rustics. There could be only one issue to the threat uttered by Guidal. She was a pious woman and a loving wife and mother; what could she do but remain on her knees praying to God for protection, while the woman Guidal ran to the next village, to the presbytery and in a flood of tears told the heart-rending tale to the kind old abbé.

Before anything could be done, however, or any decision come to, the Marquis de Saint-Lucque, the little Vicomte and the abbé himself were arrested and dragged to Mézières pending their being taken to Paris for trial and sentence.

And when Marianne returned to the farm, she found that Madame de Saint-Lucque had left the house at dead of night with her two little children.

She had put together a small bundle of primary necessities, had wrapped the children up in all the warm clothing she possessed, and holding each one by the hand, she wandered down the road in the direction of Mézières. Where to go she knew not, only away, away from the danger of denunciation, of arrest and the awful, inevitable guillotine. Her two little girls! Innocent children! To think that there could be such inhuman beasts in the world, in this beautiful France, who would injure them. Who would, Heavens above! put them to death!

Of her husband and her son she had no news whatever. In her heart she cherished the one hope that they were still safe under the care of the Abbé Prud'hon. But of this she could not be sure, and she dared not question people, for fear of compromising those whom she cared for most in all the world.

There followed for the poor woman days of unspeakable misery: days in which she heard her children cry out: "Maman, j'ai faim!" and was unable to give them food. Her children! days, when feeling herself tracked like a wild animal, she became a wanderer on the face of the earth. The weather was cold, but, fortunately, it was dry. With the two little girls clinging to her skirts she roamed down the country roads around Rocroi getting as near the Belgian frontier as she dared, plunging into the woods, hiding in the undergrowth whenever her keen ear detected the slightest sound of approaching footsteps, or the clatter of distant horses' hoofs. And there she would remain crouching sometimes for hours on end, hugging the children as close to her as she could so as to impart some of the warmth inside her to their tender bodies. Then when she felt that immediate danger was past, she would wander out of the wood once more and go along the road, begging for a few sous or something to eat for her hungry little ones from the barefooted passer-by or at the door of the meanest-looking peasant's hut, where news of whole-sale arrests or the iniquitous Law of the Suspect had not yet found its way. For many nights she and the children slept in derelict farm buildings or tumble-down outhouses, and once or twice out in the open. She was almost at the end of her tether when her wanderings brought her to the neighbourhood of the Parc aux Daims. The place was not altogether unknown to her, but while she was still at the Guidals she had heard rumours that the house was visited by ghosts. She had no superstitious fears herself, but came readily to the conclusion that it was soldiers of the Republican Guard or of the military police that haunted the place and had on that account never dared to go near it. But hunger and cold drove her thither one evening, when the children were almost perished with cold, and to add to her misery snow began to fall.

The whole property, garden, orchard and a piece of pasture land, was, as Madame de Saint-Lucque knew, enclosed by a low wall surmounted by iron work, which for the most part was broken down and a prey to rust and decay. The iron gate, too, was off its hinges and lying on the ground in a state of complete dilapidation, obstructing the access to the drive which in its turn led up to the perron of the château. Eve started to skirt the containing wall and presently came to a small postern gate, or rather the remnants of one. Her ears keenly on the alert, could detect no sound breaking through the stillness of the night. She lifted first one little girl and then the other over the broken stonework, and then passed through the gap in the wall. The snow fell in large flakes and was already lying thick on the ground. No light showed anywhere from the direction where the château stood out like a solid block of darkness blacker than the night. Without looking to right or left, but trusting to her instinct to guide her, she made her way through a wilderness of weeds to the house.

Presently she found herself at the foot of a short flight of stone steps leading to the perron. These she mounted and came to the front door, which was wide open. Through this she passed. The place was as dark as pitch. All that Eve could do was to grope her way round. She appeared to be in a square vestibule on which gave several doors, all of which were open. On the left she stumbled against the bottom of a marble staircase with what seemed to the touch like a wrought-iron balustrade.

The little girls, frightened of the dark and shivering with cold, were crying. Eve gathered them to her as a mother-hen does her chicks, and led them through one of the open doors. The room in which she now entered was obviously large and lofty. Vaguely through the gloom she perceived the dim greyish light of three tall windows, the glass of which was broken for the most part. But they were in the lee of the wind and here, at any rate, was shelter against the cold and the snow.

While groping her way about, Eve barked her shins against pieces of furniture that seemed to be lying topsy-turvy about. She set a chair or two up on their legs and lifted her precious children up on these. She had a bit of stale bread and a couple of apples in her pocket which she gave them to munch, and then went on groping. She could have screamed for joy when her hands encountered what was obviously a thick carpet rolled up into a bundle. It is wonderful what the ingenuity of a devoted mother will invent for the well-being of her children. To lay the heavy carpet out on the wooden floor, well away from the night air, to pick up the little girls, lay them down on the carpet and roll it over them, was soon done. The carpet was large and there was warmth in it for Eve also, and though she did not sleep much that night, she had the joy of hearing the even breathing of these two most precious beings on earth.

At daybreak the next morning Eve de Saint-Lucque explored the place where she had found temporary refuge. The room where she and the children had spent the night was one of three in enfilade, with double doors opening one into the other. All three were littered with furniture mostly broken. All three had tall windows with broken glass, oak floors and an air of complete desolation.

Going out to the vestibule, Eve perceived the marble staircase on her right leading to the story above, and, opposite, facing the bottom of the stairs, another tall double door which gave on a very large room with vaulted ceiling and a monumental mantelpiece, obviously a room used in the olden days of luxury and hospitality as a banqueting-hall. Soon after that the children woke. They were warm, but they were hungry. Eve wandered out into what had once been a beautiful garden, but was nothing now but a wilderness of weeds. Beyond it, not far from the house, was the orchard. A few miserable apples still hung upon the trees. Eve gathered the best ones and gave them to the children to eat. Thank God for the good health and sturdy constitution with which they were endowed, or never could they have outlived the privations of the past two weeks.

Eve then wandered out into the road to beg. And this she did the following day also and the day after that, always like some small defenceless animal scenting an enemy in every flutter of a leaf or the crackle of tiny twigs in the woods. On the whole, passers-by were kind. The carriage-way which branches off the main road and winds along in a series of curves to the gateway of the Parc aux Daims was no longer a frequented one these days. No longer did luxurious equipages wend their way to the hospitable château, or gaily bedight cavaliers on prancing horses come cantering down the lane. Only now and then did a market cart go by, taking produce for

delivery to the villages around, or an occasional passer-by — farmer or peasant — come stumping along in sabots. They were indigent most of them, the men and the women; but most of them had a sou to spare for the sad-eyed beggar in ragged black clothes in whom it would have been hard to recognise the proud and beautiful Marquise de Saint-Lucque. And when pockets were void of sous, there would be a bit of hard cheese or stale bread, a few apples or a drop of milk, and Eve de Saint-Lucque would murmur in gratitude through her tears: “May le bon Dieu reward you.”

On the third day when she had taken her stand in the road at some little distance from the park gates, and stretched out her hand to occasional passers-by, she saw a woman come along who had a good-sized bundle slung over her shoulders. She seemed very weary. As this woman drew near, Eve perceived that she was none other than Marianne Guidal, the farmer’s wife.

At sight of Madame de Saint-Lucque she threw her arms up in the air and cried excitedly: “At last! At last!” She seized hold of Eve’s hands and covered them with kisses.

“Madame la Marquise! Madame la Marquise!” she continued almost sobbing, and would have fallen on her knees had not Eve restrained her.

“Marianne! My goodness Marianne!” the latter admonished, “in Heaven’s name, be careful! there may be prying eyes and ears about!”

Marianne quickly put her hand to her mouth.

“I have been hunting for Madame la — for you everywhere,” she resumed, sinking her voice to a whisper. “But I have not dared to question people and I’ve had to be very careful where I went as I am sure Guidal is watching me. Yesterday he went off to Rocroi Fair. It lasts three days. He won’t be back till late to-morrow. So I’ve been able to get about and keep my ears open for any village gossip. And so I heard casually that a poor woman — your pardon Madame la Mar —, — had been begging the last day or two in the road near the Parc aux Daims. I guessed it was Madame, so I put a few things together this morning and came along.”

She paused a moment, for she was evidently a prey to such deep emotion that she was hardly able to speak. At last she said, her voice shaking with excitement, her tear-dimmed eyes fixed on Eve de Saint-Lucque:

“I had to come. God guided me hither. I came to tell you that Monsieur le Marquis and Monsieur le Vicomte are now safe somewhere in Belgium or in England, people said, and so is our good Abbé Prud’hon.”

Eve gave a gasp as much of astonishment as of intense joy.

“Le bon Dieu be praised,” she exclaimed fervently, “but what has happened?”

“Monsieur le Marquis, Monsieur le Vicomte and the good abbé were arrested the very night that Madame left the farm. I had run out to the presbytery to let them know what Guidal had threatened to do. A few hours later I heard about the arrests. The news was all over the villages around. I was heart-broken and still more so when I realised that Madame had gone, I knew not whither. Three or four days later it was known in the entire district that the diligence in which Monsieur le Marquis with the young Vicomte and the abbé were being taken to Paris to be tried and put to death by those murdering devils, that the diligence, I say, was waylaid by highwaymen in the forest of Mézières, at dead of night, and driven away no one has ever known what direction. Anyway, it vanished then and there with M. le Marquis, the Vicomte and the abbé inside it. No one ever found a trace of it or of the highwaymen or of the prisoners. It was as if the earth had swallowed the lot of them. But I have heard it said more than once that le bon Dieu himself sent one of his emissaries to save Monsieur le Marquis, who had never harmed any man or woman in all his life, our good abbé, who is such a saintly man, and the dear innocent little Vicomte with them. The whole attack was so mysterious that the highwaymen could not have been quite human. People talk of English spies, but we poor country folk know nothing about that. All I know is that I will pray to le bon Dieu on my knees every night for the rest of my life that He may save Madame and the dear little demoiselles, by any means which He thinks best.”

Long after Marianne had ceased talking, which she had done very volubly, Eve remained silent and contemplative savouring, as it were, the joy of knowing that her husband and her son were safe, even though she must continue to suffer, to care for her little girls and to avoid compromising their safety by any careless word or act on her part. Subconsciously she watched Marianne untying the knots which held her bundle together. It fell apart displaying its contents: a bottle of milk, a large piece of cheese, two loaves of bread, half a dozen apples. Also a couple of horse blankets, thick and warm. It was these that had made the bundle so bulky and heavy.

“I’ve boiled the milk,” Marianne said; “it will keep for a day or two, till I can come back.”

With innate delicacy she had refrained from intruding by word or look on Madame de Saint-Lucque’s absorption, and now she asked with old-world deference:

“Would Madame deign to accept?”

She busied herself with doing up the bundle of provisions again. Eve could only murmur:

“Marianne, my dear, good Marianne!” She put her arms round the old woman’s shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks. “How can I ever thank you?” she said, and took the precious bundle from her. “But you must not come again,” she went on firmly, “for our sakes as well as your own, you must not come again. It is too dangerous, and much too far for you to walk. If people have already noticed me, I shall have to try and find shelter elsewhere, at any rate for a few days, and then perhaps come back here. But you must not come, Marianne dear. Promise you won’t come.”

Again she kissed the old woman’s wrinkled cheeks and Marianne gave a reluctant promise which obviously she did not mean to keep. After which Eve, carrying the bundle of provisions which meant food for the two children for several days to come, turned back towards the Parc aux Daims, while Marianne, who by now was in a flood of tears, went away in the opposite direction.

There followed three days of comparative relief from hardship, of happiness at the news brought by Marianne, as well as the joy of having sufficient food for the two little girls. Eve only ate what kept body and soul together, but the children ate heartily and were luckily in quite good health.

She saw nothing of Marianne during those three days, but this was not because of the promise the good woman had made, but because the farmer had returned from Rocroi Fair a day earlier than was expected. He said very little to his wife, and appeared sullen and irritable. On the third day following Marianne’s first visit to the Parc aux Daims, he pleaded important business in the neighbourhood which, he said, would take up the best part of the morning. Marianne, thinking herself free, made her way with a few

more provisions to the park gates, hoping to see Madame de Saint-Lucque again. Her husband suspecting her intention waylaid her: saw her turn into the side-road which leads to the Park aux Daims. He went straight to Mézières and that same afternoon gave information to the Commissary of Police that the ci-devant Saint-Lucque woman with her two children were hiding in the derelict château.

Chapter XV: WHATEVER HAPPENS

Eve de Saint-Lucque knew, of course, nothing during those few days of the terrible danger which threatened her and her children through the rancour of Guidal. The fact that her husband and her son had been rescued in such a mysterious way through an unexplicable agency, had not only given her a great measure of happiness, but also a wonderful feeling of hope. She could not account for that hope, but she certainly felt it. Deep down in her heart she felt it, and for the first time for many weeks and months she went about singing to herself for very joy. Sitting with one little girl on her knee, and the other squatting on the ground at her feet she would recall for them little childish songs of long ago, or tales of three little bears or of the seven dwarfs which enchanted them and caused them to break into the full-throated laughter which she loved to hear.

Only the nights were still terribly trying. They were so long and so cold, and the consequent inactivity so very hard to endure.

Marianne had put tinder and a couple of candles in that first bundle which she brought, but the danger of revealing her presence by allowing a light to filtrate through the windows was far too great to allow of such a luxury. Nor would Eve take the children out with her, even into the garden; their shrill young voices or their laughter might, she feared, attract the attention of a casual passer-by. And any passer-by might be an enemy these days.

Before Marianne's welcome visit she had gone out by day into the road to beg for food, and wandered out at night because of the feeling of peace the deserted garden gave her. Whatever ghosts had been wont to haunt the place had evidently found more congenial headquarters. With ears on the qui vive for the slightest sound that might betoken danger, Eve would then stroll as far as the orchard where a few winter apples still hung half withered on the trees. She never heard as much as a faint rustle among the leaves or the crackling of dry twigs in the undergrowth. Never, until that evening, the third since Marianne's visit. The moon was nearly at its full then, and though she hid her face behind a bank of clouds, the night itself was not very dark. A grey light hovered over the park as far as the surrounding wall, and the air was damp and quite still. Eve wandered as far as the postern gate. Resting her elbows on the broken piece of the wall she glanced up and down the road. It was completely deserted. Not a soul in sight. Not a cat on the prowl.

And chancing to look down on the edge of the road the other side of the wall, she saw something white lying there. Something white which looked like a piece of paper weighted down by a stone. Had it not been for the stone Eve would have thought no more about it. A piece of paper fallen out of the hand of a passer-by probably. But the stone? Someone must have weighted the paper down with a stone. Why? Curiosity impelled Eve first to lean out further over the wall, and then to slip out by the postern, to kneel down by the roadside and timorously to move the stone and extricate that piece of paper. Who put it there? Who put the stone over it, and did it contain a message intended for her? At first she thought it might be a message from Marianne. Dear, kind, thoughtless Marianne! Any passer-by might have picked it up and God only knew what mischief this might cause.

With the paper in her hand Eve quickly slipped back through the broken-down postern and made her way quickly to the château. Groping about in the dark she found one of the candles and the tinder. She had before now explored the house sufficiently to know that there was a large wall-cupboard in one of the rooms in which she could safely venture to light the candle and let it burn for a few minutes, at any rate, while she crouched in its deepest recess just long enough to peruse the contents of the mysterious missive.

She had to read it through two or three times before she took in its full significance. This is what it said:

"Your husband, your son and Abbé Prud'hon are safe in England. You and your little ones will soon join them. Whatever happens do not lose your faith or your trust in those who have pledged their honour to save you and who have never failed to keep their word. Destroy this as soon as read. And remember . . . whatever happens do not lose your faith."

This message was so wonderful, so stupendous that no wonder Eve's poor aching head could not take it all at once.

It was impossible these days to live in France either openly or in hiding, without knowing something about a mysterious agency known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and its activities. In most places throughout the country, villages and small townships situated at some distance from the large cities, the leader of this gang of English spies, as they were called, was believed to be a kind of supernatural being, either an evil or a good spirit, according to taste or political views. To the Terrorists who ruled France, he was the devil incarnate. To the unfortunates whom fear of death compelled to remain in hiding, he was a messenger of God sent to bring into their hearts hope of deliverance and of life.

To Eve de Saint-Lucque he was that and more. She had heard before now of mysterious messages and this was obviously one, for in the right-hand corner, by way of signature, there was a rough drawing in red chalk of a small five-petalled flower. Marianne had already told her that rumour had it that Monsieur le Marquis, the little Vicomte and the good abbé had been rescued by an unknown agency when they were being taken to Paris for trial which could only have one dire issue. And now this wonderful message! This promise! This pledge! This word of honour given! She and her children were soon to join those dear ones in England, in that hospitable land of the free. A promise! A pledge! How could she fail to believe and to trust?

"Whatever happens do not lose your faith." It was so clear, so categorical! such a message of hope and of comfort. No! No! a thousand times No. She would never lose her faith. This she now swore before God, as she knelt by the side of her sleeping children. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed out her heart in an ecstasy of joy and gratitude.

Chapter XVI: A MASTER SLEUTH

It was on this same day that Citizen André Renaud, the master sleuth, arrived direct from Paris. He presented his credentials as special envoy of the Committee of Public Safety, first to the Chief Commissary of Police of Mézières, and then asked to be received by Citizeness Damiens, at whose special request he had been sent down from headquarters.

He was ushered into the presence of Mam'zelle Guillotine. She was in a towering rage, turned on the newcomer like a wild cat, showered a volley of abuse and vituperation on the unfortunate man who stood in the doorway mute and obviously flabbergasted at this stormy reception, his credentials, with large seals dangling therefrom, held in his trembling hand, towards the irate harpy. She was marching up and down the long room still muttering curses and generally behaving more like an animal in a rage than a human being.

At last she snatched the paper out of the man's hand. Without as much as glancing down on them, she tore them across and threw them into his face.

"So much for you," she cried hoarsely, and gave him a resounding smack on the cheek, "and so much for your Paris and your Committee. You are nothing but traitors and cowards — traitors, I tell you, and — cowards. But I'll teach you what it costs to fool and cheat Gabrielle Damiens. Mam'zelle Guillotine, they call me. Did you know that? I'll give you and your d — Committee a taste of my guillotine."

And so she went on yelling and screaming, letting herself go to the full extent of her stupendous rage, while the sleuth, still mute and obviously thrown out of countenance, was picking up the torn pieces of paper, smoothing them out and thrusting them into the pocket of his coat. It was only when the rabid fury paused at last, exhausted and breathless, and, pouring out a mugful of eau de vie drained it at a draught, that he ventured at last to put in a word.

"But what have I done?" he murmured meekly.

Gabrielle put down the empty mug and turned to glance at the sleuth who was ruefully nursing his smarting cheek. She looked him up and down once or twice and gave a contemptuous shrug. Not that she did not like the look of the man. She did. She liked his large face, especially now that one cheek was flaming red, his blonde, tousled hair, his big coarse hands and powerful legs, and after that one shrug of contempt, a tigerish grin spread over her face. This the sleuth was quick to note and all at once he broke into a loud guffaw. And this also appeared to please Mam'zelle Guillotine. He came further into the room, towards her. He had a funny rolling gait, like that of a seaman, and now came to a halt with those big legs of his wide apart, his arms outspread, and coarse hands displaying the hard-skinned palms all disfigured with callosities and warts.

Like to like. Gabrielle Damiens's look, which she gave him now, became quite appreciative. She remained contemplative and silent for a moment or two, and he reiterated with a self-confident smirk this time: "What have I done to anger you, citizeness?"

"You have arrived exactly twenty-four hours too late, my friend," she replied dryly, "and those twenty-four hours will cost you dear, that's all."

"Twenty-four hours too late. What do you mean?" he queried.

"Just what I said."

He said nothing more for the moment, pulled a chair towards him, straddled it, rested his great arms across its back and looked her square in the face.

"What exactly did you say, my pigeon?" he then asked.

"I said that you have come to Mézières twenty-four hours too late."

"How so?"

"The ci-devant Saint-Lucque woman is in hiding with her two brats in a deserted house close by here. We are proceeding with her arrest this very night."

Citizen André Renaud broke into another loud guffaw.

"Oh!" he said, "is that it? I do the work and someone else gets the credit, while I get my face slapped and a torrent of abuse. You are really impayable, my pigeon."

"You do the work?" Gabrielle retorted; "it was Citizen Guidal, the farmer. . . ."

"Of course, it was Citizen Guidal, the farmer, my subordinate, who has been under my orders for the past three days," the sleuth broke in, and brought his large palm with a resounding slap on his thigh. "And he has been clever enough to fool you, my cabbage, into believing that a fool like that could track an aristo to her hiding-place. Why, farmer Guidal has about as much brains as one of his own calves. And what did you give him by way of payment for this information, citizeness? Public money — or a kiss? What?"

And he was roaring with laughter all the time, with that full-throated laughter that Gabrielle loved to hear. But she was feeling completely bewildered now.

"Do you mean to tell me . . ." she began.

And once again he broke in:

"I mean to tell you, my cabbage, that you have been fooled. Do you suppose," he went on with an attempt at seriousness, "that the Committee of Public Safety — not a provincial one, remember, but the Head Committee up in Paris — would have sent me down here to assist you in running to earth the Saint-Lucque women, if any local groundling could do the work for you?"

To this she made no reply, and he drew the torn credentials from his pocket and held them out to Gabrielle.

"Don't tear them up again," he admonished her; "now that my work here is done, I am going back to Paris and I shall want them."

Gabrielle didn't look at the papers again. She felt bewildered and distinctly humiliated.

"I'll send for farmer Guidal," she said.

"Yes, do!" he assented. "I'll comb his hair for him. The master sleuth, eh, what? Why didn't he find the aristos for you before? Why did you have to send to Paris for me? I was here two days ago. It took me twenty-four hours, exactly, to trace the Saint-Lucque aristos to that place — what is it called?"

"The Parc aux Daims."

“And another twenty-four to make sure that the woman and the brats were the traitors you wanted. The Committee in Paris put me on the track of your friend the farmer. He was useful. I have a second subordinate working for me also. He, too, will be coming presently to denounce the ci-devants and to take credit like your friend Guidal, for having tracked them. You have been fooled, my pigeon, fooled. We’ll say nothing more about it. But be careful that you do not get fooled again, and give away public money — it was not just a kiss, was it? — to liars and traitors. There might be trouble, you know.”

His final outburst of laughter was so hearty that it rang out from attic to cellar of the episcopal mansion. He rubbed his large hands together, banged Gabrielle with easy familiarity on the shoulder, and gave a chuckle of complete self-confidence.

Indeed it was his self-confidence, his self-assurance that had finally subjugated Mam’zelle Guillotine. Like to like. They became the best of friends after this. She allowed him to sit down very close to her, laid her head against his shoulder, and soon was in ecstasy over the wonderful stories he told her of his exploits as a tracker of aristos. He stretched out his spatulate fingers and moved them up and down to demonstrate their vice-like grip round the necks of traitors.

“If you want more work of that sort done,” he added complacently, “before I go back to Paris, just command me. I will do it for you, my beauty.”

He took hold of her hand and rubbed its palm against the thick stubble of his three-days’ beard on his chin and upper lip. He had a way of purring like a wheezy old tom-cat. After which he pinched her ear and said in conclusion:

“Yes! I will do that work for you, citizeness, and for France, and leave you to do the rest, Mam’zelle Guillotine.”

Yes! Gabrielle Damiens did like Citizen André Renaud, the master sleuth from Paris, very much.

Chapter XVII: THUNDER CRASH

Eve de Saint-Lucque had not known for months and years so much happiness as she did the whole of this day. With the knowledge that her husband and son were safe, and the certainty that she and the little girls would soon be with them and that they would all be reunited over in England with no daily tales of horror to poison the pure air of heaven, or danger of death hovering over their heads, she went about all day singing softly to herself and kissed her children over and over again for very joy of living. The flames of trust and love were burning brightly in her heart.

And then the blow fell like a thunder crash.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon: a wan, grey light still hovered over the open country. The last two days had been comparatively mild, but when the shades of evening began to draw in, a heavy bank of lead-coloured clouds gathered in the east and gradually spread over the sky. It soon got very cold. There was snow coming, Eve felt sure, shivering in her worn-out black dress. It would soon be bedtime for the children, she thought, and was thankful, because then she could make them snug and warm, rolled up in the old drawing-room carpet. Vaguely she wondered if anything was going to happen and when? She marvelled and tried to conjecture how the mysterious agency, the wonderful Scarlet Pimpernel, would work for her salvation. Would she presently hear the tramp of horses' hoofs and hear the hoarde of heroic rescuers come riding down the drive? Would she see these emissaries from heaven come dashing into the château and hear their rallying calls as one by one they would seize the children and finally herself and carry them off in their arms, away, away from terror and from death, away to happy England.

And suddenly she heard footsteps on the road beyond the gates. Not the tramp of horses' hoofs or the rallying call of heroic rescuers, but heavy, measured steps which came up the drive, approached the perron and then mounted the outside steps to the front door. In a moment Eve de Saint-Lucque's happy exultation was changed to sudden fear, stark agonizing fear. She strained her ears to listen. Two men had just crossed the threshold of the front door. Two men or perhaps a man and a woman. Eve couldn't quite tell but already instinct had told her that here was danger, deadly danger for herself and for her children. She struggled to her feet and tiptoed to the folding doors, which were the sole barriers between her and that enemy, who had come through the darkness as the messenger of death. But there was neither latch nor bolt on the doors. They were rickety and hung loosely on their hinges.

Eve went back to the improvised beds where the little girls were lying. They had been asleep but now they woke and Mariette, the little one, began to cry: "Maman! what is it?"

"Hush, my pigeon," the distraught mother murmured, "say your prayers and ask the good God to protect us."

The footsteps had now got as far as the vestibule. They came to a halt and a man's voice called loudly:

"Open that door!"

Eve could not have moved for very life. She remained crouching by the side of her children, with her protecting arms round them. Her limbs were paralysed and her eyes were fixed on the door, through the chinks of which she perceived the dim light of a lantern.

The next moment the doors were roughly thrown open, and in the framework a man and a woman appeared. He was wrapped in a dark cloak from his neck down to his knees, and wore a felt hat which completely hid the upper part of his face. But it was not on him that Eve de Saint-Lucque fixed her horrified gaze. She was looking on the woman on whose face the light from the lantern drew deep and grotesque shadows. The features coarsened with age, brought back memories of the past, and involuntarily Eve's lips gave a murmur:

"Gabrielle Damiens!"

The woman laughed. It was a harsh and a cruel laugh. Her dark eyes glowed, with a kind of savage triumph. She chuckled and took a step or two into the room.

"Aye, Eve de Nesle!" she said harshly. "It is Gabrielle Damiens right enough. You did not expect to see me again in this world, did you, after your precious mother and your cowardly husband consigned me to a living tomb?"

She stood there in the darkness, her tall gaunt frame silhouetted against the dim light of the lantern. To Eve de Saint-Lucque she appeared as the very incarnation of the spirit of evil, of the power of darkness come to dash her fondest hopes and drag her down into the abyss of despair. The woman went on speaking slowly, as if she had weighed every word before she uttered them.

"For sixteen years did I linger in a dungeon in the Bastille, while you, Eve de Saint-Lucque, lived your life of happiness and luxury with the dastard who had betrayed me and cast me off like a worn-out shoe. Sixteen years! during which my life was at a standstill, and one hope alone compelled death to pass me by. The hope that I should live to see what I see now."

Slowly Eve rose to her feet. The depth of her misery was so immense that in spite of her shorter stature she seemed to tower over the other woman through the very sublimity of her despair. Her slender body appeared as a protective shield between this creature of evil and her innocent children.

"May God forgive you," she murmured. "You tried to do a great wrong sixteen years ago, but I had nothing to do with your punishment."

"That is as it may be," Gabrielle retorted with a shrug, "but let me assure you that I shall have everything to do with your punishment. Your miserable husband has escaped but I'll guarantee that he will be wishing himself dead before I have done with you and your brats."

After which she turned to her companion.

"You can go now, Citizen Renaud," she said curtly. "You have done your work well and I'll do the rest."

"You are satisfied," the man responded, "that these aristos are the women you want?"

"Yes. I am satisfied."

"Sergeant Meridol is just outside with half a dozen troopers. I'll send them along to you." He looked Eve de Saint-Lucque up and down seeming to appraise her weakness; then pointing at her over his shoulder with a grimy thumb he went on with a sneer: "I don't think you need fear trouble from her until they come."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room and across the vestibule. Eve's sensitive ears caught the sound of his footsteps going down the perron steps and treading the garden path, and after a few minutes she heard his voice calling out: "Citizen sergeant." And another voice answering from a distance: "Present, citizen."

Gabrielle Damiens had remained in the room leaning against the door-jamb, her arms crossed over her sunken bosom. Eve de Saint-Lucque could perceive the vague outline of her silhouetted against the light behind. She closed her eyes trying to shut out this vision of cruelty and of impending doom. Gabrielle never said another word. She seemed just to be gloating in silence at sight of the hopelessness of this woman whom she hated with such brutal intensity.

The measured tread of the sergeant and the guard were heard coming up the path, mounting the perron and presently coming to a halt in the vestibule. The sergeant took one more step forward. Gabrielle, turning to him, demanded gruffly:

"Everything ready, citizen sergeant?"

"Everything, citizeness," the man replied. "I have a couple of good horses harnessed to a covered cart, and as you see the commandant has given me a half a dozen men."

Gabrielle threw one last malevolent look on Eve de Saint-Lucque and the two children, after which she turned and strode out of the room and across the vestibule to the front door without uttering another word. Her footsteps not unlike those of a man resounded down the perron steps and on the frozen ground outside. Then only did Eve open her eyes, and fixed them on the soldiers who had lined up behind their sergeant and were standing at attention the other side of the folding doors. Two of them carried stable lanterns. All were armed with bayonets. They wore the promiscuous shabby uniforms affected by the Republican army: they had red caps on their heads adorned with tricolour cockades. The sergeant now stalked further into the room. He gave a word of command to the men and they followed him in, making straight for Eve and the place where the children lay.

"What do you want?" Eve demanded.

"You and the two brats," the sergeant gave curt reply. "Come quietly," he added sternly, "or there will be trouble."

Two of the men seized hold of her while the others pulled away the old carpet that covered the children.

Eve de Saint-Lucque fought like a lioness, while the two men tried to drag her to the door.

"Leave me alone," she cried while she struggled. "We'll come quietly if you leave us alone."

The men let her go and the sergeant ordered her to put some clothes on the children. The soldiers stood about while Eve collected what warm clothing she had for the little girls and with trembling hands managed to get them dressed. She took the two horse blankets which Marianne had brought her and wrapped these round the children's shoulders. The sergeant said roughly:

"That's enough now. We can't stay here all night." And turning to the men he commanded:

"Pick up these brats and take them outside."

Then, of course, prudence went to the wind. Eve de Saint-Lucque felt her senses going. She became a mad woman, seized hold of a chair, swung it over her head threatening to hurl it at the first man who approached her children, would have done it too the next moment had not one of the soldiers at a word from the sergeant dealt her a blow on the head with the butt-end of his bayonet. She fell in a pathetic heap to the ground, not seriously hurt, only stunned, for the blow had not been a heavy one. To soldiers of the Republic detailed to apprehend fugitive aristos, the general orders were to bring in their prisoners alive.

"Pick up the woman and the brats," the sergeant said reiterating his former order. Eve de Saint-Lucque was unconscious. Mercifully she was spared the sight of seeing her children in the arms of men who were followers of regicides and wholesale murderers. Soon the jolting and creaking of wheels grinding on the axles brought her back to her senses. She and her two little girls had been bundled into a hooded cart, and were lying side by side on its hard wooden flooring. Both the children were crying and calling pitiably for "Maman!" Madame de Saint-Lucque feeling ill and sick from the blow contrived nevertheless to gather the little ones closer to her. Fortunately they were well wrapped up in the thick horse blankets, and their tiny hands felt quite warm. One of these blankets had also been thrown over her, and she did not feel the cold.

The cart went slowly jolting along over the rough roads. Through the canvas hood Eve perceived vague forms stumping along the ground, keeping pace with the cart, and heard the measured footsteps of the troopers each side of her. The children had cried themselves to sleep and both were now cuddled up against their mother. Eve was wide awake. Satisfied that the children were asleep and fairly comfortable, she tried to gather her wits together. As her mind gradually cleared, she became aware of the two words that seemed to stand before her mental vision in letters of fire: "Whatever happens!"

Was it comprehensible? Was it possible that this mysterious behest could apply to the terrible event that had just taken place? "Whatever happens!" the behest had gone on to say, "do not lose your faith or your trust in those who have pledged their honour to save you, and who have never failed to keep their word."

Eve had obeyed the command to destroy the missive as soon as read. But she had committed every word to memory. Until a few hours ago these words had been to her like a profession of faith and of hope. She had sworn before God that she would never lose her faith. But now that faith began to waver, and hope to recede into clouds of despair, she recited them sotto voce over and over again forcing hope to return to her, and faith to revive.

"Whatever happens" was comprehensive, she kept on reiterating to herself, forcing herself with all the will-power she possessed to trust and to believe. Whatever happens! the words at the close of the missive had been underlined. Whatever happens, her arrest and that of her children, the terror, the humiliation, the terrible predicament in which she now was, being driven along, whither she knew not, guarded by a posse of soldiers who of a surety would never allow her to escape — were all these horrors hinted at in the magic word: "Whatever?"

"Oh my God!" she murmured, and hugged her children closer to her, "grant me faith, make me trust those brave men who have sworn to protect me and my innocent little ones."

Chapter XVIII: AT THE COMMISSARIAT OF POLICE

The Commissariat of Police, Section City of Mézières, stood, an isolated building, at a corner of the Market Square. It was being guarded day and night by a detachment of the local police which, to make assurance doubly sure, had been reinforced by half a company of troopers with a sergeant and two corporals, all of them trained and experienced men. It had gradually leaked out, though still kept in the deepest secrecy, that an expedition was being set on foot which had for its object nothing less than the apprehension of that gang of English spies and their audacious chief who had set the revolutionary government by the ears for the past three years, by aiding aristos and traitors to escape justice. The reward for the apprehension of the master spy was a matter of ten thousand livres, of which every man who aided in the capture would receive his share, in consequence of which there was no lack of keenness on the part of police and troopers, keenness which amounted to enthusiasm.

On the morning following the arrest of Madame de Saint-Lucque and her children, two men and a woman sat in conference on the upper floor of the Commissariat. The men were the Chief Commissary, Citizen Henri Lescar, and the Citizen André Renaud, the reputed master sleuth, the stranger sent down from Paris to assist the authorities of the province in the difficult task of apprehending the Saint-Lucque family of traitors. The woman was Gabrielle Damiens.

Though the conference was being held at a round table it was pretty evident that the dominating personality among these three officials was the woman.

The Chief Commissary of Police, Citizen Henri Lescar, had a paper covered with writing in his hands and had just completed the reading of it out loud. He then laid the paper down on the table in front of him and said firmly:

"These are my orders. Citizen Chauvelin sent them down to me himself from Paris by special courier. They were drafted by the Head Section of the Committee of Public Safety who sat in special session for the purpose. And these orders," he concluded decisively, "I must obey."

Gabrielle Damiens on the other hand was making no secret of her determination to disobey those orders, wherever they came from. The Saint-Lucque woman and her children were now under arrest, and she had made up her mind as to what she wanted done with the prisoners. Nothing would do but she must have her way, and let the Committee of Public Safety mind its own affairs. In the Province of Artois the will of Mam'zelle Guillotine, in her own estimation at any rate, was law. She spoke in a loud voice and with forceful gestures, bringing her fist down now and again on the table with such a crash that everything on it shook and rattled: the ink spluttered out of the ink-pot, and the grease from the tallow candles flew in all directions.

The men listened to her, dominated by the power of this woman's personality. But at first they had protested.

"I think," Renaud the sleuth had put in tentatively, "that we ought to obey the orders from Paris."

And the Chief Commissary reiterated with a dubious shake of the head:

"They were transmitted to us through Citizen Chauvelin at the bidding of the Committee of Public Safety, who sat in special session in order to discuss the whole question."

This was one of the occasions on which Citizeness Damiens brought her fist down with a bang on the table and the Chief Commissary's immaculate waistcoat was sprinkled with ink and with tallow.

"What do I care," she queried defiantly, "about any Committee of Public Safety and their orders? As for Chauvelin, he is only a fool with one fixed idea — the capture of the English spy. But things here in this province are going to be done my way, let me tell you. If they are not—"

She shrugged, a shrug which implied a threat that neither of the two men dared apparently to disregard. Renaud did put in a feeble: "But . . ."

"There is no but about it," Gabrielle retorted forcibly. "Chauvelin has already used every argument to try and persuade me that the capture of that cursed English spy is of more importance to the government than bringing aristos and traitors to justice. That may be. I dare say he is right, but he has blundered so often that I do not trust his much-vaunted acumen. The capture of that Scarlet Pimpernel may be all very well, but I won't allow the Saint-Lucque brood to slip through my fingers. Let me tell you that. And if you two idiots," she went on with a chuckle and a coarse oath, "go against my will, I can assure you that you will no longer have need of your cravats."

She looked so resolute and so fierce that instinctively the hands of the two men went up to their necks. Chief Commissary Lescar's cheeks had turned a greenish colour, the glance with which he met the woman's savage glare was furtive and terror-stricken. But the sleuth did not allow himself to be intimidated for long. He edged his chair closer to Gabrielle's, put on an amorous air whilst his arm stole round her shoulders.

"You know, my cabbage," he murmured, "that you can always reckon on your little André to do what you want."

Gabrielle coolly shook herself free from his embrace.

"My little André," she retorted dryly, "had better do what I want or . . ."

"Don't let's quarrel, my pigeon," the man went on with fulsome adulation; "give me a kiss. You are my queen, you know, the only love of my life, my beautiful adorable goddess."

And as she turned, half willing to respond to this maudlin flattery, he broke into one of those loud guffaws which experience had taught him always got the better of her irascible moods.

"Did my little cabbage really think," he queried between bursts of immoderate laughter, "that her André would want to thwart her in anything?"

Thus was peace restored between the lovers. What could the unfortunate Commissary do after that but agree to everything that Mam'zelle Guillotine desired? It was, anyway, the safer attitude to take up, for Gabrielle Damiens could be a relentless enemy, and she had power too to enforce her will. So he waited patiently and in silence while a kind of rough bill-ing and coo-ing went on at the other end of the table, whispered endearments, pinching of cheeks and ears, all intermingled with prolonged outbursts of laughter. At last he ventured to interrupt:

"Then what is it you wish to do, Citizeness Damiens?" he asked abruptly.

Gabrielle thrust her ardent lover away from her and turned in her usual resolute way to the Chief Commissary.

"How does the whole affair stand at the present moment?" she countered.

"The women were arrested last evening, as you know, citizeness . . ."

"I know all that," Gabrielle broke in dryly; "that is not what I was asking. Where are the aristos now?"

"In the cells down below," the Commissary replied.

Gabrielle was silent for a moment or two. A deep frown appeared between her brows, giving an almost sinister expression to her face. Her thoughts were concentrated on the one thing that her very soul desired, the death of Eve de Saint-Lucque and the two children. Let that elusive Scarlet Pimpernel do his worst; all that she, Gabrielle Damiens, lived for these days was to see the heads of these three women fall under the knife of the guillotine — her guillotine, hers, wielded by her own hand, and to hear the death-rattle in their throats.

The two men had waited in silence while she appeared buried in thought. At last she spoke.

"The diligence from Rocroi was due in on Wednesday. It does not go back until Monday. Now I want it brought round here to the back door. I want the Saint-Lucque woman — not the children, mind — to be taken in it to Paris to-morrow, along with a half a dozen fully armed men, who will travel inside the coach with her. And I imagine," she added with a harsh laugh, "that she will not have a very agreeable journey. I propose that we make a start soon after daybreak. I will drive the diligence myself and come to a halt on the crest of the hill in the forest where we shall expect to get in touch with the English spies. The escort shall dismount, we'll eat and drink and pretend to go to sleep."

"Though I am not proposing to obey every command of Citizen Chauvelin," she continued after a slight pause, "I consider him a shrewd man, even though he is in disgrace. He is quite convinced and I am sure he is right that the Scarlet Pimpernel will be at his tricks again and risk everything in an attempt to drag the Saint-Lucque women out of our clutches. Anyway, I shall be ready for him. The trap is set for the English vermin to fall into, and when we have got him and his followers we'll truss them like so many calves, throw them into the diligence and, as I said, I will drive them myself for immediate slaughter to Paris. The men from inside the coach will then march back to Mézières and wait there for further orders. I'll warrant," she concluded with a complacent chuckle, "that no man or superman, spirit of evil or mere audacious spy, will snatch the reins out of these hands."

She spread out her large, coarse hands — hands that had dealt death to many innocent men, women and children. Renaud captured one of them and raised it to his lips.

He broke into the loud guffaw which Gabrielle loved to hear: but it was only a wry smile that curled round the Chief Commissary's lips.

"You are willing, citizeness," he ventured to ask, "to take full responsibility for this direct disobedience to orders?"

"What orders?" Gabrielle questioned with a shrug.

"That the three aristos shall remain here in the cells until after the capture of the English spies has been effected."

Another shrug from Gabrielle and a contemptuous "Pshaw!" After which she said decisively, weighing every word and emphasising it by a tap of her finger on the table-top:

"Did you not hear me say, Citizen Commissary, that I want the Saint-Lucque woman to be taken to Paris in the diligence to-morrow, along with half a dozen fully armed men? I spoke pretty clearly, it seems to me."

"Quite clearly, my sweet dove," André Renaud put in with a smirk.

The Commissary ventured on a final protest, a very weak one this time.

"Orders state categorically that there should be no prisoners in the diligence. Only half a dozen picked men fully armed and . . ."

Gabrielle looked him up and down for a moment or two before she broke in dryly:

"That cravat of yours does not become you, Citizen Lescar. Are you tired of wearing it?"

The threat was obvious. The Commissary swallowed hard. His throat was dry and his cheeks were the colour of ashes.

André Renaud burst into a loud guffaw.

"No use for cravats, Citizen Commissary," he chortled, "if one runs counter to my turtle-dove here."

He then turned to Gabrielle and put his arm round her shoulder, trying to draw her nearer to him.

"And what does my lovely one wish her little André to do in all this?" he asked with an affected simper.

She shook herself roughly free from him.

"You, André," she replied curtly, "will take charge of the cart into which the two Saint-Lucque brats must be thrown sometime during the night, when there are no prying eyes about. The woman, on the other hand, must be taken in the same way from the cells to the diligence, as secretly as possible, and given in charge of the picked men in there. The brats must be securely bound in the cart against possible escape. It will be the Citizen Commissary's business to see that all this is properly done: the diligence brought round here to the back door, half a dozen picked men armed to the teeth settled inside, and the woman thrust in quietly sometime during the night. Everything done, in fact, according to my orders," Gabrielle said finally, and cast an imperious glance on the unfortunate Lescar, now reduced to abject silence.

She waited a moment or two before turning to Renaud.

"Weather permitting, I shall make an early start with the diligence to-morrow," she said to him, "and take what escort I may require. How many men has the citizen captain promised you?"

"Two dozen, my pigeon," he replied.

"Including the six picked men?"

"Yes!"

"Then I'll have twelve troopers with me, and you can have the rest. I shall drive the diligence myself, as I said before, and the picked men will be inside ready for the attack. As soon as we have got the English spies we'll have them bound and gagged and thrown into the coach. We'll drive post-haste to Grécourt and wait for you there."

"For me, my cabbage?"

"You will have made a start half an hour after I have gone. You will drive the cart yourself and go round by Parny and Labat. Make a halt at Grécourt. If I am not there wait for me. If I am there first I'll wait for you. Anyway, it must be at Grécourt that we join forces, and all drive happily to Paris together: the English spies in the diligence, the three women in the cart, two dozen men to escort us and see that the devil himself does not interfere. After that, hey, presto! the tribunal and the guillotine for that lot of vermin, what?"

"And promotion for us all," Renaud put in jovially, turning to the Chief Commissary, "not forgetting the reward of ten thousand livres of which you and I will pocket the largest share, eh, my friend?"

He brought his huge hand down with such force on Lescar's shoulder that the poor little man nearly fell off his chair. A fit of coughing took his breath away. Renaud cast adoring glances on his "little cabbage."

"Isn't she wonderful?" he ejaculated fulsomely, and once more tried to draw her closer to him. But she shook him off as roughly as before.

"Leave off behaving like a maudlin fool," she said harshly.

She turned to the Chief Commissary and queried:

"Have I made everything clear? Are you going to follow my instructions? That is what I want to know." Citizen Lescar was making violent efforts to recover his dignity. Difficult under the circumstances. He had been dominated by this woman, been made to feel abject through sheer terror for his life. He, the chief magistrate in this district, who ought to have it in his power to order her arrest for contempt of the law, for flouting the commands of the Committee of Public Safety; but he couldn't do it. He dared not. He felt humiliated and abject, yet writhing within himself for what he knew was sheer cowardice. That ever-present fear held him down in craven bondage — the fear of the guillotine, of the Committee of Public Safety, of Gabrielle Damiens. He knew not which he feared the most.

At last he said, putting on as pompous an air as he could:

"Since you are taking the lead in this affair, citizeness, everything will be done in accordance with your wishes."

Gabrielle drew a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"I think that is a wise decision, Citizen Commissary," she said dryly. A contemptuous smile curled round her full lips. She had got her way, and knew well enough what had brought this man to heel: but like most dominating women she despised the men who surrendered their will to hers.

While this brief passage of arms went on inside the Commissariat, a tumult in the street below which had been slight at first was growing in volume. A number of people had congregated at the corner of the Market Square, and something, apparently, had annoyed them. A very usual thing these days. Crowds collected in desultory fashion with no known purpose. The women would start grumbling about something or other. There was so much to grumble at. The price of flour, the scarcity of milk, just anything and everything that was very obviously the fault of the government up in Paris. Then the men would take the matter up. Growling and threatening. Drowning the women's shrill voices with their vituperations.

The government? Bah! What are they doing save talking and promising. Promising! always promising! The capture of the English spies, the punishment of all the aristos! The execution of the oppressors of the people! But what came of those promises. Nothing at all. Flour and lard were as dear as ever, and milk more and more unobtainable every day. And what about the English spies? They had been at their tricks again and put the whole of the province to shame. And those aristos, the women whom Mam'zelle Guillotine has sworn to execute with her own hands, what about them? Promises, promises, sacré name of a dog! Why was nothing done?

"Where are the aristos?" came in a strident call from the women.

And the men shouted: "Have the English spies got at them again?"

Loud and ribald laughter greeted this suggestion. Citizen Lescar whose nerves had not yet recovered from repeated shocks, looked at Gabrielle with the eyes of a dog that has been whipped and fears further punishment. Pathetic eyes they were in their avowal of helplessness and reliance on moral support from this strong-willed woman. But all he got from her was another contemptuous shrug and a sneer.

"Hadn't you better reassure them, Citizen Commissary," she said, "before they throw stones at these windows?"

She watched him with that withering glance of hers while he was obviously trying to gain time by collecting papers together, blowing his nose, smoothing his hair, all of it with hands that shook visibly.

"Try not to be such a craven," Gabrielle snapped out at last. "Go out to them like a successful general about to proclaim a smashing victory. You have the aristos under arrest, haven't you? And a trap set for the English spies from which they cannot escape? Tell them so, like a man, and don't look like a whipped cur if you can help it. The revolutionary government has no use for curs, remember."

Thus placed between the devil and the deep sea, the fear of the Committee in Paris and terror of this vitriolic woman, the unfortunate Lescar had no alternative but to obey. He rose in grim silence and tinkled a hand-bell. A subordinate entered to whom he gave orders for the front door of the Commissariat to be thrown open.

"And don't forget to have the diligence sent round to the back door, Citizen Commissary. I expect the driver can still be found at the Ecu d'Or," were Gabrielle's final commands to her victim as, without casting another glance at his tormentor, he followed his subordinate down the stairs.

A few cheers and an equal number of cat-calls greeted him as he stepped out on the perron.

Somehow, now that he no longer felt the eyes of Mam'zelle Guillotine looking down on him with contempt or with fury, he felt more of a man. He looked down on the crowd below, almost unafraid. The cheers had heartened him: the cat-calls he did not hear, or else mistook them for cheers also. Gabrielle's final words had given him his clue. Now that she wasn't there to prod him with her irony he felt proud and sure of himself, and knew just what he meant to say. He would speak like a successful general, and proclaim victory. There he stood now on the top of the perron this winter's morning casting vague and grotesque shadows on his lean face, his long thin nose and pointed chin. He raised his hand demanding silence.

"Citizens," he began in a firm tone of voice, and loudly enough for all to hear, "this is a great day for us all, for we have wiped out the blot from the escutcheon of our beloved province. The impudent English spies got the better of us once, but we have turned the tables on them this time. The three aristos, whom you all know to have been oppressors of the poor, and traitors to the Republic, are

under arrest. Citizen Renaud, a stranger to us all, but as great a patriot as ever served his country, came all the way from Paris to track these vermin, these snakes to their lair. Now we have got them safely under lock and key here in the Commissariat and to-morrow we will convey them, under sufficient escort this time, to Paris, where they will be tried on a charge of high treason, judged and condemned to death. Our esteemed citizeness Gabrielle Damiens will have the privilege of presiding over their execution here in Mézières. Long live the Republic!”

All this and more did Citizen Lescar say to the assembled townsfolk, who cheered him to the echoes. And having done this he was conscious of a great sense of relief. He had been given his orders by that irascible and dangerous harpy, whose dictates under the present conditions prevailing in France, no man would ever dare to disobey: these orders ran counter in some respects to those which he had received from Paris, but she didn’t care; she had made her own plans for the conveyance of the aristos and for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and had shouldered full responsibility for her disobedience. In case of failure she must also shoulder the blame and suffer the punishment.

Chapter XIX: THE INTERLOPER

The news of the arrest of Madame de Saint-Lucque and her daughters created a great stir not only in Mézières itself but throughout the neighbourhood. Madame de Saint-Lucque belonged as it were to the district. Her mother was the daughter of a local estate agent, became for a time King's favourite, was created Comtesse de Nesle and played for some six or eight years a great role in the court life of Paris and Versailles. Her daughter Eve was generally believed to be the daughter of Louis XV, who engineered her marriage with the Vicomte — afterwards Marquis — de Saint-Lucque. The marriage was a very happy one: there were three children — a boy and two girls — and all seemed *couleur de rose* until the outbreak of the revolution, when persecution followed, flight from the ancestral home, separation, arrest and constant danger of death.

The Marquis de Saint-Lucque and his son had been rescued from the clutches of the Terrorists through the agency of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. This fact had rankled in the midst of all patriotic Artesians, who looked upon this successful feat of the English spies as a disgrace and a direct insult to the whole of their province and their local revolutionary guard. The news that the *ci-devant* Marquise and her children had at last been run to earth and were now under arrest soothed their wounded pride to a certain extent. Not that the Saint-Lucques were any of them disliked in the district. Monsieur le Marquis — as he was termed in those pre-revolution days — often came to Tourteron, where Madame had inherited the *château* and demense of that name from her grandfather, the estate agent. He had made himself very popular with the working people round about the neighbourhood. He was good-looking — the women liked him for that — he was genial, open-handed and not proud. Madame was also very much liked. She was a good mother and devoted wife, virtues very much appreciated in provincial France in those olden days, when the King and Court gave a sad example of immorality and loose living, and she took a real and personal interest in the families of the poor, and the hard-working housewives whom she often visited.

But, of course, these things were all of the past. There were no such persons as Monsieur le Marquis and Madame la Marquise now, when all men and all women were equal in the sight of the government of France and an era of Liberty and Fraternity had set in throughout the country. The fact that Fraternity seemed to mean that every man's hand was raised against every other who did not agree with his views did not strike the poor ignorant farmer or charcoal-burner as peculiar. The government had declared that aristos were traitors and avowed enemies of wage-earners whom they had reduced to slavery. They plotted with foreigners for the destruction of France and must be exterminated as vermin, root and crop. And that was that.

Men with stentorian voices and wearing tricolour scarves round their waists toured the country in luxurious chaises and harangued the populace of towns and villages from improvised rostrums set up outside *estaminets* or public buildings. With impassioned words and gestures they pilloried those who had dared to own land which rightfully belonged to tillers of the soil or houses which were obviously the property of those who had built them with their own hands. The fact that some of those houses, like the *château* of Labat, had been built two or three hundred years ago, had nothing to do with the principle enunciated by these wine-shop orators and the impecunious Artesians were ready enough to swallow the bait cast to them by these mischief-makers intent on fishing in troubled waters.

Everything then was made ready for the start on the morrow. The *ci-devant* Marquise was hustled in the small hours of the morning into the diligence which stood outside the back door of the Commissariat of Police.

She was not allowed to bid good-bye to her children who had been incarcerated in a separate cell from hers. The poor woman had been gagged and trussed with cords, and been rendered half unconscious by blows before the men detailed for this abominable work succeeded in getting her locked up in the diligence. Only an hour later was the gag removed from her mouth, and her arms and legs freed from the cords. When she opened her eyes, she found herself propped up in a corner of the vehicle and all around her there were a number of men who stood or sat there in stony silence, filling all the available space inside the coach. It remained at a standstill, and the only light by which Eve was able to take stock of her surroundings came from a small lantern outside. After a time she tried to speak, asked a timid question or two but she received no answer. It would be impossible even to attempt to describe what that poor woman suffered in mind and body during the whole of that awful night. To call her experience a nightmare would be to understate what she went through. For it was no dream. Rather was it hell upon earth. The parting from her children had been the worst of the many ordeals she had had to undergo in these past four years of anxiety and sorrow; and now, when she sat huddled in a corner of the diligence not knowing what had become of them and with those grim and silent men keeping guard over her, she thought that she had at last reached the abysmal depths of misery. In vain did she try and infuse hope into her stricken soul. In vain did she make brave efforts to keep two magic words before her mind: "Whatever happens . . ." She kept on reiterating them, forcing herself to trust and believe but alas! no longer succeeding. Surely when those brave Englishmen planned her rescue they had not anticipated this.

The dawn broke, grey and dim, and very cold. It had snowed all night. The diligence was driven round to the open Market Square in front of the main door of the Commissariat, where a score of troopers from the 61st Regiment of Cavalry were already lined up. Citizeness Damiens was early on the scene, giving orders, seeing to it that every man had his arms and accoutrements in perfect condition, encouraging, admonishing, full of excitement and energy. Once she opened the door of the diligence and peeped in to have a look at the men inside, and also to gloat over her victim. She called out with a strident laugh:

"This is what it felt like, Eve de Nesle, inside a dungeon of the Bastille with nothing to dream of for sixteen years except revenge. I thought you would like to know."

She slammed the door and turned to find herself in the embrace of André Renaud.

"That's right, my cabbage," he said and imprinted a smacking kiss on her neck; "don't spare that vermin. Give it them hot and strong."

He had arrived on the scene with another score of troopers for use as escort if required. A hooded cart into which the two young daughters of Madame de Saint-Lucque had been hustled, as their mother had been, under cover of the grey dawn was drawn up in the narrow street at the side door of the Commissariat.

The military pageant thus formed on the market place was quite imposing. Two score of troopers, the huge diligence and in the forefront an orderly holding the handsome white charger of Citizen André Renaud. The latter was in close conversation with the Chief Commissary. His massive arm was round Gabrielle's neck, and every few moments his loud guffaws would ring out through the frosty air right across the market place.

A huge crowd had assembled by now and cheered the soldiers, the Chief Commissary and Mam'zelle Guillotine with lusty energy. The morning was raw and frosty and it was still snowing. The troopers — ill-clad and ill-shod as were most of the regiments of the Republic — were inclined to grumble. The old clock on the municipal building had just struck seven and there was talk of making a start. The Chief Commissary was bidding the travellers farewell and wishing them luck: Gabrielle was preparing to climb up to the box-seat of the diligence when there appeared to be some commotion at the further end of the market place. Shrill voices were heard asking hurried questions.

"Where?"

"Art sure they were the English spies?"

"In the Parc aux Daims?"

The crowd round the diligence thinned out a little as several quidnuncs turned to find out what was causing the tumult over there. A young labourer was, it seems, the centre of attraction in a small knot of excited townsfolk. He was being thrust forward by them across the square in the direction of the Commissariat.

"Go and tell the Citizen Commissary."

And above the hubbub three words twice repeated rang out clearly: "The Scarlet Pimpernel!"

It struck Citizen Lescar like a blow on the side of the head.

"What is that?" he thundered. And: "Who is this lad? What does he want?"

"He has news for you, Citizen Commissary," shouted a man from out the crowd.

"Go on, boy," urged one of the women, "tell the Citizen Commissary. Don't be afraid."

The boy was now quite close to the Commissary, but he stood there, looking scared, mute as a carp and scratching his head.

"What is it?" thundered Lescar. "Who is this lad?"

"Jean Bernays," somebody said, "the shepherd."

"What does he want? Name of a dog! Won't anyone speak?"

"He says that there is a gang of foreigners, English he thinks, in hiding in the Parc aux Daims."

"Name of a name!" the Commissary swore hoarsely, and seizing the boy by the shoulder he gave him a vigorous shake. The lad immediately began to cry.

Here Gabrielle intervened. She knew the village lads in the district and that there was nothing ever to be gained by trying to bully them. They at once became scared and dumb.

"Tell me, boy," she said and thrust her tall form between Lescar and the shepherd: "Didst see the foreigners last night or only this morning?"

The boy sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand before he replied:

"I only saw them this morning. I was looking after the farmer's sheep. It was maybe four o'clock. Very dark it was. They weren't there yesterday."

"What were they doing?"

The boy shrugged. "Just moving about," he said.

"How didst know they were foreigners?"

"Well! I didn't understand what they said. And then one man caught sight of me. I was watching them from the gate. He offered me money to run away and to hold my tongue. He spoke like a foreigner."

"Then what didst thou do?"

"I took the money and ran to farmer Matthieu and told him what I had seen."

"What did farmer Matthieu say?"

"Told me to get up behind him on his horse. He was just going off to Charleville market. From Charleville I ran all the way to here."

"Where is the money the foreigners gave thee?" the Commissary demanded.

The boy did not like that, would have run away had he dared. Gabrielle thrust a hand summarily into his breeches' pocket, encountered a screw of paper which she drew out and unfolded. It was crumpled and dirty: inside it there were a few silver coins.

"Something is written here," she said and handed the paper over to Renaud. "Can you read it, citizen? I can't."

Nor could the clever sleuth from Paris. He gazed on the dirty scrap of paper and so did Gabrielle. In the end it was Chief Commissary Lescar who looked over Renaud's shoulder and then pointed with a triumphant finger to the last word of the mysterious writing: and whether you could read the rest or not made no matter, for that one word did stand out clearly and unmistakably and it was scribbled in red chalk: P I M P E R N E L.

The Chief Commissary, the sleuth and Gabrielle Damiens gazed at one another for a moment, open-mouthed, dumbfounded — just long enough for the shepherd to seize his opportunity, snatch his money out of the woman's hand and run away across the square. The Chief commissary was the first to speak.

"I am going after him," he said resolutely.

"After whom?" Gabrielle demanded.

"After that accursed English spy. Citizen sergeant," he commanded, "you and twenty of your men come with me. I am for the Parc aux Daims."

He called to one of the troopers to dismount and bring his horse round to him. In vain did Renaud protest.

"You can't take all these troopers away like that," he said; "Citizeness Damiens and I cannot be left to make a start without sufficient escort."

"You will not need to make a start," Lescar retorted gruffly, "until I come back with my prisoner, that impudent Scarlet Pimpernel."

"But the prisoners . . ." Renaud went on expostulating.

"If you are afraid," the Commissary broke in, "send round to the barracks for reinforcements. I am going to the Parc aux Daims with Sergeant Méridol and twenty men to capture my quarry while I know where I can get it."

A horse was brought round to him and he prepared to mount when Gabrielle's harsh voice once again intervened.

"You are making a fool of yourself, Citizen Lescar," she said roughly. "The purpose of the Scarlet Pimpernel is to get at the aristos. If we get him or when we get him, it will be when he is at one of his tricks either here or in the forest, or in fact anywhere on the road. To run after him when we have set such a fine trap for him is just folly."

But the Chief Commissary had been too long under the domination of this tyrant in petticoats. He refused to listen to her now.

"My duty," he said resolutely, "is to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel. I have had orders to that effect over and over again for the past three years. If I allow this opportunity to slip by I should be a traitor to the Republic. Already I have wasted too much time in talk and recriminations."

He swung himself into the saddle and called again to the sergeant.

"Citizen sergeant," he commanded, "you will accompany me with twenty of these men. The others remain here with Citizeness Damiens, and Citizen Renaud will send to the barracks for as many more as he wants."

In vain did Renaud swear and protest: in vain did Gabrielle growl like an angry tiger: they were both of them powerless in face of the Chief Commissary's superior authority over the soldiers.

"En avant!" he cried, and set off across the square followed by sergeant and troopers.

"En avant!" and the cavalcade rode away with much jingling of harness and clatter of hoofs on the stone pavement and to the accompaniment of loud cheers from the crowd. Young and old, men and women, yelled themselves hoarse with enthusiasm. Admittedly the worthy townsfolk cared nothing about Citizen Renaud who remained standing there looking somewhat sheepish. He was a stranger to them. Nobody knew him. He had certainly been credited with having tracked the female aristos to their hiding-place, but there the matter ended. Many there were who had listened with indignation to the altercation between him and Citizen Lescar. What right, they thought, had this Parisian interloper to interfere with their Chief Commissary in the exercise of his duty. The Chief Commissary was entirely within his rights when he decided to go at once and capture that abominable English spy, who had led the entire province by the nose with his devilish tricks of helping traitors to escape from justice, and it was past any worthy Artesian's comprehension that Citizeness Damiens — herself a god patriot if ever there was one — should have backed up a stranger against one of their own townsfolk. But there! What can one expect from a woman in love? And Mam'zelle Guillotine's infatuation for the Parisian was no longer a mere rumour but a fact known to all who had their wits about them.

Thus had the crowd watched the proceedings with mixed feelings of approbation for their Chief Commissary and a certain measure of hostility towards Renaud, and after the cheering for Lescar and his cavalcade had subsided there was some booing and hissing directed at the stranger.

Two soldiers were standing together on the fringe of the crowd at the junction of the market place with the narrow street on which gave the side door of the Commissariat. They were ill-shod and ill-clothed in the same haphazard uniforms as their comrades of the 61st regiment. Now and then they both looked over their shoulder down the narrow street where the hooded cart was drawn up.

Presently they were joined by a third man, who was dressed as they were, whereupon all three drew back a few steps from the edge of the crowd.

"You have the orders?" one of them asked.

"Yes!"

They spoke in French. Only a keen ear would have detected the foreign accent in their speech, which was scarcely audible through the hubbub and chattering of the crowd.

The newcomer now said:

"When the hubbub is at its height, and the attention of the entire crowd is concentrated on what goes on in the market place, we must work our way unobserved down this narrow street to the cart, garrote the troopers in charge of it — driver and two troopers — throw them into the cart and drive away like hell, take first turning on the right and drive straight on after that. The chief will meet us soon after on the road."

"Is that all?" one of the others asked.

"Yes! The chief warns us to pay no heed to what goes on in the market place, however startling it may be."

"I wonder what he is thinking of?"

"Something desperate, I take it."

"God protect him!" sighed one of the men.

"To-day and always," the others echoed simultaneously.

Renaud, evidently both furious with things in general and perplexed as to what he had better do in view of the hostility of the crowd, turned for advice to Gabrielle Damiens.

"What shall I do now, my pigeon?" he asked dolefully.

She was standing by the near front wheel of the diligence giving orders to the corporal left in command of her escort.

"Take the reins yourself," she was saying to the soldier, "and drive as far as Grécourt and wait for me there. I will take the reins after that."

Then only did she condescend to notice the somewhat foolish-looking swain.

"What does my little cabbage wish me to do?" he reiterated meekly.

"Stay here," she replied dryly, "and see that the two brats in the cart are not spirited away from under your nose. With half the population of Mézières standing round gaping at you, you would be a fool and worse to let that happen. In the meanwhile send round to the barracks for a score more soldiers. When you have them here you can make a start just as if nothing had happened."

"But you, my love . . ." Renaud ventured to say.

"I shall stay here till that fool Lescar returns either with that English devil in which case I should like to get a squint at the impudent rascal before Paris claims him, or without him which I imagine will be the case. I shall then ride to Grécourt and pick up the diligence there. And everything," she concluded, "will go on just as I have planned."

The corporal had already obeyed orders, climbed to the box-seat of the diligence and taken up the reins. Gabrielle gave the order: "En avant," and the old vehicle giving a great shake like a frowsy dog wakened from sleep, started on its way with much creaking of wheels and grinding of axles. The escort thundered to right and left of it, their horses; hoofs drawing sparks from the stony ground. The crowd forgetting for the moment to boo at the stranger broke into a cheer and the young ones among them ran across the square in the wake of the cavalcade, until it turned into the main road and was lost to view.

The master sleuth remained standing where he was, looking the picture of indecision and bewilderment. He tried to recapture Gabrielle's attention by amorous glances, but she only gave him a contemptuous shrug, and without another word turned on her heel and went up the perron steps into the Commissariat.

Chapter XX: THE COURIER

Chief Commissary Lescar was in the meantime riding hell for leather at the head of his troop of stalwarts on the hard road which winds its tortuous way between Mézières and Rocroi. The Parc aux Daims lay about midway between the two cities, to the right of this main artery; a narrow way, little more than a lane, led up to its front gate. Lescar communicated itself to the soldiers who saw in this expedition the foundation of their future fortune.

"On! On citizens!" the Chief Commissary had cried out lustily at the start; "we'll have that abominable English spy under lock and key, and out share of ten thousand livres in our pockets before the day is out."

So on the rode, twenty of them, a sufficient number surely of well-equipped soldiers of the Republic to put to rout that elusive and dangerous adventurer the Scarlet Pimpernel. On they rode heedless of their empty stomachs and of the inclemency of the weather. An hour or so went by. The weather had turned bright and frosty and the men were hard put to it to prevent their horses from slipping. At a word of command from Lescar they drew rein to give the wearied beasts a breather.

"We'll be at the Parc long before midday," the Commissary said, wishing to put heart into the men. "There will be at least a hundred livres for each of you if we bring back that Scarlet Pimpernel alive."

A quarter of an hour later they turned into the secondary road which led to the Parc aux Daims. Presently they drew rein once more. The château and the park were in sight.

"Now citizen soldiers," Lescar enjoined the men, "attention! Keep your eyes open! Let nothing escape you. The English spies will be on the alert."

He paused a moment, rose in his stirrups and gazed out in the direction of the Parc.

"They have taken shelter inside the château," he said. "I don't see anything moving in the garden."

"En avant!" he commanded.

The narrow road was bordered with grass. Covered with frozen snow it deadened the clatter of horses' hoofs. Absolute silence reigned around. Lescar proceeded cautiously. He knew the ground well and avoiding what had been the drive and the main gate he made straight for the broken-down postern in the encircling wall. The men passed through behind him, at foot pace, one by one. The château lay at a distance of some two hundred metres to the left. The Commissary gave the order to dismount and to tether the horses to some tall pine trees which formed a spinney close by. While the men obeyed, he stepped out into the open and took a quick survey of the stretch of parkland before him. The quietude all around disconcerted him. Surely those devilish English spies had not slipped through his fingers after all. He was beginning to wish he had listened to Mam'zelle Guillotine's advice and remained with these good troopers on guard round the aristos. As she rightly said the purpose of the Scarlet Pimpernel was the rescue of the aristos. It always was. Perhaps it was foolish to try and run him to earth. The challenge should come from him.

The silence which reigned in park and château was certainly strange. Alone the breeze which had sprung up in the last few moments made a weird sound as it moaned through the leafless twigs of the old trees and the lifeless foliage of evergreen shrubs. Calling to Sergeant Méridol to accompany him Lescar went down on hands and knees and holding his pistol in his right hand, he crept forward cautiously in the direction of the château, closely followed by the sergeant. The broken unshuttered windows seemed to stare at him like giant eyes. Lifeless yet alert. Had the English spies decamped or were they behind those windows, watching him as he moved soundlessly through the tall grass and tangled undergrowth.

Far be it from me to suggest that Chief Commissary Lescar was in any way afraid; rather was he conscious of a feeling of excitement, as if something stupendous was about to happen, something that would prove to be the turning-point of his whole career. Now he came to a halt and beckoned to the sergeant to do the same. They were within a hundred metres of the château. The perron and wide-open front door were clearly visible. Still not a sound from there.

"Go back and tell the men to come along," Lescar murmured under his breath. "I have a feeling that the English spies are in there and are waiting for us."

He didn't wait for the men but crept along under cover of the shrubbery right up to the perron. Pistol in hand, ready for anything he mounted the short flight of steps and peeped through the front door into the vestibule. Not a sound. No sign of any living soul. He passed through the front door taking stock of his surroundings. He had been inside the château before. Long ago when it was inhabited, and before it had fallen into decay. He was familiar with the two smaller rooms in front of him, with the staircase on the left and, on the right, the door which gave on the largest room in the house where receptions and big dinners were wont to be held.

But all the doors were closed now and Lescar did not feel like pushing any of them open while he was alone in case those English devils were on the other side ready to pounce on any intruder. The next moment, however, his straining ears caught the sound of the troopers approaching. Sergeant Méridol was the first to mount the perron and to step over the threshold. The men soon followed. Cocked pistols in hand they filed in through the front door into the vestibule.

The Chief Commissary indicated the door on the right. The soldiers visibly impressed by the silence and by the aspect of this derelict building seemed none too eager to obey, whereupon Lescar, closely followed by the sergeant, strode to the door and kicked it open. It flew back with a loud cracking and banging, disclosing a sight which caused every man there to gasp with astonishment. The room was large and lofty and must at one time have looked imposing, before the paper on the walls had peeled off in strips and the windows were broken. But it was not the aspect of the room itself that roused the men first to surprise and then to excitement, it was the long table which stretched along it from end to end, a table laden with all sorts of good things, most of them unknown to these poor half-starved soldiers of the Republic: meat, bread, cheese, and what's more, three dozen or more bottles of wine, with corks drawn, all ready for a score of hungry, thirsty men who had been in the saddle for three hours and were half perished with cold and fatigue. In vain did Sergeant Méridol attempt to intervene, in vain did Lescar command, threaten, entreat in the name of the Republic; discipline, never very easily enforced in these days of liberty and equality, was thrown to the winter wind that came in gusts through the broken windows. The men, uttering a portentous cheer, pushing and jostling, tumbling over one another, made helter-skelter for the festive board, seized on slabs of meat and hunks of bread and grabbed the thrice-welcome bottles of wine, which in most cases were emptied

almost at a draught. The sergeant, of course, was caught in the vortex. In face of such a marvellous spread, he would have been more than human had he allowed duty to interfere with his enjoyment of it.

As for the Chief Commissary, after he had raged and stormed, after he had threatened sergeant and troopers with exemplary punishment, he realised that he was wasting his breath. The scene before him was like the realisation of a human torrent which nothing on earth had the power to stay. He himself remained dumbfounded, unconscious of hunger, thirst or fatigue, conscious only of a weird sensation of something stupendous and fateful to come. No, no! Things were not as they should be. This mysterious repast laid out by unseen hands in a derelict house savoured of witchcraft or the machinations of a devil. The question was: what devil had engineered and brought about this amazing situation and lured twenty good patriots to such a flagrant dereliction of duty. Lescar turned his head away so as not to gaze any longer on this guzzling, already half-besotted, crowd of men whom he had brought hither to help him come to grips with the most audacious adventurer known. In spite of the cold outside, the large room had become hot and stuffy, the atmosphere reeked of the smell of meat, of hot breaths and the fumes of wine: the weird silence which a while ago had reigned in the empty house had given place to sounds of smacking lips and of working jaws.

Disgusted with sight and sound he made his way to the window and stood gazing out on the wintry landscape, the snow-covered ground, the leafless trees. The whole aspect of this deserted parkland seemed like an emblem of the despondency of his soul. He felt lonely and misunderstood, and suddenly gazing out across the park his eyes became aware of something moving over by the broken-down postern gate. The next moment he was able to distinguish that "something" to be a horse picking its way across the overgrown lawn and through the tangled shrubbery. There were two men in the saddle: one of them a soldier in uniform, the other riding behind him had his arm round his companion's waist. His head drooped over the other's shoulder. He appeared half fainting with exhaustion.

Lescar was out on the perron in a trice. The rider had already drawn rein at the foot of the steps.

"Where are you from?" Lescar called out to him.

"From Mézières, citizen," the soldier replied.

"What news?"

"Citizen Renaud sent me to tell you that all was well. The diligence is well on the way and he himself was thinking of making a start with the other aristos. He doesn't want to wait much longer as he wants to make Grécourt before nightfall. He sent to the barracks for more men. They only could spare half a dozen, but citizen Renaud says that these are quite sufficient."

Lescar made no comment on the news. He was wondering in his mind where his own interests lay in this tangled affair. Should he return to his post in Mézières and let the matter of the Scarlet Pimpernel drift? He certainly didn't feel that he would have much chance against the English spies should they return in numbers, and with most of his troop in a state of intoxication. Or should he stand his ground and with the few men who had remained sober, like this newcomer and Sergeant Méridol, effect the wonderful capture which would mean a fortune and his name inscribed on the golden roll of patriots who had rendered signal service to the Republic? It was a difficult problem to solve. The Chief Commissary remained silently brooding for a minute or two and then bethought himself of the man who had ridden behind the soldier.

"Who are you?" he demanded abruptly.

The man appeared almost exhausted, and at Lescar's peremptory question he gave a start and almost rolled out of the saddle. He would have measured his length on the ground had not Lescar run down the perron steps and caught him ere he fell. He was a youngish man decently dressed, save that his clothes were stained with the dirt and mud of the road.

"Your pardon, citizen," he murmured, "but I have ridden all the way from Paris without drawing rein."

"Who are you?" Lescar reiterated, "and what do you want?"

The man drew a sealed letter from the inner pocket of his coat.

"I am courier in the service of the Committee of Public Safety," he said; "I have orders to deliver this to no one but the Chief Commissary of the Mézières Section himself. My credentials are inside," he added and handed the letter to Lescar who at once broke the seal and quickly unfolded the missive.

"I met the courier outside Mézières," the soldier put in. "He was asking for the Chief Commissary. I thought I had best bring him along with me. And as he—"

But he got no further for he was suddenly interrupted by a cry of horror twice repeated from Citizen Lescar, who in his turn appeared as if he was about to measure his length on the ground. "A horse!" the Chief Commissary exclaimed hoarsely. "I must to Mézières at once."

Without waiting to see if the courier or the soldier followed him he ran across the park as fast as the undergrowth and the weedy grass would allow him in the direction of the spinney where his troopers' horses were tethered.

"Follow me," he cried over his shoulder to the soldier, "and let the courier come too."

The two men were inclined to grumble, but Lescar gave them no time to protest.

"It is a matter of life and death," he shouted as he ran, "and all those louts over in the château are either drugged or drunk."

After a moment's hesitation the soldier thought it best to obey, whilst the courier appeared unwilling to be left alone in this derelict spot. At any rate he climbed slowly and rather painfully back into the saddle, and the wearied mount with its double burden picked its way to the spinney where the Chief Commissary was just getting to horse, looking so scared and so death-like pale that the soldier called out instinctively:

"What has happened, citizen? You look scared to death."

But Lescar who had run on the rough ground nearly all the way from the château was hardly able to speak.

"Get fresh horses both of you . . ." he gasped, "and follow me."

Chapter XXI: AN OUTRAGE

To gather one's thoughts together, to think at all, was quite out of the question. Lescar's brain was at a standstill, all he could do was to ride, ride on, with hope and despair warring in his mind, despair for the most part gaining the upper hand. He had thrust the letter in the inner pocket of his coat and his hand remained there clutching that fateful missive which, undoubtedly, did mean life or death to him.

The wintry sun was past the meridian now and had begun its downward course to the west. Soon the shades of evening would be drawing in and the market cart with the two female aristos would be driven, Satan alone knew whither. And the unfortunate Commissary rode on at breakneck speed, with just enough sense to avoid the frozen puddles on the road, and to take advantage of any patches of mud where a feeble thaw had set in under the midday sun. The two men followed more leisurely. They were, in fact, some little way behind when the town of Mézières at last came in sight.

Ten minutes later Lescar on ahead had reached the first isolated house of the city; another five and his horse's hoofs were drawing sparks from the stones of the main street. The Market Square could already be perceived through the mist-laden atmosphere. Lescar strained his eyes to see what was going on. There was quite a good crowd there still apparently, hanging about in a desultory fashion. And there was a sprinkling of uniforms to be seen among the throng. In the midst of it all there was Citizen Renaud, who held his white charger by the bridle. Gabrielle Damiens ran down the steps of the Commissariat just then and flung herself into his arms.

Lescar gave a cry of jubilation. All was well.

Renaud had just called out:

"One more kiss, my pigeon, and I go."

Gabrielle threw her arms round his neck. The crowd closed in round them, and forgetting its hostility to the stranger, gave the lovers a loud cheer as they exchanged kiss after kiss.

Another minute and Lescar was across the square. He drew rein so abruptly that his horse reared and snorted and the crowd in dismay scattered in all directions. Gabrielle dragged herself out of her lover's embrace.

"What's all this?" she demanded harshly.

"If it is not the Citizen Commissary," ejaculated a woman in the crowd.

Whereupon Renaud, in the act of mounting his white charger, exclaimed with an oath:

"That cursed fool again!"

"What do you want?" Gabrielle demanded as Lescar dismounted in double-quick time and nearly knocked Mam'zelle over, so close to her did he land.

"Have you got the spy? Where is he?" she went on peremptorily, and the men and women in the crowd questioned him eagerly. "Where is the English spy?"

With a dramatic gesture worthy of the finest classical traditions, Lescar pointed to the man on the white charger and spoke the one word at the top of his voice so that all might hear:

"There!"

Gabrielle shrugged and muttered: "The man is drunk." The whole crowd turned to look on Citizen Renaud, who was evidently of the same opinion as Mam'zelle, for he only shrugged and with a click of the tongue urged his horse to start. With a yell that would have shamed a wild beast in a rage, Lescar threw up his arms and with a vigorous working of his elbows forged his way through the crowd to the very side of Renaud and seized the bridle of the prancing white charger.

"I tell you all," he screamed, in a voice hoarse with excitement, "that if you let this man out of your sight you will be the blackest traitors that ever betrayed your country."

Renaud raised his whip and with it struck the Chief Commissary on the head. An outrage against the chief authority of the town. The population resented it. It had appeared dumbfounded for the moment, but now it rose in its wrath and with many murmurings gathered round their Commissary and the man on the white charger, effectually impeding the latter's movements. It was once again a case of animosity against the stranger and loyalty to one of their own kin. Renaud struck out right and left with his whip.

"Let me pass, you dolts," he cried, while Lescar, who had yelled himself hoarse, tried to recover his breath before starting to yell again.

"En avant!" Renaud shouted to the escort of troopers, who had much ado to keep their horses quiet in the midst of all this turmoil. "This man is mad or drunk."

Gabrielle in the meanwhile had also forged her way to the side of her lover. She came to a halt, facing Lescar with flaming eyes.

"What's all this?" she demanded. "Speak, man, ere I denounce you as the traitor you so freely talk about."

"Don't let this man go," Lescar countered, "and I'll tell you."

"Citizen Renaud stays here," Gabrielle responded firmly. And the sleuth accustomed to obey this masterful woman turned to her, holding his horse in check.

"All right, my pigeon," he murmured, "but it's getting late and I can't waste my time with this fool."

"Never mind about your time, citizen," she retorted dryly. "You stay here, understand? I want to hear what the Chief Commissary has to say, and that's enough. Now then, citizen, speak up."

The crowd gathered more closely round the principal actors in this rather puzzling drama, pressing near to one another in an endeavour to get some warmth into their blood, for it was very cold. The women drew their shawls — if they happened to have any — tightly round their shoulders. The men's noses and hands were blue. Their bare feet in their wooden sabots were nearly frozen. But the situation as it now appeared provided excitement enough to make their discomfort seem unimportant. The Chief Commissary looked to be in a fever of agitation. Mam'zelle Guillotine was obviously puzzled, whilst the stranger was in a towering rage. The young corporal in command of the troopers who formed the escort round the cart tried to push his way through the throng, but it had become so dense and the hostility of the people so marked that he ordered three of the men to join him, whilst the others were told to remain with the cart on the fringe of the crowd, one to hold the reins and the others on guard.

"Speak up, Citizen Commissary," the woman shouted to Lescar, and the men echoed the cry. "Speak up!"

Lescar dived into the pocket of his coat. He drew out the papers which the courier from Paris had brought him. He put on a pompous air and forced himself to speak slowly and steadily.

"The Committee of Public Safety sitting in Paris," he began, "sent me a courier this morning with a letter which was to be delivered into no other hands but mine. Here are his credentials."

He unfolded one of the papers and with a grandiose gesture held it out to Gabrielle, who snatched it out of his hand. She had become, as it were, the spokesman of the assembly. The paper bore the signature of two of the principal members of the Committee of Public Safety and also its official seal. It stated that the bearer was an accredited courier to the Committee and had been entrusted with a private letter addressed to the Chief Commissary of the district of Mézières; the letter to be delivered into his own hands.

"Yes, that's in order," Gabrielle declared. "Where's the courier?"

"Not far behind," the Commissary replied. "I rode along full tilt, he followed more slowly. He'll be here in a few minutes."

While he spoke he unfolded the second communication, and, with a flourish more dramatic than before, handed it to Gabrielle. Now there was no one to equal Gabrielle Damiens for shouting, raging and storming when she was roused, and both Citizen Renaud and the rest of the crowd quite expected one of those violent outbursts from Mam'zelle Guillotine while she ran her eyes down the paper which the Citizen Commissary had given her. But the only sound that came through her lips was a growl like that of a wild cat before it starts to spit and to scratch. The crowd remained breathless. Waiting. Wondering. And suddenly the enraged woman's arms shot out, she threw the paper back into the Commissary's face and then with both hands she seized the man on the white charger by the leg, and had dragged him off his horse before he realized what was happening. Thus taken unawares and entirely helpless, he rolled over and over on the ground. The horse reared, plunged, scattering the bystanders, and the unfortunate man had the greatest difficulty in warding off the more dangerous kicks from its hoofs, until the corporal was able to seize the mettlesome beast by the bridle and to bring it to comparative quiescence. But this didn't prove to be the end of the wretched stranger's troubles, for Gabrielle had got hold of his whip and with it was belabouring him on the head, the back, the shoulders with such fury and such strength that he cried and cried again for mercy. Nor did she desist till the whip broke. She threw it from her and stood with arms akimbo, looking down on her half-conscious victim. The man on whom she had lavished her kisses a few short minutes ago. Her face looked positively evil.

True, the good Artesians were not altogether sorry to see the arrogant stranger thus brought to pain and humiliation, for these were days when the sight of physical and mental suffering was an all too familiar one; the tumbrils and the guillotine made it an almost daily spectacle for young and old, and even for children. They looked on it as a part of this life's routine, as a distraction from the monotony of weary, idle hours. But in this case the expression on Mam'zelle's face was almost terrifying. There was contempt as well as rage in her eyes and the strong vein of cruelty never wholly absent from her mien. They were all of them dumbfounded, even the Chief Commissary had lost his pompous air, and his excitement appeared to have calmed down. He and Gabrielle, the stranger on the ground, the corporal on horseback holding the white charger by the bridle and the three troopers, formed a compact group, round which the throng now stood in a wide circle, eager, expectant, awed into silence. But the silence did not last long. Presently there rose a murmur. It began with the women whispering to one another:

"What has he done?"

"Is he really the English spy?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"No, impossible!"

"The Commissary said so."

"He denounced him."

"But how did he know?"

And the murmur was taken up by the men, until there was a hum like a swarm of hornets which filled the market.

"Is he the English spy?"

"How do they know?"

For somehow the stranger, much as they mistrusted him, did not answer to their conception of what the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel was like. He was tall, but should have been taller still, of Titanic proportions, like the legendary giants: he should have looked less human, more like the supernatural being of the nether world.

"He is not the Scarlet Pimpernel," some of the women asserted boldly.

"I don't believe it," the men said.

Gabrielle turned her glowering eyes on the Chief Commissary.

"Tell them," she commanded, "what is written in that letter."

Lescar smoothed out the crumpled paper which Gabrielle had thrown in his face.

"Attention!" he cried loudly, and then went on:

"This letter comes to me from Citizen Renaud . . ."

"Citizen Renaud?" they exclaimed. "But the letter came by courier from Paris, then how —?"

He then began to read:

"Citizen Chief Commissary of the Section of Mézières in the Province of Artois.

"This is to warn you that there is an English spy known to his followers as the Scarlet Pimpernel, who has been impersonating me these few days past. I have reasons to believe that his latest activities have been directed in your province. So, be on the look-out. I have been detained in Paris, but will be in Mézières within the next twenty-four hours. The Committee of Public Safety here in Paris is sending its special courier to you for me, to bring you this urgent letter.

"And," the Chief Commissary added, "the letter is signed André Renaud, and bears the seal and stamp, as well as two signatures of members of the Committee of Public Safety in Paris."

The unfortunate man, still lying in his semi-unconsciousness on the ground, had made desperate efforts to regain his senses. He struggled and wriggled his bruised body about until he was able to prop himself up on his elbow. Looking up at his tormentor with an

expression of hatred at least as intense as her own: "You'll pay for this, Mam'zelle Guillotine," he contrived to murmur between his teeth and then turned his glance on the Chief Commissary, who was in the act of folding up the momentous papers and thrusting them back into his pocket. The expression of hatred in the stricken man's eyes lingered there also for a few seconds, but soon changed to contempt as he broke into a forced, immoderate laughter. But this hilarity was short-lived. The next moment the crowd had suddenly, if somewhat tardily, realised the full significance of the one horrible fact, namely that this man, this intruding, arrogant stranger, was none other than the far-famed Scarlet Pimpernel, the most dangerous enemy of France, who had devised the abominable trick of impersonating a servant of the Republic in order to save a batch of female traitors from the punishment their crimes deserved. The fact that it was this same man who had brought about the arrest of the ci-devant Marquise de Saint-Lucque was lost sight of for the moment. What was remembered was the dramatic gesture of the Chief Commissary pointing to this man when he was asked: "Where is the English spy?" and his voice answering loudly so that all might hear: "There!"

The angry murmurings of the crowd turned to threats of violence.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel! That abominable English spy! That's what this man was all the time, and we never guessed."

"Mam'zelle Guillotine!" one of the women shouted, "you'll know what to do."

The man on the ground realised the danger he was in. Three or four violent kicks had already been dealt to him.

The corporal ordered the troopers to close in round him to protect him from further assaults from the crowd. This audacious English spy was food for the guillotine, not for the mere sadistic entertainment of a lot of provincial louts. They did their best to ward off the kicks and blows that were freely aimed at the prostrate form of the stranger.

Whether it was a sudden inspiration or merely the powerful instinct of self-preservation, who can tell? Certain it is that when matters appeared at their blackest, when the troopers seemed unable to cope any longer with the crowd which had become very violent, the stranger, whoever he was, succeeded in regaining his feet. He looked to right and left of him and over the heads of the multitude and uttered a long-sustained cry of horror and affright.

"The cart," he exclaimed, "where is it?"

Where, indeed? The crowd parted, gazed in direction of the street corner to which the stranger pointed with quaking hand.

"The cart!" the latter reiterated, choking with emotion, whilst men and women vainly tried to switch off their minds from one horrible fact to another, from the personality of one man, his duplicity, his shameless impersonation, their own wrath and desire to punish, to the outrageous trick played upon them by one whose identity could not be in doubt for one moment. For the cart had gone. Vanished with the troopers and their horses. While the attention of the crowd had been drawn to the stranger and his presumed misdeeds, the female aristos had been spirited away from under their nose. The cart had been driven away under cover of the uproar and the gathering mist which enveloped the narrow street. A couple of troopers had been left in charge of it when the others with their corporal were called to protect the stranger from further assaults from the irate and unruly crowd. Their horses had vanished with them, whilst a third trooper who had been holding the reins had also disappeared. When did this outrage happen? Whither had all those men gone? Who could tell? And what in Satan's name had become of the cart and horses?

Both Gabrielle and the Commissary had remained tongue-tied at first, rigid as granite statues; the expression on the Commissary's face was at first one of incredulity, then of bewilderment and finally of horror. But Gabrielle's face remained expressionless, her face became the colour of ashes, it looked like the face of the dead. She never moved, not even when the Commissary gave a loud command to the troopers.

"After them, citizens, they cannot have gone far."

The corporal and the troopers jerked their horses' heads round and set spurs to their flanks, scattering the crowd in all directions. Men and women took up the cry: "They cannot have gone far," and swarmed all over the market place, rushing blindly, aimlessly, hither and thither, shouting confused suggestions to the bewildered soldiers.

"This way, citizen!"

"No, that!"

"This is the short cut to Grécourt."

"They'd avoid that."

"Try the road to Labat."

The way into the side street and that street itself were soon nothing but scenes of the wildest confusion in which men and women effectively obstructed all possibility of pursuit.

"This way, citizen!"

"No, that!"

And so on, while confusion was made more confounded at every moment. There were at least half a dozen ways which led from the centre of the town to anywhere. It was getting late in the afternoon. Evening began to draw in. Soon a misty sleet mixed with snow began to fall and it was difficult to distinguish anything beyond a fraction of a league ahead, past the city lights.

It was all very well to keep on shouting and urging: "They cannot have gone far." That might be true enough but the question was: "In which direction?"

There were only three troopers, besides their corporal, and the Chief Commissary who were mounted, and they might possibly have overtaken the cart even though it was being driven at breakneck speed. The corporal and one of the troopers went in one direction, the others followed the Commissary while the young men in the crowd ran down the various narrow streets which gave all round the Market Square. And with it all there was rush and uproar and enough shouting, clatter of horses' hoofs and of wooden shoes on the pavement stones, as to give any fugitive all the warning required for a good get-away.

Chapter XXII: NIGHTMARE

Gabrielle, after those few minutes of stone-like stupefaction, had pulled herself forcefully together. Hers was not a nature to allow herself to be cowed by any man or any event. In spite of the humiliation which she had endured and the many ups and downs of exultation and of horror through which she had passed during this fateful day, she was still Mam'zelle Guillotine, whose commands were law in the Province of Artois, and at whose words the fiercest Terrorists up in Paris were wont to tremble. Renaud, the sleuth, the arrogant stranger on whom she had lavished her kisses a short hour ago, and to whom she had administered such degrading punishment, was standing there, by the white charger, with one hand on the bridle, and was making serious efforts to shake off the feeling of giddiness caused by the heavy blows on his head. They stood isolated now, these two, in front of the Commissariat, the whole crowd having melted away, scattered like leaves before the wind. Gabrielle turned a glance of withering contempt on her former suitor and when she saw that he was preparing to mount, she just seized him by the arm with a grip that was like a vice and thrust him out of her way with such violence that he nearly came down again on his knees. Another contemptuous glance, a shrug, and it was she who had mounted the white charger.

"You stay where you are!" she commanded, "While I try to undo the mischief you have done."

With a click of the tongue she set the horse to walk across the square.

Renaud shouted after her, his voice choked with hatred unspeakable.

"The mischief I have done? You devil incarnate, you shall pay for this. Mark my words."

Whether she heard him or not is difficult to say. Certain it is that she put her horse to the trot without once turning to him. Straight ahead she rode across the square until she turned into the Grécourt road.

It was still snowing, but overhead the clouds were thin and from behind them the wan light of the moon shed a faint, greyish aura over the frozen landscape. Gabrielle knew every inch of the road and with unerring hand and eyes guided her mount. At first she overtook one or two detachments of voluntary search-parties who with much shouting and any amount of voluble talk were still patrolling the road, hopeful of coming up with the cart, which "could not have gone far." They cheered Gabrielle as she went by.

Once past the foremost of these enthusiasts she put her horse to a walk. Her eyes keen as those of a hawk pierced the darkness to right and left of her. She had the feeling that it would be on this road that she would come across some trace of that audacious Scarlet Pimpernel. All around her the stillness could almost be felt. The snow fell in large soft flakes. Not a breath of air stirred the leafless branches of the tall poplars that bordered the road, and Gabrielle's keen ears could not detect the slightest sound of distant wheels or horse's trot. It was only half an hour later that the white charger suddenly shied at a black, shapeless mass which lay by the roadside.

Gabrielle dismounted and holding the horse by the bridle went up to the black mass which had frightened it. Two men, wearing the uniforms of the 61st regiment, were lying half in and half out of the ditch. They were tied to one another with cord, and a woolen scarf was wound round the lower part of their faces. The snow lay over them like a thin, white blanket. As Gabrielle approached them, they made a combined vigorous effort to utter a cry of distress, but it was only a faint gurgle that reached her ears. She threw the reins over her arm and with strong capable hands she released the men of their bonds, and unwound the scarf from round their mouths. Their teeth were chattering and their arms and legs were trembling with the cold. She pulled one man up by his coat collar and then the other, but never uttered a word till she had them both in a sitting posture.

Once this was accomplished her peremptory questions came out sharp and clear.

"What happened?"

"It was while you were hitting out at the English spy," one of the men contrived to reply.

"The English spy?"

"Yes! We thought he was the man sent down here to track the aristos. And he turned out to be that abominable Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Then what happened?"

"We could not help watching," and even through his chattering teeth the soldier gave a chuckle. "It was such a fine sight seeing you belabouring that spy."

"I stood on the front board," added the trooper who had been holding the reins. "The better to see you. Name of a dog, I wouldn't have been in his shoes for a pension."

"And the kisses you had been giving him . . ."

But Gabrielle was not in a mood to listen to any bantering. "Didn't you hear me ask what happened?" she demanded harshly.

"Just this, citizeness," one of the troopers gave reply, the one who was best able to speak; "when the whole crowd in the square was yelling itself hoarse with laughter and when excitement was at its height, my comrade and I were suddenly seized by the leg, dragged off our horses, struck on the head, and rolled over on the ground. We were gagged and bound and thrown into the cart before we could utter a sound."

"The same thing happened to me," said the other. "I held the reins, and I was standing on the front board watching you flourishing that whip, when I was seized by the legs and dragged down from the board. I too was gagged and bound and thrown into the cart, and as I had struck my head heavily against the wheel, I was too dizzy to offer any resistance."

"You were driven away in the cart?"

"Then and there, citizeness."

"Where is the cart now?"

"I don't know, citizeness. But it must be somewhere near here. I just heard it come to a halt and the horses gallop away before I half lost consciousness."

"The horses?"

"Yes! They were taken out of the shafts. I could hear that. It was not far from here."

"Where is your other comrade?"

"I don't know, citizeness. He was with us in the cart. Perhaps he is still there now."

"Anyone else but you three dolts in the cart?"

"Yes! Two brats. And there were others, I think, but I could not see," the soldier gave answer.

"Nor I," echoed the other.

"How many English spies were there?" Gabrielle asked again.

"I couldn't tell exactly, citizeness. There must have been at least a dozen. They fell on us like a swarm of hornets."

"And that's a lie," Gabrielle asserted dryly. "A dozen? I don't believe there were more than two or three — And perhaps only one," she added slowly.

"I give you my word, citizeness—"

"Hold your tongue. You were nothing but a set of traitors and cowards."

"And that is unfair, citizeness. What could we do? When the cart stopped we were dragged out and thrown down in this ditch and left to perish of cold for all those devils knew. Wasn't that so, comrade?"

There was a grunt of assent, and Gabrielle queried again:

"Where is the cart now?"

"I don't know, citizeness."

To Gabrielle Damiens the whole of this story told jerkily by men whose lips were shaking with cold, was like a nightmare from which she would presently wake and find that nothing of it was real, that all of it was only a hideous phantasmagoria brought before her mind by mischievous emissaries of Satan and sent by him to worry and exasperate her. That she, the strong-minded Amazon, the lion-hearted wielder of the sword of justice, the indomitable scorner of men should thus have been cozened, baffled, bamboozled like any groundling or village dolt was inconceivable. It was maddening and for a time she felt as if her wits had deserted her and she remained crouching there in the ditch beside those two soldiers, with an expression in her face which, but for the darkness, would have been terrifying.

The men never moved. They were sore in limb and their bodies were almost inert. After a time Gabrielle appeared to gather her wits together again. She struggled to her feet, paid no heed to the soldiers, never spoke another word to them. She stood there with the horse's reins swung over her arm, she, more solidly dark than the surrounding darkness, and the white charger beside her like a ghost. Her eyes tried to pierce the veil of snow, searching the gloom for an outline of the cart. The men watched her when presently she mounted and threw herself astride into the saddle. They went on watching as she turned her horse's head back towards Mézières, put him to the trot and was soon engulfed in the night. After which they in their turn struggled to their feet and walked slowly back in the direction of the city.

They walked on in silence at first, stamping their feet and swinging their arms across their chest striving to get the blood back into their frozen limbs. At first and until the sound of the white charger's hoofs died away in the distance down the road.

Had Gabrielle Damiens been endowed with super-human senses, she would have been lost in wonderment, for as soon as the stillness of the night became so absolute that it seemed almost palpable, it was broken by a sound which, in this lonely bit of country, roused the barn-door owl from its nightly contemplation and disturbed the prowling cat in its chase after little birds.

"By George!" a voice suddenly broke forth through the gloom in a language Mam'zelle Guillotine would not have understood, had she heard; "I'm positively frozen stiff."

And another voice then echoed: "I've never been so cold in all my life."

"Got your flask handy, Glynde?"

The other fumbled into his inside pocket and handed a flask to his friend.

"No, you go first," the latter said.

Both had a good pull at the flask.

"I hope we get horses at the Ecu d'Or."

"The chief said we were certain to. It is a posting-inn, you know. Stage-coaches get their relay there."

"Yes, I know. And with all this turmoil going on . . ."

The other man shrugged.

"Well! If we can't get horses we'll have to walk. It is not far and I know the way."

"The walk will do us good," his friend commented with easy philosophy.

"When I think what the chief has put up with . . ."

One of the men who spoke was Sir Philip Glynde, the owner of Glynde Towers, one of the show places in East Anglia, with its famous racing stables, its show gardens and hot-houses. The other was Viscount St. Dennys, one of the richest men in England, who had been equerry to the Prince of Wales till he gave up that position and all the pleasures attached to it, in order to follow his chief in the path of obedience and self-sacrifice. Accustomed to every luxury that the possession of a large fortune can procure, sybarites both, they talked quite gaily of a tramp in the night across country with an icy wind driving snow and sleet into their faces, just as they had endured with equal gaiety and as a matter of course, lying flat on hard frozen ground for over an hour with teeth chattering and limbs growing stiff with cold and the pressure of ropes around their body.

On ahead a bright light glinted through the gloom.

"There's the Ecu d'Or," Glynde remarked.

"Now for a mug of mulled wine," the other rejoined.

"If we get it the Lord be praised."

"If we don't may the devil take the landlord and his ugly wife."

On they tramped after that in silence till they came to the posting-inn into which they turned and made straight for the coffee-room.

There was mulled wine made hot for the asking and the payment thereof, and there were a couple of horses to be had also, old nags but serviceable, anyway. Glynde gave a deep sigh when the obsequious landlord closed his grasping hand over the pieces of gold which St. Dennys had pressed into it.

"I almost wish the brute had not got us everything we wanted," he said ruefully. "The thought of Blakeney at this moment sickens me."

St. Dennys agreed with him, but said more lightly:

"We've obeyed orders. Thank God we were able to do that. I was dreadfully sorry for those kids."

"And there's the poor mother still knocking about somewhere."

"How in Heaven's name will the chief get her away?"

They drank the hot wine while the two nags, which they had been forced to purchase at a preposterous price, were being saddled. Soon they got to horse and rode away, into the night.

"What did they give thee?" the woman asked her husband, while he busied himself putting up the shutters in the house and barring the door.

"Five louis," he replied curtly.

"They are either mad," the wife retorted, "or else English spies; else they wouldn't have parted with all that money."

"It matters not what they are," the man rejoined with a shrug. "Their money is good anyway."

BOOK IV

Chapter XXIII: A MESSAGE

All these exciting events just described are put on record in the archives of the city of Mézières: the arrival of the master sleuth from Paris, the arrest of the ci-devant Marquise de Saint-Lucque and her two children, and the preposterous accusation brought against the envoy of the Committee of Public Safety by Citizen Chief Commissary Lescar and the turmoil that ensued in consequence. It is also on record that three days before this last event the stage-coach which plies fortnightly between Barlemont in Belgium and Paris, came to its habitual halt at the Ecu d'Or, the posting-inn on the outskirts of Mézières. On this occasion it brought its usual complement of travellers who were made to alight in order to have their passports examined and their identity scrutinised. There were not many strangers among the small crowd that tumbled helter-skelter out of the lumbering vehicle which had brought them jogging along the hard frozen road from the other side of the Franco-Belgian frontier, and nearly shaken their souls out of their bodies during four hours of this very trying journey. Half a dozen passengers were allowed to pass immediately through the barrier where the examination took place, and filed into what was still called the coffee-room, though no coffee was ever dispensed there these days. Only mugs of sour wine which was made hot if it was specially paid for, and if the landlord and his wife happened to be in an amiable mood. This privileged half-dozen hungry and thirsty travellers were French citizens, farmers or shopkeepers who traded regularly with Belgium, crossing the frontier backwards and forwards, and personally known to the police. The others, they were Belgians of Dutch for the most part, were kept waiting, standing out in the cold where innumerable questions were put to them, their papers taken away from them and brought back again, and countless other vexations put upon them till one of them, a woman, collapsed, fainting with hunger and cold and had to be carried indoors by her fellow sufferers. These were two men and another woman, all obviously foreigners. One of the men, a stocky little fellow, was described on his passport as of Dutch nationality, native of Batavia, and skipper of the cargo ship Van Tromp of the Netherlands line. He had landed in Antwerp with a load of coffee, part of which was destined for a wholesale house in Paris. His papers were all in order. They had been signed by the Dutch governor of Batavia and countersigned in Antwerp by Citizen Duvernay, representing the revolutionary government of France in the port of Antwerp. Nothing could be more clear or above board, but the police inspector in charge of the revision of foreign passports in the district was inexperienced and officious. He gave himself airs of authority which annoyed the Dutch skipper who became very truculent, heaped curses and abuse on the young officer and was with difficulty restrained from coming to blows with him. His fellow travellers, a man and a woman, did their best to soothe the ruffled feelings of the irate Dutchman. "Do, I pray you, intervene," the woman said to her companion, "we shall never get away while this row is going on."

They had each their passports and other papers in one hand, and each carried a small valise. The man thrust the papers without more ado under the young officer's nose.

"If you could get us through quickly, citizen," he said ingratiatingly, "we would be greatly beholden to you. My friend is cold and hungry. We would like to get food and drink and beds for a night or two before we proceed on our way. We are American citizens," he went on, "and our papers are entirely in order."

With this he insinuated a handful of silver coins into the officer's hand, whose manner at once underwent a change: his hand closed over the money and thrust inside his tunic, after which he took the American's papers and made a show of scrutinising them carefully.

Passports and papers were undoubtedly in order. They were signed by Mr. John Adams, the first United States ambassador accredited to England. Possibly, the officer of Mézières knew nothing at all of Mr. John Adams, and very little of the United States of America, but he knew all about Citizen Jean Lambert Tallien and Citizen Barras, two of the most prominent members of the Convention, who had countersigned the passports. The woman was described thereon as Madeleine St. Just and the man as Honoré St. Just her brother, both citizens of the United States, come to Europe in order to visit their cousin Louis St. Just, the friend and intimate of Maximilien Robespierre himself, names indeed to conjure with.

The police officer's manner became almost abject. Completely ignoring the truculent Dutchman and his imperious demands, he stamped passports and papers without further demur, did not order the valises to be opened for examination, and even went to the length of escorting these highly-connected foreigners as far as the inn and recommended them to the special care and attention of the landlord and his ill-favoured wife, with a whispered hint of the financial benefit that would be derived from such attention. The landlord took the hint and forgetting his status of free citizen of the Republic of France, and its laws of Equality for all, became almost servile in his desire to provide his guests with everything they desired.

However, they did not want much seemingly, only a couple of rooms with a clean bed for two or three nights, and for the moment just a quiet corner where they could sit and eat in peace. There was a lot of: "This way, citizeness," from the landlord, and: "The coffee-room is crowded, you will be better here," as he ushered the travellers into a small parlour adjoining the larger room and summoned his wife to lay the table and bring along the best food the Ecu d'Or could muster.

Marguerite Blakeney sank on to the hard horse-hair sofa, and drew a long sigh of relief. She gathered her cape closely round her and gave a little shiver.

"You are cold, Lady Blakeney," her companion said with obvious concern.

There was an iron stove in a corner of the room. A fire of logs was roaring up the chimney. Marguerite held her hands to the blaze.

"And very tired, I am afraid," the man continued; "it has been such a long journey."

"It was not so bad at first," she commented softly, "while Percy was with us."

And her eyes seemed to search the flames as if seeking in them a picture of the face and form she loved. They had only just parted. And no journey, however trying, could be hard to bear while Percy was there with her.

After a moment or two she spoke: "Sir Andrew!"

"Yes?"

"Do you think we shall see Percy again to-day?"

"I don't know, Lady Blakeney . . ." Ffoulkes replied, paused a moment or two and then added: "I am afraid not."

"He only left you the one message, didn't he?"

"That's all. He slipped the note into my hand when he got off the coach at Bouillon and whispered the two words: 'For her.'"

Sir Andrew took a crumpled paper from his pocket, gave it to Marguerite. Her hand closed on it.

"You have seen yours?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"What does it say?"

"Only one word: Wait."

"Not much, is it?" Marguerite commented with a fleeting little smile.

"I suppose Tony has gone by now," she added.

"I'll go and see, shall I?"

"Please do."

"You'll be all right here, won't you?" Sir Andrew asked anxiously.

"Of course I will. Don't worry about me. Our friend the landlord and his grim-faced wife have scented a bribe and are as amiable as you could wish."

He picked up his hat and went out of the room.

After he had gone Marguerite sat for a while with that crumpled paper in her hand. It was early afternoon, but the narrow room with its dingy rep curtains and windows veiled in dust was already wrapped in gloom. Only the red glow from the iron stove shed a warm light on Marguerite's hand and the paper which she held. A confused murmur of voices came from the crowded coffee-room next door. Presently a woman came in carrying a lighted lamp which she set upon the table. She certainly was grim-faced and surly, and looked askance at Marguerite who paid no attention to her.

"I have some soup," she said curtly; "it is hot. Would you like some?"

Marguerite said "Yes!" thinking more of Sir Andrew than of herself.

"There are also potatoes cooked in lard," the woman went on, "and a small piece of pork. You had better have that too as there's nothing else."

She did not wait for a reply, and stumped out of the room.

As soon as she had gone, Marguerite smoothed out the paper which contained Percy's last message to her. She swallowed the tears which dimmed her eyes and pressed her lips against the paper whereon his dear hand had rested.

And this is what she read:

"On my knees do I beg your forgiveness, my beloved, for the discomfort and suffering you are enduring now. Would I had had the heart not to listen when you said to me: 'If you go, I go with you.' Your eyes, your lips, your lovely arms held me in bonds that no man living should have dared to sever. 'If you love me, do not go,' you entreated, and your exquisite voice broke in an agony of tears. Yet I, like a madman, thought only of two little children who would need a woman's care, and thought more of them and their helpless mother, thought more of an ideal, of my duty and mine honour and of my solemn pledge to Saint-Lucque, more of all that than I did of you. 'If you love me,' you begged, 'do not go.' If I loved you! I love you with my whole soul, with every fibre of my being, more than life and eternity, but I could not love you, dear, so much, loved I not honour more. With the help of my faithful lieutenants I will bring those defenceless women safely to England according to my pledged word, then my arms will close again around you and you will feel my whole soul in a kiss."

His whole soul! his wonderful, self-denying, high-minded soul. That last day in London, how vividly did she recall it now, the rout at the Duchesse de Roncevaux's mansion. The Abbé Prud'hon's tribute to the heroism of her beloved, the intimate talk with the Prince of Wales, and those few brief moments in the library when she made her last desperate appeal to him in the name of love, and felt that appeal was useless and that love stood vanquished before the inner instinct of the sportsman-adventurer, the selfless humanitarian, the knight-errant who had heard the call of the innocent and the weak.

This occurred three days ago. Since then Marguerite Blakeney and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had obeyed Percy's laconic instructions and waited. Whether they were in danger or not, they neither knew nor cared. Certainly not, declared Marguerite, for Percy was of a surety watching over them. They were objects of special care from the landlord and his wife, who took the money so lavishly poured into their hands and in exchange did their best to secure the privacy of these American guests, and to give them clean beds and as good food as the state of the country allowed. Citizens of the great American Republic for whom the great patriot General Lafayette had fought, were popular in France, and the name of St. Just was also one to conjure with. And they still waited in patience and in fortitude on this third day after their arrival, while the most exciting incidents the city of Mézières had ever known were occurring in the market place, while Mam'zelle Guillotine belaboured her unfortunate swain with his riding-whip, while the hooded cart with the Saint-Lucque children was spirited away and their mother endured soul-racking agony inside the diligence that was taking her off to Paris. Marguerite and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes heard vague rumours that something unusual was going on in the city. Sound of many voices raised in shrill staccato reached their ears, while they were sitting in the parlour waiting for their meagre supper. People seemed to be passing in and out of the front door all the time and the door of the coffee-room kept on banging constantly.

When the woman brought in the supper she appeared less surly than usual. Seemed actually inclined to talk. Her eyes were quite bright and her cheeks flushed. Marguerite ventured to question her.

"Has anything special happened, citizeness? There seems to be such excitement about."

The woman grunted and shrugged.

"Excitement!" she exclaimed. "I should think there was excitement and to spare. They say that the English spy has been captured. The man they have been hunting for for years."

Marguerite's self-control at this moment was super-human. She did not gasp or catch her breath. She never moved. It was Sir Andrew who spoke.

"Oh! I have heard about him. Even in the United States of America people talk about a mystic personage who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I don't know what he is supposed to do. And have they really got him?"

The woman gave another shrug and a short, harsh laugh.

"Not they," she said. "Our people are fools. It seems they collared the wrong man."

"The wrong man?"

"Well, some people said he was the right man and some that he was the wrong one. But what everyone in Mézières knows by now is that the two aristos who should have been taken to Paris to be guillotined — two little traitors, what? — were spirited away under the very nose of Citizeness Damiens, the public executioner. It seems she is mad with rage and the whole town is in a state of terror, wondering on whom she will vent her fury."

Marguerite really was wonderful. How she kept motionless and outwardly calm while she heard the woman actually stating the fact that Percy had been captured is one of the secrets of her intrepid nature. Sir Andrew remained standing close beside her, with one hand on her shoulder. She put up hers and their two hands met in a pressure of reassurance and of comfort.

As soon as the woman had gone Sir Andrew said:

"I don't believe for a moment that anything has happened to Percy. You don't either, do you, Lady Blakeney?"

"No," she replied simply, "I do not."

"But with your permission I'll go and ascertain just what did occur to give rise to the rumour. I might hear something. Shall I go?"

"Do."

"Promise me you won't fret," he urged.

She looked up at him with a wan little smile.

"I promise," she said.

"I won't be long," were his final words before he went out.

He was back half an hour later.

"I've seen Tony," were the first words he spoke as soon as he had closed the door behind him.

"Tony!" Marguerite exclaimed.

She was still sitting by the fire which now was burning low. Ffoulkes put some logs on while he continued.

"I met him a few moments ago. He was coming this way and will meet us on the Grécourt road. He gave me a scribbled note from Percy."

He took the note from his waistcoat pocket and read out its contents by the light of the lamp.

"The Saint-Lucque children are quite safe. I am taking them to a place I know of called Saint Félix. It is a derelict village this side of Grécourt, slightly off the road on the right. You can't miss it. I want you to meet me there. Your landlord at the Ecu d'Or has a cabriolet and a good horse, which you can either hire or purchase outright. Steal it if you must, bring plenty of provisions and drive hell-for-leather."

Ffoulkes thrust the paper into the stove. Marguerite watched it burn.

"Thank God!" she said, "he is safe. And there is at last something for us to do."

"We had better pretend to eat some of this supper," Sir Andrew rejoined, "and then talk about the cabriolet."

They sat down and tried to swallow a morsel. Marguerite asked:

"Did Tony say anything about the Saint-Lucque children?"

"Yes ye did. He was in it all. But he couldn't say much as it would have been dangerous with so many people about."

"But what about Sir Philip Glynde and my Lord St. Dennys?"

Sir Andrew gave a short laugh. Quite a merry one.

"They are having a very hard time, poor devils," he said lightly.

"What do you mean?"

"Tony had been busy trussing them up like a pair of capons and left them lying in a near-by field, getting frozen and cramped like the very devil."

"Great heavens!"

"Oh, they are quite happy, Lady Blakeney. Do not fret about them. The chief's orders, you know. We'd all go to hell for him, if he ordered us to go."

Marguerite made no reply to this. How could she? Ffoulkes, the loyal lieutenant, had spoken and voiced the feelings of eighteen others as true and brave as himself. She could only wonder within the depths of her soul at the marvellous magnetism exercised by the one man who had made her so infinitely proud and happy in his love. They sat at the table a few minutes longer. The white-faced clock up on the wall struck five. The shades of evening were rapidly drawing it. Ffoulkes rose and went in search of the landlord. The question of hiring a vehicle of some sort was then broached. "We want to get to Grécourt before nightfall," Ffoulkes explained to the man. "My aunt, the citizeness St. Just, the mother of the great patriot my cousin, has been expecting us the last two days. We had not intended to stay here so long, but my sister was tired after the journey and we were very comfortable in your house."

A preposterous price was, of course, asked for the purchase, not the hire, of an old-fashioned cabriolet, an equally aged horse and a basket of provisions, such as could be got. The landlord made pretence of being suspicious, talked of police and of taking risks by aiding strangers to wander about the country without special permits. Such risks and suspicious were naturally to be paid for along with the horse and the cabriolet. In the end the sight of half a dozen louis set all patriotic scruples at rest. The cabriolet was brought round. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes took the reins whilst Marguerite, wrapped in shawl and mantle, snuggled in the corner of the carriage under the hood. On the road to Saint Félix, they met Lord Anthony Dewhurst, one of the most elegant fops known in the society of London and Bath. He was clothed in the promiscuous bits of uniform, tattered tunic and shoes down at heels, his nose was blue and his fingers stiff. Sir Andrew drew rein and Tony scrambled into the cabriolet by the side of Marguerite. "What is Percy going to do about Madame de Saint-Lucque," she murmured enquiringly, more to herself than to him.

"God and he alone know," Tony replied, then he added: "It is the devil, the children being separated from their mother. It means two tasks instead of one."

"But he'll do it," murmured Ffoulkes fervently.

"No doubt about that," Tony echoed under his breath.

Chapter XXIV: THE COSY CORNER

The Parc aux Daims is not by any means the only derelict homestead in Artois. The province, owing to its proximity to the capital, had already suffered much even in the early days of the revolution when inflammatory speeches delivered outside and inside of every cabaret by agents of the government had provoked a half-starved peasantry into acts of brigandage and loot. And not only were these acts directed against landlords and so-called aristos, but more often than not well-to-do farmers and peasant proprietors even in a small way, were faced with the fury of an enraged populace and saw their homesteads invaded and destroyed, even though some of their most virulent attackers had been their equals and friends in the past.

Thus it was with the once prosperous village of Saint Félix, distant a couple of leagues from Mézières and less than half a league off the Grécourt main road. In this year of grace and fraternity — that is 1794 — it was nothing but a conglomeration of derelict cottages and a jumble of stones, broken-down walls and charred remains of roofs, doors and window-frames. The tower of the little church had partially collapsed. It was leaning over at an acute angle with great fissures in its sides, its pointed roof with great gaps open to rain and snow, showed glimpses of its cracked bell, now for ever mute. What had been the presbytery beside it had been burnt down to the ground.

Close to the presbytery there had once stood a substantially built wayside inn with stables and outhouses. Its sign was *Le bon petit Coin* (The Cosy Corner), and had been the property of a worthy Artesian who had drawn home-brewed ale, tapped casks of local wine and led a God-fearing life with his wife and family until a rabble led by paid agitators from Paris had raided his house, set fire to it and destroyed all his belongings till nothing but the crumbling walls remained of what had been a prosperous business place and a happy homestead. The innkeeper and his family drifted away, no one knew or cared whither they went, or what became of them, nor is it the purpose of this chronicle to follow up their traces. Enough that crumbling walls and broken roof of the house withstood the ravages of autumn gales, of winter snow and hail-storms better than the rest of the village had done, and that as a freakish chance would have it, the sign *Le bon petit Coin* still dangled engagingly on its posts. But no one ever went there. No traveller ever entered its inhospitable doors.

“The Cosy Corner”? It was anything but cosy on this bleak February evening when a hooded cart drawn by a couple of horses came to a halt beneath its creaking signpost. The man who had been driving it threw down the reins and jumped down from the cart. At the back, under the hood, there were two bundles wrapped in thick blankets. Live bundles, through the thick folds of which came the sound of whimpering and little human cries: “Maman?” The man went round to the back of the cart. With infinite precaution he took up the bundles and carried them into the derelict house. Through one room, which had obviously been the public bar once, he carried the two bundles one by one, and thence into an inner room, wherein, as there was no furniture whatever, he deposited them with tender care on the wooden floor. He saw to it that the blankets covered the small human forms efficiently against the cold, and listened for a moment or two to the pathetic cries of “Maman.” He then took a bottle out of the pocket of his big coat. It contained milk. Perhaps there was even a tiny, very tiny drop of brandy in the milk.

“That will comfort you, you poor kids,” he murmured to himself, and insinuated the bottle into the small human mouths. There was some spluttering, but swallowing also. The man gave a quaint little chuckle. “I ought to have been a nursemaid!” he went on murmuring to himself. He waited for a few moments longer, until gradually the cries of “Maman” became more rare, and the two bundles of blankets no longer betrayed any movement through their folds. He went out of the room and gave himself a good stretch. “Sink me!” he muttered, “but I’m stiff. I never thought a woman could hit so hard.”

He went back to the cart and peeped down under the hood. It was still snowing, but the evening had not yet fully drawn in, and he could perceive the forms of three men lying on their sides across the floor of the cart. They were trussed up with cords, and their knees were drawn up to the middle of their chests. Their coats were wrapped round their legs and shoulders, and scarves were wound round their mouths and chins.

“Well,” the man muttered again, “you can’t come to much harm like that, my friends, and cannot do much mischief either.” He tied up the horses to the ring in the wall, picked up an untidy bundle of something soft from the driving-seat of the cart and finally turned into the tap-room of the Cosy Corner.

This was none other than Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the prince of dandies, the *enfant gâté* of London and Bath society, the brilliant sportsman, and always the smartest and gayest man in town. He was anything but that just now when he staggered into the tap-room and let himself go down on the floor. Now that there was nothing imperative left to do, reaction set in, and in spite of indomitable will-power, he was feeling giddy and sick. He ached in every limb. Felt himself all over to see if there were any broken bones to deplore.

“Curse that virago! How she did hit!”

But he was light-hearted for all that. Physical discomfort — that’s all this was — had no hold on his spirits. Except for that feeling of giddiness, caused by the blows on his head, he would have burst into song or laughter.

“By George!” he thought, and chuckled inwardly. “How she must have cursed when she learned that the kids had gone. And how she will swear, and threaten and fulminate when—”

He paused abruptly in his reflection, for his keen ear had suddenly detected the sound of wheels in the remote distance. He pulled himself together, struggled to his feet, stretched out his arms, and there he was now, a magnificent specimen of manhood, tall, broad, vigorous, as if he had never known an ache or pain in his life.

Marguerite was nigh! Marguerite was coming! In five minutes she would be here — in his arms. O God! grant a weak man strength to bear up under the fullness of this joy!

A quarter of an hour later the tap-room of the Cosy Corner was giving shelter to the three men who had watched the well-nigh tragic drama enacted by Mam’zelle Guillotine and Chief Commissary Lescar, a drama in which their beloved chief had been the all-too-willing victim.

They crouched on the creviced floor, closely huddled together, for it was very cold. A stable lantern placed in front of them threw a circle of dim light on the floor and on the primitive repast which they were consuming at the moment; they were digging their young

teeth into hunks of stale bread and dry cheese and alternately taking pulls at their respective flasks of brandy. They were dressed in the promiscuous clothes that were served out to infantry regiments not required for service in the more important towns. This meant that their breeches were ragged, that they had no tunics or stockings, and that their shoes were down at heels. And here they were, these sybarites, accustomed to silks and satins, perfumes and Mechlin lace, to drinking old Burgundy and feeding on turkeys and Strasburg patties, here they were munching rye bread and drinking raw brandy and enjoying life to the full as they had never done before.

With them at this hour was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes just come over with Lady Blakeney from the neighbourhood of Mézières in a ramshackle cabriolet purchased at a fabulous price from the landlord of the Ecu d'Or. Poor Sir Andrew! He had gone through a bad moment when he entered the tap-room of the Cosy Corner and there was greeted by Sir Philip Glynde and my Lord St. Dennys with a stern demand for something fit to eat.

"Something fit to eat?" Sir Andrew mimicked with biting irony. "You gluttons! Haven't I given you luscious cheese and—"

"Luscious cheese?" Sir Philip broke in with mock indignation. "St. Dennys, did you hear that? And luscious bread I suppose he would call this jaw-breaking crust."

"Now, listen to me, Ffoulkes," St. Dennys continued sternly. "Either you delve once more into that basket which I saw reposing in the vehicle which brought you here, and bring us along something fit for an English gentleman to eat—"

"Together with enough good wine to tickle his fastidious palate," the other put in.

Sir Andrew laughed and gave a shrug.

"Well, what is the alternative?" he asked gaily.

"Or you give us a good reason for not doing as we command"

"I'll give you the best of reasons," Ffoulkes retorted. "The provisions were not intended for a set of gluttons like you. They will be kept for the journey which lies ahead of us all. And let me tell you that I will defend them against your predatory fingers to the last drop of my blood."

"You inhuman monster," St. Dennys cried, and with this he flung a lump of cheese at the head of Sir Andrew, who, still laughing, dodged this first missile only to be pelted by others. He was forced ultimately to cry for mercy. A free fight ensued such as all British schoolboys revel in. And they were just schoolboys for the time being, these brave followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel, full of high animal spirits and the very joy of living.

When peace was at last restored, all four of them settled down once more to their repast of dry bread and cheese.

Between the courses of this sumptuous repast they tried to give Ffoulkes some account of what had gone on in Mézières this afternoon.

"Never in all my life," my Lord Tony was saying, "did I see anything so appalling as the chief under the hand of that vixen, and Glynde, St. Dennys and I being obliged to stand by, under strict orders not to interfere and commit a murder. I tell you," he concluded emphatically, "it was hell!"

A hearty, careless laugh broke in on the moodiness which had suddenly fallen on the small company at recollection of the horror they witnessed a few short hours ago. The laughter came from the inner room, where Marguerite at this moment was held closely in her husband's arms, while he whispered in her ear:

"You understand, don't you, my beloved?"

"No, Percy," she said resolutely, and threw her head back so as to look him straight in the eyes. "I do not. What you wish me to do is impossible. Impossible," she reiterated firmly.

A stable lantern was set on a projection in the wall, and by its dim light Marguerite could just see her husband's face. His eyes were looking down into hers and she could see that there was a merry twinkle in them and that the lines round his mouth were set in a gently ironical smile.

It was then that this merry, careless laugh came to the ears of his friend.

"What?" he enquired lightly. "Insubordination?"

"Percy!" she protested.

"I am not wishing you to do anything, my beloved," he said. "You are a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. The most adored. The most revered amongst all. But you are a member, and I am your chief whom you have sworn to obey in all things. And I am giving you a command."

That was all he said, speaking very softly; his voice was hardly audible it was so low, just a trifle husky, but perfectly firm. Marguerite buried her face against his shoulder. He went on with infinite tenderness:

"Look at me, my beloved. Are we not one, you and I? Have we not gone through endless joy and often bitter sorrow together? This is one of the moments in our life when we must work together — and suffer together—"

"Why Percy? Why?" she broke in pitifully through her sobs.

"Because somewhere near here, within a stone's throw of this spot which your dear presence has hallowed, there is a helpless, innocent woman who is faced with death, a horrible death which she would have to endure in loneliness and sorrow surpassing in intensity anything you and I have ever known. Also because there are two little children in this very room who will be motherless unless we come to their aid, you and I, and because an English gentleman would stand for ever dishonoured before you and his own conscience if he so shamefully broke his word."

"But if I stayed with you Percy . . ." came as a final entreaty from Marguerite's aching heart. The hood had fallen back from her head. Through the gloom Percy's hand sought the waves of her soft golden hair which rippled gently round her face and neck. With his handkerchief he brushed gently, very gently the tears that were coursing down her cheeks.

"I might fail, my adored one," was his calm reply. "Do you know what that would mean to them and to me?"

She could no longer speak, her heart was so full of sorrow that she thought it must surely break. And suddenly his mood changed. The tender sentiment of a moment ago flew away into the unknown and the adventurous spirit, the spirit of the sportsman, once more gained the mastery over his strange personality.

"You do understand, don't you, my adored, my loyal helpmate," he asked with his habitual light-hearted eagerness, "just what I want you to do?"

Marguerite unable to speak nodded in reply.

"You will take these two innocents with you in the cart. Glynde, St. Dennys and Tony, who are still in their haphazard uniforms, will accompany you. All three will sit on the driving-seat and will look very imposing and official up there in their tattered uniforms. Ffoulkes, of course, will have to remain under the hood with you. Tony will drive you to Perignon, which is on the other side of the French frontier not far from the city of Luxembourg. He knows the way quite well as he has been along there with me more than once. It is one of the loneliest corners in Eastern France. There is no proper road, only a rather wide bridle-path through ploughed fields which skirts a few isolated villages and avoids the approach to any city. Anyway, the news of what has been going on in Mézières has not had time to spread itself in that direction. There are no patrols along the paths and no garrisons anywhere near. If, after the break of dawn, a few labourers going to their work should gape at you, they will be over-awed at sight of three soldiers of the Republic on the driving-seat of a market cart."

He broke off for the sole purpose of gazing anxiously into her tear-filled eyes and to murmur with a short sigh: "How lovely you are, my beloved!" and then went on in the same matter-of-fact tone of voice, giving his direction clearly, succinctly, like a general issuing commands, certain that they would be obeyed. "I have given Tony all the necessary papers in case they are required. They are in perfect order, signed by Tallien, Barras and our faithful friend, Armand Chauvelin. These signatures are the most perfect specimens of forgery I have ever seen in all my life, and I have had some experience in forged safe-conducts, have I not? I need not tell you who did them, nor what I paid for them. The fellow runs great risks every time he serves me, but he must have put by a cosy little fortune by now and he knows that in case of trouble he can always count on us—"

Once again he paused, his eyes fixed into vacancy, his mind at work on the great problem which he would confront on the morrow. The children were safe, of that he was sure. So sure, in fact, that something of his almost supernal confidence in himself had communicated itself to Marguerite. She had contrived to swallow her tears and it was in a steady voice that she put the all-important question to him:

"What about you, Percy?"

He gave a little chuckle.

"What about me?" he echoed with inimitable merriment. "Why, sweetheart, I will be kissing your lovely hands — let me see — in a sen'night from to-day at the Fisherman's Rest in Dover, while that nice little baggage, Suzan Jellyband, will be seeing to the creature comforts of poor Madame de Saint-Lucque. . . . Hush! my adored one," he added quickly, and placed a finger over her mouth, for she had been on the point of speaking. "If you say one word more I shall be tempted to silence you with a kiss, and then . . . then God help me! for it would be so difficult, so very difficult to slip away. Now you must try and get a couple of hours' rest if not of sleep."

He stooped and picked up the bundle which he had brought with him in the cart. Out of it he took a couple of cushions. One of these he disposed upon the floor in a corner of the room, the other he propped up against the wall. She watched him smiling.

"Promise me you will try and rest," he urged. "The children are asleep and you must not worry about them any more, promise."

She contrived to say firmly "I promise," and did her best to appear comfortably installed on one cushion with her head resting on the other.

He did not look at her again, turned the lantern so as to shade its light from her eyes.

Before he left the room he said earnestly:

"You don't know what your presence here this time has meant to me. God bless you."

In the meanwhile, in the tap-room after that one moment of subdued emotion when their chief's laughter rang so merrily in their ears, Sir Philip Glynde, his eyes fixed on the communicating door, murmured with a quick sigh:

"Poor old Percy!"

"Don't say that!" Sir Andrew Ffoulkes protested earnestly, knowing what was passing in the minds of the three friends. "Percy adores his wife. We all know that. And she worships him. But those two wonderful people would be the first to resent the idea of any of us being sorry for them. They are prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause they have at heart. Their lives, their entire fortune . . ."

"Their love?" put in one of the others.

"Their love, yes," Ffoulkes assented; and then added after a second's hesitation: "He, at any rate. He has proved it more than once. But, of course, with a glamorous woman like Lady Blakeney it is difficult to guess just what she feels."

"What about you, Ffoulkes," St. Dennys put in with a smile. "You ought to know what all that sort of thing feels like. The long separations, the constant 'farewells.'"

None of the others passed a remark on this. They all knew Ffoulkes's love for his young wife and that he, too, like all the others, was ready to follow his chief wherever and whenever he was called. He, too, like Blakeney, was ready for any sacrifice in the cause of suffering humanity. As indeed they all were. But he and Blakeney were the only married men in their ranks, and many a time had some of them like Glynde or Tony or St. Dennys probed their hearts wondering whether if they in their turn would be ready to sacrifice love for the sake of an ideal.

Sir Andrew gave a slight shrug.

"That's quite right, my dear fellow," he said lightly in answer to St. Dennys, and with that reticence in matters of sentiment peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon race. "But you see, Percy means so much to me, and I have such an admiration for him as a man and as our chief, that when I am working with him I seem to become different somehow . . . I feel differently, I mean . . . about everything. . . . I dare say this sounds queer, and I expect you all think me a bounder for saying it . . . but there it is. . . ."

There was no answer to this, for obviously there was nothing that could be said, and silence fell for a few moments on the congenial little company.

But all of a sudden the communicating door was opened and Blakeney came in.

"Well," he queried airily, "you four chatterers, have you had enough of this sumptuous repast, and have you got a last drop of something to drink for a thirsty man?"

Four flasks of brandy were immediately held up to him. He took two and drained them both.

"I know what you were talking about. Your chief under the whip of a virago, what?"

"Don't, Percy," Tony exclaimed, "it was hellish."

Blakeney could not help laughing: the earnestness and the towering rage of his friend filled him with boyish delight.

"I am sure it was," he admitted, "but how else were we going to engage the attention of that huge crowd long enough to give you three fellows time to deal with those poor kids, with the three troopers and with the cart? And you did it splendidly. And that awful time you had lying in the open field, trussed like a brace of chickens, frozen nearly to death. My God! but you were wonderful! weren't they, Ffoulkes? There are no finer men in the whole wide world than you fellows who honour me by your friendship. God bless and reward you! You have been wonderful to-day."

He appeared to be in the highest spirits though to the keen ears of his devoted followers the voice of their valiant leader sounded perhaps a trifle husky, a little less vibrant than usual.

"Thank Heaven!" he added with a short, quick sigh, "Lady Blakeney will know nothing of what happened in Mézières."

"And she never will," Lord Tony declared fervently.

There was a short moment of silence until Blakeney exclaimed:

"Sink me! I never thought a woman could hit quite so hard. I had a good wacking from my friend Chauvelin once. Not himself, but a pair of lusty bullies. It would have made his heart glad to see me this afternoon. Mam'zelle Guillotine hit twice as hard as his myrmidons did that time in Calais. By George!" he concluded, with something approaching admiration, "what a woman!"

"What are you going to do with her, Blakeney," Glynde asked, "when you've got her?"

There arose an animated discussion as to what should be done with the noted fury. Hanging was, of course, too good for her. Lifelong imprisonment to repeat her experiences in the Bastille would be far too merciful. Tony, who felt particularly bloodthirsty, had read something about lynching in America. He would have liked to have seen the harpy who had laid hands on his chief either burned at the stake or beaten to death, something peculiarly painful and lingering, he urged.

Blakeney said nothing while the matter was being discussed. When the arguments were finally silenced he rejoined:

"You sadistic young ruffians! But you won't get your way with Mam'zelle Guillotine, you know."

"Why not?"

As Blakeney made no immediate reply to this, Tony queried anxiously:

"You are not going to let her get away, Percy, are you?"

"No!" Blakeney answered. "I won't do that, I promise you."

The last sight Marguerite had of her husband was when she peeped out under the hood at the back of the cart. His tall form was still vaguely distinguishable through the fast gathering gloom. He stood, a solitary figure, under the portico of the Cosy Corner. Bare-headed. The falling snow made white patches on each of his shoulders. His face she could no longer see. Tony clicked his tongue. The horse's hoofs grated against the frozen road. The cart gave a lurch and moved slowly away into the night. And darkness swallowed the solitary figure of the great leader, who after a moment or two turned and went within.

BOOK V

Chapter XXV: THE MAN IN BLACK

Saint Félix is situated half a league, not more, from Grécourt. The latter in itself is not much of a town, all it does is to serve as a stopping-place for one or two diligences that did not halt in Mézières. It also was noted for its fortnightly horse and cattle market which used to be the scene of great activity in the olden days, and of festive gatherings during the spring and summer months when music and dancing went on all day and half the night, on the grass plots of the cabarets around the market place, and copious drinking and jollity in their respective rooms. But all this merry-making was now a thing of the past. Farmers and cattle-breeders did stroll into the city once a fortnight with their live stock such as it was: poor half-starved animals they were for the most part, because food was dear and scarce now that the brains of the country concentrated on the quickest way to get rid of all landowners who before this era of equality and fraternity had helped nature to produce the necessities of life for man and beast. It was the eve before market day when Gabrielle Damiens mounted on her whilom swain's white charger rode into Grécourt. She was in an anxious and moody frame of mind. The disappearance of the two Saint-Lucque children, coming on the top of her disappointment over the rescue of the Marquis and the young Vicomte, had dealt a smashing blow not only to her pride, but chiefly to her burning passion of hatred and revenge. After she had left the three soldiers on the road, she wandered on horseback first into Mézières, then feeling unconquerable restlessness, she prowled about in the fast-gathering darkness along the country roads oblivious of time and place; like an unquiet spirit seeking repose. At one time she almost lost her way. She hardly knew where she was when she came on a deserted village, or rather what had been a village once and was now only a mass of ruins. She gave the charger his head and let him roam around the tumble-down cottages and what had once been the village street. "This must be Saint Félix," she thought. "And Grécourt must be over that way."

She turned her horse's head in the direction in which she thought the little township lay. The short interlude had caused her to gather her roving thoughts together. But only momentarily. As soon as she found herself on the right road once again, off they went at a tangent. The image of that great, hulking creature, André Renaud, rose out of the darkness confronting her mental vision. The problem of the man's personality, his tempestuous wooing, his exuberant temperament puzzled and harassed her brain, taunted her with its unfathomable mystery. If the man whom she had kissed and trusted and subsequently chastised was not the master sleuth sent to her from Paris, who and what was he? And what had become of him while the crowd dispersed and she herself rode away? She had no recollection of him after she had snatched the reins of the white charger out of his hands and left him lying on the ground muttering threats and imprecations. She reached Grécourt in this confused state of mind. Even the sight of the diligence which stood in the yard of the Bon Camarade where she intended to spend the night did not rouse her out of her moodiness. She drew rein. The ostler ran along to aid her to dismount. Scorning his help she jumped down from the saddle. The landlord came along quickly. His manner, when in the new arrival he recognised Mam'zelle Guillotine, became almost servile. "What did the citizeness require?"

"Supper and a room. I leave again early tomorrow." After which she demanded:

"When did the diligence come in?"

"About two hours ago, citizeness."

"Where is the corporal?"

"In the tap-room having supper."

"Many people in the tap-room?"

"A good number. It's market day to-morrow."

"I know that. I want my supper in a quiet corner. By the way, what is your name?"

"Magnol Fernand. At your service, citizeness."

"Get me something hot then, Citizen Magnol, and be quick about it."

She made her way to the tap-room. It was of the usual pattern to be found in varying sizes in every inn and cabaret of eastern

France. Drab-coloured walls that had once been white. An iron stove with inside chimney rising to the blackened, rafted ceiling. A long, trestle table in the middle of the room. Benches each side of it, and the inevitable odour of boiled cabbage, garlic, damp clothes and humanity. A score or more of men were sitting at the centre table consuming platefuls of soup with much sound of gustation and smacking of lips. Their steaming contents gave forth the insistent odour of garlic and cabbage.

A girl with tousled hair and dressed in a promiscuous conglomeration of rags, went round the table bearing hunks of bread on a platter. Her name was apparently Philomène. There was hardly any talking in the room, except for occasional calls for Philomène and for bread.

When the door was opened and Gabrielle came in a few heads were turned in her direction. Not by any means all. Most of the men knew her by sight as a matter of course, but these were not the days of cheery, friendly greetings, and after a moment or two the smacking of lips and plying of metal spoons went on as before. She strode across the room. The landlord hovered round her and piloted her to a corner of the room where two small tables were seemingly disposed for the reception of privileged guests. One of these tables was occupied by a solitary guest, a man dressed in sober black. Gabrielle bestowed on him a quick appraising glance. She sat down at the other table. Philomène brought plates, fork, spoon and knife and set a candle on the table.

"What will the citizeness take?" the landlord asked.

"What is there?"

"Cabbage soup . . ."

"I can smell it. What else?"

"A piece of pork with beans."

"What else?"

"Potatoes . . ."

"Good. Bring me potatoes, beans and pork, and see that they are hot."

"Any wine?"

"Yes! Red. From the cask."

The landlord shuffled out of the room. Gabrielle sat on, waiting. She tried hard not to appear to be scrutinising her fellow guest too closely. Nevertheless, she took stock of him every time his head was turned away. She could not see him very well because of the flickering candlelight between her and her vision of him. She put him down as an official of some sort. Police probably. His hair was very dark and lanky. He wore it rather long at the back and tied at the nape of the neck with a black ribbon. It was plastered down his forehead in a rigid, straight line, which made it look like a black band just above his bushy eyebrows. He looked well groomed, although his cheeks showed dark blue against his sallown skin and the starched linen stock round his throat. In her present mood Gabrielle felt intrigued. A Marseillais, she thought, and wanted to hear him speak. Anyway, from the South.

She called to Philomène for salt.

Forestalling the girl, the stranger took the salt box from his own table and placed it in front of Gabrielle. She gave him a curt "Thank you," to which he responded: "At your service, citizeness," stressing the last syllable of *citoyen-ne* as is the manner of those in the South.

"You are a stranger here, citizen?" Gabrielle asked.

"I am a stranger everywhere, citizeness," he replied, "even in Paris from whence I came yesterday."

"Yes," thought Gabrielle, "you are distinctly of the South, my friend. Your accent is slight but unmistakable."

"So you are from Paris, citizen?" she went on. "Are you making a long stay in our province?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"How soon I can lay hands on a reputed criminal."

"How so?"

"I am of the secret police, Citizeness Damiens," the man replied quietly, and with his left hand he turned back the lapel of his coat, displaying a metal badge surmounted by a tricolour ribbon. It was then that Gabrielle noticed that his right sleeve was pinned empty to his coat.

"You know who I am?" was all she could think of saying at the moment.

"If I did not would I have revealed my mission to you?" he countered dryly.

He spoke all the time in an even, monotonous tone of voice, without the slightest inflexion or emphasis, like one reciting a lesson learned by heart.

"What is that mission, citizen?" Gabrielle queried, this time in her wonted peremptory way.

"As I have told you, citizeness, to hunt after a reputed criminal."

"If he is reputed I must know about him. I know every criminal in the Province of Artois. Who is he?" she demanded, paused for a second or two, and suddenly gave a gasp, exclaiming: "Do you mean the English spy?"

The stranger nodded.

"Do you know him, citizeness?"

"No," she faltered.

"Nevertheless, if rumour does not lie, you had him under your hand a few hours ago. Why did you let him go?"

His voice was still quite even and only just audible, but there was something stern now and rasping in its tone. He did not look at the woman while he spoke, but over her shoulder on the drab-coloured wall on which to the words "Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité," traced thereon in black chalk, had been added the words: "ou la Mort." He looked that way so insistently that Gabrielle, fascinated, turned round to look. But she was not the woman ever to be intimidated by the suggestion of a threat, wherever it came from. She gave a shrug and a harsh, ironic laugh.

"If you have those sort of ideas in your head, citizen," she said dryly, "You won't go far in your career."

"What do you mean?"

"That you are altogether on the wrong track. The man whom I horsewhipped this afternoon is not the celebrated Scarlet Pimpernel."

"What makes you say that?"

"It was he who first called our attention to the disappearance of the cart."

"A clever trick, since he took you in."

"What do you mean by a clever trick?"

"He had to get out of your clutches, citizeness, or you would have killed him."

"I certainly would—" she began, paused a moment or two, then went on: "Do you dare to assert that the man who has been spending the last two days in Mézières, who effected the arrest of the traitor aristos the *ci-devant* Saint-Lucque and her brats, and who was sent out specially from Paris by Armand Chauvelin to aid me in the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, do you dare to tell me that he was . . ."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel himself," the man broke in firmly. "He was not sent out from Paris, citizeness. He only said he was."

"He was André Renaud — I saw his papers. They were signed by Maximilien Robespierre and two other members of the Committee of Public Safety; André Renaud . . ."

"He was not André Renaud," the other broke in again with increased emphasis.

"How do you know?"

"Because I happen to be André Renaud, citizeness." Gabrielle Damiens gave such a start that the table on which she had leaned her elbows gave a lurch, and the beer bottle which did duty for a candlestick rolled down on the floor. The candle broke, the light went out and the corner where these two sat in close conversation was in greater obscurity than before.

Gabrielle's glowering eyes searched the face of the stranger through this gloom.

"You!" she burst out, gasping for breath.

"Even I," the man responded coolly.

"I don't believe it . . . I don't believe it," she reiterated over and over again, trying to steady her voice, and to stop her teeth from chattering.

"Why shouldn't you believe it, citizeness?" he retorted. "Who do you suppose I am?"

"I don't know," she murmured gruffly.

He gave a short laugh.

"Well, I am not the Scarlet Pimpernel, am I, or I shouldn't be here talking to you?"

That was true enough. Gabrielle passed the back of her hand across her moist forehead. He went on:

"You have been believing and disbelieving so many things here to-day, citizeness, no wonder you are bewildered, and," he added, with, for the first time, the hint of a threat in what he said, "are like now to commit the greatest blunder of your career. And let me tell you, citizeness, that you are not quite so indispensable in the estimation of the government that you can afford to commit blunder after blunder as you have done in the past few days."

She pulled herself together, straightening out her massive shoulders, and retorted defiantly:

"Blunders? I? You forget to whom you are talking, Citizen—"

"André Renaud," he put in with a thin smile.

Whereupon she gave a shrug.

"I don't believe it," she again persisted.

"It makes no matter," he countered coolly, "whether you believe in me or not. I can do my duty without any help from you. I know all the plans that have been made for the capture of the English spy, and I also know that you, Citizeness Gabrielle Damiens, Mam'zelle Guillotine, have run counter to the orders sent to you direct by the Committee of Public Safety . . ."

"How do you know that?" she broke in roughly. "Who was . . ." She paused abruptly, afraid that she was giving herself away.

"It was Citizen Armand Chauvelin who told me what the orders were," he put in quietly.

"I don't believe it," she reiterated with parrot-like insistence.

"Shall I tell you what they were . . . and how you contravened them?"

No reply to that from Gabrielle. She sat there a veritable statue of obstinacy and sullenness, her elbows resting on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. Her mind had got back to that awful state of puzzlement and confusion of a while ago. The very name André Renaud, seemed to be burning inside her brain with letters of fire. She tried to recapture every phase of her association with the man. His arrival at the episcopal palace, her rage against him because he had come when the ci-devant Saint-Lucque woman was already under arrest, on a denunciation from the farmer Guidal. Guidal! She had flung the name in the man's face at the time, whereupon and with consummate self-possession he had erased Guidal's very name from the tablets of her memory. It came back to her now. What a fool she had been not to confront the farmer with the man who called himself André Renaud and claimed to be the master sleuth sent to her from Paris.

Then there was the man's personality, which now obtruded itself with exasperating persistence before her troubled mind. The more she thought of him the more did her brain reject the thought that that huge, hulking male creature with his coarse ways and brutal love-making could possibly be André Renaud the noted sleuth-hound, the tracker of criminals and traitors, a calling requiring suavity of manner, tact, effacement, every quality, in fact, which that rowdy, hoydenish lout did not possess. English — that's what he was. He spoke French, but he was English. He couldn't be anything but English — not with those huge legs and immense shoulders. Frenchmen occasionally were broad and powerful-looking, like this man opposite to her now. Though tall, a Frenchman was graceful and soft of speech, unless he was the spokesman of the government and was obliged to talk forcefully to a crowd of waverers.

Thoughts! Thoughts! Conjectures! There they were going round and round in the whirlpool of Gabrielle's brain. Her dark, glowering eyes remained fixed on the man who had set all this effervescence foaming and boiling inside her, making her temples throb and sending her blood rushing like a fiery torrent through her veins. He was almost sinister-looking in his funereal clothes and that black hair which looked like a mourning band round his forehead, with his measured speech, his sallowness and that empty sleeve. What a contrast to the burly, noisy boor who had made love to her, to his showy clothes and clumsy boots, his tousled yellow hair and florid skin.

Gabrielle Damiens visualising all this, remembering the other man's fulsome adulation, and his resounding kisses, cursed herself for a fool. Fortune and fame were in her grasp and she let everything go, even the chance of realising a part of her revenge.

The ci-devant Marquis and the boy were gone, the two brats also, probably. And all of this the work of a man who had bamboozled her. Led her by the nose until she became like a despicable noodle, mistrusting her own powers of which she had always been so justly proud.

"If I only could trust you," she burst out, staring like a wild cat at the sober, placid figure of the man before her. "Whom else could you trust, citizeness, if not the man who was sent down for the express purpose of aiding you in the capture of the greatest prize that ever fell to the lot of a patriot like yourself?"

He paused a moment. Looking her full in the face. Returning stare for stare. His eyes looked more sinister than ever overshadowed by those bushy eyebrows and surmounted by that band of straight black hair which seemed to cut off the upper part of his face. It appeared to begin at the eyes and to end just above the chin, where the stock of snow-white linen presented such a crude contrast to his blue-black cheeks and chin. He did look sinister, devilish, for there had crept a look into his eyes that was both malefic and menacing.

"And that prize," he resumed after that short ominous pause, "you actually allowed to slip out of your hands. You held him at your mercy and you let him go."

"I horsewhipped him," she murmured, through clenched teeth.

"Do you think he cared? What you did was to give his followers time to spirit away the two aristos. After that he disappeared. Or am I wrong?" he concluded with biting sarcasm.

Slowly, gradually, step by step, Gabrielle saw her spirit breaking and her will-power crumbling under the vague terror engendered in her by this man's malignant personality. He dominated her. She was half afraid of him, in a way that she had never been afraid of anyone in her life before. She tried to think of him as a minor official, with far less influence with the powers up in Paris than she had. She thought of her own friends, of Robespierre, the virtual dictator of France, and of others in commanding positions who knew and appreciated her patriotic worth. They would stand by her, even if she had committed a blunder or two or contravened a casual order.

Something that went on in her mind at this comforting thought must have shown in her face, for the man broke in on her meditations:

"This is not the time to think of influential friends, citizeness. The dogs of the revolution are at one another's throats. Robespierre is at grips with Danton. Terror is the order of the day. The chase after traitors is swift and hot. Nothing but a spectacular coup can save you from death after the blunder you have committed, Mam'zelle Guillotine."

Having said this he rose.

"This place is insufferably hot," he said dryly. "I shall be at your service in the courtyard, in close proximity to your diligence and in close conversation with your troopers. I must feel assured that they are worthy of the trust which you have placed in them."

He stalked out of the room, leaving Gabrielle Damiens sitting in the gloom with her elbows on the table, her chin resting against her clenched fists, her eyes glowering. Glowering like those of a wild cat. Burning with hatred and with fear. She watched the man walk through the room with a long, rather laboured stride. He was tall, but distinctly round-shouldered, and stooped as he walked. How different, through Gabrielle, to the rolling gait, the straight square shoulders, the heavy tread of her whilom courtier.

Something had to be done about the whole thing. Gabrielle Damiens was no fool. She knew even before this man began to threaten her that if she allowed the English spy to slip through her fingers again it would go ill — very ill — with her. And she would die un-avenged. The hated Saint-Lucque, and the whole brood of them would be spirited away if she blundered again. Well then, what had best be done? This man here with his airs of incorruptible officialdom — imitator of Robespierre what? — in his sober, well-cut clothes, might, after all, be of service. Might have ideas worth considering. He was a blood-hound, a tracker, he might have ideas. Time was getting short. There was the journey to Paris on the morrow, and the certainty that the English spies would work their coup in the forest of Mézières. Everyone thought that. Everyone believed it. Chauvelin had expounded his theory before the Committee of Public Safety, had submitted his plans for the capture of the arch-enemy. The Committee had approved of the theory and agreed to the plan. This man, this Marseillais with the stooping shoulders and blue chin, had knowledge of all that. He seemed to know everything, in fact, like one associated with the high powers in Paris. He knew all about the orders transmitted to her by Chauvelin. He had heard of her defiance and contravention of the orders.

There were calls for the landlord just then. They came from outside. Sharp and peremptory they were, coming from one who was not used to being kept waiting. Gabrielle thought she recognised the voice with its accent from the South. At once there was a commotion. Citizen Magnol ran in and out of the house, backwards and forwards from the tap-room to the kitchen, carrying bottles and tins labelled "cloves" and "nutmeg" or "sugar." After a time he came in carrying a huge bowl of steaming mulled wine. Philomène was hard on his heels, laden with a number of pewter mugs.

"What's all this?" Gabrielle queried.

"Hot wine, citizeness, for the soldiers," the landlord replied.

"Who ordered it?"

"Citizen Renaud from Paris. He thought the men looked starved with cold. . . . They certainly look it . . . This will do them good."

He took a ladle full of the hot stuff from the bowl, tasted it and smacked his lips. The company at the trestle-table watched the proceedings with covetous eyes. The men laughed. One of them said: "It looks good." Another declared: "I'll have some of that, too, citizen landlord."

"So will I," said a third.

"And I," came lustily all down the length of the table.

"Make haste, citizen landlord," they all shouted at him, as he held up the bowl with both hands and marched with it as with a trophy out of the room. Philomène ran in his wake, carrying a load of pewter mugs. Their exit was accompanied by lusty cheers, which after a moment or two found their echo in the yard outside.

Gabrielle struggled to her feet, feeling unaccountably weary. Her legs felt heavy like lead. She picked up her mantle and, wrapping it round her, stumped slowly out of the room.

André Renaud — was he really André Renaud? — was out there in the yard. Half a dozen troopers were gathered round him, all laughing and bandying jokes. The landlord had just come out carrying the bowl of mulled wine. Philomène was close behind him with the pewter mugs. They came to a halt, Magnol holding up the bowl in accordance with the custom of the country, for the customer who paid for the drink to pronounce his approval. This the black-coated stranger did, he took the ladle offered him by the landlord, and pronounced the mixture good.

The landlord assisted by Philomène now went the round, distributing the hot drink. The soldiers raised their mugs, cheering the black-coated stranger. Nor were the men in the diligence forgotten. From them, after their long confinement in the narrow space, came huzzas and cheers more lustily than the rest.

"Shall we give the prisoner a hot drink, too?" the stranger suggested. "It will put heart into her."

The corporal in charge was quite willing.

"Why shouldn't she get drunk, poor thing?" he said lightly.

He and the men were having a good time. They felt kindly disposed towards that wretched woman, who was being trundled about in a jolting vehicle with nothing short of trial and death at the end of this awful journey. Once or twice during the day she had been jostled out by order of the corporal in charge of the escort. She had been given food on arrival at the Bon Camarade, when she was thrust in and out of the coach as if she had been a bale of goods. But not once during this long day did a word of complaint escape her lips. She sat in a corner of the vehicle, motionless and silent. The soldiers were not cruel men, not all of them by any means. There were some who felt quite sorry for her, especially when Mam'zelle Guillotine came a while ago and had a look at her. Such torrents of

abuse as then poured from the lips of the noted patriot, even the troopers had never heard before. But the woman never moved. She scarcely seemed to hear. Yes, the men had been sorry for her then. But, *que voulez vous?* Duty is duty, and disobedience to orders punishable by death.

The corporal in charge was not averse to allowing the prisoner to take a mug of hot wine at the hands of the stranger who was so generously paying for this treat. There was nothing in his orders against that. Two of the men even got out of the coach to make room for him and helped him up the step because of his one arm, when he handed a mug to the wretched woman and stood by while she drank it down.

Gabrielle had been standing all this while outside the door of the inn gazing at the animated scene. Her glowing eyes followed every movement of André Renaud. He had just come out of the diligence when he caught sight of her. The lanthorn which hung from a rafter under the projecting roof was above his head. The new style sugar-loaf hat which he wore threw an irregular shadow over parts of his face. It also caused him to look taller than she had thought him before, in spite of his decided stoop. Below the hat the funereal looking band of black hair encircled his forehead and the top of his long nose, were the only features visible on his face.

Gabrielle strode across the yard, and he came on to meet her.

"What right had you," she demanded roughly, "to interfere with my men?"

He was profuse in his apologies.

"A thousand pardons, citizeness," he pleaded with unwonted humility; "I did it for the best. The men were getting restive as the cold got into their bones. They will fight better now, being warm inside. I was sure you would approve."

The false air of humility did not last long. Already his voice had become harsh and his tone dictatorial. Gabrielle was up in arms.

"I am not starting before dawn," she declared curtly; "time for them to freeze again before then."

Greatly to her surprise he seemed to acquiesce.

"You must do as you please," he responded dryly, paused a moment, then added with a regretful sigh:

"And so we shall miss that elusive English spy again!"

"Miss him?" she countered. "Why should we, or rather I, miss him?"

"Because, as I said before, the men are already impatient and restive, what with the cold and the delay. If you wait about here all night their enthusiasm will fizzle out before you reach the forest. It is only a fizzle now. You blame me for giving them a warm drink, but they were more tired and dispirited than you think. Make a start soon, citizeness," he urged with great earnestness, "their blood is warm now, don't let it cool down again. You could be in the forest before the dawn and the weather is just perfect for the capture of a gang of marauders like those English spies."

Then, as she remained obstinately silent, he continued with a note in his voice which sounded like a solemn warning:

"Your policy, citizeness, believe me, is to travel by night and to rest by day. The English spies are night birds. They only fly about in the dark."

She was looking straight past him now, across the yard where the bulky diligence with its inside load of picked men loomed out like a huge black mass darker than the darkness around. It held the one thing that to Gabrielle Damiens was more precious than anything on earth, more precious than life itself — her chance of revenge. It was all very well for this man here and for all the Committees in Paris to think only of the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel; but for her, Gabrielle, who had spent sixteen years in a living tomb to suit the ambitious intrigues of the Saint-Lucque family, the thought of wreaking her revenge on the entire brood outweighed any thought of patriotism or personal advancement. That woman in the diligence meant more to her than a whole army of English spies.

She stood there brooding, unable to make a decision. She felt that in a way this man, André Renaud — was he really André Renaud — was right, whoever he was. The English spies were night birds who flapped their wings only in the night, and they were out to wrest that woman Saint-Lucque out of her clutches. Yes! the man with the maimed arm was probably right, and as for her, Gabrielle, the double capture was the prize to aim for. There had been so much talk, so many intrigues and so much mystery around the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, that she herself was caught in the vortex of hatred against the man and in the torrent of this mad longing to see him brought to ruin and to death. The man who had made love to her! The man whom she had kissed! Who had mocked and derided and flouted her! The man whom she had held at her mercy under her whip-lash and whom she had allowed to escape from full retributive justice.

She hated him! By Satan and all his horde, how she did hate him!

"His was not really a clever impersonation," the man in black broke in casually on her thoughts. "I wonder that you, citizeness, who have a great reputation for shrewdness, were so easily taken in. You have met men of the secret police before now, was he at all like any of them? Just think of our mutual friend, Citizen Chauvelin. He is the master of us all. We try to model ourselves on that pattern. Suave. Soft of speech. Gentle of manner. There you have your successful tracker of spies and criminals. Not a great hulking, blundering lout like the man who courted your favours. Look at me, citizeness, and think of him and then say which of us two is the most likely to trap those audacious English spies?"

She did look at him. Suave. Soft of speech. Gentle of manner, he was the very replica of Armand Chauvelin.

She had, however, remained as was her wont, obstinately silent, nor did he say anything more for the moment. He allowed her gaze to travel over his stooping figure, his lean jaw and empty sleeve; a slight, ironical smile hovered round his lips. But this Gabrielle could not see. Then there was silence between them for a time. A distant clock in the city struck ten. The night was going to be very dark. Only a thin film of snow fell intermixed with rain. It no longer spread a mantle of white over the ground, rather did it turn to slush and mud as it fell. The troopers when they had drunk their fill of the good mulled wine, turned into the coach-house for shelter. The doors and windows of the diligence had once again been hermetically closed on the six picked men and their unfortunate prisoner. And gradually all signs of life were stilled in the yard of the Bon Camarade. And darkness became more dense. Almost palpable. The volets throughout the house had been closed one by one, only the door into the inn had remained open, and through it came filtrating a dim shaft of light.

These two, the man and the woman, remained as it were the sole occupants of this dark and noiseless place. They were looking at one another like two swordsmen about to engage. A few moments went by, and then Gabrielle suddenly turned on her heel and went

into the house. The man did not follow her. He remained standing almost motionless under the shelter of the projecting roof. He did not seem to feel the cold, nor was he impatient. The distant clock struck the quarter after the hour, and a minute later Gabrielle emerged once more out of the house.

She took no notice of the stranger, strode past him and called loudly for the corporal in charge.

To him she gave the order to make an immediate start.

In a moment the Bon Camarade awoke from its torpor. There was running and shouting. Orders and counter orders. Horses pawing in their stables, the clatter of their hoofs on the cobblestones of the yard. Volets and windows thrown open, heads thrust out to see what was going on. Ostlers and grooms busy. The landlord fussy and obsequious. The team was put to. The carriage lanterns lighted and fixed in position. The escort prepared to mount. A few street urchins ventured into the yard and stood round the diligence gaping at its closed doors and windows, watching the soldiers and the horses, passing criticisms and remarks in their shrill childish voices.

And towering in this vortex of sound and movement the massive form of Mam'zelle Guillotine wrapped in a fur-lined mantle, stood out by the side of the tall, stooping figure clad in black, scarce distinguishable from the darkness around. The master sleuth from Paris.

Gabrielle Damiens prepared to mount to the box-seat of the coach.

"I am driving," she announced briefly, speaking to him. "Are you coming with me?"

"Not with you, citizeness," he replied. "I might hamper you. But there will be a horse to spare for me here. I will start as soon as may be and meet you at the cross-roads just before you come to Falize. Will you wait for me there?"

"Falize itself would be better. We could pull up there."

"As you like, but the cross-roads would suit you best, citizeness. If I am there, and I shall be, we would have command of the two roads and could then decide which would be the safest to take."

"What do you mean by that?" Gabrielle demanded. She had one foot on the axle of the near front wheel, preparing to mount.

"There has been a persistent rumour all day in Grécourt," he said in a whisper, "that the English spies are mustering in this district. They are said to be more numerous than they usually are. Some talk of a dozen, others of two score. Of course, the story may only be a canard. But it is best you should be warned. I shall know more about the rumour when I meet you, and, as I say, we'll take the road that gives the best chance of safety."

"I am not afraid," Gabrielle muttered, and without another word she climbed up to the box-seat and settled herself down, reins in hand, and driving-apron stretched over her massive thighs. The corporal in charge climbed up after her and sat down by her side.

A click of the tongue. A scraping and jolting and lurching. Much pawing and snorting. The iron hoofs drawing sparks from the cobblestones. The damp leather squeaking. The axles grinding. The metal jingling. A shout from Gabrielle:

"The cross-roads then."

A resounding crack of the whip and the lumbering vehicle started on its way.

Chapter XXVI: FORTUNE IN SIGHT

Long after the rumble of wheels had died away in the distance the quidnuncs sat around in the tap-room arguing, talking, discussing they knew not what, and drinking their favourite mulled wine. As a matter of fact nothing very important had happened. Nothing so very unusual. The farmers who had come to Grécourt with their live stock were the first to say that the sight of a coach with closed doors and windows and escorted by a posse of soldiers was not a rare occurrence in the city. A fortnight or so ago-it may have been three weeks, just such a coach had come through Grécourt on its way to Paris. Doors and windows closed. An important detachment of soldiers from one of the local regiments. Great secrecy. Everything, in fact, to arouse the curiosity of patriots who wanted to know what all the mystery was about. In that case it transpired that in the coach were three whilom aristos, one of them none other than the ci-devant Marquis de Saint-Lucque, who was known by all and sundry in the province. With him was his son, a boy who should have been at school. And there was also a caoltin, the abbé Prud'hon. Not at all a bad man, any more than Saint-Lucque and his boy were bad. But it seems that they really were traitors to their country. They wanted to sell the whole of the province of Artois to the Austrians, who were the arch-enemies of France, and who would immediately grind all the Artesians under their iron heel, seize their land, their crops, take their children into bondage and their wives as serving-maids.

And it seems that Saint-Lucque, the abbé Prud'hon and even the boy were all in a huge maleficent plot to do this evil thing. And so they were arrested and were being driven to Paris in the diligence which halted at the Bon Camarade, just as this other one had done this very night. In Paris it seems all three of them were going to be tried for treason. They would be condemned to death and then they were going to be brought back to Mézières where Mam'zelle Guillotine was going to make short work of them.

Yes, the worthy Artesian farmers nodded sagely, that was what happened to traitors who conspired against the Republic and worked against their own country and for the ruin of all the farmers who toiled for the welfare and prosperity of France.

Unfortunately in that case things did not turn out quite in the way that had been anticipated. For while the diligence conveying the traitors to Paris was passing through the forest of Mézières, it was held up by masked highwaymen who attacked the soldiers, killed and wounded most of them, maimed the horses and finally drove the coach away in the darkness, no one knew whither or in which direction. The highwaymen were never apprehended and the traitors vanished as if they had been spirited away by the devil himself.

That was the story that was told in the tap-room of the Bon Camarade on this February night, the eve of market day, by the farmers and breeders gathered in Grécourt for the occasion. Their spirits were not as high as they usually were. Money was scarce these days, in spite of the fact that money-grabbers and aristos had been put to death in hundreds, and the government up in Paris had solemnly promised that when there were no more aristos in France every labourer, every farmer, every toiler and worker would have the fortunes that those traitors had stolen from the people and then squandered like water. Every man in the country would be prosperous and free to do just what he liked and never need do another stroke of work if he had no mind to do it.

Well, promises were all right enough. But as far as agriculture in the Province of Artois was concerned, there was less money to be made out of it now than in the days when the ci-devant Saint-Lucque, the Belforts and others were there to farm the land and pay good wages to those who worked for them.

As for market day, it certainly was not the merry, profitable day it used to be in the past. What about to-morrow? The weather was so bad. Buyers would certainly be scarce and prices would come down to cut-throat level.

"What we each want is money to drop down into our laps without having to toil and moil for it. That is what the government has promised us and nothing less should satisfy us."

The man who spoke was younger than the majority of the guests around the table. This, no doubt, accounted for his lusty speech and full-throated voice. Most of the others approved of what he said and showed their appreciation by banging their half-empty mugs on the table. "Money to drop down into our laps, without having to toil and moil for it." No wonder the prospect appealed to all these harrassed, over-taxed, hard-working men.

"The government did promise . . ." somebody remarked.

"And nothing less should satisfy us," another echoed forcefully, while mugs were again banged on the table-top.

Right through the hubbub of voices and the noise of metal against the table, a clear, sharp voice suddenly resounded. It came from near the door, through which the one-armed stranger had just entered the room. He closed the door behind him, stood with his back to it, facing the company, every man of whom had suddenly turned astonished, enquiring eyes upon him. There was silence for a moment or two, while the resonant voice appeared to have raised an echo in the low-raftered room. The pewter mugs were slowly emptied. One old farmer gave a doubtful shrug.

"All very well talking," he said.

"Talking won't feed the stock or manure the ground," objected another greybeard.

"How are we going to set about it, citizen?" queried a third, with slashing irony.

"About making money drop into to your laps?" he countered.

There was a chorus of "Yes! yes! yes! how is it going to be done?"

"And when?" the youngster added, he who had first brought the question on the tapis.

"When?" the man in black rejoined. "Not later than to-night."

Well, of course, that was something undreamed of. Something so utterly foolish and impossible that the man who suggested it was either a devil or just a mad-man. Roars of mocking laughter greeted him, when he moved away from the door and took his stand at the head of the table. Mocking laughter, jeers, ironical huzzas were hurled at him, and cries of "How? How? How?"

By way of a reply the stranger called loudly for the landlord.

"Our throats are dry," he said; "we'll talk about this over full mugs of mulled wine."

Magnol came in, looking rather scared. He had been on the point of closing his house for the night, not being used to such late hours.

"Citizen landlord," the stranger commanded, turning to him, "a fresh bowl of spiced wine, the best your cellar can procure. Into it you shall pour a bottle of your best brandy. Make it hot and strong, well spiced and as sweet as love. And now be quick about it. We have important business to transact."

This all looked more serious than had at first appeared. The man in black was certainly no devil or he never would have ordered a bowlful of that excellent mulled wine, and all the more excellent with a bottle of good brandy poured into it. He had the welfare of farmers and stockbreeders of Artois at heart. No! No! he was no devil. A madman perhaps, but his next words would settle that question. For the moment he remained standing at the head of the table, obstinately silent, paying no heed to the many questions, some sarcastic, others encouraging and even peremptory, that were hurled at him from one end of the table to the other. Until presently the landlord returned with the bowl of hot wine and received a regular ovation, as he went the round ladling the drink into the mugs.

"This man here," one of the drovers said to him, "tells us that he is going to find a way of throwing money into our laps without our having to do a handstir of work for it."

"More power to his elbow," Magnol assented, "but how is he going to do it?"

"Let's drink his health and see," a farmer suggested who, apparently, had a practical turn of mind.

This was done, with much cheering, and a great deal of laughter mostly sarcastic and sceptical.

"I thank you, friends," responded the man at the end of the table. He scarcely touched the edge of his mug with his lips. "And now," he went on, and allowed his resonant voice to reach every ear and so fill every corner of the room. "Enough of this and let us talk seriously. You want to know how you can earn a substantial sum of money without toiling and moiling for it. You can do it by thwarting the machinations of a grasping harpy who to-morrow will, if you do not put a stop to it, pocket the sum of two thousand louis which by right of justice should be yours."

A gasp went right round the table.

"Two thousand louis!" came bursting out from every mouth.

"Where would two thousand louis be coming from?"

"Can you tell us that?"

"From the government who is paying that sum of money in solid gold to any party of French citizens who between them effect the capture of the noted English spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

It was a loud groan of disappointment that went the round this time when the vibrant voice of the man in black ceased to resound through the room.

"Oh! That!!!" was uttered in tones of withering contempt. Contempt which was expressed in several less salubrious ways. They had all heard of the English spy before, and they had been harangued before now by representatives of the government who came down from Paris and talked, and made all sorts of promises which where never kept. The English spy! Yes! they knew all about him. A myth, what? An imaginary personage whom no one had ever seen and whose personality was always brought to the fore whenever any aristos who should have been sent to the guillotine managed to evade justice. Whenever that happened there was always a lot of talk. It was at once asserted that the local police officials were not at fault. Of course they were not. The Commissary was invariably spoken of as a man of lofty patriotism and of great acumen. But obviously no man born of woman could grapple with a supernatural creature, with a Titan of immense stature, fiery eyes, hair that bristled and nostrils that emitted crackling flames.

Oh, yes! the good farmers and hard-working drovers and breeders had all heard these stories before. They were not going to listen to them again to-night. They drained their mugs, and grumbled as they drank.

"I am for bed," one of the men said and rose to go.

"So am I," concluded another.

In a moment most of them were on their feet. Moody and disillusioned, they never thought of saying "Thank you!" for the warm drink.

There was quite a stampede in the direction of the door, until that same resonant voice called out: "Stop!" And the call was so compelling that for the space of a minute of two the drive towards the door came to a halt, and twenty pairs of eyes were once more turned in the direction of the stranger.

"Are you fools or madmen?" he cried forcefully. "Are you really going to throw away the one chance you will ever have of bringing ease and comfort to your wives and children? Do you know what two thousand louis means? They mean one hundred louis to each one of you. One hundred louis to put in your pocket this very night. And for doing what? Wrestling the English spy from the clutches of a woman, who already has more louis and is richer than any of you can ever hope to be."

"What woman?" someone shouted.

"Mam'zelle Guillotine, of course."

A few of the men gravely shook their heads, others murmured: "That huzzy!" and muttered under their breath: "I wouldn't care to tackle her."

Be it noted that in spite of these grave misgivings on the part of the older men, the younger ones looked eagerly up at the speaker.

Mam'zelle Guillotine had apparently not many friends among this little crowd of country bumpkins. She had certainly become very prominent and very powerful in the province, but many there were who remembered her when in ragged kirtle and torn shift she wandered from one village to another and from an improvised rostrum outside the local inn spouted denunciation against every aristo, and every man who possessed as much as a square bit of land. And when she had finished spouting, she would drag a cap off the head of the man nearest to her and hand it round begging — yes, begging — for a few sous to pay for a bit of supper. And now she wore a fur-lined mantle and lived in Mézières in a palace.

Bah!!

And with riches had come arrogance. She was dictatorial, tyrannical as any aristo. She was feared, but she also was detested.

"Have you never realised," the stranger went on, not loudly but very quietly, leaning slightly forward, his eyes under those beetling brows searching the faces of his hearers, "have you never guessed that all along the arrest of the ci-devant Saint-Lucque family, one after the other, has been connected with the capture of the English spy? He has been at work in your district for some time. Was it not

he who dragged the ci-devant Marquis and his son and the calotin Prud'hon out of the clutches of Mam'zelle Guillotine? And now she means to have her revenge on him. She means to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel in the very act of trying to effect the escape of the woman Saint-Lucque, and thus earn the full reward of two thousand louis offered to any patriot who would lay that enemy of France by the heels."

"Lucky Mam'zelle Guillotine," he went on, certain now of holding the attention of his audience. "She has the means of earning twenty times as much money as would keep any one of you in affluence for the rest of your lives. Lucky Mam'zelle Guillotine! And I'll tell you something more, my friends, and that is that she already has the Scarlet Pimpernel gagged and bound in that diligence which you saw standing here in the yard for over two hours. How do you suppose I should know anything of this affair, if it was not already accomplished? No, no, Mam'zelle Guillotine is not one to talk till after a thing is done. And I tell you she talked to me about it all in this very room. And she laughed at me and mocked me and threw my helplessness in my face, knowing that I could do nothing."

"She was right there, citizens. I was alone. What could I do? I had not had the chance of talking to you all, of hearing from you that you would join me in the most glorious expedition ever undertaken by twenty patriots like yourselves."

Indeed, the man had no cause to complain of inattention. Never had an orator so engrossed an audience. Young and old hung upon his words. They exchanged glances, murmuring words of commendation. Eager, excited were they all. Impatient. Expectant. Wanting to hear more about this money, this gold, this fortune that could be theirs for the snatching.

"What must we do?" they asked.

"What must we do to be as lucky as Mam'zelle Guillotine?"

"Just do as I tell you," the speaker replied in stentorian accents, "and the fortune is yours."

"Tell us, then."

"Speak up, citizen."

"We'll go to hell with you."

The man threw back his head and laughed. Laughed immoderately. And the laughter came from the intense joyousness of his heart.

"Not to hell, citizens," he cried exultantly. "Only as far as the cross-roads on this side of Falize."

He dropped his voice and once again spoke in that subdued tone which was more impressive than any shouting could be.

"Some of you, if I mistake not," he said, "have brought in horses for the sale of livestock to-morrow. They could not be put to better use than the purpose which we have in view. If any man has a pistol let him take it, or a sabre if he has one, a goodly knife, a garden tool, a scythe, anything he can fight with. For there may be a bit of fighting, let me tell you. Mam'zelle Guillotine and her myrmidons will not give up their prize-capture without putting up a fight. Mounted on good horses, we'll easily overtake the party at the cross-roads on this side of Falize. I know they mean to call a halt there before deciding which road which they will ultimately take. Both lead to Paris, one through the forest, the other by a round-about way. Well! citizens, what do you say? Shall we decide what their fate is to be? Shall we seize the coach and its occupants, one of which is worth one hundred louis to every one of you? Shall we? Shall we, citizens, who see your wives in ragged kirtles and your children cold and hungry, shall we snatch this rich booty from the hands of an overweening terrorist? What do you say?"

"Yes!" came from a score of sturdy throats, shouting in unison.

"Let's drink to it, then!" And the stranger raised his mug high above his head. He went on once again in his full, vibrant voice. "To the confusion of Mam'zelle Guillotine! To our success in snatching from her the prize that is ours by right! To victory!"

"To victory!"

And the mugs were emptied at one draft.

So compelling was this man's personality, so irresistible his oratory, that these men, some young and eager, others older and sedate, drank and shouted in a way that they never would have dared to do in a more sober mood. To drink to the confusion of Mam'zelle Guillotine would on normal occasions have entailed immediate arrest, prosecution for treason, probably. But this occasion was abnormal. One hundred louis dangling as a golden vision before the eyes of men who had never looked forward to a carefree future, made warriors of these simple country folk. They felt that the blood of heroes was coursing through their veins. Even the grey-beards shouted: "To victory!" as heartily as the youngsters. What would you? Money was so scarce these days! Everyone was so poor. So poor! Starvation was stalking the land. Children cried for bread. Work was grinding and wages small. No wonder that the thought of capturing the mysterious English spy and seeing a hundred louis fall into their laps inflamed the imagination of these ignorant rustics. A hundred louis! And golden louis at that! No dirty scraps of paper, mind you! And with nothing to do for it but an exciting adventure.

So "Hurrah!" for the man who had shown them the way to this marvellous good fortune.

There was only the unfortunate landlord, citizen Magnol, who did not feel as happy as his customers. He had crept back into the tap-room and had been standing in the doorway listening to the harangue of that black-coated, one-armed stranger. He had witnessed the incitement to treason, the appeal to the cupidity of a lot of witless boors, which of a certainty would land the lot of them in gaol. He had heard the shouts and the cheers, and he was terrified. When the cry to "Victory!" echoed from one end of the tap-room to the other, he turned tail and ran helter-skelter up the rickety stairs that led to the loft under the sloping roof, and bolted into the attic where his wife was already in bed. There he joined her, buried his face in the hard pillow and pulled the blanket right over his head so as not to hear anything more of the awful things that were going on down below.

But he was not destined to enjoy tranquillity for long. A few moments during which his wife, roused from her first sleep, tried in vain to get a word out of him. She had just turned over ready to go to sleep again, having made up her mind that her Fernand had had one of his many drinking bouts, when a heavy step came mounting up the rickety stairs. The sound was followed by repeated hard knocks on the door and a peremptory call for the citizen landlord. The door was thrown open and the black-coated stranger who was making all this pother stalked in. He carried a small lantern, which he flashed into the faces of Magnol and his wife, who sat up straight in bed, shivering and shaking with terror.

"Citizen landlord," he said. And he spoke as one in authority. "A grave injustice is being done to the loyal patriots who are at present under your roof. They are determined that the wrong done to them shall be righted this very night. I have told them how this can best be done, and they are going in a perfectly peaceful frame of mind to put their case before one of the highest authorities in the

Province of Artois. I will not mention names, but what the patriots propose to do is in accordance with the laws of the Republic as passed by the National Convention and in strict accordance with the Rights of Man."

He paused a moment, letting his words sink into the feeble minds of these two terrified individuals. Magnol was staring round-eyed not at the stranger, but into the flame of the lantern which appeared to fascinate him and to render him motionless and mute. Only his teeth chattered as if he suffered from ague. The woman had disappeared from view. Her head was buried in the bedclothes.

The stranger continued in the same authoritative voice: "Citizen landlord, two courses are open to you now. Either you side with the patriots in the cause of justice, in which case, if you give them the required help, there will be twenty golden louis for you . . ."

Once more he came to a halt. Magnol's fixed stare seemed suddenly to become galvanised. Cupidity never entirely absent from a peasant's nature gave a spark of vitality to his beady, black eyes. His gaze shifted from the light of the lantern to the hand of the stranger, in whose palm something jingled which sounded uncommonly like precious metal.

"I am a good patriot," he murmured through his chattering teeth.

"I know you are," the stranger rejoined, "that's why I have come to tell you that we count on you to side with us who are fellow patriots and give us what help you can. For," he went on solemnly, emphasising every word, "if you refuse to give us that help, I myself will denounce you as aiding and abetting treason by lending your house to a pack of conspirators and supplying them with food and drink."

Saying this, he turned back the lapel of his coat and allowed the light of the lantern to flash on the metal badge beneath it, which proclaimed him to be a high official of the national police force.

Magnol, scared and bewildered, passed the back of his hand over his humid brow.

"I don't understand," he murmured; "on which side are you, citizen?"

"On your side if you give me the help I need. Dead against you if you refuse."

Once more he allowed the precious metal to jingle in his hand. And Magnol, scared out of his wits, murmured feebly:

"What must I do?"

"Get out of bed," the stranger commanded, "and come with me. You will hand over to the patriots downstairs every gun, every pistol and sabre, every scythe, axe or other tool which you have got stored in your cellars."

"I haven't any stores," Magnol protested.

But he did get out of bed; the jingling metal was a magnet that would have lured him to Gehenna.

"Well, let me see what you have got; and then we will talk."

So far so good. Citizen Magnol, like any landlord of a prosperous country inn, had three or four serviceable guns, a pistol or two and a good number of agricultural implements carefully stored away. He allowed the twenty good patriots to help themselves to what they needed and soon these worthies had laid hands on every available weapon likely to be useful in a fight, if fight there was. And most of them hoped that there would be a good scrap at the very least. Three of them commandeered the guns, two others were quick enough to seize the pistols, while some had to be content with sickles or scythes. One man had a saw, another took a wood-chopper, and there were two or three who had brought their own guns with them, on the chance of getting a pot-shot at a hare.

After that there was a raid on the stables. Most of the men had come into Grécourt on their own horses, and there were a few nags which had been brought in for the sale, for those who had come on foot. There were two fine, mettlesome young horses that had been brought in by a farmer from Tourteron. These were at once appropriated by the stranger without any protest from the owner.

Thus the little cavalcade was formed. They were lined up in the yard, the horses champing and snorting in the cold night air. A pale watery moon had rent the bank of clouds and peeped down on the amazing scene more suggestive of mediæval times than of a winter's night in revolutionary France. The stranger mounted on one young horse held the other by the bridle. He gave the order to start and the cortège filed past him with many a hearty cheer and loud huzzas.

When the last of them had turned out of the yard into the road, he called to the landlord. Magnol had been standing by, gazing on the men, on the horses, on the primitive arms glinting in the blue light of the moon. He was like a man in a trance. He made sure that he was dreaming and would presently wake up to the sound of snoring emitted by his plethoric wife. He was still conscious of an awful feeling of terror, of speeches round him, of Mam'zelle Guillotine wielding her instrument of death, and of a tall, sable-clad figure spouting threats at him. A menacing "either-or."

"Citizen landlord!"

The voice struck his senses as with a whip-lash. He staggered and nearly measured his length on the ground. He blinked his eyes and shielded his head with his arm, for something had been flung at him, something that jingled as it fell at his feet.

The sound of the cavalcade galloping away down the road, the cheers and huzzas were gradually getting fainter. But now there was a fresh clang of hoofs on the cobblestones of the yard. Magnol pulled himself together, tried to collect his scattered senses. He looked about him and perceived a solitary rider wrapped from head to foot in a voluminous mantle. The rider held a second horse by the bridle. In a trice he was across the yard and disappeared round the angle of the house. Magnol could hear the young horses prancing and champing and finally settle down to a swift and fiery gallop.

Then only did Magnol stoop and pick up the missile that had been flung at him.

It was a purse and contained twenty golden louis.

Chapter XXVII: AT THE CROSS ROADS

Mam'zelle Guillotine had given the order to halt. It was here, at the cross-roads, that André Renaud had promised to meet her. Falize was distant less than a league away. The road ahead led straight to Paris. There was the secondary road which, as Renaud said, also led by a détour to the capital. Gabrielle was wishing he would soon come. The drive had proved very wearisome, for the roads were heavy and so was the old diligence with its load of armed troopers. And she felt lonely and dispirited. Even the thought of that woman, the last of that family which she hated with such intensity, failed to inflame her blood. The woman was safe enough for the guillotine, but there should have been five of that abominable brood to satisfy Gabrielle Damiens's lust for the blood of the Saint-Lucques.

She gave the order to dismount and the troopers sat by the roadside, or walked up and down the road trying to put warmth into their feet and hands. The moon, peeping through a bank of clouds, made the whole scene appear weird. It did not seem real. Not of this earth. Soon after the start one of the team had gone lame. The corporal in charge was bending over examining the fetlock. Gabrielle, restless and impatient, came down from the box-seat. Wrapped in her warm mantle, with the hood over her head, she looked like a huge furred animal stamping up and down to keep herself warm. Her keen ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound. She felt the tension that kept the men's nerves on edge. They, of course, could do nothing but wait while the time dragged on and there was no sign, as yet, of that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel whom they were out to capture.

The great lumbering vehicle loomed out of the wan grey light like some grim, spectral monument.

And all at once a sound which caused the men to pause in their pacing, to stand rigid and on the alert, ready to mount the very second that the order was given. Gabrielle too had paused. Her heart seemed to have stopped its beating. Her hot hands gripped the edge of her fur mantle, and with a sharp twist of the head she threw the hood back, away from her ears. The sound which she had heard was of two horses galloping at tip-top speed from the direction of Grécourt. Two horses? Would that be André Renaud? Or was chance really on her side and was it the English spy with one of his followers who were coming this way? She gave a quick appraising glance on the men and gave the order: "Attention!"

The men saw to the priming of their pistols, thrust them back into their belts and drew their sabres. The corporal went round to the door of the diligence, released the lock and to the men cooped up inside he also spoke the one word: "Attention!"

"If that should be the English spies," Gabrielle said aloud, so that the men might hear, "we are ready for them."

The order as far as the escort was concerned was to feign inattention and wait for the attack. The English spies were wily, and should they scent a trap they might scamper away to safety. And the men stood still and waited, their nerves taut, their senses strained. They were like greyhounds held in leash. And now with the Scarlet Pimpernel almost in sight, they were straining the leash to breaking-point.

It was the corporal who first caught sight of the black-coated stranger riding full tilt, from the direction of Grécourt and putting on greater and greater speed as he neared the crossways.

"The stranger with the one arm, citizeness," he said to Gabrielle. She drew a deep sigh of relief. André Renaud — she was sure of him now — had not played her false. With him to give her the weight of his personality with the troopers, she felt more sure of success. Here was a man worthy of her trust. Of late she had felt — oh! so vaguely — a certain weakening of her mettle. Once or twice she had felt conscious of the one thing she had never dreamed of before — Fear. Yes! on two occasions she had actually been afraid. Of whom? Of what? She could not say. It was something indecisively connected with the man with one arm and the fiery eyes under beetling brows. She had not actually been afraid of him or of his threats. He was of the secret police, but she did not fear the police. Her record for militant patriotism was unblemished. At the same time she felt reassured that he was no enemy, and was wholeheartedly on her side.

For Gabrielle Damiens was clever enough to know that her hold on the people of Artois was beginning to slacken. Popular she had never been. But she had been held in awe and that was what she liked. So far there had been no outward sign of waning in the fear which she liked to inspire. Fear? Yes! but no longer that kind of rough admiration which her ruthlessness and free speech was wont to call forth. She had not often indulged in tub-thumping oratory lately, but on the rare occasion when she did, the crowd around her was much thinner than it used to be. She was seldom cheered nowadays, and often she would see her audience diminish in number while she talked. Men on the fringe of the crowd would quietly steal away to the nearest cabaret. Women hardly ever came to hear her.

All these things were facts which had gradually forced themselves upon her mind. They were the result of her absorption in the one great object of her life, the destruction of the Saint-Lucque family. Thoughts of her revenge obtruded themselves into her oratory until it became dull through the monotony of its theme. The worthy Artesians got tired of listening to vituperations hurled at this one family of aristos, when they wanted to hear all about the doings of the Committee of Public Safety up in Paris, the execution of the Girondins, the quarrels between the Moderates and the Terrorists and other more interesting subjects.

Be that as it may, Gabrielle with her thoughts still centered on the Saint-Lucques and her disappointment in connection with their rescue by the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, was inclined after this to allow the man from Paris, whoever he was, to dominate her.

He was out to capture the English spy, she to keep her hold on the prisoner. True he was maimed and, as far as she could judge, past middle-age, in spite of his jet-black hair — which she was sure was dyed with walnut juice — but he had a commanding voice and would keep up the soldiers' morale more easily than she could.

The rider drew rein, arriving at full tilt, and pulled the young horses back on their haunches till they reared and beat the air with their forefeet. In an instant he was out of the saddle and close to Gabrielle. A voluminous dark mantle wrapped him up from head to foot, and the bridle of the two horses were curled round his one arm, leaving the hand free. He took hold of Gabrielle's wrist and drew her to the side of the road out of earshot of the men.

"I don't want to scare them," he said to her in a whisper, "but the rumour has gained ground and what's more it is true."

"What rumour?"

"The English spies have mustered a full force. Some put their numbers down to half a hundred. They were in hiding all day in and about Grécourt. As soon as you had made a start with the diligence they seemed literally to spring out of the ground. So someone told

me who saw it all. They were all over the town, swarmed in the market place, in the streets, the cabarets, everywhere. The inhabitants bolted into shelter like rabbits lopping off to their burrows. They were scared out of their wits. Some of them, however, ran to the police and demanded protection. The police duly turned out. The English attacked them with pistols. They killed and wounded a number of them, and then galloped away, hell-for-leather, in this direction."

He still kept a hold on Gabrielle's wrist; but now, when he paused for a moment in order to draw breath, she shook herself free and made for the diligence.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded, and seized hold of her arm again.

"Make an immediate start," she replied curtly.

"How far will you get," he countered, "with that slow-going vehicle? You cannot vanish into the night before the English rabble overtakes you, and they are more numerous than your escort. They are well mounted, too, let me tell you. Now I have two high-mettled horses here. One for you, the other for myself."

"You are crazy!"

"You would be crazy, citizeness, if you tried to flee with that lumbering vehicle, before a pack of well-mounted brigands."

"I would take the secondary road . . ."

"And risk losing the prisoner? The English spies would sight you before you came to the bend of the road. And what chance would your men have, out-numbered four to one?"

"I will not be parted from the prisoner," Gabrielle declared obstinately.

"Why should you be?" he retorted. "Listen to me, citizeness. Name of a dog! can't you understand that the only way to keep the prisoner out of the clutches of the English spies is to leave the coach here standing as a decoy, and to take the woman along with us?"

"Take the woman along with us?" she echoed fiercely. "What in the name of Satan do you mean?"

"You take one horse, citizeness, and I the other. The prisoner can ride pillion behind one of us. They are high-mettled three-year-olds, these horses. We'll be well away before the English horde has discovered that there is no one in the diligence, only the troopers. Order your corporal to wait here and stand his ground. To fight to the last man, and when he has captured the Scarlet Pimpernel, to throw him into the coach and start at once for Falize, where we will meet him as soon as we are satisfied that the storm has blown over and that the coast is clear. Come, citizeness," he urged, "there is no time to lose."

He paused a moment, tensely expectant. Then as she still remained silent and obstinate, he spoke the one word:

"Listen!"

The night was so still that from far, very far away, a confusion of sounds seemed to come floating on the midnight air. Only a murmur at first. Nothing more. A buzzing as from a swarm of bees.

"Listen!" the man said again. And now his voice, though hoarse and toneless, was soul — and spirit-stirring. Gabrielle stood motionless as a statue and listened. She heard the distant murmur like a swarm of bees. The buzzing and the droning. And then, through that confused sound, something like a shout. So vague, so distant, it could scarcely be heard.

"The prisoner, citizeness. It is her they are after."

That compelling voice with its commanding note pierced the armour of Gabrielle's obstinacy.

"Come," she commanded.

She strode to the diligence and he followed her with the horses. With her own hands she opened the door of the coach. The atmosphere inside was suffocating. There was a scramble and a scraping of feet, as the troopers were roused from torpor.

"Present, citizeness," they muttered in unison.

"The prisoner," she commanded again.

"Here, citizeness," one of the soldiers responded.

They pushed and they jostled, each striving to snatch a breath of fresh air at the open door. The unfortunate prisoner was pushed about like a bundle of goods. A feeble moan escaped her lips.

"Hold the horses, citizeness," the stranger broke in curtly.

She obeyed mechanically, moving like an automaton. And like an automaton she called the corporal and gave him what orders the stranger had demanded of her: "Fight to the last man. . . . Throw the English prisoner into the coach. . . . We will meet you at Falize." She watched the man put his foot on the step of the vehicle and with his one arm elbow his way to the woman's side, put that one arm round her and drag her to him. He wrapped his voluminous mantle round her and held her close.

"To horse, citizeness," he urged with desperate intensity. Again she obeyed and was already in the saddle, when the confusion of sounds far away, suddenly became more distinct. A shout arose and then another. Above the buzzing and the humming they arose and seemed to come from many lusty throats. And through the shouting and the buzzing there was a rolling and a drumming and the tramp of many hoofs.

On one high-mettled horse rode Gabrielle Damiens, known throughout the Province of Artois as Mam'zelle Guillotine, on the other a man wrapped in the folds of a black mantle had a woman in his arms.

The moon hid her light behind a bank of clouds.

Darkness fell once more over the land.

The riders galloped on and on into the night.

Chapter XXVIII: THE FIGHT

The troopers round and in the diligence were on the alert. They could hear in the distance the sound of horses' hoofs, the shouts and laughter which proclaimed the approach of the English spy and his followers. The English spy! whose capture would mean a goodly sum of money in the pockets of every soldier here present this night. The order to mount was given by the corporal, and in a trice half a dozen stalwarts were in the saddle while six others inside the diligence sat waiting with cocked pistols on their knees.

A few minutes of tense expectation went by, then suddenly round the bend of the road the forms of a dozen or more horsemen galloping, detached themselves from out of the gloom. At sight of the diligence they gave a wild cry of triumph, and brandishing a collection of miscellaneous weapons they rushed to the attack.

"Attention, citizen soldiers," the corporal commanded. "Shoot low. We must have this English horde alive or we'll forfeit half the prize money."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than with another outburst of frenzied excitement the band of hot-headed farmers and drovers tumbled helter-skelter out of their saddles and rushed to the attack. There was the diligence in front of them looming out of the night like a huge black mass. A fortress to be stormed as the Bastille, that monument of tyranny, had been stormed and reduced four and a half years ago. While some of the party started a hand-to-hand fight with the mounted troopers, others made for the diligence. But before they had come anywhere near it the corporal gave the word of command in a stentorian voice. The carriage door was suddenly thrown open and out came the half-dozen picked men, pistol in hand, eager and ready for the fight. The result of this move was nothing short of disastrous for the unfortunate soldiers.

They were not in the best of trim, after being cooped up in an airless box with only a few short periods of relaxation, for close on twenty-four hours. But apart from that they were from the first at a disadvantage. The attacking party rushed on them as they scrambled out of the coach. Not only were they outnumbered, but as they were forced to come out one by one through the narrow doors, they were fallen on with fists and sickles or axes and soon a number of them were more or less seriously wounded.

It was then that the corporal, who was in the thick of it all, suddenly became aware that the man with whom he was at grips at the moment was not the Scarlet Pimpernel at all or any of the English spies, but farmer Papillon with whom he, Corporal Orgelet, had drunk a mug or two of excellent mulled wine at the Bon Camarade in Grécourt only a few hours ago. He had known Citizen Papillon ever since they had run about together, barefooted ragamuffins in ragged breeches, bent on raiding the nearest apple-orchards.

"What the devil does all this mean?" he thundered, as his friend Papillon raised a powerful, menacing fist high above his head.

"It means that thou art a thief," the farmer fulminated in reply. "Aye! a thief and a liar, and that I'll teach thee not to cheat thy friends another time."

With this, he brought his fist down with a crash on his whilom boon-companion's head.

The fight, such as it was, degenerated into fisticuffs. Farmers and drovers expert enough with a gun when out after a hare or a rabbit had little experience in the use of a pistol or a sabre. Seeing that they were not making any headway with these weapons they cast them incontinently aside and relied on their fists, their sickles and woodchoppers to wreak what mischief they could. And they did wreak any amount of that, for they brought down and wounded a couple of horses, which was an infamous thing to do, and had the effect of turning the wrath of the soldiers into something like execration. They struck at their assailants with their sabres, shouting:

"Take that, thou limb of Satan!"

"'Tis with Mam'zelle Guillotine thou wilt have to reckon."

Indeed, the troopers had already realised that here were no English spies, only a set of drunken jackanapes who in their senseless frenzy were actually daring to lay hands on the soldiers of the Republic. The attack was either an insane hoax, or the result of some ghastly misunderstanding. For the soldiers and the attacking party were all friends together. There was Faret, the drover from Nérthon and Constant the washerwoman's son over St. Charles way, and there was Charon the farmer as well as Papillon, and even Antoine, who was own cousin to Corporal Orgelet. What in the devil's name was it all about? It was very mysterious and extremely foolish.

It was also very serious.

These irresponsible fire-eaters would have to be taught a lesson. They would have to learn to their cost that such wanton madness could not remain unpunished and that a man who dares to attack a soldier of the Republic and impede him in the execution of his duty must suffer for his crime. The fight had only lasted a few minutes, but of the thirty-two combatants who took part in it, on one side and the other, there were at least a dozen lying wounded on the ground. And there were the poor horses too. The whole affair might have become even more tragic than it already was. So far the troopers had been unable to use their pistols to good effect. The mounted men were slashing away with their sabres, and the others who had turned out of the diligence, had been at grips each with two or even three assailants who gave them no respite but pounded away at them with their fists. Corporal Orgelet himself was lying on the ground with his friend Papillon holding him down. He had already received from his whilom boon-companion one or two nasty cracks on the head, when with a clever twist of his body he contrived to get hold of his pistol and to discharge it into Papillon's thigh. The latter uttered a loud imprecation and rolled over on his side yelling: "Assassin! Thou hast murdered me!"

The sudden report, however, had the good effect of sobering the aggressors. It also brought the soldiers back to a sense of discipline, and gave them the confidence which this extraordinary surprise attack had so signally shaken. At once the fight between soldiers and civilians assumed its just proportions, and after a few more pistol shots had been discharged, a few more sabre thrusts gone home and a few stalwarts had been sent rolling over on the ground, Orgelet was able to call a "Halt!". The assailants were ready to surrender. He ordered them to be mustered up. Groaning and cursing, for most of them had suffered pretty severely at the hands of the soldiers, they were lined up, guarded by the troopers, some of whom were in as pitiable a state as themselves. The faint, grey gleam of a winter's night revealed some of them standing, others kneeling or crouching, some with their faces smeared with blood, their eyes bunged up and lips bleeding, all with their hair hanging lank and wet over their eyes. They did indeed present a sorry spectacle. Orgelet himself in a sad plight and dizzy with many a crack on the head, passed up and down the short line, eyeing the wretched men with wrath and contempt in his eyes.

"I ought to have the lot of you summarily shot," he said grimly. "Yes! shot here and now. And I will do it, too," he bellowed at them. "Unless you tell me at once what is the meaning of this abominable outrage."

"Thou can't add murder to thy other crimes, citizen corporal," Papillon retorted loudly, "to thy lying and thy cheating, and joining hands with Mam'zelle Guillotine to rob us of what was our due."

"Joining hands with Mam'zelle Guillotine to rob you?" Orgelet countered, lost in bewilderment. "What the devil do you mean? Of what did I rob you?"

"Of the reward due to us for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"The capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel?" Orgelet thundered at them. "You fools! You dolts! That is impossible now after the hellish row you have been making."

"Do not lie to us, Orgelet," one of the wounded men responded. "We know that thou didst capture the English spy in our district and that thou and Mam'zelle Guillotine will share the prize money which is rightly due to us. We came to avenge a wrong . . ."

"What balderdash is this?" Orgelet broke in gruffly. "Who says we captured the English spy?"

"I do," declared Faret, the drover from Néthon.

Orgelet gave a shrug of contempt, a light had suddenly broken in on the confusion of his mind. He was beginning to understand.

"If we captured him," he queried, "what have we done with him?"

"You've got him locked up in there." And with a dramatic gesture Antoine, who was own cousin to Orgelet, pointed to the diligence. "Thief! Liar, thy mother shall hear of this."

This was altogether too much for the corporal's gravity. He burst out laughing and continued to laugh immoderately until feeling faint and giddy with the pain in his head, he nearly measured his length on the road.

"Ah!" he said, his voice still shaking with inward laughter, "is that where that mysterious English spy is? . . . Well," he went on, after a slight pause, "go and get him out, my friends."

Funnily enough, in the heat and excitement of the fight the one object that had induced these madmen to commit the unpardonable folly of attacking troopers of the Republican army had been lost sight of by them. From the moment when they came to close quarters with the soldiers, thoughts of the Scarlet Pimpernel and the English horde vanished from their minds. The only idea that did remain fixed was the question of a hundred louis apiece which these soldiers had filched from them. But now, when Corporal Orgelet himself pointed to the diligence and said: "Go and get him out," there was, in spite of wounds and despite exhaustion, one concerted rush for the coach. Something like a scramble, in fact, which left an unpleasant trail of blood in its wake. The carriage door was still wide open. Farmer Papillon was the first to set foot inside the coach. He groped about the interior with his hands, administered vigorous kicks to supposed and non-existent occupants. Kicks which only reached his unfortunate boon-companions and drew groans and curses from them in response. Some seven or eight of them succeeded in entering the coach and as they tumbled one on the top of the other all they did was to aggravate their woes and the soreness of their wounds.

And all the while Orgelet and the men stood outside whole-heartedly enjoying the joke. For them the whole thing had degenerated into a joke. Whether in the meanwhile the English spies had gone never to return, whether their chance of earning a bit of money had vanished into the night air, on the wings of noise and confusion and hard blows freely dealt and received, they could form no idea as yet. One thing only was certain, and that was that orders must be obeyed. Orders were to fight to the last man and then proceed to Falize where Mam'zelle Guillotine would rejoin the party. Orgelet, who was a good soldier and good disciplinarian, rallied the troopers round him. He ordered the wounded to enter the diligence, and the others to get back to horse. The horses brought hither by the attacking party had wandered away across fields for the most part. A few had stampeded and bolted back to the stables whence they had come. Others again were presently recaptured, after a short difference of opinion 'tween man and beast. Those that were hurt must of necessity be walked along very quietly on the lead. Fortunately their wounds were not serious and Falize was not far.

As for the miserable aggressors, there they were, crestfallen, and dolefully nursing their wounds. It was easy to see that Corporal Orgelet and the soldiers looked upon them with contempt and pity rather than ill-feeling. The whole affair had been inglorious. Victory over such rabble was nothing to be proud of. Orgelet mounted to the box-seat and took the reins. The escort was formed once more. A crack of the whip and a click of the tongue and the team settled into their collars. The cumbrous vehicle once more started on its way, whilst a score of discomfited and bedraggled rustics made their way as best they could afoot or astride a horse, back to Grécourt.

Chapter XXIX: HELL-FOR-LEATHER

Blakeney held Eve de Saint-Lucque close to him under the folds of his voluminous mantle. Keeping to the edge of the road, where the ground was soft, he gave the mettlesome three-year-old full rein. He seemed indeed to have imbued his mount with all the devilment that was in his own blood, enjoying to the full the noble sport which in an earnest profession of faith he had extolled before his royal friend on that winter's evening more than a sen'night ago, when surrounded by every luxury that wealth and epicurism could devise, he had boldly declared:

"I'll back my favourite sport against any that has ever been invented for making a man feel akin to the gods. . . . With the keen air fanning your cheeks, with the night wrapping you round. With woman or child clinging to you, their weak arms holding tightly to your waist, with human wolves behind you while you ride for dear life through unknown country, riding, galloping, not knowing where you may land, out of one death-trap into another . . . that, Your Highness, is the sport for me . . ."

Gabrielle was doing her best to keep up with him. Something of his wild animal spirits had got into her now. No longer dispirited, no longer doubtful of success, she kept her mind fixed on this wonderful victory which she had achieved over those whom she hated so bitterly. True the other members of the execrated family had escaped her, but she hugged herself with the comforting thought that the Saint-Lucque children would be motherless, and their father a widower, and all of them broken-hearted. And this was thanks to André Renaud — or whoever he was — who had been the *deus ex machina*, the final instrument of her revenge.

Galloping sometimes behind him, at others some little distance in the rear, all that she could see of him through the gloom was the square mass of his mantle, which enveloped him from the neck to the knees. Yes, there was a devil in the man, she said to herself, while she made vigorous efforts not to lag behind.

After the first ten minutes of this wild gallopade, when the sounds of fighting, way over the cross-roads, had been swallowed up by the night, she had ceased to try to determine whither she was being led. She had lost all sense of direction. All she could do was to follow blindly on. It was only after a long climb over a steep portion of the road, when the man drew rein to give his horse a breather, that she ventured on questioning him.

"What is our first objective?" she asked.

"The unknown," he cried joyously in response.

"The unknown?" she echoed grimly. "You are mad."

"By George! I believe I am," he assented, and peeped down through the closure of his mantle at the burden which lay in his arms.

"We are not heading for Paris," she objected; "I do not even know where we are."

"No more do I, citizeness," he responded with a happy chuckle. "But we'll get somewhere in time. Before dawn if we are lucky. En avant, citizeness, the unknown means victory to two of us over our enemies. They'll never look for us there."

Even before he had finished speaking, he had touched his mount slightly with a spur and off they were again, he with his burden under his mantle, and she, galloping as close to him as she could, with her thoughts once more beginning to whirl about in her brain and her nerves strained to breaking-point.

At one time she thought that they were making tracks for Mézières. It was too dark to see much and Gabrielle Damiens was not a country wench, not a rustic who would know direction by instinct, by the way the wind blew, and by the fleeting clouds. Less than five years ago she was still a captive in the Bastille. Since then she had roamed in and out of cities and knew little of the open country. She had not seen much of her own Province of Artois. Mézières and its immediate neighbourhood she knew, of course. She also knew Grécourt and Falize and the main roads which led to Paris one way and to the Belgian frontier the other. It was not along either of these roads they were speeding now. Then whither were they going? Her tired eyes wandered round striving to pierce the darkness of the night. Now and again, when for a few brief moments the moon peeped through a fissure in the clouds, she thought to perceive somewhere in the distance a half-forgotten landmark: a jutting hillock, a belt of trees or the white church steeple of an isolated village. And when presently the road plunged into a thicket she thought it must be the forest of Mézières. But the forest of Mézières was more dense, the undergrowth thicker, the road in places more steep. It was here that the encounter with the English spies was to have taken place. No, no! This was not the forest of Mézières. Then what was it?

Once outside the belt of trees, her straining ears perceived the sound of running water. Swift and turbulent. Where could this be? They went over a bridge and to right and left she could hear the water rushing and tumbling down from a height over rocky projections. The rider on ahead put his horse to a trot, and she was able to come up to him. Quite close. It seemed to her then as if at a short distance away a few solid masses inky-black and grouped together loomed out of the gloom darker than the night. A village probably.

"The unknown," he called out, with a ring of triumph in his voice, and pointed in that direction. "En avant, citizeness."

And before she was aware of what was happening, he had caught hold of her bridle rein, and thereafter she knew nothing more, for her mount was being carried along with its stable companion, hell-for-leather at breakneck speed.

She made an effort to wrench the bridle out of his hand, but it was held in a grip that was as hard and as unyielding as steel. Half dazed with fatigue and want of breath, she tried to slide down out of the saddle. Her foot had just touched the ground the ground, when with a vigorous jerk he drew rein. Panting and snorting and beating the air with their hoofs, the horses presently came to a dead halt. Gabrielle fell clean out of the saddle and lay in a heap on the ground. She was on the point of swooning. Through a state of semi-consciousness, she heard the man calling repeatedly for the landlord, and later on there was a banging of shutters and creaking of door hinges. She lay quite still for she was bruised all over and inexpressibly weary. Again she heard the man's voice:

"Hey there! citizen landlord."

And she murmured: "Where am I?"

It was shortly before the dawn, a pale grey light in the east picked out with a silvery sheen here and there a sloping roof or the topmost branch of tall cypress trees. It was cold and damp. Gabrielle rolled over on her side. She was lying prone on the mud of the

road. Over her head something squeaked with irritating persistency. She glanced up and vaguely discerned a painted sign swinging on its post. She heard one man's voice alternating with another.

"Travellers, citizen landlord. We have lost our way. Can you put us up until daylight?"

There was some demur followed by a jingle of precious metal. After which the other voice put in gruffly:

"I have one room. . . ."

"This purse contains a louis d'or, citizen landlord. If there were two rooms there would be two louis."

Further demur apparently and then:

"It is too late for supper, anyway."

"If you bring us three mugs of hot mulled wine, there will be four louis d'or inside this purse."

After which a shrill voice called from above:

"Don't be a fool, Mathieu. Let the travellers come in and give them mulled wine while I get the rooms ready. It will cost you five louis," she went on after a slight pause, "and no questions asked."

The three of them sat at a table in the tap-room of this wayside inn. The landlord had brought in three large pewter mugs filled to the brim with steaming, spiced wine. There is no better drink in the world than mulled wine concocted by a French countryman. Eve de Saint-Lucque, looking a pitiful rag of femininity, gave a wan smile as Blakeney persuaded her to drink.

"You too, citizeness," he said turning to Gabrielle, who sat there sullen and mute doing her best to fight that intense weariness which took all the life out of her. Blakeney drew a flask out of his pocket.

"The wine is good," he said, "but a drop of good old cognac will improve it."

He poured out the contents of his flask into Gabrielle's pewter mug. She drank it all down at one draught.

A woman's footsteps were heard clattering down the wooden stairs.

"The rooms are ready," she announced curtly.

"And so are the five louis d'or," Blakeney responded gaily and counted out the gold in the woman's wrinkled hand.

"Will you follow our kind hostess, citizeness," he said, lightly touching Gabrielle on the shoulder. She gave no answer, spread out her arms over the table and let her head drop down heavily upon them.

"I'll stay here," she murmured almost inaudibly.

Blakeney stood by for a moment looking down on her with an expression in his face that was partly of contempt and partly of pity. She never moved.

He then went over to the other side of the table where Eve de Saint-Lucque sat fingering the pewter mug, and gazing out before her, at Gabrielle for a time and then at him. Her eyes circled with purple, her quivering lips, her wan and sunken cheeks, showed plainly the extent to which this unfortunate and plucky woman had suffered. But in spite of the pain which she still endured, in spite of intense fatigue, bruised body and aching head, it was a pæan of praise and benediction and reverence that her poor, weary eyes expressed as she looked on the man to whom she owed her life and that of her children.

When she rested in his arms throughout this mad gallopade through the darkness and the frosty air, he had at one moment peeped down at her through the folds of his mantle and murmured just loudly enough for her to hear:

"Your children are safe in the care of my friends. You are safe with me. The Scarlet Pimpernel has kept his word."

She had snuggled up closer to him then, striving to make herself as small, as little burdensome to him as she could. She had never seen him yet, but from the moment that he dragged her out of the diligence, she felt somehow secure in his protecting arms.

Now in this squalid room, with its drab walls and its menacing inscriptions: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort, with the silence around only broken by the prosaic sound of the other woman's stertorous breathing. Eve looked up and tried to make out something of the mysterious personality of her rescuer. All she saw of him was the top of his head masked by coal-black hair which lay across his forehead like a funereal band. She saw a pair of bushy, black eyebrows, a long thin nose, a chin buried in a white linen stock. The tallow candle set on the table flickered in the draught. The sight which she got of that curious face was fitful and intermittent, but in her own mind she was quite sure that the black hair was a wig and that the nose was a false one, and the beetling brow a final touch to what was obviously a disguise. She gazed at him whilst an expression of puzzlement settled into her eyes. Puzzlement that turned into an appeal. Would she ever look into his face, his real face, she wondered. Would she ever behold the man as he really was, or would he ever remain for her an enigma, a mysterious entity, the hero of her dreams?

"Do you think you can bear it Madame?" he now asked. He had said something else before that, but she had not heard. So she said simply:

"I can bear anything that you impose upon me. What is it?"

"Three, perhaps four days in a rickety, jolting cart with intervals of rest in derelict cottages with a hard floor for a bed and straw for a pillow. Can you bear it?"

"You mock me, sir," she countered with a smile, "by asking me this. When do we start?"

"As soon as I have made arrangements with our rapacious landlord. In the meanwhile try and snatch a couple of hours' sleep. The woman is just outside. She will conduct you to your room."

He went to the door and called to the woman. When he turned back to Eve she was standing beside Gabrielle's inert form. She raised enquiring eyes to his.

"Will she be with us all the time?" she asked.

He gave a short, low laugh. Then he said with a curious sudden change to earnestness.

"No, Madame, whatever the fool or the heathen may say, God is just." He paused a moment, then added:

"We'll leave her here in the care of her master."

"Her master? You mean . . .?"

"I mean the master who has prompted all her actions in the past. He will, I doubt not, look after her now and in the future."

Eve, wondering what he meant, went thoughtfully to her room.

Chapter XXX: THE SILENT POOL

When Gabrielle roused herself from her drugged sleep, a pale wintry sun was peeping in through the grimy window of the tap-room. It was broad daylight. Half a dozen men were sitting at the table, some of them were drinking wine, others eating some sort of savoury stew which they ladled out for themselves out of a metal tureen. Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked about her. She had no recollection whatever of where she was. She sniffed the air like a hungry dog, the odour of the stew had roused her and she was hungry. Her tongue felt parched and clung to the roof of her mouth.

An elderly woman was busy about the room serving the men who called for this, that and the other. They were all labourers or countrymen of some sort. Gabrielle looked at them with bleared eyes. When her gaze came to rest on the woman, she blinked and then called thickly for food and drink. No one took much notice of her. The woman brought her a mug and a bottle and set them on the table; she also brought a spoon and a metal plate and Gabrielle helped herself to the savoury stew out of the tureen.

"There's a room ready for you upstairs," the woman said to her, "It is paid for. You can go up if you like."

Gabrielle rose, she shook herself like a frowsy cur, for she felt cold and stiff. Wrapping the fur mantle closely round her she strode out of the room. A slatternly wench on the landing showed her up to the attic where a truckle-bed had been made up for her. Gabrielle threw herself down on the palliasse, closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Suddenly she opened her eyes, she was wide awake. It must have been late in the afternoon. The last of a wintry twilight shed its wan light through the cracked window of the squalid attic. Gabrielle rose. She still felt cold and stiff and dizzy from the fatigue of that wild ride through the night. She wandered down the rickety stairs and peeped into the tap-room. The slatternly wench was there doing some perfunctory cleaning of the table and setting down mugs, plates and spoons for supper-guests. The landlord came stumping out from the back premises, his sabots clattering on the tiled floor.

"Your room has been paid for for a week," he said gruffly, as soon as he caught of Gabrielle. "Do you want to stay?"

She said: "Perhaps." And turning on her heel went in the direction of the front door.

"The other two went at crack of dawn," the man went on. "They left a small parcel for you. I'll go and get it."

He stumped back to the kitchen and returned after a moment or two with something soft wrapped in a dirty scrap of paper, held tightly in his hand. Gabrielle took the parcel from him. It was dark in the passage, so she went back to the tap-room, sat down at the table and drew the tallow candle nearer to her. She undid the parcel and spread the contents out on the table. The landlord peered inquisitively over her shoulder.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "what on earth are these things?"

"As you see, citizen," Gabrielle replied. And the landlord declared subsequently that never had he heard a woman's voice sound so strange and inhuman. It was, he said, more like the growling of a wounded beast than the voice of a woman. She fingered the things that were lying on the table: a wig of black hair, a papier-mâché nose, a pair of false eyebrows. She touched each thing with a hand that shook visibly. The man picked them up one by one and quickly dropped them again, as if they scorched his fingers.

"What devil's work is this?" he muttered.

"Devil's work, as you say, citizen landlord," she rejoined dully. "The work of the English spy who was here in this very room a few hours ago. Had you detained him, you would be richer now by a hundred louis. Think of that, citizen landlord. Good night. Pleasant dreams."

She gave a curious, mirthless laugh, as if she were demented, so the landlord said later on. She picked up one by one the miscellaneous contents of the parcel, strode out of the room and went out into the street.

The last of the twilight had faded out of the sky. The village street lay still and dark to right and left of the wayside inn, in the doorway of which stood the lonely woman. She glanced up and down the street, trying to distinguish some landmark or other in the gloom, or perhaps just making up her mind as to which way to turn for her solitary ramble in the night. The sound of running water came faintly to her ear from the left. She turned in that direction, ambling along aimlessly at first. Then as the sound grew more distinct, she quickened her step, walked more resolutely along. Always in the darkness which only revealed vaguely the edge of the road, and always in the direction whence came the sound of running water.

Thus she came to the bridge which spanned the torrent, the bridge over which she had ridden full tilt yesterday, with her bridle rein held in a grip that was like steel, whilst she herself was held in bondage and rendered helpless in the hands of a ruthless and relentless enemy.

"What is our first objective?" she had asked him then.

And he had replied: "The unknown."

And for her the unknown was a torrent that came scurrying and tumbling down over rocky projections. She stood quite still, looking down on the waters which she heard but could not see. On the right a mossy path ran along the edge of the stream. Gabrielle turned her wearied footsteps down that way. On she wandered with the sound of running water falling on her ear like the accusing voice of a relentless Nemesis.

"Thy revenge," it murmured, "where is it now? For it thou didst scheme and murder and commit every crime that disgraced thy womanhood. Where is it now? Those whom thy hatred has pursued are safe and happy out of thy reach. Where art thou at this hour? Whither doest thou go?"

And idly wandering Gabrielle Damiens came to the pool wherein the turbulent eddy found its rest. Here the swirl of the falling waters caused innumerable bubbles to form and to burst again. Beyond the swirl, the pool seemed to be placid and very still. Gabrielle came to a halt, and looking down she tried to gauge the depth of the water, but the night was like ebony and the over-hanging trees threw a further veil of darkness over the silent pool. She stood quite still now, and around her everything was still save for the occasional crackling of dry twigs overhead or the movement of tiny furtive feet in the undergrowth. She still had in her hands that collection of curious objects — the wig, the false eyebrows, the nose made of papier-mâché such as clowns wear at the circus. She fingered them lightly for a while, then laid them down on a flat piece of projecting stone. There was no wind and the things remained

all night where she had put them. They were found in the early morning by a couple of labourers on their way to work. They wondered what on earth these things could possibly be, and how they got there. No one ever knew.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Province of Artois no one ever knew what had become of Mam'zelle Guillotine. She had come no one knew whence. She went no one knew whither. Six months later the Reign of Terror in France came to an end. The guillotine in the province was no longer kept busy and an honest butcher of Mézières did all that there was to do.

Chapter XXXI: AN INTERLUDE

Marguerite Blakeney was in her husband's arms. She was looking pale and wan and her wonderful, luminous eyes still bore the traces of all the tears which she had shed. She had been the first to arrive in Dover at the Fisherman's Rest, in the company of Percy's devoted followers and the two little children for whose sake he had thrown his precious life in the balance of Fate, courting death with joy in his heart and a smile on his lips. For close on a month Marguerite in her weary travelling to Belgium and through Belgium on to England, had known nothing of her adored husband, save that at every hour of the day and night that heroic life was in deadly peril.

Now when his arms were once more round her and she looked into his merry deep-set eyes, the joy of reunion was almost more than she could bear. She tried to make him tell her something of what he had endured and gone through for the sake of an unfortunate woman and two innocent children now happily reunited to husband, father and brother.

"Luck was on my side, light of my life," was all he said, "because you were so near me all the time. And luck was backed by the courage and understanding of brave men like Ffoulkes and Tony, Glynde and St. Dennys, and your adorable self."

"But, Percy," she insisted, "if luck had failed you. If . . ."

"Luck, my beloved," he said, and once more that wonderful look of the born adventurer, the gambler, the fearless sportsman, the look which she dreaded to see more than any other, came back into his eyes; "luck is just an old woman, m'dear, bald save for one hair on her head. It is up to her courtier to seize her by that one hair when perchance she flits by past him at arm's length. But, by George," he concluded with his infectious, merry laugh, "having got hold of that hair, it is up to him not to let it go. And that is all I did, my adored, I did not let go."

THE END

THE TRIUMPH

Chapter I

“The everlasting stars look down, like glistening eyes bright with immortal pity, over the lot of man”

1

Nearly five years have gone by! Five years, since the charred ruins of grim Bastille — stone image of Absolutism and of Autocracy — set the seal of victory upon the expression of a people's will and marked the beginning of that marvellous era of Liberty and of Fraternity which has led us step by step from the dethronement of a King, through the martyrdom of countless innocents, to the tyranny of an oligarchy more arbitrary, more relentless, above all more cruel, than any that the dictators of Rome or Stamboul ever dream of in their wildest thirst for power. An era that sees a populace always clamouring for the Millennium, which ranting demagogues have never ceased to promise: a Millennium to be achieved alternatively through the extermination of Aristocracy, of Titles, of Riches, and the abrogation of Priesthood: through dethroned royalty and desecrated altars, through an army without leadership, or an Assembly without power. They have never ceased to prate, these frothy rhetoricians! And the people went on, vaguely believing that one day, soon, that Millennium would surely come, after seas of blood had purged the soil of France from the last vestige of bygone oppression, and after her sons and daughters had been massacred in their thousands and their tens of thousands, until their headless bodies had built up a veritable scaling ladder for the tottering feet of lustful climbers, and these in their turn had perished to make way for other ranters, other speech-makers, a new Demosthenes or long-tongued Cicero. Inevitably these too perished, one by one, irrespective of their virtues or their vices, their errors or their ideals: Vergniaud, the enthusiast, and Desmoulins, the irresponsible; Barnave, the just, and Chaumette, the blasphemer; Hébert, the carrion, and Danton, the power. All, all have perished, one after the other: victims of their greed and of their crimes — they and their adherents and their enemies. They slew and were slain in their turn. They struck blindly, like raging beasts, most of them for fear lest they too should be struck by beasts more furious than they. All have perished; but not before their iniquities have for ever sullied what might have been the most glorious page in the history of France — her fight for Liberty. Because of these monsters — and of a truth there were only a few — the fight, itself sublime in its ideals, noble in its conception, has become abhorrent to the rest of mankind. But they, arraigned at the bar of history, what have they to say, what to show as evidence of their patriotism, of the purity of their intentions? On this day of April, 1794, year II of the New Calendar, eight thousand men, women, and not a few children, are crowding the prisons of Paris to overflowing. Four thousand heads have fallen under the guillotine in the past three months. All the great names of France, her noblesse, her magistracy, her clergy, members of past Parliaments, shining lights in the sciences, the arts, the Universities, men of substance, poets, brain-workers, have been torn from their homes, their churches or their places of refuge, dragged before a travesty of justice, judged, condemned and slaughtered; not singly, not individually, but in batches — whole families, complete hierarchies, entire households: one lot for the crime of being right, another for being nobly born; some because of their religion, others because of professed free-thought. One man for devotion to his friend, another for perfidy; one for having spoken, another for having held his tongue, and another for no crime at all — just because of his family connexions, his profession, or his ancestry. For months it had been the innocents; but since then it has also been the assassins. And the populace, still awaiting the Millennium, clamour for more victims and for more — for the aristocrat and for the sans-culotte, and howl with execration impartially at both.

2

But through this mad orgy of murder and of hatred, one man survives, stands apart indeed, wielding a power which the whole pack of infuriated wolves thirsting for his blood are too cowardly to challenge. The Girondists and the Extremists have fallen. Hébert, the idol of the mob, Danton its hero and its mouthpiece, have been hurled from their throne, sent to the scaffold along with ci-devant nobles, aristocrats, royalists and traitors. But this one man remains, calm in the midst of every storm, absolute in his will, indigent where others have grasped riches with both hands, adored, almost deified, by a few, dreaded by all, sphinx-like, invulnerable, sinister — Robespierre! Robespierre at this time was at the height of his popularity and of his power. The two great Committees of Public Safety and of General Security were swayed by his desires, the Clubs worshipped him, the Convention was packed with obedient slaves to his every word. The Dantonists, cowed into submission by the bold coup which had sent their leader, their hero, their idol, to the guillotine, were like a tree that has been struck at the root. Without Danton, the giant of the Revolution, the colossus of crime, the maker of the Terror, the thunderbolt of the Convention, the part was atrophied, robbed of its strength and its vitality, its last few members hanging, servile and timorous, upon the great man's lips. Robespierre was in truth absolute master of France. The man who had dared to drag his only rival down to the scaffold was beyond the reach of any attack. By this final act of unparalleled despotism he had revealed the secrets of his soul, shown himself to be rapacious as well as self-seeking. Something of his aloofness, of his incorruptibility, had vanished, yielding to that ever-present and towering ambition which hitherto none had dared to suspect. But ambition is the one vice to which the generality of mankind will always accord homage, and Robespierre, by gaining the victory over his one in the Convention, in the Clubs and in the Committees, had tacitly agreed to obey. The tyrant out of his vaulting ambition had brought forth the slaves. Faint hearted and servile, they brooded over their wrongs gazed with smouldering wrath on Danton's vacant seat in the Convention, which no one cared to fill. But they did not murmur, hardly dared to plot, and gave assent to every decree, every measure, every suggestion promulgated by the dictator who held their lives in the hollow of his thin white hand; who with a word, a gesture, could send his enemy, his detractor, a mere critic of his actions, to the guillotine.

Chapter II

Feet of Clay

1

On this 26th day of April, 1794, which in the newly constituted calendar is the 7th Floreal, year II of the Republic, three women and one man were assembled in a small, closely curtained room on the top floor of a house in the Rue de la Planchette, which is situated in a remote and dreary quarter of Paris. The man sat upon a chair which was raised on a dais. He was neatly, indeed immaculately, dressed, in dark cloth coat and tan breeches, with clean linen at throats and wrists, white stockings and buckled shoes. His own hair was concealed under a mouse-coloured wig. He sat quite still, with one leg crossed over the other, and his thin, bony hands were clasped in front of him.

Behind the dais there was a heavy curtain which stretched right across the room, and in front of it, at opposite corners, two young girls, clad in grey, clinging draperies, sat upon their heels, with the palms of their hands resting flat upon their thighs. Their hair hung loose down their backs, their chins were uplifted, their eyes fixed, their bodies rigid in an attitude of contemplation. In the centre of the room a woman stood, gazing upwards at the ceiling, her arms folded across her breast. Her grey hair, lank and unruly, was partially hidden by an ample floating veil of an indefinite shade of grey, and from her meagre shoulders and arms, her garment — it was hardly a gown — descended in straight, heavy, shapeless folds. In front of her was a small table, on it a large crystal globe, which rested on a stand of black wood, exquisitely carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and beside it a small metal box.

Immediately above the old woman's head an oil lamp, the flame of which was screened by a piece of crimson silk, shed a feeble and lurid light upon the scene. Against the wall half a dozen chairs, on the floor a threadbare carpet, and in one corner a broken-down chiffonier represented the sum total of the furniture in the stuffy little room. The curtains in front of the window, as well as the portières which masked both the doors, were heavy and thick, excluding all light and most of the outside air.

The old woman, with eyes fixed upon the ceiling, spoke in a dull, even monotone.

"Citizen Robespierre, who is the Chosen of the Most High, hath deigned to enter the humble abode of his servant," she said. "What is his pleasure to-day?"

"The shade of Danton pursues me," Robespierre replied, and his voice too sounded toneless, as if muffled by the heavily weighted atmosphere. "Can you not lay him to rest?"

The woman stretched out her arms. The folds of her woollen draperies hung straight from shoulder to wrist down to the ground, so that she looked like a shapeless bodiless, grey ghost in the dim, red light.

"Blood!" she exclaimed in a weird, cadaverous wail. "Blood around thee and blood at thy feet! But not upon thy head, O Chosen of the Almighty! Thy decrees are those of the Most High! Thy hand wields His avenging Sword! I see thee walking upon a sea of blood, yet thy feet are as white as lilies and thy garments are spotless as the driven snow. Avaunt," she cried in sepulchral tones, "ye spirits of evil! Avaunt, ye vampires and ghouls! and venture not with your noxious breath to disturb the serenity of our Morning Star!"

The girls in front of the dais raised their arms above their heads and echoed the old soothsayer's wails.

"Avaunt!" they cried solemnly. "Avaunt!"

Now from a distant corner of the room, a small figure detached itself out of the murky shadows. It was the figure of a young negro, glad in white from head to foot. In the semi-darkness the draperies which he wore were alone visible, and the whites of his eyes. Thus he seemed to be walking without any feet, to have eyes without any face, and to be carrying a heavy vessel without using any hands. His appearance indeed was so startling and so unearthly that the man upon the dais could not suppress an exclamation of terror. Whereupon a wide row of dazzlingly white teeth showed somewhere between the folds of the spectral draperies, and further enhanced the spook-like appearance of the blackamoor. He carried a deep bowl fashioned of chased copper, which he placed upon the table in front of the old woman, immediately behind the crystal globe and the small metal box. The seer then opened the box, took out a pinch of something brown and powdery, and holding it between finger and thumb, she said solemnly:

"From out the heart of France rises the incense of faith, of hope, and of love!" and she dropped the powder into the bowl. "May it prove acceptable to him who is her chosen Lord!"

A bluish flame shot up from the depth of the vessel, shed for the space of a second or two its ghostly light upon the gaunt features of the old hag, the squat and grinning face of the negro, and toyed with the will-o'-the-wisp-like fitfulness of the surrounding gloom. A sweet-scented smoke rose upwards to the ceiling. Then the flame died down again, making the crimson darkness around appear by contrast more lurid and more mysterious than before.

Robespierre had not moved. His boundless vanity, his insatiable ambition, blinded him to the effrontery, the ridicule of this mysticism. He accepted the tangible incense, took a deep breath, as if to fill his entire being with its heady fumes, just as he was always ready to accept the fulsome adulation of his devotees and of his sycophants.

The old charlatan then repeated her incantations. Once more she took powder from the box, threw some of it into the vessel, and spoke in a sepulchral voice:

"From out of the heart of those who worship thee rises the incense of their praise!"

A delicate white flame rose immediately out of the vessel. It shed a momentary, unearthly brightness around, then as speedily vanished again. And for the third time the witch spoke the mystic words:

"From out the heart of an entire nation rises the incense of perfect joy in thy triumph over thine enemies!"

This time, however, the magic powder did not act quite so rapidly as it had done on the two previous occasions. For a few seconds the vessel remained dark and unresponsive; nothing came to dispel the surrounding gloom. Even the light of the oil lamp overhead appeared suddenly to grow dim. At any rate, so it seemed to the autocrat who, with nerves on edge, sat upon his throne-like seat, his

bony hands, so like the talons of a bird of prey, clutching the arms of his chair, his narrow eyes fixed upon the sybil, who in her turn was gazing on the metal vessel as if she would extort some cabalistic mystery from its depth.

All at once a bright red flame shot out of the bowl. Everything in the room became suffused with a crimson glow. The old witch bending over her cauldron looked as if she were smeared with blood, her eyes appeared bloodshot, her long hooked nose cast a huge black shadow over her mouth, distorting the face into a hideous, cadaverous grin. From her throat issued strange sounds like those of an animal in the throes of pain.

"Red! Red!" she lamented, and gradually as the flame subsided and finally flickered out altogether, her words became more distinct. She raised the crystal globe and gazed fixedly into it. "Always red," she went on slowly. "Thrice yesterday did I cast the spell in the name of Our Chosen... thrice did the spirits cloak their identity in a blood-red flame... red... always red... not only blood... but danger... danger of death through that which is red..."

Robespierre had risen from his seat, his thin lips were murmuring hasty imprecations. The kneeling figurants looked scared, and strange wailing sounds came from their mouths. The young blackamoor alone looked self-possessed. He stood by, evidently enjoying the scene, his white teeth gleaming in a huge, board grin.

"A truce on riddles, Mother!" Robespierre exclaimed at last impatiently, and descended hastily from the dais. He approached the old necromancer, seized her by the arm, thrust his head in front of hers in an endeavour to see something which apparently was revealed to her in the crystal globe. "What is it you see in there?" he queried harshly.

But she pushed him aside, gazed with rapt intentness into the globe.

"Red!" she murmured. "Scarlet... aye, scarlet! And now it takes shape... Scarlet... and it obscures the Chosen One... the shape becomes more clear... the Chosen One appears more dim..."

Then she gave a piercing shriek.

"Beware!... beware!... that which is Scarlet is shaped like a flower... five petals, I see them distinctly... and the Chosen One I see no more..."

"Malediction!" the man exclaimed. "What foolery is this?"

"No foolery," the old charlatan resumed in a dull monotone. "Thou didst consult the oracle, oh thou, who art the Chosen of the people of France! and the oracle has spoken. Beware of a scarlet flower! From that which is scarlet comes danger of death for thee!"

Whereat Robespierre tried to laugh.

"Some one has filled thy head, Mother," he said in a voice which he vainly tried to steady, "with tales of the mysterious Englishman who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"Thy mortal enemy, O Messenger of the Most High!" the old blasphemer broke in solemnly. "In far-off fog-bound England he hath sworn thy death. Beware!"

"If that is the only danger which threatens me—" the other began, striving to speak carelessly.

"The only one, and the greatest one," the hag went on insistently. "Despise it not because it seems small and remote."

"I do not despise it; neither do I magnify it. A gnat is a nuisance, but not a danger."

"A gnat may wield a poisoned dart. The spirits have spoken. Heed their warning, O Chosen of the People! Destroy the Englishman ere he destroy thee!"

"Pardi!" Robespierre retorted, and despite the stuffiness of the room he gave a shiver as if he felt cold. "Since thou dost commune with the spirits, find out from them how I can accomplish that."

The woman once more raised the crystal globe to the level of her breast. With her elbows stretched out and her draperies falling straight all around her, she gazed into it for a while in silence. Then she began to murmur.

"I see the Scarlet Flower quite plainly... a small Scarlet Flower.... And I see the great Light which is like an aureole, the Light of the Chosen One. It is of dazzling brightness — but over the Scarlet Flower casts a Stygian shadow."

"Ask them," Robespierre broke in peremptorily, "ask thy spirits how best I can overcome mine enemy."

"I see something," the witch went on in an even monotone, still gazing into the crystal globe "white and rose and tender... is it a woman...?"

"A woman?"

"She is tall, and she is beautiful... a stranger in the land... with eyes dark as the night and tresses black as the raven's wing.... Yes, it is a woman.... She stands between the Light and that blood-red flower. She takes the flower in her hand... she fondles it, raises it to her lips.... Ah!" and the old seer gave a loud cry of triumph. "She tosses it mangled and bleeding into the consuming Light.... And now it lies faded, torn, crushed, and the Light grows in radiance and in brilliancy, and there is none now to dim its pristine glory—"

"But the woman? Who is she?" the man broke in impatiently. "What is her name?"

"The spirits speak no names," the seer replied. "Any woman would gladly be thy handmaid, O Elect of France! The spirits have spoken," she concluded solemnly. "Salvation will come to thee by the hand of a woman."

"And mine enemy?" he insisted. "Which of us two is in danger of death now — now that I am warned — which of us two? — mine English enemy, or I?"

Nothing loth, the old hag was ready to continue her sortilege. Robespierre hung breathless upon her lips. His whole personality seemed transformed. He appeared eager, fearful, credulous — a different man to the cold, calculating despot who sent thousands to their death with his measured oratory, the mere power of his presence. Indeed, history has sought in vain for the probably motive which drove this cynical tyrant into consulting this pitiable charlatan. That Catherine Théot had certain psychic powers has never been gainsaid, and since the philosophers of the eighteenth century had undermined the religious superstitions of the Middle Ages, it was only to be expected that in the great upheaval of this awful Revolution, men and women should turn to the mystic and the supernatural as to a solace and respite from the fathomless misery of their daily lives.

In this world of ours, the more stupendous the events, the more abysmal the catastrophes, the more do men realize their own impotence and the more eagerly do they look for the Hidden Hand that is powerful enough to bring about such events and to hurl upon them such devastating cataclysms. Indeed, never since the dawn of history had so many theosophies, demonologies, occult arts,

spiritualism, exorcism of all sorts, flourished as they did now: the Theists, the Rosicrucians, the Illuminat, Swedenborg, the Count of Saint Germain, Weishaupt, and scores of others, avowed charlatans or earnest believers, had their neophytes, their devotees, and their cults.

Catherine Théot was one of many: for the nonce, one of the most noteworthy in Paris. She believed herself to be endowed with the gift of prophecy, and her fetish was Robespierre. In this at least she was genuine. She believed him now to be a new Messiah, the Elect of God. Nay! she loudly proclaimed him as such, and one of her earliest neophytes, an ex-Carthusian monk named Gerle, who sat in the Convention next to the great man, had whispered in the latter's ear the insidious flattery which had gradually led his footsteps to the witch's lair.

Whether his own vanity — which was without limit and probably without parallel — caused him to believe in his own heaven-sent mission, or whether he only desire to strengthen his own popularity by endowing it with supernatural prestige, is a matter of conjecture. Certain it is that he did lend himself to Catherine Théot's cabalistic practices and that he allowed himself to be flattered and worshipped by the numerous neophytes who flocked to this new temple of magic, either from mystical fevour or merely to serve their own ends by fawning on the most dreaded man in France.

2

Catherine Théot had remained rigidly still, in rapt contemplation. It seemed as if she pondered over the Chosen One's last peremptory demand.

"Which of us two," he had queried, in a dry, hard voice, "is in danger of death now — now that I am warned — mine English enemy, or I?"

The next moment, as if moved by inspiration, she took another pinch of powder out of the metal box. The nigger's bright black eyes followed her every movement, as did the dictator's half-contemptuous gaze. The girls had begun to intone a monotonous chant. As the seer dropped the powder into the metal bowl, a highly scented smoke shot upwards and the interior of the vessel was suffused with a golden glow. The smoke rose in spirals. Its fumes spread through the airless room, rendering the atmosphere insufferably heavy.

The dictator of France felt a strange exultation running through him, as with deep breaths he inhaled the potent fumes. It seemed to him as if his body had suddenly become etherealized, as if he were in truth the Chosen of the Most High as well as the idol of France. Thus disembodied, he felt in himself boundless strength! the power to rise triumphant over all his enemies, whoever they may be. There was a mighty buzzing in his ears like the reverberation of thousands of trumpets and drums ringing and beating in unison to his exaltation and to his might. His eyes appeared to see the whole of the people of France, clad in white robes, with ropes round their necks, and bowing as slaves to the ground before him. He was riding on a cloud. His throne was of gold. In his hand he had a sceptre of flame, and beneath his feet lay, crushed and mangled, a huge scarlet flower. The sybil's voice reached his ears as if through a surpernal trumpet:

"Thus lie for ever crushed at the feet of the Chosen One, those who have dared to defy his power!"

Greater and greater became his exultation. He felt himself uplifted high, high above the clouds, until he could see the world as a mere crystal ball at his feet. His head had touched the portals of heaven; his eyes gazed upon his own majesty, which was second only to that of God. An eternity went by. He was immortal.

Then suddenly, through all the mystic music, the clarion sounds and songs of praise, there came a sound, so strange and yet so human, that the almighty dictator's wandering spirit was in an instant hurled back to earth, brought down with a mighty jerk which left him giddy, sick, with throat dry and burning eyes. He could not stand on his feet, indeed would have fallen but that the negro had hastily pulled a chair forward, into which he sank, swooning with unaccountable horror.

And yet that sound had been harmless enough: just a peal of laughter, merry and inane — nothing more. It came faintly echoing from beyond the heavy portière. Yet it had unnerved the most ruthless despot in France. He looked about him, scared and mystified. Nothing had been changed since he had gone wandering into Elysian fields. He was still in a stuffy, curtained room; there was the dais on which he had sat; the two women still chanted their weird lament; and there was the old necromancer in her shapeless, colourless robe, coolly setting down the crystal globe upon its carved stand. There was the blackamoor, grinning and mischievous, the metal vessel, the oil lamp, the threadbare carpet. What of all this had been a dream? The clouds and the trumpets, or that peal of human laughter with the quaint, inane catch in it? No one looked scared: the girls chanted, the old hag mumbled vague directions to her black attendant, who tried to look solemn, since he was paid to keep his impish mirth in check.

"What was that?" Robespierre murmured at last.

The old woman looked up.

"What was what, O Chosen One?" she asked.

"I heard a sound—" he mumbled. "A laugh... Is anyone else in the room?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"People are waiting in the antechamber," she replied carelessly, "until it is the pleasure of the Chosen One to go. As a rule they wait patiently, and in silence. But one of them may have laughed." Then, as he made no further comment but still stood there silent, as if irresolute, she queried with a great show of deference: "What is thy next pleasure, O thou who art beloved of the people of France?"

"Nothing... nothing!" he murmured. "I'll go now."

She turned straight to him and made him elaborate obeisance, waving her arms about her. The two girls struck the ground with their foreheads. The Chosen One, in his innermost heart vaguely conscious of ridicule, frowned impatiently.

"Do not," he said peremptorily, "let anyone know that I have been here."

"Only those who idolize thee—" she began.

"I know — I know," he broke in more gently, for the fulsome adulation soothed his exacerbated nerves. "But I have many enemies... and thou too art watched with malevolent eyes.... Let not our enemies make capital of our intercourse."

"I swear to thee, O Mighty Lord, that thy servant obeys thy behests in all things."

"That is well," he retorted drily. "But thy adepts are wont to talk too much. I'll not have my name bandied about for the glorification of thy necromancy."

"Thy name is sacred to thy servants," she insisted with ponderous solemnity. "As sacred as is thy person. Thou art the regenerator of the true faith, the Elect of the First Cause, the high priest of a new religion. We are but thy servants, thy handmaids, thy worshippers."

All this charlatanism was precious incense to the limitless vanity of the despot. His impatience vanished, as did his momentary terror. He became kind, urbane, condescending. At the last, the old hag almost prostrated herself before him, and clasping her wrinkled hands together, she said in tones of reverential entreaty:

"In the name of thyself, of France, of the entire world, I adjure thee to lend ear to what the spirits have revealed this day. Beware the danger that comes to thee from the scarlet flower. Set thy almighty mind to compass its destruction. Do not disdain a woman's help, since the spirits have proclaimed that through a woman thou shalt be saved. Remember! Remember!" she adjured him with ever-growing earnestness. "Once before, the world was saved through a woman. A woman crushed the serpent beneath her foot. Let a woman now crush that scarlet flower beneath hers. Remember!"

She actually kissed his feet; and he, blinded by self-conceit to the folly of this fetishism and the ridicule of his own acceptance of it, raised his hand above her head as if in the act of pronouncing a benediction.

Then without another word he turned to go. The young negro brought him his hat and cloak. The latter he wrapped closely round his shoulders, his hat he pulled down well over his eyes. Thus muffled and, he hoped, unrecognizable, he passed with a firm tread out of the room.

3

For awhile the old witch waited, strainer her ears to catch the last sound of those retreating footsteps; then, with a curt word and an impatient clapping of her hands, she dismissed her attendants, the negro as well as her neophytes. These young women at her word lost quickly enough their air of rapt mysticism, became very human indeed, stretched out their limbs, yawned lustily, and with none too graceful movements uncurled themselves and struggled to their feet. Chattering and laughing like so many magpies let out of a cage, they soon disappeared through the door in the rear.

Again the old woman waited silent and motionless until that merry sound too gradually subsided. Then she went across the room to the dais, and drew aside the curtain which hung behind it.

"Citizen Chauvelin!" she called peremptorily.

A small figure of a man stepped out from the gloom. He was dressed in black, his hair, of a nondescript blonde shade and his crumpled linen alone told light in the general sombreness of his appearance.

"Well?" he retorted drily.

"Are you satisfied?" the old woman went on with eager impatience. "You heard what I said?"

"Yes, I heard," he replied. "Think you he will act on it?"

"I am certain of it."

"But why not have named Theresia Cabarrus? Then, at least, I would have been sure—"

"He might have recoiled at an actual name," the woman replied, "suspected me of connivance. The Chosen of the people of France is shrewd as well as distrustful. And I have my reputation to consider. But, remember what I said: 'tall, dark, beautiful, a stranger in this land!' So, if indeed you require the help of the Spaniard—"

"Indeed I do!" he rejoined earnestly. And, as if speaking to his own inward self, "Theresia Cabarrus is the only woman I know who can really help me."

"But you cannot force her consent, citizen Chauvelin," the sybil insisted.

The eyes of citizen Chauvelin lit up suddenly with a flash of that old fire of long ago, when he was powerful enough to compel the consent or the co-operation of any man, woman or child on whom he had deigned to cast an appraising glance. But the flash was only momentary. The next second he had once more resumed his unobtrusive, even humbled, attitude.

"My friends, who are few," he said, with a quick sigh of impatience; "and mine enemies, who are without number, will readily share your conviction, Mother, that citizen Chauvelin can compel no one to do his bidding these days. Least of all the affianced wife of powerful Tallien."

"Well, then," the sybil argued, "how think you that—"

"I only hope, Mother," Chauvelin broke in suavely, "that after your séance to-day, citizen Robespierre himself will see to it that Theresia Cabarrus gives me the help I need."

Catherine Théot shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh!" she said drily, "the Cabarrus knows no law save that of her caprice. And as Tallien's fiancée she is almost immune."

"Almost, but not quite! Tallien is powerful, but so was Danton."

"But Tallien is prudent, which Danton was not."

"Tallien is also a coward; and easily led like a lamb, with a halter. He came back from Bordeaux tied to the apron-strings of the fair Spaniard. He should have spread fire and terror in the region; but at her bidding he dispensed justice and even mercy instead. A little more airing of his moderate views, a few more acts of unpatriotic clemency, and powerful Tallien himself may become 'suspect.'"

"And you think that, when he is," the old woman rejoined with grim sarcasm, "you will hold his fair betrothed in the hollow of your hand?"

"Certainly!" he assented, and with an acid smile fell to contemplating his thin, talon-like palms. "Since Robespierre, counselled by Mother Théot, will himself have placed her there."

Whereupon Catherine Théot ceased to argue, since the other appeared so sure of himself. Once more she shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, then, if you are satisfied..." she said.

"I am. Quite," he replied, and at once plunged his hand in the breast-pocket of his coat. He had caught the look of avarice and of greed which had glittered in the old hag's eyes. From his pocket he drew a bundle of notes, for which Catherine immediately stretched out a grasping hand. But before giving her the money, he added a stern warning.

"Silence, remember! And, above all, discretion!"

"You may rely on me, citizen," the sybil riposted quietly. "I am not likely to blab."

He did not place the notes in her hand, but threw them down on the table with a gesture of contempt, without deigning to count. But Catherine Théot cared nothing for his contempt. She coolly picked up the notes and hid them in the folds of her voluminous draperies. Then as Chauvelin, without another word, had turned unceremoniously to go, she placed a bony hand upon his arm.

"And I can rely on you, citizen," she insisted firmly, "that when the Scarlet Pimpernel is duly captured..."

"There will be ten thousand livres for you," he broke in impatiently, "if my scheme with Theresia Cabarrus is successful. I never go back on my word."

"And I'll not go back on mine," she concluded drily. "We are dependent on one another, citizen Chauvelin. You want to capture the English spy, and I want ten thousand livres, so that I may retire from active life and quietly cultivate a plot of cabbages somewhere in the sunshine. So you may leave the matter to me, my friend. I'll not allow the great Robespierre to rest till he has compelled Theresia Cabarrus to do your bidding. Then you may use her as you think best. That gang of English spies must be found, and crushed. We cannot have the Chosen of the Most High threatened by such vermin. Ten thousand livres, you say?" the sybil went on, and once again, as in the presence of the dictator, a mystic exultation appeared to possess her soul. Gone was the glitter of avarice from her eyes; her wizened face seem transfigured, her shrunken form to gain in stature. "Nay! I would serve you on my knees and accord you worship, if you avert the scarlet danger that hovers over the head of the Beloved of France!"

But Chauvelin was obviously in no mood to listen to the old hag's jeremiads, and while with arms uplifted she once more worked herself up to a hysterical burst of enthusiasm for the bloodthirsty monster whom she worshipped, he shook himself free from her grasp and finally slipped out of the room, without further wasting his breath.

Chapter III

The Fellowship of Grief

1

In the antechamber of Catherine Théot's abode of mysteries some two hours later, half a dozen persons were sitting. The room was long, narrow and bare, its walls dank and colourless, and save for the rough wooden benches on which these person sat, was void of any furniture. The benches were ranged against the walls; the one window at the end was shuttered as to exclude all daylight, and from the ceiling there hung a broken-down wrought-iron chandelier, wherein a couple of lighted tallow candles were set, the smoke from which rose in irregular spirals upwards to the low and blackened ceiling.

These persons who sat or sprawled upon the benches did not speak to one another. They appeared to be waiting. One or two of them were seemingly asleep; others, from time to time, would rouse themselves from their apathy, look with dim, inquiring eyes in the direction of a heavy portière. When this subsided again all those in the bare waiting-room resumed their patient, lethargic attitude, and a silence — weird and absolute — reigned once more over them all. Now and then somebody would sigh, and at one time one of the sleepers snored.

Far away a church clock struck six.

2

A few minutes later, the portière was lifted, and a girl came into the room. She held a shawl, very much the worse for wear, tightly wrapped around her meagre shoulders, and from beneath her rough wollen skirt her small feet appeared clad in well-worn shoes and darned worsted stockings. Her hair, which was fair and soft, was partially hidden under a white muslin cap, and as she walked with a brisk step across the room, she looked neither to right nor left, appeared to move as in a dream. And her large grey eyes were brimming over with tears.

Neither her rapid passage across the room nor her exit through a door immediately opposite the window created the slightest stir amongst those who were waiting. Only one of the men, a huge ungainly giant, whose long limbs appeared to stretch half-across the bare wooden floor, looked up lazily as she passed.

After the girl had gone, silence once more fell on the small assembly. Not a sound came from behind the portière; but from beyond the other door the faint patter of the girl's feet could be heard gradually fading away as she went slowly down the stone stairs.

A few more minutes went by, then the door behind the portière was opened and a cadaverous voice spoke the word, "Enter!"

There was a faint stir among those who waited. A woman rose from her seat, said dully: "My turn, I think?" and, gliding across the room like some bodiless spectre, she presently vanished behind the portière.

"Are you going to the Fraternal Supper to-night, citizen Langlois?" the giant said, after the woman had gone. His tone was rasping and harsh and his voice came with a wheeze and an obviously painful effort from his broad, doubled-up chest.

"Not I!" Langlois replied. "I must speak with Mother Théot. My wife made me promise. She is too ill to come herself, and the poor unfortunate believes in the Théot's incantations."

"Come out and get some fresh air, then," the other rejoined. "It is stifling in here!"

It was indeed stuffy in the dark, smoke-laden room. The man put his bony hand up to his chest, as if to quell a spasm of pain. A horrible, rasping cough shook his big body and brought a sweat to his brow. Langlois, a wizened little figure of a man, who looked himself as if he had one foot in the grave, waited patiently until the spasm was over, then, with the indifference peculiar to these turbulent times, he said lightly:

"I would just as soon sit here as wear out shoe-leather on the cobblestones of this God-forsaken hole. And I don't want to miss my turn with mother Théot."

"You'll have another four hours mayhap to wait in this filthy atmosphere."

"What an aristo you are, citizen Rateau!" the other retorted drily. "Always talking about the atmosphere!"

"So would you, if you had only one lung wherewith to inhale this filth," growled the giant through a wheeze.

"Then don't wait for me, my friend," Langlois concluded with a careless shrug of his narrow shoulders. "And, if you don't mind missing your turn..."

"I do not," was Rateau's curt reply. "I would as soon be last as not. But I'll come back presently. I am the third from now. If I'm not back you can have my turn, and I'll follow you in. But I can't—"

His next words were smothered in a terrible fit of coughing, as he struggled to his feet. Langlois swore at him for making such a noise, and the women, roused from their somnolence, sigh with impatience or resignation. But all those who remained seated on the benches watched with a kind of dull curiosity the ungainly figure of the asthmatic giant as he made his way across the room and anon went out through the door.

His heavy footsteps were heard descending the stone stairs with a shuffling sound, and the clatter of his wooden shoes. The women once more settled themselves against the dank walls, with feet stretched out before them and arms folded over their breasts, and in that highly uncomfortable position prepared once more to go to sleep.

Langlois buried his hands in the pockets of his breeches, spat contentedly upon the floor, and continued to wait.

3

In the meanwhile, the girl who, with tear-filled eyes, had come out of the inner mysterious room in Mother Théot's apartments, had, after a slow descent down the interminable stone stairs, at last reached the open air.

The Rue de la Planchette is only a street in name, for the houses in it are few and far between. One side of it is taken up for the major portion of its length by the dry moat which at this point forms the boundary of the Arsenal and of the military ground around the Bastille. The house wherein lodged Mother Théot is one of a small group situated behind the Bastille, the grim ruins of which can be distinctly seen from the upper windows. Immediately facing those houses is the Porte St. Antoine, through which the wayfarer in this remote quarter of Paris has to pass in order to reach the more populous parts of the city. This is just a lonely and squalid backwater, broken up by undeveloped land and timber yards. One end of the street abuts on the river, the other becomes merged in the equally remote suburb of Popincourt.

But, for the girl who had just come out of the heavy, fetid atmosphere of Mother Théot's lodgings, the air which reached her nostrils as she came out of the wicket-gate, was positive manna to her lungs. She stood for awhile quite still, drinking in the balmy spring air, almost dizzy with the sensation of purity and of freedom which came to her from over the vast stretch of open ground occupied by the Arsenal. For a minute or two she stood there, then walked deliberately in the direction of the Porte St. Antoine.

She was very tired, for she had come to the Rue de la Planchette on foot all the way from the small apartment in the St. Germain quarter, where she lodged with her mother and sister and a young brother; she had become weary and jaded by sitting for hours on a hard wooden bench, waiting her turn to speak with Mother Théot, and then standing for what seemed an eternity of time in the presence of the soothsayer, who had further harassed her nerves by weird prophecies and mystic incantations.

But for the nonce weariness was forgotten. Régine de Serval was going to meet the man she loved, at a trysting-place which they had marked as their own: the porch of the church of Petit St. Antoine, a secluded spot where neither prying eyes could see them nor ears listen to what they had to say. A spot which to poor little Régine was the very threshold of Paradise, for here she had Bertrand all to herself, undisturbed by the prattle of Joséphine or Jacques or the querulous complaints of maman, cooped up in that miserable apartment in the old St. Germain quarter of the city.

So she walked briskly and without hesitation. Bertrand had agreed to meet her at five o'clock. It was now close on half-past six. It was still daylight, and a brilliant April sunset tinged the cupola of Ste. Marie with gold and drew long fantastic shadows across the wide Rue St. Antoine.

Régine had crossed the Rue des Balais, and the church porch of Petit St. Antoine was but a few paces farther on, when she became conscious of heavy, dragging footsteps some little way behind her. Immediately afterwards, the distressing sound of a racking cough reached her ears, followed by heartrending groans as of a human creature in grievous bodily pain. The girl, not in the least frightened, instinctively turned to look, and was moved to pity on seeing a man leaning against the wall of a house, in a state bordering on collapse, his hands convulsively grasping his chest, which appeared literally torn by a violent fit of coughing. Forgetting her own troubles, as well as the joy which awaited her so close at hand, Régine unhesitatingly recrossed the road, approached the sufferer, and in a gentle voice asked him if she could be of any assistance to him in his distress.

"A little water," he gasped, "for mercy's sake!"

Just for a second or two she looked about her, doubtful as to what to do, hoping perhaps to catch sight of Bertrand, if he had not given up all hope of meeting her. The next, she had stepped boldly through the wicket-gate of the nearest porte-cochère, and finding her way to the lodge of the concierge, she asked for a drop of water for a passer-by who was in pain. A jug of water was at once handed to her by a sympathetic concierge, and with it she went back to complete her simple act of mercy.

For a moment she was puzzled, not seeing the poor vagabond there, where she had left him half-swooning against the wall. But soon she spied him, in the very act of turning under the little church porch of Petit St. Antoine, the hallowed spot of her frequent meetings with Bertrand.

He seemed to have crawled there for shelter, and there he collapsed upon the wooden bench, in the most remote angle of the porch. Of Bertrand there was not a sign.

Régine was soon by the side of the unfortunate. She held up the jug of water to his quaking lips, and he drank eagerly. After that he felt better, muttered vague words of thanks. But he seemed so weak, despite his stature, which appeared immense in this narrow enclosure, that she did not like to leave him. She sat down beside him, suddenly conscious of fatigue. He seemed harmless enough, and after awhile began to tell her of his trouble. This awful asthma, which he had contracted in the campaign against the English in Holland, where he and his comrades had to march in snow and ice, often shoeless and with nothing but bass mats around their shoulders. He had but lately been discharged out of the army as totally unfit, and he had no money wherewith to pay a doctor, he would no doubt have been dead by now but that a comrade had spoken to him of Mother Théot, a marvellous sorceress, who knew the art of drugs and simples, and could cure all ailments of the body by the mere laying on of hands.

"Ah, yes," the girl sighed involuntarily, "of the body!"

Through the very act of sitting still, a deadly lassitude had crept into her limbs. She was thankful not to move, to say little, and to listen with half an ear to the vagabond's jeremiads. Anyhow, she was sure that Bertrand would no longer be waiting. He was ever impatient if he thought that she failed him in anything, and it was she who had appointed five o'clock for their meeting. Even now the church clock way above the porch was striking half-past six. And the asthmatic giant went glibly on. He had partially recovered his breath.

"Aye!" he was saying, in response to her lament, "and of the mind, too. I had a comrade whose sweetheart was false to him while he was fighting for his country. Mother Théot gave him a potion which he administered to the faithless one, and she returned to him as full of ardour as ever before."

"I have no faith in potions," the girl said, and shook her head sadly the while tears once more gathered in her eyes.

"No more have I," the giant assented carelessly. "But if my sweetheart was false to me I know what I would do."

This he said in so droll a fashion, and the whole idea of this ugly, ungainly creature having a sweetheart was so comical, that despite her will, the ghost of a smile crept round the young girl's sensitive mouth.

“What would you do, citizen?” she queried gently.

“Just take her away, out of the reach of temptation,” he replied sententiously. “I should say, ‘This must stop,’ and ‘You come away with me, ma mie!’”

“Ah!” she retorted impulsively, “it is easy to talk. A man can do so much. What can a woman do?”

She checked herself abruptly, ashamed of having said so much. What was this miserable caitiff to her that she should as much as hint her troubles in his hearing? In these days of countless spies, of innumerable confidence tricks set to catch the unwary, it was more than foolhardy to speak of one’s private affairs to any stranger, let alone to an out-at-elbows vagabond who was just the sort of refuse of humanity who would earn a precarious livelihood by the sale of information, true or false, wormed out of some innocent fellow-creature. Hardly, then, were the words out of her mouth than the girl repented of her folly, turned quick, frightened eyes on the abject creature beside her.

But he appeared not to have heard. A wheezy cough came out of his bony chest. Nor did he meet her terrified gaze.

“What did you say, citoyenne?” he muttered fretfully. “Are you dreaming?... or what?...”

“Yes — yes!” she murmured vaguely, her heart still beating with that sudden fright. “I must have been dreaming.... But you... you are better-?”

“Better? Perhaps,” he replied, with a hoarse laugh. “I might even be able to crawl home.”

“Do you live very far?” she asked.

“No. Just by the Rue de l’Anier.”

He made no attempt to thank her for her gentle ministration, and she thought of how ungainly he looked — almost repellent — sprawling right across the porch, with his long legs stretched out before him and his hands buried in the pockets of his breeches. Nevertheless, he looked so helpless and so pitiable that the girl’s kind heart was again stirred with compassion, and when presently he struggled with difficulty to his feet, she said impulsively:

“The Rue de l’Anier is on my way. If you will wait, I’ll return the jug to the kind concierge who let me have it and I’ll walk with you. You really ought not to be about the street alone.”

“Oh, I am better now,” he muttered, in the same ungracious way. “You had best leave me alone. I am not a suitable gallant for a pretty wench like you.”

But already the girl had tripped away with the jug, and returned two minutes later to find that the curious creature had already started on his way and was fifty yards or more farther up the street by now. She shrugged her shoulders, feeling mortified at his ingratitude, and not a little ashamed that she had forced her compassion where it was so obviously unwelcome.

Chapter IV

One Dram of Joy must have a Pound of Care

1

She stood for a moment, gazing mechanically on the retreating figure of the asthmatic giant. The next moment she heard her name spoken, and turned quickly with a little cry of joy.

"Régine!"

A young man was hurrying towards her, was soon by her side and took her hand.

"I have been waiting," he said reproachfully, "for more than an hour."

In the twilight his face appeared pinched and pale, with dark, deep-sunken eyes that told of a troubled soul and a consuming, inward fire. He wore cloth clothes that were very much the worse for wear, and boots that were down at heel. A battered tricorne hat was pushed back from his high forehead, exposing the veined temples with the line of brown hair, and the arched, intellectual brows that proclaimed the enthusiast rather than the man of action.

"I am sorry, Bertrand," the girl said simply. "But I had to wait such a long time at Mother Théot's, and—"

"But what were you doing now?" he queried with an impatient frown. "I saw you from a distance. You came out of yonder house, and then stood here like one bewildered. You did not hear when first I called."

"I have had quite a funny adventure," Régine explained; "and I am very tired. Sit down with me, Bertrand, for a moment. I'll tell you all about it."

A flat refusal hovered palpably on his lips.

"It is too late—" he began, and the frown of impatience deepened upon his brow. He tried to protest, but Régine did look very tired. Already, without waiting for his consent, she had turned into the little porch, and Bertrand perforce had to follow her.

The shades of evening now were fast gathering in, and the lengthened shadows stretched out away, right across the street. The last rays of the sinking sun still tinged the roofs and chimney pots opposite with a crimson hue. But here, in the hallowed little trysting-place, the kingdom of night had already established its sway. The darkness lent an air of solitude and of security to this tiny refuge, and Régine drew a happy little sigh as she walked deliberately to its farthestmost recess and sat down on the wooden bench in its extreme and darkest angle.

Behind her, the heavy oaken door of the church was closed. The church itself, owing to the contumaciousness of its parish priest, had been desecrated by the ruthless hands of the Terrorists and left derelict, to fall into decay. The stone walls themselves appeared cut off from the world, as if ostracized. But between them Régine felt safe, and when Bertrand Moncrif somewhat reluctantly sat down beside her, she also felt almost happy.

"It is very late," he murmured once more, ungraciously.

She was leaning her head against the wall, looked so pale, with eyes closed and bloodless lips, that the young man's heart was suddenly filled with compunction.

"You are not ill, Régine?" he asked, more gently.

"No," she replied, and smiled bravely up at him. "Only very tired and a little dizzy. The atmosphere in Catherine Théot's rooms was stifling, and then when I came out—"

He took her hand, obviously making an effort to be patient and to be kind; and she, not noticing the effort or his absorption, began to tell him about her little adventure with the asthmatic giant.

"Such a droll creature," she explained. "He would have frightened me but for that awful, churchyard cough."

But the matter did not seem to interest Bertrand very much; and presently he took advantage of a pause in her narrative to ask abruptly:

"And Mother Théot, what had she to say?"

Régine gave a shudder.

"She foretells danger for us all," she said.

"The old charlatan!" he retorted with a shrug of the shoulders. "As if every one was not in danger these days!"

"She gave me a powder," Régine went on simply, "which she thinks will calm Joséphine's nerves."

"And that is folly," he broke in harshly. "We do not want Joséphine's nerves to be calmed."

But at his words, which in truth sounded almost cruel, Régine roused herself with a sudden air of authority.

"Bertrand," she said firmly, "you are doing a great wrong by dragging the child into your schemes. Joséphine is too young to be used as a tool by a pack of thoughtless enthusiasts."

A bitter, scornful laugh from Bertrand broke in on her vehemence.

"Thoughtless enthusiasts!" he exclaimed roughly. "Is that how you call us, Régine? My God! where is your loyalty, your devotion? Have you no faith, no aspirations? Do you no longer worship God or reverence your King?"

"In heaven's name, Bertrand, take care!" she whispered hoarsely, looked about her as if the stone walls of the porch had ears and eyes fixed upon the man she loved.

"Take care!" he rejoined bitterly. "Yes! that is your creed now. Caution! Circumspection! You fear—"

"For you," she broke in reproachfully; "for Joséphine; for maman; for Jacques — not for myself, God knows!"

"We must all take risks, Régine," he retorted more composedly. "We must all risk our miserable lives in order to end this awful, revolting tyranny. We must have a wider outlook, think not only of ourselves, of those immediately round us, but of France, of humanity, of the entire world. The despotism of a bloodthirsty autocrat has made of the people of France a people of slaves, cringing, fearful, abject — swayed by his word, too cowardly now to rebel."

"And what are you? My God!" she cried passionately. "You and your friends, my poor young sister, my foolish little brother? What are you, that you think you can stem to torrent of this stupendous Revolution? How think you that your feeble voices will be heard above the roar of a whole nation in the throws of misery and of shame?"

"It is the still small voice," Bertrand replied, in the tone of a visionary, who sees mysteries and who dreams dreams, "that is heard by its persistence even above the fury of thousands in full cry. Do we not call our organization 'the Fatalists'? Our aim is to take every opportunity by quick, short speeches, by mixing with the crowd and putting in a word here and there, to make propaganda against the fiend Robespierre. The populace are like sheep; they'll follow a lead. One day, one of us — it may be the humblest, the weakest, the youngest; it may be Joséphine or Jacques; I pray God it may be me — but one of us will find the word and speak it at the right time, and the people will follow us and turn against that execrable monster and hurl him from his throne, down into Gehenna."

He spoke below his breath, in a hoarse whisper which even she had to strain her ears to hear.

"I know, I know, Bertrand," she rejoined, and her tiny hand stole out in a pathetic endeavour to capture his. "Your aims are splendid. You are wonderful, all of you. Who am I, that I should even with a word or a prayer, try to dissuade you to do what you think is right? But Joséphine is so young, so hot-headed! What help can she give you? She is only seventeen. And Jacques! He is just an irresponsible boy! Think, Bertrand, think! If anything were to happen to these children, it would kill maman!"

He gave a shrug of the shoulders and smothered a weary sigh. She had succeeded in capturing his hand, clung to it with the strength of a passionate appeal.

"You and I will never understand one another, Régine," he began; then added quickly, "over these matters," because, following on his cruel words, he had heard the tiny cry of pain, so like that of a wounded bird, which much against her will had escaped her lips. "You do not understand," he went on, more quietly, "that in a great cause the sufferings of individuals are nought beside the glorious achievement that is in view."

"The sufferings of individuals," she murmured, with a pathetic little sigh. "In truth 'tis but little heed you pay, Bertrand, to my sufferings these days." She paused awhile, then added under her breath: "Since first you met Theresia Cabarrus, three months ago, you have eyes and ears only for her."

He smothered an angry exclamation.

"It is useless, Régine," he began.

"I know," she broke in quietly. "Theresia Cabarrus is beautiful; she has charm, wit, power — all things which I do not possess."

"She has fearlessness and a heart of gold," Bertrand rejoined and, probably despite himself, a sudden warmth crept into his voice. "Do you not know of the marvellous influence which she exercised over that fiend Tallien, down in Bordeaux? He went there filled with a veritable tiger's fury, ready for a wholesale butchery of all the royalists, the aristocrats, the bourgeois, over there — all those, in fact, whom he chose to believe were conspiring against this hideous Revolution. Well! under Theresia's influence he actually modified his views and became so lenient that he was recalled. You know, or should know, Régine," the young man added in a tone of bitter reproach, "that Theresia is as good as she is beautiful."

"I do know that, Bertrand," the girl rejoined with an effort. "Only—"

"Only what?" he queried roughly.

"I do not trust her... that is all." Then, as he made no attempt at concealing his scorn and his impatience, she went on in a tone which was much harsher, more uncompromising than the one she had adopted hitherto: "your infatuation blinds you, Bertrand, or you — an enthusiastic royalist, an ardent loyalist — would not place your trust in an avowed Republican. Theresia Cabarrus may be kind-hearted — I don't deny it. She may have done and she may be all that you say; but she stands for the negation of every one of your ideals, for the destruction of what you exalt, the glorification of the principles of this execrable Revolution."

"Jealousy blinds you, Régine," he retorted moodily.

She shook her head.

"No, it is not jealousy, Bertrand — not common, vulgar jealousy — that prompts me to warn you, before it is too late. Remember," she added solemnly, "that you have not only yourself to think of, but that you are accountable to God and to me for the innocent lives of Joséphine and of Jacques. By confiding in that Spanish woman—"

"Now you are insulting her," he broke in mercilessly. "Making her out to be a spy."

"What else is she?" the girl riposted vehemently. "You know that she is affianced to Tallien, whose influence and whose cruelty are second only to those of Robespierre. You know it, Bertrand!" she insisted, seeing that at last she had silenced him and that he sat beside her, sullen and obstinate. "You know it, even though you choose to close your eyes and ears to what is common knowledge."

There was silence after that for a while in the narrow porch, where two hearts once united were filled now with bitterness, one against the other. Even out in the street it had become quite dark, the darkness of a spring night, full of mysterious lights and grey, indeterminate shadows. The girl shivered as with cold and drew her tattered shawl more closely round her shoulders. She was vainly trying to swallow her tears. Goaded into saying more than she had ever meant to, she felt the finality of what she had said. Something had finally snapped just now: something that could never in after years be put together again. The boy and girl love which had survived the past two years of trouble and of stress, lay wounded unto death, bleeding at the foot of the shrine of a man's infatuation and a woman's vanity. How impossible this would have seemed but a brief while ago!

Through the darkness, swift visions of past happy times came fleeting before the girl's tear-dimmed gaze: visions of walks in the woods round Auteuil, of drifting down-stream in a boat on the Seine on hot August days — aye! even of danger shared and perilous moments passed together, hand in hand, with bated breath, in darkened rooms, with curtains drawn and ears straining to hear the distant cannonade, the shouts of an infuriated populace or the rattle of death carts upon the cobblestones. Swift visions of past sorrows and past joys! An immense self-pity filled the girl's heart to bursting. An insistent sob that would not be suppressed rose to her throat.

"Oh, Mother of God, have mercy!" she murmured through her tears.

Bertrand, shamed and confused, his heart stirred by the misery of this girl whom he had so dearly loved, his nerves strained beyond endurance through the many mad schemes which his enthusiasm was for ever evolving, felt like a creature on the rack, torn between compunction and remorse on the one hand and irresistible passion on the other.

"Régine," he pleaded, "forgive me! I am a brute, I know — a brute to you, who have been the kindest little friend a man could possibly hope for. Oh, my dear," he added pitifully, "if you would only understand...."

At once her tender, womanly sentiment was to the fore, sweeping pride and just resentment out of the way. Hers was one of those motherly natures that are always more ready to comfort than to chide. Already she had swallowed her tears, and now that with a wearied gesture he had buried his face in his hands, she put her arm around his neck, pillowed his head against her breast.

"I do understand, Bertrand," she said gently. "And you must never ask my forgiveness, for you and I have loved one another too well to bear anger or grudge one toward the other. There!" she said, and rose to her feet, and seemed by that sudden act to gather up all the moral strength of which she stood in such sore need. "It is getting late, and maman will be anxious. Another time we must have a more quiet talk about our future. But," she added, with renewed seriousness, "if I concede you Theresia Cabarrus without another murmur, you must give me back Joséphine and Jacques, If — if I — am to lose you — I could not bear to lose them as well. They are so young...."

"Who talks of losing them?" he broke in, once more impatient, enthusiastic — his moodiness gone, his remorse smothered, his conscience dead to all save to his schemes. "And what have I to do with it all? Joséphine and Jacques are members of the Club. They may be young, but they are old enough to know the value of an oath. They are pledged just like I am, just like we all are. I could not, even if I would, make them false to their oath." Then, as she made no reply, he leaned over to her, took her hands in his, tried to read her inscrutable face through the shadows of night. He thought that he read obstinacy in her rigid attitude, the unresponsive placidity of her hands. "You would not have them false to their oath?" he insisted.

She made no reply to that, only queried dully:

"What are you going to do to-night?"

"To-night," he said with passionate earnestness, his eyes glowing with the fervid adour of self-immolation, "we are going to let hell loose around the name of Robespierre."

"Where?"

"At the open-air supper in the Rue St. Honoré. Joséphine and Jacques will be there."

She nodded mechanically, quietly disengaged her hands from his feverish grasp.

"I know," she said quietly. "They told me they were going. I have no influence to stop them."

"You will be there, too?" he asked.

"Of course. So will poor maman," she replied simply.

"This may be the turning point, Régine," he said with passionate earnestness, "in the history of France!"

"Perhaps!"

"Think if it, Régine! Think o fit! Your sister, your young brother! Their name may go down to posterity as the saviours of France!"

"The saviours of France!" she murmured vaguely.

"One word has swayed a multitude before now. It may do so again... to-night!"

"Yes," she said. "And those poor children believe in the power of their oratory."

"Do not you?"

"I only remember that you, Bertrand, have probably spoken of your plan to Theresia Cabarrus, that the place will be swarming with the spies of Robespierre, and that you and the children will be recognized, seized, dragged into prison, then to the guillotine! My God!" she added, in a pitiful murmur. "And I am powerless to do anything but look on like an insentient log, whilst you run your rash heads into a noose, and then follow you all to death, whilst maman is left alone to perish in misery and in want."

"A pessimist again, Régine!" he said with a forced laugh, and in his turn rose to his feet. "'Tis little we have accomplished this evening," he added bitterly, "by talking." She said nothing more. An icy chill had hold of her heart. Not only of her heart, but of her brain and her whole being. Strive as she might, she could not enter into Bertrand's schemes, and as his whole entity was wrapped up in them she felt estranged from him, out of touch, shut out from his heart. Unspeakable bitterness filled her soul. She hated Theresia Cabarrus, who had enslaved Bertrand's fancy, and above all she mistrusted her. At this moment she would gladly have given her life to get Bertrand away from the influence of that woman and away from that madcap association which called itself "the Fatalists," and into which he had dragged both Joséphine and Jacques. Silently she preceded him out of the little church porch, the habitual trysting-place, where at one time she had spent so many happy hours. Just before she turned off into the street, she looked back, as if through the impenetrable darkness which enveloped it now she would conjure up, just once more, those happy images of the past, but the darkness made no response to the mute cry of her fancy, and with a last sigh of intense bitterness, she followed Bertrand down the street.

Less than five minutes after Bertrand and Régine had left the porch of Petit St. Antoine, the heavy oak door of the church was cautiously opened. It moved noiselessly upon its hinges, and presently through the aperture the figure of a man emerged, hardly discernible in the gloom. He slipped through the door into the porch, then closed the former noiselessly behind him. A moment or two later his huge, bulky figure was lumbering up the Rue St. Antoine, in the direction of the Arsenal, his down-at-heel shoes making a dull clip-clop on the cobblestones. There were but very few passers-by at this hour, and the man went along with his peculiar shuffling gait until he reached the Porte St. Antoine. The city gates were still open at this hour, for it was only a little while ago that the many church clocks of the quartier had struck eight, nor did the sergeant at the gate pay much heed to the beggarly caitiff who went by; only he and the half-dozen men of the National Guard who were in charge of the gate, did remark that the belated wayfarer appeared to be in distress with a terrible asthmatic cough which caused one of the men to say with grim facetiousness: "Pardi! but here's a man who will not give maman guillotine any trouble!" They all noticed, moreover, that after the asthmatic giant had passed through the city gate, he turned his shuffling footsteps in the direction of the Rue de la Planchette.

Chapter V

Rascality Rejoices

1

The Fraternal Suppers were a great success. They were the invention of Robespierre, and the unusual warmth of these early spring evenings lent the support of their balmy atmosphere to the scheme.

Whole Paris is out in the streets on these mild April nights. Families out on a holiday, after the daily spectacle of the death-cart taking the enemies of the people, the conspirators against their liberty, to the guillotine.

And maman brings a basket filled with whatever scanty provisions she can save from the maximum per day allowed for the provisioning of her family. Beside her, papa comes along, dragging his youngest by the hand — the latter no longer chubby and rosy, as were his prototypes in the days gone by, because food is scarce and dear, and milk unobtainable; but looking a man for all that, though bare-footed and bare-kneed, with the red cap upon his lank, unwashed locks, and hugging against his meagre chest a tiny toy guillotine, the latest popular fancy, all complete with miniature knife and pulleys, and frame artistically painted a vivid crimson.

The Rue St. Honoré is a typical example of what goes on all over the city. Though it is very narrow and therefore peculiarly inconvenient for the holding of outdoor entertainments, the Fraternal Suppers there are extensively patronized, because the street itself is consecrated as holding the house wherein lives Robespierre.

Here, as elsewhere, huge braziers are lit at intervals, so that materfamilias may cook the few herrings she has brought with her if she be so minded, and all down the narrow street tables are set, innocent of cloths or even of that cleanliness which is next to the equally neglected virtue of godliness. But the tables have an air of cheeriness nevertheless, with resin torches, tallow candles, or old stable lanterns set here and there, the flames flickering in the gentle breeze, adding picturesqueness to the scene which might otherwise have seemed sordid, with those pewter mugs and tin plates, the horn-handled knives and iron spoons.

The scanty light does little more than accentuate the darkness around, the deep shadows under projecting balconies or lintels of portes-cochères carefully closed and barred for the night; but it glints with weird willo'-the-wisp-like fitfulness on crimson caps and tricolour cockades, on drawn and begrimed faces, bony arms, or lean, brown hands.

A motley throng, in truth! The workers of Paris, its proletariat, all conscripted servants of the State — slaves, we might call them, though they deem themselves free men — all driven into hard manual labour, partly by starvation and wholly by the decree of the Committees, who decide how and when and in what form the nation requires the arms or hands — not the brains, mind you! — of its citizens. For brains the nation has no use, only in the heads of those who sit in Convention or on Committees. “The State hath no use for science,” was grimly said to Lavoisier, the great chemist, when he begged for a few days’ surcease from death in order to complete some important experiments.

But coal-heavers are useful citizens of the State; so are smiths and armourers and gunmakers, and those who can sew and knit stockings, do anything in fact to clothe and feed the national army, the defenders of the sacred soil of France. For them, for those workers — the honest, the industrious, the sober — are the Fraternal Suppers invented; but not for them only. There are the “tricotteuses,” sexless hags, who, by order of the State, sit at the foot of the scaffold surrounded by their families and their children and knit, and knit, the while they jeer — still by order of the State — at the condemned — old men, young women, children even, as they walk up to the guillotine. There are the “insulteuses publiques,” public insulters, women mostly — save the mark! — paid to howl and blasphemy as the death-carts rattle by. There are the “tappe-durs,” the hit-hards, who, armed with weighted sticks, form the body-guard around the sacred person of Robespierre. Then, the members of the Société Révolutionnaire, recruited from the refuse of misery and of degradation of this great city; and — oh, the horror of it all! — the “Enfants Rouges,” the red children, who cry “Death” and “à la lanterne” with the best of them — precocious little offsprings of the new Republic. For them, too, are the Fraternal Suppers established: for all the riff-raff, all the sweepings of abject humanity. For they too must be amused and entertained, lest they sit in clusters and talk themselves into the belief that they are more wretched, more indigent, more abased, than they were in the days of monarchical oppression.

2

And so, on these balmy evenings of mid-April, family parties are gathered in the open air, around meagre suppers that are “fraternal” by order of the State. Family parties which make for camaraderie between the honest man and the thief, the sober citizen and the homeless vagabond, and help one to forget awhile the misery, the starvation, the slavery, the daily struggle for bare existence, in anticipation of the belated Millennium.

There is even laughter around the festive boards, fun and frolic. jokes are cracked, mostly of a grim order. There is intoxication in the air: spring has got into the heads of the young. And there is even kissing under the shadows, love-making, sentiment; and here and there perhaps a shred of real happiness.

The provisions are scanty. Every family brings its own. Two or three herrings, sprinkled with shredded onions and wetted with a little vinegar, or else a few boiled prunes or a pottage of lentils and beans.

“Can you spare some of that bread, citizen?”

“Aye! if I can have a bite of your cheese.”

They are fraternal suppers! Do not, in the name of Liberty and Equality, let us forget that. And the whole of it was Robespierre’s idea. He conceived and carried it through, commanded the voices in the Convention that voted the money required for the tables, the benches, the tallow candles. He lives close by, in this very street, humbly, quietly, like a true son of the people, sharing house and board with citizen Duplay, the cabinet-maker, and with his family.

A great man, Robespierre! The only man! Men speak of him with bated breath, young girls with glowing eyes. He is the fetich, the idol, the demigod. No benefactor of mankind, no saint, no hero-martyr was ever worshipped more devotedly than this death-dealing monster by his votaries. Even the shade of Danton is reviled in order to exalt the virtues of his successful rival.

"Danton was gorged with riches: his pockets full, his stomach satisfied! But look at Robespierre!"

"Almost a wraith! — so thin, so white!"

"An ascetic!"

"Consumed by the fire of his own patriotism."

"His eloquence!"

"His selflessness!"

"You have heard him speak, citizen?"

A girl, still in her 'teens, her elbows resting on the table, her hands supporting her rounded chin, asks the question with bated breath. Her large grey eyes, hollow and glowing, are fixed upon her vis-à-vis, a tall, ungainly creature, who sprawls over the table, vainly trying to dispose of his long limbs in a manner comfortable to himself.

His hair is lank and matted with grease, his face covered in coal-dust; a sennight's growth of beard, stubbly and dusty, accentuates the squareness of his jaw even whilst it fails to conceal altogether the cruel, sarcastic curves of his mouth. But for the moment, in the rapt eyes of the young enthusiast, he is a prophet, a seer, a human marvel: he has heard Robespierre speak.

"Was it in the Club, citizen Rateau?" another woman asks — a young matron with a poor little starveling at her breast.

The man gives a loud guffaw, displays in the feeble, flickering light of the nearest torch a row of hideous uneven teeth, scored with gaps and stained with tobacco juice.

"In the Club?" he says with a curse, and spits in a convenient direction to show of his contempt for that or any other institution. "I don't belong to any Club. There's no money in my pocket. And the Jacobins and the Cordeliers like to see a man with a decent coat on his back."

His guffaw broke in a rasping cough which seemed to tear his broad chest to ribbons. For a moment speech was denied him; even oaths failed to reach his lips, trembling like an unset jelly in this distressing spasm. His neighbours alongside the table, the young enthusiast opposite, the comely matron, paid no heed to him — waited indifferently until the clumsy lout had regained his breath. This, mark you, was not an era of gentleness or womanly compassion, and an asthmatic mudlark was not like to excite pity. Only when he once more stretched out his long limbs, raised his head and looked about him, panting and blear-eyed, did the girl insist quietly:

"But you have heard Him speak!"

"Aye!" the ruffian replied drily. "I did."

"When?"

"Night before last. Tenez! He was stepping out of citizen Duplay's house yonder. He saw me leaning against the wall close by. I was tired, half asleep, what? He spoke to me and asked me where I lived."

"Where you lived?" the girl echoed, disappointed.

"Was that all?" the matron added with a shrug of her shoulders.

The neighbours laughed. The men enjoyed the discomfiture of the women, who were all craning their necks to hear something great, something palpitating, about their idol.

The young enthusiast sighed, clasped her hands in favour.

"He saw that you were poor, citizen Rateau," she said with conviction; "and that you were tired. He wished to help and comfort you."

"And where did you see you lived, citizen?" the young matron went on, in her calm, matter-of-fact tone.

"I live far from here, the other side of the water, not in an aristocratic quarter like this one — what?"

"You told Him you lived there?" the girl still insisted. Any scrap or crumb of information even remotely connected with her idol was manna to her body and balm to her soul.

"Yes, I did," citizen Rateau assented.

"Then," the girl resumed earnestly, "solace and comfort will come to you very soon, citizen. He never forgets. His eyes are upon you. He knows your distress and that you are poor and weary. Leave it to him, citizen Rateau. He will know how and when to help."

"He will know, more like," here broke in a harsh voice, vibrating with excitement, "how and when to lay his talons on an obscure and helpless citizen whenever his Batches for the guillotine are insufficient to satisfy his lust!"

A dull murmur greeted this tirade. Only those who sat close by the speaker knew which he was, for the lights were scanty and burnt dim in the open air. The others only heard — received this arrow-shot aimed at their idol — with for the most part a kind of dull resentment. The women were more loudly indignant. One or two young devotees gave a shrill cry or so of passionate indignation.

"Shame! Treason!"

"Guillotine, forsooth! The enemies of the people all deserve the guillotine!"

And the enemies of the people were those who dared raise their voice against their Chosen, their Fetich, the great, incomprehensible Mystery.

Citizen Rateau was once more rendered helpless by a tearing fit of coughing.

But from afar, down the street, there came one or two assenting cries.

"Well spoken, young man! As for me, I never trusted that bloodhound!"

And a woman's voice added shrilly: "His hands reek of blood. A butcher, I call him!"

"And a tyrant!" assented the original spokesman. "His aim is a dictatorship, with his minions hanging around him like abject slaves. Why not Versailles, then? How are we better off now than in the days of kingship? Then, at least, the streets of Paris did not stink of blood. Then, at least—"

But the speaker got no father. A hard crust of very dry, black bread, aimed by a sure hand, caught him full in the face, whilst a hoarse voice shouted lustily:

"Hey there, citizen! If thou'lt not hold thy tongue 'tis thy neck that will be reeking with blood o'er soon, I'll warrant!"

"Well said, citizen Rateau!" put in another, speaking with his mouth full, but with splendid conviction. "Every word uttered by that jackanapes yonder reeks of treason!"

"Shame!" came from every side.

"Where are the agents of the Committee of Public Safety? Men have been thrown into prison for less than this."

"Shame!"

"Denounce him!"

"Take him to the nearest Section!"

"Ere he wreaks mischief more lasting than words!" cried a woman, who tried as she spoke to give her utterance its full, sinister meaning.

"Shame! Treason!" came soon from every side. Voices were raised all down the length of the tables — shrill, full-throated, even dull and indifferent. Some really felt indignation — burning, ferocious indignation; others only made a noise for the sheer pleasure of it, and because the past five years had turned cries of "Treason!" and of "Shame!" into a habit. Not that they knew what the disturbance was about. The street was long and narrow, and the cries came some way from where they were sitting; but when cries of "Treason!" flew through the air these days, 'twas best to join in, lest those cries turned against one, and the next stage in the proceedings became the approach of an Agent of the Sûreté, the nearest prison, and the inevitable guillotine.

So every one cried "Shame!" and "Treason!" whilst those who had first dared to raise their voices against the popular demagogue drew together into a closer batch, trying no doubt to gather courage through one another's proximity. Eager, excited, a small compact group of two men — one a mere boy — and three women, it almost seemed as if they were suffering from some temporary hallucination. How else would five isolated persons — three of them in their first youth — have dared to brave a multitude?

In truth Bertrand Moncrif, face to face as he believed with martyrdom, was like one transfigured. Always endowed with good looks, he appeared like a veritable young prophet, haranguing the multitude and foretelling its doom. The gloom partly hid his figure, but his hand was outstretched, and the outline of an avenging finger pointing straight out before him, appeared in the weird light of the resin torch, as if carved in glowing lava. Now and then the fitful light caught the sharp outline of his face — the straight nose and pointed chin, and brown hair matted with the sweat of enthusiasm.

Beside him Régine, motionless and white as a wraith, appeared alive only by her eyes, which were fixed on her beloved. In the hulking giant with the asthmatic cough she had recognized the man to whom she had ministered earlier in the day. Somehow, his presence here and now seemed to her sinister and threatening. It seemed as if all day he had been dogging her footsteps: first at the soothsayer's then he surely must have followed her down the street. Then he had inspired her with pity; now his hideous face, his grimy hands, that croaking voice and churchyard cough, filled her with nameless terror.

He appeared to her excited fancy like a veritable spectre of death, hovering over Bertrand and over those she loved. With one arm she tried to press her brother Jacques closer to her breast, to quench his eagerness and solence his foolhardy tongue. But he, like a fierce, impatient young animal, fought to free himself from her loving embrace, shouted approval to Bertrand's oratory, played his part of the young propagandist, heedless of Régine's warnings and of his mother's tears. Next to Régine, her sister Joséphine — a girl not out of her 'teens, with all the eagerness and exaggeration of extreme youth, was shouting quite as loudly as her brother Jacques, clapping her small hands together, turning glowing, defying, arrogant eyes on the crowd of great unwashed whom she hoped to sway with her ardour and her eloquence.

"Shame on us all!" she cried with passionate vehemence. "Shame on us French women and French men that we should be the abject slaves of such a bloodthirsty tyrant!"

Her mother, pale-faced, delicate, had obviously long since given up all hope of controlling this unruly little crowd. She was too listless, too anemic, had no doubt suffered too much already, to be afraid for herself or for her children. She was past any thought or fear. Her wan face only expressed despair — despair that was absolutely final — and the resignation of silent self-immolation, content to suffer beside those she loved, only praying to be allowed to share their martyrdom, even though she had no part in their enthusiasm.

Bertrand, Joséphine and Jacques had all the ardour of martyrdom. Régine and her mother all its resignation.

3

The Fraternal Supper threatened to end in a free fight, wherein the only salvation for the young fire-eaters would lie in a swift taking to their heels. And even then the chances would be hopelessly against them. Spies of the Convention, spies of the Committees, spies of Robespierre himself, swarmed all over the place. They were marked men and women, those five. It was useless to appear defiant and high-minded and patriotic. Even Danton had gone to the guillotine for less.

"Shame! Treason!"

The balmy air of mid-April seemed to echo the sinister words, but Bertrand appeared unconscious of all danger. Nay! it almost seemed as if he courted it.

"Shame on you all!" he called out loudly, and his fresh, sonorous voice rang out above the tumult and the hoarse murmurings. "Shame on the people of France for bowing their necks to such monstrous tyranny. Citizens of Paris, think on it! Is not Liberty a mockery now? Do you call your bodies your own? They are but food for cannon at the bidding of the Convention. Your families? You are parted from those you love. Your wife? You are torn from her embrace. Your children? They are taken from you for the service of the State. And by whose orders? Tell me that! By whose orders, I say?"

He was lashing himself into a veritable fury of self-sacrifice, stood up beside the table and with a gesture even bade Joséphine and Jacques be still. As for Régine, she hardly was conscious that she lived, so acute, so poignant was her emotion, so gaunt and real the approach of death which threatened her beloved.

This of course was the end — this folly, this mad, senseless, useless folly! Already through the gloom she could see as in a horrible vision all those she cared for dragged before a tribunal that knew of no mercy; she could hear the death-carts rattling along the

cobblestones, she could see the hideous arms of the guillotine, ready to receive this unique, this believed, this precious prey. She could feel Joséphine's arms clinging pitiably to her for courage; she could see Jacques' defiant young face, glorying in martyrdom; she could see maman, drooping like a faded flower, bereft of what was life to her — the nearness of her children. She could see Bertrand, turning with a dying look of love, not to her but to the beautiful Spaniard who had captured his fancy and then sold him without compunction to the spies of Robespierre and of her own party.

But for the fact that this was a "Fraternal Supper," that people had come out here with their families, their young children, to eat and to make merry and to forget all their troubles as well as the pall of crime that hung over the entire city, I doubt not but what the young Hotspur and his crowd of rashlings would ere now have been torn from their eats, trampled under foot, at best been dragged to the nearest Commissary, as the asthmatic citizen Rateau had already threatened. Even as it was, the temper of many a paterfamilias was sorely tried by this insistence, with willful twisting of the tigers' tails. And the women were on the verge of reprisals. As for Rateau, he just seemed to gather his huge limbs together, uttered an impatient oath and an angry: "By all the cats and dogs that render this world hideous with their howls, I have had about enough of this screeching oratory." Then he threw one long leg over the bench on which he had been sitting, and in an instant was lost in the gloom, only to reappear in the dim light a few seconds later, this time on the farther side of the table, immediately behind the young rhetorician, his ugly, begrimed face with its grinning, toothless mouth and his broad, bent shoulders towering above the other's slender figure.

"Knock him down, citizen!" a young woman cried excitedly. "Hit him in the face! Silence his abominable tongue!"

But Bertrand was not to be silenced yet. No doubt the fever of notoriety, of martyrdom, had got into his blood. His youth, his good looks — obvious even in the fitful light and despite his tattered clothes — were an asset in his favour, no doubt; but a man-eating tiger is apt to be indiscriminate in his appetites and will devour a child with as much gusto as a gaffer; and this youthful firebrand was teasing the man-eating tiger with reckless insistence.

"By whose orders," he reiterated, with passionate vehemence, "by whose orders are we, free citizens of France, dragged into this abominable slavery? Is it by those of the Representatives of the People? No! Of the Committees chosen by the People? No! Of your Municipalities? your Clubs? your Sections? No! and again No! Your bodies, citizens, your freedom, your wives, your children, are all slaves, the property, the toys of one man — real tyrant and traitor, the oppressor of the weak, the enemy of the people; and that man is—"

Again he was interrupted, this time more forcibly. A terrific blow on the head deprived him of speech and of sight. His senses reeled, there was a mighty buzzing in his ears, which effectually drowned the cries of execration or of approval that greeted his tirade, as well as a new and deafening tumult which filled the whole narrow street with its weird and hideous sounds.

Whence the blow had come, Bertrand had no notion. It had all been so swift. He had expected to be torn limb from limb, to be dragged to the nearest Commissariat: he courted condemnation, envisaged the guillotine; 'stead of which, he was prosily knocked down by a blow which would have felled an ox.

Just for a second, his fast-fading perceptions struggled back into consciousness. He had a swift vision of a giant form towering over him, with grimy fist uplifted and toothless mouth grinning hideously, and of the crowd, rising from their seats, turning their backs upon him, waving their arms and caps frantically, and shouting, shouting, with vociferous lustiness. He also had an equally swift pang of remorse as the faces of his companions — of Régine and Mme de Servat, of Joséphine and Jacques — whom he dragged with him into this mad and purposeless outburst, rose prophetically before him from out the gloom, with wide-eyed, scared faces and arms uplifted to ward off vengeful blows.

But the next moment these lightning-like visions faded into complete oblivion. He felt something hard and heavy hitting him in the back. All the lights, the faces, the outstretched hands, danced wildly before his eyes, and he sank like a log on the greasy pavement, dragging pewter plates, mugs and bottles down with him in his fall.

Chapter VI

One Crowded Hour of Glorious Life

1

And all the while, the people were shouting:

“Le violâ!”

“Robespierre!”

The Fraternal Supper was interrupted. Men and women pushed and jostled and screamed, the while a small, spare figure in dark cloth coat and immaculate breeches, with smooth brown hair and pale-ascetic face, stood for a moment under the lintel of a gaping porte-cochère. He had two friends with him; handsome, enthusiastic St. Just, the right hand and the spur of the bloodthirsty monster, own kinsman to Armand St. Just the renegade, whose sister was married to a rich English millor; and Couthon, delicate, half-paralysed, wheeled about in a chair, with one foot in the grave, whose devotion to the tyrant was partly made up of ambition, and wholly of genuine admiration.

At the uproarious cheering which greeted his appearance, Robespierre advanced into the open, whilst a sudden swift light of triumph darted from his narrow, pale eyes.

“And you still hesitate!” St. Just whispered excitedly in his ear. “Why, you hold the people absolutely in the hollow of your hand!”

“Have patience, friend!” Couthon remonstrated quietly. “Robespierre’s hour is about to strike. To hasten it now, might be courting disaster.”

Robespierre himself would, in the meanwhile, have been in serious danger through the exuberant welcome of his admirers. Their thoughtless crowding around his person would easily have given some lurking enemy or hot-headed, would-be martyr the chance of wielding an assassin’s knife with success, but for the presence amongst the crowd of his “tappe-durs” — hid-hards — a magnificent bodyguard composed of picked giants from the mining districts of Eastern France, who rallied around the great man, and with their weighted sticks kept the enthusiastic crowd at bay.

He walked a few steps down the street, keeping close to the houses on his left; his two friends, St. Just and Couthon in his carrying chair, were immediately behind him, and between these three and the mob, the tappe-durs, striding two abreast, formed a solid phalanx.

Then, all of a sudden, the great man came to a halt, faced the crowd, and with an impressive gesture imposed silence and attention. His bodyguard cleared a space for him and he stood in the midst of them, with the light of a resin torch striking full upon his spare figure and bringing into bold relief that thin face so full of sinister expression, the cruel mouth and the coldly glittering eyes. He was looking straight across the table, on which the débris of Fraternal Suppers lay in unsavoury confusion.

On the other side of the table, Mme de Serval with her three children sat, or rather crouched, closely huddled against one another. Joséphine was clinging to her mother, Jacques to Régine. Gone was the eagerness out of their attitude now, gone the enthusiasm that had revelled the bloodthirsty tyrant in the teeth of a threatening crowd. It seemed as if, with that terrific blow dealt by a giant hand to Bertrand who was their leader in this mad adventure, the awesome fear of death had descended upon their souls. The two young faces as well as that of Mme de Serval appeared distorted and haggard, whilst Régine’s eyes, dilated with terror, strove to meet Robespierre’s steady gaze, which was charged with sinister mockery.

And for one short interval of time the crowd was silent; and the everlasting stars looked down from above on the doings of men. To these trembling, terrified young creatures, suddenly possessed with youth’s passionate desire to live, with a passionate horror of death, these few seconds of tense silence must have seemed like an eternity of suffering. Then Robespierre’s thin face lighted up in a portentous smile — a smile that caused those pale cheeks yonder to take on a still more ashen hue.

“And where is our eloquent orator of a while ago?” the great man asked quietly. “I heard my name, for I sat at my window looking with joy on the fraternization of the people of France. I caught sight of the speaker, and came down to hear more clearly what he had to say. But where is he?”

His pale eyes wandered slowly along the crowd; and such was the power exercised by the extraordinary man, so great the terror that he inspired, that every one there — men, women and children, workers and vagabonds — turned their eyes away, dared not meet his glance lest in it they read an accusation or a threat.

Indeed, no one dared to speak. The young rhetorician had disappeared, and every one trembled lest they should be implicated in his escape. He had evidently got away under cover of the confusion and the noise. But his companions were still there — four of them; the woman and the boy and the two girls, crouching like frightened beasts before the obvious fury, the certain vengeance of the people. The murmurs were ominous. “Death! Guillotine! Traitors!” were words easily distinguishable in the confused babbling of the sullen crowd.

Robespierre’s cruel, appraising glance rested on those four pathetic forms, so helpless, so desperate, so terrified.

“Citizens,” he said coldly, “did you not hear me ask where your eloquent companion is at this moment?”

Régine alone knew that he lay like a log under the table, close to her feet. She had seen him fall, struck by that awful blow from a brutal fist; but at the ominous query she instinctively pressed her trembling lips close together, whilst Joséphine and Jacques clung to her with the strength of despair.

“Do not parley with the rabble, citizen,” St. Just whispered eagerly. “This is a grand moment for you. Let the people of their own accord condemn those who dared to defame you.”

And even Couthon, the prudent, added sententiously:

“Such an opportunity may never occur again.”

The people, in truth, were over-ready to take vengeance into their own hands.

“À la lanterne, les aristos!”

Gaunt, bedraggled forms leaned across the table, shook begrimed fists in the direction of the four crouching figures. With the blind instinct of trapped beasts, they retreated into the shadows step by step, as those threatening fists appeared to draw closer, clutching at the nearest table and dragging it with them, in an altogether futile attempt at a barricade.

"Holy Mother of God, protect us!" murmured Mme de Serval from time to time.

Behind them there was nothing but the rows of houses, no means of escape even if their trembling knees had not refused them service; whilst vaguely, through their terror, they were conscious of the proximity of that awful asthmatic creature with the wheezy cough and the hideous, toothless mouth. At times he seemed so close that they shut their eyes, almost feeling his grimy hands around their throat, his huge, hairy arms dragging them down to death.

It all happened in the space of a very few minutes, far fewer even than it would take completely to visualize the picture. Robespierre, like an avenging wraith, theatrical yet impassive, standing in the light of a huge resin torch, which threw alternate lights and shadows, grotesque and weird, upon his meagre figure, now elongating the thin, straight nose, now widening the narrow mouth, misshaping the figure till it appeared like some fantastic ghoul-form from the nether world. Behind him, his two friends were lost in the gloom, as were now Mme de Serval and her children. They were ensconced against a heavy porte-cochère, a rickety table alone standing between them and the mob, who were ready to drag them to the nearest lanthorn and immolate them before the eyes of their outraged idol.

"Leave the traitors alone!" Robespierre commanded. "Justice will deal with them as they deserve."

"À la lanterne!" the people — more especially the women — demanded insistently.

Robespierre turned to one of his "tappe-durs."

"Take the aristos to the nearest Commissariat," he said. "I'll have no bloodshed to mar our Fraternal Supper."

"The Commissariat, forsooth!" a raucous voice positively bellowed. "Who is going to stand between us and our vengeance? Robespierre has been outraged by this rabble. Let them perish in sight of all!"

How it all happened after that, none who were there could in truth have told you. The darkness, the flickering lights, the glow of the braziers, which made the inky blackness around more pronounced, made everything indistinguishable to ordinary human sight. Certain it is that citizen Rateau — who had constituted himself the spokesman of the mob — was at one time seen towering behind the four unfortunates, with his huge arms stretched out, his head thrown back, his mouth wide open, screaming abuse and vituperation, demanding the people's right to take the law into its own sovereign hands.

At that moment the light of the nearest resin torch threw his hulking person into bold relief against a heavy porte-cochère which was immediately behind him. The mob acclaimed him, cheered him to the echoes, agreed with him that summary justice in such a case was lone satisfying. The next instant a puff of wind blew the flame of the torch in a contrary direction, and darkness suddenly enveloped the ranting colossus and the cowering prey all ready to his hand.

"Rateau!" shouted some one.

"Hey, there! citizen Rateau! Where art thou?" came soon from every side.

No answer came from the spot where Rateau had last been seen, and it seemed as if just then a strong current of air had slammed a heavy door to somewhere in the gloom. Citizen Rateau had disappeared, and the four traitors along with him.

It took a few seconds of valuable time ere the mob suspected that it was being robbed of its prey. Then a huge upheaval occurred, a motion of the human mass densely packed in the Rue St. Honoré, that was not unlike the rush of water through a narrow gorge.

"Rateau!" People were yelling the name from end to end of the street.

2

Superstition, which was rampant in these days of carnage and of crime, had possession of many a craven soul. Rateau had vanished. It seemed as if the Evil One, whose name had been so freely invoked during the course of the Fraternal Supper, had in very truth spirited Rateau away.

On the top of the tumult came a silence as complete as that of a graveyard at midnight. The "tappe-durs," who at their chief's command had been forging their way through the crowd, in order to reach the traitors, ceased their hoarse calls of "Make way there, in the name of the Convention!" whilst St. Just, who still stood close to his friend, literally saw the cry stifled on Robespierre's lips.

Robespierre himself had not altogether realized what had happened. In his innermost heart he had already yielded to his friends' suggestion, and was willing to let mob-law run its course. As St. Just had said: what a triumph for himself if his detractors were lynched by the mob! When Rateau towered above the four unfortunates, hurling vituperation above their heads, the tyrant smiled, well satisfied; and when the giant thus incontinently vanished, Robespierre for a moment or two remained complacent and content.

Then the whole crowd oscillated in the direction of the mysterious porte-cochère. Those who were in the front ranks threw themselves against the heavy panels, whilst those in the rear pushed with all their might. But the porte-cochères of old Paris are heavily constructed. Woodwork that had resisted the passage of centuries withheld the onslaught of a pack of half-starved caitiffs. But only for awhile.

The mob, fearing that it was getting foiled, broke into a howl of execration, and Robespierre, his face more drawn and grey than before, turned to his companions, trying to read their thoughts.

"If it should be—" St. Just murmured, yet dared not put his surmise into words.

Nor had he time to do so, or Robespierre the leisure to visualize his own fears. Already the massive oak panels were yielding to persistent efforts. The mighty woodwork began to crack under the pressure of this living battering ram; when suddenly the howls of those who were in the rear turned to a wild cry of delight. Those who were pushing against the porte-cochère paused in their task. All necks were suddenly craned upwards. The weird lights of torches and the glow of braziers glinted on guant necks and upturned chins, turned heads and faces into phantasmagoric, unearthly shapes.

Robespierre and his two companions instinctively looked up too. There, some few mètres lower down the street, on the third-floor balcony of a neighbouring house, the figure of Rateau had just appeared. The window immediately behind him was wide open and the

room beyond was flooded with light, so that his huge person appeared distinctly silhouetted — a black and gargantuan mass — against the vivid and glowing background. His head was bare, his lank hair fluttered in the breeze, his huge chest was bare and his ragged shirt hung in tatters from his brawny arms. Flung across his left shoulder, he held an inanimate female form, whilst with his right hand he dragged another through the open window in his wake. Just below him, a huge brazier was shedding its crimson glow.

The sight of him — gaunt, weird, a veritable tower of protean revenge — paralyzed the most ebullient, silenced every clamour. For the space of two seconds only did he stand there, in full view of the crowd, in full view of the almighty tyrant whose defamation he had sworn to avenge. Then he cried in stentorian tones:

“Thus perish all conspirators against the liberty of the people, all traitors to its cause, by the hands of the people and for the glory of their chosen!”

And, with a mighty twist of his huge body, he picked up the inanimate form that lay lifeless at his feet. For a moment he held the two in his arms, high above the iron railing of the balcony; for a moment those two lifeless, shapeless forms hung in the darkness in mid-air, whilst an entire crowd of fanatics held their breath and waited, awed and palpitating, only to break out into frantic cheering as the giant hurled the two lifeless bodies down, straight into the glowing brazier.

“Two more to follow!” he shouted lustily.

There was pushing and jostling and cheering. Women screamed, men blasphemed and children cried. Shouts of “Vive Rateau!” mingled with those of “Vive Robespierre!” a circle was formed, hands holding hands, and a wild saraband danced around the glowing brazier. And this mad orgy of enthusiasm lasted for full three minutes, until the foremost among those who, awestruck and horrified, had approached the brazier in order to see the final agony of the abominable traitor, burst out with a prolonged “Malediction!”

Beyond that exclamation, they were speechless — pointed with trembling hands at the shapeless bundles on which the dull fire of the braziers had not yet obtained a purchase.

The bundles were shapeless indeed. Rags hastily tied together to represent human forms; but rags only! No female traitors, no aristos beneath! The people had been fooled, hideously fooled by a traitor all the more execrable, as he had seemed one of themselves. “Malediction! Death to the traitor!”

Aye, death indeed! The giant, whoever he might be, would have to bear a charmed life if he were to escape the maddened fury of a foiled populace.

“Rateau!” they shouted hoarsely.

They looked up to that third-floor balcony which had so fascinated them awhile ago. But now the window was shut and no light from within chased the gloom that hung over the houses around.

“Rateau!” the people shouted.

But Rateau had disappeared. It all seemed like a dream, a nightmare. Had Rateau really existed, or was he a wraith, sent to tease and to scare those honest patriots who were out for liberty and for fraternity? Many there were who would have liked to hold on to that theory — men and women whose souls, warped and starved by the excesses and the miseries of the past five years, clung to any superstition, any so-called supernatural revelations, that failed to replace the old religion that had been banished from their hearts.

But in this case not even superstition could be allowed free play. Rateau had vanished, it is true. The house from whence he had thus mocked and flouted the people was searched through and through by a mob who found nothing but bare boards and naked walls, empty rooms and disused cupboards on which to wreak its fury.

But down there, lying on the top of the brazier, were those two bundles of rags slowly being consumed by the smouldering embers, silent proofs of the existence of that hulking creature whose size and power had, with that swiftness peculiar to human conceptions, already become legendary.

And in a third-floor room, a lamp that had recently been extinguished, a coil of rope, more rages, male and female clothes, a pair of boots, a battered hat, were mute witnesses to the swift passage of the mysterious giant with the wheezy cough — the trickster who had fooled a crowd and thrown the great Robespierre himself into ridicule.

Chapter VII

Two Interludes

1

Two hours later the Rue St. Honoré had resumed its habitual graveyard-like stillness. The stillness had to come at last. Men in their wildest passions, in their most ebullient moods, must calm down sooner or later, if only temporarily. Blood aglow with enthusiasm, or rage, or idolatry, cannot retain its fever-pitch uninterruptedly for long. And so silence of that turbulent scene of awhile ago.

Here, as in other quarters of Paris, the fraternal suppers had come to an end; and perspiring matrons, dragging weary children at their skirts, wended their way homewards, whilst their men went to consummate the evening's entertainment at one of the numerous clubs or cabarets where the marvellous doings in the Rue St. Honoré could be comfortably lived over again or retailed to those, less fortunate, who had not been there to see.

In the early morning the "nettoyeurs publiques" would be coming along, to clear away the débris of the festivities and to gather up the tables and benches which were the property of the several Municipal sections, and put them away for the next occasion.

But these "nettoyeurs" were not here yet. They, too, were spending an hour or two in the nearest cabarets, discussing the startling events that had rendered notorious one corner of the Rue St. Honoré.

And so the streets were entirely deserted, save here and there for the swift passage of a furtive form, hugging the walls, with hands in pockets and a crimson cap pulled over the eyes, anxious only to escape the vigilance of the night-watchman, swift of foot and silent of tread; and anon, in the Rue St. Honoré itself, when even these nightbirds had ceased to flutter, the noiseless movement of a dark and mysterious form that stirred cautiously upon the greasy cobblestones. More silent, more furtive than any hunted beast creeping out of its lair, this mysterious form emerged from under one of the tables that was standing nearly opposite the house where Robespierre lived and close to the one where the superhuman colossus had wrought his magic trick.

It was Bertrand Moncrif. No longer a fiery Desmosthenes now, but a hunted, terror-filled human creature, whom a stunning blow from a giant fist had rendered senseless, even whilst it saved him from the consequences of his own folly. His senses still reeling, his limbs cramped and aching, he had lain stark and still under the table just where he had fallen, not sufficiently conscious to realize what was happening beyond his very limited range of vision or to marvel what was the ultimate fate of his companions.

His only instinct throughout this comatose condition was the blind one of self-preservation. Feeling rather than hearing the tumult around him, he had gathered his limbs close together, lain as still as a mouse, crouching within himself in the shelter of the table above. It was only when the silence around had lasted an eternity of time that he ventured out of his hiding-place. With utmost caution, hardly daring to breathe, he crept on hands and knees and looked about him, up and down the street. There was no one about. The night fortunately was moonless and dark; nature had put herself on the side of those who wished to pass unperceived.

Bertrand struggled to his feet, smothering a cry of pain. His head ached furiously, his knees shook under him; but he managed to crawl as far as the nearest house, and rested for awhile against its wall. The fresh air did him good. The April breeze blew across his burning forehead.

For a few minutes he remained thus, quite still, his eyes gradually regaining their power of vision. He recollected where he was and all that had happened. An icy shiver ran down his spine, for he also remembered Régine and Mme de Serva and the two children. But he was still too much dazed, really only half conscious, to do more than vaguely marvel what had become of them.

He ventured to look fearfully up and down the street. Tables scattered pell-mell, the unsavoury remnants of fraternal suppers, a couple of smouldering braziers, collectively met his gaze. And at one point, sprawling across a table, with head lost between outstretched arms, a figure, apparently asleep, perhaps dead.

Bertrand, now nothing but a bundle of nerves, could hardly suppress a cry of terror. It seemed to him as if his life depended on whether that sprawling figure was alive or dead. But he dared not approach in order to make sure. For awhile he waited, sinking more and more deeply into the shadows, watching that motionless form on which his life depended.

The figure did not move, and gradually Bertrand nerved himself up to confidence and then to action. He buried his head in the folds of his coat-collar and his hands in the pockets of his breeches, and with silence, stealthy footsteps he started to make his way down the street. At first he looked back once or twice at the immobile figure sprawling across the table. It had not moved, still appeared as if it might be dead. Then Bertrand took to his heels and, no longer looking either behind him or to the right or left, with elbows pressed close to his side, he started to run in the direction of the Tuileries.

A minute later, the motionless figure came back to life, rose quickly and with swift, noiseless tread, started to run in the same direction.

2

In the cabarets throughout the city, the chief topic of conversation was the mysterious events of the Rue St. Honoré. Those who had seen it all had marvellous tales to tell of the hero of the adventure.

"The man was eight or else nine feet high; his arms reached right across the street from house to house. Flames spurted out of his mouth when he coughed. He had horns on his head; cloven feet; a forked tail!"

These were but a few of the asserverations which rendered the person of the fictitious citizen Rateau a legendary one in the eyes of those who had witnessed his amazing prowess. Those who had not been thus favoured listened wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

But all agreed that the mysterious giant was in truth none other than the far-fame Englishman — that spook, that abominable trickster, that devil incarnate, known to the Committees as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"But how could it be the Englishman?" was suddenly put forward by citizen Hottot, the picturesque landlord of the Cabaret de la Liberté, a well-known rendezvous close to the Carrousel. "How could it be the Englishman who played you that trick, seeing that you all say it was citizen Rateau who... The devil take it all!" he added, and scratched his bald head with savage vigour, which he always did whenever he felt sorely perplexed. "A man can't be two at one and the same time; nor two men become one. Nor... Name of a name of a dog!" concluded the worthy citizen, puffing and blowing in the maze of his own puzzlement like an old walrus that is floundering in the water.

"It was the Englishman, I tell thee!" one of his customers asserted indignantly. "Ask anyone who saw him! Ask the tappe-durs! Ask Robespierre himself! He saw him, and turned as grey as — as putty, I tell thee! he concluded, with more conviction than eloquence.

"And I tell thee," broke in citizen Sical, the butcher — he with the bullet-head and bull-neck and a fist that could in truth have felled an ox; "I tell thee that it was citizen Rateau. Don't I know citizen Rateau?" he added, and brought that heavy fist of his down upon the upturned cask on which stood pewter mugs and bottles of eau de vie, and glared aggressively round upon the assembly. He had only one eye; the other presented a hideous appearance, scarred and blotched, the result of a terrible fatality in his early youth. The one eye leered with a glance of triumph as well as of a challenge, daring any less muscular person to impugn his veracity.

One man alone was bold enough to take up the challenge — a wizened little fellow, a printer by trade, with skin of the texture of grained oak and a few unruly curls that tumbled over one another above a highly polished forehead.

"And I tell thee, citizen Sical," he said with firm decision; "I tell thee and those who aver, as thou dost, that citizen Rateau had anything to do with those monkey-tricks, that ye lie. Yes!" he reiterated emphatically, and paying no heed to the glowering looks and blasphemies of Sical and his friends. "Yes, ye lie! Not consciously, I grant you; but you lie nevertheless. Because—" He paused and glanced around him, like a clever actor conscious of the effect which he produced. His tiny beady eyes blinked in the glare of the lamp before him.

"Because what?" came in an eager chorus from every side.

"Because," resumed the other sententiously, "all the while that ye were supping at the expense of the State in the open, and had your gizzards stirred by the juggling devices of some unknown mountebank, citizen Rateau was lying comfortably drunk and snoring lustily in the antechamber of Mother Théot, the soothsayer, right at the other end of Paris!"

"How do you know that, citizen Langlois?" queried the host with icy reproval, for butcher Sical was his best customer, and Sical did not like being contradicted. But little Langlois with the shiny forehead and tiny, beady, humorous eyes, continued unperturbed.

"Pardi!" he said gaily, "because I was at Mother Théot myself, and saw him there."

That certainly was a statement to stagger even the great Sical. It was received in complete silence. Every one promptly felt that the moment was propitious for another drink; nay! that the situation demanded it.

Sical, and those who had fought against the Scarlet Pimpernel theory, were too staggered to speak. They continued to imbibe citizen Hottot's eau de vie in sullen brooding. The idea of the legendary Englishman, which has so unexpectedly been strengthened by citizen Langlois' statement concerning Rateau, was repugnant to their common sense. Superstition was all very well for women and weaklings like Langlois; but for men to be asked to accept the theory that a kind of devil in human shape had so thrown dust in the eyes of a number of perfectly sober patriots that they literally could not believe what they saw, was nothing short of an insult.

And they had seen Rateau at the fraternal supper, had talking with him, until the moment when... Then who in Satan's name had they been talking with?

"Here, Langlois! Tell us—"

And Langlois, who had become the hero of the hour, told all he knew, and told it, we are told, a dozen times and more. How he had gone to Mother Théot's at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and had sat patiently waiting beside his friend Rateau, who wheezed and snored alternately for a couple of hours. How, at six o'clock or a little after, Rateau went out because — the aristo, forsooth! — had found the atmosphere filthy in Mother Théot's antechamber — no doubt he went to get another drink.

"At about half-past seven," the little printer went on glibly, "my turn came to speak with the old witch. When I came out it was long past eight o'clock and quite dark. I saw Rateau sprawling upon a bench, half asleep. I tried to speak with him, but he only grunted. However, I went out then to get a bit of supper at one of the open-air places, and at ten o'clock I was once more past Mother Théot's place. One or two people were coming out of the house. They were all grumbling because they had been told to go. Rateau was one who was for making a disturbance, but I took him by the arm. We went down the street together, and parted company in the Rue de l'Anier, where he lodges. And here I am!" concluded Langlois, and turned triumphantly to challenge the gaze of every one of the sceptics around him.

There was not a single doubtful point in his narrative, and though he was questioned — aye! and severely cross-questioned, too — he never once swerved from his narrative or in any manner did he contradict himself. Later on it transpired that there were others who had been in Mother Théot's antechamber that day. They too subsequently corroborated all that the little printer had said. One of them was the wife of Sical's own brother; and there were others. So, what would you?

"Name of a name of a dog, then, who was it when spirited the aristos away?"

Chapter VIII

The Beautiful Spaniard

1

In the Rue Villedot, which is in the Louvre quarter of Paris, there is a house, stone built and five-storied, with grey shutters to all the windows and balconies of wrought iron — a house exactly similar to hundreds and thousands of others in every quarter of Paris. During the day the small wicket in the huge porte-cochère is usually kept open; it allows a peep into a short dark passage, and beyond it to the lodge of the concierge. Beyond this again there is a courtyard, into which, from every one of its four sides, five rows of windows, all adorned with grey shutters, blink down like so many colourless eyes. The inevitable wrought-iron balconies extend along three sides of the quadrangle on every one of the five floors, and on the balustrade of these, pieces of carpet in various stages of decay are usually to be seen hanging out to air. From shutter to shutter clothes lines are stretched and support fantastic arrays of family linens that flap lazily in the sultry, vitiated air which alone finds its way down the shaft of the quadrangle.

On the left of the entrance passage and opposite the lodge of the concierge there is a tall glass door, and beyond it the vestibule and primary staircase, which gives access to the principal apartments — those that look out upon the street and are altogether more luxurious and more airy than those which give upon the courtyard. To the latter, two back stairways give access. They are at the far corners of the courtyard; both are pitch dark and reek of stuffiness and evil smells. The apartments which they serve, especially those on the lower floors, are dependent for light and air on what modicum of these gifts of heaven comes down the shaft into the quadrangle.

After dark, of course, porte-cochère and wicket are both closed, and if a belated lodger or visitor desires to enter the house, he must ring the bell and the concierge in his lodge will pull a communicating cord that will unlatch the wicket. It is up to the belated visitor or lodger to close the wicket after him, and he is bound by law to give his name, together with the number of the apartment to which he is going, in to the concierge as he goes past the lodge. The concierge, on the other hand, will take a look at him so that he may identify him should trouble or police inquiry arise.

On this night of April, somewhere near midnight, there was a ring at the outer door. Citizen Leblanc, the concierge, roused from his first sleep, pulled the communicating cord. A young man, hatless and in torn coat and muddy breeches, slipped in through the wicket and hurried past the lodge, giving only one name, but that in a clear voice, as he passed:

“Citoyenne Cabarrus.”

The concierge turned over in his bed and grunted, half asleep. His duty clearly was to run after the visitor, who had failed to give his own name; but to begin with, the worthy concierge was very tired; and then the name which the belated caller had given was one requiring special consideration.

The citoyenne Cabarrus was young and well favoured, and even in these troublous days, youth and beauty demanded certain privileges which no patriotic concierge could refuse to grant. Moreover, the aforesaid lady had visitors at all hours of the day and late into the night — visitors for the most part with whom it was not well to interfere. Citizen Tallien, the popular Representative in the Convention was, as every one knew, her ardent adorer. 'Twas said by all and sundry that since the days when he met the fair Cabarrus in Bordeaux and she exercised such a mellowing influence upon his bloodthirsty patriotism, he had no thought save to win her regard.

But he was not the only one who came to the dreary old apartment in the Rue Villedot, with a view to worshipping at the Queen of Beauty's shrine. Citizen Leblanc had seen many a great Representative of the People pass by his lodge since the beautiful Theresia came to dwell here. And if he became very confidential and his interlocutor very insistent, he would throw out a hint that the greatest man in France to-day was not infrequent visitor in the house.

Obviously, therefore, it was best not to pry too closely into secrets, the keeping of which might prove uncomfortable for one's peace of mind. And citizen Leblanc, tossing restlessly in his sleep, dreamed of the fair Cabarrus and wished himself in the place of those who were privileged and pay their court to her.

2

And so the belated visitor was able to make his way across the courtyard and up the dark back stairs unmolested, but even this reassuring fact failed to give him confidence. He hurried on with the swift and stealthy footstep which had become habitual to him, glancing over his shoulder from time to time, wide-eyed and with ears alert, and heart quivering with apprehension.

Up the dark and narrow staircase he hurried, dizzy and sick, his head reeling in the dank atmosphere, his shaking hands seeking the support of the walls as he climbed wearily up to the third floor. Here he almost measured his length upon the landing, tottered up again and came down sprawling on his knees against one of the doors — the one which had the number 22 painted upon it. For the moment it seemed as if he would once more fall into a swoon. Terror and relief were playing havoc with his whirling brain. He had not sufficient strength to stretch out an arm in order to ring the bell, but only beat feebly against the panel of the door with his moist palm.

A moment later the door was opened, and the unfortunate fell forward into the vestibule at the feet of a tall apparition clad in white and holding a small table lamp above her head. The apparition gave a little scream which was entirely human and wholly feminine, hastily put down the lamp on a small console close by, and by retreating forcefully farther into the vestibule, dragged the half-animate form of the young man along too; for he was now clinging to a handful of white skirt with the strength of despair.

“I am lost, Theresia!” he moan pitifully. “Hide me, for God's sake!... only for to-night!”

Theresia Cabarrus was frowning now, looked more perplexed than kindly, and certainly made no attempt to raise the crouching figure from the ground. Anon she called loudly: “Pepita!” and whilst waiting for an answer to this call, she remained quite still, and the

frown of puzzlement on her face yielded to one of fear. The young man, obviously only half conscious, continued to moan and to implore.

"Silence, you fool!" she said peremptorily. "The door is still open. Anyone on the stairs could hear you. Pepita!" she called again, more harshly this time.

The next moment an old woman came from somewhere out of the darkness, threw up her hands at sight of that grovelling figure on the floor, and would no doubt have broken out in loud lament but that her young mistress ordered her at once to close the door.

"Then help the citizen Moncrif to a sofa in my room," the beautiful Theresia went on peremptorily. "Give him a restorative and see above all to it that he hold his tongue!"

With a quick imperious jerk she freed herself from the convulsive grasp of the young man, and walking quickly across the small vestibule, she went through a door at the end of it that had been left ajar, leaving the unfortunate Moncrif to the ministrations of Pepita.

3

Theresia Cabarrus, who had obtained a divorce from her husband, the Marquis de Fontenay (by virtue of a decree of the former Legislative Assembly, which allow — nay, encouraged — the dissolution of a marriage with an émigré who refused to return to France). Theresia Cabarrus was, in this year 1794, in her twenty-fourth year, and perhaps in the zenith of her beauty and in the plenitude of that power which had subjugated so many men. In what that power consisted the historian has vainly tried to guess; for it was not her beauty only that brought so many to her feet. In the small oval face, the pointed chin, the full, sensuous lips, so typically Spanish, we look in vain for traces of that beauty which we are told surpassed that of other women of her time; whilst in the dark, velvety eyes, more tender than spiritual, and in the narrow arched brows, we fail to find an expression of the esprit which had moulded Tallien to her will and even brought Robespierre out of the shell of his asceticism — a willing victim to her wiles.

But who would be bold enough to analyse that subtle quality, acknowledged by all, possessed by a very few, which is vaguely denoted by the word "charm"? Theresia Cabarrus must have possessed it to a marvellous degree — that, and an utter callousness for the feelings of her victims, which would leave her mind cool and keen to pursue her own ends, whilst theirs was thrown into that maze of jealousy and of passion wherein prudence flies to the winds and the fever of self-immolation gets into the blood.

At this moment, in the sparsely furnished room of her dingy apartment, she looked like an angry goddess. Her figure, which undeniably was superb, was drawn to its full height, its splendid proportions accentuated by the clinging folds of her modish gown — a marvel of artistic scantiness, which only have concealed the perfectly modelled bust, and left the rounded thigh, in its skin-tight, flesh-coloured undergarment, unblushingly exposed. Her blue-black hair was dressed in the new fashion, copied from ancient Greece and snooded by a glittering antique fillet; and her small bare feet were encased in satin sandals. Truly a lovely woman, but for that air of cold displeasure coupled with fear, which marred the harmony of the dainty, child-like features.

After awhile Pepita came back.

"Well?" queried Theresia impatiently.

"Poor M. Bertrand is very ill," the old Spanish woman replied with unconcealed sympathy. "He has fever, the poor cabbage. Bed is the only place for him...."

"He cannot stay here, as thou well knowest, Pepita," the imperious beauty retorted drily. "Thy head and mine are in danger every moment that he spends under this roof."

"But thou couldst not turn a sick man out into the streets in the middle of the night."

"Why not?" Theresia riposted coldly. "It is a beautiful and balmy night. Why not?" she reiterated fretfully.

"Because he would die on thy doorstep," was old Pepita's muttered reply.

Theresia shrugged her shoulders.

"He dies if he goes," she said slowly, "and we die if he stays. Tell him to go, Pepita, ere citizen Tallien comes."

A shudder went through the old woman's spare frame.

"It is late," she protested. "Citizen Tallien will not come to-night."

"Not only he," Theresia rejoined coldly, "but — but — the other — Thou knowest well, Pepita — those two arranged to meet here in my lodgings to-night."

"But not at this hour!"

"After the sitting of the Convention."

"It is nearly midnight. They'll not come," the old woman persisted obstinately.

"They arranged to meet here, to talk over certain matters which interest their party," citoyenne Cabarrus went on, equally firmly. "They'll not fail. So tell citizen Moncrif to go, Pepita. He endangers my life by staying here."

"Then do the dirty work thyself," the old woman muttered sullenly. "I'll not be a part to cold-blooded murder."

"Well, since citizen Moncrif's life is more valuable to thee than mine—"

Theresia began, but got no farther. The words died on her lips.

Bertrand Moncrif, very pale, still looking scared and wild, had quietly entered the room.

"You wish me to go, Theresia," he said simply. "You did not think surely that I would do anything that might endanger your safety. My God!" he added with passionate vehemence, "Do you not know that I would at any time lay down my life for yours?"

Theresia shrugged her statuesque shoulders.

"Of course, of course, Bertrand," she said a little impatiently, though obviously trying to be kind. "But I do entreat you not to go into heroics at this hour, and not to put on tragic airs. You must see that for yourself as well as for me it would be fatal if you were found here, and—"

"And I am going, Theresia," he broke in seriously. "I ought never to have come. I was a fool, as usual!" he added with bitterness. "But after that awful fracas I was dazed and hardly knew what I was doing."

The frown of vexation reappeared upon the woman's fair, smooth brow.

"The fracas?" she asked quickly. "What fracas?"

"In the Rue St. Honoré. I thought you knew."

"No. I know nothing," she retorted, and her voice was now trenchant and hard. "What happened?"

"They were deifying that brute Robespierre—"

"Silence!" she broke in harshly. "Name no names."

"And they were deifying a bloodthirsty tyrant, and I—"

"And you rose from your seat," she broke in again, and this time with a laugh that was cruel in its biting irony; "and lashed yourself into a fury of eloquent vituperation. Oh, I know! I know!" she went on excitedly. "You and your Fatalists, or whatever you call yourselves! And that rage for martyrdom!... Senseless, stupid, and selfish! Oh, my God! how selfish! And then you came here to drag me down with you into an abyss of misery, along with you to the guillotine... to..."

It seemed as if she were choking, and her small white hands, with a gruesome and pathetic gesture, went up to her neck, smoothed it and fondled it, as if to shield it from that awful fate.

Bertrand tried to pacify her. It was he who was the more calm of the two now. It seemed as if her danger had brought him back to full consciousness. He forgot his own danger, the threat of death which lay in wait for him, probably on the very threshold of this house. He was a marked man now; martyrdom had ceased to be a dream: it had become a grim reality. But of this he did not think. Theresia was in danger, compromised by his own callous selfishness, his mind was full of her; and Régine, the true and loyal friend, the beloved of past happier years, had no place in his thoughts beside the exquisite enchantress, whose very nearness was paradise.

"I am going," he said earnestly. "Theresia, my beloved, try to forgive me. I was a fool — a criminal fool! But lately — since I thought that you — you did not really care; that all my hopes of future happiness were naught but senseless dreams; since then I seem to have lost my head — I don't know what I am doing!... And so—"

He got no farther. Ashamed of his own weakness, he was too proud to let her see that she made him suffer. For the moment, he only bent the knee and kissed the hem of her diaphanous gown. He looked so handsome then, despite his bedraggled, weebegone appearance — so young, so ardent, that Theresia's egotistical heart was touched, as it had always been when the incense of his perfect love rose to her sophisticated nostrils. She put out her hand and brushed with a gentle, almost maternal, gesture the matted brown hair from his brow.

"Dear Bertrand," she murmured vaguely. "What a foolish boy to think that I do not care!"

Already he had been brought back to his senses. The imminence of her danger lent him the courage which he had been lacking, and unhesitatingly now he jumped to his feet and turned to go. But she, quick in the transition of her moods, had already seized him by the arm.

"No, no!" she murmured in a hoarse whisper. "Don't go just yet... not before Pepita has seen if the stairs are clear."

Her small hand held him as in a vice, whilst Pepita, obedient and silent, was shuffling across the vestibule in order to execute her mistress's commands. But, even so, Bertrand struggled to get away. An epitome of their whole life, this struggle between them! — he trying to free himself from those insidious bonds that held him one moment and loosed him the next; that numbed him to all that he was wont to hold sacred and dear — his love for Régine, his loyalty, his honour. An epitome of her character and his: he, weak and yielding, every a ready martyr thirsting for self-immolation; and she, just a bundle of feminine caprice, swayed by sentiment one moment and by considerations of ambition or of personal safety the next.

"You must wait, Bertrand," she urged insistently. "Citizen Tallien may be on the stairs — he or — or the other. If they saw you!... My God!"

"They would conclude that you had turned me out of doors," he riposted simply. "Which would, in effect, be the truth. I entreat you to let me go!" he added earnestly. "Twere better they met me on the stairs than in here."

The old woman's footsteps were heard hurrying back. Bertrand struggled to free himself — did in truth succeed; and Theresia smothered a desperate cry of warning as he strode rapidly through the door and across the vestibule only to be met here by Pepita, who pushed him with all her might incontinently back.

Theresia held her tiny handkerchief to her mouth to deaden the scream that forced itself to her lips. She had followed Bertrand out of the salon, and now stood in the doorway, a living statue of fear.

"Citizen Tallien," Pepita had murmured hurriedly. "He is on the landing. Come this way."

She dragged Bertrand by the arm, not waiting for orders from her mistress this time, along a narrow dark passage, which at its extreme end gave access to a tiny kitchen. Into this she pushed him and locked the door upon him.

"Name of a name!" she muttered as she shuffled back to the vestibule. "If they should find him here!"

Citoyenne Cabarrus had not moved. Her eyes, dilated with terror, mutely questioned the old woman as the latter made ready to admit the visitor. Pepita gave reply as best she could, by silent gestures, indicating the passage and the action of turning a key in the lock. Her wrinkled old lips hardly stirred, and then only in order to murmur quickly and with a sudden assumption of authority:

"Self-possession, my cabbage, or you'll endanger yourself and us all!"

Theresia pulled herself together. Obviously the old woman's warning was not to be ignored, nor had it been given a moment too soon. Outside, the visitor had renewed his impatient rat-tat against the door. The eyes of mistress and maid met for one brief second. Theresia was rapidly regaining her presence of mind; whereupon Pepita smoothed out her apron, readjusted her cap, and went to open the door, even whilst Theresia said in a firm voice, loudly enough for the new visitor to hear:

"One of my guests, at last! Open quickly, Pepita!"

Chapter IX

A Hideous, Fearful Hour

1

A young man — tall, spare, with sallow skin and shift, restless eyes — pushed unceremoniously past the old servant, threw his hat and cane down on the nearest chair, and hurrying across the vestibule, entered the salon where the beautiful Spaniard, a picture of serene indifference, sat ready to receive him.

She had chosen for the setting of this scene a small settee covered in old rose brocade. On this she half sat, half reclined, with an open book in her hand, her elbow resting on the frame of the settee, her cheek leaning against her hand. Immediately behind her, the light from an oil lamp tempered by a shade of rose-coloured silk, outlined with a brilliant, glowing pencil the contour of her small head, one exquisite shoulder, and the mass of her raven hair, whilst it accentuated the cool half-tones of her diaphanous gown, on the round bare arms and bust, the tiny sandalled feet and cross-gartered legs.

A picture in truth to dazzle the eyes of any man! Tallien should have been at her feet in an instant. The fact that he paused in the doorway bore witness to the unruly thoughts that ran riot in his brain.

"Ah, citizen Tallien!" the fair Theresia exclaimed with a perfect assumption of sang-froid. "You are the first to arrive, and are indeed welcome; for I was nearly swooning with ennui. Well!" she added, with a provocative smile, and extended a gracious arm in his direction. "Are you not going to kiss my hand?"

"I heard a voice," was all the response which he gave to this seductive invitation. "A man's voice. Who was it?"

She raised a pair of delicately pencilled eyebrows. Her eyes became as round and as innocent-looking as a child's.

"A man's voice?" she riposted with a perfect air of astonishment. "You are crazy, mon ami; or else are crediting my faithful Pepita with a virile bass, which in truth she doth not possess!"

"Whose voice was it?" Tallien reiterated, making an effort to speak calmly, even though he was manifestly shaking with choler.

Whereupon the fair Theresia, no longer gracious or arch, looked him up and down as if he were no better than a lacquey.

"Ah, çà!" she rejoined coldly. "Are you perchance trying to cross-question me? By what right, I pray you, citizen Tallien, do you assume this hectoring tone in my presence? I am not yet your wife, remember; and 'tis not you, I image, who are the dictator of France."

"Do not tease me, Theresia!" the man interposed hoarsely. "Bertrand Moncrif is here."

For the space of a second, or perhaps less, Theresia gave no reply to the taunt. Her quick, alert brain had already faced possibilities, and she was far too clever a woman to take the risks which a complete evasion of the truth would have entailed at this moment. She did not, in effect, know whether Tallien was speaking from positive information given to him by spies, or merely from conjecture born of jealousy. Moreover, another would be here presently — another, whose spies were credited with omniscience, and whom she might not succeed in dominating with a smile or a frown, as she could the love-sick Tallien. Therefore, after that one brief instant's reflection she decided to temporize, to shelter behind a half-truth, and replied, with a quick glance from under her long lashes:

"I am not teasing you, citizen. Bertrand came here for shelter awhile ago."

Tallien drew a quick sigh of satisfaction, and she went on carelessly:

"But, obviously, I could not keep him here. He seemed hurt and frightened.... He has been gone this past half-hour."

For a moment it seemed as if the man, in face of this obvious lie, would flare out into a hot retort; but Theresia's luminous eyes subdued him, and before the cool contempt expressed by those exquisite lips, he felt all his blustering courage oozing away.

"The man is an abominable and an avowed traitor," he said sullenly. "Only two hours ago—"

"I know," she broke in coldly. "He vilified Robespierre. A dangerous thing to do. Bertrand was ever a fool, and he lost his head."

"He will lose it more effectually to-morrow," Tallien retorted grimly.

"You mean that you would denounce him?"

"That I will denounce him. I would have done so to-night, before coming here, only — only—"

"Only what?"

"I was afraid he might be here."

Theresia broke into a ringing if somewhat artificial peal of laughter.

"I must thank you, citizen, for this consideration of my feelings. It was, in truth, thoughtful of you to think of sparing me a scandal. But, since Bertrand is not here—"

"I know where he lodges. He'll not escape, citoyenne. My word on it!"

Tallien spoke very quietly, but with that concentrated fury of which a fiercely jealous man is ever capable. He had remained standing in the doorway all this while, his eyes fixed on the beautiful woman before him, but his attention feverishly divided between her and what might be going on in the vestibule behind him.

In answer to his last threatening words, the lovely Theresia rejoined, more seriously:

"So as to make sure I do not escape either!" And a flash of withering anger shot from her dark eyes on the unromantic figure of her adorer. "Or you, mon ami! You are determined that Mme Roland's fate shall overtake me, eh? And no doubt you will be thrilled to the marrow when you see my head fall into your precious salad-bowl. Will yours follow mine, think you? Or will you prefer to emulate citizen Roland's more romantic ending?"

Even while she spoke, Tallien had been unable to repress a shudder.

"Theresia, in heaven's name—!" he murmured.

"Bah, mon ami! There is no longer a heaven these days. You and your party have carefully abolished the Hereafter. So, after you and I have taken our walk up the steps of the scaffold—"

“Theresia!”

“Eh, what?” she went on coolly. “Is that not perchance what you have in contemplation? Moncrif, you say, is an avowed traitor. Has openly vilified and insulted your demi-god. He has been seen coming to my apartments. Good! I tell you that he is no longer here. But let that pass. He is denounced. Good! Sent to the guillotine. Good again! And Theresia Cabarrus in whose house he tried to seek refuge, much against her will, goes to the guillotine in his company. The prospect may please you, mon ami, because for the moment you are suffering from a senseless attack of jealousy. But I confess that it does not appeal to me.”

The man was silent now; awed against his will. His curiously restless eyes swept over the graceful apparition before him. Insane jealousy was fighting a grim fight in his heart with terror for his beloved. Her argument was a sound one. Even he was bound to admit that. Powerful though he was in the Convention, his influence was as nothing compared with that of Robespierre. And he knew his redoubtable colleague well enough that an insult such as Moncrif had put upon in the Rue St. Honoré this night would never be forgiven, neither in the young hot-head himself nor in any of his friends, adherents, or mere pitying sympathizers.

Theresia Cabarrus was clever enough and quick enough to see that she had gained one point.

“Come and kiss my hand,” she said, with a little sight of satisfaction.

This time the man obeyed, without an instant’s hesitation. Already he was down on his knees, repentant and humiliated. She gave him her small, sandalled foot to kiss. After that, Tallien became abject.

“You know that I would die for you, Theresia!” he murmured passionately.

This is the second time to-night that such an assertion had been made in this room. And both had been made in deadly earnest, whilst the fair listener had remained equally indifferent to both. And for the second time to-night, Theresia passed her cool white hand over the bent head of an ardent worshipper, whilst her lips murmured vaguely:

“Foolish! Oh, how foolish! Why do men torture themselves, I wonder, with senseless jealousy?”

Instinctively she turned her small head in the direction of the passage and the little kitchen, where Bertrand Moncrif had found temporary and precarious shelter. Self-pity and a kind of fierce helplessness not untinged with remorse made her eyes appear resentful and hard.

There, in the stuffy little kitchen at the end of the dark, dank passage, love in its pure sense, happiness, brief perhaps but unalloyed, and certainly obscure, lay in wait for her. Here, at her feet, was security in the present turmoil, power, and a fitting background for her beauty and her talents. She did not want to lose Bertrand; indeed, she did not intend to lose him. She sighed a little regretfully as she thought of his good looks, his enthusiasm, his selfless ardour. Then she looked down once more on the narrow shoulders, the lank, colourless hair, the bony hands of the erstwhile lawyer’s clerk to whom she had already promised marriage, and she shuddered a little when she remembered that those same hands into which she had promised to place her own and which now grasped hers in passionate adoration had, of a certainty, signed the order for those execrable massacres which had for ever sullied the early days of the Revolution. For a moment — a brief one, in truth — she marvelled if union with such a man was not too heavy a price to pay for immunity and for power.

But the hesitancy only lasted a few seconds. The next, she had thrown back her head as if in defiance of the whisperings of conscience and of heart. She need not lose her youthful lover at all. He was satisfied with so little! A few kind words here, an occasional kiss, a promise or two, and he would always remain her willing slave.

It were foolish indeed, and far, far too late, to give way to sentiment at this hour, when Tallien’s influence in the Convention was second only to that of Robespierre, whilst Bertrand Moncrif was a fugitive, a suspect, a poor miserable fanatic, whose hot-headedness was for ever landing him from one dangerous situation into another.

So, after indulging in the faintest little sigh of yearning for the might-have-been, she met her latest adorer’s worshipping glance with coquettish air of womanly submission, which completed his subjugation, and said lightly:

“And now give me my orders for to-night, mon ami.”

She settled herself down more comfortably upon the settee, and graciously allowed him to sit on a low chair beside her.

2

The turbulent little incident was closed. Theresia had her way, and poor, harassed Tallien succeeded in shutting away in the innermost recesses of his heart the pangs of jealousy which still tortured him. His goddess was now all smiles, and the subtle flattery implied by her preference for him above his many rivals warmed his atrophied heart and soothed his boundless vanity.

We must accept the verdict of history that Theresia Cabarrus never loved Tallien. In truth appears to be that what love she was capable of had undoubtedly been given to Bertrand Moncrif, whom she would not entirely dismiss from his allegiance, even though she had at last been driven into promising marriage to the powerful Terrorist.

It is doubtful if, despite that half-hearted and wholly selfish love for the young royalist, she had ever intended that he should be more to her than a slavish worshipper, a friend on whom she could count for perpetual adoration or mere sentimental dalliance; but a husband — never! Certain it is that even Tallien, influential as he was, was only a pis-aller. The lovely Spaniard, we make no doubt, would have preferred Robespierre as a future husband, or, failing him, Louise-Antoine St. Just, but the latter was deeply enamoured of another woman; and Robespierre was too cautious, too ambitious, to allow himself to be enmeshed.

So she fell back on Tallien.

3

“Give me my orders for tonight,” the lovely woman had said to her future lord. And he — a bundle of vanity and egoism — was flattered and soothed by this submission, though he knew in his heart of hearts that it was only pretence.

“You will help me, Theresia?” he pleaded.

She nodded, and asked coldly: “How?”

"You know that Robespierre suspects me," he went on, and instinctively, at the mere breathing of that awe-inspiring name his voice sank to a murmur. "Ever since I came back from Bordeaux."

"I know. Your leniency there is attributed to me."

"It was your influence, Theresia—" he began.

"That turned you," she broke in coldly, "from a bloodstained beast into a right-minded justiciary. Do you regret it?"

"No, no!" he protested; "since it gained me your love."

"Could I love a beast of prey?" she retorted. "But if you do not regret, you are certainly afraid."

"And he had sent me to Bordeaux to punish, not to pardon."

"Then you are afraid!" she insisted. "Has anything happened?"

"No; only his usual hints — his vague threats. You know them."

She nodded.

"The same," he went on somberly, "that he used ere he struck Danton."

"Danton was hot-headed. He was too proud to appeal to the populace who idolized him."

"And I have no popularity to which I can appeal. If Robespierre strikes at me in the Convention, I am doomed—"

"Unless you strike first."

"I have no following. We none of us have. Robespierre sways the Convention with one word."

"You mean," she broke in more vehemently, "that you are all cringing cowards — the abject slaves of one man. Two hundred of you are longing for this era of bloodshed to cease; two hundred would stay the pitiless work of the guillotine — and not one is plucky enough to cry, 'Halt! It is enough!'"

"The first man who cries 'Halt!' is called a traitor," Tallien retorted gloomily. "And the guillotine will not rest until Robespierre himself had said, 'It is enough!'"

"He alone knows what he wants. He alone fears no one," she exclaimed, almost involuntarily giving grudging admiration where in truth she felt naught but loathing.

"I would not fear either, Theresia," he protested, and there was a note of tender reproach in his voice, "if it were not for you."

"I know that, mon ami," she rejoined with an impatient little sigh. "Well, what do you want me to do?"

He leaned forward in his chair, closer to her, and did not mark — poor fool! — that, as he drew near, she recoiled ever so slightly from him.

"There are two things," he said insinuatingly, "which you could do, Theresia, either of which would place Robespierre under such lasting obligation to you that he would admit us into the inner circle of his friends, trust us and confide in us as he does in St. Just or Couthon."

"Trust you, you mean. He never would trust a woman."

"It means the same thing — security for us both."

"Well?" she rejoined. "What are these two things?"

He paused a moment, appeared to hesitate; then said resolutely:

"Firstly, there is Bertrand Moncrif... and his Fatalists—"

Her face hardened. She shook her head.

"I warned Robespierre about to-night," she said. "I knew that a lot of young fools meant to cause a fracas in the Rue St. Honoré. But the whole thing has been a failure, and Robespierre has no use for failures."

"It need not be a failure — even yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Robespierre will be here directly," he urged, in a whisper rendered hoarse with excitement. "Bertrand Moncrif is here — Why not deliver the young traitor, and earn Robespierre's gratitude?"

"Oh!" she broke in indignant protest. Then, as she caught the look of jealous anger which at her obvious agitation suddenly flared up in his narrow eyes again, she went on with a careless shrug of her statuesque shoulders: "Bertrand is not here, as I told you, my friend. So these means of serving your cause are out of my reach."

"Theresia," he urged, "by deceiving me—"

"By tantalizing me," she broke in harshly, "you do yourself no good. Let us understand one another, my friend," she went on more gently. "You wish me to serve you by serving the dictator of France. And I tell you you'll not gain your ends by taunting me."

"Theresia, we must make friends with Robespierre! He has the power; he rules over France. Whilst I—"

"Ah!" she retorted with vehemence. "That is where you and your weak-kneed friends are wrong! You say that Robespierre rules France. 'Tis not true. It is not Robespierre, the man, who rules; it is his name! The name of Robespierre has become a fetish, an idolatry. Before it every head is bent and every courage cowed. It rules by the fear which it evokes and by the slavery which it compels under the perpetual threat of death. Believe me," she insisted, "'tis not Robespierre who rules, but the guillotine which he wields! And we are all of us helpless — you and I and your friends. And all the others who long to see the end of this era of bloodshed and of revenge, we have got to do as he tells us — pile up crime upon crime, massacre upon massacre, and bear the odium of it all, while he stands aloof in darkness and in solitude, the brain that guides, whilst you and your party are only the hands that strike. Oh! the humiliation of it! And if you were but men, all of you, instead of puppets—"

"Hush, Theresia, in heaven's name!" Tallien broke in peremptorily at last. He had vainly tried to pacify her while she poured forth the vials of her resentment and her contempt. But now his ears, attuned to sensitiveness by an ever-present danger, had caught a sound which proceeded from the vestibule — a sound which made him shudder — a footstep — the opening of a door — a voice. "Hush!" he entreated. "Every dumb wall has ears, these days!"

She broke into a harsh, excited little laugh.

"You are right, my friend," she said under her breath. "What do I care, after all? What do any of us care now, so long as our necks are fairly safe upon our shoulders? But I'll not sell Bertrand," she added firmly. "If I did it I should despise myself too much and hate

you worse. So tell me quickly what else I can do to propitiate the ogre!”

“He’ll tell you himself,” Tallien murmured hurriedly, as the sounds in the vestibule became more loud and distinctive. “Here they are! And, in heaven’s name, Theresia, remember that our lives are at that one man’s mercy!”

Chapter X

The Grim Idol that the World Adores

1

Theresia, being a woman, was necessarily the more accomplished actor. While Tallien retired into a gloomy corner of the room, vainly trying to conceal his agitation, she rose quite serene in order to greet her visitors.

Pepita had just admitted into her mistress's apartments a singular group, composed of two able-bodied men supporting a palsied one. One of the former was St. Just, one of the most romantic figures of the Revolutionary period, the confidant and intimate friend of Robespierre and own cousin to Armand St. Just and to the beautiful Marguerite, who had married the fastidious English milord, Sir Percy Blakeney. The other was Chauvelin, at one time one of the most influential members of the Committee of Public Safety, now little more than a hanger-on of Robespierre's party. A man of no account, to whom not even Tallien and his colleagues thought it worth while to pay their court. The palsied man was Couthon, despite his crimes an almost pathetic figure in his helplessness, after his friends had deposited him in an armchair and wrapped a rug around his knees. The carrying chair in which he spent the greater part of his life had been left down below in the concierge's lodge, and St. Just and Chauvelin had carried him up the three flights of stairs to citoyenne Cabarrus's apartment.

Close behind these three men came Robespierre.

Heavens! if a thunderbolt had fallen from the skies on that night of the 26th of April, 1794, and destroyed house No. 22 in the Rue Villedot, with all those who were in it, what a torrent of blood would have been stemmed, what horrors averted, what misery forefended!

But nothing untoward happened. The four men who sat that night and well into the small hours of the morning in the dingy apartment, occupied for the present by the beautiful Cabarrus, were allowed by inscrutable Providence to discuss their nefarious designs unchecked.

In truth, there was no discussion. One man dominated the small assembly, even though he sat for the most part silent and apparently self-absorbed, wrapped in that taciturnity and even occasional somnolence which seemed to have become a pose with him of late. He sat on a high chair, prim and upright. Immaculately dressed in blue cloth coat and white breeches, with clean linene at throat and wrist, his hair neatly tied back with a black silk bow, his nails polished, his shoes free from mud, he presented a marked contrast to the ill-conditioned appearance of those other products of revolutionary ideals.

St. Just, on the other hand — young, handsome, a brilliant talker and convinced enthusiast — was only too willing to air his compelling eloquence, was in effect the mouthpiece of the great man as he was his confidant and his right hand. He had acquired in the camps which he so frequently visited a breezy, dictatorial manner that pleased his friends and irritated Tallien and his clique, more especially when sententious phrases fell from his lips which were obviously the echo of some of Robespierre's former speeches in the Convention.

Then there was Couthon, sarcastic and contemptuous, delighting to tease Tallien and to affect a truculent manner, which brought abject flattery from the other's lips.

St. Just the fiery young demagogue, and Couthon the half-paralysed enthusiast, were known to be pushing their leader toward the proclamation of a triumvirate, with Robespierre as chief dictator and themselves as his two hands; and it amused the helpless cripple to see just how far the obsequiousness to Tallien and his colleagues would go in subscribing to so monstrous a project.

As for Chauvelin, he said very little, and the deference wherewith he listened to the others, the occasional unctuous words which he let fall, bore testimony to the humiliating subservience to which he had sunk.

And the beautiful Theresia, presiding over the small assembly like a goddess who listens to the prattle of men, sat for the most part quite still, on the one dainty piece of furniture of which her dingy apartment boasted. She was careful to sit so that the rosy glow of the lamp fell on her in the direction most becoming to her attitude. From time to time she threw in a word; but all the while her whole attention was concentrated on what was said. At her future husband's fulsome words of flattery, at his obvious cowardice before the popular idol and his cringing abjectness, a faint smile of contempt would now and then force itself up to her lips. But she neither reproved nor encouraged him. And when Robespierre appeared to be flattered by Tallien's obsequiousness she even gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

2

St. Just, now always the mouthpiece of his friend, was the first to give a serious turn to the conversation. Compliments, flatteries, had gone their round; platitudes, grandiloquent phrases on the subject of country, intellectual revolution, liberty, purity, and so on, had been spouted with varying eloquence. The fraternal suppers had been alluded to with servile eulogy of the giant brain who had conceived the project.

Then it was that St. Just broke into a euphemistic account of the disorderly scene in the Rue St. Honoré.

Theresia Cabarrus, roused from her queen-like indifference, at once became interested.

"The young traitor!" she exclaimed, with a great show of indignation. "Who was he? What was he like?"

Couthon gave quite a minute description of Bertrand, and accurate one, too. He had faces the blasphemer — thus was he called by this compact group of devotees and sycophants — for fully five minutes, and despite the flickering and deceptive light, had studied his features, distorted by fury and hate, and was quite sure that he would know them again.

Theresia listened eagerly, caught every inflection of the voices as they discussed the strange events that followed. The keenest observer there could not have detected the slightest agitation in her large, velvety eyes — not even when the met Robespierre's coldly

inquiring gaze. No one — not even Tallien — could have guessed what an effort it cost her to appear unconcerned, when all the while she was straining every sense in the direction of the small kitchen at the end of the passage, where the much-discussed Bertrand was still lying concealed.

However, the certainty that Robespierre's spies and those of the Committees had apparently lost complete track of Moncrif, did much to restore her assurance, and her gaiety became after awhile somewhat more real.

At one time she turned boldly to Tallien.

"You were there, too, citizen," she said provokingly. "Did you not recognise any of the traitors?"

Tallien stammered out an evasive answer, implored her with a look not to taunt him and not to play like a thoughtless child within sight and hearing of a man-eating tiger. Thereisa's dalliance with the young and handsome Bertrand must in truth be known to Robespierre's army of spies, and he — Tallien — was not altogether convinced that the fair Spaniard, despite her assurances to the contrary, was not harbouring Moncrif in her apartment even now.

Therefore he would not meet her tantalizing glance; and she, delighted to tease, threw herself with greater zest than before into the discussion, amused to see sober Tallien, whom in her innermost heart she despised, enduring tortures of apprehension.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, apparently enraptured by St. Just's glowing account of the occurrence, "what would I not give to have seen it all! In truth, we do not often get such thrilling incidents every day in this dull and dreary Paris. The death-carts with their load of smirking aristos have ceased to entertain us. But the drama in the Rue St. Honoré! à la bonne heure! What a palpitating scene!"

"Especially," added Couthon, "the spiriting away of the company of traitors through the agency of that mysterious giant, who some aver was just a coal-heaver named Rateau, well known to half the night-birds of the city as an asthmatic reprobate; whilst others vow that he was—"

"Name him not, friend Couthon," St. Just broke in with a sarcastic chuckle. "I pray thee, spare the feelings of citizen Chauvelin." And his bold, provoking eyes shot a glance of cool irony on the unfortunate victim of his taunt.

Chauvelin made no retort, pressed his thin lips more tightly together as if to smother any incipient expression of the resentment which he felt. Instinctively his glance sought those of Robespierre, who sat by, still apparently disinterested and impassive, with head bent and arms cross over his narrow chest.

"Ah, yes!" here interposed Tallien unctuously. "Citizen Chauvelin has had one or two opportunities of measuring his prowess against that of the mysterious Englishman; but we are told that, despite his talents, he has met with no success in that direction."

"Do not tease our modest friend Chauvelin, I pray you, citizen," Theresia broke in gaily. "The Scarlet Pimpernel — that is the name of the mysterious Englishman, is it not? — is far more elusive and a thousand times more resourceful and daring than any mere man can possibly conceive. 'Tis woman's wits that will bring him to his knees one day. You can take my word for that!"

"Your wits, citoyenne?"

Robespierre had spoken. It was the first time, since the discussion had turned on the present subject, that he had opened his lips. All eyes were at once reverentially turned to him. His own, cold and sarcastic, were fixed upon Theresia Cabarrus.

She returned his glance with provoking coolness, shrugged her splendid shoulders, and retorted airily:

"Oh, you want a woman with some talent as a sleuthhound — a female counterpart of citizen Chauvelin. I have no genius in that direction."

"Why not?" Robespierre went on drily. "You, fair citoyenne, would be well qualified to deal with the Scarlet Pimpernel, seeing that your adorer, Bertrand Moncrif, appears to be a protégé of the mysterious League."

At this taunt, uttered by the dictator with deliberate emphasis, like one who knows what he is talking about, Tallien gave a gasp and his sallow cheeks became the colour of lead. But Theresia placed her cool, reassuring hand upon his.

"Bertrand Moncrif," she said serenely, "is no adorer of mine. He foreswore his allegiance to me on the day that I plighted my troth to citizen Tallien."

"That is as may be," Robespierre retorted coldly. "But he certainly was the leader of the gang of traitors whom that meddlesome English rabble chose to snatch away to-night from the vengeance of a justly incensed populace."

"How do you know that, citizen Robespierre?" Theresia asked. She was still maintaining an outwardly calm attitude; her voice was apparently quite steady, her glance absolutely serene. Only Tallien's keen perceptions were able to note the almost wax-like pallor which had spread over her cheeks and the strained, high-pitched tone of her usually mellow voice. "Why do you suppose, citizen," she insisted, "that Bertrand Moncrif had anything to do with the fracas to-night? Methought he had emigrated to England — or somewhere," she added airily, "after — after I gave him his definite congé."

"Did you think that, citoyenne?" Robespierre rejoined with a wry smile. "Then let me tell you that you are under a misapprehension. Moncrif, the traitor, was the leader of the gang that tried to rouse the people against me to-night. You ask me how I know it?" he added icily. "Well, I saw him — that is all!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Theresia, in well-played mild astonishment. "You say Bertrand Moncrif, citizen? He is in Paris, then?"

"Seemingly."

"Strange, he never came to see me!"

"Strange, indeed!"

"What does he look like? Some people have told me that he is getting fat."

The discussion had now resolved itself into a duel between these two: the ruthless dictator, sure of his power, and the beautiful woman, conscious of hers. The atmosphere of the drabbily furnished room had become electrical. Every one felt it. Every man instinctively held his breath, conscious of the quickening of his pulses, of the accelerated beating of his heart.

Both the duellists appeared perfectly calm. Of the two, in truth, Robespierre appeared the most moved. His staccato voice, the drumming of his pointed fingers upon the arms of his chair, suggested that the banter of the beautiful Theresia was getting on his nerves. It was like the lashing of a puma's tail, the irritation of a tempter unaccustomed to being provoked, and Theresia was clever enough — above all, woman enough — to note that, since the dictator was moved, he could not be perfectly sure of his ground. He

would not display this secret irritation if by a word he could confound his beautiful adversary, and openly threaten where now he only insinuated.

"He saw Bertrand in the Rue St. Honoré," was the sum total of her quick reasoning; "but does not know that he is here. I wonder what it is he does want!" came as an afterthought.

The one that really suffered throughout, and suffered acutely, was Tallien. He would have given all that he possessed to know for a certainty that Bertrand Moncrif was no longer in the house. Surely Theresia would not be foolhardy enough to provoke the powerful dictator into one of those paroxysms of spiteful fury for which he was notorious — fury wherein he might be capable of anything — insulting his hostess, setting his spies to search her apartments for a traitor if he suspected one of lying hidden away somewhere. In truth, Tallien, trembling for his beloved, was ready to swoon. How marvellous she was! how serene! While men held their breath before the inexorable despot, she went on teasing the tiger, even though he had already begun to snarl.

"I entreat you, citizen Robespierre," she said, with a pout, "to tell me if Bertrand Moncrif has grown fat."

"That I cannot tell you, citoyenne," Robespierre replied curtly. "Having recognized my enemy, I no longer paid heed to him. My attention was arrested by his rescuer."

"That elusive Scarlet Pimpernel," she broke in gaily. "Unrecognizable to all save to citizen Robespierre, under the disguise of an asthmatic gossoon. Ah, would I had been there!"

"I would you had, citoyenne," he retorted. "You would have realized that to refuse your help to unmask an abominable spy after such an episode is tantamount to treason."

Her gaiety dropped from her like a mantle. In a moment she was serious, puzzled. A frown appeared between her brows. Her dark eyes flashed, rapidly inquiring, suspicious, fearful, upon Robespierre.

"To refuse my help?" she asked slowly. "My help in unmasking a spy? I do not understand."

She looked from one man to the other. Chauvelin was the only one who would not meet her gaze. No, not the only one. Tallien, too, appeared absorbed in contemplating his finger nails.

"Citizen Tallien," she queried harshly. "What does this mean?"

"It means just what I said," Robespierre intervened coldly. "That abominable English spy has fooled us all. You said yourself that 'tis a woman's wit that will bring that elusive adventurer to his knees one day. Why not yours?"

Theresia gave no immediate reply. She was meditating. Here, then, was this other means to her hand, whereby she was to propitiate the man-eating tiger, turn his snarl into a purr, obtain immunity for herself and her future lord, but what a prospect!

"I fear me, citizen Robespierre," she said after awhile, "that you overestimate the keenness of my wits."

"Impossible!" he retorted drily.

And St. Just, ever the echo of his friend's unspoken words, added with a great show of gallantry:

"The citoyenne Cabarrus, even from her prison in Bordeaux, succeeded in snaring our friend Tallien, and making him the slave of her beauty."

"Then why not the Scarlet Pimpernel?" was Couthon's simple conclusion.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" Theresia exclaimed with a shrug of her handsome shoulders. "The Scarlet Pimpernel, forsooth! Why, meseems that no one knows who he is! Just now you all affirmed that he was a coal-heaver named Rateau. I cannot make love to a coal-heaver, can I?"

"Citizen Chauvelin knows who the Scarlet Pimpernel is," Couthon went on deliberately. "He will put you on the right track. All that we want is that he should be at your feet. It is so easy for the citoyenne Cabarrus to accomplish that."

"But if you know who he is," she urged, "why do you need my help?"

"Because," St. Just replied, "the moment that he lands in France he sheds his identity, as a man would a coat. Here, there, everywhere — he is more elusive than a ghost, for a ghost is always the same, whilst the Scarlet Pimpernel is never twice alike. A coal-heaver one day; a prince of dandies the next. He has lodgings in every quarter of Paris and quits them at a moment's notice. He has confederates everywhere: concierges, cabaret-keepers, soldiers, vagabonds. He has been a public letter-writer, a sergeant of the National Guard, a rogue, a thief! 'Tis only in England that he is always the same, and citizen Chauvelin can identify him there. 'Tis there that you can see him, citoyenne, there that you can spread your nets for him; from thence that you can lure him to France in your train, like you lured citizen Tallien to obey your every whim in Bordeaux. Once a man hath fallen a victim to the charms of beautiful Theresia Cabarrus," added the young demagogue gallantly, "she need only to beckon and he will follow, as does citizen Tallien, as did Bertrand Moncrif, as do so many others. Bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to your feet, here in Paris, citoyenne, and we will do the rest."

While his young devotee spoke thus vehemently, Robespierre had relapsed into his usual pose of affected detachment. His head was bent, his arms were folded across his chest. He appeared to be asleep. When St. Just paused, Theresia waiting awhile, her dark eyes fixed on the great man who had conceived this monstrous project. Monstrous, because of the treachery that it demanded.

Theresia Cabarrus had in truth identified herself with the Revolutionary government. She had promised to marry Tallien, who outwardly at least was as bloodthirsty and ruthless as was Robespierre himself; but she was a woman and not a demon. She had refused to sell Bertrand Moncrif in order to pander to Tallien's fear of Robespierre. To entice a man — whoever he was — into making love to her, and then to betray him to his death, was in itself an abhorrent idea. What she might do if actual danger of death threatened her, she did not know. No human soul can with certainty say, "I would not do this or that, under any circumstances whatever!" Circumstance and impulse are the only two forces that create cowards or heroes. Principles, will-power, virtue, are really subservient to those two. If they prove the stronger, everything in man must yield to them.

And Theresia Cabarrus had not yet been tried by force of circumstance or driven by force of impulse. Self-preservation was her dominant law, and she had not yet been in actual fear of death.

This is not a justification on the part of this veracious chronicle of Theresia's subsequent actions; it is an explanation. Faced with this demand upon her on the part of the most powerful despot in France, she hesitated, even though she did not altogether dare to refuse. Womanlike, she tried to temporize.

She appeared puzzled; frowned. Then asked vaguely:

"Is it then that you wish me to go to England?"

St. Just nodded.

"But," she continued, in the same indeterminate manner, "meseems that you talk very glibly of my — what shall I say? — my proposed dalliance with the mysterious Englishman. Suppose he — he does not respond?"

"Impossible!" Couthon broke in quickly.

"Oh!" she protested. "Impossible? Englishmen are known to be prudish — moral — what? And if they man is married — what then?"

"The citoyenne Cabarrus underrates her powers," St. Just riposted glibly.

"Theresia, I entreat!" Tallien put in dolefully.

He felt that the interview, from which he had hoped so much, was proving a failure — nay, worse! For he realized that Robespierre, thwarted in this desire, would bitterly resent Theresia's positive refusal to help him.

"Eh, what?" she riposted lightly. "And it is you, citizen Tallien, who would push me into this erotic adventure? I' faith, your trust in me is highly flattering! Have you not thought that in the process I might fall in love with the Scarlet Pimpernel myself? He is young, they say, handsome, adventurous; and I am to try and capture his fancy... the butterfly is to dance around the flame.... No, no! I am too much afraid that I may singe my wings!"

"Does that mean," Robespierre put in coldly, "that you refuse us your help, citoyenne Cabarrus?"

"Yes — I refuse," she replied calmly. "The project does not please me, I confess."

"Not even if we guaranteed immunity to your lover, Bertrand Moncrif?"

She gave a slight shudder. Her lips felt dry, and she passed her tongue rapidly over them.

"I have no lover, except citizen Tallien," she said steadily, and placed her fingers, which had suddenly become ice-cold, upon the clasped hands of her future lord. Then she rose, thereby giving the signal for the breaking-up of the little party.

In truth, she knew as well as Tallien that the meeting had been a failure. Tallien was looking sallow and terribly worried. Robespierre, taciturn and sullen, gave her one threatening glance before he took his leave.

"You know, citoyenne," he said coldly, "that the nation has means at its disposal for compelling its citizens to do their duty."

"Ah, bah!" retorted the fair Spaniard, shrugging her shoulders. "I am not a citizen of France. And even your unerring Public Prosecutor would find it difficult to frame an accusation against me."

Again she laughed, determined to appear gay and inconsequent through it all.

"Think how the accusation would sound, citizen Robespierre!" she went on mockingly. "'The citoyenne Cabarrus, for refusing to make amorous overtures to the mysterious Englishman known as the Scarlet Pimpernel, and for refusing to administer a love-philtre to him as prepared by Mother Théot at the bidding of citizen Robespierre!' Confess! Confess!" she added, and her rippling laugh had a genuine note of merriment in it at last, "that we none of us would survive such ridicule!"

Theresia Cabarrus was a clever woman, and by speaking the word "ridicule," she had touched the one weak chink in the tyrant's armour. But it is not always safe to prod a tiger, even with a child's cane, or even from behind protecting bars. Tallien knew this well enough. He was on tenterhooks, longing to see the others depart so that he might throw himself once again at Theresia's feet and implore her to obey the despot's commands.

But Theresia appeared unwilling to give him such another chance. She professed intense fatigue, bade him "good night" with such obvious finality, that he dared not outstay his welcome. A few moments later they had all gone. Their gracious hostess accompanied them to the door, since Pepita had by this time certainly gone to bed. The little procession was formed, with St. Just and Chauvelin supporting their palsied comrade, Robespierre detached and silent, and finally Tallien, whose last appealing look to his beloved would have melted a heart of stone.

Chapter XI

Strange Happenings

1

Now the dingy little apartment in the Rue Villedot was silent and dark. The elegant little lamp with its rose-coloured shade was turned down in the withdrawing-room, leaving only a tiny glimmer of light, which failed to dispel the gloom around. The nocturnal visitors had departed more than a quarter of an hour ago; nevertheless, the beautiful hostess had not yet gone to bed. In fact, she had hardly moved since she bade the final adieu to her timorous lover. The enforced gaiety of the last few moments still sat like a mask upon her face. All that she had done was to sink with a sigh of weariness upon the settee.

And there she remained, with neck craned forward, listening, straining every nerve to listen, even though the heavy, measured footsteps of the five men had long since ceased to echo up and down the stone passages and stairs. Her foot, in its quaint small sandal, beat now and then an impatient tattoo upon the threadbare carpet. Her eyes at intervals cast anxious looks upon the old-fashioned clock above the mantelpiece.

It struck half-past two. Whereupon Theresia rose and went out into the vestibule. Here a tallow candle flickered faintly in its pewter sconce and emitted an evil-smelling smoke, which rose in spirals to the blackened ceiling.

Theresia paused, glanced inquiringly down the narrow passage which gave access to the little kitchen beyond. Between the kitchen and the corner of the vestibule where she was standing, two doors gave on the passage: her bedroom, and that of her maid Pepita. Theresia was vividly conscious of the strange silence which reigned in the whole apartment. The passage was pitch dark save at its farthest end, where a tiny ray of light found its way underneath the kitchen door.

The silence was oppressive, almost terrifying. In a hoarse, anxious voice, Theresia called:

"Pepita!"

But there came no answer. Pepita apparently had gone to bed, was fast asleep by now. But what had become of Bertrand?

Full of vague misgivings, her nerves tingling with a nameless fear, Theresia picked up the candle and tiptoed down the passage. Outside Pepita's door she paused and listened. Her large dark eyes looked weird in their expression of puzzlement and of awe, the flickering light of the candle throwing gleams of orange-coloured lights into the depths of the widely dilated pupils.

"Pepita!" she called; and somehow the sound of her own voice added to her terror. Strange that she should be frightened like this in her own familiar apartment, and with a faithful, sturdy maid sleeping the other side of this thin partition wall!

"Pepita!" Theresia's voice was shaking. She tried to open the door, but it was locked. Why had Pepita, contrary to her habit, locked herself in? Had she, too, been a prey to some unexplainable panic? Theresia knocked against the door, rattled the handle in its socket, called more loudly and more insistently, "Pepita!" and, receiving no reply, fell, half-swooning with fear, against the partition wall, whilst the candle slipped out of her trembling grasp and fell with a clatter to the ground.

She was now in complete darkness, with senses reeling and brain paralysed. How long she remained thus, in a state bordering on collapse, she did not know; probably not more than a minute or so. Consciousness returned quickly, and with it the cold sweat of an abject fear; for through this returning consciousness she had perceived a groan issuing from behind the locked door. But her knees were still shaking; she felt unable to move.

"Pepita!" she called again; and to her own ears her voice sounded hoarse and muffled. Straining her ears and holding her breath, she once more caught the sound of a smothered groan.

Whereupon, driven into action by the obvious distress of her maid, Theresia recovered a certain measure of self-control. Pulling herself vigorously together, she began by groping for the candle which had dropped out of her hand a while ago. Even as she stooped down for this she contrived to say in a moderately clear and firm voice:

"Courage, Pepita! I'll find the light and come back." Then she added: "Are you unable to unlock the door?"

To this, however, she received no reply save another muffled groan.

Theresia now was on her hands and knees, groping for the candlestick. Then a strange thing happened. Her hands, as they wandered vaguely along the flagged floor, encountered a small object, which proved to be a key. In an instant she was on her feet again, her fingers running over the door until they encountered the keyhole. Into this she succeeded, after further groping, in inserting the key; it fitted and turned the lock. She pushed open the door, and remained paralysed with surprise upon the threshold.

Pepita was reclining in an arm-chair, her hands tied behind her, a woollen shawl wound loosely around her mouth. In a distant corner of the room, a small oil-lamp, turned very low, cast a glimmer of light upon the scene. For Theresia to run to the pinioned woman and undo the bonds that held her was but the work of a few seconds.

"Pepita!" she cried. "What in heaven's name has happened?"

The woman seemed not much the worse for her enforced duress. She groaned, and even swore under her breath, and indeed appeared more dazed than hurt. Theresia, impatient and excited, had to shake her more than once vigorously by the shoulder before she was able to gather her scattered wits together.

"Where is M. Bertrand?" Theresia asked repeatedly, ere she got a reply from her bewildered maid.

At last Pepita was able to speak.

"In very truth, Madame," she said slowly, "I do not know."

"How do you mean, you do not know?" Theresia queried, with a deepened frown.

"Just what I saw, my pigeon," Pepita retorted with marked acerbity. "You ask me what has happened, and I say I do not know. You want to know what has become of M. Bertrand. Then go and look for yourself. When I last saw him, he was in the kitchen, unfit to move, the poor cabbage!"

"But, Pepita," Theresia insisted, and stamped her foot with impatience, "you must know how you came to be sitting here, pinioned and muffled. Who did it? Who has been here? God preserve the woman, will she never speak!"

Pepita by now had fully recovered her senses. She had struggled to her feet, and went to take up the lamp, then led the way toward the door, apparently intent on finding out for herself what had become of M. Bertrand and in no way sharing her mistress's unreasoning terror. She halted on the threshold and turned to Theresia, who quite mechanically started to follow her.

"M. Bertrand was sitting in the arm-chair in the kitchen," she said simply. "I was arranging a cushion for his head, to make him more comfortable, when suddenly a shawl was flung over my head without the slightest warning. I had seen nothing; I had not heard the merest sound. And I had not the time to utter a scream before I was muffled up in the shawl. Then I was lifted off the ground as if I were a sack of feathers, and I just remember smelling something acrid which made my head spin round and round. But I remember nothing more after until I heard voices in the vestibule when thy guests were going away. Then I heard thy voice and tried to make thee hear mine. And that is all!"

"When did that happen, Pepita?"

"Soon after the last of thy guests had arrived. I remember I looked at the clock. It must have been half an hour after midnight."

While the woman spoke, Theresia had remained standing in the middle of the room, looking in the gloom like an elfin apparition, with her clinging, diaphanous draperies. A frown of deep puzzlement lay between her brows and her lips were tightly pressed together as if in wrath; but she said nothing more, and when Pepita, lamp in hand, went out of the room, she followed.

2

When, the kitchen door being opened, that room was found to be empty, Theresia was no longer surprised. Somehow she had expected this. She knew that Bertrand would be gone. The windows of the kitchen gave on the ubiquitous wrought-iron balcony, as did all the other windows of the apartment. That those windows were unfastened, had only been pushed to from the outside, appeared to her as a matter of course. It was not Bertrand who had thrown the shawl over Pepita's head; therefore some one had come in from the outside and had kidnapped Bertrand — some one who was peculiarly bold and daring. He had not come in from the balcony and through the window, because the latter had been fastened as usual by Pepita much earlier in the evening. No! He had gone that way, taking Bertrand with him; but he must have entered the place in some other mysterious manner, like a disembodied sprite bent on mischief or mystery.

Whilst Pepita fumbled and grumbled, Theresia started on a tour of inspection. Still deeply puzzled, she was no longer afraid. With Pepita to speak and the lamps all turned on, her habitual courage and self-possession had quickly returned to her. She had no belief in the supernatural. Her materialistic, entirely rational mind at once rejected the supposition, hinted at by Pepita, that magical powers had been at work to take Bertrand Moncrief to a place of safety.

Something was going on in her brain, certain theories, guesses, conjectures, which she was passionately eager to set at rest. Nor did it take her long. Candle in hand, she had gone round to explore. No sooner had she entered her own bedroom than the solution of the mystery lay revealed before her, in a shutter, forced open from the outside, a broken pane of glass which had allowed a hand to creep in and surreptitiously turn the handle of the tall French window to allow of easy ingress. It had been quickly and cleverly done; the splinters of glass had made no noise as they fell upon the carpet. But for the disappearance of Bertrand, the circumstances suggested a nimble housebreaker rather than a benevolent agency for the rescue of young rashlings in distress.

The frown of puzzlement deepened on Theresia Cabarrus's brow, and her mobile mouth with the perfectly arched if somewhat thin lips expressed a kind of feline anger, whilst the hand that held the pewter candlestick trembled perceptibly.

Pepita's astonishment expressed itself by sundry exclamations: "Name of a name!" and "Is it possible?" The explanation of the mystery had loosened her tongue, and while she set stolidly to work to clear up the debris of glass in her mistress's bedroom, she allowed free rein to her indignation against the impudent marauder, who in doubt had only been foiled in his attempt at wholesale robbery by some lucky circumstance which would presently come to light.

The worthy old peasant absolutely refused to connect the departure of M. Bertrand with so obvious an attempt at housebreaking.

"M. Bertrand was determined to go, the poor cabbage!" she said decisively; "since thou didst make him understand that his staying here was a danger to the front door whilst thou wast engaged in conversation with that pack of murderers, whom may the good God punish one of these days!"

From which remark we may gather that Pepita had not imbibed revolutionary ideals with the air of her native Andalusia.

Theresia Cabarrus, wearied beyond endurance by all the events of this night, as well as by her old servant's incessant gabble, finally sent her, still muttering and grumbling, to bed.

Chapter XII

Chauvelin

1

Theresia had opposed a stern refusal to Pepita's request that she might put her mistress to bed before she herself went to rest. She did not want to go to bed: she wanted to think, and now that that peculiar air of mystery, that silence and semi-darkness no longer held their gruesome sway in her apartment, she did not feel afraid.

Pepita went to bed. For awhile, Theresia could hear her moving about, with ponderous, shuffling footsteps; then, presently everything was still. The clock of old St. Roch struck three. Not much more than half an hour had gone by since her guests had been departed. To Theresia it seemed like an infinity of time. The sense of a baffling mystery being at work around her had roused her ire and killed all latent fear.

But what was the mystery?

And was there a mystery at all? Or was Pepita's rational explanation of the occurrence of this night the right one after all?

Citoyenne Cabarrus, unable to sit still, wandered up and down the passage, in and out of the kitchen; in and out of her bedroom, and thence into the vestibule. Then back again. At one moment, when standing in the vestibule, she thought she heard some one moving on the landing outside the front door. Her heart beat a little more rapidly, but she was not afraid. She did not believe in housebreakers and she felt that Pepita, who was a very light sleeper, was well within call.

So she went to the front door and opened it. The quick cry which she gave was one of surprise rather than of fear. In her belated visitor she had recognized citizen Chauvelin; and somehow, by a vague process of reasoning, his presence just at this moment seemed quite rational — in keeping with the unsolved mystery that was so baffling to the fair Theresia.

"May I come in, citoyenne?" Chauvelin said in a whisper. "It is late, I know; but there is urgency."

He was standing on the threshold, and she, a few paces away from him in the vestibule. The candle, which now burned low in its socket, was behind her. Its light touched with a weird, flickering glow on the pale face of the once noted Terrorist, with its pale eyes and sharply hooked nose, which gave him the air of a gaunt bird of prey.

"It is late," she murmured vaguely. "What do you want?"

"Something has happened," he replied, still speaking below his breath. "Something which concerns you. And, before speaking of it to citizen Robespierre—"

At the dread name Theresia stepped farther back into the vestibule.

"Enter!" she said curtly.

He came in, and she closed the door carefully behind him. Then she led the way into the withdrawing room and turned up the wick of the lamp under its rosy shade. She sat down and motioned to him to do the same.

"What is it?" she asked.

Before replying, Chauvelin's finger and thumb — thin and pointed like the talons of a vulture — went fumbling in the pocket of his waistcoat. From it he extracted a small piece of neatly folded paper.

"When we left your apartment, citoyenne — my friend St. Just and I supporting poor palsied Couthon, and Robespierre following close behind us — I spied this scrap of paper, which St. Just's careless foot had just kicked to one side when he was stepping across the threshold. Some unknown hand must have insinuated it underneath the door. Now, I never despise stray bits of paper. I have had so many through my hands that proved after examination to be of paramount importance. So, whilst the others were busy with their own affairs I, unseen by them, had already stooped and picked the paper up."

He paused for a moment or two, then, satisfied that he held the beautiful woman's undivided attention, he went on in his habitual dry, urbane monotone:

"Now, though I was quite sure in my own mind, citoyenne, that this billet-doux was intended for your fair hands, I felt that, as its finder, I had some sort of lien upon it—"

"To the point, citizen, I pray you!" Theresia broke in harshly, tried by a show of impatience and of fatigue to hide the anxiety which had once more taken possession of her heart. "You found a letter addressed to me; you read it. As you have brought it here, I presume that you wish me to know its contents. So get on, man, get on!" she added more vehemently. "It is not at three in the morning that one cares for dalliance."

By way of reply, Chauvelin slowly unfolded the note and began to read:

"Bertrand Moncrif is a young fool, but he is too good to be the plaything of a sleek black pantheress, however beautiful she might be. So I am taking him away to England where, in the arms of his long-suffering and loyal sweetheart, he will soon forget the brief madness which so nearly landed him on the guillotine and made of him a tool to serve the selfish whims of Theresia Cabarrus."

Theresia had listened to the brief, enigmatic epistle without displaying the slightest sign of emotion or surprise. Now, when Chauvelin had finished reading, and with his strange, dry smile had handed her the tiny note, she took it and for awhile contemplated it in silence, her face perfectly placid save for a curious and ominous contraction of the brows and a screwing-up of the fine eyes, which gave her a curious, snake-like expression.

"You know, of course, citoyenne," Chauvelin said after awhile, "who the writer of this — shall we say? — impudent epistle happens to be?"

She nodded.

"The man," he went on placidly, "who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel. The impudent English adventurer whom citizen Robespierre has asked you, citoyenne, to lure into the net which we may spread for him."

Still Theresia was silent. She did not look at Chauvelin, but kept her eyes fixed upon the scrap of paper, which she had folded into a long, narrow ribbon and was twining in and out between her fingers.

"A while ago, citoyenne," Chauvelin continued, "in this very room, you refused to lend us a helping hand."

Still no reply from Theresia. She had just smoothed out the mysterious epistle, carefully folded it into four, and was in the act of slipping it into the bosom of her gown. Chauvelin waited quite patiently. He was accustomed to waiting, and patience was an integral part of his stock in trade. Opportunism was another.

Theresia was sitting on her favourite settee, leaning forward with her hands clasped between her knees, her head was bent, and the tiny rose-shaded lamp failed to throw its glimmer of light upon her face. The clock on the mantelshelf behind her was ticking with insentient monotony. Anon, a distant chime struck the quarter after three. Whereupon Chauvelin rose.

"I think we understand one another, citoyenne," he said quietly, and with a sigh of complete satisfaction. "It is late now. At what hour may I have the privilege of seeing you alone?"

"At three in the afternoon?" she replied tonelessly, like one speaking in a dream. "Citizen Tallien is always at the Convention then, and my door will be denied to everybody else."

"I'll be here at three o'clock," was Chauvelin's final word.

Theresia had not moved. He made her a deep bow and went out of the room. The next moment, the opening and shutting of the outer door proclaimed that he had gone.

After that, Theresia Cabarrus went to bed.

Chapter XIII

The Fisherman's Rest

1

And whilst the whole of Europe was in travail with the repercussion of the gigantic upheaval that was shaking France to its historic foundations, the last few years had seen by very little change in this little corner of England.

The Fisherman's Rest stood where it had done for two centuries and long before thrones had tottered and anointed heads fallen on the scaffold. The oak rafters, black with age, the monumental hearth, the tables and high-backed benches, seemed like mute testimonies to good order and to tradition, just as the shiny pewter mugs, the foaming ale, the brass that glittered like gold, bore witness to unimpaired prosperity and an even, well-regulated life.

Over in the kitchen yonder, Mistress Sally Waite, as she now was, still ruled with a firm if somewhat hasty hand, the weight of which, so the naughty gossips averred, even her husband, Master Harry Waite, had experienced more than once. She still queened it over her father's household, presided over his kitchen, and drove the young scullery wenches to their task with her sharp tongue and an occasional slap. But The Fisherman's Rest could not have gone on without her. The copper saucepans would in truth not have glittered so, nor would the home-brewed ale have tasted half so luscious to Master Jellyband's faithful customers, had not Mistress Sally's strong brown hands drawn it for them, with just the right amount of creamy foam on the top and not a bit too much.

And so it was still many a "Ho, Sally! 'Ere Sally! 'Ow long'll you be with that there beer!" or "Say, Sally! A cut of your cheese and homebaked bread; and look sharp about it!" that resounded from end to end of the long, low-raftered coffee-room of The Fisherman's Rest, on this fine May day of the year of grace 1794.

Sally Waite, her muslin cap set at a becoming angle, her kerchief primly folded over her well-developed bosom, and her kirtle neatly raised above a pair of exceedingly shapely ankles, was in and out of the room, in and out of the kitchen, tripping it like a benevolent if somewhat substantial fairy, bandying chaff here, administering rebuke there, hot, panting and excited.

2

The while mine host, Master Jellyband — perhaps a shade more portly of figure, a thought more bald of pate, these last two years — stood with stubby legs firmly planted upon his own hearth, wherein, despite the warmth of a glorious afternoon, a log fire blazed away merrily. He was giving forth his views upon the political situation of Europe generally with the self-satisfied assurance born of complete ignorance and true British insular prejudice.

Believe me, Mr. Jellyband was in no two minds about "them murderin' furriners over yonder" who had done away with their King and Queen and all their nobility and quality, and whom England had at last decided to lick into shape.

"And not a moment too soon, hark'ee, Mr. 'Empseed," he went on sententiously. "And if I 'ad my way, we should 'ave punished 'em proper long before this — blown their bloomin' Paris into smithereens and carried off the pore Queen afore those murderous villains 'ad 'er pretty 'ead off 'er shoulders!"

Mr. Hempseed, from his own privileged corner in the inglenook, was not altogether prepared to admit that.

"I am not for interfering with other folks' ways," he said, raising his quaking treble so as to stem effectually the torrent of Master Jellyband's eloquence. "As the Scriptures say—"

"Keep your dirty fingers from off my waist!" came in decisive tones from Mistress Sally Waite, whilst the shrill sound made by the violent contact of a feminine hand against a manly cheek froze the Scriptural quotation on Mr. Hempseed's lips.

"Now then, now then, Sally!" Mr. Jellyband thought fit to say in stern tones, not liking his customers to be thus summarily dealt with.

"Now then, father," Sally retorted, with a toss of her brown curls, "you just attend to your politics, and Mr. 'Empseed to 'is Scriptures, and leave me to deal with them impudent jackanapes. You wait!" she added, turning once more with a parting shot directed against the discomfited offender. "If my 'Arry catches you at them tricks, you'll see what you get — that's all!"

"Sally!" Mr. Jellyband admonished, more sternly this time. "You'll 'ave my lord Hastings 'ere before 'is dinner is ready."

Which suggestion so overawed Mistress Sally that she promptly forgot the misdoings of the forward swain and failed to hear the sarcastic chuckle which greeted the mention of her husband's name. With an excited little cry, she ran quickly out of the room.

Mr. Hempseed, loftily unaware of interruption, concluded his sententious remark:

"As the Scriptures say, Mr. Jellyband: 'Ave no fellowship with the unfruitful work of darkness.' I don't 'old not with interfering. Remember what the Scriptures say: 'E that committeth sin is of the devil, and the devil sinneth from the beginning,'" he concluded with sublime irrelevance, sagely nodding his head.

But Mr. Jellyband was not thus lightly to be confounded in his argument — no, not by any quotation, relevant or otherwise!

"All very fine, Mr. 'Empseed," he said, "and good enough for them 'oo, like yourself, are willin' to side with them murderin' reprobates..."

"Like myself, Mr. Jellyband?" protested Mr. Hempseed, with as much vigour as his shrill treble would allow. "Nay, but I'm not for them children of darkness—"

"You may be or you may not," Mr. Jellyband went on, nothing daunted. "There be many as are, and 'oo'd say 'Let 'em murder,' even now, but I say that them as 'oo talk that way are not true Englishmen; for 'tis we Englishmen 'oo can teach the furriner just what 'e may do and what 'e may not. And as we've got the ships and the men and the money, we can just fight 'em as are not of our way o' thinkin'. And let me tell you, Mr. 'Empseed, that I'm prepared to back my opinions 'gainst any man as don't agree with me!"

For the nonce Mr. Hempseed was silent. True, a Scriptural text did hover on his thin, quivering lips; but as no one paid any heed to him for the moment its appositeness will for ever remain doubtful. The honours of victory rested with Mr. Jellyband. Such lofty patriotism, coupled with so much sound knowledge of political affairs, could not fail to leave its impress upon the more ignorant and the less fervent amongst the frequenters of The Fisherman's Rest.

Indeed, who was more qualified to pass an opinion on current events than the host of that much-frequented resort, seeing that the ladies and gentlemen of quality who came to England from over the water, so as to escape all them murtherin' reprobates in their own country, did most times halt at The Fisherman's Rest on their way to London or to Bath? And though Mr. Jellyband did not know a word of French — no furrin lingo for him, thank 'ee! — he nevertheless had mixed with all that nobility and gentry for over two years now, and had learned all that there was to know about the life over there, and about Mr. Pitt's intentions to put a stop to all those abominations.

3

Even now, hardly had mine hosts conversation with his favoured customers assumed a more domestic turn, than a loud clatter on the cobblestones outside, a jingle and a rattle, shouts, laughter and bustle, announced the arrival of guests who were privileged to make as much noise as they pleased.

Mr. Jellyband ran to the door, shouted for Sally at the top of his voice with a "Here's my lord Hastings!" to add spur to Sally's hustle. Politics were forgotten for the nonce, arguments set aside, in the excitement of welcoming the quality.

Three young gallants in travelling clothes, smart of appearance and debonair of mien, were ushering a party of strangers — three ladies and two men — into the hospitable porch of The Fisherman's Rest. The little party had walked across from the inner harbour, where the graceful masts of an elegant schooner lately arrived in port were seen gently swaying against the delicately coloured afternoon sky. Three or four sailors from the schooner were carrying luggage, which they deposited in the hall of the inn, then touched their forelocks in response to a pleasant smile and nod from the young lords.

"This way, my lord," Master Jellyband reiterated with jovial obsequiousness. "Everything is ready. This way! Hey, Sallee!" he called again; and Sally, hot, excited, blushing, came tripping over from the kitchen, wiping her hot plump palms against her apron in anticipation of shaking hands with their lordships.

"Since Mr. Waite isn't anywhere about," my lord Hastings said gaily, as he put a bold arm round Mistress Sally's dainty waist, "I'll e'en have a kiss, my pretty one."

"And I, too, by gad, for old sake's sake!" Lord Tony asserted, and plucked a hearty kiss on mistress Sally's dimpled cheek.

"At your service, my lords, at your service!" Master Jellyband rejoined, laughing. Then added more soberly: "Now then, Sally, show the ladies up into the blue room, the while their lordships 'ave a first shake down in the coffee-room. This way, gentlemen — your lordships — this way!"

The strangers in the meanwhile had stood by, wide-eyed and somewhat bewildered in face of this exuberant hilarity which was so unlike what they had pictured to themselves of dull, fog-ridden England — so unlike, too, the dreary moroseness which of late had replaced the erstwhile lighthearted gaiety of their own countrymen. The porch and the narrow hall of The Fisherman's Rest appeared to them seething and vitality. Every one was talking, nobody seemed to listen; every one was merry, and every one knew everybody else and was pleased to meet them. Sonorous laughter echoed from end to end along the solid beams, black and shiny with age. It all seemed so homely, so happy. The deference paid to the young gallants and to them as strangers by the sailors and the innkeeper was so genuine and hearty without the slightest sign of servility, that those five people who had left behind them so much class-hatred, enmity and cruelty in their own country, felt an unaccountable tightening of the heart, a few hot tears rise to their eyes, partly of joy, but partly too of regret.

4

Lord Hastings, the youngest and merriest of the English party, guided the two Frenchmen toward the coffee-room, with many a jest in atrocious French and kindly words of encouragement, all intended to put the strangers at their ease.

Lord Anthony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes — a trifle more serious and earnest, yet equally happy and excited at the success of their perilous adventure and at the prospect of reunion with their wives — lingered a moment longer in the hall, in order to speak with the sailors who had brought the luggage along.

"Do you know aught of Sir Percy?" Lord Tony asked.

"No, my lord," the sailor gave answer; "not since he went ashore early this morning. 'Er Ladyship was waitin' for 'im on the pier. Sir Percy just ran up the steps and then 'e shouted to us to get back quickly. 'Tell their lordships,' 'e says, 'I'll meet them at The Rest.' And then Sir Percy and 'er ladyship just walked off and we saw naun more of them."

"That was many hours ago," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes mused, with an inward smile. He too saw visions of meeting his pretty Suzanne very soon, and walking away with her into the land of dreams.

"'Twas just six o'clock when Sir Percy 'ad the boat lowered," the sailor rejoined. "And we rowed quick back after we landed 'im, but the Day-Dream, she 'ad to wait for the tide. We wurr a long while gettin' into port."

Sir Andrew nodded.

"You don't know," he said, "if the skipper had any further orders?"

"I don't know, sir," the man replied. "But we mun be in readiness always. No one knows when Sir Percy may wish to set sail again."

The two young men said nothing more, and presently the sailors touched their forelocks and went away. Lord Tony and Sir Andrew exchanged knowing smiles. They could easily picture to themselves their beloved chief, indefatigable, like a boy let out from school, exhilarated by the deadly danger through which he had once more passed unscathed, clasping his adored wife in his arms and

wandering off with her, heaven knew whither, living his life of joy and love and happiness during the brief hours which his own indomitable energy, his reckless courage, accorded to the sentimental side of his complex nature.

Far too impatient to wait until the tide allowed the Day-Dream to get into port, he had been rowed ashore in the early dawn, and his beautiful Marguerite — punctual to the assignation conveyed to her by one of those mysterious means of which Percy alone knew the secret — was ready there to receive him, to forget in the shelter of his arms the days of racking anxiety and of cruel terror for her beloved through which she had again and again been forced to pass.

Neither Lord Tony nor Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, the Scarlet Pimpernel's most faithful and devoted lieutenants, begrudged their chief these extra hours of bliss, the while they were left in charge of the party so lately rescued from horrible death. They knew that within a day or two — withing a few hours, perhaps — Blakeney would tear himself away once more from the clinging embrace of his exquisite wife, from the comfort of luxury of an ideal home, from the adulation of friends, the pleasures of wealth and of fashion, in order mayhap to grovel in the squalor and filth of some outlandish corner of Pairs, where he could be in touch with the innocents who suffered — the poor, the terror-stricken victims of the merciless revolution. Within a few hours, mayhap, he would be risking his life again every moment of the day, in order to save some poor hunted fellow-creature — man, woman or child — from death that threatened them at the hands of inhuman monsters who knew neither mercy nor compunction.

And for the nineteen members of the League, they took it in turns to follow their leader where danger was thickest. It was a privilege eagerly sought, deserved by all, and accorded to those who were most highly trusted. It was invariably followed by a period of rest in happy England, with wife, friends, joy and luxury. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst and my lord Hastings had been of the expedition which brought Mme de Serval with her three children and Bertrand Moncrif safely to England, after adventures more perilous, more reckless of danger, than most. Within a few hours they would be free to forget in the embrace of clinging arms every peril and every adventure save the eternal one of love, free to forswear everything outside that, save their veneration for their chief and their loyalty to his cause.

Chapter XIV

The Castaway

1

An excellent dinner served by Mistress Sally and her attendant little wenches put everybody into rare good-humour. Madame de Serval — pale, delicate, with gentle, plaintive voice and eyes that had acquired a pathetically furtive look — even contrived to smile, her heart warmed by the genuine welcome, the rare gaiety that irradiated this fortunate corner of God's earth. Wars and rumours of war reached it only as an echo of great things that went on in the vast outside world; and though more than one of Dover's gallant sons had perished in one or the other of the Duke of York's unfortunate incursions into Holland, or in one of the numerous naval engagements off the Western shores of France, on the whole, the war, intermittent and desultory, had not yet cast its heavy gloom over the entire country.

Joséphine and Jacques de Serval, whose enthusiasm for martyrdom had received so severe a check in the course of the Fraternal Supper in the Rue. St. Honoré, had at first with the self-consciousness of youth adopted an attitude of obstinate and irreclaimable sorrow, until the antics of Master Harry Waite, pretty Sally's husband — jealous as a young turkey-cock of every gallant who dared to ogle his buxom wife — brought laughter to their lips. My Lord Hastings' comical attempts at speaking French, the droll mistakes he made, easily did the rest; and soon their lively, high-pitched Latin voices mingled with unimpaired gaiety with the more mellow sound of Anglo-Saxon tongues.

Even Régine de Serval had smiled when my lord Hastings had asked her with grave solemnity whether Mme de Serval would wish "le fou de descendre" — the lunatic to the come downstairs — meaning all the while whether she wanted the fire in the big hearth to be let down, seeing that the atmosphere in the coffee-room was growing terribly hot.

The only one who seemed quite unable to shake off his moroseness was Bertrand Moncrief. He sat next to Régine, silent, somewhat sullen, a look that seemed almost one of dull resentment lingering in his eyes. From time to time, when he appeared peculiarly moody or when he refused to eat, her little hand would steal out under the table and press his with a gentle, motherly gesture.

2

It was when the merry meal was over and while Master Jellyband was going the round with a fine bottle of smuggled brandy, which the young gentlemen sipped with unmistakable relish, that a commotion arose outside the inn; whereupon Master Harry Waite ran out of the coffee-room in order to see what was amiss.

Nothing very much apparently. Waite came back after a moment or two and said that two sailors from the barque *Angela* were outside with a young French lad, who seemed more dead than alive, and whom it appears the barque had picked up just outside French waters, in an open boat, half perished with terror and inanition. As the lad spoke nothing but French, the sailors had brought him along to The Fisherman's Rest, thinking that maybe some of the quality would care to interrogate him.

At once Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, my Lord Tony and Lord Hastings were on the *qui vive*. A lad in distress, coming from France, found alone in an open boat, suggested one of those tragedies in which the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel was wont to play a rôle.

"Let the lad be taken into the parlour, Jellyband," Sir Andrew commanded. "You've got a fire in there, haven't you?"

"Yes, yes, Sir Andrew! We always keep fires going here until past the 15th of May."

"Well then, get him in there. Then give him some of your smuggled brandy first, you old dog! then some wine and food. After that we'll find out something more about him."

He himself went along in order to see that his orders were carried out. Jellyband, as usual, had already deputed his daughter to do the necessary, and in the hall there was Mistress Sally, capable and compassionate, supporting, almost carrying, a youth who in truth appeared scarce able to stand.

She led him gently into the small private parlour, where a cheerful log-fire was blazing, sat him down in an arm-chair beside the hearth, after which Master Jellyband himself poured half a glass of brandy down the poor lad's throat. This revived him a little, and he looked about him with huge, scared eyes.

"Sainte Mère de Dieu!" he murmured feebly. "Where am I?"

"Never mind about that now, my lad," replied Sir Andrew, whose knowledge of French was of a distinctly higher order than that of his comrades. "You are among friends. That is enough. Have something to eat and drink now. Later we'll talk."

He was eyeing the boy keenly. Contact with suffering and misery over there in France, under the leadership of the most selfless, most understanding man of this or any time, had intensified his powers of perception. Even the first glance had revealed to him the fact that here was no ordinary waif. The lad spoke with a gentle, highly refined voice; his skin was delicate, and his face exquisitely beautiful; his hands, though covered with grime, and his feet, encased in huge, coarse boots, were small and daintily shaped, like those of a woman. Already Sir Andrew had made up his mind that if the oilskin cap which sat so extraordinarily tightly on the boy's head were to be removed, a wealth of long hair would certainly be revealed.

However, all these facts, which threw over the young stranger a further veil of mystery, could not in all humanity be investigated now. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, with the consummate tact born of kindness, left the lad alone as soon as he appeared able to sit up and eat, and himself rejoined his friends in the coffee-room.

Chapter XV

The Nest

1

No one, save a very few intimates, knew of the little nest wherein Sir Percy Blakeney and his lady hid their happiness on those occasions when the indefatigable Scarlet Pimpernel was only able to spend a few hours in England, and when a journey to their beautiful home in Richmond could not be thought of. The house — it was only a cottage, timbered and creeper-clad — lay about a mile and a half outside Dover, off the main road, perched up high on rising ground over a narrow lane. It had a small garden round it, which in May was ablaze with daffodils and bluebells, and in June with roses. Two faithful servants, a man and his wife, looked after the place, kept the nest cosy and warm whenever her ladyship wearied of fashion, or else, actually expecting Sir Percy, would come down from London for a day or two in order to dream of that elusive and transient happiness for which her soul hungered, even while her indomitable spirit accepted the inevitable.

A few days ago the weekly courier from France had brought her a line from Sir Percy, together with the promise that she should rest in his arms on the 1st of May. And Marguerite had come down to the creeper-covered cottage knowing that, despite obstacles which might prove insuperable to others, Percy would keep his word.

She had stolen out at dawn to wait for him on the pier; and sure enough, as soon as the May-day sun, which had risen to-day in his glory as if to crown her brief happiness with warmth and radiance, had dissipated the morning mist, her yearning eyes had spied the smart white gig which had put off from the Day-Dream leaving the graceful ship to await the turn of the tide before putting into port.

Since then, every moment of the day had been one of rapture. The first sight of her husband in his huge caped coat, which seemed to add further inches to his great height, his call of triumph when he saw her, his arms outstretched, there, far away in the small boat, with a gesture of such infinite longing that for a second or two tears obscured Marguerite's vision. Then the drawing up of the boat against the landing-stage; Percy's spring ashore; his voice, his look; the strength of his arms; the ardour of his embrace. Rapture, in truth, to which the thought of its brief duration alone lent a touch of bitterness.

But of parting again Marguerite would not think — not to-day, while the birds were singing a deafening paean of joy; not while the scent of growing grass, of moits, travelling earth, was in her nostrils; not while the sap was in the trees, and the gummy crimson buds of the chestnuts were bursting into leaf. Not while she wandered up the narrow lane between hedges of black-thorn in bloom, with Percy's arm around her, his loved voice in her ear, his merry laughter echoing through the sweet morning air.

After that, breakfast in the low, rafted room — the hot, savoury milk, the home-baked bread, the home-churned butter. Then the long, delicious, intimate talk of love, and of yearnings, of duty and of gallant deeds. Blakeney kept nothing secret from his wife; and what he did not tell her, that she easily guessed. But it was from the members of the League that she learned all there was to know of heroism and selflessness in the perilous adventures through which her husband passed with so lighthearted a gaiety.

"You should see me as an asthmatic reprobate, m'dear," he would say, with his infectious laugh. "And hear that cough! Lud love you, but I am mightily proud of that cough! Poor old Rateau does not do it better himself; and he is genuinely asthmatic."

He gave her an example of his prowess; but she would not allow him to go on. The sound was too weird, and conjured up visions which to-day she would fain forget.

"Rateau was a real find," he went on more seriously; "because he is three parts an imbecile and as obedient as a dog. When some of those devils are on my track, lo! the real Rateau appears and yours truly vanishes where no one can find him!"

"Pray God," she murmured involuntarily, "they never may!"

"They won't, m'dear, they won't!" he asserted with lighthearted conviction. "They have become so confused now between Rateau the coalheaver, the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, and the problematic English milor, that all three of these personalities can appear before their eyes and they will let 'em all escape! I assure you that the confusion between the Scarlet Pimpernel who was in the ante-chamber of Mother Théot on that fateful afternoon, and again at the Fraternal Supper in the Rue St. Honoré, and the real Rateau who was at Mother Théot's while that same exciting supper party was going on, was so great that not one of those murdering reprobates could trust his own eyes and ears, and that we got away as easily as rabbits out of a torn net."

Thus did he explain and laugh over the perilous adventure where he had faced a howling mob disguised as Rateau the coalheaver, and with almost superhuman pluck and boldness had dragged Mme de Serval and her children into the derelict house which was one of the League's headquarters. That is how he characterized the extraordinary feat of audacity when, in order to give his gallant lieutenants time to smuggle the unfortunates out of the house through a back and secret way, he showed himself on the balcony above the multitude, and hurled dummy figures into the brazier below.

Then came the story of Bertrand Moncrif, snatched half-unconscious out of the apartment of the fair Theresia Cabarrus, whilst Robespierre himself sat not half a dozen yards away, with only the thickness of a wall between him and his arch enemy.

"How the woman must hate you!" Marguerite murmured, with a slight shudder of acute anxiety which she did her best to conceal. "There are things that a woman like the Cabarrus will never forgive. Whether she cares for Bertrand Moncrif or no, her vanity will suffer intensely, and she will never forgive you for taking him out of her clutches."

He laughed.

"Lud, m'dear!" he said lightly. "If we were to take heed of all the people who hate us we should spend our lives pondering rather than doing. And all I want to ponder over," he added, whilst his glance of passionate earnestness seemed to envelop her like an exquisite warm mantle, "is your beauty, your eyes, the scent of your hair, the delicious flavour of your kiss!"

2

It was some hours later on that same glorious day, when the shadows of ash and chestnut lay right across the lane and the arms of evening folded the cosy nest in their mysterious embrace, that Sir Percy and Marguerite sat in the deep window-embrasure of the tiny living-room. He had thrown open wide the casements, and hand resting in hand, they watched the last ray of golden light lingering in the west and listened to the twitterings which came like tender "good nights" from the newly-built nests among the trees.

It was one of those perfect spring evenings, rare enough in northern climes, without a breath of wind, when every sound carries clear and sharp through the stillness around. The air was soft and slightly moist, with a tang in it of wakening life and of rising sap, and with the scent of wild narcissus and of wood violets rising like intoxicating incense to the nostrils. It was in truth one of those evening when happiness itself seems rudely out of place, and nature — exquisite, but so cruelly, transient in her loveliness — demands the tribute of gentle melancholy.

A thrust said something to its mate — something insistent and tender that lulled them both to rest. After that, Nature became quite still, and Marguerite, with a catch in her throat which she would have given much to suppress, laid her head upon her husband's breast.

Then it was that suddenly a man's voice, hoarse but distant, broke in upon the perfect peace around. What it said could not at first be gathered. It took some time ere Marguerite became sufficiently conscious of the disturbing noise to raise her head and listen. As for Sir Percy, he was wrapped in the contemplating of the woman he worshipped, and nothing short of an earthquake would have dragged him back to reality, had not Marguerite raised herself on her knees and quickly whispered:

"Listen!"

The man's voice had been answered by a woman's raised as if in defiance that seemed both pitiful and futile.

"You cannot harm me now. I am in England!"

Marguerite leaned out of the window, tried to peer into the darkness which was fast gathering over the lane. The voices had come from there: first the man's, then the woman's, and now the man's again; both speaking in French, the woman obviously terrified and pleading, the man harsh and commanding. Now it was raised again, more incisive and distinct than before, and Marguerite had in truth some difficulty in repressing the cry that rose to her lips. She had recognized the man's voice.

"Chauvelin!" she murmured.

"Aye, in England, citoyenne!" that ominous voice went on drily. "But the arm of justice is long. And remember that you are not the first who has tried — unsuccessfully, let me tell you! — to evade punishment by flying to the enemies of France. Wherever you may hide, I will know how to find you. Have I not found you here, now? — and you but a few hours in Dover!"

"But you cannot touch me!" the woman protested with the courage of one in despair.

The man laughed.

"Are you really simple enough, citoyenne," he said, "to be convinced of that?"

This sarcastic retort was followed by a moment or two of silence, then by a woman's cry; and in an instant Sir Percy was on his feet and out of the house. Marguerite followed him as far as the porch, whence the sloping ground, aided by flagged steps here and there, led down to the gate and thence on to the lane.

It was close beside the gate that a human-looking bundle lay huddled, when Sir Percy came upon the scene, even whilst, some fifty yards away at the sharp bend of the lane, a man could be seen walking rapidly away, his pace wellnigh at a run. Sir Percy's instinct was for giving chase, but the huddle-up figure put out a pair of arms and clung to him so desperately, with smothered cries of: "For pity's sake, don't leave me!" that it would have been inhuman to go. And so he bent down, raised the human bundle from the ground, and carried it bodily up into the house.

Here he deposited his burden upon the window seat, where but a few moments ago he had been wrapped in the contemplation of Marguerite's eyelashes, and with his habitual quaint good-humour, said:

"I leave the rest to you, m'dear. My French is too atrocious for dealing with the case."

Marguerite understood the hint. Sir Percy, whose command of French was nothing short of phenomenal, never used the language save when engaged in his perilous undertakings. His perfect knowledge of every idiom would have set any ill-intentioned eavesdropper thinking.

The human bundle looked very pathetic lying there upon the window seat, propped up with cushions. It appeared to be a youth, dressed in rough fisherman's clothes and with a cap that fitted tightly round the head; but with hands delicate as a woman's and a face of exquisite beauty.

Without another word, Marguerite quietly took hold of the cap and gently removed it. A wealth of blue-black hair fell like a cascade over the recumbent shoulders. "I thought as much!" Sir Percy remarked quietly, even whilst the stranger, apparently terrified, jumped up and burst into tears, moaning piteously:

"Oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! Sainte Vierge, protégez-moi!"

There was nothing to do but to wait; and anon the first paroxysm of grief and terror passed. The stranger, with a wry little smile, took the handkerchief which Lady Blakeney was holding out to her and proceeded to dry her tears. Then she looked up at the kind Samaritans who had befriended her.

"I am an impostor, I know," she said, with lips that quivered like those of a child in grief. "But if you only knew...!"

She sat bolt upright now, squeezing and twirling the wet handkerchief between her fingers.

"Some kind English gentlemen were good to me, down in the town," she went on more glibly. "They gave me food and shelter, and I was left alone to rest. But I felt stifled in the narrow room. I could hear every one talking and laughing, and the evening air was so beautiful. So I ventured out. I only meant to breathe a little fresh air; but it was all so lovely, so peaceful... here in England... so different to..."

She shuddered a little and looked as if she was going to cry again. But Marguerite interposed gently:

"So you prolonged your walk, and found this lane?"

"Yes. I prolonged my walk," the woman replied. "I did not notice that the road had become lonely. Then suddenly I realized that I was being followed, and I ran. Mon Dieu, how I ran! Whither, I knew not! I just felt that something horrible was at my heels!"

Her eyes, dilated with terror, looked as black as sloes. They were fixed upon Marguerite, never once raised on Sir Percy, who, standing some way apart from the two women, was looking down on them, silent and apparently unmoved.

The stranger shuddered again; her face was almost grey in its expression of fear, and her lips seemed quite bloodless. Marguerite gave her trembling hands an encouraging pat.

"It was lucky," she said gently, "that you found your way here."

"I had seen the light," the woman continued more calmly. "And I believe that at the back of my mind there was the instinct to run for shelter. Then suddenly my foot knocked against a stone, and I fell. I tried to raise myself quickly, but I had not the time, for the next moment I felt a hand on my shoulder, and a voice — oh, a voice I dread, citoyenne! — called to me by name."

"The voice of citizen Chauvelin?" Marguerite asked simply.

The woman looked up quickly.

"You knew-?" she murmured.

"I knew his voice."

"But you know him?" the other insisted.

"I know him — yes," Marguerite replied. "I am a compatriot of yours. Before I married, I was Marguerite St. Just."

"St. Just?"

"We are cousins, my brother and I, of the young deputy, the friend of Robespierre."

"God help you!" the woman murmured.

"He has done so already, by bringing us both to England. My brother is married, and I am Lady Blakeney now. You too will feel happy and safe now that you are here."

"Happy?" the woman ejaculated, with a piteous sob. "And safe? Mon Dieu, if only I could think it!"

"But what have you to fear? Chauvelin may have retained some semblance of power over in France. He has none over here."

"He hates me!" the other murmured. "Oh, how he hates me!"

"Why?"

The stranger made no immediate reply. Her eyes, dark as the night, glowing and searching, seemed to read the very soul behind Marguerite's serene brow. Then after awhile she went on, with seeming irrelevance:

"It all began so foolishly!... mon Dieu, how foolishly! And I really meant nothing treacherous to my own country — nothing unpatriotic, quoi?" she suddenly seized Marguerite's two hands and exclaimed with childlike enthusiasm: "You have heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel, have you not?"

"Yes," Marguerite replied. "I have heard of him."

"You know then that he is the finest, bravest, most wonderful man in all the world?"

"Yes, I know that," Marguerite assented with a smile.

"Of course, in France they hate him. Naturally! He is the enemy of the republic, quoi? He is against all those massacres, the persecution of the innocent. He saves them and helps them when he can. So they hate him. Naturally."

"Naturally!"

"But I have always admired him," the woman continued, enthusiasm glowing in her dark eyes. "Always; always! Ever since I heard what he had done, and how he saved the Comte de Tournay, and Juliette Marny, and Esther Vincent, and — and countless others. Oh, I knew about them all! For I knew Chauvelin well, and one or two of the men on the Committee of Public Safety quite intimately, and I used to worm out of them all the true facts about the Scarlet Pimpernel. Can you wonder that with my whole soul I admired him? I worshipped him! I could have laid down my life to help him! He has been the guiding star of my dreary life — my hero and my king!"

She paused, and those deep, dark eyes of her were fixed straight out before her, as if in truth she beheld the hero of her dreams. There was a glow now in her cheeks, and her marvellous hair fell like a sable mantle around her, framing the perfect oval of the face and enhancing by vivid contrast the creamy whiteness of chin and throat and the rose-like bloom that had spread over her face. Indeed, this was an exquisitely beautiful creature, and Marguerite, herself one of the loveliest women of her time, was carried away by genuine, wholehearted admiration for the stranger, as well as by her enthusiasm, which, in very truth, seeing its object, was a perfectly natural feeling.

"So now," the woman concluded, coming back to the painful realities of life with a shudder, which extinguished the light in her eyes and took all the glow out of her cheeks, "so now you understand perhaps why Chauvelin hates me!"

"You must have been rather indiscreet," Marguerite remarked with a smile.

"I was, I suppose. And Chauvelin is so vindictive. He hates the Scarlet Pimpernel. Out of a few words, foolishly spoken perhaps, he has made out a case against me. A friend gave me warning. My name was already in the hands of Fouquier-Tinville. You know what that means! Perquisition! Arrest! Judgment! Then the guillotine! Oh, mon Dieu! And I had done nothing! — nothing! I fled out of Paris. An influential friend just contrived to arrange this for me. A faithful servant accompanied me. We reached Boulogne. How, I know not! I was so weak, so ill, so wretched, I hardly lived. I just allowed François — that was my servant — to take me whithersoever he wished. But we had no passports, no papers — nothing! And Chauvelin was on our track. We had to hide — in barns... in pig-styes... anywhere! But we reached Boulogne at last... I had some money, fortunately. We bribed a fisherman to let us have his boat. Only a small boat — imagine! A rowing boat! And François and I alone in it! But it meant our lives if we didn't go; and perhaps it meant our lives if we went! A rowing boat on the great, big sea!... Fortunately the weather was fine, and François lifted me into the boat. And I just remember seeing the coast of France receding, receding, receding — farther and farther from me. I was so tired. It is possible that I slept. Then suddenly something woke me. I was wide awake. I had heard a cry. I knew I had heard a cry, and then a splash — an awful splash! I was wet through. One oar hung in the rowlock; the other had gone. And François was not there. I was all alone."

She spoke in hard, jerky sentences, as if every word hurt her physically as she uttered it. For the most part she was looking down on her hands, that twitched convulsively and twisted the tiny wet handkerchief into a ball. But now and again she looked up, not at Marguerite always, rather at Sir Percy. Her glowing, tear-wet eyes fastened themselves on him from time to time with an appealing or a defiant gaze. He appeared silent and sympathetic, and his glance rested on her the whole while that she spoke, with an expression of detached if kindly interest, as if he did not quite understand everything that she said. Marguerite as usual was full of tenderness and compassion.

"How terribly you must have suffered!" she said gently. "But what happened after that?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know!" the poor woman resumed. "I was too numbed, too dazed with horror and fear, to suffer very much. The boat drifted on, I suppose. It was a beautiful, calm night. And the moon was lovely. You remember the moon last night?"

Marguerite nodded.

"But I remember nothing after... after that awful cry... and the splash! I suppose my poor François fainted or fell asleep... and that he fell into the water. I never saw him again.... And I remember nothing until — until I found myself on board a ship with a lot of rough sailors around me, who seemed very kind.... They brought me ashore and took me to a nice warm place, where some English gentlemen took compassion on me. And... and... I have already told you the rest."

She leaned back against the cushions of the seat as if exhausted with the prolonged effort. Her hands seemed quite cold now, almost blue, and Marguerite rose and closed the window behind her.

"How kind and thoughtful you are!" the stranger exclaimed, and after a moment added with a weary sigh, "I must not trespass any longer on your kindness. It is late now, and... I must go."

She struggled to her feet, rose with obvious reluctance.

"The inn where I was," she said, "it is not far?"

"But you cannot go out alone," Marguerite reckoned. "You do not even know the way!"

"Ah, no! But perhaps your servant could accompany me... only as far as the town.... After that I can ask the way... I should no longer be frightened."

"You speak English then, Madame?"

"Oh, yes! My father was a diplomat. He was in England once for four years. I learned a little English. I have not forgotten it."

"One of the servants shall certainly go with you. The inn you speak of must be The Fisherman's Rest, since you found English gentlemen there."

"If Madame will allow me?" Sir Percy broke in, for the first time since the stranger had embarked upon her narrative.

The stranger looked up at him with a half-shy, half-eager smile.

"You, milor!" she exclaimed. "Oh no! I would be ashamed—"

She paused, and her cheeks became crimson whilst she looked down in utter confusion on her extraordinary attire.

"I had forgotten," she murmured tearfully. "François made me put on these awful clothes when we left Paris."

"Then I must lend you a cloak for to-night," Marguerite interposed with a smile. "But you need not mind your clothes, Madame. On this coast our people are used to seeing unfortunate fugitives landing in every sort of guise. To-morrow we must find you something wherein to travel to London."

"To London?" the stranger said with some eagerness. "Yes! I would wish to go to London."

"It will be quite easy. Mme de Serval, with her son and two daughters and another friend, is travelling by the coach to-morrow. You could join them, I am sure. Then you would not be alone. You have money, Madame?" Marguerite concluded, with practical solicitude.

"Oh, yes!" the other replied. "I have plenty for present needs... in a wallet... under my clothes. I was able to collect a little — and I have not lost it. I am not dependent," she added, with a smile of gratitude. "And as soon as I have found my husband—"

"Your husband?" Marguerite exclaimed.

"M. le Marquis de Fontenay," the other answered simply. "Perhaps you know him. You have seen him... in London?... Not?"

Marguerite shook her head.

"Not to my knowledge."

"He left me — two years ago... cruelly... emigrated to England... and I was left alone in the world.... He saved his own life by running away from France; but I — I could not go just then... and so..."

She seemed on the verge of breaking down again, then recovered herself and continued more quietly:

"That was my idea, you see; to find my husband one day. Now a cruel Fate has forced me to fly from France; so I thought I would go to London and perhaps some kind friends will help me to find M. de Fontenay. I have never ceased to love him, though he was so cruel. And I think that... perhaps... he also has not quite forgotten me."

"That were impossible," Marguerite rejoined gently. "But I have friends in London who are in touch with most of the emigrés here. We will see what can be done. It will not be difficult, methinks, to find M. de Fontenay."

"You are an angel, milady!" the stranger exclaimed; and with a gesture that was perfect in its suggestion of gracious humility, she took Marguerite's hand and raised it to her lips. Then she once more mopped her eyes, picked up her cap and hastily hid the wealth of her hair beneath it. After which, she turned to Sir Percy.

"I am ready, milor," she said. "I have intruded far too long as it is upon your privacy.... But I am not brave enough to refuse your escort. Milady, forgive me! I will walk fast, very fast, so that milor will return to you very soon!"

She wrapped herself up in a cloak which, at Lady Blakeney's bidding, one of the servants had brought her, and a moment or two later the stranger and Sir Percy were out of the house, whilst Marguerite remained for awhile on the porch, listening to their retreating footsteps.

There was a frown of puzzlement between her brows, a look of troubled anxiety in her eyes. Somehow, the brief sojourn of that strange and beautiful woman in her house had filled her soul with a vague feeling of dread, which she tried vainly to combat. There was no real suspicion against the woman in her heart — how could there be? — but she — Marguerite — who as a rule was so compassionate, so understanding of those misfortunes, to alleviate which Sir Percy was devoting his entire life, felt cold and

unresponsive in this case — most unaccountably so. Mme de Fontenay's story differed but little in all its grim detail of misery and humiliation from the thousand and one other similar tales which had been poured for the past three years into her sympathetic ear. She had always understood, had always been ready to comfort and to help. But this time she felt very much as if she had come across a sick or wounded reptile, something weak and dumb and helpless, and yet withal unworthy of compassion.

However, Marguerite Blakeney was surely not the woman to allow such fancies to dry the well of her pity. The gallant Scarlet Pimpernel was not wont to pause in his errands of mercy in order to reflect whether the objects of his selfless immolation were worthy of it or no. So Marguerite, with a determined little sigh, chided herself for her disloyalty and cowardice, and having dried her tears she went within.

Chapter XVI

A Lover of Sport

1

For the first five minutes, Sir Percy Blakeney and Madame de Fontenay walked side by side in silence. Then she spoke.

"You are silent, milor?" she queried, speaking in perfect English.

"I was thinking," he replied curtly.

"What?"

"What a remarkably fine actress is lost in the fashionable Theresia Cabarrus."

"Madame de Fontenay, I pray you, milor," she retorted drily.

"Theresia Cabarrus nevertheless. Madame Tallien probably to-morrow: for Madame divorced that weak-kneed marquis as soon as the lay 'contre les emigrés' allowed her to regain her freedom."

"You seem very well informed, milor."

"Almost as well as Madame herself," he riposted with a pleasant laugh.

"Then you do not believe my story?"

"Not one word of it!" he replied.

"Strange!" she mused. "For every word of it is true."

"Demmed strange!" he assented.

"Of course, I did not tell all," she went on, with sudden vehemence. "I could not. My lady would not understand. She has become — what shall I say? — very English. Marguerite St. Just would understand... Lady Blakeney — no?"

"What would Lady Blakeney not understand?"

"Eh bien! About Bertrand Moncrif."

"Ah?"

"You think I did harm to the boy... I know... you took him away from me... You! The Scarlet Pimpernel!... You see, I know! I know everything! Chauvelin told me..."

"And guided you most dexterously to my door," he concluded with a pleasant laugh. "There to enact a delicious comedy of gruff-voiced bully and pathetic victim of merciless persecution. It was all excellently done! Allow me to offer you my sincere congratulations!"

She said nothing for a moment or two, then queried abruptly:

"You think that I am here in order to spy upon you?"

"Oh!" he riposted lightly, "how could I be so presumptuous as to suppose that the beautiful Cabarrus would bestow attention on so unworthy an object as I?"

"'Tis you now, milor," she rejoined drily, "who choose to play a rôle. A truce on it, I pray you; and rather tell me what you mean to do."

To this query he gave no reply, and his silence appeared to grate on Theresia's nerves, for she went on harshly:

"You will betray me to the police, of course. And as I am here without papers—"

He put up his hand with that gently deprecating gesture which was habitual to him.

"Oh!" he said, with his quiet little laugh, "why should you thin I would do anything so unchivalrous?"

"Unchivalrous?" she retorted with a pathetic sigh of weariness. "I suppose, here in England, it would be called an act of patriotism or self-preservation... like fighting an enemy... or denouncing a spy—"

She paused a moment or two, and as he once more took refuge in silence, she resumed with sudden, moving passion:

"So it is to be a betrayal after all! The selling of an unfortunate woman to her bitterest enemy! Oh, what wrong have I ever done you, that you should persecute me thus?"

"Persecute you?" he exclaimed. "Pardi, Madame; but this is a subtle joke which by your leave my dull wits are unable to fathom."

"It is no joke, milor," she rejoined earnestly. "Will you let me explain? For indeed it seems to me that we are at cross purposes, you and I."

She came to a halt, and he perforce had to do likewise. They had come almost to the end of the little lane; a few yards farther on it debouched on the main road. Beyond that, the lights of Dover Town and the Harbour lights glinted in the still, starry night. Behind them the lane, sunk between grassy slopes and overhung by old elms of fantastic shapes, appeared dark and mysterious. But here, where they stood, the moon shed its full radiance on the broad highway, the clump of copper beeches over on the left, that tiny cottage with its thatched roof nestling at the foot of the cliff; and far away, on the picturesque mass of Dover Castle, the church and towers. Every bit of fencing, every tiny twig in the hawthorn hedges, stood out clear cut, sharp like metal in the cold, searching light. Theresia — divinely slender and divinely tall, graceful despite the rough masculine clothes which she wore — stood boldly in the full light; the tendrils of her jet black hair were gently stirred by an imperceptible breeze, her eyes, dark and luminous, were fixed upwards at the man whom she had set out to subjugate.

"That boy," she went on quite gently, "Bertrand Moncrif, was just a young fool. But I liked him, and I could see the abyss to which his folly was tending. There was never anything but friendship between us; but I knew that sooner or later he would run his head into a noose, and then what good would his pasty-faced sweetheart have been to him? Whilst I — I had friends, influence — quoi? And I liked the boy; I was sorry for him. Then the catastrophe came... the other night. There was what those ferocious beasts over in Paris were pleased to call a Fraternal Supper. Bertrand Moncrif was there. Like a young food, he started to vilify Robespierre — Robespierre, who is the idol of France! There! — in the very midst of the crowd! They would have torn him limb from limb, it seems.

I don't know just what happened, for I wasn't there; but he came to my apartment — at midnight — dishevelled — his clothes torn — more dead than alive. I gave him shelter; I tended him. Yes, I! — even whilst Robespierre and his friends were in my house, and I risked my life every moment that Bertrand was under my roof! Chauvelin suspected something then. Oh, I knew it! Those awful pale, deep-set eyes of his seemed to be searching my soul all the time! At which precise moment you came and took Bertrand away, I know not. But Chauvelin knew. He saw — he saw, I tell you! He had not been with us the whole time, but in and out of the apartment on some pretext or other. Then, after the others had left, he came back, accused me of having harboured not only Bertrand, but the Scarlet Pimpernel himself! — swore that I was in league with the English spies and had arranged with them to smuggle my lover out of the house. Then he went away. He did not threaten. You know him as well as I do. Threatening is not his way. But from his look I knew that I was doomed. Luckily I had François. We packed up my few belongings then and there. I left my woman Pepita in charge, and I fled. As for the rest, I swear to you that it all happened just as I told it to milady. You say you do not believe me. Very well! Will you then take me away from this sheltered land, which I have reached after terrible sufferings? Will you send me back to France, and drive me to the arms of a man who but waits to throw me into the tumbril with the next batch of victims for the guillotine? You have the power to do it, of course. You are in England; you are rich, influential, a power in your own country; whilst I am an alien, a political enemy, a refugee, penniless and friendless. You can do with me what you will, of course. But if you do that, milor, my blood will stain your hands for ever; and all the good you and your League have ever done in the cause of humanity will be wiped out by this execrable crime."

She spoke very quietly and with soul-moving earnestness. So was also exquisitely beautiful. Sir Percy Blakeney had been more than human if he had been proof against such an appeal, made by such perfect lips. Nature itself spoke up for Theresia: the softness and stillness of the night; the starlit sky and the light of the moon; the sent of wood violets and of wet earth, and the patter of tiny, mysterious feet in the hedgegrows. And the man whose whole life was consecrated to the relief of suffering humanity and whose ears were for ever strained to hear the call of the weak and of the innocent — he could far, far sooner have believed that this beautiful woman was speaking the truth, rather than allow his instinct of suspicion, his keen sense of what was untrustworthy and dangerous, to steel his heart against her appeal.

But whatever his thoughts might be, when she paused, wearied and shaken with sobs which she vainly tried to suppress, he spoke to her quite gently.

"Believe me, dear lady," he said, "that I had no thought of wronging you when I owned to disbelieving your story. I have seen so many strange things in the course of my chequered career that, in verity, I ought to know by now how unbelievable truth often appears."

"Had you known me better, milor—" she began.

"Ah, that is just it!" he rejoined quaintly. "I did not know you, Madame. And now, meseems, that Fate has intervened, and that I shall never have the chance of knowing you."

"How is that?" she asked.

But to this he gave no immediate answer, suggested irrelevantly:

"Shall we walk on? It is getting late."

She gave a little cry, as if startled out of a dream, then started to walk by his side with her long, easy stride, so full of sinuous grace. They went on in silence for awhile, down the main road now. Already they had passed the first group of town houses, and The Running Footman, which is the last inn outside the town. There was only the High Street now to follow and the Old Place to cross, and The Fisherman's Rest would be in sight.

"You have not answered my question, milor," Theresia said presently.

"What question, Madame?" he asked.

"I asked you how Fate could intervene in the matter of our meeting again."

"Oh!" he retorted simply. "You are staying in England, you tell me."

"If you will deign to grant me leave," she said, with gentle submission.

"It is not in my power to grant or to refuse."

"You will not betray me — to the police?"

"I have never betrayed a woman in my life."

"Or to Lady Blakeney?"

He made no answer.

"Or to Lady Blakeney?" she insisted.

Then, as he still gave no answer, she began to plead with passionate earnestness.

"What could she gain — or you — by her knowing that I am that unfortunate, homeless waif, without kindred and without friends, Theresia Cabarrus — the beautiful Cabarrus! — once the fiancée of the great Tallien, now suspect of trafficking with her country's enemies in France... and suspect of being a suborned spy in England!... My God, where am I to go? What am I to do? Do not tell Lady Blakeney, milor! On my knees I entreat you, do not tell her! She will hate me — fear me — despise me! Oh, give me a chance to be happy! Give me — a chance — to be happy!"

Again she had paused and placed her hand on his arm. Once more she was looking up at him, her eyes glistening with tears, her full red lips quivering with emotion. And he returned her appealing, pathetic glance for a moment or two in silence; then suddenly, without any warning, he threw back his head and laughed.

"By Gad!" he exclaimed. "But you are a clever woman!"

"Milor!" she protested, indignant.

"Nay: you need have no fear, fair one! I am a lover of sport. I'll not betray you."

She frowned, really puzzled this time.

"I do not understand," she murmured.

"Let us get back to The Fisherman's Rest," he retorted with characteristic irrelevance. "Shall we?"

"Milor," she insisted, "will you explain?"

"There is nothing to explain, dear lady. You have asked me — nay! challenged me — not to betray you to anyone, not even to Lady Blakeney. Very well! I accept your challenge. That is all."

"You will not tell anyone — anyone, mind you! — that Mme de Fontenay and Theresia Cabarrus are one and the same?"

"You have my word for that."

She drew a scarce perceptible sigh of relief.

"Very well then, milor," she rejoined. "Since I am allowed to go to London, we shall meet there, I hope."

"Scarcely, dear lady," he replied, "since I go to France to-morrow."

This time she gave a little gasp, quickly suppressed — for she hoped milor had not noticed.

"You go to France to-morrow, milor?" she asked.

"As I had the honour to tell you, I go to France to-morrow, and I leave you a free hand to come and go as you please."

She chose not to notice the taunt; but suddenly, as if moved by an uncontrollable impulse, she said resolutely:

"If you go, I shall go too."

"I am sure you will, dear lady," he retorted with a smile. "So there really is no reason why we should linger here. Our mutual friend M. Chauvelin must be impatient to hear the result of this interview."

She gave a cry of horror and indignation.

"Oh! You — you still think that of me?"

He stood there, smiling, looking down on her with that half-amused, lazy glance of his. He did not actually say anything, but she felt that she had her answer. With a moan of pain, like a child who has been badly hurt, she turned abruptly, and burying her face in her hands she sobbed as if her heart would break. Sir Percy waited quietly for a moment or two, until the first paroxysm of grief had quieted down, and he said gently:

"Madame, I entreat you to compose yourself and to dry your tears. If I have wronged you in my thoughts, I humbly crave your pardon. I pray you to understand that when a man holds human lives in his hands, when he is responsible for the life and safety of those who trust in him, he must be doubly cautious and in his turn trust no one. You have said yourself that now at last in this game of life and death, which I and my friends have played so successfully these last three years, I hold the losing cards. Then must I watch every trick all the more closely, for a sound player can win through the mistakes of his opponent, even if he hold a losing hand."

But she refused to be comforted.

"You will never know, milor — never — how deeply you have wounded me," she said through her tears. "And I, who for months past — ever since I knew! — have dreamed of seeing the Scarlet Pimpernel one day! He was the hero of my dreams, the man who stood alone in the mass of self-seeking, vengeful, cowardly humanity as the personification of all that was fine and chivalrous. I longed to see him — just once — to hold his hand — to look into his eyes — and feel a better woman for the experience. Love? It was not love I felt, but hero-worship, pure as one's love for a starlit night or a spring morning, or a sunset over the hills. I dreamed of the Scarlet Pimpernel, milor; and because of my dreams, which were too vital for perfect discretion, I had to flee from home, suspected, vilified, already condemned. Chance brings me face to face with the hero of my dreams, and he looks on me as that vilest thing on earth: a spy! — a woman who could lie to a man first and send him afterwards to his death!"

Her voice, though more passionate and intense, had nevertheless become more steady. She had at last succeeded in controlling her tears. Sir Percy had listened — quite quietly, as was his wont — to her strange words. There was nothing that he could say to this beautiful woman who was so ingenuously avowing her love for him. It was a curious situation, and in truth he did not relish it — would have given quite a great deal to see it end as speedily as possible. Theresia, fortunately, was gradually gaining the mastery over her own feelings. She dried her eyes, and after a moment or two, of her own accord, she started once more on her way.

Nor did they speak again with one another until they were under the porch of The Fisherman's Rest. Then Theresia stopped, and with a perfectly simple gesture she held out her hand to Sir Percy.

"We may never meet again on this earth, milor," she said quietly. "Indeed, I shall pray to le bon Dieu to keep me clear of your path."

He laughed good-humouredly.

"I very much doubt, dear lady," he said, "that you will be in earnest when you utter that prayer!"

"You choose to suspect me, milor; and I'll no longer try to combat your mistrust. But to one more word you must listen: Remember the fable of the lion and the mouse. The invincible Scarlet Pimpernel might one day need the help of Theresia Cabarrus. I would wish you to believe that you can always count on it."

She extended her hand to him, and he took it, the while his inveterately mocking glance challenged her earnest one. After a moment or two he stooped and kissed her finger-tips.

"Let me rather put it differently, dear lady," he said. "One day the exquisite Theresia Cabarrus — the Egeria of the Terrorists, the fiancée of the Great Tallien — might need the help of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I would sooner die than seek your help, milor," she protested earnestly.

"Here in Dover, perhaps... but in France?... And you said you were going back to France, in spite of Chauvelin and his pale eyes, and his suspicions of you."

"Since you think so ill of me," she retorted, "why should you offer me your help?"

"Because," he replied lightly, "with the exception of my friend Chauvelin, I have never had so amusing an enemy; and if would afford me intense satisfaction to render you a signal service."

"You mean, that you would risk your life to save mine?"

"No. I should not risk my life, dear lady," he said with his puzzling smile. "But I should — God help me! — do my best, if the need arose, to save yours."

After which, with another ceremonious bow, he took final leave of her, and she was left standing there, looking after his tall, retreating figure until the turn of the street hid him from view.

Who could have fathomed her thoughts and feelings at that moment? No one, in truth; not even herself. Theresia Cabarrus had met many men in her day, subjugated and fooled not a few. But she had never met anyone like this before. At one moment she had thought she had him: he appeared moved, serious, compassionate, gave her his word that he would not betray her; and in that word, her unerring instinct — the instinct of the adventuress, the woman who succeeds by her wits as well by her charm — told her that she could trust. Did he fear her, or did he not? Did he suspect her? Theresia could not say. She had no experience of such men. As for the word “sport,” she hardly knew its meaning; and yet he had talked of not betraying her because he was “a lover of sport”! It was all very puzzling; very mysterious.

For a long while she remained standing in the porch. From the square bay window on her right came the sound of laughter and chatter, issuing from the coffee-room, whilst one or two noisy groups of sailors and their girls passed her by, singing and laughing, down the street. But in the porch, where she stood, the noisy world appeared distant, as if she were alone in one of her own creation. She could, just by closing her eyes and ears to the life around her, imagine she could still hear the merry, lazy, drawling voice of the man she had set out to punish. She could still see his tall figure and humorous face, with those heavy eyes that lit up now and again with a strange, mysterious light, and the firm lips every ready to break into a smile. She could still see the man who so loved sport that he swore not to betray her, and risked the chance, in his turn, of falling into a trap.

Well! he had defied and insulted her. The letter which he left for her after he had smuggled Bertrand Moncrif out of her apartment, rankled and stung her pride as nothing had ever done before. Therefore the man must be punished, and in a manner that would leave no doubt in his mind as to whence came the blow that struck him. But it was all going to be very much more difficult than the beautiful Theresia Cabarrus had allowed herself to believe.

Chapter XVII

Reunion

1

It was a thoughtful Theresia who turned into the narrow hall of The Fisherman's Rest a few moments later. The inn, when she left it earlier in the evening, had still been all animation and bustle consequent on the arrival of their lordships with the party of ladies and gentlemen over from France, and the excitement of making all these grand folk comfortable for the night. Theresia Cabarrus, in her disguise as a young stowaway, had only aroused passing interest — refugees of every condition and degree were frequent enough in these parts — and when awhile ago she had slipped out in order to enact the elaborate rôle devised by her and Chauvelin, she had done so unperceived. Since then, no doubt there had been one or two cursory questions about the mysterious stowaway, who had been left to feed and rest in the tiny living-room; but equally no doubt, interest in him waned quickly when it was discovered that he had gone, without as much as thanking those who had befriended him.

The travellers from France had long since retired to their rooms, broken with fatigue after the many terrible experiences they had gone through. The young English gallants had gone, either to friends in the neighbourhood or — in the case of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Anthony Dewhurst — ridden away in the early part of the evening, so as to reach Ashford mayhap or Maidstone before nightfall, and thus lessen the distance which still separated them from the loved ones at home.

A good deal of noise and laughter was still issuing from the coffee-room. Through the glass door Theresia could see the habitués of The Fisherman's Rest — yokels and fisherfolk — sitting over their ale, some of them playing cards or throwing dice. Mine host was there too, engaged as usual in animated discussion with some privileged guests who sat in the ingle-nook.

Theresia slipped noiselessly past the glass door. Straight in front of her a second passage ran at right angles; two or three steps led up to it. She tip-toed up these, and then looked about her, trying to reconstruct in her mind the disposition of the various rooms. On her left a glass partition divided the passage from the small parlour wherein she had found shelter on her arrival. On her right the passage obviously led to the kitchen, for much noise of crockery and shrill feminine voices and laughter came from there.

For a moment Theresia hesitated. Her original intention had been to find Mistress Waite and see if a bed for the night were still available; but a slight noise or movement issuing from the parlour caused her to turn. She peeped through the glass partition. The room was dimly lighted by a small oil-lamp which hung from the ceiling. A fire still smouldered in the hearth, and beside it, sitting on a low stool staring into the embers, his hands held between his knees, was Bertrand Moncrif.

Theresia Cabarrus had some difficulty in smothering the cry of surprise which had risen to her throat. Indeed, for the moment she thought that the dim light and her own imaginative fancy was playing her a fantastic trick. The next, she had opened the door quite noiselessly and slipped into the room. Bertrand had not moved. Apparently he had not heard; or if he had cursorily glanced up, he had disdained to notice the roughly clad fellow who was disturbing his solitude. Certain it is that he appeared absorbed in gloomy meditations; whilst Theresia, practical and deliberate, drew the curtains together that hung in front of the glass partition, and thus made sure that intruding eyes could not catch her unawares. Then she murmured softly:

"Bertrand!"

He woke as from a dream, looked up and saw her. He passed a shaking hand once or twice across his forehead, then suddenly realized that she was actually there, near him, in the flesh. A hoarse cry escaped him, and the next moment he was down on his knees at her feet, his arms around her, his face buried in the folds of her mantle.

Everything — anxiety, sorrow, even surprise — was forgotten in the joy of seeing her. He was crying like a child, and murmuring her name in the intervals of covering her knees, her hands, her feet in their rough boots with kisses. She stood there, quite still, looking down on him, yielding her hands to his caresses. Around her full red lips there was an undefinable smile; but the light in her eyes was certainly one of triumph.

After awhile he rose, and she allowed him to lead her to an arm-chair by the hearth. She sat down, and he knelt at her feet with one arm around her waist, and his head against her breast. He had never in his life been quite so exquisitely happy. This was not the imperious Theresia, impatient and disdainful, as she had been of late — cruel even sometimes, as on that last evening when he thought he would never see her again. It was the Theresia in the early days in Paris, when first she came back from Bordeaux, with a reputation for idealism as well as for beauty and wit, and with a gracious acceptance of his homage which had completely subjugated him.

She insisted on hearing every detail of his escape out of Paris and out of France, under the protection of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. In truth, he did not know who his rescuer was. He remembered by little of that awful night when, after the terrible doings at the Fraternal Supper, he had sought refuge in her apartment and then realized that, like a criminal and selfish fool, he was compromising her precious life by remaining under her roof.

He had resolved to go as soon as he was able to stand — resolved if need be to give himself up at the nearest Poste de Section, when in a semi-conscious state he became aware that some one was in the room with him. He had not the time or the power to rouse himself and to look about, when a cloth was thrown over his face and he felt himself lifted off the chair bodily and carried away by powerful arms, whither he knew not.

After that, a great deal had happened — it all seemed indeed like a dream. At one time he was with Régine de Serval in a coach, at others with her brother Jacques, in a hut at night, lying on straw, trying to get some sleep, and tortured with thoughts of Theresia and fear for her safety. There were halts and delays, and rushes through the night. He himself was quite dazed, felt like a puppet that was dragged hither and thither in complete unconsciousness. Régine was constantly with him. She did her best to comfort him, would try to wile away the weary hours in the coach or in various hiding-places by holding his hand and talking of the future — the happy future in England, when they would have a home of their own, secure from the terrors of the past two years, peaceful in complete oblivion of

the cruel past. Happy and peaceful! My God! As if there could be any happiness or peace for him, away from the woman he worshipped!

Theresia listened to the tale, for the most part in silence. From time to time she would stroke his hair and forehead with her cool, gentle hand. She did ask one or two questions, but these chiefly on the subject of his rescuer: Had he seen him? Had he seen any of the English gentlemen who effected his escape?

Oh, yes! Bertrand saw a good deal of the three or four young gallants who accompanied him and the party all the way from Paris. He only saw the last of them here, in this inn, a few hours ago. One of them gave him some money to enable him to reach London in comfort. They were very kind, entirely unselfish. Mme de Serval, Régine, and the others were overwhelmed with gratitude, and oh, so happy! Joséphine and Jacques had forgotten all about their duty to their country in their joy at finding themselves united and safe in this new land.

But the Scarlet Pimpernel himself, Theresia insisted, trying to conceal her impatience under a veneer of tender solicitude — had Bertrand seen him?

"No!" Bertrand replied. "I never once set eyes on him, though it was he undoubtedly who dragged me helpless out of your apartment. The others spoke of him — always as 'the chief.' They seemed to reverence him. He must be fine and brave. Régine and her mother and the two young ones have learned to worship him. Small wonder! seeing what he did for them at that awful Fraternal Supper."

"What did he do?" Theresia queried.

And the story had to be told by Bertrand, just as he had had it straight from Régine. The asthmatic coal-heaver — the quarrel — Robespierre's arrival on the scene — the shouts — the mob. The terror of that awful giant who had dragged them into the empty house, and there left them in the care of others scarce less brave than himself. Then the disguises — the wanderings through the streets — the deathly anxiety at the gates of the city — the final escape in a laundry cart. Miracles of self-abnegation! Wonders of ingenuity and of daring! What wonder that the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel was one to be revered!

"On my knees will I pay homage to him," Bertrand concluded fervently; "since he brought you to my arms!"

She had him by the shoulders, held him from her at arm's length, whilst she looked — inquiring, slightly mocking — into his eyes.

"Brought me to your arms, Bertrand?" she said slowly. "What do you mean?"

"You are here, Theresia," he riposted. "Safe in England... through the agency of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

She gave a hard, mirthless laugh.

"Aye!" she said drily; "through his agency. But not as you imagine, Bertrand."

"What do you mean?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel, my friend, after he had dragged you away from the shelter which you had found under my roof, sent an anonymous denunciation of me to the nearest Roste de Section, as having harboured the traitor Moncrif and conspiring with him to assassinate Robespierre whilst the latter was in my apartment."

Bertrand uttered a cry of horror.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"The chief Commissary of the Section," she went on glibly, earnestly — never taking her eyes off his, "at risk of his life, gave me warning. Aided by him and a faithful servant, I contrived to escape — out of Paris first, then across country in the midst of unspeakable misery, and finally out of the country into an open boat, until I was picked up by a chance vessel and brought to this inn more dead than alive."

She fell back against the cushion of the chair, her sinuous body shaken with sobs. Bertrand, speechless with horror, could but try and soothe his beloved as she had soothed him a while ago, when past terrors and past bitter experiences had unmanned him. After a while she became more calm, contrived to smile through her tears.

"You see, Bertrand, that your gallant Scarlet Pimpernel is as merciless in hate as he is selfless in love."

"But why?" the young man ejaculated vehemently. "Why?"

"Why he should hate me?" she rejoined with a pathetic little sigh and a shrug of the shoulders. "Chien sabe, my friend! Of course, he does not know that of late — ever since I have gained the regard of citizen Tallien — my life has been devoted to intervening on behalf of the innocent victims of our revolution. I suppose he takes me for the friend and companion of all those ruthless Terrorists whom he abhors. He has forgotten what I did in Bordeaux, and how I risked my life there, and did so daily in Paris for the sake of those whom he himself befriends. It may all be a question of misunderstanding," she added, with gentle resignation, "but 'tis one that wellnigh did cost me my life."

Bertrand folded her in his arms, held her against him, as if to shield her with his body against every danger. It was his turn now to comfort and to console, and she rested her head against his shoulder — a perfect woman rather than an unapproachable divinity, giving him through her weakness more exquisite bliss than he had ever dreamed of before. The minutes sped on, winged with happiness, and time was forgotten in the infinity of joy.

Theresia was the first to rouse herself from this dream of happiness and oblivion. She glanced up at the clock. It was close upon ten. Confused, adorable, she jumped to her feet.

"You will ruin my reputation, Bertrand," she said with a smile, "thus early in a strange land!"

She would arrange with the landlord's daughter, she said, about a bed for herself, as she was very tired. What did he mean to do?

"Spend the night in this room," he replied, "if mine host will let me. I could have such happy dreams here! These four walls will reflect your exquisite image, and 'tis your dear face will smile down on me ere I close mine eyes in sleep."

She had some difficulty in escaping from his clinging arms, and 'twas only the definite promise that she gave him to come back in a few minutes and let him know what she had arranged, that ultimately enabled him to let her go. Even so, he felt inexpressibly sad when

she went, watched her retreating figure, so supple and so quaint in the rough, masculine clothes and the heavy mantle, as she walked resolutely down the passage in the direction of the kitchen. From the coffee-room there still came the sound of bustle and of merriment; but this little room seemed so peaceful, so remote — a shrine, now that his goddess had hallowed it by her presence.

Bertrand drew a deep sigh, partly of happiness, partly of utter weariness. He was more tired than he knew. She had promised to come back and say good night... in a few minutes.... But the minutes seemed leaden-footed now... and he was half-dead with fatigue. He threw himself down on the hard, uncomfortable horsehair sofa, whereon he hoped to pass the night if the landlord would let him, and glanced up at the clock. Only three minutes since she had gone... of course she would not be long... only a few more minutes... a very few.... He closed his eyes, for the lids felt heavy... of a surety he would hear her come....

Chapter XVIII

Night and Morning

1

Theresia waited for a moment or two at the turn of the passage, until her keen ear had told her that Bertrand was no longer on the watch and had closed the door behind him. Then she retraced her steps — on tiptoe, lest he should hear.

She found her way to the front door; it was still on the latch. She opened it and peered out into the night. The little porch was deserted, but out there on the quay a few passers-by still livened the evening with chatter or song. Theresia was on the point of stepping out of the porch, when a familiar voice hailed her softly by name:

“Citoyenne Cabarrus!”

A man, dressed in dark clothes, with high boots and sugar-loaf hat, came out from the dark angle behind the porch.

“Not here!” Theresia whispered eagerly. “Out on the quay. Wait for me there, my little Chauvelin. I’ll be with you anon. I have so much to tell you!”

Silently, he did as she desired. She waited for a moment in the porch, watching the meagre figure in the dark cloak making its way across to the quay, then walking rapidly in the direction of the Pent. The moon was dazzlingly brilliant. The harbour and the distant sea glistened like diamond-studded sheets of silver. From afar there came the sound of the castle clock striking ten. The groups of passers-by had dwindled down to an occasional amorous couple strolling homewards, whispering soft nothings and gazing enraptured at the moon; or half-a-dozen sailors lolling down the quays arm in arm, on their way back to their ship, obstructing the road, yelling and singing the refrain of the newest ribald song; or perhaps a belated pedlar, weary of an unprofitable beat, wending his way dejectedly home.

One of these poor wretches — a cripple with a wooden leg and bent nearly double with the heavy load on his pack — paused for a moment beside the porch, held out a grimy hand to Theresia, with a pitiable cry.

“Of your charity, kind sir! Buy a little something from the pore ole man, to buy a bit of bread!”

He looked utterly woebegone, with lank grey hair blown about by the breeze and a colourless face covered with sweat, that shone like painted metal in the moon-light.

“Buy a little something, kind sir!” he went on, in a shrill, throaty voice. “I’ve a sick wife at ‘ome, and pore little gran’children!”

Theresia — a little frightened, and not at all charitably inclined at this hour — turned hastily away and went back into the house, whither the cripple’s vigorous curses followed her.

“May Satan and all his armies—”

She shut the door on him and hastened up the passage. That cadaverous old reprobate had caused her to shudder as with the presentiment of coming evil.

2

With infinite precaution, Theresia peeped into the room where she had left Bertrand. She saw him lying on the sofa, fast asleep.

On the table in the middle of the room there was an old ink-horn, a pen, and few loose sheets of paper. Noiseless as a mouse, Theresia slipped into the room, sat at the table, and hurriedly wrote a few lines. Bertrand had not moved. Having written her missive, Theresia folded it carefully, and still on tiptoe, more stealthily even than before, she slipped the paper between the young man’s loosely clasped fingers. Then, as soundlessly as she had come, she glided out of the room, ran down the passage, and was out in the porch once more, breathless but relieved.

Bertrand had not moved; and no one had seen her. Theresia only paused in the porch long enough to recover her breath, then, without hesitation and with rapid strides, she crossed over to the water’s edge and walked along in the direction of the Pent.

Whereupon, the figure of the old cripple emerged from out the shadows. He gazed after the fast retreating figure of Theresia for a moment or two, then threw down his load, straightened out his back, and stretched out his arms from the shoulders with a sigh of content. After which amazing proceedings he gave a soft, inward chuckle, unstrapped his wooden leg, slung it with his discarded load across his broad shoulders, and turning his back upon harbour and sea, turned up the High Street and strode rapidly away.

3

When Bertrand Moncrief woke, the dawn was peeping in through the uncurtained window. He felt cold and stiff. It took him some time to realize where he was, to collect his scattered senses. He had been dreaming... here in this room... Theresia had been here... and she had laid her head against his breast and allowed him to soothe and comfort her. Then she said that she would come back... and he... like a fool... had fallen asleep.

He jumped up, fully awake now; and as he did so a folded scrap of paper fell out of his hand. He had not known that it was there when first he woke, and somehow it appeared to be a part of his dream. As it lay there on the sanded floor at his feet, it looked strangely ghostlike, ominous; and it was with a trembling hand that, presently, he picked it up.

Every minute now brought fuller daylight into the room; a grey, cold light, for the window faced the south-west, showing a wide stretch of the tidal harbour and the open sea beyond. The sun, not fully risen, had not yet shed warmth over the landscape, and to Bertrand this colourless dawn, the mysterious stillness which earth assumes just before it awakens to the sun’s kiss, seemed inexpressibly dreary and desolate.

He went to the window and threw open the casement. Down below, a kitchen wench was busy scrubbing the flagged steps of the porch; over in the inner harbour, one or two fishing vessels were preparing to put out to sea; and from the tidal harbour, the graceful

yacht which yesterday had brought him — Bertrand — and his friends safely to this land of refuge, was majestically gliding out, like a beautiful swan with gleaming wings outspread.

Controlling his apprehension, his nervousness, Bertrand at last contrived to unfold the mysterious epistle. He read the few lines that were traced with a delicate, feminine hand, and with a sigh of infinite longing and of ardent passion, he pressed the paper to his lips. Theresia had sent him a message. Finding him asleep, she had slipped it into his hand. The marvel was that he did not wake when she stooped over him, and perhaps even touched his forehead with her lips.

“A kind soul,” so the message ran, “hath taken compassion on me. There was no room for me at the inn, and she has offered me a bed in her cottage, somewhere close by. I do not know where it is. I have arranged with the landlord that you shall be left undisturbed in the small room where he found one another, and where the four walls will whisper to you of me. Good night, my beloved! Tomorrow you will go to London with the de Servals. I will follow later. It is better so. In London you will find me at the house of Mme de Neafchateau, a friend of my father’s who lives at No. 54 in the Soho Square, and who offered me hospitality in the days when I thought I might visit London for pleasure. She will receive me now that I am poor and an exile. Come to me there. Until then my heart will feed on the memory of your kiss.”

The letter was signed “Theresia.”

Bertrand pressed it time and again to his lips. Never in his wildest dreams had he hoped for this; never even in those early days of rapture had he tasted such perfect bliss. The letter he hid against his breast. He was immeasurably happy, felt as if he were treading on air. The sea, the landscape, no longer looked grey and dreary. This was England, the land of the free, the land wherein he had regained his beloved. Ah, the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, while seeking ignoble vengeance against her, for sins which she never had committed, did in truth render him and her a priceless service. Theresia, courted, adulated, over in Paris, had been as far removed from Bertrand Moncrif as the stars; but here, where she was poor and lonely, a homeless refugee like himself, she turned instinctively to the faithful lover, who would gladly die to ensure her happiness.

With that letter in his possession, Bertrand felt that he could not remain indoors. He was pining for open spaces, the sea, the mountains, God’s pure air — the air which she too was breathing even now. He snatched up his hat and made his way out of the little building. The kitchen wench paused in her scrubbing and looked up smiling as he ran past her, singing and shouting for joy. For Régine — the tender, loving heart that pined for him and for his love — he had not a thought. She was the past, the dull, drabby past wherein he had dwelt before he knew how glorious a thing life could be, how golden the future, how rosy that horizon far away.

By the time he reached the harbour, the sun had risen in all its glory. Way out against the translucent sky, the graceful silhouette of the schooner swayed gently in the morning breeze, her outspread sails gleaming like wings that are tinged with gold. Bertrand watched her for awhile. He thought of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel and the hideous vengeance which he had wrought against his beloved. And the rage which possessed his soul at the thought obscured for a moment the beauty of the morning and the glory of the sky. With a gesture characteristic of his blood and of his race, he raised his fist and shook it in the direction of the distant ship.

Chapter XIX

A Rencontre

1

For Marguerite, that wonderful May-day, like so many others equally happy and equally wonderful, came to an end all too soon. To dwell on those winged hours were but to record sorrow, anxiety, a passionately resentment coupled with an equally passionate acceptance of the inevitable. Her intimate friends often marvelled how Marguerite Blakeney bore the strain of these constantly recurring farewells. Every time that in the early dawn she twined her loving arms round the neck of the man she worshipped, feeling that mayhap she was looking into those dear, lazy, laughing eyes for the last time on earth — every time, it seemed to her as if earth could not hold greater misery.

Then after that came that terrible half-hour, whilst she stood on the landing-stage — his kisses still hot upon her lips, her eyes, her throat — and watched and watched that tiny speck, that fast-sailing ship that bore him away on his errand of mercy and self-sacrifice, leaving her lonely and infinitely desolate. And then the days and hours, when he was away and it was her task to smile and laugh, to appear to know nothing of her husband save that he was a society butterfly, the pet of the salons, an exquisite, something of a fool, whose frequent absences were accounted for by deer-stalking in Scotland or fishing in the Tweed, or hunting in the shires — anything and everything that would throw dust in the eyes of the fashionable crowd of whom she and he formed an integral part.

“Sir Percy not with you to-night, dear Lady Blakeney?”

“With me? Lud love you, no! I have not seen him these three weeks past.”

“The dog!”

People would talk and ask questions, throw out suggestions and innuendoes. Society a few months ago had been greatly agitated because the beautiful Lady Blakeney, the most fashionable woman about town, had taken a mad fancy for — you'll never believe it, my dear! — for her own husband. She had him by her side at routs and river-parties, in her opera-box and on the Mall. It was positively indecent! Sir Percy was the pet of Society, his sallies, his inane laugh, his lazy, delicious, impertinent ways and his exquisite clothes, made the success of every salon in which he chose to appear. His Royal Highness was never so good-tempered as when Sir Percy was by his side. Then, for his own wife to monopolize him was preposterous, abnormal, extravagant! Some people put it down to foreign eccentricity; others to Lady Blakeney's shrewdness in thus throwing dust in the eyes of her none-too-clever lord, in order to mask some intrigue or secret amour, of which Society had not as yet the key.

Fortunately for the feelings of the fashionable world, this phase of conjugal affection did not last long. It had been at its height last year, and had waned perceptibly since. Of late, so it was averred, Sir Percy was hardly ever at home, and his appearances at Blakeney Manor — his beautiful house at Richmond — were both infrequent and brief. He had evidently tried of playing second fiddle to his exquisite wife, or been irritated by her caustic wit, which she was wont to sharpen at his expense; and the ménage of these two leaders of fashion had, in the opinion of those in the know, once more resumed a more normal aspect.

When Lady Blakeney was in Richmond, London or Bath, Sir Percy was shooting or fishing or yachting — which was just as it should be. And when he appeared in society, smiling, elegant, always an exquisite, Lady Blakeney would scarce notice him, save for making him a butt for her lively tongue.

2

What it cost Marguerite to keep up this rôle none but a very few ever knew. The identity of one of the greatest heroes of this or any time was known to his most bitter enemy — not to his friends. So Marguerite went on smiling, joking, flirting, while her heart ached and her brain was at times wellnigh numb with anxiety. His intimates rallied round her, of course: the splendid little band of heroes who formed the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel — Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and his pretty wife; Lord Anthony Dewhurst and his lady, whose great dark eyes still wore the impress of the tragedy which had darkened the first month of her happy wedded life. Then there was my lord Hastings; and Sir Evan Cruche, the young Squire of Holt, and all the others.

And for the Prince of Wales, it is more than surmised by those competent to judge that His Royal Highness did indeed guess at the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, even if he had not actually been apprised of it. Certain it is that his tact and discretion did on more than one occasion save a situation which might have proved embarrassing for Marguerite.

In all these friends then — in their conversation, their happy laughter, their splendid pluck and equally splendid gaiety, the echo of the chief whom they adored — Marguerite found just the solace that she needed. With Lady Ffoulkes and Lady Anthony Dewhurst she had everything in common. With those members of the League who happened to be in England, she could talk over and in her mind trace the various stages of the perilous adventure on which her beloved and the others were even then engaged.

And there were always the memories of those all too brief days at Dover or in Richmond, when her loving heart tasted such perfect happiness as is granted only to the elect: the happiness that comes from perfect love, perfect altruism, a complete understanding and measureless sympathy. On those memories her hungering soul could subsist in the intervals, and with them as her unalienable property, she could even bid the grim spectre of unhappiness begone.

3

Of Madame de Fontenay — for as such Marguerite still knew her — she saw but little. Whether the beautiful Theresia had gone to London or no, whether she had succeeded in finding her truant husband, Marguerite did not know and cared less. The unaccountable antipathy which she had felt on that first night of her acquaintance with the lovely Spaniard still caused her to hold herself aloof. Sir Percy, true to his word, had not betrayed the actual identity of Theresia Cabarrus to his wife; but in his light, insouciant manner had

dropped a word or two of warning, which had sharpened Marguerite's suspicions and strengthened her determination to avoid Mme de Fontenay as far as possible. And since monetary or other material help was apparently not required, she had no reason to resume an intercourse which, in point of fact, was not courted by Theresia either.

But one day, walking alone in Richmond Park, she came face to face with Theresia. It was a beautiful late afternoon in July, the end of a day which had been a comparatively happy one for Marguerite — the day when a courier had come from France with news of Sir Percy; a letter from him, telling her that he was well and hinting at the possibility of another of those glorious days together at Dover.

With that message from her beloved just to hand, Marguerite had felt utterly unable to fulfill her social engagements in London. There was nothing of any importance that claimed her presence. His Royal Highness was at Brighton; the opera and the rout at Lady Portarles' could well get on without her. The evening promised to be more than ordinarily beautiful, with a radiant sunset and the soft, sweet-scented air of a midsummer's evening.

After dinner, Marguerite had felt tempted to stroll out alone. She threw a shawl over her head and stepped out on to the terrace. The vista of velvet lawns, of shady paths and rose borders in full bloom, stretched out into the dim distance before her; and beyond these, the boundary wall, ivy-clad, overhung with stately limes, and broken into by the finely wrought iron gates that gave straight into the Park.

The shades of evening were beginning to draw in, and the garden was assuming that subtle veil of mysterious melancholy which perfect beauty always lends. In the stately elms far away, a blackbird was whistling his evensong. The night was full of sweet odours — roses and heliotrope, lime and mignonette — whilst just below the terrace a bed of white tobacco swung ghost-like its perfumed censer into the air. Just an evening to lure a lonely soul into the open, away from the indifferent, the casual, into the heart of nature, always potent enough to soothe and to console.

4

Marguerite strolled through the grounds with a light foot, and anon reached the monumental gates, through which the exquisite peace and leafy solitude of the Park seemed to beckon insistently to her. The gate was on the latch; she slipped through and struck down a woodland path bordered by tangled undergrowth and tall bracken, and thus reached the pond, when suddenly she perceived Mme de Fontenay.

Theresia was dressed in a clinging gown of diaphanous black silk, which gave value to the exquisite creamy whiteness of her skin and to the vivid crimson of her lips. She wore a transparent shawl round her shoulders, which with the new-modish, high-waisted effect of her gown, suited her sinuous grace to perfection. But she wore no jewellery, no ornaments of any kind: only a magnificent red rose at her breast.

The sight of her at this place and at this hour was so unexpected that, to Marguerite's super-sensitive intuition, the appearance of this beautiful woman, strolling listless and alone beside the water's edge, seemed like a presage of evil. Her first instinct had been to run away before Mme de Fontenay was aware of her presence; but the next moment she chided herself for this childish cowardice, and stood her ground, waiting for the other woman to draw near.

A minute or two later, Theresia had looked up and in her turn had perceived Marguerite. She did not seem surprised, rather came forward with a glad little cry, and her two hands outstretched.

"Milady!" she exclaimed. "Ah, I see you at last! I have oft wondered why we never met."

Marguerite took her hands, greeted her as warmly as she could. Indeed she did her best to appear interested and sympathetic.

Mme de Fontenay had not much to relate. She had found refuge in the French convent of the Assumption at Twickenham, where the Mother Superior had been an intimate friend of her mother's in the happy olden days. She went out very little, and never in society. But she was fond of strolling in this beautiful Park. The sisters had told her that Lady Blakeney's beautiful house was quite near. She would have liked to call — but never dared — hoping for a chance rencontre which hitherto had never come.

She asked kindly after milor, and seemed to have heard a rumour that he was at Brighton, in attendance on his royal friend. Of her husband, Mme de Fontenay had as yet found no trace. He must be living under an assumed name, she thought — not doubt in dire poverty — Theresia feared it, but did not know — would give worlds to find out.

Then she asked Lady Blakeney whether she knew aught of the de Servals.

"I was so interested in them," she said, "because I had heard something of them while I was in Paris, and seeing that we arrived in England the same day, though under such different circumstances. But we could not journey to London together, as you, milady, so kindly suggested, because I was very ill the next day.... Ah, can you wonder?... A kind friend in Dover took care of me. But I remember their name, and have oft marvelled if we should ever meet."

Yes; Marguerite did see the de Servals from time to time. They rented a small cottage not very far from here — just outside of town. One of the daughters, Régine, was employed all day at the fashionable dress-maker's in Richmond. The younger girl, Joséphine, and the boy, Jacques, was doing work in a notary's office. It was all very dreary for them, but their courage was marvellous; and though the children did not earn much, it was sufficient for their wants.

Madame de Fontenay was vastly interested. She hoped that Régine's marriage with the man of her choice would bring a ray of real happiness into the household.

"I hope so too," Lady Blakeney assented.

"Milady has seen the young man — Régine's fiancé?"

"Oh, yes! once or twice. But he is engaged in business all day, it seems. He is inclined to be morbid and none too full of ardour. It is a pity; for Régine is a sweet girl and deserves happiness."

"We have so much sorrow in common," she said with a pathetic smile. "So many misfortunes. We ought to be friends."

Then she gave a slight little shiver.

"The weather is extraordinarily cold for July," she said. "Ah, how one misses the glorious sunshine of France!"

She wrapped her thin, transparent shawl closer round her shoulders. She was delicate, she explained. Always had been. She was a child of the South, and fully expected the English climate would kill her. In any case, it was foolish of her to stand thus talking, when it was so cold.

After which she took her leave, with a gracious inclination of the head and a cordial *au revoir*. Then she turned off into a small path under the trees, cut through the growing racken; and Marguerite watched the graceful figure thoughtfully, until the leafy undergrowth hid her from view.

Chapter XX

Departure

1

The next morning's sun rose more radiant than before. Marguerite greeted it with a sigh that was entirely a happy one. Another round of the clock had brought her a little nearer to the time when she would see her beloved. The next courier might indeed bring a message naming the very day when she could rest once more in his arms for a few brief hours, which were so like the foretaste of heaven.

Soon after breakfast she ordered her coach, intending to go to London in order to visit Lady Ffoulkes and give Sir Andrew the message which was contained for him in Percy's last letter. Whilst waiting for the coach, she strolled out into the garden, which was gay with roses and blue larkspur, sweet william and heliotrope, alive with a deafening chorus of blackbirds and thrushes, the twittering of sparrows and the last call of the cuckoo. It was a garden brimful of memories, filled in rich abundance with the image of the man she worshiped. Every bird-song seemed to speak his name, the sighing of the breeze amidst the trees seemed to hold the echo of his voice; the perfume of thyme and mignonette to bring back the savour of his kiss.

Then suddenly she became aware of hurrying footsteps on the gravelled path close by. She turned, and saw a young man whom at first she did not recognize, running with breathless haste towards her. He was hatless, his linen crumpled, his coat-collar awry. At sight of her he gave a queer cry of excitement and relief.

"Lady Blakeney! Thank God! Thank God!"

Then she recognized him. It was Bertrand Moncrief.

He fell on his knees and seized her gown. He appeared entirely overwrought, unbalanced, and Marguerite tried in vain at first to get a coherent word out of him. All that he kept on repeating was:

"Will you help me? Will you help us all?"

"Indeed I will, if I can, M. Moncrief," Marguerite said gently. "Do try and compose yourself and tell me what is amiss."

She persuaded him to rise, and presently to follow her to a garden seat, where she sat down. He remained standing in front of her. His eyes still looked wild and scared, and he passed a shaking hand once or twice through his unruly hair. But he was obviously making an effort to compose himself, and after a little while, during which Marguerite waited with utmost patience, he began more coherently:

"Your servants said, milady," he began more quietly, "that you were in the garden. I could not wait until they called you, so I ran to find you. Will you try and forgive me? I ought not to have intruded."

"Of course I will forgive you," Marguerite rejoined with a smile, "if you will only tell me what is amiss."

He paused a moment, then cried abruptly:

"Régine has gone!"

Marguerite frowned, puzzled, and murmured slowly, not understanding:

"Gone? Whither?"

"To Dover," he replied, "with Jacques."

"Jacques?" she reiterated, still uncomprehending.

"Her brother," he rejoined. "You know the boy?"

Marguerite nodded.

"Hot-headed, impulsive," Moncrief went on, trying to speak calmly. "He and the girl Joséphine always had it in their minds that they were destined to liberate France from her present state of anarchy and bloodshed."

"Like you yourself, M. Moncrief!" Marguerite put in with a smile.

"Oh, I became sobered, reasonable, when I realized how futile it all was. We all owe our lives to that noble Scarlet Pimpernel. They were no longer ours to throw away. At least, that was my theory, and Régine's. I have been engaged in business; and she works hard... Oh, but you know!" he exclaimed impulsively.

"Yes, I know all your circumstances. But to the point, I pray you!"

"Jacques of late has been very excited, feverish. We did not know what was amiss. Régine and I oft spoke of him. And Mme de Serval has been distraught with anxiety. She worships the boy. He is her only son. But Jacques would not say what was amiss. He spoke to no one. Went to his work every day as usual. Last night he did not come home. A message came for Mme de Serval to say that a friend in London had persuaded him to go to the play and spend the night with him. Mme de Serval thought nothing of that. She was pleased to think that Jacques had some amusement to distract him from his brooding thoughts. But Régine, it seems, was not satisfied. After her mother had gone to bed, she went into Jacques's room; found some papers, it seems... letters... I know not... proof in fact that the boy was even then on his way to Dover, having made arrangements to take ship for France."

"Mon Dieu!" Marguerite exclaimed involuntarily. "What senseless folly!"

"Ah! but that is not the worst. Folly, you say! But there is worse folly still!"

With the same febrile movements that characterized his whole attitude, he drew a stained and crumpled letter from his pocket.

"She sent me this, this morning," he said. "That is why I came to you."

"You mean Régine?" Marguerite asked, and took the letter which he was handing to her.

"Yes! She must have brought it round herself... to my lodgings... in the early dawn. I did not know what to do... whom to consult... A blind instinct brought me here... I have no other friend..."

In the meanwhile Marguerite was deciphering the letter, turning a deaf ear to his ramblings.

"My Bertrand," so the letter ran, "Jacques is going to France. Nothing will keep him back. He says it is his duty. I think that he is mad, and I know that it will kill maman. So I go with him. Perhaps at the last — at Dover — my tears and entreaties might yet prevail.

If not, and he puts this senseless project in execution, I can watch over him there, and perhaps save him from too glaring a folly. We go by coach to Dover, which starts in an hour's time. Farewell, my beloved, and forgive me for causing you the anxiety; but I feel that Jacques has more need of me than you."

Below the signature "Régine de Serval" there were a few more lines, written as if with an afterthought:

"I have told maman that my employer is sending me down into the country about some dresses for an important customer, and that as Jacques can get a few days' leave from his work, I am taking him with me, for I feel the country air would do him good.

"Maman will be astonished and no doubt hurt that Jacques did not send her word of farewell, but it is best that she should not learn the truth too suddenly. If we do not return to Dover within the week, you will have to break the news as gently as you can."

Whilst Marguerite read the letter, Bertrand had sunk upon the seat and buried his head in his hands. He looked utterly dejected and forlorn, and she felt a twinge of remorse at thought how she had been wronging him all this while by doubting his love for Régine. She placed a kindly hand on the young man's shoulder.

"What was your idea," she asked, "in coming to me? What can I do?"

"Give me advice, milady!" he implored. "I am so helpless, so friendless. When I had the letter, I could think of nothing at first. You see, Régine and Jacques started early this morning, by the coach from London, long before I had it. I thought you could tell me what to do, how to overtake them. Régine loves me — oh, she loves me! If I knelt at her feet I could bring her back. But they are marked people, those two. The moment they attempt to enter Paris, they will be recognized, arrest. Oh, my God! have mercy on us all!"

"You think you can persuade Régine, M. Moncrif?"

"I am sure," he asserted firmly. "And you, milady! Régine thinks the whole world of you!"

"But there is the boy — Jacques!"

"He is just a child — he acted on impulse — and I always had great authority over him. And you, milady! The whole family worship you!... they know what they owe you. Jacques has not thought of his mother; but if he did—"

Marguerite rose without another word.

"Very well," she said simply. "We go together and see what we can do with those two obstinate young folk."

Bertrand gave a gasp of surprise and of hope. His whole face lighted up and he gazed upon the beautiful woman before him as a worshipper would on his divinity.

"You, milady?" he murmured. "You would... really... help me... like that?"

Marguerite smiled.

"I really would help you like that," she said. "My coach is ordered; we can start at once. We'll get relays at Maidstone and at Ashford, and easily reach Dover to-night, before the arrival of the public coach. In any case, I know every one of any importance in Dover. We could not fail to find the runaways."

"But you are an angel, milady!" Bertrand contrived to stammer, although obviously he was overwhelmed with gratitude.

"You are ready to start?" Marguerite retorted, gently checking any further display of emotion.

He certainly was hatless, and his clothes were in an untidy condition; but such trifles mattered nothing at a moment like this. Marguerite's household, on the other hand, were accustomed to these sudden vagaries and departures of their mistress, either for Dover, Bath, or any known and unknown destination, often at a few minutes' notice.

In this case the coach was actually at the gates. The maids packed the necessary valise; her ladyship changed her smart gown for a dark travelling one, and less than half an hour after Bertrand Moncrif's first arrival at the Manor, he was seated beside Lady Blakeney in her coach. The coachman cracked his whip, the postilion swung himself into the saddle, and the servants stood at attention as the vehicle slowly swung out of the gates; and presently, the horses putting on the pace, disappeared along the road, followed by a cloud of dust.

Bertrand Moncrif, brooding, absorbed in thoughts, said little or nothing while the coach swung along at a very brisk pace. Marguerite, who always had plenty to think about, did not feel in the mood to try and make conversation. She was very sorry for the young man, who in very truth must have suffered also from remorse. His lack of ardour — obviously only an outward lack — toward his fiancée and the members of her family, must to a certain extent have helped to precipitate the present catastrophe. Coolness and moroseness on his part gave rise to want of confidence on the other. Régine, heart-sick at her lover's seeming indifference, was no doubt all the more ready to lavish love and self-sacrifice upon the young brother. Marguerite was sorry enough for the latter — a young fool, with the exalté Latin temperament, brimming over with desires for self-immolation as futile as they were senseless — but her generous heart went out to Régine de Serval, a girl who appeared redestined to sorrow and disappointments, endowed with an exceptionally warm nature and cursed with the inability to draw whole-hearted affection to herself. She worshipped Bertrand Moncrif; she idolized her mother, her brother, her sister. But though they, one and all, relied on her, brought her the confidences of their troubles and their difficulties, it never occurred to any one of them to give up something — a distraction, a fancy, an ideal — for the sake of silent, thoughtful Régine.

Marguerite allowed her thoughts thus to dwell on these people, whom her husband's splendid sacrifice on their behalf had rendered dear. Indeed, she loved them like she loved so many others, because of the dangers which he had braved for their sakes. Their lives had become valuable because of his precious one, daily risked because of them. And at the back of her mind there was also the certainty that if these two young fools did put their mad project in execution and endeavoured to return to Paris, it would again be the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel who would jeopardize his life to save them from the consequences of their own folly.

Luncheon and a brief halt was taken at Farningham and Maidstone reached by three o'clock in the afternoon. Here Lady Blakeney's own servants took leave of her, and post-horses were engaged to take her ladyship on to Ashford. Two hours later, at Ashford, fresh relays were obtained. The public coach at this hour was only some nine or ten miles ahead, it seems, and there was now every chance that Dover would be reached by nightfall and the young runaways met by their pursuers on arrival.

All was then for the best. Bertrand, after the coach had rattled out of Ashford, appeared to find comfort and courage. He began to talk, long and earnestly — of himself, his plans and projects, his love for Régine, to which he always found it so difficult to give expression; of Régine herself and the de Servals, mother, son and daughters. His voice was toneless and very even. The monotony of his diction acted after awhile as a soporific on Marguerite's nerves. The rumble of the coach, the closeness of this long afternoon in July, the rocking of the springs, made her feel drowsy. After a while took, a curious scent pervaded the interior of the coach — a sweet, heady scent that appeared to weigh her eyelids down and gave her a feeling of delicious and lazy beatitude. Bertrand Moncrif droned on, and his voice came to her fast-fading senses as through a thick pulpy veil. She closed her eyes. That sweet, intoxicating scent came, more marked, more insistent, to her nostrils. She laid her head against the cushions, and still she heard the dreary monotone of Bertrand's voice, quite inarticulate now, like the hum of a swarm of bees....

Then, all of a sudden she was fully conscious; only just in time to feel the weight of an iron hand against her mouth and to see Bertrand's face, ghastly of hue, eyes distorted more with fear than rage, quite close to her own. She had not the time to scream, and her limbs felt as heavy as lead, so that she could not struggle. The next moment a thick woollen scarf was wound quickly and tightly round her head, covering her mouth and eyes, only barely giving her room to breathe, and her hands and arms were tied together with cords.

This brutal assault had been so quick and so sudden that at first it seemed to Marguerite like part of a hideous dream. She was not fully conscious, and was half suffocated by the thick folds of the scarf and that persistent odour, which by its sickened sweetness caused her wellnigh to swoon.

Through this semi-consciousness, however, she was constantly aware of her enemy, Bertrand Moncrif — the black-hearted traitor who had carried out this execrable outrage: why and for what purpose, Marguerite was too dazed to attempt to guess. He was there, that she knew. She was conscious of his hands making sure of the cords round her wrists, tightening the scarf around her mouth; then presently she felt him leaning across her body and throwing down the window, and she heard him shouting to the driver:

"Her ladyship as fainted. Drive as fast as ever you can till you come to that white house yonder on the right, the one with the green shutters and the tall yew at the gate!"

The driver's reply she could not hear, nor the crack of his whip. Certain it is that, though the coach had rattled on at a great pace before, the horses, as if in response to Bertrand's commands, now burned the ground under their hoofs. A few minutes went by — an eternity. Then that terrible cloying perfume was again held close to her nostrils; an awful dizziness and nausea seized her; after which she remembered nothing more.

Chapter XXI

Memories

1

When Marguerite Blakeney finally recovered consciousness, the sun was low down in the west. She was in a coach — not her own — which was being whisked along the road at terrific speed. She was alone, her mouth gagged, her wrists and her ankles tied with cords, so that she could neither speak nor move — a helpless log, being taken... whither?... and by whom?

Bertrand was not here. Through the front window of the coach she could perceive the vague outline of two men sitting on the driver's seat, whilst another was riding the off-leader. Four horses were harnessed to the light coach. It flew along in a south-easterly direction, the while the shades of evening were fast drawing in.

Marguerite had seen too much of the cruelties and barbarities of this world, too much of the hatred that existed between enemy countries, and too much of the bitter rancour felt by certain men against her husband and indirectly against herself, not to realize at once whence the blow had come that had struck her. Something too in the shape of that back which she perceived through the window in front of her, something in the cut of the threadbare coat, the set of the black bow at the nape of the neck, was too familiar to leave her even for a moment in doubt. Here was no ordinary foot-pad, no daring abduction with a view to reward or ransom. This was the work of her husband's enemies, who, through her, were once more striving to get at him.

Bertrand Moncrief had been the decoy. Whence had come the hatred which prompted him to raise his hand against the very man to whom he owed his life, Marguerite was still too dazed to conjecture. He had gone, and taken his secret of rancour with him, mayhap for ever. Lying pinioned and helpless as she was, Marguerite had but the one thought: in what way would those fiends who had her a prisoner use her as a leverage against the life and honour of the Scarlet Pimpernel? They had held her once before — not so very long ago — in Boulogne, and he had emerged unscathed, victorious over them all.

Marguerite, helpless and pinioned, forced her thoughts to dwell on that time, when his enemies had filled to the brim the cup of humiliation and of dread which was destined for each him through her hands, and his ingenuity and his daring dashed the cup to the ground ere it reached her lips. In truth, her plight then, at Boulogne, was in no way less terrible, less seemingly hopeless than now. She was a prisoner then, just as she was now; in the power of men whose whole life and entire range of thought had for the past two years been devoted to the undoing and annihilation of the Scarlet Pimpernel. And there was a certain grim satisfaction for the pinioned, helpless woman in recalling the many instances where the daring adventurer had so completely outwitted his enemies, as well as in the memory of those days at Boulogne when the life of countless innocents was to be the price of her own.

2

The embarkation took place somewhere on the coast around Brichington. When, at dead of night, the coach came to a halt, and the tang of sea air and salt spray reached Marguerite's burning cheeks and parched lips, she tried with all her might to guess at her exact position. But that was impossible.

She was lifted out of the coach, and at once a shawl was thrown over her face, so that she could not see. It was more instinct than anything else that guided her perceptions. Even in the coach she had been vaguely conscious of the direction in which she had been travelling. All that part of the country was entirely familiar to her. So often she had driven down with Sir Percy, either to Dover or more often to some lonely part of the coast, where he took ship for unknown destinations, that in her mind she could, even blinded with tears and half-conscious as she was, trace in her mind the various turnings and side-roads along which she was being borne at unabating speed.

Birchington — one of the favourite haunts of the smuggling fraternity, with its numberless caves and retreats dug by the sea in the chalk cliffs, as if for the express benefit of ne'er-do-wells — seemed the natural objective of the miscreants who had her in their power. In fact, at one moment she was quite sure that the square tower of old Minister church flitted past her vision through the window of the coach, and that the horses immediately after that sprinted the hill between Minster and Acoll.

Be that as it may, there was no doubt that the coach came to a halt at a desolate spot. The day which had begun in radiance and sunshine, had turned to an evening of squall and drizzle. A thin rain soon wetted Marguerite's clothes and the shawl on her head through and through, greatly adding to her misery and discomfort. Though she saw nothing, she could trace every landmark of the calvary to the summit of which she was being borne like an insentient log.

For a while she lay at the bottom of a small boat, aching in body as well as in mind, her eyes closed, her limbs cramped by the cords which owing to the damp were cutting into her flesh, faint with cold and want of food, wet to the skin yet with eyes and head and hands burning hot, and her ears filled with the dreary, monotonous sound of the oars creaking in the rowlocks and the boom of the water against the sides of the boat.

She was lifted out of the boat and carried, as she judged, by two men up a companion ladder, then down some steps and finally deposited on some hard boards; after which the wet shawl was removed from her face. She was in the dark. Only a tiny streak of light found its way through a chink somewhere close to the floor. A smell of tar and of stale food gave her a wretched sense of nausea. But she had by now reached a stage of physical and mental prostration wherein even acute bodily suffering counts as nothing, and is endurable because it is no longer felt.

After a while the familiar motion, the well-known sound of a ship weighing anchor, gave another blow to her few lingering hopes. Every movement of the ship now bore her farther and farther from England and home, and rendered her position more utterly miserable and hopeless.

Far be it from me to suggest even for a moment that Marguerite Blakeney lost either spirit or courage during this terrible ordeal. But she was so completely helpless that instinct forced her to remain motionless and quiescent, and not to engage in a fight against overwhelming odds. In mid-Channel, surrounded by miscreants who had her in their power, she could obviously do nothing except safeguard what dignity she could by silence and seeming acquiescence.

She was taken ashore in the early dawn, at a spot not very far from Boulogne. Precautions were no longer taken against her possible calls for help; even the cords had been removed from her wrists and ankles as soon as she was lowered into the boat that brought her to shore. Cramped and stiff though she was, she disdained the help of an arm which was held out to her to enable her to step out of the boat.

All the faces around her were unfamiliar. There were four or five men, surly and silent, who piloted her over the rocks and cliffs and then along the sands, to the little hamlet of Wimereux, which she knew well. The coast at this hour was still deserted; only at one time did the little party meet with a group of buxom young women, trudging along barefooted with their shrimping nets over their shoulders. They stared wide-eyed but otherwise indifferent, at the unfortunate woman in torn, damp clothes, and with golden hair all dishevelled, who was bravely striving not to fall whilst urged on by five rough fellows in ragged jerseys, tattered breeches, and bare-kneed.

Just for one moment — a mere flash — Marguerite at sight of these girls had the wild notion to run to them, implore their assistance in the name of their sweethearts, their husbands, their sons; to throw herself at their feet and beg them to help her, seeing that they were women and could not be without heart or pity. But it was a mere flash, the wild vagary of an over-excited brain, the drifting straw that mocks the drowning man. The next moment the girls had gone by, laughing and chattering. One of them intoned the “*Ca ira!*” and Marguerite, fortunately for her own dignity, was not seriously tempted to essay so futile, so senseless an appeal.

Later on, in a squalid little hovel on the outskirts of Wimereux, she was at last given some food which, though of the poorest and roughest description, was nevertheless welcome, for it revived her spirit and strengthened her courage, of which she had sore need.

The rest of the journey was uneventful. Within the first hour of making a fresh start, she had realized that she was being taken to Paris. A few words dropped casually by the men who had charge of her apprised her of the fact. Otherwise they were very reticent — not altogether rough or unkind.

The coach in which she travelled during this stage of the journey was roomy and not uncomfortable, although the cushions were ragged and the leatherwork mildewed. Above all, she had the supreme comfort of privacy. She was alone in the coach, alone during the halts at way-side hostelries when she was allowed food and rest, alone throughout those two interminable nights when, with brief intervals whilst relays of horses were put into the shafts or the men took it in turns to get food or drunk in some house unseen in the darkness, she vainly tried to get a snatch or two of sleep and a few moments of forgetfulness; alone throughout that next long day, whilst frequent summer showers sent heavy raindrops beating against the window-panes of the coach, and familiar landmarks on the way to Paris flitted like threatening ghouls past her aching eyes.

Paris was reached at dawn of the third day. Seventy-two hours had crept along leaden-footed, since the moment when she had stepped into her own coach outside her beautiful home in Richmond, surrounded by her own servants, and with that traitor Moncrief by her side. Since then, what a load of sorrow, of anxiety, seemed as nothing beside the heartrending thoughts of her beloved, as yet ignorant of her terrible fate and of the schemes which those fiends who had so shamefully trapped her were even now concocting for the realization of their vengeance against him.

Chapter XXII

Waiting

1

The house to which Marguerite was ultimately driven, and where she presently found herself ushered up the stairs into a small, well-furnished apartment, appeared to be situated somewhere in an outlying quarter of Paris.

The apartment consisted of three rooms — a bedroom, a sitting-room, and small cabinet de toilette — all plainly but nicely furnished. The bed looked clean and comfortable, there was a carpet on the floor, one or two pictures on the wall, an arm-chair or two, even a few books in an armoire. An old woman, dour of mien but otherwise willing and attentive, did all she could to minister to the poor wearied woman's wants. She brought up some warm milk and home-baked bread. Butter, she explained, was not obtainable these days, and the household had not seen sugar for weeks.

Marguerite, tired out and hungry, readily ate some breakfast; but what she longed for most and needed most was rest. So presently, at the gruff invitation of the old woman, she undressed and stretched her weary limbs between the sheets, with a sigh of content. Anxiety, for the moment, had to yield to the sense of well-being, and with the name of her beloved on her lips Marguerite went to sleep like a child.

When she woke, it was late afternoon. On a chair close by her bedside was some clean linen laid out, a change of stockings, clean shoes, and a gown — a perfect luxury, which made this silent and lonely house appear more like the enchanted abode of ogres or fairies than before. Marguerite rose and dressed. The linen was fine, obviously the property of a woman of refinement, whilst everything in the tiny dressing-room — a comb, hand-mirror, soap, and scented water — suggested that the delicate hand of a cultured woman had seen to their disposal. A while later, the dour attendant brought her some soup and a dish of cooked vegetables.

Every phase of the situation became more and more puzzling as time went on. Marguerite, with the sense of well-being further accentuated by the feel of warm, dry clothes and of wholesome food, had her mind free enough to think and to ponder. She had thrown open the window, and peeping out, noted that it obviously gave on the back of the house and that the view consisted of rough, uncultivated land, broken up here and there by workshops, warehouses, and timber-yards. Marguerite also noted that she was gazing out in the direction of the north-west, that the apartment wherein she found herself was on the top floor of a detached house which, judging by certain landmarks vaguely familiar, was situated somewhere outside the barrier of St. Antoine, and not very far from the Bastille and from the Arsenal.

Again she pondered. Where was she? Why was she being treated with a kindness and consideration altogether at variance with the tactics usually adopted by the enemies of the Scarlet Pimpernel? She was not in prison. She was not being starved, or threatened, or humiliated. The day wore on, and she was not confronted with one or other of those fiends who were so obviously using her as a decoy for her husband.

But though Marguerite Blakeney was not in prison, she was a prisoner. This she had ascertained five minutes after she was alone in the apartment. She could wander at will from room to room; but only in them, not out of them. The door of communication between the rooms was wide open; those that obviously gave on a landing outside were securely locked; and when a while ago the old woman had entered with the tray of food, Marguerite had caught sight of a group of men in the well-known tattered uniform of the National Guard, standing at attention in a wide, long antechamber.

Yes; she was a prisoner! She could open the windows of her apartment and inhale the soft moist air which came across the wide tract of a barren land; but these windows were thirty feet above the ground, and there was no projection in the outside wall of the house anywhere near that would afford a foothold to anything human.

Thus for twenty-four hours she was left to meditate, thrown upon her own resources, with no other company save that of her own thoughts, and they were anything but cheerful. The uncertainty of the situation soon began to prey upon her nerves. She had been calm in the morning; but as the day wore on the loneliness, the mystery, the silence, began to tell upon her courage. Soon she got to look upon the woman who waited on her as upon her jailer, and when she was alone she was for ever straining her ears to hear what the men who were guarding her door might be saying among themselves.

The next night she hardly slept.

2

Twenty-four hours later she had a visiting from citizen Chauvelin.

She had been expecting that visit all along, or else a message from him. When he came she had need of all her pluck and all her determination, not to let him see the emotion which his presence caused her. Dread! Loathing! These were her predominant sensations. But dread above all; because he was dressed with scrupulous care and affected the manners and graces of a society which had long since cast him out. It was not the rough, out-at-elbows Terrorist who stood before her, the revolutionary demagogue who hits out right and left against a caste that has always spurned him and held itself aloof; it was the broken-down gentleman at war with fortune, who strives by his wits to be revenged against the buffetings of Fate and the arrogance which ostracized him as soon as he was down.

He began by asking solicitously after her well-being; hoped the journey had not over-fatigued her; humbly begged her pardon for the discomfort which a higher power compelled him to put upon her. He talked platitudes in an even, unctuous voice until Marguerite, exasperated, and her nerves on edge, curtly bade him to come to the point.

"I have come to the point, dear lady," he retorted suavely. "The point is that you should be comfortable and have no cause to complain whilst you are under this roof."

"And how long am I to remain a prisoner under it?" she asked.

"Until Sir Percy has in his turn honoured this house with his presence," he replied.

To this she made no answer for a time, but sat quite still looking at him, as if detached and indifferent. He waited for her to speak, his pale eyes, slightly mocking, fixed upon her. Then she said simply:

"I understand."

"I was quite sure you would, dear lady," he rejoined blandly. "You see, the phase of heroics is past. I will confess to you that it proved of no avail when measured against the lofty coolness of that peerless exquisite. So we over here have shed our ardour like a mantle. We, too, now are quite calm, quite unperturbed, quite content to wait. The beautiful Lady Blakeney is a guest under this roof. Well, sooner or later that most gallant of husbands will desire to approach his lady. Sooner or later he will learn that she is no longer in England. Then he will set his incomparable wits to work to find out where she is. Again, I may say that sooner or later, perhaps, even aided by us, he will know that she is here. Then he will come. Am I not right?"

Of course he was right. Sooner or later Percy would learn where she was; and then he would come. He would come to her, despite every trap set for his undoing, despite every net laid to catch him, despite danger of death that waited for him if he came.

Chauvelin said little more. In truth, the era of heroics was at an end. At an end those ominous "either — ors" that he was wont to mete out with a voice quivering with rage and lust of revenge. Now there was no alternative, no deep-laid plot save one: to wait for the Scarlet Pimpernel until he came.

In the meanwhile she, Marguerite, must remain helpless and a prisoner; she must eat and drink and sleep. She, the decoy! — who would never know when the crushing blow would fall that would mean a hundred deaths to her if it involved that of the husband whom she worshipped.

After a while, Chauvelin went away. In fact, she never knew actually when he did go. A while ago he had sat there on that upright chair, quiet, well groomed, suave of speech and bland of manner.

"Then he will come," he had said quite urbanely. "Am I not right?"

When Marguerite closed her eyes she could still see him, his mocking gaze fixed upon her, his thin, white hands folded complacently before him. And presently, as the day wore on and the shades of evening blurred one object in the room after another, the straight-backed chair, still left in its place, assumed a fantastic human shape — the shape of a meagre figure with narrow shoulders and thin, carefully be-stockinged legs. And all the faint noises around her — the occasional creaking of the furniture, the movements of the men outside her door, the sighing of the evening breeze in the foliage of the elm trees — all were merged into a thin, bland human voice, that went on repeating in a kind of thin, dreary monotone:

"Then he will come. Am I not right?"

Chapter XXIII

Mice and Men

1

It was on her return from England that Theresia Cabarrus took to consulting the old witch in the Rue de la Planchette, driven thereto by ambition, and also no doubt by remorse. There was nothing of the hardened criminal about the fair Spaniard; she was just a spoilt woman who had been mocked and thwarted, and desired to be revenged. The Scarlet Pimpernel had appeared before her as one utterly impervious to her charms, and, egged on by Chauvelin, who used her for his own ends, she entered into a callous conspiracy, the aim of which was the destruction of that gang of English spies who were the enemies of France, and the first stage of which was the heartless abduction of Lady Blakeney and her incarceration as a decoy for the ultimate capture of her own husband.

A cruel, abominable act! Theresia, who had plunged headlong into this shameful crime, would a few days later have given much to undo the harm she had wrought. But she had yet to learn that, once used as a tool by the Committee of Public Safety and by Chauvelin, its most unscrupulous agent, no man or woman could hope to become free again until the work demanded had been accomplished to the end. There was no freedom from that taskmaster save in death; and Theresia's fit of compunction did not carry her to the lengths of self-sacrifice. Marguerite Blakeney was her prisoner, the decoy which would bring the English milor inevitably to the spot where his wife was incarcerated; and Theresia, who had helped to bring this state of things about, did her best to smother remorse, and having done Chauvelin's dirty work for him she set to to see what personal advantage she could derive from it.

Firstly, the satisfaction of her petty revenge: the Scarlet Pimpernel caught in a trap, would surely regret his interference in Theresia's love affairs. Theresia cared less than nothing about Bertrand Moncrif, and would have been quite grateful to the English milor for having spirited that embarrassing lover of hers away but for that letter which had wounded the beautiful Spaniard's vanity to the quick, and still rankled sufficiently to ease her conscience on the score of her subsequent actions. That the letter was a bogus one, concocted and written by Chauvelin himself in order to spur her on to a mean revenge, Theresia did not know.

But far stronger than thoughts of revenge were Theresia's schemes for her own future. She had begun to dream of Robespierre's gratitude, of her triumph over all those who had striven for over two years to bring that gang of English spies to book. She saw her name writ largely on the roll of fame; she even saw in her mind, the tyrant himself as her willing slave... and something more than that.

For her tool Bertrand she had no further use. By way of a reward for the abominable abduction of Lady Blakeney, he had been allowed to follow the woman he worshipped like a lackey attached to her train. Dejected, already spurned, he returned to Paris with her, here to resume the life of humiliation and of despised ardour which had broken his spirit and warped his nature, before his gallant rescuer had snatched him out of the toils of the beautiful Spaniard.

Within an hour of setting his foot on French soil, Bertrand had realized that he had been nothing in Theresia's sight but a lump of malleable wax, which she had moulded to her own design and now threw aside as cumbersome and useless. He had realized that her ambition soared far above linking her fate to an obscure and penniless lover, when the coming man of the hour — citizen Tallien — was already at her feet.

2

Thus Theresia had attained one of her great desires: the Scarlet Pimpernel was as good as captured, and when he finally succumbed he could not fail to know whence came the blow that struck him.

With regard to her future, matters were more doubtful. She had not yet subjugated Robespierre sufficiently to cause him to give up his more humble love and to lay down his power and popularity at her feet; whilst the man who had offered her his hand and name — citizen Tallien — was for ever putting a check upon her ambition and his own advancement by his pusillanimity and lack of enterprise.

Whilst she was aching to push him into decisive action, into seizing the supreme power before Robespierre and his friends had irrevocably established theirs, Tallien was for temporizing, fear that in trying to snatch a dictatorship he and his beloved with him would lose their heads.

"While Robespierre lives," Theresia would argue passionately, "no man's head is safe. Every rival, sooner or later, becomes a victim. St. Just and Couthon aim at a dictatorship for him. Sooner or later they will succeed; then death to every man who has ever dared oppose them."

"Therefore 'tis wiser not to oppose," the prudent Tallien would retort. "The time will come."

"Never!" she riposted hotly. "While you plot, and argue and ponder, Robespierre acts or signs your death-warrant."

"Robespierre is the idol of the people; he sways the Convention with a word. His eloquence would drag an army of enemies to the guillotine!"

"Robespierre!" Theresia retorted with sublime contempt. "Ah, when you have said that, you think you have said everything! France, humanity, the people, sovereign power! — all that, you assert, is embodied in that one man. But, my friend, listen to me!" she went on earnestly. "Listen, when I assert that Robespierre is only a name, a fetish, a manikin set up on a pedestal! By whom? By you, and the Convention; by the Clubs and the Committees. And the pedestal is composed of that elusive entity which you call the people and which will disintegrate from beneath his feet as soon as the people have realized that those feet are less than clay. One touch of a firm finger against that manikin, I tell you, and he will fall as dust before you; and you can rise upon that same elusive pedestal — popularity, to the heights which he hath so easily attained."

But, though Tallien was at times carried away by her vehemence, he would always shake his head and counsel prudence, and assure her that the time was not yet. Theresia, impatient and dictatorial, had more than once hinted at rupture.

"I could not love a weakling," she would aver; and at the back of her mind there would rise schemes, which aimed at transferring her favours to the other man, who she felt would be more worthy of her.

"Robespierre would not fail me, as this coward does!" she mused, even while Tallien, blind and obedient, was bidding her farewell at the very door of the charlatan to whom Theresia had turned in her ambition and her difficulties.

Something of the glamour which had originally surrounded Mother Théot's incantations had vanished since sixty-two of her devotees had been sent to the guillotine on charge of conspiring for the overthrow of the Republic. Robespierre's enemies, too cowardly to attack him in the Convention or in the Clubs, had seized upon the mystery which hung over the séances in the Rue de la Planchette in order to undermine his popularity in the one and his power in the other.

Spies were introduced into the witch's lair. The names of its chief frequenters became known, and soon wholesale arrests were made, which were followed by the inevitable condemnations. Robespierre had not actually been named; but the identity of the sycophants who had proclaimed him the Messenger of the Most High, the Morning Star, or the Regenerator of Mankind, were hurled across from the tribune of the Convention, like poisoned arrows aimed at the tyrant himself.

But Robespierre had been too wary to allow himself to be dragged into the affair. His enemies tried to goad him into defending his worshippers, thus admitting his association with the gang; but he remained prudently silent, and with callous ruthlessness he sacrificed them to his own safety. He never raised his voice nor yet one finger to save them from death, and whilst he — bloodthirsty autocrat — remain firmly installed upon his self-constituted throne, those who had acclaimed him as second only to God, perished upon the scaffold.

Mother Théot, for some inexplicable reason, escaped this wholesale slaughter; but her séances were henceforth shorn of their splendour. Robespierre no longer dared frequent them even in disguise. The house in the Rue de la Planchette became a marked one to the agents of the Committee of Public Safety, and the witch herself was reduced to innumerable shifts to eke out a precarious livelihood and to keep herself in the good graces of those agents, by rendering them various unavowable services.

To those, however, who chose to defy public opinion and to disregard the dangers which attended the frequentation of Mother Théot's sorceries, these latter had lost little or nothing of their pristine solemnity. There was the closely curtained room; the scented, heavy atmosphere; the chants, the coloured flames, the ghost-like neophytes. Draped in her grey veils, the old witch still wove her spells and called on the powers of light and of darkness to aid her in fortelling the future. The neophytes chanted and twisted their bodies in quaint contortions; alone, the small blackamoor grinned at what experience had taught him was nothing by quackery and charlatanism.

Theresia, sitting on the dias, with the heady fumes of Oriental scents blurring her sight and the clearness of her intellect, was drinking in the honeyed words and flattering prophecies of the old witch.

"Thy name will be the greatest in the land! Before thee will bow the mightiest thrones! At thy word deads will fall and diedems will totter!" Mother Théot announced in sepulchral tones, whilst gazing into the crystal before her.

"As the wife of citizen Tallien?" Theresia queried in an awed whisper.

"That the spirits do not say," the old witch replied. "What is a name to them? I see a crown of glory, and thy head surrounded by a golden light; and at thy feet lies something which once was scarlet, and now is crimson and crushed."

"What does it mean?" Theresia murmured.

"That is for thee to know," the sybil replied sternly. "Commune with the spirits; lose thyself in their embrace; learn from them the great truths, and the future will be made clear to thee."

With which cryptic utterance she gathered her veils around her, and with weird murmurs of, "Evohe! Evohe! Sammael! Zamiel! Evohe!" glided out of the room, mysterious and inscrutable, presumably in order to allow her bewildered client to meditate on the enigmatical prophecy in solitude.

But directly she had closed the door behind her, Mother Théot's manner underwent a chance. Here the broad light of day appeared to diversify her of all her sybilline attributes. She became just an ugly old woman, wrinkled and hook-nosed, dressed in shabby draperies that were grey with age and dirt, and with claw-like hands that looked like the talons of a bird of prey.

As she entered the room, a man who had been standing at the window opposite, staring out into the dismal street below, turned quickly to her.

"Art satisfied?" she asked at once.

"From what I could hear, yes!" he replied, "though I could have wished thy pronouncements had been more clear."

The hag shrugged her lean shoulders and nodded in the direction of her lair.

"Oh!" she said. "The Spaniard understands well enough. She never consults me or invokes the spirits but they speak to her of that which is scarlet. She knows what it means. You need not fear, citizen Chauvelin, that in the pursuit of her vaulting ambition, she will forget that her primary duty is to you!"

"No," Chauvelin asserted calmly, "she'll not forget that. The Cabarrus is no fool. She knows well enough that when citizens of the State have been employed to work on its behalf, they are no longer free agents afterwards. The work must be carried through to the end."

"You need not fear the Cabarrus, citizen," the sybil rejoined dryly. "She'll not fail you. Her vanity is immense. She believes that the Englishman insulted her by writing that flippant letter, and she'll not leave him alone till she has had her revenge."

"No!" Chauvelin assented. "She'll not fail me. Nor thou either, citoyenne."

The old hag shrugged her shoulders.

"I?" she exclaimed, with a quiet laugh. "Is that likely? You promised me ten thousand livres the day the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured!"

"And the guillotine," Chauvelin broke in grimly, "if thou shouldst allow the woman upstairs to escape."

"I know that," the old woman rejoined dryly. "If she escapes 'twill not be through my connivance."

"In the service of the State," Chauvelin riposted, "even carelessness becomes a crime."

Catherine Théot was silent for a moment or two, pressed her thin lips together; then rejoined quite quietly:

"She'll not escape. Have no fear, citizen Chauvelin."

"That's brave! And now, tell me what has become of the coalheaver Rateau?"

"Oh, he comes and goes. You told me to encourage him."

"Yes."

"So I give him potions for his cough. He has one foot in the grave."

"Would he had both!" Chauvelin broke in savagely. "That man is a perpetual menace to my plans. It would have been so much better if we could have sent him last April to the guillotine."

"It was in your hands," Mother Théot retorted. "The Committee reported against him. His measure was full enough. Aiding that execrable Scarlet Pimpernel to escape...! Name of a name! it should have been enough!"

"It was not proved that he did aid the English spies," Chauvelin retorted moodily. "And Fouquier-Tinville would not arraign him. He vowed it would anger the people — the rabble — of which Rateau himself forms an integral part. We cannot afford to anger the rabble these days, it seems."

"And so Rateau, the asthmatic coalheaver, walked out of prison a free man, whilst my neophytes were dragged up to the guillotine, and I was left without means of earning an honest livelihood!" Mother Théot concluded with a doleful sigh.

"Honest?" Chauvelin exclaimed, with a sarcastic chuckle. Then, seeing that the old witch was ready to lose her temper, he quickly added: "Tell me more about Rateau. Does he often come here?"

"Yes; very often. He must be in my anteroom now. He came directly he was let out of prison, and has haunted this place ever since. He thinks I can cure him of his asthma, and as he pays me well—"

"Pays you well?" Chauvelin broke in quickly. "That starveling?"

"Rateau is no starveling," the old woman asserted. "Many an English gold piece hath he given me."

"But not of late?"

"No later than yesterday."

Chauvelin swore viciously.

"Then he is still in touch with that cursed Englishman!"

Mother Théot shrugged her shoulders.

"Does one ever know which is the Englishman and which is the asthmatic Rateau?" she queried, with a dry laugh.

Whereupon a strange thing happened — so strange indeed that Chauvelin's next words turned to savage curses, and that Mother Théot, which to the lips, her knees shaking under her, tiny beads of perspiration rising beneath her scanty locks, had to hold on to the table to save herself from falling.

"Name of a name of a dog!" Chauvelin muttered hoarsely, whilst the old woman, shaken but that superstitious dread which she liked to arouse in her clients, could only stare at him and mutely shake her head.

And yet nothing very alarming had occurred. Only a man had laughed, light-heartedly and long; and the sound of that laughter had come from somewhere near — the next room probably, or the landing beyond Mother Théot's anteroom. It had come low and distinct, slightly muffled by the intervening wall. Nothing in truth to frighten the most nervous child!

A man had laughed. One of Mother Théot's clients probably, who in the company of a friend chose to wile away the weary hour of waiting on the sybil by hilarious conversation. Of course, that was it! Chauvelin, cursing himself now for his cowardice, passed a still shaking hand across his brow, and a wry smile distorted momentarily his thin, set lips.

"One of your clients is of good cheer," he said with well-assumed indifference.

"There is no one in the anteroom at this hour," the old hag murmured under her breath. "Only Rateau... and he is too scant of breath to laugh... he..."

But Chauvelin no longer heard what she had to say. With an exclamation which no one who heard it could have defined, he turned on his heel and almost ran out of the room.

Chapter XXIV

By Order of the State

1

The antechamber, wide and long, ran the whole length of Mother Théot's apartment. Her witch's lair and the room where she had just had her interview with Chauvelin gave directly on it on the one side, and two other living rooms on the other. At one end of the antechamber there were two windows, usually kept closely shuttered; and at the other was the main entrance door, which led to landing and staircase.

The antechamber was empty. It appeared to mock Chauvelin's excitement, with its grey-washed walls streaked with grime, its worm-eaten benches and tarnished chandelier. Mother Théot, voluble and quaking with fear, was close at his heels. Curtly he ordered her to be gone; her mutterings irritated him, her obvious fear of something unknown grated unpleasantly on his nerves. He cursed himself for his cowardice, and cursed the one man who alone in this world had the power to unnerve him.

"I was dreaming, of course," he muttered aloud to himself between his teeth. "I have that arch-devil, his laugh, his voice, his affectations, on the brain!"

He was on the point of going to the main door, in order to peer out on the landing or down the stairs, when he heard his name called immediately behind him. Theresia Cabarrus was standing under the lintel of the door which gave on the sybil's sanctum, her delicate hand holding back the portière.

"Citizen Chauvelin," she said, "I was waiting for you."

"And I, citoyenne," he retorted gruffly, "had in truth forgotten you."

"Mother Théot left me alone for a while, to commune with the spirits," she explained.

"Ah!" he riposted, slightly sarcastic. "With what result?"

"To help you further, citizen Chauvelin," she replied; "if you have need of me."

"Ah!" he exclaimed with a savage curse. "In truth, I have need of every willing hand that will raise itself against mine enemy. I have need of you, citizeness; of that old witch; of Rateau, the coalheaver; of every patriot who will sit and watch this house, to which we have brought the one bait that will lure the goldfish to our net."

"Have I not proved my willingness, citizen?" she retorted, with a smile. "Think you 'tis pleasant to give up my life, my salon, my easy, contented existence, and become a mere drudge in your service?"

"A drudge," he broke in with a chuckle, "who will soon be greater than a Queen."

"Ah, if I thought that!..." she exclaimed.

"I am as sure of it as that I am alive," he replied firmly. "You will never do anything with citizen Tallien, citoyenne. He is too mean, too cowardly. But bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to his knees at the chariot wheel of Robespierre, and even the crown of the Bourbons would be yours for the asking."

"I know that, citizen," she rejoined dryly; "else I were not here."

"We hold all the winning cards," he went on eagerly. "Lady Blakeney is in our hands. So long as we hold her, we have the certainty that sooner or later the English spy will establish communication with her. Catherine Théot is a good jailer, and Captain Boyer upstairs has a number of men under his command — veritable sleuthhounds, whose efficiency I can guarantee and whose eagerness is stimulated by the promise of a magnificent reward. But experience has taught me that that accursed Scarlet Pimpernel is never so dangerous as when we think we hold him. His extraordinary histrionic powers have been our undoing hitherto. No man's eyes are keen enough to pierce his disguises. That is why, citoyenne, I dragged you to England; that is why I placed you face to face with him, and said to you, 'That is the man.' Since then, with your help, we hold the decoy. Now you are my coadjutor and my help. In your eyes I place my trust; in your wits, your instinct. In whatever guise the Scarlet Pimpernel presents himself before you — and he will present himself before you, or he is no longer the impudent and reckless adventurer I know him to be! — I feel that you at least will recognize him."

"Yes; I think I should recognize him," she mused.

"Think you that I do not appreciate the sacrifice you make — the anxiety, the watchfulness to which you so nobly subject yourself? But 'tis you above all who are the lure which must inevitably attract the Scarlet Pimpernel into my hands."

"Soon, I hope," she sighed wearily.

"Soon," he asserted firmly. "I dare swear it! Until then, citizeness, in the name of your own future, and in the name of France, I adjure you to watch. Watch and listen! Oh, think of the stakes for which we are playing, you and I! Bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to his knees, citoyenne, and Robespierre will be as much your slave as he is now the prey to a strange dread of that one man. Robespierre fears the Scarlet Pimpernel. A superstitious conviction had seized hold of him that the English spy will bring about his downfall. We have all seen of late how aloof he holds himself. He no longer attends the Committees. He no longer goes to the Clubs; he shuns his friends; and his furtive glance is for ever trying to pierce some imaginary disguise, under which he alternately fears and hopes to discover his arch-enemy. He dreads assassination, anonymous attacks. In every obscure member of the Convention who walks up the steps of the tribune, he fears to find the Scarlet Pimpernel under a new, impenetrable mask. Ah, citoyenne! what influence you would have over him if through your agency all those fears could be drowned in the blood of that abominable Englishman!"

"Now, who would have thought that?" a mocking voice broke in suddenly, with a quiet chuckle. "I vow, my dear M. Chambertin, you are waxing more eloquent than ever before!"

Like the laughter of a while ago, the voice seemed to come from nowhere. It was in the air, muffled by the clouds of Mother Théot's perfumes, or by the thickness of doors and tapestries. Weird, yet human.

“By Satan, this is intolerable!” Chauvelin exclaimed; and paying no heed to Theresia’s faint cry of terror, he ran to the main door. It was on the latch. He tore it open and dashed out upon the landing.

2

From here a narrow stone staircase, dank and sombre, led downwards as well as upwards, in a spiral. The house had only the two stories, perched above some disused and dilapidated storage-rooms, to which a double outside door and wicket gave access from the street.

The staircase received its only light from a small window high up in the roof, the panes of which were coated with grime, so that the well of the stairs, especially past the first-floor landing, was almost in complete gloom. For an instant Chauvelin hesitated. Never a coward physically, he yet had no mind to precipitate himself down a dark staircase when mayhap his enemy was lying in wait for him down below.

Only for an instant however. The very next second had brought forth the positive reflection: “bah! Assassination, and in the dark, are not the Englishman’s ways.”

Scarce a few yards from where he stood, the other side of the door, was the dry moat which ran round the Arsenal. From there, at a call from him, a dozen men and more would surge from the ground — sleuthhounds, as he had told Theresia a moment ago, who were there on the watch and whom he could trust to do his work swiftly and securely — if only he could reach the door and call for help. Elusive as that accursed Pimpernel was, successful chase might even now be given to him.

Chauvelin ran down half a dozen steps, peered down the shaft of the staircase, and spied a tiny light, which moved swiftly to and fro. Then presently, below the light a bit of tallow candle, then a grimy hand holding the candle, an arm, the top of a shaggy head crowned by a greasy red cap, a broad back under a tattered blue jersey. He heard the thump of heavy soles upon the stone flooring below, and a moment or two later the weird, sepulchral sound of a churchyard cough. Then the light disappeared. For a second or two the darkness appeared more impenetrably dense; then one or two narrow streaks of daylight showed the position of the outside door. Something prompted him to call:

“Is that you, citizen Rateau?”

It was foolish, of course. And the very next moment he had his answer. A voice — the mocking voice he knew so well — called up to him in reply:

“At your service, dear M. Chambertin! Can I do anything for you?”

Chauvelin swore, threw all prudence to the winds, and ran down the stairs as fast as his shaking knees would allow him. Some three steps from the bottom he paused for the space of a second, like one turned to stone by what he saw. Yet it was simple enough: just the same tiny light, the grimy hand holding the tallow candle, the shaggy head with the greasy red cap.... The figure in the gloom looked preternaturally large, and the flickering light threw fantastic shadows on the face and neck of the colossus, distorting the nose to a grotesque length and the chin to weird proportions.

The next instant Chauvelin gave a cry like an enraged bull and hurled his meagre person upon the giant, who, shaken at the moment by a tearing fit of coughing, was taken unawares and fell backwards, overborne by the impact, dropping the light as he fell and still wheezing pitifully whilst trying to give vent to his feelings by vigorous curses.

Chauvelin, vaguely surprised at his own strength or the weakness of his opponent, pressed his knee against the latter’s chest, gripped him by the throat, smothering his curses and wheezes, turning the funeral cough into agonized gasps.

“At my service, in truth, my gallant Pimpernel!” he murmured hoarsely, feeling his small reserve of strength oozing away by the strenuous effort. “What you can do for me? Wait here, until I have you bound and gagged, safe against further mischief!”

His victim had in fact given a last convulsive gasp, lay now at full length upon the stone floor, with arms outstretched, motionless. Chauvelin relaxed his grip. His strength was spent, he was bathed in sweat, his body shook from head to foot. But he was triumphant! His mocking enemy, carried away by his own histrionics, had overtaxed his colossal strength. The carefully simulated fit of coughing had taken away his breath at the critical moment; the surprise attack had done the rest; and Chauvelin — meagre, feeble, usually the merest human insect beside the powerful Englishman — had conquered by sheer pluck and resource.

There lay the Scarlet Pimpernel, who had assumed the guise of asthmatic Rateau once too often, helpless and broken beneath the weight of the man whom he had hoodwinked and derided. And now at last all the intrigues, the humiliations, the schemes and the disappointments, were at an end. He — Chauvelin — free and honoured: Robespierre his grateful servant.

A wave of dizziness passed over his brain — the dizziness of coming glory. His senses reeled. When he staggered to his feet he could scarcely stand. The darkness was thick around him; only two streaks of daylight at right angles to one another came through the chinks of the outside door and vaguely illumined the interior of the dilapidated store-room, the last step or two of the winding stairway, the row of empty barrels on one side, the pile of rubbish on the other, and on the stone floor the huge figure in grimy and tattered rags, lying prone and motionless. Guided by those streaks of light, Chauvelin lurched up to the door, fumbled for the latch of the wicket-gate, and finding it pulled the gate open and almost fell out into the open.

3

The Rue de la Planchette was as usual lonely and deserted. It was a second or two before Chauvelin spied a passer-by. That minute he spent in calling for help with all his might. The passer-by he quickly dispatched across to the Arsenal for assistance.

“In the name of the Republic!” he said solemnly.

But already his cries had attracted the attention of the sentries. Within two or three minutes, half a dozen men of the National Guard were speeding down the street. Soon they had reached the house, the door where Chauvelin, still breathless but with his habitual official manner that brooked of no argument, gave them hasty instructions.

"The man lying on the ground in there," he commanded. "Seize him and raise him. Then one of you find some cord and bind him securely."

The men flung the double doors wide open. A flood of light illumined the store-room. There lay the huge figure on the floor, no longer motionless, but trying to scramble to his feet, once more torn by a fit of coughing. The man ran up to him; one of them laughed.

"Why, if it isn't old Rateau!"

They lifted him up by his arms. He was helpless as a child, and his face was of a dull purple colour.

"He will die!" another man said, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

But, in a way, they were sorry for him. He was one of themselves. Nothing of the aristo about asthmatic old Rateau!

They had succeeded in propping him up and sitting him down upon a barrel. His fit of coughing was subsiding. He had breath enough now to swear. He raised his head and encountered the pale eyes of citizen Chauvelin fixed as if sightlessly upon him.

"Name of a dog!" he began; but got no farther. Giddiness seized him, for he was weak from coughing and from that strangling grip round his throat, after he had been attacked in the darkness and thrown violently to the ground.

The men around him recoiled at sight of citizen Chauvelin. His appearance was almost death-like. His cheeks and lips were livid; his hair dishevelled; his eyes of an unearthly paleness. One hand, clawlike and shaking, he held out before him, as if to ward off some horrible apparition.

This trance-like state made up of a ghastly fear and a sense of the most hideous, most unearthly impotence, lasted for several seconds. The men themselves were frightened. Unable to understand what had happened, they thought that citizen Chauvelin, whom they all knew by sight, had suddenly lost his reason or was possessed of a devil. For in truth there was nothing about poor old Rateau to frighten a child!

Fortunately the tension was over before real panic had seized on any of them. The next moment Chauvelin had pulled himself together with one of those mighty efforts of will of which strong natures are always capable. With an impatient gesture he passed his hand across his brow, then backwards and forwards in front of his face, as if to chase away the demon of terror that obsessed him. He gazed on Rateau for a moment or two, his eyes travelling over the uncouth, semi-conscious figure of the coalheaver with a searching, undefinable glance. Then, as if suddenly struck with an idea, he spoke to the man nearest him:

"Sergeant Chazot? Is he at the Arsenal?"

"Yes, citizen," the man replied.

"Run across quickly then," Chauvelin continued; "and bring him hither at once."

The soldier obeyed, and a few more minutes — ten, perhaps — went by in silence. Rateau, weary, cursing, not altogether in full possession of his faculties, sat huddled up on the barrel, his bleary eyes following every movement of citizen Chauvelin with an anxious, furtive gaze. The latter was pacing up and down the stone floor, like a caged, impatient animal. From time to time he paused, either to peer out into the open in the direction of the Arsenal, or to search the dark angles of the store-room, kicking the piles of rubbish about with his foot.

4

Anon he uttered a sigh of satisfaction. The soldier had returned, was even now in the doorway with a comrade — a short, thick-set, powerful-looking fellow — beside him.

"Sergeant Chazot!" Chauvelin said abruptly.

"At your commands, citizen!" the sergeant replied, and at a sign from the other followed him to the most distant corner of the room.

"Bend your ear and listen," Chauvelin murmured peremptorily. "I don't want those fools to hear." And, having assured himself that he and Chazot could speak without being overheard, he pointed to Rateau, then went on rapidly: "You will take this lout over to the cavalry barracks. See the veterinary. Tell him."

He paused, as if unable to proceed. His lips were trembling, his face, ashen-white, looked spectral in the gloom. Chazot, not understanding, waited patiently.

"That lout," Chauvelin resumed more steadily after a while, "is in collusion with a gang of dangerous English spies. One Englishman especially — tall, and a master of histrionics — uses this man as a kind of double. Perhaps you heard...?"

Chazot nodded.

"I know, citizen," he said sagely. "The Fraternal Supper in the Rue St. Honoré. Comrades have told me that no one could tell who was Rateau the coalheaver and who the English milor."

"Exactly!" Chauvelin rejoined dryly, quite firmly now. "Therefore, I want to make sure. The veterinary, you understand? He brands the horses for the cavalry. I want a brand on this lout's arm. Just a letter... a distinguishing mark..."

Chazot gave an involuntary gasp.

"But, citizen-!" he exclaimed.

"Eh? What?" the other retorted sharply. "In the service of the Republic there is no 'but,' Sergeant Chazot."

"I know that, citizen," Chazot, abashed, murmured humbly. "I only meant... it seems so strange..."

"Stranger things than that occur every day in Paris, my friend," Chauvelin said dryly. "We brand horses that are the property of the State; why not a man? Time may come," he added with a vicious snarl, "when the Republic may demand that every local citizen carry — indelibly branded in his flesh and by order of the State — the sign of his own allegiance."

"Tis not for me to argue, citizen," Chazot rejoined, with a careless shrug of the shoulders. "If you tell me to take citizen Rateau over to the veterinary at the cavalry barracks and have him branded like cattle, why..."

"Not like cattle, citizen," Chauvelin broke in blandly. "You shall commence proceedings by administering to citizen Rateau a whole bottle of excellent eau de vie, at the Government's expense. Then, when he is thoroughly and irretrievably drunk, the veterinary will put the brand upon his left forearm... just on letter... Why, the drunken reprobate will never feel it!"

"As you command, citizen," Chazot assented with perfect indifference. "I am not responsible. I do as I'm told."

“Like the fine soldier that you are, citizen Chazot!” Chauvelin concluded. “And I know that I can trust to your discretion.”

“Oh, as to that-!”

“It would not serve you to be otherwise; that’s understood. So now, my friend, get you gone with the lout; and take these few words of instructions with you, for the citizen veterinary.”

He took tablet and point from his pocket and scribbled a few words; signed it “Chauvelin” with that elegant flourish which can be traced to this day on so many secret orders that emanated from the Committee of Public Safety during the two years of its existence.

Chazot took the written order and slipped it into his pocket. Then he turned on his heel and briefly gave the necessary orders to the men. Once more they hoisted the helpless giant up on his feet. Rateau was willing enough to go. He was willing to do anything so long as they took him away from here, away from the presence of that small devil with the haggard face and the pale, piercing eyes. He allowed himself to be conducted out of the building without a murmur.

Chauvelin watched the little party — the six men, the asthmatic coalheaver and lastly the sergeant — file out of the place, then cross the Rue de la Planchette and take the turning opposite, the one that led through the Porte and the Rue St. Antoine to the cavalry barracks in the Quartier Bastille. After which, he carefully closed the double outside doors and, guided by instinct since the place down here was in darkness once more, he groped his way to the foot of the stairs and slowly mounted to the floor above.

5

He reached the first-floor landing. The door which led into Mother Théot’s apartments was on the latch, and Chauvelin had just stretched out his hand with a view to pushing it open, when the door swung out on its hinges, as if moved by an invisible hand, and a pleasant, mocking voice immediately behind him said, with grave politeness:

“Allow me, my dear M. Chambertin!”

Chapter XXV

Four Days

1

What occurred during the next few seconds Chauvelin himself would have been least able to say. Whether he stepped of his own accord into the antechamber of Catherine Théot's apartment, or whether an unseen hand pushed him in, he could not have told you. Certain it is that, when he returned to the full realization of things, he was sitting on one of the benches, his back against the wall, whilst immediately in front of him, looking down on him through half-closed, lazy eyes, débonnair, well groomed, unperturbed, stood his arch-enemy, Sir Percy Blakeney.

The antechamber was gloomy in the extreme. Some one in the interval had lighted the tallow candles in the centre chandelier, and these shed a feeble, flickering light on the dank, bare walls, the carpetless floor, the shuttered windows; whilst a thin spiral of evil-smelling smoke wound its way to the blakened ceiling above.

Of Theresia Cabarrus there was not a sign. Chauvelin looked about him, feeling like a goaded animal shut up in a narrow space with its tormentor. He was making desperate efforts to regain his composure, above all he made appeal to that courage which was wont never to desert him. In truth, Chauvelin had never been a physical coward, nor was he afraid of death or outrage at the hands of the man whom he had so deeply wronged, and whom he had pursued with a veritable lust of hate. No! he did not fear death at the hands of the Scarlet Pimpernel. What he feared was ridicule, humiliation, those schemes — bold, adventurous, seemingly impossible — which he knew were already seething behind the smooth, unruffled brow of his arch-enemy, behind those lazy, supercilious eyes, which had the power to irritate his nerves to the verge of dementia.

This impudent adventurer — no better than a spy, despite his aristocratic mien and air of lofty scorn — this meddlesome English brigand, was the one man in the world who had, when he measured his prowess against him, invariably brought him to ignominy and derision, made him a laughing-stock before those whom he had been wont to dominate; and at this moment, when once again he was being forced to look into those strangely provoking eyes, he appraised their glance as he would to sword of a proved adversary, and felt as he did so just that same unaccountable dread of them which had so often paralysed his limbs and atrophied his brain whenever mischance flung him into the presence of his enemy.

He could not understand why Theresia Cabarrus had deserted him. Even a woman, if she happened to be a friend, would by her presence have afforded him moral support.

"You are looking for Mme de Fontenay, I believe, dear M. Chambertin," Sir Percy said lightly, as if divining his thoughts. "The ladies — ah, the ladies! They add charm, piquancy, eh? to the driest conversations. Alas!" he went on with mock affectation, "that Mme de Fontenay should have fled at first sound of my voice! Now she hath sought refuge in the old witch's lair, there to consult the spirits as to how best she can get out again, seeing that the door is now locked.... Deemed awkward, a locked door, when a pretty woman wants to be on the other side. What think you, M. Chambertin?"

"I only think, Sir Percy," Chauvelin contrived to retort, calling all his wits and all his courage to aid him in his humiliating position, "I only think of another pretty woman, who is in the room just above our heads and who would also be mightily glad to find herself the other side of a locked door."

"Your thoughts," Sir Percy retorted with a light laugh, "are always so ingenuous, my dear M. Chambertin. Strangely enough, mine just at this moment run on the possibility — not a very unlikely one, you will admit — of shaking the breath out of your ugly little body, as I would that of a rat."

"Shake, my dear Sir Percy, shake!" Chauvelin riposted with well-simulated calm. "I grant you that I am a puny rat and you are the most magnificent of lions; but even if I lie mangled and breathless on this stone floor at your feet, Lady Blakeney will still be a prisoner in our hands."

"And you will still be wearing the worst-cut pair of breeches it has ever been my bad fortune to behold," Sir Percy retorted, quite unruffled. "Lud love you, man! Have you guillotined all the good tailors in Paris?"

"You choose to be flippant, Sir Percy," Chauvelin rejoined dryly. "But, though you have chosen for the past few years to play the rôle of a brainless nincompoop, I have cause to know that behind your affectations there lurks an amount of sound common sense."

"Lud, how you flatter me, my dear sir!" quoth Sir Percy airily. "I vow you had not so high an opinion of me last time I had the honour of conversing with you. It was at Nantes; do you remember?"

"There, as elsewhere, you succeeded in circumventing me, Sir Percy."

"No, no!" he protested. "Not in circumventing you. Only in making you look a demmed fool!"

"Call it that, if you like, sir," Chauvelin admitted, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders. "Luck has favoured you many a time. As I had the honour to tell you, you have had the laugh of us in the past, and no doubt you are under the impression that you will have it again this time."

"I am such a believer in impressions, my dear sir. The impression now that I have your charming personality is indelibly graven upon my memory."

"Sir Percy Blakeney counts a good memory as one of his many accomplishments. Another is his adventurous spirit, and the gallantry which must inevitably bring him into the net which we have been at pains to spread for him. Lady Blakeney—"

"Name her not, man!" Sir Percy broke in with affect deliberation; "or I verily believe that within sixty seconds you would be a dead man!"

"I am not worthy to speak her name, c'est entendu," Chauvelin retorted with mock humility. "Nevertheless, Sir Percy, it is around the person of that grivous lady that the Fates will spin their web during the next few days. You may kill me. Of course, I am at this

moment entirely at your mercy. But before you embark on such a perilous undertaking, will you allow me to place the position a little more clearly before you?"

"Lud, man!" quoth Sir Percy with a quaint laugh. "That's what I'm here for! Think you that I have sought your agreeable company for the mere pleasure of gazing at your amiable countenance?"

"I only desired to explain to you, Sir Percy, the dangers to which you expose Lady Blakeney, if you laid violent hands upon me. 'Tis you, remember, who sought this interview — not I."

"You are right, my dear sir, always right; and I'll not interrupt again. I pray you to proceed."

"Allow me then to make my point clear. There are at this moment a score of men of the National Guard in the room above your head. Every one of them goes to the guillotine if they allow their prisoner to escape; every one of them receives a reward of ten thousand livres the day they capture the Scarlet Pimpernel. A good spur for vigilance, what? But that is not all," Chauvelin went on quite steadily, seeing that Sir Percy had apparently become thoughtful and absorbed. "The men are under the command of Captain Boyer, and he understands that ever day at a certain hour — seven in the evening, to be precise — I will be with him and interrogate him as to the welfare of the prisoner. If — mark me, Sir Percy! — if on any one day I do not appear before him at that hour, his orders are to shoot the prisoner on sight...."

The word was scarce out of his mouth; it broke in a hoarse spasm. Sir Percy had him by the throat, shook him indeed as he would a rat.

"You cur!" he said in an ominous whisper, his face quite close now to that of his enemy, his jaw set, his eyes no longer good-humoured and mildly scornful, but burning with the fire of a mighty, unbridled wrath. "You damned — insolent — miserable cur! As there is a Heaven above us—"

Then suddenly his grip relaxed, the whole face changed as if an unseen hand has swept away the fierce lines of anger and hate. The eyes softened beneath their heavy lids, the set lips broke into a mocking smile. He let go his hold of the Terrorist's throat; and the unfortunate man, panting and breathless, fell heavily against the wall. He tried to steady himself as best he could, but his knees were shaking, and faint and helpless, he finally collapses upon the nearest bench, the while Sir Percy straightened out his tall figure, with unruffled composure rubbed his slender hands one against the other, as if to free them from dust, and said, with gentle, good-humoured sarcasm:

"Do put your cravat straight, man! You look a disgusting object!"

He dragged the corner of a bench forward, sat astride upon it, and waited with perfect sang-froid, spy-glass in hand, while Chauvelin mechanically readjusted the set of his clothes.

"That's better?" he said approvingly. "Just the bow at the back of your neck... a little more to the right... now your cuffs.... Ah, you look quite tidy again!... a perfect picture, I vow, my dear M. Chambertin, of elegance and of a well-regulated mind!"

"Sir Percy—!" Chauvelin broke in with a vicious snarl.

"I entreat you to accept my apologies," the other rejoined with utmost courtesy. "I was on the verge of losing my temper, which we in England would call demmed bad form. I'll not transgress again. I pray you, proceed with what you were saying. So interesting — demmed interesting! You were talking about murdering a woman in cold blood, I think—"

"In hot blood, Sir Percy," Chauvelin rejoined more firmly. "Blood fired by thoughts of just revenge."

"Pardon! My mistake! As you were saying—"

"'Tis you who attack us. You — the meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel, with your accursed gang!... We defend ourselves as best we can, using what weapons lie closest to our hand—"

"Such as murder, outrage, abduction... and wearing breeches the cut of which would provoke a saint to indignation."

"Murder, abduction, outrage, as you will, Sir Percy," Chauvelin retorted, as cool now as his opponent. "Had you ceased to interfere in the affairs of France when first you escaped punishment for your machinations, you would not now be in the sorry plight in which your own intrigues have at last landed you. Had you left us alone, we should by now have forgotten you."

"Which would have been such a pity, my dear M. Chambertin," Blakeney rejoined gravely. "I should not like you to forget me. Believe me, I have enjoyed life so much these past two years, I would not give up those pleasures even for that of seeing you and your friends have a bath or wear tidy buckles on your shoes."

"You will have cause to indulge in those pleasures within the next few days, Sir Percy," Chauvelin rejoined dryly.

"What?" Sir Percy exclaimed. "The Committee of Public Safety going to have a bath? Or the Revolutionary Tribunal? Which?"

But Chauvelin was determined not to lose his temper again. Indeed, he abhorred this man so deeply that he felt no anger against him, no resentment; only a cold, calculating hate.

"The pleasure of pitting your wits against the inevitable," he riposted dryly.

"Ah?" quoth Sir Percy airily. "The inevitable has always been such a good friend to me."

"Not this time, I fear, Sir Percy."

"Ah? You really mean this time to—?" and he made a significant gesture across his own neck.

"In as few days as possible."

Whereupon Sir Percy rose, and said solemnly:

"You are right there, my friend, quite right. Delays are always dangerous. If you mean to have my head, why — have it quickly. As for me, delays always bore me to tears."

He yawned and stretched his long limbs.

"I am getting so deemed fatigued," he said. "Do you not think this conversation has lasted quite long enough?"

"It was none of my seeking, Sir Percy."

"Mine, I grant you; mine, absolutely! But, hang it, man! I had to tell you that your breeches were badly cut."

"And I, that we are at your service, to end the business as soon as may be."

"To—?" And once more Sir Percy passed his firm hand across his throat. Then he gave a shudder.

"B-r-r-r!" he exclaimed. "I had no idea you were in such a demmed hurry."

"We await your pleasure, Sir Percy. Lady Blakeney must not be kept in suspense too long. Shall we say that, in three days...?"

"Make it four, my dear M. Chambertin, and I am eternally your debtor."

"In four days then, Sir Percy," Chauvelin rejoined with pronounced sarcasm. "You see how ready I am to meet you in a spirit of conciliation! Four days, you say? Very well then; for four days more we keep our prisoner in those rooms upstairs.... After that—"

He paused, awed mayhap, in spite of himself, but the diabolical thought which had suddenly come into his mind — a sudden inspiration which in truth must have emanated from some unclean spirit with which he held converse. He looked the Scarlet Pimpernel — his enemy — squarely in the face. Conscious of his power, he was no longer afraid. What he longed for most at this moment was to see the least suspicion of a shadow dim the mocking light that danced in those lazy, supercilious eyes, or the merest tremor pass over the slender hand framed in priceless Mechlin lace.

For a while complete silence reigned in the bare, dank room — a silence broken only by the stertorous, rapid breathing of the one man who appeared moved. That man was not Sir Percy Blakeney. He indeed had remained quite still, spy-glass in hand, the good-humoured smile still dancing round his lips. Somewhere in the far distance a church clock struck the hour. Then only did Chauvelin put his full fiendish project into words.

"For four days," he reiterated with slow deliberation, "we keep our prisoner in the room upstairs.... After that, Captain Boyer has orders to shoot her."

Again there was silence — only for a second perhaps; whilst down by the Stygian creek, where Time never was, the elfish ghouls and impish demons set up a howl of delight at the hellish knavery of man.

Just one second, whilst Chauvelin waited for his enemy's answer to this monstrous pronouncement, and the very walls of the drabby apartment appeared to listen, expectant. Overhead, could be dimly heard the measured tramp of heavy feet upon the uncarpeted floor. And suddenly through the bare apartment there rang the sound of a quaint, light-hearted laugh.

"You really are the worst-dressed man I have ever come across, my good M. Chambertin," Sir Percy said with rare good-humour. "You must allow me to give you the address of a good little tailor I came across in the Latin Quarter the other day. No decent man would be seen walking up the guillotine in such a waistcoat as you are wearing. Ad for your boots—" He yawned again. "You really must excuse me! I came home late from the theatre last night, and have not had my usual hours of sleep. So, by your leave—"

"By all means, Sir Percy!" Chauvelin replied complacently. "At this moment you are a free man, because I happen to be alone and unarmed, and because this house is solidly built and my voice would not carry to the floor above. Also because you are so nimble that no doubt you could give me the slip long before Captain Boyer and his men came to my rescue. Yes, Sir Percy; for the moment you are a free man! Free to walk out of this house unharmed. But even now, you are not as free as you would wish to be, eh? You are free to despise me, to overwhelm me with lofty scorn, to sharpen your wits at my expense; but you are not free to indulge your desire to squeeze the life out of me, to shake me as you would a rat. And shall I tell you why? Because you know now that if at a certain hour of the day I do not pay my daily visit to Captain Boyer upstairs, he will shoot his prisoner without the least compunction."

Whereupon Blakeney threw up his head and laughed heartily.

"You are absolutely priceless, my dear M. Chambertin!" he said gaily. "But you really must put your cravat straight. It has once again become disarranged... in the heat of your oratory, no doubt.... Allow me to offer you a pin."

And with inimitable affectation, he took a pin out of his own cravat and presented it to Chauvelin, who, unable to control his wrath, jumped to his feet.

"Sir Percy—!" he snarled.

But Blakeney placed a gentle, firm hand upon his shoulder, forcing him to sit down again.

"Easy, easy, my friend," he said. "Do not, I pray you, lose that composure for which you are so justly famous. There! Allow me to arrange your cravat for you. A gentle tug here," he added, suiting the action to the word, "a delicate flick there, and you are the most perfectly cravatted man in France!"

"Your insults leave me unmoved, Sir Percy," Chauvelin broke in savagely, and tried to free himself from the touch of those slender, strong hands that wandered so uncomfortably in the vicinity of his throat.

"No doubt," Blakeney riposted lightly, "that they are as futile as your threats. One does not insult a cur, any more than one threatens Sir Percy Blakeney — what?"

"You are right there, Sir Percy. The time for threats has gone by. And since you appear so vastly entertained—"

"I am vastly entertained, my dear M. Chambertin! How can I help it, when I see before me a miserable shred of humanity who does not even know how to keep his tie straight or his hair smooth, calmly — or almost calmly — talking of — Let me see, what were you talking of, my amiable friend?"

"Of the hostage, Sir Percy, which we hold until the happy day when the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel is a prisoner in our hands."

"M, yes! He was that once before, was he not, my good sir? Then, too, you laid down mighty schemes for his capture."

"And we succeeded."

"By your usual amiable methods — lies, deceit, forgery. The latter has been useful to you this time too, eh?"

"What do you mean, Sir Percy?"

"You had need of the assistance of a fair lady for your schemes. She appeared disinclined to help you. So when her inconvenient lover, Bertrand Moncrif, was happily dragged away from her path, you forged a letter, which the lady rightly looked upon as an insult. Because of that letter, she nourished a comfortable amount of spite against me, and lent you her aid in the fiendish outrage for which you are about to receive punishment."

He had raised his voice slightly while he spoke, and Chauvelin cast an apprehensive glance in the direction of the door behind which he guessed that Theresia Cabarrus must be straining her ears to listen.

"A pretty story, Sir Percy," he said with affected coolness. "And one that does infinite credit to your imagination. It is mere surmise on your part."

"What, my friend? What is surmise? That you gave a letter to Madame de Fontenay which you had concocted, and which I had never written? Why, man," he added with a laugh, "I saw you do it!"

“You? Impossible!”

“More impossible things than that will happen within the next few days, my good sir. I was outside the window of Madame de Fontenay’s apartment during the whole of your interview with her. And the shutters were not as closely fastened as you would have wished. But why argue about it, my dear M. Chambertin, when you know quite well that I have given you a perfectly accurate exposé of the means which you employed to make a pretty and spoilt woman help you in your nefarious work?”

“Why argue, indeed?” Chauvelin retorted dryly. “The past is past. I’ll answer to my country, which you outrage by your machinations, for the methods which I employ to circumvent them. Your concern and mine, my gallant friend, is solely with the future — with the next four days, in fact... After which, either the Scarlet Pimpernel is in our hands, or Lady Blakeney will be put against the wall upstairs and summarily shot.”

Then only did something of his habitual lazy non-chalance go out of Blakeney’s attitude. Just for the space of a few seconds he drew himself up to his full magnificent height, and from the summit of his splendid audacity and the consciousness of his own power, he looked down at the mean, cringing figure of the enemy who had hurled this threat of death against the woman he worshipped. Chauvelin vainly tried to keep up some semblance of dignity; he tried to meet the glance which no longer mocked, and to close his ears to the voice which, sonorous and commanding, now threatened in its turn.

“And you really believe,” Sir Percy Blakeney said slowly and deliberately, “that you have the power to carry through your infamous schemes? That I — yes, I! — would allow you to come within measurable distance of their execution? Bah! my dear friend. You have learned nothing by past experience — not even this: that when you dared to lay your filthy hands upon Lady Blakeney, you and the whole pack of assassins who have terrorized this beautiful country far too long, struck the knell of your ultimate doom. You have dared to measure your strength against mine by perpetrating an outrage so monstrous in my sight that, to punish you, I — even I! — will sweep you off the face of the earth and send you to join the pack of unclean ghouls who have aided you in your crimes. After which — thank the Lord! — the earth, being purged of your presence, will begin to smell sweetly again.”

Chauvelin made a vain effort to laugh, to shrug his shoulders, to put on those airs of insolence which came so naturally to his opponent. No doubt the strain of this long interview with his enemy had told upon his nerves. Certain it is that at this moment, though he was conscious enough to rail inwardly at his own cowardice, he was utterly unable to move or to retort. His limbs felt heavy as lead, an icy shudder was coursing down his spine. It seemed in truth as if some uncanny ghoul had entered the dreary, dank apartment and with gaunt, invisible hand was tolling a silent passing bell — the death-knell of all his ambitions and all his hopes. He closed his eyes, for he felt giddy and sick. When he opened his eyes again he was alone.

Chapter XXVI

A Dream

1

Chauvelin had not yet regained full possession of his faculties, when a few seconds later he saw Theresia Cabarrus glide swiftly across the antechamber. She appeared to him like a ghost — a pixie who had found her way through a keyhole. But she threw him a glance of contempt that was very human, very feminine indeed, and the next moment she was gone.

Outside on the landing she paused. Straining her ears, she caught the sound of a firm footfall slowly descending the stairs. She ran down a few steps, then called softly:

“Milor!”

The footsteps paused, and a pleasant voice gave quiet reply:

“At your service, fair lady!”

Theresia, shrewd as well as brave, continued to descend. She was not in the least afraid. Instinct had told her before now that no woman need ever have the slightest fear of that elegant milor with the quaint laugh and gently mocking mien, whom she had learned to know over in England.

Midway down the stairs she came face to face with him, and when she paused, panting, a little breathless with excitement, he said with perfect courtesy:

“You did me the honour to call me, Madame?”

“Yes, milor,” she replied, in a quick, eager whisper. “I heard every word that passed between you and citizen Chauvelin.”

“Of course you did, dear lady,” he rejoined with a smile. “If a woman once resisted the temptation of putting a shell-like ear to a keyhole, the world would lose many a cause for entertainment.”

“That letter, milor—” she broke in impatiently.

“Which letter, Madame?”

“That insulting letter to me... when you took Moncrif away.... You never wrote it?”

“Did you really think that I did?” he retorted.

“No. I ought to have guessed... the moment that I saw you in England....”

“And realized that I was not a cad — what?”

“Oh, milor!” she protested. “But why — why did you not tell me before?”

“It had escaped my memory. And if I remember rightly, you spent most of the time when I had the honour of walking with you, in giving me elaborate and interesting accounts of your difficulties, and I, in listening to them.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed vehemently. “I hate that man! I hate him!”

“In truth, he is not a lovable personality. But, by your leave, I presume that you did not desire to speak with me so that we might discuss our friend Chauvelin’s amiable qualities.”

“No, no, milor!” she rejoined quickly. “I called to you because—”

Then she paused for a moment or two, as if to collect her thoughts. Her eager eyes strove to pierce the gloom that enveloped the figure of the bold adventurer. She could only see the dim outline of his powerful figure, the light from above striking on his smooth hair, the elegantly tied bow at the nape of his neck, the exquisite filmy lace at his throat and wrists. His head was slightly bent, one arm in a curve supported his chapeau-bras, his whole attitude was one befitting a salon rather than this dank hovel, where death was even now at his elbow; it was as cool and unperturbed as it had been on that May-day evening, in the hawthorn scented lanes of Kent.

“Milor,” she said abruptly, “you told me one — you remember? — that you were what you English call a sportsman. Is that so?”

“I hope always to remain that, dead lady,” he replied with a smile.

“Does that mean,” she queried, with a pretty air of deference and hesitation, “does that mean a man who would under no circumstances harm a woman?”

“I think so.”

“Now even if she — if she has sinned — transgressed against him?”

“I don’t quite understand, Madame,” he rejoined simply. “And, time being short — Are you perchance speaking of yourself?”

“Yes. I have done you an injury, milor.”

“A very great one indeed,” he assented gravely.

“Could you,” she pleaded, raising earnest, tear-filled eyes to his, “could you bring yourself to believe that I have been nothing but a miserable, innocent tool?”

“So was the lady upstairs innocent, Madame,” he broke in quietly.

“I know,” she retorted with a sigh. “I know. I would never dare to plead, as you must hate me so.”

He shrugged his shoulders with an air of carelessness.

“Oh!” he said. “Does a man every hate a pretty woman?”

“He forgives her, milor,” she entreated, “if he is a true sportsman.”

“Indeed? You astonish me, dear lady. But in verity you all in this unhappy country are full of surprises for a plain, blunt-headed Britisher. Now what, I wonder,” he added, with a light, good-humoured laugh, “would my forgiveness be worth to you?”

“Everything!” she replied earnestly. “I was deceived by that abominable liar, who knew how to play upon a woman’s pique. I am ashamed, wretched.... Oh, cannot you believe me? And I would give worlds to atone!”

He laughed in his quiet, gently ironical way.

"You do not happen to possess worlds, dear lady. All that you have is youth and beauty and ambition, and life. You would forfeit all those treasures if you really tried to atone."

"But—"

"Lady Blakeney is a prisoner.... You are her jailer.... Her precious life is the hostage for yours."

"Milor—" she murmured.

"From my heart, I wish you well, fair one," he broke in lightly. "Believe me, the pagan gods that fashioned you did not design you for tragedy... And if you ran counter to your friend Chauvelin's desires, I fear me that that pretty neck of yours would suffer. A thing to be avoided at all costs! And now," he added, "have I your permission to go? My position here is somewhat precarious, and for the next four days I cannot afford the luxury of entertaining so fine a lady, by running my head into a noose."

He was on the point of going when she placed a restraining hand upon his arm.

"Milor!" she pleaded.

"At your service, dear lady!"

"Is there naught I can do for you?"

He looked at her for a moment or two, and even through the gloom she caught his quizzical look and the mocking lines around his firm lips.

"You can ask Lady Blakeney to forgive you," he said, with a thought more seriousness than was habitual to him. "She is an angel; she might do it."

"And if she does?"

"She will know what to do, to convey her thoughts to me."

"Nay! but I'll do more than that, milor," Theresia continued excitedly. "I will tell her that I shall pray night and day for your deliverance and hers. I will tell her that I have seen you, and that you are well."

"Ah, if you did that—" he exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"You would forgive me, too?" she pleaded.

"I would do more than that, fair one. I would make you Queen of France, in all but name."

"What do you mean?" she murmured.

"That I would then redeem the promise which I made to you that evening, in the lane — outside Dover. Do you remember?"

She made no reply, closed her eyes; and her vivid fancy, rendered doubly keen by the mystery which seemed to encompass him as with a supernal mantle, conjured up the vision of that unforgettable evening: the moonlight, the scent of the hawthorn, the call of the thrush. She saw him stooping before her, and kissing her finger-tips, even whilst her ears recalled every word he had spoken and every inflexion of his mocking voice:

"Let me rather put it differently, dear lady," he had said then. "One day the exquisite Theresia Cabarrus, the Egeria of the Terrorists, the fiancée of the great Tallien, might need the help of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

And she, angered, piqued by his coolness, thirsting for revenge for the insult which she believed he had put upon her, had then protested earnestly:

"I would sooner die," she had boldly asserted, "than seek your help, milor!"

And now, at this hour, here in this house where Death lurked in every corner, she could still hear his retort:

"Here in Dover, perhaps.... But in France?"

How right he had been!... How right! She — who had thought herself so strong, so powerful — what was she indeed but a miserable tool in the hands of men who would break her without scruple if she ran counter to their will? Remorse was not for her — atonement too great a luxury for a tool of Chauvelin to indulge in. The black, hideous taint, the sin of having dragged this splendid man and that innocent woman to their death, must rest upon her soul for ever. Even now she was jeopardizing his life, every moment that she kept him talking in this house. And yet the impulse to speak with him, to hear him say a word of forgiveness, had been unconquerable. One moment she longed for him to go; the next she would have sacrificed much to keep him by her side. When he wished to go, she held him back. Now that, with his wonted careless disregard of danger, he appeared willing to linger, she sought for the right words wherewith to bid him go.

He seemed to divine her thoughts, remained quite still while she stood there with eyes closed, in one brief second reviewing the past. All! All! It all came back to her: her challenge to him, his laughing retort.

"You mean," she said at parting, "that you would risk your life to save mine?"

"I should not risk my life, dear lady," he had said, with his puzzling smile; "But I should — God help me! — do my best, if the need arose, to save yours."

Then he had gone, and she had stood under the porch of the quaint old English inn and watched his splendid figure as it disappeared down the street. She had watched, puzzled, uncomprehending, her heart already stirred by that sweet, sad ache which at this hour brought tears to her eyes — the aching sorrow of that which could never, never be. Ah! if it had been her good fortune to have come across such a man, to have aroused in him that admiration for herself which she so scorned in others, how different, how very different would life have been! And she fell to envying the poor prisoner upstairs, who owned the most precious treasure life can offer to any woman: the love of a fine man. Two hot tears came slowly through her closed eyes, coursing down her cheeks.

"Why so sad, dear lady?" he asked gently.

She could not speak for the moment, only murmured vaguely:

"Four days—"

"Four days," he retorted gaily, "as you say! In four days, either I or a pack of assassins will be dead."

"Oh, what will become of me?" she sighed.

"Whatever you choose."

"You are bold, milor," she rejoined more calmly. "And you are brave. Alas! what can you do, when the most powerful hands in France are against you?"

"Smite them, dear lady," he replied airily. "Smite them! Then turn my back upon this fair land. It will no longer have need of me." Then he made her a courteous bow. "May I have the honour of escorting you upstairs? Your friend M. Chauvelin will be awaiting you."

The name of her taskmaster brought Theresia back to the realities of life. Gone was the dream of a while ago, when subconsciously her mind had dwelt upon a sweet might-have-been. The man was nothing to her — less than nothing; a common spy, so her friends averred. Even if he had not presumed to write her an insulting letter, he was still the enemy — the foe whose hand was raised against her own country and against those with whose fortunes she had thrown in her lot. Even now, she ought to be calling loudly for help, rouse the house with her cries, so that this spy, this enemy, might be brought down before her eyes. Instead of which, she felt her heart beating with apprehension lest his quiet even voice be heard on the floor above, and he be caught in the snare which those who feared and hated him had laid for him.

Indeed, she appeared far more conscious of danger than he was; and while she chided herself for her folly in having called to him, he was standing before her as if he were in a drawing-room, holding out his arm to escort her in to dinner. His foot was on the step, ready to ascend, even whilst Theresia's straining ears caught the sound of other footsteps up above: footsteps of men — real men, those! — who were set up there to watch for the coming of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and whose vigilance had been spurred by promise of reward and by threat of death. She pushed his arm aside almost roughly.

"You are mad, milor!" she said, in a choked murmur. "Such foolhardiness, when your life is in deadly jeopardy, becomes criminal folly."

"The best of life," he said airily, "is folly. I would not miss this moment for a kingdom!"

She felt like a creature under a spell. He took her hand and drew it through his arm. She went up the steps beside him.

Every moment she thought that one or more of the soldiers would be coming down, or that Chauvelin, impatient at her absence, might step out upon the landing. The dank, murky air seemed alive with ominous whisperings, of stealthy treads upon the stone. Theresia dared not look behind her, fearful lest the grim presence of Death itself be suddenly made manifest before her.

On the landing he took leave of her, stooped and kissed her hand.

"Why, how cold it is!" he remarked with a smile.

His was perfectly steady and warm. The very feel of it seemed to give her strength. She raised her eyes to his.

"Milor," she entreated, "on my knees I beg of you not to toy with your life any longer."

"Toy with my life?" he retorted gaily. "Nothing is further from my thoughts."

"You must know that every second which you spend in this house is fraught with the greatest possible danger."

"Danger? Ne'er a bit, dear lady! I am no longer in danger, now that you are my friend."

The next moment he was gone. For awhile, Theresia's straining ears still caught the sound of his form footfall upon the stone steps. Then all was still; and she was left wondering if, in very truth, the last few minutes on the dark stairs had not all been part of a dream.

Chapter XXVII

Terror or Ambition

1

Chauvelin had sufficiently recovered from the emotions of the past half-hour to speak coolly and naturally to Theresia. Whether he knew that she had waylaid Sir Percy Blakeney on the stairs or no, she could not conjecture. He made no reference to his interview with the Scarlet Pimpernel, nor did he question her directly as to whether she had overheard what passed between them.

Certainly his attitude was a more dictatorial one than it had been before. Some of his first words to her contained a veiled menace. Whether the sense of coming triumph gave him a fresh measure of that arrogance which past failures had never wholly subdued, or whether terror for the future caused him to bluster and to threaten, it were impossible to say.

"Vigilance!" he said to Theresia, after a curt greeting. "Incessant vigilance, night and day, is what your country demands of you now, citizeness! All our lives now depend upon our vigilance."

"Yours perhaps, citizen," she rejoined coolly. "You seem to forget that I am not bound."

"You? Not bound?" he broke in roughly, and with a strident laugh. "Not bound to aid in bringing the most bitter enemy of your country to his knees? Not bound, now that success is in sight?"

"You only obtained my help by a subterfuge," she retorted; "by a forged letter and a villainous lie."

"Bah! Are you going to tell me, citizeness, that all means are not justifiable when dealing with those whose hands are raised against France? Forgery?" he went on, with passionate earnestness. "Why not? Outrage? Murder? I would commit every crime in order to serve the country which I love, and hound her enemies to death. The only crime that is unjustifiable, citizeness, is indifference. You? Not bound? Wait! Wait, I say! And if by your indifference or your apathy we fail once more to bring that elusive enemy to book, wait then until you stand at the bar of the people's tribunal, and in the face of France, who called to you for help, of France, who beset by a hundred foes, stretch appealing arms to you, her daughter, you turned a deaf ear to her entreaties, and, shrugging your fair shoulders, calmly pleaded, 'Bah! I was not bound!'"

He paused, carried away by his own enthusiasm, feeling perhaps that he had gone too far, or else had said enough to enforce the obedience which he exacted. After awhile, since Theresia remained silent too, he added more quietly:

"If we capture the Scarlet Pimpernel this time, citizeness, Robespierre shall know from my lips that it is to you and to you alone that he owes this triumph over the enemy whom he fears above all. Without you, I could not have set the trap out of which he cannot now escape."

"He can escape! He can!" she retorted defiantly. "The Scarlet Pimpernel is too clever, too astute, too audacious, to fall into your trap."

"Take care, citizeness, take care! Your admiration for that elusive hero carries you beyond the bounds of prudence."

"Bah! If he escapes, 'tis you who will be blamed."

"And 'tis you who will suffer, citizeness," he riposted blandly. With which parting shaft he left her certain that she would ponder over his threats as well as over his bold promise of a rich reward.

Terror and ambition! Death, or the gratitude of Robespierre! How well did Chauvelin gauge the indecision, the shallowness of a fickle woman's heart! Theresia, left to herself, had only those two alternatives over which to ponder. Robespierre's gratitude, which meant that the admiration which already he felt for her would turn to stronger passion. He was still heart-whole, that she knew. The regard which he was supposed to feel for the humble cabinet-maker's daughter could only be a passing fancy. The dictator of France must choose a mate worthy of his power and of his ambition; his friends would see to that. Robespierre's gratitude! What a vista of triumphs and of glory did that eventuality open up before her, what dizzy heights of satisfied ambition! And what a contrast if Chauvelin's scheme failed in the end!

"Wait," he had cried, "until you stand at the bar of the people's tribunal and plead indifference!"

Theresia shuddered. Despite the close atmosphere of the apartment, she was shivering with cold. Her loneliness, her isolation, here in this house, where an appalling and grim tragedy was even now in preparation, filled her with sickening dread. Overhead she could hear the soldiers moving about, and in one of the rooms close by her sensitive ear caught the sound of Mother Théot's shuffling tread.

But the sound that was most insistent, that hammered away at her heart until she could have screamed with the pain, was the echo of a lazy, somewhat inane laugh and of a gently mocking voice that said lightly:

"The best of life is folly, dear lady. I would not miss this moment for a kingdom."

Her hand went up to her throat to smother the sobs that would rise up against her will. Then she called all her self-control, all her ambition, to her aid. This present mood was sentimental nonsense, an abyss created by an over-sensitive heart, into which she might be falling headlong. What was this Englishman to her that thought of his death should prove such mental agony? As for him, he only laughed at her; despised her still, probably; hated her for the injury she had done to that woman upstairs whom he loved.

Impatient to get away from this atmosphere of tragedy and of mysticism which was preying on her nerves, Theresia called peremptorily to Mother Théot, and when the old woman came shuffling out of her room, demanded her cloak and hood.

"Have you seen aught of citizen Moncriff?" she asked, just before going away.

"I caught sight of him over the way," Catherine Théot replied, "watching this house, as he always does when you, citizeness, are in it."

"Ah!" the imperious beauty retorted, with a thought of spite in her mellow voice. "Would you could give him a potion, Mother, to cure him of his infatuation for me!"

"Despise no man's love, citizeness," the witch retorted sententiously. "Even that poor vagabond's blind passion may yet prove thy salvation."

A moment or two later Theresia was once more on the dark stairs where she had dreamed of the handsome milor. She sighed as she ran swiftly down — sighed, and looked half-fearfully about her. She still felt his presence through the gloom; and in the ghostly light that feebly illumined the corner whereon he had stood, she still vaguely saw in spirit his tall straight figure, stooping whilst he kissed her hand. At one moment she was quite sure that she heard his voice and the echo of his pleasant laugh.

Down below, Bertrand Moncrif was waiting for her, silent, humble, with the look of a faithful watch-dog upon his pale, wan face.

“You make yourself ill, my poor Bertrand,” Theresia said, not unkindly, seeing that he stood aside to let her pass, fearful of a rebuff if he dared speak to her. “I am in no danger, I assure you; and this constant dogging of my footsteps can do no good to you or to me.”

“But it can do no harm,” he pleaded earnestly. “Something tells me, Theresia, that danger does threaten you, unbeknown to you, from a quarter least expected.”

“Bah!” she retorted lightly. “And if it did, you could not avert it.”

He made a desperate effort to check the words of passionate protestations which rose to his lips. He longed to protect her from harm, how happy he would be if he might die for her. But obviously he dared not say what lay nearest to his heart. All he could do now was to talk silently by her side as far as her lodgings in the Rue Villedot, grateful for this small privilege, uncomplaining and almost happy because she tolerated his presence, and because while she walked the ends of her long scarf stirred by the breeze would now and again flutter against his cheek.

Miserable Bertrand! He had laden his soul with an abominable crime for this woman’s sake; and he had not even the satisfaction of feeling that she gave him an infinitesimal measure of gratitude.

Chapter XXVIII

In the Meanwhile

1

Chauvelin, who, despite his many failures, was still one of the most conspicuous — since he was one of the most unscrupulous — members of the Committee of Public Safety, had not attended its sittings for some days. He had been too deeply absorbed in his own schemes to trouble about those of his colleagues. In truth, the coup which he was preparing was so stupendous, and if it succeeded his triumph would be so magnificent, that he could well afford to hold himself aloof. Those who were still inclined to scorn and to scoff at him to-day would be his most cringing sycophants on the morrow.

He knew well enough — none better — that during this time the political atmosphere in the Committees and the Clubs was nothing short of electrical. He felt, as every one did, that something catastrophic was in the air, that death, more self-evident than ever before, lurked at every man's elbow, and stalked round the corner of every street.

Robespierre, the tyrant, the autocrat whose mere word swayed the multitude, remained silent and impenetrable, absent from every gathering. He only made brief appearances at the Convention, and there sat moody and self-absorbed. Every one knew that this man, dictator in all but name, was meditating a Titanic attack upon his enemies. His veiled threats, uttered during his rare appearances at the speaker's tribune, embraced even the most popular, the most prominent, amongst the representatives of the people. Every one, in fact, who was likely to stand in his way when he was ready to snatch the supreme power. His intimates — Couthon, St. Just, and the others — openly accused of planning a dictatorship for their chief, hardly took the trouble to deny the impeachment, even whilst Tallien and his friends, feeling that the tyrant had already decreed their doom, went about like ghostly shadows, not daring to raise their voice in the Convention lest the first word they uttered brought down the sword of his lustful wrath upon their heads.

The Committee of Public Safety — now re-named the Revolutionary Committee — strove on the other hand by a recrudescence of cruelty to ingratiate itself with the potential dictator and to pose before the people as alone pure and incorruptible, blind in justice, inexorable where the safety of the Republic was concerned. Thus an abominable emulation of vengeance and of persecution went on between the Committee and Robespierre's party, wherein neither side could afford to give in, for fear of being accused of apathy and of moderation.

Chauvelin, for the most part, had kept out of the turmoil. He felt that in his hands lay the destiny of either party. His one thought was of the Scarlet Pimpernel and of his imminent capture, knowing that, with the most inveterate opponent of revolutionary excesses in his hands, he would within an hour be in a position to link his triumph with one or the other of the parties — either with Robespierre and his herd of butchers, or with Tallien and the Moderates.

He was the mysterious and invisible *deus ex machina*, who anon, when it suited his purpose, would reveal himself in his full glory as the man who had tracked down and brought to the guillotine the most dangerous enemy of the revolutionary government. And, so easily is a multitude swayed, that that one fact would bring him popularity transcending that of every other man in France. He, Chauvelin, the despised, the derided, whose name had become synonymous with Failure, would then with a word sweep those aside who had mocked him, hurl his enemies from their pedestals, and name at will the rulers of France All within four days!

And of these, two had gone by.

2

These days in mid-July had been more than usually sultry. It seemed almost as if Nature had linked herself with the passions of men, and hand in hand with Vengeance, Lust and Cruelty, had rendered the air hot and heavy with the presage of on-coming storm.

For Marguerite Blakeney these days had gone by like a nightmare. Cut off from all knowledge of the outside world, without news from her husband for the past forty-eight hours, she was enduring mental agony such as would have broken a weaker or less trusting spirit.

Two days ago she had received a message, a few lines hastily scribbled by an unknown hand, and brought to her by the old woman who waited upon her.

"I have seen him," the message said. "He is well and full of hope. I pray God for your deliverance and his, but help can only come by a miracle."

The message was written in a feminine hand, with no clue as to the writer.

Since then, nothing.

Marguerite had not seen Chauvelin again, for which indeed she thanked Heaven on her knees. But every day at a given hour she was conscious of his presence outside her door. She heard his voice in the vestibule: there would be a word or two of command, the grounding of arms, then some whispered talking; and presently Chauvelin's stealthy footstep would slink up to her door. And Marguerite would remain still as a mouse that scents the presence of a cat, holding her breath, life almost at a standstill in this agony of expectation.

The remainder of the day time hung with a leaden weight on her hands. She was given no books to read, not a needle wherewith to busy herself. She had no one to speak to save old Mother Théot, who waited on her and brought her her meals, nearly always in silence, and with a dour mien which checked any attempt at conversation.

For company, the unfortunate woman had nothing but her own thoughts, her fears which grew in intensity, and her hopes which were rapidly dwindling, as hour followed hour and day succeeded day in dreary monotony. No sound around her save the incessant tramp, tramp of sentries at her door, and every two hours the changing of the guard in the vestibule outside; then the whispered

colloquies, the soldiers playing at cards or throwing dice, the bibulous songs, the ribald laughter, the obscene words flung aloud like bits of filthy rag; the life, in fact, that revolved around her jailers and seemed at a standstill within her prison walls.

In the late afternoons the air would become insufferably hot, and Marguerite would throw open the window and sit beside it, her gaze fixed upon the horizon far away, her hands lying limp and moist upon her lap.

Then she would fall to dreaming. Her thoughts, swifter than flight of swallows, would cross the sea and go roaming across country to her stately home in Richmond, where at this house the moist, cool air was fragrant with the scent of late roses and of lime blossom, and the murmur of the river lapping the mossy bank whispered of love and of peace. In her dream she would see the tall figure of her beloved coming toward her. The sunset was playing upon his smooth hair and upon his strong, slender hands, always outstretched toward the innocent and the weak. She would hear his dear voice calling her name, feel his arms around her, and her senses swooning in the ecstasy of that perfect moment which comes just before a kiss.

She would dream... only to wake up the next moment to hear the church clock of St. Antoine striking seven, and a minute or two later that ominous shuffling footstep outside her door, those whisperings, the grounding of arms, a burst of cruel laughter, which brought her from the dizzy heights of illusive happiness back to the hideous reality of her own horrible position, and of the deadly danger which lay in wait for her beloved.

Chapter XXIX

The Close of the Second Day

1

Soon after seven o'clock that evening the storm which had threatened all day burst in its full fury. A raging gale tore at the dilapidated roofs of this squalid corner of the great city, and lashed the mud of the streets into miniature cascades. Soon the rain fell in torrents; one clap of thunder followed on another with appalling rapidity, and the dull, leaden sky was rent with vivid flashes of lightning.

Chauvelin, who had paid his daily visit to the Captain in charge of the prisoner in the Rue de la Planchette, was unable to proceed homewards. Wrapped in his cloak, he decided to wait in the disused storage-room below until it became possible for an unfortunate pedestrian to sally forth into the open.

There seems no doubt that at this time the man's very soul was on the rack. His nerves were stretched to breaking point, not only by incessant vigilance, by obsession of the one idea, the one aim, but also by multifarious incidents which his overwrought imagination magnified into attempts to rob him of his prey.

He trusted no one — not Mother Théot, not the men upstairs, not Theresia: least of all Theresia. And his tortured brain invented and elaborated schemes whereby he set one set of spies to watch another, one set of sleuthhounds to run after another, in a kind of vicious and demoniac circle of mistrust and denunciation. Nor did he trust himself any longer: neither his instinct nor his eyes, nor his ears. His intimates — and he had very few of these — said of him at that time that, if he had his way, he would have had every tatterdemalion in the city branded, like Rateau, lest they were bribed or tempted into changing identities with the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Whilst waiting for a lull in the storm, he was pacing up and down the dank and murky storage house, striving by febrile movements to calm his nerves. Shivering, despite the closeness of the atmosphere, he kept the folds of his mantle closely wrapped around his shoulders.

It was impossible to keep the outer doors open, because the rain beat in wildly on that side, and the place would have been in utter darkness but for an old grimy lantern which some prudent hand had set up on a barrel in the centre of the vast space, and which shed a feeble circle of light around. The latch of the wicket appeared to be broken, for the small door, driven by the wind, flapped backwards and forwards with irritating ceaselessness. At one time Chauvelin tried to improvise some means of fastening it, for the noise helped to exacerbate his nerves and, leaning out into the street in order to seize hold of the door, he saw the figure of a man, bent nearly double in the teeth of the gale, shuffling across the street from the direction of the Porte St. Antoine.

It was then nearly eight o'clock, and the light treacherous, but despite the veil of torrential rain which intervene between him and that shuffling figure, something in the gait, the stature, the stoop of the wide, bony shoulders, appeared unpleasantly familiar. The man's head and shoulders were wrapped in a tattered piece of sacking, which he held close to his chest. His arms were bare, as were his shins, and on his feet he had a pair of sabots stuffed with straw.

Midway across the street he paused, and a tearing fit of coughing seemed to render him momentarily helpless. Chauvelin's first instinct prompted him to run to the stairs and to call for assistance from the Captain Boyer. Indeed, he was half-way up to the first floor when, looking down, he saw that the man had entered the place through the wicket-door. Still coughing and spluttering, he had divested himself of his piece of sacking and was crouching down against the barrel in the centre of the room and trying to warm his hands by holding them against the glass sides of the old lantern.

From where he stood, Chauvelin could see the dim outline of the man's profile, the chin ornamented with a three-days' growth of beard, the lank hair plastered above the pallid forehead, the huge bones, coated with grime, that protruded through the rags that did duty for a shirt. The sleeves of this tattered garment hung away from the arm, displaying a fiery, inflamed weal, shaped like the letter "M," that had recently been burned into the flesh with a branding iron.

The sight of that mark upon the vagabond's arm caused Chauvelin to pause a moment, then to come down the stairs again.

"Citizen Rateau!" he called.

The man jumped as if he had been struck with a whip, tried to struggle to his feet, but collapsed on the floor, while a terrible fit of coughing took his breath away. Chauvelin, standing beside the barrel, looked down with a grim smile on this miserable wreckage of humanity whom he had so judiciously put out of the way of further mischief. The dim flicker of the lantern illumine the gaunt, bony arm, so that the charred flesh stood out like a crimson, fiery string against a coating of grime.

Rateau appeared terrified, scared by the sudden apparition of the man who had inflicted the shameful punishment upon him. Chauvelin's face, lighted from below by the lantern, did indeed appear grim and forbidding. Some few seconds elapsed before the coalheaver had recovered sufficiently to stand on his feet.

"I seem to have scared you, my friend," Chauvelin remarked dryly.

"I — I did not know," Rateau stammered with a painful wheeze, "that anyone was here... I came for shelter..."

"I am here for shelter, too," Chauvelin rejoined, "and did not see you enter."

"Mother Théot allows me to sleep here," Rateau went on mildly. "I have had no work for two days... not since..." And he looked down ruefully upon his arm. "People think I am an escaped felon," he explained with snivelling timidity. "And as I have always lived just from hand to mouth..."

He paused, and cast an obsequious glance on the Terrorist, who retorted dryly:

"Better men than you, my friend, live from hand to mouth these days. Poverty," he continued with grim sarcasm, "exalts a man in this glorious revolution of ours. 'Tis riches that shame him."

Rateau's branded arm went up to his lanky hair, and he scratched his head dubiously.

"Aye," he nodded, obviously uncomprehending; "perhaps! But I'd like to taste some of that shame!"

Chauvelin shrugged his shoulders and turned on his heel. The thunder sounded a little more distant and the rain less violent for the moment, and he strode toward the door.

"The children run after me now," Rateau continued dolefully. "In my quartier, the concierge turned me out of my lodging. They keep asking me what I have done to be branded like a convict."

Chauvelin laughed.

"Tell them you've been punished for serving the English spy," he said.

"The Englishman paid me well, and I am very poor," Rateau retorted meekly. "I could serve the State now... if it would pay me well."

"Indeed? How?"

"By telling you something, citizen, which you would like to know."

"What is it?"

At once the instinct of the informer, of the sleuthhound, was on the qui vive. The coalheaver's words, the expression of cunning on his ugly face, the cringing obsequiousness of his attitude, all suggested the spirit of intrigue, of underhand dealing, of lies and denunciations, which were as the breath of life to this master-spy. He retraced his steps, came and sat upon a pile of rubbish beside the barrel, and when Rateau, terrified apparently at what he had said, made a motion as if to slink away, Chauvelin called him back peremptorily.

"What is it, citizen Rateau," he said curtly, "that you could tell me, and that I would like to know?"

Rateau was cowering in the darkness, trying to efface his huge bulk and to smother his rasping cough.

"You have said too much already," Chauvelin went on harshly, "to hold your tongue. And you have nothing to fear... everything to gain. What is it?"

For a moment Rateau leaned forward, struck the ground with his fist.

"Am I to be paid this time?" he asked.

"If you speak the truth — yes."

"How much?"

"That depends on what you tell me. And now, if you hold your tongue, I shall call to the citizen Captain upstairs and send you to jail."

The coalheaver appeared to crouch yet further into himself. He looked like a huge, shapeless mass in the gloom. His huge yellow teeth could be heard chattering.

"Citizen Tallien will send me to the guillotine," he murmured.

"What has citizen Tallien to do with it?"

"He pays great attention to the citoyenne Cabarrus."

"And it is about her?"

Rateau nodded.

"What is it?" Chauvelin reiterated harshly.

"She is playing you false, citizen," Rateau murmured in a hoarse breath, and crawled like a long, bulky worm a little closer to the Terrorist.

"How?"

"She is in league with the Englishman."

"How do you know?"

"I saw her here... two days ago.... You remember, citizen... after you..."

"Yes, yes!" Chauvelin cried impatiently.

"Sergeant Chazot took me to the cavalry barracks.... They gave me to drink... and I don't remember much what happened. But when I was myself again, I know that my arm was very sore, and when I looked down I saw this awful mark on it.... I was just outside the Arsenal then.... How I got there I don't know.... I suppose Sergeant Chazot brought me back.... He says I was howling for Mother Théot.... She has marvellous salves, you know, citizen."

"Yes, yes!"

"I came in here.... My head still felt very strange... and my arm felt like living fire. Then I heard voices... they came from the stairs.... I looked about me, and saw them standing there...."

Rateau, leaning upon one arm, stretched out the other and pointed to the stairs, Chauvelin, with a violent gesture, seized him by the wrist.

"Who?" he queried harshly. "Who was standing there?"

His glance followed the direction in which the coalheaver was pointing, then instinctively wandered back and fastened on that fiery letter "M" which had been seared into the vagabond's flesh.

"The Englishman and citoyenne Cabarrus," Rateau replied feebly, for he had winced with pain under the excited grip of the Terrorist.

"You are certain?"

"I heard them talking—"

"What did they say?"

"I do not know.... But I saw the Englishman kiss the citoyenne's hand before they parted."

"And what happened after that?"

"The citoyenne went to Mother Théot's apartment and the Englishman came down the stairs. I had just time to hide behind that pile of rubbish. He did not see me."

Chauvelin uttered a savage curse of disappointment.

"Is that all?" he exclaimed.

“The State will pay me?” Rateau murmured vaguely.

“Not a sou!” Chauvelin retorted roughly. “And if citizen Tallien hears this pretty tale...”

“I can swear to it?”

“Bah! Citoyenne Cabarrus will swear that you lied. ‘Twill be her word against that of a mudlark!”

“Nay!” Rateau retorted. “‘Twill be more than that.”

“What then?”

“Will you sweat to protect me, citizen, if citizen Tallien-”

“Yes, yes! I’ll protect you.... And the guillotine has no time to trouble about suck muck-worms as you!”

“Well, then, citizen,” Rateau went on in a hoarse murmur, “if you will go to the citoyenne’s lodgings in the Rue Villedot, I can show you where the Englishman hides the clothes wherewith he disguises himself... and the letters which he writes to the citoyenne when...”

He paused, obviously terrified at the awesome expression of the other man’s face. Chauvelin had allowed the coalheaver’s wrist to drop out of his grasp. He was sitting quite still, silent and grim, his thin, claw-like hands closely clasped together and held between his knees. The flickering light of the lanthorn distorted his narrow face, lengthened the shadows beneath the nose and chin, threw a high light just below the brows, so that the pale eyes appeared to gleam with an unnatural flame. Rateau hardly dared to move. He lay like a huge bundle of rags in the inky blackness beyond the circle of light projected by the lanthorn; his breath came and went with a dragging, hissing sound, now and then broken by a painful cough.

For a moment or two there was silence in the great disused store-room — a silence broken only by the thunder, dull and distant now, and the ceaseless, monotonous patter of the rain. Then Chauvelin murmured between his teeth:

“If I thought that she...” But he did not complete the sentence, jumped to his feet and approached the big mass of rags and humanity that cowered in the gloom. “Get up, citizen Rateau!” he commanded.

The asthmatic giant struggled to his knees. His wooden shoes had slipped off his feet. He groped for them, and with trembling hands contrived to put them on again.

“Get up!” Chauvelin reiterated, with a snarl like an angry tiger.

He took a small tablet and a leaden point from his pocket, and stooping toward the light he scribbled a few words, and then handed the tablet to Rateau.

“Take this over to the Commissary of the Section in the Place du Carrousel. Half a dozen men and a captain will be detailed to go with you to the lodgings of the citoyenne Cabarrus in the Rue Villedot. You will find me there. Go!”

Rateau’s hand trembled visibly as he took the tablets. He was obviously terrified at what he had done. But Chauvelin paid no further heed to him. He had given him his orders, knowing well that they would be obeyed. The man had gone too far to draw back. It never entered Chauvelin’s head that the coalheaver might have lied. He had no cause for spite against the citoyenne Cabarrus, and the fair Spaniard stood on too high a pinnacle of influence for false denunciations to touch her. The Terrorist waited until Rateau had quietly slunk out by the wicket door; then he turned on his heel and quickly went up the stairs.

2

In the vestibule on the top floor he called to Capitaine Boyer.

“Citizen Captain,” he said at the top of his voice, “You remember that to-morrow eve is the end of the third day?”

“Pardi!” the Captain retorted gruffly. “Is anything changed?”

“No.”

“Then, unless by the eve of the fourth day that cursed Englishman is not in our hands, my orders are the same.”

“Your orders are,” Chauvelin rejoined loudly, and pointed with grim intention at the door behind which he felt Marguerite Blakeney to be listening for every sound, “unless the English spy is in our hands on the evening of the fourth day, to shoot your prisoner.”

“It shall be done, citizen!” Captain Boyer gave reply.

Then he grinned maliciously, because from behind the closed door there had come a sound like a quickly smothered cry.

After which, Chauvelin nodded to the Captain and once more descended the stairs. A few seconds later he went out of the house into the stormy night.

Chapter XXX

When the Storm Burst

1

Fortunately the storm only broke after the bulk of the audience was inside the theatre. The performance was timed to commence at seven, and a quarter of an hour before that time the citizens of Paris who had come to applaud citoyenne Vestris, citoyen Talma, and their colleagues, in Chénier's tragedy, *Henri VIII*, were in their seats.

The theatre in the Rue de Richelieu was crowded. Talma and Vestris had always been great favourites with the public, and more so perhaps since their secession from the old and reactionary Comédie Française. Citizen Chénier's tragedy was in truth of a very poor order; but the audience was not disposed to be critical, and there was quite an excited hush in the house when citoyenne Vestris, in the part of "Anne de Boulen," rolled off the meretricious verses:

"Trop longtemps j'ai gardé le silence;

Le poids qui m'accablait tombe avec violence."

But little was heard of the storm which raged outside; only at times the patter of the rain on the domed roof became unpleasantly apparent as an inharmonious accompaniment to the declamation of the actors.

It was a brilliant evening, not only because citoyenne Vestris was in magnificent form, but also because of the number of well-known people who sat in the various boxes and in the parterre and who thronged the foyer during the entr'actes.

It seemed as if the members of the Convention and those who sat upon the Revolutionary Committees, as well as the more prominent speakers in the various Clubs, had made a point of showing themselves to the public, gay, unconcerned, interested in the stage and in the audience, at this moment when every man's head was insecure upon his shoulders and no man knew whether on reaching home he would not find a posse of the National Guard waiting to convey him to the nearest prison.

Death indeed lurked everywhere.

The evening before, at a supper party given in the house of deputy Barrère, a paper was said to have dropped out of Robespierre's coat pocket, and been found by one of the guests. The paper contained nothing but just forty names. What those names were the general public did not know, nor for what purpose the dictator carried the list about in his pocket; but during the representation of *Henri VIII*, the more obscure citizens of Paris — happy in their own insignificance — noted that in the foyer during the entr'actes, citizen Tallien and his friends appeared obsequious, whilst those who fawned upon Robespierre were more than usually arrogant.

2

In one of the proscenium boxes, citizeness Cabarrus attracted a great deal of attention. Indeed, her beauty to-night was in the opinion of most men positively dazzling. Dressed with almost ostentatious simplicity, she drew all eyes upon her by her merry, ringing laughter, the ripple of conversation which flowed almost incessantly from her lips, and the graceful, provocative gestures of her bare hands and arms as she toyed with a miniature fan.

Indeed, Theresia Cabarrus was unusually light-hearted to-night. Sitting during the first two acts of the tragedy in her box, in the company of citizen Tallien, she became the cynosure of all eyes, proud and happy when, during the third interval, she received the visit of Robespierre.

He only stayed with her a few moments, and kept himself concealed for the most part at the back of the box; but he had been seen to enter, and Theresia's exclamation, "Ah, citizen Robespierre! What a pleasant surprise! 'Tis not often you grace the theatre with your presence!" had been heard all over the house.

Indeed, with the exception of Eleonore Duplay, whose passionate admiration he rather accepted than reciprocated, the incorruptible and feline tyrant had never been known to pay attention to any woman. Great therefore was Theresia's triumph. Visions of that grandeur which she had always coveted and to which she had always felt herself predestined, danced before her eyes; and remembering Chauvelin's prophecies and Mother Théot's incantations, she allowed the dream-picture of the magnificent English milord to fade slowly from her ken, bidding it a reluctant adieu.

Though in her heart she still prayed for his deliverance — and did it with a passionate earnestness — some impish demon would hover at her elbow and repeat in her unwilling ear Chauvelin's inspired words: "Bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to his knees at the chariot-wheel of Robespierre, and the crown of the Bourbons will be yours for the asking." And if, when she thought of that splendid head falling under the guillotine, a pang of remorse and regret shot through her heart, she turned with a seductive smile to the only man who could place that crown at her feet. His popularity was still at its zenith. To-night, whenever the audience caught sight of him in the Cabarrus' box, a wild cheer rang out from gallery to pit of the house. Then Theresia would lean over to him and whisper insinuatingly:

"You can do anything with that crowd, citizen! You hold the people by the magnetism of your presence and of your voice. There is no height to which you cannot aspire."

"The greater the height," he murmured moodily, "the dizzier the fall..."

"'Tis on the summit you should gaze," she retorted; "not on the abyss below."

"I prefer to gaze into the loveliest eyes in Paris," he replied with a clumsy attempt at gallantry; "and remain blind to the summits as well as to the depths."

She tapped her daintily shod foot against the ground and gave an impatient little sigh. It seemed as if at every turn of fortune she was confronted with pusillanimity and indecision. Tallien fawning on Robespierre; Robespierre afraid of Tallien; Chauvelin a prey to nerves. How different to them all was that cool, self-possessed Englishman with the easy good-humour and splendid self-assurance!

"I would make you Queen of France in all but name!" He said this as easily, as unconcerned as if he were promising an invitation to a rout.

When, a moment or two later, Robespierre took leave of her and she was left for a while alone with her thoughts, Theresia no longer tried to brush away from her mental vision the picture on which her mind loved to dwell. The tall, magnificent figure; the lazy, laughing eyes; the slender hand that looked so firm and strong amidst the billows of exquisite lace.

Ah, well! The dream was over! It would never come again. He himself had awakened her; he himself had cast the die which must end his splendid life, even at the hour when love and fortune smiled at him through the lips and eyes of beautiful Cabarrus.

Fate, in the guise of the one man she could have loved, was throwing Theresia into the arms of Robespierre.

3

The next moment she was rudely awakened from her dreams. The door of her box was torn open by a violent hand, and turning, she saw Bertrand Moncrif, hatless, with hair dishevelled, clothes dripping and mud-stained, and linen soaked through. She was only just in time to arrest with a peremptory gesture the cry which was obviously hovering on his lips.

"Hush — sh — sh!" came at once from every portion of the audience, angered by this disturbing noise.

Tallien jumped to his feet.

"What is it?" he demanded in a quick whisper.

"A perquisition," Moncrif replied hurriedly, "in the house of the citoyenne!"

"Impossible!" she broke in harshly.

"Hush!... Silence!" the audience muttered audibly.

"I come from there," Moncrif murmured. "I have seen... heard..."

"Come outside," Theresia interjected. "We cannot talk here."

She led the way out, and Tallien and Moncrif followed.

The corridor fortunately was deserted. Only a couple of ouvreuses stood gossiping in a corner. Theresia, white to the lips — but more from anger than fear — dragged Moncrif with her to the foyer. Here there was no one.

"Now, tell me!" she commanded.

Bertrand passed his trembling hand through his soaking hair. His clothes were wet through. He was shaking from head to foot and appeared to have run till now he could scarcely stand.

"Tell me!" Theresia reiterated impatiently.

Tallien stood by, half paralysed with terror. He did not question the younger man, but gazed on him with compelling, horror-filled eyes, as if he would wrench the words out of him before they reached his throat.

"I was in the Rue Villedot," Moncrif stammered breathlessly at last, "when the storm broke. I sought shelter under the portico of a house opposite the citoyenne's lodgings.... I was there a long time. Then the storm subsided.... Men in uniform came along.... They were soldiers of the National Guard... I could see that, though the street was pitch-dark.... They passed quite close to me.... They were talking of the citoyenne.... Then they crossed over to her lodgings.... I saw them enter the house.... I saw citizen Chauvelin in the doorway.... He chided them for being late.... There was a captain, and there were six soldiers, and that asthmatic coalheaver was with them."

"What!" Theresia exclaimed. "Rateau?"

"What in Satan's name does it all mean?" Tallien exclaimed with a savage curse.

"They went into the house," Moncrif went on, his voice rasping through his parched throat. "I followed at a little distance, to make quite sure before I came to warn you. Fortunately I knew where you were... fortunately I always know..."

"You are sure they went up to my rooms?" Theresia broke in quickly.

"Yes. Two minutes later I saw a light in your apartment."

She turned abruptly to Tallien.

"My cloak!" she commanded. "I left it in the box."

He tried to protest.

"I am going," she rejoined firmly. "This is some ghastly mistake, for which that fiend Chauvelin shall answer with his life. My cloak!"

It was Bertrand who went back for the cloak and wrapped her in it. He knew — none better — that if his divinity desire to go, no power on earth would keep her back. She did not appear in the least afraid, but her wrath was terrible to see, and boded ill to those who had dared provoke it. Indeed, Theresia, flushed with her recent triumph and with Robespierre's rare if clumsy gallantries still ringing in her ear, felt ready to dare anything, to brave anyone — even Chauvelin and his threats. She even succeeded in reassuring Tallien, ordered him to remain in the theatre, and to show himself to the public as utterly unconcerned.

"In case a rumour of this outrage penetrates to the audience," she said, "you must appear to make light of it.... Nay! you must at once threaten reprisals against its perpetrators."

Then she wrapped her cloak about her and, taking Bertrand's arm, she hurried out of the theatre.

Chapter XXXI

Our Lady of Pity

1

It was like an outraged divinity in the face of sacrilege that Theresia Cabarrus appeared in the antechamber of her apartment, ten minutes later.

Her rooms were full of men; sentries were at the door; the furniture was overturned, the upholstery ripped up, cupboard doors swung open; even her bed and bedding lay in a tangled heap upon the floor. The lights in the rooms were dim, one single lamp shedding its feeble rays from the antechamber into the living-room, whilst another flickered on a wall-bracket in the passage. In the bedroom the maid Pepita, guarded by a soldier, was loudly lamenting and cursing in voluble Spanish.

Citizen Chauvelin was standing in the centre of the living-room, intent on examining some papers. In a corner of the antechamber cowered the ungainly figure of Rateau the coalheaver.

Theresia took in the whole tragic picture at a glance; then with a proud, defiant toss of the head she swept past the soldiers in the antechamber and confronted Chauvelin, before he had time to notice her approach.

"Something has turned your brain, citizen Chauvelin," she said coolly. "What is it?"

He looked up, encountered her furious glance, and at once made her a profound, ironical bow.

"How wise was our young friend there to tell you of our visit, citoyenne," he said suavely.

And he looked with mild approval in the direction where Bertrand Moncrif stood between two soldiers, who had quickly barred his progress and were holding him tightly by the wrists.

"I came," Theresia retorted harshly, "as the forerunner of those who will know how to punish this outrage, citizen Chauvelin."

Once more he bowed, smiling blandly.

"I shall be as ready to receive them," he said quietly, "as I am gratified to see the citoyenne Cabarrus. When they come, shall I direct them to call and see their beautiful Egeria at the Conciergerie, whither we shall have the honour to convey her immediately?"

Theresia threw back her head and laughed; but her voice sounded hard and forced.

"At the Conciergerie?" she exclaimed. "I?"

"Even you, citoyenne," Chauvelin replied.

"On what charge, I pray you?" she demanded, with biting sarcasm.

"Of trafficking with the enemies of the Republic."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are mad, citizen Chauvelin!" she riposted with perfect sang-froid. "I pray you, order your men to re-establish order to my apartment; and remember that I will hold you responsible for any damage that has been done."

"Shall I also," Chauvelin rejoined with equally perfect equanimity, "replace these letters and other interesting objects, there where we found them?"

"Letters?" she retorted, frowning. "What letters?"

"These, citoyenne," he replied, and held up to her gaze the papers which he had in his hand.

"What are they? I have never seen them before."

"Nevertheless, we found them in that bureau." And Chauvelin pointed to a small piece of furniture which stood against the wall, and the drawers of which had obviously been forcibly torn open. Then as Theresia remained silent, apparently ununderstanding, he went on suavely: "They are letters written at different times to Mme de Fontenay, née Cabarrus — Our Lady of Pity, as she was called by grateful Bordeaux."

"By whom?" she asked.

"By the interesting hero of romance who is known to the world as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"It is false!" she retorted firmly. "I have never received a letter from him in my life!"

"His handwriting is all too familiar to me, citoyenne; and the letters are addressed to you."

"It is false!" she reiterated with unabated firmness. "This is some devilish trick you have devised in order to ruin me. But take care, citizen Chauvelin, take care! If this is a trial of strength 'twixt you and me, the next few hours will show who will gain the day."

"If it were a trial of strength 'twixt you and me, citoyenne," he rejoined blandly, "I would already be a vanquished man. But it is France this time who has challenged a traitor. That traitor is Theresia Fontenay, née Cabarrus. The trial of strength is between her and France."

"You are mad, citizen Chauvelin! If there were letters writ by the Scarlet Pimpernel found in my rooms, 'tis you who put them there!"

"That statement you will be at liberty to substantiate to-morrow, citoyenne," he retorted coldly, "at the bar of the revolutionary tribunal. There, no doubt, you can explain away how citizen Rateau knew of the existence of those letters, and led me straight to their discovery. I have an officer of the National Guard, the commissary of the section, and half a dozen men, to prove the truth of what I say, and to add that in a wall-cupboard in your antechamber we also found this interesting collection, the use of which you, citoyenne, will no doubt be able to explain."

He stepped aside and pointed to a curious heap which littered the floor — rags for the most part: a tattered shirt, frayed breeches, a grimy cap, a wig made up of lank, colourless hair, the counterpart of that which adorned the head of the coalheaver Rateau.

Theresia looked on those rags for a moment in a kind of horrified puzzlement. Her cheeks and lips became the colour of ashes. She put her hand up to her forehead, as if to chase a hideous, ghoulish vision away, and smothered a cry of horror. Puzzlement had given place to a kind of superstitious dread. The room, the rags, the faces of the soldiers began to whirl around her — impish shapes to dance

a wild saraband before her eyes. And in the midst of this witch's cauldron the figure of Chauvelin, like a weird hobgoblin, was executing elf-like contortions and brandishing a packet of letters writ upon scarlet paper.

She tried to laugh, to speak defiant words; but her throat felt as if it were held in a vice, and losing momentary consciousness she tottered, and only saved herself from measuring her length upon the floor by clinging with both hands to a table immediately behind her.

As to what happened after that, she only had a blurred impression. Chauvelin gave a curt word of command, and a couple of soldiers came and stood to right and left of her. Then a piercing cry rang through the narrow rooms, and she saw Bertrand Moncrif for one moment between herself and the soldiers, fighting desperately, shielding her with his body, tearing and raging like a wild animal defending its young. The whole room appeared full of deafening noise: cries and more cries — words of command — calls of rage and of entreaty. Then suddenly the word "Fire!" and the detonation of a pistol at close range, and the body of Bertrand Moncrif sliding down lip and impotent to the floor.

After that, everything became dark around her. Theresia felt as if she were looking down an immeasurable abyss of inky blackness, and that she was falling, falling....

A thin, dry laugh brought her back to her senses, her pride to the fore, her vanity up in arms. She drew her statuesque figure up to its full height and once more confronted Chauvelin like an august and outraged divinity.

"And at whose word," she demanded, "is this monstrous charge to be brought against me?"

"At the word of a free citizen of the State," Chauvelin replied coldly.

"Bring him before me."

Chauvelin shrugged his shoulders and smiled indulgently, like one who is ready to humour a wayward child.

"Citizen Rateau!" he called.

From the anteroom there came the sound of much shuffling, spluttering, and wheezing; then the dull clatter of wooden shoes upon the carpeted floor; and presently the ungainly, grime-covered figure of the coalheaver appeared in the doorway.

Theresia looked on him for a few seconds in silence, then she gave a ringing laugh, and with exquisite bare arm outstretched she pointed to the scrubby apparition.

"That man's word against mine!" she called, with well-assumed mockery. "Rateau, the caitiff against Theresia Cabarrus, the intimate friend of citizen Robespierre! What a subject for a lampoon!"

Then her laughter broke. She turned once more on Chauvelin like an angry goddess.

"That vermin!" she exclaimed, her voice hoarse with indignation. "That sorry knave with a felon's brand! In truth, citizen Chauvelin, your spite must be hard put to it to bring up such a witness against me!"

Then suddenly her glance fell upon the lifeless body of Bertrand Moncrif, and on the horrible crimson stain which discoloured his coat. She gave a shudder of horror, and for a moment her eyes closed and her head fell back, as if she were about to swoon. But she quickly recovered herself. Her will-power at this moment was unconquerable. She looked with unutterable contempt on Chauvelin; then she raised her cloak, which had slipped down from her shoulders, and wrapped it with a queen-like gesture around her, and without another word led the way out of the apartment.

Chauvelin remained standing in the middle of the room, his face quite expressionless, his clawlike hands still fingering the fateful letters. Two soldiers remained with him beside the body of Bertrand Moncrif. The maid Pepita, still shrieking and gesticulating violently, had to be dragged away in the wake of her mistress.

In the doorway between the living-room and the antechamber, Rateau, humble, snivelling, more than a little frightened, stood aside in order to allow the guard and their imperious prisoner to pass. Theresia did not condescend to look at him again; and he, shuffling and stumbling in his clumsy wooden shoes, followed the soldiers down the stairs.

2

It was still raining hard. The captain who was in charge of Theresia told her that he had a chaise ready for her. It was waiting out in the street. Theresia ordered him to send for it; she would not, she said, offer herself as a spectacle to the riff-raff who happened to be passing by. The captain had probably received orders to humour the prisoner as far as was compatible with safety. Certain it is that he sent one of his men to fetch the coach and to order the concierge to throw open the porte-cochère.

Theresia remained standing in the narrow vestibule at the foot of the stairs. Two soldiers stood on guard over the maid, whilst another stood beside Theresia. The captain, muttering with impatience, paced up and down the stone-paved floor. Rateau had paused on the stairs, a step or two just above where Theresia was standing. On the wall opposite, supported by an iron bracket, a smoky oil-lamp shed a feeble, yellowish flicker around.

A few minutes went by; then a loud clatter woke the echoes of the dreary old house, and a coach drawn by two ancient, half-starved nags, lumbered into the courtyard and came to a halt in front of the open doorway. The captain gave a sigh of relief, and called out: "Now then, citoyenne!" whilst the soldier who had gone to fetch the coach jumped down from the box-seat and, with his comrades, stood at attention. The maid was summarily bundled into the coach, and Theresia was ready to follow.

Just then the draught through the open door blew her velvet cloak against the filthy rags of the miserable ruffian behind her. An unexplainable impulse caused her to look up, and she encountered his eyes fixed upon her. A dull cry rose to her throat, and instinctively she put up her hand to her mouth, striving to smother the sound. Horror dilated her eyes, and through her lips one word escaped like a hoarse murmur:

"You!"

He put a grimy finger to his lips. But already she had recovered herself. Here then was the explanation of the mystery which surrounded this monstrous denunciation. The English milor had planned it as revenge for the injury done to his wife.

"Captain!" she cried out shrilly. "Beware! The English spy is at your heels!"

But apparently the captain's complaisance did not go to the length of listening to the ravings of his fair prisoner. He was impatient to get this unpleasant business over.

"Now then, citoyenne!" was his gruff retort. "En voiture!"

"You fool!" she cried, bracing herself against the grip of the soldiers who were on the point of seizing her. "'Tis the Scarlet Pimpernel! If you let him escape—"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel?" the Captain retorted with a laugh. "Where?"

"The coalheaver! Rateau! 'Tis he, I tell you!" And Theresia's cries became more frantic as she felt herself unceremoniously lifted off the ground. "You fool! You fool! You are letter him escape!"

"Rateau, the coalheaver?" the captain exclaimed. "We have heard that pretty story before. Here, citizen Rateau!" he went on, and shouted at the top of his voice. "Go and report yourself to citizen Chauvelin. Tell him you are the Scarlet Pimpernel! As for you, citoyenne, enough of this shouting — what? My orders are to take you to the Conciergerie, and not to run after spies — English, German, or Dutch. Now then, citizen soldiers!..."

Theresia, throwing her dignity to the winds, did indeed raise a shout that brought the other lodgers of the house to their door. But her screams had become inarticulate, as the soldiers, in obedience to the captain's impatient orders, had wrapped her cloak about her head. Thus the inhabitants of the dreary old house in the Rue Villedot could only ascertain that the citoyenne Cabarrus who lodged on the third floor had been taken to prison, screaming and fighting, in a manner that no self-respecting aristocrat had ever done.

Theresia Cabarrus was ignominiously lifted into the coach and deposited by the side of equally noisy Pepita. Through the folds of the cloak her reiterated cry could still faintly be heard:

"You fool! You traitor! You cursed, miserable fool!"

One of the lodgers on the second floor — a young woman who was on good terms with every male creature that wore uniform — leaned over the balustrade of the balcony and shouted gaily down:

"Hey, citizen captain! Why is the aristocrat screaming so?"

One of the soldiers looked up, and shouted back:

"She has hold of the story that citizen Rateau is an English milord in disguise, and she wants to run after him!"

Loud laughter greeted this tale, and a lusty cheer was set up as the coach swung clumsily out of the courtyard.

A moment or two later, Chauvelin, followed by the two soldiers, came quickly down the stairs. The noise from below had at last reached his ears. At first he too thought that it was only the proud Spaniard who was throwing her dignity to the winds. Then a word or two sounded clearly above the din:

"The Scarlet Pimpernel! The English spy!"

The words acted like a sorcerer's charm — a call from the vasty deep. In an instant the rest of the world ceased to have any importance in his sight. One thing and one alone mattered; his enemy.

Calling to the soldiers to follow him, he was out of the apartment and down in the vestibule below in a trice. The coach at that moment was turning out of the porte-cochère. The courtyard, wrapped in gloom, was alive with chattering and laughter which proceeded from the windows and balconies around. It was raining fast, and from the balconies the water was pouring down in torrents.

Chauvelin stood in the doorway and sent one of the soldiers to ascertain what the disturbance had all been about. The man returned with an account of how the aristocrat had screamed and raved like a mad-woman, and tried to escape by sending the citizen captain on a fool's errand, vowing that poor old Rateau was an English spy in disguise.

Chauvelin gave a sigh of relief. He certainly need not rack his nerves or break his head over that! He had good cause to know that Rateau, with the branded arm, could not possibly be the Scarlet Pimpernel!

Chapter XXXII

Grey Dawn

1

Ten minutes later the courtyard and approach of the old house in the Rue Villedot were once more wrapped in silence and in darkness. Chauvelin had with his own hands affixed the official seals on the doors which led to the apartments of citoyenne Cabarrus. In the living room, the body of the unfortunate Moncrif still lay uncovered and unwatched, awaiting what hasty burial the commissary of the section would be pleased to order for it. Chauvelin dismissed the soldiers at the door, and himself went his way.

The storm was gradually dying away. By the time that the audience filed out of the theatre, it was scarcely raining. Only from afar, dull rumblings of thunder could still faintly be heard. Citizen Tallien hurried along on foot to the Rue Villedot. The last hour had been positive torture for him. Although his reason told him that no man would be fool enough to trump up an accusation against Theresia Cabarrus, who was the friend, the Egeria of every influential man in the Convention or the Clubs, and that she herself had always been far too prudent to allow herself to be compromised in any way — although he knew all that, his overwrought fancy conjured up vision which made him sick with dread. His Theresia in the hands of rough soldiery — dragged to prison — he himself unable to ascertain what had become of her — until he saw her at the bar of that awful tribunal, from which there was no issue save the guillotine!

And with this dread came unendurable, gnawing remorse. He himself was one of the men who had helped to set up the machinery of wild accusations, monstrous tribunals and wholesale condemnations which had been set in motion now by an unknown hand against the woman he loved. He — Tallien — the ardent lover, the future husband of Theresia, had aided in the constitution of that abominable Revolutionary Committee, which could strike at the innocent as readily and as ruthlessly as at the guilty.

Indeed at this hour, this man, who long since had forgotten how to pray, when he heard the tower-clock of a neighbouring church striking the hour, turned his eyes that were blurred with tears towards the sacred edifice which he had helped to desecrate, and found in his heart a half-remembered prayer which he murmured to the Fount of all Mercy and of Pardon.

2

Citizen Tallien turned into the Rue Villedot, the street where lodged his beloved. A minute or so later, he was making his way up the back staircase of the dingy house where his divinity had dwelt until now. On the second-floor landing two women stood gossiping. One of them recognized the influential Representative.

“It is citizen Tallien,” she said.

And the other woman at once volunteered the information:

“They have arrested the citoyenne Cabarrus,” she said; “and the soldiers did not know whither they were taking her.”

Tallien did not wait to listen further. He stumbled up the stairs to the third floor, to the door which he knew so well. His trembling fingers wandered over the painted panels. They encountered the official seals, which told their own mute tale.

The whole thing, then, was not a dream. Those assassins had taken his Theresia and dragged her to prison, would drag her on the morrow to an outrageous mockery of a tribunal first, and then to death! Who shall say what wild thoughts of retrospection and of remorse coursed through the brain of this man — himself one of the makers of a bloody revolution? What visions of past ideals, good intentions, of honest purpose and incessant labour, passed before his mind? That glorious revolution, which was to mark the regeneration of mankind, which was to have given liberty to the oppressed, equality to the meek, fraternity in one vast human family! And what did it lead to but to oppression far more cruel than all that had gone before, to fratricide and to arrogance on the one side, servility on the other, to constant terror of death, to discouragement and sloth?

For hours citizen Tallien sat in the dark, on the staircase outside Theresia’s door, his head buried in his hands. The grey dawn, living and chill, which came peeping in through the skylight overhead, found him still sitting there, stiff and numb with cold.

Whether what happened after that was part of a dream, he never knew. Certain it is that presently something extraneous appeared to rouse him. He sat up and listened, leaned his back against the wall, for he was very tired. Then he heard — or thought he heard — firm, swift steps on the stairs, and soon after saw the figure of two men coming up the stairs. Both the men were very tall, one of them unusually so, and the ghostly light of dawn made him appear unreal and mysterious. He was dressed with marvellous elegance; his smooth, fair hair was tied at the nape of the neck with a satin bow; soft, billowy lace gleamed at his wrists and throat, and his hands were exquisitely white and slender. Both the men wore huge coats of fine cloth, adorned with many capes, and boots of fine leather, perfectly cut.

They paused on the vestibule outside the door of Theresia’s apartment, and appeared to be studying the official seals affixed upon the door. Then one of them — the taller of the two — took a knife out of his pocket and cut through the tapes which held the seals together. Then together they stepped coolly into the apartment.

Tallien had watched them, dazed and fascinated. He was so numb and weary that his tongue — just like it does in dreams — refused him service when he tried to call. But now he struggled to his feet and followed in the wake of the two mysterious strangers. With him, the instinct of the official, the respect due to regulations and laws framed by his colleagues and himself, had been too strong to allow him to tamper with the seals, and there was something mysterious and awesome about that tall figure of a man, dressed with supreme elegance, whose slender, firm hands had so unconcernedly committed this flagrant breach of the law. It did not occur to Tallien to call for help. Somehow, the whole incident — the two men — were so ghostlike, that he felt that at a word they would vanish into thin air.

He stepped cautiously into the familiar little antechamber. The strangers had gone through to the living-room. One of them was kneeling on the floor. Tallien, who knew nothing of the tragedy which had been enacted inside the apartment of his beloved, marvelled what the men were doing. He crept stealthily forward and craned his neck to see. The window at the end of the room had been left

unfastened. A weird grey streak of light came peeping in and illumined the awesome scene: the overturned furniture, the torn hangings; and on the ground, the body of a man, with the stranger kneeling beside it.

Tallien, weary and dazed, always of a delicate constitution, felt nigh to swooning. His knees were shaking, a cold dread of the supernatural held his heart with an icy grip and caused his hair to tingle at the roots. His tongue felt huge and as if paralysed, his teeth were chattering together. It was as much as he could do not to measure his length on the ground; and the vague desire to remain unobserved kept him crouching in the gloom.

He just could see the tall stranger pass his hands over the body on the floor, and could hear the other ask him a question in English.

A few moments went by. The strangers conversed in a low tone of voice. From one or two words which came clearly to his ear, Tallien gathered that they spoke in English — a language with which he himself was familiar. The taller man of the two appeared to be giving his friend some orders, which the latter promised to obey. Then, with utmost precaution, he took the body in his arms and lifted it from the floor.

"Let me help you, Blakeney," the other said in a whisper.

"No, no!" the mysterious stranger replied quickly. "The poor worm is as light as a feather! 'Tis better he died as he did. His unfortunate infatuation was killing him."

"Poor little Régine!" the younger man sighed.

"It is better so," his friend rejoined. "We'll be able to tell her that he died nobly, and that we've given him Christian burial."

No wonder that Tallien thought that he was dreaming! These English were strange folk indeed! Heaven alone knew what they risked by coming here, at this hour, and into this house, in order to fetch away the body of their friend. They certainly were wholly unconscious of danger.

Tallien held his breath. He saw the splendid figure of the mysterious adventurer step across the threshold, bearing the lifeless body in his arms with as much ease as if he were carrying a child. The pale grey light of morning was behind him, and his fine head with its smooth fair hair was silhouetted against the neutral-tinted background. His friend came immediately behind him.

In the dark antechamber he paused, and called abruptly:

"Citizen Tallien!"

A cry rose to Tallien's throat. He had thought himself entirely unobserved, and the stranger a mere vision which he was watching in a dream. Now he felt that compelling eyes were gazing straight at him, piercing the darkness for a clearer sight of his face.

But the spell was still on him, and he only moved in order to straighten himself out and to force his trembling knees to be still.

"They have taken the citoyenne Cabarrus to the Conciergerie," the stranger went on simply. "To-morrow she will be charged before the Revolutionary Tribunal..... You know what is the inevitable end—"

It seemed as if some subtle magic was in the man's voice, in his very presence, in the glance wherewith he challenged that of the unfortunate Tallien. The latter felt a wave of shame sweep over him. There was something so splendid in these two men — exquisitely dressed, and perfectly deliberate and cool in all their movements — who were braving and daring death in order to give Christian burial to their friend; whilst he, in face of the outrage put upon his beloved, had only sat on her desecrated doorstep like a dumb animal pining for its master. He felt a hot flush rush to his cheeks. With quick, nervy movements he readjusted the set of his coat, passed his thin hands over his rumpled hair; whilst the stranger reiterated with solemn significance:

"You know what is the inevitable end.... The citoyenne Cabarrus will be condemned...."

Tallien this time met the stranger's eyes fearlessly. It was the magic of strength and of courage that flowed into him from them. He drew up his meagre stature to its full height and threw up his head with an air of defiance and of conscious power.

"Not while I live!" he said firmly.

"Theresia Cabarrus will be condemned to-morrow," the stranger went on calmly. "Then the next day, the guillotine—"

"Never!"

"Inevitably!... Unless—"

"Unless what?" Tallien queried, and hung breathless on the man's lips as he would on those of an oracle.

"Theresia Cabarrus, or Robespierre and his herd of assassins. Which shall it be, citizen Tallien?"

"By Heaven!—" Tallien exclaimed forcefully.

But he got no further. The stranger, bearing his burden, had already gone out of the room, closely followed by his friend.

Tallien was alone in the deserted apartment, where every broken piece of furniture, every torn curtain, cried out for vengeance in the name of his beloved. He said nothing. He neither protested nor swore. But he tip-toed into the apartment and knelt down upon the floor close beside the small sofa on which she was wont to sit. Here he remained quite still for a minute or two, his eyes closed, his hands tightly clasped together. Then he stooped very low and pressed his lips against the spot where her pretty, sandalled foot was wont to rest.

After that he rose, strode with a firm step out of the apartment, carefully closing the doors behind him.

The strangers had vanished into the night; and citizen Tallien went quietly back to his own lodgings.

Chapter XXXIII

The Cataclysm

1

Forty names! Found on a list in the pocket of Robespierre's coat!

Forty names! And every one of these that of a known opponent of Robespierre's schemes of dictatorship: Tallien, Barrère, Vadier, Cambon, and the rest. Men powerful to-day, prominent Members of the Convention, leaders of the people, too — but opponents!

The inference was obvious, the panic general. That night — it was the 8th Thermidor, July the 26th of the old calendar — men talked of flight, of abject surrender, of appeal — save the mark! — to friendship, camaraderie, humanity! Friendship, camaraderie, humanity? An appeal to a heart of stone! They talked of everything, in face, save of defying the tyrant; for such talk would have been folly.

Defying the tyrant? Ye gods! When with a word he could sway the Convention, the Committees, the multitude, bend them to his will, bring them to heel like any tamer of beasts when he cracks his whip?

So men talked and trembled. All night they talked and trembled; for they did not sleep, those forty whose names were on Robespierre's list. But Tallien, their chief, was nowhere to be found. 'Twas known that his fiancée, the beautiful Theresia Cabarrus, had been summarily arrested. Since then he had disappeared; and they — the others — were leaderless. But, even so, he was no loss. Tallien was ever pusillanimous, a temporizer — what?

And now the hour for temporizing is past. Robespierre then is to be dictator of France. He will be dictator of France, in spite of any opposition led by those forty whose names are on his list! He will be dictator of France! He has not said it; but his friends have shouted it from the house-tops, and have murmured under their breath that those who oppose Robespierre's dictatorship are traitors to the land. Death then must be their fate.

When then, ye gods? What then?

2

And so the day broke — smiling, mark you! It was a beautiful warm July morning. It broke on what is perhaps the most stupendous cataclysm — save one — the world has ever known.

Behold the picture! A medley. A confusion. A whirl of everything that is passionate and cruel, defiant and desperate. Heavens, how desperate! Men who have thrown lives away as if lives were in truth grains of sand; men who have juggled with death dealt it and tossed it about like cards upon a gaming table. They are desperate now, because their own lives are at stake; and they find now that life can be very dear.

So, having greeted their leader, the forty draw together, watching the moment when humility will be most opportune.

Robespierre mounts the tribune. The hour has struck. His speech is one long, impassioned, involved tirade, full at first on vague accusations against the enemies of the Republic and the people, and is full of protestations of his own patriotism and selflessness. Then he warms to his own oratory; his words are prophetic of death, his voice becomes harsh — like a screech owl's, so we're told. His accusations are no longer vague. He begins to strike.

Corruption! Backsliding! Treachery! Moderatism! — oh, moderatism above all! Moderatism is treachery to the glorious revolution. Every victim spared from the guillotine is a traitor let loose against the people! A traitor, he who robs the guillotine of her prey! Robespierre stands alone incorruptible, true, faithful unto death!

And for all that treachery, what remedy is there? Why, death of course! Death! The guillotine! New power to the sovereign guillotine! Death to all the traitors!

And seven hundred faces became paler still with dread, and the sweat of terror rises on seven hundred brows. There were only forty names on that list... but there might be others somewhere else!

And still the voice of Robespierre thunders on. His words fall of seven hundred pairs of ears like on a sounding-board; his friends, his sycophants, echo them; they applaud, rise in wild enthusiasm. 'Tis the applause that is thundering now!

One of the tyrant's most abject slaves has put forward the motion that the great speech just delivered shall forthwith be printed, and distributed to every township, every village, throughout France, as a monument to the lofty patriotism of her greatest citizen.

The motion at one moment looks as if it would be carried with acclamations; after which, Robespierre's triumph would have risen to the height of deification. Then suddenly the note of dissension; the hush; the silence. The great Assembly is like a sounding-board that has ceased to respond. Something had turned the acclamations to mutterings, and then to silence. The sounding-board has given forth a dissonance. Citizen Tallien has demanded "delay in printing that speech," and asked pertinently:

"What has become of the Liberty of Opinion in this Convention?"

His face is the colour of ashes, and his eyes, ringed with purple, gleam with an unnatural fire. The coward has become bold; the sheep has donned the lion's skin.

There is a flutter in the Convention, a moment's hesitation. But the question is put to the vote, and the speech is not to be printed. A small matter, in truth — printing or not printing.... Does the Destiny of France hang on so small a peg?

It is a small matter; and yet how full of portent! Like the breath of mutiny blowing across a ship. But nothing more occurs just then. Robespierre, lofty in his scorn, puts the notes of his speech into his pocket. He does not condescend to argue. He, the master of France, will not deign to bandy words with his slaves. And he stalks out of the Hall surrounded by his friends.

There has been a breath of mutiny; but his is still the iron heel, powerful enough to crush a raging revolt. His withdrawal — proud, silent, menacing — is in keeping with his character and with the pose which he has assumed of late. But he is still the Chosen of the

People; and the multitude is there, thronging the streets of Paris — there, to avenge the insult put upon their idol by a pack of slinking wolves.

And now the picture becomes still more poignant. It is painted in colours more vivid, more glowing than and again the Hall of the Convention is crowded to the roof, with Tallien and his friends, in a close phalanx, early at their post!

Tallien is there, pale, resolute, the fire of his hatred kept up by anxiety for his beloved. The night before, at the corner of a dark street, a surreptitious hand slipped a scrap of paper into the pocket of his coat. It was a message written by Theresia in prison, and written with her own blood. How it ever came into his pocket Tallien never knew; but the few impassioned, agonized words, seared his very soul and whipped up his courage:

“The Commissary of Police has just left me,” Theresia wrote. “He came to tell me that to-morrow I must appear before the tribunal. This means the guillotine. And I, who thought that you were a man....!”

Not only is his own head in peril, not only that of his friends; but the life of the woman whom he worships hangs now upon the thread of his own audacity and of his courage.

St. Just on this occasion is the first to mount the tribune; and Robespierre, the very incarnation of lustful and deadly Vengeance, stands silently by. He has spent the afternoon and evening with his friends at the Jacobins’ Club, where deafening applause greeted his every word, and wild fury raged against his enemies.

It is then to be a fight to the finish To your tents, O Israel!

To the guillotine all those who have dared to say one word against the Chosen of the People! St. Just shall thunder Vengeance from the tribune at the Convention, whilst Henriot, the drunken and dissolute Commandant of the Municipal Guard, shall, but the might of the sword and fire, proclaim the sovereignty of Robespierre through the streets of Paris. That is the picture as it has been painted in the minds of the tyrant and of his sycophants: a picture of death paramount, and of Robespierre rising like a new Phoenix from out the fire of calumny and revolt, greater, more unassailable than before.

And lo! One sweep of the brush, and the picture is changed.

Ten minutes... less... and the whole course of the world’s history is altered. No sooner had St. Just mounted the tribune than Tallien jumped to his feet. His voice, usually meek and cultured, rises in a harsh crescendo, until it drowns that of the younger orator.

“Citizens,” he exclaims, “I ask for truth! Let us tear aside the curtain behind which lurk concealed the real conspirators and the traitors!”

“Yes, yes! Truth! Let us have the truth!” One hundred voices — not forty — have raised the echo.

The mutiny is on the verge of becoming open revolt, is that already, perhaps. It is like a spark fallen — who knows where? — into a powder magazine. Robespierre feels it, sees the spark. He knows that one movement, one word, one plunge into that magazine, foredoomed though it be to destruction, on stamp with a sure foot, may yet quench the spark, may yet smother the mutiny. He rushes to the tribune, tries to mount. But Tallien has forestalled him, elbows him out of the way, and turns to the seven hundred with a cry that rings far beyond the Hall, out into the streets.

“Citizens!” he thunders in his turn. “I begged of you just now to tear aside the curtains behind which lurk the traitors. Well, the curtain is already rent. And if you dare not strike at the tyrant now, then ’tis I who will dare!” And from beneath his coat he draws a dagger and raises it above his head. “And I will plunge this into his heart,” he cries, “if you have not the courage to smite!”

His words, that gleaming bit of steel, fan the spark into a flame. Within a few seconds, seven hundred voices are shouting, “Down with the tyrant!” Arms are waving, hands gesticulate wildly, excitedly. Only a very few shout: “Behold the dagger of Brutus!” All the others retort with “Tyranny!” and “Conspiracy!” and with cries of “Vive la Liberté!”

At this hour all is confusion and deafening uproar. In vain Robespierre tries to speak. He demands to speak. He hurls insults, anathema, upon the President, who relentless refuses him speech and jingles his bell against him.

“President of Assassins,” the falling tyrant cries, “I demand speech of thee!”

But the bell goes jingling on, and Robespierre, choked with rage and terror, “turns blue” we are told, and his hand goes up to his throat.

“The blood of Danton chokes thee!” cries one man. And these words seem like the last blow dealt to the fallen foe. The next moment the voice of an obscure Deputy is raised, in order to speak the words that have been hovering on every lip:

“I demand a decree of accusation against Robespierre!”

“Accusation!” comes from seven hundred throats. “The decree of accusation!”

The President jingles his bell, puts the question, and the motion is passed unanimously.

Maximilien Robespierre — erstwhile master of France — is decreed accused.

Chapter XXXIV

The Whirlwind

1

It was then noon. Five minutes later, the Chosen of the People, the fallen idol, is hustled out of the Hall into one of the Committee rooms close by, and with his friends — St. Just, Couthon, Lebas, his brother Augustin, and the others — all decreed accused and the order of arrest launched against them. As for the rest, 'tis the work of the Public Prosecutor — and of the guillotine.

At five o'clock the Convention adjourns. The deputies have earned food and rest. They rush to their homes, there to relate what has happened; Tallien to the Conciergerie, to get a sight of Theresia. This is denied him. He is not dictator yet; and Robespierre, though apparently vanquished, still dominates — and lives.

But from every church steeple the tocsin bursts; and a prolonged roll of drums ushers in the momentous evening.

In the city all is hopeless confusion. Men are running in every direction, shouting, brandishing pistols and swords. Henriot, Commandant of the Municipal Guard, rides through the streets at the head of his gendarmes like one possessed, bent on delivering Robespierre. Women and children fly screaming in every direction; the churches, so long deserted, are packed with people who, terror-stricken, are trying to remember long-forgotten prayers.

Proclamations are read at street corners; there are rumours of a general massacre of all the prisoners. At one moment — the usual hour — the familiar tumbril with its load of victims for the guillotine rattles along the cobblestones of the Rue St. Antoine. The populace, vaguely conscious of something stupendous in the air — even though the decree of accusation against Robespierre has not yet transpired — loudly demand the release of the victims. They surround the tumbrils, crying, "Let them be free!"

But Henriot at the head of his gendarmes comes riding down the street, and while the populace shouts, "It shall not be! Let them be free!" he threatens with pistols and sabre, and retorts, bellowing: "It shall be! To the guillotine!" And the tumbrils, which for a moment had halted, lumber on, on their way.

2

Up in the attic of the lonely house in the Rue de la Planchette, Marguerite Blakeney heard but a mere faint echo of the confusion and of the uproar.

During the previous long, sultry afternoon, it had seemed to her as if her jailers had been unwontedly agitated. There was much more moving to and fro on the landing outside her door than there had been in the last three days. Men talked, mostly in whispers; but at times a word, a phrase here and there, a voice raised above the others, reached her straining ears. She glued her ear to the keyhole and listened; but what she heard was all confusion, sentences that conveyed but little meaning to her. She distinguished the voice of the Captain of the Guard. He appeared impatient about something, and talked about "missing all the fun." The other soldiers seemed to agree with him. Obviously they were all drinking heavily, for their voices sounded hoarse and thick, and often would break into bibulous song. From time to time, too, she would hear the patter of wooden shoes, together with a wheezy cough, as from a man troubled with asthma.

But it was all very vague, for her nerves by this time were on the rack. She had lost count of time, of place; she knew nothing. She was unable even to think. All her instincts were merged in the dead of that silent evening hour, when Chauvelin's furtive footsteps would once more resound upon the stone floor outside her door, when she would hear the quick word of command that heralded his approach, the grounding of arms, the sharp query and quick answer, and when she would feel again the presence of the relentless enemy who lay in wait to trap her beloved.

At one moment that evening he had raised his voice, obviously so that she might hear.

"To-morrow is the fourth day, citizen Captain," she had heard him say. "I may not be able to come."

"Then," the voice of the Captain had said in reply, "if the Englishman is not here by seven o'clock—"

Chauvelin had given a harsh, dry laugh, and retorted:

"Your orders are as they were, citizen. But I think that the Englishman will come."

What it all meant Marguerite could not fail to conjecture. It meant death to her or to her husband — to both, in fact. And all to-day she had sat by the open window, her hands clasped in silent, constant prayer, her eyes fixed upon the horizon far away, longing with all her might for one last sight of her beloved, fighting against despair, striving for trust in him and for hope.

3

At this hour, the centre of interest is the Place de l'Hôtel de Ville, where Robespierre and his friends sit entrenched and — for the moment — safe. The prisons have refused one by one to close their gates upon the Chosen of the People; governors and jailers alike have quaked in the face of so monstrous a sacrilege. And the same gendarmes who have been told off to escort the fallen tyrant to his penultimate resting-place, have had a touch of the same kind of scruple — or dread — and at his command have conveyed him to the Hôtel de Ville.

In vain does the Convention hastily reassemble. In vain — apparently — does Tallien demand that the traitor Robespierre and his friends be put outside the pale of the law. They are for the moment safe, redacting proclamations, sending out messengers in every direction; whilst Henriot and his gendarmes, having struck terror in the hearts of all peaceable citizens, hold the place outside the Town Hall and proclaim Robespierre dictator of France.

The sun sinks towards the west behind a veil of mist. Ferment and confusion are at their height. All around the city there is an invisible barrier that seems to confine agitation within its walls. Outside this barrier, no one knows what is happening. Only a vague

dread has filtrated through and gripped every heart. The guard at the several gates appear slack and undisciplined. Sentries are accosted by passers-by, eager for news. And, from time to time, from every direction, troops of the Municipal gendarmes ride furiously by, with shouts of "Robespierre! Robespierre! Death to the traitors! Long live Robespierre!"

They raise a cloud of dust around them, trample unheedingly over every obstacle, human or otherwise, that happens to be in their way. They threaten peaceable citizens with their pistols and strike and women and children with the flat of their sabres.

As soon as they have gone by, excited groups close up in their wake.

"Name of a name, what is happening?" every one queries in affright.

And gossip, conjectures, rumours, hold undisputed sway.

"Robespierre is dictator of France!"

"He has ordered the arrest of all the Members of the Convention."

"And the massacre of all the prisoners."

"Pardi, a wise decree! As for me, I am sick of the eternal tumbrils and the guillotine!"

"Better finish with the lot, say I!"

"Robespierre! Robespierre!" comes as a far-off echo, to the accompaniment of thundering hoofs upon the cobble-stones.

And so, from mouth to mouth! The meek and the peace-loving magnify these rumours into approaching cataclysm; the opportunists hold their tongue, ready to fall in with this party or that; the cowards lie in hiding and shout "Robespierre!" with Henriot's horde or "Tallien!" in the neighbourhood of the Tuileries.

Here the Convention has reassembled, and here they are threatened presently by Henriot and his artillery. The members of the great Assembly remain at their post. The President has harangued them.

"Citizen deputies!" he calls aloud. "The moment has come to die at our posts!"

As they sit waiting for Henriot's cannonade, and calmly decree all the rebels "outside the pale of the law."

Tallien, moved by a spirit of lofty courage, goes, followed by a few intimates, to meet Henriot's gunners boldly face to face.

"Citizen soldiers!" he calls aloud, and his voice has the resonance of undaunted courage. "After covering yourselves with glory on the fields of honour, are you going to disgrace your country?" He points a scornful finger at Henriot who, bloated, purple in the face, grunting and spluttering like an old seal, is reeling in his saddle. "Look at him, citizen soldiers!" Tallien commands. "He is drunk and besotted! What man is there who, being sober, would dare to order fire against the representatives of the people?"

The gunners are moved, frightened too by the decree which has placed them "outside the pale of the law." Henriot, fearing mutiny if he persisted in the monstrous order to fire, withdraws his troops back to the Hôtel de Ville.

Some follow him; some do not. And Tallien goes back to the Hall of the Convention covered with glory.

Citizen Barras is promoted Commandant of the National Guard and of all forces at the disposal of the Convention, and ordered to recruit loyal troops that will stand up to the traitor Henriot and his ruffianly gendarmes. The latter are in open revolt against the Government; but, name of a name! Citizen Barras, with a few hundred patriots, will soon put reason — and a few charges of gunpowder — into them!

4

So, at five o'clock in the afternoon, whilst Henriot has once more collected his gendarmes and the remnants of his artillery outside the Hôtel de Ville, citizen Barras, accompanied by two aides-de-camp, goes forth on his recruiting mission. He makes the round of the city gates, wishing to find out what loyal soldiers amongst the National Guard the Convention can rely upon.

Chauvelin, on his way to the Rue de la Planchette, meets Barras at the Porte St. Antoine; and Barras is full of the news.

"Why were you not at your place at the Assembly, citizen Chauvelin?" he asks of his colleague. "It was the grandest moment I have ever witnessed! Tallien was superb, and Robespierre ignoble! And if we succeed in crushing that bloodthirsty monster once and for all, it will be a new era of civilization and liberty!"

He halts, and continues with a fretful sigh:

"But we want soldiers — loyal soldiers! All the troops that we can get! Henriot has the whole of the Municipal Gendarmerie at his command, with muskets and guns; and Robespierre can always sway that rabble with a word. We want men!... Men!..."

But Chauvelin is in no mood to listen. Robespierre's fall or his triumph, what are they to him at this hour, when the curtain is about to fall on the final act of his own stupendous drama of revenge? Whatever happens, whoever remains in power, vengeance is his! The English spy in any event is sure of the guillotine. He is not the enemy of a party, but of the people of France. And the sovereignty of the people is not in question yet. Then, what matters if the wild beasts in the Convention are at one another's throat?

So Chauvelin listens unmoved to Barras' passionate tirades, and when the latter, puzzle at his colleague's indifference, reiterates frowning:

"I must have all the troops I can get. You have some capable soldiers at your command always, citizen Chauvelin. Where are they now?"

Chauvelin retorts drily:

"At work. On business at least as important as taking side in a quarrel between Robespierre and Tallien."

"Pardi!..." Barras protests hotly.

But Chauvelin pays no further attention to him. A neighbouring church clock has just struck six. Within the hour and his arch enemy will be in his hands! Never for a moment does he doubt that the bold adventurer will come to the lonely house in the Rue de la Planchette. Even hating the Englishman as he does, he knows that the latter would not endanger his wife's safety by securing his own.

So Chauvelin turns on his heel, leaving Barras to fume and to threaten. At the angle of the Porte St. Antoine, he stumbles against and nearly knocks over a man who sits on the ground, with his back to the wall, munching a straw, his knees drawn up to his nose, a crimson cap pulled over his eyes, and his two long arms encircling his shins.

Chauvelin swore impatiently. His nerves were on the rack, and he was in no pleasant mood. The man, taken unawares, had uttered an oath, which died away in a racking fit of coughing. Chauvelin looked down, and saw the one long arm branded with the letter "M," the flesh still swollen and purple with the fire of the searing iron.

"Rateau!" he ejaculated roughly. "What are you doing here?"

Meek and servile, Rateau struggled with some difficulty to his feet.

"I have finished my work at Mother Théot's, citizen," he said humbly. "I was resting."

Chauvelin kicked at him with the toe of his boot.

"Then go and rest elsewhere," he muttered. "The gates of the city are not refuges for vagabonds."

After which act of unnecessary brutality, his temper momentarily soothed, he turned on his heel and walked rapidly through the gate.

Barras had stood by during this brief interlude, vaguely interested in the little scene. But now, when the coalheaver lurched past him, one of his aides-de-camp remarked audibly:

"An unpleasant customer, citizen Chauvelin! Eh, friend?"

"I believe you!" Rateau replied readily enough. Then, with the mulish persistence of a gabby who is smarting under a wrong, he thrust out his branded arm right under citizen Barras' nose. "See what he has done to me!"

Barras frowned.

"A convict, what? Then, how is it you are at large?"

"I am not a convict," Rateau protested with sullen emphasis. "I am an innocent man, and a free citizen of the Republic. But I got in citizen Chauvelin's way, what? He is always full of schemes—"

"You are right there!" Barras retorted grimly. But the subject was not sufficiently interesting to engross his attention further. He had so many and such momentous things to do. Already he had nodded to his men and turned his back on the grimy coalheaver, who, shaken by a fit of coughing, unable to speak for the moment, had put out his grimy hand and gripped the deputy firmly by the sleeve.

"What is it now?" Barras ejaculated roughly.

"If you will but listen, citizen," Rateau wheezed painfully, "I can tell you—"

"What?"

"You were asking citizen Chauvelin where you could find some soldiers of the Republic to do you service."

"Yes; I did."

"Well," Rateau rejoined, and an expression of malicious cunning distorted his ugly face. "I can tell you."

"What do you mean?"

"I lodge in an empty warehouse over yonder," Rateau went on eagerly, and pointed in the direction where Chauvelin's spare figure had disappeared a while ago. "The floor above is inhabited by Mother Théot, the witch. You know her, citizen?"

"Yes, yes! I thought she had been sent to the guillotine along with—"

"She was let out of prison, and has been doing some of citizen Chauvelin's spying for him."

Barras frowned. This was none of his business, and the dirty coalheaver inspired him with an unpleasant sense of loathing.

"To the point, citizen!" he said curtly.

"Citizen Chauvelin has a dozen or more soldiers under his command, in that house," Rateau went on with a leer. "They are trained troops of the National Guard—"

"How do you know?" Barras broke in harshly.

"Pardi!" was the coalheaver's dry reply. "I clean their boots for them."

"Where is the house?"

"In the Rue de la Planchette. But there is an entrance into the warehouse at the back of it."

"Allons!" was Barras' curt word of command, to the two men who accompanied him.

He strode up the street toward the gate, not caring whether Rateau came along or no. But the coalheaver followed in the wake of the three men. He had buried his grimy fists once more in the pocket of his tattered breeches; but not before he had shaken them, each in turn, in the direction of the Rue de la Planchette.

Chauvelin in the meanwhile had turned into Mother Théot's house, and without speaking to the old charlatan, who was watching for him in the vestibule, he mounted to the top floor. Here he called peremptorily to Captain Boyer.

"There is half an hour yet," the latter murmured gruffly; "and I am sick of all this waiting! Let me finish with that cursed aristo in there. My comrades and I want to see what is going on in the city, and join in the fun, if there is any."

"Half an hour, citizen," Chauvelin rejoined drily. "You'll lose little of the fun, and you'll certainly lose your share of the ten thousand livres if you shoot the woman and fail to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Bah! He'll not come now," Boyer riposted. "It is too late. He is looking after his own skin, pardi!"

"He will come, I swear!" Chauvelin said firmly, as if in answer to his own thoughts.

Inside the room, Marguerite has heard every word of this colloquy. Its meaning is clear enough. Clear and horrible! Death awaits her at the hands of those abominable ruffians — here — within half an hour — unless... Her thoughts are becoming confused; she cannot concentrate. Frightened? No, she is not frightened. She has looked death in the face before now. That time in Boulogne. And there are worse things than death.... There is, for instance, the fear that she might never see her husband again... in this life.... There is only half an hour or less than that... and... and he might not come.... She prays that he might not come. But, if he does, then what chance has he? My God, what chance?

And her tortured mind conjures up visions of his courage, his coolness, his amazing audacity and luck.... She thinks and thinks... if he does not come... and if he does....

A distant church clock strikes the half-hour... a short half-hour now...

The evening is sultry. Another storm is threatening, and the sun has tinged the heat-mist with red. The air smells foul, as in the midst of a huge, perspiring crowd. And through the heat, the lull, above the hideous sounds of those ruffians outside her door, there is a rumbling noise as of distant, unceasing thunder. The city is in travail.

Then suddenly Boyer, the Captain of the ruffians, exclaims loudly:

"Let me finish with the aristo, citizen Chauvelin! I want to join in the fun."

And the door of her room is torn open by a savage, violent hand.

The window behind Marguerite is open, and she, facing the door, clings with both hands to the sill. Her cheeks bloodless, her eyes glowing, her head erect, she waits, praying with all her might for courage... only courage.

The ruffianly captain, in his tattered, mud-stained uniform, stands in the doorway — for one moment only. The next, Chauvelin has elbowed him out of the way, and in his turn faces the prisoner — the innocent woman whom he has pursued with such relentless hatred. Marguerite prays with all her might, and does not flinch. Not for one second. Death stands there before her in the guise of this man's vengeful lust, which gleams in his pale eyes. Death is there waiting for her, under the guise of the ignoble soldiers in the scrubby rags, with their muskets held in stained, filthy hands.

Courage — only courage! The power to die as he would wish her to... could he but know!

Chauvelin speaks to her; she does not hear. There is a mighty buzzing in her ears as of men shouting — shouting what, she does not know, for she is still praying for courage. Chauvelin has ceased talking. Then it must be the end. Thank God! she has had the courage not to speak and not to flinch. Now she closes her eyes, for there is a red mist before her and she feels that she might fall into it — straight into that mist.

6

With closed eyes, Marguerite suddenly seems able to hear. She hears shouts which come from below — quite close, and coming nearer every moment. Shouts, and the tramp, the scurry of many feet; and now and then that wheezing, asthmatic cough, that strange, strange cough, and the click of wooden shoes. Then a voice, harsh and peremptory:

"Citizen soldiers, your country needs you! Rebels have defied her laws. To arms! Every man who hangs back is a deserter and a traitor!"

After this, Chauvelin's sharp, dictatorial voice raised in protest:

"In the name of the Republic, citizen Barras!—"

But the other breaks in more peremptorily still:

"Ah, ça, citizen Chauvelin Do you presume to stand between me and my duty? By order of the Convention now assembled, every soldier must report at once at his section. Are you perchance on the side of the rebels?"

At this point, Marguerite opens her eyes. Through the widely open door she sees the small, sable-clad figure of Chauvelin, his pale face distorted with rage to which he obviously dare not give rein; and beside him a short, stoutish man in cloth coat and cord breeches, and with the tricolour scarf around his waist. His round face appears crimson with choler and in his right hand he grasps a heavy malacca stick, with a grip that proclaims the desire to strike. The two men appear to be defying one another; and all around them are the vague forms of the soldiers silhouetted against a distant window, through which the crimson afternoon glow comes peeping in on a cloud of flickering dust.

"Now then, citizen soldiers!" Barras resumes, and incontinently turns his back on Chauvelin, who, white to the lips, raises a final and menacing word of warning.

"I warn you, citizen Barras," he says firmly, "that by taking these men away from their post, you place yourself in league with the enemy of your country, and will have to answer to her for this crime."

His accent is so convinced, so firm, and fraught with such dire menace, that for one instant Barras hesitates.

"Eh bien!" he exclaims. "I will humour you thus far, citizen Chauvelin. I will leave you a couple of men to wait on your pleasure until sundown. But, after that..."

For a second or two there was silence. Chauvelin stands there, with his thin lips pressed tightly together. Then Barras adds, with a shrug of his wide shoulders:

"I am contravening my duty in doing even so much; and the responsibility must rest with you, citizen Chauvelin. Allons, my men!" he says once more; and without another glance on his discomfited colleague, he strides down the stairs, followed by Captain Boyer and the soldiers.

For a while the house is still filled with confusion and sounds: men tramping down the stone stairs, words of command, click of sabres and muskets, opening and slamming of doors. Then the sounds slowly die away, out in the street in the direction of the Porte St. Antoine. After which, there is silence.

Chauvelin stands in the doorway with his back to the room and to Marguerite, his claw-like hands intertwined convulsively behind him. The silhouette of the two remaining soldiers are still visible; they stand silently and at attention with their muskets in their hands. Between them and Chauvelin hovers the tall, ungainly figure of a man, clothed in rags and covered in soot and coal-dust. His feet are thrust into wooden shoes, his grimy hands are stretched out each side of him; and on his left arm, just above the wrist, there is an ugly mark like the brand seared into the flesh of a convict.

Just now he looks terribly distressed with a tearing fit of coughing. Chauvelin curtly bids him stand aside; and at the same moment the church clock of St. Louis, close by, strikes seven.

"Now then, citizen soldiers!" Chauvelin commands.

The soldiers grasp their muskets more firmly, and Chauvelin raises his hand. The next instant he is thrust violently back into the room, loses his balance, and falls backward against a table, whilst the door is slammed to between him and the soldiers. From the other side of the door there comes the sound of a short, sharp scuffle. Then silence.

Marguerite, holding her breath, hardly realized that she lived. A second ago she was facing death; and now....

Chauvelin struggled painfully to his feet. With a mighty effort and a hoarse cry of rage, he threw himself against the door. The impetus carried him further than he intended, no doubt; for at that same moment the door was opened, and he fell up against the massive form of the grimy coalheaver, whose long arms closed round him, lifted him off the floor, and carried him like a bundle of straw to the nearest chair.

"There, my dear Mr. Chambertin!" the coalheaver said, in exceedingly light and pleasant tones. "Let me make you quite comfortable!"

Marguerite watched — dumb and fascinated — the dexterous hands that twined the length of rope round the arms and legs of her helpless enemy, and wound his own tricolour scarf around that snarling mouth.

She scarcely dared trust her eyes and ears.

There was the hideous, dust-covered mudlark with bare feet thrust into sabots, with ragged breeches and tattered shirt; there was the cruel, mud-stained face, the purple lips, the toothless mouth; and those huge, muscular arms, one of them branded like the arm of a convict, the flesh still swollen with the searing of the iron.

"I must indeed crave your ladyship's forgiveness. In very truth, I am a disgusting object!"

Ah, there was the voice! — the dear, dear, merry voice! A little weary perhaps, but oh! so full of laughter and of boyish shame-facedness! To Marguerite it seemed as if God's own angels had opened to her the gates of Paradise. She did not speak; she scarce could move. All that she could do was to put out her arms.

He did not approach her, for in truth he looked a dusty object; but he dragged his ugly cap off his head, then slowly, and keeping his eyes fixed upon her, he put one knee to the ground.

"You did not doubt, m'dear, that I would come?" he asked quaintly.

She shook her head. The last days were like a nightmare now; and in truth she ought never to have been afraid.

"Will you ever forgive me?" he continued.

"Forgive? What?" she murmured.

"These last few days. I could not come before. You were safe for the time being.... That fiend was waiting for me...."

She gave a shudder and closed her eyes.

"Where is he?"

He laughed his gay, irresponsible laugh, and with a slender hand, still covered with coal-dust, he pointed to the helpless figure of Chauvelin.

"Look at him!" he said. "Doth he not look a picture?"

Marguerite ventured to look. Even at sight of her enemy bound tightly with ropes to a chair, his own tricolour scarf wound loosely round his mouth, she could not altogether suppress a cry of horror.

"What is to become of him?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I wonder!" he said lightly.

Then he rose to his feet, and went on with quaint bashfulness:

"I wonder," he said, "how I dare stand thus before your ladyship!"

And in a moment she was in his arms, laughing, crying, covered herself now with coal-dust and with grime.

"My beloved!" she exclaimed with a shudder of horror. "What you must have gone through!"

He only laughed like a schoolboy who had come through some impish adventure without much harm.

"Very little, I swear!" he asserted gaily. "But for thoughts of you, I have never enjoyed anything so much as this last phase of a glorious adventure. After our clever friend here ordered the real Rateau to be branded, so that he might know him again wherever he say him, I had to bribe the veterinary who had done the deed, to do the same thing for me. It was not difficult. For a thousand livres the man would have branded his own mother on the nose; and I appeared before him as a man of science, eager for an experiment. He asked no questions. And, since then, whenever Chauvelin gazed contentedly on my arm, I could have screamed for joy!"

"For the love of Heaven, my lady!" he added quickly, for he felt her soft, warm lips against his branded flesh; "don't shame me over such a trifle! I shall always love that scar, for the exciting time it recalls and because it happens to be the initial of your dear name."

He stooped down to the ground and kissed the hem of her gown.

After which he had to tell her as quickly and as briefly as he could, all that had happened in the past few days.

"It was only by risking the fair Theresia's life," he said, "that I could save your own. No other spur would have goaded Tallien into open revolt."

He turned and looked down for a moment on his enemy, who lay pinioned and helpless, with hatred and baffled revenge writ plainly on the contorted face and pale, rolling eyes.

And Sir Percy Blakeney sighed, a quaint sigh of regret.

"I only regret one thing, my dear M. Chambertin," he said after a while. "And that is, that you and I will never measure wits again after this. Your damnable revolution is dead... I am glad I was never tempted to kill you. I might have succumbed, and in very truth robbed the guillotine of an interesting prey. Without any doubt, they will guillotine the lot of you, my good M. Chambertin. Robespierre to-morrow; then his friends, his sycophants, his imitators — you amongst the rest.... 'Tis a pity! You have so often amused me. Especially after you had put a brand on Rateau's arm, and thought you would always know him after that. Think it all out, my dear sir! Remember our happy conversation in the warehouse down below, and my denunciation of citoyenne Cabarrus... You gazed upon my branded arm then and were quite satisfied. My denunciation was a false one, of course! 'Tis I who put the letters and the rags in the beautiful Theresia's apartments. But she will bear me no malice, I dare swear; for I shall have redeemed my promise. To-morrow, after Robespierre's head has fallen, Tallien will be the greatest man in France and his Theresia a virtual queen. Think it all out, my dear Monsieur Chambertin! You have plenty of time. Some one is sure to drift up here presently, and will free you and the two soldiers, whom I left out on the landing. But no one will free you from the guillotine when the time comes, unless I myself...."

He did not finish; the rest of the sentence was merged in a merry laugh.
“A pleasant conceit — what?” he said lightly. “I’ll think on it, I promise you!”

7

And the next day Paris went crazy with joy. Never had the streets looked more gay, more crowded. The windows were filled with spectators; the very roofs were crowded with an eager, shouting throng.

The seventeen hours of agony were ended. The tyrant was a fallen, broken man, maimed, dumb, bullied and insulted. Aye! He, how yesterday was the Chosen of the People, the Messenger of the Most High, now sat, or rather lay, in the tumbril, with broken jaw, eyes closed, spirit already wandering on the shores of the Styx; insulted, railed at, cursed — aye, cursed! — by every woman, reviled by every child.

The end came at four in the afternoon, in the midst of acclamations from a populace drunk with gladness — acclamations which found their echo in the whole of France, and have never ceased to re-echo to this day.

But of all that tumult, Marguerite and her husband heard but little. They lay snugly concealed the whole of that day in the quiet lodgings in the Rue de l’Anier, which Sir Percy had occupied during these terribly anxious times. Here they were waited on by that asthmatic reprobate Rateau and his mother, both of whom were now rich for the rest of their days.

When the shades of evening gathered in over the jubilant city, whilst the church bells were ringing and the cannons booming, a market gardener’s cart, driven by a worthy farmer and his wife, rattled out of the Porte St. Antoine. It created no excitement, and suspicion was far from everybody’s mind. The passports appeared in order; but even if they were not, who cared, on this day of all days, when tyranny was crushed and men dared to be men again?

THE END

SIR PERCY HITS BACK

Chapter 1

On the spot where the Hotel Moderne now rears its more ambitious head, there stood at that time a cottage with sloping red-tiled roof and white-washed walls. It was owned by one Baptiste Portal, an old peasant of the Dauphine, who dispensed refreshments to travellers and passers-by, as his father and grandfather had done before him, in the shape of somewhat thin vin du pays and an occasional glass of eau-de-vie, while he spent his slack time chiefly in grumbling at the fact that the new posting-inn on the high road had taken all his trade away. He did not see the necessity of the posting-inn, did not old Baptiste, nor for that matter that of the high-road or the post-chaise. Before all these new notions had come into the heads of the government people up in Paris, travellers had been content to come squelching through the mud on the back of a good horse, or come ploughing through inches of dust in the old coche. So why not now? And was not the old wine of Les Amandiers as good and better than the vinegar dispensed at the more pretentious posting-inn? The place was called Les Amandiers because at the back of the house there were two anaemic almond-trees with gaunt, twisted arms which covered themselves in the spring with sickly blooms, and in the summer with dust. In the front of the house, up against the white-washed wall, there was a wooden bench on which Baptiste's privileged customers were wont to sit on fine evenings, to drink their vin du pays and join the old man in his wholesale condemnation of the government "up in Paris" and its new-fangled ways. From this vantage-point a glorious view was obtained over the valley of the Bueche, and beyond Laragne as far as the peaks of Pelvoux: whilst to the right towered in the distance the grand old citadel of Sisteron with its turrets and fortifications dating from the fourteenth century, and the stately church of Notre Dame. But views and winding rivers, snowy peaks, and medieval fortresses did not interest Baptiste Portal's customers nearly as much as the price of almonds or the alarming increase in the cost of living. Now, on this particular afternoon in May the mistral was blowing mercilessly across the valley from over the snows of Pelvoux, and the cold and the dust had driven all of good Portal's customers indoors. The low-raftered room, decorated with strings of onions which hung from the ceiling together with a bunch or two of garlic, of basil and other pot-herbs, and perfumed also with the aroma of the pot-au-feu simmering in the kitchen, had acquired just that right atmosphere, cosy, warm, and odorous, beloved of every true man born in the Dauphine. It was a memorable afternoon, remembered long afterwards and retold by the gossips of Sisteron and Laragne in all its dramatic details. But at this hour, nothing more dramatic had occurred than the arrival of a detachment of soldiers, under the command of an under-officer, who had come up from Orange, so they said, in order to fetch away the young men who were wanted for the army. They had demanded supper and shelter for the night. Of course soldiers, as soldiers, were very much disapproved of by those worthies of Sisteron who frequented Les Amandiers, more especially now when what they did was to fetch away the young men for cannon-fodder, to fight the English and prolong this awful war which caused food to be so dear and hands for harvesting so scarce. But, on the other hand, soldiers, as company, were welcome. They brought news of the outside world, most of it bad, it is true — nothing good did happen anywhere these days — but news nevertheless. And though at the recital of what went on in Paris, in Lyons, or even as near as Orange, the guillotine, the tumbrils, the wholesale slaughter of tyrants and aristos, one shuddered with horror and apprehension, there were always the lively tales of barrack-life to follow, the laughter, the ribald song, and something of life seemed to infiltrate into this sleepy half-dead corner of the old Dauphine. The soldiers — there were a score of them — occupied the best place in the room, as was only fitting; they sat squeezed tightly against one another like dried figs in a box, on the two benches on either side of the centre trestle table. Old Baptiste Portal sat with them, beside the officer. Some kind of lieutenant this man appeared to be, or other subaltern: but, oh dear me! these days one could hardly tell an officer from the rag-tab and bob-tail of the army, save for the fact that he wore epaulettes. Now this man — but there! What was the use of comparing these ruffians with the splendid officers of the King's armies in the past? This one certainly was not proud. He sat with his men, joked, drank with them, and presently he convened friend Portal to a glass of wine: "A la sante!" he added, "de la Republique, and of Citizen Robespierre, the great and incorruptible master of France!"

Baptiste, wagging his old head, had not liked to refuse, because soldiers were soldiers and these had been at great pains to explain to him that the reason why the guillotine was kept so busy was because Frenchmen had not yet learned to be good Republicans. "We've cut off the head of Louis Capet and of the widow Capet, too," the officer had added with grim significance, "but there are still Frenchmen who are bad patriots and hanker after the return of the tyrants."

Now Baptiste, like all his like in the Dauphine, had learned in childhood to worship God and honour the King. The crime of regicide appeared to him unforgivable, like that mysterious sin against the Holy Ghost which M. le Cure used vaguely to hint at, and which no one understood. In addition to that, Baptiste greatly resented His late Majesty King Louis XVI and his august Queen being irreverently referred to as Louis Capet and the widow Capet. But he kept his own counsel and silently drank his wine. What his thoughts were at the moment was nobody's business. After that, talk drifted to the neighbourhood: the aristos who still clung to the land which by right belonged to the people. Neither Baptiste nor his customers — old peasants from the district — were a match for the lieutenant and his corporals in such discussions. They did not dare argue, only shook their heads and sighed at the coarse jests which the soldiers uttered against people and families whom everyone in the Dauphine knew and esteemed. The Frontenacs, for instance. The talk and the jests had turned on the Frontenacs: people who had owned the land for as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember and God only knows how long before that. Well! it appeared that in the eyes of the Republic the Frontenacs were bad patriots, tyrants and traitors. Didn't Citizen Portal know that? No! Portal did not — he had never been called "citizen" before, and didn't like it: he was just Baptiste to those who knew him, quoi? — nor would he admit that the Frontenacs were traitors. There was Monsieur, who knew more about cattle and almonds than any man for leagues around. How could he be a bad patriot? And Madame, who was very good and pious, and Mademoiselle who was so ill and delicate. But on this there followed an altercation — stern rebuke of Baptiste from the officer for talking of "Monsieur", of "Madame" and "Mademoiselle". Bah! there were no aristos left in these days.

"Aren't we all citizens of France?" the lieutenant concluded grandiloquently.

Silence and submission on the part of all the groundlings which followed the lieutenant's rebuke, somewhat mollified the latter's aggressive patriotism. He condescended to relate how he had been deputed to make a perquisition in the house of the Frontenacs, and if anything was found in the least compromising, then the devil help the whole brood: their lives would not be worth an hour's purchase. In fact, in the lieutenant's opinion — and who better qualified to hold one? — the Frontenacs were already judged, condemned, and as good as guillotined. He held with the "law of the suspect" lately enacted by the National Assembly, did Lieutenant Godet.

Again much wagging of heads! "The Committees in all Sections," Godet now goes on airily, and proceeds to pick his teeth after that excellently stewed scrag-end of mutton, "the Committees in all Sections are ordered in future to arrest all persons who are suspect."

No one knows what is a Committee, nor yet a Section: but they are evidently fearsome things. But no matter about them: the thing is, who are the "suspect" who are thus arrestable?

"The Frontenacs are suspect," the lieutenant explains whilst sucking his tooth-pick, "and so are all persons who by their actions — or — their writings — have become — er — suspect."

Not very illuminating, perhaps, but distinctly productive of awe. The worthies of Sisteron, those who are privileged to sit close to the centre table and actually to put in a word with the soldiers, sip their wine in silence. Just below the tiny window at the end of the room, two charcoal-burners, or wood-cutters — I know not what they are — are lending an attentive ear. They dare not join in the conversation because they are comparative strangers, vagabonds really, come to pick up a few sous by doing menial work too lowering for a local peasant to do. One of them is small and slender, but looks vigorous; the other, much older, with stooping shoulders, and grey, lank hair that falls over a wrinkled forehead. He is harassed by a constant, tearing cough which he strives in vain to suppress out of respect for the company.

"But," the worthy Portal puts in tentatively, "how does one know Monsieur le — I mean, citizen officer, that a person is in verity suspect?"

The lieutenant explains with a sweeping gesture of the tooth-pick: "If you are a good patriot, Citizen Portal, you are able to recognize a Suspect in the street, you can seize him by the collar then and there, and you may drag him off before the Committee, who will promptly clap him in prison. And remember," he added significantly, "that there are forty-four thousand Committees in France to-day."

"Forty-four thousand?" somebody exclaims.

"And twenty three," Godet replies, gloating over his knowledge of this trifling detail.

"Forty-four thousand and twenty three," he reiterates, and claps the table with the palm of his hand.

"One in Sisteron?" someone murmurs.

"Three!" the lieutenant replies.

"And the Frontenacs are suspect, you say?"

"I shall know that tomorrow," rejoins the other, "and so will you."

The way he said those last three words caused everyone to shudder. Over at the far end of the room, the charcoal burner, or whatever he was, had a tearing fit of coughing.

"Tis little Fluerette who will weep her eyes out," good old Baptiste said with a doleful shake of the head, "if anything happens to Mad — to the citizens up at the chateau."

"Fluerette?" the lieutenant asked.

"She is Armand's daughter — Citizen Armand you know — why — ?"

He might well stare, for the officer, for some unaccountable reason, had burst into a loud guffaw.

"Citizen Armand's daughter, did you say?" he queried at last, his eyes still streaming with the effort of laughing.

"Yes, of course. As pretty a wench as you can see in Dauphine. Why shouldn't Armand have a daughter, I'd like to know."

"Do tigers have daughters?" the lieutenant retorted significantly.

Somehow the conversation languished after that. The fate which so obviously awaited the Frontenacs, who were known and loved, cast a gloom over the most buoyant spirits. Not even the salacious stories of barrack-life, on which the men now embarked with much gusto, found responsive laughter.

It was getting late, too. Past eight o'clock, and tallow was dear these days. There was a cart-shed at the back of the house, with plenty of clean straw: some of the soldiers declared themselves ready for a stretch there: even the voluble officer was yawning. The regular customers of Les Amandiers took the hint. They emptied their mugs, paid over their sous, and trooped out one by one.

The wind had gone down. There was not a cloud in the sky, which was a deep, and intense sapphire blue, studded with stars. The waning moon was not yet up, and the atmosphere was redolent of the perfume of almond blossoms. Altogether a lovely night, Nature in her kindest, most gentle mood. Spring in the air and life stirring in the entrails of the earth in travail. Some of the soldiers made their way to the shed, whilst others stretched out on the floor, or the benches of the room, there to dream perhaps of the perquisition to be made tomorrow and of the tragedy which would enter like a sudden devastating gust of wind into the peaceful home of the Frontenacs.

Nature was kind and gentle: and men were cruel and evil and vengeful. The Law of the Suspect! No more cruel, more tyrannical law was ever enacted within the memory of civilization. Forty-four thousand and twenty-three Committees to mow down the flower of the children of France. A harvest of innocents! And lest the harvesters prove slack, the National Convention has just decreed that a perambulating army shall march up and down the country, to ferret out the Suspect and feed the guillotine. Lest the harvesters prove slack, men like Lieutenant Godet with a score of out-at-elbows, down-at-heels brigands, are ordered to scour the country, to seize and strike. To feed the guillotine, in fact, and to purge the Soil of Liberty.

Is this not the most glorious revolution the world has ever known? Is it not the era of Liberty and of the Brotherhood of Man?

Chapter 2

The perambulating army had now gone to rest: some in the cart-shed, some along the benches and tables or floor of the inn. The lieutenant in a bed. Is he not the officer commanding this score of ardent patriots? Therefore he must lie in a bed — old Portal's bed — whilst old Portal himself and his wife, older and more decrepit than he, can lie on the floor, or in the dog's kennel for aught Lieutenant Godet cares.

The two wood-cutters — or shall we call them charcoal-burners? — were among the last to leave. They had petitioned for work among the worthies here present: but money was very scarce these days, and each man did what work he could for himself, and did not pay another to do it for him. But Papa Tronchet, who was a carpenter by trade and owned a little bit of woodland just by the bridge, close to Armand's cottage, he promised one of the men — not both — a couple of hours' work tomorrow: wood-cutting at the rate of two sous an hour, and then he thought it dear.

And so the company had dispersed: each man to his home. The two vagabonds — wood-cutters or charcoal-burners, they were anyhow vagabonds — found their way into the town. Wearily they trudged, for one of them was very old and the other lame, till they reached a narrow lane at right angles to the riverbank. The lane was made up of stone houses that had overhanging eaves, between which the sun couldn't ever penetrate. It was invariably either as damp as the bottom of a well, or as dry and wind-swept as an iron stove-pipe. Tonight it was dry and hot: broken-down shutters, innocent of paint, creaked upon rusty hinges. A smell of boiled cabbage, of stale water and garlic hung beneath the eaves; it came in great gusts down pitch-dark stairways, under narrow doors, oozing with sticky moisture.

The two vagabonds turned into one of these doors and by instinct seemingly, for it was pitch dark, they mounted the stone stairs that squelched with grease and dirt underneath their feet. They did not speak a word until they came to the top of the house, when one of them with a kick of his boot threw open a door; it groaned and creaked under the blow. It gave on an attic-room with sloping ceiling, black with the dirt of ages, and with dormer window masked by a tattered rag that had once been a curtain. There was a wooden table in the centre of the room, and three chairs, with broken backs and ragged rush-seats, dotted about. On the table a couple of tallow candles guttered in pewter sconces.

One of the chairs was drawn close up to the table and on it sat a young man dressed in a well-worn travelling-coat with heavy boots on his feet, and a shabby tricorne hat on the top of his head. His arms were stretched out over the table and his face was buried in them. He had obviously been asleep when the door was so unceremoniously thrown open. At the sound he raised his head and blinked drowsily in the dim light at the newcomers.

Then he stretched out his arms, yawned, and gave himself a shake like a sleepy dog, and finally exclaimed in English! "Ah! At last!"

One of the vagabonds — the one namely who at Les Amandiers had appeared with bent shoulders and a hacking cough, now straightened out what proved to be a magnificent athletic figure, and gave a pleasant laugh.

"Tony, you lazy dog!" he said, "I've a mind to throw you downstairs. What say you, Ffoulkes? While you and I have been breaking our backs and poisoning our lungs with the scent of garlic, I verily believe that this villain Tony has been fast asleep."

"By all means, let's throw him downstairs," assented the second vagabond, now no longer lame, whom his friend had addressed as Ffoulkes.

"What would you have me do but sleep?" Tony broke in with a laugh. "I was told to wait, and so I waited. I'd far rather have been with you."

"No, you wouldn't," Ffoulkes demurred, "for then you would have been dirtier than I, and almost as filthy as Blakeney. Look at him; did you ever see such a disgusting object?"

"By Gad!" rejoined Blakeney, surveying his own slender hands coated with coal-dust, grease and grime. "I don't know when I have been quite so dirty. Soap and water!" he commanded with a lofty gesture, "or I perish."

But Tony gave a rueful shrug.

"I have a bit of soap in my pocket," he said, and diving into the capacious pocket of his coat he produced an infinitesimal remnant of soap which he threw upon the table. "As for water, I can't offer you any. The only tap in the house is in the back kitchen which Madame, our worthy landlady, has locked up for the night. She won't have anything wasted, she tells me, not even water."

"Fine, thrifty people, your Dauphinois," commented Blakeney, wisely shaking his head. "But did you try bribery?"

"Yes! But Madame — I beg your pardon, Citizeness Martot — immediately called me a cursed aristo, and threatened me with some committee or other. I couldn't argue with her, she reeked of garlic."

"And you, Tony, are an arrant coward," Blakeney rejoined, "where garlic is concerned."

"I am," Tony was willing to admit. "That's why I am so terrified of you both at this moment."

They all laughed, and since water was not obtainable, Sir Percy Blakeney, one of the most exquisite dandies of his time, and his friend Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, sat down on rickety chairs, in clothes sticky with dirt, their faces and hands masked by a thick coating of grime. Down the four walls of the small attic-room fillets of greasy moistures trickled and mingled with the filth that lay in cakes upon the floor.

"I can't bear to look at Tony," Blakeney said with a mock sigh, "he is too demned clean."

"We'll soon remedy that," was Ffoulkes' dry comment.

And behold Sir Andrew Ffoulkes at close grips with Lord Antony Dewhurst, and this in silence for fear of disturbing the rest of the house, and bringing attention on themselves. It was a sparring match in the best style, Blakeney acting as referee, its object — to transfer some of the grime that coated the clothes and hands of Sir Andrew on to the immaculate Lord Tony. They were only boys after all, these men, who even now were risking their lives in order to rescue the innocent from the clutches of a bloody tyranny. They were boys in their love of adventure, and in their hero worship, and men in the light-hearted way in which they were prepared for the supreme sacrifice, should luck turn against them.

The sparring match ended in a call for mercy on the part of Lord Tony. His face was plastered with grime, his hands as dirty as those of his friends.

"Tony," Blakeney said finally, when he called a halt, "if her ladyship were to see you now, she would divorce you."

Vent having been given to unconquerable animal spirits, there was a quick return to the serious business of the day.

"What is the latest?" Lord Tony asked.

"Just this," Sir Percy replied: "That these hell-hounds have sent out detachments of soldiers all over the country to ferret out what they are pleased to call treason. We all know what that means. Since their iniquitous "Law of the Suspect", no man, woman, or child is safe from denunciation: now with this perambulating army, summary arrests occur by the thousand. It seems that at any moment any of those brigands can seize you by the coat-collar and drag you before one of their precious committees, who promptly sends you to the nearest guillotine."

"And you came from a detachment of those brigands, I suppose."

"We have; Ffoulkes and I spent a couple of hours in their company, in the midst of fumes of garlic that would have reduced you, Tony, to a drivelling coward. I vow the smell of it has even infested my hair."

"Anything to be done?" Tony asked simply. He knew his chief well enough to perceive the vein of grim earnestness through all this flippancy.

"Yes!" Blakeney replied. "The squad of brigands who are scouring this part of France are principally after a family named Frontenac, which consists of father, mother and an invalid daughter. I had already found out something about them in the course of the day, whilst I carted some manure for a farmer close by. Beastly stuff, manure, by the way! I tried to get into touch with Monsieur, who is a stubborn optimist, and does not believe that any man could mean harm to him or to his family. I went to him in the guise of a royalist agent, supposed to have inside information of impending arrests. He simply refused to believe me. Well! we've met that type of man before. He will have a terrible awakening tomorrow."

Sir Percy paused for a moment or two, a deep frown between his brows. His keen intellect, alive to all those swift tragedies which he had devoted his life to countermining, was already at work envisaging the immediate future, the personages of the coming drama, husband, wife, invalid daughter; then the perquisition, the arrest, summary condemnation and slaughter of three helpless innocents.

"I can't help being sorry for the man," he said after awhile, "though he is an obstinate fool! but it is the wife and daughter whom we cannot allow those savage beasts to capture and to kill. I caught sight of them. The girl is pathetic, frail and crippled. I couldn't bear—"

He broke off abruptly. No need to say more, of course; they understood one another, these men who had braved death so often together for love of humanity and for love of sport. Blakeney silent, one firm, slender hand clasped upon the table, was working out a problem of how to rescue three helpless people from that certain death-trap which was already laid for them. The other two waited in equal silence for orders. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel! pledged to help the innocent and to save the helpless! One to command, nineteen to obey: the two who were here, in this filthy, dark attic-room, were the chief's most trusted officers; but the others were not far away!

Seventeen others! scattered about the countryside, disguised, doing menial work in order to keep in touch with the population, spying, hiding in woods or huts: all of them under orders from their chief, and prepared for the call from him.

"Tony," Blakeney said at last, "you'd better find Hastings and Stowmaries at once and they must pass the word round to others. I want three of them — they can draw lots for that — to go to the Four Oaks and there to remain until I can send Ffoulkes to them with full instructions. When you've done that, I want you and Ffoulkes to spend the night in and about Les Amandiers, and gather what you can of the projects of these brigands by keeping your ears open. I'll keep in touch with you from time to time."

"You think," Ffoulkes put in, "that we'll have trouble with the Frontenacs?"

"Not with the ladies, of course," Blakeney replied. "We'll get them safely out of the way before the perambulating army of jackals arrives. With God's help we ought to have enough time to gather a few valuables together. The problem will be with that obstinate, tiresome man. I feel sure he won't move until the soldiers are hammering at his door. Anyway I shall know my way in and about the chateau by tomorrow morning, and will then get into touch with you both at Les Amandiers."

He rose: a tall, straight figure on whom the filthy clothes of a vagabond sat with strange incongruity. But even in this strange garb which was grotesque as well as degrading, there was an extraordinary dignity in the carriage of the head, the broad shoulders, the firm, long Anglo-Saxon limbs, but above all in the flash of the eyes beneath their heavy lids and in the quiet, low-toned voice so obviously accustomed to be heard and obeyed. The two others were ready on the instant to act according to instructions: to act without argument or question. The fire of excitement was in their eyes: the spirit of adventure, of sport for sport's sake, had them in its grip.

"Do I go with you now, Blakeney?" Ffoulkes asked, as his chief had remained for a moment standing, as if following a train of thought.

"Yes," Blakeney replied. "And by the way, Ffoulkes, and you too, Tony, while you are at Les Amandiers try and find out about this girl Fleurette the old innkeeper spoke about. He said that the girl would cry her eyes out if anything happen to the Frontenacs. You remember?"

"I do. He also said that she was as pretty a wench as could be found in the Dauphine," Ffoulkes put in with a smile.

"Her father is named Armand," Blakeney rejoined.

"And the lieutenant called him a tiger, rather enigmatically I thought."

"This Fleurette sounds like an engaging young person," Lord Tony commented with a smile.

"And should be useful in our adventure," Blakeney concluded. "Find out what you can about her."

He was the last to leave the room. Ffoulkes and Lord Tony had already gone down the stone staircase, feeling their way through the darkness. But Sir Percy Blakeney stood a minute or two longer, erect, silent, motionless. Not Sir Percy Blakeney, that is, the elegant courtier, the fastidious fop, the spoilt child of London society, but the daring adventurer, ready now as so often before, to throw his life into the balance to save three innocent people from death. Would he succeed? Nay! that he did not for a moment doubt. Not for a moment. He would save the Frontenacs as he had saved scores of helpless men, women and children before, or leave his bones to

moulder in this fair land where his name had become anathema to the tigers that fed on the blood of their kindred. The true adventurer! Reckless of risks and dangers, with only the one goal in view: Success.

Sport? Of course it was sport! grand, glorious, maddening sport! Sport that made him forget every other joy in life, every comfort, every beatitude. Everything except the exquisite wife who in far-off England waited patiently, with deadly anxiety gnawing at her heart, for news of the man she worshipped. She, perhaps, the greatest heroine of them all.

With a quick sigh, half of impatience, half of longing, Sir Percy Blakeney finally blew out the tallow-lights and made his way out into the open.

Chapter 3

The house where Fleurette was born and where she spent the first eighteen years of her life, still stands about halfway down the road between Sisteron and Serres and close to Laragne, which was then only a village nestling in the valley of the Bueche. To get to it you must first go cautiously down the slope at the head of the old stone bridge, and then climb up another slope to the front door beside the turbulent little mill stream, the soft gurgle of which had lulled Fluerette to sleep ever since her tiny ears had awakened to earthly sounds.

The house is a tumble-down ruin now, only partly roofed in: doors and shutters are half off their hinges: the outside staircase is worm-eaten and unsafe, the white-washed walls are cracked and denuded of plaster; the little shrine above the door has long been bereft of its quaint, rudely painted statue of St. Anthony of Padua with the Divine Child in his arms. But the wild vine still clings to the old walls, and in the gnarled branches of the old walnut tree, a venturesome pair of blackbirds will sometimes build their nest.

A certain atmosphere of mystery and romance still lingers in the tiny dell, and when we fly along the road in our twentieth-century motor-car, we are conscious of this romantic feeling, and we exclaim: "Oh! how picturesque!" and ask the chauffeur to halt upon the bridge, and then get our Kodaks to work.

Perhaps when the plate is developed and we look upon the print, we fail to recapture that sense of a picturesque by-gone age, and wonder why we wasted a precious film on what is nothing but a tumble-down old cottage, and why so many tumble-down old cottages are left to crumble away and disfigure the lovely face of France. But a century and a half ago, when Fluerette was born, there was an almond tree beside the front door, which in the early spring looked as if covered with pink snow. In those days the shutters and the doors and the outside staircase were painted a beautiful green, the walls were resplendent with fresh white-wash every year. In those days too the wild vine turned to a brilliant crimson in the autumn, and in June the climbing rose was just a mass of bloom. Then in May the nightingale often sang in the old walnut-tree, and later on, when Fluerette was tall enough, she always kept a bunch of forget-me-nots in a glass, in the recess above the front door, at the foot of St. Antoine de Padoue, because, as is well known, he is the saint to appeal to in case one has lost anything one values. One just made the sign of the cross and said fervently "St. Antoine de Padoue priez pour nous!" and lo! the kindly saint would aid in the search, and more often than not the lost treasure would be found.

All this was, of course, anterior to the horrible events which in a few days transformed the genial, kindly people of France into a herd of wild beasts thirsting for each other's blood, and before legalized cruelty, murder and regicide had arraigned that fair land at the bar of history, and tarnished her fair fame forever. Fluerette was just eighteen when the terrible events came to pass that threatened to wreck her young life, and through which she learned not only how cruel and evil man could be, but also to what height of self-abnegation and heroism they could at times ascend.

Fluerette's birthday was in May, and that day was always for her the gladdest day of the year. For one thing she could reckon on Bibi being home — Bibi being the name by which she had called her father ever since she had learned to babble. Fleurette had no mother, and she and Bibi just worshipped each other. And of course Bibi had come home for her eighteenth birthday, and had stayed three whole days, and he had brought her a lovely shawl, one that was so soft and fleecy that when you rubbed your cheek against it, it felt just like a caress from a butterfly's wing.

Old Louise — who had looked after the house and watched over Fluerette ever since Fluerette's mother had gone up to heaven to be with the bon Dieu and all the Saints — old Louise had cooked a delicious dinner, which was a very difficult thing to do these days when food was scarce and dear, and eggs, butter and sugar only for the very rich who could bribe M'sieu' Colombe, the epicier of the Rue Haute, to let them have what they wanted. But no matter! Old Louise was a veritable genius where a dinner was concerned, and M'sieu' Colombe, the grocer, and M'sieu' Duflos the butcher, had allowed her to have all she asked for: a luscious piece of meat, three eggs, a piece of butter, and this without any extra bribe. Then there were still half a dozen bottles of that excellent red wine which Bibi had bought in the happy olden days; and he had opened one of the bottles, and Fluerette had drunk some wine and felt very elated and altogether happy — but for this there was another reason of which more anon.

Of course the latter part of the day had been tinged with sadness, again for that one reason which will appear presently: but not only because of that, but because of Bibi's departure, which it seems, could not be postponed, although Fluerette begged and begged that he should remain at least until tomorrow so as not to spoil this most perfect day. Le bon Dieu alone knew when Fluerette would see Bibi again, his absences from home had of late become more frequent and more prolonged.

Mais voila! on one's eighteenth birthday one is not going to think of troubles until the very last minute when it is actually on the doorstep. And the day had been entirely glorious. Not a cloud: the sky of such a vivid blue that the forget-me-nots that grew in such profusion beside the stream looked pale and colourless beneath it. The crimson peonies behind the house were in full bloom, and the buds of the climbing rose on the point of bursting.

And now dinner was over. Louise was busy in the kitchen washing up the plates and dishes, and Fluerette was carefully putting away the beautiful silver forks and spoons which had been brought out for the occasion. She was putting them away in the fine leather case with the molleton lining, which set off the glistening silver to perfection, and little Fluerette felt happy and very contented. She worked away in silence because Bibi had leaned his darling old head against the back of his chair, and closed his eyes. Fluerette thought he had dropped off to sleep.

He looked thin and pale, the poor dear, and there were lines of anxiety and discontent around his thin lips: his hair too had of late been plentifully sprinkled with gray. Oh! how Fluerette longed to have him here at Lou Mas. Always and always. It was the only home she had ever known; dear, beautiful, fragrant Lou Mas. Here she would tend him and care for him until all those lines of care upon his face had vanished. And what more likely to bring a smile to his lips than dear old Lou Mas with its white-washed walls and red-tiled roofs, with its green shutters and little mill streams beside which, for nine months of the year, flowers grew in such profusion; violets, forget-me-nots, and lilies of the valley in the spring, and meadowsweet throughout the summer until an early frost cut them down?

As for this room, Fluerette knew that there could not be in the whole of France, anything more beautiful or more cosy. There was the beautiful walnut side-board, polished until it shone like a mirror, there were the chairs covered in crimson rap, rather faded it is true, but none the worse for that, and there was Bibi's special armchair adorned with that strip of tapestry which Fluerette had worked

in cross-stitch, expressly for his birthday the year of her first communion. Never had there been such chairs anywhere. And that beautiful paper on the walls, the red and yellow roses that looked as if you could pick them off their lovely chocolate-coloured ground, and the chandelier with the crystal drops, and the blue vases with the gold handles that adorned the mantelpiece, not to mention the print curtains and the pink and blue check cloth upon the table. Oh, Fluerette loved all these things, they had been the playthings of her childhood and now they were her pride. If only Bibi would smile again, she felt that the whole world would be like heaven.

And then all at once everything went wrong. Fluerette had got her beautiful new shawl out of its wrappings and draped it round her shoulders and rubbed her cheek against it. Then she had said quite innocently: "It is so lovely, Bibi, and the wool is so soft and fine. I am sure that it came from England."

And it was from that moment that everything went wrong. To begin with, and quite by accident, of course, Bibi broke the stem of the glass out of which he had been drinking, and a quantity of very precious wine was spilt over the beautiful tablecloth.

Whereupon, unaccountably, because of course the table cloth could be washed, Bibi pushed his plate aside quite roughly and suddenly looked ten years older; so wan and pale and shrivelled and old. Fluerette longed to put her arms round him — as she used to do in the happy olden days — and ask him to tell her what was amiss. She was grown up now — eighteen years old today — quite old enough to understand. And if Bibi loved her as she thought he did, he would be comforted.

But there it was! There was something in the expression on Bibi's face that checked Fluerette's impulse. She went on quietly — very quietly, like a little mouse — with her work, and for a while there was silence in the cosy room with the beautiful roses on the wall that looked as if you could pick them off their chocolate ground: a silence that was unaccountably full of sadness.

Chapter 4

Bibi was the first to hear the sound of footsteps coming up to the door. He gave a start, just as if he were waking from a dream.

"It's M'sieu' Colombe," Fluerette said.

At once Bibi reproved her, a thing he hardly ever did: "Citizen Colombe," he said sternly.

Fluerette shrugged her plump shoulders: "Ah well — !" she exclaimed.

"You must learn, Fluerette," Bibi insisted, still with unwonted severity. "You are old enough to learn."

She said nothing more; only kissed the top of his head, the smooth brown hair, of late so plentifully tinged with grey, and promised that she would learn. She stood by the sideboard intent on putting the silver away, with her back turned to Bibi so that he could not see the soft tone of pink that had crept into her cheeks, as soon as she perceived that two pairs of feet were treading the path outside the door.

Now there was a vigorous knock against the door, and a cheery, raucous voice called out loudly: "May one enter?"

Fluerette ran to the door and opened it.

"But certainly, certainly," she said, and then added, seemingly very astonished: "Ah! and M'sieu' Amédé, too?" From which the casual observer would perhaps infer that the pink colour in her cheeks had been due to the arrival of M'sieu' Colombe, the epicier of the Rue Haute, rather than to that of his son Amédé. It was no doubt also that worthy epicier with his round, florid face, dark, twinkling eyes, and general air of ferocious kindliness that caused the pink colour to spread from Fluerette's cheeks down to her neck and the little bit of throat that peeped out above her kerchief.

The good Colombe had already stalked into the room and with a familiar "Eh bien! Eh bien! We did contrive to come and drink Fluerette's health after all?" had slapped Bibi vigorously over the lean shoulders. But Amédé had come to a halt on the mat in which he was mechanically wiping his boots as if his very life depended on their cleanliness. Between his fingers he was twirling an immense posy of bright pink peonies, but his eyes were fixed on Fluerette, and on his broad, plain face, which shone with perspiration and good temper, there was a half-shy, wholly adoring look.

He gulped hard once or twice before he murmured, hoarse with emotion:

"Mam'zelle Fluerette!"

And Fluerette wiped her hot little hand against her apron before she whispered in shy response:

"M'sieu' Amédé!"

Not for these two the new fangled "citoyen" and "citoyenne" decreed in far-off Paris. To their unsophisticated ears the clamour of a trumpet-tongued revolution only came as an unreal and distant echo.

Amédé appeared to have finished cleaning his boots, and Fluerette was able to close the door behind him before she held out her hand for the flowers which he was too bewildered to offer.

"Are those beautiful flowers for me, M'sieu' Amédé?" she asked.

"If you will deign to accept them, Mam'zelle Fluerette?" he replied.

She was eighteen and he was just twenty. Neither of them had ever been away more than a few hours from their remote little village of Dauphine where they were born — she in the little house with the green shutters, and he in the Rue Haute above the shop where his father, Hector Colombe, had sold tallow-candles and sugar, flour and salt, and lard and eggs to the neighbors, ever since he had been old enough to help his father in the business. And when Amédé was four, and Fluerette two, they had made mud pies together in the village street with water from the fountain, and Amédé had warned Fluerette against the many powerful enemies that sometimes threatened her and caused her to scream with terror, such as M'sieu' Duflos, the butcher's dog, or Achille the garde-champetre with his ferocious scowl, or Ma'ame Amelie's geese.

They had sat together — not side by side, you understand, but the boys on the right side of the room and the girls on the left — in the little class-room where M. le Curé taught them their alphabet and subsequently the catechism; and also that two and two make four. They had knelt side by side in the little primitive church at Laragne, their little souls overburdened with emotion and religious fervor, when they made their first communion: Fluerette in a beautiful white dress, with a wealth of white roses on her fair hair, and a long tulle veil that descended right down to her feet; and Amédé in an exquisite cloth coat with brass buttons, a silk waistcoat, buckled shoes and a white ribbon sash on his left arm.

And when Amédé had been old enough to be entrusted with his father's errands over at Serres, a couple of leagues away, Fluerette had climbed behind him on the saddle, and with her arms round his waist, so as to keep herself steady, they had ridden together along the winding road white with dust, Ginette, the good old mare, ambling very leisurely as if she knew that her riders were in no hurry to get anywhere that day.

And now Fluerette was eighteen and Amédé twenty, and her hair was like ripe corn, and her eyes as blue as the sky on a midsummer morn, whilst her mouth was dewy and fragrant as a rose in June. No wonder that poor Amédé felt as if his feet were of lead and his neck too big for his cravat, and when presently she asked him to fill a vase with water out of the carafe so that she could place the beautiful flowers in it, is it a wonder that he spilt the water all over the floor, seeing that his clumsy hands met her dainty fingers around the neck of the carafe?

The good Hector pretended to be very angry with his son for his clumsiness.

"Voyez-moi cet imbecile!" he said in that gruff voice of his which had become a habit with him, because he had to use it all day in order to ward off the naughty village urchins who tried to steal the apples out of his shop.

"Mam'zelle Fluerette, why don't you box his ears?"

Which, of course, was a very funny proposition that caused Fluerette and Amédé to laugh immoderately first and then to whisper and to chaff whilst they mopped the water off the tiled floor. And the good Hector turned once more to Bibi, and shaking his powerful first at nothing in particular, he brought it down with a crash upon the table.

"And now those gredins, those limbs of Satan are taking him away for cannon-fodder! Ah! the devils! the pigs! the pig-devils!"

Bibi looked up inquiringly.

"Taking him away, are they?" he asked dryly. Then he added with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders: "Amédé is twenty, isn't he?"

"What's that to do with their dragging him away from me, when I want him to help in the shop?" Hector retorted with what he felt was unanswerable logic.

"What would be the good of keeping shop, my good Hector," Bibi rejoined simply, "if France was invaded by foreigners as she is already ruined by traitors?"

"Well! And isn't she ruined now by all those devils up in Paris who can think of nothing better than war or murder?" growled Hector Colombe, heedless of the quick gesture of warning which Bibi had given him.

Adèle, the girl from the village who gave old Louise a hand about the house when Bibi was at home, had just come in from the kitchen with a pile of plates and dishes which she proceeded to range upon the dresser. Hector shrugged his big shoulders. Whoever would think of taking notice of Adèle? A wench who got five souls a day for scrubbing floors! An undersized, plain-faced creature with flat feet and red elbows. Bah!

But Bibi still put up a warning finger:

"Little pitchers have long ears," he said in a whisper.

"Oh! I know, I know," Hector rejoined gruffly. "It is the fashion these days for us all to spy upon one another. A pretty pass they have brought us to," he added, "your friends in Paris."

To this Bibi made no reply. No doubt he knew that it was impossible to argue with Hector, once the worthy epicier was in one of his moods. Adèle had finished her task and glided out of the room, silent, noiseless, furtive as a little rat, which she vaguely resembled with small, keen eyes, and pointed nose and chin. In a corner of the room, by the window, still busy with those flowers which seemingly would not set primly in the vase, Fluerette and Amédé were talking under their breath.

"I'm going away, Mam'zelle Fluerette," said he.

"Going away, M'sieu' Amédé? Whither? When?"

"They want me in the army."

"What for?" she asked naively.

"To fight against the English."

"But you won't go, will you, M'sieu' Amédé?"

"I must, Mam'zelle Fluerette."

"Oh, but what shall I — I mean, what will M'sieu' Colombe do? You must remain here, to help him in the shop." And fight against it as she would, there was an uncomfortable little lump in her throat when she pictured how terribly lost M'sieu' Colombe would be without his son.

"Father is very angry," Amédé said rather hoarsely, because he too had an uncomfortable lump in his throat now. "But it seems there's nothing to be done. I have to go."

"When?" Fluerette murmured, so softly, so softly, that only a lover's ears could possibly have caught the whisper.

"I have to present myself tomorrow," Amédé replied, "before M'sieu' le Commissaire de Police at Serres."

"Tomorrow? And I have been so happy today!"

The cry came from an overburdened little heart, brought face to face with its first sorrow. Fluerette no longer attempted to keep back her tears, and Amédé, not quite sure whether he should cry because he was going away or dance with joy because it was his going away that was making Fluerette cry, but in time by wiping his face which was streaming with perspiration and tears.

"I wish I could at least have seen those children wedded," the worthy epicier muttered in the interval of blowing his nose with an noise like a cloudburst. "At least," he added with the good round oath which he reserved for occasions such as these, "before they take my Amédé away."

Bibi on the other hand appeared to be more philosophical.

"We must wait for better times," he said, "and anyhow Fluerette is too young to marry."

Chapter 5

Parting is not such sweet sorrow as the greatest of all poets would have us believe. At any rate Fleurette did not find it at all sweet, on this her eighteenth birthday, which should have been a very happy one.

It was bad enough saying "adieu" to Bibi. But Fleurette was accustomed to that. Of late Bibi had been so often and so long absent from home: sometimes weeks — nay! months — would elapse, and there would be no Bibi to fondle Fleurette and bring life and animation within those white-washed walls that held all that was dearest to her in the world. It was undoubtedly heart-rending to bid Bibi adieu: but in a way, one knew that the darling would come back to Lou Mas as soon as he was able, come for one of those surprise visits that made Fleurette as gay as a linnet all the while they lasted. But to say goodbye to Amédé was a different matter. He was going into the army. He was going to fight the English. Le Bon Dieu alone knew if Amédé would ever come back. Perhaps he would be killed. Perhaps — oh! perhaps —

Never in her life had Fleurette been so sad.

And now the last of the goodbyes had been said. Bibi, accompanied by M'sieu' Colombe and Amédé, had walked away in the direction of the village, where he would pick up his horse, and start along the main road that led to Serres and thence to Paris.

Fleurette remained on the bridge for some time, shading her eyes against the sun, because they ached so from all the tears which she had shed. The three men had become mere specks, 'way down the road: old Louise had gone back to her kitchen with Adèle, only Fleurette remained standing on the bridge alone. Tears were still running down her cheeks, whilst with aching eyes she strove to catch a last sight of Bibi as he and his two companions disappeared round the bend of the road. Or was it Amédé she was trying to see?

The afternoon sun had spread a mantle of gold over the snowy crests of Pelvoux: on the sapphire sky myriads of tiny clouds seemed to hold hearts of living flame in their fleecy bosoms. The wavy ribbon of the Bueche was like a giant mirror that reflected a whole gamut of glowing tints, blue and gold, and purple, whilst on the winding road, the infinitesimal atoms of dust seemed like low-lying clouds of powdered topaz. Suddenly in the direction of Sisteron those clouds rose, more dense: something more solid than powdered topaz, animated the distance: grew gradually more tangible and then became definite. Fleurette now could easily distinguish ten or a dozen men coming this way. They all wore red caps on their heads. Ahead of them came a man on horseback. He wore a tricorne hat, adorned with a tricolour cockade, and the sun drew sparks of flame from the steel bit in his horse's mouth and from the brass bosses and buckles on the harness.

Now Fleurette could hear the dull stamping of hoofs on the dusty road, and the tramping of heavy, weary footsteps: and she watched, fascinated, these men coming along.

All at once the rider put his horse to a trot, and the next moment he reined in on the bridge. He put out his hand and cried a sharp: "Halte!" whereupon the other men all came to a halt. Fleurette stood there wondering what all this meant. Vaguely she guessed that these men must be soldiers, though, of a truth, with the exception of the one on horseback and who appeared to be their officer, there was very little that was soldierly about them. Their red caps were of worsted, and adorned with what had once been a tricolour cockade, but was now so covered with dust that the colours were well-nigh indistinguishable. The men's coats, too, once blue in colour and fitted with brass buttons, were torn and faded, with several buttons missing: their breeches were stained with mud, they had no stockings inside their shoes, and it would have been impossible to say definitely whether their shirts had been of a drabby grey when they were new, or whether they had become so under stress of wear and dirt. Fleurette's recollection flew back to the smart soldiers she used to see when she was a tiny tot and Bibi took her to Serres or Sisteron on fête days when the military band would march past in their beautiful clothes all glittering with brass buttons, and their boots polished up so that you could almost see yourself in them.

But there! every one knew that these were terribly hard times and that new clothes were very, very dear: So Fleurette supposed that the poor soldiers had to wear out their old ones just like everybody else. And her sensitive little heart gave an extra throb or two, for she had suddenly remembered that M'sieu' Amédé would also be a soldier very soon, wearing a shabby coat, and perhaps no stockings inside his shoes. Still thinking of M'sieu' Amédé, she was very polite to the man on horseback, although he was unnecessarily abrupt with her, asking her gruffly whether Citizen Armand was within.

Fleurette said "No!" quite gently, and then, choosing to ignore the coarse manner in which the man uttered a very ugly oath, she went on: "Father has been gone a quarter of an hour and more, and if you—"

"Citizen Armand, I asked for," the officer broke in roughly, "not our father."

"Father's name is Armand," Fleurette said, still speaking very politely. "I thought you were asking for him."

The horseman, she thought, realizing his mistake, should have excused himself for speaking so rudely: but he did nothing of the sort. He just shrugged his shoulders and said in a very curious way, which sounded almost like a sneer:

"Oh! is that how it is? You are Citizen Armand's daughter, are you?"

"Yes! M'sieu' l'officier."

"Call me citizen lieutenant," the man retorted roughly. "Hasn't your father taught you to speak like a good patriot?"

Fleurette would not have admitted for the world that she was half- afraid of this unkempt, unshaven officer with the gruff voice, but she felt intimidated, shy, ill at ease. She would have given worlds to have some one friendly beside her, old Louise, or even Adèle.

"Shall I call Ma'ame Louise," she suggested, "to speak with her?"

"No," the man replied curtly, "what's the use if your father isn't there? Which way did he go?"

"To the village first, M'sieu' — I mean citizen, to pick up his horse which he always leaves at M'sieu' Colombe's stables. He is going to Paris afterwards."

"How far is it to the village?"

"Less than a quarter of a league — er — citizen."

"And the house," the officer asked again, "where the ci-devant Frontenacs live, is that far?"

"About half a league by the road from here," Fleurette replied, "the other side of the village. There is a short cut behind this house, past the mill, but—"

The man, however, was no longer listening to what she said. He muttered something that sounded very like an oath, and then turned to the soldiers: "Allons! Marche!" he commanded sharply. The men appeared terribly dusty and tired and hardly made a movement to obey: at the first call of "Halte", some of them had thrown themselves down by the edge of the road and stretched out full length on the heaps of hard stones pile up there; others had wandered down the slope by the bridge, and lying flat on the ground were slaking their thirst in the cool, clear water of the stream. Fleurette was very sorry for them.

"May they wait a moment, M'sieu' le — I mean, citizen lieutenant," she pleaded. "I'll get them something to drink. We haven't much, but I know Louise won't—"

But the officer took no further notice either of her or of the men. Having given his order to march, he had readjusted the reins in his hands, and struck his spurs somewhat viciously into his horse's flanks. The horse reared and plunged for a moment, then started off at a sharp trot, clouds of dust flying out from under its hoofs.

The men made an effort to rise. Fleurette put up a finger and smiled at them all.

"Wait one minute," she said, and ran quickly back into the house.

There was the best part of a bottle left of that good red wine: Bibi had not touched it again after he broke the stem of his glass. Fleurette had picked up the bottle and taken a tin mug from the dresser and was about to start out again before Louise thought of asking her what she was up to.

"There are some poor, tired soldiers outside on the bridge," Fleurette replied, "I want to take them something to drink. There's not much of it, and twelve of them to share it, but it will be better than nothing, and perhaps le bon Dieu will make a miracle and make it be enough. They seemed so thirsty, poor dears."

"Let Adèle go," Louise said curtly. "I don't like you speaking with those vagabonds."

And while Adèle ran out, as she was bid, with mug and bottle, Louise continued to mutter half under her breath:

"I can't abide these sans-culottes. Brigands the lot of them. What are they doing in the neighbourhood, I'd like to know. Up to no good you may depend. Let Adèle talk to them. It is not fit for a well-brought-up wench like you to be seen in such company."

Fleurette did not pay much attention to old Louise's mutterings. There was plenty to do in the house with washing up and tidying things away. And it was Louise's habit to grumble at anything that was in any way unusual: a wet day in August, or a mild one in December, a caleche on the road, a horseman, a soldier, or a letter for Bibi. She was always called "old Louise" although, in truth, she had scarce reached middle age; but her skin was dry and rough like the soil of her native Dauphiné, her face and hands were prematurely wrinkled, and her voice had become harsh of late, probably for want of use, like a piece of mechanism that has stood still and begun to grind for want of a lubricant. In Armand's house, when he was absent, she ruled supreme. Fleurette never dreamed of disobeying, and Armand's only peremptory orders to Louise were never to mention politics or current events to the child.

Louise had nursed Fleurette at her breast when Fleurette's mother died in child-bed, and she had left her own baby in the care of her sister, already a widow and childless. Considerations of money had prompted her at the time, for Monsieur Armand, as he was then, had made her liberal offers: afterwards, it was too late to regret. Her own daughter, Adèle, born of an unknown father who loved and rode away, had been brought up to a life of drudgery by her aunt, who sent the girl out to earn her own living as soon as she could toddle, whilst Fleurette was brought up to have everything she wanted; petted and idolized by a father plentifully supplied with money. Fleurette and Adèle were foster-sisters, but with destinies as wide apart as the peaks of Pelvoux.

But Louise never spoke one bitter word when she saw Adèle with toil-worn hands scrubbing the kitchen floor on which Fleurette trod with dainty, high-heeled shoes. Perhaps she loved her foster-child more than she did her own; perhaps it was only the same considerations of money that had already guided her conduct before, that prompted her later to indulgence towards the rich man's daughter, whilst reserving her pent-up acrimony for the household drudge. No one knew what Louise's feelings were toward Adèle — Adèle herself least of all. The girl was silent, reserved, self-contained, very conscientious in her work, but not very responsive to the many kindnesses shown her by M'sieu' Armand or Mam'zelle Fleurette. She still lived with her aunt who had brought her up, and she appeared to lay no claim to her mother's affection: she had earned her own living ever since she was ten years of age, and now, at eighteen, she looked more like a woman than a girl: her little face was all pinched up, the lips thin, the eyes either sharp as needless or expressionless like those of a rodent. She hardly ever spoke and no one had ever seen her smile.

Old Louise's mutterings presently turned toward Adèle's prolonged absence:

"What is the girl about now, I should like to know? She is not a gossip as a rule."

She went on with her washing up for a moment or two longer, and then said sharply:

"Run along, Fleurette, and see what the wench is doing. Lazy baggage, with all the work there's still to do."

Fleurette ran out at once. She too wondered why Adèle was such a long time. And there, sure enough, standing on the bridge, was Adèle talking to the soldiers. The officer was already out of sight. Adèle talking! and Fleurette even thought that she heard her giggle. Incredible! The soldiers were all laughing, and one of them was in the act of drinking the last drop out of the tin mug.

Fleurette stood for a moment on the doorstep, vaguely wondering what in the world had come over Adèle, when a rather curious incident occurred: the soldiers were all laughing, jesting apparently with the girl, and one of them, with head tilted back, was draining the last drop out of the tin mug. Fleurette was on the point of calling to Adèle when her attention was arrested by the appearance of an old man carrying what looked like a load of faggots tied up in coarse sacking. He seemed to have climbed the slopes on the opposite side of the road; at any rate there he was, all of a sudden, immediately behind the group of soldiers.

He appeared to be drunk, for he staggered as he walked and leaned heavily on a stout gnarled stick. Fleurette could not have told you exactly how it all happened, but all of a sudden Adèle's giggling and the soldiers' jests were interrupted by the old faggot-carrier tumbling down clumsily, right between them all.

Adèle screamed. The soldiers swore, and one of them went to the length of giving the old man a savage kick, whilst two others incontinently picked him up between them and flung him over the parapet of the bridge. Fleurette gave a cry of dismay and ran to the poor man's assistance. She felt hot with indignation at such wanton brutality. How right, she thought as she ran, had old Louise's estimate been of these soldiers — little better than brigands they were, and cruel to boot. The poor faggot-carrier, for such he seemed to be, was lying half in and half out of the stream: the grass and sloping ground had somewhat broken his fall, but nevertheless there he

lay, motionless and groaning piteously. Fleurette called peremptorily to Adèle to come and help her hoist up the poor man on his legs again. He was very dirty, dressed in nothing but rags, his feet swathed in coarse bass matting; he was stockingless, shirtless and hatless; but he appeared to be powerfully built and Fleurette marvelled how he could have allowed himself to be thus maltreated without a struggle. No doubt he was drunk or crippled with rheumatism.

Up on the bridge the soldiers were preparing to start once more on their way. They took no more notice of their unfortunate victim nor of Adèle; but Fleurette looking up felt that their last glance was for her; some of them were regarding her with a leer, others with more pronounced malevolence. She distinctly saw one man nudge his neighbour and point a finger at her: whereat both of them gave a mocking laugh.

She felt hurt and indignant: in her sheltered life she had never met with malevolence before. However, for the moment, her first care was for the poor faggot-carrier. Adèle had come to her assistance, and together the two girls succeeded in getting the old man on his legs again. He appeared more scared than hurt, and with his big, toil-stained hands, he felt himself all over to see, perhaps, if any bones were broken; and all the while he kept on murmuring rather pathetically: "Nom de nom, de nom de Dieu!" as if surprised that such a tragic adventure should have happened to him.

Fleurette asked him if he were hurt, and he replied: "No, Mam'zelle..that is citizeness," and he added: "Ah, I shall never get used to these new ways. I am too old."

"Can you get on your way now?" Fleurette asked.

"Yes! yes, Mam'zelle, that is citizeness. But," he went on piteously, "I am so hungry. I come from over Mison way and I have not had a bite since seven o'clock this morning."

This naturally stirred Fleurette's kind, compassionate heart. She told Adèle to run into the house and ask Louise for a hunk of bread. Adèle, silent and self-contained once more, obeyed without comment. The incident was closed as far as Fleurette was concerned. Her thoughts flew back to Amédé and to his last day and evening which he would be spending in his cozy home. She wished she had been bold enough to ask him to come and bid her a last adieu tomorrow morning before he went away to fight the English.

And while she stood there gazing out over the valley where the metal cross on the church steeple of Laragne glistened like gold in the sunlight, a strange voice — soft yet firm — suddenly struck her ear from somewhere close behind her.

"Papers and valuables are behind the panel in Madame's room."

She swung round terrified, so terrified that the cry she was about to utter died away in her throat. She looked about her, scared, shivering with that nameless dread which assails every mortal in face of the supernatural. And yet everything seemed as peaceful as before: the little mill stream splashed and gurgled with its soft, persistent sound; in the old walnut tree a thrush was calling to its mate and the old faggot-carrier was busy tying up his faggots into the sacking again. Fleurette's eyes rested for an instant anxiously upon him. She expected to see him raise his head, to look about him, to appear scared as she was herself; but he gave no sign of having heard anything of that mysterious voice, fresh and compelling like a command from heaven. Oh no! Fleurette could not have screamed. She was too panic-stricken just at first to utter a sound. And yet nothing had really happened to alarm the most timorous. Only those few words spoken by an unseen tongue. What did they mean? What could they mean? They were simple and commonplace enough: Fleurette repeated them to herself mechanically:

"Papers and valuables are behind the panel in Madame's room."

What did it mean? What papers? what valuables? and why should the mysterious speaker have wished her to know that they were behind the panel in Madame's room? Madame was, of course, Madame de Frontenacs over at the château, and all of a sudden Fleurette remembered that the mounted soldier had asked her the way to the château. Gradually she was feeling less scared. Less scared but more excited. She looked round at the statue of St. Antoine, at whose feet she had this morning placed a fresh bunch of forget-me-nots. Somehow she associated the mysterious voice with St. Antoine. Perhaps Madame had lost some valuable papers, and the kind saint had chosen this means of letting her know where her treasure was. Fleurette made the sign of the cross on her bosom; she remembered the story of Jeanne d'Arc which M. le Curé had used to tell her, of how the humble shepherdess of Domrémy had been compelled by heavenly voices to go forth and deliver France from her enemies and never rest until she had seen the King crowned in his cathedral of Rheims.

Fleurette felt something of that same fervour which had animated Jeanne d'Arc. She felt that she must go forth and tell Madame about the valuables and the papers. The evening was warm and she would not need her shawl. She could go just as she was as far as the château and be back before the twilight had faded into night. Adèle in the meanwhile appeared at the front door, she had her shawl over her head, and a hunk of bread in her hand. Then only did Fleurette remember the old faggot-carrier. She turned in order to bid him "Godspeed." He stood there quite motionless, leaning upon his stick, bending under the weight of his load of faggots which he had hoisted upon his back. His lank hair hung over his wrinkled forehead and half concealed his eyes. But suddenly through the veil of lank grey hair Fleurette met the man's glance fixed upon her; and her heart gave a queer jump. Those were not the eyes of a decrepit old man; they were young and clear and bright: of a luminous grey-blue, with heavy lids that could not wholly conceal the humorous twinkle in the eyes, nor yet the kindly, searching glance which was fixed on Fleurette.

This was the moment when she really would have screamed. The sense of something ununderstandable and unreal was more than she could bear, she would have screamed, but those twinkly, searching eyes held her, and at the same time seemed to reassure her, to tell her not to be afraid. She felt as if she were in a dream: unable to do anything, only to stare and stare at the old faggot-carrier, while gradually all her terrors seemed to fall away from her, and she was filled with a sense of courage and of determination. The whole incident, the voice, the glance, her terror and reassurance had lasted less than five seconds. Already Adèle was close by. She was bringing the bread for the poor, half-starved man, and Fleurette now watched him, fascinated, as he took the bread with a humble: "Merci, Mam'zelle," and started at once on it, like a man who has not tasted food all day. He was just a decrepit old man, bent with rheumatism, dirty, unkempt, insecure on his tottering limbs. He even raised his eyes once, and once more looked at her; but the glance was dim like that of an old man; there was no twinkle in the eyes, only the weariness of poverty and old age.

And Fleurette felt that she had dreamed it all: the voice, the glance, the message from St. Antoine, just as her terrors had faded from her, so now her excitement vanished too. It must all have been a dream. It was a dream! Perhaps old Louise, who was versed in all

kinds of dreamlore, would know of an explanation for the whole mysterious occurrence. Feeling very tired all of a sudden — for she felt the reaction after the tenseness of the last few moments, she went back into the house. In the doorway she turned to have a last look at the old faggot-carrier; leaning heavily on his stick, he was making his way along the bank of the stream. The last she saw of him was his big bundle done up in sacking and his legs bending beneath the weight.

Adèle wrapped in her shawl had gone the other way. She was already up on the bridge. With a little sigh of disappointment Fleurette went into the house. It had been such an exciting dream!

But she did not speak about it to old Louise; she just went quietly about the house, doing one or two little bits of work that Adèle had left undone.

The slowly sinking sun had turned the gold on Pelvoux's snowy crest to a brilliant rose, when Fleurette suddenly announced to Louise that she was going over to the château. She often went there, and at all hours of the day.

"So long as you are home before dark," was Louise's only remark. "I don't like those down-at-heel soldiers being about."

Fleurette promised that she would not be late. She picked up her beautiful new shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders. The château was not far; over by the mountain track, it was not more than a quarter of a league at most. Swiftly Fleurette ran out of the house and then along the edge of the stream — the same way that the old faggot-carrier had gone an hour so ago.

And now the mantle of twilight was falling over the valley; the jade- coloured sky held myriads of tiny, fleecy clouds of a brilliant, glowing crimson, which one by one faded into grey along the snow of Pelvoux reflected the glory of the sinking sun, and in the old walnut- tree the thrush's song was stilled.

Chapter 6

The place was always called le château for want of a more appropriate name. As a matter of fact it was just a large, rumbling roomy farmhouse with stables and stable-yards and sheds and outbuildings, all built in a mass and at different times as necessity demanded, in the midst of a really fine park, shady with century old trees and fragrant with accacias and roses. Here for many generations the de Frontenacs, father and son, had lived, toiled, and died, farming their land, honouring their King and otherwise not troubling their heads over much with politics or with art or literature. They were good, kindly, honest folk, all of them, and if the light of their intellect burned somewhat dim, that of their charity was always kept fed and bright.

They belonged to that sturdy stock which had given France one of her most valiant sons in Louis de Frontenac, the man who had made Eastern Canada a jewel worthy of the crown of France. The jewel had been lost since then, irretrievably lost to the English, and the crown of France been dragged in the mire of a bloody revolution, its glory forever overshadowed by the unforgivable crime of a purposeless regicide: but the present holder of the ancient name and owner of the lands had kept himself aloof from the awful dissension that raged in the big cities; he had remained in his heart loyal to his martyred King, and though shorn of most of his wealth, deprived of a great deal of his inheritance, perpetually threatened with confiscation or attainder, he continued to lead the simple life, hoping for better things, detached as far as he was able from the turmoil that was ruining his country and shaming her in the eyes of the world.

At all seasons of the year, and in all weathers, he could be seen out on his farm, directing the work in fields or stables, clad in rough boots and breeches, abrupt of speech, but kindly in deeds, beloved by some, envied by others, hated only by those few who see in every noble life a reproach to their own.

His wife was the daughter of an Admirable in the late King's navy, who had thought it prudent to serve the Republic, as he had served his King, with commendable detachment from his country's politics. Though brought up in the midst of the gaieties and luxuries of Paris, Anne de Grandville had been quite content to follow the husband of her choice to the lonely house in the Dauphiné, and to fall in with his bucolic ways: she donned a cotton kirtle and linen apron as readily as she had donned silken panniers in the past, and took as much pride in her cooking now as she had done once in her proficiency in the dance.

At one time Charles de Frontenac had sorely grieved because he had no son to whom he could bequeath his glorious name and fine inheritance, but now he was glad. With France handed over to the control of assassins, bandits, and regicides, the name of Frontenac might, he opined, just as well die out. What was the use of toiling to improve land which tomorrow might be wrested from its rightful owners: what was the use of saving money which would probably on the morrow fall into the hands of brigands? "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on this earth where rust and moth doth corrupt and where thieves break through and steal!" had never been so wise an admonition as it was today.. All that Charles de Frontenac hoped to do was to put by a sufficient competence to keep his wife and invalid daughter in comfort once he was under the ground. That daughter was the apple of his eye. Bereft of position and most of his wealth, all his thoughts and hopes were centered on this delicate being who seemed like the one ray of sunshine amidst thunder-clouds of disappointment and treachery.

Rose de Frontenac had been a cripple from birth, and it was her delicacy and her helplessness that had so endeared her to her father. He was a man resplendent with vigor and of herculean strength: one of those bull-necked men who could have taken his place in an ox-team and not proved a weakling. His hands were rough, his fist as hard as a hammer. His clothes smelt of damp earth and of manure; the descendent of a long line of aristocrats, Charles de Frontenac, was above all a son of the soil. To him his pale-faced, fragile daughter seemed like a being from another world; he hardly dared touch her cheek with his thick, clumsy fingers, nor dared he approach her save after copious ablutions and sprays of scent. His heart was as big as his body. He adored his daughter, he loved his wife, he beamed with fondness for Fleurette: Fleurette who was as gay as a linnet, who could always bring a smile to the pale lips of his wan, white Rose: Fleurette, who could sing like a lark, prattle like a young sparrow and whose corn-coloured hair smelt of wild thyme and of youth.

Chapter 7

Fleurette had walked very fast. She was still tremendously excited and would have ran all the way, only that the road for the most part led sharply uphill and that her heart was beating and pumping wildly with agitation.

Strangely enough the gates of the park were wide open, which was very unusual, as they were always kept closed for fear of the foot-pads and vagabonds. Old Pierre, who was in charge of the gate, was nowhere to be seen. Fleurette ran along the sanded avenue which, bordered by bosquets of acacia and elder, led in sharp curves up to the house. Twilight was slowly fading into evening, but even through the gathering darkness Fleurette noticed that the avenue, usually so beautifully raked and tidy, was all trampled and knocked about as if by the weight of many heavy feet. A minute later the main block of the château stood out before her, like a solid mass silhouetted against a jade-coloured sky. Just above the pointed roof of the turret at the furthest angle above the façade, a star shone with a cold, silvery radiance.

The entrance into the main building was under a broad archway which intersected the façade and led into the great farmyard and to the sheds and farm buildings. Fleurette felt vaguely conscious that something unusual had occurred at the château; though the place looked peaceful enough, it appeared strangely deserted at this hour, when usually men and maids were still about their work. She slipped quickly under the archway, and turning sharply to the left, she came to the great paved hall where servants and farm hands sat at meals.

She found the place in a strange state of confusion: the men — they were all old men these days, as all the young ones had had to go and join the army and fight the English — the men were standing about in groups, talking and gesticulating with their arms, after the manner of the people of Dauphiné, who are glib of speech and free with their gestures; the maids were gathered together in the dark corner of the room, holding their aprons to their eyes. The oil lamp which hung from the whitewashed ceiling had not yet been lit: only one or two tallow-candles on the table guttered in their pewter scones.

Old Mathieu, who was the acknowledged father of the staff and who was affectionately called Papa by the maids, was the first to spy Fleurette, who stood disconcerted in the doorway.

“Ah! Mam’zelle Fleurette! Mam’zelle Fleurette!” he exclaimed and lifted his hands and cast up his eyes with an expression of woe: “Quel malheur! Mon Dieu, quel malheur!”

He had on his bottle-green coat, his buckled shoes, and the white cotton gloves which he wore when he served the family at meals upstairs. They had just finished dinner, it seems, when the awful calamity occurred.

“But what is it, papa?” Fleurette asked, feeling quite ready to cry in sympathy. “What has happened?”

“The soldiers, Mam’zelle!” Papa replied, and a fresh groan went the round of men and women alike, and one or two of the girls sobbed aloud.

Now as far as Fleurette was concerned, as recently as this very morning, the inner meaning of these words “the soldiers!” would not perhaps have had much significance. In her own little home, by Bibi’s strict orders, politics and social questions were never discussed. Fleurette was not supposed to know anything of the conflicts that were raging in the great cities, in the name of liberty and of fraternity. The horrors of summary arrests, of perquisitions, of sentences without trial, of wholesale executions, of hatred and revenge and lust were supposed to be beyond her ken; and knowing Bibi’s abhorrence of those subjects being broached, she kept her counsels and her knowledge to herself. But Fleurette was not brainless, and she had a large heart. With her brain she had noted many things which were willfully kept away from her, and her kind heart had often been filled with pity at many of the tales which she had heard in the village, tales of suffering under this new kind of tyranny wielded, it seems, in the name of liberty and of the brotherhood of man. She had heard many things and had forgotten nothing; but somehow until this morning these things had seemed remote, like the tales of ogres and demons which are told to frighten children. She had not disbelieved them, but vaguely she felt that nothing of the sort could possibly happen to people whom she knew and loved.

But since this morning many things had occurred which had widened her range of vision. Amédée, who did not want to go away, was being dragged from his home in order to be made into a soldier and to fight the English. She had actually seen some of those soldiers, ragged, uncouth and unkempt, with their officer, like a great bully, speaking to her, as if she were a mere slut out of the streets. He had jeered when she told him that she was Citizen Armand’s daughter, and the soldiers had nudged one another and seemed to mock her when she met their glance. Then again she had heard the mysterious voices and seen something in the person of a decrepit old faggot-carrier that had thrilled and puzzled her. All these things had worked a subtle change in Fleurette. The tales of ogres and demons no longer appeared quite so remote. The fact that there were evil and sorrow in the world had in a vague kind of way been brought home to her, and also that the spectre of death and misery of which she had only heard was actually lurking in this peaceful corner of Dauphiné and had already knocked at this very door.

“The soldiers!” meant something to her now.

“What happened?” she asked, and a dozen tongues were ready to embark on the telling of the tragic event. It was just after dinner. Madame and Mademoiselle had retired to the boudoir, as usual, and monsieur was sipping his wine in the dining room, when the great bell at the gate clanged loudly. Pierre, who was still at work in the stables, ran to open the gate: he was almost knocked down by two men on horseback who, without a word or question, rode past him along the avenue up to the house followed by a dozen men or more in tattered uniforms and wearing dirty read caps on their heads. The sound of horses and of men stamping the ground brought some of the maids and farmhands out into the yard. The soldiers had come to a halt under the archway, the two riders then dismounted and ordered André to take their horses round to the stables. André, of course, did not dare disobey. Then, as the entrance door was closed, one of the soldiers knocked loudly against it with the butt-end of his musket, whilst one of those who had been on horseback and who appeared to be in authority called out summarily:

“Open in the name of the Republic!”

Old Mathieu, who was upstairs clearing away the dinner things, terribly scared, ran down to open the door. Again without a word or question, the soldiers pushed past him until they came to the vestibule where they demanded to know where were the ci-devant

Frontenacs. Old Mathieu here paused in his narrative and once more threw up his hands and cast up his eyes in horror.

"Ci-devant, mam'zelle!" he exclaimed. "I ask you! Just as those devils up in Paris talked of our poor martyred King and Queen!"

Of course he tried to stop the brigands from going up to see Madame like that, in their dusty shoes and dirty clothes. But what could he do alone among so many? Ah! if only Baptiste and Jean, Achille and Henri had been there, as in the good old days, fine sturdy fellows of the Dauphiné: they would soon have got the better of these down-at-heel bandits, and if it was a case of protecting Madame and Mademoiselle, why! there would have been some broken heads, and the soldiers of the Republic would have sung another song than they were singing now, the muckworms! But there! Henri and André and the lot of the young ones had all been taken for cannon-fodder, to fight against the English, and there were only a few fogies left now like he — Mathieu — and the women.

Anyway, poor old papa was helpless. All he could do was to precede those hell-hounds upstairs, so that he might at least warn Monsieur of what was coming. But even this they would not let him do; as soon as he had reached the upstairs landing, the same man who had ordered him to open the front door in the name of the Republic, and who wore a tricolour sash around his middle, this same man grabbed him by the shoulder and thrust him aside as if he were a bundle of faggots. And without more ado, he just walked into the dining room where Monsieur was still quietly sipping his last glass of wine.

From seeing Monsieur sitting there, the beautiful long-stemmed wine glass in his hand, his face quite serene, you would have thought that he had heard nothing of the turmoil on the stairs. But he had heard everything, the tramping of feet, the rough voices, the curt command to open in the name of the Republic. He knew what was coming. Perhaps he had expected it long ago. It was well to be prepared for anything these days. Anyway, there he sat, glass in hand, his elbow resting on the table, where Mathieu had but a few minutes ago been engaged in clearing away the dessert. At the rude entry made by all those ragamuffins into his beautifully ordered dining room, he just turned his head and looked at the men.

"In the name of the Republic," the man with the sash said curtly.

Monsieur put his glass down and rose slowly to his feet.

"What is it you want?" he asked quietly.

"The rest of the family, first of all," the man with the sash replied. "I want you all here together."

"Madame de Frontenac and my daughter Rose are not at home," said Monsieur, still speaking very quietly.

"That's a lie," the other retorted. "They were at meal here with you."

And with careless finger he pointed to the serviettes and plates which still littered the table. Monsieur did not wince under the insult; nor was the saying of such a brigand an insult to so high-minded a gentleman as Monsieur. All he said was:

"That is so. Madame and Mlle. de Frontenac were at dinner with me, until half an hour ago when they left the house together."

"Whither did they go?"

"That I do not know."

"Which is another lie."

"If I did know," Monsieur rejoined imperturbably, "I would not tell you."

"We'll soon see about that," the man with the sash said grimly. He then turned to the soldier who appeared to be in command over the others: "Allons! citizen lieutenant," he said curtly, "the rest is your business. The two women have got to be found. That's the first thing, after that we shall see."

The officer then ordered two of his men to stand on guard over Monsieur, and since then the tramp, tramp of the soldiers' feet had resounded throughout the château. Upstairs they went, and downstairs; in Madame's room and in Mademoiselle's, in the kitchen, the stables, the offices. They interrogated the men, they bullied the women; they turned everything topsy-turvy; they raked about in the hay and the straw of the stables, they scoured the park, they glued their ugly, dirty noses to the sanded paths, trying to find the imprint of footsteps. But neither of Madame or Mademoiselle had they yet found a trace. They were still at it, raking and scouring and searching. In the intervals they tried to browbeat Monsieur, threatening him with summary shooting one moment, which only made him laugh and shrug his shoulders, and promising immunity for his women-folk if he would say where they could be found. But these promises only made Monsieur laugh and again shrug his shoulders.

"Immunity?" he said. "They have that already, thank God! for they are beyond your reach now. If they were not, do you think I would trust to your promises?"

Old Mathieu paused. The story had neared its end: — this tale of woe and anxiety and horror, such as the worthy old man had never thought to see. The others had not much to say; the maids were still crying, with excitement rather than grief, and the old men stared open-mouthed, or sagely nodded their heads. "Then," Fleurette put in at last, "Madame and Mademoiselle have gone. Really — really gone?"

Mathieu nodded with another sigh, half of perplexity, half of woe.

"But whither?" Fleurette insisted. "How? Why?"

"God alone knows, Mam'zelle," papa averred. "He has spirited Madame and Mademoiselle away to save them from these brigands."

"Did anybody see them go?"

Men and maids shook their heads. No one had seen Madame or Mademoiselle go. Old Mathieu was the last to have seen the ladies. He had just begun to clear the table, when they rose, and, as was their custom, went through to the boudoir. Mathieu had opened the door for them. And now he came to think of it, the ladies had each kissed Monsieur very tenderly before they went out of the room. Yes! the kiss had seemed like a farewell. Mathieu shook his head dolefully: he remembered it now, but hadn't thought anything about it at the moment. Monsieur certainly appeared more thoughtful. Usually, while he drank his last glass of wine and Mathieu was engaged in washing the silver in the large copper bowl which he always brought into the room for that purpose, Monsieur would chat with him, talk over the gossip of the day. But tonight he had been unusually silent. Yes! Mathieu now remembered quite distinctly about the kiss, and about Monsieur being so silent. But he certainly had noticed nothing else unusual, until the moment when those brigands banged at the door and demanded admittance in the name of their godless Republic.

Mathieu was on the stairs at that moment, so he did not know how Monsieur had looked when he heard all the tramping and the noise. But Madame and Mademoiselle were gone, of that there could be no doubt. The brigands had searched for them, like so many dogs digging for a bone, and not a trace was there of the two ladies, for the bon Dieu, no doubt, had made them invisible.

Of old Mathieu and the staff, the officer in command took no notice, after he had summarily ordered them to muster up in the hall; he had counted up the indoor servants and the farmhands; those who had their homes outside the precincts of the château, he ordered roughly out of the place.

"Get back to your homes!" he had said to them, after he had inspected and questioned them; "and stay there quietly, if you value your lives."

So there were only half a dozen old men, the four girls and the staff's cook left in the château. All of them were scared, and as Mam'zelle Fleurette could see, they just stood about and talked and talked while the girls did nothing but cry. He — Mathieu — could do nothing with any of them. The work of the house ought to be carried on; none of them had had any supper yet. But there! young and old, they were, all of them, too much upset to work or to eat; and the tramp-tramp, upstairs and downstairs was nerve-shattering to everybody.

Fleurette listened to the amazing story until the end. As Mathieu said, there was the ceaseless tramping of feet still going on. They — those horrible soldiers of the Republic, unworthy to be called Frenchmen — were still searching for Madame and Mademoiselle in order to drag them to Orange where the awful guillotine had been at work these months past; or perhaps even to Paris — that den of horrors beside which the stories of demons and ogres were but trivial tales.

Madame and Mademoiselle! who never in their lives had done harm to anyone: but rather spent every hour of the day planning and executing kind deeds! And Mademoiselle! so delicate and frail that even her father, who idolized her, hardly dared touch her. And now these men, these rough and uncouth soldiers, with their harsh voices and bullying ways, to think of their approaching Mademoiselle, pushing her, dragging her, it made Fleurette's blood boil even to think of such a possibility. No wonder that the bon Dieu made them invisible to the eyes of all those bandits.

Tramp! tramp! tramp! and now a loud banging as if pieces of furniture, chairs, tables were being overturned, and then a crash, as of broken china!

"Holy Virgin!" Papa Mathieu exclaimed with a loud groan; "to think of Madame's beautiful things! Those brigands are furious at not finding Madame and Mademoiselle, and are venting their wrath on inanimate things."

It was these words of old Mathieu that sent Fleurette's thoughts flying in another direction — back to the early afternoon of this memorable day — back to the first visit of these awful soldiers, and to the faggot-carrier with his bundle tied up in sacking. From thence to the voice! The mysterious voice that had told her where valuables and papers were to be found. It was such a flash of recollection that her whole face became transfigured; anxiety and superstitious awe gave place to that same fervour which had animated her when she met the eyes of the faggot-carrier: eyes that conveyed a message, which at last she was beginning to understand.

"Papa!" she cried impulsively.

"Yes, Mam'zelle?" Mathieu asked with another sigh.

"Did anything else happen — I mean anything unusual? — did Madame — or Monsieur — receive a letter? a message? or — or did any other stranger come to the château this afternoon?"

"Oh, think, Papa Mathieu, think," she implored with tears of agitation choking her voice. "I cannot tell you how important it is. Try to remember — was there anything? — anybody?—"

Papa persistently shook his head, until Pierre, who was the gate keeper, reminded him that Monsieur had gone down the avenue as far as the gate, just ten minutes before dinner was served.

"There's nothing very unusual in that," Mathieu retorted. "Monsieur is often out just before dinner is served."

"Yes!" Pierre insisted. "But what did he do this evening? He walked straight to the gate, which I had closed half an hour before. I saw him. He walked straight to the gate, he did, and you know the old acacia tree just the other side? Well! Monsieur put his foot on a bar of the gate and reached over to the forked branch of the old tree. I saw him quite plainly, I tell you. And when he walked back to the house he had a piece of paper in his hand with some writing on it, which he was reading. And I think, papa," Pierre concluded triumphantly, "you'll have to admit that there was something unusual in that."

But Mathieu, with the obstinacy of old age and long service, would not admit it, even now.

"Monsieur," he said, "met the mail-carrier at the gate, he often comes at this hour. He gave Monsieur a letter. Monsieur often gets letters—"

But here André interposed. Old André — they were all of them old — worked in the stables, and it was he who had taken the two horses from the soldiers when ordered to do so, and walked them around to the stables. It was then that he noticed two beggars hanging about in the yard: a man and a woman. He had peremptorily ordered them off the premises.

"Beggars!" Fleurette exclaimed eagerly. "What were they like?"

André said that as the sun was in his eyes he couldn't see them very well. There was a man and a woman. He was busy with the horses and upset by the arrival of all these brigands. The woman he couldn't see at all because of the shawl which covered her head, but he recollected that the man was a big fellow, bent nearly double under a huge bundle tied up in sacking.

"When I spoke to him," André went on, "he mumbled something or other, but I just told him to clear out, he and his woman; we'd enough of vagabonds, I said, in the place with all these soldiers."

"And did he go?" Fleurette asked.

"Yes! I must admit he went off quite quietly after that. I did not think he meant any evil, because when he first caught sight of me he did not attempt to hide or to run away."

"If he had," André went on after a moment or two, "I would have been after him pretty quickly, and wanted to know what was in that big bundle."

He paused, a look of perplexity and of shamefacedness came over his wrinkled old face while he thoughtfully scratched his head: "Now I think of it," he said, "I ought to have inspected that bundle. It looked mighty heavy for faggots or for rags. Perhaps he had been up to no good after all — and directly after I lost sight of him and his woman I saw a whole lot of faggots lying in a heap close by the stable door."

The other old men and the maids had gathered closer round André and Fleurette. His was the first they had heard of the old vagabond and his woman, and the bundle which appeared so heavy.

"You certainly ought to have inspected that bundle, André," Mathieu said sententiously. He felt that there was a chance of recapturing his dignity which seemed to have been slightly impaired through his argument with Pierre. He could reassert his authority at any rate by rebuking André. "It looks," he went on, "as if the old vagabond had brought a lot of faggots with him, then turned them out of the sacking and replaced them by God knows what valuables he may have stolen."

"I was so upset, you understand, papa!" André murmured ruefully.

"We were all of us upset, as you call it, André," papa rebuked sternly, "but that is no excuse for neglect of duty."

"Don't scold André, papa," Fleurette broke in excitedly. "My belief is that the old vagabond, as you call him, was a messenger from the Holy Virgin, sent on purpose to get Madame and Mademoiselle safely out of the way."

"Oh, Mam'zelle!"

"From the Holy Virgin!"

"Sainte Marie, mère de Dieu, priez pour nous!" came in chorus from the maids. Even the cook, an elderly woman, jealous of her own dignity, was unable to conceal her excitement. The old men shook their heads, looked wise and skeptical.

"What makes you say that, Mam'zelle Fleurette?" Mathieu asked in an awed whisper.

But Fleurette was silent now. Already she had repented of having said so much. Discretion would have been so much wiser. That was the worst of her: she always allowed her tongue to run away with her. She looked eagerly from one anxious face to the other: well she knew that the little she had said would be talked over and commented on and be made the subject of gossip until it reached the village and possibly even Serres and Sisteron; and God only knew what harm this might do to Madame and Mademoiselle. She bit the tip of her tongue hard just to punish it for having wagged too freely, and seized with a sudden impulse, which she found irresistible, she snatched up a candle from the table and incontinently turned and fled out of the hall, leaving the others to gape and stare after her, to scratch their heads, and to conjecture.

Aye! and to gossip, too.

Chapter 8

Perquisitions in those days of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality were perhaps among the minor horrors that befell innocent and guilty alike, at the behest of tyrants more implacable than the Inquisitors of Mediaeval Spain, more cruel than the Borgias: but they were terrible nonetheless. A perquisition meant, in most cases, the destruction of every household treasure, every family relic cherished through the generations, it meant the wanton smashing of furniture and mirrors, the ripping up of valuable tapestries and of mattresses, the defacement of priceless pictures, it meant prying, hostile eyes thrust into receptacles, however secret, into private papers and even letters. Nothing was sacred to men deputed to insult and to offend, just as much as to search.

When Fleurette reached that part of the house which was occupied by the family, she was confronted by the wildest, the most heart-stirring confusion. The carpets had been torn off the floors, the furniture for the most part lay in broken heaps about the room, mirrors and pictures had been dragged off the walls, broken crockery and glass were scattered everywhere, intermingled with horsehair and other stuffing out of chairs and mattresses, whilst all the walls, the doors, the window-frames bore traces of rude handling with bayonet or the heel of a boot. Fleurette, wide-eyed and appalled, ran from room to room; the uttering tallow-candle which she held threw flickering lights and grotesque shadows on the scattered objects about her, made them seem more weird, like the appurtenances of an abode of ghosts. Here in the pretty boudoir Mademoiselle's embroidery frame lay smashed to tinder wood with threads of the work still hanging to it, bits of rags, pathetic in their look of abandonment and desolation. There in the withdrawing room, the beautiful satin-wood spinet with its painted panels and exquisite marqueterie was lying on its side, its body gaping like a gigantic wound, the strings emitting a final vibration like the last song of a dying swan.

From the direction of the dining room came the incessant murmur of voices, but throughout the rest of the apartments, in the midst of all the wreckage, a silence reigned as of the grave. The place now was completely deserted. It seemed almost as if some terrible tornado had swept through these living-rooms; some implacable forces of nature rather than the hatred and cupidity of men. An earthquake could not have been more devastating, a fire more destructive.

And now in the midst of it all Fleurette came to a standstill, candle in hand: her breath came and went in quick short gasps, and her heart was beating furiously. The silence in this semi-darkness with those long, ghost-like shadows seemed to oppress her; the broken bits of beautiful things which she had known and loved ever since she remembered anything, gave her an awful feeling of desolation and a kind of foreboding of things, still worse, to come. It was instinct which had brought her to a halt here in this one room amongst the others. It was always known as Madame's room, for here Madame would always sit when she gave her orders to various members of the household, here that she would look through the household accounts whilst Fleurette and Rose, when they were still children, would sit in a corner of the sofa by the huge hearth, hand in hand, with a picture book on their knees, silent like a pair of tiny white mice, waiting until Madame had finished her, because then they would all go into the garden to gather flowers for the rooms, and fruit for desert, or perhaps go down into the kitchen and learn how to dress a chicken for the table, or how best to mix a salad.

And Fleurette stood for a moment or two quite still, holding the candle high above her head, contemplating this wreckage. Then, having found a safe place in which to deposit the candle, she carefully closed the door which gave, like several others, on a long corridor that led to the main staircase at one end and to the service stairs at the other. The time had come to cease contemplation, to drive away superstitious fears and to act. Closing her eyes, Fleurette strove first of all to recapture pictures of long ago, to recreate the scenes enacted in this room, before this awful calamity had fallen on these people whom she loved so dearly. Memory was not rebellious. She could see the whole picture just as it had impressed itself on the tablets of her mind when she used to sit here as a child. There by the window Madame's desk used to stand. It was lying on its side now, the drawers wrenched open, the handles broken, papers, pen and sand scattered about; the ink had run out and stained the beautiful old Aubusson carpet. But there Madame used to sit. Fleurette could almost see her now, at the desk. Her big household books were open before her. Writing, calculating, and putting her money by in a leather bag. And presently she would rise, pick up her bag and books and carry them across the room to a spot close to the wall, the other side of the hearth. Here she would come to a standstill, and putting her beautiful hand somewhere against the wall, she would turn to the girls — they were mere children then — and smile at them in a mysterious way; and they would say solemnly "Open Sesame!" just as they had heard in the tale of Ali Baba and the forty robbers, which Monsieur de Frontenac had often told them. As soon as they had said the magic words the wall would open like the entrance of the robbers' cave in the tale of Ali Baba, disclosing a recess into which Madame would put her books and her bag of money. Then she would once more turn and give a sign to the children and they would say: "Close Sesame!" and the mysterious door would swing to again and no trace be left of the recess which lay hidden somewhere behind the paneled wall.

The whole picture stood out before Fleurette's mental vision in every detail; the exact spot where Madame used to stand, the way she put out her hand and touched the paneled wall. Carefully picking her way through the maze of broken furniture, Fleurette came to a halt on the very spot where she had so often seen Madame standing, with her books and money-bag in her arms. She put out her hand and touched the panel as Madame had done: all over the carved panels she put her hand, touching and pressing each bit of carving in its turn. Her heart was still beating wildly, but not in any way with fear. In fact she was surprised at herself for not being afraid. It was just the excitement of this wonderful adventure! She, Fleurette, who had seen nothing of the world beyond her own village of Laragne and an occasional glimpse at Sisteron, suddenly found herself guiding the destinies of people whom she loved — the messenger sent by the bon Dieu to help them in their need. There is no young human creature living who would not respond, heart and soul, to such a call, and Fleurette was of the South, a child of that romantic land of Dauphiné which had given so many of her heroic sons to strive and work for France.

And suddenly, as Fleurette pressed her finger on every piece of carved relief, one by one, she felt the centre of a dog-rose yield to the pressure. Softly, noiselessly, the panel swung outwards, and there in the recess were the familiar household books and the money-bag. Beside them lay a leather wallet and a small casket fitted with a brass lock. Without any hesitation Fleurette took the bag, the wallet and the casket, leaving the books where they were. Never for a moment did the thought occur to her that she might be

discovered in what would be a highly compromising position. She was too simple-minded, too innately honest to think that she might be suspected of theft.

Having stowed the wallet and the bag in the wide pockets of her kirtle and hidden the casket beneath her shawl, Fleurette picked her way back across the room. She left the mysterious recess open because she did not know how to close it, and did not want to waste any time trying to find out. She found her way to the door and opened it, then she blew out the candle and finally peeped out into the corridor.

It was deserted. The lingering evening light, pale and ghostlike, came creeping in through the row of tall arched windows facing her. As everywhere else in the château, the corridor bore the melancholy traces of the soldiers' passage. It was the same devastation. The same wanton destruction was only too apparent in the torn carpet and the fragments of glass and broken sconces that littered the floor. Fleurette, turning her back on the direction of the main staircase, made her way to the back stairs which wound in a close spiral down to the service door.

Fleurette descended with quick, furtive steps, until, past the first curve of the spiral, the stairs were in total darkness. But she would have found her way all about the château blindfold, so well did she know its every nook and cranny. She came to the door and fumbled for the bolts. She had drawn one and taken off the chain, when she heard a measured tramp on the other side of the door. Steps were coming this way along the flagged path; a moment or two later they came to a halt close to the door. Fleurette hardly daring to breathe, listened. A voice said: "Did you go in there?"

"No, citizen," replied another, "not by this door. The bolts are fastened on the inside."

Something else was said which Fleurette did not catch, and the steps receded in the direction of the front of the house. She waited a minute or two longer, breathless and motionless, until she heard what she thought was the tramp of feet in the corridor above her. The soldiers had apparently been ordered to come round again, perhaps they would be coming down those stairs. To hesitate now might prove fatal. Fumbling once more in the gloom, Fleurette found the last bolt and drew it, and the next moment was out in the open. The back door gave on the yard. On the right were the stables, and facing the door, the riding school and one or two sheds; on the left the kitchens and the servants' quarters. In this direction too was the great archway and the main entrance into the house. Past the archway was the park and the avenue leading to the big gates.

After a moment's reflection Fleurette decided to avoid these main approaches: there was another way across the park, past the stable gate. Hugging the casket closely under her shawl, Fleurette set out in the direction of the stables. There was no one about and she felt comparatively safe. Night was now rapidly drawing in, and she fortunately had on a dark kirtle and dark worsted stockings. The air was very still and the waning moon not yet risen in the east. From far away came the sound of the bell of Laragne church. It struck eight. Fleurette felt a pang of anxiety. She had promised to be home before dark and Louise would be anxious and cross: and there was still something she wanted to do before she went home. Now she was past the stable door where, in a heap, just as old André had said, there lay a pile of faggots. The sight of them gave Fleurette a happy thrill. Was she not obeying the dictates of the mysterious voice which had spoken to her through the medium of the old faggot-carrier?

The next moment, a firm step resounded on the flagstones of the stables, and a second later a man appeared under the lintel of the door.

"Fleurette! what in God's name are you doing here?"

Smothering a startled cry, Fleurette turned and found herself face to face with her father. He was standing at the stable door; his hands were clasped behind his back, and he had a tricolour sash round his waist. Now women, young girls, especially, those born and bred in outlying country districts, are credited with being stupid, silly in their fears, timorous like hens; and so no doubt would Fleurette have been in ordinary circumstances. She may not have been either clever or brave originally; she would perhaps have behaved in a silly, timorous fashion but for this one fact, that she knew something terrible was happening to the Frontenacs whom she loved, and that she had been deputed by the bon Dieu, or merely by a human friend, to do something important for them. In order to do this she must keep her head; and trust any woman to keep her head if one she loves is in peril.

"What are you doing here, Fleurette?" Bibi reiterated rather sternly.

And Fleurette, with a well-simulated nervous little laugh, retorted lightly:

"Why, Bibi chéri, I might retaliate! What are you doing here? I thought you were on your way to Paris."

"What are you doing here, Fleurette?" Bibi said once more, and Fleurette thought that his voice had never sounded so harsh before.

"But, Bibi," Fleurette said simply, "I often come to see Madame and Mademoiselle. And after you left this afternoon I felt so lonely and sad, I thought I might seek Mademoiselle Rose for company."

"And have you seen her?"

"No. They told me Madame and Mademoiselle had gone."

"Who told you?"

"Papa Mathieu."

"What else did he tell you?"

"Only that there were soldiers come to the château, and that I'd better go home again — and so I'm going."

"He didn't tell you anything else?"

"No," Fleurette replied innocently. "Was there anything else to say?"

"No — er — no," Bibi rejoined. "Of course not. But Fleurette—"

"Yes, Bibi darling?"

"How often must I tell you that you must not talk of "Madame" and "Mademoiselle"? There are no Madames and Mademoiselles now; we are, all of us equally, citizens of France."

"Yes, Bibi," Fleurette rejoined demurely. "And I really, really am very careful when strangers are about. It doesn't matter what I say before you, does it, chéri Bibi?"

"No, no," Bibi muttered, seemingly without much conviction, and Fleurette then went on quickly:

"I must run home now, chéri Bibi, or Louise will be getting anxious. You are coming too, aren't you? Louise will get you such a lovely supper and then—"

"No, my little one," Bibi said. "I can't. Not tonight. I must be in Orange tomorrow."

"But Bibi—"

"Run along, child," Bibi broke in almost fiercely. "It's a dark night, and there are always vagabonds about."

"Ah well then, good night, Bibi," Fleurette murmured meekly.

And suddenly Bibi put out his hand and grasped Fleurette by the wrist.

"Are you not going to kiss me, Fleurette?" he asked with oh! such a tone of sadness now in his voice.

It was a terrible moment. What a mercy that the darling had seized her left wrist, rather than her right, because with her right hand Fleurette was hugging the small casket under her shawl. There were also the wallet and the moneybag in the pocket of her kirtle: oh! if Bibi should knock against them! Fortunately it was dark, and he could not see the bulge under her shawl. But, of course, she could not part from Bibi chéri without giving him a farewell kiss. He seemed sad and unhappy, and there was something about his whole manner that Fleurette did not understand.

At first, when he startled her by suddenly appearing at the stable door, she had not even tried to conjecture what he was doing here; she was too deeply absorbed in her own adventure for the moment to do more than vaguely wonder what part Bibi was playing in the tragic events that had wrought such desolation at the château. Bibi chéri, who worshipped his little Fleurette, who was always so kind, so gentle, a slave to everyone of her whims; he must have been dragged into this horrible affair, was perhaps an innocent tool of those cruel people in Paris, who monopolized his time and kept him away from his home.

Indeed she had no mistrust in him whatever; but her trust in him did not go to the length of telling him about the casket, or the mysterious voice of the faggot-carrier; those were her own secrets, secrets too which concerned the Frontenacs for whom Bibi had never evinced a very great affection, and had even tried to dissuade Fleurette from having too much intercourse with them. It was in fact her love for Madame and Monsieur, and for Mademoiselle Rose, and Bibi's strange dislike of them, which had brought the only clouds in the sunshine of their affection.

But of this Fleurette was not thinking at the moment, her one thought was of her secret and how best to guard it. All the same she would not have denied Bibi chéri the kiss he asked for. She must take the risk, that was all, and once again trust to her wits. She allowed him to put his arms round her neck and held up her fresh young face for his kiss: she held the casket so carefully that he did not feel its sharp angles. All was well, for now she was free from his embrace, but still he had hold of her left hand, and drew her close to him.

"Fleurette, my little one," he said earnestly.

"Yes, Bibi."

"Do you know where the two Frontenac women have gone to?"

"No, Bibi, I do not," Fleurette was able to reply in all truthfulness, and looked her father straight in the eyes. "They were gone before I came."

"It is for their good that I ask you."

"I am sure it is, Bibi, but really, really I do not know."

Bibi gave a quick, impatient sigh.

"Ah, well! goodbye, my Fleurette."

"Good night, Bibi."

At last she was free. With her left hand she blew a last kiss to Bibi, and then quickly sped across the yard. Her heart felt heavy and there was an uncomfortable lump in her throat. For the first time she had been brought face to face with the realities of life. Hitherto she had lived in a kind of fairyland in which she was the carefully tended and guarded queen, and Bibi the acknowledged king as well as slave.

Everything in the world was perfect, and lovely, and wonderful; the men and women in it — not only Bibi, but Louise, and M. Duflos the butcher, and M. Colombe the grocer, and — and M. Amédé — they were all kind and generous and gentle. But now cruelty and spite had come within her ken. An ugly ghoul called "hatred" had passed by hand in hand with his ugly brother "mistrust" and the latter had whispered something in her ear just now, which had caused her to shrink within herself when Bibi had kissed her, and to turn from him and to run away with a strange sense of relief.

She did not look back as she sped across the yard, and when she came to the small postern gate she was thankful to find it on the latch, so that she could slip out unseen.

Chapter 9

Fleurette was too young, too ignorant for self-analysis. She could not have told you what had made her act in the way she did, nor what had caused her so to mistrust Bibi as not to share her precious secret with him. All she knew was that she had had a wild desire to get away from him.

A cart-track led from the postern gate across a couple of fields where it joined the main road; one or two isolated farm buildings belonging to M. de Frontenac, and the open fields on both sides, made the track fairly safe from foot-pads. The main road too which led through the village would be safer after dark, than the short cut over the mountains. Fleurette hastened along, hugging her treasures, hoping that she would not fall in with the soldiers on their return from the château.

The weather had not fulfilled the promise made by the beauty of the sunset: heavy clouds hung over the sky; only one or two streaks of pale lemon-coloured light, like great gashes through the leaden clouds, still lingered in the West. Through the gloom farm-sheds and isolated trees loomed out like great immobile giants, and, on the right, the dense mass of the avenue of acacias and elder and the great gates of the château.

Fleurette was already well on her way along the high-road and in sight of the first house of the village, the cottage where Adèle lived with her aunt, the widow Tronchet, when she heard the all too familiar sound behind her of the heavy tramping of feet and of horses' hoofs raising the dust of the road. The night was so still that the sounds reached her ears distinctly. She heard the lieutenant's harsh voice giving a brief word of command: the creaking of the château gates, as they swung upon their hinges. Just then Roy, Monsieur's dog, set up a dismal howl, and from one of the tall poplar-trees that bordered the road an owl gave a hoot and fluttered out into the night.

Fleurette broke out into a run. She knew that she could ask for shelter in the widow Tronchet's cottage and wait there until the soldiers had gone by. Perhaps Adèle would walk home with her after that. Fortunately she could already perceive the light glimmering in one of the tiny windows, and just at the moment Adèle came out of the front door, probably to see for herself what the unusual sounds were about.

She was mightily surprised to see Fleurette come running along.

"They are the same soldiers, Adèle," Fleurette explained breathlessly, as she followed her foster-sister into the cottage, "who were at Lou Mas this afternoon. Close the door, do, and I'll tell you all about them."

The widow Tronchet came out of her kitchen, and looked disapprovingly at Fleurette. She did not like the girl, and discouraged all intercourse between her and Adèle. She was a thrifty, hard-featured, hard-hearted peasant — older than her sister Louise by a couple of years — who had exacted every ounce of work and obedience from Adèle in payment for the shelter of her roof and for her daily bread. She had never forgiven her sister for leaving Adèle on her hands, though the girl had always worked her fingers to the bone, grudgingly no doubt, but diligently, in order to bring additional comfort into the cottage. But it was a poor, ill-furnished cottage, wherein food was none too plentiful, and beds hard, whereas Louise at Lou Mas lived in the lap of luxury; and envy had fostered dislike until it had almost become hatred.

She listened, with a frown on her hard wrinkled face, to Fleurette's breathless tale of what had happened at the château. It would be the gossip of the village by to-morrow, that the soldiers of the Republic had arrested Monsieur, and that Madame and Mademoiselle had fled no one knew whither.

"Oh, Ma'ame Tronchet," Fleurette concluded, her fresh voice hoarse with sobs, "dear Ma'ame Tronchet, you don't think they're really going to harm Monsieur, do you?"

The widow Tronchet shrugged her shoulders and gave a short, harsh laugh.

"I'm not thinking about it at all one way or the other," she said drily. "What difference does it make to us poor people," she went on, grumbling, while she busied herself about the room, "what happens to all those aristos? They never cared what happened to us."

For the moment Fleurette could do no more than stare at the widow Tronchet, in horror. Never had she heard anyone say anything so wicked. She was quite ready to defend Monsieur and Madame against any accusation of hard-heartedness, and would have done so at risk of offending the disagreeable, ill-natured old woman, but for the moment her attention, as well as that of Adèle's, was riveted on the sounds outside. The soldiers had just come round the bend of the road; they were quite close to the cottage already, with the two horsemen walking their mounts in the van.

"They are going on to Serres," Fleurette whispered. In her heart she was wondering what Bibi was going to do. He was evidently not going to Orange, as he had said he would. Would he spend the night at Lou Mas after all? If he did, was there any danger of Fleurette's secret leaking out? Of Bibi chéri finding out something about the casket and the precious wallet? Fleurette was still hugging the casket, she could see the widow Tronchet's hard, steely eyes, gazing curiously at the bulge underneath her shawl, and then at the fullness in her kirtle where the wallet and the money-bag lay hidden in the pockets: Fleurette felt the blood rush up to her cheeks, and then had the mortification of seeing Adèle's pinched-up little face break into a smile. Of what were those two women thinking? Surely not that she, Fleurette, had been stealing. Their faces were so inscrutable: the older woman's hard and set, and Adèle's rat-like and furtive, as if determined to conceal her thoughts.

The next moment they all heard the horsemen go by. Adèle ran to the door and peered out into the night. Over her shoulder she said to Fleurette:

"There's your father riding with the soldiers. Shall I shout to him and tell him you are here?"

Instinctively Fleurette shook her head, and with that same inscrutable smile still on her face, Adèle deliberately closed the door again.

"They've got Monsieur walking between them," she commented drily.

"It would have been better," the widow said acidly to Fleurette, "for Citizen Armand to know that you are here. It won't be safe for women to be alone on the high-road this night, I am thinking."

Then, as Fleurette remained silent, debating within herself what she had best do, the old woman went on curtly: "The sooner you get home now, my girl, the better. Adèle has got to put in an hour's work at Citizen Colombe's up at the village: it is miserable pay enough," she continued muttering to herself, "and a shame that one girl should have to work so hard, whilst another lives a pampered life of luxury. But anyway," she concluded abruptly, "I can't be wasting any lamp-oil on you."

"No — no — of course not, Ma'ame Tronchet," Fleurette stammered. But the widow, still muttering under her breath, was paying no more attention to her. She had climbed on to a chair, and reaching up to the lamp that hung from the ceiling, she turned out the light. The room was now in darkness except for the light that came in through the open kitchen door. The widow with a curt: "Don't be late, Adèle," went off into the kitchen, and a moment or two later could be heard busy with her pots and pans.

Adèle had picked up her shawl, and equally unceremoniously gone as far as the door, when Fleurette called her shyly back.

"Adèle!"

The girl turned without speaking, her hand on the door which she was holding open.

"If you are going to M'sieur Colombe, could you—" Fleurette stammered, "I mean, would you tell Monsieur Amédé, that — that I am here, and perhaps—"

"Why don't you come along with me?" Adèle retorted drily, "and tell him what you want."

Of course Fleurette could not tell her that she did not want Monsieur and Madame Colombe to know that she had something important to say to M'sieu' Amédé. So all she said was: "Oh, Adèle, please!"

Adèle retorted with a shrug of the shoulders and an ugly little sneer:

"You don't want his papa and mama to know, I suppose."

Fleurette whispered: "No!"

"Very well!" was all that Adèle said in reply. "I'll tell him."

And in her usual, furtive, noiseless way she went out of the house, closing the door behind her.

Chapter 10

Fleurette remained in darkness, silent, motionless as a little mouse, listening for the well-known footstep which in a few minutes, she knew, would be at the door. It had perhaps been a rash thing thus to give herself away to Adèle, but the girl was uncommunicative and had never been known to gossip. Between two risks Fleurette had chosen the lesser one. If Bibi — as she feared — was going back to Lou Mas, there would be no chance whatever of keeping the secret of Madame's casket and valuables from him, and what Bibi's attitude would be towards them, Fleurette could not guess. It was the great Unknown. For Madame's sake and Mademoiselle's she would not risk it.

Like an inspiration the thought of M'sieur Amédé had occurred to her; of Amédé who, when she was a little girl and he a growing lad, would always take the blame on himself and know how to shield her when they had got into mischief together. She felt now, especially since this afternoon, that she could trust Amédé in a way that she had never trusted anyone else. Not even Bibi. Unfortunately Adèle had to be made a part confidant of the purpose: but after all what did Adèle know? She couldn't know anything about the casket and Madame's valuables: and if she did sneer, or even talk to her aunt about this message sent to M'sieu' Amédé through her, well! Fleurette was prepared to face the gossip — as long as her secret was safe.

She was counting the minutes — the seconds — Five minutes for Adèle to go to the Rue Haute: three and a half for Amédé to run along here — she did not doubt that he would run. Then there would be the intervening time whilst Adèle sought for an opportunity to speak to him alone. But oh! how Time dragged on leaden-footed! Nearly fifteen minutes must have gone by since Adèle went away. The widow Tronchet was still busy in the kitchen, rattling her pots and pans: but any moment she might finish and perhaps come in here and find Fleurette still waiting. Then there would be more acrimonious remarks, questions, arguments — Had Fleurette known anything about nerves, she would have said that hers were irritated to snapping-point; but there was little talk of nerves in that year, 1794, and none in this remote corner of Dauphiné.

Fleurette found it very difficult even to sit still. Would Amédé never come! All sorts of possibilities occurred to her, bringing her to the point of screaming with impatience. Perhaps he was from home, or working in the shop under his father's eye. Perhaps the soldiers had called at the épicerie and taken him away, and Fleurette would never see him again — Oh! if only time would stand still until Amédé came!

Then at last, when she was on the point of bursting into tears with disappointment, she heard the quick, familiar step. Amédé!!! As noiselessly as possible she opened the door and slipped out. There, sure enough, was Amédé coming along. Though it was very dark now, Fleurette knew it was he because of the sound of his footsteps. Hearing hers, he came to a halt, and she ran up to him, breathless with excitement. All at once the enormity of what she had done struck terror in her heart. She, Fleurette, whose reputation had stood hitherto above all gossip, who for three years in succession had been crowned Queen of the month of May, an honour only accorded to girls of spotless character, she had actually given an assignation to a young man — at night — far from her home and his!

And with the horror of what she had done came an intense shyness. What would M'sieur Amédé himself think of her? Indeed, she had to evoke all her fondness for Madame and all her fears for Mademoiselle before she could summon enough courage to approach him, and to place a timid little hand upon his arm. She felt it trembling at her touch, and through the silence of the night came an answering timid sigh and whisper:

"Mam'zelle Fleurette! What can I do in your service?"

His timidity gave her courage. Gently she led him to the edge of the road where the tall poplar-trees cast long, impenetrable shadows.

"M'sieur Amédé," Fleurette began, whispering low so that chance eavesdroppers might not hear: "I don't know what you'll think of me. I know I have done something which every one in the village would call reprehensible. I sent for you in secret because — because, M'sieur Amédé, there is no one in the world I can trust, as I do trust you."

This time there came no sigh on the part of the young peasant, only a quick intaking of the breath, as if he had suddenly been dazzled by a wonderful light. His hard, rough hand crept up shyly and fastened over the soft, quivering one that lay upon his sleeve just like a frightened bird. But he was a man of few words, and therefore said nothing: and Fleurette, encouraged by the pressure of that rough hand, went on more glibly.

"It is about Monsieur, Madame and Mademoiselle," she said, "up at the château. Soldiers have visited the place and they have broken the furniture and torn the beautiful carpets and the curtains: why, I know not. They have also called Monsieur, Madame and Mademoiselle traitors and aristos, and they have seized Monsieur and dragged him away from him home. By a miracle, M'sieur Amédé, a miracle wrought by the bon Dieu himself, Madame and Mademoiselle were able to escape out of the château before those awful soldiers came. I know that they are safe, but—"

"How do you know that, Mam'zelle Fleurette?" Amédé asked also in a whisper.

"Because, M'sieur Amédé," she replied, "there is a mysterious personage working for the safety of Madame and Mademoiselle, under the direct guidance of the good God. I feel quite sure that Monsieur will also presently be saved through him."

"A mysterious personage, Mam'zelle Fleurette?"

"Yes, a direct messenger from Heaven. He has come down to earth in the guise of an old faggot-carrier. He looks old and decrepit and toil-worn, but when he speaks his voice is like that of an archangel, and if he looks at you his eyes give you the strength of giants and celestial joy."

"But, Mam'zelle Fleurette—"

"His voice spoke to me this afternoon, M'sieu' Amédé. All it said to me was that papers and valuables were behind the panel in Madame's room. At that time I knew nothing about the soldiers. I had seen them but did not know that they were going to the château to arrest Monsieur and Madame and Mademoiselle Rose. Nevertheless when that voice spoke to me, I felt I must go over to the château as quickly as may be."

"Why did you not send for me then, Mam'zelle Fleurette?"

"I seemed to be in a hurry, impelled to run along as fast as I could. So I went by the mountain track. When I arrived at the château, the soldiers had been there some time. They had turned the place topsy-turvy, scared the servants and smashed and torn up everything, leaving nothing but the walls intact. It seemed as if a great tempest had swept by and wrecked everything. Monsieur was under arrest and Madame and Mademoiselle had gone. No one knew whither. Then suddenly I remembered that mysterious voice: I found my way to Madame's room, and I found the panel, behind which Madame used to hide her household books and her money. I had often watched her doing this when I was a child. I tried to remember how to make the panel work and the good God helped me. And behind the panel I found Madame's papers and her money, and a small box which, I am sure, has precious things in it, or it would not have been there."

"Then what did you do, Mam'zelle Fleurette?" Amédé gasped under his breath, his none too sharp wits slowly taking in the details of the amazing adventure.

"I just took the wallet, M'sieu' Amédé," she replied simply, "and the money-bag, and the box. And here they are."

She tapped the pockets of her kirtle and made him feel the bulge underneath her shawl.

"Oh, mon Dieu!" he exclaimed fervently.

And then she told him about Bibi, and how frightened she was lest when she returned to Lou Mas she should find him there. Bibi's sympathies seemed to be all with the soldiers, she explained, and he would for certain make her give up Madame's papers and valuables to the lieutenant.

"That is why," she concluded with a return to her first timidity, "I wished to speak with you, dear M'sieu' Amédé."

"The Eternal Eve!" It was the first time Fleurette had used an endearing word when speaking to Amédé. Born and bred in this remote corner of Dauphiné, unsophisticated, untutored in the ways of coquetry and cajolery, she knew nevertheless, true daughter of the first mother that she was, that after this he would be mere wax in her hands.

He was!

All that he wanted to know was what he could do for her. Had she asked him to throw himself into the Buèche, he would have done it: but all that she wanted was for him to put her treasures in a safe place, until such time as Madame required them.

"If Bibi knew what I was doing, M'sieu' Amédé," she pleaded, "he would order me to give up Madame's property. But I know that the bon Dieu meant me to take charge of it, or why," she argued naïvely, "should He have sent His messenger to me?"

Of course Amédé was only too ready to share the burden of this wonderful secret with Fleurette.

It was wonderful to share anything with this loveliest being in all the world; and the thought that she trusted him more even than her father, was sending him wellnigh crazy with joy.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Mam'zelle Fleurette," he said: "There's an old tool-shed at the back of our house where all sorts of rubbish are kept. It is an absolute litter now, and the back of it has not been cleared or interfered with for years. But I know of a convenient hole in the flooring, hidden well away in a corner. I'll put these things there. They'll be quite safe — Mam'zelle Fleurette, you'll know where to find them after I've gone away, if you want them."

"After you've gone away?"

For the moment she had forgotten. Of course he was going! How could she forget? He was going to join the army — to fight the English — ! Perhaps he was never coming back — oh! How could she — how could she forget?

Amédé after the long speech which he had delivered in a whisper — his longest speech on record — had remained silent. The tone of anguish in Fleurette's voice, just now when he recalled the fact that he was going away, had given him an immense thrill of joy. Altogether poor Amédé felt so happy that he was almost ashamed. The night was so beautifully still: the wind had gone down, and slowly the great clouds that had obscured the sky since sunset were rolling away over the valley. Already overhead a patch of translucent indigo appeared, ever-widening, and revealing one by one the scintillating worlds that are beyond man's ken. Amédé did not want to speak; he wanted it less than he had ever done before. He just wanted to stand there beside this exquisite creature, wrapped in the silence of the night, feeling her nearness, hearing the gentle murmur of her breath come and go through her perfect mouth. She had extracted the casket from under her shawl and given it to him to hold, and she also gave him the wallet and the money-bag; and as she did this, her little hand, so soft and so warm, came in contact with his now and then — quite often — and poor Amédé was on the point of swooning with delight.

"I do trust you, M'sieu' Amédé," she whispered in the end: "and you'll do this for Madame's sake, will you not? and also for Mademoiselle's. And also," she added softly, "for mine."

"Oh! Mam'zelle Fleurette," Amédé sighed. What he had wished to say was: "I would die for you, beloved of my heart: at a word from you I would lay down my life, or barter my soul." But Amédé had no command of words, and was now cursing himself for being a clumsy fool. He stowed away the wallet and the bag into the pockets of his breeches, and tucked the casket underneath his blouse.

"And now I must go home, dear Monsieur Amédé," Fleurette said. "As it is, I am afraid Bibi will be anxious."

Her hand was on his arm: and with a sudden impulse he stooped and pressed his lips against that exquisite little hand. Fortunately they were still standing in the shadows cast by the poplar-trees, or Amédé must have seen the blush that rose to Fleurette's cheeks when she felt the delicious thrill of that timid kiss. A soft breeze stirred the branches above their heads, and through the quivering leaves there came a sigh that was like an echo of their own. And above the crests of Pelvoux the waning moon suddenly rent the last clouds that veiled her mystery, and flooded the snowy immensities with a shower of gold. Slowly the shades of night yielded to the magic, and the high-road glistened like a silvery ribbon winding, snake-like, toward Laragne.

Fleurette gave a sudden start of alarm.

"What is it, Mam'zelle Fleurette," Amédé asked.

"Some one," she said. "I saw some one move there — furtively — among the shadows."

He turned to look. A small figure wrapped in a shawl had just gone past on the other side of the road.

"It is only Adèle," he said carelessly. "She is going home."

Not altogether reassured, Fleurette peered into the shadows. She did not think that it was Adèle whom she had seen, or, if it was Adèle, there was some one else lurking in the shadows, she felt sure: and though she was not altogether frightened, she felt herself

trembling, and her knees giving way under her. No doubt it was in order to save herself from falling that she had leaned more heavily against Amédé's arm. Certain it is that he put that arm round her, only in order to support her; but the contact of that warm, quivering young body against his breast sent the last shred of his self-control flying away on the evening breeze.

The high-road was bathed in honey-coloured light, but these two were standing in the deep shadow cast by the poplar-trees; and the darkness wrapped them round as in a velvety, downy blanket. His arm tightened round her shoulders, pressed her closer and closer to his breast, held her there so closely that she could scarcely breathe.

It was only in order to get her breath that she raised her face to his; far be it from me to suggest that it was for any other motive; but this proved the final undoing of poor M'sieu' Amédé; for the next moment his lips were fastened hungrily on hers, and her sweet young soul went out to him, in a first, a most delicious kiss.

Chapter 11

It all seemed like a lovely dream after that: this walking together arm in arm down the high-road with the waning moon throwing great patches of silvery light to guide them on their way.

They went through the village, not caring whom they met. They belonged to each other now; that wonderful kiss was a bond between them that only death could sever. That was how they felt; supremely, marvellously happy, thrilled with his new delight, this undreamed joy: and with it all a cloud of measureless sorrow at the impending farewell. The magic words had been spoken: "You love me, Fleurette?" The eternal question to which the only answer is a sigh. No, they did not care whom they met. They could laugh at gossip now: from this night they were tokened to one another, and only M. le Curé's blessing could make their happiness more complete.

As a matter of fact they met no one, for they avoided the main street of the village and made their way to Lou Mas along narrow by-paths that meandered through orchards of almond-trees heavy with blossom. For the most part they were silent. Fleurette's little hand rested on Amédé's arm. Now and then he gave that hand a quick, excited squeeze and this relieved his feelings for the time being. Under his other arm he hugged the casket, the precious treasure that had been the mute but main spring of his happiness. It represented Fleurette's trust in him: that priceless guerdon he would not have bartered for a kingdom.

"You will not part with Madame's valuables, will you, Amédé?" she had enjoined him most solemnly. "Not to anyone?"

"Never, Fleurette," he had replied solemnly. "On my soul!"

When they were within sight of Lou Mas, they decided that it would be best for him to turn back. She, Fleurette, was quite safe now, and of course old Louise would be waiting for her — and perhaps Bibi. She was not going to make a secret of her walk home with Amédé. Indeed she wished it proclaimed from the house-tops that they were tokened to one another, and that they would be married as soon as this horrible war was over. There was to be no secret about it, and Fleurette knew well enough that neither Bibi nor M'sieu' Colombe would object; but because of Madame's valuables, she did not want Amédé to come to Lou Mas until to-morrow. And so that first wonderful kiss found its successor in another — one that was perhaps even more delicious, because it was more poignant — the precursor of the last farewell.

Fleurette found Louise anxiously waiting for her. Bibi had not returned and the old woman knew nothing, of course, of the tragic events that had occurred at the château. Fleurette told her what had happened, and while she was speaking Bibi came in. He looked tired and anxious, but Fleurette thought it prudent not to appear to notice anything unusual about him. He made no reference to the events at Frontenac, and when nine o'clock came he kissed Fleurette as tenderly, as unconcernedly as usual. Nine o'clock! What a lifetime, as far as Fleurette was concerned, had been crowded into this past hour!

She went to bed as in a dream, partly made up of sorrow and partly of great joy: even the excitement of her adventure at the château was lost in the immensity of that joy. Fleurette fell asleep with her cheek against the hand on which Amédé had planted that first timid kiss.

When she came down in the early morning Bibi had already gone.

Chapter 12

The soldiers of the Republic together with their officer had spent half the night at Laragne in the tavern kept by the Père Gramme, drinking and jesting with the drabs of the village. Each man had a tale to tell of his own prowess at the château, and how but for him, the ci-devant Frontenac would have slipped through the fingers of justice as readily as the two women had gone.

They were very proud of their prisoner, who sat lonely and silent in a corner of the low-raftered room, foul with the odour of sour wine and perspiring humanity. Monsieur de Frontenac — the ci-devant as he was curtly termed — was apparently taking his misfortune calmly; neither threats nor vain promises caused him to depart from his attitude of quiet philosophy. The soldiers had, of course, made up their minds that he knew well enough where his wife and daughter were in hiding, but they had also realized by now that it was not in their power to force him to divulge what he knew.

The lieutenant — a man who had begun life as a notary's clerk, and therefore had some education — was content to shrug his shoulders and to declare that the citizens of the nearest Committee of Public Safety had plenty of means at their disposal for making an obdurate prisoner speak. He recalled that at the trial of the Widow Capet she had been forced into admissions which, before that, she would sooner have died than make. Mocking glances, jeers and insults were thereupon cast on the prisoner who remained as unconcerned, as serene as before.

The lieutenant had commandeered billets for his men in the better houses of the village, and just before midnight the party broke up. The prisoner was then conducted to the small, local poste de gendarmerie and there incarcerated in the cell usually occupied by vagabonds and cattle-thieves. Two or three of the soldiers remained at the poste to reinforce the local gendarmes, in case some hot-heads in the village meditated a coup to wrest the traitor Frontenac from the clutches of justice. The lieutenant himself had selected the house of Citizen Colombe the grocer of the Rue Haute for his night-quarters. To say that the worthy épicier did not accord this representative of his country's army a warm welcome, would be to put it mildly. He was furious, and showed it as plainly as he dared; but there is in every French peasant a sound vein of common sense, and he knows — none better — when submission to the ruling powers is not only the best policy, but at the same time the most conducive to the preservation of his own dignity.

Ma'ame Colombe — or rather the citizeness — made the lieutenant comfortable and that was all; but at the bottom of her heart she felt that she must do unto him as she would wish her own son to be done by presently, when he too was a soldier in that army which she detested. She fell asleep thinking of Amédé tramping the high-road as these men had done, stockingless, hatless, with unwashed shirt and a dirty worsted cap on his head; and she dreamed all night of him, deprived even of his weekly bath in the big tub, over in the wash-house. That is what she objected to mostly in these men: the dirt. It was wonderful, of course, their fighting for their country, now that all the other countries in the world were attacking France, but Ma'ame Colombe argued to herself that patriotism might just as well be allied to cleanliness. Even the lieutenant, who was after all an officer, and should be setting a good example to his men, would have looked much more imposing if he had washed his face and taken the dust of the road out of his hair.

Great, therefore, was Ma'ame Colombe's astonishment the next morning when she, along with several of her friends, being at the market, saw another detachment of soldiers marching into Larange from the direction of Sisteron. Only eight of them there were, with one officer and a wagon drawn by two splendid horses; but *nom du ciel!* what a different set of men and horses these were. The men clean as new pins, magnificently dressed in blue coats with white facings and belts, white breeches — all spotless — and black gaiters that reached midway up their thighs. Beneath their elegant chapeau-bras, each adorned with a silk tricolour cockade, they wore their own hair, down to their shoulders, unfettered by the old, ridiculous queue, and each man had successfully cultivated a fierce and magnificent moustache. Everything about them glistened with cleanliness, their boots, their buckles, their muskets; as for the officer, never in all their lives had the good ladies of Larange seen anyone so magnificent: tall, blond, with a moustache that he could easily have tucked behind his ears, and a little tuft of blond beard at the tip of his chin, he walked with drawn sword at the head of his squad, a superb tricolour sash further enhancing the glory of his attire.

Potatoes and eggs and butter were forgotten, while market-women and customers stood gaping, open mouthed. Never had such beautiful specimens of manhood been seen in Larange. By the time they reached the Rue Haute all the village had turned out to have a look at them, and heads appeared at every cottage window. The village urchins followed the little squad, intoning the "Marseillaise" and giving vent to their excitement by performing miracles of acrobatic evolutions. Even Ma'ame Colombe, who was at the moment selecting a piece of meat for Sunday's dinner, could not help but say to herself that she would not mind Amédé being in the army if he was going to look like that!

At that very moment one of the urchins paused in the midst of a magnificently sketched somersault in order to run down the street and back to the market-place, shouting excitedly:

"Ma'ame Colombe! Ma'ame Colombe! the soldiers are at the épicerie."

And so they were! Ma'ame Colombe hastily straightened her cap and snatching up her market basket, ran to the corner of the Rue Haute just in time to see the soldiers with their officer and wagon come to a halt outside her front door. The worthy Hector with his son Amédé, and the old man who helped in the shop, were busy taking down the shutters and displaying the sacks of various kinds of haricots and lentils in tempting array all along the shop front. Ma'ame Colombe heard the magnificent officer give a quick order: "Halte!" and "Attention!" and the next moment she saw him enter the shop followed by his men, the wagon remaining drawn up a little further down the street. The urchins and gaffers crowded round the doorstep open-mouthed, and Ma'ame Colombe had some difficulty in pushing her way through into her own house.

The officer began by asking Hector Colombe how many soldiers of the Republic were still sleeping under his roof.

"Only the lieutenant and two men, M'sieu' l'officier," Hector replied. Whereupon the officer broke in curtly:

"Call me citizen captain. This is the army of the Revolution and its soldiers are not aristos meseems."

Which remark boded no good to Ma'ame Colombe's ears. Clean or dirty they all appeared to be the same type of brigands; overbearing, exacting and merciless! Ah that poor dear Amédé!

The officer then demanded to see the lieutenant and the two soldiers. Amédé offered to call them, but was stopped by a brief command from the captain:

"No, not you," he said curtly, "I want you here, the citizeness can go."

Ma'ame Colombe, obedient and vaguely frightened, put down her basket and went upstairs to fetch the lieutenant and the two men, who were still in bed. But although she had only been gone a couple of minutes, her sense of fear took on a more tangible form when she came down again, for she found all the drawers of the counter open, and much of their contents scattered about the floor. Some of the soldiers were busy ferreting about, behind and under the counter. The officer stood in the middle of the shop talking with Hector, who looked both choleric and sullen; in the doorway, the crowd of gaffers were being kept back by two of the soldiers, who were using the butts of their muskets when some venturesome urchin tried to cross the threshold. But what filled poor Ma'ame Colombe's heart with dismay was the sight of Amédé sitting in the parlour behind the shop, with two other soldiers obviously on guard over him.

Her instinct prompted her to run first of all to her husband with a quick whisper: "Hector, what does this mean?"

But the magnificent officer brusquely thrust himself between her and Hector and said gruffly: "It means, citizeness, that not only treason, but also theft has been traced to this house, and that it is lucky for you that news of it reached the Committee of Sisteron in time, else," he added grimly, "it had been worse for you and your family."

"Treason and theft?" Ma'ame Colombe exclaimed in hot indignation. "You must take it from me, young man, citizen, captain, or whatever you may be, that I'll allow no one to—"

"Hold your tongue, woman," the officer broke in curtly; "you do yourself no good by these protests. Obedience is your wisest course."

"Good or no good," Ma'ame Colombe persisted heatedly, "I won't have the word theft used in connection with this house, and if—"

"Make your wife hold her tongue, citizen," the officer, now addressing Hector once more, broke in curtly, "or I shall have to send her to the poste for interfering with a soldier of the Republic in the execution of his duty."

Poor Hector Colombe, whose choler was shrinking in inverse ratio to that of his wife, did his best to pacify the worthy dame.

"It is all a mistake, Angélique," he said gently. "M'sieu' le Capitaine — pardon! the citizen captain thinks that Amédé has some papers and valuables belong to Madame — I mean, to the Citizeness Frotenac—"

"Are they calling my Amédé a thief, then?" Ma'ame Colombe demanded hotly.

"No! No!" Hector replied, trying to be patient and conciliatory. "Have I not told you that it is all a mistake? Every one knows there are no thieves in this house; but it seems the authorities think that Amédé may have hidden those valuables pour le bon motif."

"If he had," the mother retorted obstinately, "he would say so. Let me just ask him—"

Hector had hold of her hand, but she wrenched it free, and before any of the soldiers could bar the way, she had run into the back parlour, shouting:

"Amédé, my little one, have you told those soldiers that you know nothing of Madame's valuables? Why, nom de Dieu!" she went on, hands on hips, defiant and aggressive like the true female defending its young, "look at the innocent. Is that the face of a thief?"

She pointed at Amédé, who, however, remained strangely silent.

"Voyons, mon petit, tell them!" Angélique Colombe went on with perhaps a shade less assurance than she had displayed at first. The next moment, however, the captain had seized her unceremoniously by the arm, and dragged her back into the front shop. Here he gave her arm a good shake.

"Did I not order you to hold your tongue?" he demanded roughly.

Cowed, in spite of herself, not so much by the officer's tone of command as by Amédé's silence, Ma'ame Colombe did, in effect, hold her tongue. A sense of disaster as well as of shame had suddenly descended upon her. Her ample bosom heaving, she sank into a chair, and threw her apron over her head. She was not crying, but she felt the need of shutting out from her vision the picture of Amédé looking so confused and sullen, of Hector looking as perplexed as she was herself, as well as of that magnificent officer with his fine clothes and his tricolour sash. But chiefly she wanted for the moment to lose sight of that crowd of gaffers and urchins and neighbours, all staring at her, with that unexplainable feeling, not exactly of contentment for her misfortune, but which can only be expressed by that untranslatable word *Schadenfreude*. Thus shut out from the rest of her little world, the poor woman slowly rocked herself backwards and forwards, murmuring inaudible words under cover of her apron, until she heard the captain's voice saying abruptly:

"Were you the officer in charge of detachment number ninety-seven?"

Curiosity got the better of sorrow, and Ma'ame Colombe peeped round the edge of her apron. The picture which she saw made her drop her apron altogether. The lieutenant who, the night before, had been so overbearing and so hilarious, stood before his superior officer now, a humble, dejected figure, dreading reprimand, like a schoolboy fearing the cane.

"I am in charge of the detachment ninety-seven — yes, citizen captain," he replied haltingly.

What a contrast these two! Ma'ame Colombe, in spite of her anxiety, her indignation and what not, could not help but compare. Woman-like, she had an eye for the handsome male, and what more gorgeous than this captain of the Republican, or revolutionary army, as he apparently liked to style his men, with his braided jacket and superb tricolour sash, with his blond hair and fierce moustachios? He poked his tufted chin out at the bedraggled-looking lieutenant before him, looked down with obvious contempt at the latter's ragged coat and mud-stained breeches. But he made no remark on the want of cleanliness and decency, as Ma'ame Colombe expected him to do.

"Where do you come from?" he demanded.

"From Orange, citizen captain."

"What is your objective?"

"After this, Serres, citizen captain, and then Valence."

"And your orders are to arrest on the way every person suspected of treason against the Republic?"

"Yes, citizen."

"And how have you obeyed these orders, citizen lieutenant?" the captain demanded sternly.

"I have done my best, citizen captain," the other replied with an attempt at bluster; "at Vaison—"

"I am not talking of Vaison, which you know quite well, citizen lieutenant. I wish to know how you obeyed the orders given to you to arrest the ci-devant Frontenac, his wife and daughter?"

"Citizen—"

"Have you done it, citizen lieutenant?" the officer thundered, and all of the bluster went out of the subaltern as he stammered meekly:

"When we reached the house of the ci-devant Frontenac, the two women had gone."

"Gone?" and the captain's voice boomed through the low-raftered room like a distant roll of cannon. "Gone? Whither?"

"Gone, citizen captain," the lieutenant murmured under his breath: "spirited away. The devil alone knows how."

"Which means that there is a traitor among you."

"Citizen captain—" the other protested.

"A traitor I say. You had secret orders, and yet the women were warned!" And once more the officer's glance flashed down with scorn on his unfortunate subordinate. His blond hair seemed to bristle with wrath; his moustachios stood out like spikes: he looked a veritable god of vengeance and of wrath.

"Whence," he thundered, "is the ci-devant Frontenac?"

"At the commissariat, citizen captain, guarded by our men," the lieutenant replied.

"And the rest of your detachment?"

"In billets in the village."

"And did you search this house when you entered it?"

"No — that is — no — I did not — that is—" stammered the wretched man.

"Or the other houses where you billeted your men?"

But this time the lieutenant only shook his head in dejected silence.

"Which means that you allowed soldiers of the Republic to sleep under strange roofs without ascertaining whether they were safe. Why, citizen lieutenant, this place might have been swarming with traitors."

"The people here, citizen, are—"

"Enough. You are relieved of your command, and you will proceed now with us to Sisteron where you will render an account of your conduct before the Committee of Public Safety."

Ma'ame Colombe, who had watched the two men closely during this exciting colloquy, saw an ashen hue spread over the lieutenant's face, beneath the thick coating of grime. Though they did not know much in this tucked-away corner of Dauphiné, of what went on in the great cities, they had vaguely heard how great officers of the army had been deprived of their rank and sent to the guillotine for not doing their duty by the army of the Republic. The crowd at the door had also listened in silence; many a cheek turned pale at sound of that thundering voice which held in its arrogant tone a menace of death.

And now the captain turned to the other two down-at-heels soldiers who stood skulking behind their lieutenant.

"Go," he commanded, "round the billets where your comrades are. Bring them hither. And one of you to the commissariat, and bring the ci-devant here too. And no delay, remember. No gossip on the way as you value your lives. I give you five minutes to have all the men and the prisoner here."

The men went immediately to execute the peremptory order, while the lieutenant remained in the shop looking the picture of humility and dejection. Ma'ame Colombe who had a kindly heart inside her ample bosom, felt almost sorry for the man, so miserable did he look. Indeed, it seemed as if this squad of elegantly clad soldiers sowed anguish and terror in their path.

But the worst was yet to come. Ma'ame Colombe thought that she had probed the last depths of humiliation when she heard that gorgeous officer call her Amédé a thief. To such a pass had this so-called revolution brought the respectable children of France, that they saw themselves bullied and insulted, and held up to shame before their neighbours. What was all that in comparison with the shame of seeing Amédé confronted with the proof that in very truth he was in possession of papers and valuables which were the property of Madame de Frontenac?

It all happened so quickly. Poor Ma'ame Colombe could scarce believe her eyes. All that she saw was two soldiers guided by their sumptuous captain go straight through the back parlour and out by the back door into the yard. What happened out there she did not know, but a minute or two later the three men were standing once more in the parlour, and the captain had in his hand a small box, a thick leather wallet and a bag which obviously contained money.

At sight of these Amédé — her Amédé — had jumped to his feet as if he had been stung; all the blood rushed to his face, and made it crimson with choler, and it looked for the moment as if he would hurl himself on the officer of the Republican army — which would have meant instant death for him, as the soldiers had already shouldered their muskets. Ma'ame Colombe gave a terrified shriek, whereat Amédé suddenly seemed to realize his position, the flush died out of his poor face, and with eyes downcast he resumed his former silent, constrained attitude.

The captain shrugged his shoulders and with a note of dry sarcasm in his voice he said:

"I see you make no attempt at denial. You are wise, citizen. Try and induce your mother not to shriek and you'll find that everything will turn out for the best."

He did not say this unkindly, and poor Ma'ame Colombe even thought that she detected an indulgent tone in his voice. She rose to her feet and put her podgy hands together, and when the captain re-entered the shop she looked up at him with tearful, entreating eyes.

"He did it with a good motive, M'sieu' le — I mean citizen captain. Look at the innocent. He is no thief. I swear he is no thief. I'd like," she went on, turning fiercely round and darting defiant glances on the crowd of gaffers on the doorstep, "I'd like to see the man who dared to say that my Amédé is a thief."

The officer had handed the pièces de conviction to one of his men, with orders to put them in the wagon. Then he commanded Amédé to stand up before him.

"Thief or no thief," he said drily, "you are guilty of having acted contrary to the interests of the Republic. You know what that means?"

Amédé made no reply, only hung his head, and twiddled his hot fingers together.

"It means," the officer continued, "that but for one thing, your life would have had to answer for this act of treason."

A groan went round the crowd on whose ears those words had fallen like the toll of a passing bell. But Ma'ame Colombe did not utter a sound. She clung to her Hector and the two old people stood there hand in hand, striving by this loving contact to conquer the icy fear that had gripped their hearts.

"The one thing that will probably save you," the officer resumed after a dramatic pause, "is that the Republic has need of you in her revolutionary army. The enemy is at the gates of France, you are young, healthy, vigorous; it is for you to show your mettle by defending your country. Thus you will redeem the past. For the moment it is my duty to take you before the Committee of Public Safety, whose final word will dispose of your fate."

He spoke loudly so that all the listeners might hear. Gaffers and urchins and market-women hardly dared to breathe. They felt awed, and could only gaze at one another, as if trying to read each other's thoughts. And while awed whispers still went the round, the down-at-heels soldiers, who had spent the night in the village, came skulking back in groups of two or threes. They pushed their way through the crowd into the shop. One of the last to arrive was M. de Frontenac, closely guarded by two of the men.

And there they all stood now in the shop, a dozen or so of them, beside the sacks of haricots and button-onions and split peas; all of them with the exception of the prisoner, looking dirty and bedraggled, with their worsted caps covered in dust, bits of hay and straw clinging to their coats and to their hair, bare-legged and grimy-faced, the steel of their bayonets dull with sludge, their breeches mud-stained. Such a contrast to their superb officer and his splendidly attired squad. And they could hear the women drawing humiliating comparisons, tittering and pointing fingers of scorn at them, whilst even the drabs, with whom they had drunk and jested the night before, turned contemptuous shoulders upon them now.

And thus they were mustered before the magnificent captain; all soldiers together, shoulder to shoulder, the down-at-heel and the grandees — aristos one would have called them, only that they were of the revolutionary army, which set out to exterminate the very last of the aristocracy, the hated tyrants and dissolute brood. And while they stood there, under the eye of the officer, the crowd outside watched them, and instinctively something of the spirit that animated the rest of France, swept like a poisonous sirocco over these worthy villagers of Laragne; the same spirit that in the great cities sent old women knitting and gossiping at the foot of the guillotine and that prompted young girls to dip their kerchiefs in the blood of its victims. A poisonous wind like the breath of demons! Some of the men and women had been to Sisteron and heard the hymn of hate, the Carmagnole! "Ça ira! Ça ira! Les aristos à la lanterne!" One or two of them began to hum it, stamping their feet to its rhythm.

Gradually the song swelled, one after another they took up the tune, these village men and maids who, unbeknown even to themselves had absorbed some of the insidious poison of hatred and black envy.

"Right! Turn!" the captain commanded, and marking time with their feet, the little squad now over twenty strong, started on its way. Ma'ame Colombe, now loudly moaning, still clung to her boy. He was very brave and tried to reassure and to comfort her. Anyway, he would have had to go to-day, he argued, his orders were to report himself at Serres, to be drafted into the army. From the officer's attitude it certainly seemed as if nothing more terrifying was to happen to him. The boy was brave enough too not to let his mother know how doubly his heart ached, because he was saying good-bye to his home, and could not say good-bye to Fleurette. His heart was filled with the image of Fleurette, but he would not add to his mother's sorrow by speaking to her of his own. He was just an unsophisticated village lad, knowing little, understanding less. His own life and comfort were nothing to him, beside the sorrow which his mother felt and which, he knew, would bring such countless tears in Fleurette's lovely blue eyes. The father too tried to be brave; the effort to keep back his tears brought the perspiration streaming down his round, kindly face. When the crowd — his friends and neighbours some of them — intoned the revolutionary song, his powerful fist was clenched, but he did not shake it at the singers. His sound common sense had come again to his rescue, and whispered to him that for Amédé's sake, quiet submission was the soundest policy.

While mother and son clung to one another in a last farewell, Hector contrived to approach M. de Frontenac who, alone in the midst of such excitement and such conflicting emotions, had remained perfectly calm. The casual observer, not knowing him, might have thought that the fate of his wife and daughter, his separation from them, and the blow that destiny had dealt to these worthy folk here, whom he had known all his life, had left him completely indifferent. He had spent the night in a prison cell, under the eye of men — the local gendarmes — whose welfare and whose families had been his care for years; but seemingly he had slept peacefully. At any rate his face showed no sign of fatigue, or his eyes of sleeplessness. He had dressed with scrupulous care; his well-worn clothes, the ones he was wearing at dinner when the soldiers made irruption into the château, were clean and tidily put on; his cravat neatly tied, his hair smooth. When Hector Colombe approached him, he gripped the worthy épicier warmly by the hand.

And now the crowd parted to allow the soldiers to pass. Some of the girls tried to ogle the handsome ones and to leer at the others, but no one attempted to do more than stare in awe and admiration at the magnificent officer. The two prisoners were ordered to mount into the wagon; one of the soldiers took the reins and the next moment the order, "Quick March!" was given.

The crowd broke into an excited "Hurrah!" and the little squad slowly moved off, officer en tête, and the wagon in the rear, in the direction of Sisteron. Then one of the villagers once more struck up the Carmagnole, and the crowd took it up. "Ça ira! ça ira!" they sang gaily, and the men took the girls by the waist and twirled them round in a gay rigadon. Old men and young girls; for there were no young men in the villages of France these days, when the army claimed them all, they danced and twirled in the wake of the retreating squad, and around them bare-footed urchins somersaulted along in the cloud of dust raised by the horses and wagon.

And that was the picture that Amédé Colombe and Charles de Frontenac, sitting side by side in the wagon, saw gradually receding before their eyes as they were driven away, prisoners from their homes.

Chapter 13

But in Lou Mas nothing was known of the tragic events that were occurring at Laragne. Old Louise and Fleurette were busy with housework, and if Fleurette went about the house, silent and wistful, it was because presently she would have to say the inevitable farewell to Amédé.

It was Adèle who brought the news. Young Colombe had been arrested by soldiers of the revolutionary army, she said, and he and M'sieu' de Frontenac had been taken to Sisteron. A superior officer of the army had come in this morning and relieved the lieutenant of his command. There had been great excitement in Laragne owing to the arrival of this new detachment of soldiers who were as splendid as those of last night had been travel-stained and bedraggled. The whole of the squad, headed by that magnificent officer, had marched away in the direction of Sisteron, the two prisoners sitting in the wagon in the rear.

It was only bit by bit that old Louise succeeded in dragging all this news out of Adèle. The girl's habitual reticence was put to a severe test by all the questions and cross-questions, whilst Fleurette stood by wide-eyed, distraught with the idea of these horrible complications in which her poor Amédé was being involved. But she would not show any emotion before Adèle, she felt vaguely that her foster-sister, never very expansive towards her, had suddenly become almost inimical. So she waited until Louise had extracted all the news she could out of the taciturn girl, and curtly ordered her back into the kitchen; then as the old woman was about to follow, Fleurette caught her by the hand.

"Louise," she said in a tone of almost desperate entreaty, "dear, kind Louise, I must go to Sisteron — at once."

"To Sisteron?" old Louise exclaimed, frowning. "Heavens alive, what is the child thinking of now?"

"Of M'sieu' Amédé, dear Louise," Fleurette replied. "You heard what Adèle said. They have taken him to Sisteron."

"And what of it?" Louise asked — but she asked for form's sake only, she knew quite well what was going on in Fleurette's head.

"Only this, dear Louise," the girl said with a little note of defiance piercing through her shyness. "We — that is Amédé and I — are tokened to one another."

"Tokened?" the old woman exclaimed with a gasp. "Since when?"

"Since last night."

"And without your father's consent? Well! of all the—"

"Chéri Bibi would approve," Fleurette asserted, "if he knew."

Old Louise shrugged her shoulders. She would not trust herself to speak because the child looked so sweet and so innocent, and her pretty blue eyes were so full of tears, that Louise felt an almost unconquerable desire to take hold of her and hug her to her breast. Which act of weakness would have seriously impaired her authority at this critical juncture. She was wondering what to say next — for in truth she more than suspected that the child was right, and that Citizen Armand would not object to those two young things being tokened to one another, when Fleurette broke in gently:

"So you see, dear, kind Louise, that I must go to Sisteron — now — at once."

"But Holy Virgin, what to do?"

"To see Amédé and comfort him."

"They won't let you see him, child."

"Then I will find chéri Bibi," Fleurette retorted calmly. "He has a great deal more authority than you and I credit him with, Louise. He can order whom he likes not only to let me see Amédé, but even to set him free."

"He would be very angry," Louise argued, "to see you wandering about the high-roads alone, while all those soldiers and riff-raff are about."

Fleurette gave a quaint little smile.

"Bibi's anger against me never lasts very long," she said. "Anyway, I will risk it. Louise dear, will you come with me?"

"I?"

"Of course, you said that Bibi would be angry if I roamed about the high-roads alone."

Louise stood squarely in front of Fleurette, looked straight into those blue eyes, which never before had held such a determined glance. Fleurette could not help smiling at the old woman's look of perplexity; she was the typical hen seeing her brood of ducklings take their first plunge in the pond.

"If you won't come with me, Louise dear," the girl said simply, "I shall have to go alone."

"Get along with ye, for an obstinate wench," Louise retorted gruffly. But the next moment she had already changed her tone. "Get on your thick woollen stockings, child," she said, "and your buckled shoes, and your brown cloak, while I put a few things in a basket for our dinner. If we don't hurry, we shan't be in Sisteron before nightfall."

"M'sieu' Duflos will lend us his cart or a horse," Fleurette rejoined gleefully, "but I won't be long, dear, kind Louise."

And swift as a young hare she ran out and then up the outside staircase to her room under the overhanging climbing rose.

A few minutes later the two women started on their way. Fleurette had on her dark kirtle, her thick stockings and buckled shoes; her fair hair was tucked away underneath her frilled mob-cap. She carried her own cloak and Louise's on her arm, whilst Louise tramped beside her, carrying a basket in which she had hastily packed a piece of bread, some cheese, and two hard-boiled eggs. If M'sieu' Duflos, the butcher, would lend them his cart, they would be in Sisteron by mid-day; but in any case they would be there before dark.

Chapter 14

But M'sieu Duflos had no cart to lend them — that is he had no horse. Didn't Mam'zelle Fleurette and Ma'ame Louise remember? Some of those brigands had been round the week before and requisitioned every horse they could lay their hands on all over the country-side; old nags, mares with foals, butchers' cobs, nothing came amiss to them, nothing was sacred. Oh those soldiers! Were they not the curse of the country? And what difference there was between the so-called revolutionary army and a pillaging band of pirates, M'sieu' Duflos, the butcher, really couldn't say.

All this he told the two women, to the accompaniment of wide gestures of his powerful arms and much shrugging of his broad shoulders. It was Fleurette who had put the question breathlessly to him, as soon as she had caught sight of him standing on the door of his shop, blocking it with his massive bulk.

"A horse? A cart? Alas! it was impossible! Ah! those brigands! those brigands!"

Fleurette could not conceal her disappointment at first; but she was so brave, so resolute; she was for making an immediate start so as to get to Sisteron before dark. Perhaps they would meet horse and cart belonging to some neighbour luckier than poor M'sieu' Duflos. But Louise, more prudent, saw an opportunity for putting the mad adventure off until the next day. A start in the early morning could then be made, she argued, and horse or no horse, Sisteron might be reached before the sun was low. A good project forsooth. Let Fleurette return with her quietly now to Lou Mas and sleep on it. That was it! sleep on it! If only Fleurette would do that she, Louise, felt quite sure that counsels of prudence would prevail.

M. Duflos sagely nodded his head. Sisteron? He could not conjecture why Mam'zelle Fleurette should wish to go to Sisteron. Without an escort! And on foot! What would Citizen Armand say to it, if he knew?

Up to this point, you perceive, not a word about the exciting events that had convulsed Laragne a little over two hours ago. M'sieu' Duflos, watching Fleurette, marvelled how much the girl knew. She on the other hand was longing to ask questions, whilst dreading to lose time in unnecessary gossip. She looked about her at the familiar objects: the pump, the shop fronts, the poste de gendarmerie, on the other side of the square, and in the corner of this Rue Haute where the soldiers must have stood this morning with Amédé, a prisoner amongst them.

Everything for the moment in Laragne appeared calm, not to say commonplace. The women had all gone home to cook the midday dinner; the men were at their work. Every moment she thought that she must see Amédé coming round the corner with his slow swinging steps, looking for her! M'sieu' Duflos and Louise were talking together, not exactly in whispers, but under their breath; the way people talk when the subject is exciting and perhaps awe-inspiring. And suddenly M. Duflos exclaimed with a great, big sigh of compassion:

"If it is not a misery! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! those poor Colombes!"

His kindly glance turned to Fleurette, and he saw her big blue eyes fixed on him. And as he was a very worthy fellow this M. Duflos, with a daughter of his own, he could not somehow return that glance; there was something in it that reminded him of a young animal in pain. He guessed that she had heard the news about young Colombe, and he knew, as every one did in Laragne, that Fleurette, over at Lou Mas, and Amédé Colombe were fond of one another, and that they would be tokened as soon as the girl had turned eighteen. This love-romance had been part of the village life ever since the two children had made mud pies together in the market square with the dust of the road and the water from the fountain, and though Armand, over at Lou Mas had become very queer of late, and no one knew anything about the mysterious business which, of recent years, kept him away from home for months on end, every one remembered the pretty Marseillaise whom nineteen years ago he had brought to Lou Mas as a blushing bride, and no one had forgotten the terrible tragedy of her death when she gave birth to Fleurette. With the kindness, one might say the indifference, peculiar to the peasant, the neighbours put down Armand's growing moroseness after that terrible event, and his secretive ways, to grief over the death of his young wife; and then after a while, they ceased to trouble about him at all, and almost forgot him as it were. But Fleurette had grown up among them all, a true child of sunny Dauphiné, in spite of her fair hair and blue eyes. They all loved her because she was so pretty, and though M'sieu' Colombe, the prosperous grocer of the Rue Haute, might at one time have had more ambitious views for his son, he and Ma'ame Colombe soon fell victims to Fleurette's charm, her dainty ways, her quaint little airs, as if she were a lady strayed into this remote village from some great city, and, above all, being natives of the South, and children of France, they succumbed to the fascination of her wealth; for there was no doubt that Armand was rich, and no doubt that he had made a declaration both privately to his friend Colombe and officially before the notary at Sisteron, that he would give his only child a dowry of ten thousand livres tournois, the day she married with his consent.

And here was this child now, whom every one knew and whom every one loved, turning great, pleading eyes on M'sieu' Duflos until the worthy fellow felt so uncomfortable that he had to clear his throat very noisily and to expectorate on the sanded floor of his shop with a sound like the falling of a shower of hailstones on a tiled roof. He thought that Fleurette knew all the details of this morning's dramatic story.

"Voyons, Mam'zelle Fleurette," he said with a rough attempt at consolation. "They won't do anything to Amédé. Really. The boy meant no harm."

All then would have been well if that fool Aristide Sicard, who was M'sieu' Duflos' errand-man, had not put in a word.

"No one," he said, "is going to believe that Amédé Colombe is a thief."

"A thief?" and Fleurette gave a funny little gasp. "Why should they think that Amédé is a thief?"

M'sieu Duflos, the butcher, had given his errand-man a vigorous kick, but the correction came too late. And now Fleurette wanted to know more.

"What is your meaning, M'sieu' Aristide?" she insisted with that funny little air of determination of hers, whilst a frown appeared between her brows.

As M'sieu' Duflos explained to the neighbours afterwards, Fleurette looked as if she might be capable of anything at the moment. He was quite frightened at the expression in her blue eyes. It was too late to undo the mischief that that fool Aristide had done, so the

butcher took the matter into his own hands. He had a sound knowledge of human nature, had M'sieu' Duflos, and he prided himself on his tact.

"You see, Mam'zelle Fleurette," he began, "it's this way. Those scurvy knaves — I mean the soldiers of the Republic — were full of choler because they had not found enough to steal at the château when they arrested poor M'sieu' de Frontenac. At first, it seems, they thought that Madame and Mademoiselle had taken their valuables away with them when they ran away; but later on something must have aroused their suspicions, or else the same kind of fool as Aristide here must have got talking. Anyway, they seem to have got the idea that Amédé Colombe had hidden Madame's valuables away somewhere and—"

"Madame's valuables!" Fleurette exclaimed, trying to hide something of the excitement which was causing her heart to thump furiously. "They thought that Amédé — ?"

"Why, yes!" M'sieu' Duflos replied to her half-formulated query. "And unfortunately—"

"What?"

"Well! They found Madame's valuables—"

But the worthy butcher got no further with his story. Without another word and swift as lightning, Fleurette had turned on her heel, and the next moment she was speeding across the market-place in the direction of the Rue Haute, whilst M'sieu' Duflos was left gazing in ludicrous perplexity at old Louise.

"What's the matter with the child?" he queried, and thoughtfully passed his hand through his harsh, bristly hair. "I thought she knew."

Old Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"She only knew that the lad had been arrested," she said, "but she had not heard about Madame's valuables being found in the Colombes' cart-shed. I was just able to stop Adèle telling her. She is so fond of M'sieu' Amédé." Louise added with a sigh: "Oh! how I wish her father were here."

M'sieu' Duflos was watching Fleurette's trim little figure speeding across the square and then disappearing round the corner of the Rue Haute.

"She's run over to the épicerie," he commented drily. "The Colombes are fond of her. They'll be able to comfort one another. Come in and have a petit verre, Louise. The child will be back soon."

But Louise would not come in, she did not want to lose sight of Fleurette, so after thanking the kind butcher for his hospitality, she too turned to go in the direction of the Rue Haute. But at the last M'sieu' Duflos had one more word to say to her.

"There's one thing more, Ma'ame Louise," he said, with unwonted earnestness in his round, prominent eyes. "If I were you I would look after that wench of yours, Adèle, a bit sharper. No offence, you know, but people have been talking in the village. She was rather too familiar with all those draggled-tailed soldiers last night."

Old Louise, with all a peasant's philosophy, shrugged her fat shoulders.

"You may be right, M'sieu' Duflos," she said drily, "but the girl, you know, is no care of mine. My sister Amélie looks after her."

After which she gave a friendly nod to the amiable butcher and made her way up to the Rue Haute as fast as she could, though this was not really so fast as Fleurette's nimble little feet had carried her.

Chapter 15

There had been no need for words. As soon as Fleurette had entered the shop Ma'ame Colombe had stretched out her arms, and Fleurette ran to her at once to be enfolded in a great maternal embrace. With her fair hair resting on Ma'ame Colombe's ample bosom, the child began by having a good cry. She had had none since she heard the fatal news, for excitement had kept every other emotion in check. But now with those motherly arms round her, she felt free to let her sorrow and anxiety have free rein. Ma'ame Colombe's ample bosom heaving against hers, and the older woman's tears wetting the top of her fair head, Fleurette looked up, swiftly drying her eyes, and put on a reassuring smile.

It was difficult to speak at first with all those sobs choking one's voice; nevertheless, whilst mopping her eyes with her pocket-handkerchief, Fleurette contrived to say:

"You know, Ma'ame Colombe, that it is all right, don't you? About Amédé, I mean."

"All right, my dear? All right?" the poor woman reiterated, and shook her head with pathetic dubiousness. "How can it be all right, when my Amédé is accused of being a thief? And before the neighbours too!" she added, whilst a deeper tone of crimson than her kitchen-fire had lent to her kind old face, spread over her cheeks.

"That's just it, Ma'ame Colombe," Fleurette continued eagerly. "Presently — to-night I hope — every one will know that it was not Amédé who took those things."

"Of course he didn't take them. But you know what village gossip is. If Amédé did not take Madame's valuables, they keep on saying, how came they to be in our cart-shed? Oh, mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" she moaned, "to think that my Hector and I should live to see such disgrace."

"But, Ma'ame Colombe," Fleurette put in, somewhat impatient with the older woman's lamentations, "I am going to Sisteron to-night to tell the gendarme how Madame's valuables came to be in your cart-shed, and who it was that stole them."

"You, child? How should you know?"

"Because it was I who took the valuables out of the secret place in Madame's room," Fleurette said glibly, "and I gave them to Amédé to take care of, and because it was I who gave them to him he hid them in a corner of the cart-shed."

"Holy Virgin!" was all that Ma'ame Colombe was able to say in response to this amazing story, "the child has taken leave of her senses."

"No, no, Ma'ame Colombe," Fleurette insisted earnestly; "it is just as I have told you. I took the valuables out of Madame's room while the soldiers were at the château, and I gave them to Amédé to take care of."

"But why?" the poor mother exclaimed, in an agony of bewilderment. "In Heaven's name why?"

"Because—"

And suddenly Fleurette hesitated. A hot flush rose to her cheeks and tears gathered in her eyes. She had felt Ma'ame Colombe's perplexed glance on her, and for the time a stinging doubt gripped her heart and made her physically almost sick. What views would other people — strangers or even friends — take of her amazing story? of the heavenly voice and the mysterious faggot-carrier with the wonderful twinkling eyes? Would they believe her? or would they deride the whole tale? or again, like dear, kind Ma'ame Colombe, would they just feel anxious, perplexed, not wishing to condemn, and yet vaguely wondering what could have induced a girl like Fleurette to go rummaging about among Madame's things, and inducing young Amédé to help her to conceal them.

An overpowering impulse prompted her to keep her beloved secret to herself. The sight of Ma'ame Colombe's grief-stricken face almost shook her resolution, but in the end it was that first impulse which conquered. After all it was only a matter of a few days, hours perhaps, and everything would become crystal-clear. Fleurette's little handkerchief was now like a wet ball in her hot hands; she breathed on it and dabbed her eyes; she straightened her cap and smoothed down her kirtle.

"And so, dear Ma'ame Colombe," she said calmly, "I am just going to Sisteron. Probably I shall find Bibi there; but even if I don't, I shall go up to the Committee of Public Safety, and I shall tell them the whole truth, so that there'll be no question of Amédé going to fight the English with the stain of theft upon his name."

It was impossible to say anything more just then, because Louise had arrived at the epicerie, breathless, but happy to catch sight of Fleurette looking quite calm and reasonable.

"I hope you gave the child a good scolding, Ma'ame Colombe," she said. "The idea of her wanting to trapeze the high-road to-day when all these ruffianly soldiers are still about."

But Fleurette only smiled. "Neither Ma'ame Colombe, nor anyone else," she said, "could dissuade me from going to see Bibi now."

"Why!" Louise exclaimed pettishly, "this morning it was M'sieu' Amédé you wanted to see."

"I do want to see Amédé," Fleurette rejoined simply, "but I must see Bibi first."

And Louise saw her exchange an understanding glance with Ma'ame Colombe. It was all very bewildering and very terrible. Of course she was terribly sorry for the Colombes, but, just for the moment, she wished them all at the bottom of the sea. A little feeling of jealousy had crept into her heart when she saw Fleurette clinging to Ma'ame Colombe and whispering words into her ears which she, Louise, could not hear, and this uncomfortable feeling added to her discomfort. What could Ma'ame Colombe be thinking about to encourage Fleurette in her obstinacy? Louise could only suppose that all common sense had been drowned in an ocean of grief for the beloved only son.

Ah! if only Monsieur Armand were here!

And with a last sigh and a none too cordial farewell to Ma'ame Colombe, Louise, dolefully shaking her head, followed Fleurette out of the shop.

Chapter 16

It was long past sunset by the time the two women reached Sisteron. Louise was dog-tired, for the day had been hot and the roads heavy with dust. They had started from Lou Mas one hour before noon, and as they left the first outlying houses of the city behind them, the clock of the tower of Notre Dame was striking eight.

The road between Laragne and Sisteron goes uphill most of the way, but withal, it is a beautiful road, winding through the wide valley of the Buèche, past orchards of grey-green olives and almond-trees laden with blossoms. Once past the confluence of the Méouge with the Buèche, it rises in a gentle gradient and gradually reveals to the eye with magnificent panorama of the Basses Alpes with their rocky crests and wide flanks draped in the sombre cloaks of pinewoods: Mont de la Baume, St. Géniez, Signal de Lure; as beautiful a picture as Nature has to offer for the delectation of travellers, but possessing no powers of fascination over the two women, who tramped along in weariness and with anxious hearts.

The road was lonely. Scarce anyone did they meet on the way; no one, at any rate, to inspire old Louise with alarm. Now and then, perhaps, a group of labourers toiling homewards would cast a bold glance on the pretty wench stepping it resolutely beside her old duenna. But after a ribald word or two, or at worst a coarse jest, they would pass on and the two women continued their way unmolested.

But the events of the day, subsequently those of the evening, were but one long string of disappointments. As soon as the first outlying houses of the city came in sight, Fleurette began inquiring pluckily and determinedly.

"Citizen Armand," she would ask, "from Lou Mas, over beyond Laragne?"

"What about him?"

"He is an important personage in Sisteron, how could I find him?"

And because she was gentle and had pretty blue eyes, and because she looked weary and anxious, people would do their best to help her. Some suggested one place, some another; the posting-inn — he might be known there, if he sometimes posted to Paris — or else the commissariat. This latter place proved a danger spot. A ferocious-looking commissaire very nearly detained the two women on a charge of vagabondage. His ugly leers and unveiled threats nearly sent Louise off her head with terror; Fleurette, however, kept up her courage nobly. The thought of Amédée drove every other terror out of her heart. She had vaguely heard that her father had something to do with a certain Committee of Public Safety. When she told this to the commissaire his manner immediately underwent a complete change; he became almost obsequious, placed himself entirely at the disposal of the citizeness for any inquiries she might wish to make about her illustrious father. Unfortunately, he said, the hour was late; the officers of the Committee of Public Safety situated in the Town Hall were now closed for the night. Citizen Armand had probably found shelter under the roof of a friend. Until to-morrow morning nothing could be done.

One thing, however, appeared clear; the soldier who had created so much stir in Laragne this morning had not come to Sisteron nor was anything known of them. There was, the now servile commissaire explained, a detachment of the 87th regiment of the line in garrison in the city and two days ago a squad of the revolutionary army lately formed for the purpose of scouring the country for traitors and aristos had passed through Sisteron and gone on in the direction of Laragne. The commissaire had heard something about a family named Frontenac against whom there was a black mark for treason against the Republic, but he did not know anything about the arrest of Monsieur or the escape of Madame and Mademoiselle — whome he persistently referred to as the *ci-devants* — nor did he know anything about the arrest of Amédée Colombe, citizen of Laragne.

It was all very disappointing. Fleurette, trying to be brave, nevertheless felt at times an overwhelming inclination to cry. For one thing she was very tired, and being young and healthy she was also hungry. She and Louise had consumed the contents of their provision basket when the day was still young. Now it was getting near bed-time and the goal of her efforts not even within sight. The sullenness and mistrust that seemed to hang over the whole city had the effect of further damping her spirits. The echo of the terrible doings in Orange, in Toulon, and Lyons had penetrated as far as this hitherto peaceful little town. Tales of summary arrests, of death-sentences without trial, of wholesale massacres were on everybody's lips. Accusations of treason, it seems, were more frequent than daily bread. The women looked harassed, hugged their children to their sides, as they slunk down the ill-lit streets, whilst throwing furtive glances over their shoulders. The men stood about in groups of three or four in the dark angles of the streets of beneath the ill-lit doorways until roughly ordered to go their way by men dressed in nothing but rags, who wore a tricolour sash round their waist and a cockade on their worsted cap.

And so ultimately to Les Amandiers, a quiet little inn off the main streets of the town, that Louise knew of through the drovers from Laragne who frequented the place when they were in Sisteron on market-day. Baptiste Portal, the landlord, suspicious at first, not liking the look of the two unprotected women seeking for lodgings at this hour of the night, was mollified by seeing the colour of Louise's money and the blue of Fleurette's eyes. His temper, it seems, had not yet recovered from the assaults made upon it a couple of days ago by a set of ragamuffins who called themselves soldiers of the Republic, and by their loud-spoken and arrogant lieutenant; but he was willing enough to make the two women welcome, and to give them supper and a bed. Then only did they tell him who they were and what the purpose of their journey: to seek Citizen Armand of Lou Mas, whose daughter Fleurette had matters of the utmost importance to communicate to him.

"Qu'à ça ne tienne!" Baptiste Portal exclaimed. "Armand was here but a couple of hours after noon. He was on his way to Orange."

"To Orange!" A cry of terror from Louise; one of excitement from Fleurette. Orange, the tiger's den! How could two unprotected women hope to enter it without being devoured? Orange where the guillotine was at work night and day! where men and women and even children were massacred in droves, where innocent people hardly dared to speak or smile or pray, lest they be seized and thrown into prison, only to be dragged out again to a horrible death.

Orange!

But Fleurette only smiled. What had they to fear seeing Bibi chéri would be there? Was not Bibi far, far more powerful than the whole of the revolutionary army? Fleurette had seen him at the château, with a great tricolour sash round his waist, giving orders, that

the officer in command of the soldiers dared not disobey.

Orange! She was not afraid of Orange! Even if the great Robespierre was in Oragne she would not be afraid to go.

After all, what did it mean? Two or three days' journey in the old coche which, it seems, left the Place d'Armes two days of the week, at nine o'clock in the morning, and lumbering along through Peipin, and Saint Etienne-les-Orgues, gave one the chance of getting a good bed for the night at Sault, and again at Carpentras, if one was too tired to continue one's journey then.

Orange indeed? Why should one fear Orange, when chance was all in one's favour. As luck would have it, it was the very next day that the coche would be starting from the Place d'Armes. All one needed was a few things, a clean pair of stockings, a handkerchief or two, a bit of soap and a towel, which dear, kind Ma'ame Portal was only too ready to lend; these were tied in a bundle and formed the only indispensable luggage which Fleurette and Louise would take with them. Fortunately Louise had plenty of money in her pocket, being always well supplied by Bibi, and then, of course, in Orange, Bibi would be there and he would provide further as necessity arose.

And thus it came to pass that among the passenger who took their places in the lumbering old vehicle that morning were two females, one of whom had corn-coloured hair and eyes bluer than forget-me-nots.

Chapter 17

The Hôtel de Ville at Orange still stands, as it did then, in the newly-named Place de la République; and if the tourist of to-day mounts its steps, enters the building through its central portal, crosses the wide vestibule and finally turns down a long corridor on his right, he will, almost at the end of this, come to a door which bears the legend: "Travaux Publics."

Should he be bold enough to push open the door, he will find himself in a perfectly banal room, with white-washed walls covered with maps and plans that are of no interest to him, a large desk at one end, and a few wooden chairs. There is a thin carpet in the middle of the red-tiled floor and faded green rep curtains temper the glaring light of the afternoon sun. But on this day of May, 1794, there were no curtains to the window, and not even a strip of carpet on the floor. There was no desk either, only a long trestle table covered with a tattered green cloth, behind which, on wooden chairs, sat three men, dressed alike in dark blue coats tightly buttoned across the chest, drab breeches and high topped boots, and wearing tricolour sashes around their waist.

The one who sat in the centre and who appeared to be in supreme authority rested his elbow on the table, and his chin was supported in his hand. He was gazing intently on a man who stood before him, in the centre of the room, the other side of the table; a man who looked foot-sore and weary and who wore a military uniform all tattered and covered with slime and dust.

The two others also kept their eyes fixed on this man. They were listening with rapt interest to the story which he was relating. Early this morning he and a dozen others also attired in tattered uniforms had come into Orange in a state bordering on collapse. They had made their way to the barracks where the officer in command had mercifully given them food and drink. As soon as they had eaten and drunk, they tried to tell their story; but this was so amazing, not to say incredible, that the officer in command had thought it prudent to send for the superintendent of gendarmerie, who in turn had the men conveyed to the Hôtel de Ville, there to be brought before the Representative of the Convention on special mission who sat with the Committee of Public Safety. And now Lieutenant Godet stood alone to face the Committee; the others had been handed back to the gendarmerie to be dealt with later on. The representative on special mission who sat with the two other Members of the Committee at the table covered with the tattered green cloth, had questioned Godet, and he thereupon embarked upon the story of this amazing adventure. He began by relating the events which three days ago had set the quiet little commune of Laragne seething with excitement. He told of the arrival of the squad of soldiers in magnificent uniforms, under the command of an officer more superb than anything that had ever been seen in the countryside before. He told of the perquisition in the house of Citizen Colombe the grocer, by those magnificent soldiers, of the finding there by them of certain valuables belonging to the ci-devant Frontenacs, valuables which he himself had vainly searched for in the château, the evening before. He told of the arrest of young Colombe: of the high-handed manner in which the superb officer had relieved him, Godet, of his command, and ordered him and his men, together with the ci-devant Frontenac, to join his squad, and to march with him out of Laragne. He had told it all with a wealth of detail, and the members of the Committee had listened in silence and with rapt interest.

But now the man at the table who was the representative on special mission, and who appeared chief in authority, broke in with an exclamation that was almost one of rage.

"And do you mean to tell me, citizen lieutenant," he said in a harsh, rasping voice, "that you could mistake a lot of English spies — for that is what they were, you may take it from me — that you could mistake them, I say, for soldiers of our army. Where were your eyes?"

Lieutenant Godet gave a shrug which he hoped would pass for unconcern. In reality he felt physically sick; a prey to overwhelming terror. At first, when he and his men had come in sight of the city, they had felt nothing but relief to see the end of what had been almost martyrdom. It was only afterwards, when he found himself in this narrow room, with its white-washed walls and its silence, and face to face with those three men, that fear had entered his heart. He felt like an animal in a cage — a mouse looking into the pale, piercing eyes of a cat. He passed his tongue once or twice over his parched lips before he gave reply.

"I was not the only one, citizen," he said sullenly, "who was deceived. The whole commune of Laragne was at the heels of those soldiers. My own men were mustered before the pseudo-captain and heard him give words of command."

"But Englishmen, citizen lieutenant," the man at the table argued; "Englishmen! Their appearance! Their speech!"

"They spoke as you and I would, Citizen Chauvelin," Godet retorted, still sullenly. "As for appearance, one man is like another. I could not be expected to know every officer of our army by sight!"

"But you said they were splendidly dressed!"

"They were. I knew the uniform well enough. Had there been a doubtful button or a galloon wanting I should have spotted it."

"But so clean!" one of the others at the table remarked with a sigh, that might have been of envy, "so magnificent!"

"I knew that there were some compagnies d'élite," the lieutenant rejoined, "attached to certain regiments. How could I guess?"

"It might have been better for you if you had," the man in the centre remarked drily.

Godet's wan face took on a more ashen hue; again he passed his tongue over his parched lips.

"Haven't we had enough of this?" one of the others at the table now put in impatiently. "We are satisfied that those English spies, or whatever they were, acted with amazing effrontery, which makes me think that perhaps they are a part of that gang that we all know of, and of which Citizen Chauvelin spoke just now. We are also satisfied that Citizen Lieutenant Godet did not show that acumen which an officer in his responsible position should have done. What we want to know now is, what happened after the pseudo-captain of the so-called 33rd division had arrested that young Colombe and marched out of Laragne?"

"And in your interest, citizen lieutenant," the man in the centre rejoined sternly, "I advise you to make a statement that is truthful in every detail."

"Had I wished to tell lies," the soldier retorted sullenly, "I shouldn't be here now. I should have—"

"No matter," the other broke in curtly, "what you would have done. The State desires to know what you did."

"Well!" Lieutenant Godet began after a moment or two during which he appeared to collect his thoughts. "We marched out of Laragne in the direction of Serres. The captain — I still, of course, looked upon him as a captain — had so disposed us that I and my own men were between two squads of his. We were footsore, all of us, because we had had three days' tramping in the dust, one day

battling against hard wind, another with long hours spent in scouring the château of those traitors Frontenacs; we were also very hungry. Remember that we had been dragged out of our beds in the early morning, and not given a chance of getting a bite or drink before starting on the march. But they, the others, were fresh as if they had just come out of barracks with their bellies full...They marched along at a swinging pace, and it was as much as we could do to keep step with them."

The man's voice became somewhat more steady as he talked. The note of terror which had been so conspicuous in it at first had given place to one of dull resentment. Encouraged by the obvious interest which his story had evoked in his hearers, he resumed more glibly:

"About half a league north of Laragne, a bridle-path branches off the high-road; into this the captain ordered his company to turn, and we continued to plod along through the dust and in the midday heat, till we came to a tumble-down cottage by the roadside; a cottage flanked by a dilapidated shed, and a bit of garden all overgrown with weeds. Here a halt was called, and the prisoners were ordered out of the wagon. A moment or two later a woman appeared at the cottage door, some words were exchanged between her and the captain, and subsequently, when order to march was given, the prisoners marched along with us; the wagon and horses having been left behind at the cottage."

"Didn't you think this very strange, citizen lieutenant?" one of the men at the table asked; "a wagon and horses which you would naturally presume belonged to the State, being thus left at a tumble-down roadside cottage?"

"Whatever I may have thought," the lieutenant replied, "it was not my place to make observations to my superior officer."

"Superior officer!" the man in the centre remarked, with a gesture of contemptuous wrath.

"I think, Citizen Chauvelin," the accused now put in a little more firmly, "that you are unnecessarily hard on me. There was really nothing to indicate—"

But the other broke in with a vicious snarl:

"Nothing to indicate — ? Nothing? The eyes of a patriot should be sharp enough to detect a spy or a traitor through any disguise—"

He paused abruptly, and cast a quick, inquisitorial glance at his two colleagues first, then at the soldier before him. Had he detected a trace, a sign, a flicker of the eyelid that betrayed knowledge of his own past? of the times — numberless now — that he too had been hoodwinked by those bold adventurers who called themselves the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and by their chief whose prowess in the art of disguise had marked some of the most humiliating hours in Chauvelin's career? Calais, Boulogne, Nantes, Paris; each of those great cities had a record of the Terrorist's discomfiture when brought face to face with that mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel. Even now, crushed in the hot palm of his hand, he held a scrap of paper which had revealed the author of the plot to which that fool Lieutenant Godet had fallen a victim — just as he, himself, Chauvelin, had done — just like that — and so many times — The penalty for him had always been more humiliation, a further fall from the original high place which he had once occupied in Paris: and with it the knowledge that one day the masters of France would tire of his failures. Ah! he knew that well enough, he knew that they would tire, and then they would crush him as they had crushed others, whose only crime, like his, had been failure.

His only claim to immunity, so far, had been the fact that he alone, of all the members of the National Assembly, of all the members of the Committees, or of the Executive, knew who the Scarlet Pimpernel really was; he had seen him without disguise; he knew him by name, not only him but some of his more important followers; and when some of the ferocious tyrants, who for the time being were the masters of France, did at times loudly demand the suppression of Citizen Chauvelin, for incompetence that amounted to treason, there were always others who pleaded for him because of that knowledge. Many felt that with the death of Chauvelin, the last hope of capturing that band of English spies would have to be abandoned; and so they pleaded for his retention and their fellow-tyrants allowed him another few months' grace so that he might accomplish that which they knew was the great purpose of his life. And whenever in the opinion of those bloodthirsty tigers, who held France under their domination, some outlying provincial districts had need of what they called "purging from the pestilence of traitors," whenever wholesale arrests, perquisitions, wholesale death-sentences or brutal massacres were the order of the day, Citizen Chauvelin was sent down with special powers, always in the vain hope that the Scarlet Pimpernel, emboldened by success, would fall into the trap perpetually set for him. The English spy's predilection for aristos, his sympathies so quickly aroused when traitors happened to be women or young children, was sure to draw his activities to any region where prisons were full and the guillotine kept busy.

Thus it was that Citizen Chauvelin had been sent to Orange. The Southern provinces of France had been left far too long to welter in a morass of treason; there were veritable nests of traitors in the châteaux and farms of Provence and Dauphiné. The country had to be purged: the traitors extirpated; the magnificent Law of the Suspect be set in motion to do this cleansing process. Any man who ventured to criticize the government, who complained of taxation or restrictions was a traitor; any man or woman who owned more than they needed for bare subsistence, who refused to pour of their surplus into the lap of patriots, was a traitor, and the country must be purged of them, until the dictatorship of the proletariat was firmly established, until every man, woman and child in the whole of France had been dragged down to the same level of mental and physical wreckage.

There had been a dramatic pause after Chauvelin's outburst of contemptuous wrath; for a minute or two, while the old clock up on the wall ticked away with slow monotony, a strange silence remained hanging over the scene. Whatever the other three men may have known or remembered of the noted Terrorist's past history, they thought it wiser to say nothing. In these days of universal brotherhood and Liberty, every man in France was frightened of his neighbour. The time had come when the lustful tigers, satiated with the blood of those whom they deemed their enemies, had turned, thirsting, for that of their whilom friends. The makers of the Terror had started digging their fangs into each other's throats. The victory now was to the most ferocious. After the Girondins, Danton, he, who had ordered the September massacres, two and a half years ago, had had to yield to a more vengeful, more merciless power than his own.

Chauvelin knew that. The victory to-day was to the most ferocious. He who would sacrifice friends, brother, sister, child, was the true patriot; the man who stayed his hand in face of a revolting crime that would put a wild beast to the blush, was unworthy the name of citizen of France. Therefore death to him. Death to the weakling. To the Moderate. This was the era of the Universal Brotherhood of Death.

What chance then had this unfortunate Lieutenant Godet now? brought to justice — save the mark! — before a man who knew that to show weakness was to court death. No wonder that all the swagger and the arrogance which made him but a day or two ago the

terror of a lot of peasants at Sisteron or Laragne, was knocked out of him, by a mere glance from those pale, piercing eyes. And he — a mere notary's clerk born and bred in the depth of Dauphiné, and thrust into the army, as a mule is thrust into harness — knew nothing of Paris save from hearsay, and nothing of the men whose word had even sent a king and queen to the scaffold. He knew nothing of Citizen Chauvelin, save that he was a man of power, before whose piercing glance and tricolour sash every man instinctively cringed and trembled. He knew nothing of Chauvelin's tussles with those same English spies who had so effectually led him, Godet, by the nose; nothing of Citizen Chauvelin's past life, very little of the present. He was just a mouse in the power of a cat; allowed a little freedom just now, while he told his tale of failure.

"Continue, citizen lieutenant," Chauvelin now said more calmly. "We are listening."

"Let me see," Godet rejoined vaguely, "where was I?"

"On the bridle-path off the main road," Chauvelin responded with a sneer; "half a league north of Laragne. The wagon and horses presumably belonging to the State left in a tumble-down cottage by the roadside. A thrilling situation forsooth. An ordinary situation you would have us believe. Pray continue. What happened after that?"

"We marched and we marched and we marched," the lieutenant resumed sullenly. "We marched until we were ready to drop. We had had three days of marching and had started in the morning without a bite, hungry! *Nom d'un nome!* how hungry we were! and weak and faint! The hours sped on; we could see the sun mounting the heavens and then start on its descent. The heat was intense, the dust terrible. It filled our eyes, our nostrils, our mouths. The soles of our feet were bleeding, sweat poured down our faces and obscured our vision. We marched and we marched, through two villages, the names of which I do not know; then over mountain passes, across rocky gorges, stepping over streams, climbing the sides of hills, the banks of rivers. I am a stranger in these parts. And I was tired. Tired! I knew not where we were, whither we were going. March! March! March! Ceaselessly. Even had I dared, I would no longer have had the strength to ask questions or to beg for mercy."

And at the recollection of those hours of agony, Lieutenant Godet wiped the perspiration from his streaming brow.

"Well?" Chauvelin queried drily, "and the others, the Englishmen?"

"They marched along at a swinging pace," Godet replied, smothering a savage oath. "Without turning a hair. They kicked up no dust. They did not sweat. They just marched. No doubt their bellies were well filled."

"And the prisoners?"

"They set to with a will. And I make no doubt but they had fed and drunk while they sat in the wagon. At any rate they showed no fatigue."

"How long did you continue on the march?"

"Till one by one we — my comrades and I — fell out by the roadside."

"And those who fell out were left, while the others went on?"

"Yes! We had gone through the second village, and were marching along the edge of a stream, when the first lot of us dropped out. Three of my men. They just rolled down the bank of the stream; and there lay on their stomachs trying to drink. The captain — or whatever he was, curse him! — called "Halt!" and one of his men ran down the bank and had a look at those three poor fellows who lay there striving to slake their hunger as well as their thirst in the cool mountain stream. But, *nom de nom!* They — the miscreants! — had no bowels of compassion. I believe — for in truth I was too tired to see anything clearly — that one of them did leave a hunk of bread by the side of the stream: perhaps he was afraid that those poor fellows would die of inanition and then their death would be upon his conscience."

"Well! And did all the men fall out that way?"

"Yes! We were marching three abreast: and three by three we all fell out. Always beside the stream, for we suffered from thirst as much as from hunger. The stream seemed to draw us, and three of us, as if by common understanding, would just roll down the bank and lie on our stomachs and try to drink. The captain no longer called a halt when that happened. One of his own men would just throw pieces of bread down to the edge of the stream, just as they would to a dog."

"And you were the last to fall out?"

"The very last. I verily believe, when I rolled down the bank and felt the cool stream against my face, that I had died and reached the Elsyian fields. A piece of bread was thrown to me, and I fell on it like a starved beast."

"And then what happened?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean? Nothing?"

"Nothing as far as we were concerned. The bank of the stream, for a length of two kilometres or more, was strewn with our dead — that is not dead, you understand, but fatigued, and only half-conscious with hunger: while those miscreants, those limbs of Satan, marched off without as much as a last look at us! Gaily they marched away singing. Yes, singing, some awful gibberish, in a tongue I did not understand. That is," poor Godet went on ruefully, "when first I had an inkling of the awful truth. That strange tongue gave it away. You understand?"

The others nodded.

"And then, by chance, I put my hand in the back pocket of my tunic, and felt that piece of paper."

With finger that quivered slightly, he pointed to Chauvelin's hand; between the clenched claw-like fingers there protruded the corner of a scrap of paper. Chauvelin failed to suppress the exclamation of rage which rose to his lips.

"*Nom de nom!*" he muttered savagely through his teeth, and with his handkerchief he wiped the beads of moisture that had risen to the roots of his hair.

"And so they marched away," one of the others remarked drily. "In which direction?"

"Straight on," the soldier replied laconically.

"On the way to Nyons, I suppose, and Walreas?"

"I suppose so. I don't know the neighbourhood."

"You do not seem to have known much, Lieutenant Godet," Chauvelin put in with a sneer.

"I come from the other side of the Drac," Godet retorted. "I could not—"

But Chauvelin broke in with an oath:

"Wherever you come from, citizen," he said sternly, "it was your duty to become acquainted with the country through which you were ordered to march your men."

"I had no orders to take them through mountain passes," Godet remarked sullenly. "We came through here a month ago and have kept to the high- road. At Sisteron I had my orders to arrest the ci-devant Frontenacs. You, Citizen Chauvelin, must know how conscientiously I did my duty. All the orders you gave me I fulfilled. After Sisteron you ordered me to go to Laragne, and thence to Serres. It was you ordered me to a halt at Laragne for the night."

"All this is beside the point," one of the others broke in roughly. "All we can gather from this confused tale is that all traces of the English spies have completely vanished."

"For the moment," Chauvelin assented drily. "It is for Lieutenant Godet to find those traces again."

He spoke now with extreme bitterness, and the glances which he levelled at Godet were both hostile and threatening. It would be curious to try and follow the mental processes which had given rise to this hostility. Godet, after all said and done, had only failed in the same manner as he himself, Chauvelin, had so often done. He had been hoodwinked by a particularly astute and daring adventurer who was an avowed enemy of France: and if being thus hoodwinked was a crime against the State, then the powerful member of the Committee of Public Safety and the humble lieutenant of infantry were fellow-criminals. This, of course, Godet did not know. Not yet: or he would not have been in such dread of this man with the pale eyes and the talon-like hands. The others he did not fear nearly so much. No doubt they too were cruel and vengeful these days. Strike or the blow will fall on you, was the rule of every man's conduct. Pochart and Danou took their cue from Chauvelin; his was the master-mind, his the more ruthless nature, all they did was to try and show their zeal by saying Amen to every suggestion, every sarcasm, every accusation put forth by their colleague.

In fact the proceedings by now had developed into a kind of duel between the accused and the principal judge; it was a duel made up of acrimonious accusations on the one hand, and of defence that weakened perceptibly as the accused became more and more confused through ever-increasing terror. The other two only put in a word here and there. They wished to know how the adventure had finally come to an end.

"In a long, weary tramp to Orange," Godet replied; "weary beyond what words can describe, footsore, hungry and thirsty we tramped."

They had to cover three leagues. How they lived through it, they none of them knew. At one or two villages which they encountered, they obtained a little food, and some drink. For the space of a league and a half, he, Godet, and two others got a lift in a farmer's wagon. On the way they asked news of the English spies. They had been seen marching merrily; but soon all traces of them had vanished.

"Had I been the traitor you say I am, Citizen Chauvelin," Godet said in the end, "would I have come into Orange with my tale? I would have tried to run away and to hide. Made my way to Toulons, what? and joined the army there. You would not have found me then; months would have gone by before you heard of my adventure."

"You underestimate the power which is in my hands, citizen lieutenant," was Chauvelin's curt comment. "Only one thing could save you from the consequences of your treachery, and that was to speak the truth and to redeem your crime."

He paused a moment, and then addressing his two colleagues, he said with slow deliberation:

"We all agree, I think, that Citizen Lieutenant Godet has been guilty of gross negligence, which to-day, when France is threatened by traitors within as well as by her enemies on her frontier, amounts to treason against the State. Silence!" he went on, throwing a stern glance on Godet who had uttered a violent word of protest. "Listen to what hope of indulgence it is in my power to give you. The State against whom you have sinned will grant you the chance of retrieving your crime. We will grant you full powers under the new Law of the Suspect. You shall go into the highways and the byways with full power to seize any man, woman or child, whom you as much as vaguely suspect of complicity in this affair. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," Godet replied dully.

"The State," Pochart put in sagely, "would rather have the English spies than your head, citizen lieutenant."

"The State will have Citizen Godet's head," Chauvelin rejoined drily, "or the English spies. The choice rests with Citizen Godet himself."

There was a moment's pause. The eyes of the soldier were fixed upon the pale, determined face of his ruthless judge. He knew that his life hung upon the decision uttered by those thin, bloodless lips. He was in the grip of a white terror; his teeth were clenched and his tongue clove, hard and dry, against the roof of his mouth. He was terrified, and in his wildly beating heart there was an immense hatred for the man who thus terrorized him. He longed to get at him, to grip him by the throat, to scream out insults into that pale, stern, colourless face. He longed to see that same fear of death which was paralysing him, dim the light of those pale eyes. His own impotence made that hatred more intense. It shone out of his eyes, and Chauvelin meeting them caught the glance like that of an enraged cur, ready to spring. Indifferent, he shrugged his shoulders and the ghost of a sneer curled round his thin lips. He was accustomed to hatred and desire for revenge.

"Citizen lieutenant," he said at last, "you have heard the decision of the committee. It has been found expedient to withhold punishment from you, because it is in your power to serve the State in a way that no other man could do at this moment. You have seen the English spies face to face; you know something of their appearance, something of their mode of speech. Go then into the highways and byways, the men who with you were guilty of negligence shall go with you. It is for you to use the full powers which the Law of the Suspect has placed in your hands. Go scour the country. Yours is the power to seize any man, woman or child whom you suspect of treason to the State, make use of that power in order to track down to their lair the English foxes who have outwitted you. Only let me add a word of warning in your ear. Do not be led by the nose a second time. If you are, no power on earth will save you. The State may forgive incompetence once: the second time it will bear the ugly name of treason."

He had risen to his feet, and just for a moment the muscles of his hand relaxed, and the scrap of paper which he had crushed into a ball rolled upon the table.

His colleague Pochart picked it up and idly opened and smoothed it out: he studied for a moment or two the close writing upon it, then looking inquiringly up at Chauvelin.

"Can you tell us what is written on this paper, citizen?" he asked.

And while he spoke he tossed the paper across to his colleague Danou.

"Is it English?" Danou asked, puzzled.

"Yes," Chauvelin replied curtly.

"It looks like poetry," Pochart remarked.

"Doggerel verses," commented Chauvelin.

"And you can't read it?"

"No!"

"I thought you knew English."

"Not I."

"Strange why a bit of doggerel verse should have been slipped into the pocket of Citizen Godet's tunic," Pochart remarked drily. "And there's your name, Citizen Chauvelin," he added, pointing to the words "À mon ami Chauvelin," which preceded the four lines of poetry written in English, a language which, apparently, no one here understood.

But Chauvelin was at the end of his patience. He seized the scrap of paper and tore it savagely into innumerable little pieces.

"Enough of this futility," he said, and brought his clenched fist down with a crash on the table. "The English spies have been facetious, that is all. We do them too much honour by attaching importance to this senseless, childish verse. Lieutenant Godet," he went on, once more addressing the accused, "you are dismissed, under the conditions I told you of just now. When next we meet face to face, you will either be the lucky man who has helped to lay these impudent English adventurers by the heel, or you will stand before me arraigned for treason and preparing for death. Now you can go."

Without another word Godet turned on his heel and went out of the room. Past the guard at the door, he went with head erect, and with a firm step he walked the whole length of the corridor. But there was one moment when in the vestibule he found himself alone. Unwatched. At any rate he thought so. So he paused and looked over his shoulder in the direction of the room where he had just spent an uncomfortable two hours. He paused and raising his fist, he shook it at the unseen presence of the man who had so terrorized him, and whom he hated because of the terror which he inspired.

"With a bit of luck," he muttered through his teeth, "we shall be even yet, you and I, mon ami Chauvelin."

Then once more with a firm step he walked out of the Town Hall.

Chapter 18

It was on the following day that the coche from Sisteron was due to arrive at Orange, and Lieutenant Godet, his mind set on the one purpose, to find a clue to his mysterious adventure with the English spies, hied him to the posting-inn which is situated in the Rue de la République.

At noon the coche, covered with dust, unloaded its wearied passengers; a farmer and his son come to negotiate a sale of stock; the wife of Citizen Henriot, the lawyer, home from her annual visit to her mother; two or three skilled artisans from the country, come to seek their fortune in town, and so on; and finally there descended from the coche two women, one of whom carried a small bundle, while the other — well! at sight of the other Citizen Lieutenant Godet uttered such a cry of surprise and of excitement that the crowd around him thought that here was a poor soldier who had taken leave of his senses.

The woman who had caused Lieutenant Godet thus to lose his self-control, was a perfectly self-possessed young woman wrapped in a cloak and hood from beneath which peeped strands of golden curls that vied in colour with the ripe corn of the Dauphiné, and eyes bluer than the sky that spread over Orange on this exquisite midday in May. The older woman who accompanied her appeared travel-stained, weary and cross; not so this beautiful girl, who tripped lightly from the coche towards the parlour of the posting-inn and with a little air of triumph and encouragement called gaily to her companion:

“The end of our journey, my Louise! And now to find Bibi!”

Even in these days of advanced democracy which in Orange had of late reached its apogee, the shattering of ancient manners and customs had not got to the stage where a beautiful woman would not command the attention and services of impressionable males, to the exclusion of others less favoured. And thus it came to pass that while the other weary and travel-stained passengers were left to look after themselves and their bits of luggage, and to wait their turn until such time as the servants of the inn were pleased to get them refreshments, the landlord himself, a florid man in shirt sleeves and baize apron, bustled obsequiously around Fleurette and Louise, offering wine bread and advice, polishing the chairs on which they were invited to sit, and generally placing himself and his house at the disposal of this attractive customer.

Fleurette took all these attentions as a matter of course. She was accustomed to being the centre of attraction at Lou Mas or in the house of M'sieu' and Ma'ame Colombe, and although her trust in the good-will of men had received one or two somewhat rude shocks of late, she still retained that self-possession and gentle air of mingled modesty and graciousness which is the attribute of every pretty, unspoilt woman. She asked for a room where she and her companion might tidy their kerchiefs and caps, and use their precious piece of scented soap, and she felt so triumphant and so elated that when she found herself in the privacy of that room she took poor old Louise by the waist and twirled her round and around in a mad dance.

“We are in Orange, Louise darling!” she cried. “We are here! here! here! and in less than an hour we shall have found Bibi will have commanded Amédé to be set free! Just think of it, Louise,” she went on more seriously, “four whole days since he was arrested! Poor, poor Amédé, under a horrible accusation of a sin which he never committed! What he must have suffered! What he must have thought of me who knew the truth and did not at once set to work to obtain his freedom...”

Gradually her tone became more and more dull, all the excitement died out of it. She saw Amédé in prison, with irons round his wrists and ankles, or else standing before stern judges who condemned him to a terrible punishment, because he held his tongue, and would not accuse the real delinquent, who was none other than she, Fleurette. She sighed, and her eyes now were full of tears, while old Louise, stolidly, and with much grumbling, got some water and proceeded to wash her face and hands and to tidy her dress.

“Come, child,” she said drily after a while, “we'll go down now and get something to eat.”

She had never ceased to protest against the madness of this adventure, prophesying every kind of calamity for them both: but Fleurette with the quiet obstinacy of the habitually meek had persisted. She had begun by wheedling the money out of Louise, then obtained the passes for places in the coche. Once on the way, it would of course have been ridiculous to turn tail and go back, and Louise, led unconsciously by a force of will stronger than her own, had found herself meekly acquiescing in all the arrangements which Fleurette made on the way. As a matter of fact she had not ceased to marvel at the child. Here was this young thing, who had never travelled in a coche before, who had never in her life been further than Serres and Sisteron, calmly undertaking a three days' journey, sleeping and eating in strange inns, and arriving at her destination unscathed. There certainly was a miracle in all this good luck, for old Louise had heard many a tale of what terrible adventures usually befell unprotected females upon the high-roads. What she did not realize was that the miracle merely consisted in the fact that in these outlying corners of beautiful France, in Dauphiné and in Provence, there was still plenty of the good old kindly stock left, some of the chivalry, the warmth of heart, the bonhomie, which all the tyranny and the cruelty perpetrated in the great cities had not contrived to kill; and that there was something in Fleurette's beauty, her simplicity as well as her determination, which brought forth that chivalry and bonhomie and helped her to win through.

When the two women returned to the parlour, where hot milk and country bread awaited them, they were met by a young soldier, who very politely and deferentially claimed acquaintance with them.

“You would not remember me, citizeness,” he said, more particularly addressing Fleurette, “but I and some very weary soldiers under my command are deeply indebted to you for your kindness to us, when, like a good Samaritan, you gave us food and drink, on the bridge near your home. Do you remember?”

He looked very bedraggled and out-at-elbows, but frank and kind. Fleurette raised shy, blue eyes up at his, and gave a little gasp of recognition. She well remembered the soldier. She remembered how sorry she had been for them all, in their shabby clothes and stockingless feet, weary and thirsty, and how she had sent Adèle out to them with food and drink. She also remembered, though she would not remind him of that, that he had been very curt and uncivil with her, had made a sneering remark when she told him that she was Citizen Armand's daughter, and also that the men under his command had been positively cruel to a poor inoffensive old man whom she afterwards befriended.

However, for the moment, she was perhaps conscious of a slight feeling of relief at sight of a familiar face; she had seen nothing but strangers ever since she left Laragne four days ago. So when the soldier, still speaking quite deferentially, reiterated his: “Do you

remember?" she replied simply: "Of course I do, citizen lieutenant." Which goes to prove that Fleurette had learned a great deal in the past three days, and the word "citizen" now came quite glibly to her tongue.

Lieutenant Godet had told her his name, told her that he was a native of Orange and was home on leave for a few days.

"A real piece of luck," he went on lightly, "seeing that perhaps I might be of service to you."

The two women sat down at the table and he helped to wait on them, brought them bread and cheese and a jug of hot milk, and hustled the maid of the inn if the latter appeared to Louise, talked of his own journey, and inquired after her adventures. Louise, despite her innate suspicion of soldiers, gradually unbent to him. The warm food further put her into a good temper, and presently the three of them were conversing in the most amicable manner.

When the meal had been duly paid for, the soldier once more offered his services. Could he pilot the citizenesses through the town?

"Well yes, you can," Louise said resolutely, "we want to find M'sieu' Armand."

"Citizen Armand," Fleurette broke in, "my father. I think you know him, citizen lieutenant."

"Know him?" he exclaimed, "of course I know Armand. Who does not know Citizen Armand in Orange?"

"Then he is here now?" Fleurette cried eagerly.

"Of a surety he is."

"You know where he lodges?"

"Every one in Orange knows where Citizen Armand lodges."

"Then you can take me to him?"

"At your service, citizeness."

"Now?"

"When you wish."

With a little cry of delight Fleurette gathered up her cloak.

"Let us go," she said simply.

Louise sighing, but stolid, followed meekly. The thought that she would soon relinquish her wayward charge into the keeping of M'sieu' Armand was a comforting one; Fleurette was tripping it gaily beside the soldier, but the latter's dirty clothes and bedraggled appearance still filled old Louise with mistrust.

They crossed the river by the old bridge and then trudged along the dusty streets to a great open place, now called Place de la République. The soldier led the way across the square to a tall stone building, flanked by a square tower, to which a flight of steps gave access. He seemed to know his way about. At the top of the steps a couple of soldiers in somewhat tidier uniforms than his own, were on guard. They stood in what Louise, who had old-fashioned notions as to the behaviour of soldiers on duty, put down as a slouchy and disrespectful attitude. When Lieutenant Godet walked past them they did not salute. This want of respect of the soldier for his officer was another manifestation, it seems, of Equality and Fraternity. Louise, with her nose in the air, sailed past in the wake of Godet and Fleurette.

After crossing a wide vestibule and turning on the right into a long paved corridor, Lieutenant Godet came to a halt before a door which bore the legend: "Committee of Public Safety, Section III." Beside the door another soldier, also in very shabby uniform, stood leaning upon his bayonet. Fleurette, overawed by the vastness and silence of the place, gazed with vague terror at this man who without uttering a word had put his bayonet athwart the door and held it there, barring the way, motionless as a statue. Lieutenant Godet then spoke to him:

"The citizeness," he said, "is the daughter of Citizen Chauvelin. She desires to speak with him!"

The daughter of Citizen Chauvelin? What did the man mean? Fleurette, puzzled and frowning, pulled him by the sleeve. She was the daughter of Citizen Armand: she'd never heard the name of Chauvelin before. Nevertheless the soldier on guard lowered his bayonet. Godet pushed open the door and the next moment Fleurette found herself facing a large desk which was covered with papers, and behind which Bibi was sitting, writing. A voice said loudly:

"Citizen Chauvelin, here's your daughter come to see you."

Whereupon Bibi raised his head and looked at her, staring as if he had seen a ghost.

Forgetting everything save the joy of seeing chéri Bibi at last, Fleurette gave a glad little cry, ran round the table, and came to halt on her knees beside Bibi's chair, with her arms round his neck.

She felt so glad, so glad that she was ready to cry.

"Bibi," she said softly, whispering in his ear, "chéri Bibi, are you not glad to see me?"

Chapter 19

At sight of Fleurette, Chauvelin had stared as if he had seen a ghost. He did not trust his eyes: they were obviously playing him a trick. It was only a second or two later that he realized it was indeed the child, come, Heaven only knew why or how, but here in this awful city where treachery, hatred and cruelty were holding sway under his own command.

Half-dazed, he yielded to the caresses of this one being the whole wide world whom his tigerish heart had ever loved. His arms closed round her beloved form, whose sweet breath as of thyme and violets filled his soul with joy. Then, looking up, he saw Louise standing there: silent, stolid, mutely accusing, and he asked roughly:

"How the hell did you both get here?"

Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"By the coche," she said, "from Sisteron."

"I know," he rejoined. "But why did you come?"

"Ask her," Louise replied curtly. "She would come. I could not let her travel alone."

Bibi's two hands were clasped round Fleurette's head, his fingers were buried in her hair: he pressed that dearly-beloved head closer and closer to his breast; joy at sight of her had already given place to terror. What was the child doing here? How and why had she come? He had kept her so completely aloof from real life, that it seemed to him that some awful cataclysm must have occurred over in that peaceful home in Dauphiné, else she were not here.

His pale, restless eyes searched Louise's impassive face:

"Who brought you here?" he reiterated roughly.

"An officer in a draggle-tailed uniform," Louise replied, still speaking curtly, whilst with a glance that was distinctly hostile her eyes swept round the room. "I thought," she added, "that he followed us into the room."

"What was he like?"

She described him as closely as she could, and then added: "I don't remember his name."

She too had heard the name "Chauvelin" spoken by the soldier and for a moment had pondered. Marvelled. In her downright peasant mind vague doubts, doubts that were eighteen years old now, turned to more definite suspicions. She knew well enough that some kind of mystery hung around the personality of Fleurette's father; she knew for instance that he was really a wealthy and high-born gentleman; but eighteen years ago, in the days of the old régime, the fact that a high-born gentleman chose to hide a love-romance from the eyes of his equally high-born friends was not an infrequent occurrence. If at any time during the past eighteen years she had learned that M'sieu' Armand was really a great Duke or Prince or Ambassador, she would have been neither surprised nor suspicious. But Chauvelin!!! For the past three years whenever rumours of cruelty or ruthless persecution of innocent men and women had penetrated to these distant corners of Dauphiné or Provence, the name of Armand Chauvelin had stood out as the protagonist of these terrible tragedies; people spoke of Danton the lion of the revolution, and also of Marat its tiger, of Robespierre and of Chauvelin.

Chauvelin!!!

And he, meeting her glance, understood what went on in her mind. As to this he was indifferent. What Louise thought of him was less than nothing. It was the child that mattered now: the child who clung to him quivering with excitement. The terror in his heart grew in intensity: it gripped him till he felt physically sick. The mad dogs of hatred and cruelty, which he himself had helped to unchain, seemed to be snarling at him and threatening his Fleurette. With a hand that trembled visibly, he stroked the pretty golden hair.

"Now, little one," he said, steadying his voice as much as he could, "are you going to tell me why you've come?"

Fleurette struggled to her feet. Self-possessed she stood before her father and said firmly:

"Chéri Bibi, I came in order to right a great wrong. I believe that you are strong and powerful and that you will help me to see justice done. That is why I came to you."

He frowned, more puzzled than before, angered with himself for being so dull-witted, for not making a guess at what had brought the child along. His mind just before she came had been so completely absorbed in the latest adventure of his arch-enemy the Scarlet Pimpernel, that the presence of Fleurette, here and now, had been for him like a sudden stunning blow on the head. He felt dazed and stupid: unable to turn his thoughts into this fresh channel.

"Fleurette, my darling," he pleaded, "try and tell me more clearly. I don't understand. What do you mean by righting a wrong? What wrong?"

"Why," she replied simply, "the arrest of M'sieu' Amédé for a crime which he did not commit."

"You knew M'sieu' Amédé had been arrested?" she insisted.

Yes, he knew that. The mock arrest of young Colombe was one of the tricks played on that fool Godet by those impudent English spies. But what had Fleurette's presence here to do with that?

She was trying to explain.

"Then you know, chéri Bibi," she was saying in that sweet, eager way of hers, "that some valuables belonging to Madame over at the château were found in the shed behind M'sieu' Colombe's shop?"

Yes, he knew that too. But what had she...?

"And that the soldiers accused M'sieu' Amédé of having stolen them?"

A sigh of relief escaped him. He was beginning to understand. Nothing to worry about apparently. Indeed he might have guessed. The child had come to plead for that young fool Amédé, and —

"And what I had come to tell you, chéri Bibi," she went on glibly, "is that it is not Amédé who stole the things belonging to Madame."

She paused for a second or two. What she was about to say required courage: and how Bibi would take it she did not know. But Fleurette had come all the way from Lou Mas, had journeyed three days, so that Bibi might right a great wrong, as only he could do,

and, once more sinking on her knees beside her father's chair, she added in a clear voice, rendered somewhat shrill with excitement:

"I stole the valuables out of Madame's room, chéri Bibi."

With a hoarse cry he clapped his hand against her mouth. My God, if some one had heard! The guard outside, or one of these innumerable spies whom he himself had set in motion, and whose ears were trained to penetrate through the most solid walls.

His pale eyes in which now lurked a kind of vague terror, wandered furtively round the room, whilst Louise, equally horrified and frightened, exclaimed almost involuntarily:

"The child is mad, M'sieu', do not listen to her."

Fleurette alone remained self-possessed: she was still on her knees, but at Bibi's rough gesture she had fallen back, steadying herself with one hand against the floor. Slowly, noiselessly, Chauvelin had risen and tiptoed across the room, Louise, wide-eyed and scared, following his every movement. They were furtive like those of a cat on the prowl, and his face was the colour of ashes. He went to the door and abruptly pulled it open. Outside the soldier on guard was quietly chatting with Lieutenant Godet; at sight of Citizen Chauvelin they stood at attention and saluted.

"Go and tell Captain Moisson over at the barracks," Chauvelin said curtly, addressing Godet, "that I shall want to see him here at two o'clock."

"Very good, citizen."

Godet saluted again and turned on his heel. Chauvelin looked at him closely, but his face was expressionless. He watched him for a moment or two, as he, Godet, strode along the corridor. Then he closed the door and went back to his seat behind the table.

He had made an almost superhuman effort to regain his composure. He wanted to hear more, and did not want to scare the child. The sight of Godet standing outside the door talking to the man on guard, had made him physically sick, raised that same terror in his heart which his presence and his glance were wont to raise in others. The expression of his face must at one moment have been absolutely terrifying for Fleurette could hardly bear to look at him; but when he sat down again his face was just like a mask, waxen and grey. He turned to her, and rested his elbow on the table, shading his eyes with his long, thin hand. And Fleurette felt how dreadful it must be for him to think that his daughter was a thief.

So before he had time to ask her any questions she embarked on glib explanations.

"You must not think, chéri Bibi," she said, "that I stole those things for a bad motive. I did it because—"

She checked herself, and went on after a second or two:

"You remember, chéri Bibi, that evening at the château when we met, you and I, by the stable door?"

Yes, he remembered. "But speak softly, child! these walls have ears!"

"I had taken the things out of Madame's room then," Fleurette continued, speaking in an agitated whisper, "and hidden them under my shawl." She gave a nervous little laugh: "Oh! I was terrified, I can tell you," she said, "that you would notice."

He had his nerves under control by now. His mind, keen, active, was concentrated on her story, his indomitable will was slowly mastering his terror. What had he to fear? Godet was out of the way, and the child's whispers could not be heard outside these four walls. If only that fool Louise did not look so scared: the sight of her face, open-mouthed and with big, round eyes, got on his nerves. He tried not to look her way. While his glance was fixed on Fleurette he felt that he could think of her, scheme for her and above all protect her — he, so important in the councils of State. So powerful. He could shield her even against the consequences of her own folly.

Of course, he must make light of the whole affair. Oh! above all make light of it. The child was silly, wilful and ignorant, but he would know how to protect her, and how to make her hold her tongue. Louise was a fool, but she was safe and these walls were solid, there was really no cause for this insane terror which had turned him giddy and faint, and at first paralysed his brain.

So he forced his quaking voice into tones of gentle banter, forced himself to smile, to tweak her cheek and to look gaily, almost incredulously into her eyes.

"Allons, allons," he said lightly, "what story is this? My little Fleurette taking things that belong to others? I won't believe it."

"Only pour le bon motif, chéri Bibi," she insisted; "because you see the soldiers were at the château, and they were ruining and stealing everything they could lay their hands on...And also because—"

Once more she checked herself, loath to give away that one cherished little secret: The mysterious voice at which perhaps Bibi would scoff. But she did tell Bibi how with the precious burden under her shawl she had hurried homewards until, fearing that she would be overtaken by the soldiers on the road, she had sought refuge in the widow Tronchet's cottage. She told him how she had watched him riding past, heading towards Lou Mas, and how she had become scared lest, if he spent the night at home, he would find out what it was that she was keeping so carefully hidden underneath her shawl.

And then she told him how she had thought of M'sieu' Amédé and has asked Adèle to tell him to meet her outside the widow's cottage, and how she had entrusted him with the precious treasure and he had undertaken to hide it in the shed outside his father's shop. But how it came to pass that those other soldiers, who were as magnificently dressed as anything Fleurette had seen in all her life, how they had come to suspect M'sieu' Amédé of the theft, she could not conjecture. All she knew was that M'sieu' Amédé was innocent and that he must be proclaimed innocent at once. At once.

"I stole the things, Bibi," she concluded, "not for a bad motive, I swear, but I did steal them and gave them to M'sieu' Amédé to keep. If anyone is to be punished, then it must be I, not he."

She was sitting on her heels, and looking up boldly, and with a little wifely air at her father. Her dear little hands were resting on her knees. She looked adorable. Chauvelin mutely put out his arms and she snuggled into them, pressing her cheek against his breast with a nervous little gesture, twiddling one of the buttons of his coat.

Old Louise, sitting at the far end of the room, had listened, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, to the tale. Her furrowed face was a mirror of all the different expressions with which Chauvelin regarded her from time to time. Terror and slow reassurance. "If that is all, then I can deal with it!" he seemed to be telling her now, when it was all over, and he knew the worst. He held the child very close to him, and there was a certain nervous terror still lurking in his eyes as he buried his face in the soft waves of her hair.

"Bibi chéri," Fleurette insisted, "I must find those who are going to sit in judgement on M'sieu' Amédé. And you will help me find them, won't you? I must tell them the truth. Mustn't I?"

"You shall, child, you shall," he babbled incoherently. He was trying to steady his voice, so as not to let her know how scared he had been.

"When Adèle told us the next morning about the soldiers having found Madame's valuables and arrested M'sieu' Amédé, I knew at once that you would help me to put everything right. So Louise and I just started then and there, as I thought we would find you in Sisteron."

"The child told me nothing," Louise protested in answer to a mute challenge from Chauvelin. "I only thought she wanted to see you in order to plead for young Colombe."

"There is no need," he said steadily, "for me or anyone to plead for him. Amédé Colombe is a free man at this hour."

Fleurette's little cry of rapture gave him a short, sharp pang of jealousy.

"Do you love him so much as all that, little one?" he asked almost involuntarily.

She blushed, and without replying hung her head. For a second or two he debated within himself whether he would tell her the whole truth, then came to the conclusion that on the whole it would be best that she should know. Doubtless she would hear the story, anyhow, from others and so he told it her just as he had had it the day before from Lieutenant Godet. The magnificent soldiers who had come that morning into Larange were not real soldiers of the revolutionary army, they were a band of English spies whose chief was known throughout France as the Scarlet Pimpernel: a cynical, impudent adventurer whose business it was to incite French men and women to desert their country in the hour of her greatest need, and who doubtless would incite Amédé Colombe to treachery and desertion. It was that chief, no doubt, who had spied on Fleurette and seen her that night hand over Madame's valuables to Amédé Colombe. He had taken this means of obtaining possession of the valuables, as well as of the persons of the ci-devant Frontenac and Amédé. Both men and money he would use against France, for the English were great enemies of this glorious revolution, the friends of all the aristos and tyrants whom the people were determined to wipe off the face of the earth.

Wide-eyed and dumb, Fleurette listened to him. After the first moment of intense joy, when she heard that Amédé was safe, there had come a sense of exultation that the mysterious voice which had urged her to find Madame's valuables had spoken with a purpose and that that purpose was now accomplished. Monsieur, Madame and Mademoiselle had all been saved by what she believed was a supernatural agency — whatever Bibi might say. No man who was a mere spy and an enemy of France could have accomplished all that this mysterious being had done, from the moment when disguised as a faggot-carrier he had commanded her to look after Madame's valuables, until the hour when clad in a magnificent uniform, daring and fearless, he had found such glorious means of saving Amédé and M'sieu de Frontenac too, from prison and perhaps death.

And after the joy and the exultation there had crept into Fleurette's heart a feeling of awe and dread for the father who apparently she had never really known until this hour. She had only known him as kind, indulgent, loving — loving in a kind of fierce way at times, snarling like a wild cat if she thwarted him — but always indulgent and always secretive. Now he seemed to lay his soul bare before her. His love of France, of that revolution which apparently he had helped to make. His hatred of those whom he called traitors and enemies of France, the aristocrats, the men who owned land and property, who had ancestors and family pride, and then the English who were the real enemies, who worked against the people, against democracy, and against liberty, who had harboured every traitor that plotted against France. Bibi hated them all and Fleurette felt awed and chilled thus to hear him speak. He, who was so gentle with her always, now spoke as if he approved of all the cruelty perpetrated against those who did not think as he did, and whom he hated with such passionate intensity.

Instinctively, and she hoped imperceptibly, she recoiled from him when he once more tried to clasp her in his arms. This man with the pale eyes and the cruel sneer was not the Bibi she loved. He was just a man whom she feared. All she wanted now was to get away, to get back to Lou Mas. Since Amédé was safe, why should she stay any more in this awful place where even Bibi seemed like a stranger?

Louise now was standing near her, and Bibi was giving Louise some peremptory orders:

"You will go back now to the Chat Noir," he said, "the inn where you were this morning. There you will wait quietly until I come to fetch you. We will get on the way as early as we can, so as to get to Vaison before dark."

"Vaison?" Louise asked, perplexed. "But the coche..."

"We are not travelling by the public coche," Bibi broke in impatiently. "My private calèche will take us as far as Lou Mas, and I'll not leave you till I've seen you safely home."

"A calèche!" Louise exclaimed. "Holy Virgin!"

"Silence, woman," Bibi cried with an oath. "There is no Holy Virgin now."

Well! of course, Bibi had said that sort of thing before now, but never in such a rough, almost savage tone. Slowly Fleurette struggled to her feet. All of a sudden she was feeling very, very tired. For four whole days excitement and anxiety had kept her up; but now excitement had died down and dull reaction had set in. A sense of unreality came over her: the voice of Bibi giving all sorts of instructions to Louise came to her muffled as if through a thick veil. All that she knew — and this was comforting — was that soon they would all be starting for home: not in a crowded, jostling old coche, but in a calèche. What a wonderful man Bibi was: so grand and powerful and rich, that he had a calèche of his own and could come and go as he pleased. She remembered how deferential the soldiers had been to him that night at the château, and even now her eyes fastened on the beautiful tricolour sash which he wore, the visible sign of his influence and power.

When Bibi finally took her in his arms and kissed her as affectionately, as tenderly as was his wont, she swayed a little when he released her and the things in the room started to go round and round before her eyes. Louise put her strong arm round her and Fleurette heard her say: "Leave her to me, she'll be all right!" She felt herself being led out of the room, past the sentry at the door, and then along a corridor.

When she felt the soft, spring air strike her in the face she felt revived, and walked steadily beside Louise as far as the inn.

Chapter 20

Bibi's orders to Louise had been to go back to the inn and there to wait until he came in his calèche to take them home to Lous Mas. And the two women, ready for the journey home, so tired that only excitement kept them from breaking down, waited for him patiently in the parlour downstairs.

The travelers who had arrived in the early morning by the old coche, had all disappeared by now, some had found accommodation at the Chat Noir, others had gone to their homes or to friends in the city; the hour for dinner was not yet, and the personnel of the inn was busy in the kitchen.

The place was deserted and silent; the room self hot and stuffy. The air was heavy with the mingled odour of dust, sale grease and boiled food. Up on the wall a large white-faced clock tricked with noisy monotony, and against the small window-pane a lazy fly kept up an intermittent buzz. Now and again from a remote part of the house came the sound of a human voice or the barking of a dog, or the rattling of pots and pans.

Louise, sitting in a large, old-fashioned armchair by the side of the great heart, had closed her eyes. The monotonous ticking of the clock, the buzzing of the fly, the heat and the silence lulled her to sleep. Fleurette, on a straight-backed chair, sat wide awake, unable to keep her eyes closed even for a few minutes, although they ached terribly and she was very, very tired. But there was so much to keep her brain busy. In the past four days more exiting events had been crowded into her life than in all the eighteen years that law behind her. And round and round they went — these events — beginning with the first sight of the squad of soldiers marching down the high road and coming to a halt on the bridge, until the happy moment when Bibi had assured her that M'sieu Amédé was safe and free, under the protection of that mysterious personage whom Bibi called an impudent spy and enemy of France but whom she, Fleurette, believed to be an agent of the bon Dieu Himself.

It seemed a part of her confused thoughts, presently, when she saw the door of the parlour slowly open and the kind soldier who had conducted her to Bibi standing in the doorway. He cast a quick glance all over the room, and as Fleurette was obviously on the point of uttering a cry of surprise, he put up a warning finger to his lips and then beckoned her to come. She rose, eager as well as mystified, and once more he made a gesture of warning, pointing to Louise and then raising a finger to his lips. A warning it was to make no noise, and not to waken Louise. Fleurette tiptoed across the room to him.

"Your father sent me round," he said in a whisper. He beckoned her to come outside. She cast a last look at Louise who was obviously peacefully asleep, and then slipped out past him into the street.

"There is something your father forgot to say to you," the soldier said as soon as she had closed the door behind Fleurette. "But he told me not to bring the old woman along, and so as she was asleep—"

"But if she wakes and finds me gone — ?" Fleurette rejoined, and turned to go back to the inn. "I must just tell her—"

Immediately he seized hold of her hand.

"Your father," he said, "told me to bring you along as quickly as I could. You know how impatient he is. It is but a step to the Hôtel de Ville. We'll be there and back before the old woman wakes."

No one knew better than Fleurette how impatient Bibi could be. If he said anything, it had to be done at once. At once. So, without further protest, she followed the kind soldier down the narrow street. A few minutes later she was back in the Hôtel de Ville, outside the door which bore the legend: "Committee of Public Safety, Section III." The same soldier in the shabby uniform was lounging, bayonet in hand, outside the door, but at sight of Lieutenant Godet he stood up at attention and made no attempt this time to bar the way. Godet pushed the door open and at a sign from him Fleurette stepped into the room. Of course she expected to see Bibi sitting as before behind the table, alone, busy writing.

Bibi certainly was there, she saw that at a glance, also that at sight of her he jumped to his feet with an expression on his face, far, far more terrible than when she had told him that it was she who had stolen Madame's valuables. But Bibi was not alone. To right and left of him two men were sitting dressed very much like he was himself and wearing the same kind of tricolour sash round their waist. There was a moment of tense silence while Fleurette, a little scared, but not really frightened, stepped further into the room. She could not take her eyes off Bibi, whose dear face had become the colour of lead. He raised his hand and passed it across his forehead. He seemed as if he wanted to speak, yet could not articulate a sound. After a second or two he looked down first at the man on his right, and then at the one on his left, then back again at her, and over her head at Lieutenant Godet.

It was Fleurette who first broke the silence.

"What is it, father?" she said. "You sent for me?"

She did not call him Bibi just then; he seemed so very, very unlike Bibi.

But all he said was:

"What — is the meaning of — of this?" and the words seemed to come through his lips with a terrible effort.

"It means, Citizen Chauvelin, that I am trying to do my duty, and redeeming my faults of negligence and incompetence, for which you passed such severe strictures on me yesterday."

The voice was that of Lieutenant Godet. Fleurette could not see him because he stood immediately behind her, but she recognized the voice, even though it was no longer amiable and almost servile as it had been earlier in the day. It had, in fact, the same tone in it which Fleurette had so deeply resented that day upon the bridge when first she had told him that she was Citizen Armand's daughter.

"You ordered me," Godet went on deliberately, "to go into the highways and the by-ways, and you gave me full power to arrest any man, woman or child whom I suspected of connivance with the enemies of France. This I have done. I have cause to suspect this woman of such connivance, and in accordance with your instructions I have brought her before you on a charge of treason."

Whereupon the man sitting on the right of Bibi nodded approvingly and said:

"If indeed you have cause to suspect this woman, citizen lieutenant, you did well to arrest her."

And the man on Bibi's left asked: "Who is this woman, citizen lieutenant?"

Then only did Bibi appear to find his voice, and it came through his lips just as if someone held him by the throat and were trying to choke him before he had time to speak.

"My daughter," was all he said.

As a matter of fact Fleurette did not understand that something terrible had occurred, she could see well enough, but for the moment the fact that she was in any way involved had not reached her inner consciousness. She did not realize that when Lieutenant Godet spoke of having arrested a woman, he was referring to her. Thinking that she was probably in the way amongst these seriously and busy men, she asked timidly:

"Shall I go, father?" whereat the man on the left gave a short, dry laugh.

"Not just yet, citizeness," he said, "we shall have to ask you one or two questions before we let you go."

"Citizen Pochart," Bibi now rejoined somewhat more steadily, "there is obviously some grave error here on the part of the citizen lieutenant and..."

"Grave error," Pochart broke in with a sneer. "We have heard nothing in the way of witnesses or details of the accusation so far, so why should you think there is an error, Citizen Chauvelin?"

Fleurette could see the struggle on Bibi's face; she could see the great drops of moisture on his face, the swollen veins upon his temples; she saw his hands clenched one against the other, and how he passed his tongue once or twice over his lips. "The citizen lieutenant," he said with a marvelous assumption of calm, "has shown too much zeal. My daughter is as good a patriot as I am myself —"

"How do you know that, Citizen Chauvelin?" the other man asked, the one on the right of Bibi.

"Because she has led a modest and a sheltered life, Citizen Danou," Bibi replied firmly. "Knowing nothing of town life, nothing of intrigues or plots against the State."

"It is impossible," Pochart put in sententiously, "for any man to know what goes on in a woman's head. The soundest patriot may have a traitor for a wife — or else a daughter."

Bibi was obviously making a superhuman effort to control himself. No one knew better than Fleurette how violent could be his temper when he was thwarted, and here were these two men, not to mention Lieutenant Godet, taunting and contradicting him, and she could see the veins swelling upon his temples and his hands clenched until the knuckles shone like polished ivory under the skin.

"My daughter is not a traitor, Citizen Pochart," he said loudly and firmly.

"Lieutenant Godet says she is," Pochart retorted dryly.

"I challenge him to prove it."

"You forget, Citizen Chauvelin," Danou put in suavely, "that it is not for the citizen lieutenant to prove this woman guilty; rather it is for her to prove her innocence."

"The Law of the Suspect," Pochart added, "has been framed expressly to meet such cases as these."

The Law of the Suspect! Ye gods! He himself, Chauvelin, had in the National Assembly voted for its adoption.

"Are we not ordered instantly to arrest all persons who by their actions, their speaking, their writing or their connections have become suspect?" This from Danou who spoke slowly, unctuously, without a trace of spite or anger in his voice. And Pochart, more rough of tone, but equally conciliatory added:

"The Law tells us that if suspect of nothing else, a man, or a woman, or even a child, may be 'suspect of being suspect'. Is that not so, Citizen Chauvelin? Methinks you yourself had something to do with the framing of that law."

"It was aimed at traitors—"

"No! No! at the suspect—"

"My daughter—"

"Ah, ça, Citizen Chauvelin," here interposed Pochart with an expressive oath, "are you by any chance on the side of the traitors? What has the State to do with the fact that this woman is your daughter? A patriot has no relatives these days. He is a son of the State, a child of France, what? Her enemies are his enemies, his hatred of traitors should override every other sentiment."

"A patriot has no sentiment," Danou echoed suavely.

Chauvelin now looked like an animal at bay. Caught in net turning round and round, wildly, impotently; seeking an egress and only succeeding in getting more and more firmly enmeshed. But he kept himself under control nevertheless. He felt the eyes of those three men probing his soul. Exulting over his misery. Hatred all around him. Cruelty. Godet openly hostile, vengeful, with a grievance for his own humiliation; ready to hit back, to demand humiliation for humiliation, and terror for terror. Revenge! My God! who but a fiend could dream of such revenge. And the other two; that fool Danou and that brute Pochart! No actual hostility about them. Only envy: a mad desire to save their own skins, to purchase notoriety, advancement at any price — even at the price of innocent blood.

And as a wild beast turning and turning in the trap will pause from time to time and glare out into the open, which means all its life has stood for until now, so did Chauvelin, with soul enmeshed in vengeance and envy, pause a moment in his mad struggle for freedom. He paused and with wildly dilated eyes gazed upon a swift, accusing vision of all the innocent blood he himself had helped to shed. Those clenched hands of his, on which his gaze for one instant rested, fascinated, how many times had they signed the decree which had deprived a father of his son, a wife of her husband, a lover of his mistress. And through the meshes that tightened round him now, Chauvelin gazing into space saw before his eyes the awful word "Retribution" written in letters of fire and blood.

And seeing the writing on the wall, he felt an immense rage against these men who dared to taunt him, who dared to hit at him, through the one vulnerable spot in his armour of callousness and cruelty. How dared they stand up to him, these miserable creatures whose existence was of less account than that of a buzzing fly? And throwing back his head he gazed upon them all, one after the other, meeting their sneering glance with a bold challenge. How dared they defy him? Him, Chauvelin? The trusted friend of Robespierre, one of the makers of this glorious revolution; one of its most firm props? Now a representative of the National Convention on special mission? There stood the child, his daughter, his little Fleurette, silent, wide-eyed, obviously not fully aware of the terrible position in which she stood: and they dared to hit at her, to accuse her, without rhyme or reason, just in order to hit at him through her. It was Godet, of course, that vile, incompetent brute: savage and cruel like the fool he was: vengeful for the bad half-hour

he had been made to spend in this very room. He must have heard something of what the child had said. At one moment her sweet voice had risen to shrill tones. Oh! what a senseless, mad confession! and he had seized upon it so that he might hit back: have his revenge. But he could prove nothing. It would be one man's word against another, and he, Chauvelin, representative on special mission, with the ear of all the great men up in Paris, would see to it, that his word carried all the weight. He would deny everything, swear that Godet lied. His was the power, he was more influential, more unscrupulous than most.

If only the child held her tongue! She would if she was assured that her Amédée was in no danger. How thankful he, Chauvelin, was that he had told her the truth this morning. He couldn't bear to look at her just at this moment, she looking so innocent, so unconscious of danger, but nevertheless he tried to convey to her with eyes and lips the warning to hold her tongue. Chauvelin had been silent for quite a little while; the others thought they had cowed him. In their hearts Pochart and Danou were not a little afraid of him. A representative on special mission had unlimited power and this Chauvelin was always a crouching beast, ready to snarl and to spring, and they knew well enough how influential he was. But here was a double chance to show their zeal, and to get even with the man whom they had always feared. As for Godet, he had obviously staked everything on this throw. His life was anyhow forfeit; Chauvelin's threats yesterday had left him no loophole for hope. But here was revenge to his hand, and at worst a powerful lever wherewith to force his enemy's hand.

Chauvelin's mind had been so busily at work that for a while he lost consciousness of these men. After his rage against them he forgot their very presence. Nothing mattered — no one — except the child, and his own power to save her. Through that semi — consciousness he heard only vague words. Snatches of phrases that passed rapidly between those two men and Godet. "Proofs—" "Witnesses—" And then Danou's voice, soft and unctuous as usual:

"Of course the more solid your proofs—"

And Pochart's, rough and determined:

"Why should we not hear that witness now?"

Godet replied lightly: "I have her here. Perhaps it would be best."

It seemed as if they were determined to ignore him, Chauvelin; to shut him out of their counsels. He was so silent, so self-absorbed; they thought that he was cowed, and dared not raise his voice in defense of his daughter. They were all alike these men — these masters of France as they liked to be called — overbearing, arrogant, always menacing, until you hit back, when all the starch would go out of them, and they would cringe, or else become surly and defiant like any aristo.

"Go and fetch your witness, citizen lieutenant," Pochart said in the end.

Then Chauvelin woke, like a tiger out of his sleep.

"What?" he queried abruptly, "what is this?"

"A witness, citizen representative," came in unctuous tones from Danou. "It will be more satisfactory in this case — the Law does not demand witnesses — suspicion is enough — but—"

"Out of deference to your position, citizen," Pochart broke in with a short laugh. "Go and fetch your witness, Citizen Godet," he added dryly. Chauvelin brought his clenched fist down with a crash on the table. "I'll not allow you—" he began in thundering accents, and met Danou's sneering, inquiring gaze.

"Allow what, citizen representative?" Pochart asked roughly.

"Refuse to hear witnesses? On what grounds?" Danou put in in smooth, velvety accents.

Godet said nothing. It was not for him to speak; but he met Chauvelin's glance just then, and almost drained his cup of revenge to its dreg.

"No one," now put in Pochart significantly, "has more respect for family ties than I have. But I am first of all a patriot, and then only a family man. I happen to be a single man, but if I were married and discovered my wife to be a traitor to the State, and an enemy of the people, I would with my own hand adjust the guillotine which would end such a worthless and miserable life."

"Now you, Citizen Chauvelin," Danou said, taking up his colleague's point, "are doing your daughter no good by trying to shield her from punishment if she be guilty."

"You would not dare—"

"Dare what, Citizen Chauvelin? Act up to the principles which you yourself have helped to promulgate in France? Indeed we dare! We dare strike at the enemies of the State whoever they may be. That woman," he added, indicating Fleurette, "is suspect; the Law of the Suspect gives our Committee power to arrest her. If she be proved innocent, she shall go free. If she be guilty, you, by defending her, cannot save her and do but condemn yourself."

And that was true! No one knew it better than Chauvelin, who but a few weeks ago in Paris had helped Merlin and Douai to frame that abominable Law. The heavy hand of Retribution was indeed upon him. The voice of the innocent had cried out for Vengeance before the Lord and Nemesis, hourglass in hand, had stalked him now at last. All that was left him at this moment, out of all that arrogance which had imposed his personality upon the masters of France, made them forget his failures and fear him even in the hour of humiliation, was just a shred of pride, which enabled him to hide his misery and his despair behind a mask of impassiveness. He even succeeded in hiding his hatred and contempt of these three curs who were yapping at his heels. And when Pochart for the third time reiterated his order to Godet to go and fetch his witness, Chauvelin made no further protest. He rose from the table and went round to where Fleurette was standing, silent, bewildered, with great tears, like those of a frightened child, running down her cheeks. He held his hands tightly clenched behind his back, to prevent himself from seizing her in his arms and raining kisses upon her golden hair, letting those sneering men see how terribly he had been hit and how he suffered. Godet had gone out of the room to fetch the witness — what witness? and the other two were sitting at the table, whispering together. Chauvelin through compressed lips murmured in Fleurette's ears:

"Try not to be frightened, little one! Don't let them see you are frightened. They dare not do anything to you."

"I am not frightened, chéri Bibi," she replied, smiling at him through her tears.

"And you will hold your tongue, Fleurette," he urged under his breath, "about what you told me this morning. Swear to me that you will."

“If M’sieu Amédée is safe—”

“I swear to you on my soul, that we do not even know where he is.”

“In that case, Bibi chéri..”

Quick footsteps outside the door. A challenge from the man on guard. The opening of the door. Then Godet’s voice saying loudly:

“The witness, citizens.”

Chauvelin looked up and saw beside Godet woman with a shawl wrapped round her head; she came forward boldly, then threw back her shawl. Chauvelin uttered a savage oath, whilst Fleurette gasped in amazement:

“Adèle!” she cried.

Chapter 21

It seemed almost the worst moment of this awful day to see Adèle — Adèle! — standing there, like some sly and furtive rodent, snapping at the hand that had fed and tended it. The lessons taught by all these makers of a revolution which was going to be a millennium for the people, and inaugurate an era of brotherly love, had been well learnt by all those who had nothing to lose and everything to gain by venality, by treachery and the blackest of ingratitude. And Chauvelin himself had been head master in that school, where this wretched little bastard had learned how to hate; she was the personification of that proletariat which he had striven to exalt, of the low, mean mind that never tries to rise and only strives to drag down others to the level of its own crass ignorance. Adèle was only a product of that levelling process which was going to make of mankind one great family, full of love for one another, of pity for the weak and contempt of the strong, and which had only succeeded in arousing a universal hatred in every breast and envy of everything that was lofty and pure. The levelling process according to its early protagonists — idealists for the most part — was destined to eliminate all tyranny and to protect those who were too weak to protect themselves; but all it had succeeded in doing was to substitute one tyranny for another; it had not levelled the classes, made one man as good as another; what it had done was to hurl down from his self-imposed altitude of nobility or of virtue every man who was unwilling to step down of his own accord. It had set every beggar on horseback who was a beggar by nature, and kept him there by virtue of ruthlessness and of cruelty. None but a fellow-beggar, more ruthless perhaps, and more cruel, could unseat him. Death was the only real leveller, and this glorious revolution had become a fraternity of death. The Republic of France must march to Liberty over corpses, one of its makers had said, and another added sententiously that no traitor failed to return; except the dead. Terror reigned now everywhere, marching hand in hand with its hand-maiden the guillotine.

The time was no longer far distant when this titanic battle between all these beggars on horseback would reach its fiercest struggle ere it ended in a gigantic cataclysm, and when the gorge of all these tigers would rise at last in face of the daily hecatombs which had made a graveyard of the fair lands of France. But that time was not yet. Men like Chauvelin had seen visions of Retribution like fiery Fata Morgana pointing to the inevitable hour, but the Godets, the Danous, the Pocharts and the Adèles knew not the signs of the times. They had learnt their lesson and were applying it for their own advancement and above all for their own safety, destroying all that was destructible, taking Earth and Heaven to witness that they whose lives had been nought but misery and hunger would henceforth sweep off the face of the earth all those who had only known ease and comfort, who had practised virtue, and never known despair.

And Adèle whose hatred of Fleurette had thriven all these years as in a forcing-house, had learnt her lesson well. Fleurette to her meant tyranny, the tyranny of riches over her poverty, of good food over her empty stomach, of neat kirtle over her rags. Poverty and Hunger had enchained her to Fleurette's wheel, had forced her to wash dishes, to scrub floors, to sleep on a straw pallet. But now her turn had come. Her very misery had put it in her power to drag Fleurette down to her own level. She had imbibed the principles of this glorious revolution until she felt herself to be one of its prophets. She had spied on Fleurette and denounced her because she had seen at last a way to satisfy her hatred and to lull her envy to rest.

She had plenty to say when questioned by Pochart and Danou; proud of the fact that for over two years now she had supplied the Sisteron section of the Committee of Public Safety with information about the district. She had known the *ci-devant* Frontenacs and it was — she was proud to state — chiefly owing to her that they came to be suspected of treason. They used to turn one of their rooms into a chapel on Sundays and a *ci-devant* priest, who was not Constitutional, performed there rites and ceremonies with wafer and cup which had long since been decreed treasonable against the State. Adèle had been forced by the *ci-devant* Frontenac women to be present at these treasonable practices; she had even been made to scrub the floor of that temple of superstition and to remove the dust from the so-called altar. Her patriotic soul had risen in revolt and she had journeyed to Sisteron one day when she was free and placed the matter before the Committee of Public Safety who had commended her for her zeal.

"Adèle!" Fleurette exclaimed involuntarily. "How could you? Indeed *le bon Dieu* will punish you for this."

At which remark everybody laughed — except Chauvelin, who smothered a groan. Oh! the child! the senseless, foolish, adorable child! She seemed wilfully to run her darling head into the noose. Adèle turned a sneering glance on Fleurette.

"I'll chance a punishment from your *bon Dieu*," she said flippantly, "for the joy of seeing you punished by the Revolutionary Tribunal."

And strange to say Chauvelin did not strike her, though she stood quite near him, with only the width of the table between her and his avenging hand. But he did not strike her, even though his muscles ached with the desire to strike her on the mouth. It was pride that held him back. How those men would have laughed to see him lose his self-control with this wench who was only emitting principles that he indirectly had taught her. Retribution! Nemesis at every turn.

And now Adèle embarked upon her main story. Her spying on Fleurette. Long, long had she suspected her, with her airs of virtue and bunches of forget-me-nots in front of a statue representing a *ci-devant* saint. "Saint Antoine de Padoue priez pour nous!" every time she placed a fresh bunch of flowers before that statue. Bah! such superstition made a patriot's gorge rise with disgust. But Adèle had said nothing. Not for a long time. She knew that citizen Chauvelin — he was known as Armand over at Laragne — was a great patriot and an intimate friend of Citizen Robespierre over in Paris. So Adèle decided to bide her time, and she did. Until that evening when at last the Frontenacs were arrested and the château ransacked. That night Adèle had had her suspicions aroused by Fleurette's strange airs of mystery, her desire to meet Citizen Colombe alone on a dark night. Fleurette had always been such a *Sainte Nitouche* that Adèle guessed that something serious was in the wind.

Like a zealous patriot she had watched, and she had seen Fleurette hand over a casket and a wallet to the young Colombe. She had heard the two talk over the question of hiding these things in a shed behind Citizen Colombe's shop, and finally seen them locked in each other's arms, which confirmed her in the idea that Fleurette, with all her appearances of virtue, was a woman guilty of moral turpitude.

And still Chauvelin did not strike her on the mouth. He fell to wondering what crime he had committed that was heinous enough to deserve this punishment of impotence.

The others listened for the most part in silence. Only occasionally did one or the other break into a chuckle. Nom de nom, what an event! Representative Chauvelin! the man of almost arrogant integrity, sent to Orange to spy and report on the workings of the Committee of Public Safety, one of the makers of the Terror, a man whose every glance was a menace, and every word a threat of death! When Adele had finished speaking, Pochart winked across at Danou. Here was a find that would exalt them both, bring their names to the notice of the great men over in Paris. All sorts of possibilities of reward and advancement loomed largely before them. And Pochart rubbed his large, coarse hands contentedly together and Danou poured himself out a glass of water and drank it down. All these possibilities had made him thirsty.

Fleurette too was silent. For the first time in her life she had come in contact with human passions of which hitherto she had not even dreamed. Adèle, the little maid of all work, with the coarse hands, the red elbows and narrow rat-like face, who wore Fleurette's cast-off clothes and worn-out shoes, had suddenly become an un-understandable and terrifying enigma. Fleurette felt as if she could not utter a sound, that any word of protest which she might raise would choke her. The girl's words, her bitter accusations, spoken in an even monotone, gave her a feeling as of an icy-cold grip upon her heart. Surrounded from her cradle onwards with love and care, this first glimpse of spite and hatred paralysed her. Only when Adèle spoke of M'sieur Amédé and of that kiss which had tokened him to Fleurette, that delicious kiss under the almond-trees, only then did a hot blush rise to her cheeks, and tears of shame gather in her eyes.

Beyond that she felt like an automaton, while these four creatures who hated her and who hated Bibi were discussing her fate. Bibi was strangely silent and motionless although from time to time the others referred a question or two to him in which case he replied in monosyllables. There was much talk of "detention" and of "revolutionary tribunal." Of course Fleurette did not understand what these meant. Since Bibi appeared so indifferent, she supposed that nothing very serious was going to happen to her.

Presently Adèle and Godet were dismissed. Adèle swept past her with her shawl once more over her head hiding the expression of her face. Her eyes did not meet Fleurette's as she glided past like a little rat seeking its burrow. Perhaps she was ashamed. Godet was ordered to send two men along — they would be wanted to take the citoyenne to the house of detention. Godet gave the salute and followed Adèle out of the room.

Fleurette's feet were aching. She had been standing quite still for over half an hour, and was longing to sit down. Bibi's eyes were upon her now, and his long thin hands were fidgeting nervously with a paper-knife. At one time he clutched it so tightly, and half raised it, as if he meant to strike one or the other of his colleagues. Fleurette tired and a little dizzy, only caught snatches of their conversation. At one time Bibi said very quietly:

"You are very bold, Citizen Danou, to measure your influence against mine."

And the man on Bibi's left retorted very suavely:

"If I have transgressed, citizen representative, I'll answer for it."

"You will," Bibi rejoined, and his words came through his thin, compressed lips, harsh and dry like blows from a wooden mallet against a metal plate. "And with your head, probably."

"Is that a threat, Citizen Chauvelin?" the other asked with a sneer.

"You may take it so if you wish."

The man on Chauvelin's right, Citizen Pochart, had in the meanwhile been writing assiduously on a large piece of paper. Now he pushed the paper in front of Chauvelin and said curtly:

"Will you sign this, citizen representative?"

"What is it?" Chauvelin asked.

"Order for the provisional arrest of one Fleur Chauvelin, suspect of treasonable connections with the enemies of France, pending her appearance before the Revolutionary Tribunal."

Chauvelin raised the paper and read it through carefully. His hand that held the paper was perfectly steady.

"Your signature," Pochart went on, and held out the quill pen invitingly toward Chauvelin, "as Representative of the National Convention on special mission is necessary on this order."

"You may take that as a threat too, Citizen Chauvelin," Danou added with a sly wink directed at his colleague Pochart, "for if you do not sign, there's others that will, and sign one too that will be even more unpleasant for you."

Chauvelin took the pen, and the two men, Pochart and Danou, sprawling over the table, had the satisfaction of seeing him sign the order for the arrest of his own child — her death probably. Not the first time either that something of the sort had occurred, that a man put his seal on the death-warrant of his kith or kin. Had not Philippe d'Orléans voted for the death of his cousin the King? Chauvelin signed with a steady hand, his lips tightly pressed one against the other. They should not see, these fiends, what torture he was enduring; they should not see that at this moment he felt just like a brute beast writhing in agony. Not that he had abandoned hope with regard to Fleurette. He felt confident that he could turn the order into a mere scrap of paper presently, and see those two snarling dogs fawning at his feet once more, kicked with the toe of his boot and howling in vain for mercy.

It was only from humiliation that, conscious of his power, he had decided that silence and outward acquiescence were his best policy. He had certain cards up his sleeve which the others wot not of, but he could only play them if he succeeded in lulling them into a sense of security by his obvious indifference. Fortunately his reputation stood him in good stead. He was known by his enemies to be so ruthless and so unscrupulous — such an ardent patriot, declared his friends — that his indifference now where his own daughter was concerned, did not even astonish Pochart and Danou. It was just like Citizen Chauvelin to send his own daughter to the guillotine. And this estimate of his character helped him to play the rôle that would mean life to Fleurette.

So there he sat for a few minutes, perfectly impassive, his face a mask, his hand perfectly steady, perusing the paper, and then deliberately drawing his pen through one of the words and substituting another.

"We'll say the house of Caristie," he said drily, "the other is already full."

Pochart shrugged his shoulders. Why not concede this point? It was so fine to have the citizen representative under one's thumb. What matter if his daughter was thrust into one prison rather than another?

"Is the guard there?" Danou asked. "We have plenty of business to see to. This one has lasted quite long enough."

"There is still that report from Avignon to look through," Pochart added. "It will need your attention, citizen representative."

"I'll be with you in one moment," Chauvelin replied calmly.

He rose and went to the door. Opened it. Yes! there was the guard sent hither by Godet, two men to escort his Fleurette to the house of Caristie the architect, now transformed into a house of detention. Chauvelin did not even wince at sight of them. He closed the door quietly and then approached Fleurette. He took hold of her hand and drew her to the furthest corner of the room, out of earshot.

"You are not frightened, little one?" he whispered to her.

"No, Bibi chéri," she replied simply. "If you tell me not to be."

"There is nothing to be frightened at, Fleurette. These brutes wish you ill; but—"

"Why should they?"

"But I can protect you."

"I know you can, chéri Bibi."

"And you won't see that wretch Adèle again."

"I wonder why she hates me! I thought we were friends."

"There are no friends these days, little one," he said almost involuntarily. "Only enemies or the indifferent — They are the least dangerous."

"There are those whom we love."

"You are thinking of Amédé?"

"And of you, chéri Bibi."

"You believed me, didn't you, little one when I told you that young Colombe is safely out of harm's way?"

"Yes," she said, "I believed you."

"Then you will hold your tongue about — about what you know?"

"I promise you, chéri Bibi. But I won't allow Amédé to suffer for what I did," she added with that determined little air of hers, which Chauvelin had learned to dread.

"He won't. He can't," he declared whilst an exclamation of impatience at her obstinacy almost escaped him. "Have I not told you —"

"We are waiting, Citizen Chauvelin," Danou's unctuous voice broke in at this point. "As you are near the door, perhaps you will call the guard."

He did. And stood silently by, while Fleurette was ordered to follow the men. She obeyed, after a last, smiling glance at Bibi. No! she was not frightened; she felt sure that he could protect her, and so long as M'sieur Amédé was safe —

The last words she said before she finally passed through the door were:

"Poor old Louise! You'll tell her, won't you, Bibi, not to fret for me? and tell her to send me my crochet work if she can. I shall have plenty of time on my hands to get on with it."

Chapter 22

At four o'clock that afternoon the President of the Revolutionary Tribunal sitting at Orange received a summons to accompany Citizen Chauvelin, Representative of the National Convention on special mission, to Paris, there to present his last reports of the cases tried by him since the beginning of the year.

Public Prosecutor Isnard received the same summons; he hastened all in a flurry to the Hôtel de Ville to find Citizen Chauvelin.

"What does it all mean, citizen?" he asked.

Chauvelin shrugged his shoulders.

"I know not," he replied. "The summons came by courier an hour ago. I have my calèche here. We could start at daybreak tomorrow and be in Valence before dark. The next day should see us in Lyons, and the middle of next week in Paris."

"Can you not conjecture —?"

Once more Chauvelin shrugged.

"One never knows," he said. "There must have come some denunciation. You and the President have your enemies, no doubt, as every one else."

Public Prosecutor Isnard's flabby cheeks were the colour of lead.

"I have always done my duty," he stammered.

"No doubt, no doubt," Chauvelin responded lightly.

"You'll be able to justify yourself, I feel sure, citizen. But you know what these summons are. Impossible to argue — or to disobey."

"Yes, I know that. But the business here—"

"What of it?"

"Our prisons are full. A batch of twenty at least should be tried every day. I have forty or fifty indictments ready now and we can keep the guillotine busy for at least a week. All that business will be at a standstill."

"You will have to work twice as hard on your return, citizen," Chauvelin retorted drily.

The arrival of the President of the Tribunal put a temporary stop to the colloquy. He too was flurried and not a little scared. He knew about these summonses that would come from time to time from Paris without any warning. They meant reprimands of a certainty. Perhaps worse. One never knows with leaders of the Government over there. One moment they would shout: "Strike! Strike!" at the top of their voices, "let not the guillotine be idle!" They would frame laws to expedite the extermination of all the traitors and suspected traitors. The next, they would draw back, accuse you of over-zeal, over-cruelty, what not? See how Carrier had suffered! He had been sent to Nantes to purge the city of aristos and bourgeois and calotins; he had done his best; invented a new way of disposing of ninety priests all at once by the mere unmooring of a flat-bottomed craft, laden with those traitors, and on a given signal opening all the hatches and sinking the whole craft with her cargo.

Well! Carrier had done that. He had effectually purged Nantes of traitors. Nevertheless he was summoned to Paris, and his head rolled into the basket on the Place de la République, just as if he had been an aristo. Look at Danton, and at — but why recall it all? Anyhow, what a week of desperate anxiety this would be until Paris was reached. President Legrange had thoughts of flight, of taking refuge in the mountains as others had done. But Public Prosecutor Isnard dissuaded him. What was the good of running away? One always got caught, and then it would of a certainty be the guillotine. Chauvelin too was for immediate obedience.

"I too am summoned," he said. "We are all in the same boat. As for the business here, it will have to wait until our return."

Public Prosecutor Isnard could not suppress a taunt.

"There's your daughter, Citizen Chauvelin," he said. "We were going to make quick work of her. I had her indictment all ready. In fact the chief witness — a wench who looks like an anæmic rat — was in my study when your summons came."

"I know, I know," Chauvelin said with perfect indifference. "Well! all that can wait till our return."

After which he added lightly: "At daybreak, citizens, my calèche will be ready outside the Chat Noir. I await you then and advise you to eat a good breakfast. Our first stop will be at Montélimar, where we can get relays. In the meanwhile I bid you adieu. I still have much work to see to before the close of day."

For the first time this day Chauvelin heaved a genuine sigh of satisfaction when the two men had departed. His first manoeuvre had succeeded admirably. With the President of the Tribunal and the Public Prosecutor out of the way, the business of the State would be at a standstill in Orange and he would have at least three weeks of freedom before him in which to act. He had planned this summons, and intended to accompany the two men as far as Lyons. There he would find some pretext for sending them on their way without him, whilst he returned in secret to Orange. That was his plan, a risky one at best; but in less than three weeks he would either have found a way of getting Fleurette out of the clutches of these fiends, or he and she would both be dead. Strangely enough at this moment he fell to wondering what his arch-enemy, the Scarlet Pimpernel, would do under the circumstances and he longed for the possession of that same imaginative brain, that marvellous resource and unbounded pluck which had foiled him, Chauvelin, at every turn.

The Scarlet Pimpernel! If that bold adventurer were to know that his bitterest foe was now probing the lowest depths of sorrow, that this cruel Nemesis had overtaken him at last, how he would exult, how jeer at his enemy. And of the many pin-pricks which Chauvelin had had to endure to-day, he felt that none could hurt him so deeply as the thought that the Scarlet Pimpernel might hear of his trouble and hold jubilee over his soul agony.

Chapter 23

That first night the party slept at Valence in the Maison de Têtes, the quaint old house with its unique façade which stands to this day in the Grand' Rue, and which in that year of grace 1794 had been requisitioned by the Drôme section of the Committee of Public Safety for its offices. A concierge with wife and family were in charge of the house and there were two or three additional rooms in it which were often placed at the disposal of any official personage who happened to be passing through Valence. Chauvelin had often stayed there on his way through to Paris and was a familiar figure to the concierge and his family; there was no difficulty whatever in finding accommodation for himself and his two friends in the Maison des Têtes for the night. Calèche and horses, together with driver and postilion, were put up in the stables at the back of the house.

Night had overtaken the party when some five kilometres outside Valence, and this last part of the way had to be done at walking pace. Thus it was nearly ten o'clock before the calèche drew up in the Grand' Rue outside the Maison des Têtes, and the concierge, hurrying to greet the unexpected and important guest, had regretfully to inform him that neither the President nor any of the officials were here to welcome him as they had already gone to their respective homes. But the rooms were there, quite ready, at the disposal of Citizen Chauvelin and his friends, and supper would be got immediately for them. The three travellers stepping out of the calèche were more than thankful to find shelter and food at this hour. Already at sunset the sky had been threatening; great banks of cloud came rolling up from the south-west, driven by tearing gusts of wind; by night-time a few heavy drops were falling, presaging the coming storm. No sooner were the travellers installed in the dining-hall in front of an excellent supper, than the storm broke in all its fury. It was accompanied by torrential rain and a tearing wind. Such wild weather during the month of May was almost unparalleled in the valley of the Rhône, so the concierge hastened to explain to the two strangers who accompanied Chauvelin. The night was very dark too, the very weather in fact for foot-pads and malefactors who, alas! infested the countryside more than ever now.

"What would you do?" the man added with a shrug, "so many are starving these days; they get their existence as best they can. Honesty is no longer the best policy."

And then he caught Citizen Chauvelin's eye, and nervously clearing his throat, began to talk of something else. It was not prudent to grumble at anything, to make any remark that might be constructed into criticism of the present tyrants of France.

Supper drew to an end, mostly in silence. Chauvelin was never of a loquacious turn of mind, and neither of the other two were in a mood to talk. After a curt good night the latter returned to the room which had been assigned to them. Chauvelin before doing the same gave orders to his driver and postilion to have the calèche at the door by seven o'clock on the following morning. Then he too went to bed, there to toss ceaselessly through the endless hours of wakefulness, his mind tortured with thoughts of his darling Fleurette, wondering how she would bear this first night in prison, the propinquity, the want of privacy, the lewd talk, perhaps, or coarse jests of some of her room-mates. It was only in the early dawn that, wearied at last in body and mind, he was able to close his eyes and snatch an hour or two's sleep.

When the concierge brought him a steaming mug of wine in the early morning, his first inquiry was after the calèche. Was it being got ready?

Yes! the concierge had seen the driver and postilion at work this hour past. Everything would doubtless be ready for a start by seven o'clock. It was now half-past six. Chauvelin drank the hot wine eagerly; his sleepless night and all his anxiety had produced a racking headache and a state of mental inertia difficult to combat. Slightly refreshed by the drink, he proceeded to dress. While he did so he heard a great clatter of horses; hoofs striking the cobblestones, a good deal of shouting and rattling of wheels. His windows gave on the Grand' Rue, and looking out he expected presently to see the calèche being driven round from the stable-yard at the back. But nothing came. He felt nervy and impatient, hoping that nothing would go wrong. Angered too with himself for feeling so flat on this very morning when he would need all his brain-power to carry his scheme successfully to the end.

He intended journeying with the two men as far as Lyons, and there to invent a pretext for separating from them, sending them on to Paris by the stagecoach, and then returning quietly and secretly to Orange alone. Already he was fully dressed and ready to go downstairs. He heard the clock in the tower of St. Apollinaire, striking seven. A minute or two later the concierge, wide-eyed and babbling incoherently, came bursting into the room.

"Citizen! Citizen! Nom de nom, quel malheur!" These ejaculations were followed by a string of lamentations, and a confused narrative of some untoward event out of which the only intelligible words that struck clearly on Chauvelin's ears were: "Calèche," and "cursed malefactors!" His questions remained unanswered; the man continuing to lament and to curse alternately.

Finally bereft of all patience, Chauvelin seized him by the shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"If you don't speak clearly, man," he said roughly, "I'll lay my stick across your shoulders."

The man fell on his knees and swore it was not his fault.

"I could not be in two places at once, citizen," he lamented. "I was looking after your two friends and my wife—"

Chauvelin raised his stick. "What is it that was not your fault?" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"That your calèche has been stolen, citizen!"

"What?"

"It is those cursed brigands! They have infested the town these past—"

The words died in his throat in a loud cry of pain. Chauvelin had brought his stick crashing upon his back.

"It was not my fault, citizen," he reiterated protesting. "I could not be in two places at once—"

But Chauvelin no longer stayed to listen. Picking up his hat and coat, he hastened downstairs, to be met in the corridor by the concierge's wife and two sons all incoherent and lamenting. The whole house by now was astir. Public Prosecutor Isnard came clattering down the stairs followed by President Legrange, both in more or less hastily completed toilette. And thus the whole party with Chauvelin en tête proceeded at full speed to the stable yard, where the yawning coach-house and empty stalls told their mute tale. Of calèche, horses, driver or postilion not a sign. The stable-man, an old fellow, and his aid, a very young lad, were busy at the moment

telling the amazing story to a small crowd of gaffers and market-women who had pushed their way into the yard from the back and were listening, open-mouthed, to a tale of turpitude and effrontery, unparalleled in the annals of Valence.

At sight of Chauvelin and his tricolour sash, the crowd of gaffers and women respectfully made way for him, and he, seizing the old stable-man by the shoulder, commanded him to tell him clearly and briefly just what had happened. Thus it was that at last he was put in possession of the facts that touched him so nearly. It seems that his own driver and postilion, up betimes, had got the calèche and horses quite ready and standing in the middle of the yard. They had in fact just put the horses to, and the postilion and driver were standing by the calèche door drinking a last mug of wine, when the from the narrow lane which connects the yard with the rue Latour at the back, a band composed of four ruffians came rushing in. Before he, the stable-man, could as much as wink an eyelid, three of these ruffians had seized the driver and postilion round their middle and thrust them into the calèche, followed them in, banged the coach door to, whilst the fourth climbed up to the box with the rapidity of a monkey, gathered up the reins and drove away.

In the meanwhile the lad who had been at work in the stables and heard the clatter came running out. Stable-man and lad then ran to the lane and out into the rue Latour, only to see the calèche rattling away at breakneck speed. They shouted and strained their lungs to attract the notice of passers-by, and they did attract their attention, but before they could explain what had happened, the calèche was well out of sight. The lad ran as fast as he could to the nearest poste de gendarmerie, but before the gendarmes could get to horse, no doubt those ruffians would have got well away with their booty.

That was in substance the story to which Chauvelin had to listen, and through which he was forced to keep his temper in check. As soon as the stable-man had finished speaking, the lad had put in his own comments, whilst the gaffers and gossips started arguing, talking, conjecturing, giving advice, suggesting, lamenting. Oh! above all lamenting! That the high roads were not safe, every one knew that to his cost. Masked highway robbers held up coaches, attacked pedestrians, robbed and pillaged the countryside. That the streets of Valence were not safe, was alas! only too true. The gendarmerie was either incompetent or venal, and lucky the man who possessed nothing that could be taken from him. But this outrage to-day in broad daylight surpassed anything that had been seen or heard before. A calèche and pair, pardieu! was not like a purse that could be hidden in one's waistcoat pocket. And so on, and so on, while Chauvelin, still silent and curbing his impatience, went back into the house, followed by his crestfallen friends and by the staff of the Maison de Têtes still lamenting and protesting their innocence and withal beginning to feel doubtful as to what the consequences might be to themselves of this untoward adventure.

The stable-lad was then sent back to the poste de gendarmerie, with orders from Citizen Representative Chauvelin that the chief officer in charge present himself immediately at the Maison des Têtes. Whilst waiting for this officer, Chauvelin, sitting in the small parlour, had a few moments' peace in which to co-ordinate his thoughts. The inertia which had weighed upon his spirits the first thing in the morning had been suddenly dissipated. Already his keen, imaginative brain had seized upon this catastrophe, and planned how to turn it to the furtherance of his scheme. And while his friends, no whit less voluble or more coherent than the concierge or his kind, were loudly lamenting: "What a misfortune, citizens! What bad luck!" and throwing up their arms in utter helplessness, Chauvelin broke in impatiently upon their wailings:

"We must make the best of it, citizens," he said, "I shall certainly be held up here a day or two, on this stupid business, but it certainly need not detain you. The stage-coach leaves for Lyons at half-past eight if I mistake not. As soon as my calèche is recovered, which I doubt not it will be in a couple of days, I'll follow you on. You in the meanwhile can proceed to Paris all the way by stage-coach. It will be perhaps not quite as comfortable as my calèche, but it will serve."

They demurred a little. The stagecoach would certainly not be as comfortable as Citizen Chauvelin's luxurious calèche, and perhaps a day or two's delay would not be very serious.

"It would be fatal," Chauvelin said emphatically. Orders from Paris such as they had received must be obeyed in the least possible delay, a couple of days idling in Valence, when a stage-coach was available, would certainly be put down to pusillanimity and want of zeal.

He could be eloquent when he liked, could Citizen Chauvelin, and on this occasion he was determined to gain his point — to send these two packing, post-haste, off to Paris, and leave himself free to return to Orange immediately. As to what would happen presently, when those two arrived in Paris and found that they had been hoaxed, that they had not been sent for, and would have to return biting the dust and chewing the cud of their wrath, as to that in truth, Chauvelin had not given a thought. To save his Fleurette, to get her away out of the country at the cost of his own life it need be, was all he thought about, and while the business of trying and condemning prisoners was at a standstill through the absence of these two men, there was a hundred to one chance that he could accomplish his purpose.

Therefore he put forth all his powers of persuasion — and they were great. He drew lurid pictures of what happened to those who were thought to be guilty of dilatoriness or want of zeal. So much so that he reduced President Legrange and Public Prosecutor Isnard — at no time very valiant heroes — to a state of abject fear, and half an hour later had the satisfaction of bidding them au revoir, in the yard of the posting-inn, they having found seats in the stage-coach to Lyons.

As soon as he had seen the last of them, he made haste to requisition a chaise and the only horses to be had in Valence, to take him forthwith to Orange.

As for his own calèche, he wished the foot-pads joy in its possession and cared less than nothing what became of his driver or his postilion.

Chapter 24

Could Citizen Chauvelin have seen his calèche and horses a couple of hours later on the road, he would perhaps not have been quite so complacent as to its fate. After rattling over the cobble-stones of Valence and tearing down the high road at maddening speed, it slackened a little for the hill, and worked its way slowly up through the small township of Livron. A quarter of a league or so further, it turned off at the cross-roads in the direction of Cest and after another half-hour came to a halt at that small cottage which still nestles to this day, with its tumble-down roof and vine-covered arbour, beside the celebrated Roman ruins at the foot of the hill, not far from the banks of the Drôme.

Three ruffians, grimy from the roots of their hair to their down-at-heel shoes, jumped out of the calèche, dragging after them in the open the driver and postilion lately in the employ of Citizen Chauvelin, Representative of the National Convention on special mission. Whilst thus journeying between Valence and Livron these two poor wretches had been securely pinioned with ropes, but they were not gagged, and they used the freedom left to their tongues, by uttering oaths and protests which appeared vastly to amuse their captors.

The fourth ruffian — for ruffian he was — despite the fact that he had donned a bourgeois' dress, the better to carry out his coup and pass unnoticed on the road, had in the meanwhile scrambled down from the box.

"Quite successful so far," he remarked lightly, speaking in English, and rubbing his hands, which were slender and long and firm, contentedly together.

"What shall we do with these?" one of his companions asked, laughing and pointing to the two woebegone prisoners, who had ceased to curse and to protest, chiefly owing to want of breath, but also through astonishment at finding themselves the victims of some kind of foreign brigands whose language they did not understand.

"Poor beggars!" the other said lightly. "We'll place them in front of an excellent breakfast and I'll warrant we need not as much as tie their legs to their chairs. Get them inside, Ffoulkes, will you, and I'll talk to them as soon as Tony and I have seen to the horses."

"You don't think the gendarmerie from Valence will be after us, Blakeney, do you?"

"Not they," Sir Percy replied. "They are very short of horses in these parts, and the best will, I doubt not, be requisitioned by my friend M. Chambertin for his own use. I wonder now," he added musing, "what he is after, taking those two ruffians with him to Paris; and whether his errand is sufficiently urgent to cause him to travel in the stage-coach, now that we have borrowed his calèche...."

He paused, slightly frowning, evidently a little puzzled.

"I wonder," he added, "if our friend in there can throw some light upon the matter."

After which Sir Percy Blakeney and Lord Anthony Dewhurst took the steaming horses out of the shafts, relieved them of their harness and gave them a good rub down, a drink and a feed, while Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Hastings went into the cottage and busied themselves with their prisoners.

My Lord Stowmaries was for the moment in charge of this untenanted cottage, which was a stronghold as well as a rallying place of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, as it lay perdu, off both the main and the secondary roads. He it was who had prepared food for his chief and his comrades with the assistance of one Amédé Colombe. The cottage consisted of four rooms; unsecurely sheltered against the weather by a cracked roof, and against damp by broken floors. There were a few very rare pieces of furniture in the place, abandoned there by the late owner and his family, worthy farmers whom the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had conveyed safely out of France when their loyal adherence to their exiled seigneurs had brought them under the ban of the Revolutionary Government.

In one of the rooms the two prisoners were busy for the moment pinching one another to see if they were really awake. After thinking that they were within sight of death at the hands of a band of malefactors, they found themselves sitting at a table in front of an excellent plate of soup, some bread and cheese and a very large mug of excellent wine, while the cords round their bodies had been removed. Anyway, a very pleasant dream. Leaving conjecture to take care of itself, they fell to on this welcome repast with a healthy appetite. The door which gave on the larger room had been left open, and through it the two men could see the band of malefactors falling to, just like themselves, in front of an excellent meal, laughing and talking in that same gibberish language which they did not understand.

"They don't look to me much like brigands," the driver remarked presently, speaking with his mouth full, "in spite of their dirty clothes."

"And that tall one," the postilion added thoughtfully, "he seems to be their captain. If you ask me I think he is an aristo."

"Or an English spy."

The other shook his head.

"Not he. English spies would have murdered us."

"Then what in the name of hell—"

He got no further, the postilion had gripped him by the arm.

"Nom de nom!" the postilion exclaimed; and expressed further amazement by a prolonged whistle. "If that is not Amédé Colombe."

"Qui ça Amédé Colombe?" the other asked.

"The son of the grocer over at Laragne. I know, I come from those parts. But what the hell is he doing here?"

Amédé Colombe sitting at the table with his wonderful new friends, caught the sound of his name, and gave an anxious start.

"Do not worry about them, my young friend," Sir Percy Blakeney said reassuringly. "Before they could do you any harm we shall be many leagues out of the way."

At which postilion and driver gazed at one another, more puzzled than ever before. Were the really dreaming, or had they actually heard that foreigner speaking their own language? — and perfectly. The driver was inclined to think that the wine which they had been drinking was potent enough to be the cause of the hallucination. Not that this deterred him from pouring himself out another mugful, and drinking it down with much smacking of the lips and sighs of contentment. It was such very excellent wine. Didn't his friend the postilion agree with him? Why of course, and the filling and refilling of the two mugs continued apace and at a great rate.

"They'll be blind in a few moments," Lord Anthony Dewhurst remarked, glancing over his shoulder at the two men.

And he was right in this surmise. In less than a quarter of an hour driver and postilion were blind to the world with arms stretched out across the table, their heads buried in the bend of their elbows, breathing stertorously.

"You are not eating my friend," my Lord Stowmaries remarked to Amédé Colombe, who in truth had been sitting, silent, self-absorbed, neither eating nor drinking.

"Friend, Amédé does not appreciate your cooking, old man," Blakeney put in lightly. "It is fairly bad, I confess. Is it not Monsieur Amédé?"

"It is excellent, milor'," the young man sighed, "but I ask you, how can I eat or drink when I am in such terrible anxiety?"

"We were just going to discuss the best way — and the quickest — of alleviating your anxiety, mon ami," Sir Percy rejoined, "all we were waiting for was for these two amiable gentlemen over there to become deaf temporarily as well as blind."

"It is not for myself that I am anxious, milor'," the young man said timidly. He was over shy of these wonderful men, who had led him from adventure to adventure, in a manner that had almost addled his poor brain. His unsophisticated mind was still vibrating with the excitement of the unforgettable hour, when throwing disguise aside these strangers had revealed themselves not as revolutionary soldiers at all, but as mysterious beings, whose actions had appeared to him to savour of the supernatural. It took him a long time to understand the situation. It seems that his being in possession of Madame de Frontenac's valuables was known to the girl Adèle who was nothing but a spy in the pay of the Committee of Public Safety. She had that night spied upon him and the girl he loved, seen the girl hand over the valuables to him, and revealed the fact to the Committee. Had these mysterious strangers not played the part of revolutionary soldiers and got him, Amédé, safely out of the way, before the real soldiers appeared upon the scene, he would at this moment be languishing in a prison at Sisteron or Orange preparatory to being sent either to the guillotine or for cannon-fodder on the frontier.

All this Amédé understood well enough, he cursed Adèle a thousand times in his heart for being such a snake in the grass. What he could not understand was why these strangers should take an interest in him and in his fate. When to his timid query on that subject their leader laughingly replied: "Sport! mon ami, the fun, the excitement nothing more philanthropic, I assure you, just sport!" he understood still less.

No wonder that to him, Amédé Colombe, the whole adventure had come as a manifestation of something supernatural. As for M. de Frontenac, his fellow-sufferer, on the other hand, he had apparently been prepared for that manifestation. It appeared that Madame and Mademoiselle had already been rescued from peril and taken to a place of safety, where presently M. de Frontenac would be able to join them, always through the instrumentality of these wonder-working strangers. The last thing M. de Frontenac had said to him, Amédé, when he took leave of him a couple of days ago, somewhere in the lonely mountain paths where the party had called a halt, was: "Trust these Englishmen Amédé, trust them with everything you hold dear. Look at me, had I not trusted them with my wife and daughter, I should have seen my dear ones first, and myself afterwards, facing the guillotine at this very hour!"

It was with these words ringing in his ears, that Amédé, sitting now amongst these men to whom he owed his life, had mustered up sufficient courage to reiterate more firmly: "It is not for myself I am anxious, milor'."

"I know that, mon ami," Sir Percy replied, "you are thinking of that brave little girl — Fleurette. Isn't that her name?"

"Yes, milor'," Amédé whispered timidly.

"Some of my friends and I are going straightway back to look after her now."

"And you will hurry, milor', you will hurry, will you not? Every day may be fatal for her."

"I think not," Blakeney said in that decisive way of his, which carried so much conviction. "You told me she was the daughter of a man high up in the councils of the revolutionary government."

"One Armand, milor'," Amédé continued. "Little is known of him in the neighbourhood, save that he is a widower and apparently has influence with the government."

"Fleurette is an only child?"

"Yes. She has lived at Lou Mas all her life."

"If her father has influence he can protect her for a time."

"For a time — yes! But — oh milor'!" the poor young man suddenly burst out with passionate vehemence, "if anything were to happen to Fleurette, I would curse you for having saved my life."

Blakeney smiled at the young man's eagerness.

"Listen, friend Amédé," he said lightly, "are you going to trust me and my friends?"

And Amédé, who remembered those last solemn words spoken by M. de Frontenac, looked into those lazy grey eyes, meeting that half earnest, half-humorous glance beneath the heavy lids, replied simply: "Yes, milor'!"

"And you will accord me what my friends accord so ungrudgingly, bless them, implicit obedience?"

Again Amédé replied simply: "Yes milor'!" And then he added! "What am I to do?"

"For the moment nothing," Sir Percy replied, "but remain here quietly and alone until you hear from me again. Can you do it?"

"If you command."

"You won't mind the loneliness?"

"I shall be thinking of Fleurette and trusting you."

"Come, that's brave!" Sir Percy concluded lightly. "You will find some provisions in the armoire in this room: but apart from that you will find your way every day down to the river, and turning to your right, you will walk along its bank till you come to a derelict shed hidden from view by two old walnut-trees. In a corner of the shed, beneath a pile of leaves, you will find something to comfort you, either a loaf of bread, or a piece of cheese, sometimes a jug of milk or a bottle of wine. Scanty fare probably, but it will suffice to keep the wolf from the door. Those who supply it are poor and risk much to do it. They owe my friends and me a debt which they pay in this fashion. Now are you prepared to live this life of a lonely anchorite while my friends and I return to Laragne and gather news of your Fleurette?"

"If I could only come with you, milor'!" Amédé sighed.

"Tush, man, what were the good of that?" Sir Percy retorted with a slight note of impatience in his pleasant voice. "You would only lead us all — and your Fleurette into trouble."

"But you will bring me news of her soon?" Amédé entreated with tears in his kind, innocent looking eyes.

"Either news of her — or Fleurette herself."

Amédé shook his head. "She would not leave her father," he said dolefully.

"Then she will be safe with him, until better times come along, which will be very soon, friend Amédé, you may take that from me. Another few months — very few — and the dragon's own teeth will be turned against itself. This anarchy cannot endure for ever, because all evil, friend Amédé, is by the grace of God Infinite."

He spoke these last words with unwonted earnestness, and simple Amédé Colombe looked up to him with awe as to a prophet standing there, magnificent in energy and strength, head thrown back, the lazy eyes beneath their heavy lids flashing with unquenchable inner fire. And suddenly he checked himself, laughter chased away earnestness, the eyes twinkled with merriment like those of a care-free schoolboy, rather than a seer.

"La!" he said lightly, "I verily believe we were waxing serious. No cause for that, eh, friend Amédé? My friends and I are off on a gay adventure. To take a message of love from you to a brave little girl who loves you, a shade better methinks, than she loves that mysterious father of hers. Write your love letter, my friend, but be sure and make it brief, and I'll deliver it myself in her own little hands. I saw her, that sweet wench of yours, no woman ever showed more pluck than she did when she went to seek Madame de Frontenac's valuables."

"You saw her, milor'!" Amédé exclaimed wide-eyed. "Mon Dieu! is there anything that you do not see?"

"There is, mon ami," Sir Percy replied gaily. "I have never seen your pretty Fleurette's mysterious father. He must be a fine man to keep the love of so sweet a daughter. So write your letter, my friend," he went on, and pointing to an oaken desk at the further end of the room on which were quill-pen, inkpot and sand, "and I promise you that I will deliver it, if only for the pleasure of having a squint at the mysterious owner of Lou Mas. Heigh-ho!" he added with a contented sigh, "but this promises to be fine sport. What say you, Ffoulkes, or you, Tony? We are going to put our heads into the wolf's jaws again, eh? Stowmaries, you, too, and Hastings. But we'll do it, and I promise you that the sight of pretty Fleurette will be a fitting compensation for some very unpleasant half hours we may have to go through. Now then, friend Amédé! your love missive, and two of you put the horses to, we'll have to make Montélimar by nightfall! there we'll either abandon the calèche, steal a couple of horses and cut across the hills to Sisteron, or keep to the calèche and the road as far as the neighbourhood of Orange, where much information can always be gleaned about the district. We'll make no plans now and trust to luck and chance. What?"

Lord Tony then pointed, smiling, to the driver and postilion still fast asleep in the adjoining room.

"What is to happen to those mudlarks?" he asked.

"We'll take them along, of course," Blakeney replied. "So thrust them into the bottom of the calèche, under the seat for choice, and those who sit inside can use them as footstools. Where we leave the calèche, there we leave them too, to find their way back to the bosom of their families in due course."

He looked so gay and so full of life and strength, so sure of himself, such pure joy in this new adventure radiated from his entire person, that some of that divine spark in him set Amédé Colombe's blood tingling through his veins. Anxiety, melancholy, doubt fell away from him at a glance from those lazy eyes now twinkling with joy, at sight of that firm mouth, ever softened by a smile; of those long, slender hands, delicate as a woman's, firm as those of a leader of men. Poor Amédé was almost happy at this moment, feeling that he was one with this band of heroes, that just by obedience and self-effacement, he could feel that he was one of them.

In cramped schoolboy hand, he wrote a brief, very brief little line to Fleurette, and told her how he adored her and longed for her nearness. He also told her that whatever else happened he implored her to trust the bearer of this note, who would be the means of bringing her back one day to the shelter of her Amédé's arms.

Less than an hour later he was all alone in the tumble-down cottage that nestled against the ruins of a former, long-since-dead civilisation. The late afternoon was soothing and balmy, the sky of a pale turquoise, clear and translucent, and as Amédé, standing somewhat forlorn at the cottage door, watching the narrow road over which the calèche had lumbered awhile ago, bearing away his mysterious new friends, the pale crescent of the moon appeared above the snow-capped crest of La Lance, and Amédé, remembering the old superstition, bowed solemnly nine times to the moon.

Chapter 25

What irked Fleurette most in her prison life was the monotony of it: the want of something to do. After she had cleaned out the room which she shared with ten others, and put herself and everything tidy, the day appeared interminably long. She did her crochet work while her supply of thread lasted; old Louise had been allowed to make up a bundle of some clothes for her, and in it she had also put the crochet work and a few hanks of thread, but a few days saw the end of this supply, after which there was nothing with which Fleurette could occupy her fingers. Some of her fellow prisoners had needles, cotton and thimbles, and presently Fleurette, always willing and always smiling, was asked to darn and mend their clothes. She was glad enough to do it, as a means of killing time.

They were a heterogeneous crowd these fellow-prisoners of hers, culled from every social grade from the great lady to the troll out of the street. Misfortune and the precariousness of existence had brought these usually warring elements closely together: friendships sprang up where in the past even a nod of recognition would have been grudged. The Comtesse de Mornas, who belonged to the highest aristocracy of Provence, would take her morning exercise with her arm round the waist of Eugénie Blanc, daughter of a second-hand clothes dealer of Orange. Hélène de Mornas's husband had been guillotined three months ago on some trumped-up charge or other, and Eugénie Blanc's father, accused of traffic with the enemy — whoever that enemy might be no one knew — had perished in that awful wholesale massacre perpetrated in Orange last month. Sorrow brought these two women together, as it did many others, and when Claire de Châtelard, obviously a woman of evil reputation, sought Fleurette's compassion with a tale of hunger, misery and arrest, that compassion was freely given, and the girl who had led such a sheltered life at Lou Mas, knowing nothing of temptation or of evil, had for daily companion after that, one Claire de Châtelard, the most notorious jade of Orange.

Thus the first few days went by. In the prison — it is architect Caristie's house with all the furniture turned out of it and the rooms left bare of everything save a few benches, a few paillasses, a table, a wash-hand basin or two — in the prison great puzzlement prevails. Hither-to every day, just before sunset, a captain of the guard with half a dozen men would enter the courtyard and standing there, would in a loud voice read out a list of names. That list was the Roll-call, the decrees of the Revolutionary Tribunal condemning so many to the guillotine on the morrow. And at all the windows of the house around the courtyard, heads would appear: men and women — yes! and children too — clutching their prison bars, and listening. Listening if their name be upon that list. And then a sigh of relief if that name was not called: another day's respite! another day in which to drag this miserable, precarious existence. As for the others, the ones whose names were read out in a loud voice by the captain of the guard, there was nothing for it but to clasp their loved ones, or mayhap only the newly-found friend, in their arms — for the last time. That same night they were transferred to the prison of the Hôtel de Ville, and in the morning the guillotine. Sometimes not that. Just driven like a herd to the slaughter: on the bridge or the Place de la République. And there the guns. And death pell-mell. Like cattle, with ne'er a grave nor a prayer.

That was how it had been before Fleurette's arrival. That cinder-wench Claire de Châtelard told her how it used to be. But Fleurette never saw anything of that. The very day after her arrival was marked by the non-appearance of the captain of the guard with his list. They all wondered, put their heads together, and for an hour or two after the usual time there was whispering, conjecturing going on. Respite for everybody: that was of course what it meant. But why? Had that awful Revolution really come to an end, as everybody had prophesied it would? Had all those tigers up in Paris really devoured one another, and was there no one left to carry on the infamy? Well! that was perhaps how it was. But no one knew anything. Not the warders. Not the prisoners. Not anybody. Inside these walls wherein news was wont to penetrate with extraordinary precision and rapidity, nothing was known. Nothing. Except that there was no list and that on the morrow the guillotine was idle.

This new departure from regular routine was accepted with the same stoicism as everything else. It was the stoicism of supreme helplessness, or rather of despair, and it had engendered in all these people, men and women, herded here together on the eve of death, a kind of levity which it is difficult for modern thought to understand. Death was so familiar to them, such a daily companion, that they had ceased to think of him with awe. Familiarity had bred contempt. And deriding Death, they turned him into ridicule. Made game of him, defied him to break their spirit. It was a species of madness born of intense horror and absolute despair. Fleurette at first felt sick and wretched at sight of these people — proud countesses and high-born seigneurs, as well as muckworms and jades — acting the guillotine, as they called it, in the great hall of Architect Caristie's house, which was assigned to them for recreation. She, poor little soul, had never learned to envisage death as anything but awesome for which the Holy Church was at pains to prepare doomed mankind with sacraments and prayers.

The first time she saw them all in their gruesome mummerly, she fled affrighted back to the dark, noisome room where she slept, and throwing herself on her miserable paillasse, she sobbed her little heart out with horror and grief, stuffed her fingers into her ears so as not to hear the voices and the laughter that came from the great hall. Here Claire de Châtelard found her an hour later, and I think this was the beginning of their friendship, for the wench found just the right words wherewith to console this ignorant little country mouse.

"Their one recreation," she urged. "They mean no irreverence. Just think of them face to face with death. Always. Deprived of every consolation: mocked, jeered at. This play-acting is only a blind to hide their own misery, the despair which they are too proud to display."

After a while Fleurette dried her tears. But she slept ill that night. Nightmares pursued her. Visions of that mock tribunal, with the mock prosecutor, and the mock culprit. And then the setting up of two chairs, and draping them with bits of crimson rags to represent the guillotine. Once or twice she sat up on her hard paillasse, hardly able to smother a scream which would have aroused her room-mates from their sleep. She had seen in retrospect one of the warders, who had helped in the acting of the gruesome play, dressed as Satan with horns and tail and entering the hall with a bound and a whoop. His rôle was to snatch the President of the Tribunal and the Prosecutor from their seats and to drag them away with him into everlasting fire, while a weird voice boomed the query: "What hour is it?" and another replied: "Eternity."

Poor little Fleurette! It was her first experience of life. And what an experience! Yet, it had only been one step from Lou Mas with its almond-trees and rippling mill-streams, with Bibi and old Louise, one step from there to this barrack of a house converted into a prison, with all its humiliating propinquities, and all its horrors. Her companions in misfortune were very kind to her. All of them. The

men as well as the women. Clair de Châtelard and the Comtesse de Mornas. They all seemed to understand her position, her helplessness, her ignorance. They were so kind! so kind! They admired her crochet-work, and talked to her of Laragne, or the snows of Pelvoux, or the almond-trees of the Dauphiné. They thanked her and kissed her when she offered to ply her needle for them: to mend their clothes or darn their stockings. Within a few days she became one of themselves. A younger sister in this family of the despairing. Within a week, or mayhap ten days, she had lost her sense of horror at their mummeries, could laugh at the antics of the mock Satan come to carry the mock judges off to hell. The only thing to which she could not get accustomed was the representation of the guillotine, the inverted chairs and the bits of red rags, the cords, the victim, the basket and the executioner. Oh! that executioner! He was terrible! Especially of late. The rôle, like that of Satan, had always been undertaken by one of the warders; rough fellows these, culled from the lowest scum of the city; men who delighted in all the physical and moral torture inflicted on the aristos under their charge, who would gloat over the sight of a father torn away from his children and led to the guillotine, who would regale the unfortunate prisoners with tales culled from the *Moniteur* of wholesale executions or brutal massacres. The idea of acting the part of executioner to the mock representations of the guillotine delighted a certain grim sense of humour which most Southerners possess. There was one man in particular, lately come to replace another who was sick, who threw himself into the gruesome rôle with zest. He would strip almost naked for the part, and then cover his face and his large body with a mixture of soot and charcoal and oil so that he looked like a huge negro, with gleaming teeth and long, lank hair, of a pale blond colour speckled with dirt.

Poor Fleurette could not bear to look at him, nor at the mock execution when one or other of her fellow-prisoners would allow himself to be tied to the mock guillotine, amidst the well-acted laughter and jeers of men and women who impersonated the awful rabble that was always to be found around the real guillotine. It was horrible, and Fleurette would run out into the corridor, or back to her miserable paillasse, anywhere where she could shut her ears to that gruesome mockery.

Unfortunately there came a day when the warder declared that an order had come through, that prisoners must remain together in the hall during the hour of recreation. He said it was so, and there was no one to contradict him. Of all the tyrants that had been set over their fellow-men, these days, none were more dreaded because more autocratic, than prison-warders. As far as prisoners knew, these tyrants' power over them was absolute. In any case they could, if contradicted or thwarted, make it ten thousand times worse than before for those who did not cringe. This order then had to be obeyed and Fleurette, cowering alone in a corner of the hall, kept her eyes tightly shut while the impish scene was being enacted.

Madame de Mornas, aristocrat, dignified, with her arm round Eugénie Blanc's waist, spoke to her very kindly.

"My dear," she said in her gentle, well-bred voice, "if we did not make a mockery of all these horrors we should brood over them, and some of us would go mad."

And Eugénie Blanc, the "old clo" dealer's daughter, added with a shrug: "You dear innocent! You have seen nothing of life as it is. You don't know what it is when memory sets to work and you see things — you see—" She gave a shudder and then a harsh laugh. "This at any rate takes one's mind off memory for a time."

Clair de Châtelard's sympathy was too sincere, though rather more grim: "We've all got to go through the real thing presently; the mockery of it now will make the reality to-morrow more endurable."

"We must practice to-day," M. de St. Luce, the great scientist said lightly, "our attitude of to-morrow."

That was the general tenor of every one's feelings upon the subject. Fleurette, touched by so much sympathy, tried to smile through her tears, and promised to school herself to the same philosophy. But as soon as all these kindly creatures had left her, in order to join, laughing, in the grim spectacle, she once more closed her eyes and sat in the dark corner, quite still, hoping that no one would notice her. But the laughter at one time was so loud, every one's mood so hilarious, that involuntary she opened her eyes and looked. The mock executioner had just completed his task. It seems he was complaining that Madame la Guillotine was still unsatisfied: she was putting out her arms, ready to embrace another lover. M. de Bollène — a minor poet well known in Provence — was declaiming some verses of his own composition, in praise of that promised embrace. The executioner's coal-black face shone like polished ebony in the flickering light of the tall candles that guttered in their sconces. Madame de Mornas, almost unrecognizable in ragged kirtle and with a crimson scarf tied round her head, was flourishing her knitting and humming the tune of the Carmagnole as an accompaniment to M. de Bollène's verses, whilst Claire de Châtelard sprawled at the foot of the mock guillotine with a red streak across her throat.

And suddenly, to her horror, Fleurette saw the executioner stride towards her corner.

"What?" he cried aloud, "tears? Tears are for aristos. To the guillotine with her!" or words to that effect. Fleurette did not rightly understand what he did say, all she knew was that this hideous, horrible man came striding towards her with hands outstretched, and that every one was laughing or singing or clapping their hands. The next moment she felt that horrible hand upon her shoulder, on her kerchief, her breast. She gave a loud scream and cowered further into the corner thinking she would faint with terror, until she heard a peremptory voice calling out loudly; "Leave the child alone, man, can't you see she is frightened?"

"Frightened? Of course she is frightened," the loathsome creature retorted with a laugh. "Did I not say that she was an aristo? Let me just call the warder and—"

A woman's voice was raised in protest:

"No, no, don't call the warder. She's done nothing wrong — and he might—"

And Madame de Mornas it was who added:

"You coveted this ring this morning, man, it is yours if you leave the child alone and say nothing to the warder."

How kind people were! How kind! As nothing further seemed to happen, Fleurette ventured to open her eyes: Claire de Châtelard was sitting beside her, trying to comfort her. The gruesome play had apparently come to an end; the prisoners in groups of three or more stood about talking and laughing, preparatory to be driven back to the sleeping-rooms for the night. The black executioner was no longer there.

"He is not a bad man really," Claire de Châtelard said to Fleurette, fondling her hand and smoothing the golden curls that clung to her moist forehead! "only very rough and coarse. Bah! these men!" she went on with a shudder. "The warder is a veritable fiend: a genius in inventing means to punish you if you do not bribe him or give in to him. All my little treasures which I was able to bring here with me, have gone into his rapacious hands. This man is not so bad, he is new to his work, he came a day or two ago to replace one

who was ill. But he is only a scavenger. When the warder is dead drunk he takes his place, the rest of the time he does all the dirtiest work in the house. A loathsome creature, what? If he were not so big, we should not be so frightened of him. But he is better than the warder.”

Fleurette only listened with half an ear. She still felt bruised and ill after the fright she had had. That horrible black hand touching her breast. It was worse than any nightmare.

She was glad when the bell clanged and the warder accompanied by his new aide — only partially relieved of the soot and the grime of his rôle — drove the prisoners like a herd of cattle back into their pens. So many women in one room, so many men in another. He had his list, and with a stout stick in his hand which he flourished as he read out the names, he drove them all in, into their respective night quarters and locked the doors upon them.

Fleurette shared her wretched paillasse with Claire de Châtelard. There was no dressing or undressing in this overcrowded room. No privacy. One just lay down in one's clothes and snatched what rest one could. Oh! the horror of it all to these women, most of them accustomed to dainty homes. Fleurette never knew which moment she dreaded most, that of opening her eyes to another awful day, or trying to close them in intermittent sleep.

Claire de Châtelard, less impressionable, was already asleep. Fleurette slipped out of her kirtle which she laid tidily across the foot of the paillasse; then she took off her muslin kerchief. As she did so something fluttered to the ground. A piece of paper neatly folded. Smothering an involuntary cry of surprise, she stooped to pick it up. Yet she hardly dared to touch the thing at first. How had it got between the folds of her kerchief? Who could possibly have put it there unbeknown to her? This was the second time with in a very little while that Fleurette had come in contact with something that savoured of the supernatural. Still timorous, and with a trembling hand, she picked the paper up. Claire was asleep and most of the others had already stretched out their limbs upon their hard paillasses. No one paid any heed to Fleurette.

There was no direct light in the room itself, but an oil lamp which hung from the ceiling in the corridor threw a feeble ray of light through the fan-light over the door. Fleurette unfolded the paper and smoothed out its creases against her knee. She made her way to the centre of the room where she could just contrive, by that dim light from above, to decipher the handwriting upon the paper. But the first word that caught her eye, nearly caused her to utter a cry of joy; it was the signature: Amédé.

Amédé! At once her eyes grew dim with tears. Amédé! Those five letters in the clumsy, schoolboyish handwriting meant happiness and home. Amédé! Before trying to read further she pressed the paper against her cheek, fondled it; laid it against her lips.

Amédé! He had written to her. Where from? How? She did not care to think. What did it matter after all? He was thinking of her. Had written to her. And some divine messenger had conveyed his missive to Fleurette. Though he was safe and well — Bibi had assured her that he was — he had thought of her and sent her this letter through one of God's own angels.

And then Fleurette dried her eyes, for she remembered that presently the bell would clang again, when all the lights would be put out and she might have to wait until to-morrow to read Amédé's letter.

It was short, very, very short. Amédé had never been a scholar, but in it he told her how he adored his Fleurette and longed for her nearness. He also told her that whatever else happened, he implored her to trust the bearer of this note who would be the means of bringing her back one day to the shelter of his arms.

The bearer of this note? Who was he? Surely, surely, one of God's angels! and so of course she trusted him. And it was only le bon Dieu who would so guide Bibi that all this trouble would come to an end and she, Fleurette, would of a certainty find a shelter once more in her Amédé's arms.

She read and re-read the few brief lines over and over again, and presently when the bell clanged, and she was forced to make her way hurriedly to her paillasse before the room was plunged into utter darkness, she laid down on the hard straw with a little sigh of contentment and of peace. Her evening prayer was one entirely of gratitude to le bon Dieu for His gift of Amédé's love and Bibi's protection. And that night Fleurette slept quite soundly, with her cheek resting against the letter from Amédé.

Chapter 26

For two whole days Citizens Pochart and Danou of the 137th Section of the committee of Public Safety had been sorely puzzled. They had received a curt note from Representative Chauvelin telling them that he would be absent from Orange for a brief while, and bidding them suspend all business until his return. Suspend all business? In very truth all business was perforce at a standstill, not because of the absence of the representative on special mission, but because of that of two high officers of State; the President of the Tribunal and Public Prosecutor.

Representative Chauvelin in his note had also alluded to this absence, stating that by direct orders from the Central Committee of Public Safety, President Legrange and Prosecutor Isnard had been obliged to proceed to Paris.

It was all very puzzling, not to say suspicious. Pochart and Danou put their heads together and came to the conclusion that here undoubtedly were some machinations at work on the part of Representative Chauvelin with a view to getting his daughter out of harm's way. The question was how to make use of these machinations. Of their knowledge that they were machinations. How in fact to turn them against the man who hitherto had carried himself with such consummate arrogance, lording it over every officer of State in Orange, with thinly veiled threats that had roused ire, malice and hatred in these men, whose rule of life was "strike ere you yourself be struck."

One thing, however, was crystal-clear. Representative Chauvelin was hard hit. He put on an air of lofty indifference; he continued to bluster and to threaten but he was hard hit by the arrest of his daughter, as indeed any family man would be. Pochart and Danou did not care one worthless assignat what became of the daughter, but they did feel that the pleasure of threatening and terrorising the representative on special mission, perhaps even of dragging him down from his exalted position and sending him in his turn to the guillotine, was not one to be missed. Up to the hour when Lieutenant Godet had arrested the wench Fleurette on suspicion, Representative Chauvelin had been a living threat to every patriot in Orange. He seemed, as it were, to be always walking hand in hand with the guillotine, or else in its shadow; sheltered himself, yet a menace to others. But now the tables were reversed, and Pochart and Danou had in one hour learned to substitute threats for soft words, arrogance for servility. And they vastly enjoyed the substitution.

But the trouble was that they were void of imagination. Representative Chauvelin could be brought down, they knew that. But how? Judging other men by themselves, they quite envisaged the possibility of a father sacrificing his own daughter in order to save himself. And there was also the possibility that a representative on special mission was powerful enough to save both his daughter and himself. Strong forces would have to be marshalled against him. Pochart and Danou with heads together passed these forces in review.

There was Lieutenant Godet who hated Representative Chauvelin with a hatred born of fear — the deadliest hatred of all. There was that rat-faced little spy, Adèle, a mixture of petty spite and malice. She would be useful. Others might be found, for Representative Chauvelin had many enemies who had not until this hour dared to come out into the open, but who would readily show themselves once the powerful representative was attacked.

And in the meanwhile the business of purging the countryside of aristos, suspects and traitors was at a standstill. With no Public Prosecutor to frame indictments and no President to try the accused, the order: "Que la Terreur soit à l'ordre du jour": "Let Terror be the order of the day," had become a dead letter. This could not go on, of course. Pochart and Danou, quite apart from their schemes against Representative Chauvelin, felt that a solution must be found — and that quickly — for this impossible situation. If allowed to continue they stood in very great risk of a reprimand from Paris for allowing the business of the State to be at a stand-still. They might be accused of want of zeal. Those great patriots up in Paris were so unreasonable, one never knew what they might do. Having sent for President Legrange and Public Prosecutor Isnard, they probably expected "the order of the day" to go on just the same. But how, nom de nom? How?

They were still seeking a solution, these two, Pochart and Danou, on the third morning, when to their surprise Representative Chauvelin walked in, as calm and indifferent as you please.

He had completed his business, he explained to them, sooner than he had anticipated. President Legrange and Public Prosecutor Isnard on the other hand had continued their journey to Paris.

Danou, suave as ever, expressed satisfaction in the return of the citizen representative. It was indeed a matter of congratulation, he added, for them all, seeing that the business of the State was so completely at a standstill.

Pochart was somewhat more emphatic.

"There are at least one hundred and sixty traitors," he said, "who should have been dealt with days ago. Your absence, citizen, and that of two other public servants should not have occurred at this critical hour—"

"It was inevitable, Citizen Pochart," Chauvelin broke in drily. "Orders from Paris, you know—"

"I was just proposing to Citizen Pochart," Danou put in mildly, "that we send a message to Paris by this new aerial telegraph to ask for further orders. There is one installed at Avignon, and a courier—"

"The aerial telegraph is required for more important business than yours, Citizen Danou," Chauvelin once more broke in, and this time with some impatience.

"What can be more important than the suppression of traitors?" Pochart argued with an obvious sneer. "I marvel at you, citizen representative, that you should think otherwise."

"The very latest decree of the National Convention," Danou added, "was that Terror be the order of the day. I too marvel at you, Citizen Chauvelin."

"There is no cause for marvel," Chauvelin rejoined with well assumed indifference. "I have not been in Orange more than a few hours. I have not had time to devise for this new situation."

"Well, then, to-morrow, citizen," Danou suggested, "will you be ready to consult with us on the best means of meeting this impossible situation? Otherwise, I am still of the opinion that the aerial telegraph, or perhaps a courier to Paris—"

He went on mumbling for a few seconds. His tone had been quite suave, not to say deferential; but Chauvelin's keen ear had not failed to detect the threat that lurked behind those smooth, velvety tones.

“To-morrow, as you say,” he concluded dryly.

All through the wearisome journey back from Valence he had been busy scheming and planning; alternately adopting and rejecting one plan after another. He knew well enough that Pochart and Danou were stalking him like wild beasts, ready to pounce on him, come to grips with him in a life and death struggle in which his darling Fleurette would also be involved.

Now after his interview with the two men, he knew that already they scented victory, that they too were scheming and planning, planning his overthrow, and using Fleurette as the deadliest weapon against him. These last three years of titanic struggle of man against man, of the strong against the weak, of the weak against the strong, had taught him that he could expect nothing, neither mercy nor consideration, from enemies whom he himself would never have hesitated to sacrifice to his own whim or his own tyranny. His only hope lay in his avowedly superior brain power. He no longer could dominate these snarling wild beasts, now that they were showing their fangs, but he could outwit them, before they sprang and devoured him. Brain-power as against blind lust. And Chauvelin thought that he could win.

Chapter 27

Representative Chauvelin was quite calm, business-like, armed with sheaves of papers and documents, when he met his colleagues the following morning in the bureau of the Committee.

"I have found," he announced as soon as they were seated, "a solution to our difficulty."

"Ah?" Danou ejaculated simply. And Pochart also said "Ah," but in a different tone.

"I have here," Chauvelin continued, and selected an official document from the pile which he had deposited upon the table. "I have here a decree which exactly meets our case. It was promulgated by the National Convention on the motion of Citizen Cabot on the 6th of Brumaire last."

Leaning back in his chair, he began to read from the official document in his hand. The others, elbows on the table, chin cupped in hand, listened with what we might call mixed feelings.

"Should it occur that through any cause whatsoever, one of the chief officers of State be absent from duty for a period exceeding seven days, the Representative on special mission shall then assume his functions and continue to discharge them for as long as seems expedient. And in the event of more than one important officer of State being so absent, the Representative on special mission shall himself appoint a substitute who will also discharge such duties as the Representative on special mission shall have assigned to him for the time being."

Having finished reading, Chauvelin put the document down, and with a gesture of finality let his thin, clawlike hand rest upon it.

"The decree is clear enough, methinks," he said coldly.

There was a pause. A silence lasting perhaps thirty seconds; then Danou said mildly:

"I have never heard of this decree."

"Nor I," Pochart echoed.

"The Central Committee in Paris," Chauvelin put in drily, "has often remarked on the strange ignorance displayed by avowed patriots, of the decrees promulgated for the welfare of the State. The Committee deems that such ignorance amounts to treason."

"May I look at the document?" Danou rejoined simply, choosing to ignore the reprimand — and the thin veiled threat.

"Certainly," Chauvelin replied, and handed the document over to his colleague.

"Is it a copy?" Pochart asked, looking over his friend's shoulder.

"An attested copy, as you can see," Chauvelin replied. "It is countersigned by Citizens Robespierre, Billaud, Couthon and Saint Just. You are not thinking of disputing the order, Citizen Danou?"

Once more and still that arrogance, those veiled threats. The situation being entirely different from what it was yesterday, Danou and Pochart dared not persist in their mood of defiance. Not before they had consulted one another, marshalled those forces — Godet, Adèle, the proofs against the wench Fleurette — and decided on the mode of attack. Representative Chauvelin must have something up his sleeve, some hidden power, or he would not be so arrogant, so threatening.

Danou wiped the sweat from his bald cranium and handed the document back to Chauvelin. Pochart shaking himself like a wet dog, returned to his seat.

"I'll take over the office of President Legrange," Chauvelin said calmly, "and preside over the Tribunal until his return."

"Then I," Danou put in boldly, "had best take over the work of the Public Prosecutor."

"Impossible, citizen," Chauvelin rejoined firmly; "I must have a lawyer for that office."

"But—"

"You do not seem to have listened very carefully, Citizen Danou," Chauvelin broke in quietly, "to my reading of the decree, or you would remember that it is for the representative on special mission to appoint a substitute, in case of absence on the part of a second important officer of State."

"And whom do you propose to appoint, citizen representative?" Pochart inquired with a sneer.

"I will let you know my decision as to that to-morrow."

"The sooner the better, citizen representative," Danou concluded unctuously. "Remember that it is my colleague and I of the 137th section of the Committee of Public Safety who will have to collect the evidence against the accused and place it before the Public Prosecutor whom you will appoint. That is a duty from which only the Central Committee can relieve us. There are one hundred and sixty prisoners, arrested under the Law of the Suspect. Some of them gravely accused, and by witnesses to."

"I am well aware of that, Citizen Danou," Chauvelin replied calmly. Not by the quiver of an eyelid did he betray the fact that the shaft had gone home. With a perfectly steady hand he collected his papers and placed a weight upon them. After which he dismissed the others with a curt nod.

"Your pardon, citizens," he said, "I have still work to do. You too doubtless. I shall require your attendance here to-morrow at this same hour."

When the door had finally closed behind the two men, the mask fell from Chauvelin's face. Leaning his elbow on the table, he buried his burning head in his hands; a heart-rending groan broke from his parched lips, his eyes felt as if seared with glowing charcoal. Ah! if he had not only forgotten these years past how to pray, what fervent orisons would he not have sent heavenwards at this hour. Help! where could he find help out of this web which his enemies had woven round him? How he hated them! longed to smite them before they had time to accomplish their fell purpose. They had determined on striking at Fleurette. Out of revenge or hatred, or was it fear? they had determined on striking at him, Chauvelin, through this being whom he loved beyond everything in the world. And he who had been one of the first protagonists of hatred and revenge and mutual distrust, he who had the will and the power, seemed so inextricably enmeshed that he could do nothing to save her. Fight? he would fight, inch by inch, step by step. Fight to save his Fleurette. Fight while he had breath in his body; fight until he fell vanquished by her side. For if he failed he would not let her die alone. He could not think of her being dragged through the streets in that awful tumbril which he himself had so often helped to fill; could not — heavens above no — could not think of her mounting the steps of the guillotine, which so many innocent feet had

mounted at his bidding. Retribution! It had come nearer, more inexorable now! Death by his Fleurette's side seemed the only possible issue.

And even as he sat there alone, in that room wherein the hatred of his fellow-men seemed still to linger like noisome ghosts, a pale ray of sunlight found its way through the closed window and played upon the myriads and myriads of dust atoms that hovered in the air. Chauvelin's hands dropped down upon the table. His weary eyes rested vacantly upon that shaft of dust-laden light. And inside its very heart he saw a face, smiling and debonair, with lazy eyes and smiling lips mocking him in his grief. It was a vision, gone as soon as seen, but vivid enough during that one brief second to bring a savage curse upon the lonely man's lips. His claw-like hand clenched so tightly that the knuckles shown like polished ivory.

"My evil genius!" he muttered through his teeth. "Had I succeeded in bringing you down, had I seen that mocking head fall under the guillotine, this devastating misery would never have come upon me. If only I could be even with you, I would die happier — even now."

Chapter 28

Ever afterwards to Chauvelin, it seemed as if the Scarlet Pimpernel had heard his challenge, and come in response to his thoughts: for hardly had a couple of days gone before the first rumour reached him of the nearness of his arch-enemy. Twenty-four hours later the hue and cry was all over Orange after a gang of English spies who, it was averred, made it their business to cheat Madame la Guillotine out of her dues.

Citizen Pochart brought Representative Chauvelin the news which already was over the town, namely that Architect Caristie and his family, consisting of his wife and the small son now aged ten, who was destined one day to become one of Orange's most distinguished citizens, had unaccountably disappeared from their tumble-down lodgings in the Rue de la République, where they had taken refuge after their house had been requisitioned by the State and turned into a prison-house.

For some time the sectional Members of the Committee of Public Safety, Citizens Pochart and Danou, ardent patriots, had had their eyes on the Caristie family. Aristos, what? Architect Caristie had designed and built houses in the past for tyrants and ci-devants. The arrest of the entire family had been decided on. It was to have taken place that very evening. Orders to that effect were out, their place of incarceration fixed in the very house where they had once sat in luxury, whilst patriots had starved outside their gates.

And suddenly the news had spread like wildfire through the town that Architect Caristie, his wife and son had disappeared. Disappeared? Where? asked every patriot. But no one knew. One evening they had still been seen, as usual, taking walking exercise on the river-bank, and the next day when the soldiers of the revolutionary army presented themselves at the door of their lodgings in the Rue de la République and demanded admittance, lo! they received no answer: the lodgings were deserted, the birds had flown from their nests. Nor could the guard at any of the gates of the city throw light upon this mysterious occurrence. No one had passed the gates without duly authenticated passes. Pochart was at his wits end and asked counsel of Representative Chauvelin. What was to be done in face of this mystery? Exercise strict supervision at the gates, Chauvelin advised. All passes in future to be signed by himself as well as by the Sectional Members of the Committee of Public Safety.

The news of the presence of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Orange had acted upon his nerves like a whiplash. Fate, it seemed, was hitting at him from every side: and he felt like a fighter who has been downed once, twice, and then suddenly felt the strength of giants in his blood; the agility of a cat spurring him on to a new and stupendous effort. In a vague, fatalistic kind of way the safety of Fleurette and the destruction of the Scarlet Pimpernel appeared to him as inextricably involved. If he allowed his arch-enemy to baffle him now and here, in this city, then Fleurette was doomed and he himself must perish.

This was the immediate state of mind into which the news of the Scarlet Pimpernel had thrown him. A wild desire to link the destruction of his enemy with the safety of his child, to deserve so well of the State, in fact, that the life of Fleurette would be ceded to him as a reward. A drowning man will catch at a straw, and so did Chauvelin catch at this hope, cling to it, turn the thought over and over in his mind. With feverish activity then he spurred those about him into additional vigilance, combated that superstitious terror with which every official these days regarded the gang of English spies and their mysterious chief. He brought to every man notice that the handsome reward offered by the Revolutionary government for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, described the Englishman's appearance, his methods, his motives, worked up every man in Orange, aye, and every woman too, into a state of enthusiasm for the possible capture of this inveterate and daring enemy of France.

But this particular frame of mind was not destined to endure. Soon memory got to work, recalled unpleasant moments in Calais, Boulogne, in Paris, in Nantes. What if here too, in Orange, the Scarlet Pimpernel should triumph and he Chauvelin once more be forced to eat the bread of humiliation? What if baffled once more, he should lose, at one terrible swoop, both his revenge and his last hope of saving Fleurette? And then it was that first the insidious, the stupendous thought penetrated his brain. Was it Satan himself who had whispered it into his ear? or some army of mocking imps intent upon torturing him to madness? But heavens above, what a thought! The Scarlet Pimpernel and Fleurette! Was that going to be the solution of this terrible impasse? The thought feverishly driven back at first, returned more insistent. Why not? And then again, why not? A young girl, sweet, pretty, innocent, was she not one to arouse those instincts of chivalry which Chauvelin had hitherto affected to despise?

What a possibility! Heavens above, what a possibility! His very senses reeled now at the thought. But he allowed his mind to dwell upon it, to weigh his possibilities: to familiarise itself more and more with it. At first it had seemed like madness, but no longer now! His Fleurette! Already Amédée Colombe was far away, under the protection of the Scarlet Pimpernel, what more likely than that — No! no! it could not be! His daughter! His, Chauvelin's! And in a swift vision he saw himself luring Marguerite Blakeney, the beloved and beautiful wife of the Scarlet Pimpernel to her death, holding her as a hostage, threatening her, torturing her. His enemy's wife! What agonies she had endured at his hands! And now Fleurette! Would not the Scarlet Pimpernel, triumphant and revengeful, gloat over her death, rather than raise a finger to save her life? Would he not gaze with joy on the misery endured by his bitterest foe?

And then once more torturing thoughts would assail him: torturing fears and torturing hopes, hopes? Yes, hopes! "Why should you not hope, man?" Whispered an insidious demon in his ear: "the Scarlet Pimpernel does not know, cannot know that Fleurette is your daughter; the daughter of his enemy Armand Chauvelin. To him she is just the sweet, pretty, innocent victim of a system of government which he hates and which he combats. Then why not hope?" And the floating, racking visions of Juliette Marny, and Yvonne de Kernogan, of the Abbé Foquet and Madeleine Lanoy, would once more haunt the day-dreams of this man already steeped in misery, and hope insidious, ever-living hope, would whisper in its turn: "To that long list of innocents snatched from prison and from death by the insolent adventurer whom you hate, why should not the name of Fleurette be added? Fleurette of unknown parentage, just a sweet girl dwelling at Lou Mas, with old Louise and a father known as Armand? Why not?"

And day after day, whilst presiding, self-appointed over a tribunal of infamy, Chauvelin's mind became more and more familiarised with the vision of his Fleurette snatched out of the jaws of death by the man with the lazy eyes and the mocking lips, the demmed, elusive Pimpernel of his day-dreams and his sleepless nights.

Chapter 29

Meanwhile in Architect Caristie's house, transformed for the necessities of the State into a prison, the old routine is now restored. Daily, once more, an hour before sunset, the captain of the guard with his half-dozen men, enters the courtyard, and in a loud voice reads the names that appear upon his roll-call. They are the names of those who on the morrow are summoned before the Revolutionary Tribunal, there to answer the charges that are trumped up against them by the venal spies, who make their living out of the blood of innocent men and women and children.

Impossible to refute those charges, since the law has decreed that it is a crime to be merely suspected of treason against the State. Fouquier-Tinville, the great Public Prosecutor in Paris, no longer troubles, it seems, to prepare fresh indictments against every accused in turn. He has a printed formula of accusation, with just the name left in blank, presently to be filled in as convenience arises. Therefore in other greater and lesser cities of France, patriots desirous of showing their zeal, can do no better than emulate the example set by so great a man. Local sections of the Committee of Public Safety prepare the indictments — set formulæ with the names left in blank. These they pass on to the Public Prosecutor who mumbles as he reads them before the Tribunal with the President sitting up on the dais, and the accused — names left in blank — brought up to the bar, not allowed to say a word in their own justification, nor to question the witnesses brought up to testify against them.

Abandon all hope then, ye whose names are upon that Roll-call! to-morrow the Tribunal, the next day the guillotine! And once again now, day after day, the captain of the guard comes to the house, late of Architect Caristie, and reads; and at all the windows that overlook the courtyard heads appear, men, women and little children — clutching the bars and listening. Listening for their own name or that of one who is dear. Sighing with relief if neither has been called, or with resignation if to-morrow is destined to bring this miserable existence to an end.

And day after day Chauvelin presides over this tribunal of infamy. Self-appointed he sits upon the dais and sees before him pass a daily file of doomed and dying. Sometimes ten, sometimes as many as twenty in a day, and still the prisons are full — fresh arrests make up for those whom the guillotine has claimed. Acquittals are rare, for moderation now has become a crime. Danton — aye! even Danton, the lion, has perished, he who ordered the September massacres, he who thundered forth from the tribune, "Liberty! Fraternity! Equality! or Death!" he has perished because he became guilty of the crime of moderation. The glorious revolution has no use for such of its products as Danton and Robespierre — for the reality of the one and the canting hypocrisy of the other: so Danton it was who perished. "It is right," he had dared to say once, "to repress Royalists: but we should not confound the innocent with the guilty!"

"And who told thee," Robespierre retorted, sea-green with hatred, "that one single innocent has perished by our hand?"

And because Danton had dared to raise his voice in the cause of the innocent, Danton had perished.

What chance then has Chauvelin to defend his Fleurette? His power is great. He can make your Pocharts and your Danous, our President Legrange or Public Prosecutor Isnard, but he cannot accord special privileges in prison for his own daughter. He cannot see her in private, comfort her, warn her if need be, tell her not to be afraid for Bibi chéri is there, on the watch, ready to protect her with his body, to stand by her in the last hour. He cannot. Pochart and Danou are on the watch. "We must not confound the innocent with the guilty," Danton had dared to say. And for this he had perished: and though he perished, could not save one single innocent.

And all evening, after the sittings of the Tribunal are over, and ten — or mayhap fifteen or twenty — condemned to the guillotine, Chauvelin like a pale, thin ghost haunts the purlieu of Architect Caristie's house. On pretext of his office he enters the courtyard with the captain of the guard and looks up at the windows to see if she is there. Once he saw her. Just her little face peeping behind the opulent shoulders of one Claire de Châtelard, the best noted strumpet in Orange. The woman had one arm round Fleurette's waist and when the captain of the guard read out the name of Clair known as Châtelard upon his list, Fleurette threw her arms round her and laid her head upon the trollop's breast.

Chauvelin turned away from the spectacle with a groan, and all night he lay awake thinking of his sweet flower laying her head upon the breast of a Claire de Châtelard.

Yet Claire de Châtelard bore herself bravely before him the next day, and when, on the day after that, he watched her from the window of the Hôtel de Ville mounting the steps of the guillotine, saw her standing there, superb and defiant with a coarse jest upon her sensual lips, he gloated over the thought that his Fleurette would no longer pillow her innocent head upon that breast. He tried to picture her, grieving for this friend, the propinquity, the squalor of that house of detention, from which there was but one egress, that egress the gate of Death. Claire de Châtelard to-day — Fleurette when? Every day the indictments are sent up to him for examination, the printed forms of accusation with the names left in blank, to be filled in as convenience demands: and every day a list of ten, perhaps fifteen names are sent along with these printed forms, and it is his business to direct the Public Prosecutor, a man of his own choosing, which of these names are to be inserted in the blank spaces, on the forms of accusation. Up to now he has been able to keep Fleurette's name out, but it has been sent up to him on two consecutive days. The fight then was getting at close quarters, Pochart and Danou were pressing him, showing their teeth like snarling dogs ready to spring. And time was hurrying on. Time would presently bring back President Legrange and Prosecutor Isnard from Paris, time would inevitably bring to light his machinations for keeping those two men out of the way. Aye! time was hurrying on, and Fleurette's name had twice appeared upon the list.

And for the past three days not a word in the town about the English spies. After Architect Caristie and his family, it had been the widow Colmars and her daughter, and then General Paulieu and his family. Disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them up. Always traitors and aristos whose arrest was imminent, whose subsequent condemnation certain. But after that, three days' respite: the Scarlet Pimpernel and his gang seemed to have disappeared in their turn.

The hopes which insidious demons had whispered in Chauvelin's ears were once more merged in a sea of despair. He derided himself for these hopes, lashed himself into a state of fury against himself for having allowed his mind to dwell upon them.

One scheme after another now did he devise and then reject. He would defy his enemies, the jury, the populace: loudly denounce the witnesses against Fleurette as liars and perjurers, pronounce her acquittal in the face of all opposition. Had he not made a point day

after day of pronouncing acquittal on one or the other of the accused? just to test his power — to see how his enemies would behave? And he saw them lying low. Sneering. Whispering. Ogling him and laughing. They knew! They saw behind his schemes and his hopes. They reserved their counter-attack. They could afford to wait, whilst he could not.

If only Fleurette bore herself well: did not allow herself to be carried away with admissions or inconsidered words, out of sentiment for that fool Amédé Colombe. Chauvelin longed to see her, if only to impress this one thing upon her; to say nothing. To admit nothing. To hold her tongue and to trust chère Bibi. If only she did that, he felt that he might save her yet. And obsessed by the idea, devoured with the desire to convey this message to her, without compromising her or giving yet another advantage to his enemies, Chauvelin at evening would wander like a restless ghost through the city.

That afternoon after he watched Claire de Châtelard mount the steps upon the guillotine, a joke upon her lips, this restlessness became exquisite torture, and racked with tumultuous thoughts, wrapped in a black mantle, he sallied forth into the streets. It was now early in June: nearly three weeks since that last care-free day, Fleurette's eighteenth birthday, spent with her over at Lou Mas, when the scent of almond blossom had been in the air and the nightingale had sung in the old walnut-tree. The day had been sunless and chilly, after sunset the rain began to fall. But rain and weather held no terrors for Chauvelin in his present mood. Holding his mantle tightly round his shoulders and pulling his hat down over his eyes, he wandered aimlessly through the streets, over the river and back again, down unpaved streets and lonely lanes, now and then sitting down to rest in some obscure little outlying café, where no one knew or heeded him, and then starting off again on his restless course. But always drifting back instinctively to the purlieu of architect Caristie's house.

Almost opposite to it there was a small café: no one sitting outside because of the rain, but the interior lighted up, and sounds of merriment proceeding from within. Chauvelin thought of going inside, feeling that if he sat down there close to the window, he could watch the walls behind which lived and suffered his little Fleurette. He did not dare to go in for fear of being recognised. He was just debating within himself whether he would go or stay, when he saw a man come out of the house of architect Caristie, cross over to the café, then disappear behind its creaking door. A scavenger, no doubt, ragged and dirty — not a warder, he was too ill-clad for that — just a scavenger — but perhaps he had seen Fleurette. The thought fascinated Chauvelin. His mind clung to it: turned it over and over. The thought that here was a man who perhaps had seen Fleurette within the last few minutes, had swept corridor or staircase when she was passing by. And with that thought there was still the burning desire to send her a message, to tell her to be brave and trust in Bibi, but above all, oh! above all, not to be led into making any admission about those valuables belonging to Madame de Frontenac, or about her association with Amédé Colombe.

Chauvelin, leaning against the wall which faced the little café, dwelt on his thoughts and his desire. He allowed the rain to drip upon his hat and upon his shoulders from the roof above him. He no longer felt restless. He just wanted to stand there and watch for the return of the man, who perhaps would be seeing Fleurette again within the next few minutes. He wondered if he dare approach him, always with the idea of possibly conveying a message to Fleurette. But the fear that the man might know who he was, deterred him from entering the café himself. He had been a fairly conspicuous figure in the courtyard of Caristie's house, standing by the side of the captain of the guard: if that scavenger was at work in the corridor, he might have looked out of the window and seen him, learned who he was. All through he had been at pains to show an indifferent attitude before his enemies: if this man happened to be a spy, would the knowledge that he, Chauvelin, was trying to establish communication with Fleurette compromise him hopelessly and do no good to her?

As he stood there pondering and debating what he had better do, he saw the scavenger come out of the café. For a minute or two the man stood at the door, his hands buried in the pockets of his ragged breeches, contemplating the rain. The next moment another, equally dirty and bedraggled ruffian came down the street, paused at the entrance of the café and passed the time of day with the scavenger. The two mudlarks remained talking for a few moments, after which they parted, each going his own way. The scavenger recrossed the road and entered the Caristie House. The other passed on in the opposite direction and Chauvelin, after an instant's hesitation, followed him. He came up with the man at the angle of the rue Longue: and putting out his arm, touched him on the shoulder. With a cry of terror the man fell on his knees.

"Mercy! I've done nothing!" he babbled almost incoherently.

"I dare say not," Chauvelin said drily "but it will be to thine advantage if thou'lt come along quietly with me."

He seized the man by the arm and dragged him up from his knees. The poor wretch tried to wriggle himself free, but Chauvelin held him tightly, and without another word drew him within the shelter of the nearest doorway. Fortunately, though them and kept up a ceaseless litany of lamentations and cries for mercy, he did so under his breath, thus creating no disturbance nor exciting the attention of the few passers-by who were hurrying homewards through the rain-swept streets.

"Are you willing, citizen," Chauvelin began abruptly, as soon as he had assured himself that the doorway was deserted and no eavesdropper nigh, "are you willing to earn fifty livres tournoi?"

The man gave no immediate reply, it seemed as if he was shaking himself free from his first terror and pondering over this extraordinary proposal, so different to what he had anticipated. Then he cleared his throat, expectorated, slowly repeated the magic words: "Fifty livres tournoi!" and finally added in an awed whisper:

"I have not seen five livres tournoi for months."

"Fifty are yours, citizen, if you'll render me a service."

"What is it?"

"That friend of yours, to whom you spoke just now — outside the café de la Lune—"

"Citizen Rémi?"

"He works in the Caristie House?"

"Yes."

"In what capacity?"

"Cleaner," the man replied laconically. "Rémi hung about for days trying to earn a bit of money. He hasn't a sou, you understand? Same as me. A few days ago one of the inside men fell sick. Rémi presented himself and got the work. I know him well."

"He has access to the prisoners?" Chauvelin asked.

"I suppose so."

"Then tell him that there will be fifty livres for him too if he will convey a written message to number 142 in room 12."

Again the man seemed to ponder: weighing the risks probably, and also the gain. Fifty livres tournoi! Immense! He had forgotten that there was such a sum of money left in the world: and then for him to have the handling of it! This led him once more to expectorate, which action apparently had the effect of stimulating his brain-power.

"It could be done," he murmured at last.

"It can be done," Chauvelin asserted emphatically, "but must be done quickly, or—"

"Rémi will be back at the Café de la Lune soon after eight o'clock. He always goes there for a sip of something after supper."

"Good! Then you can meet him at that hour and tell him to wait for you, then come at once and find me here, under this doorway. I'll have the letter ready—"

"The whole thing is very risky, citizen," the man demurred.

"If it were not," Chauvelin rejoined drily, "I would not spend one hundred livres tournoi in the attempt."

"Fifty livres is not over much, when one risks one's neck."

"You are not risking your neck," Chauvelin retorted, "as you well know. And you'll not get more from me than fifty livres each. Take it or leave it."

He knew how to deal with these mudlarks, apparently, for the man after he had spat once more once or twice, seemed satisfied.

"I'll be back here," he said laconically, "after I have seen Rémi again."

Then Chauvelin let him go. The darkness and the rain soon swallowed him up: but Chauvelin himself remained for quite a while standing motionless under the doorway. He had not yet burnt his boats, was still free, if he thought the risk too great, to fail in his appointment. The man did not know who he was, had not seen him in the darkness and under the wide brim of his hat: but there was the risk that this Rémi might be a spy, who would take the letter intended for Fleurette straightway to Pochart or Danou. The letter might thus betray him and so minimise his power of saving Fleurette. He had to safeguard himself against the merest breath of suspicion in order to keep his power. The more irreproachable, detached, incorruptible he appeared before the populace, the more Spartan in his attitude towards his own child until the day of her trial, the greater his chance of saving her at the last. But his desire to warn her against unconsidered words or any kind of admissions outweighed for the moment every other consideration. He hurried back to his lodgings through the rain, and at once sat down to pen his letter to the child.

"My beloved one," he began, "at last I am able to send a word to you, which I hope and trust will reach your darling little hands. Child of my heart, this is to entreat you to continue in your trust of me, for I swear to you by the memory of your dead mother, that while you trust me I can save you. I can save the man you love. Moreover, I entreat you, beloved child of my soul, do not make any admission when brought before the tribunal, as you must be shortly, alas! If witnesses testify against you, just hold your peace; if others question you, deny everything. This I entreat you to do for the sake of the love I bear you, for the sake of the tears I have shed these past weeks, ever since your folly hath brought you to this pass."

He signed the letter "Bibi." Thus he had mentioned no names and in addition taken the precaution of disguising his writing as far as he was able. After which he sealed the letter and slipped it in the inner pocket of his coat. Time was now hanging heavily. Like a beast in its cage, Chauvelin paced up and down the narrow room, his hands clenched behind his back, a world of soul agony expressed upon his wax-like face.

As soon as he heard the tower-clock of Notre-Dame strike eight, he picked up his hat and cloak and once more sallied forth into the streets.

Chapter 30

A quarter of an hour later two out-at-elbows ragamuffins met inside the Café la Lune. Out-side the rain had not abated, both the men, who were clad in what were little more than rags, appeared soaked through to the skin. At this hour the little café was almost deserted. Citizen Sabot, the proprietor, was sitting at one table with a couple of friends; at another a couple of road-menders were sipping their absinthe, when the scavenger from the prison house came slouching in. He sat down on the bench against the wall in the darkest corner of the room and ordered a bottle of wine for himself and a friend. Presently the latter came and joined him and for a while the two men sat drinking in silence. Soon an animated discussion arose between the proprietor and his friends on the respective merits of Vouvray and Beaujolais as a table wine.

This entailed much shouting and copious gesticulations. Sabot had a deep-booming voice which reverberated from end to end of the room and caused the window-panes to rattle in their frames.

The scavenger from the prison house had apparently drunk more during the day than was good for him. His head leaned heavily on his hand, his elbow resting upon the table, his eyes had become bleary, his speech uncertain. His friend sat opposite to him, with his back to the rest of the company, and when Sabot's voice roused the echoes in the small stuffy room, he leaned forward and whispered in the other's ear:

"I had an adventure after I left you this afternoon."

"Eh?" the scavenger murmured incoherently. "Where?"

"At the angle of the Rue Longue I was pounced upon in the darkness and dragged under the shelter of a door-way. A man had me by the shoulder. He had seen me talking with you. He offered me fifty livres and the same for you, if you will give a letter to a certain prisoner in there."

And he nodded in the direction of the high walls of the Caristie house. His friend's reply to this preliminary statement was a prolonged snore.

"The prisoner to whom you are to give the letter is number 142 in room 12," the other went on, still speaking below his breath. "Who is that? Do you know?"

The scavenger from the prison house waited for a moment or two until the discussion at the next table was specially loud-tongued, then he murmured:

"Yes! It is the girl Fleurette."

"Ah!" remarked his friend.

"Who was the man who spoke to you?"

"I don't know. It was pitch-dark. He wore a broad-brimmed hat and spoke in a hoarse whisper."

"Her father, probably. The man Armand, I have marvelled why we did not hear from him before. What have you arranged?"

"That I meet him under the same doorway, after I've seen you. He will then give me the letter."

"We'll keep to that then. But try and see the man. I might recognise him by your description."

He paused for a moment or two, yawned, stretched, emptied his mug of wine and then went on. "If I went myself I might scare him off. So it is best you should go. But try and see his face. I'll wait here till you come."

After which he ordered another bottle of wine. Sabot broke away from his friends in order to serve his customer.

"You've had about as much as you ought to have, citizen Rémi," he said drily, as he uncorked the bottle and set it on the table.

"That is none of your business, citizen," Rémi retorted with a bibulous laugh, "so long as I pay for what I drink."

He threw some coins on the table. Sabot picked them up with a shrug and then rejoined his friends, and resumed the discussion with them on the merits or demerits of Vouvray and Beaujolais. The other ruffian took the opportunity of shuffling out of the café, and the scavenger, sprawling over the table, composed himself to sleep.

Hugging the walls, the other slunk through the street till he came to the doorway, where effectively he had appointed to meet Chauvelin.

"Well!" the latter queried impatiently as soon as the other came in sight. "Have you seen your friend?"

"Yes."

"Does he agree?"

"Yes."

With a sigh of relief Chauvelin drew the sealed letter from his breast pocket.

"Fifty livres, remember," he said slowly, "for each of you, when you bring me back the answer."

"Oh!" the man exclaimed, visibly disappointed. "There's an answer then?"

"Yes! An answer. Your friend will see to it that you bring me back either an answer or some token which will satisfy me that the letter is in the right hands."

The man gave a short laugh.

"You do not trust me, citizen," he said.

"No," Chauvelin replied laconically. "I do not."

"I do not blame you," the other retorted. "I do not trust you altogether either. How do I know, when Rémi and I have risked our lives in your service, that the money will be forthcoming?"

"You do know that, citizen," Chauvelin rejoined drily, "and anyway you are bound to take that risk."

"Why should I?" the man retorted.

"Because you are more sorely in need of money than I of your services."

This argument appeared unanswerable. At any rate the ruffian now said with a light laugh:

"Have it your own way. Give me the letter. Number 142 in room 12 shall have it, you can wager your shirt on that."

Without another word Chauvelin handed him the letter. It was so dark under the doorway that it was only by groping that the other was able to get hold of it. He drew so near to Chauvelin that the latter, fearing that the man was trying to have a close look at him, pulled his hat lower down over his eyes. The other resorted to his habitual expression of indifference by spitting upon the floor; then he slipped the letter underneath his ragged blouse.

"Where do I find you," he asked, "after Rémi has done your errand?"

"You will go into the Rue Longue," Chauvelin replied, "To the house of citizen Amouret, the chandler. Up the first flight of stairs, on the right-hand side, you will come to a door which is painted a slate- grey. Knock at that door and you will find me within."

"At what hour?"

"At any time to-morrow after the executions in the Place de la République," Chauvelin replied.

Chapter 31

To say that Fleurette had in the past few days become familiarised with the grim mummeries that went on in the common room, would be putting it rather strongly. But she certainly had no longer the same horror of them as she had had at first. The presentment of the mock guillotine still harrowed her, it is true, but she could not help laughing when the antics of the mock Satan and his satellites when they seized the President of the Tribunal and the Public Prosecutor and dragged them off to an imaginary hell. There was that one man in particular whom she had sometimes noticed before and who was aide to one of the warders, and was very diverting. She used to watch him turning and wriggling his huge body, which he had painted all over with soot and draped in bits of red rags. He made an ideal Satan with tail and horns complete, and sometimes it seemed to Fleurette as if he went through all his antics for the sole purpose of bringing a smile upon her lips. Moreover, in a vague kind of way, she associated him with that lovely letter from Amédé, which she had found inside the folds of her kerchief one evening.

The death of so many who had been her prison-companions at first, especially that of Claire de Châtelard had deeply affected her. The want of fresh air, of exercise, and above all of love and joy, had begun to affect her health: her cheeks had lost their freshness, her eyes their lustre, her lips their smile.

It was only in the recreation hour that she would smile sometimes. Always when that big, clumsy, hideous-looking fellow who was some kind of aide to one of the warders, set himself the task of fooling for her benefit. She came to look upon him as a friend, and remembering how mysteriously that letter from Amédé had come inside her kerchief, she would look up whenever he came near her, wondering if he had another such welcome message for her. And one evening — she really had not the least idea how it happened — she found a sealed letter inside her work- basket. And the letter was from chéri Bibi. Oh! the joy of it! She read, and re-read it, and kissed the paper whereon his dear hand had rested. How she had missed Bibi all these days! How she longed to reassure him that she was well and that she trusted and believed in him! As to obeying him in all things, of course she would do it. To begin with, she was not afraid, not the least bit in the world. He was watching over her, and he was so great and powerful that no danger could possibly assail her while he cared for her. She would indeed obey him in all things, hold her peace while that wicked Adèle tried to do her harm; she would hold her peace before the Tribunal just as le bon Jésus had done when he was questioned by his judges.

Oh! it was a dear, a comforting, an infinitely precious letter. And beside it Fleurette had found a tiny little slip of paper on which were scribbled the words: "Let me have something to take back to the writer, to let him know that you are well. Leave it in your work basket, and I will see to it that he gets it." And so Fleurette had written a few lines to chéri Bibi; told him that she was well, and assured him that she was not afraid and would obey his commands in all things. She would hold her peace and trust in him. This little note she had hidden that evening in her work basket and by noon on the following day it had gone.

Chapter 32

"But me no butts, my dear Tony, I am sick of all these filthy rags. And if I am to see pretty Fleurette's papa then must I see him decently clad and in my right mind."

So spake Sir Percy Blakeney to his friend, late the following evening, it was in an attic under the roof of a half-derelict house in the Rue du Pont close to the river-bank. The owners of the house had long since disappeared, fled into the mountains or perished on the guillotine; no one knew or cared. Blakeney, and those members of his league who were with him, had hit upon it on their arrival in Orange, had made the attic their head-quarters, whilst most of the vagabonds of the city used the rest of the house as their lair. They too were outwardly vagabonds, dressed in rags, appeared unkempt, unshaven, and unwashed, when they sallied forth in the early mornings each on an errand of mercy to succour those in need of help or those who were in danger or distress.

It was only o' nights, sometimes, that an overwhelming desire for cleanliness and nice clothes caused these English gentlemen to cast aside their rags and to venture out into the open dressed in clothes that would have caused the ragamuffins of Orange go snarl at their heels like so many hungry curs.

They had been eight days in Orange now, and already architect Caristie, with his wife and small son, the widow Colmars and her daughter, and poor old General Paulieu with his family owed their safety to this gallant League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. But there was still more to do.

"We must get that child Fleurette out of that hell," the chief had said, and since then brain and heart had been at work to find the means to that end.

Later on Lord Tony had remarked: "I wish we could find out about that father of hers; this man Armand. He seems to hold some kind of position under this government of assassins, but I for one have tried in vain to learn something more definite about him."

"I think," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes added, "that his position must be a high one, or the girl would have been brought to trial before now."

"Unless our amiable friend, M. Chauvelin, has got this Armand under lock and key somewhere else," was my Lord Stowmaries' comment upon the situation.

Sir Percy was silent. Frankly the position puzzled him. He would have liked to get into touch with the man Armand, but for once he and his friends were baffled by this anonymity which appeared so closely guarded. Great then had been the rejoicing in the attic of the derelict house in the Rue du Pont, when Lord Anthony Dewhurst — a most perfect type of ruffian in rags and a thick coating of grime — related his adventure with the mysterious individual who, under cover of darkness and rain, had offered him and his friend Rémi, fifty livres each for delivering a message to a prisoner, who was none other than little Fleurette.

"At last we'll get in touch with the mysterious Armand," they all declared eagerly. It was arranged that the chief would himself take Fleurette's reply to the house in the Rue Longue. But go on this errand in the filthy rags of a scavenger he would not.

"The night is pretty dark," he declared, "and I would rather the mysterious Armand saw me as I am. I may also have a chance," he added with his merriest laugh, "of coming across my good friend M. Chambertin. It is some weeks since last we met, and not to have had a pleasant chat with him all these days, while we were within a stone's throw of one another, has been a sore trial to me. I caught a glimpse of him a day or two ago, in the courtyard of the Caristie House. He looked to be sick and out of sorts. A sight of me might cheer him up."

"You won't take any risks, Blakeney," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes remarked.

"Any number, my dear fellow," Sir Percy replied laughing. "And you know you envy me, you dog. But I feel thoroughly selfish to-night. I mean to take the note to Armand myself, and I mean to take the privilege of having a little chat with my friend Chambertin. And both these things I am going to do as an English gentleman and not as a mudlark in stinking, filthy rags."

He had completed his toilet now, looked magnificent in clothes cut by the leading London tailor, which set off his splendid figure to perfection, with snow-white stock and speckless boots.

"If a single pair of eyes should see you," Sir Andrew insisted, with an anxious sigh.

"I should have a whole pack of wolves at my heels," Blakeney admitted. "But that wouldn't be the first time any of us have had to run for our lives, eh? nor the first time we gave an entire pack of them the slip."

He picked up his hat and took a last look at Fleurette's little note which he had to deliver at the house in the Rue Longue.

"This man Armand must be a very decent fellow," he mused, "his letter to the child was really fine in spirit as well as in affection. Yes! he must be a decent fellow and we must get the girl for his sake as much as for that of our friend Colombe. What?"

On that, of course, they were all agreed. The activities of the League, since the rescue of General Paulieu and his family, were centered now on Fleurette. There were still one or two minor points to discuss, arrangements of detail to complete, but the main project for the girl's rescue could not be determined until it was definitely known whether her father, Armand, was going to be a help or an hindrance.

"Anyway I shall know more," Blakeney said finally, as he made for the door, "when I have sampled this man."

It was then nine o'clock in the evening. The night was dark and stormy. Gusts of wind alternated with sharp showers of rain — an altogether unusual state of weather for the time of year in these parts. The few passers-by of respectable appearance on their way home from business or work did no more than throw a cursory glance on the tall figure that passed hurriedly by. A few vagabonds clinging to their rags which the wind threatened to tear off their meagre bodies, did perhaps pause, cowering against a dark wall, murmuring a threat or a curse against the aristo, but an unexpected coin slipped into their grimy hands, quickly silenced both curse and threat.

Blakeney knew his way well through the streets of Orange. Having kept along the river bank till he came to the bridge, he turned up the Rue de la République. Glancing up at a house on his right, a smile of pure joy lit up his anxious face. Three nights ago on this spot, he had carried architect Caristie's small son in his arms, while Caristie and his wife followed him down the street to the market cart which awaited them at the top of the bridge. Three hours later an officer of the revolutionary army was hammering at the door of Caristie's lodgings, only to find that the birds had flown. It had been a merry night, and merrier morning, while he, Blakeney, drove the

market cart out of the city with Caristie and his wife concealed amidst the sacks of haricots and peas, and the boy thrust into an empty oil-jar.

Well! something equally daring would have to be devised for the girl Fleurette, and perhaps for her father, the mysterious Armand. Blakeney, throwing back his head in the teeth of rain and wind, drew a deep breath of delight. This was life in very truth. To plan, to scheme, to accomplish. Alternately hare and hound, to revel in this case with human lives as the goal. And if at times the thought of beautiful Marguerite, lonely and anxious in far-off England, caused a pang like a knife-thrust to his heart, her soothing voice, her reassuring smile came to him as a swift vision from the spirit-land to encourage and console. In suffering and anxiety, as well as in the joy of reunion, Marguerite always understood.

Now he turned from the Place de la République into the Rue Longue, and the next couple of hundred yards brought him to the house of Lucien Amouret, corn-chandler. The outside door was on the latch. Pushing it open he found himself in a narrow hall, with an inner door leading into the shop on his left and a staircase in front of him. A lamp hung from the ceiling and shed a dim light on stair and hall. From the shop came the sound of voices in conversation, but though the stairs creaked under his tread, no one came out to see whose the step might be.

Sir Percy ran lightly up the stairs, and on the first landing came to the door, painted a slate grey. This part of the house appeared silent and deserted; the upper floors wrapped in dead gloom. A rusty bell-pull hung beside the door. Sir Percy gave it a pull, and a discordant clang roused the sleeping echoes of the chandler's house. A moment or two later he caught the sound of shuffling footsteps, the door was opened, an old woman in cap and shawl mutely inquired what the visitor desired.

"Is citizen Armand within?" Blakeney asked.

The woman, he thought, looked at him rather curiously for a second or two, then shrugged her shoulders. Without wasting words she shuffled off down a dimly lighted passage, leaving him to enter or not, as he pleased. The next moment he heard a woman's voice — the same woman probably — say: "An aristo is asking to see Citizen Armand." Again a moment's silence, then the woman came shuffling back, signed to him to enter and closed the door behind him.

"In there," she said laconically, and nodded towards the end of the passage where a half open door revealed a shaft of more brilliant light. Then she shuffled off again, presumably to her kitchen, leaving the visitor to his own devices.

Sir Percy took off his hat and coat and laid them down on a chair close by; he then walked the length of the passage to the half-open door, pushed it open and found himself in a small room, comfortably furnished, lighted by a lamp which stood upon a centre table. The table was littered with papers. Behind it sat a man writing. At sound of Sir Percy's footsteps he looked up. The eyes of the two men met, and it almost seemed to one of them at least that time for a few seconds stood still.

And then a pleasant laugh broke the silence, and a gentle lazy voice said slowly:

"Egad! if it is not my engaging friend M. Chambertin! The gods do indeed favour me, sir, for there's no man in the world I would sooner have seen at this hour than your amiable self."

After the first paralysing second, Chauvelin had jumped to his feet. He had thought that once again his feverish fancy was playing his senses a mocking trick, that the face which ever haunted his day-dreams and his sleepless nights had only come to him on the wings of imagination. But the merry laugh, the lazy voice were all too real. His enemy was truly there, not a vision, but a cruel, mocking reality. Swiftly his clawlike hand shot out, fastened on an object that lay amidst a litter of papers, and would have lifted it, had not another slender and firm hand shot out likewise and fastened itself upon his wrist with a grasp like a vice of steel.

Chauvelin had the greatest difficulty in the world to smother a cry of pain. His fingers opened, spread out fan-wise, the pistol which he had seized fell back upon the litter of papers. With a soft laugh Sir Percy sat down on the edge of the table, picked up the pistol, withdrew the charge and swept it into the sand-box close to his hand, the while Chauvelin watched him greedily, hungrily, as a caged feline might watch a prey that was beyond its reach.

A white-faced clock on the wall struck the half-hour. Sir Percy laid the pistol down upon the table, and flicked his fine, well-shaped hands one against the other.

"There now, my dear M. Chambertin," he said gaily, "we can converse more comfortably together. Do you think it would have been wise to put a charge of powder through your humble servant? We should both of us have missed much of the zest of life."

"It is always your pleasure to mock, Sir Percy," Chauvelin said with an effort. "There are various popular sayings which I might recall to your mind, such as that the pitcher went once too often to the well."

"And Sir Percy once too often to visit his friend M. Chambertin, eh?"

"I think you will find that this is so," Chauvelin rejoined trying, none too successfully, to ape his enemy's easy familiarity. "Orange is not a healthy place for English spies these days."

"Possibly not," Blakeney retorted lightly. "Nor for some unfortunate children of France, I am thinking."

"Traitors and spies, you are right there, Sir Percy. We have no use for them in Orange — or elsewhere."

"Or for honest men, eh, my friend? for chaste women and innocent children. That is why your humble servant and the league of which methinks you know a thing or two, propose to remove these from this polluted soil."

Chauvelin had rested this elbow on the table. His hand shading his face against the glare of the lamp, effectually concealed its varying expressions from the keen eyes of his enemy.

"You have not told me yet, Sir Percy," he said after a few second's silence, "what procures me the honour of your visit at this hour."

"Pure chance, my dear sir," Blakeney replied, "though the honour is entirely mine. As a matter of fact I came to find one Armand."

Twice did the pendulum of the white-faced clock tick the seconds before Chauvelin said quietly:

"My colleague? Have you business with him?"

"Yes," Blakeney replied slowly. "I have a message for him."

"I can deliver it."

"Why not I? since I came on purpose."

"My colleague is absent."

"I can wait."

"From whom then is the message?"

"From his daughter."

"Ah!"

Once more there was a pause. The white-faced clock ticked on but the two men were silent. Chauvelin's face was shaded by his hand, and it needed all the energy, all the strength of his will to keep that hand absolutely steady, not to allow a finger to tremble. In the other hand he held a long quill pen and with it he traced a geometrical pattern upon a blank sheet of paper. Sir Percy Blakeney, still sitting on the edge of the table watched him, motionless.

"Pretty drawing that," he said abruptly. And with a slender finger pointed to the design that grew in intricate lines under Chauvelin's aimless pen.

The other gave a start, the pen spluttered, scattering the ink in spots all over the paper.

"There now, you have spoilt it," Sir Percy continued lightly. "I had no idea you were such a master draughts-man."

Chauvelin threw down his pen. He had his nerves under control at last, was able to drop his hand, to lean back in his chair, and with both hands buried in the pockets of his breeches, to throw back his head and look his enemy squarely in the face.

"About that message, Sir Percy," he said with well-feigned indifference.

"What about it, my dear M. Chambertin?" Blakeney rejoined lightly.

"My colleague, Citizen Armand, has been called away — to Lyons on State business."

"But how unfortunate!" Sir Percy exclaimed.

"I am sending a courier to Lyons this very night."

"Too late, my dear M. Chambertin! Too late, I fear!"

Chauvelin frowned. "What mean you by too late, Sir Percy?" he asked slowly.

"Armand's daughter is sick, my dear M. Chambertin," Blakeney rejoined, speaking very slowly, as if to weigh his every word.

"Before your courier can possibly reach Lyons, she will be dead."

"My God!—"

It was the most heart-rending cry that had ever come from a man's throat. Chauvelin had jumped to his feet; his two hands, claw-like, as if carved in marble, gripped the arms of his chair; his knees were shaking, his pale eyes stared like those of a maniac, his cheeks were the colour of lead.

For the space of ten seconds he stood thus, with his whole body quivering, his senses reeling, his eyes fixed on those finely moulded lips that had dealt this appalling blow. Then slowly consciousness returned, a veil seemed to be lifted from before his eyes, knowledge had entered his brain. He knew that he had fallen into the trap set for him by this astute adventurer. He realised that he had betrayed the secret which he would have guarded with his life.

"So," Sir Percy said at last very slowly, "'tis you are Citizen Armand, and the sweetest flower that ever bloomed in this putrid atmosphere has its roots in polluted soil?"

Still quite slowly and deliberately he drew Fleurette's note out of the breast-pocket of his coat; for a second or two he held it lightly between slender finger and thumb, then laid it on the table in front of Chauvelin.

"She is not sick," he said quietly, "nor yet dying. If you have not forgotten how to pray, man, pray to God now, pray with all your might, that the same power which enabled you to torture my wife and wellnigh to break her brave spirit, will aid you to save your daughter from those tigers whom you have called your friends."

Chauvelin had sunk back in the chair. His head was buried in his hands. Tumultuous thoughts rushed through his brain until he felt that his reason must be tottering. A haze was before his eyes. Perhaps it was caused by tears. Who knows? Only the recording angel mayhap. Even wild beasts cry in agony when deprived of their young.

Only after a few minutes did he become aware of the note penned by his little Fleurette and laid in front of him by his bitterest foe. The Scarlet Pimpernel! The only man in all the world who might perhaps have saved Fleurette, who would have saved Fleurette, if he, Chauvelin, had not betrayed the secret of his heart.

Like one waking from a dream, Chauvelin picked up the note, and looked fearfully about him, dreading to meet those mocking lazy eyes, which, no doubt, at this hour gleamed with malicious triumph.

But Sir Percy Blakeney was no longer there.

Chapter 33

The stage was now set for the last act of the tragedy, which the chief actor himself knew could only end one way. He had schemed and planned until he felt that his reason would give way, until he feared that he would lose the nerve and the power of which he had such sore need. He had thought of everything, weighed every possibility from the bribing of prison warders, to the suppression — by murder if need be — of the two witnesses Godet and Adèle. He had thought of turning the tables on Pochart and Danou, by launching accusations against them. But all these plans had to be rejected one by one. Fleurette liberated to-day through the success of one or the other of these schemes would only be re-arrested on the morrow. The suppression of the witnesses, the arrest of his more powerful enemies, would only rouse more bitter antagonism against himself and failing in the end to save his Fleurette, would end in precipitating her doom.

Driven by despair, he had at one time pinned his hopes of salvation for the child on the possible interference of the Scarlet Pimpernel, but even that fond and foolish hope had been shattered by his betrayal of his jealously guarded secret. What was there left to hope for? That his power was great enough at the Tribunal to force an acquittal in spite of the witnesses, in spite of Pochart and Danou and all the mob whom they had already gathered round them. The Public Prosecutor, a man of his own making, would not dare to side against him. But there was the populace, the rabble, the swinish multitude, who, now that even the worst type of venal and corrupt jury had been abolished, were judges and jury, advocate and prosecutor all in one. The last word always rested with them, and Pochart and Danou, egged on by envy and revenge, would know how to sway the rabble.

Chauvelin was not the man to indulge in illusions. He knew well enough — none better — that the passions of hatred and of spite which he himself had engendered and fostered in the hearts of his fellowmen, were turned against him, as they had been turned on all the makers of this bloody revolution, on your Brissots and your Carriers, your Philippe d'Orléans, and your great Danton. They would destroy his exquisite Fleurette as effectually as they had destroyed thousands of others, equally innocent.

And now the end had come. No longer could the day be put off. President Legrange and Public Prosecutor Isnard might be arriving in Paris any hour when the new aerial telegraph might be set in motion, or a courier sent down to Orange poste-haste and burst the bubble of Chauvelin's machinations.

And then on that afternoon of the 15th of June two things occurred. To begin with when the Public Prosecutor placed before him the printed forms of accusation with the names left in blank, and with them a list of the names of those awaiting trial, Chauvelin with a hand that appeared quite steady, wrote in one blank space the name of Fleur Chauvelin, nommée Armand. Secondly when, an hour later, the captain of the guard stood in the courtyard of the Caristie house reading out the names of those who were to stand their trial on the morrow, Fleurette heard the sound of her own name.

She was not frightened, nor did she weep. Tears were a thing of the past for her. Twenty days had gone by since she had been happy, more than a fortnight since she had been brought into this house and deprived of air and sunlight and joy. One by one those who had been kind to her in this prison house had gone: Claire de Châtelard, Madame de Mornas, poor Eugénie Blanc, and kind M. de Bollène. Their names had been on the roll-call. The next day they were gone, and Fleurette never saw them again. Lately she had been lonely too. No one had taken the place in her unsophisticated heart of Claire de Châtelard. The only friend she had left was the warder's aide, the rough scavenger who had brought her the two welcome letters. Amédée's and Bibi's. He still continued his antics, joined in the gruesome mummeries which still went on in the common room, and Fleurette somehow had a sense of re-assurance when he was nigh. But this night of all nights, after she had heard the captain of the guard read her name upon the roll-call, her grimy friend was not there. Fleurette missed him, and disappointment over his absence was the only sorrowful feeling of which she felt conscious, when she realised that her fate would be decided on the morrow.

She was not afraid. Had not Bibi enjoined her, begged her to trust him and not to be afraid? She wondered when she would be allowed to see Bibi, whether he would be there to-morrow, at her trial, encouraging her with his presence and with his glance when she was made to stand before the judge. She knew that in a sense she had done wrong. She had taken Madame's valuables and handed them over to Amédée. This she had no right to do, and since Adèle had seen her with M'sieur Amédée that evening, and spoken ill of her because of that, she supposed that she would be punished. It was only vaguely that she marvelled what the punishment would be. But she was not afraid because she trusted Bibi. Nor did she regret her actions. If it had all to be done over again, she would act in precisely the same way. The mysterious voice often rang in her ear even now. She had obeyed the commands of le bon Dieu, and it was le bon Dieu who had chosen a still more mysterious way for saving M'sieur Amédée from the consequences of her actions.

Thus did Fleurette envisage the day that was to come, with love and trust in her heart for Bibi, and the certainty after all these trials and tribulations of a happy reunion with him and old Louise at Lou Mas.

Not to mention the reunion with M'sieur Amédée.

Chapter 34

The first thing that struck Fleurette's perceptions when she entered that huge room, was that up at the further end of it — upon a raised platform and behind a tall desk, sat Bibi chéri himself. Two other men sat there with him, but Fleurette hardly saw them. It was on Bibi that she looked. She had slept very little during the night. Excitement had kept her awake, as well as the tears and lamentation of two of her room-mates who were to appear with her this day before the tribunal.

And it was Bibi who was to be her judge. Well then obviously she had nothing to fear. One of some fifteen of her fellow-prisoners, she was hustled with them across the room to a wooden bench where they were roughly ordered to sit down. As they crossed the room boos and hisses, and one or two louder cries of execration, greeted them. A few remarks, all of them malevolent, rose above the murmurs.

"That old man there, I knew him once. Old tyrant. He's getting his deserts at last."

"Do you see the woman next to him? Five free-born Frenchwomen she had at a time once, to wait on her and do her hair. Aristos, va! It won't take long to do thy hair to-morrow. One snick with the scissors, what?"

"That young wench too. Not much more than eighteen, I warrant."

"I hear she is a thief as well as a traitor."

"Pity they should have abolished the whipping-post. That would have done the young traitors a world of good."

"Me, I prefer the guillotine; quickest work, eh?"

Fleurette had blushed with shame to the roots of her hair. She tried not to look in the direction whence these voices, harsh and coarse had come. She tried to think of M'sieur Amédé and of the joy she would have when she saw him again. But she could not shut the gates of her consciousness against all these people who had gathered here for the sole purpose of seeing their fellow-creatures suffer. Men and women and even little children. The women for the most part had brought their knitting, for every one was knitting socks these days for the brave soldiers who were fighting against the enemies of France, and through the murmur of voices, the monotonous click-click of the needles acted as an irritant upon the nerves.

All around there appeared to be a sea of faces. And eyes. Innumerable eyes that glared, and mouths that grinned and decided. And above the faces, a sea of red caps with tricolour cockades. Fleurette tried hard not to look. She closed her eyes and tried to murmur the prayers she and M'sieur Amédé used to say together when M. le Cure prepared them for their first communion.

Bibi wore a hat with feathers. He had a bell in front of him, and this he often tinkled, when the noise from the crowd all around became too great. Once or twice he was addressed as "Citizen President." Fleurette had never seen him look so stern. The words which he spoke to the accused were not only bitter but terribly cruel. He seemed so unlike her real chéri Bibi, that she caught herself marvelling whether her fancy was not playing her aching eyes some strange and horrible trick.

One after the other the names of her fellow-prisoners were called, and one by one they were made to stand up and then walk to the centre of the room and up a couple of shallow steps to a small raised platform round which there was a wooden railing. In every instance as soon as the prisoner mounted this platform, and became as it were the centre of attraction for all these innumerable eyes, he or she would be greeted with groans and hisses and cat's calls, until Bibi tinkled his bell and loudly demanded silence.

A man in a red cap who sat just below Bibi's desk then stood up and read something out aloud, which Fleurette never understood, but which the crowd apparently did, for the reader was frequently interrupted by more boos and hisses and often cries of execration. After this reading Bibi, or one of the two men who sat beside him, asked the prisoner questions. These were sometimes replied to, but not always. The crowd invariably threw in loud comments on both questions and answers, and Bibi was then forced to tinkle his bell in order to demand silence. And through the noise, the sound that was never drowned, and never was still, was the click-click of hundreds of knitting needles.

The first batch of prisoners to face the Tribunal, were men and women almost unknown to Fleurette. They had not long been brought into the Caristie House, had replaced others who had been Fleurette's early companions in prison. She had seen them in the common room, acting in the grim farces that were the fashion there, but she had not made friends with them as she had done with Claire de Châtelard or Madame de Mornas. But when came the turn of a woman who had actually been her room-mate, who had sat next to her on the bench of the accused, and squeezed her hand ere she was led up to the raised platform with the wooden railing, then, Fleurette felt all her resolution of bravery and trust in Bibi, giving way.

The heat in the room had become unbearable. The stench of dank and grimy clothes, of perspiring humanity, of hot breaths charged with hate, acted as a pungent soporific. Fleurette's head fell forward once or twice, her eyes involuntarily closed. For a time she lost consciousness. It was her own name spoken in a stentorian voice that brought her back to reality.

"Fleur Chauvelin, nommée Armand."

Some one nudged her elbow. An impatient voice rasped out a sharp: "Allons! allons!" and she found herself dragged to her feet and led by the arm to the raised platform, amidst a din which fortunately was too great to allow her ears to catch individual sounds.

She looked straight across to Bibi, who was as pale as a waxen image.

"Fleur Chauvelin, nommée Armand."

Chapter 35

There is no doubt that everything would have gone well, had it not been for Fleurette herself. Perhaps “well” is the wrong word: “differently” would be better. Nothing could have gone “well,” because even though Chauvelin had succeeded in obtaining an acquittal, his enemies would have returned immediately to the charge, and forced on the girl’s re-arrest even before she had left the Tribunal. There had been cases during the past few weeks, in Paris, in Lyons and so on, when prisoners were acquitted and re-arrested, re-tried, acquitted again, and again re-arrested. A regular cat-and-mouse game, at which Chauvelin himself was an adept. Nevertheless with a first acquittal there might have been some hope. And he practically had obtained that acquittal, when Fleurette herself ruined her chance and caused her own condemnation. Chauvelin could have struck her for her folly. His love for her always pertained to that of a wild beast for its young; the instinct to devour in moments of peril. If she was destined to perish, then it should be by his own hand, not as a spectacle for the rabble to gloat on.

The Moniteur of the 22nd Messidor gives one or two interesting details concerning the trial of a country girl named Fleur Chauvelin, daughter of a Citizen Armand Chauvelin of the Central Committee of Public Safety, and member of the National Convention, and relates at full length the extraordinary incidents which marked its close. Looking back upon that memorable day, and on the solemn hour which saw the girl Fleur Chauvelin, nommée Armand called to the bar of the accused, we visualise Chauvelin the father, presiding over that Tribunal of infamy, and having sent within the last half-hour half a dozen fellow- creatures callously to death, now seeing his own daughter, the only being in all the world whom he had ever loved, standing there before him, accused, condemned already in the eyes of the canaille.

There was no time wasted during the proceedings, wherein the accused was allowed neither jury nor advocate. The State as represented by its three nominees who sat as judges, was judge and jury and prosecutor all in one. It was men like Chauvelin who had invented this travesty of justice and eliminated all procedure devised by civilisation for the protection of the accused.

The Public Prosecutor opened the proceedings by reading the indictment in mechanical monotone; it was identically the same as that framed against hundreds of others — guilty or innocent alike — the printed formula invented by the odious Fouquier-Tinville in which the words “Traitor” and “Enemy of the Republic” were alone intelligible. All else was a jumble of words. The crowd was not listening. Their attention was fixed on the accused whose modest bearing and spotless attire seemed to arouse their spite and their derision, more than the rags and filth displayed by a previous prisoner had done.

When the reading of the indictment came to an end, Pochart sitting beside the Presiding Judge asked the usual question:

“Is the prisoner accused publicly or in secret?”

And the Public Prosecutor replied: “Publicly.”

Danou, the third judge then asked: “By whom?”

And again the Public Prosecutor gave reply:

“By one Adèle,” he said, “of unknown parentage, and Citizen Lieutenant Godet of the revolutionary army.”

“And to what will these persons testify?”

“To the treason committed against the State by the accused and to her connection with the enemies of the Republic.”

After which Adèle was called. Her small rat-like face looked wan and pinched; her hands trembled visibly, and she wiped them continually against the ragged apron which she wore. She was obviously very nervous and never looked once in the direction of the accused, but she spoke clearly enough in a shrill, high-pitched voice. Questioned at first by the Public Prosecutor, she presently embarked more glibly upon her story, relating the events which were intended to condemn Fleurette. Chauvelin already knew the tale by heart. The soldiers on the ridge. The raid on the château. Fleurette’s halt that evening in the cottage of the widow Tronchet. Her assignation, through Adèle, with Amédée Colombe. The casket and wallet underneath her shawl, then transferred into young Colombe’s keeping.

Oftimes Chauvelin tried to break into the girl’s narrative; he put stern questions to her, tried to intimidate her, to trip her into misstatements or obvious contradictions. But Adèle held her ground. Informer, ingrate, wanton though she was, she was speaking the truth and was not to be shaken. Hisses and boos from the crowd oft greeted the President’s cross-questionings, cries of approbation greeted Adèle’s spirited rejoinders. In the wordy warfare between herself and Chauvelin, she scored nearly every time. Encouraged by the sympathy of the rabble, she lost her nervousness, whilst he gradually lost his self-control. He had so much at stake, and she nothing but the satisfaction of vanity and of spite.

“Be not intimidated, citizeness,” Pochart put in forcefully at one moment, “let not powerful influences sway you from your duty.”

“Vas-y, Adèle of unknown parentage!” one of the women shouted from above. “’Twas some aristo doubtless who betrayed thy mother. Let this aristo at least pay for her kind.”

Amidst thunderous applause Adèle stepped down from the bar. Chauvelin tried in vain to command silence, he was shouted down by the crowd.

“Thou’rt a true patriot, Citizen Chauvelin,” one woman called out lustily. “To have a traitor for a daughter is a curse. Her death will not be for thee a sacrifice.”

He waited in seeming patience, white to the lips, until the tumult had subsided, then calling all his reserves of strength, moral and mental, to his aid, he said in a calm firm voice:

“The witness has lied. The events which she has described could not have taken place in her presence seeing that on that day and at that hour she was in my house, at Lou Mas, half a league away.”

This pronouncement was greeted with mighty uproar. Derisive laughter, cat’s calls, whistling, strident shouts made riotous confusion. Only two persons in the room appeared serene. One was the accused, the other her judge. The Moniteur says that throughout the whole proceedings the attitude of the accused was astonishingly calm: “d’une sérénité étonnante.” She looked straight before her, sometimes at the President, but more often her eyes appeared to be fixed on the tricolour flag draped over the wall above his head, and ornamented with a red cap and the words writ largely: “Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort.”

And so too was the President equally serene. Outwardly. He stood upright whilst the turmoil continued, with head erect and hands held behind his back. Insults and jeers flew at him from every side. But he never winced. The rabble called him, "Traitor, Liar, Tyrant!" and various other names impossible to record. But he waited in seeming patience, until the crowd, eager to hear more, fell to comparative stillness once more. Then Pochart's rasping voice cut through the silence, like the sound of a file against metal.

"You'll have to substantiate that statement Citizen President," he said.

"My statements need no substantiation," Chauvelin retorted coolly. "The word of a representative of the people is sufficient against any witness."

And while Pochart was considering a suitable repartee, Danou put in smoothly:

"Should we not hear the next witness, citizen Lieutenant Godet, before we discuss the matter?"

"Yes, yes!" the crowd yelled in response.

Scenting the unusual, the crowd was more excited than was its wont. Of late these hasty trials, six to the hour, with condemnation as a foregone conclusion, had become monotonous. One condemnation had been very much like another. But here was something novel. The rumour had already spread like wildfire that the accused was no less than the daughter of the President, Citizen Chauvelin, who was well-known in the councils of State, a prominent member of many committees, and, some said, a personal friend of the great Robespierre. Here in truth was a test of supreme patriotism; a judge called upon to condemn his own daughter if she be guilty. And of course she was guilty, or she would not be here. There was no sympathy for either of them, only interest in the issue of this amazing trial. The crowd did not like the prisoner's attitude, what they called her aristocratic airs and disdainful ways; even the children pointed grimy little fingers at her and hurled the poisonous darts of loathsome epithets at the aristocrat.

Thus was the scene prepared for the entrance of Lieutenant Godet, who stepped up to the witness' platform with a display of self-assurance and a swagger that charmed the women. He was a man after their own heart, a real *sans culotte* in grimy rags, unkempt, unshaved, unwashed, the type of which the martyr Jean Paul Marat had been the most perfect exponent.

Conversations, objurgations, murmurs even were stilled; the click-click of knitting needles alone made a soft accompaniment to Citizen Godet's replies to the Public Prosecutor's preliminary questions. It was indeed a remarkable, an amazing, an almost unbelievable tale, which he had to tell. And gradually as he unfolded the various details of this extraordinary adventure a hush fell over the crowded room, very like the calm which nature assumes ere she sends forth the thunders of her wrath.

Godet, still with this air of self-assurance, related how he and the soldiers under his command, as well as the whole commune of Laragne had been tricked by a band of English spies whose actions proved them to have been in league with Amédée Colombe and with the accused. He told of the magnificently dressed soldiers. Their raid on the premises of Colombe the grocer of the Rue Haute. Their march through the village. Their captain's swagger. His orders to himself, Godet, and to the real soldiers of the revolutionary army.

Still the crowd gave no sign of approbation, or disapprobation. Only that ominous, expectant hush which presaged a storm. The accused always serene, smiled — so the *Moniteur* avers — as she encountered the President's glance. Smiled cheerfully and trustfully. But the President's face was inscrutable, and the colour of wax.

And then Godet went on to relate the long, weary tramp along the mountain roads. The dust. The fatigue. The want of food. He told how the *ci-devant* Frontenac and Amédée Colombe wrested from the hands of justice, were presently taken to some unknown place of safety, while the soldiers of the Republic were left by the wayside to perish of fatigue or inanition.

He had finished speaking, and still the click-click of the knitting needles was the only sound that broke the silence. The witness, sensing this silence, feeling its menace, had lost something of his arrogance; the hand with which he stroked his shaggy moustache trembled perceptibly. The accused, overcome by the heat, wiped her forehead with the corner of her apron, then she smiled once more across at her father.

And suddenly through the solemn stillness a woman's shrill voice was raised:

"Those English spies did make a fool of thee, I am thinking, Citizen Godet!"

This suddenly relieved the tension. It was like a dam let loose. In a moment every kind of call and of cry of laughter and of groan rang from end to end of the room.

"The English have made a fool of thee!"

Within a minute or two this became a general cry, accompanied by the stamping of feet, and loud and prolonged laughter, both malevolent and derisive. Godet, ludicrous in his bewilderment, rolled terror-filled eyes, whilst vainly trying to raise his voice above the din. The *Moniteur* says definitely that the accused put her hands to her ears. The uproar was in truth deafening.

A few moments of this confusion, and the next, Chauvelin was on his feet clanging his bell. His stentorian voice rose above the tumult, demanded silence, and in the lull that presently ensued, that same voice now subdued to a lower, though no less impressive key, rang clear and calm.

"Is it not an insult, citizen patriots to ask you to listen to the words of a fool, when the life of a French girl is at stake?"

The passionate earnestness with which he spoke, the burning indignation expressed in that calm, subdued voice, had the effect of awing the screaming rabble. They turned to gaze on him, as he stood there, facing them all, calm, proud, almost majestic, despite his small stature. Seizing this sudden advantage he began to speak. Without a gesture, hardly raising his voice, he began quietly, not choosing his words, or striving after eloquence, but only as a man speaking to his friends. And by one of those inexplicable reactions which will so often change the temper of a crowd, men, women and children ceased to curse and to deride. The innumerable eyes were fixed with more curiosity than malevolence upon him, the mouths, agape, uttered no further groan, and once more the click-click of knitting needles was momentarily stilled.

"Citizens," he said, "you have heard two witnesses against the accused. One of these, the wench Adèle I myself, representative of the people, have convicted of deliberate falsehood, spoken to the prejudice of a French patriot. The other your own words have condemned for a fool, and an easy tool in the hands of English spies. You called him a fool, citizens, but I call him a traitor. Lieutenant Godet was not a tool in the hands of the English spies, he was their confederate, their help. Can you bring yourselves to believe, citizens, that a loyal soldier of the Republic could be deceived by false uniforms, by French words spoken by alien lips? Can you believe this story of a forced march, of starvation by the wayside in the company of English spies whose every action, every word,

every gesture almost, must have betrayed them as the foreigners they actually were. Citizens, I appeal to that reputation for clear thinking and for logic, for which French men and women are famous throughout the world. At this hour when our beloved country is threatened on every side, is this the time, I say, for allowing yourselves to be duped by traitors who would sell you and your land, your dues and your liberty for English gold — ?”

“No! no!” came a lusty shout in response. And the crowd took up the cry. “No! We’ll not sell our liberties for English gold.”

“Say on, citizen representative.”

Pochart had jumped to his feet; once or twice he had tried to break in on Chauvelin’s peroration, with cries of: “Thou’rt slandering a soldier of the Republic!” or: “Traitor! thou’rt in league with thy daughter!”

But he was not listened to. There was something about Chauvelin which fascinated the mob. His white, calm face, his pale, piercing eyes, his voice, dull, even monotonous, but penetrating to the most distant corners of the room. And there was also that welcome element of novelty. This pleased the women. Trials and condemnations in incessant routine had begun to pall. Here was something new. Witnesses summoned, then discredited, and finally accused. Such a thing had never been witnessed before in Orange.

And so the crowd would not listen to Pochart or Danou, they wanted to hear Chauvelin; they did not particularly wish to see Fleurette nommée Armand acquitted, but they did relish the prospect of the two witnesses being sent to the bench of the accused. That was novelty for them, and it was what they wanted for the moment. Moreover they did think that the citizen lieutenant with all his swagger had been such a consummate fool, if no worse, that it would be distinctly amusing to see that stupid head of his roll down into the basket of the guillotine.

Neither Pochart nor Danou, however, were men to give up the struggle quite so easily. In the fight against the representative on special mission, who had threatened them and lorded it over them for so long, they only contemplated one issue: victory. Victory! which would mean satisfaction of pride and of revenge. They had set out to win and did not consider themselves beaten. Not yet. Already Pochart was on his feet, and his rasping voice rose booming above the tumult. As soon as a slight lull gave him an opportunity he seized it, and cried in thunderous accents:

“Citizens! Frenchmen! French women! All of you!” And then again: “Citizens all! Let me put the same question to you, that the President asked you just now: will you allow yourselves to be duped? Will you go like sheep whithersoever traitors may lead you?”

The crowd murmured and shrugged shoulders, would have shouted Pochart down only that the rasping voice of his rose above the cry of: “A la lanterne, all traitors and fools!”

Pointing an accusing finger at Chauvelin, Pochart took up the cry.

“So say I,” he roared in a terrific straining of his powerful lungs: “A la lanterne all the traitors who try to throw dust in your eyes. Have you forgotten that the citizen President is the father of the accused? And that he knows well enough that if the child be guilty, then is the parent guilty too? To save himself he is trying to shield a traitor. Do not allow yourselves to be duped by him. Look on the citizen President, my friends, and ask him how it comes about that he lavished all the treasures of his eloquence upon this one traitor, when yesterday and the day before that, he sent to the guillotine every man, woman and child who came before the Tribunal, and on a mere suspicion of treason.”

A dull murmur greeted this peroration. There had been something in Pochart’s eloquence which caused the crowd not to veer round just yet, but at an rate to look on the President of the Tribunal with rather less awe, and something approaching suspicion.

“That is true,” a woman said loudly. “The President showed no mercy to traitors yesterday. And it is treason now to be as much as suspected of treason, we’ve been told.”

“It is my duty to protect the innocent,” Chauvelin retorted firmly, “as well as to punish the guilty.”

“Methinks,” Danou now broke in, and his slow, and suave tones came in strange contrast to the clamorous eloquence of his colleagues: “methinks that the traitor Danton made some such remark too, ere justice put her hand on him.”

“Danton was a traitor, and thou too, Citizen Danou, art a traitor for speaking his name in this hall of justice.”

“Justice!” Pochart cried, pallid with rage, for he had felt that the word “traitor” hurled at Danou was meant to strike him also. “Justice! hark at the traitor, who should be standing in the dock beside his brood.”

“Vas-y, Citizen President,” the woman cried excitedly. “It is thy turn now.”

They had cast aside their knitting, so palpitating had this duel become between these three men. Insensate, doltish as they were, they scented the tragedy that underlay this wordy warfare; they guessed that the man who presided over this infamous tribunal and who with a casual stroke of the pen had sent hundreds indiscriminately to death, had one soft corner in his callous heart, and that his colleagues, consumed with envy and hatred were hitting at that vulnerable spot and had already succeeded in making him writhe in agony.

At the same time, such is the psychology of a multitude as against that of individuals, there was still a wave of sympathy tending in the direction of this father fighting so desperately for the life of his child. Strictly speaking it was not sympathy, rather was it mere instinctive understanding of family ties. Five years of this awful revolution, during which every cruel lust in man or woman had been sedulously fostered, every softer mood repressed, had not yet succeeded in crushing altogether that feeling for family solidarity which is the most distinctive characteristic of the French nation. And this spectacle of a father sitting in judgment over his own child, actually expressed to pronounce the death-sentence over her, did undoubtedly for the time being sway the crowd in his favour. He was given a more respectful hearing than either of his colleagues or either of the witnesses, and when Godet’s name recurred on the tapis, it was greeted with derisive cries of “Cet imbécile!” and when Adèle was mentioned, most of the women shouted spitefully: “Liar!”

Chauvelin, sensitive of course to the slightest wavering in the temper of the populace, felt his advantage and strained every nerve to press it home. The whole situation was of course terribly precarious. At any moment a look, a word, a false move on his part, might cause the crowd to veer right over against him. Even after an acquittal sometimes, the populace would suddenly demand that the accused be re-arrested: a second trial, more of a mockery and a travesty of justice than the first, would be insisted on, after which condemnation was a foregone conclusion. All this Chauvelin knew, none better, and there were moments when he felt as if madness or death were preferable to this terrible fight that in the end could have but one issue. And yet fight he must, fight for every inch of

ground, fight with the last breath in his body, and with it silence the vituperations of those fiends who had raised their noisome voices against his Fleurette.

Even now Pochart was on his feet again, shouting, gesticulating, banging his fist upon the table.

"Citizens," he reiterated for the third time, "do not let yourselves be duped by men who are ruining your country by pandering to traitors. Look at the accused! I say she is nothing but a wanton, who should be tied to the whipping-post ere she be sent to the guillotine. Look at the aristocrat, I say, with the demure airs and the folded kerchief; she, forsooth, goes forth o' nights to meet her lover under the almond-trees, there to concoct treason with her lover against the Republic. She was seen, remember, seen, I say, in spite of what interested parties may aver. You have heard the witness, a humble, simple girl, the victim of aristocratic lust and of tyranny. That witness spoke the truth. She saw the accused and her lover at dead of night whispering and embracing. I ask you, does a clean-minded, respectable woman, citizen of our glorious Republic, spend her nights in the company of her lover? Rather is it not the wanton, the traitor, who shuns the light of day and seeks the darkness, for the hatching of treasonable plots against the State? Look at the witness, citizens. Humbly and simply did she speak the truth—"

"She lied as well you know it, Citizen Pochart," Chauvelin broke in forcefully. "Liar, forger and thief, I decree her accused and command that she stand her trial for these offences against the Republic. Look at her, my friends, citizens all," he went on, and pointed an accusing finger at Adèle whose pinched little face had become the colour of lead, and who sat in a corner of the witness' bench, cowering within herself, her trembling hands, now and then, lifting a handkerchief to wipe the sweat of terror that had risen to her brow. "Look at her," Chauvelin continued, appealing to the sea of faces before him: "And now look at the accused. She is serene, because she is innocent; whilst the guilty trembles because she knows her treachery has come to light at last. Look at those two women, citizens, and yourselves pronounce which is the traitor and which is the stainless."

Of a truth all would have been well after that. Chauvelin passed a quivering hand across his brow. It was streaming with moisture. The strain had been immense. Mentally he felt broken by the effort. But he also felt that for the moment at least he had won the day. The *Moniteur* states definitely that: "il y eût tout lieu de croire qu'un acquittement eût été applaudi." At any rate the applause at the moment was deafening, and if Chauvelin could have obtained a hearing for another sixty seconds he would have put the acquittal to the populace vote, and, as the *Moniteur* says, it would have been carried.

What would have happened afterwards nobody can say. The most fickle entity in the world is a multitude, and of all the multitudes, an audience watching the suffering of a fellow-creature is the most fickle and the most callous. For the next two or three minutes at any rate, Chauvelin held the sympathy of the crowd. Fleurette did not count either way. For the spectators of this heart-rending pageant she was just a thing, an insentient object placed there for their entertainment, the pivot round which circled their excitement. But Chauvelin, the father pleading for his daughter's life had won their sympathy — the sympathy of tiger-cats, satiated for the moment and licking their chops in the intervals of snarling.

All then would have been well but for the action of one of the sympathisers who stood leaning up against the wall in the crowd; a giant he was, coated with grime — coal heaver or scavenger probably, only half clad in ragged shirt and torn breeches, with dirty feet thrust stockingless into sabots, a red worsted cap over his unkempt hair, his face streaked with sweat and coal-dust. In one hand he held a large raw carrot which he was munching with loud snapping of the jaws and smacking of the lips. He was one of the noisiest in his approval of the President's peroration.

"Vas-y, President," he shouted. "A la lanterne, the fools and traitors. Where is that trollop? Let her stand up. We want to look at her, eh, citizens?"

"Yes! Yes! we want to see her! Stand up, Adèle of unknown parentage! Let's look at you."

The women, or course, were the loudest in their demand for the unfortunate Adèle. Bred by misery, often out of degradation, trained by five years of an execrable revolution, the women of France were not *féministes* these days. The spectacle of one of their own sex on the guillotine gave them more satisfaction than that of a man. Now they wanted to see Adèle of the pinched, rat-like face, Adèle with the trembling hands and the shrinking shoulders, they wanted to see her squirm before their wrath, they wanted to see her wriggle like a worm prodded with a pin. Incidentally they had almost for gotten Fleurette.

Louder and even louder they clamoured for Adèle, and at an order from the President, two soldiers of the National guard did presently drag Adèle from the corner of the witness' bench where she was cowering like a frightened rodent, and dragged her — or rather carried her — to the bar of the accused. The crowd seeing that its dictates were being obeyed, restrained its frenzy for an instant and, through the comparative stillness that ensued, a piercing shriek rang out from the unfortunate Adèle.

"Mercy! Mercy!" she cried, and struggled fiercely to free herself from the men's grasp. "I am innocent! I spoke the truth."

A thunderous shout of derisive laughter greeted her cry. The women, with their hands on their knees, were literally rocking with laughter. They thought that Adèle with a face like a rat, wisps of lank hair poking out from underneath her cap which sat all awry, with mouth wide open uttering shrieks which no one could hear through the deafening tumult, was supremely funny.

The President made no attempt to quell the disturbance. It was all to the good. The greater the hatred against Adèle, the greater his chance, not only of forcing wave of sympathy for himself at full-tide, until he had the opportunity of getting Fleurette out of Orange. He was striving with all his might to catch his darling's eye. But Fleurette's glance was fixed on Adèle. She seemed to him to be fascinated with horror, mute and paralysed. She was looking on Adèle, and her dear little hand was fidgeting the corner of her kerchief.

Through the ear-splitting uproar led by the women, Pochart and Danou, their sympathisers, men of their own choosing, vainly tried to get a hearing. As well try to shout down a tempestuous sea as these hundreds of women gloating over the spectacle of one of their own sex writhing in an agony of terror.

"Hein!" came in a stentorian shout from the grimy giant in the rear of the crowd; "thou wouldst slander the innocent girl with lies. Take that for thy pains."

And he hurled the remnant of his raw carrot over the head of the intervening crowd at the unfortunate Adèle.

It missed her by a hairbreadth, but the action delighted the crowd. They took up the cry: "Take that for thy pains!" and sent various missiles flying at the girl, who, crouching down on her knees, lay there like a bundle of goods just below the bar of the accused where Fleurette stood, gazing down at her, fascinated with horror.

Looking back later on that terrible moment, Chauvelin felt that it was the action of the grimy coal-heaver — or scavenger, whatever he was — that precipitated the catastrophe. He it was who egged on the rabble to virulent hatred against Adèle. It was he who by hurling that first missile at the girl brought in a further, more immense element of cruelty and horror into the situation. Certain it is that up to that moment Fleurette had appeared more dazed than horrified. She must even in her own gentle heart have felt a burning indignation against Adèle for the treacherous part which she had played, and if the girl's arrest had been effected outside the Tribunal, she would perhaps never have actually realised what had brought it about. But with that shout of "Thou wouldst slander the innocent girl with thy lies," full consciousness returned to her, and with it the recollection of everything that had gone before. Chauvelin, who watched her with the devouring gaze of his love, saw as in a flash, through the quick glance which swept from Adèle to himself and thence over the sea of perspiring faces, the full workings of her mind.

He tried to keep the tumult going; he hoped that Fleurette would faint, so that she might be carried out of court. He prayed that the roof of the gigantic building would come crashing down and bury him and Fleurette and all that swinish multitude in its ruins ere she spoke the words which he saw hovering on her lips.

But none of these things happened. Rather by that perversity which is peculiar to Chance, a sudden lull broke in on the mighty uproar, a lull through which Fleurette's calm voice rang clear as water poured into a crystal glass.

"Adèle was not lying, nor did she slander me, I did give some valuable articles into the keeping of my beloved M'sieur Amédée Colombe, at the hour spoken of by her, and I have no doubt that she did see me, as she says."

Chapter 36

One must of necessity turn once more to the *Moniteur* of the 22nd Messidor year II of the Republic One and Indivisible. There in the *Choix des Rapports* XXV. 516-17, despite its sobriety of language and paucity of detail, there is ample proof that throughout the proceedings it was the action of one unknown that precipitated the final catastrophe. "Un géant," we are told, "fut le premier à lancer l'accusation fautive contre le Président du Tribunal, et on tumulte irrépressible s'ensuivit."

"False," you observe. But on that 16th day of June, 1794, Chauvelin of the National Convention, member of committees and confidant of Robespierre, did, we know, stand in danger of being dragged out into the open and hung on the nearest lamp post. The crowd was in no mood even to wait for the paraphernalia of the guillotine. They wanted to see the arch-traitor, the perjurer, who had sworn false oaths and lied in order to save himself and his brood, hang then and there. The giant spoken of in the *Choix des Rapports* had, it seems, hardly waited till the words were out of Fleurette's mouth, before he pushed his way to the forefront of the crowd, with vigorous play of his powerful elbows. Down he was now, in the body of the court. In the struggle, his ragged shirt had been half torn off his shoulders, and his broad chest and sinewy arms could be seen, nude and immense, and coated with grime. Out of one of the pockets of his tattered breeches he produced another uncooked carrot, and into this he bit lustily, then with a wide sweep of the arm he launched one by one against the President of the Tribunal the damning invectives which the *Moniteur* has characterised as false. "Traitor!" he cried. "Liar and perjurer! Citizens all, have you in all your lives ever witnessed such infamy?"

The *Choix des Rapports* describes the tumult as irrepressible. Indeed at that moment it would have been easier to dam a raging torrent with one pair of hands, than to suppress the riotous confusion that ensued. Fleurette of a truth stood there forgotten, so did Adèle and Godet. All eyes were fixed on the President, every menacing gesture tended in his direction, all the strident cries, the insults, the varied and foul epithets were hurled against him. There were but few sober tempers in that crowded room at the moment. A dozen perhaps; no more. Older men, one or two women who watched rather than yelled. And what they saw interested and puzzled them, so much that, when the time came, when everybody else was shouting themselves hoarse to the verge of mania, they still kept cool and silent.

Like everybody else these few were gazing on the President. They saw him standing there on the bench like a figure carved in stone, and, like a stone, his face was of a grey, ashen colour. His eyes looked dim and colourless as if a hand had drawn a film over them; his lips were parted, his nostrils distended. The breath seemed to come with difficulty out of his lungs. A figure, in truth of terror and despair. But calm and still. Motionless as a stone. The giant munching his carrot had waved his huge arms about and yelled himself hoarse until he had lashed all the spectators into a state of frenzy. Finally he strode across the room, and came to a halt close to the judges; bench facing the President.

The three judges had been watching him all along: Pochart and Danou with undisguised glee, and President Chauvelin with that stony stare out of his colourless eyes. But even as the giant approached, Chauvelin though apparently motionless, seemed inwardly to sink within himself, to crouch as a hunted beast in face of the menacing enemy. And suddenly like that of an automaton, up went his arm. With finger outstretched he pointed at the giant and one word escaped his trembling, rigid lips.

"You!"

Those who were watching him could not understand the word, for it was spoken in an alien tongue. Nor could they understand what happened afterwards. But what actually did happen was that the grimy giant threw back his head and gave a quaint and altogether pleasant laugh.

"Why yes!" he said in the same alien tongue, which no one present understood. "At your service, my dear M. Chambertin."

And Chauvelin murmured almost under his breath:

"You have your revenge at last, Sir Percy."

"Hitting back as you see, my friend."

It all passed unperceived in the midst of the irrepressible tumult, save by those few who sober-tempered chose to watch rather than to yell. It is doubtful whether even Pochart and Danou, who sat close by, saw anything of this brief, this mysterious scene.

The very next moment the grimy giant, this time with a hoarse and not at all a pleasant laugh, had hurled his half-munched carrot straight into the President's face. Then facing the crowd once more he threw up his great arms high above his head.

"Why should we wait, citizens?" he shouted louder than the rest of the yelling crowd. "A la lanterne, I say, the traitor and his brood. The guillotine is ready outside the Place. The executioner is to hand. Why wait?"

Nothing could have pleased the crowd better. They were all like tigers scenting blood, demanding it, licking their jaws in anticipation.

"Who is for a front place for the spectacle?" a man shouted from the rear of the crowd.

"A moi! the front place," a woman cried in response.

"A moi! A moi!" came from every side.

Then the general scramble began. A stampede down the gradients. The clatter of wooden sabots against the floor. The screams of women and children pushed and squeezed by the crowd. The grounding of arms, the click of bayonets, the words of command from the officer in charge of the guard, who were here to maintain order and who were quite powerless. The did of a truth try to stem the mob, to prevent the mad rush, the trampling, the stampede. But there were in reality too few of them for the task. All available fighting men being required for the army abroad, these were for the most part too inexperienced and too incompetent; raw recruits, half-trained for a wholly inadequate corps of gendarmerie. The officers did what they could, but the men themselves were soon caught in the vortex. Having no idea of discipline or duty, they soon became just a part of the mob, allowed themselves to be carried along by the crowd. They were just as excited, just as eager to see the President of a revolutionary tribunal sent summarily to the guillotine, as anyone else. Their lust for the spectacle was as keen as that of any ragamuffin in the place. They were but half-trained ragamuffins themselves, and as every man these days was at least as good as his officer and owed him neither obedience nor respect, it was small wonder that in emergencies like these, the soldiers got out of hand, whilst the officers, shrugging their shoulders, viewed the scene with indifference.

In the meanwhile the grimy giant had effectually fought his way along the floor of the house as far as the bar of the accused, where Fleurette, wide-eyed, deathly pale, half-crazy now with terror, had just fallen forward unconscious across the railing, drooping like a lily that is battered by the storm.

“And à moi the traitors,” the giant shouted, and it was marvellous how his booming voice rang above the uproar and the confusion.

He dragged Fleurette’s inanimate body from the bar and flung it over his shoulder, as if it were a bundle of goods. Then with two huge strides he was right in front of the judges’ bench, and there turned back to face the crowd again.

“Take your places for the spectacle,” the Titan shouted, “and I’ll bring along the actors for you.”

And so they rushed out in a compact, struggling mass, hurrying, scurrying, fighting and pushing and struggling. Out in the open, in the Place de la République, into the sunshine and under the blue vault of heaven they rushed. The guillotine was set up there ready for its afternoon work, but, as the grimy giant had said, “Why wait?” Why indeed. No one was in a mood for waiting. The blackest traitor this town had ever seen had tried to save himself and his brood by slandering worthy citizens of the République. By the by, where were they? Adèle of unknown parentage and the swaggering Lieutenant Godet? Ah bah! they were forgotten. Lost in the crowd. Who cared? Time enough to cheer them when the traitors and slanderers were punished. Who cared indeed? For the moment the most important thing in the world was to secure a place of vantage for witnessing the wonderful spectacle. The President of a revolutionary tribunal, a representative of the people in the National Convention, was not often to be seen in Orange mounting the steps of the guillotine. That spectacle was reserved for the Parisians — lucky people! — who saw the heads of ci-devant kings and queens, of generals and dukes and duchesses and of countless other aristos roll into the basket. Therefore every one scrambled for a good seat. The houses all round the Place were invaded by the mob; windows and balconies were soon filled with eager faces; boys and men swarmed on the roofs, clung to the rain-pipes, the gargoyles on the Hôtel de Ville, the guillotine reared its gaunt arms, painted a vivid red. The officers of the gendarmerie had succeeded by dint of threats, in restoring some semblance of order in the tenue of their men. They now stood at attention round the guillotine on the platform of which the executioner was busy with his grim task.

The crowd around was very still. Something oppressive, unconnected with the heat of midday sun, seemed to hang in the air. People were still pouring out of the Hôtel de Ville, though not in such compact numbers. Gradually these numbers too were thinned. Those that came out last appeared more sober, less excited than the mob that had spread itself all over the Place shrieking and gesticulating in the manner habitual to these natives of the South. Some of the last to come out were a group of men well known in Orange, one was the butcher from the rue Longue, another the innkeeper of Les Trois Abeilles, a third kept the haberdashery shop over the bridge. Citizens Pochart and Danou were with them. They were all talking eagerly together as they came down the steps. A group of women were standing close by.

“Are they bringing the traitors?” they asked.

“Yes Citizen Tartine,” the butcher replied, “that fine patriot Rémi, one of the scavengers at the Caristie house is close behind us, with some of his mates. They’ve got the traitors between them. We are to give the sign by firing this pistol when the executioner is ready.”

He showed the women the pistol which he said Rémi himself had given him.

“The executioner is ready now,” the women said, three of them speaking at once.

Citizens Pochart and Danou and the others then walked across the Place to the foot of the guillotine, one of them spoke a few words with the executioner. The crowd of spectators watched with feverish excitement. And presently Citizen Tartine, the butcher, raised his arm and fired a pistol in the air. A number of women shrieked. The excitement was so tense that the loud report sent the others into hysterics. Soon, however, the rumour went round that the pistol-shot was the signal that everything was ready for the spectacle and for the entrance of the chief actors in the play. After which every noise subsided. The multitude held its breath; a thousand pairs of eyes were fixed on the wide-open portals of the Hôtel de Ville waiting for the grandiose appearance of Rémi the scavenger and his mates bearing the traitors upon their shoulders.

Up, on the platform of the guillotine, the executioner was giving a last look to the pulleys. The soldiers stood at attention.

The huge crowd waited.

Chapter 37

The Moniteur does not say much about what happened afterwards. “La foule attendit avec assez de patience,” is all it says, “mais personne ne vint.”

The portals of the Hôtel de Ville which should have been a frame for the entrance of the principal actors in the last act of the drama, showed nothing but the yawning black emptiness beyond. The crowd waited, says the Moniteur, with sufficient patience. They did wait quite happily for ten minutes, agitatedly for twenty. But nobody came. Citizens Pochart and Danou, also Citizen Tartine, the butcher, and three or four others, were seen to make their way back across the Place, to run quickly up the steps of the Hôtel de Ville and subsequently disappear inside its portals. Still the crowd waited, very much as a crowd will wait in a theatre when the entr’acte is too long; some of them hilariously, others with impatient yawns, others again with tapping of feet and presently with murmurs of: “La Lan-terne! La Lan-terne!”

The next thing that happened was the reverberating clang of the portals of the Hôtel de Ville being suddenly closed. Then only did the crowd realise that they were being cheated of the spectacle. Murmurs were loud, and there were some hisses and boos and cat’s calls. But on the whole they took the event with extraordinary calm. There was no rioting as indeed might have been expected. A few hot-heads tried to create a disturbance demanding that the executioner be given something to do. Madame la Guillotine should not be cheated of her dinner.

“She’s hungry, give her something to eat,” was the catchword these hot-heads used in order to excite the rest of the crowd. Somehow it did not work. There certainly were a few bouts of fisticuffs, one or two broken heads, the soldiers round the guillotine and those on guard at the street corners did use their bayonets with some effect, but on the whole the crowd was strangely subdued, more inclined to whisper than to shout.

For quite a little while after the portals of the Hôtel de Ville had been closed, they still waited, thinking that perhaps something more was being devised for their entertainment. But as time went on and nothing happened, they thought they might as well get home. It was dinner time. The children were hungry, and though there was little enough in the larders these days, one had to get home and give them what there was. The whole thing had been strange. Very strange. As men and women wended their way homeward, their thoughts reverted to that titanic figure with the grimy face and the huge bare chest, one sinewy arm encircling the body of the wench Fleurette nommée Armand, which hung limp across his massive shoulder. He was no mere mortal, that was certain. And though the Government up in Paris had abolished le bon Dieu, and declared that it was Citizen Robespierre who was the “Être Suprême,” something of the old superstitions imbibed at their mothers’ knees, still lingered in these untutored, undisciplined minds. That the Titan with the flashing eyes and grimy face should have vanished with the traitors whom he and his satellites had seized, was but the fitting ending to his meteoric appearance. The Government might forbid belief in God and the Devil, in heaven and in hell, but here was proof positive that the Devil did exist. He was black and he was of abnormal stature, he had a great bare chest and strong muscular arms, and — clearest proof of all — he had before the very eyes of the citizens of Orange seized upon two traitors and carried them away with him to limbo.

Nothing would take that idea out of the people’s mind, and long after these horrible days of the revolution had passed away and men and women had returned to sanity, those who were present on that day in June at the trial of one Fleur Chauvelin nommée Armand, would recount the marvellous story of how the devil had entered the court-house and spirited the accused away. Only a few knew the true facts of the case, and even so a great deal was left to surmise. Among those who knew was Citizen Tartine, the butcher. And this is what he told his friends when they pressed him with questions. It seems that when the crowd stampeded out of the Hôtel de Ville, he, Tartine, together with Citizens Pochart and Danou who had stepped down from the judges’ bench, and three or four other notabilities of the city among whom was Motus, the chief warder of the Caristie House, put their heads together for moment or two, wondering if something could not be done towards sending the wench Fleurette and her father by a back way to one or other of the prison houses, with a view to bringing them up for formal trial on the morrow. They did feel, however, that given the present temper of the populace, such a move might prove dangerous to themselves. “The people will demand a victim, two victims, perhaps more,” Danou said with a doubtful nod of the head. “They might vent their wrath on us.”

That was sound logic, and the project was abandoned almost as soon as it was formulated.

Motus, it seems, then turned familiarly to the giant and said:

“Tiens, Rémi, is it thou?”

“Myself, citizen,” the giant replied.

In response to inquiries from the others, Chief Warder Motus then explained that Rémi was a scavenger whom he himself had taken on in the Caristie House for extra work when the regular man fell sick. A splendid patriot, Motus averred. There was, therefore, not the faintest cause for suspicion.

“Come along, all of you,” Pochart now said addressing Rémi and his mates. “Bring along the prisoners. The people are waiting.”

“Give them time to settle down,” Rémi replied with a shrug and laugh. “We are the chief comedians in this play. Do you all go and prepare everything for our entrance.”

“You won’t tarry?” Danou admonished.

“Not we,” Rémi replied. “We’re as eager as you for the spectacle, eh, citizens?” he added, turning to his mates who had the President of the Tribunal still between them.

Rémi then took a pistol out of his ragged breeches and handed it to Citizen Tartine.

“When the executioner is ready,” he said, “and everything prepared for our entrance, just give us the signal by firing the pistol. We’ll be with you a few minutes after that. We’ve yet another surprise for the spectators,” he added with another laugh, “which will delight them and you.”

Tartine vowed that not the slightest suspicion entered his head or that of his companions. How could one suspect a patriot vouched for by no less a person than Motus the chief warder? In the end, however, Pochart decided that two men of the gendarmerie, one of

whom was a sergeant, who were still standing at attention below the judges' bench, should remain with Rémi and his mates and escort them when the time came, on to the Place.

After which the group of notabilities followed the rest of the crowd out into the open. When looking back upon what followed, they all agreed that some fifteen minutes must have gone from the time when they finally left the court-house and took their last look at Rémi and his mates, to that when they returned and found the place empty. They all said that even then, at first glance, no suspicion entered their minds and they stood about for a few minutes talking together, thinking that Rémi was preparing the surprise spectacle which he had promised them. Thinking too that every moment would bring the scavenger back with his mates and the prisoners. Tartine, the butcher, was the first to suspect that there might be something wrong. He crossed the floor of the room, and made his way to the private door which was at the back of the judges' bench and led to some corridors and private rooms, and also to the back of the premises of the Hôtel de Ville, and to a back door which gave on a narrow street that ran parallel with the façade.

The private door was locked, with no key to be seen. But even then, so remote was suspicion from their minds that Tartine and the others hammered away on the door and called loudly to Rémi. The door was made of solid oak, but Pochart and Tartine were both of them powerful men. Receiving no answer to their call, they searched amidst the litter left pell-mell by the crowd upon the gradients, and found an axe and a leaded stick. Thus armed they attacked the panels of the door, whilst Danou and one of the others wisely thought of closing the portals of the Hôtel de Ville. The oak panels yielded after awhile. The door battered in, fell under the heavy blows dealt by Tartine the butcher with the axe. He and Pochart and two or three of the others striding over the debris, found themselves in a dark corridor.

Some twenty paces down the corridor on the right, they came to another door. It was locked, but behind it came a vigorous sound of banging and the door shook now and again as if under heavy blows. Once more the axe was brought into play, the door was smashed in and as it fell in with a crash, it revealed the two men of the gendarmerie, with arms and legs securely pinioned, and their crimson caps stuffed into their mouths. One of them had succeeded in rolling along the floor, near enough to the door to kick against it with his otherwise helpless feet.

There could no longer be any doubt. The public had been hoaxed either by an impudent imposter, or by a traitor, bribed to aid the prisoners to escape. The words: "English spies," soon cropped up as did those of Amédée Colombe and architect Caristie and a host of others. This too, no doubt, was their work. At least this was the opinion of some, whilst others, headed by Danou, shook their heads dubiously. Citizen Chauvelin was known to be the sworn enemy of those English spies — weren't they called the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel? — and it was Citizen Chauvelin and his daughter Fleur who had been so insolently spirited away.

Having hastily released the men of the gendarmerie, they all ran down the length of the corridor as swiftly as they could, chiefly because one of the soldiers said that this corridor led ultimately to a back entrance of the Hôtel de Ville. But the building itself was something of a maze, the passages were dark and narrow, it took them all some time to find that back door, and when at last they came upon it, they found it locked.

Once more the axe had to come into play, and time had in the meanwhile slipped by to the tune of some twenty minutes. Nor did the narrow back street reveal any of the secrets of this amazing adventure. Impostors, traitors or English spies, Rémi the scavenger and his mates had disappeared with the two prisoners and taken their secret with them. On the other side of the road there was a row of one-storied, tumble down houses, inhabited by some of the poorest families in the city. Inquiries at each house in succession revealed but little. Nearly all the inmates had spent their morning as usual watching the trials in the Hôtel de Ville and were not yet home; but in one of the houses a sick woman had, it seems, been standing at the window when she saw four or five men come out of the building opposite. One of them, she said, was very tall and was carrying what she thought was a large bundle on his shoulder. The others were hustling a short, thin man who wore a blue coat and had on a tricolour sash round his waist. They turned sharply to their right and she soon lost sight of them. She thought nothing about the incident, one saw so many strange things these days.

In the meanwhile the crowd on the Place had begun to disperse, the first stragglers were wending their way to their homes. Pochart and Danou holding high functions in the administration of justice, did not feel that it was incumbent upon them to go hunting for spies. That was the business of the gendarmerie, and they parted presently from their friends, declaring their intention of sending immediately for the Chief Commissary of Police. The others, feeling that it was not part of their duty either to run after escaped prisoners, found that they had pressing business to see to at home.

As far as Citizen Tartine, the butcher, was concerned, the incident had no further interest for him save for the pleasure of recounting his share of the adventure to his numerous friends. A couple more traitors escaped from the clutches of justice, a few more English spies when already the country swarmed with them, was nothing to worry one's head about.

Pochart and Danou did, on the other hand, worry their heads considerably about it all. They had a burning desire to know just what the English spies did ultimately do with their colleague Chauvelin. They hoped — oh! very ardently — that as soon as the much-vaunted Scarlet Pimpernel discovered that it was his inveterate enemy whom he had rescued from the guillotine, he would either hand him back straightway to the tender mercies of justice, or simply murder him in some convenient and out-of-the-way corner of the district. Pochart and Danou would have preferred the former alternative as being more satisfactory to their wounded vanity and their baffled spite.

Unlike Tartine, they seldom spoke of their experiences in connection with the affair. But their hopes did rise to their zenith when a week or so later President Legrange and Public Prosecutor Isnard returned from their fool's errand to Paris; there could be no doubt that even Robespierre, friend of Chauvelin though he be, would order the punishment of such a consummate liar and traitor.

Chapter 38

An immense lassitude had held Fleurette in a kind of semi-consciousness, a dreamless sleep from which she woke at intervals, only to open her eyes for a moment, and immediately let the lids, heavy with sleep, fall over them again. It was the reaction insisted on by health and youth against the terrible nerve-strain of that awful day.

During the brief intervals while she had a certain consciousness of things about her, she found herself nestling against chéri Bibi's shoulder! And when, with half-dimmed eyes she looked up at him, and tried to smile between two yawns, she always saw his pale, grave face turned away in profile, gazing straight out before him into the dark recess of the post-chaise, in which apparently they were travelling. She called softly to him once or twice, but he never turned to look at her, only his hand, which felt cold and clammy, would gently stroke her hair.

How long all this lasted, what happened to her in the intervals of sleep, Fleurette never knew, but there came a time when the chaise rattled unpleasantly over the cobble-stones of a city, and lights darted to and fro through the darkness as the vehicle lumbered along through fitfully lighted streets. Fleurette sat up straight; all the sleep suddenly gone out of her eyes.

"Where are we going, chéri Bibi?" she asked. "Do you know?"

"No! I do not," Bibi replied, and his voice sounded hoarse and hollow. "Would to God I did."

Fleurette had never heard him invoke *le bon Dieu* before, and she tried through the gloom to peer into his face.

"But we are out of danger now, chéri?" she asked wide-eyed, the old terror which had caused her to lose consciousness in that awful court-house, once more clutching at her heart.

"I do not know," he murmured mechanically; "would to God I did."

And then as if recalled to himself by the half-drawn sigh of terror from Fleurette, he seized hold of her, and pressed her head against his breast.

"No! No!" he said hastily, "they cannot harm you whilst I'm here to guard you."

Just then the coach came to a halt, and a moment later the door was thrown open and a gruff voice said:

"Will you descend, citizeness?"

Fleurette, frightened, clung to Bibi. She made no attempt to move. Whereupon the gruff voice resumed:

"If you don't come willingly, I shall have to send some one to fetch you."

Fleurette buried her face against Bibi's coat. His arms held her tightly. A minute, perhaps less, went by, and then — suddenly — she heard a voice — a very gentle, very timid voice this time, saying:

"Mam'zelle Fleurette! Oh, Mam'zelle Fleurette, I pray you to turn to me. It is I — Amédé."

What had happened? Was she dreaming? Or had she died of fright and gone straight up to heaven? Certain it is that she felt a timid hand upon her shoulder, whilst Bibi's hold upon her relaxed.

"Hold up the lantern, man," the gruff voice now broke in upon the delicious silence that ensued, "and let her see that she is not dreaming."

The light of a lantern flashed across Fleurette's eyes, she opened them and turned her head, and found herself gazing on M'sieur Amédé's pink and moist face, into his kind eyes full of anxiety and of tenderness, upon his mouth which had taught her how to kiss. Gently, slowly, she extricated herself from Bibi's embrace. Gently, slowly she seemed to glide into Amédé's arms.

He carried her whither she knew not. All she knew was that presently she found herself snuggling in a deep, cosy arm-chair, and that Amédé was kneeling beside her, with his eyes fixed ecstatically upon her as if she were *la sainte Vierge* herself.

"Where am I, dear M'sieur Amédé?" she asked.

"At Ste. Césaire, Mam'zelle Fleurette," he replied.

"Where is that?"

"Just outside Nîmes. Your chaise passed through the streets of Nîmes."

"I daresay," she said with a tired little sigh. "I was so sleepy; I didn't know where we were."

"We are under the protection of the bravest men that ever lived," Amédé said slowly. "They saved me from death. They have saved you, Mam'zelle Fleurette."

A shudder went through her. She closed her eyes as if to try and shut away the awful visions which his words had conjured up. But his kind, strong arms encircled her closer, and she nestled against him and once again felt comforted and safe. He told her the entire odyssey of his rescue, from the hour when the mock soldiers entered his father's shop at Laragne, until when his brave rescuers took leave of him outside the derelict cottage by the banks of the Drôme, and he, seeing the pale crescent of the moon rise above the snow-capped crest of La Lance, had solemnly bowed nine times, praying for that joy which to-day was his at last.

He had spent a few very lonely days in the cottage after that, devoured with anxiety as to the fate of his beloved. He could not eat, he could not sleep. For hours he would watch the filmy crescent of the moon, whose pale light mayhap illumined the window behind which his own Fleurette would also be watching and praying. And three days ago he received the message which he was waiting for. It appeared mysteriously early one morning outside the cottage door. A missive, with a stone put upon it to prevent its being blown away by the wind. How it got there Amédé never knew. It came from the leader of that gallant little league of Englishmen who devoted their lives to helping those in distress. In it he, Amédé, was ordered to walk as far as Crest, to the house of Citizen Marcor the farrier, where he could hire a horse. And then to hie him straightway hither to Ste. Césaire, not sleeping in any wayside inn, but rather in the fields, under shelter of hedges of forest trees, getting food for himself and his horse as best he could. The missive further directed him, on arriving at Ste. Césaire, to seek out an empty house situated in the Rue Basse, and there to wait, for of a surety within two days he would hold his beloved Fleurette in his arms. Amédé had obeyed these commands to the letter. This very morning he had arrived at Ste. Césaire and found the house in the Rue Basse. It was neither empty nor uninhabited. There was furniture in the house, and what's more there were two friends, two fine English heroes, who had been expecting Amédé and who made him welcome when he arrived. Oh! and didn't Mam'zelle Fleurette think that these Englishmen were the finest and bravest men that ever lived? As for their chief who

was known amongst them as the Scarlet Pimpernel (le mouron rouge, M'sieur Amédé called it), he surely was more like one of the mythological gods rather than a mere mortal.

M'sieur Amédé seemed very anxious to know what Mam'zelle Fleurette thought about all these marvellous adventures, but how could she tell him, how could she talk at all when every time she raised her blue eyes to him, he broke off in the midst of a most exciting narrative in order to ask her in a voice vibrating with passion: "Tu m'aimes Fleurette?"

Chapter 39

Chauvelin, after he had seen Fleurette safely carried away in her lover's arms, sat for awhile in the dark interior of the coach, starting into the gloom, his folded hands clasped between his knees. His thoughts were in such a whirl that it almost seemed as if he were unconscious. He certainly was insentient; he neither saw, nor heard, nor felt anything save the joy of knowing that his Fleurette was safe. It was only a few minutes — fifteen perhaps — later that a pleasant laugh broke in on his riotous thoughts, and that he became aware of a tall figure sitting beside him in the coach.

"You see, my dear M. Chambertin," the voice which he dreaded most in all the world said suddenly in his ear, "I would not forgo the pleasure of bidding you au revoir."

Chauvelin half turned to his enemy, the man whom he had so persistently wronged, so persistently pursued with hatred and with spite. Through the gloom he could just see the outline of the massive figure, wrapped in a dark, caped coat, and of the proud head so nobly held above the firm, somewhat stiff neck.

Did all that this man stood for in the way of heroism and selflessness, strike a chord of shame in the heart of this callous, revolutionary tyrant? Why shall say? Certain it is that for the moment Chauvelin felt awed, and sat there in the gloom, silent, motionless, staring into the black vacancy. But after a second or two his lips uttered mechanically the name that was uppermost in his mind:

"Fleurette?"

"She is under my care," Blakeney said slowly. "To-morrow at break of day she and her sweetheart will set sail for England with some of my friends. There she will be under the care of the noblest woman in the world, Lady Blakeney, who will take her revenge on you for all the wrong you did her, by lavishing the treasures of her sympathy upon your child."

"Then Fleurette will be happy?" Chauvelin murmured involuntarily.

"Happy, yes! she will soon forget."

"Then I am ready, Sir Percy."

"Ready? For what?"

"My life is at your service. My enemies are waiting for me over in Orange. You have but to send me back thither and your own vengeance will be complete."

For a second or two after that there was silence in the old post-chaise; only Chauvelin's laboured breathing broke the utter stillness of the gloom. Until suddenly a pleasant, mocking laugh struck upon his ear.

"Egad man, you are priceless," quoth Sir Percy gaily. "You must indeed credit me with a total lack of the saving grace, if you think it would amuse me to hand you over to your genial friends over in Orange."

"But I am at your mercy, sir."

"As I and my beloved wife have been once or twice, eh? Well! I am hitting back now. That's all."

"Hitting back?" Chauvelin exclaimed. "You have the power now. I admit it. I am in your hands. My life is at your command."

"La man!" Sir Percy retorted lightly, "what should I do with your worthless life? For the moment all I want is to make that sweet child up there completely happy by telling her that you are safe and well. After that you may go to the devil for aught I care. You probably will."

"Then," Chauvelin murmured aghast, "you grant me my life, you—"

"I am sending you back safely as far as Nimes. What happens to you after that I neither know nor care. You have tried to do me such an infinity of wrong at different times, you still hate me so cordially, you—"

He paused for a moment with firm lips tightly pressed together and slender hand clutched upon his knee.

"You are right there, Sir Percy," Chauvelin murmured between his teeth. "God knows how I still hate you, even after this. You have the power to hit back. Why the devil don't you do it?"

Whereupon Sir Percy threw back his head and his merry, infectious laugh woke the slumbering echoes of the sleepy little town.

"La, man," he said, "you're astonishing. Can't you see that this is my way of hitting back?"

THE END

FIE, SIR PERCY!

I

"You really are impossible, Sir Percy! Here are we ladies raving, simply raving, about this latest exploit of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel, and you do naught but belittle his prowess. Lady Blakeney, I entreat, will you not add your voice to our chorus of praise, and drown Sir Percy's scoffing in an ocean of eulogy?"

Lady Alicia Nugget was very arch. She tapped Sir Percy's arm with her fan. She put up a jewelled finger and shook it at him with a great air of severity in her fine dark eyes. She turned an entreating glance on Marguerite Blakeney, and as that lady appeared engrossed in conversation with His Grace of Flint, Lady Alicia turned the battery of her glances on His Royal Highness.

"Your Highness," she said appealingly.

The Prince laughed good-humouredly.

"Oh!" he said, "do not ask me to inculcate hero-worship into this mauvais sujet. If you ladies cannot convert him to your views, how can I...a mere man...?"

And His Highness shrugged his shoulders. There were few entertainments he enjoyed more than seeing his friend Sir Percy Blakeney badgered by the ladies on the subject of their popular and mysterious hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"Your Highness," Lady Alicia retorted with the pertness of a spoilt child of Society. "Your Highness can command Sir Percy to give us a true — a true — account of how that wonderful Scarlet Pimpernel snatched Monsieur le Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay with Madame la Comtesse and their three children out of the clutches of those abominable murderers in Paris, and drove them triumphantly to Boulogne, where they embarked on board an English ship and were ultimately safely landed in Dover. Sir Percy vows that he knows all the facts..."

"And so I do, dear lady," Sir Percy now put in, with just a soupçon of impatience in his pleasant voice, "but, as I've already had the privilege to tell you, the facts are hardly worth retailing."

"The facts, Sir Percy," commanded the imperious beauty, "or we'll all think you are jealous."

"As usual you would be right, dear lady," Sir Percy rejoined blandly; "are not ladies always right in their estimate of us poor men? I am jealous of that demmed, elusive personage who monopolizes the thoughts and the conversation of these galaxies of beauty who would otherwise devote themselves exclusively to us. What says Your Highness? Will you deign to ban for this one night at least every reference to that begad shadow?"

"Not till we've had the facts," Lady Alicia protested.

"The facts! The facts!" the ladies cried in an insistent chorus.

"You'll have to do it, Blakeney," His Highness declared.

"Unless Sir Andrew Ffoulkes would oblige us with the tale," Marguerite Blakeney said, turning suddenly from His Grace of Flint, in order to give her lord an enigmatic smile, "he too knows the facts, I believe, and is an excellent raconteur."

"God forbid!" Sir Percy Blakeney exclaimed, with mock concern. "Once you start Ffoulkes on one of his interminable stories...Moreover," he added seriously, "Ffoulkes always gets the facts wrong. He would tell you, for instance, that the demmed Pimpernel rescued those unfortunate Tournon-d'Agenays single-handed; now I happen to know for a fact that three of the bravest English gentlemen the world has ever known did all the work whilst he merely..."

"Well?" Lady Alicia queried eagerly. "What did that noble and gallant Scarlet Pimpernel merely do?"

"He merely climbed to the box-seat of the chaise which was conveying the Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and his family under escort to Paris. And the chaise had been held up by three of the bravest..."

"Never mind about three of the bravest English gentlemen at the moment," Lady Alicia broke in impatiently, "you shall sing their praises to us anon. But if you do not tell us the whole story at once, we'll call on Sir Andrew Ffoulkes without further hesitation. Your Highness...!" she pleaded once more.

"My fair one," His Highness rejoined with a laugh, "I think that we shall probably get a truer account of this latest prowess of the Scarlet Pimpernel from Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. It was a happy thought of Lady Blakeney's," he added with a knowing smile directed at Marguerite, "and I for one do command our friend Ffoulkes forthwith to satisfy our curiosity."

In vain did Sir Percy protest. In vain did he cast surreptitious yet reproachful glances at his royal friend and at his beautiful wife. His Highness had commanded and the ladies, curious and eager, were like beautiful peacocks, spreading out their multi-coloured silks and satins, so as to look their best whilst Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, an avowed admirer of the Scarlet Pimpernel, was being hunted for through the crowded reception-rooms, so that he might comply with His Highness's commands.

The latest prowess of the Scarlet Pimpernel! The magic words flitted on the perfume-laden atmosphere from room to room, and ladies broke off their flirtations, men forsook the gaming tables, for it was murmured that young Ffoulkes had first-hand information as to how the popular English hero had snatched M. le Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and all his family out of the clutches of those murdering revolutionaries over in Paris.

In a moment Sir Andrew Ffoulkes found himself the centre of attraction. His Royal Highness bade him sit beside him on the sofa, and all around him silks were rustling, fans were waving, whilst half a hundred pairs of bright eyes were fixed eagerly upon him. Sir Andrew caught a glance from Marguerite Blakeney's luminous eyes, and a smile of encouragement from her perfect lips. He was indeed in his element; a worshipper of his beloved chief, he was called upon to sing the praises of the man whom he admired and loved best in all the world. Had the bevy of beauties around him known that he was recounting his own prowess as well as that of his leader and friend, they could not have hung more eagerly on his lips.

In the hubbub attendant on settling down, so as to hear Sir Andrew's narrative, even the popular Sir Percy Blakeney was momentarily forgotten. The idol of London Society, he nevertheless had to be set aside for the moment in favour of the mysterious hero who, as elusive as a shadow, was still the chief topic of conversation in the salons of two continents.

The ladies would have it that Sir Percy was jealous of the popularity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Certain it is that as soon as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had started to obey His Highness's commands by embarking on his narrative, Sir Percy retired to the sheltered alcove at the further end of the room and stretched out his long limbs upon a downy sofa, and promptly went to sleep.

"Is it a fact, my dear Ffoulkes," His Highness had asked, "that the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel and his lieutenants actually held up the chaise in which the Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and his family were being conveyed to Paris?"

"An absolute fact, Your Highness," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes replied, while a long drawn-out "Ah!" of excitement went the round of the brilliant company. "I have the story from Madame la Comtesse herself. The Scarlet Pimpernel, in the company of three of his followers, all of them disguised as footpads, did at the pistol-point hold up the chaise which was conveying the prisoners from their chateau of Agenay, where they had been summarily arrested, to Paris. It occurred on the very crest of that steep bit of road which intersects the forest between Mezieres and Epone. The church clock at Mantes had struck seven when the chaise had rattled over the cobblestones of that city, so it must have been past eight o'clock when the attack was made. Inside the vehicle M. de Tournon-d'Agenay with his wife, his young son and two daughters, sat huddled up, half-numbed with terror. They had no idea who had denounced them, and on what charge they had been arrested, but they knew well enough what fate awaited them in Paris. The revolutionary wolves are fairly on the war-path just now. Robespierre and his satellites feel that their power is on the wane. They are hitting out to right and left, preaching the theory that moderation and human kindness are but the sign of weakness and want of patriotism. To prove their love for France, lovely France, whose white robes are stained with the blood of her innocent children, and to show their zeal in her cause, they commit the most dastardly crimes."

"And those poor Tournon-d'Agenays?" one of the ladies asked with a sympathetic sigh.

"Madame la Comtesse assured me," Sir Andrew replied, "that her husband, and in fact all the family, had kept clear of politics during these, the worst times of the revolution. Though all of them are devoted royalists, they kept all show of loyalty hidden in their hearts. Only one thing had they forgotten to do and that was to take down from the wall in Madame's boudoir a small miniature of their unfortunate Queen."

"And for this they were arrested?"

"They were innocent of everything else. In the early dawn after their summary arrest they were dragged out of their home and were being conveyed for trial to Paris, where their chances of coming out alive were about equal to those of a rabbit when chased by a terrier."

"And that was when the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel interposed?" Lady Alicia put in with a sigh. "He knew M. le Tournon-d'Agenay and his family were being taken to Paris."

"I believe he had had an inkling of what was in the wind some time before the arrest. It is wonderful how closely he is always in touch with those who one day may need his help. But I believe that at the last moment plans had to be formulated in a hurry. Fortunately, chance on this occasion chose to favour those plans. Day had broken without a gleam of sunshine; a thin drizzle was falling, and there was a sharp head wind on, which fretted the horses and forced the driver to keep his head down, with his broad-brimmed hat pulled well over his eyes. Nature, as you see, was helping all she could. The whole thing would undoubtedly have been more difficult had the morning been clear and fine. As it was, one can imagine the surprise attack. Vague forms looming suddenly out of the mist, and the sharp report of a pistol, twice in quick succession. The horses, who, sweating and panting, had fallen into a foot-pace, dragging the heavy coach up the steep incline, through the squelching mud of the road, came to a violent and sudden halt on the very crest of the hill at the first report. At the second they reared and plunged wildly. The shouts of the officer in charge of the escort did, as a matter of fact, so I understand, add to the confusion. The whole thing was, I am assured, a matter of a couple of minutes. It was surprise and swiftness that won the upper hand, for the rescue party was outnumbered three to one. Had there been the slightest hesitation, the slightest slackening of quick action, the attack would of a certainty have failed. But during those few minutes of confusion, and under cover of the mist and the vague greyness of the morning, the Scarlet Pimpernel and his followers, down on their knees in the squelching mud, were not merely fighting, you understand? No! They were chiefly engaged in cutting the saddle girths under the bellies of eight fidgety and plunging horses, and cracking their pistols in order to keep up the confusion. Not an easy task, you will admit, though 'tis a form of attack well-known in the East, so I understand. At any rate, those had been the chief's orders, and they had to be carried out. For my part, I imagine that superstitious terror had upset the nerves of that small squad of Revolutionary guard. Hemmed in by the thicket on either side of the road, the men had not sufficient elbow-room for a good fight. No man likes being attacked by a foe whom he cannot well see, and in the melee that ensued the men were hindered from using their somewhat clumsy sabres too freely for fear of injuring their comrades' mounts, if not their own; and all they could do was to strive to calm their horses and, through the din, to hear the words of command uttered by their lieutenant.

"And all the while," Sir Andrew went on, amidst breathless silence on the part of his hearers, "I pray you picture to yourselves the confusion; the cracking of pistols, the horses snorting, the lieutenant shouting, the prisoners screaming. Then, at a given moment, the Scarlet Pimpernel scrambled up the box-seat of the chaise. As no doubt all of you ladies know by now, he was the most wonderful hand with horses. In one instant he had snatched the reins out of the bewildered Jehu's hands, and with word of mouth and click of tongue had soothed the poor beasts' nerves. And suddenly he gave the order: 'Ca va!' which was the signal agreed on between himself and his followers. For them it meant a scramble for cover under the veil of mist and rain, whilst he, the gallant chief, whipped up the team which plunged down the road now at break-neck speed."

"Of course, the guard, and above all the lieutenant, grasped the situation soon enough, and immediately gave chase. But they were not trick-riders any of them, and with severed saddle-girths could not go far. Be that as it may, the Scarlet Pimpernel drove his team without a halt as far as Molay, where he had arranged for relays. Once well away from the immediate influence of Paris, with all its terrors and tyrannical measures, the means of escape for the prisoners became comparatively easy, thanks primarily to the indomitable pluck of their rescuer and also to a long purse. And that, ladies and noble lords," Sir Andrew concluded, "is all I can tell you of the latest exploit of our hero. The story is exactly as I had it from Madame la Comtesse de Tournon-d'Agenay, whose only sorrow, now that she and those she loves are safe at last in England, is that she never once caught a glimpse of her rescuer. He proved as elusive to

her as to all of us, and we find ourselves repeating the delightful doggerel invented on that evasive personage by our prince of dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney.”

“Marvellous!” “Enchanting!” “Palpitating!” “I nearly fainted with excitement, my dear!” These were some of the ejaculations uttered by dainty, well-rouged lips while the men, more or less, were silent, pondering, vaguely longing to shake the enigmatical hero once at least by the hand.

His Highness was questioning Sir Andrew Ffoulkes more closely about certain details connected with the story. It was softly whispered, and not for the first time either, that His Highness could, and he would, solve the riddle of the identity of that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel.

Dainty, sweet, and gracious as usual, Lady Ffoulkes, née Suzanne de Tournay, had edged up to Lady Blakeney, and the two young wives of such gallant men held one another for one instant closely by the hand, a token of mutual understanding, of pride and of happiness.

One of two of the ladies were trying to recall the exact words of the famous doggerel, which, it was averred, had on more than one occasion given those revolutionary wolves over in Paris a wholesome scare:

“We seek him here.

We seek him there!”

“How does it go, my dear?” Lady Alicia sighed. “I vow I have forgotten.”

Then she looked in dainty puzzlement about her. “Sir Percy!” she exclaimed. “Where is the immortal author of the deathless rhyme?”

“Sir Percy! Where is Sir Percy?”

And the call was like the chirruping of birds on a sunny spring morning. It stilled all further chattering for the moment.

“Where is Sir Percy?” And silence alone echoed, “Where?”

Until a real material sound came in response. A long drawn-out sound that caused the ladies to snigger and the men to laugh. It was the sound of a loud and prolonged snore. The groups of gay Society butterflies, men and women, parted disclosing the alcove at the further end of the room, where on the sofa, with handsome head resting against rose-coloured cushion, Sir Percy Blakeney was fast asleep.

II

But in Paris the news of the invasion of the ci-devant Comte et Comtesse de Tournon-d’Agenay with their son and two daughters was received in a very different spirit. Members of the Committees of Public Safety and of General Security, both official and unofficial, professional and amateur, were more irate than they cared to admit. Everyone was blaming everyone else, and the unfortunate lieutenant who had been in command of the escort was already on his way to Toulon, carrying orders to young Captain Bonaparte to put him in the thickest of the fight, so that he might, by especial bravery, redeem his tarnished honour.

Citoyen Lauzet, Chief of Section in the rural division of the department Seine et Oise, was most particularly worried by the incident which, it must be remembered, occurred in his district. The hand of the well-known English spy, known throughout France as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, could obviously be traced in the daring and impudent attack on an armed escort, and the subsequent driving of the chaise through three hundred kilometres of country where only shameless bribery and unparalleled audacity could have saved them from being traced, followed, and brought to justice. Citoyen Lauzet, a faithful servant of the State, felt that the situation was altogether beyond his capacity for dealing with; those English spies were so different to the ordinary traitors and aristos whom one suspected, arrested and sent to the guillotine all in the turn of a hand. But how was one to deal with men whom one had never seen and was never likely to see, if rumour spoke correctly? Citoyen Lauzet scratched his bald pate and perspired freely in his endeavour to find a solution to his difficulty, but he found none.

It was in the midst of his perturbations that he bethought him of his friend Armand Chauvelin. Now Lauzet was quite aware of the fact that that same friend of his was under a cloud just now; that he had lost that high position he once held on the Committee of Public Safety, for reasons which had never been made public. Nevertheless, Lauzet had reasons for knowing that in the matter of tracking down spies Armand Chauvelin had few, if any, equals; and he also knew that for some unexplained cause Chauvelin would give several years of his life, and everything he possessed in the world, to get his long, thin fingers round the throat of that enigmatical personage known as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And so in his difficulty, Citoyen Lauzet sent an urgent message to his friend Chauvelin to come at once to Mantes if possible — a request which delighted Chauvelin with which he forthwith complied. And thus, three days after the sensational rescue of the Tournon-d’Agenay family, those two men — Lauzet and Chauvelin — both intent on the capture of one of the most bitter enemies of the revolutionary government of France, were sitting together in the office of the rural commissariat at Mantes. Lauzet had very quickly put his friend in possession of the facts connected with the impudent escapade, and Chauvelin, over an excellent glass of Fine, had put his undoubted gifts and subtle brain at the service of the official.

“Now listen to me, my dear Lauzet,” he said after a prolonged silence, during which the Chief of Section had been able to trace on his friend’s face the inner workings of a master-mind concentrated on one all-engrossing object. “Listen to me. I need not tell you, I think, that I have had some experience of that audacious Scarlet Pimpernel and his gang; popular rumour will have told you that. It will also have told you, no doubt, that in all my endeavours for the capture of that detestable spy, I was invariably foiled by persistent ill-luck on the one side, and the man’s boundless impudence on the other. It is because I did fail to lay the audacious rascal by the heels that you see me now, a disgraced and disappointed man, after half a lifetime devoted to the service of my country. But, in the lexicon of our glorious revolution, my good Lauzet, there is no such word as fail; and many there are who deem me lucky because my head still happens to be on my shoulders, after certain episodes at Calais, Boulogne, or Paris of which you have, I doubt not, heard more than one garbled version.”

Lauzet nodded his bald head in sympathy. He also passed a moist, hot finger around the turn of his cravat. This allusion to failure in connection with the desired capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel had started an unpleasant train of thought.

"I've only told you all this, my good Lauzet," Chauvelin went on, with a sarcastic curl of his thin lips, "in order to make you realize the value which, in spite of my avowed failures, the Committee of Public Safety still set upon my advice. They have disgraced me, it is true, but only outwardly. And this they have only done in order to leave me a wider scope for my activities, particularly in connection with the tracking down of spies. As an actual member of the Committee I was obviously an important personage whose every movement was in the public eye; now, as an outwardly obscure agent, I come and go in secret. I can lay plans. I can help and I can advise without arousing attention. Above all, I can remain the guiding head prepared to use such patriots as you are yourself, in the great cause which we all have at heart, the bringing to justice of a band of English spies, together with their elusive chief, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Well spoken, friend Chauvelin," Citoyen Lauzet rejoined, with a tone of perplexity in his husky voice, "and, believe me, it was because I had a true inkling of what you've just said that, in my anxiety, I begged you to come and give me the benefit of your experience. Now tell me," he went on eagerly, "how do you advise me to proceed?"

Chauvelin, before he replied to this direct question, had another drink of Fine. Then he smacked his lips, set down his glass, and finally said with slow deliberation:

"To begin with, my good Lauzet, try and bethink yourself of some family in your district whose position, shall we say, approaches most nearly to that of the *ci-devant* Tournon-d'Agenays before their arrest. That is to say, what you want is a family who at one time professed loyalty to tyrants and who keeps up some kind of cult — however inoffensive — for the Bourbon dynasty. That family should consist of at least one woman or, better still, one or two young children, or even an old man or an imbecile. Anything, in fact, to arouse specially that old-fashioned weakness which, for want of a better word, we will call sympathy. Now can you think of a family of that kind living anywhere in your district?"

Lauzet pondered for a moment or two.

"I don't for the moment," he said slowly, "but when I look through the files I dare say I might..."

"You must," Chauvelin broke in decisively. "That kind of brood swarms in every district. All you have to do is to open your eyes. Anyway, having settled on a family, which will become our tool for the object we have in view, you will order a summary perquisition to be made by your gendarmerie in their house. You will cause the head of the family to be brought before you and you will interrogate him first, and detain him under suspicion. A second perquisition will then not come amiss; in fact you will have it bruited all over the neighbourhood that this particular family has been denounced as 'suspect' and that their arrest and subsequent trial in Paris, on a charge of treason, is only a matter of days. You understand?"

"I do," Lauzet replied, in a tone that sounded decidedly perplexed and unconvinced. "But..."

"There is no but about it," Chauvelin retorted brusquely. "You have asked my help and I give you my orders. All you have to do is to obey and not to argue. Is that clear?"

"Quite, quite clear, my good friend," Lauzet hastened to assure him. "In fact, I already have someone in my mind" "Which is all to the good," Chauvelin broke in curtly. "On the balance of your zeal your reward will presently be weighed. Now listen further to me. Having followed my instructions as to perquisitions and so on, you will arrange as sensational an arrest of your family as you can. The more it is talked about in the neighbourhood the better for our purpose. You understand?"

"I do, I do," Lauzet said eagerly. "I see your whole scheme now. You want to induce the English spies to exert themselves on behalf of this family, so that..."

"Exactly! Therefore the more sympathy you can evoke for them the better; a pretty girl, an invalid, a cripple; anything like that will arouse the so-called chivalry of those spies. Then, having effected your arrest, you arrange to convey the family to Paris, and do so, apparently under rather feeble escort, say not more than four men. You will choose for your purpose the early dawn of a day when a thick mist lies over the land, or when a driving rain or tearing wind makes observation difficult."

"But"

"Not more than four men, remember," Chauvelin reiterated with slow emphasis, "as visible escort."

"I understand."

"Instead of the usual chaise for conveying your prisoners to Paris, you will use the local diligence and, having disposed of the prisoners inside the vehicle, you will have it further packed with half a dozen or more picked men from your local gendarmerie, armed with pistols; and you will take a leaf out of the Scarlet Pimpernel's own book, because that half-dozen picked men will be disguised as other aristos in distress, women, cripples, old men or what you will. You can then go even further in your trickery, and arrange a breakdown for your diligence in the loneliest bit of road in the forest of Mezieres, and choose the twilight for your *mise-en-scene*. Then..."

But Lauzet could no longer restrain his enthusiasm.

"Oh, then! I see it all!" he exclaimed eagerly. "The band of English spies will have been on the watch for the diligence. They will attack it, thinking that it is but feebly guarded. But this time we shall be ready for them and..."

But suddenly his enthusiasm failed. His round, fat face lost its glow of excitement, and his small, round eyes stared in comic perplexity at his friend.

"But suppose," he murmured, "they think better of it, and allow the diligence to proceed in peace. Or suppose that they are engaged in the nefarious deeds in some other department of France."

"Then," Chauvelin rejoined coolly, "all you'd have to do would be to continue your journey to Paris and set your family down in the Conciergerie, ready to await trial and the inevitable guillotine. No harm will have been done. There'll be a family of traitors less in your district, anyway, and you must begin the setting of your comedy all over again. Sooner or later, if you set your trap in the way I have outlined for you, that cursed Scarlet Pimpernel will fall into it. Sooner or later," he reiterated emphatically, "I am sure of it. My only regret is that I didn't think of this plan before now. It has been vaguely moving in my mind, ever since I heard of the escape of the Tournon-d'Agenays, and I wish to Heaven I had matured it then and there; we could have got that Scarlet Pimpernel as easily as possible. However, there's nothing lost, and all I can do now, my friend, is to wish you success. If you succeed you are a made man."

And you will succeed," Chauvelin concluded, rising and holding out his hand to his colleague, "if you follow my instructions to the last letter."

"You may be sure I'll do that," Lauzet said with earnest emphasis.

And the two sleuth-hounds shook hands on their project, and drank a glass of Fine to its success. But before Chauvelin finally took leave of his friend, he turned to him with renewed earnestness and solemnity.

"And above all, my good Lauzet," he said slowly, "remember that in all this your watchword must be: 'Silence and discretion'. Breathe but a word of your intentions to a living soul, and you are bound to fail. The English spies have their spies who serve them well. They have a long purse which will alternatively purchase help from their friends and treachery from ours. Breathe not of your project to any living soul, friend Lauzet, of your head will pay the price for your indiscretion."

Lauzet was only too ready to give the required promise, and the two friends then parted on a note of mutual confidence and esteem.

III

A fortnight later the whole of the little city of Moisson was in a ferment owing to the arrest of one of its most respected tradesmen. Citizen Deseze who, anyone would have thought, was absolutely above suspicion, had been put to the indignity of a summary perquisition in his house. He had protested — as was only natural under the circumstances — and in consequence of this very moderate protest he had been dragged before the Chief of Section at Mantes and had had to submit to a most rigorous and most humiliating interrogatory. Nay more! He was detained for two whole days, while his invalid wife and pretty little daughter were wellnigh distraught with anxiety.

Then on the top of that, there followed another perquisition: just as if anyone could suspect the Deseze family of treason against their country. They certainly had never been very hotly in favour of the extreme measures taken by the revolutionary government — such as the execution of the erstwhile King and of Marie-Antoinette, ci-devant Queen of France — but Citizen Deseze had always abstained from politics. He had been wont to say that God, not man, ruled the destinies of countries, and that no doubt what was happening these days in France occurred by the will of God, or they could never occur at all. He for his part was content to sell good vintage wines from Macon or Nuits, just as his father had done before him, and his grandfather before that, for the house of Deseze, wine merchants of Moisson in the department of Seine et Oise, had been established for three generations and more, and had always been a pattern of commercial integrity and lofty patriotism.

And now these perquisitions! these detentions! and finally the arrest, not only of good Citizen Deseze himself, but of his invalid wife and pretty little daughter. If one dared, one would protest, call a meeting, anything. It was almost unbelievable, so unexpected was it. What had the Deseze family done? No one knew. Inquiries at the commissariat of the section elicited no information. There were vague rumours that the poor invalid citizeness had always remained very pious. She had been taught piety by her parents, no doubt, and had been brought up in a convent school besides. But what would you? Piety was reckoned a sin these days, and who would dare protest?

The servants at the substantial house inhabited by the Deseze family were speechless with tears. The perquisitions, and then the arrest, had come as a thunderbolt. And now they were all under orders to quit the house, for it would be shut and ultimately sold for the benefit of the State. Oh, these were terrible times! The same tragedy had occurred not far away from Moisson in the case of the Tournon-d'Agenays, whom no one was allowed to call Comte and Comtesse these days. They too had been summarily arrested, and were being dragged to Paris for their trial when, by some unforeseen miracle, they had been rescued and conveyed in safety to England. No one knew how, nor who the gallant rescuers were; but rumours were rife and some were very wild. The superstitious believed in direct Divine interference, though they dared not say this openly; but in their hearts they prayed that God might interfere in the same way on behalf of good Citizen Deseze and his family.

Poor Hector Deseze himself had not much hope on that score. He was a pious man, it is true, but his piety consisted in resignation to the will of God. Nor would he have cared much if God had only chosen to strike at him; it was the fate of his invalid wife that wrung his heart, and the future of his young daughter that terrified him. He had known the Citizen Commissary practically all his life. Lauzet was not a bad man, really. Perhaps he had got his head rather turned through his rapid accession from his original situation as packer in the Deseze house of business, with a bed underneath the counter in the back shop, to that of Chief of Section in the rural division of the department of Seine et Oise, with an official residence in Mantes, a highly important post, considering its proximity to Paris. But all the same Lauzet was not a bad man, and must have kept some gratitude in his heart for all the kindness shown to him by the Deseze family when he was a lad in their employ.

But in spite of every appeal Lauzet remained stony-hearted. "If I did anything for you, Citizen, on my own responsibility," he said to Deseze during the course of an interrogatory, "I should not only lose my position, but probably my head into the bargain. I have no ill-will towards you, but I am not prepared to take such a risk on your behalf."

"But my poor wife," Deseze protested, putting his pride in his pocket and stooping to appeal to the man who had once been a menial in his pay. "She is almost bedridden now and has not long to live. Could you not exercise some benevolent authority for her sake?"

Lauzet shook his head. "Impossible," he said decisively.

"And my daughter," moaned the distracted father, "my little Madeleine is not yet thirteen. What will be her fate? My God, Lauzet! Have you no bowels of compassion? Have not you got a daughter of your own?"

"I have," Lauzet retorted curtly, "and therefore I have taken special care to keep on the right side of the government and never to express an opinion on anything that is done for the good of the State. And I should advise you, Citizen Deseze, to do likewise, so that you may earn for yourself and your family some measure of mercy for your transgressions."

And with this grandiloquent phrase, Lauzet indicated that the interview was now at an end. He also ordered the prisoner to be taken back to Moisson, and there to be kept in the cells until the following day, when arrangements would be complete for conveying the Deseze family under escort to Paris.

IV

The following day was market-day in Moisson, and at first Lauzet had been doubtful whether it would not be best to wait another twenty-four hours before carrying through his friend Chauvelin's project. The dawn, however, broke with ideal conditions for it: a leaden sky, a tearing wind, and torrents of rain, alternating with a thin drizzle. On the whole, Nature had ranged herself on the side of all those who worked their nefarious deeds under cover of semi-darkness. Lauzet, gazing out on the mournful, autumnal aspect of weather and sky, felt that if the Scarlet Pimpernel did indeed meditate mischief he would choose such a day as this.

Thus it was that in the early dawn of this market-day the citizens of Moisson had a sad scene to witness. Soon after seven o'clock a small crowd collected round the big old-fashioned diligence which had drawn up outside the Deseze house in the Rue des Pipots. To right and left of the vehicle were soldiers on horseback, two on each side, mounting guard, and the man who held the reins was also in the uniform of the rural gendarmerie. Everyone in the city knew this man. Charles-Marie was his name, and he had begun life as a baker's assistant—a weak, anaemic-looking youth, who had been sent out of the Army because he was no use as a fighting man, so timorous and slow-witted was he.

Lately he had obtained a position as ostler at the posting inn in Mantes because, it seems, he did know something about horses; but why he should have been chosen to drive the diligence to Paris to-day, nobody could conjecture. He must have had a friend in high places to be so exalted above his capabilities. Anyway, there he sat on the box, looking neither to right nor left, but straight between the ears of his off-leader, and not a word would he say in response to the questions, the jeers and the taunts which came to him from his friends in the crowd.

Soon, however, excitement centred round the portecochere of the Deseze house. It had suddenly been thrown wide open, and in the doorway appeared poor Citizeness Deseze escorted by two officers of gendarmerie, and closely followed by Madeleine, her little daughter, also under guard. It was pitiable to see the poor invalid, who could scarcely stand on her half-paralysed limbs, thus being dragged away from her home where she had lived as a happy wife and mother for close on a quarter of a century. A murmur of sympathy for the two women and of execration for the brutality of this arrest rose from the crowd. But it was quickly enough suppressed. Who would dare to murmur openly these days, when spies of the revolutionary government lurked at every street corner?

Hostile glances, however, were shot at Citizen Lauzet, who had come over that morning from Mantes and now stood by, somewhat detached from the crowd, watching the proceedings in the company of his friend Chauvelin.

"Is this in accordance with your idea?" he asked in a whisper when, presently, Chauvelin completed a quick and comprehensive examination of the diligence.

Chauvelin's only reply was a curt and peremptory "Hush", and a furtive glance about him to see that there were no likely eavesdroppers within hearing. He knew from experience that the famous League of the Scarlet Pimpernel also had spies lurking in every corner; spies not so numerous perhaps as those in the pay of the Committee of Public Safety, but a great deal more astute, and he also knew—none better—that the case of the Deseze family was just one that would appeal to the sporting or chivalrous instincts of that band of English adventurers.

But he was satisfied with the *mise-en-scene* organized, under his supervision, by Chief of Section Lauzet. Prominence had been given all over the department to the arrest of the Deseze family, to the worth and integrity of its head, the sickness of the wife, the charm and modesty of the daughter. Half a dozen picked men of the gendarmerie of Mantes, armed to the teeth, would join the diligence at Mantes, but they would ride inside disguised as passengers, whilst it was left for anybody to see that the coach was travelling under a feeble guard of four men, an officer and three troopers, and was driven by a lout who was known to have no fight in him.

Lauzet had been inspired when he chose this day; a typical day in late October, with that pitiless rain lashed by a south-easterly wind that would score the roads and fret the horses. Down in the forest, the diligence would have to go almost at foot-pace, for the outline of every tree on the roadside would be blurred, and objects would loom like ghosts out of the mist.

Yes! the scene was well set for the comedy invented by Chauvelin for the capture of his arch enemy. It only remained for the principal actors to play their roles to his satisfaction. Already the female prisoners had been hustled into the diligence amidst the sighs and tears of their sympathizers in the crowd. Poor Madame Deseze had sunk half-fainting with exhaustion into the arms of her young daughter, and the two women sat huddled in the extreme corner of the vehicle, more dead than alive. And now, amidst much jolting and creaking, some shouting and cursing, too, with cracking of whip and jingling of spurs, the awkward, lumbering diligence was started on its way. Some two hundred metres further on, it came to a halt once more, outside the commissariat, and here the male prisoner, Citizen Deseze himself, was made to join his family in the airless, creaking vehicle. Resigned to his own fate, he set himself the task of making the painful journey as endurable as may be to his invalid wife. Hardly realizing yet the extent of their misfortune and the imminence of their doom, the three victims of Lauzet's cupidity and Chauvelin's vengeance suffered their martyrdom in silence and with resignation.

The final start from Moisson had been made at eight o'clock. By this time, the small city was filling with the neighbouring farmers and drovers, with their cattle and their carts and vehicles of every kind, all tending either to the Place du Marche, or to the various taverns for refreshment. Lauzet, accompanied by Chauvelin, had ridden back to Mantes. Just before nine o'clock the diligence rattled over the cobblestones of that city, and a halt was called at the posting inn. It was part of the programme to spend some hours in Mantes, where the extra men of the gendarmerie would be picked up, and only to make a fresh start when the shades of evening were beginning to draw in. It was not to be supposed that the English brigands would launch their attack in broad daylight, and the weather did not look as if it were going to mend.

Chauvelin, of course, was there, seeing to every arrangement, with his friend Lauzet close at his elbow. He had himself picked out the six men of the gendarmerie who were to ride in disguise inside the diligence; he had inspected their disguises, added an artistic or realistic touch here and there before he pronounced them to be good.

Finally he turned to the young officer who was in command of the party.

"Now," he said very earnestly to him, "you know just what you are going to do? You realize the importance of the mission which is being entrusted to you?"

The officer nodded in reply. He was a young man and ambitious. The task which had been allotted to him had fired his enthusiasm. Indeed, in these days, the capture of that elusive English spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel was a goal for which every young officer of gendarmerie was wont to strive; not only because of the substantial monetary reward in prospect, but because of the glory attached to the destruction of so bitter an enemy of revolutionary France.

"I will tell you, Citizen," the young man said to Chauvelin, "how I have finally laid my plans, and you shall tell me if you approve. About a kilometre and half before the road emerges out of the wood, the ground rises gradually, and there are one or two sharp bends in the road until it reaches the crest of the hill. That part of the forest is very lonely, and at a point just before the ground begins to rise I intend to push my mount on for a metre or two ahead of the men, and pretend to examine the leaders of the team. After a while I will call 'Halt,' and make as if I thought there was something wrong with the traces. The driver is such a lout that he and I will embark on a long argument as to what he should do to remedy the defect, and in the course of the argument I will contrive to slip a small piece of flint which I have in my pocket under the hoof of one of the coach horses."

"You don't think one of your men will see you doing that-and perhaps wonder?"

"Oh, I can be careful. It is done in a moment. Then we shall get on the road again, and five minutes later that same coach-horse will be dead lame. Another halt for examination this time near the crest of the hill. The lout of a driver will never discover what is amiss. I shall make as if the hurt was serious, and set myself the task of tending it. I thought then, subject to your approval, of ordering the troopers to dismount. I have provided them with good wine and certain special rations in their knapsacks. At a word from me they will rest by the roadside, seemingly heedless and unconcerned, but really very wide-awake and keen on the scent. The diligence will the while be at a standstill, with doors shut and curtains closely drawn, but the six men whom we have stowed inside the coach are keen on their work, well-armed and, like hungry wolves, eager to get their teeth into the enemies of France. They will be on the alert, their hands on their pistols, ready to spring up and out of the coach at the first sign of an attack. Now what think you of that setting, Citizen?" the young officer concluded, "for luring the English spies into a fight? Their methods are usually futile, but this time they will have to meet us in hand-to-hand combat, and, if they fall into our trap, I know that we can deal with them."

"I can but pronounce your plan admirable, Citizen Captain," Chauvelin replied approvingly. "You have my best wishes for your success. In the meanwhile Citizen Lauzet and I will be anxiously waiting for news. We'll make a start soon after you, and strike the bridle-path through the forest. This gives us a short cut which will bring us to Epone just in time to hear your news. If you have been attacked, send me a courier thither as soon as you have the English spies securely bound and gagged inside the coach."

"I'll not fail you, Citizen," the young Captain rejoined eagerly.

Lauzet, who stood by, anxious and silent, whilst this colloquy was going on, shrugged his shoulders with a show of philosophy.

"And at worst," he said, "if that meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel should think prudence the better part of valour, if he should scent a trap and carefully avoid it, we would always have the satisfaction of sending the Deseze family to the guillotine."

"The English spies," Chauvelin rejoined dryly, "will not scent a trap, nor will they give up the attempt to rescue the Deseze family. This is just a case to rouse their ire against us, and if it prove successful, one to flatter their vanity and redound to their credit in their own country. No," he went on thoughtfully, "I have no fear that the Scarlet Pimpernel will evade us this time. He will attack, I know. The only question is, when he does are we sufficiently prepared to defeat him?"

"With the half-dozen excellent men whom I have picked up here in Mantes," the young officer retorted, "I shall have nine under my command, and we are prepared for the attack. It is the English spies who will be surprised, we who will hold the advantage, even as to numbers, for the Scarlet Pimpernel can only work with two or three followers and we shall outnumber them three to one."

"Then good luck attend you, Citizen Captain," Chauvelin said at last. "You are in a fair way of rendering your country a signal service; see that you let not fame and fortune evade you in the end. Remember that you will have to deal with one of the most astute as well as most daring adventurers of our times, who has baffled men that were cleverer and, at least, as ambitious as yourself. Stay," the Terrorist added, and placed his thin, claw-like hand as if in warning on the other man's arm. "It is impossible, even for me who knows him as he is and who has seen him in scores of disguises, to give you any accurate description of his personality; but one thing you can bear in mind is that he is tall above the average; tall, even for an Englishman, and his height is the one thing about him that he cannot disguise. So beware of every man who is taller than yourself, Citizen Captain; however innocent he may appear, take the precaution to detain him. Mistrust every tall man, for one of them is of a surety the Scarlet Pimpernel."

He finally reminded the young Captain to send him a courier with the welcome news as soon as possible. "Citizen Lauzet and I," he concluded, "will ride by the bridle-path and await you at Epone. I shall be devoured with anxiety until I hear from you."

V

The men were not nervous, not at first. They were merely excited, knowing what awaited them, both during the journey and afterwards by way of reward. If they were successful there would be for every man engaged in the undertaking a sufficiency to provide for himself and his family for the rest of his life. The capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel! Half a dozen magic words in truth, and they had spurred Citizen Captain Raffet and his squad with boundless enthusiasm. They felt no discomfort either from tearing wind or driving rain. With eyes fixed before them they rode on, striving to pierce the mist-laden distance where the enemy of France was even now lurking, intent on that adventure which would be his last.

It was long past five o'clock when the diligence with its escort reached the edge of the forest. What little daylight there had been all afternoon was already beginning to wane; the sky was of a leaden colour, heavily laden with rain-clouds, save 'way behind in the west, where a few fiery, crimson streaks cut through the clouds like sharp incisions, there, where the setting sun still lingered in the autumn sky.

The men now were keenly on the alert, their eyes searching the dim light that glimmered through the forest trees, their ears attuned to the slightest sound that rose above the patter of their horses' hoofs, or the grinding of the coach wheels over the muddy road. The

forest between Mezieres and Epone is four kilometre long; the road which intersects it plunges down into the valley and then rises up again with one or two sharp bends to the crest of the hill, after which, within the space of two hundred yards the forest trees quickly become sparse, and the open country lies spread out like a map with, on the right, the ribbon of the Seine winding its way along to St. Germain and Paris.

It was in the forest that the enemy would lurk. Out in the open he would find no cover, and could be sighted a couple of kilometres all round and more, if he attempted one of his audacious tricks. The light, which became more and more fitful as the sun sank lower in the west, made observation difficult; the thicket to right and left of the road looked like a dark, impenetrable wall, from behind which, mayhap, dozens of pairs of eyes were peering, ready to attack. The men who were riding by the side of the coach felt queer sensations at the roots of their hair; their hands, moist and hot, clung convulsively to the reins, and the glances which they cast about them became furtive and laden with fear.

But those who were inside the diligence had no superstitious terrors to contend with. The aristos were huddled up together in the far corner of the vehicle, and the men had spread themselves out, three a side, as comfortably as they could. A couple of bottles of excellent wine had been a welcome supplement to their rations, and put additional heart into them. One of them had produced a pack of greasy, well-worn cards from his pocket with which to while away the time.

A quarter of an hour later the Captain in command called a halt; the jolting vehicle came to a standstill with a jerk, and there was much scrambling and creaking and jingling, while the driver got down from his seat to see what was amiss. Nothing much apparently, for a minute or two later the diligence was once more on its way. Soon there was an appreciable slackening of speed, then a halt. More shouting and swearing, creaking and scrambling. The men inside marvelled what was amiss. It was as much as their life was worth to put their heads out of the window, or even to draw one of the tattered blinds to one side in order to peep. But they quickly put cards and wine away; it was better to be prepared for the word of command which might come now at any moment. They strained their ears to listen, and one by one, a word or two, a movement, a sound, told them what was happening. Their comrades outside were ordered to dismount, to take it easy, to sit down by the roadside and rest. It seems one of the draught-horses had gone lame. The men who were inside sighed with a longing for rest, too, a desire to stretch their cramped limbs, but they did not murmur. They were waiting for the word of command that would release them from their inactivity. Until then there was nothing to do but to wait. No doubt this halt by the roadside was just a part of the great scheme for luring the English adventurers to the attack. Grimly and in silence the six picked men inside the coach drew their pistols from their wallets, saw that they were primed and in order, and then laid them across their knees with their fingers on the triggers, in readiness for the Englishmen when they came.

VI

It was not everybody at Moisson who sympathized with the Deseze family when they were arrested. There were all the envious, the dissatisfied, the ambitious, as well as the ragtag-and-bobtail of the district who had linked their fortunes with the revolutionary government and who looked for their own advancement by loudly proclaiming their loyalty to its decrees. For such as these the Deseze family, with their well-known integrity, their wealth and unostentatious piety, were just a set of aristos whom the principles of the glorious revolution condemned as traitors to the State and to the people.

And on market-days Moisson was always full of such people; they were noisy and they were aggressive, and while the sympathizers with the Deseze family, after they had waved a last farewell towards the fast disappearing diligence, went quietly about their business or returned silently to their homes, the others thought this a good opportunity for airing some of those sentiments which would be reported in influential quarters if any government spy happened to be within earshot.

In spite of the persistent bad weather men congregated in and about the market-place during the intervals of business, and lustily discussed the chief event of the day. There was much talk of Citizen Lauzet whom everyone had known as a young out-at-elbows ragamuffin in the employ of Hector Deseze, and who now had power of life and death over the very man who had been his master. Be it noted that Lauzet appeared to have very few friends among the crowd of drovers and shepherds and the farmers who came in with their produce from the outlying homesteads. With advancement in life had come arrogance in the man and a perpetual desire to assert his authority over those with whom he had fraternized in the past. Those, however, who had their homes in the immediate neighbourhood of Mantes dared not say much, for Lauzet was feared almost as much as he was detested, but the strangers who had come into Moisson with their cattle and their produce were free enough with their tongue. Rumour had gone far afield about this arrest of the Deseze family, and many there were who asserted that mysterious undercurrents were at work in this affair; undercurrents that would draw Citizen Lauzet up on the crest of a tidal wave to the giddy heights of incredible fortune.

Nay more! There were many who positively asserted that in some unexplainable way the whole of the Deseze affair was connected with the capture of the English spy known throughout France as the Scarlet Pimpernel. This spy had been at work in the district some time; everyone knew that it was he who had dragged those ci-devant traitors and aristos, the Tournon-d'Agenays, out of Citizen Lauzet's clutches, and Citizen Lauzet was now having his revenge. He would capture the Scarlet Pimpernel, catch him in the very act of trying to effect the escape of the Deseze family, and thus earn the reward of ten thousand livres offered to any man who would lay that enemy of France by the heels.

Lucky Lauzet! Thus to have the means of earning a sum of money sufficient to keep a man and his family in affluence for the rest of their lives. And besides the money there would be glory too! Who could gauge the height to which a man might rise if he brought about the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel? Well, Lauzet would do it! Lucky Lauzet! He would certainly do it, asserted some; those sort of men always have all the luck! There were even those who asserted that the Scarlet Pimpernel was already captured and that Lauzet had got him. Lucky, lucky Lauzet!

"You don't suppose," one man declared, "that anything would be known of the affair unless it was already accomplished? Lauzet is not one to talk till after a thing is done. No! No! Believe me, my friends, Lauzet has already got his ten thousand livres in his pocket!"

He was a wizened, little old man from over Lanoy way, and now he dolefully shook his head.

"And to think," he went on, "that I might have laid that English spy by the heels myself, if I had had a bit of luck like Lauzet."

A shout of derision greeted this astounding assertion.

"You papa Sargon?" one of the crowd ejaculated with a loud laugh. "You, laying the English spy by the heels? That is the best joke I've heard for many a day. Will you tell us how that came about?"

And papa Sargon told the tale how he and his wife had a visit from a squad of soldiers who told him that they were after a band of English spies who were known to be in that district. The soldiers asked for a night's shelter as they were weary after a long day's ride. Papa Sargon remained convinced in his own mind that for the better part of a night he had harboured the most bitter enemies of his country, and if he had only guessed who those supposed soldiers were, he might have informed the local commissary of police, and earned ten thousand livres for himself. Now this story would not perhaps have been altogether convincing to unprejudiced ears, but such as it was, and with everything that had occurred in Moisson these past few days, it aroused considerable excitement. It went to prove that the Scarlet Pimpernel was not nearly so mysterious or so astute as rumour credited him to be, since he almost fell a victim to papa Sargon. It also went to prove to the satisfaction of the company present that Citizen Lauzet had been sharper than papa Sargon and, having come across the Scarlet Pimpernel through some lucky accident, he had laid hands on him and was even now conveying him to Paris, where a grateful government would hand him over the promised reward of ten thousand livres.

This notion, which gradually filtrated into the minds of the company, did not tend to make Citizen Lauzet any more popular; and when presently most of that same company adjourned to Leon's for refreshment, there were some among the younger men who wanted to know why they should not have their share in those ten thousand livres. The Scarlet Pimpernel, they argued with more enthusiasm than logic, had been captured in their district. The Deseze family who were in some way connected with the capture were citizens of Moisson; why should not they, citizens of Moisson too, finger a part of the reward?

It was all very wild and very illogical, and it would have been impossible for anyone to say definitely who was the prime mover in the ensuing resolution which, by the way, was carried unanimously, that a deputation should set out forthwith for Mantes to interview Citizen Lauzet and demand in the name of justice, and for the benefit of Moisson, some share in the money prize granted by the government for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Subsequently, both papa Sargon and a drover from Aincourt were held to be chiefly to blame, but as papa Sargon very properly remarked, neither he nor the stranger from Aincourt stood to gain anything by the wild-goose chase, so why should they have instigated it?

Be that as it may, soon after the midday meal, half a score of young stalwarts climbed into the cart of the drover from Aincourt, and the party, full of enthusiasm and of Leon's excellent red wine, set out for Mantes. They had provided themselves with a miscellaneous collection of arms; those who possessed guns brought them along, then they borrowed a couple of pistols from Leon and two more from old Mitau who had been a soldier in his day. Some of them had sabres, others took sickles or scythes which might be useful; one man had a saw, another took a wood-chopper. All these things would be very useful should there be a fight over this affair, and most of them hoped that there would be a fight.

The first disappointment came on arrival to Mantes. Here at the Commissariat they were informed that Citizen Lauzet had been gone these past two hours. He had ridden away in the company of his friend who had come from Paris some two days previously. The general idea prevalent at the Commissariat was that the two men had ridden away in the direction of Paris.

The second disappointment, a corollary of the first, was that the diligence with prisoners and escort had started on its way less than half an hour ago. It seemed in very truth as if the plot thickened. Lauzet and his friend from Paris gone, the diligence gone! No one paused to reflect how this could possibly mean anything in the nature of a plot, but by this time spirits were inflamed. Unaccountably inflamed. Everyone was so poor these days; money was so terribly hard to earn; work was so grinding, remuneration so small, that now that the idea of the capture of the English spy with its attendant reward had seized hold of the imagination of these young hotheads, they clung to it tenaciously, grimly, certain that if they acted quickly and wisely, and if no one else got in the way, they would succeed in gaining the golden prize. A competence! Just think of it! And with nothing to do for it but an exciting adventure. And here was Lauzet interfering! Snatching the prize for himself! Lauzet, who already drew a large salary from the State for very little work.

All this had been talked over, sworn over, discussed, commented at great length all the way between Moisson and Mantes, in the rickety cart driven by the drover from Aincourt. He was a wise man, that drover. His advice was both sound and bold. "Why," he asked pertinently, "should a man like Citizen Lauzet get everything he wants? I say it is because he has a friend over in Paris who comes along and helps him. Because he has money and influence. What? Was there ever anything seen quite so unjust? Where is the English spy, my friend? I ask you. He is in this district. Our district. And what I say is that what's in our district belongs to us. Remember there's ten thousand livres waiting for every man who takes a hand in the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Ten thousand livres! and Citizen Lauzet with that stranger from Paris is even at this hour riding away with it in his pocket."

He spoke a great many more equally eloquent words, for he had a gift of speech, had this drover from Aincourt. A rough fellow, it is true, but one with his heart in the right place, and born in the district, too; anyone could tell that by the contemptuous way with which he spoke of any stranger born outside this corner of Seine et Oise. To the man who had sat next to him on the way from Moisson to Mantes he had confided the story of his life; told him that at thirteen years of age he had been pressed into service on board one of the ci-devant tyrant's ships, that the ship had been captured by English corsairs, and he had been a galley slave until he succeeded in breaking his chains and swimming to shore while the English sloop lay off Ushant. No wonder he hated the whole foul brood of the English. He was their slave for nigh on twenty years. And always he harked back on the golden prize which, he declared, would not be shared up. Each and every man who took a hand in the capture of the English spy would receive his ten thousand livres.

He was listened to with great attention, was the drover. And his words presently carried all the more weight because something very strange came to light. It appeared that the diligence from Moisson with prisoners and escort had made a half of several hours in Mantes. The party only made a fresh start in the late afternoon. That was strange enough in all conscience. What did it mean but that Lauzet was courting the darkness for his schemes? But there was something more mysterious still. While the diligence stood before the posting inn ready to start, horses pawing and champing, the driver on his box, whip in hand, the four troopers who were on guard to right and left of the vehicle would not allow anyone to come within measurable distance of it. Be it noted that all the blinds of the coach were drawn so that it was impossible to get a peep at the inside. But two young men, strangers to the neighbourhood, who had

since come forward, eager to tell their story, more venturesome than others, had crept under the horses' bellies and tried to peer into the interior of the coach. They were almost immediately driven away with blows and curses by the troopers, but not before they had vaguely perceived that there were more than just the prisoners inside the diligence. The prisoners were all huddled up in the furthest corner of the vehicle, but there were others. The young men who had had a peep, despite the blows from the troopers, had seen three or four men at least. They might have been ordinary travellers who had picked up the diligence at Mantes. But in that case, why all this secrecy? Why the drawn blinds, the start in the late afternoon so that the shades of evening would actually be drawing in when the diligence and its escort ploughed its way through the muddy road of the forest between Mezieres and Epone? Why a feeble escort of only four men when, of late, and when the ci-devant Tournon-d'Agenays were being conveyed to Paris, as many as eight or ten picked troopers of the National Guard had ridden beside the diligence? Indeed, the drover from Aincourt was right. Indubitably right. Citizen Lauzet and his friend from Paris had entered into a plot, a dastardly, cowardly plot to cheat the citizens of Moisson of their just share in the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. There was no doubt that the Scarlet Pimpernel was already captured, and that Lauzet was having him conveyed in secret to Paris. The escort might appear feeble, but there were men inside the diligence who held the English spy, bound hand and foot between them, with a cocked pistol at his head. Why! The two young strangers who had succeeded in getting a peep at the inside of the diligence quite thought, from the description everyone had of him, that one of the men whom they glimpsed was in very truth the Scarlet Pimpernel.

"He was so tall," they said, "so tall that he had to sit almost bend double, otherwise his head would have knocked against the roof of the coach." They were almost prepared to swear also that this tall man's hands were tied together with ropes.

After that, as the drover from Aincourt very properly said, any man would be a fool who doubted Lauzet's treachery and cupidity. It was resolved to proceed immediately in his wake, to seize him wherever he might be, him and any man who had helped him in his treachery. Aye, if he had an army to protect him, he would find that the men of Moisson and Mantes were not to be flouted and cheated with impunity. The drover from Aincourt was bribed to take the party in his cart as far as Mezieres. He demurred a little at first; seemed to turn crusty and impervious to threats. Eventually he was offered one hundred livres out of every man's share if the English spy was captured, and one livre if he was not.

"Eh bien," he said at last in token of consent, and they all scrambled back into the cart.

VII

Captain Raffet had given the order to dismount and the troopers sat by the roadside under the trees, making a pretence to rest. Each man, however, had his sabre ready to his hand, and each had seen to the priming of his pistol, while the Captain himself ostensibly busied himself with examining the fetlock of the mare who had gone lame. The wind had gone down and the torrential rain had ceased, but there was a thin mist-like drizzle that soaked through the men's clothing and chilled them to the bone. The tension had become acute. With nerves on edge the men, those who were in the open as well as those who were cooped up inside the diligence, could do nothing but wait while the time dragged on and the woods was full of sounds; of the crackling of twigs, the fall of rain-laden leaves, the scrunching of earth under tiny, furtive, feet scurrying away through the undergrowth. The great, awkward diligence loomed out of the mist like some gigantic spectral erection, peopled by forms that breathed and lived and hardly emitted a sound. Only very occasionally from the interior there came the painful moan, quickly suppressed, from the poor invalid's parched throat.

And all at once something more tangible: a patter of feet, a call, a voice half-drowned in the gathering mist. It came way down the road, from the direction of Mézieres. The men sat up, alert, quivering with excitement, their eyes straining to pierce the thicket, since the sharp bend in the road hid the oncomers from view. The order was to feign inattention, to wait for the attack, lest the wily enemy, scenting a trap, scampered away to safety. And the men waited, very much like greyhounds held in leash, quivering with eagerness, their hot, moist hands grasping sabre and pistol, the while Captain Raffet, as keenly alert as they, carried on a desultory conversation with the driver about the mare's injured fetlock. Vague forms began to detach themselves out of the mist, coming round the bend; soon they gained volume and substance. The voice still calling gained power and clarity. It was as much as Captain Raffet could do, by muttered word and glance of eye, to keep those human greyhounds of his in check. With the Scarlet Pimpernel perhaps in sight they were straining on the leash to its breaking-point.

It was at the very moment that, throwing all prudence to the wind, the men suddenly raised themselves upon their knees, and were on the point of springing to their feet, unable to contain their excitement any longer, that Charles-Marie, the loony driver, who had once been a baker's assistant, exclaimed joyfully, "Pardi! If it isn't Citizen Plante home from market already." And the next instant the oncoming figure revealed itself as that of an old man, walking along with the aid of a tall stick, and calling at times to his dog or to the half-dozen sheep he was driving before him.

Citizen Plante was not of a gregarious disposition, nor of an inquisitive one apparently, for he passed by without a word or glance of curiosity directed at the troopers or at the vehicle. All that he did was to nod to the driver as he went by, whilst the men gazed at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, as if he had been a spectre. And like a spectre he seemed to glide past them and out of sight. A minute or two later the twilight and the mist had swallowed him up with his sheep and his dog, and had smothered his monotonous calls in the veils of the night.

A groan of disappointment and impatience rose from the parched throats of the men. The passage of old Plante and his sheep had exasperated their nerves. A moment ago they had felt chilled and cramped; now their blood was up, their bodies were in a sweat with the violence of their disappointment. Already Plante and his sheep were far away. That silence, so full of sounds, had once more descended upon the forest. Again the men waited with eyes and ears strained, their nerves a-tingle, their breathing hard and stertorous. And once more there fell upon their straining ears the sound of human life coming from the direction of Mézieres. This time it was the sound of cart-wheels creaking through the mud, and of ill-adjusted harness jingling with the movement of wearily-plodding horses. There was also from time to time the sound of distant voices, a harsh call or uproarious laugh suddenly stilled as if in response to a peremptory warning. Nothing in truth to suggest the furtive methods of the English adventurers it seemed more like a party of farmers coming home from market.

The troopers were on the alert, of course, but not quite so keenly perhaps as they were before their disappointment over Citizen Plante's passage across the scene. But a minute or two later a quick word from their Captain brought them sharply to attention. The cart had obviously come to a halt, but a lusty shout now rang through the stillness of the night, and there was a general sound of scampering and of running, mingled with calls of excitement and encouragement. A few minutes of tense expectation, then suddenly round a bend a band of ten or a dozen men came into view, armed with miscellaneous weapons. At sight of the diligence they gave a wild shout of triumph, brandished their weapons and rushed to the attack.

"Attention, citizen soldiers," Raffet commanded hastily. "Do not shoot unless you are obliged. But if you must, shoot low. We must have some of those English spies alive if we can."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than, with a renewed shout of triumph, the band of young ruffians threw themselves like a pack of enraged puppies on the soldiers, whilst others made straight for the diligence. But before they had gone within twenty metres of it the Captain gave the quick word of command that brought the men of the gendarmerie out of the coach, pistols in hand, ready for the fight.

The attacking party, however, held no laggards either. Egged on by the drover of Aincourt and still shouting wildly, they rushed on the men of the gendarmerie as they scrambled out of the coach. Numbers being about equal on either side, the men coming out one by one were at a great disadvantage. Almost as soon as they had set foot to the ground they were fallen on with fist or sabre, and soon the confusion was complete.

"What the devil's game is this?" Raffet shouted hoarsely, for in an instant he found himself at grips, not with the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, but with Gaspard, the son of the butcher at Moisson, whom he had known ever since they had been ragamuffins together. And Gaspard was as strong as some of the bullocks his father was wont to kill. Before Raffet could recover from the surprise of this wholly unexpected turn of events Gaspard had brought his heavy fist crashing down on his whilom friend's skull.

"It means," Gaspard shouted, mad with fury, "that thou'rt a traitor and that I'll teach thee to help cheat thy friends."

Nor could Raffet argue after that. He had need of all his faculties to defend himself against this young ox. He had drawn his pistol, true, but Gaspard's iron-like hand had closed around his wrist and the fight soon degenerated to fisticuffs. The troopers fared no better, either. Though they had been prepared for an attack, they were not prepared for this furious onslaught made upon them by their friends. Name of a dog! What did it all mean? For they were all friends, these madmen, every one of them; young men from Moisson and Lanoy and Mantes. There was François the mercer of the Rue Grande, and Jacques whose father kept the tavern at the sign of the Black Swan, and Paul whose mother was the best washerwoman in Mantes. And words flew round to the accompaniment of thumping blows.

"Jacques, art thou mad or drunk?"

"Achille! Thy father will beat thee for this escapade."

"Name of a name, but you'll all get something for this night's work."

And all the while blows were raining fast and furious. There was no lust to kill, only wild enthusiasm for a fight, a desire to be avenged on friends who had aided that rascal Lauzet to cheat the men of the district out of the golden prize.

"Give up the English spies or I'll squeeze the breath out of thy throat." This from Gaspard the butcher's son who had felled his friend Raffet to the ground and rolled over and over in the mud with him, the two men snarling at one another and biting and scratching like a couple of angry dogs.

Had they all gone mad, these men of Moisson? The issue of the struggle might have remained longer in the balance had not Raffet just then freed his right hand from the iron grip of Gaspard and discharged his pistol into his whilom comrade's leg. Gaspard rolled over on to his back with a groan and a curse.

"Traitor. Thou hast murdered me," he cried, while the blood flowed freely out of his thigh.

But the one pistol-shot had the effect of sobering the combatants. The aggressors and pistols, too, and sabres, but in their excitement had forgotten how to use them. The sudden report, however, brought the soldiers back to a sense of discipline, wakened them, as it were, from their surprise, and in a moment gave them a decided advantage over the undisciplined attacking party. This wild fisticuffs could not go on. It was unworthy of the soldiers of the Republic. They were being attacked by a band of irresponsible young jackanapes whom the devil himself must for the nonce have deprived of reason, but it remained for the picked men of the rural gendarmerie to teach them that such madness could not remain unpunished, and friend or foe, he who attacks a soldier of the Republic must suffer for his wantonness. Far be it from the chronicler of these events to pretend that all these thoughts did surge clearly in the heads of the troopers. What is a fact is that from the moment their Captain discharged a pistol into Gaspard's thigh, they became masters of the situation. The fight between soldiers and citizens assumed its just proportions; there were a few pistol-shots, some sabre thrusts, a good deal of groaning and cursing, while more than one stalwart besides Gaspard rolled over in the mud.

The fight had lasted less than ten minutes. When the first rush on the diligence was made, the twilight was already fading into dusk. Now when the last shot had been fired and the last of the hotheads had cried for mercy, dusk was slowly yielding to the darkness of the night. Raffet called the soldiers to attention. They were still panting with excitement, some of them were dizzy from the blows dealt freely on their skulls; one or two showed a bunged eye or a bleeding lip, but none of them were seriously hurt. The hotheads from Moisson and Mantes had not fared quite so well. Some of them had received a charge of shot in leg, arm or shoulder, and were lying groaning or half-conscious on the ground; those who had escaped with minor hurts were on their knees, held down by the heavy hand of a trooper. They did not in truth represent an edifying spectacle, with their faces streaming with blood and perspiration, their clothes torn, their shirtsleeves hanging in rags, their hair wet and lank, hanging before their eyes. Raffet ordered them to be mustered up; his sharp glance ran over them as they stood or crouched together in a line.

"I ought to have the lot of you summarily shot," Raffet said sternly to them after he had inspected his men and seen that victory had not cost them dear. "Yes, shot," he reiterated, "for interfering with the soldiers of the Republic in the exercise of their duty; and I will do it, too," he went on after a moment's pause, "unless you tell me now the meaning of this abominable escapade."

"You know it well, Citizen Raffet," Paul the washerwoman's son said, still breathless with excitement and with a savage oath, "when you joined hands with that traitor Lauzet to cheat us all of what was our due."

"Joined hands with Lauzet? What the devil do you mean?" Raffet queried frowning. "In what did I join hands with Lauzet?"

"In capturing the English spy and getting the reward for yourselves when it rightly belonged to us."

"The reward," Raffet retorted dryly, "will be for whosoever may be lucky to get the English spy. For the moment I imagine that if he meant to attack us to-night your folly has scared him. The noise you made would keep any brigand out of the way."

"No use lying to us, Raffet," one of the others retorted somewhat incoherently. It was François who spoke this time, the mercer from the Rue Grande, and he had always been noted for his eloquence. "You raised your hands against us citizens of the Republic who came here to avenge an unpardonable wrong. And let me tell you that 'tis you who will suffer for this night's work--"

"Ah ça!" Raffet broke in savagely, for his temper was still up. "How long are you going to talk in riddles? In truth it's the devil that has deprived you of your senses. What's all this talk about the English spy? Who told you we were after him? And why should you hinder us from doing our duty?"

"We know," François retorted, striving to appear calm and full of dignity, "that not only were you after the English spy, but we know that you captured him in our district and that you have got him in the diligence yonder and are conveying him to Paris, where you and your friends will share ten thousand livres which by rights should have belonged to us men of the district where the spies were captured."

"What gibberish is this? I tell you that not only have we not got the English spy, but owing to your senseless folly, we are not likely to get him now."

"I say that the English spy is in your diligence," François exclaimed, and pointed dramatically at the old vehicle which stood like a huge, solid mass, heavier and darker than the surrounding gloom. "Some of us have seen him, I tell you." And his companions, even those who were in the sorriest plight, nodded in assent.

But Raffet swallowed his temper now. What was the use of arguing with these fools? He would have thought it beneath his dignity to give them ocular demonstration that the diligence now only held three miserable aristos. But the trouble was what to do with this crowd. Raffet counted them over. There were eight of them, and four of these were helpless with wounds in the legs. Somehow at the first rush Raffet thought there had been more like a dozen young ruffians and he had a distinct recollection of a big, clumsy fellow who seemed the prime mover in this senseless escapade. But no doubt he as well as one or two others had had the good sense to take to their heels, and Raffet had certainly no intention of scouring the woods for them. On the other hand, he had every intention of seeing those that remained well punished for their folly. He did not wish to drag them along with him to Epone. It was another four kilometres and more and the first part of the journey would still be through the forest; with the gathering darkness the coach-horses would have to be led by men carrying lanterns.

Pondering a moment over the future of his prisoners, Raffet had a sudden inspiration.

"Who drove the cart that brought you all hither?" he demanded.

"A man from Lanoy," Paul, the washerwoman's son, replied.

"Then he shall take you back to Mantes the way you came."

"You would not dare--" One of the others protested.

Raffet, however, had already turned to his corporal of gendarmerie.

"Citizen Corporal," he said, "take these rascals as far as the cart which brought them thither. It must have come to a halt somewhere near the bottom of the hill. Let two of your men go with them to Mantes and there hand them over to the deputy commissary. Order the owner of the cart to drive them on pain of severe punishment if he refuses. Take one of the lanterns with you. It will be needed as the road will be pitch dark before they are well on their way. And stay! You have some stout cord inside the diligence. We were going to use it on the English spy. Now it will serve to bind these rogues together two by two, lest they try some more of their tricks on you. Those who are hurt can lie in the bottom of the cart."

"Citizen Raffet," François, the mercer, raised his voice in final impotent protest. "You will answer to the State for this outrage on her citizens."

But Raffet was no longer in a mind to listen. The corporal had sent one of the men to find the length of rope which was inside the diligence and was to have served for binding up the English spies, and now it would be used on a lot of jackanapes on their homeward journey to Mantes. Protests and curses were indeed in vain, and the soldiers, whose tempers had not yet cooled down, were none too gentle with the rope. Raffet, in the meanwhile, had called one of the men of the gendarmerie to him. "Ride, Citizen Soldier," he commanded, "as fast you can to Epone. You will find the Citizen Commissary and his friend from Paris at the posting inn. Tell them just what has occurred and that I am sending the pack of miscreants back to Mantes for punishment. Tell them also that this senseless piece of folly has not left us unprepared for attack by the English spies, though we have not much more hope in that direction now. We shall be on the road again in a quarter of an hour, but will have to walk the horses practically all the way, so do not expect to be in Epone for another two hours at least."

Then at last did comparative silence fall upon the scene, where a brief while ago deafening shouts and tumultuous *melée* had roused the woodland echoes. Only the prisoners now were heard groaning and cursing. The courier had ridden away bearing the unwelcome news to Lauzet and his friend from Paris; the men who were not busy with the prisoners were looking to their horses or their accoutrements, while Raffet stood by, observant and grim. And suddenly, right out of the darkness there came the sound of agonizing calls for help.

"What was that?" Raffet queried straining his ears to listen.

"Help," came from the distance. And then again, "Help! Ho," and "Curse you, why don't you come?" And with it all the now familiar sound of men fighting and shouting. Not so very far away either. A couple of hundred metres, perhaps, just the other side of the bend. Were it not for the thicket and darkness, a man could cut his way through to where those shouts came from in a couple of minutes.

"Help! Help!"

One of the prisoners broke into a harsh laugh. "It's Citizen Lauzet, I'll wager," he said, "and his friend from Paris."

"Citizen Lauzet?" Raffet exclaimed. "What in hell do you mean?"

"Well," Paul, the washerwoman's son, replied still laughing and forgetting his sorry plight in the excellence of the joke. "We found those two ambling on the bridle-path, on their way to Epone, ready no doubt to seize the largest share of reward for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Great God!"

"And so we seized them both," François, the mercer, rejoined, "and did to them what you are doing now to us; gave them a good hiding, then bound them together with ropes and threw them in the bottom of the cart."

"Name of a dog?"

"And no doubt," came a high-pitched voice from among the group of prisoners, "the English spies have found them and..."

"Malediction!" But Raffet got no further. Astonishment not unmixed with terror rendered him speechless. The Scarlet Pimpernel. Ye Gods! And the Chief of Section and his friend at the mercy of that fiend. Even now his straining ears seemed to perceive through these calls for help a triumphant battle-cry in a barbaric tongue.

"Here," he cried to the troopers. "Two of you are sufficient to bring these rascals along; and you, corporal, and two men come with me. Citizen Lauzet and his friend are being murdered even now."

He hurried down the road followed by the corporal and two men of the gendarmerie, whilst those that were left behind saw to it that the perpetrators of all this additional outrage and of all this pother were duly garrotted and started on their way.

To them Raffet shouted a final: "Three of you remain to guard the prisoners and make ready for an immediate start when we return." Then he disappeared round the bend in the road.

VIII

The shouting had ceased as Raffet and his troops hurried along. Indeed, at first he might have thought that his ears had deceived him, had not that agonized call for help still risen insistently through the gloom. He searched the darkness, and suddenly a sight greeted him by the roadside which caused his hair to stand up on his head. At first this seemed nothing but a bundle lying half-in and half-out of the ditch in the mud, with the drip-drip from the trees making a slimy puddle around it. It was from this bundle that the calls for help and the curses proceeded.

It was appalling, almost unbelievable, for there were the Chief of Section in the rural division of the department of Seine et Oise, Citizen Lauzet, and his friend from Paris whom Captain Raffet knew as Citizen Chauvelin, a man who stood very high in the estimation of the government, and they were lying in a muddy puddle in the ditch like a pair of calves tied together for market. Raffet might have disbelieved his eyes had it not been for the language which Citizen Lauzet used all the while that the rope which bound him was being cut by the corporal.

"Thank the Lord," Raffet exclaimed fervently, "that you are safe."

"I'll have 'em flayed alive, the rascals," Lauzet exclaimed in a voice rendered feeble and hoarse with much shouting, as well as rage. "The guillotine is too mild a death for such miscreants. They attacked me, Citizen Captain, would you believe it? Me! Chief of Section in the rural gendarmerie. Have you ever heard of such an outrage? They shouted at us from behind. My friend and I were riding along quite slowly, and we had just turned into the bridle-path from the road. We heard the cart and all the shouting, but we thought that they were just a pack of drunken oafs returning from market. So we paid them no heed, not even when anon we heard that on the road the cart had drawn up and, chancing to glance back at the moment, I saw these louts jumping helter-skelter out of the cart. And the next moment they were on us, the lot of them. Ten or a dozen of them they were, the rogues."

"The miserable scoundrels," Raffet exclaimed fervently.

"They dragged us out of our saddles," Lauzet continued, "they beat us about the head..."

"Name of a name..."

"And all the while they kept on shouting, 'Traitor! Traitor! Give up the English spy to us.' In vain did we try and protest. They would not hear us, and what could we do against a dozen of them? Then finally they bound us with ropes, wound our cravats about our mouths so that we could scarcely breathe, and listed us into that jolting cart, where we lay more dead than alive while it was driven by a lout at breakneck speed.

"Have no fear, Citizen," Raffet put in forcefully. "Their punishment shall be exemplary."

"I have no fear," Lauzet retorted dryly, "for I'll see to their punishment myself. The scamps, the limbs of Satan! But I'll teach them. There we lay, Citizen Captain, at the bottom of the cart, my friend Citizen Chauvelin, who wore the tricolour scarf of office round his middle, and I, chief commissary of the district, and those ruffians dared to wipe their shoes on us. So we drove for a kilometre and a half through the forest. Then presently the cart drew up and all those louts jumped down like a pack of puppies and ran away up the hill with shouts that would wake the dead. The last I remember, for in the jolting and my cramped position I had partly lost consciousness, was that my friend and I were lifted out of the cart as unceremoniously as we had been thrust into it. We were carried up the road some little way and then thrown into the ditch by the roadside, in the mud, just where you ultimately found us, and our cravats were loosened from round our mouths. Immediately we started screaming for help, but there was such a din going on up the road, that we felt the sound of our voices could not possibly reach you. Fortunately, in the end, you did hear us, or maybe we should have perished of cold and inanition."

"Malediction," Raffet swore viciously. "And you might have been attacked by those cursed English spies while you lay helpless here. We thought we heard them, and their battle-cry, and hurried to your assistance."

He turned and shook his fist with another savage oath at the gang of prisoners which had just come into view. Sobered and chastened, they allowed themselves quite meekly to be dragged along by a couple of soldiers. Some of them were able to walk, and were made to do so with the aid of vigorous kicks if they flagged, whilst the others, those who had sustained wounds or were otherwise helpless, had been hoisted up, none too gently, on the shoulders of their comrades in misfortune. Altogether, they looked a sorry lot. Raffet smiled grimly at sight of them whilst Lauzet fell to cursing and anathematizing them viciously.

Chauvelin alone showed no emotion. As soon as the rope that held him had been severed, he had sat up on a broken tree-stump, staring straight out before him into the mist, and meditatively stroking his sore wrists and arms. It seemed as if some secret thought had the power to keep his wrath and indignation in check. Nor did he as much as glance up when the procession of soldiers and prisoners came into view. Before his semi-consciousness there floated a vague vision which he was striving to capture. When first those abominable louts had thrust him and Lauzet in the bottom of the cart, and he lay there bound and gagged, nursing his stupendous wrath and hopes of revenge, he had become aware that the driver, who still sat aloft just above him, had suddenly turned and, leaning over, had peered into his face. It had only been a very brief glance; the next moment the man was sitting up quite straight again, and all that Chauvelin saw of him was his back, with the great breadth of shoulders and general look of power and tenacity. But it was the brief vision of that glance that Chauvelin now was striving to re-capture. The blue-grey eyes with their heavy lids that could not be disguised, and the mocking glance which had seemed to him like rasping metal against his exacerbated nerves. And suddenly he called to Raffet: "The driver and the cart, where are they?"

The Captain's sharp eyes searched the mist that was rising in the valley.

"Down at the bottom of the hill," he said. "The driver seems to be on the box. I shall want him to drive these rascals back to Mantes."

"Send him to me at once," Chauvelin broke in curtly.

Raffet gave the necessary orders, although inwardly he chafed at this new delay. The prisoners slowly continued their way, and Chauvelin waited, expectant. For what? He could not have told you. He certainly did not expect to be brought face to face with his old enemy. And yet But whatever vague hopes he might have entertained were dissipated soon enough by an exclamation from Raffet.

"Charles-Marie! What in a dog's name are you doing here?"

And a weak, querulous voice rose in reply. "He told me I was to run along and drive the cart back to Mantes for him. He..."

"He?" queried Raffet sharply. "Who?"

"I don't know, Citizen Captain," replied Charles-Marie.

"Who ordered you to leave the diligence and your horses?"

"I don't know, Citizen Captain," protested the unfortunate Charles-Marie. "It's God's truth. I don't know."

"You must know why you're not sitting on the box of the diligence."

"Yes. I know that, for I scrambled down as soon as I saw Gaspard fall on you, Citizen Captain."

"Why did you scramble down?"

"Because the horses were restive. At the first pistol-shot they started rearing and I had a mighty task to hold them. Fortunately, someone came and gave me a hand with them."

"What do you mean by 'someone came'? Who was it?"

"He was a drover from Aincourt, Citizen Captain, and so he knew all about horses, and how could I keep four terrified horses quiet, all by myself?"

"You miserable fool."

"All very well, Citizen Captain, but I never was a fighting man, and I don't like those pistol-shots all about me. One of them might have caught me, I say, and it was only right I should find cover somewhere, lest indeed I be hit by mistake."

"You abominable coward," Raffet rejoined savagely.

"But all that does not explain how you got here."

"Well, Citizen, it was like this. The drover from Aincourt saw that I was not altogether happy, and he said to me, 'There'll be more fighting presently when the English spies come to attack.' I said nothing at first. All I could do was to groan for, as I say, I'm not a fighting man. I went out of the Army because I was too ill to fight, and my mother..."

"Never mind about your mother now. What happened after that?"

"He said to me: 'You go and get on the seat of the cart which is up the road. It is my cart. You can drive it back to Mantes and leave it and my horses at the posting inn where they know me. I'll look after these horses for you, and when the fighting's over I'll drive the diligence to Paris. No one will be any the wiser and I don't mind a bit of a fight. I can do a bit of fighting myself.' Well," Charles-Marie went on dolefully, "there didn't seem much harm in that. I could see he knew all about horses from the way he handled them; but I'm no fighting man, and when I was engaged to drive the diligence from Moisson to Paris, I was not told that there would be any fighting."

"So you turned your back on the diligence, like a coward, and crept along here..."

"I didn't creep, Citizen. I followed you when..."

"Pardi!" Raffet broke in with an oath. "Another of you that will not escape punishment. If I had my way the guillotine would be busy in Mantes for days to come."

There was nothing for it now but to allow Charles-Marie to drive the cart back to Mantes, since its owner had probably seized an opportunity by now of taking to his heels. Poor Raffet was worn out with the excitement of the past half-hour, and bewildered with all the mystery that confronted him at every turn. Vaguely he felt that something sinister lurked behind this last incident recited to him by Charles-Marie, but for the moment he did not connect it with the possible manoeuvres of the English spies. He thought that chapter of the day's book of adventures closed. It would be an extraordinary piece of luck, indeed, if in the end they should still come across the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Anyway, for the moment, the most important thing was to see the cartload of prisoners on its way, and to this Raffet devoted his attention. He walked down as far as the cart, saw the prisoners stowed in, Charles-Marie on the box with a trooper beside him to see that he did his work properly, another in the cart to watch over the prisoners, and a third to the horses' heads with a lighted lantern. After that, what happened to the pack of miscreants Raffet cared less than nothing; in the end they would not escape punishment, whether they reached Mantes this night, or spent the hours of darkness in the forest. They were securely bound now; wounded of hale they lay huddled up in the cart, their spirit broken, and with hardly a groan left in them. Raffet gave the order to start. With much creaking and grinding the wheels ploughed their way through the mud; it would take a couple of hours to cover the three kilometres

back as far as Mantes. Raffet stood for a moment or two watching the veil of darkness which gradually engulfed the cart, the horses and their human load. Just for a minute longer the fitful glimmer of the lanthorn shone through the trees and for awhile the voice of the man who carried it was heard encouraging the horses or urging them on.

Then only did Raffet bethink himself of the citizen from Paris who had given him the order to bring the driver of the cart to him. Quickly he turned on his heel and walked up the road again. The corporal and the troopers were there waiting for him, but Citizen Lauzet and his friend from Paris had gone.

IX

Indeed, Chauvelin had not waited to hear the whole of Charles-Marie's tale. Throughout all the adventures which had befallen him this day, he had seen the hand of his enemy, the Scarlet Pimpernel. Now he no longer had any doubt. Almost at the first words uttered by Charles-Marie he had jumped to his feet, all the stiffness gone out of his bones; and despite the darkness, the mud and the rain, he turned and ran up the slushy road, round the bend beyond which he had heard the fight a quarter of an hour ago. To Lauzet he had shouted a curt, "Come," and Lauzet had followed, obedient, understanding, like a dog, only vaguely scenting danger to himself, danger more serious than any that had threatened him during this eventful day.

Chauvelin ran through the darkness with Lauzet at his heels. The road appeared endless and black, the silence full of portent. Only the drip from the trees broke the silence; only the leaden greyness of the close of evening faintly pierced the darkness where the trees grew sparse on the edge of the wood. Despite the cold and rawness of the mist, he was in a bath of perspiration; though his veins were on fire, his teeth chattered with the cold. Lauzet, behind him, was panting like an apoplectic seal. The sticky mud clung to the men's shoes; their limbs still stiff from hours of confinement begrudged them every service. Soon Lauzet fell with a groan by the roadside. But Chauvelin did not give in. Through the darkness he had perceived things that moved; through the silence he had heard sounds that spurred him to fresh effort. Stumbling, half-dazed, he went round the bend of the road; then he, too, fell exhausted by the roadside, exhausted and trembling as with ague. The scene which greeted his aching eyes had finally unnerved him. There, on the crest of the hill, he saw three horses tethered to neighbouring trees, three soldiers with their hats pulled down over their eyes. Of the diligence there was not a sign. Chauvelin stared and stared at this scene. He had not strength enough to rise, though his every nerve ached to go up to one of these pinioned figures by the trees and to ask what had happened.

Thus Raffet found him five or ten minutes later. He came with his soldiers and a lantern or two. On their way they had met with Lauzet and had brought him along with them. Chauvelin could not do more at first than point with trembling finger straight out before him, and Raffet and the men swinging their lanterns came on the spectacle of the three men and the three horses tied to the forest trees, the animals calm as horses are wont to be when Nature and men are silent around them; the men inert and half-conscious, smothered under their own hats. Raffet and his troopers soon released them, but it took them some time to recover their breath.

"Question them, Citizen Captain," Chauvelin commanded feebly.

The men's statements, however, were somewhat vague. It seems that after their comrades had gone off, some with their Captain, others with the prisoners, the three who were left behind busied themselves at first with their horses, examining the saddle-girths and so on, when one of them spied something moving underneath the diligence.

"It was getting dark by that time," the man explained. "However, I called to my mates, and we stooped to see what it was. We were very much surprised, you may be sure, to see two pairs of feet in ragged shoes. We seized hold of them and pulled. The feet were attached to two pairs of legs in tattered stocking and breeches. Finally there emerged from underneath the diligence two ragamuffins with mud up to their eyes and their clothing in rags.

"We questioned them," the soldier went on to say, "and gathered from them that they were just what they appeared to be, two young jackanapes who had joined those other hotheads at Mantes where the whole thing was planned, intending to have a little fun. Soon, however, they got scared. Fearing the consequences of their escapade, they had crawled under the diligence, hoping there to lie perdu until they could comfortably take to their heels."

"They were a sorry-looking pair," another soldier put in. "We put them down for two poltroons, not worth powder and shot, and were just wondering what we should do with them when suddenly, without the slightest warning, they turned on us like a couple of demons. Not they only, for a third fellow seemed to have sprung out of the earth behind us, and come to their aid. A giant he was."

"A giant," Raffet exclaimed, for he had suddenly remembered Citizen Chauvelin's warning about the English spy, who was tall above the average.

"Aye! A giant, with the strength of an ox. I can only speak for myself, but all I know is that in an instant I felt an arm around my throat like a band of steel and I was hurled to the ground with a man on top of me. I was held down and bound with ropes, and my cravat was thrust into my mouth so that I could not shout for help. The next thing I remember was that I was lifted from the ground as if I were a bundle of straw, and I was tied to yonder tree, and finally my hat was pulled down over my eyes, my cravat wound round my mouth so that I just could breathe and no more; and there I remained until you, Citizen Captain, came and set me free."

The other two men had the same tale to tell. All three harked on the giant whose size and strength they vowed were supernatural.

"He had eyes of flame, Citizen," one of them said.

"His hair emitted sparks as it stood up around his head," declared another.

"The devils," murmured Lauzet with a shudder.

"After them," exclaimed the enthusiastic young Captain. "We have three horses, and that awkward diligence can't have got far."

"You haven't looked at the horses, have you, Citizen Raffet?" Chauvelin remarked dryly.

"There's nothing wrong with them, is there?" Raffet retorted and turned to look at the animals. The next moment a savage oath broke from his lips.

"The saddles," he exclaimed. "They're gone."

"And the bridles too, I think," Chauvelin retorted slowly. "Unless some of you are circus riders, I don't quite see what you can do. But you did not suppose, Citizen Captain, that those English devils would leave you the means of running after them, did you?"

No one said anything for the moment. There was indeed, nothing to say. Reproaches and vituperations would come later, punishment, too, perhaps. The soldiers and their Captain hung their heads, brooding and ashamed.

"They have a good start, curse 'em," Lauzet muttered presently.

"What could we do against those limbs of Satan?" Raffet rejoined glumly.

"You should have stayed, Citizen Captain, to guard the coach," Chauvelin retorted with a snarl.

"We heard you call for help, Citizen," Raffet protested glumly, "and one man told us what a plight you were in. We thought you were being attacked by the English spies — murdered perhaps. It was our duty to come to your assistance."

Indeed it was a sense of fatality that had fallen over these men; they felt numb, unable to think, hardly able to move.

"Epone is not more than four kilometres, Citizen," Raffet at last ventured, "and we have the lanterns."

And so the procession started trudging down the incline in the darkness and the rain, Chauvelin and Lauzet, Raffet and his corporal with a couple of troopers carrying the lanterns. Two hours later they reached Epone hungry, tired, spattered with mud up to their chins. Nothing had been seen or heard of the diligence on the way. At the posting inn the party found Raffet's courier waiting for them. He had been perplexed at not finding anyone to whom he could deliver the message, but whiled away the time of waiting in the coffee-room, where mine host plied him with excellent wine which had the effect of loosening his tongue.

He thought he was doing no harm by recounting at full length the adventures that had befallen him and his comrades. Thus the story was all over the district by the time the labourers of Epone had gone to their work the following morning, and the Chief of Section in the department of Sein et Oise, Citizen Lauzet, became the laughing-stock of the countryside, together with his wonderful friend from Paris. Late that same day, a horseless diligence which at first appeared deserted and derelict was discovered half a dozen kilometres to the north of the forest of Mézieres in the mud of the stream that runs southward into the Seine. A group of labourers going to their work were the first to see it. It had been dragged into the stream and left axle-deep in the water behind a clump of tall reeds. The labourers reported their find to a patrol of Raffet's troopers whom he had sent out to scour the countryside. The wheels had sunk deep into the mire, and it was only after a great deal of exertion that labourers and soldiers together succeeded in dragging the coach over the flat bank upon firm land.

In the interior they found three saddles and bridles, and two pairs of ragged shoes.

"Truly fate has been against us," Lauzet sighed dolefully when he heard of the find. "Satan alone knows where the English spies and the prisoners are at this hour."

"Well on their way to England," Chauvelin remarked. "I know 'em. With their long purse and their impudence they'll work their way to the coast, aided by fools and traitors. Such fools and traitors," he added under his breath, "as helped them last night in their latest adventure."

X

Little Madeleine Deseze was very shy. She had been brought by her father to pay her respects to Monseigneur le Prince de Galles, because maman was too ill to accompany her.

His Royal Highness had the child beside him on the sofa, and was questioning her about her adventures on that awful day when she and papa and maman were being taken to Paris in the diligence, and believed that they were destined to perish on the guillotine.

"I don't remember much, Monseigneur," Madeline said shyly. "Maman and I were too frightened to notice anything. There was so much shouting and fighting. It was terrible."

"Shall I tell you what happened, little one?" His Royal Highness was pleased to say.

"Your Highness, steaming punch is served in the yellow drawing-room," a pleasant voice interposed, with the assurance of privilege.

"Fie, Sir Percy," exclaimed Lady Alicia Nugget, "would you spoil His Highness's story?"

"Rather that than let good punch spoil with cooling, dear lady," Sir Percy retorted with a smile.

"Seize him and garrotte him," His Highness broke in with a laugh, "as our gallant hero and his friends seized and garrotted a Chief of Section, whatever that may be, and his powerful friend from Paris."

"Seize him! Garrotte him," cried many a pair of charmingly-rouged lips.

The next moment Sir Percy Blakeney, that prince of dandies, saw himself fettered by a number of lovely arms, while gay voices chirruping like birds cried: "The story, Your Highness, we entreat. He cannot interrupt now."

"I have the story from one who knows," His Highness resumed with a smile, "and our little friend Madeleine shall hear it. It was thus: Our gallant Scarlet Pimpernel, in one of his happiest disguises as a drover from Aincourt, did with the aid of two of his followers egg on a number of young louts into the belief that they were being cheated out of the reward due to them for the capture of the noted English adventurers in their district. Full of enthusiasm and excellent wine they came on the Chief of Section who, I imagine, answers to our Chief Constable of a County, together with a gentleman from Paris who some of us have known in the past. Well, the young louts, eager for the fray, and always egged on by the drover from Aincourt, seized and garrotted those two worthy gentlemen and, throwing them into the cart, took them along with them. In the forest of Mézieres they came upon the diligence in which were our little friend Madeleine and her parents. The vehicle was ostensibly guarded by four troopers only, but our Scarlet Pimpernel and his friends had already ascertained that as a matter of fact there were half a dozen more men inside the coach, and that all were armed to the teeth. Altogether too many for three men to tackle; and since the chief motto of our band of heroes is never to attempt where they cannot succeed, stratagem had here to come to the aid of valour."

"And what did they do?" one of the ladies queried breathlessly.

"The driver from Aincourt, our gallant Scarlet Pimpernel," His Highness replied, "brought the cart to a standstill about a quarter of a mile from the crest of the hill where the diligence had come to a halt prepared for an attack. Then he allowed the louts to rush the vehicle, and a general mêlée ensued. But he and his two followers in the meanwhile lifted the Chief of Section and his fiend out of the cart and carried them up the road to a point from which their call for help would presently be heard. Here they left them in the ditch,

but carefully took the gags from their mouths. Immediately the two worthy gentlemen started to shout. Nor could they be blamed, for their plight was indeed pitiable. At first there was so much din in the *melée* at the top of the hill that their cries could not be heard. And in the meanwhile one of our gallant heroes had crept up through the thicket to the crest of the hill. Then presently the fighting ceased. The enthusiastic Captain of *gendarmerie* heard the cries for help, accompanied by a good deal of shouting and clash of metal carried on by the Scarlet Pimpernel himself and his second follower. Now do you see what was the result of this manoeuvre?"

"No! No!" the ladies exclaimed. And the men, no less enthusiastic and interested cried: "Will your Highness proceed?"

"The prisoners let out the secret that the Chief of Section and his friend were lying bound with ropes in a ditch, whilst one of our heroes—the one who had gone back to the scene of the fight and mingled with the crowd — was able to put in a word that no doubt those two great and worthy citizens were being attacked and murdered by the English spies. The English spies! You have no conception, ladies, what magic lies in those three words for every soldier in the Republic. They mean hopes of promotion and of big monetary reward. In an instant the enthusiastic Captain had called to some of his men to follow him, to go to the rescue of their Chief of Section, and incidentally to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel. And that was the immediate outcome of the clever stratagem. The Captain divided his forces. Three he took with him, two were left to bring the prisoners along, another had been sent as courier with a message. Three only were left to guard the diligence. The gallant Scarlet Pimpernel had made a clever calculation. Already by a small ruse he had rid himself of the cart. Under cover of the darkness his two equally gallant followers had crept underneath the vehicle, whilst he waited in the thicket for the right time to strike. I leave you to guess the rest. The three remaining soldiers taken unawares, the horses unsaddled, the diligence finally driven down the hill by our hero, whilst inside the coach his two followers were doing their best to assure little Madeleine and her parents that all was well. Soon they abandoned the cumbersome diligence and took to the road. That part of the story is perhaps less exciting though no less heroic. The Scarlet Pimpernel has nineteen followers; it was their task to be on the road, to aid the fugitives with disguises, to help in the great task of reaching the coach in safety.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the story," His Highness concluded, rising. "Let us go and drink some of my friend Blakeney's excellent punch. But after we have drunk our toast for the King, let us raise our glasses to our national hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

With a courtly bow and a smile he offered his arm to Marguerite Blakeney who, with a glistening tear in her beautiful eyes, gave His Highness a glance of gratitude.

"Are you coming, Blakeney?" the Prince said with a merry laugh. "You must drink our toast, too, remember. To the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel!"

All the ladies laughed, partly with gaiety, but also with excitement. Then with one accord they cried: "Come and drink, Sir Percy, to the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I'll come, dear ladies," Sir Percy said with a sigh, "since His Highness commands, but you'll forgive me if I cannot drink to that demmed, elusive shadow."

Laughing still, the ladies cried: "Fie, Sir Percy! Jealous again?"

And little Madeleine, with her great childish gaze fixed upon the handsome English gentleman, cried in her piping little voice: "Fie, Sir Percy!"

THE PRINCIPAL WITNESS

I

Those who knew the widow Lesueur declared that she was quite incapable of the villainous and spiteful action which landed poor Joséphine Palmier in the dock for theft. This may or may not be so. Citoyenne Lesueur had many friends, seeing that she was well-to-do and in good odour with all the Committees and Sections that tyrannized over humble folk in a manner which recalled the very worst days of the old régime, to the distinct advantage of the latter. Moreover, Achille Lesueur was a fine man, with a distinct way with the women. He had a glossy black moustache and flashing dark eyes, since he was a true son of the South, rather inclined to be quarrelsome; and he had very decided views on politics, had Achille. You should hear him singing the Carmagnole: “Ca ira! Ca ira!” and “Les aristos à la lanterne!” He did it so lustily, it verily sent a thrill all down your spine.

He was for destroying everything that pertained to the old order: titles, of course, and private ownership of every sort and kind, and the lives of all those who did not agree with him. Land must belong to the nation, and all that grew on the land and was produced under the earth or brought out of the sea. Everything must belong to the people: that was Achille’s creed. Houses and fields and cattle and trees and women. Oh, above all, women! Women were the property of the nation.

That was the grand new creed, which had lately been propounded at Achille’s Club — the Cordeliers. And everybody knows that what the Cordeliers discuss to-day becomes law by decree of the National Assembly the day after to-morrow.

Now, there were many who averred that Achille Lesueur became a devotee of that creed only after Joséphine Palmier, his mother’s maid-of-all-work, disdained his amorous advances. Joséphine was pretty and had the dainty appearance which, in these grand days of perfect equality, proclaimed past sojourn in the house of a whilom aristocrat — as a menial, probably. Bah! Achille, whenever he tried to question Joséphine about the past and received no satisfactory answer, would spit and leer; for he had a wholesome contempt for all aristocrats and bourgeois and capitalists, and people of all sorts who had more money than he — Achilles Lesueur, the only son of his mother — happened to have at the moment.

Did I mention the fact that the widow Lesueur was very well-to-do, that she owned an excellent little business for the sale of wines, both wholesale and retail, and that Achille’s creed that everything should belong to the people did not go to the length of allowing, say, Hector and Alcibiade, to help themselves to a stray bottle or so of the best Roussillon which happened to be standing invitingly on his mother’s counter?

How he explained this seeming discrepancy in his profession of faith I do not pretend to say. Perhaps he did not consider it a discrepancy, and drew a firm line between the ownership of the people and the dishonesty of individuals. Be that as it may, Achille Lesueur had made up his mind that he was in love with Joséphine Palmier and that he would honour her by asking her to become his wife.

She refused — refused categorically and firmly; gave as an excuse that she could give him no love in return. No love, to him — Achille — with the flashing eyes, the long maternal purse, and the irresistible ways? It was unthinkable! The wench was shy, ignorant, stupid, despite her airs and graces of an out-at-elbows aristocrat. Achille persevered in his suit, enlisted his mother’s help, who indeed could not imagine how any girl in her five senses could throw away such a splendid chance. Joséphine Palmier had looked half-starved when first she applied for the situation of maid-of-all-work in the widow Lesueur’s house. She had great purple rings under her eyes and hands almost transparently thin; her lips looked pinched with cold, and her hair was lank and lustreless.

Now she still looked pale and was not over-plump; but the Citizeness Lesueur told all her neighbours that the wench had a voracious appetite, very difficult to satisfy, and that in accordance with the national decree, she was being treated as a friend of the house.

And now this wanton ingratitude! Joséphine Palmier, a waif out of the gutter, refusing the hand of Achille, his mother’s only son, in marriage!

Ah, ça! Was the baggage perchance an aristocrat in disguise? One never knew these days! Half-starved aristocrats were glad enough to share the bread of honest citizens in any capacity; and it was a well-known fact that the ci-devant Comtesse d’Aurillac had been cook to Citizen Louvet before she was sent as a traitor and a spy to the guillotine.

II

Achille was persistent, and Joséphine obstinate. Citoyenne veuve Lesueur, whilst watching the growth of her son’s passion, waxed exasperated.

Then the crisis came.

Achille’s passion reached its climax, and the widow Lesueur’s anger no longer knew bounds. The baggage must go. Had anyone ever seen such wanton wickedness? First to encourage Achille’s attentions — oh, yes! the whilom aristo had from the first made eyes at the rich and handsome son of the house. Now, no doubt, she had some traitor waiting for her somewhere, or even perhaps one of those abominable English spies who literally infested Paris these days, intriguing and suborning traitors and seducing the daughters of honest patriots, so as to point with hypocritical finger afterwards at the so-called immoral tendencies of this glorious revolution. Oh, no! Citoyenne Lesueur did not mince matters.

“Take your rags and chattels with you, my wench, and go!”

And Joséphine, tearful, humiliated, anxious for the future of pauvre maman, who was quietly starving in a garret whilst her daughter earned a precarious livelihood for both as a household drudge, put together her few tiny possessions — mere relics of former happy times — and went out of the Citoyenne Lesueur’s inhospitable doors, followed by the latter’s curses and jeers — Achille having been got safely out of the way for the occasion.

This had occurred in the late afternoon of the 6th Floréal, which corresponds with the 25th day of April of more ordinary calendars.

On the morning of the 7th, which was Saturday, Citoyenne Lesueur came downstairs to the shop as usual, a little after six, took down the shutters, and started to put the place tidy for the day's work; when, chancing to look on the drawer which contained the takings of the week, she saw at once that it had been tampered with, the lock forced, the woodwork scratched.

With hands trembling with anxiety, the worthy widow fumbled for her keys, found them, opened the drawer, and there was confronted with the full evidence of her misfortune. Two hundred francs had been abstracted from the till — oh! the citoyenne was quite positive as to that, for she had tied that money up separately with a piece of string and set it in a special corner of the drawer. As for the baggage — eh! was not her guilt patent to everyone?

To begin with, she had been dismissed for bad conduct the evening before, turned out of the house for immoral ways, with which Citoyenne Lesueur had only put up all this while out of pity and because the girl was so poor and so friendless. Then there was the testimony of Achilles. He had returned from his Club at ten o'clock that evening. He was positive as to the time, because the clock of the Hôtel de Ville was striking the hour at the very moment when he saw Joséphine Palmier outside his mother's shop. She was wrapped in a dark cloak, and carried a bundle under her arm. He — Achilles — could not understand what the girl might be doing there, out in the streets at that hour, for he knew nothing of the quarrel between her and his mother.

He spoke to her, it seems, called her by name; but she did not respond, and hurried by in the direction of the river. Achilles was very much puzzled at this incident, but the hour being so late he did not think of waking his mother and telling her of this strange rencontre, nor did he think of going into the shop to see if everything was in order. What would you? One does not always think of everything!

But there the matter stood, and the money was gone. And Citoyenne veuve Lesueur called in the Chief Commissary of the Section and gave her testimony, and attested as a patriot and a citizen against Joséphine, known to her as Palmier. That this was an assumed name, the worthy widow was now quite positive. That Joséphine was nought but an aristo in disguise looked more and more likely every moment.

The citoyenne recalled many an incident. Name of a name, what a terrible affair! If only she had not been possessed of such a commiserating heart, she would have turned the baggage out into the street long ago.

But now, what further testimony did any Commissary want, who is set at his post by the Committee of Public Safety for the protection of the life and property of honest citizens and for the punishment of bourgeois and aristos — traitors all — who are for ever intriguing against both?

As for Achilles, he attested and deposed, fumed, raged, and swore; would have struck the Citizen Commissary had he dared, when the latter cast doubt upon his — Achilles's — testimony; suggested that the Club of the Cordeliers was known for its generous libations, and that at that hour of the night any of its members might be pardoned for not recognizing even a pretty wench in the dark. And the Rue des Enfers was always a very dark street, the Citizen Commissary concluded indulgently.

Achilles was beside himself with rage. Imagine his word being doubted! What was this glorious Revolution coming to, he desired to know? In the end, he vowed that Joséphine Palmier was both a thief and an aristocrat, but that he — Achilles Lesueur, the most soulful and selfless patriot the Republic had ever known — was ready to exercise the rights conferred upon him by the recent decree of the National Convention and take the wench for his wife; whereupon she would automatically become his property, and, as the property of the aforesaid soulful and selfless patriot, be no longer amenable to the guillotine.

Achilles had inherited that commiserating heart from his mother apparently; and the Chief Commissary of the Section, himself a humane and a just man, if somewhat weak, greatly approved of this solution to his difficulties. Between ourselves, he did not believe very firmly in Joséphine's guilt, but would not have dared to dismiss her without sending her before the Tribunal lest this indulgence on his part be construed into trafficking with aristos.

III

All would then have been well, but that Joséphine Palmier, from the depths of the prison where she had been incarcerated for three days, absolutely refused to be a party to this accommodating arrangement. She refused to be white-washed by the amorous hands of Achilles Lesueur, declared that she was innocent and the victim of an abominable conspiracy hatched by mother and son in order to inveigle her into a hated marriage.

Thus the matter became very serious. From a mere question of theft, the charge had grown into one of false accusation, of conspiracy against two well-known and highly respected citizens. The Citizen Chief Commissary scratched his head in uttermost perplexity. The trouble was that he did not believe that the accusation was a false one. In his own mind, he was quite certain that the widow and her precious son had adopted this abominable means of bringing the recalcitrant girl to the arms of a hated lover.

But, name of a name! what is a Commissary to do? Being a wise man, Citizen Commissary Bourgoïn referred the whole matter to a higher authority: in other words, he sent the prisoner to be tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal, the Tribunal Extraordinaire, where five judges and a standing jury would pronounce whether Joséphine Palmier was a traitor, an aristo, as well as a thief, and one who has trafficked with English spies for the destruction of the Republic.

And here the unfortunate girl is presently arraigned, charged with a multiplicity of crimes, any one of which will inevitably lead her to the guillotine.

Citizen Fouquier-Tinville, the Attorney-General, has the case in hand. Citizen Dumas, the Judge-President, fixes the accused with his pale, threatening eye. The narrow court is crowded to the ceiling. Somehow, the affair has excited public interest, and Achilles Lesueur and his widowed mother, being well-to-do sellers of good wine, have many friends.

Attorney-General Fouquier-Tinville has read the indictment. The accused stands in the dock facing the five judges, with a set, determined look on her face. She wears a plain grey frock with long, narrow sleeves down to her pale, white hands, which accentuate the slimness of her appearance. The white kerchief round her shoulders and the cap which conceals her fair hair are spotlessly clean. Maman has carefully washed and ironed them herself and brought them to Joséphine in the prison, so that the child should look neat before her judges.

"Accused, what answer do you give to the indictment?" the Judge-President questions sternly.

"I am innocent," the girl replies firmly. "I was not in the Rue des Enfers at the hour when yonder false witness declares that he spoke with me."

Achille, who sits on a bench immediately below the jury, devours the girl with his eyes. Every now and again he sighs, and his red, spatulated hands are clasped compulsively together. At Joséphine's last words, spoken in a tone of unutterable contempt, a crimson flush spreads over his face, and his teeth — white and sharp as those of some wild, feline creature — bury themselves in his fleshy lower lip. His mother, who sits beside him, demure and consequential in sober black with open-work mittens on her thin, wrinkled hands, gives Achille a warning look and a scarce-perceptible nudge. It were not wise to betray before these judges feelings of which they might disapprove.

"I am innocent!" the girl insists. "I do not know why the Citizeness Lesueur should try and fasten such an abominable crime on me."

Here the Attorney-General takes her up sharply.

"The Citizeness Lesueur cannot be accused of trying to make you out a thief, since her only son is prepared to make you his wife."

"I would rather die accused of the vilest crimes known upon this earth," she retorts firmly, "than wed a miserable liar and informer!"

Achille utters a cry of rage not unlike that of a wild beast. Again his mother has to restrain him. But the public is in sympathy with him. Imagine that pitiful aristo scorning the love of so fine a patriot!

The Attorney-General is waxing impatient.

"If you are innocent," he says tartly, "prove it. The Revolutionary Committee of your Section has declared you to be a Suspect, and ordered your arrest as such. The onus to prove your innocence now rests with you."

"At ten o'clock on the night of the 6th Floréal, I was with my mother," the girl insists calmly, "in the Rue Christine — at the opposite end of the city to where the Rue des Enfers is situated."

"Prove it," reiterates the Attorney-General imperturbably.

"My mother can testify—" the girl retorts.

But Citizen Fouquier-Tinville shrugs his shoulders.

"A mother is not a witness," he says curtly. "Mothers have been known to condone their children's crimes. The law does not admit the testimony of a mother, a father, a husband, or a wife. Was anyone else at the Rue Christine that night — one who saw you, and can swear that you could not possibly have been at the Rue des Enfers at the hour to which the principal witness hath attested?"

But this time the girl is dumb. Her sensitive lips are drawn closely together, as if they would guard a secret which must remain inviolate.

"Well?" the Attorney-General goes on with a sneer. "You do not reply. Where is the witness who can testify that you were in the Rue Christine, at the other end of Paris, at the hour when the principal witness swears that he saw you in the Rue des Enfers?"

Again the accused gives no reply. And now it is the turn of the five judges to become insistent first, then impatient, and finally very angry. Every one of them has, in turn, put the same proposition to the accused:

"You say that the principal witness could not have seen you in the Rue des Enfers at ten o'clock of the 6th Floréal, because at that hour you were in the Rue Christine. Well, prove it!"

And every one of them has received the same mute answer: an obstinate silence, the sight of a face pale and drawn, and a glance from large, purple-rimmed eyes that have a haunting, terrified look in them now.

In the end, the Judge-President sums up the case and orders the jury to "get themselves convinced". And this they must do by deliberating and voting audibly in full hearing of the public; for such is the law to-day.

For awhile thereupon, nothing is heard in the court save that audible murmur from the stand where the jury are "getting themselves convinced". The murmur itself is confused; only from time to time a word, a broken phrase, penetrates to the ear of the public or to that of the unfortunate girl who is awaiting her doom. Such words as "obvious guilt", or "no doubt a traitor", "nought but an aristo", "the guillotine", occur most frequently; especially "the guillotine". It is such a simple solver of problems, such an easy way to set all doubts at rest!

The accused stands in the dock facing the judges. She does not glance in the direction of the jury. She seems like a statue fashioned of alabaster, a ghost-like harmony in grey and white, her kerchief scarce whiter than her cheeks.

Then suddenly there is a sensation. Through the hum of the jury "debating audibly", a raucous voice is raised from out the body of the public, immediately behind the dock.

"Name of a dog! Why, Cyrano lodges at No. 12, Rue Christine. He was there on the evening of the 6th. Eh, Cyrano? En avant, my ancient!"

"Cyrano, en avant!" The chorus is taken up by several men in ragged shirts and blouses, to the accompaniment of ribald laughter and one or two coarse jokes.

The jury cease their "audible deliberation". Remember that this Tribunal Extraordinaire is subject to no law forms. Judges and jury are here to administer justice as they understand it, not as tradition — the hated traditions of the old régime — had it in the past. They are here principally in order to see that the Republic suffers no detriment through the actions of her citizens; and there is no one to interfere with them as to how they accomplish this laudable end.

This time, all of them being puzzled by the strangeness of the affair — the singular dearth of witnesses in such a complicated case — they listen to the voice of the public: vox populi suits their purpose for the nonce.

So, at an order from the Judge-President, someone is hauled out of the crowd, pushed forward into the witness-box, hustled and bundled like a bale of goods: a great, hulking fellow with muscular arms and lank, fair hair covered with grime. He is a cobbler by trade, apparently, for he wears a leather apron and generally exhales an odour of tanned leather. He has a huge nose, tip-tilted and of a rosy-purple hue; a perpetual tiny drop of moisture hangs on his left nostril, whilst another glistens unceasingly in his right eye. His appearance in the witness-box is greeted by a round of applause from his friends.

"Cyrano!" they shout gaily, and clap their hands. "Vivat, Cyrano!"

He draws his hand slowly across his nose and smiles, a shy, self-deprecating smile which sits quaintly on one so powerfully built.

"They call me Cyrano, the comrades," he says in a gentle, indulgent voice, addressing the Judge-President, "because of my nose. It seems there was once a great citizen of France called Cyrano, who had a very large nose, and—"

"Never mind about that," the Judge-President breaks in impatiently. "Tell us what you know."

"I don't know much, Citizen," the man replies with a doleful sigh. "The comrades, they will have their little game."

"What is your name, and where do you lodge?"

"My name is Georges Gradin, and I lodge at No. 12, Rue Christine."

He fumbles with one hand inside his shirt, for he wears no coat, and out of that mysterious receptacle he presently produces his certificatory Carte de Civisme — his identity card, what? — which the sergeant of the Revolutionary guard, who stands beside the witness-box, snatches away from him and hands up to the Judge-President.

Apparently the document is all in order, for the Judge returns it to the witness; then demands curtly:

"You know the widow Palmier?"

"Yes, Citizen Judge," replies the witness. "She lives on the top floor and my shop is down below. On the night of the 5th, I was in the lodge of the Citizen Concierge at ten o'clock when someone rang the front-door bell. The concierge pulled the communicating-cord and a man came in and walked very quickly past the lodge on his way to the back staircase; but not before I had seen his face and recognized him as one who has frequently visited the widow Palmier."

"Who was it?" queries the Judge-President.

"I don't know his name, Citizen Judge," Gradin replies slowly, "but I know him for a cursed aristocrat, one who, if I and the comrades had our way, would have been shorter by a head long ago."

He still speaks in that same shy, self-deprecating way, and there is no responsive glitter in his blue eyes as he voices this cold-blooded, ferocious sentiment. The judges suddenly sit up straight in their chairs, as if moved by a common spring. They had not expected these ultra-revolutionary terrorist opinions from the meek-looking cobbler with the watery eyes and the huge, damp nose. But the Judge-President figuratively smacks his lips, as does also Attorney-General Fouquier-Tinville. They have both already recognized the type of man with whom they have to deal: one of your ferocious felines, gentle in speech, timid in manner and self-deprecating; but one who has sucked in bloodthirsty Marat's theories of vengeance and of murder, by every pore of his grimy skin, and hath remained more vengeful far than Danton, more relentless than Robespierre.

"So the principal witness in this mysterious case is an aristo?" the Judge-President puts in thoughtfully. "Where does he live?"

"That I do not know, Citizen Judge," Gradin replies in his meek, simple way. "But I can find him," he adds, and solemnly wipes his nose on his shirt-sleeve.

"How?" queries the Judge.

"That is my affair, Citizen," says Gradin imperturbably. "Mine, and the comrades!" Then he turns to the body of the court, there where in a compact mass of humanity a number of grimy faces are seen, craned upwards in order to catch full sight of the man in the witness-box. "Eh, comrades?" he says to them. "We can find the aristo, what?"

There is a murmur of assent, and a reiteration of the ribald joke of awhile ago. The Judge-President raps upon his desk with the palm of his hand, demands silence peremptorily. When order is restored, he turns once more to the witness.

"Your affair!" he says curtly. "Your affair! That is not enough. The law cannot accept the word of all and sundry who may wish to help in its administration, however well-intentioned they may be; and it is the work of the Committee of Public Safety to find such traitors and aristos as are a danger to the State. You and your comrades are not competent to deal with so serious a matter."

"Not competent, Citizen Judge?" Georges Gradin queries meekly. "Then I pray you look at the accused and see if we are not competent to find the aristo whom she is trying to shield."

He gave a short, dry laugh, and pointed a long, stained finger at the unfortunate girl in the dock. All eyes were immediately turned to her. Indeed, it required no deep knowledge of psychology to interpret accurately the look of horror and of genuine fear which literally distorted Joséphine Palmier's pale, emaciated face. And now, when she saw the eyes of the five judges fixed sternly upon her, a hoarse cry escaped her trembling lips.

"It is false!" she cried, and clung to the bar of the dock with both hands as if she were about to fall. "The man is lying! No one came that evening to maman's lodgings. There was no one there but maman and I."

"Give me and the comrades till to-morrow, Citizen Judge," Gradin interposed meekly; "and we'll have the aristo here, to prove who it is that is lying now."

The Moniteur, of the 10th Floréal, year I, which gives a detailed account of that memorable sitting of the Tribunal Extraordinaire, tells us that after this episode there was a good deal of confusion in the court. The jury, once more ordered by the judges to deliberate and to vote audibly, decided that the principal witness on behalf of the accused must appear before the court on the morrow at three o'clock of the afternoon; failing which, Joséphine Palmier would be convicted of perjury and conspiracy directed against the persons of Citizeness veuve Lesueur and her son Achilles, a crime which entailed the death sentence.

Gradin stepped down from the witness-box, a hero before the public. He was soon surrounded by his friends and led away in triumph.

As for Achilles and his mother, they had listened to Georges Gradin's evidence with derision rather than with wrath. No doubt they felt that whichever way the affair turned new they would have ample revenge for all the disdain they had suffered at the hands of the unfortunate Joséphine.

The Moniteur concludes its account of the episode by the bald statement that the accused was taken back to the cells in a state of unconsciousness.

IV

The public was on tenterhooks about the whole affair. The latter had the inestimable charm which pertains to the unusual. Here was something new — something different to the usual tableau of the bourgeois or the aristocrat arraigned for spying or malpractices

against the safety of the Republic; to the usual proud speech from the accused, defying the judges who condemned; to the usual brief indictment and swift sentence, followed by the daily spectacle of the tumbril dragging a few more victims to the guillotine.

Here, there was mystery; a secret jealously guarded by the accused, who apparently preferred to risk her neck rather than drag some unknown individual — an aristo evidently, and her lover — before the tribunal, even in the mere capacity of witness.

And so the court is crowded on this second day of Joséphine's trial, with working-men and shopmen, with women and some children. A sight, what? This girl, half-aristocrat, half-maid-of-all-work! And the handsome Achille — how will he take the whole affair? He has been madly in love with the accused, so they say.

And will Cyrano produce the principal witness as he promised that he would do? A fine fellow, that Cyrano, and hater of aristos! Name of a name, how he hated them!

The court is crowded; the judges waiting. The accused, more composed than yesterday, stands in the dock, grasping the rail with her thin, white hands, her whole slender body slightly bent forward, as if in an attitude of tense expectancy.

Anon, Georges Gradin appears upon the scene, is greeted with loud guffaws and calls of "Vivat, Cyrano!" He is pushed along, jostled, bundled forward, till he finds himself once more in the witness-box, confronting the Judge-President, who demands sternly:

"The witness you promised to find — the aristocrat — where is he?"

"Gone, Citizen Judge!" Gradin exclaims, and throws up his arms with a gesture of desperation. "Gone; the canaille scoundrel! The traitor!"

"Gone? Name of a dog, what do you mean?"

It is Fouquier-Tinville who actually voices the question. But the Judge-President has echoed it by bringing his heavy fist down with a crash upon his desk. The other judges, too, have asked the question by gesture, exclamation, every token of wrath. And the same query has been re-echoed by a hundred throats, rendered dry and raucous with excitement.

"Gone? Where? How? What do you mean?"

And Gradin, meek, ferocious, with great hairy hands clawing the rail of the witness-box, explains.

"We scoured Paris all last night, the comrades and I," he begins, in short, halting sentences. "We knew one or two places the aristo was wont to haunt — the Café de la Montagne, the Club Républicain, the Bibliothèque de la Nation. That is how we meant to find him. We went in bands, two and three of us at a time. We did not know where he lodged; but we knew we should find him at one of those places — then we would tell him that his sweetheart was in peril — we knew we could get him here — But he has gone — gone; the scoundrel, the canaille! They told us at the Club Républicain he had been gone five days...got a forged passport through the agency of those abominable English spies — the Scarlet Pimpernel, what? It was all arranged the night of the 6th, when he went to the Rue Christine, and the accused and her mother were to have joined him the next day. But the accusation was launched by that time and the Palmiers, mother and daughter, were detained in the city. But he has gone! The thief! The coward!"

He turned to the crowd, amongst whom his friends were still conspicuous, stretched out his long, hairy arm, and shook his fist at an imaginary foe.

"But me and the comrades will be even with him yet! Aye, even!" he reiterated, with that sleek and ferocious accent which had gained him the confidence of the judges. "And in a manner that will punish him worse than even the guillotine could have done. Eh, comrades?"

The Judge-President shrugs his shoulders. The whole thing has been a failure. The accused might just as well have been condemned the day before and much trouble would have been saved.

Attorney-General Fouquier-Tinville alone rejoices. His indictment of the accused would now stand in its pristine simplicity: "Joséphine Palmier, accused of conspiring against the property and good name of Citizeness Lesueur and her son." A crime against the safety of the Republic. The death sentence to follow as a natural sequence. Fouquier-Tinville cares nothing about a witness who cannot be found. He is not sure that he ever believed in the latter's existence, and hardly listens to Georges Gradin, still muttering with sleek ferocity: "I'll be even with the aristo!"

The Judge-President, weary, impatient, murmurs mechanically: "How?"

Georges Gradin thoughtfully wipes his nose, looks across at the accused with a leer on his face, and a sickly smile upon his lips.

"I'll marry the accused myself," he says, with a shy, self-deprecating shrug of his broad shoulders. "I must be even with the aristo."

Everyone looks at the accused. She appears ready to swoon. Achille Lesueur has pushed his way forward from out the crowd at the back.

"You fool!" he shouts, in a voice half-strangled with rage. "She has refused to marry me!"

"The law takes no count of a woman's whim," Gradin rejoins simply. "She is the property of the State. Is that not so, comrades?"

He is fond of appealing to his friends: does so at every turn of events; and they stand by him with moral support, which consists in making a great deal of noise and in shouting "Vivat, Cyrano!" at every opportunity. They are a rough-looking crowd, these comrades of Gradin: mechanics, artisans, citizens with or without employment, of the kind that are not safely tampered with these days. They are the rulers of France.

Now they have ranged themselves against Achille Lesueur: call him "bourgeois" to his face, and "capitalist".

"The aristo shall wed Gradin, not Achille! Vivat, Cyrano!" they shout.

Georges Gradin is within his rights. By decree of the Convention, a female aristocrat becomes the property of the State. Is Joséphine Palmier an aristocrat?

"Yes!" asserts Gradin. "Her name is de Lamoignon. Her father was a ci-devant — an aristo — of the worst type."

"If she marries anyone, she marries me!" asserts Achille.

"We'll see about that!" comes in quick response from Gradin. "A moi, comrades!"

And before the judge or jury, or anyone there for that matter, can recover from the sudden shock of surprise, Gradin, with three strides of his long legs, is over the bar of the dock, in the dock itself the next moment, and has seized Joséphine Palmier and thrown her across his broad shoulders as if she were a bale of goods. To clinch the bargain, he imprints a smacking kiss upon her cheek.

Josephine Palmier's head rolls almost inert upon her shoulders, white and death-like save for the crimson glow on one side of her face, there where her conquering captor has set his seal of possession. Gradin gives a long, coarse laugh.

"She does not care for me, it seems," he says, in his usual self-deprecating way. "But it will come."

The comrades laugh. "Vivat, Cyrano!" And they close in around their friend, who once more, with one stride of his long limbs, is over the bar of the dock, at the back of it this time, and is at once surrounded by a yelling, gesticulating crowd.

There is indescribable confusion. Vainly does the Attorney-General shout himself hoarse, vainly does the Judge-President rap with a wooden mallet against his desk. Everyone shouts, everyone gesticulates; most people laugh. Such a droll fellow, that Cyrano, with his big nose! There he is, just by the doorway now, still surrounded by "the comrades". But his huge frame towers above the crowd, and across his broad shoulder, still slung like a bale of goods, lies the unconscious body of Joséphine Palmier.

In the doorway he turns. His glance sweeps over the court, above the massed heads of the throng; and suddenly he flings something white and weighty across the court. It lands on the desk of the Judge-President. Then, using the inert body of the girl as a battering-ram wherewith to forge himself a way through the fringe of the crowd, he begins to move. His strength, his swiftness, above all his authority, carry him through. In less than ten seconds he has scattered the crowd and has gained ten paces on the foremost amongst them. The five judges and the jury are left gasping; and the Judge-President's trembling hands mechanically finger the missile, whilst with every second the pseudo-Gradin has forged ahead, striding with long limbs that know neither hesitation nor slackness. He knows his way about this Palace of Justice as no one else does probably in the whole of Paris. In and out of corridors, through guarded doors and down winding stairs, he goes with an easy, swinging stride, never breaking into a run. To those who stare at him with astonishment or who try to stop him, he merely shouts over his shoulder:

"A female aristocrat! The spoils of the nation! The Judge-President has just given her to me. A fine wife, what?"

Some of them know Gradin the cobbler by sight. A ferocious fellow with whom it is not safe to interfere; and name of a name, what a patriot!

As for "the comrades", they have been merged with the crowd, swallowed up, disappeared. Who shall recognize them amongst so many?

Less than five minutes later, there is a coming and a going, and a rushing; orders given; shouts and curses flying from end to end, from court to corridor. The whole machinery of the executive of the Committee of Public Safety is set in motion to find traces of a giant cobbler, carrying a fainting aristocrat upon his shoulders.

The Judge-President has at last mastered the contents of that missile flung at him by the cobbler across the court. It consists of a scrap of paper, scrawled over with a doggerel rhyme and a signature drawn in red, representing a small, five-petalled flower in shape like a Scarlet Pimpernel.

But of "Cyrano" there is not a trace, nor yet of half a dozen of his "comrades" who had been so conspicuous in the court when first he had snatched the aristocrat Joséphine Palmier from the dock.

V

Maître Rochet, the distinguished advocate who emigrated to England in the year 1793, has left some interesting memoirs, wherein he gives an account of the last days which he spent in Paris, when his fiancée, Mademoiselle Joséphine de Lamoignon, driven by extreme poverty to do the roughest kitchen work for a spiteful employer, was accused by the latter of petty theft, and stood in the dock under the charge. He knew nothing of her plight, for she had never told him that she had been driven to work under an assumed name; until one evening he received the visit of a magnificent English milord, whom he subsequently knew in England as Sir Percy Blakeney.

In a few very brief words, Sir Percy told him the history of the past two days and of the iniquitous accusation and trial which had ended so fortunately for Mademoiselle de Lamoignon, and for her mother. The two ladies were now quite safe under the protection of a band of English gentlemen, who would see them safely across France and thence to England.

Sir Percy had come to propose that Maître Rochet should accompany them.

It was not until the distinguished advocate met his fiancée again that he heard the full and detailed account of her sufferings and of the heroism and audacity of the English adventurer who had brought her and her mother safely through perils innumerable to the happy haven of a home in England.

THE STRANGER FROM PARIS

I

What had happened was this:

On the night of the 16th Nivôse a band of those English adventurers who were known throughout the country as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had made an armed attack on the local commissariat at Limours. They had presented pistols at the heads of the police officers, had gagged and pinioned them, whilst the rest of their gang had ransacked the commissariat, and duly found the half-dozen aristos who had been apprehended that very day on a charge of counter-revolutionary sentiments openly expressed, and were to have been transferred to Paris the next day for trial and, presumably, summary condemnation and execution. They were women for the most part, these aristos, and there were a couple of children amongst them. Anyway, those English spies got clear away with them, vanished into the night after their coup, like so many spooks carrying their living booty upon their saddlebows.

How they ever managed to elude the night patrols on the main roads, or, in fact, what became of them at all after their daring raid, remained a baffling mystery. But the feelings of the population of Limours were positively outraged by this impudent act of aggression. Hitherto the Scarlet Pimpernel, well known in Paris and in the great cities as the most virulent and most active enemy of the Republic, the most able and most daring of the thousands of English spies who infested the country, was at Limours nothing but a name: that of a man endowed with supernatural attributes, in whom only the superstitious and the ignorant believed; but, in truth, just a legend which caused the sophisticated and wise to smile with lofty incredulity.

"Let that elusive personage but show his face in Limours," those wisecracks would say, "and we would very soon show him that we are not so easily hoodwinked as all those clever people in Paris, or Nantes, or Boulogne."

Thus the raid on the commissariat came as a veritable thunderclap, scarce to be believed.

Citizen Campon, the chief commissary of police, sent urgent messages to Paris: "What am I to do?" and "I am at my wit's ends," alternated with "In the name of — er — everything, send me help." In fact, the poor man was in despair. He felt that "suspension" was in the air and talk of "dereliction of duty." Between this and a positive accusation of treason was but a very short step these days. Heaven and a wayward fate alone knew when the unfortunate commissary would be made to take it. Fortunately for him, he happened to have a friend in Paris who had at one time been a man of considerable influence on the Committee of Public Safety. This man had of late somewhat fallen from this high estate, but he was still credited with being on intimate terms with Maximilien Robespierre and one or two of the more prominent orators in the Convention. His name was Chauvelin, and it was to him that Campon turned in his distress.

Citizen Chauvelin's advice (sent to his friend in Limours by special courier) may be summarized thus:

My good friend:

I know that cursed Scarlet Pimpernel and his ways to my cost. The more impossible or perilous the adventure, the more certain is he to embark upon it. Judging from his recent coup, he appears to have confederates in Limours. At any rate, he is, I imagine, still in touch with your township. My advice to you is this: secure a pack of aristos, the more innocent, the more pathetic, the better, two or three women, young, if possible, a batch of children. Give it out that you have them incarcerated in any house or place you choose to name, and that you propose to send the whole pack to Paris, or elsewhere, for trial on any given day. Then you may take what precautions you choose and calmly await events. As sure as I am sitting here writing this with mine own hand, as certain as is my hatred for that abominable English intriguer, he will make an attempt to get those aristos out of your clutches. Then 'tis for you to see that he fails, and that you catch him in the attempt.

Unfortunately, Citizen Chauvelin was not permitted to journey to Limours in order to be of active assistance to his friend. Rumours anent the activities of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Paris itself necessitated his remaining in the city. Had he been allowed to go...

But I am anticipating.

Suffice it is to say that the Committee of Public Safety, realizing the need of the moment at Limours, as well as in Paris, sent a sealed letter then and there to Citizen Campon, assuring him that within the next four-and-twenty hours Citizen Mayet, one of the ablest men known to the sectional committees for the tracking down criminals and the detection of spies, would journey to Limours in order to take in hand and carry through a plan for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

In the meanwhile, Chief Commissary Campon was desired to act on the advice given him by Citizen Chauvelin.

This Campon did, and after reflection decided on the arrest of a woman named Mailly, widow of a late officer of the Royal Guard, of her sister who had been abbess in a local, now derelict, convent, and of her two children, Pauline, aged sixteen, and André, a lad of eleven. A lovely lot, in truth, to serve as a bait for the adventurous passion of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

To these arrests Citizen Mayet, on his arrival two days later, gave unqualified approval.

"A lovely lot," he agreed, "as you say. Where have you put them?"

"I have them here in the commissariat," Campon replied, "and am ready to make any arrangements which you might suggest."

"The commissariat," Mayet agreed, "will do very well for the moment. Give it out as publicly as possible — but not obtrusively, remember — that the prisoners will be transferred to the tribunal of Chartres on any given day you choose to name. This will give that cursed English spy time to make his plans, whilst we, on the other hand, can make ours for the laying of him by the heels."

And Citizen Mayet rubbed his huge, coarse hands complacently together. He was a large, brawny, muscular fellow whose clenched fist looked fit to fell an ox. He explained to Citizen Campon that at one time he had been a butcher by trade, but that since the severe shortage of meat he had found it more profitable to serve one or other of the committees as a sleuth-hound and denouncer of counter-revolutionaries. He was apparently of a very cheerful disposition, for his loud guffaws and violent outbursts of hilarity, mostly at his own jokes, would shake the walls of the old commissariat to their very foundations.

Campon had at once conceived the greatest possible admiration for the newcomer. He appeared so invariably cheerful, and so very sure of himself, and withal so marvellously ferocious, like a huge man-eating tiger — three qualities not one of which did the poor commissary himself possess. He himself had always been considered an able, cool-headed, reliable man. Born at Limours, he and his family before him, who had kept the local cookshop for three generations, were as well known in the district as the proverbial town pump. But just now Citizen Campon was little else than a bundle of nerves. He knew that his head, of which he was both fond and proud, was at stake in this plan for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

II

In accordance with Mayet's orders it was at once given out quite publicly that the prisoners, who were still confined in the commissariat, would be transferred the very next day to the tribunal at Chartres.

"No doubt," the jovial ex-butcher had declared with unruffled cheerfulness, "the Scarlet Pimpernel has evolved some scheme by now for wresting the aristos out of our clutches, whether from the commissariat or on the road to Chartres remains to be seen, but the latter is the more probable."

The commissariat, an isolated building standing at an angle of the principle street in Limours, was being guarded day and night, but to make assurance doubly sure, Mayet had asked for, and obtained, the assistance of half a company of the 61st Regiment, which was stationed at Chartres, with a sergeant and two corporals. These men were to furnish the escort for the journey between Limours and Chartres, which was duly arranged to begin at ten o'clock of the following day.

At that hour and on that day everything was ready for the start. The aristos were duly packed like so many cattle in an old market cart to which a couple of heavy artillery horses were harnessed, and on the front board of which sat one of the corporals belonging to the 61st regiment would form the escort, whilst Chief Commissary Campon had arranged to ride at the head of the procession and Citizen Mayet, with two rough fellows whom he had brought with him from Paris as aides-de-camp, would form the rear. As this cavalcade formed outside the commissariat it looked in truth very imposing. All Limours turned out to see the start.

The old clock in the church tower had not yet struck ten; the morning was bitterly raw and frosty, and the men — ill clad and ill shod as were most of the armies of the Republic — were obviously grumbling at the cold.

Citizens Campon and Mayet were standing talking together outside the commissariat waiting to give the order to start when a man was suddenly seen running down the street from the direction of Longjumeau at an immoderate speed, waving his arms and shouting as he ran.

Soon his shouts became more coherent. He was calling for the citizen commissary at the top of his voice:

"Citizen Commissary! Citizen Commissary! News! News!"

The next moment he was close on the scene, appeared gasping for breath, and, despite the cold, was streaming with perspiration.

"I have run all the way from Bernix," he contrived to say in answer to the chief commissary's peremptory query.

"Well?" broke in Campon eagerly.

"There's a gang of foreigners — English spies in very truth — in hiding in the ruins of the château."

"Name of a name!" Campon ejaculated, and would have shouted still more emphatically had not Mayet restrained him.

"Who is this man?" the latter demanded.

"Jean Mathis, the shepherd," Campon gave reply. "I have set a number of these fellows to scour the neighbourhood for me for traces of those English adventurers."

In a moment Mayet's jovial face had become grave.

"You should not have done that without consulting me. You have them on the qui vive now, and—"

"Never mind about that," Campon interposed roughly. "We know where they are."

"Then leave them there till they come out into the open."

"Not I," the other retorted decisively. "The château de Bernix is not half a league away. I am going here and now, with a dozen men, to capture my quarry whilst I know where I can lay my hands on them."

"But the prisoners," Mayet protested.

"You stay behind and look after them. I'll leave a score of soldiers to help you and half the population of Limours. You would be a fool to let them slip away, more especially as I shall be engaging the attention of our elusive friend, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Mayet vainly endeavoured to assert his authority.

"I was sent here in order to capture those English spies," he said. "If you run counter to my orders you do so at your risk and peril, Citizen Campon."

"If I let the opportunity slip by of capturing that Scarlet Pimpernel, when I know where he is hiding, I should be contravening my duty. Sergeant Torson," he added authoritatively, "you will accompany me with a score of your men. The others remain here with Corporal Vernay in charge under the orders of Citizen Mayet. Understood? Then en avant!"

Mayet swore and threatened, but in the end had to give in. Already a quarter of an hour had been lost in useless arguments. Campon was in the saddle, and whilst Torson got his men ready the chief commissary asked a few more pertinent questions of Jean Mathis.

Were the foreigners in hiding at the château yesterday, or had they, seemingly, only just come? Jean Mathis could not say exactly when they had come. He had been near the ruins yesterday, and had seen no one then. But this morning when he arrived, soon after six o'clock, he at once perceived signs of life in and around the derelict château. Subdued lights were moving to and fro; he had heard whisperings and stealthy footfalls. How did he know that the intruders were foreigners? Well, he had caught the words "Yes" and "Damn!" both of which were English, and — well — because one man came up to him and, seeing that he was on the watch, offered him money to go away and to hold his tongue. He spoke French, but like a foreigner. What had Jean done then? Why, taken the money, of course, and then run like a good patriot to tell the citizen commissary what he had seen. But not before he had noted many things! (And here Jean Mathis thumped himself vigorously on the chest in conscious pride at his own foresight and his own patriotism.) He had noted that the gang of malefactors had much luggage with them — bundles without number, and some cooking utensils — and that

six horses — yes, six horses — had not Jean mentioned them before? — six horses were tethered in that portion of the rained château that had once been the stables. Oh! and Jean was nearly forgetting something. The money that the foreigner had given him was wrapped in a piece of paper, and on this paper there was something written which Jean, not knowing how to read, could not, of course, decipher, but he had brought the paper with him, and now produced it from the depth of a very hot and very grimy hand. It was creased and soiled, the writing blurred almost beyond recognition, but both Campon and Mayet pored over it, trying to wrest, at any rate, a part of its secret from those grimy folds.

It was Campon who in the end pointed a triumphant finger to the last word of the mysterious writing. The rest he could not read, because it was in a foreign tongue — English most probably — but that one word stood clear and unmistakable: whether you knew the language or whether you did not, there was the word as clear as crystal: “Pimpernel.”

“Now, Citizen Mayet,” he said, his voice hoarse with excitement, “do you still persist in calling me a fool for going to capture a prey that is absolutely waiting to fall into my hand?”

After that, in truth, even Mayet appeared undecided. If Jean Mathis had spoken the truth, then it were treason and worse to allow the prey to escape. With their bundles and their cooking utensils and their horses, those impudent English spies evidently used the ruined château as their headquarters and relied on the superstition of the neighbouring yokels to give the ghost-haunted place a wide berth.

“Anyway,” and these were Mayet’s final words to the excited chief commissary, “anyway, I will not make a start with the prisoners until your return. I do not personally believe that you will come across that gang of malefactors at Bernix, and I have no wish to encounter them on the highroad with only twenty men to aid me in case of an attack. Whilst I am in Limours the population will see to it that these accursed spies do not show their ugly faces in this township. Eh, my friends?”

Whereupon those who had pressed forward sufficiently to catch the citizen’s words gave a loud cheer. Admittedly, they cared nothing about Citizen Mayet, who was a stranger to them, sent down from Paris, and therefore an object of suspicion and jealousy, and they cared everything for Citizen Commissary Campon, who was one of themselves, and whose mother still kept the local cook shop, as she had done for the past thirty years. But these feelings of sympathy and of antipathy were for the nonce merged in an intense and comprehensive feeling of deadly hatred against that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, whom rumour had represented to them as the incarnation of evil, the worst enemy their country ever had, the upholder of aristos and the friend of traitors. So they cheered Campon as he rode away with his escort of twenty stalwarts, all well armed with good muskets and with pistols in their belts, and they cheered Mayet, who remained behind to guard the aristos with another score equally stalwart and equally well-equipped soldiers of the 61st Regiment; and when, a moment or two later, a child in the crowd spied the aristos who had thrust pale, anxious faces out of the closely hooded market cart, marvelling what new misery, what further indignity, was being projected against them, there rose from the crowd such a mighty hissing and booing as would have gladdened the heart of the most bloodthirsty rhetorician in the Convention.

III.

Along the hard, frozen road which leads from Limours to Bernix, Campon and his escort clattered on at a steady trot. On! On! Not a man there but had it in his mind that the nation had promised a reward of ten thousand francs to the first man who laid hands on the Scarlet Pimpernel, and of a thousand to each man who had aided in the capture of the abominable spy. So on! on! my stalwarts! heedless of the biting frost, the keenest that has been known in this part of France within memory of the oldest inhabitant; heedless of the awful jar from the uneven road which even under the trees was frozen to the consistency of corrugated iron. Jean Mathis was riding on the pillion behind one of the men. He felt that the glory of the expedition, if successful, would be entirely due to his perspicacity, his courage, and his patriotism.

The road betwixt Limours and Bernix cuts straight across the woods, leaving Longjumeau well on the left. On the edge of the wood Campon cried a halt. Some two hundred metres farther on, the gray ruins of the château, with the pale rays of the midday sun full upon them, had suddenly come in sight. The house had been built some ninety years ago by “Le Roi Soleil” for one of the ladies of his choice: it had been the first to suffer at the outbreak of the Revolution, as it was then still held by one of the lineal descendants of that same lady who was mightily unpopular in the neighbourhood. The château was burned and gutted, the trees of the park cut down for fuel, its surrounding wall demolished, its forged iron gateway melted down for cannon, and there the place had remained since, derelict, lonely, reputed to be haunted by the ghosts of dead aristocrats, but in reality the meeting place of every gang of malefactors of the district — thieves, smugglers, or spies — who found their safety in the superstitious awe of the countryside.

Even Campon, advanced republican and free-thinker though he was, could not repress a shudder when he first caught sight of the old château looming before him through the broken-down gateway of the park — silent, solitary, awesome. It seemed as if a hundred hidden eyes were peeping out through the orifices, the broken windows, the roofless attics of the derelict building.

A strange silence appeared to reign around, and though in the woods which the men had just traversed the keen frosty air had been very still, here in the outskirts of this abandoned park a weird, souging breeze moaned through the leafless twigs of broken and torn trees and the lifeless foliage of evergreen shrubs.

So strange indeed was the silence that Campon felt a sudden sinking of the heart at thought that mayhap his quarry had already fled, or, worse still, that it was falling even now, into the hands of his rival, Mayet.

He gave hurried orders to the men to remain well under cover in the woods, whilst he dismounted, and, accompanied only by Jean Mathis, crept forward cautiously on hands and knees through the shrubberies and tall rough grass of the park, with a view of ascertaining if indeed the gang of spies was still there or no. But, indeed, the silence appeared all the more oppressive as the two men drew nigh to the château itself. Neither here nor in the park was there the faintest sign of life. Certainly the horses were no longer in the stables, and not a footfall, not a quickly drawn breath even, was perceptible to the straining ears of Citizen Campon. Had the English gang decamped, or were they on the watch? Again that awful feeling crept down the chief commissary’s spine, that awful feeling that numberless pairs of eyes were watching him through the torn windows of the château.

After a rapid consultation with Jean Mathis it was decided that the latter should go on alone as far as the château. The English spies already knew him by sight; he was dressed in his shepherd’s blouse, his sheepskin and gaiters, just as he had been this morning when

one of the strangers had accosted him. They would, therefore, have no suspicion of him.

Campon was conscious of an intense feeling of excitement, and when he saw Mathis straighten out his long, lean back and start at an easy, careless stride toward the château, he felt a positive thrill shake his nerves, like the presage of something huge, stupendous, the turning point of his whole career.

For a while he waited in agonized suspense. Jean Mathis had quickly disappeared amidst the shrubberies. Just for a second or two his sheepskin and the blue of his blouse appeared upon the steps of the perron, then it seemed that he entered the château, for he was lost to sight.

Campon made his way back to the shelter of the woods. His nerves were terribly on edge. He could not get to horse, but paced up and down the narrow clearing where the men and their mounts had found satisfactory cover.

Half an hour went by. Campon was enduring the tortures of a lost soul. He could not understand why Jean Mathis tarried, imagined every kind of horror and the worst of disappointments. So unnerved was he that after a while he sent one of the men all the way back to Limours to beg Citizen Mayet on no account to relax vigilance, or to make a start with the aristos until he, Campon, had returned from the expedition on which he was now engaged.

At the end of that half hour Campon's apprehension had turned to genuine fear. Something must have happened to Mathis. He consulted with Torson, the sergeant, who appeared sulky and unhelpful. It was long past the dinner hour. The men were desperately hungry. There was already talk amongst them of turning tail and returning to their quarters at Chartres, and in these days of rampant democracy and slackened discipline that threat would undoubtedly be put into execution unless something was done. The men were ready enough for a man-hunt, keen enough to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel if he was about, but hours of inactivity in this biting cold weather had ruffled their tempers, and they were on the verge of insubordination.

Campon, realizing the danger, agreed with the sergeant that there was only one thing to be done: make for the château at all risks. The men were armed, and their rising temper could incite them to make quick work of the spies. The brigands were in the château, of that there could no longer be any doubt, since they had apparently done away with that unfortunate Jean Mathis.

Far be it for me to say that there were any cowards among those men. They were twenty all told, and ready enough for a scrap with the English adventurers. The superstitious awe which had hold of them in face of the silent, ghost-haunted château soon disappeared when they were called to action. Silently they looked to their pistols, and at a word from their sergeant they tethered their horses to the most convenient trees, and the next moment were picking their way carefully through the rough grass of the park, which with its rank growth had long ago obliterated the last vestiges of the garden paths.

Still not a sound from the château. Campon, who had the sergeant, Torson, with him, was the first to reach the perron. The men quickly followed suit, and soon, cocked pistol in hand, they were all firing in through the broken doorway into the derelict building.

The next moment a loud exclamation from Torson brought them all to the stately door of one of the apartments on the ground floor. Here an amazing sight met their gaze. The room which stretched out before them, with broken ceiling, gutted window frames, and charred walls, had obviously been once an imposing one. Right along the centre of it now there was a long board, supported on trestles and covered with a white cloth. On this board was spread a copious collation — meats, bread, bottles of wine — everything apparently prepared for a joyous feast. Of this Jean Mathis was even now partaking freely. He sat at the farther end of the board, a huge pasty before him, into which he still dived at intervals with his knife. Beside him lay a couple of empty bottles on their sides, and the flush upon Jean's cheeks, the vague look in his eyes, the disorder of his hair, and the thickness of his speech bore witness to the excellent reasons which had kept him inside the ruined château for so long.

The men, in truth, gave only one look upon the unexpected scene; the next moment they hurled themselves with a wild shout of joy, helter-skelter into the room, tumbling over one another in their eagerness to share in the delectable feast. Nor did their sergeant's somewhat feeble protests against this lack of discipline prevail. The men were half-perished with cold and hunger. They saw the good things of this earth spread invitingly before them, and would have been more than human had they as much as attempted to resist the alluring temptation. A minute later a portentous silence had fallen over the assembly; nothing, in truth, could be heard in the vast and stately ruins save the clatter of knives and dishes, and the delicious, mellifluous sound of wine gurgling out of bottles. Torson, of course, was caught in the vortex. He was no martyr to duty. Moreover, was there not a certain merit in consuming this repast so lavishly laid out for the enemies of the Republic?

As for Campon, he began by storming and swearing, then he admonished and entreated, and, finally, when obviously he was wasting his breath, he picked up a dish of pasty and a bottle of wine, and, standing apart from the others, he leaned against one of the deep window embrasures and in sullen silence began to eat.

A strange scene, forsooth, and a mysterious one; this repast spread by unseen hands for guests who did not appear. In the intervals of enjoying the pasty and putting down a mug or two of excellent wine, the good Campon would feel an uncomfortable jarring of his nerves, a sickly apprehension that all was not as it should be.

What, in the meanwhile, was happening at Limours? What was Mayet doing in the interval? Campon, beginning to feel replete, was gazing thoughtfully through the window across the devastated park when, with a loud oath, he turned, hastily put down empty dish and mug, and ran incontinently out of the room. The men did no more than look up lazily as he disappeared through the door, and his hurried footsteps clanged weirdly on the broken flagstones of the hall. They were, in truth, far too happy and comfortable to pay heed to anything that might be going on outside. Some of them had fallen into a delicious state of somnolence, others were singing bibulous songs, others again, including Jean Mathis, had collapsed upon the floor.

Campon took no notice of them; he was out of the building in less than ten seconds and running across the park, where a man on horseback, with another riding beside him, had but a moment ago emerged out of the wood. The rider was urging on his horse with spur and knees, and the beast, despite the cold and frost, was covered with lather. At sight of Campon the rider drew rein and the two men jumped out of the saddle. One of them was the soldier whom Campon had sent back to Limours about an hour before with an urgent message to Mayet.

"What is it?" the commissary queried sharply as soon as the men had dismounted, his heart thumping furiously against his breast in an agony of apprehension.

"I was to report from Citizen Mayet," the soldier replied, "that all was well..."

"Thank God!" Campon ejaculated, remembering for the first time for many years that God still presided over the destinies of France, even though her sons had chosen to deny Him.

"But," the soldier went on rapidly, "he says that he cannot wait much longer. He told me to explain to you that his force was quite sufficient to convey the aristos to Chartres, and that he would certainly make a start in the early part of the afternoon."

Campon made no reply. He was brooding over the news, marvelling if it would be in his interest to let the whole matter drift as Mayet had ordered it. Then he bethought himself of the man who had ridden behind the soldier.

"Who are you?" he asked abruptly.

The man appeared weary, scarce able to stand. At the commissary's peremptory query, however, he drew a sealed letter from the inner pocket of his tattered coat.

"Courier in the service of the Committee of Public Safety," he said, laconically, and handed the letter to Campon. "I rode from Paris this morning, with orders to deliver this to no one but the Citizen Campon himself."

"I met the courier just outside Limours, on my way back here," the soldier went on to explain, whilst Campon, with an obviously shaking hand, was breaking the seal of the letter. "He was asking after the citizen commissary. I thought I could not do better than bring him along with me..."

But the man got no further in his speech. He was, in truth, only just in time to catch the commissary, who with a loud cry of horror had tottered, and would undoubtedly have measured his length on the ground but for the soldier's timely assistance.

"A horse!" he exclaimed, hoarsely, for indeed he felt that he was choking. "I must to Limours at once."

And, without waiting for the man's help, he strode to where the horses were tethered in the wood, champing and fretting their bits, and, seizing the nearest one by the bridle, he made futile efforts to free the animal, all in a vague, blundering manner which further upset the poor brute and called forth an exclamation of contempt from the two men.

After that the soldiers made the horse ready, and held the stirrup for the quaking commissary.

"You get to horse, too, and at once," the latter commanded, "and let the courier come, too."

The men murmured. They were dog-tired.

"Do as I say," Campon went on roughly. "It is a matter of life and death, and the others are all lying besotted or dead drunk inside the château."

"But what has happened, Citizen?" the soldier queried sullenly. "Duty is duty, but..."

"There is no but about it," the commissary cried in a raucous voice as he settled down into his saddle and gathered the reins in his shaking hand. "This letter comes to me from Citizen Mayet."

"Citizen Mayet!" the soldier exclaimed, thinking that the commissary had lost his head. "But the letter comes from Paris..."

"Yes," Campon cried in response, "from Paris, where Citizen Mayet, the real Citizen Mayet, still is at the present moment. He warns me that that accursed English spy has been impersonating him these few days past."

"Malediction!" the soldier ejaculated lustily.

"Aye, malediction!" Campon assented, whilst his whole body thrilled in a veritable frenzy of excitement, "for it is a false Mayet who came to Limours — a false Mayet who hath charge of the prisoners — a false Mayet who will spirit them away right under our very noses unless I get to Limours in time!"

"Then I am with you," the two men cried simultaneously, as they, too, swung themselves into the saddle, leaving their own wearied mounts to wander loosely and at will.

"But have no fear, Citizen Commissary," the soldier added, just as his horse settled down into an easy trot. "There are twenty of our regiment guarding the aristos, and the whole population of Limours is out to foil the tricks of that crafty Scarlet Pimpernel."

Hope and despair alternately played havoc with the chief commissary's nerves as he pushed along at breakneck speed, along the road to Limours, closely followed by the two men. On the whole, hope predominated. As the soldier had pertinently reminded him, there were not only twenty of his loyal comrades, but half the population of the little township on the spot to see that that impudent English adventurer did not carry out one of his accursed tricks.

At last the edge of the wood was reached. Limours was in sight. Another ten minutes and the three riders had reached the first isolated house of the city: another five, and the horses were thundering down the long main street. Already Campon had seen that unusual bustle reigned around the commissariat. Already he could hear the clanking of metal, the snorts and pawing of the horses, the creaking of saddles and harness, the words of command and the shouts attendant upon a cavalcade on the move.

On, no! But a minute more and he had perceived the hood of the market cart lumbering slowly up the street, to right and left of it the tricolour cockades on the caps of the soldiers catching the pale gray light of the wintry sun: and ahead, in front of the cart, the huge figure of the false Mayet, mounted on a white charger, appeared to Campon's excited gaze like the very incarnation of the devil. And all around, the crowd of worthy citizens of Limours, booing the aristos and cheering to the echoes the impudent and audacious trickster who was even then leading them by the nose.

Right into the very midst of the crowd Campon rode, scattering affrighted men, women, and children all around him. Then suddenly he brought his horse to a standstill.

"Halt!" he cried in a stentorian voice.

At first only the crowd heard him, gazed on him openmouthed and terrified, for truly the face of the chief commissary was livid with fury. But on ahead the cavalcade went coolly on its way. In fact, that fiend incarnate upon the white charger had just given the order to trot.

"Halt!" cried Campon again. "In the name of the Republic, halt!"

Some of the soldiers heard him, turned in their saddles to see what was the matter. Campon caught the eye of the corporal in charge, and once again cried: "Halt! In the name of the Republic, at your peril, Corporal Vernay, I command you to halt!"

Then that impudent English spy turned in his saddle, too, caught sight of Campon shouting and gesticulating in the midst of the crowd; but all that he did was to swear loudly.

“Name of a dog, that fool Campon is trying to interfere again! En avant!” he cried to the soldiers, “or we’ll not make Chartres before nightfall.”

But the corporal and the men had instinctively pulled up at the commissary’s peremptory calls of “Halt!” After all, they knew him. He was the local commissary. The stranger from Paris was, in truth, nothing to them. So they halted: and the market cart, after lumbering on for a while in splendid isolation, came also to a halt, whilst the stranger from Paris stormed and swore that they would all suffer for this insubordination. The crowd, in the meanwhile, was swarming everywhere — round the market cart, round the soldiers, and, above all, round Campon, who had begun to tell them of the impudent trick that the man on the white charger had very nearly played them. In quick, jerky, but pithy sentences he told them just what had happened: the arrival of the stranger with the letters of credentials from the Committee of Public Safety, the stranger who pretended to be Citizen Mayet, the servant of the Republic, and who was none other than that accursed and famous English adventurer, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

At first the man on the white charger did not seem to understand what Campon was saying, then a look went over his face as if he thought the chief commissary was nothing but a raving maniac. Finally, when after a few seconds the purport of Campon’s oratory reached his senses, he swore the loudest and most comprehensive oath that had ever shaken the little township to its very foundations; after which he broke into a loud and immoderate roar of laughter.

But that outburst of hilarity soon died in his throat. The crowd, too, had suddenly realized the full, horrible reality. With a wild shout, men and women, aye, even the children, literally hurled themselves upon the man who had thought to play them such an abominable trick. He swore and he shouted, plunged his spurs into his horse’s flanks till the beast reared and struck out with its forehoofs, scattering momentarily the angry, yelling crowd. But only momentarily. The next they had returned to the charge, headed and egged on by Campon, whom shame at being fooled and latent horror of what might have been so hideous a catastrophe had turned into a raging and vindictive madman. The soldiers whose duty it was to protect the abominable malefactor, in order to save him from the guillotine, did what they could to keep the crowd at bay. But even so the object of their fury was torn from his white charger, rolled on the ground, kicked, maltreated, spat upon like the abominable spy that he was.

Gradually, however, even the wild ravings of an angry crowd are bound to subside. In this case, after twenty minutes of the maddest orgy of rage and of hate some of the soldiers had succeeded in forming a guard around the prostrate form of the stranger from Paris and of his quivering, excited, snorting charger, whilst others gradually pushed the foremost of the crowd back from the object of their wrath and their vindictiveness. The temper of the people was slowly cooling down. Pushed back by the soldiers, they formed into knots, still talking, volubly and with much animated gesture, of the past exciting events. The chief commissary was urging them all to go home. He even collected his scattered wits sufficiently to order the removal of the aristos back to the commissariat, as it would now be too late to convey them to Chartres this day.

Ah! when the true Citizen Mayet, the noted and trusted servant of the Committee of Public Safety, did eventually arrive in Limours he would find that his task had already been ably accomplished by a proud chief commissary of police, conscious of his own worth and of valuable services rendered to the state!

Even whilst Citizen Campon, saddle-sore but happy, was able to dismount, meaning to take a few hours’ rest in his mother’s cook shop over the way, a loud exclamation followed by a vigorous curse quickly dispelled his short dream of bliss.

“The cart!” Corporal Vernay had exclaimed, and the soldiers near him had cried excitedly: “And the aristos! They have gone!”

“Impossible!” shouted one man.

But the impossible was a fact indeed! The market cart, with its occupants, had vanished — spirited away even whilst the crowd, the soldiers, the commissary had their whole attention fixed upon the object of their rage. The market cart had gone! When? Whither? Who could tell? Not the two soldiers who had sat on the front board, for they were presently discovered some fifty paces round the curve of the road, with arms and legs securely tied together with cords, so that they could not move, and woollen scarves wound around their mouths. When these were removed they were able to explain that when the disturbance was at its height and their own attention entirely concentrated on the lively spectacle which they were watching by standing on the front board and looking over the hood of the cart, they were suddenly seized by the legs, thrown down, gagged, and bound, then carried to this spot before they could even utter a scream. No one paid any heed to them, and they actually saw the cart driven away at breakneck speed in the direction of Versailles.

To Campon this tale, when it was reported to him, was like a fall of icy water down his spine. For a moment he could neither see nor hear, he could not even think, and the expression of his face was so terrible that those nearest him fell back appalled. Quite mechanically, and like one moving in a dream, he went up the street to where half-a-dozen soldiers were guarding the prostrate body of the stranger from Paris. The latter, bruised, bleeding, aching in limb, in pride, and in temper, was only partially conscious, but sufficiently so to glare with bunged-up eyes, redolent of hatred and contempt, on the unfortunate chief commissary, and to murmur in a choked and throaty voice: “You dolt! You fool! You ass! You traitor! You shall pay me for this!”

Then only did Citizen Campon understand that the man who lay there before him, bruised and sore, spouting vengeance through purple and thick lips, was indeed the true Citizen Mayet after all, and that the whole tragic episode from beginning to end — the strangers at the ruined château, the money and paper purposely give to Jean Mathis so as to lure him, Campon and some of the soldiers away from the scene of the proposed coup, the feast spread out in the château in order to entice those soldiers to indiscipline and render them momentarily helpless, the courier (obviously a false one, bearing a forged letter from Paris, and whom now Campon vainly sought amongst the crowd) — all, all had been part of the gigantic hoax invented and perpetrated by that abominable spy, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

IV.

In a lonely cottage the other side of Versailles, hidden from the road and secure from prying eyes, the little party halted. It was, in truth, their first halt since the exciting moment when three men, who seemed but a part of that awful, yelling crowd at Limours, had boarded

the market cart, overpowered its drivers, and driven it away under the very noses of chief commissary and sergeant, of soldiers and citizens, who were all far too blind with excitement to see anything but the object of their wrath.

Madame Mailly, with her sister and two children, were vainly trying to find words wherewith to express their gratitude to the brave English gentlemen who had saved them from certain death. One of these, who appeared to be the leader, and who looked magnificent even in the rough and shabby clothes of a proletariat of Limours, said to her with a smile:

"I pray you do not thank any of us, dear lady. My friends will tell you, as I do, that we spent in Limours to-day one of the most enjoyable afternoons of our checkered careers. The only thing I regret is that I must be in Paris this night, else it were my greatest joy to go and watch the first tête-à-tête meeting between our friends Campon and Mayet. What say you, Tony?" he added, turning to one of his friends. "You were such an efficient courier. When you handed the forged letter to Campon this morning and he really thought that good old Mayet was none other than the Scarlet Pimpernel, what did he say? His language was forcible, was it not?"

"Nothing to what Mayet's must have been later on when the fun was raging around him," the other assented, with a laugh.

"Nothing," the leader said, with his irrepressible gaiety, "to what their language is now, when they realize that Madame Mailly and her family are safely out of their hands. En route, madame, mademoiselle," he concluded, "we hope to let you see the white cliffs of England before many days are past."

FLY-BY-NIGHT

1

They were so enthusiastic! so eager! Perhaps the secrecy and the excitement of it all appealed more to them than the actual ideals which they advocated. For they were all young men of the professional classes and of the lower bourgeoisie: men who, you would have thought, would have nothing to gain by political intrigue or the reestablishment of the old monarchy, and who were risking their lives to overthrow a system that had not, in very truth, much interfered with the even tenor of their lives.

They held their meetings in the cellar of an old house at the bottom of the Rue de l'Odéon, which was decorated with a white flat that bore the emblem of the royal fleur-de-lys on it in gold, and was hung on the wall immediately behind the seat usually occupied by the chairman. Here the young hotheads would talk politics o' nights and swear allegiance to King Louis XVII, by the grace of God King of France: the poor mite who had been dispossessed of all save his precarious little life, and that too was at the mercy of the inhuman brutes who held him captive. An old wastrel, Servan by name, kept watch at the street door during the sittings and tidied up the place afterward. Strangely enough, no one knew much about Servan. He came and he went. Now and then he disappeared for days on end, when, at his earnest request, sittings would be suspended until his return. Servan was invaluable for ferreting out the plans of the committee of the section; invaluable in his position as watch-dog-in-chief of the Club des Fils du Royaume.

It was one night while Servan was absent that the inevitable catastrophe occurred. He had begged that the sittings of the club should be postponed for a few days. But the next day happened to be the 14th of October, and on that morning had begun the trial of Marie Antoinette — erstwhile Queen of France, now called the Widow Capet — before the Revolutionary Tribunal, at the bar of Fouquier-Tinville, the public prosecutor. What could Les Fils du Royaume do but call a hurried meeting to discuss this portentous event?

Old Servan's warning was forgotten, and at eleven o'clock that same night eighteen or twenty young enthusiasts met to formulate plans for the liberation of their queen.

An hour later the blow had fallen. The ominous command: "Open in the name of the Republic!" came loudly and peremptorily from outside. "The police! Sauve qui peut!" in hurried, hoarse whispers from within. They were trapped like so many rats in a burrow. There was nothing for it but to make a fight for one's life first and make a rush for the open, if possible, when darkness might be of service.

But the revolutionaries were armed with bayonets, and the issue was never for a moment in doubt. The Sons of the Kingdom fought bravely and there were several broken heads among the guard. In the end, some fifteen of the young conspirators were overpowered. Bleeding from several wounds, they were tied together like so much cattle, with cords, and marched up the narrow dank stairs into the street, where the raiding party handed them over to a fresh body of soldiers. They were taken to the chief dépôt of the section, whilst five others lay dead upon the floor of the cellar in the Rue de l'Odéon. The chief commissary of the section ordered the bodies to be left there.

"The garbage can be cleared away another time," he remarked spitefully.

Two days later the bodies were removed, but there were only four of them then. And on looking through his list of prisoners and comparing it with that of the dead, the chief commissary found that one name was missing from both. It was that of Félicien Lézennes, chairman of the Club des Fils du Royaume.

2

The news of the raid on the Club des Fils du Royaume came as a thunderbolt upon the little household at Mon Abris. Little was known at first save the meagre announcement which appeared the following day in the *Moniteur*. Madame St. Luc, however, was at once filled with the gloomiest forebodings as to her son-in-law's fate. Adrienne Lézennes, always self-contained, didn't say much, but her father appeared distinctly resentful as well as anxious. The plight into which Félicien's hot-headedness had landed them all had a grating effect upon his nerves.

They might all of them have been so happy in their little home — a detached, creeper-clad house, standing in an hectare of ground in the Batignolles quarter of Paris, not far from the Porte d'Asnières — had it not been for Félicien's mania for running his head into a noose. Monsieur St. Luc himself had been a well-to-do attorney in his time, had retired at the outbreak of the Revolution, for he was a firm upholder of the monarchic system; but what was the use of airing one's views on so great a subject, when the guillotine loomed so large on the horizon of every bourgeois's life these days?

"That fool Félicien!" so his father-in-law invariably dubbed him. More so now than ever, since he had become a fugitive, hiding God alone knew where, starving probably. For five days after the raid his family did not know what had become of him. Adrienne haunted the purlieus of the prisons, trying to get some information as to her husband's fate, but she could glean none. Then, on the fifth day, when despair had wellnigh seized her, there came a message written in Félicien's own hand, assuring them all that he was safe and under the protection of a brave English milord, who had picked him up half-dead after the raid and brought him, at risk of his life, to a place of safety just outside Paris. How that note came to the house it was impossible to say. Marthe, the serving wench, found the scrap of paper lying on the mat in the small lobby when she came down in the morning. It had been pushed in under the door, and Marthe had hardly dared to touch it at first; it looked so weird and ghostlike, she said.

The note also contained an earnest warning that, the house being certainly now under observation by the spies of the Committee of Public Safety, the utmost discretion and circumspection were imperative; but that mother and father and Adrienne, and also Marthe, had best make quietly ready to leave Paris at an hour's notice. In the meanwhile, however, Félicien adjured them all not to be anxious, and on no account to make any move until they heard from him again. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel — a magnificent English organization — had the welfare of the household in hand. All would be well if they would only act on instructions.

Unfortunately, Monsieur St. Luc, accustomed as he had been all his life to direct and regulate the affairs of his family, refused on so solemn an occasion to be dictated to by his son-in-law (that fool Félicien!). By his orders a few necessary effects were at once hastily

put together. The whole family, he decided, had best leave Paris that very day. He himself would see to passports. He had friends in several administrations who would help to get his family away, and they would all go to St.-Aubin by the Sea, where he owned a little house property, and where they could live in retirement until this cloud had blown over.

While the women packed St. Luc went to the local commissariat to see about the passports. His request was flatly refused. The Committee of Public Safety, so the chief commissary of the section told him, had an eye on Mon Abris. This sudden desire on the part of the household to leave Paris would certainly cause all their names to be placed upon the list of the "Suspect"; which meant that a domiciliary visit, a perquisition, and consequent arrest on some kind of trumped-up charge could now be considered imminent.

Monsieur St. Luc, by his obstinacy, had precipitated the crisis and hopelessly endangered his own life and that of all those he cared for. The situation, from being tense, had suddenly become tragic. There was nothing for it now but to act on Félicien's original advice, praying God in the meanwhile that this wiser course had not been taken too late.

Soon after Monsieur St. Luc's return from his unsuccessful errand another message came, exactly similar to the previous one — a scrap of paper pushed mysteriously under the door and found by Marthe in the little lobby on the mat. But the writing this time was a strange one, and it bore no signature, only a small device in the left-hand corner, drawn in red, and representing a small five-petalled flower, in shape like a Scarlet Pimpernel. The message warned Monsieur St. Luc that a domiciliary visit at Mon Abris could be expected at about four o'clock; that the arrest of the entire household, on suspicion of conspiracy, had already been decided. The usual travesty of justice would inevitably follow, with condemnation, and probably the guillotine in the end. The message, however, went on to assure Monsieur St. Luc that measures were being taken for the immediate flight of himself and his household out of Paris, but that their very lives now depended on implicit obedience. The writer of this warning would himself be at Mon Abris within the hour, to give them final instructions.

3

The family had assembled in the little boudoir which gave on the left of the hall. The two old people were sitting, one on each side of the hearth. Between them, Adrienne Lézennes, kneeling in front of the fire, had the drawer of her husband's desk beside her. This she had filled with all his papers that she could find, and was systematically putting them, packet by packet, into the flames.

"Above all, Adrienne," Madame St. Luc insisted earnestly, "burn anything you can find that looks as if it related to the English milord. It would be an eternal shame on us all if those brutes came on his track while he is working for our salvation."

"Milord is too clever to allow a pack of loons to catch him," Monsieur St. Luc riposted dryly. "But, in any case, Adrienne had best destroy every scrap of paper that Félicien was fool enough to leave about for our undoing."

Neither his wife nor his daughter made further comment on the matter, and for a while no sound disturbed the quietude of the cosy-looking room, save the hissing of the flames licking the loose bundles of papers, and the monotonous ticking of the old clock standing against the wall.

"I wish they would come," Madame St. Luc said presently. "It will be best when it is all over."

"They won't be here for another hour at least," Adrienne rejoined. "And we don't know how bad the worse may be," she added under her breath.

"I wish milord were here," Madame sighed plaintively.

An hour later a detachment of the revolutionary guard, belonging to the Sectional Committee of Public Safety, had assembled in the garden in front of Mon Abris. There were a dozen or more of them, dressed in the usual haphazard attire which, in these days of penury and of prolonged war, did duty for military uniform: ragged breeches, odd coats that more often than not hung loosely upon thin, narrow shoulders; feet thrust bare into sabots or any old boots that might have been picked up in the course of a foraging expedition. The men were under the command of a big, burly ruffian known as Citizen Captain Courtain, who was standing before the front door, vociferating lustily the habitual "Open, in the name of the Republic!" And since he did not obtain the prompt answer to his summons which he required, he proceeded to kick against the door with the point of his boot.

"Hé là!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Open there, I say! Do not waste the time of the loyal servants of the Republic, or you'll have your doors and windows presently smashed about your heads."

He was about to put his sturdy shoulder to the door when it was opened from within. Marthe, neatly dressed and prim, trying to look brave at sight of those awful soldiers whom every peace-loving citizen had learned to dread, stood by, while the men filed through into the square hall in the wake of their captain. The latter then turned to the wench and demanded curtly:

"The Citizen St. Luc, his wife, and daughter — where are they?"

"In the boudoir, Citizen Captain," the girl replied quite readily. She appeared self-possessed and spoke as if she were repeating a lesson. The captain gave her a quick, searching look.

"How many of you live in the house?" he queried.

"Four of us altogether. The Citizen St. Luc, with his wife and their daughter, Adrienne Lézennes. I do the service of the house."

"And what does Félicien Lézennes, the husband of Adrienne, do?" the captain broke in abruptly.

This time the girl did not answer so glibly. There was an instant's hesitation of her voice — the mere fraction of a second, imperceptible no doubt to the bullying rascallion before her — ere she gave reply.

"Félicien Lézennes," she said quite steadily after awhile, "has been gone for some days. You know that well enough, Citizen Captain."

"I know nothing," he retorted, "save that this house stinks of aristos, and that an accursed English spy, who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, is suspected of having been in and out of here."

The wench shrugged her shoulders.

"I know nothing about English spies," she riposted dryly. "Methinks you, Citizen Captain, have been led by the nose."

"We'll soon see about that," was the captain's curt rejoinder. "Now," he added peremptorily, "which is the room you call the boudoir?"

Marthe led the way to a door on the left of the hall and opened it without knocking.

"This way, Citizen Captain," she said simply, and was in the act of standing aside in order to let the soldiers file into the room, when she quickly put her hand up to her mouth as if to smother a sudden, involuntary cry.

In an instant, Courtain had her by the arm.

"What is it?" he queried roughly.

"The mutton stew!" she exclaimed glibly. "I have left it on the fire. It will burn for sure!"

She made as if to run out of the room, but Courtain held her tight.

"You stay here, Citizeness," he commanded. "Pierre Dumont there will see to your stew. His mother was an excellent cook and taught him all she knew."

He nodded to one of his men, who laughed and shrugged his shoulders, then went out of the room.

"Let go my arm, Citizen Captain," the girl said, apparently reassured as to the fate of her stew. "You are hurting me."

The incident was closed. Captain Courtain gave a comprehensive, searching look around. The two ladies had made no movement when first he had entered the room. The older one sat quite still in the high-backed armchair by the hearth, the younger one, on a low tabouret by her side, was busy with some sewing. Monsieur St. Luc rose to receive the soldiers of the Republic.

"Your name?" Courtain queried roughly.

"Adrien St. Luc, attorney-at-law," the old man replied with much dignity.

"Félicien Lézennes, where is he?"

"I do not know, Citizen Captain. We none of us have seen him this past week and more."

"You lie!" Courtain retorted. "He is a fugitive from justice. Where should he find shelter but with his relatives?"

"I know nothing of Félicien Lézennes's movements," Monsieur St. Luc reiterated firmly.

"Well for you if you do not! Give me your keys," the captain commanded.

"Nothing is locked," St. Luc replied. "We have nothing to hide."

Whereupon Courtain with a shrug of the shoulders turned to his men.

"You have heard me question the aristo," he said. "He denies everything. Now, there's a strong suspicion that a cursed traitor is in hiding in this house, as well as that abominable English spy who should have been hung on a lantern post long ago. Therefore, comrades, leave not a single piece of furniture in its place of a single door or drawer unopened. The house must be searched through and through; and there are outhouses and stables, too, in the ground. Understand?"

The men were ready enough to obey. There was a reward of forty sous for every man who brought an escaped suspect to justice; and there had been rumours of some English spies being about. Good reward was promised for their capture, too, whilst for the apprehension of the mysterious leader who was known as the Scarlet Pimpernel, a man might earn as much as ten thousand francs.

Courtain himself remained behind after his comrades had gone. He had apparently set himself the task of searching the boudoir and interrogating the inmates of the house.

"I always mistrust the place where women congregate," he had said in his own picturesque language, ere his men dispersed about the premises.

Indeed, no one understood that type of work better than did Captain Courtain. Not a cranny escaped his vigilant eye, not a nook where an aristo might lie concealed or compromising papers be stowed away. After he had been in the boudoir half an hour there was not one unbroken piece of furniture there. The upholstered chairs had been ripped and the carpets torn up from the floor; he had put his heel through every drawer of the desk, and his fist through every bit of panelling. He had even, in places, torn the paper from the walls.

The three women watched him, fascinated and motionless. Not a word of protest escaped them when they saw some of their most precious treasures ruthlessly destroyed. Monsieur St. Luc made no protest either. He had resumed his seat, was staring moodily before him, and replied in curt monosyllables whenever Courtain put a question to him. Anon the latter threw himself upon the sofa, which his rough handling had reduced to mere wreckage, and gave vent to his disappointment by a comprehensive curse. Then he curtly ordered Marthe to get him some wine. The girl turned to her master, asking for the key.

"I thought you said that nothing was locked in this house," Courtain remarked with a sneer. He was on his feet again in a moment, and turned to St. Luc. "Give me the cellar key," he commanded.

"It is at your service," St. Luc replied.

He took a key from his pocket and held it out to Courtain. "You are free to walk in, Citizen Captain," he said simply.

But Courtain would not take the key.

"Not without you, my friend," he riposted. "Do you take me for a nincompoop, ready to fall into a booby-trap? Allons!" he added roughly. "Marche!"

St. Luc obeyed without another word, walked out of the room in front of Courtain, who took the precaution of turning the key in the lock of the boudoir door behind him.

"We don't want our birds to fly away in our absence, eh?" he remarked with a leer.

The whole house appeared alive with noise: shouts and laughter, smashing of woodwork, and tramping of heavy feet. In the centre of the hall one of the men was brandishing a crowbar, whilst three or four others were apparently egging him on to some doughty deed.

"What is that crowbar for?" Courtain queried curtly.

"The cellar door, Citizen Captain," one of the men replied. "We have searched every nook and corner of the house except the cellar, which is locked. The door has a deal of resistance in it. We thought this crowbar—"

"Throw it down, comrades," Courtain broke in jovially. "Citizen St. Luc will do the honours of his cellar for us in person."

There was no need to reiterate this order. In a moment the crowbar was thrown down and the little procession was formed, with St. Luc leading the way and Courtain treading hard on his heels. The citizen captain had quietly taken a pistol out of his breeches pocket.

"In case something happens that I don't like!" he remarked casually to St. Luc. "And remember that some of my men, if not all, have loaded pistols, too."

But St. Luc appeared quite placid, gave but a cursory glance at the pistol. He led the way across the hall, then down a flight of stairs which was faced at the bottom by a heavy oak door. St. Luc inserted the key in the lock and flung the door open.

"This is the cellar," he said curtly.

"Well!" riposted Courtain with affected jollity. "Go in, and we'll follow."

St. Luc, still placidly, led the way in. The cellar was vast and well ordered, with casks ranged around and an array of bottles and jars filled with the delicacies beloved of the French bourgeoisie. It derived some light from a small grated window set high in the wall. There were some empty wooden casks standing about, and a row of pewter mugs hung on hooks along the edge of a shelf.

"Quite cosy and inviting in here, eh, comrades?" Courtain remarked jauntily.

The soldiers were not long in getting to work. They helped themselves to the mugs, and one of them volunteered to draw the wine, as he had been a butler in an aristos house in pre-Revolution days. Soon each had a mugful of wine in his hand; one of them started to sing, the others joined in. The merry sound attracted their comrades, who were still busy in other parts of the house. They came helter-skelter, running down the stone staircase, and presently the vast cellar was filled with a merry-making throng, in the midst of which St. Luc's majestic figure in sober black, with stiff white stock and tie and iron-gray hair falling modishly down to his shoulders, had lost nothing of the dignity and sang-froid of the well-to-do attorney.

"You do not drink, Citizen St. Luc?" courtain asked him good-humouredly. Then, as the other made no reply, he added with stern significance: "If you are trying some hidden game, my friend, by making my men drunk, you will do yourself no good and aggravate your own case and that of the women upstairs. Drunk or sober, we stay in the house until we've found your precious son-in-law or that confounded Englishman, or both; and I may as well tell you that I have another eight or ten men outside in your garden. So even if these men do get drunk—"

"If they get drunk," broke in St. Luc impatiently, "they'll never rid me of that confounded Englishman or my daughter or that ne'er-do-well husband of hers."

"What?"

The shrill ejaculation had burst involuntarily from Courtain. He literally gave a jump as well as a gasp of astonishment at this wholly unexpected retort, and spilled a quarter of a litre of precious wine in the act. "What did you say?"

"I said that I wished to be rid of that confounded Englishman, a regular Fly-by-Night, who has led us into all this trouble," St. Luc rejoined, and a malicious, spiteful glitter lit up for a moment the even pallor of his face. "As for that fool Lézennes — !"

He paused and pressed his lips together, as if fearing to say too much.

Courtain gave a prolonged whistle.

"Oho!" he said, "so that's the way the wind blows, is it? Why did you not speak of this before?"

"How could I," retorted St. Luc sullenly, "in the presence of my daughter?"

"Then," Courtain went on significantly, "you are willing to — ?"

He looked St. Luc straight in the eyes, and the latter nodded in response.

"Where are they?" the other continued. Then, as the old attorney was about to reply, Courtain suddenly gripped his arm and dragged him to a corner of the cellar where they could talk without fear of being overheard. He had just remembered that a reward of ten thousand francs was due to the man who captured the Scarlet Pimpernel. "Where are they?" he reiterated eagerly, dropping his voice to a whisper.

But St. Luc's manner had already undergone a change. That strange, malicious glitter had died out of his eyes. He looked sheepish and ashamed.

"I-I don't know," he stammered, "just where they are...If the men kept sober they could..."

"None of that!" retorted Courtain roughly. "You have gone too far now, Citizen, to draw back without risking your neck. Where are they?" he reiterated for the third time, and gripped St. Luc so fiercely by the arm that the older man could scarce keep back a cry of pain. "Well, are you going to speak, or shall I have you and your womankind placed under arrest until you do?"

"No, no!" said St. Luc weakly. "I'll tell you. I meant to tell you, only—"

"Only what?"

"The Englishman is very powerful. He is not easily captured. Many have tried and all have failed, remember. And my son-in-law, too, is young and vigorous."

"So much the better," retorted Courtain. "It will be the greater glory for me. Are they in the house?"

"No," replied St. Luc.

"Where then?"

"Not very far from here. Through the barrier. The empty house at the junction of the Rue du Bois. You know it, Citizen Captain? It used to belong to Lézennes's aunt and uncle — aristos who have had to fly the country."

"No, I don't know the house. Is it Clinchy way?" Courtain asked.

"More on the Levallois-Perret side. You can't miss it. Go straight up the Route d'Asnières and take the third turning on the left; then go on till you come to a forked road, when you want to bear to your right. You'll see a white gate—"

"Never mind about that!" Courtain broke in impatiently. "You had best come and show us the way."

"No, no!" St. Luc protested, and his voice had a note of plaintive entreaty in it now. "I couldn't face Lézennes or the Englishman! It would kill me! And my daughter! My wife! They would know...Oh, my God!" he added, and covered his face with his hands as if in abject shame.

The situation seemed vastly to amuse Courtain.

"Many people like to say 'A.'," he remarked dryly, "but don't care to say 'B.' Well, I'll be a good dog, Citizen. The traitors shan't see you. You'll put us on our way, then I'll leave you in charge of two of my men, who will bring you back while we go search the place."

St. Luc still appeared to hesitate, but only for a moment. Obviously, as Courtain had tersely put it, he had gone too far now to draw back. Nor did the captain take any notice of his scruples. There were ten thousand francs waiting for him at the end of a more or less

hazardous expedition, and he had plenty of stalwart fellows under his command. He was not likely to abandon so splendid a chance for reward and advancement. But he took the opportunity before starting of having St. Luc thoroughly searched for any weapons he might have concealed about his person.

"I am taking no risks," he said dryly, when the old attorney tried to protest.

Satisfied on that point, he quickly organized the expedition, turned the men out of the cellar, and locked the door behind them, putting the key in his pocket.

"Do not relax your vigilance for one instant, Citizen Lavérie," he said to the soldier whom he was leaving in command of the party. "The women are, of course, safe under lock and key in the boudoir. See that no one has access to them. I am taking the men with me whom I left on guard outside the house. They have not had the opportunity of visiting the cellar," continued Courtain dryly, "and I shall find them more reliable. St. Luc is coming with us part of the way, but I'll send him back here presently under escort, and then you had better lock him up with the women in the boudoir. Any further orders I may have to give you I will send through the men who will bring St. Luc along. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Citizen Captain," Lavérie replied.

After which Courtain went to muster the men whom he desired to accompany him to the empty house at Levallois-Perret. As he had remarked to Lavérie, they were men who had not tasted St. Luc's wines as yet. Besides taking on risks, he was leaving nothing to chance. He had heard tales of the marvellous prowess of that English spy who, from all accounts, was a kind of legendary athlete, endowed with supernatural cunning and strength. Well, this time he would have to reckon with Citizen Captain Courtain: a man whom nothing could daunt and whose courage was equal to his perspicacity.

His escort, too, looked fit and keen. It was then close on seven o'clock. The sun was slowly sinking down in the west behind a canopy of heavy clouds. Courtain placed himself at the head of his squad and ordered St. Luc to march by his side.

4

A quarter of an hour's brisk walk brought them to the Porte d'Asnières. The gates were closed for the night, but Courtain and his escort, besides being well known to the officer in command, had all the necessary passes, and the party was let through without any hindrance.

Half an hour afterward, at the top of the Route d'Asnières and its junction with the Rue du Bois, where the roads fork, St. Luc came to a halt.

"There is the house," he said, and pointed up the road to where a small building gleamed white in the midst of a clump of old and twisted acacia trees. But, despite his protestations, Courtain would not release him.

"You are coming a bit further along with us, my man," he said curtly. "I told you I was taking no risks."

It was only when they came to a low, broken-down fence which appeared to mark the boundary of the grounds around the house that Courtain finally detailed two of his men to remain on guard over St. Luc.

"Wait for me here," he commanded. "If you hear any fracas inside the house, come to my assistance."

"But the aristo—" suggested one of the men, nodding toward St. Luc.

"In case of trouble," retorted Courtain curtly, "stab him in the legs with your bayonets. Then he can't run far."

He found a rickety gate in the fence and, followed by his escort, proceeded to march up to the house. It lay a hundred mètres, or perhaps less, farther on. The ground around it had no doubt once been a garden; it was now nothing but a mass of overgrown shrubs and a wilderness of nettles. Courtain and his men could be seen for a time ploughing their way through the weeds. Anon they reached the house. The captain's voice of command rang out through the fast-gathering dusk. No answer came from within. The house appeared indeed deserted. Courtain then pushed open the door, which yielded quite easily, and he and his men disappeared inside the house.

Those who had remained on guard over St. Luc settled down for a long wait, sat down on the sloping ground with their backs against the fence, taking care to keep the aristo between them and their bayonets close to their hands.

How it all happened they could not afterward have said. The attack came from behind the fence, they thought, and began with a stunning blow on their heads. Before they could recover from the violence of this assault, thick scarves were wound round their faces; they felt smothered, blinded, unable to call for help. Both tried to reach out for their bayonets, but were almost simultaneously thrown flat to the ground, more securely gagged, pinioned, their pockets ransacked, and finally left to lie there, not even knowing whence the swift and vigorous blow had come that had reduced them to such absolute helplessness. All that they could hear was St. Luc's voice, sometimes moaning, at others cursing violently. But what had become of him they neither of them could say.

Certain it is that less than ten minutes later, two soldiers of the revolutionary guard, with a tall civilian between them who appeared to be their prisoner, presented themselves at the Porte de Clichy, which is next to that of Asnières. They had the required passes such as are supplied to the revolutionary guard in the exercise of their duty. Their papers being all in order, they were allowed to pass through into the city without any delay.

5

Lavérie and the men left behind at Mon Abris had not forgotten the crowbar which had been thrown down in the hall earlier in the afternoon. And this was very fortunate as it happened, because darkness soon began to draw in and at first no candles or lamps could be found anywhere. The serving maid, summoned from the boudoir, explained that lamps were always kept in the cellar on one of the shelves. Whereupon, since the citizen captain had chosen to lock the cellar door, there was nothing for it but to use the crowbar in the manner in which it was originally intended.

There was no disobedience or defiance of discipline in that. To remain in darkness in a house which reeked of aristos was not to be thought of, and Lavérie himself gave the order to break open the cellar door.

Subsequently, when the whole matter was inquired into and punishment duly meted out to the guilty, it was never suggested that Lavérie did anything more reprehensible than just omitting to have the lamps lighted then and there. But it seems that when they were found, it was discovered that they needed filling. The oil drum could not at once be found, and in the meanwhile a couple of tallow candles were made to do duty instead, one being placed on the trestle table in the cellar and the other in the hall.

The semi-darkness certainly left the house rather gloomy; but the evening light had not wholly faded out of the sky, and a pale, grayish streak still came peeping in through the windows and the wide-open door of the hall.

It was close on half-past nine when a couple of men's voices, in conjunction with that of St. Luc, first reached Lavérie's ears. He was then in the cellar with half-a-dozen comrades, and — yes, well! they were having a drink whilst the others remained on guard about the house. There was no harm in that. The entire premises had been literally turned inside out more than once in the course of the afternoon; the women were safe under lock and key, and all the men were well armed. No one could say that any of them had had too much to drink, but they were tired as well as hot, for the evening had turned sultry, and there was thunder in the air.

"Which of you is Citizen Lavérie?" a voice shouted down from above.

"Here, in the cellar," Lavérie replied. "We are busy with the lamps. Who are you?"

"Guard from the Porte d'Asnières," the voice gave answer. "We have brought St. Luc back with us and have a message for you from Citizen Captain Courtain. He has got the aristos."

"Where?" queried Lavérie eagerly, and ran helter-skelter up the stairs. The others remained down below, straining their ears to listen.

Two soldiers, in the same haphazard uniforms that they were all wearing these days, were standing in the hall. Lavérie saw them vaguely through the gloom, with St. Luc's tall, funereal-looking figure between them, and his own comrades crowding excitedly around the newcomers.

"Over in the house at Levallois-Perret," one of the latter replied. "Citizen Courtain wants you to bring the women along to him at once."

Lavérie groaned.

"What for?"

"An important confrontation. Citizen Courtain has sent for the chief commissary of the section, and we are to pick up a couple more aristos who are being detained in a house in the Rue Legendre. It seems that the English spies have had their headquarters there recently. I tell you, comrade," continued the man, "there will be some fine doings at Levallois-Perret presently; and all of us who have had a share in the business are also to have a share in the reward."

But Lavérie was not to be cajoled with any promise of a reward. He gave another groan.

"We are dog-tired, all of us," he mumbled. "We've been on our feet since three o'clock this afternoon."

"And we've got a half-a-dozen horses outside," the newcomer riposted glibly. "We borrowed them from the guard at the Porte d'Asnières. All we've got to do is to get some sort of vehicle from the neighbourhood for the aristos. By the way," he added, turning to his comrade, "did we unearth an old barouche when we were rummaging round the grounds this afternoon?"

"You did," assented Lavérie more cheerfully. "I saw it, too, and there were two horses and some harness in the stables. So, if we can have the mounts—"

"Four of you can have mounts," rejoined the other. "But two of the horses must be led, as they are for our two comrades who are guarding the aristos in the Rue Legendre. With them, and the two of us in the box of the barouche, we shall make an escort of eight: quite enough to be guard against any unpleasant surprise. You Citizen Lavérie," he concluded, "will, I presume, take command of the party?" Then he indicated St. Luc. "And in the meanwhile, perhaps you'll take charge of this old scarecrow, whilst I and my comrade here get out the barouche and put the horses to."

It all seemed so simple. There was really nothing to arouse any man's suspicions, however vigilant he might be. Perhaps, if there had been more light, Lavérie or one of the others would have noticed something strange about the newcomers. But they were in uniform and they had brought St. Luc back with them, together with a message from Courtain, just as Lavérie expected. Moreover, they themselves suggested that the latter should take command of the party. Anyone would have been deceived.

Be that as it may, the coach and pair were got ready in less than twenty minutes. Lavérie in the meanwhile had collected the three women and placed them with St. Luc in charge of some of the men. Now he ordered the aristos to be bundled into the barouche. They all obeyed with the same passive meekness which they had exhibited all along. The three women got in first, then the long-legged old attorney. The two soldiers were already on the box; but there was a little delay at the start, because some of the horses, notably the two in the carriage and a couple of saddled ones, were extremely restive. Lavérie and his men, feeling tired and not too sure of their seats after their prolonged visits to the cellar of Mon Abris, were at pains to select the four mounts that looked almost as sleepy as themselves.

However, the cavalcade was presently got into order. Lavérie gave the word of command, and the procession started at last on its way.

Midway down the Rue Legendre the man on the box drew rein, and Lavérie called a halt.

"This is where we pick up the aristos," the former said, and pointed to a house on his right.

"How shall we find them?" Lavérie asked.

"Two of our comrades are on guard right inside the door," the soldier replied. "Give the password," he added as Lavérie dismounted and called to one of his men to do likewise.

"What is it?" queried the latter.

"Fly-by-night," was the reply.

Everything still quite simple, Lavérie and his comrade found the door of the house wide open, and inside the dark and narrow passage two soldiers were on guard. Lavérie gave the password, whereupon one of them retired farther into the house and presently returned, pushing an elderly woman and an old man roughly before him.

"Are these the aristos?" Lavérie asked.

The soldier nodded.

"The citizen captain must be expecting them," he said.

At a command from Lavérie the two old people were now bundled into the barouche. But the women inside the carriage complained that there was no more room, whereupon St. Luc volunteered to get out and mount on the box. There was some argument over that; but Lavérie was really too sleepy to argue, nor did he protest when St. Luc took the reins in his hands. Perhaps he did not notice. The Rue Legendre was very dark.

Thus the procession was formed once more, the carriage leading the way this time and the mounted escort around.

"We'll go by the Porte de Clichy," the soldier on the box called out at last. "It is the better and quicker way, and the citizen captain will be getting impatient."

It was now quite dark. The party of horsemen, with the ponderous, lumbering vehicle, made a great clatter over the ill-paved streets. The Porte de Clichy was soon reached. There was no question of detaining a carriage escorted by a detachment of revolutionary guard. Lavérie, moreover, was a well-known figure in these parts, and he had all his passes in order.

"Aristos," he explained curtly to the officer in command at the gate, who peeped curiously into the carriage. "Orders of the Citizen Captain Courtain. Important business with the chief commissary of the section at Levallois-Perret."

"Pass on, Citizen!" the officer replied, and stood watching the barouche through the gate and until it was out of sight.

6

The first inkling that Lavérie had that something was wrong was when the driver of the carriage deliberately turned his horses' heads to the right after he had followed the Route de Clichy for about ten minutes. He turned up the Route de Pouchet, whereas Levallois-Perret was in just the opposite direction. Lavérie called the driver's attention to what he thought was merely an error, whereupon the latter whipped up his horses and literally tore up the Route de Pouchet at breakneck speed.

Lavérie dug his knees into his horse and, calling loudly to his men, started in pursuit. But he and the men were tired, and the horses they were riding felt anything but fresh. After a minute or two the carriage gained ground visibly: only two of the mounted men seemed able to keep up with it. Lavérie shouted to them to keep up, but they apparently needed no spur to their efforts. It became a neck to neck race between these two and the barouche, Lavérie and the other three dropping more and more behind every moment. Their horses were obviously spent; they themselves could scarcely sit in their saddles.

"Draw your pistols!" Lavérie shouted to those in front. "Fire at the horses or at the driver. Fire, curse you!" he reiterated, as the soldiers paid no heed to his orders but merely continued to gallop one on each side of the carriage.

He pulled out his own pistol, fired once or twice; but his hand was unsteady, and his eyesight suffered from the effects of Monsieur St. Luc's excellent wines.

Up on the box, the long-legged attorney and the two soldiers were enjoying one of the finest runs they ever remembered in their adventurous careers.

"If," St. Luc presently said, with a light-hearted laugh, "you remembered to give those poor horses the draught I prescribed, they'll drop in a few minutes. They'll come to no harm afterward, but they won't stand a forced gallop for long."

An exclamation from the man next him caused him to look over his shoulder.

"Ah, I thought so!" he went on gaily, for just at that moment Lavérie rolled over and over with his mount on the dusty road. Two minutes later another man followed suit. "If this old barouche were not so confoundedly heavy!" he added, and encouraged his horses with whip and tongue.

"You can slacken, Blakeney," the other exclaimed after awhile. "We are safe from pursuit now."

Indeed, Lavérie's two last comrades had also fallen away. Their horses, covered with sweat and shaking at the knees, had quietly rolled over in the dusty road.

Lord Anthony Dewhurst, one of London's most exquisite dandies, dressed in the haphazard uniform of a revolutionary, was surveying the spectacle from the top of the barouche. Soon the gloom and the distance hid Lavérie and his comrades from view. Then Lord Tony turned back to his chief.

"It was a difficult business this time," he said lightly.

"Yes," Sir Percy replied. "Because we could not trust that obstinate St. Luc to act his part himself. He would have given it all away, so I conveyed him and his wife to the Rue Legendre first, and had some difficulty, I assure you, in persuading him to come. Then I assumed the rôle of the elderly attorney myself and my dear Marguerite made an excellent Madame St. Luc, who kept the other two women up to their task of silence and obedience. At one moment she thought that the waiting-wench would betray us all."

"And if Courtain or one of his men happened to have known the real St. Luc by sight—"

"Then we should have had to devise something else," Blakeney retorted carelessly. "Unlike our friend Courtain, I believe in taking every risk."

"By the way, I wonder what Courtain is doing at the present moment in the lonely house at Levallois-Perret."

"Still waiting for the English spies and the aristos to turn up. He won't leave the house for at least an hour. When I was there about midday, I left every possible indication that the English spies had their headquarters in the house and would surely return before evening. The worthy citizen captain, anxious for the reward, is still calmly waiting for the birds to fly into his trap."

"It was very well managed," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes continued.

"By you two," Blakeney retorted. "Your attack on my two guardians from behind the fence was a masterpiece, and, of course, you rifled their pockets for their passes, but I have yet to hear where you got the horses from."

"We picked up one here and there. That was not very difficult; and everything else was so splendidly thought of," Lord Tony mused, and cast a look of profound admiration for his chief. "The wine and the empty lamps; the carriage and the restive horses. It would have taken a sharper man than poor Lavérie to suspect a trap."

Inside the carriage, Adrienne Lézennes had put her arms round her mother; her hand was on her father's knee. But her eyes and those of her companions in this exciting adventure were fixed upon the false Madame St. Luc.

“And it is you, milady, and your brave husband who have saved us all!” Monsieur St. Luc was saying ruefully.

“At peril of your lives,” Adrienne added in a tear-choked voice.

“Ah! but you must not cry, little woman,” Marguerite Blakeney said gaily. “We shall be meeting your Félicien at Pouchet, and he must not see you with red eyes!”

“And so we are going to England!” Madame St. Luc mused.

“A dull old country; but safe,” Lady Blakeney replied.

THE LURE OF THE CHATEAU

I

"You can't touch Malzieu! Whatever you do, you dare not touch him!"

And the speaker, a stout florid man with thick features and flaccid hanging mouth, brought his clenched fist down with a crash upon the table.

"And why not, if you please, Citizen Desor?" the other man retorted sharply. "Why should any traitor be inviolate, however popular he may be?"

This second speaker was a small spare man, with white, almost cadaverous face and pale, deep-set eyes that darted from time to time piercing, steel-like glances at his interlocutor. But Desor only shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Because," he said, and made a wide sweeping gesture with his thick grimy hand, "because of the whole neighbourhood, Citizen Chauvelin. St. Brieuc is not Paris you must remember: no man with a touch of genius gets lost in this town as he would in your big city. And you must admit that Malzieu is a genius. Did you ever see him in Molière? No? Or as Figaro? Name of a dog, he makes you die of laughter. And handsome, I tell you! The women just adore him, and all St. Brieuc is justly proud of him, for this is his birthplace. The Château de Maljovins close by here belonged to his grandfather and is now in the possession of his cousin Désiré. You can't touch him, I say, for if you do there will be riots in St. Brieuc, and not a single servant of the Republic, civil or military, would be left alive to take the tale as far as Paris."

Chauvelin remained silent after that with eyes closed and lips tightly as if he were striving to shut every ingress to his mind against the other's prying. Then presently he said with quiet emphasis:

"We can't allow a man to remain in such a position. Any man who is the idol of a rabble is a danger to the State."

"He will be a danger," Desor retorted, "if you arrest him."

"That would surely depend on the grounds for the arrest," Chauvelin rejoined blandly.

"I don't understand you," Desor muttered. "Malzieu has done nothing. He is a good patriot, he—"

"If Malzieu, for instance, were to commit a crime—"

Desor laughed. "Malzieu?" he exclaimed. "A crime? He wouldn't harm a cat."

Chauvelin uttered an ejaculation of impatience.

"You are obtuse, my friend," he said. "If Malzieu were to commit a crime — a brutal, cowardly crime — I imagine that the rabble who adore him now, discovering that their idol had feet of clay, would quickly enough hurl him down from his pedestal."

"Yes!" Desor admitted. "If!"

"Well, then!" Chauvelin rejoined significantly, and fixed those pale, scrutinizing eyes of his on his companion. Desor met those eyes, interrogated them for a second or two, until something in their cold, steely gaze mirrored the dark thoughts within.

"You mean — ?" he murmured.

Chauvelin merely shrugged and retorted: "Why not?"

"A difficult problem, Citizen Chauvelin!" was Desor's dry remark.

"But not one above your powers, Citizen," Chauvelin concluded blandly.

II

It was on a cold, gusty day in late September that Citizen Fernand Malzieu received the visit of one Desor, a lawyer of somewhat shady antecedents, settled in St. Brieuc since poor Pégou, the old-established notary, had paid on the guillotine the price of his own loyalty to former clients. Desor brought some interesting news, none the less welcome because it came through such an unpleasant channel. Malzieu's cousin, Désiré, who owned the old château of Maljovins, had died, leaving the property to his next of kin, Fernand, the last of his name. Désiré Malzieu had all his life been an eccentric, not to say a maniac. For years he had lived in the old château, all alone, seeing no one, waited on by one old woman who ministered to all his wants. Nothing was known about his life, save that periodically he would go to Paris, taking his old servant Julie with him. Désiré kept an old horse and chaise: he would harness the one to the other and off he and old Julie would go: they would remain absent sometimes two months, sometimes as much as six; but no one knew when they went or when they came back. The old château appeared equally lonely, equally desolate whether the master was in residence or no: of late he had been absent for the best part of a year, and the news of his death had, it seems, come from Paris. For nearly a year the old château had been deserted: it stood perched high up on the cliffs, above the turbulent ocean, and the booming of the waves against the granite rocks had been the only sound that broke the silence of the grim solitude.

But Fernand, with the mercurial, artistic temperament of his class, had always loved Maljovins. As a boy, when Désiré's father and mother were still alive, he had been a constant visitor at the château, but of late he and his cousin had drifted apart. Désiré's eccentricities, his maniacal love of solitude, had kept Fernand's attempts at friendship at bay. And now he was dead and Fernand the rover, the mountebank, found himself in possession of what he had coveted more than anything else in the world: the old family château. It was dull and grey and lonely, but it was Maljovins. Fernand laughed when Desor reminded him of a somewhat curious condition attached to the legacy.

"The place is only yours, Citizen," the notary said, "as long as you make it your habitual dwelling-place. If you are ever absent from it more than three months in any one year, the estate and the château become the property of Julie Navet, the faithful servant of your late cousin, Désiré."

"I have no greater wish, Citizen Notary," Fernand retorted, "than to live at Maljovins for the rest of my days."

"And you are not afraid?"

"Afraid of what?"

"Oh, I don't know," the notary said, and he gave a shudder, as if a wave of cold had passed down his spine. "They say the place is haunted."

"I would love to see a ghost."

"It has been deserted for so long, they say, that malefactors have, before now, made it a place of refuge."

"They'll be welcome to anything I take there with me."

"You are determined, then, Citizen?"

"Certainly I am. Would you have me refuse so brilliant a legacy? I am a poor man, Citizen Notary," Malzieu continued with simple dignity, "and my marriage to the Citizeness Céleste Gambier is delayed through my lack of means."

"Ah!" concluded the notary, "that accounts for everything. Well, I wish you luck, Citizen! When do you go to Maljovins?"

"To-morrow."

Already the lawyer had collected his papers and stuffed them into a leather wallet which he carried under his arm. He now reached for his hat and took his leave.

"Good luck, Citizen," he said once more as Malzieu escorted him through the ante-room and there bade him good-bye.

III

A quarter of an hour later Fernand Malzieu was speeding through the streets of St. Brieuc. Daylight was quickly fading into dusk. The streets were ill-lighted, and in the shelter of doorways and obscure passages furtive figures crouched under cover of the darkness. But Malzieu paid no heed to these. He feared no one in this town, for he was conscious of his own popularity and of the love which his fellow-townsmen — even those of the underworld — had for him. For the past ten years Malzieu had made France laugh, and France had very great need of laughter these days; and he was handsome withal, and genial, spent as freely as he got, and, despite tempting offers to settle down permanently in Paris as a member of the Comédie française, he had continued to make St. Brieuc his headquarters and went on living there, in his native town, simply, unostentatiously, waiting for better times so that he might marry pretty Céleste, the daughter of Citizen Gambier, the municipal doctor.

Malzieu had come to a halt outside a low, narrow house in the Rue des Remparts. It was the house inhabited by the Citizen Gambier and his daughter Céleste. Fernand had just plied the knocker with his accustomed impatience when a tall man wearing a huge caped coat and chapeau-bras, which further enhanced his stature, accosted him by slapping him lustily on the back.

"Well, luckiest of mortals!" the new-comer said gaily, "how goes the world with you?"

"Milor!" Malzieu exclaimed with a thought of consternation in his voice, "what are you doing in this town?"

"Passing through St. Brieuc," the other replied, "on my way to Paris. Are you not rehearsing a new rôle? I must see you in that."

"Ye gods! Do you know Citizen Chauvelin is in St. Brieuc? He is here on some mission of mischief, you may be sure."

"To keep an eye on you probably, my friend," the stranger retorted dryly. "But you have never answered my first question yet."

"How the world goes with me?" Malzieu rejoined lightly. "Well! We produce the new play on Thursday, and I have just become the proprietor of my ancestral château."

"Two excellent bits of news," the Englishman said. "I shall hope to applaud you on Thursday. When do you take possession of your château?"

"To-morrow, if all's well. It is only mine, I must tell you on condition that I am never absent from it longer than three months at a time."

"Ah! An eccentric will, then? Whose was it?"

"My cousin, Désiré de Malzieu, left me the property."

The Englishman frowned. "Ah!" he said, "I did not know he was dead."

"You knew him?"

"I had heard of him — in Paris."

The two men were about to part, and Malzieu was already grasping his friend's hand, bidding him good night, when the Englishman suddenly said with grave earnestness:

"Don't go to Maljovins to-morrow, Fernand. Wait a week or two. You lose nothing by waiting and the whole affair sounds to me like a trap."

"A trap, milor?" Fernand retorted, with a merry laugh, "who should want to entrap me? I am not worth killing. I only possess a thousand livres in all the world, and I shan't have them in my pocket when I go to Maljovins."

"I know, I know," the Englishman rejoined with an impatient sigh. "But you'll admit that I have had some experience of these revolutionary devils over here, and of their methods, and there's something about this will—"

"Now, milor," Malzieu broke in lightly, "if you are going to warn me of danger, it is not to-morrow that I shall go to Maljovins, but to-night."

Whereupon the Englishman said no more, but went his way, whilst Fernand ran up the stone stairs of the house in the Rue des Remparts two at a time, for he was in a mighty hurry to tell his beloved Céleste of the good fortune that had just fallen to his lot.

That same evening, half an hour after Fernand had taken leave of Dr. Gambier and Céleste, and whilst the girl was tidying up the little apartment preparatory to going to bed, she saw that a slip of paper had been mysteriously inserted underneath the front door. Not being of a nervy disposition, she picked up the note and unfolded it. In it was written:

If you ever need a friend, ask advice from the public letter-writer at the angle of Passage Fontaine.

Céleste had been gravely puzzled when she read the note: but she had also been amused. Was it likely that she would be in need of a friend, when she had her father and Fernand in whom she could always confide? But two days had gone by since then, and now she was indeed badly in need of a friend. She did not want to worry her father, who had plenty of troubles and cares of his own; as for Fernand — well! The trouble was about Fernand. It took Céleste some little time to make up her mind: these were times when it was not prudent to trust anyone or anything. That note may have been a trap: and yet —

A few moments later Céleste was speeding along the Rue des Remparts. She noticed that at the angle of the Passage Fontaine a public letter-writer had of late set up his wares. It was five o'clock of the afternoon: a thin drizzle was falling: Céleste wrapped her shawl close round her head and shoulders and looked cautiously about her. The evening was drawing in, and there were few passers-by: some fifty mètres on ahead the rickety awning that sheltered the letter-writer's table flapped dismally in the wind. The man himself appeared to be dozing under the awning: Céleste hesitated a second or two longer, then she went boldly up to the table.

"I am Céleste Gambier," she said softly, "and have need of a friend."

The letter-writer did not appear to move, but from somewhere out of the semi-darkness, a kindly voice murmured: "What is it?"

"Fernand Malzieu has not been at his lodgings for four days," she said in a hurried whisper. "Last Friday evening, he said good night to me, telling me that he was going to Maljovins the next day to explore the old château. No one has seen or heard anything of him since. This is Tuesday. There was a dress-rehearsal at the theatre this morning. He did not put in an appearance. People make light of this. They say Fernand is engrossed with his good fortune, and has forgotten his duties. They say he will not fail to put in an appearance on Thursday for the production of the play, but I know Fernand better than they do: I know that nothing would make him forget his duties. Something has happened to Fernand, and I am scared to death."

As soon as she had begun her tale, the public letter-writer had roused himself from slumber, and while she spoke he made as if he were writing from her dictation. He was a funny old fellow, with spectacles on his nose, and a shaggy mop of white hair above his high, wrinkled forehead. It was fortunate that the shades of evening were drawing in so quickly in this corner of the narrow street, and that the weather was too bad for clients of the letter-writer to be demanding his services. When Céleste had done speaking, the old man continued for awhile to scribble aimlessly upon the sheet of paper before him, then, when there was not a single passer-by in sight, he said:

"Go home now! Try not to appear anxious. I will bring you news of Fernand to-morrow."

Céleste wanted to ask him a question or two, but, very abruptly, the old man rose, and without paying any further heed to her, he began collecting his traps together and folding up his awning.

"It is getting dark, Citizeness," he said in a loud, gruff voice. "I am going home now and to bed. I advise you to do the same."

And Céleste perforce had to follow this advice.

IV

An hour later two men were speeding down the Chemin de la Digue which leads to the seashore. When they had reached the edge of the cliffs they turned sharply to the left toward the village of Maljovins.

"It is infernally dark," one of the men said impatiently. "Are you sure of the way?"

"Quite sure, Citizen," the other replied; "that sombre mass of building over there is the château."

"And you have provided for everything?"

"For everything, Citizen, and I know that you will be satisfied. Our men succeeded in capturing Fernand Malzieu in the courtyard of the château when he arrived there on Saturday: he has been under lock and key in one of the tower rooms ever since. His cousin Désiré returned from Paris this morning. My man is already there, ready to act if he has not done so already, and the old woman, Julie Navet, has agreed to my terms for giving the evidence which I require. In less than an hour we can have Fernand Malzieu under arrest for the peculiarly brutal murder of his aged cousin, and there will be two eye-witnesses to the crime. Directly afterwards, we will publish the will of Désiré Malzieu, which I have prepared and which I have already shown to Fernand. This will provide us with the motive for the murder and will render the assassin doubly odious to his former worshippers. No!" Desor concluded, with absolute complacency, "we have left nothing to chance, and the Committee of Public Safety will, I hope, give me due recognition for my work."

To this broad hint Chauvelin gave no direct reply, and after a moment's silence he asked abruptly:

"You are sure of your man, I imagine?"

"I could not have found a better," Desor replied. "Orgelet is a man who ought to have been guillotined ages ago, he has half a dozen crimes on his conscience and to-day would murder his own mother for a few francs. I have him in the hollow of my hand, as I hold proofs of certain forgeries and trafficking with our enemies which would send him to the guillotine to-morrow. He knows that, and knows, too, that if he ever played me false or betrayed us in any way, I would use those proofs without hesitation. He has a kind of rough intelligence, too, and will act his part rightly, you may be sure."

"And the woman — what is her name?"

"Julie Navet? Oh, with her, greed is master of all her actions. The way I have worded the will of Désiré Malzieu she becomes sole beneficiary under it, if Fernand does not comply with the conditions. And he cannot do that if we send him to the guillotine for murder."

"The signature to the will? Is that in order?"

"Quite in order, Citizen: and there are the signatures of the two witnesses. Indeed, indeed," the notary concluded emphatically, "you need have no fear on that score either. It is not the first time," he went on cynically, "that I have had to concoct a document of that sort, and I am not likely to bungle this one."

"No," was Chauvelin's equally cynical retort, "for it would not be to your interest, Citizen, to make an enemy of me. As for your reward," he added more lightly, "you need have no fear. It will be adequate: I promise you."

After which there was silence for a while between these two partners in the infamous plot. They walked on rapidly, bending their heads to the wind: soon an irregular mass of masonry, partially hidden by clumps of trees, loomed out of the fast-gathering darkness. It was the chateau of Maljovins. The two men, silently and cautiously, began by making a tour of inspection of the entire building.

The main body of the house consisted of two stories only, but in the centre of the façade an extra story had been added; it only consisted of one room, with a window and a balcony. The front of the house was approached by a paved courtyard, and it was ornamented by a colonnaded porch which gave support to another and larger balcony; under this porch was the main entrance into the château. To right and left the house was flanked by square, projecting towers, each of which had doors giving direct access into them

from the courtyard. As the château was built on the side of the cliff, the upper story was on the level at the back: a broken-down veranda, covered with overgrown wild vine, gave access through glazed doors into this side of the house. Here, too, and to the left of the veranda there was an additional tower, taller than the others and octagonal in shape: this tower also had, a door which gave direct access into it. From this multiplicity of doors it was easy to infer that the rooms on the ground floor of the towers had no direct communication with other parts of the house, and that there was possibly only one staircase in the centre of the château.

The two men had completed the tour of the building: with their linen carefully concealed by the dark lapels of their coats, and their hats pulled well over the eyes, they moved about the darkness noiselessly, like ghosts. They had just reached the veranda and were cautiously peering about them, when a slight sound coming from the darkest angle caused Desor suddenly to dart forward with an angry oath: the next moment there was the sound of a sharp struggle, a smothered curse, a choking murmur, and the notary dragged a man out from under the veranda into the open.

"What is the meaning of this?" Chauvelin queried in a whisper.

"Name of a dog," came in a hoarse reply from the victim of Desor's sudden onslaught, "if that is the way you treat a patriot—"

"Citizen Orgelet — !" murmured the notary.

"Who else?" the other retorted. "A fine fright you gave me, I can tell you. And why do you interfere with my business, I'd like to know."

"It was a mistake, Citizen," Desor whispered apologetically. "I thought—"

"You have lost your nerve, Citizen Desor," Orgelet riposted, with a sneer. "Seeing ghosts, what? Well, am I to finish this business, or am I not?"

"I thought to find it all done—" grunted Desor.

"I had no opportunity," was Orgelet's gruff rejoinder, "the aristo arrived late in the afternoon. He bolted and barred all the doors and windows himself. It took me some time to get one undone."

"Why all this to-do?" Desor retorted roughly, "there is no one in the house but the old woman, and she won't interfere with you."

But apparently Orgelet was inclined to be truculent. "If you can find someone else to do the work for you," he began; but Chauvelin once again broke in impatiently:

"Stop this wrangling!" he commanded; "and you, Citizen Orgelet, get to business: we've wasted too much time already."

Orgelet shook himself like a big, shaggy dog: then, with hands in pocket, he shuffled back up the shallow steps of the veranda, Chauvelin and Desor following closely behind him.

"I have got these shutters undone," Orgelet whispered, and softly disengaged first the outside latch of one of the shutters, and then the bolt of the glazed doors. A moment later he had stepped cautiously into the house, whilst Desor and Chauvelin remained outside — watching. It was pitch dark. For a moment or two everything was as silent, as motionless as a grave — then from out of the darkness a soft shuffling sound made itself heard, the sound of stealthy footsteps creeping down some unseen stairs, and anon a voice came whispering through the gloom:

"Hist, is that you; Citizen Orgelet?"

"At your service, Citizeness," Orgelet replied.

The footsteps came nearer and suddenly a shaft of light pierced the darkness, and lit up the grotesque figure of an old woman, scantily dressed in a petticoat and shawl. Orgelet had opened the shutter of a small, dark lantern which he carried in his belt: the old woman only just succeeded in smothering the scream which had risen to her throat.

"How you frightened me, Citizen!" she murmured hoarsely.

"Too late now to think of fright," Orgelet retorted. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes!" the woman replied, "he has gone to bed, and there's no one in the house but me."

"Which is the bedroom?"

"Just up those steps, then turn sharply to your right. The door in front of you, at the end of the passage. I have left it on the latch."

"Then stay down here until I call you. I shall not be long," was Orgelet's final, cynical retort, as he tiptoed toward the stairs.

The old woman remained crouching somewhere in a dark angle of the room: Chauvelin, closely followed by Desor, had stepped noiselessly into the room. They watched, fascinated, the movements of the shaft of light that came from the lantern at Orgelet's belt. Up the stairs it travelled, then took a sharp turn to the left, and crept along a short passage: Orgelet's footsteps were noiseless, but presently the watchers heard the soft sound of a door being cautiously opened, followed almost immediately by a loud cry of "Qui va là"?

The old woman gave a smothered cry and buried her face in her hands. Desor, with hands that shook and dripped with moisture, gripped the edge of his companion's coat. Only Chauvelin remained motionless and unmoved. The first cry had been followed by another: "Voleur! Assassin!" The silent, deserted château seemed suddenly alive with noise: a tramping of feet overhead, a struggle, another cry, quickly smothered this time, then a dull thud. After that, silence again.

And a few minutes later the watchers from below saw the tell-tale shaft of light come creeping back, first along the passage, then down the stairs. Orgelet had done his work.

"Is he dead?" Chauvelin asked.

He had spoken quite calmly, hardly raising his voice, and yet the sound reverberated like dull thunder through the silence and the gloom.

"I believe you," Orgelet grunted in reply: then added with a cynical laugh: "It was tough work, I can tell you." He was intent on nursing one of his wrists, rubbing it with the palm of his other hand and muttering a coarse oath or else a groan from time to time. The bright eye of his lantern wandered aimlessly from point to point about the room with every movement that he made: one moment it lit up the huddled figure of the old woman, and the next it alighted on Desor's bloated face or on Chauvelin's shrunken figure and pale, thin hands. The room appeared large, running right through from the veranda at the back of the house to the balcony above the porch in front. The staircase was somewhere on the left encased in gloom. There was very little furniture about: a horse-hair sofa in one angle, a desk in another: in the centre, a round table, with three or four upright chairs around it.

The old woman had begun to whimper, her teeth could be heard chattering.

"Stop that snivelling," Chauvelin broke in impatiently.

"My poor, poor master," she moaned.

"You should have thought of that sooner, my good woman," Chauvelin retorted dryly. "Are you forgetting perchance, that Citizen Orgelet has just put you in possession of a very nice château and some valuable land?" he added with a sneer.

At once the sound of whimpering ceased.

"You won't go back on that, Citizen?" she asked.

"Not unless you play me false."

"I won't play you false," the woman said more steadily, even though she could not quite stop the chattering of her teeth, "tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"It won't be difficult either," Desor grunted. "And what a reward!"

"It is close on nine o'clock now," Chauvelin resumed in curt, incisive tones. "At ten o'clock you will go upstairs into your master's room—"

"Saints in Heaven!" the woman broke in shrilly, "how shall I do that?"

"By thinking, I imagine, of the will which your master has made, leaving all his property to you," Chauvelin replied with a dry chuckle. "That ought to steady your knees as you go up those stairs. Well, you will carry a candle, and you need only go as far as the door, but you'll open the door wide and then let yourself sink down on the threshold, as if you were in a faint, and there you will remain until the Commissary of Police arrives on the scene. You understand?"

"Yes, yes!" she murmured, "but, my God, how shall I do it?"

"The Commissary of Police will question you, and you will tell him that Citizen Orgelet here is your nephew, that he had been doing some work in the stables for your master and had then come in to have supper with you: that your master went up to bed at nine o'clock, and that you and your nephew followed an hour later: that going up the stairs you both heard certain sounds that alarmed you: that you went to the door of your master's room, found it on the latch, pushed it open, and saw — you understand me? — saw Citizen Malzieu, whom you know well by sight, standing over your master with his two hands around his throat; that you screamed, and Citizen Orgelet rushed forward to apprehend the murderer, after which you must have fainted for you remember nothing more. Is that clear?"

"Quite — quite clear, Citizen," the woman muttered feebly.

"And what did I do," here broke in Orgelet, "with a dry cackle, whilst my respected aunt fainted on the doorstep?"

"You overpowered the assassin," replied Chauvelin curtly, "pinioned him to a chair by securing his hands with his belt and his feet with yours, wound your scarf around his mouth then you ascertained that poor Désiré Malzieu was dead, and finally ran to the nearest commissariat of police, like the good citizen that you are."

"Hm! And the assassin?"

"We have him under lock and key. He has been shut up in one of the tower-rooms since Saturday; he will be too hungry to struggle much."

"So long as it seems reasonable that I overpowered him and pinned him to a chair, single-handed—"

"What? A sturdy, big gossoon like you? — and Fernand Malzieu is an actor — puny — effete—"

"I am not objecting, Citizen, if you are satisfied!"

"Then go and fetch the fellow. You'll find him in the ground-floor room of the octagonal tower on this side of the château. We must get our *mise-en-scène* right, eh, Citizen Desor?"

But Desor did not seem over-inclined to talk. There was something ghoulish in the matter-of-fact way in which Citizen Chauvelin was directing the staging of this grizzly comedy of which he, Desor, was the principal author.

"Are you dreaming, Citizen," Chauvelin said abruptly in that trenchant voice of his which always seemed to contain a menace. "Give your friend Orgelet the key of the tower-room. After which we'll go and set up the scene for the last act of the play."

Silently Desor fumbled in the capacious pocket of his coat and silently he handed a key to Orgelet.

"The ground-floor room in the octagon tower, you said?" the ruffian remarked, and then shuffled across the room toward the veranda. The next moment he had disappeared through the glazed door; his lantern went with him, and the two men and the old woman remained in utter darkness. Orgelet's heavy, dragging footsteps could be heard quite distinctly, first on the wooden flooring of the veranda, then squelching the soft, rain-sodden ground of the pathway round the house. The silence around was death-like; way below the cliffs, the outgoing tide made no sound of breaking surf, or rattle of pebbles on the beach: the rain fell, soft and persistent; soundless, too. The darkness alone seemed to carry sounds within its folds — Orgelet's footsteps, and after awhile the grating of a rusty key in a lock, somewhere in the near distance, and a murmur as of a man's voice.

"Get a candle, woman," Desor said suddenly in a husky voice, "this darkness is enough to choke a man."

"No, no, leave it alone," Chauvelin riposted. "Orgelet will be back directly."

Somewhere close by a wooden shutter flapped, weirdly, persistently, like the knocking of ghostly knuckles seeking admittance into the house of death, then once again heavy footsteps squelched the muddy path. They sounded heavier, slower, than before. Soon a narrow shaft of light loomed through the darkness: it drew nearer, and presently fell across the veranda floor.

"Name of a name of a dog, this is work for beasts, not for man," came from a gruff voice, even as Orgelet reappeared under the lintel of the glazed door. A heavy burden lay right across his shoulders: a ray of light from the lantern in his belt caught the tip of his big nose and the point of his chin covered with a grimy stubble.

"Take him upstairs," Chauvelin commanded; "we'll follow."

Orgelet muttered a few more oaths, but never thought to disobey. He toiled laboriously up the narrow, winding stairs, with Chauvelin close on his heels, and Desor, dragging Julie Navet by the hand, following on behind.

Outside the door of the room where Désiré Malzieu lay lifeless, Orgelet paused and deposited his burden on the ground, propping it up against the wall.

"I thought I would lock our friend Désiré in," he said, with his coarse, callous laugh, "in case the dead took to walking."

He took a key out of his pocket, but before inserting it in the lock, he looked down on the burden which he had brought on his shoulders all this way from the tower-room. The light from his lantern fell on Fernand Malzieu's pale, wan face; his eyes were open and had a dull, feverish glow in them, his hair lay matted against his forehead, his mouth and chin were hidden by a woollen scarf wound loosely around his mouth.

"He doesn't look much like a desperate murderer now, does he?" Orgelet remarked sarcastically.

Then he turned the key in the lock and threw open the door. He took the lantern from his belt and held it high above his head, moving it to and fro to illumine different parts of the room. The light fell on the tumbled bed, the blankets dragged to the floor, the broken crockery and overturned chair, and in the centre of the room the motionless form of old Désiré Malzieu lying on his face with claw-like fingers clutching convulsively at the carpet.

"A pretty sight, what?" Orgelet remarked with a ghoulish cackle. "What do you think of it, Citizen Chauvelin?"

With a cry of impatience Chauvelin snatched the lantern from him and stepped briskly into the room; Desor still dragging the woman by the hand, was hard on his heels.

The next moment the door behind them fell to with a loud bang, and the key grated in the lock. A noise as of a hundred demons let loose issued from inside the room, whilst on the other side of the door Orgelet cautiously lifted the inanimate figure of Fernand Malzieu from the ground and once more hoisted him up on his shoulders. Quickly, but as swiftly as he could, guiding himself with one hand to the banisters, and steadying his burden with the other, he hurried down the stairs, across the room, out once more through the glazed door, then through the veranda back into the open. He skirted the house and crossed the courtyard: here he paused a moment to lend an ear to the shouting, the cursing and the banging that still issued from the top story of the château. Quietly chuckling to himself, he re-started on his way, and this time he did not halt until he had reached the path at the top of the cliffs. Here he came to a standstill, and gently laid his bundle down: then he gave a cry like that of a sea-mew, and thrice repeated it.

All around the same silence still held sway, only from below at this point the gentle murmur of the waves rose and fell in rhythmic cadence that was soothing and agreeable to the ear.

Two men emerged now out of the darkness, and Citizen Orgelet called out to them in an extraordinarily cultured and well-modulated voice and in amazingly perfect English:

"Hastings, is that you?"

"At your command," a pleasant voice gave reply. "Galveston is with me. Have you got your man?"

"You bet I have. But I fear me he cannot walk."

"We have a couple of horses not two hundred mètres from here," my lord Hastings explained, "and we can carry him so far."

"I'll leave him in your hands, then," the pseudo-Orgelet rejoined. "You can take him to his lodgings in the Rue des Moines, number 17, over against the jeweller's shop at the sign of the opal ring. Give him in charge of his man-of-all-work, and then go at once to the house of the Citizen Doctor Gambier, see Mademoiselle Céleste, his daughter, and tell her the news. After that, meet me at my lodgings. I must get some of this filth off me before I can think of anything else."

He watched my lord Hastings and Sir Richard Galveston while they lifted the still unconscious body of Fernand Malzieu in their arms, and then he waited until these two devoted followers had disappeared in the darkness with their precious burden. After which, he turned on his heel and walked back toward the old château.

V

An hour later in a dingy lodging situated not far from the one where Fernand Malzieu was slowly recovering consciousness under the loving eyes of Céleste Gambier, we men were delighting in the story of this latest adventure of their beloved chief.

"I could not resist going back to that old crow's nest," Blakeney was saying gaily, "just to see how that unsavoury rabble was getting on. I was just in time to see the elegant form of my ever-engaging friend Chauvelin silhouetted against the light behind him; he was apparently mentally gauging the distance from the top balcony to the one below and marvelling if he might venture on a jump. He had succeeded in opening the window and the shutter: the door, I imagine, holding fast; it was of oak, very stout, and the lock was good. He was silent as usual: but in the room behind him, his precious mate, Desor, as well as old Désiré Malzieu and that abominable hag, were making a noise fit to bring all the evil spirits out of Hades."

"Old Malzieu was not hurt, then?" one of the young men asked.

"Not he!" Sir Percy replied. "You see, what actually happened was this: after poor, little Céleste had confided her anxiety to me, and I had arranged to meet some of you on the cliffs, I put on some rags and set off at once, as you know, for the old château. I knew, of course, that poor, unsuspecting Fernand had walked straight into a trap which those devils had set for him. What that trap was I could only conjecture, but I had shot a guessing arrow into the air and it had not fallen wide of the mark. My only fear was that we should be too late, and that I should find the abominable deed already done. The château was all in darkness when I arrived, door and windows hermetically closed; but peeping through one of the shutters under the veranda I saw old Désiré sitting at the table, having some supper and waited on by that old hag Julie. Of Fernand I saw no sign. A moment or two later I became conscious that I was not the only night-bird prowling round the old château. A bulky, clumsy form was lurking in the shadows, obviously intent on mischief. He, too, like myself, peeped through the shutters of the veranda, then he ensconced himself in its darkest angle and waited. I, in the meanwhile, had found cover behind some rough shrubbery from whence I had observed his movements. I give you my word that the whole sinister plan invented by those fiends was by this time as clear as daylight to me. A lurking assassin! A will supposed to have been made in favour of Fernand whose popularity disturbed the complacency of the Terrorists! A charge of wilful murder! Odium cast on the popular actor! The idol of the people turned into an execrated criminal! Well, we had to put a spoke in that abominable wheel or shame the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel for ever."

"You know the rest," Blakeney went on lightly.

“Skirting the house, I succeeded in effecting an entrance into it by climbing by way of the two balconies up to the top floor window, which luckily was not so securely latched as those on the lower floors. The room which I entered was obviously the master’s bedroom: everything was prepared for him for the night. Trusting to luck, I hid underneath the bed and waited. After awhile, Désiré Malzieu came upstairs. Then came the dramatic moment. What exactly happened in the room below I cannot, of course, tell you. I was just trusting to luck. But presently I heard shuffling footsteps, then voices from below, finally the opening of the bedroom door. You can easily guess the rest: whilst Orgelet fell on old Désiré Malzieu, who was shouting ‘Voleur! Assassin!’ fit to wake the dead, I fell on Orgelet, who was so taken by surprise that he never uttered a sound. What with his belt and my own and a length of rope which I had stuffed into my pockets, I managed to get him well trussed and silenced and stuffed underneath the bed: old Désiré was sprawling on the floor, but I did not think that he was very grievously hurt. From Orgelet I had taken the dark lantern which proved such a valuable friend, for it lit up everything round me and left my face in darkness. After that, the whole thing became child’s play. I was sent by Desor to fetch poor Fernand: until that moment I did not know where he was and never had the time or opportunity to look for him. When I first saw him, he was more dead than alive, but we may take it at this moment, under the able ministrations of Mademoiselle Céleste, he is more alive than dead. And so, home, friends,” the daring adventurer concluded with his merry, last laugh; “frankly, I am demmed fatigued. At dusk to-morrow we make for the Day-Dream and set sail for England, and unless the little party’s obstinacy prove greater than our determination, we’ll have Fernand Malzieu and his pretty Céleste and possibly old Doctor Gambier on board, too.”

IN THE TIGER'S DEN

I

Heavens above, the indignation! The entire commune of Bordet was outraged: its rampant patriotism was stirred to its depths.

Think of it! That abominable gang of English desperadoes had been at work in the region. Aye! within a stone's throw of Bordet itself. For Bordet is an important commune, look you! Situated less than half a dozen leagues from Paris, and possessing a fine château which might be termed a stronghold, it had the proud distinction of having harboured important prisoners at different times — aristos, awaiting condemnation and death — when the great prisons of the capital were, mayhap, over-full, or it was thought more expedient to erect a guillotine on the spot.

Thus it was that the ci-devant Bishop of Chenonceaux — a man of eighty who should have known better than to defy the law — and the equally old Curé de Venelle had been incarcerated in Fort St. Arc, and it was from there, and on the very eve of the arrival of Mme la Guillotine and her attendant executioner on a visit to Bordet, that those two old calotins were spirited away under the very nose of Citizen Sergeant Renault, one of the shrewdest soldiers in the department and more keen after spies than a terrier is after rats.

Sergeant Renault was soundly rebuked for what was mercifully termed his carelessness, and he was ordered off to defy Holland to rejoin his regiment, there to expiate his misdemeanour by fighting against the English. And good luck to him, if he came home with all his fingers and toes and the tip still on his nose. The authorities in Paris, on the other hand, despatched a special officer down to Bordet to take over the command of the detachment of National Guard stationed at Fort St. Arc, as well as to supervise the organization of the police in the district.

Now, if the English spies dared to show their ugly faces in Bordet they would have to deal with Citizen Papillon — a very different man to that fool Renault, whose popularity and reputation had effectually gone down with him. A day or two after the arrival of Papillon, a batch of prisoners were brought to Fort St. Arc: ci-devant priests — contumacious ones, so 'twas understood — from villages over Orléans way, whose crimes against the new laws regulating the administration of religion were too many to enumerate. No wonder that the authorities in Paris required a man of Papillon's shrewdness and enthusiasm to guard these against the possible interference of that master-spy — the mysterious Englishman, known throughout the country as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Papillon, sitting in state in the Taverne des Trois Rats, surrounded by an admiring crowd of citizens, gave it as his opinion that not the devil himself — so be it there was a devil — could spirit the aristos out of St. Arc.

"And look you," he went on sententiously, "look you, citizens all! It has come to my ears, that there are those among you who, for filthy lucre, have actually lent a hand to those abominable English spies in their treacherous devices against the security of the State. Now, let me tell you this: if I catch any man of you thus trafficking with those devils I will shoot him on sight like a dog!"

And he looked so fierce when he said this, and rolled his eyes so ferociously that many a man felt an icy shiver coursing down his spine.

"Therefore," concluded Citizen Papillon, "if any one of you here know aught of the doings of that gang of malefactors, or of the place of their abode, let him come forward now like a man, and a patriot, and impart such information to me."

There was silence after that — silence all the more remarkable as the Taverne des Trois Rats was densely packed with men, all of whom hung spellbound on the irascible sergeant's lips. Citizen Papillon, having delivered himself of such sound patriotic principles, proceeded to quench his thirst, and whilst he did so, the silence gradually broke, firstly into a soft murmur, then into louder whispering; finally a few words were distinguishable above a general hum which sounded now like the buzzing inside a beehive.

"Tell him, Citizen Chapeau!" one or two men kept on repeating in a hoarse whisper. "It is thy duty to tell."

Thus admonished and egged on too by sundry prods from persuasive elbows and fists, a tall, ungainly youth slowly worked his way in and out of the forest of tables, chair, and intervening humanity, until he came within a few feet of the redoubtable Papillon, where he remained standing, obviously timid and undecided.

"Well, Citizen, what is it?" the Sergeant condescended to say in an encouraging tone of voice.

"It is — it is that—" the youth answered. Then he suddenly blurted out the whole astounding fact: "It is that I know where the English spies have their night quarters!" he said.

"What?" And Sergeant Papillon nearly fell off his chair, so staggered and excited was he. He appeared quite speechless for the moment, nor did Chapeau say anything more: his courage had once more sunk into his sabots. Then someone volunteered the remark:

"Citizen Glapeau lives on the outskirts of the commune. His father is a mender of boats."

"Well, what of that?" Papillon demanded.

"My father and I have seen strange forms of late prowling about the river bank o' nights," Chapeau said with a swift if transitory return to courage.

Papillon, with characteristic keenness, seized upon these scanty facts, and within a few minutes had dragged from the timid Chapeau all the information he needed.

Chapeau's story was simple enough. Close to the river bank, not a quarter of a league from his father's hut, there was a derelict cottage. Citizen Papillon would not know it, as he was a stranger in these parts, but everyone in Bordet knew the place and could go to it blindfolded. Eh bien! Chapeau could swear he had seen vague forms moving about inside the cottage and, in fact — in fact — well, he himself had taken wine and food there once or twice — oh, certainly not more than twice — at the command of a tall foreigner, who might have been an Englishman.

This was neither the place nor the time to deal with Chapeau's misdemeanour in the matter of parleying with and feeding the enemies of the country. Sergeant Papillon for the nonce contented himself with admonishing the delinquent and frightening him into a state bordering on imbecility. After which he turned to his subordinate, Corporal Joly, and fell to whispering with him. It was understood that measures were being taken for a nocturnal expedition against the English spies, and after awhile the agitated throng

fled out of the Taverne des Trois Rats and men returned to their homes to ponder over the events which were about to plunge the peaceful commune of Bordet into a veritable hurricane of excitement.

II

The derelict cottage which stood with its back to the towpath had no roof; only two of its outside walls were whole, the others, built of mud and stone, had partially fallen in. Inside, the place was littered with debris of plaster and of lath: the front door had gone, leaving a wide, shapeless gap in its place: the inside walls were partly demolished, and there was no trace of any staircase.

In the shelter of these ruins vague forms were moving. The night was dark and very still after the rain. The moon was up, but invisible behind a thin veiling of clouds which tempered her light into a grey half-tone that lay over the river like a ghost-like pall and made the shadows appear almost solid upon the banks. The miscellaneous noises which during the day filled the immediate neighbourhood of the towpath with life and animation had long since died away: all sounds were stilled in the direction of the boat-mender's workshop some two hundred mètres away. All that could be heard now was the sighing of the night-breeze through the reeds or the monotonous drip-drip of lingering raindrops from the branches of the willow trees. Even the waterfowl and tiny, prowling beasts were at rest, and the lazy river made no sound as she lapped her flat banks with silent somnolence.

The men who were sheltering in the derelict cottage did not speak. They were of the type whom a life of adventure and of deadly perils constantly affronted, had endorsed with the capacity for perfect quietude and protracted silences. It is only the idle and shallow-witted who are for ever restless and discursive. Of time, they took no count: the whole of the night was before them, with its every moment mapped out for action and for thought.

Then suddenly one of them spoke:

"They should be here by now," he said in a soft whisper, scarce distinguishable from the sighing of the wind among the rushes, "unless the worthy Papillon has changed his mind. You'll have to hold them a good quarter of an hour when they do come," he added, with a pleasant laugh.

A happy chuckle came in response to this command.

He who had first spoken straightened out his tall figure and gazed above the low parapet of broken masonry toward the remote distance where the solid, irregular pile of Fort St. Arc stood out spectral, almost weird, against the midnight sky.

"When Ffoulkes and I have done our work," he resumed after awhile, "we'll meet as arranged. I don't know how many of us there will be, but we'll do our best."

"I believe that my information is correct," another voice put in quietly. "There are half a dozen old priests shut up in the topmost story of the tower they call Duchesse Anne."

"Nothing could be better," the chief went on, "as the tower is close to the river and very easy of access. I wonder, now," he added thoughtfully, "why they chose it."

"I wondered, too," the other assented. "It seems the prisoners were moved in there yesterday."

"Well, so long as we have the boats..."

"We have two: and Hastings is in charge of them, in the backwater just below the Venelle woods."

"Then there is nothing more to arrange," the chief concluded, "and so long as you, Tony, and Holte can keep that fool Papillon and his detachment off our hands until they are too tired to do more mischief, Ffoulkes and I will have ample time for our work and should certainly be at the back-water before dawn."

Before any of the others could give reply, however, he gave a peremptory: "Hush!" then added quickly: "Here they are! Come, Ffoulkes!"

To any but a practised ear, the silence of the night was still unbroken: only such men as these, whose senses were keyed up to the presence of danger, like the beasts in the desert or jungle, could have perceived that soft and subtle sound of men stirring far away. A detachment of the National Guard was in truth moving forward stealthily along the towpath and the adjacent fields from the direction of Bordet: their thinly-shod feet made no noise on the soft, rain-sodden earth. They crept along, their backs bent nearly double, they carried their muskets in their hands and each man had a pistol in his belt.

In the derelict cottage all was silence again. Of the four men who had been there, two had gone. These two were also creeping along under cover of the darkness, but their way lay in the direction of Bordet. They appeared as one with the shadows of the night, which enveloped them as in a shroud. At times they crawled flat on their faces, like reptiles in the ditches, at others they flitted like spectres across an intervening field.

When, after awhile, the body of Papillon's men was in their rear, they struck boldly across to the towpath, and thereafter, with elbows held to their sides, swiftly and with measured tread they ran along towards Fort St. Arc. At a distance of some two hundred mètres from the pile they halted. A spinney composed of alders, birch, and ash gave them shelter; the undergrowth below hid them from view.

"What disgusting objects we must look," one of the men said with a quaint, happy laugh. "I vow that confounded mud has even got into my teeth."

He drew a scented handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped his face and hands.

"I wonder," he said, musing, "if it is possible for any man to be quite such a fool as Papillon appears. Well, we shall see."

The other, in the meanwhile, had groped his way to a dense portion in the undergrowth, whence after some searching in the dark, he brought out a bundle of clothes.

"Hastings has not failed us," he said simply. "And the others will be waiting in the Venelle woods."

Whereupon the two men proceeded to divest themselves of the rough and mud-stained garments which they were wearing, and to don the clothes which their friend had laid ready for them. These consisted of uniforms of the National Guard, a disguise oft affected by members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel: blue coats with red facings, white breeches and high, black gaiters reaching above the knee, all very much worn and stained.

“Excellent!” the taller of the two men said when he had fastened the last button. “Now, Ffoulkes, remember! You wait below until I give the signal. You have the rope, of course?”

He did not wait for a reply, but started to walk at a quick pace towards the fort. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Bart., one of the smartest exquisites in London, followed close on his heels, with a heavy-knotted rope wound around his person.

Everything had been pre-arranged. Within a few minutes the two men had reached the edge of the spinney, and the irregular pile of the old fort, with the tower known as the Duchesse Anne in the foreground, rose grim and majestic above them. The Duchesse Anne was an irregular heptagonal tower surmounted by a battlement. There were only two small windows, one above the other, in the façade which fronted the spinney: they were perched high up, close to the battlemented room; one of these windows, the lower one of the two, showed a dim light.

Above it, to the immediate left, there was a square, flat projection which might have served as a look-out place or a concealing closet. A tiny window was cut into its face. To the right and left of the tower, the irregular roofs and battlements of the fort, some of them in ruins, all of them obviously neglected and disused, rose in irregular masses against the sky. Shallow, rocky slopes, covered with rough grasses and shrubs, led up to the foot of the fort, save where these had been cut into to form a bridge that led to the main entrance portal. The night had become very dark. Heavy clouds were rolling in from the south-west, completely obliterating the moon, and a few heavy raindrops had begun to fall.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes now wound the knotted rope around his chief’s body, and a minute later the latter began his ascent of the slopes. Immediately the darkness swallowed him up. Sir Percy Blakeney, one of the most powerful athletes of his time, was possessed of almost abnormal physique and was as agile as a cat. To him the climbing of a rough, stone wall did not present the slightest difficulty. Here, a century-old ivy and a stout iron pipe gave him all the help he needed. Within five minutes he was on a level with the lower of the two windows — the one which showed a dim light, like a sleepy, half-open eye, through the darkness clinging with one hand to the ivy and with the other to a stone projection, he peeped in through the window. It was innocent of glass. One bar of iron divided it vertically in two, leaving, so Sir Percy ascertained at once, sufficient space for the passage of a human body. The room on which it gave was large and bare. Blakeney, for the space of a second or two, thought it was empty. He seized the iron bar and limbed upon the sill; this gave him a commanding view of the room. It was innocent of furniture, save for one chair, and in the corner, on a level with the window, a table.

In front of this table, kneeling upon the floor, and with their heads buried in their hands, six men were kneeling. Sir Percy could only see their backs, clad in black soutanes, shiny at the seams, threadbare across the shoulders, and the worn soles of their shoes. The men were praying. One of them was reciting a Litany: the others gave the responses.

Without another thought, Sir Percy Blakeney threw one shapely leg over the window-sill, then the other, and dropped gently down into the room.

In one moment the six men were on their feet, with a loud cry of triumph which had nothing priestly in its ring, and through which one voice, hoarse with excitement, rang out commanding and distinct.

“My gallant Scarlet Pimpernel, so then we meet at last!”

III

In less time than that of a heart-beat Sir Percy realized the magnitude of the trap which had been laid for him. In less than one second he saw himself surrounded; at a call from his first assailants, half a dozen more men had rushed into the room; he felt a dozen pairs of hands laid about his person and heard the cries of exultation and the shouts of derision. He saw the pale eyes of his arch-enemy Chauvelin glistening with triumphant malice as they met his own across the room.

A dozen pairs of hands! No wonder that Chauvelin called to him with a complacent grin.

“I think we have fairly caught you this time, eh, my fine gentleman!”

He looked so evil just then, so cruel and withal so triumphant that Blakeney’s imperturbable humour got the better of his grim sense of danger. He threw back his head and a loud, merry peal of laughter woke the echoes of the old fort.

“By Gad!” he said lightly. “I verily believe, sir, that you have.”

They thought that he meant to sell his life dearly; one or two of them raised the butt-ends of their pistols, ready to strike the struggling lion on the head. But that struggle was brief. Just once he freed himself from them all. Just once did he send one or two of his assailants, with a mighty blow of his powerful fists, sprawling, half-senseless, against the wall. Just once did Hébert — Hébert who had a heavy score to settle against the Scarlet Pimpernel — raise a knife, and would have dealt a death-blow to the fighting giant in the back, but it was Chauvelin himself who struck the would-be assassin such a heavy blow on the wrist with his pistol, that the knife fell with a clatter to the ground.

“You fool,” he said with a snarl, “this is not the time to kill him.”

At that same moment Blakeney raised his hand, and before anyone could intervene he flung something white and heavy with unerring precision and lightning rapidity through the window. But what was one man’s strength — even if it be almost superhuman — against the weight of numbers?

“You are caught, my fine Scarlet Pimpernel!” Chauvelin kept on repeating in a shrill, excited voice, and rubbed his thin, claw-like hands complacently one against the other “You are caught at last and this time...”

He left the sentence uncompleted, but there was a world of vengeful malice in those unspoken words. Quickly enough the end came. One man used the butt-end of his pistol and struck at the lion from behind. The blow caught him at the back of the head and for a moment his senses reeled: whereupon they got him down flat upon the table and tied him to it with the knotted rope which he had about him.

Even through half-swooning senses, he was aware of Chauvelin’s thin, colourless face thrust close to his own.

“Fairly caught, eh, my gallant Pimpernel?” the Terrorist whispered with a malicious chortle; “there are four calotins in the room above and you have fallen like a bird into my trap this time.”

"Aye! and been trussed like a fowl," Sir Percy gave cool reply. "The last time you trussed me like this was on the sands off Calais. On that occasion too you had donned clerical garb, my friend. 'Tis all of good augury."

Chauvelin laughed; he felt secure at last. No more bargaining with the Scarlet Pimpernel, no more parleyings. The guillotine here in the courtyard of the fort as soon as it could be brought down from Paris. He would send a courier for it at once. In less than twelve hours, it could be here. In the meanwhile, unless indeed supernatural agencies were at work, there was no fear that this trussed bundle of anguished humanity could escape out of this trap.

Blakeney securely tied to the table, with several mètres of rope wound about his body, was as helpless as his most bitter enemy could have wished. For the nonce he seemed to have lost consciousness. He lay quite still, with eyes closed, and slender hands — the hands of an idealist and of an exquisite — hanging limp and nerveless from the wrist.

That was the last vision which Chauvelin had of him as he finally went out of the room in the wake of his friends. They took the lantern away with them and left the captured giant in darkness. After which they filed out through the door and pushed the heavy bolts home. Even so half a dozen men were left on guard outside: the others quietly went their way, satisfied.

IV

How long Sir Percy remained thus pinioned in total darkness, he could not have told you. Time for him had ceased to be. That he had not been altogether blind to the possibility of this danger was proved by the fact that he had a message ready for Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, in his pocket, carefully weighted with a disc of lead. It contained less than half a dozen words and was characteristic both of the man and of his friends, in whom he trusted. The words were "Am helpless. Wait for signal." This message he had succeeded in flinging out of the window before he had been finally overpowered. He was quite convinced in his own mind that if Sir Andrew received the missile, nothing short of death itself would move him from his post. He would watch and wait.

All that prescience could accomplish had therefore been done; from henceforth luck, indomitable will and untiring pluck could alone save this reckless adventurer from the consequence of his own daring.

Indomitable will and pluck — the pluck to wait and to remain quiescent at this moment when the husbanding of strength perhaps meant ultimate safety. He did not struggle, nor did he waste his energies, great as they were, in futile attempts to free himself from his bonds. The men, who had set the cunning trap, were not likely to have bungled over the tying of knots; therefore Blakeney, pinioned and helpless, was content to wait and to watch — to watch for this swift passage of fortune — the quaint, old saying in which he had so often professed belief: "Of fortune the wayward god with the one hair upon his bald pate, the one hair which he, who is bold may seize and therewith enchain the god to his chariot."

He waited and listened. No sound came from the other side of the door: the soldiers on guard were probably asleep; but overhead men were stirring; shuffling footsteps moved to and fro across the floor. The old calotins were watching and praying, and he who had set out to rescue them lay like an insentient log, the victim of a clumsy feint. At thought of this Sir Percy swore inwardly, and his fine, sensitive lips broke into a self-deprecating smile.

But presently he fell asleep.

When he awoke, he did so because the darkness about him had become less dense. The moon had torn a rent in her mantle of clouds: she peeped in through the window; a shaft of her pale, cold light lay along the floor.

Pinioned as he was, Sir Percy could not do more than slightly raise his head and turn his eyes so as to search with cat-like glance the remotest angles of his prison. Then suddenly his roaming eyes alighted upon an object which lay on the floor just beneath the window. A knife! the one wherewith Hébert had tried to stab him and which Chauvelin had knocked out of his colleague's hand. There it had lain all this while — an unseen salvation.

Strength? of course it required strength! and pluck and determination! But here was a man who had all three in a more than a human degree. Tied to the table, his arms and legs helpless, he had just his powerful shoulders as a leverage, and to a certain extent his elbows. With their aid he started first a gentle oscillating movement of the table, which was a rickety one, the floor being old too, made of deal planks roughly put together and very uneven. Gradually by regular pressure first with one shoulder and elbow, then with the other, the table rocked more and more: presently it tottered, partly swung back again, staggered again and finally came down with a terrific clatter on the floor, bearing its human burden with it to the ground. A broken arm, leg, or shoulder? Perhaps! The adventurer would not think of that! If he did not succeed in getting out of this, he would be no worse off with a broken limb than he had been before. And there was always the chance! At this moment it meant life to him and to others.

The fracas had, of course, roused the soldiers on guard. Sir Percy lying prone now, with the table on top of him, heard them stirring the other side of the door. Anon the bolts were pushed open, the heavy latch lifted. The chance! my God, the chance! The chance of what those miserable soldiers would do when they found the prisoner in such a precarious position. And then there was the knife! My God, do not let them see that knife...and guess! Blakeney lying there, half-numb with the fall, bruised more than he knew, could just perceive its dim outline in the penumbra less than half a dozen feet away. There followed a couple of minutes of suspense more agonizing perhaps than any through which the bold Scarlet Pimpernel had gone through this night. He heard the footsteps of the soldiers entering the room. One, two, three of them. One came up close to him, and laughed. Then the others laughed too. No doubt, the mysterious Englishman, endowed by popular superstition with supernatural powers, looked mightily ridiculous, lying there upon his face with table legs towering above him. Obviously the soldiers thought so too, looked upon his plight as a huge joke, and laughed and laughed; one of them adding to the joke by kicking the pinioned foe. Then they all retired, and went back to their interrupted sleep. Blakeney heard the violent closing of the door, the grating of the heavy bolts in their socket, then nothing more.

The knife still lay there on the ground, not half a dozen feet away, and the moon once more veiled her light behind a bank of grey clouds.

To drag himself along the ground with scarcely any noise was still a difficult task, but it was not a superhuman one. Slowly, painfully but surely Blakeney soon lessened the distance between himself and that weapon of salvation. Five minutes later his hand had closed on the knife, and he was rubbing its edge against that portion of the rope which he was able to reach. The labour was

arduous and time was speeding on. Darkness had once more become absolute: through the open window there came the scent of moisture, and the faint sound of dripping rain upon the ivy-leaves. A distant church-clock struck three — two hours then before the break of dawn! — two hours and there was such a lot more to be done.

A quarter of an hour later the first piece of rope had given way, and the slow process of disentangling it had begun. It required an infinity of patience and above all absolute noiselessness. But it was done in time. At last the prisoner was free from the rope and he was able gently to crawl away from under the table. A moment later he was at the window peering out in the darkness. A thin drizzle was falling, and the soft, moist air of early morning cooled his burning forehead.

"By God!" he murmured to himself. "May I never be in so tight a hole again. All my compliments, my good M. Chauvelin. The trap was magnificently laid. But I was a fool to fall into it. I wonder if there is anyone down there now—"

Leaning out of the window, he detached a small piece of loose mortar from the outside wall and let it fall into the depth below. At once his keen ear detected the sound of men stirring down there, sitting up, mayhap, to listen, or merely turning over in their sleep.

"They've left nothing to chance," he murmured with a good-humoured chuckle. Fortunately, when his enemies brought him down they had not searched through his pockets, so now from an inner one he took a pencil and a tablet, and, blindly, for the darkness was complete, he wrote a long message to his friend. When he had finished, he listened for a moment; no sound now came from below; whereupon he gave a gentle call, like the melancholy hooting of an owl. It was answered immediately from out of the midst of the spinney, and Blakeney then flung the second message to Sir Andrew — a message of instructions, on the fulfilment of which depended not so much his own life, as that of four helpless, innocent priests.

After which he wound the precious, knotted rope once more around his person, threw one leg over the sill, and, a moment later, started to climb once more up the side of the ancient, ivy-covered wall.

V

Midnight had struck at the church tower of Ste Cunégonde when Sergeant Papillon returned from his expedition to the derelict cottage. After a siege lasting over a quarter of an hour, during which those satané Englishmen had kept up a wild fusillade from the ruined house and succeeded in putting half a dozen of Papillon's best men hors de combat, the Sergeant had given the order to charge, and the men had, indeed, boldly rushed into the place — only to find the cottage entirely deserted! It was scoured in every nook and cranny, but not a sign of human life could there be found, nothing but the usual heap of debris, the litter of broken laths, of masonry and scrap-iron. The Englishmen had vanished as if the earth had swallowed them up. Indeed, the silence and desolation appeared spectral and terrifying. And it was in very truth the earth that had swallowed up those mad Englishmen. They must have crept through a disused drain which gave from a back room of the cottage direct into the bank of the river. Here they must have lain perdu half-in and half-out of the water, hidden by the reeds, until the soldiers were busy searching the cottage, when no doubt they made their way, under cover of the reeds, and along the bank to a place of safety.

Papillon had been obliged to leave the wounded in the derelict cottage and had returned somewhat crestfallen, glad to find that his discomfiture was not counted against him. In very truth he could not guess that his expedition had succeeded over-well in its object, which was to throw dust in the eyes of that astute Scarlet Pimpernel by persuading him that here were a lot of louts and fools whom it was mighty easy to hoodwink. Since then the mysterious Englishman had been captured and was now lying a helpless prisoner in one of the topmost rooms of the Duchesse Anne. There was nothing to fear from him. The English spy, completely helpless, was so well guarded, that not a host of his hobgoblins could trick his warders now. A dozen men outside his door, he himself little more than an insentient log, and a good watch at the foot of the tower! What cabalistic power was there to free him from it all? Chauvelin, Hébert and the other Terrorists — all members of the Committee of Public Safety, who looked strangely out of the picture in their clerical garb, with the tricolour sash peeping out beneath their soutanes — finally retired satisfied, leaving Papillon and the men whom he had brought back with him on duty in the guard-room for the night. They would be relieved one hour before break of dawn.

It all occurred when the church-clock of Ste Cunégonde was striking four. Some of the soldiers had been relieving the tedium of the night by playing dominoes, others by recounting the legendary adventures which popular belief ascribed to the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. All around, the place was still. It was good to think of that turbulent Englishman lying so still and helpless in the room above. Then suddenly the voice of the sentry rang with a quick challenge through the silence of the night. It was immediately followed by the sharp report of a musket-shot, and before Papillon and his men could collect their somewhat sleepy senses the passage and vestibule outside the guard-room, as well as the courtyard beyond, were filled with awesome sounds of men shouting, of hoarse commands, of cries, objurgations and curses. Papillon stepped out of the guard-room. In a moment the confused hubbub was changed into the one terrifying phrase repeated by a number of rushing, gesticulating men: "The Englishman has escaped!"

"Where? How?"

But nobody could say for certain. The facts appeared to be that the sentry at the bridge-head had heard a sound, and seen a man running from the direction of the river. Both the sentinels fired, but in the darkness they missed their man. Just then the detachment of National Guard, who had come from their headquarters at Bordet to relieve Papillon, came into view at the bridge-head. With them was one of the members of the Committee of Public Safety, still in his clerical garb and with the tricolour scarf gleaming beneath his soutane. He shouted a peremptory order: "After him, Citizen Soldiers! or by Satan your heads shall pay for it, if the Englishman escapes!" This order the sentry dared not disobey, seeing whence it came, and both the men immediately gave chase, aided by those who had been on guard at the foot of Duchesse Anne.

But beyond that no one knew anything definite, and presently the question was raised: "Had the Englishman really escaped?"

This, Sergeant Papillon set out immediately to ascertain. A winding stone staircase leads from the vestibule into the tower. He went up, followed by his own men, while the relief guard remained in the vestibule.

No sooner, however, had the last of the Sergeant's men disappeared round the bend of the stairs, than these newcomers silently and without haste filed out of the vestibule, crossed the narrow courtyard, the entrance portal and the bridge, and a minute later had disappeared amidst the undergrowth of the spinney. Stealthily, warily, but with unerring certainty they made their way through the

thick scrub, striking inland first then immediately behind St. Arc and back toward the river. They had thus walked in a complete semi-circle around the fort, and reached that portion of it which consists of a hollow, ruined tower rising sheer out of the water and abutting on the battlemented roof of the main building.

"Now," said one of the men in a quick whisper, "we should soon be seeing Blakeney up there, and those poor old priests being lowered by him from the roof."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than the melancholy cry of an owl came softly sounding from the battlements above.

"And here he is! God bless him!" came fervently as if in unison from the hearts of the others.

Blakeney had succeeded in the task which he had set out to do. He had climbed into the room under the roof where four unfortunate priests had been imprisoned, preparatory to their being sent to death, for the crime of adhering to their religion and administering it in the way they believed the Divine Master had taught them to do. Their gallant rescuer had soon found a means of breaking through the ceiling and getting out upon the roof. With the help of the table, the chairs, and the precious rope, he contrived to aid these four unfortunates to escape from their hideous prison. They were sturdy country-folk, these old priests, and did not shrink from perilous adventure, encouraged as they were by a kindly voice and helped along by a sure and firm hand.

And whilst the Duchesse Anne tower, the staircases, vestibule and courtyard of the fort were singing from end to end with shouts, and words of command, with curses and derisive laughter, the Scarlet Pimpernel, in a remote corner of the fort which the tumult and confusion had not yet reached carefully lowered his four old protégés down from the roof into the arms of his friends. Quietly he did it, without haste and without delay, but aided by the members of his league not one whit less devoted, less resourceful than he. There were just five minutes in which the work of rescue had to be done; after which the confusion and the search would spread to this lonely spot, and the noble act of self-sacrifice would have been offered up in vain.

But it was all accomplished in the time, and soon the little party, under cover of that darkest moment which comes just before the dawn, were speeding up the river bank toward the Venelle woods, where in a lonely backwater one of their gallant band of heroes was waiting for them with the boats.

The chief was the last to step into the boat, and as the others began to row, and the four old priests reverently whispered a prayer of thanksgiving to God, he looked with eyes curiously filled with regret on the grim pile that stood out vaguely silhouetted against the dark sky.

"By Gad!" he murmured with an entirely happy little laugh. "I would not have missed this night's adventure for a fortune. I am quite sorry to go."

THE LITTLE DOCTOR

On that late September evening two men stood upon the lonely shore of a picturesque corner of Brittany looking out to sea where a graceful schooner, catching upon her sails the last lingering glow of the setting sun, was fast disappearing behind the horizon line. One of these men was tall above the average, and his height and breadth of shoulders were accentuated not only by the dark many-caped coat which he wore but also by proximity to the small, wizened figure of his companion, an old man whose white hair was tossed about by the wind, and whose pale blue eyes had that half-vacant gaze peculiar by daylight to those who habitually burn the midnight oil. He it was who first broke the silence between the two of them, and he spoke as if in response to a quick, short sigh that had escaped the younger man's lips.

"I should be happier, milord," he said gently, "if you yourself were on board that schooner now."

The other made no reply, gave the signal for turning away from the shore, and anon the two men walked slowly back along the coast toward the distant town. They did not speak: each was buried in his own thoughts. It was only when the lights of the little city could be seen twinkling in the near distance that they came to a halt; the older man grasped his companion's slender hand with a gesture that was almost one of affection.

"Give it up, milord," he said earnestly. "God knows you have done more than enough in the defence of the innocent and the weak. The soil of France has been made purer and finer since your foot hath trodden it. But now it is enough. You have earned your rest, you deserve to enjoy your happiness in peace, and to think of your own precious life and of your own safety."

But the other shook his head and smiled somewhat wistfully.

"And," he said, "what about yourself, my dear Lescar?"

"Oh! I am safe enough," the old man replied. "They all know me for a harmless fool round about here. And my profession is my safeguard. Even the most hot-headed patriot knows that the country could not afford to send all its doctors to the guillotine."

"You are right there," the other assented. "Well, God guard you."

Dr. Lescar watched the tall, athletic figure until the fast-spreading gloom gathered it in its embrace, then he continued his way in the direction of St.-Jean. He lived in a little house just inside the city walls, and had in truth made a shrewd remark when he said that even the wildest revolutionaries in France would not think of sending all their doctors to the guillotine. Sickness, epidemics born of hunger and of cold had followed in the wake of all the other miseries which a set of self-seeking and cruel autocrats had brought upon the land, and in St.-Jean itself Dr. Lescar had been kept busy. No one thought of molesting him, no one hitherto had been fiendish enough to suspect or to denounce him. They knew well enough that death would take a far heavier toll in the city if it were not for his unremitting devotion and undoubted skill.

The old man had met the English milord on one of those errands of mercy the pursuit of which formed the life's business of both these men. They were destined to understand one another; the self-sacrifice of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel found its counterpart in the unselfish herosim of the obscure country doctor, and friendship born of mutual esteem had sprung up between them over the alleviations of several miseries. It was an impoverished family of gentle birth, named La Forest, suspected of counter-revolutionary tendencies and recently denounced to the Committee of Public Safety, which was even at this hour on the way to England on board the schooner which Sir Percy Blakeney and Dr. Lescar had been watching till she was out of sight. The latter had befriended them whilst he had the power and the Scarlet Pimpernel had saved them from certain death; but the old man felt heartsick when he thought of the equally certain danger to which the noble-hearted English milord exposed himself by remaining even a day longer in this country where a hundred enemy eyes were on the watch for him.

Dr. Lescar saw nothing of his English friend for several days after the departure of the schooner; vaguely he hoped that milord had taken his earnest advice and had gone back to England. He himself was more than usually busy that autumn; in the wake of early frosts and heavy rains had come an epidemic of lung and throat trouble, and the doctor was up and about seeing patients all the day and half the night through. It was only in the evenings that he indulged in an hour or two's recreation in the Taverne des Trois Rats, where sundry worthy tradesmen of the city were wont to congregate and to gossip over a muddy cup of coffee and a rank pipe of stale tobacco and strive to forget for awhile the miseries which the high ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity had brought upon them all. It was a tavern that was much frequented by sailors and fisherfolk, not to mention the numerous smugglers who plied their dangerous trade with some immunity along the lonely bit of coast.

On this occasion there was a group of that fraternity engaged in animated conversation at one end of the room, whilst Dr. Lescar and his friends sat together over their coffee at the other. The talk here had drifted to the ever-interesting topic of the Scarlet Pimpernel. The rescue of the La Forests under the very nose of the local Revolutionary Tribunal was still a nine days' wonder. Dr. Lescar was known to have attended one of the children the very day before the entire family had been spirited away on board an English schooner that had brought in a cargo of smuggled Bradford cloth and never been suspected of belonging to the noted English spy and his amazing league of bravos.

"You must have seen the Scarlet Pimpernel, Doctor," one of the men said jovially; "you must have seen him! Come! there's no harm in seeing a spy — not for a man like you who would be too busy to trouble about denouncing anyone, as it would be the duty of an ordinary citizen to do."

"I may have seen the Scarlet Pimpernel," Dr. Lescar replied coolly, "or I may not. How can I tell? seeing that we none of us know what he is like, or who he is."

"You must know if an English aristo visited the La Forests," the other persisted, "you were in and out of their house."

"Citizen Bausset is right," here interposed a mean-looking, sharp-featured man who was sitting alone at a small table close by. "You must have seen or at least suspected something, Citizen Doctor."

He spoke sharply and with a certain indefinite air of authority which at once drew the eyes of all those present upon him.

"Do you not think it strange," he went on with a note of dry sarcasm in his thin, shrill voice and addressing the group of men who sat at the table nearest him, "Do you not think it strange, Citizens, that Dr. Lescar, who was an intimate of those traitors La Forest—"

"Who says he was an intimate?" interposed Bausset, throwing himself at once into the breach in order to defend his friend.

"I say so," the other retorted quickly. "He attended them without demanding his just fees—"

"More honour to him," one or two broke in warmly.

"Perhaps. I am not impugning him for that. I merely endeavour to prove that the citizen doctor was intimate enough with the La Forests to give them his time and his trouble for nothing; and I therefore assert that he must have been aware of the plot hatched by those English spies to cheat the laws of our country and to aid a set of damnable traitors to escape from justice."

The man never once raised his voice, nor did he make a single gesture of wrath or of authority; nevertheless, when he had finished speaking no one attempted to contradict him. A silence fell on them all, and furtive looks that spoke of hidden terrors were hastily exchanged, whilst — almost imperceptibly — those who had sat nearest to the little doctor edged their chairs away.

The only one in the room who appeared wholly unconcerned was Dr. Lescar himself. He continued to pull at his long-stemmed pipe and to sip his coffee with perfect quietude. After awhile he said simply:

"My country will judge of mine actions: I have done naught of which any true patriot need be ashamed." Then he turned and deliberately faced the man with the thin voice and added calmly: "Every man, woman, and child in and about this city knows me. You, Citizen, are a stranger here. Will you not tell us your name, and by whose authority you come here amongst us and impugn the loyalty of the citizens of St.-Jean?"

The other appeared to hesitate for a moment, then with quiet deliberation he unbuttoned his coat and displayed the tricolour scarf of officialdom which was wound around his waist. With his long, thin fingers he tapped the scarf and said dryly: "This is my authority, Citizen Doctor. My name is Péret, at your service."

"Then, Citizen Péret, I pray you be more explicit," Lescar rejoined calmly, "and frame your accusation against me in a manner that I can understand."

"I am not accusing you, Citizen Doctor," Péret retorted more amicably; "but you should understand how anxious the government is to get hold of that English spy whose machinations have fostered the spirit of rebellion and treachery in France. We cannot leave a stone unturned to track him to his hiding place. My accusations were not directed against you. I was only seeking for the truth."

This change of front, from truculence to conciliation, had at once a cheering influence upon the company; a general sense of relief loosened every tongue. Dr. Lescar was very popular in the city; there was scarce a family dwelling in it who did not owe him a debt of gratitude, and every man in the room was conscious of a vague feeling of satisfaction at the thought that the good doctor of St.-Jean was too important a personage to be dealt with summarily by the tyrannical Committees of Public Safety.

In the silence that ensued in the immediate entourage of Lescar and Péret the hum of conversation at the farther end of the room became more audible. Here a group of rough-looking customers had apparently lent an ear to the wordy passage of arms whilst continuing an exciting game of dominoes. They were an ugly crowd, unwashed and loud of speech, and all of them were drinking hard; some of them spoke French, with the throaty accent that hails from Spain or Portugal, others only spoke their own language amongst themselves — English, Dutch, Norwegian — whilst those who were obviously French, equally obviously hailed from Marseilles. All of them had that unmistakable air about them that proclaims the rough seafaring life, and not only that but also the unavowed trade, the traffic which calls for constant risks, perilous adventure, and familiarity with crime. Here, from out the general murmur made up of foreign oaths and truculent arguments, the voices of two or three Frenchmen detached themselves more clearly. They were mariners by profession and had the rich colouring, dark, crisp hair, and massive build peculiar to the sons of Provence. Fine, sturdy fellows they were and would in truth have been goodly to look at with their flashing eyes and full red lips and the gold earrings in their ears, were it not for the glowering, surly, at times coldly cruel expressions which would suddenly spread over their features if they were contradicted, or thought themselves insulted.

"I tell you, Pierre-Hercule," one of them said to the other, "that you'll gain far more by speaking than by holding your tongue."

"'Tis not for me to speak," Pierre-Hercule retorted with an oath. "Dieudonné here knows more about it than I do."

And he half turned to the third man who sat close beside him, a man whose face was disfigured by a scar that ran straight between his brows and gave him a peculiarly hard, obstinate expression; his watery eyes and hanging lips suggested that he had already drunk more than was good for him, and at Pierre-Hercule's words he indulged in a stream of meaningless oaths.

"I don't want to give that fool of a doctor away," he murmured thickly. "He was very good to my little wench once when she was sick; so hold thy tongue, Pierre-Hercule, and thou too, Jean-Paul, for I've a good mind to break thy jaw to stop thy cackling."

This was too good an opening for a quarrel and the beginnings for a fight to be lightly passed over and the next few minutes were taken up with fierce expletives and provocative cries on the one side and sundry attempts at peace-making on the part of those nigh.

At the other end of the room Citizen Péret was apparently asleep; it was only Lescar and his friend Bausset who had noted that at the last speech from the Marseillais, the representative of the Committee of Public Safety had opened one eye and then turned slightly toward the smugglers, the better to hear what next they would say.

"Thou'rt a fool, Dieudonné," Pierre-Hercule resumed after the quarrel had been hastily patched up. "Dost forget that thine own neck is in danger, all the while that thou chooseth to hold thy tongue?"

Dieudonné put his hand to his throat and swallowed hard. The prospect was obviously an unpleasant one.

"Anyway," he said gruffly, "it is too late. The Englishman must be gone by now."

"Then 'tis ten thousand francs thou has lost, my friend," Jean-Paul retorted dryly, "for that is the reward for the capture of the Englishman."

"Not only ten thousand francs," here broke in the thin, shrill voice of Citizen Péret, "but most probably thy head as well."

Unseen and silent, he had edged up to the table around which the smugglers sat; at sound of his voice the three Provençals had jumped to their feet and hastily made the sign of the Cross — one may deal in illicit goods and be pious for all that. The foreigners gazed up at Péret in surly silence.

"Yes! thy head," Péret went on sharply. "Dost not know that to traffic with an enemy of thy country is treason and punishable by death?"

"How did I know that he was an enemy of my country?" Dieudonné retorted savagely.

"Every Englishman is an enemy of France. We are at war with England."

"Not every Englishman, Citizen," Dieudonné rejoined. "Our own government up in Paris has bought Bradford cloth from one or two English traders whom I could name, and—"

"That is beside the point," Péret interposed hastily. "According to thine own showing, thou didst meet an English spy and failed to denounce him."

"How should I know he was an English spy?"

"The description of that abominable Scarlet Pimpernel has been circulated far and wide. Every seafaring man, every coastguardsman, every loyal citizen should know him at a glance."

"That's just it," Dieudonné rejoined with a loud oath. "The Englishman of whom I speak could not possibly be the Scarlet Pimpernel. The Scarlet Pimpernel is tall; the Englishman I saw was short, wizened, a shrimp, what? He has a sick wife and two miserable brats whom Dr. Lescar over there has attended to my knowledge the last three days."

"Is this true?" Péret exclaimed with a snarl, and wheeled round abruptly to face the old doctor.

"I attend all those who are sick," Lescar replied, "but I have no recollection of the people of whom Citizen Dieudonné is speaking."

"We'll soon see about that," Péret retorted, sneering. "Where did that Englishman lodge?" he asked once more, turning to Dieudonné.

Dieudonné hesitated palpably for a moment or two. Murmurs of "shame on thee" came from various parts of the room, and Bausset, the friend of Lescar, swore a savage oath. But the authority of the tricolour scarf, the threat which it implied, the ever-present dread of accusations, of summary trials and of the guillotine, quickly smothered any generous impulse and after a second's pause Dieudonné replied sullenly:

"In the last house in the Rue des Pipots. The end house before you come to the edge of the cliff."

Whereupon Péret without further remark called out loudly:

"Citizen Corporal! Hey, there!"

A couple of soldiers immediately entered the room; unbeknown to the company, they had apparently all along been on guard somewhere close by. Behind them in the doorway worthy Citizen Liard, landlord of Les Trois Rats, stood wringing his hands, lamenting at this insult put upon his loyal house.

"Citizen Corporal," Péret commanded, "go at once to the barracks, and ask the captain to detail a dozen men to accompany you. Your orders are to go to the end house in the Rue des Pipots and to bring every person you find inside that house here to me. Go quickly!"

The soldiers saluted and went out of the room; their rapid, measured steps were heard to cross the narrow passage and then resounded down the cobbled road. In the public room an ominous silence had fallen over the assembly. Men had drawn their chairs closer together, casting obsequious glances on Péret, or servilely offering him food and drink. The fear of death was upon them; one or two had made a furtive attempt to sneak out of the room, but a peremptory word from the Terrorist glued them to the spot.

"Every man," he said curtly, "who goes out of this room without my permission will be a dead man to-morrow. Citizen Landlord, I make you responsible for everyone in this house."

Only the little doctor remained perfectly calm, sipping his coffee and now and again giving a pull at his long-stemmed pipe. But with the exception of Bausset no one spoke with him; they had edged their chairs away, as far from him as they could.

In the far corner of the room the company of smugglers had become singularly quiet. It seemed as if they felt the magnetism of the impending tragedy. Now and then a murmur from one of them would break the silence, but it was quickly suppressed by the others. Dieudonné, the unworthy hero of the drama, sat sullenly pulling away at the fragments of an old clay pipe. The others apparently were blaming him for what had happened, for a few injurious epithets were hurled at him between copious draughts of liquor.

Half an hour went by. Péret had been at pains to restrain his impatience; his fingers were drumming a devil's tattoo upon the table and his narrow, hawklike face was working as if a savage oath was forcing its way through his lips.

Then suddenly he jumped to his feet; quick, measured footsteps resounded on the cobblestones of the narrow street. A few seconds later the corporal entered the room. He appeared breathless with excitement.

"We went to the Rue des Pipots," he said, speaking rapidly, "the last house in the street—"

"Yes! Yes!" Péret broke in, in his shrill treble, "and whom did you find there?"

"No one, Citizen."

"What do you mean? No one?"

"No one, Citizen. The house was empty. But I left three of our men on guard, waiting your instructions, because in an outhouse in the waste ground adjoining we found a quantity of smuggled goods: English ale, cloth, steel files. It was quite by chance we lighted on them."

"Smuggled goods, eh?" Péret remarked, obviously disappointed. "We can see about those to-morrow. It was not worth while keeping three men to guard a few yards of cloth."

"It was not the cloth, Citizen, nor the English files that made me and my men anxious. It was this note which we found soiled and crumpled, forgotten amongst the goods."

And the soldier handed a dirty scrap of paper to Péret, who seized on it eagerly and quickly glanced over its contents. Then he turned back abruptly to the group of smugglers.

"This epistle," he said dryly, "is addressed to you, Citizen Dieudonné."

Dieudonné jumped to his feet.

"To me?" he queried with an oath.

"It suggests that you meet the writer at the usual trysting place at ten o'clock this evening. Where is that trysting place, Citizen Dieudonné?"

"I don't know what you mean," the smuggler replied gruffly. "The epistle is not addressed to me."

"Ah, but I think that it is," Péret rejoined blandly. "How can we assume that there is more than one Dieudonné who plies the nefarious trade smuggling in St.-Jean. The epistle is addressed to the Citizen Dieudonné at the sign of the Flying Bull in St.-Jean. Now my police happen to know, Citizen Dieudonné, that you are lodging at the sign of the Flying Bull. Where is the usual trysting place, Citizen Dieudonné?"

"It is all a lie," Dieudonné swore hotly. "Are you all fools or am I mad? I tell you that letter was not written to me. I know nothing of any trysting place."

"H'm," Péret retorted with affected urbanity, "that is a pity for you, Citizen. Because the device at the foot of this epistle — see, it is done in red ink and shaped like a small flower — suggests to me that it was written by that arch spy the Scarlet Pimpernel, and unless you can tell us what is the trysting place where he suggests that you meet him—"

He paused and looked intently on the smuggler, whose cheeks beneath the tan had taken on a leaden hue.

"It is all a lie," Dieudonné murmured, but those who heard him now could note a tone of hesitancy, aye, and of fear in his gruff voice.

"Unless," Péret reiterated very slowly, "you can tell us the whereabouts of that trysting place, you will be a dead man within the hour."

"Name of a dog!"

"Aye, name of a dog!" Péret retorted at the top of his high-pitched voice, "you dirty, miserable spy, who tried — clumsily enough — to save your pocket by telling us lies and denouncing a man whom this city respects. You hoped, I imagine, to keep me and these citizen soldiers busy whilst you removed your hoard and trafficked with that cursed Englishman. Well! the guillotine is set up in the market place conveniently, just outside this house. If within the next five minutes you do not put me on the track of the Scarlet Pimpernel your head will roll into the basket, my friend. And," he added with a vicious snarl, turning to the rest of the company, "whoever protests or interferes will go the same way too. Citizen Corporal, take this man out into the square. The sight of Madame Guillotine's outstretched arms will, mayhap, loosen his tongue."

The man — who was huge and powerful — fought desperately and with amazing vigour; but resistance was, of course, futile, and within half a minute he was over-powered and led out of the room, cursing viciously and shaking a clenched fist in the direction of the little doctor.

"You mealy mouthed reprobate," he shouted, "I'll be even with you yet!"

But after he had been made to cross the narrow hall and, the front door being wide open, he had caught sight of the hideous erection in the market place, dimly illumined by an overhead lanthorn, he gave a dismal howl like a terrified cur and blabbed half-incoherently:

"I'll tell you! I'll tell you where you can find the Englishman."

Péret, who had followed the small posse into the little hall, gave an exclamation of satisfaction; then he made a peremptory gesture in the direction of a door close by which bore the legend "Private" upon it.

"In there!" he said curtly.

He himself pushed the door open and went into what was apparently the landlord's private parlour. A pair of ragged curtains hung in front of the only window. In the centre of the room there was a table; on it a tattered cloth. Around the walls were ranged a sofa and a few chairs of black horsehair, adorned with soiled antimacassars, and upon the chimney shelf an old clock ticked monotonously. A smoky, evil-smelling oil lamp hung from the blackened ceiling and threw a dim circle of light around.

The soldiers pushed Dieudonné into the parlour.

"Two of you remain on guard in this room," Péret commanded, "the others at attention outside the front and back doors of this house, see that no one leaves it. Now then, Citizen Dieudonné," he went on, as soon as his orders had been obeyed, "we wait to hear what you have to tell us."

"It's simple enough," the smuggler murmured, cowed and browbeaten apparently into submission. "The Englishman is rich. He owns a schooner which you must have seen out to sea. When he comes ashore I give him shelter out of sight of the police; in exchange he brings me cargoes of English files, or cloth, what? There's not much harm in that."

"To traffick with an enemy of France," Péret broke in dryly, "to cheat your country of revenue, to harbour an English spy is black treason, punishable by death without trial."

"If I am to die whatever I do," Dieudonné broke out like an infuriated animal at bay, "then I'll not speak. Find the Englishman as best you can."

"Silence!" Péret thundered in response. "You are not here to argue with me, but to speak. But let me tell you this, my friend," he added with sudden urbanity, "as soon as we have captured the Englishman you shall have a full pardon for all your misdeeds and be free to go whithersoever you please."

"Then send your men to the house of Dr. Lescar; the Englishman was to meet me there at ten o'clock to-night."

"I don't believe it," Péret retorted. "It is another trick."

"A trick, is it?" Dieudonné cried hoarsely, "a trick? Let me tell you, Citizen Péret, that you and your committee are being fooled and tricked. Fooled by that sanctimonious doctor who lines his pockets and sells his country to the enemy. A trick? Go, send your soldiers to the doctor's house. You'll soon see if this is a trick."

For a moment after that there was complete silence in the dingy, ill-lit parlour. Péret's deep-set eyes were fixed upon the smuggler's face, as if he would drag the truth out of him by brute force. Then he glanced at the clock. It lacked twenty minutes to ten.

The soldiers at the door were waiting, immobile and mute.

"A full pardon, man, if you have spoken truly," Péret muttered between his teeth. "But if within an hour from now the guard have not returned with the Englishman, or if in some other way you have lied to me — well — it is not too late an hour to set Madame la Guillotine to work."

He went to the window and threw it open. It gave on to the side of the house.

"Citizen Corporal!" he shouted.

"Present, Citizen," came in quick response as the corporal hastened around the corner.

Péret leaned out of the window and, when the soldier was within whispering distance, he gave him rapid instructions:

"The house of Dr. Lescar — you know it?"

"Perfectly, Citizen."

"Go there at once with a dozen of your men. At ten o'clock, or soon after, a man will arrive. He is tall and powerful — will probably be disguised. Do not allow yourself to be tricked — seize any man you suspect and remember that your heads are at stake."

"Tell them to bring Dr. Lescar in here to me."

Then he turned back into the room. For the next few moments the silence of the night was broken by quick words of command; the measured tramp of the soldiers as they crossed the market square and the peremptory call for Dr. Lescar. Anon the little doctor was ushered into the parlour. He appeared as serene as before, asked no questions and barely looked at the smuggler, who at sight of him had broken into a jeering laugh and raised a menacing fist.

"Pray to your saints, Citizen Doctor," he said, "that the Englishman keeps the tryst which we made with him, else you and I, it seems, are to lose our heads within the hour."

After that all was still. The doctor sat down quietly beside the table and soon appeared absorbed in calm meditation. Outside, the little city was already asleep, or mayhap its inhabitants were cowering wide-awake in their beds, vaguely conscious of the tragedy that was being enacted in their peace-loving town.

The tavern itself seemed like the abode of wraiths. Inside the public room no one had stirred. No one dared stir. There were still soldiers on guard about the entrances and all those in the public rooms remembered Péret's orders and his threats.

In the private parlour the silence was electric; through it could only be heard the dismal, monotonous ticking of the clock and the gentle grating of metal against metal, as the curtain swayed upon its rod, blown by the breeze which came through the open window. Péret had sunk down on the sofa, with his elbows resting on his knees, his face buried in his hands, striving vainly to keep his excitement in check. The soldiers, alert and keen, kept close watch upon the smuggler and upon the doctor. Dieudonné stood close beside the table, one hand resting on the back of a chair; he was swaying slightly on his legs like a man drunk, and his glance, which had become unsteady, travelled incessantly from the calm face of the doctor to the crouching figure of the Terrorist.

Then it happened all in a moment: the soldiers themselves scarce knew how, so unexpected was it, like a sudden flash of lightening in a serene sky. All that they recollected was that Dieudonné at a stroke lifted the chair nearest to him and, swinging it up, struck the hanging lamp. There was a terrific clatter of broken glass and falling metal; one of the soldiers, on the very point of turning to pull open the door, felt his leg clutched by an unseen hand, and he fell against his comrade, dragging him down with him, even whilst Citizen Péret's calls and curses sounded muffled, almost inaudible.

Less than two seconds later the noise had attracted the attention of the guard outside. The door was pulled open; soldiers came rushing in; the lantern from the hall threw some measure of light upon the confusion that reigned in the private parlour. There were some among the soldiers who, had they dared, would in truth have laughed aloud, so comical did the situation appear: their comrades struggling to their feet, the broken glass, the oil from the lamp flowing in an evil-smelling stream, and, funniest of all, Citizen Péret, the dreaded Terrorist, vainly striving to disentangle himself from the folds of the tablecloth which completely enveloped him, whilst the draught through the open window, now that the door was open, blew the curtains straight out into the room and somehow helped to make the situation appear more confused and more ludicrous.

Of the smuggler and the little doctor there was not a sign. In vain did Péret, as soon as he had found breath, shout himself hoarse with cries of: "After them! After them! Curse you for a set of fools! After them! They cannot have gone far!"

But, in truth, though mayhap they had not gone far, they had gone far enough to be out of reach. Indeed, such a pursuit was bound to be futile, as there were no indications whatever which ways the fugitive had gone and many seconds were lost by the pursuers in arguments as to which road to take. The darkness of the night favoured them, too, and suddenly even the heavens were on their side, when it began to rain heavily.

The records of St.-Jean in Brittany go to prove that the pursuit was carried on in spite of many drawbacks and endless heart-burnings and disappointments, until a posse of coastguardsmen sighted a rowing boat out to sea which was making for a graceful English schooner whose lights could be seen faintly glimmering through the veil of darkness and of rain. They sent a volley of musket shot after that boat, but whoever it was who wielded the oars easily baffled them.

And a couple of hours later, when from far away inland came the sound of church clocks of St.-Jean booming the midnight hour, Dr. Lescar was pacing up and down the deck of the Day-Dream beside the man to whom he owed his life.

"I wish I understood it all, milord," he said. "Indeed, it seems that my gratitude hath o'erclouded my brains, for it all seems an inextricable puzzle to me."

"Nay! my dear doctor," Sir Percy Blakeney replied, smiling pleasantly on the eager face of the little man. "Your generosity makes far too much of what was just a happy adventure for me, almost entirely due to chance."

"Chance! It could not have been chance, milord, else how came you to be in the public room of the tavern at the very hour when Péret made up his mind to have me arrested?"

"Ah, but that is where you are mistaken, doctor. You think that it was a sudden thought of Péret's tortuous brain that caused him to launch an accusation against you. But I who — alas for me — know these abominable Terrorists from old and varied experience, I guessed the moment that such an important personage came to St.-Jean that he had been sent in order to track down noble game. And who more important, more noble, more of a thorn in the flesh of all those reprobates, than you, my dear doctor, with your gentle, unselfish ways, your refinement, your learning, and your pity. Nay! do not protest! We all know how the people of St.-Jean love you, and to be loved of the people these days stinks in the nostrils of those arrogant demagogues. I knew that your arrest was a matter of a few hours, that it would need but a chance click of the tongue to send a pack of curs snarling at your heels, so I devised my little comedy. You know my belief, do you not? my belief in my own luck, my belief that that the Goddess of Chance is bald is save for one hair in her head, and that when she flies, unseen, before us, if we can grasp that hair we hold her a slave to our will; well! to-night I grasped that hair. I laid my scene in the outhouse of the Rue des Pipots, with smuggled goods and the epistle making the assignation for ten o'clock. Then, disguised as the smuggler Dieudonné and one or two members of my faithful league as Pierre-Hercule and Jean-

Paul, we goaded Péret into accusing you then and there. It took time; but it was a mere juggling with words and phrases till we got him to send his soldiers off to the Rue des Pipots, where they found the epistle which I had prepared for them. From that point until we got him into a state of somewhat fuddled rage we had easy work. I wanted to get him and you into one private room with me; I did not care how many soldiers he had to guard him; the Goddess of Chance was ahead of me and I grasped her by the one hair. After that, to break a lamp, to plunge the room into darkness, to trip up the soldiers, to throw a heavy cloth over the head of Péret was work that any schoolboy would accomplish with zest. The window was already open as you know; I lifted you across my shoulders — you weigh more than a child, my dear doctor — and together we gave Citizen Péret's guard of bloodhounds a magnificent run, until we reached the secret cove, which was the rendezvous for my faithful lieutenants, and where one of them was waiting for us with a boat. Indeed, you and I had not long to wait either. During the wild chase after us, attention at the tavern had relaxed, the two members of my league had no difficulty in getting away. They too made straight for the cove, while our pursuers ran aimlessly about the town. And now," Sir Percy Blakeney concluded with a happy sigh, "please forgive me for this long disquisition. 'Tis you who wanted to know how the adventure was planned. To me and my league it was both simple and pleasant. Ask my friends Lord Anthony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes if they would not greatly relish another such joyous adventure."

The little doctor was silent for a moment or two; when he spoke again his voice was veiled with tears.

"Ah, milord! you and your friends are English, and you have — I understand — as great a horror of sentiment as you have of cowardice: therefore I will make a great effort and keep back the words of gratitude and admiration which wellnigh choke me. But at evening when, mayhap, for awhile you rest from your labours of self-sacrifice and heroism and in the arms of your dear wife live only for her beauty and her love, then I beg of you to remember that at that hour there will always rise from an old man's lips a hymn of thanksgiving to God, in that He created men like you!"

THE CHIEF'S WAY

Part One

"Tell me all about it, boy!"

"It's damnable, damnable, damnable!"

"Of course it is — but how can I judge?"

"Blakeney, you will help me," the younger man pleaded. "You must." And his gray, rather shifty eyes, despite the frown between the brows, were fixed in a half-appealing, half-obstinate glance on his chief.

These were the early days of the League. The work of rescue to one or two of these young enthusiasts was still a novelty — exciting — but perhaps not quite so serious as it became later on. The chief was obeyed, revered by those who were most in earnest — but there were one or two — not more — who, full of zest at first, had found discipline and blind obedience irksome. There was Kulmsted, whom they all mistrusted, and who had not been allowed to join the present expedition. Marguerite had begged her husband not to take him along, and these were the early days of that marvellous recrudescence of love when Marguerite and Percy had found one another, after that terrible misunderstanding which had threatened to wreck both their lives. Therefore, her earnestly expressed wish could not be denied and Kulmsted was left to nurse disloyal thoughts in England. There were one or two members of the League, Lord Tony and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, my Lord Hastings and others, who would have liked to extend the prohibition to young Fanshawe. He was a keen sportsman and apparently a loyal friend. He had joined the League with an enthusiasm which scarcely had an equal, but he was wilful and obstinate — an inveterate gambler and apt to turn very nasty if matters did not go just the way he desired.

But Blakeney, with that marvellous cheerfulness and optimism which was his greatest charm and that inveterate belief in the loyalty of others, born of his own perfect rectitude, had dismissed with a light shrug the warnings of his friends.

"You do the boy an injustice," he declared. "Good God, man, Fanshawe is a Scotsman, a sportsman, and a gentleman — find me greater deterrents to any suspicion of treachery."

On this occasion some half-dozen members of the League had with their chief found refuge in a derelict cottage, which lay off the main Thiers-Roanne road. In ragged clothes, unkempt and covered with grime, they looked just what they pretended to be — miserable vagrants driven from home by penury, and striving to pick up a precarious existence by playing outside village cabarets. Even at this moment Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the most perfect exquisite London society had ever known, the intimate friend of the Prince of Wales, the inimitable Squire of Dames, had stretched out his long legs, which were innocent of stockings and only partially covered by a ragged pair of breeches. In his hands — the Duchess of Flintshire had called them irresistibly beautiful — which were coated with coal dust he had a violin and a bow; his hair, which looked lank and unkempt, hung in matted strands over his forehead.

He had been performing on his violin in a manner which had brought forth groans from his hearers and missiles of various kinds hurled amidst shouts of laughter at his offending head.

In a remote corner of the hut young Lord Fanshawe had been talking in eager whispers to two of his companions who appeared too impatient to listen; and the young man had worked himself up into a state of exasperation until Blakeney's pleasant, if authoritative, voice suddenly put an end to laughter and focused everyone's attention on Fanshawe.

"Blakeney, you will help — you must!"

"We'll all help, my dear fellow," Blakeney replied, and his gently ironical glance rested for a moment on the flushed face and restless eyes of his friend. "Tell us all about it. We'll make no more music to-night."

And as Fanshawe remained silent, with that wilful, obstinate look more marked on his face, Sir Percy insisted more firmly:

"Tell us, my dear fellow, how it all began. And when."

"About four years ago," Lord Fanshawe began at last, "when I was on a visit to the D'Ercourts, at the Château Montbrison. Aline was lovely then...a mere child; not yet seventeen, I think but..."

The boy paused a moment. The obstinacy died out of his eyes and gave way to a look of softness. The others made no comment, they sat all round him silently; some of them on the floor with their knees drawn up to their chins, their hands clasped round their knees. After a while Fanshawe seemed to shake off the wave of sentiment that had gripped him by the throat and he went on in a more matter-of-fact tone of voice.

"We had a very gay time at the château, I remember. It was the season of the chasse — you know what that means in France — dancing, cavalcades, tournaments, everything to make life gay and beautiful. Aline was the life and soul of it all. Her brother François I did not care about; he was sullen and had a curious trait of arrogance and cruelty in him which, I must say, I never found in the other French friends whom I used to visit in those days. The old comte and comtesse, on the other hand, were perfectly charming, slightly artificial perhaps in their studied manners and ways of entertaining their guests, but marvellously hospitable and pleasant. As far as I could gather they were always kind to the people of the village, and during times of distress both the comtesse and Aline would sally forth with baskets of provisions on their arms, and I am sure kindly words on their lips, to see what was amiss and to succour where they could.

"But trouble was brewing already. News from the big cities used to filtrate down to this remote village, which lies off the main road between Thiers and Roanne. Men in black coats and cocked hats — you know the sort — would come down to the cabaret and hold meetings there to which the village lads crowded eagerly. I never heard any of those speeches but even we, in England, know something of these agitators, whose mission in life is to make trouble.

"All of us at the château had heard of this Paul Notara who was a young and good-looking fellow and kept the little village school. I strolled down with François D'Ercourt one day as far as the school building, which was also Notara's home. It was very neatly kept and very picturesque. It had a little bit of garden and a pond and Notara himself told me that he reared a few ducks and chickens and sold his eggs and poultry. We had a long talk, and I got on very well with him. As you know, I speak French fairly fluently. He struck me as a very highly educated man and cultured above his station. He told me that his mother and father used to keep the village

cabaret, and when his father died Paul and his mother sold the business. He then applied for and obtained the post of schoolmaster in the village, settled down in the house attached to the schoolroom, and lived on there with his mother whom he idolized.

"Notara, it seems, had never thought of marrying then because his mother made him so happy and comfortable that the idea of bringing into the house a young woman who might prove a stormy petrel never entered his head. At least that was what he told me. But while I and others were guests at Montbrison — it was the first time I had been there — old Marianne, Notara's mother, died. Now, of course, I do not know the rights or wrongs of that story, but what Notara told me sounded credible enough. It appears that the old woman caught a chill one November night coming home from the castle where she had been summoned by Madame la Comtesse to help in the kitchen. I know that they had a houseful at the time and we certainly had a great to-do with banquetings and so on; I quite believe that extra hands were required in the kitchen, but it seems that this wretched old Marianne was already crippled with rheumatism, and Notara says that she was made to stand in the yard in the pouring rain doing some work for which there was no accommodation in the kitchen. Be that as it may, the old woman developed some chest trouble, and in three days she was dead. Well, of course, that was nobody's fault and I am quite convinced in my own mind that both Madame la Comtesse and Aline did all they could to help because it was in their nature so to do, but Notara assured me that he was quite alone at the time to look after his mother, that he entreated the leech of Montbrison to come and see her but that there happened to be an epidemic of mange among Madame le Comte's hounds and that the leech told him that these were far more important than old Marianne. Anyway, the death of his mother seems to have embittered Notara's soul, and probably did lay the seeds to his subsequent bitter resentment."

A murmur went round the small assembly who up to now had listened in complete silence to this simple enough narrative. The soft look in Fanshawe's eyes had quickly died down again. As soon as Notara's name came to his lips, that sullen, obstinate look which seemed the keyhole of his character returned to his comely young face.

Blakeney poured out a glass of water and handed it to him. "You are telling your tale most admirably, my dear fellow," he said lightly; "but do not lose your breath till you have quite finished. I can see the whole picture before me, so can the others I'm sure; and all that you tell us now will help us, of course, to decide what had best be done in the immediate future."

Fanshawe drank the water eagerly. He was not breathless but his throat was dry and his hand slightly shaky. After a while he resumed his story.

"It was François d'Ercourt who told me that, according to village gossip, Paul Notara was quickly enough consoled after the death of his mother. Six months or so later he had resumed his place among the young folk in the village. He was fond of dancing and of their beloved game of bowls on the village green. He drank, but not to excess, and had an eye for a pretty wench, but it seems that although he looked at this girl and that one, not one of them could boast of having received more than passing attention from Paul Notara. This strange indifference on his part was, of course, much commented on in the village, and presently when spring came along the idea began to get about that Paul had a secret passion gnawing at his heart. You may well imagine that after that these village folk put their heads together and decided that they would find out for themselves why it was that Paul Notara, who had quite a bit of money and a nice position, who was moreover good-looking and hard-working, was still a bachelor.

"I don't know how François and Monsieur le Comte got to hear of the facts, but certain it is that we all of us at the château used to make great fun of the village schoolmaster's hopeless passion for Mademoiselle Aline. For so it was: the village gossips had watched him, it seems, o' nights, and they declared that Notara was for ever haunting the purlieus of the castle and wandering beneath its walls; he had even been observed to linger in the one spot in the park from which he could spy the lighted windows and balcony which gave on Aline's room. Laughter and gossip in the village soon became general. Imagine a village schoolmaster daring to fall in love with a daughter of Monsieur le Comte! But that Paul Notara was in love with Aline was no longer a matter of conjecture; it was an established fact.

"As was only to be expected, this gossip came presently to the ears of the Comte d'Ercourt and of the comtesse and also of François d'Ercourt who, quite unnecessarily I thought, flew into a violent rage and declared that he would punish that impertinent schoolmaster with a sound thrashing, unless this abominable gossip died down within the next few weeks.

"It was soon after that that the tragedy occurred."

Again the young man paused. He rested his elbows on his knees and buried his face in his hands. It had been easy enough to recount in an impersonal way the events which had occurred in a village, and in a castle inhabited by friends, but quite another matter to tell of the tragedy which had turned the whole tide of his destiny, and even warped his nature to the extent of changing his feelings of friendship and loyalty to his chief into incipient rebellion and treachery.

Blakeney said nothing, but more clearly than anyone else in the room he could read just what was going on in the young man's mind. He had such a capacity for sympathy and understanding that, where others would be ready to condemn, he could always find something to excuse and a great deal to pity. "Go on, Fanshawe," he said gently. "I think we ought to hear from you exactly what happened on that night. So far I have only heard a garbled and possibly a prejudiced account of that miserable tragedy."

Fanshawe raised his head and looked outward and into vacancy as if he were seeing again in a vision that exquisite autumn evening when on the heights the tall cypresses had thrust their velvety blackness above the sea of feathery pines, and down in the valley the leaves of the plane trees had turned from russet to gold and lay thickly on the ground like a soft, murmuring carpet that made a soft swishing sound under the feet of the passers-by. The waning moon cast mysterious lights and deep purple shadows across the avenue of the park, and in the darkness the white flowers alone gleamed ghostlike, while their coloured sisters hid their garish beauty in the mantle of the night.

"It is four years ago almost to a day," he resumed after a while. "Aline and I wandered out into the park one evening after supper, lured as we were by the beauty of the night. Unfortunately, she was never allowed outside the house unless accompanied by a maid. That, as you know, was the general custom in France in those days among young girls as well born and well bred as was Aline. But I can assure you that on this occasion the maid's presence was intensely irksome, both to Aline and to me. There was so much that I wished to say to her, and I could see that she was willing to listen. We both wanted to dream, and the swishing sound of the leaves under our feet was just the right accompaniment to all that I wanted to whisper in her ear.

"This was my second visit to the château, and my love for Aline had grown in intensity. The girl, I could see, was developing into an exquisitely beautiful woman. I felt that my happiness lay entirely in her hands; I knew the prejudices that existed — especially in those days — in the minds of French aristocrats against unions with foreigners, but I trusted in my name and my considerable fortune to overcome those prejudices in the minds of Aline's parents. Anyway, the thought of making Aline my wife haunted my mind by day and my dreams by night. She was exquisite, her eyes were like the mysterious ocean that bathes the rocky shore of our cliffs in Cornwall, and her lips had the velvety sheen which lies on the petal of a rose. I wanted to say all this to her, and by the light of the moon I could see her dear face soften and her eyes glowing when ever I was bold enough to take her hand."

"Oh, we had to be very careful in those days how we approached the daughter of a French aristocrat. No wonder, then, that both Aline and I found the maid's presence irksome, especially when at a given moment she interrupted one of my most passionate phrases with an impertinent: 'I am sure Mademoiselle should be going indoors, the night is chilly..' But Aline was not quite such a child as her maid and her mother supposed, and I had the joy of hearing her retort quite impatiently: 'Yes, it is chill; run, wench, and fetch me my shawl, the one which I left in the boudoir this afternoon.'"

"I could not help smiling to myself, for I knew that the boudoir was situated in a wing of the château at some distance from this avenue, and you may imagine the joy I felt when I realized that Aline's intention was to rid herself of the maid's company and to remain with me alone for some length of time."

"And so we wandered on down the avenue under the plane tree, and it would be useless for me to tell you how happy I was when I felt her yielding as I put my arm round her waist. I think I was on the point of snatching a kiss, when, from the distance, I heard François d'Ercourt's voice calling to me: he was in the stables which were close by, looking after one of his horses which was sick. Afraid that, if I did not respond at once, he might come and fetch me and, finding his sister alone with me, might make himself unpleasant, I gave Aline's dear little hand a last squeeze, pressed my lips on her fingers, and went to find François."

"Now, what happened after that I heard ultimately from Aline herself. It seems that she waited in the avenue for a moment or two, half-hoping now that her maid would not tarry; then suddenly, through the gloom, amongst the trees, she saw a figure moving toward her. She came to a halt, vaguely frightened: there were many marauders about these days, for discontent in the village was rife, stirred up as it was by those agitators from Paris. Aline was about to call for help; as I told you, the stables were not very far, and both her brother and I, as well as the grooms, were close by, but before she could utter a sound a voice which she declared was very soft and gentle begged her not to be alarmed. The mysterious figure moved out of the darkness into the light of the waning moon, and Aline recognized Paul Notara. She told me herself that she did not remember exactly what he said to her at the time. Certain it is that he declared his love for her, but assured her at the same time that he looked upon her with reverence as he would on the Virgin Mary, and went on talking just the sort of twaddle which men of his class, half-educated and possibly romantic, usually say under the circumstances. Aline was not frightened of him; I think, poor darling, she was slightly flustered by this declaration of love, which she said was very respectful and gentle. Anyway, the romantic little scene ended in Notara falling on his knees and kissing the hem of her gown. He also tried to get hold of her hand, but I do believe that nothing more serious would have happened and not Fate intervened in the shape of Aline's maid, who returning at that moment with the shawl upon her arm. She, seeing a man crouching beside her mistress, a man who she thought must be an evil-doer, set up a mighty scream of alarm."

"Notara jumped to his feet. I take it he was no fool, and realized that his position would be a very precarious one should he be discovered here by any of the grooms or perhaps by Monsieur le Vicomte himself. Aline was deeply distressed. She was a sweet nature, and was no doubt moved to pity for the man who was in love with her, and she really tried her best to get him away before François arrived on the scene. Notara, however, seems on this occasion to have behaved like an idiot. He made no attempt to get away, and a minute or two later a crowd of grooms and lackeys were all about him, his flight was cut off, and to make matters worse, François, who had heard the maid's scream, had come hurrying to the spot. I followed closely behind him, and we arrived just in time to see Notara brought down to his knees by the weight of the grooms' hands upon his shoulders. François, I must tell you, was in a furious rage, demanding an explanation, looking on Notara as if ready to kill the man. The maid, terrified lest she should be blamed for having been absent from her mistress gave an altogether wrong version of what she had seen. According to her, Notara had molested Aline, and she had screamed for help, being afraid lest a worse outrage should befall."

"Aline assured me subsequently that she did all she possibly could to pacify her brother. Paul Notara, she declared, had said nothing whatever to offend her. But there was no holding François then; his rage appeared to have cooled down outwardly, but he was in one of those white furies which are far more dangerous than the more violent sort. He reiterated more than once and always apparently with the greatest calm: 'What was this lout doing here at this hour? And why should he dare speak to you?' He had a riding whip in his hand, and suddenly I saw him turn to Notara and tighten his grip upon the whip. He addressed the wretched man quite coldly, and asked him two or three times: 'How dared you? How dared you?' and again: 'How dared you?' And before Notara could say one word, and before I had the chance of interfering, he raised his whip and struck him twice in the face."

"He would have done it a third time, only, fortunately, I was now near enough to take hold of his wrist and prevent a further blow. I really cannot tell you how Notara looked, what he did, or even what Aline said. I know that she gave a cry and hid her face in her hands, whilst I did my very best to control François, who seemed like a man who had seen red and wanted someone's blood. I take it that Notara was never a coward, and he certainly was a powerful, well-built man. I suppose that he succeeded in wrenching his arms free, although I did not see him struggle. What I did see was that he was about to raise his fist and, in his turn, to strike François in the face. Of course, that was nothing but blind and senseless rage, because, as you know, in France, for a man in his position to raise his hand against his seigneur was, in those days, punishable by death. Fortunately or unfortunately, I really don't know which, the lackeys were there to intercept the gesture: they seized Notara's arms again before he could actually raise his fist."

"By this time I had contrived to wrest the whip out of François's hand. His rage had entirely left him, he was as cool as you or I, and, turning to me, he said, laughing lightly: 'You English are as sentimental as our women. Why should I not thrash that cur, I should like to know?' And he said something about our men in the navy getting worse thrashings than he would have administered to Notara, and for lesser faults than his."

"I was thankful to see the grooms and lackeys dragging the man away. François went up to his sister: he took her by the hand and led her, willing and silent, back toward the château. I tried to get a last glance from her, but I think she was crying; and no wonder! She was little more than a child, and the scene had entirely upset her nerves. I remember next day hearing François and his father discussing the punishment that should be meted to Notara. François, of course, was for having him summarily hanged for having raised his hand against him and insulted Aline. But Monsieur le Comte himself decided otherwise. It seems that they looked upon Notara as a useful man in the village, well-to-do and industrious. He paid heavy taxes into the coffers of his seigneur and his government, and I suppose that it was doubtful whether another man of that same calibre could be found in this out-of-the-way village."

"I must say that at the time my sympathies were mostly with Notara, although I had thought him a ridiculous fool for making love to Aline. But he really had been so respectful and had kept his own counsel so completely that I never had cause to demean myself by jealousy. After that horrible scene of the night before I felt very sorry for him, as I was quite sure he had done nothing to irritate François to such a pitch of violence. Anyway, Monsieur le Comte, after he had heard the full story of the adventure, came to the conclusion that a sound thrashing would meet the case. In the light of to-day's events I am not quite sure whether François's idea of hanging the brute would not have been the wiser course, but at the time it was decided that there was nothing like a stout stick for breaking a man's spirit and humbling his pride. What we none of us reckoned with was that this breaking of spirit and of pride could only be a temporary affair and that resentment and bitterness would be far more difficult to combat than mere insolence."

"And so the next day I understood that Paul Notara had been duly thrashed and within an inch of his life. It was owing to one of the blows from François's whip that he lost the sight of one eye and his face became singularly ugly and almost grotesque. I can imagine him for days afterward, while he lay sick, nursing thoughts of bitter hatred against everyone at the château. I thought that probably his love for Aline would turn to hatred; I think in a way it has. I suppose he has had plenty of time to think over all his wrongs, both imaginary and real. Certain it is that as soon as he got better he threw himself blindly into politics."

"As you know, matters were already then moving fast in Paris. Notara, as soon as he got better, left his native village and wandered away, presumably to the capital. In the meanwhile, those devils up in Paris have kept on sending their agitators into all the villages of France, and particularly over here. They have stirred up these louts into a terrible state of resentment. The story of Notara, of course, leaked out, and he has been deified into a kind of village hero. When he returned, which was only a couple of months ago, and in the company of one of those agitators, he was tacitly chosen to be the leader of all the malcontents in the village. Most of the young men have been drafted into military service. There are only aged and crippled ones left, but they are the ones who remember the past; some of them have seen Notara grow up amongst them, and that is the chief cause, I think, which led to the horrible scene of this afternoon."

Lord Fanshawe paused. His narrative was at an end. The others had listened in silence, nor did they speak for some time. Blakeney, too, was silent. He was meditating on what he had heard. "There is no doubt," he said after a while, "that there are a good many innocents like Aline who will have to suffer for sins which they have not committed and which they abhor."

Part Two

Four years had gone by since that memorable evening, the tragic events of which Lord Fanshawe had related to his friends. The old régime had been swept away. The king and queen were prisoners in the hands of their people, soon to pay with their lives the penalty incurred by their forbears. Men, women, and even children had expiated on the guillotine the ignorances, the faults, the crimes of which they themselves were often innocent.

And still the work of retribution went on. Nothing was forgotten of past injustice and past oppression, and in this death feud between caitiff and aristocrat worse crimes were committed than those it was sought to avenge. The Comte d'Ercourt had been among the first to suffer. Already in the earliest days of the Revolution, and even while Madame la Comtesse was lying ill with fever, brought on no doubt by worry and anxiety, an angry mob of peasants invaded the château — very much as another had done at Versailles — demanding speech of Monsieur le Comte and Madame la Comtesse, of Monsieur le Vicomte, and Mademoiselle Aline, and when the family refused to see them they forced their way into the private apartments, smashed in a door or two on their way, ripping up cushions and upholstery with the agricultural tools which they carried, and tearing down priceless pictures from the walls.

It seems that they had contemplated nothing more, once in the presence of Monsieur le Comte and his family, than to assert their right over Monsieur le Comte's domains, to shoot what game they chose, to ride his horses, or milk his cows and goats for their own benefit, and to empty his granaries, since bread in the district was scarce. But they also asserted their right of telling Monsieur le Comte and his family a few home truths. Many matters were raked up which no doubt both Comte d'Ercourt and his son would have wished to consign to oblivion. Of these, the tragic fate of Paul Notara was more bitterly resented than many another act of oppression or cruelty. Notara himself had left the village and had not been seen or heard of since. No one knew whither he had gone. But the picture of him when he wandered off on a chill December morning, with a bundle of goods slung over his shoulder, his face with that hideous scar over one eye turned for the last time on his native village, was one not easily forgotten. And Aline, only recently emerged out of childhood, listened wide-eyed and horror-stricken to all this vituperation. Malevolence and hatred had never touched her before. She knew nothing of the execration in which her father and brother and, in a lesser degree, she and her mother were held by these people whom she had been taught to regard as of less account than her horses and dogs.

Now, when bitter words and angry curses were hurled at those she loved best, when one of the men in a fit of fury seized her pet dog and with a savage cry threw it out of the window onto the flagged terrace below, when a begrimed hand snatched the string of pearls from her neck and tore the lace ruffle from her brother's wrists, she could only stand there, trembling and speechless, not understanding what all this meant or why it had pleased God to inflict such an outrage upon her dear father and mother who had always led a pious life, fearing God and honouring the king.

But still darker days ensued. All the servants of the château, who used to be so diligent and well mannered, now became rough and overbearing. Impossible to give any one of them an order without receiving a rude reply — often a point-blank refusal. And presently they left, one by one — the men to seek employment in the cities, the women because they no longer had taste for domestic work. The château, once the scene of so much revelry, so many feasts, became silent and deserted. Only the family remained at last, with old

Pierre and Yvonne to do what little service they could — Yvonne to cook scanty meals, and Pierre to try and keep Monsieur le Comte's and Monsieur le Vicomte's clothes as tidy as possible and to clean the three or four rooms which the family now occupied. The rest of the house was shut up, with sheets thrown over furniture and pictures to save them from the dust: and though the weather was bitterly cold only one or two fires were lighted occasionally, because wood was so scarce and dear. Men in rough clothes and sabots came from Thiers or Roanne and without saying "by your leave" carted away the provisions of food and fuel that enriched the storerooms of the château. They would march through the deserted rooms, peer into drawers and cupboards, carry away anything portable they fancied, and smash or otherwise destroy priceless objects of art which had been the pride of the old château and its owners for many generations.

But the worst was yet to come. Aline, who was then just twenty-one, saw her mother die, untended by a leech. She knew nothing of the healing art herself, poor child! and Yvonne did what she could, but Madame d'Ercourt just faded out of life: content to go rather than see worse humiliations befall her children. And when Aline, half-distracted with grief, wept bitter tears because the leech from Thiers refused to come and see her mother, because, forsooth, the road was long and the weather cold, Yvonne just shrugged her shoulders, and said dryly: "I remember Paul Notara coming here, half-crazy, begging the leech to come to his dying mother. But the leech could not be troubled about old Marianne, because forsooth he had to tend Monsieur le Comte's dogs who were sick with the mange."

Hatred, bitterness everywhere. Oh, my God! when would it all cease?

Part Three

Down in the village Paul Notara, recently back from Paris, taught his friends how to nurse thoughts of revenge. Day after day, night after night, the village folk would sit together, their stomachs empty and their brains seething with resentment, discussing the marvellous events up in Paris, where the people, tired of misery and want, and conscious of their newly found liberties, had begun by storming the Bastille, raiding that great monument which for centuries had stood as the embodiment of everything that was tyrannical and cruel in the old régime of France. Since then they had seized the persons of the king and his family and kept them prisoners, forcing the king to do their will under threat of worse to come. News filtered slowly through to this remote corner of the Lyonnais, but it did reach even these sleepy villages in time. Itinerant vendors of cheap wares, or vagrant musicians would bring tales of the great doings in the big cities, not only in Paris, but also in Orléans or in Bordeaux. Then why not in Thiers?

Paul Notara, blind in one eye, older than his years through mental and bodily suffering, was no longer the handsome young man of the past. His dreams had been shattered, even the memory of Aline seldom disturbed his thoughts. He had not forgotten her, but would not allow himself to think. Perhaps he wished to forget that it had been because of her that that terrible outrage had been laid upon him. He hated all her kindred and her friends, but the love of his youth prevented his feelings toward her to turn to bitterness. And while the other men from the village sat around the tables of the inn discussing the latest news from Paris, gloating over the tales of reprisals, of executions, of summary justice dealt out to those who had tyrannized over them in the past, Notara would often sit amongst them, brooding and silent, only putting in a word here and there, a word that would stir up their flagging interest on their smouldering hatred. Though blind in one eye and no longer the fine lad he used to be, Paul Notara, with his superior education and his forceful personality, was the acknowledged leader amongst them.

With their headquarters in Thiers, the agents of the new government were all over the neighbourhood urging the lads of the villages to find out who it was amongst the bourgeois and the ci-devants who trafficked with the enemies of the people of France. But the agents of the government soon enlightened them. The enemies of the people, they said, were all those who in the past had made the poor work while they feasted and enjoyed life. They were those who had luxuries of all kinds at their command while the people starved and while the poor had not even a leech to look after them when they were sick. Well, there were plenty of those all over France: the owners of the land, for the most part aristos or bourgeois. But, said the agents of the government, the land by right belonged to the people. What right had a few to monopolize it? To close up the woods and forests and declare that the beasts that were good to eat were their own inalienable property? Then there were others as well who owned no land but had made money by selling goods to the poor at exorbitant prices, whilst they themselves waxed rich in the process. Merchants and manufacturers, all of them tyrants. It was the turn of the people now to show their power over them.

And so the village lads sucked all those theories in as they would their mothers' milk. It was good to hear that it was their turn now to feast and to enjoy, whilst those others who had lived on the fat of the land would suffer poverty and even want.

They gloated over the idea. Every one of them had a grievance to record, an injustice to avenge. The old inn parlour was crowded most nights with hotheads and malcontents. An agitator had been over from Paris and had talked so forcefully and so eloquently that the whole countryside was now convinced that the millennium had come at last upon the earth, that everybody who had been poor would become rich, that everyone would have enough to eat and drink and ne'er a stroke of work to do — no other work, that is, except denouncing traitors to the justice of their country.

"Let not a single aristo remain," the agitator had entreated with fiery eloquence, "to continue those traditions of tyranny under which the people of France have groaned for centuries. Let but one of that brood be left to stalk the land and back you will all sink into that abyss of poverty out of which the government of the people, for the people, is striving now to drag you."

The fact that up to this hour the government of the people for the people had only succeeded in throwing the country into worse poverty than before was not brought home to these ignorant village folk. All they knew was that in the past they had often looked with envy on the stores of good things — game, fuel, fruit — that entered the château of the D'Ercourts while they themselves were left to munch rye bread and mouldy potatoes. So, quite naturally, poor things, they banged their fists upon the big vats that did duty for tables in the cabaret and shouted with one accord:

"Down with every aristo!"

"Down with D'Ercourt and his brood!"

"To hell with their château!"

The government agents made it clear that, in order to effect this admirable purpose of destroying all the enemies of the people, it was needful that the men of the village volunteer for service on the Gendarmerie Nationale. The pay was not much — a couple of sous a day — but there would be the glory of tracking and even arresting the enemies of France.

And they were willing enough to be so enrolled — life was dreary and dull and one got tired of hearing what others were doing in the big cities, in Paris and Orléans and even in Thiers — then why not have the same kind of excitement in Drumettaz? The women especially were keen. They could not be enrolled in the Gendarmerie Nationale, but they saw to it that their menfolk got the tricolour badge round their arm, the cockade in their caps, and that they learned how to use the bayonets which the government agent had brought for them from Paris.

“Down with D’Ercourt and his brood!” became their favourite cry. And the more they heard of ci-devant ducs and comtes being sent to the guillotine, the more they heard of the ci-devant king and his family being kept in prison, the more were they determined that their comte and vicomte, yea! and the girl, too, up at the château should be punished for their past wealth and arrogance as those others had been.

“Down with the D’Ercourts!” they cried.

“Down, I quite agree,” the man from Paris went on, satisfied that the tares which he had sown were coming up plentifully; “but why delay? There is no time like the present, and if you wait too long...who knows? Those aristos might escape your just wrath and run away to that land of fogs and tyranny called England, where so many traitors have already found refuge.”

“That would be a shame on us all, if those D’Ercourts were to escape.”

The man who muttered this between his teeth, though loudly enough for those nearest him to hear, was André, the village smith. He had been crippled in his youth through a kick from one of Monsieur le Comte’s horses. Like Notara, his physical sufferings had come to him — though indirectly — at the hands of those tyrants and oppressors up at the château, and they gave him a right to counsel and to lead, though not in so great a measure as Paul Notara.

“We’ll not let them escape,” one of the men declared emphatically.

“Then why not go up there to-day?” the man from Paris suggested. “They have a marvellous way, those aristos, of escaping punishment, just by slipping through your fingers.”

“I have even heard tell,” André the cripple put in dryly, “that more than one aristo has fled from justice aided by supernatural agency. There is talk of a sacré Englishman—”

“A devil—”

“Who just flicks his fingers like this and the aristo becomes at once invisible — vanishes into the air — even at the foot of the gallows.”

“The guillotine, André — we don’t talk of gallows now.”

“Nor do we talk of devils — or supernatural agencies.”

It was Notara who spoke. As was his wont, he had been sitting, silent and brooding, listening to all that wild talk with ill-concealed impatience.

“But you must have heard of the Englishman, Notara. They say that he is taller than any two men put end to end, that when he opens his eyes flames gush out from them, and when he speaks—”

“Name of a dog, stop that old woman’s talk,” Notara retorted with an oath. “Are we children that we are to be scared by tales of hobgoblins? Here!” he called, turning to where, in the far corner of the room, a small group of vagrant musicians stood humbly waiting for alms, “show us your mettle, brothers, and play a lively tune that will put heart into these cravens’ breasts.”

The suggestion was very welcome. In this remote village of the Lyonnais the advanced theories of reason and common sense had not yet chased superstition entirely away. And while André and his friends had discussed the supernatural attributes of the mysterious Englishman, more than one lad had felt a cold shudder running down his spine.

“Yes! Yes! A tune!” they called, with obvious relief. The musicians began to play. They were unkempt, dirty, clad in a few rags. One had a fiddle, another a clarinet, the third one a bassoon — old battered instruments that emitted wailing sounds under the trembling fingers of the players. They played the songs of old France, love songs, martial songs, the gay songs of the countryside, and while the voices rose in chorus, and the familiar words and tunes filled the overheated room, hatred and vengeance and cruelty were momentarily forgotten: the characteristic French spirit of gaiety had gained the upper hand.

“Au clair de la lune

Mon ami Pierrot.”

and

“J’aime Bachus, j’aime Manon

Tous deux partagent ma tendresse.”

But this sane and softer mood did not suit the man in the black coat and tricolour sash who had, by his impassioned harangue, worked these lads up into a martial and virile temper. To hear them singing sentimental ditties did not suit his purpose at all. He had been sent down from Paris to create strife and resentment — he was paid, handsomely, too, to create them — to make trouble in fact, not to see it die down in a wave of sentimentality. Turning to the out-at-elbows musicians, he called to them with well-feigned indignation:

“Are ye milksops or chicken-livered cowards?” he demanded. “These old ditties are fit for old women, not for men. Have ye never heard the tune we, in Paris, call ‘Marseillaise,’ because the lads from Marseilles marched gaily against the enemies of their country to its inspiring refrain? Cannot ye play that rather than these spiritless songs? I, for one, would of a certainty call any musician a traitor who could not strike up that patriotic tune.”

Oh, that awful word “traitor”! It always had such an ominous ring. The leader of the musicians, a gentle fellow, bent nearly double with aching joints, his swollen fingers scarce able to touch the fiddle strings, cowered before the menacing glance of the man from Paris. And at first tentatively, then more boldly, he struck up the opening bars of the new “Marseillaise”:

“Allons, enfants de la patrie...”

"Come, that's better," the man from Paris condescended. "Now, then, my lads. All together." Thus egged on, shamed out of their softer mood, the men bellowed in chorus:

"Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé!"

Thus are the moods of a crowd swayed by deft manipulation. Within a few minutes the man from Paris, sent hither to make trouble, had all these wretched caitiffs in the hollow of his hand. He told them to bellow, and they bellowed. He told them that they had suffered untold wrongs at the hands of cruel tyrants, and they remembered every unpleasant incident that had ever occurred in their lives; he asked them who were those who had ground them down into poverty and humiliation, and with one accord they shouted in reply:

"D'Ercourt and his brood up at the château."

The man from Paris had, of a truth, stirred up all the trouble he wanted.

"Then why not storm their château now, as the people of Paris stormed the Bastille? Why not take the aristos prisoners, as the people of France even now hold the ci-devant king?"

Why not, indeed? Heads were put together — poor ignorant heads! — and the matter discussed. It would be good to see those D'Ercourts punished. The vicomte, now — what an arrogant taskmaster he had been — how rough with the men — how insolent with the women — and Monsieur le Comte —

"No, no!" said the man from Paris, "there are no comtes and vicomtes now. Ci-devants, if you like, and aristos. But we French men and women are just citizens of France. All of us, and all equal. Equality, Liberty, Fraternity — that is our motto and the 'Marseillaise' the tune to which we sing its praise. Allons, enfants de la patrie!" he went on lustily: "to the Château de Montbrison. If we do not find there proof and to spare that those D'Ercourts are all a set of traitors, then you can call me a traitor if you will and send me to the guillotine."

He had a ringing voice, had the man from Paris. These makers of strife in outlying villages were chosen for their oratory and their power to sway such tempers as were apt to become dormant. In most of the villages there still lurked a certain respect for the seigneurs. Habits not only of a lifetime but of generations cannot so easily be cast aside. Sometimes a certain amount of gratitude would also linger in the memory: gratitude for past kindnesses, sentiment for the younger generation born and grown to adolescence in the village. And the parish priest, not yet dispossessed, was still powerful enough to threaten with God's wrath those who were turbulent. Therefore, these men from Paris were well chosen and highly paid. Itinerant agitators, they had to earn their money by dint of shouting and inspiring gestures:

"Allons, enfants de la patrie! Le jour de gloire est arrivé!"

"Come, you old slow-coach," this stirrer of trouble in Drumettaz shouted to the musicians. "In the van! Ply your bassoon and your cracked fiddle, till the hills echo and reëcho with the martial tune."

The musicians, eager to please, picked up their instruments and marched out of the inn parlour, striking up as they did the first bar of the new song. Their leader, in ragged coat and torn breeches, hoseless, and with feet thrust into sabots, looked but a wreck of humanity as he plied his bow. Yet he must have been a fine figure of a man at one time, tall and broad-shouldered. It must be supposed that one of the many diseases attendant on poverty and insufficient food had bent his spine and twisted his limbs. Cowed before the lordly glance and menacing attitude of this black-coated dictator from Paris, he seemed still further to shrink into himself, even whilst his quivering fingers evoked the virile strain of the "Marseillaise." His three companions, one wielding a fiddle, another a bassoon, and the third a clarinet, followed in his wake.

Thus was the cortège formed. Behind the musicians marched the newly enrolled men of the Gendarmerie Nationale, six of them, carrying their bayonets. They bore themselves well, proud of their own martial air, their tricolour badges, and their vast importance. And after them came the other men of the village, the old and the crippled, all singing lustily. A few women were with them. Most of them had worked for Madame la Comtesse and Mademoiselle Aline in the past. They felt in a mood now to exult over those aristos who were feeling the pinch of want for the first time in their lives.

Not that either Madame la Comtesse or Mademoiselle Aline had ever been unkind: they had merely taken all the good things of this world as if these were theirs by right. They had also taken the work of the people in the same arrogant spirit: theirs by right. Because God had created them in a sphere above their fellows. And Jeanne and Marie, Anna and Joséphine had served them and worked for them, because they had done so all their lives and because their mothers had done it before them. It had never struck them that they also had rights and privileges and liberties. Not until these black-coated gentlemen with the tricolour scarves had explained to them that the earth was theirs and the fulness thereof and that if there was a God at all, which they declared was doubtful, He had of a certainty created all men and women to have equal rights in everything on the earth. And if any of those aristos dared to stand in the way, or tried with outside aid to cling to all the old fallacies of the past, why, then, there was a certain Madame la Guillotine up in Paris whose arms would receive all the ci-devants and aristos, bourgeois and priests who stood in the way of the liberties of the people.

Thus were the great gates of the château reached at last. A motley crowd of men and women in ragged clothes, panting and sweating after the long tramp along the muddy road. Unarmed, fortunately, save for those bayonets which the valiant Gendarmerie Nationale did not know how to wield. The shades of the evening were falling fast: only a gray and misty twilight lingered still in the clearings. A warm, boisterous wind blew from over the range of Forrez. The Garde Nationale, conscious of their importance, demanded admittance, but the gates were no longer kept locked these days. What had been the good? There was always a group of malcontents or mere mischief-makers to break them open if they had been locked. Musicians en tête, they marched in and swarmed into the courtyard: then up the perron steps to the front door. There was nothing to stop them. No bolts, no locks, no bars. So straight across the stately vestibule dimly lit by a single oil lamp which cast a faint, yellowish glow on the massive marble columns, making them seem like ghosts looming out of the darkness.

Then up the monumental staircase on which had passed such brilliant assemblies in the past. Now the marble treads were dull and cracked, the ormolu balustrade twisted and broken — the result of the former raid upon the old château. Monsieur d'Ercourt was in one of the small boudoirs with his son François when first he heard the noise of tramping feet, of hoarse singing and shouting approaching

from the road. He knew what it all meant. He put down the book which he was reading and, walking erect and calm, he sought Pierre and Yvonne in the kitchen.

"We shall have trouble again here directly," he said coolly: "a crowd of villagers is invading the château. We must try and not get a repetition of what we went through before. Can I trust you both to look after Mademoiselle Aline?"

Pierre and Yvonne swore that they would do their best. They would see to it that Mademoiselle Aline remained quietly in one of the rooms on the top floor. Those rowdies from the village could easily be persuaded that she was from home visiting her aunt in Bordeaux.

Satisfied, or nearly so, the Comte d'Ercourt rejoined his son in the boudoir. Neither of them was afraid. With all their faults, the great French nobles of the time possessed an immense courage which amounted to virtue. They had been arrogant, and were now humbled, but they never cringed. The shadow of Death lurked around them all the time, but they were prepared for every fate, and as ready to meet death on the gallows as they had been in the past on the battlefield or in the cause of chivalry. They had learned their lesson of resignation and dignity from their king.

The crowd made noisy irruption into the boudoir; laughing, shouting, and singing, and pushing the musicians in front of them. The Gendarmerie Nationale lined up along the wall, guarding the door.

The room was dark: only faintly illumined by tallow candles guttering in the sconces of a tall, massive silver candelabra.

Monsieur d'Ercourt had ostentatiously taken up his book again. He did no more than look up when the first of the intruders pushed the door open and, panting with excitement, stood for a moment under the lintel, astonished because they had thought to find a family group cowering and clinging together in an agony of fear and only found Monsieur le Comte calmly reading a book and the vicomte examining the handle of his hunting crop.

"What is it you want?" Monsieur le Comte asked calmly.

There was no immediate reply. The intruders were hoping to see the black-coated man from Paris come to the fore and be their spokesman, as he had been their chosen orator. But the government agent, having fomented the mischief, was prudently keeping out of the way. Nor was Notara there. The villagers felt momentarily baffled. Fortunately, André the cripple was there. He elbowed his way to the front, and with his twisted legs set well apart, his hands thrust in the pockets of his ragged breeches, and chewing a length of straw, he addressed the Comte d'Ercourt, but not before he had spat on the Aubusson carpet just to show what a fine and independent citizen of the Republic he was.

"We have come, D'Ercourt," he said, "in an entirely friendly spirit, and only because we desire that you and your son there shall join us in singing that wonderful new tune called the 'Marseillaise,' which it is incumbent on every son of France to know and to sing. Isn't that it, comrades?" he concluded, half-turning to his friends.

A murmur of assent came in response.

"Well said, André!" some of them declared.

"Just in a friendly spirit..."

"A fine tune, D'Ercourt. Let's hear you sing it."

Monsieur d'Ercourt looked calmly on the hunched-up figure of the cripple and retorted quite simply: "A not unnatural desire. Let's hear the tune. My son and I are ready to listen."

The flickering flames of the tallow candles cast eerie lights and weird-looking shadows over the faces of André and the crowd, twisting them into grotesque shapes and drawing fantastic shadows on the wall of gnomelike faces with elongated noses and outstretched chins.

At a word from the cripple the musicians once more intoned the patriotic hymn:

"Contre nous de la tyrannie..."

"Sing! nom d'un chien, sing! All of you," André commanded, and they did sing both loudly and thoroughly out of tune. Alone Monsieur le Comte and his son sat there, silent and aloof. Monsieur le Comte had drawn his book and the light closer to him and, resting his elbow on the table, appeared once more absorbed in reading. The vicomte drummed his fingers against the table.

For the first few minutes André and the others glowered at the two aristos, whose calm attitude was distinctly exasperating. So much so, in fact, that André with a savage curse suddenly snatched the book out of the comte's hand and hurled it across the room against the wall.

"Did you not hear me say sing? Nom d'un chien," he demanded, and raised his fist, as if ready to strike. In a moment, François was on his feet and already stood between his father and the cripple.

"You dare touch Monsieur le Comte, you insolent..."

André had instinctively drawn back a step or two — the instincts of a lifetime are not easily ignored — but the very next moment he had recovered his aplomb and, looking the vicomte up and down, he indulged in loud ironical laughter:

"Dare?" he exclaimed. "Monsieur le Comte? — Insolent? — Did you hear those words, citizens of a free land?" And he flicked his fingers under the vicomte's nose. "This do I dare, my fine bird — and this — and—"

He untied the vicomte's cravat and the next moment was in the act of tweaking his nose when François hit out with clenched fist and struck him full in the mouth.

In an instant all was confusion. André had cried: "Malediction!" as he staggered under the blow. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. A streak of blood appeared between his lips. "Murder! Outrage!" the women cried. The music had suddenly ceased; the leader of the band had fled from the room. Monsieur le Comte and his son were surrounded now by a crowd that meant mischief or worse. The men of the Gendarmerie Nationale pushed their way to the front and, wielding their bayonets as they would a bludgeon, they soon brought the Comte d'Ercourt to the ground. He was an old man, and though he fought valiantly to avert blows from every side, he was quickly rendered helpless while the vicomte vainly tried to come to his father's aid.

It was while confusion was at its height that an authoritative voice called out from the rear of the crowd:

"If any killing's to be done here, I have first call."

It was Paul Notara. He had not joined in with the crowd and the musicians when they started out for the château. The man from Paris, scenting in this powerful personality a valuable tool for his work of trouble, had engaged him in conversation. Notara listened to him for awhile: but in thought he followed the other men on their way to the château. He had not been within its boundary walls since that memorable night four years ago. He wondered how it looked now in its forlorn and neglected state. He wondered also if Aline were there, and if all those hotheads would molest her. And if she were molested, how she would act. There was also the hope of seeing that miserable vicomte cowed, perhaps maltreated — a pleasant sight for one who had suffered at his hands.

So Notara abruptly turned his back on the man from Paris and left him standing there, frowning and puzzled, while he made his way over to the château. He arrived there some fifteen minutes after the others, just in time to see the worst of the mêlée in the boudoir; Monsieur le Comte in a precarious position on the floor, and the vicomte seriously threatened by the infuriated cripple. He elbowed his way through the crowd, past the valiant gendarmes, and with a rough hand he dragged André aside and thrust him out of the way. Then he stood facing the vicomte.

“We’ve not met, François, have we, for four years?” he said. “I wonder if you have forgotten everything that I remember.”

He brought his hand down heavily on the vicomte’s shoulder. The latter tried to shake him off, but Notara tightened his grip and, peering into the other’s face, he said slowly: “It is my turn now, François, and I am going to give myself the satisfaction of thrashing you — yes, thrashing you, my fine fellow, as one thrashes a cur — within an inch of your life — as you had me thrashed that time by your lackeys. Do you remember that?”

In his right hand he had a stout stick, and this he raised above his head with a flourish and uttered a long mirthless laugh, whilst the weight of his left hand on the vicomte’s shoulder forced the latter down on his knees.

“Well said, Notara,” some of the men shouted — aye! and some of the women, too. “The stick! That’s what these aristos want to bring them to their sense.”

And down came Notara’s stick with a dull thud across the Vicomte François’s shoulders. Monsieur le Comte had just sufficient strength to utter a cry of helpless rage, whilst the vicomte, manfully smothering a groan, put up his arms to ward the next blow from his head. Down came the stick again.

A shout of joy and derision went up from the crowd.

“Well done, Notara!” the men and women shouted.

“Le jour de gloire est arrivé!” some of them cried, full of excitement and of zest.

Up went Notara’s stick once more. The flickering candlelight distorted his face, making it look like that of some demon of rage and of spite. He was deathly pale, but his movements were slow and deliberate. His was the calm fury, the white heat of an overwhelming passion. Even the most ignorant and loutish amongst that crowd knew that he meant to strike and to strike again until his victim had paid for past offences with his life.

It was during the tense silence which preceded that third blow that a portière which concealed a second door was pushed violently aside and a woman’s piercing shriek rang out of the darkness:

“Holy Virgin! François! Father!”

The room on which this door and portière gave was on a higher level than the boudoir; two steps gave access to it. Aline, motionless with horror, stood on the top of those steps for the space of a second or two. From where she stood she could see everything — her father on the ground, her brother at Notara’s feet, the upraised stick, Notara’s face, distorted and grotesque.

Her father! her brother! The horror in her had turned her sweet young face as if to stone. With dilated eyes she stared down at the awful scene, and the men and women who were there, savage and lustful though they had been but a few seconds ago, were themselves aghast, or perhaps moved to pity at sight of the girl. Thus for a moment or two an awed silence held sway in the crowded room — a silence during which Paul Notara and Aline looked into one another’s eyes.

Four years had gone by since Paul had looked upon the woman whom he had so madly worshipped, and something of that reverence with which he had regarded her in the past seemed to struggle back into his heart. The vengeful hand which had brandished the stick dropped to his side, and his lips murmured a half-articulate word — her name — “Aline!”

Aline said nothing. After that first cry of horror not a sound had come to her lips. Only her eyes, when first they rested on Notara, told him that she, too, remembered. Did they plead, or did they command? Certain it is that after those few tense seconds Notara’s glance fell away. With a muttered word of scorn he released François, and then turned to the crowd.

“Leave these people alone,” he commanded; “it is better we let the government in Paris deal with them.”

His words broke the spell which had so unaccountably descended upon them.

Murmurs of protest rose from the malcontents. They had not come all this way — had not worked themselves up into a passion of resentment — to be thus sent about their business, unsatisfied. No, not even by Paul Notara, their avowed friend and leader. He had not, it seems, forgotten his schoolmaster days, when he drilled little boys into submission. But they were men, not boys, and these D’Ercourts were aristos and enemies of France. Were they to be allowed to continue plotting against the liberties of the people?

And Notara himself? Was he turning traitor, too? It looked like it, when suddenly, at a word from that D’Ercourt girl, he robbed them all of their revenge.

Strangely enough, though they murmured and protested, they were on the whole inclined to let the matter drop for the moment — to go away quietly, and to wait until they had thought things over.

“We’ll talk with the citizen agent from Paris,” André the cripple had muttered audibly. “We’ll see what he says.”

And this seemed to satisfy them. They threw suspicious, glowering looks on Notara, who, however, paid no heed to them. He seemed like a man in a dream, with that one dark eye of his still fixed upon Aline — seeing nothing but her. Monsieur le Comte, in the meanwhile, aided by his daughter, had struggled to his feet. François d’Ercourt, with studied nonchalance, was readjusting the set of his cravat, striving the while with all his might to hide his face from Notara and the crowd, for in his eyes there glowed a flame of deadly rage and hatred.

The musicians had started to play the good old tune:

“Jeanne, Jeannette, et Jeanneton Toutes trois jeunes et jolies...”

This had a further effect in calming the turbulent spirits. Some of them nodded their heads sagely, and said:
"The citizen agent from Paris will know what to do."
And so, with the musicians once more in the van, they filed in an orderly fashion down the monumental staircase. The men of the Gendarmerie Nationale, carrying their bayonets, followed the crowd. Notara was last to leave.

Part IV

While men made the earth ugly with their hatred and their passions, Nature was in one of her lovely moods. Once more the autumn evenings were sweet and mellow, once more the velvety blackness of cypresses was thrust above the sea of feathery pines: once more the dead leaves of planes and elms made a soft swishing carpet beneath the feet of the passers-by.

Aline d'Ercourt, still under the influence of all the horror which she had experienced that afternoon, tried to find comfort and to soothe her nerves in the solitary avenues of the park. In the days that were gone, when she knew nothing of men and of their passions, she would have been frightened to wander out in the gloaming alone, but now that she had seen hatred and hardness of heart at such close quarters, she felt that in her heart there was no longer any room for cowardly fear. Men, even the most evil, seemed to have done their worst with her. When presently she saw a figure detach itself out of the gloom she was not afraid, not even when in that lurking figure she recognized Notara — the man whose hatred for those she cared for had killed all sense of mercy and humanity in him. Aline was not afraid of him, but to speak with him or to listen to him was the very last thing she could have wished, and so — quite instinctively she turned away at sight of him, ready to flee from him as she would from some powerful and mysterious enemy.

But already he was close beside her, so close that stretching out his hand he grasped her skirt and clung to it, so that she could not run away.

"I entreat you not to be afraid, Mlle Aline," he said, and his voice was soft and gentle: "and to grant me just a few words. Believe me, I ..."

The moon was at her brightest, and the shadows long and purple. She could not see his face because it was in shadow — only one shoulder and the massive leg, slightly bending at the knee.

"I am not afraid," she said coldly. "Why should I be? It is not in your power to do me more harm than you have already done."

"Harm? Great God! And I who would sooner die than harm as much as one of your exquisite hands."

"Do not let us speak of that," she retorted. "I pray you, release my gown. I would like to call at least this part private and free from the presence of those who hate me and mine so bitterly. I have little to care for now," she added, "except my privacy."

She tried to disengage her skirt, but he clung to it so tightly that she was helpless.

"You cannot go, Mademoiselle Aline," he said, "until you have heard why I came out here this night. For the sake of your father and your brother, you must listen to me."

At these words she stood still. He had spoken very quietly and very softly, and his appeal in the name of her father and brother had been spoken with compelling earnestness.

"Will you listen!" he insisted.

She did not reply, but her silence gave consent, and after a moment or two he went on:

"I dare say you have seen, Mademoiselle, how the men listened to me this afternoon. They look upon me as a leader because of the wrong I suffered at your brother's hands. A few hours ago I was on the point of avenging upon his person the terrible wrong that he did to me... " A quick intake of the breath, and Paul Notara went on more vehemently: "I am not speaking of physical wrongs. The wrong that he did me was an outrage to my manhood and to my pride. From that, I have never recovered. Through it, I have become less and more than a man; even the love that I had for you — and God knows that it was pure and holy — is no longer so now. But I still love you, and for the sake of that love, I am willing to forego my just desire for revenge. I can save our father, your brother, and yourself from the fate which has overtaken so many of your friends and kindred..."

At these words, which to Aline's ears sounded like a message of hope from Heaven, she gave a quick little cry:

"Notara," she said impulsively, "if you will do that..."

"I am not a saint, Mlle Aline," he broke in coolly, "anything but that. I am only a man with feelings, a man with hatred in his heart just as much as with love. Your people before then had looked on me as little better than a beast of burden, created for the sole purpose of toiling so that they might rest, of labouring and suffering so that they might enjoy. But we won't go back on that now. As I have told you, I am willing to forgo my revenge, I am willing to help those whom you love for the sake of the past love which I bore you, but it is on one condition." He paused, and Aline made no reply. A silence seemed to have fallen over Nature, only the tender murmuring of the wind in the dying leaves of the planes broke the mysterious hush which held sway in the park. For two or three minutes these two stood there, silent, facing one another, each knowing that the other understood. Aline felt the tears come to her eyes, she marvelled if God willed her to make this sacrifice for the sake of those she cared for. She knew well enough what Notara meant when he spoke of a condition, and she wondered whether she had it in her to give up everything which she held most dear — her honour, her pride, her love — to this creature who was her enemy. And while every thought in her brain seemed annihilated save that one — the power of sacrifice — her ears caught the far-off sound of a sweet instrument, the gentle murmuring strain of a song of old France — plaintive and appealing — one that spoke of home and joy and love. The sound was so sweet and sad that Aline but her hands to her face and allowed the tears to trickle through her fingers.

Notara shrugged his shoulders. He was long past the time when women's tears had the power to move him. "I think those tears mean consent," was all that he said. "I think you will be wise to accept. I have a great deal of influence in this neighbourhood, I can find the means to convey your father and your brother from here to Grenoble and thence over the Swiss frontier, but that will only be if you will pledge yourself to be my wife and come with me to-morrow before the maire of Thiers, when I shall pass a ring over your finger. Whether you will be happy with me will be a matter for yourself to decide. My love for you may have undergone a change, but

it is not dead, and I will do my best that you do not regret the step which you will have taken for the sake of your father and your brother.”

Aline’s hands dropped from her face, she looked straight at Notara. By the light of the moon she could see his pale, ugly face, with the empty socket caused by her brother’s blow. Somehow there was something in that terrible wound which told her more plainly than words could do, that to appeal to this man who had suffered so much at her brother’s hands, would indeed be useless. He had so obviously spoken his last word. Was the sacrifice beyond her power, she wondered?

“I must think,” she murmured feebly.

“Yes,” he said, “you can think until to-morrow. But only until then. The whole village — the women as well as the men — are incensed against your people. With great difficulty I held them back to-day. In a day or two I might be powerless and we might all of us perish together. You must do as you think best. We have twenty-four hours before us, perhaps less: but if within that time you have become my wife, I will see to it that your father and your brother are safely over the frontier. You, of course, will be safe with me...always.”

He allowed her skirt to slip out of his hand. For a moment it seemed as if he would raise it to his lips — as he had done that evening four years ago. Aline wanted to say something to him — what, she knew not — but something kind, for he seemed so gentle now and looked so sad.

He had suffered — God in Heaven! how he must have suffered! And at her brother’s hands. Aline remembered everything now — that night in this same dark and solitary avenue, how gentle he had been then, how almost reverential, and for that avowal of love which could not have been an insult, even to a queen, he had been punished like a dog! An overwhelming feeling of pity welled up in her heart for him — pity the tender, and kinsman of love. She wanted to keep him back, to hear him speak again, to hear him tell her that he forgave her for what her brother had done. But already the shades of the evening had enfolded his tall, massive figure. Soon he disappeared out of her sight. From far away the plaintive song still reached her ear.

Silent and thoughtful — not altogether unhappy — Aline went slowly back to the château.

Part V

It was on this same evening, after the turbulent expedition to the château, and about an hour after Aline d’Ercourt’s interview with Paul Notara in the park, that Sir Percy Blakeney and his friends — all of this still in the ragged coats and breeches of itinerant musicians — had met in the derelict cottage off the main Thiers-Roanne Road and listened to Lord Fanshawe’s story of his early acquaintance with the d’Ercourts and with Paul Notara.

Something in the young man’s attitude, ever since the members of the league had turned their activities to this corner of the Lyonnais, had induced the chief to ask for this explanation. He only knew vaguely that Fanshawe had in the past been acquainted with the d’Ercourts, that he even had been, and still was, in love with Aline: it was, in fact, owing to rumours transmitted to him by Fanshawe that he decided to turn his attention to Thiers and its neighbourhood, here to seek out those who might need his help and that of the League. There were those in these remote districts of France — men and women, young and old — who, have led a secluded life, God-fearing and simple-minded, had for some unexplainable reason been singled out by the revolutionary government for persecution. In the desire to enlist the support of agriculturists and peasants, the Terrorists had done their best to arouse the cupidity of these ignorant people by wild promises of untold wealth to be derived from expropriation of the land.

It was always the business of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel to discover where such persecution was rife, where there were innocents likely to suffer, and where active help would be most needed. Fanshawe had spoken of the neighborhood of Thiers, of the d’Ercourts and others, and had said quite enough to arouse the sympathy of his chief.

But Blakeney was too shrewd an observer of human nature to be satisfied with Fanshawe’s vague hints of former acquaintanceship with the d’Ercourt family. As soon as he and his followers arrived in the neighbourhood he scented the hatred and resentment which existed in the village against the d’Ercourts. He heard various scraps of gossip about this Paul Notara, about the Vicomte François and about Aline, a young girl, who obviously was one of those innocents on whom injustice, born of blind resentment, would fall most heavily.

He questioned Fanshawe who, pressed to tell the whole story, poured out into the sympathetic ear of his chief and his friends the epic of his love for Aline, of Notara’s wrongs and of the fears and jealousies which wrought such havoc in his own soul.

A quarter of an hour or so after the young man had concluded his story, Blakeney rose and went out of the cottage. Lord Anthony Dewhurst was on guard outside, in case night hawks with prying eyes and ears came too near to the derelict cottage.

“Go inside, Tony,” Blakeney said to him. “I’ll stay out here. I want to think things over for awhile. Fanshawe’s story...you heard it?”

“Only fragments,” Lord Tony replied. “But I can piece them together easily enough....Blakeney, I wish you wouldn’t...”

“What?”

“I mistrust that boy...more than ever after I heard his tale...”

“Only fragments, Tony...”

“Enough to know that he is half-crazy with jealousy. If I have read your intentions aright, Blakeney...”

“You have, Tony.”

“You mean to get this man Notara away as well as the d’Ercourts?”

“Of course. If he and Aline stay here, their life would not be worth a week’s purchase. She has by now made up her mind to accept the bargain. I heard and saw her an hour ago in the park. The moment I struck up a love ditty on this cracked old fiddle she burst into tears. I know those symptoms,” Sir Percy went on with a gentle snigger. “She is half in love with the brute already. A fine fellow, in a way. Too fine to be thrown to the wolves.”

“Whilst that young Fanshawe is just a despicable young mole,” Lord Tony concluded as in response to a mute command from his chief he turned to go into the cottage.

"Between ourselves, that is also my opinion," Blakeney assented lightly. "That is why I don't want him to marry Aline d'Ercourt. She is too fine a woman to risk getting her heart broken by his future infidelities...and he'd commit so many!..."

The interior of the cottage was in almost total darkness. Only in one corner of the bare, half-empty room, a tallow candle guttered in a pewter sconce. Through the tiny window, innocent of frame or glass, the slanting rays of the moon entered mysterious and ghost-like. There were six of them there — fine English gentlemen, all of them, exquisites in London Society of the most engaging type, keen riders to hounds, adepts at all the graceful arts that make a man popular with his own sex, and admired by the women. Yet here they were now, grimy and unkempt, dressed in a few rags, heedless of the cool October evening and the freshening wind that blew over the range of Forrez — and all of them as keen after this new altruistic sport as they ever were at home after stag or fox. They squatted on the bare boards of the floor, or paced up and down the room eagerly discussing the position as revealed to them by Lord Fanshawe — but only in whispers, because these were the days when spying and anonymous denunciations were encouraged and highly paid by the revolutionary Government.

Alone Lord Fanshawe sat, somewhat apart from the others, in the darkest corner of the room on one of the few wooden chairs that furnished this derelict cottage.

"I cannot understand Blakeney..." he said at one moment: and his voice sounded harsh, with a rasping note of discontent and obstinacy.

"How do you mean, you don't understand him?" one of the others retorted. "A more single-minded man never lived. He never seems to think of anything else but how to help someone, and if he cannot help, then how to comfort. My God! and with such a happy home as he's got, such a marvellous wife...money, position...he's got everything ...and look at him...."

"Well," Fanshawe put in sullenly, "don't we all..."

"Yes, now and again," the other insisted, "but Blakeney practically lives in this God-forsaken country now...and with a whole pack of these wolves lying in wait for him all the time. And when there is work to be done, he never thinks of himself, only of us...all the time."

How they loved their chief, all these young men! It was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes who had spoken, and he was the most enthusiastic, the most trusted amongst the members of the League. It was only young Fanshawe ...

"He would do well to take counsel from some of us sometimes," the latter muttered, but only half-audibly. He was still almost ashamed of his own disloyalty, and half-afraid to betray himself before the others.

It was at this point that Lord Anthony Dewhurst came into the room. He usually was the gayest of the party. A regular sportsman. Perhaps not quite so sentimentally attached to Sir Percy as was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, for instance, and some of the others, but the truest of the true, and with boundless admiration not to say reverence for the chief, to whom he gave implicit obedience and trust.

"What counsel would you be giving the chief on this occasion, Fanshawe?" he asked lightly. "Blakeney, as you know, is always ready to listen."

"Well," Fanshawe retorted in a tone of obvious exasperation, "we all know that this afternoon Blakeney had a hand in letting poor little Aline know what was going on downstairs when Notara was giving the vicomte his well-deserved punishment. She was safe enough, I imagine, in one of the remote wings of the château, and why a young and sensitive girl should have been dragged into that dirty business..." He checked himself, and as the others made no comment, he went on sullenly:

"I knew at once that it was Blakeney who had found her and brought her down, because, if you remember, he disappeared from the room just when the fun was about to begin, and a few minutes later there was poor little Aline..."

"Blakeney did right, as usual, for Aline was the only person who could have stopped that abominable murder just then....Notara was seeing red...and we could not have interfered without..."

"And the best thing that could have happened," young Fanshawe broke in vehemently. "Why should not Notara have killed that miserable François, he well deserved it and would have been off our hands. We could have concentrated on Aline and perhaps her old father..."

"I don't understand you, Fanshawe," my Lord Hastings put in earnestly. "I thought this Vicomte François was your friend. On which side are you exactly?"

"I care nothing about any of them," the young man replied, "my one thought is Aline, and I feel that by worrying about the rest of them we are minimizing our chance of saving her."

It was while Fanshawe said this that Sir Percy Blakeney re-entered the room though none of them noticed him at once, and he stood for awhile in the doorway, listening.

"We are going to worry, my dear fellow," he now said, "and quite considerably, too, about all of them. I have a plan in my head which, with luck, will answer very well. I should certainly be afraid that even if Notara's scheme came off..."

"Oh, he has a scheme, too, has he?" Fanshawe broke in with a sneer.

"I should have called it a bargain," Sir Percy said quietly.

"The devil!" Fanshawe exclaimed. "What bargain?"

"To get the d'Ercourt family out of the country on condition that Mademoiselle Aline becomes his wife."

"And do you mean to tell me..." Fanshawe almost shrieked out in an excess of rage, and his face reddened to the roots of his hair. But he made a violent effort to regain control over himself, and went on more coolly: "How do you know that this bargain was proposed?"

"I heard Notara and Aline together in the park, about an hour ago."

"Aline, of course, rejected this with scorn."

"Not she," Blakeney replied. "She burst into tears — that was all."

"She loathes and hates Notara."

"She did, but she pities him now, and we all know that pity in a woman's heart soon turns to love."

"Never while I live—" Fanshawe cried, but Blakeney put up a quietly restraining hand.

"We are not here to discuss love idylls, my dear fellow," he said, with just the first suspicion of authority in his voice: "neither yours, nor Notara's. We are here to drag four innocents out of the clutches of these murdering wolves."

"Four?"

"Perhaps I should have said three, for your friend François is not innocent like the others. But we could not in all humanity leave him behind and so—"

"But who are the four?"

"The Comte d'Ercourt, his son and daughter — and the man Notara."

"Notara? Surely you do not mean —?"

"What?"

"Risk our lives for that brute —?"

"Not for a brute," Blakeney replied quietly, "for a man who has suffered bitter wrongs innocently — wrongs so bitter that for a time his whole nature became warped — but a fine fellow for all that. Already those murdering wolves are lying in wait for him. His return to his finer self is not understood by them, and they are already planning to destroy him. That is why we must get him out of their clutches — as for risking our lives..."

He laughed, and shrugged his shoulders, his deep-set lazy eyes wandered lovingly — proudly — to those half-dozen men who were his willing helpmates in the tasks of mercy and self-sacrifice which he spent his life in accomplishing.

"I have a plan in my mind," Sir Percy continued, after a slight pause, "which will work very well and will be ridiculously easy, once we can get the d'Ercourts and Notara away from this village and on the road to Thiers. My plan works from there, and for it our headquarters will be the half-derelict Maison Gaglio, which you all know. The d'Ercourts we could get away straight from him, because they would follow us readily enough: but how to get Notara away at the same time puzzles me a little for the moment — he certainly would not come with us willingly, so we shall have to..."

He broke off abruptly and paced up and down the narrow room for a while, frowning and thinking. One of those daring plans of which he alone possessed the secret was taking shape in his fertile brain. The others hung on his lips. They knew they could trust their chief to find a means to save those four people from the cruel fate which without his help would surely overtake them: presently they would each be told their task on the morrow and what share each would have in the exciting sport. Fanshawe alone did not look at the chief. He sat on one of the rickety chairs with his hands buried in the pockets of his ragged breeches, pondering sullenly.

"I think, I have the glimmer of an idea," Blakeney said suddenly, "and, by God! I can promise you all more exciting sport than you have ever had in all your lives. As for Paul Notara, I reserve for him the surprise of his life."

"Whatever your scheme may be, Blakeney," Fanshawe said firmly and coolly, "you must not reckon on me to help you with it."

At these words, spoken with the obstinacy of a contumacious schoolboy, all eyes were turned instinctively on the chief. Such words had never been spoken by any of them since the first inception of the League, and even those who knew Blakeney most intimately marvelled how he would take this outburst of rebellion on the part of one of his youngest followers.

Thus an absolute silence fell upon them all, whilst Blakeney from his full magnificent height looked down upon the flushed, sullen face of young Fanshawe. He said nothing. Only to the keen eyes of his two most intimate friends did there appear a very slight drawing up of his fine figure, a drooping of the heavy lids over the deep-set blue eyes, and a tightening of the firm lips. The silence after a while became oppressive.

Fanshawe had not moved, and the look of sullen obstinacy on his face became more marked. And suddenly the silence was broken in an unexpected way by a ripple of merry laughter. Blakeney threw back his head and laughed: the novelty of the situation had tickled his sense of humour. This boy standing up to him, defying him, looking like a sulky schoolboy daring his master to lay hands on him!...It seemed as if a magic spell had been broken, and Blakeney said lightly:

"Do you mind telling us exactly what you mean, my dear fellow? I don't think any of us quite understood you when you said...What exactly did you say, by the way?"

"I meant just what I said," Fanshawe replied dryly. "You may formulate any scheme you please for the d'Ercourts; I think that François is a miserable worm, but he is Aline's brother, and I will do all I can to help you and the others to see the family safely over the frontier: but I'll not be party to any such scheme if it includes Notara."

"And how do you propose to take up that attitude of...what shall I call it? — independence?" Blakeney queried, still speaking lightly and with a gentle, ironical smile upon his lips.

"I will see Aline and..." Fanshawe began.

But Blakeney put up a gently restraining hand. "We'll talk of that presently, my dear fellow; for the moment, I think, it is your turn to keep watch outside. You will find the night cold and soothing."

Fanshawe seemed to hesitate for a moment. He had tasted the first sweets of rebellion and felt extraordinarily valiant and important. He was prepared to follow up his advantage: but somehow he had become conscious of an atmosphere of hostility about him: perhaps, too, he felt a desire to be alone for awhile to think matters over more deliberately. Certain it is that he appeared willing to obey this minor command from his chief. He rose, but gave no look to the others, and without another word went out into the night.

After a second or two Blakeney followed him; he closed the cottage door behind him lest the others should hear what he wished to say. Once outside and alone with the boy, he put a kindly hand on his shoulder, and by sheer force of will compelled those sullen-looking eyes to look straight into his own.

"Now, listen to me, my boy," he said, speaking in a whisper and with infinite kindness. "I am always ready to make any allowance for jealousy. We are all friends together, and some of us have suffered more than others in our affections: for these, and for you, I have the utmost sympathy, but you must understand that there is one thing I'll never tolerate and that is insubordination. We have banded ourselves together in order to help suffering humanity, in order to right wrongs and redress injustice. There is only one way by which we can succeed in our work and that is by working willingly and wholeheartedly together. You understood that, when you joined the League in its very early days. More than that: you, like the others, swore a solemn oath and gave me your word of honour that you would follow me and obey me in all things. Think all that over, my dear lad. You have got your two hours' watch before you now."

During those two hours, while you perform this duty, the safety of us all is practically in your hands: so you see how completely I trust you.” After which, Sir Percy Blakeney gave the young man’s shoulder an affectionate pat, and then, with a quickly suppressed sigh, he turned and went back into the cottage.

Part VI

For half an hour did young Fanshawe wrestle with the demon of treachery — this much to his credit — one half-hour, while a thousand mischievous imps seemed to be whispering in his ear.

He tried to persuade himself that there was nothing disloyal in what he contemplated — rebellion, perhaps, against arbitrary rules of conduct — but treachery, no! The chief was not infallible, and in this case to risk valuable lives for that brute Notara, was nothing short of madness. Fanshawe hated Notara, with that most deadly hatred which is born of jealousy. Vaguely he suspected a rival in that beggarly schoolmaster, who had dared to make love to Aline — Aline was young — sensitive — romantic. Woman-like, she might...Great God! the very thought caused Fanshawe’s nerves to tingle and send his pulses beating. Anything rather than that. Jealousy had reawakened his dormant love for Aline. She looked lovely, standing under the lintel of the door, her small hand holding back the heavy portière, her marvellous eyes fixed on that brute-beast, till they had cowed him into showing mercy. At all risks, at all costs she must be forcibly torn away from any possible influence which Notara, through his very ruthlessness, might exert over her. Women were such strange untamed creatures: the primeval cave-man stood a far better chance with them than the most polished gentleman.

Fanshawe cursed and swore under his breath — he swore to himself that Notara should remain in France amidst the wolves, and if the guillotine was to be his lot, he, Fanshawe, would not grieve. But Aline must be got away...at all risks...at all costs....

After half an hour of this fight with all the demons of jealousy and wounded vanity, he finally gave in to them. By the light of the moon he tore a page out of his pocket-book; on this he scribbled rapidly, in French, with a hand that trembled visibly:

I am close by you Aline; for days I have planned how to be of service to you. I am writing this by the light of the moon. To-morrow, at dawn, you will receive this message of love and hope. Do you remember this afternoon, when that ferocious brute raised his hand against François, there were four vagrant musicians there; I was one of them. Ragged and unkempt, I was even then watching over you and planning how to serve you. Now my plans have matured. One hour after sunset I will be waiting for you at the postern gate beside the old stables. Trust yourself to me, and I will not only see you safely out of the country, but I swear to you by our love, which dwells in my heart more strongly than ever, that your father and François will join us in Switzerland within the week. You and I will make straight for Chambéry where Monseigneur Barco, Bishop of Savoy, will unite us in marriage. In the name of our love, Aline, I entreat you to trust me. Deadly danger threatens you and yours if you do not.

He signed this with the pet name which Aline herself had bestowed on him when first he made love to her: “Martin Pêchur.” He then folded the paper carefully and thrust it into the pocket of his ragged breeches. Then he waited, pacing up and down outside the cottage until a bank of clouds which had gathered over in the west obscured the face of the moon. He reckoned that he had just a little over an hour in which to accomplish his errand and to be back here before the end of his watch, when one of the others would come to relieve him.

There was, of course, the possible danger of one of them — the chief perhaps — calling to him while he was not there to respond. But that risk he had made up his mind to run. After all, he was not a schoolboy fearing punishment for playing truant. Anyway, he did take the risk, and when presently the bank of clouds veiled the light of the moon, he stole noiselessly away.

The village was no more than a ten minutes’ walk, if he stepped out. The bank of clouds had gathered volume, and the night now was very dark. But Fanshawe knew his way well. With luck he would find the man he wanted.

As soon as he reached the village he made his way to the cabaret; the outer door was wide open, and he was able to peep in. Despite the lateness of the hour the place was still crowded. The events of the day had been so numerous and so exciting that they had not yet been discussed in all their bearings. The women had gone back to their homes, but the men stood or sat around the big barrels that did duty for tables, talking volubly and drinking the thin local wine. As usual there were the beggars, two or three cripples, one with one leg, the other with one eye, the third with an empty sleeve, going the round of the customers to pick up either a sou or a drink.

Paul Notara was not there, but the man from Paris was very much to the fore, sitting on a bench at the further end of the room, with half a dozen privileged companions with whom he was talking eagerly.

Fanshawe, looking as grimy and unkempt as any of the beggars, leaned against the framework of the doorway for a moment of two surveying the scene. One or two of the customers looked up at him, but recognizing in the slouching, bedraggled figure one of the itinerant musicians of this afternoon, paid no further heed to him. One kindly person offered him a drink which he refused. A few moments later a wretched, maimed creature, who had collected a few sous and been given a mug of wine, hobbled out of the cabaret. Fanshawe followed him, at some distance, until the cripple reached the top of the village, well away from likely spies. Then Fanshawe accosted him.

“Hey, mon ami.”

The beggar halted, turned, and vaguely perceiving the approaching figure through the gloom, muttered at once his habitual, entirely mechanical: “Alms, kind friend. Alms for a poor cripple, who...”

“Alms and more will you get from me, my friend,” Fanshawe said to him in a whisper: “if you will do what I ask.”

“There’s nothing I can do...how can I earn?...I can only beg, I am maimed...helpless...”

“You can go up to the château for me...”

“It is far...and the hour late....They’ll all be abed there...”

“Tomorrow morning...in the early hours...you will find Mademoiselle Aline....”

“Yes, sometimes she gives me alms, if Pierre or Yvonne...”

“You need not ask for alms. You will tell Pierre or Yvonne that you have brought a message for Mademoiselle Aline, which will mean life or death to her and her father and brother....”

"A message?"

"A letter which you will give her."

"And what'll I get if I do?"

"One piece of gold to-night, and another when you bring me back the answer."

"Give me the letter," the cripple said eagerly. "Gold!...I have not seen a piece of gold since..."

Fanshawe took a coin out of his pocket, also the letter.

"As soon as you have given this to Mademoiselle Aline you will come here — to this spot — and sit on that corner stone, begging as you always do until I come."

"Yes, yes. I'll do it," the cripple assented and put out his maimed hand for the gold. "It is a terrible risk...for there are spies...everywhere...but gold!...Name of a name...Gold!"

Fanshawe gave him the letter and the money. They had spoken in whispers, and the night enclosed them as in a dark shroud. The cripple, he knew, was wont to spend nights under the stars, under shelter of a hedge or a haystack, or if the weather was unkind, then inside some derelict barn or cow-byre. Even now as soon as he had hidden the coin and paper somewhere inside his rags he hobbled away, leaning on his crutch. Fanshawe soon lost sight of him: the darkness seemed to close in around him like a mantle. A few drops of rain fell, and a moaning, sighing wind came from over the mountain tops. The young man shivered under his scanty rags: but neither doubt nor remorse assailed him: "For Aline's sake," he repeated under his breath once or twice. "Once she has pledged herself to me, I shall know how to guard her against the wiles of that brute Notara."

It never entered Fanshawe's head that he was behaving like a traitor and a fool. His jealousy had blinded him. Notara in his eyes had become a rival — a dangerous rival — with a strange, compelling power to wrest Aline's affections and force her to his will, then how could it be treacherous or wrong to guard her against such a destiny?

Never once did the young man look back upon the scene of his crime. Had he done so he would even through the gloom have perceived a crouching figure slowly lifting itself to its knees, then to its feet and with stealthy steps follow in the wake of the cripple. There was neither struggle nor noise — hardly a smothered cry from the cripple when he felt himself seized from behind, held tightly with one arm round his thin shoulders, while a quick and sure hand sought and found the paper beneath his rags.

The whole incident had lasted less than two minutes. After that, silence and darkness held sway once more: only the patter of the rain on the withered leaves of the planes broke the stillness of the night. The cripple had started to whimper; under his rags found the gold coin which still lay snugly there. He gave a sigh of regret for the second coin which would not be his on the morrow, but after all, the night had not been unprofitable and it was a long tramp up to the château. With a final shrug of satisfaction he made his way towards a thatched barn where he with a boon companion were wont to find shelter on a wet night.

Lord Fanshawe in the meanwhile made his way back quickly to the derelict cottage. Considerably less than an hour had gone by since he left his post of duty. Everything appeared unchanged, and yet... the young man was conscious of a feeling of aversion or of awe, which? when first through the gloom he spied the square block inside whose tumble-down walls sat the friends — the chief — whom he had betrayed. Not a sound came from within. Fanshawe found his way to a broken tree-stump just outside the cottage door. Here he sat down and waited.

Part VII

In the village cabaret the flickering tallow candles were burning low. Some of the men had already paid for their drinks and gone, others stood about preparatory to going. In the further corner of the room the black-coated man from Paris was still talking earnestly to André the smith, and to a few of his chosen friends. All the beggars and hangers-on had long since departed.

It was just at the moment when the man from Paris finally made up his mind to say good night and to retire to the miserable little room which the innkeeper's wife had got ready for him upstairs, that a hunched-up figure of a man appeared in the doorway. He stood under the lintel for a moment or two casting anxious eyes around.

"Who are you? And what do you want?" Jacques the innkeeper asked him roughly. "There's nothing more to be got here to-day."

Then looking more closely at the man he added:

"Have I seen your ugly face before?..."

The man did not answer, nor did he go away, and when Jacques tried to push him off the doorstep he stood as firm as a rock.

The man from Paris hearing the slight scuffle looked round. "What's all this?" he asked.

The man thrust out his long arm: in his clenched fist he held what looked like a very dirty scrap of paper. "For you," he said laconically.

After a second's hesitation the man from Paris came across the room and took the paper from him. The others watched him while he unfolded it, then drawing as near as he could to one of the guttering candles he read what was written from his pocket, handed them to Jacques and said:

"Give these to the man, also a drink of wine and a crust."

Jacques took the coins, poured out the wine, picked up a crust from the table where the provisions were kept and then went to seek the ragged messenger, whom he thought to find on the other side of the door. But the man had vanished.

Then it was that Jacques suddenly recollected where he had seen the man before.

"Why, if it wasn't that old musician of this afternoon..." he said.

"Musician of this afternoon?" the man from Paris exclaimed. In the letter which the beggar had handed to him there occurred the words: "Do you remember this afternoon...there were four vagrant musicians there. I was one of them."

"After him one of you," he cried. "Name of a dog, Jacques, you should not have let the man go."

The night by now had waxed very dark, rain was falling: one or two of the men went out and tried to peer through the gloom, to listen to any footfall dying away in the distance.

But nothing could be seen or heard of the ragged fiddler who had brought the mysterious letter. Crestfallen they came back to the cabaret parlour. The man from Paris appeared terribly upset.

"Close the door, Jacques," he said impatiently, "and listen all of you."

Jacques closed the outer door; he and the other men gathered round the man from Paris who looked even more solemn and commanding than was his wont.

"Matters here in Drumetaz," he began gravely, "have suddenly assumed national importance, and it is my duty to warn you that great events will occur within the next twenty-four hours. Listen to this letter."

He unfolded the letter which the mysterious musician had brought him and read it through carefully and aloud to the men. They listened in silence.

When he had finished one of them asked: "What does it mean?"

"It means," the man from Paris replied, "that we are on the track of that gang of English spies who your government have tried to run to earth for over two years. They are some of the most dangerous enemies of France, for they make it their business to assist traitors in escaping from justice. It also means that that d'Ercourt brood is up to the neck in treachery and in league with the English spies, for this letter is addressed by one of those devils to the girl Aline."

A murmur of horror went round the room. The poor ignorant caitiffs did indeed believe every word the man from Paris said to them. The latter continued to talk at great length, telling them of all the misdeeds perpetrated by that abominable Englishman who was a very devil incarnate; for his capture, dead or alive, the revolutionary Government was prepared to give his entire weight in gold. The murmur that went round the room was no longer one of horror.

"What are we to do to get him?" they asked eagerly.

"Two things you can do," the man from Paris replied. "Firstly you can arrest the whole of the d'Ercourt crowd, and that immediately before your intentions are bruited about in the village. This letter is sufficient witness to their treachery: doth it not prove that they are in league with the enemies of France?"

They nodded their heads sagely:

"Aye, aye, they are traitors all of them," they murmured to one another.

"And so is Paul Notara a traitor, in my opinion," André the cripple put in spitefully. He had never liked Notara and was jealous of his superior influence over the village folk. What a chance to put such a rival out of the way.

"I promise you," the man from Paris rejoined, "that Notara will also be dealt with according to his deserts. But we can always get hold of him; the English devils only trouble about aristos, it seems. For the moment we must concentrate on the d'Ercourt crowd. And it is up to you, patriots all, to watch over them and see that they do not escape the just punishment which awaits them in Paris."

"Tell us what to do and we'll do it," they said with one accord, through André the cripple who had become their spokesman.

"You will proceed to the château and effect the arrest of the ci-devant d'Ercourt, his son and daughter. All night through you will guard them on sight, but you will not answer any questions they may put to you, nor enter into any explanations. At daybreak you will bring them hither. I, in the meanwhile, will requisition from the local farmers a couple of covered carts in which you will convey the prisoners to Thiers. I, of course, have my own coach. In Thiers the representatives of the government will deal with the ci-devant as they think best."

"But what of the English devils?" they asked. "There's the reward..."

"Which I make no doubt you will secure by capturing the noted Scarlet Pimpernel—"

"But how?"

"There's the writer of this letter. He will have received no reply, but even so he is certain to hang about the purlieu of the château and try and communicate with the d'Ercourt woman. He won't know that she will be on her way to Thiers by then. Anyway, two of you just remain on the watch round about the walls of the château. Any suspicious person you see loitering about there, you will arrest and bring hither to await my return. Is that clear?"

They swore that it was, and nodded their heads eagerly: they were all thinking of the reward.

"Straight to the château, then," the man from Paris said in conclusion, "and make sure of your birds. But remember to guard every possible ingress and egress, every possible way of escape. Before the sun is high in the heavens we'll have three traitors on the way which leads to the guillotine. As for the others...we shall see."

They obeyed in silence and one by one filed out of the cabaret. The man from Paris nodded quietly to himself, and gave a sigh of satisfaction. He was pleased with his day's work. Few patriots had ever fomented so much trouble in so short a time.

An hour later the arrest was effected in the château de Montbrison. The Comte d'Ercourt, his son and daughter, roused from their first sleep, accepted their fate with that stoicism and dignity which did so much to awaken sympathy for their caste in foreign countries. Even François showed neither the rage nor the contempt which he felt. After the first question or two had been met by studied silence on the part of this impoverished gendarmerie, he and M. le Comte did not condescend to utter another word. The terrible events of the afternoon had already proved how useless any attempt at resistance would be. It could only have ended once again in a disastrous loss of dignity.

The men who had come on this preposterous errand were men who in the past had worked for wages in or about the château. Most if not all of them had received many a kindness at the hands of Madame la Comtesse and Mademoiselle Aline. But all that was now forgotten. In these days of excitement and recriminations there was no time for gratitude, no time to glance back into the past.

Aided by Pierre and Yvonne, M. le Comte and his family were soon dressed. Yvonne had had the charity or merely the good sense to brew some hot coffee. She and Pierre stood by, silent and inscrutable, while their employers whom they had served all these years were subject to the indignity of a constant watch by the men all through the night. The hours went by leaden-footed. M. le Comte was the only one who from time to time snatched a few moments' sleep. Aline's glance travelled over the familiar objects, and in that glance there dwelt the pathos of an everlasting farewell.

Down in the derelict cottage there was in truth nothing in the manner of any of his friends or of the chief to rouse in Fanshawe the fear that his escapade had been discovered. When his two hours' watch were at an end, and he was relieved by my lord Hastings he went back into the cottage, and although both Blakeney and the others seemed somewhat curt and silent, Fanshawe was too deeply preoccupied with his own affairs to pay more than passing heed to this.

"Seek shelter where you can," Sir Percy now commanded to his followers. "We have been too long in this cottage to risk spending another night in it. Disperse for the night and we'll meet to-morrow as arranged soon after daybreak. Good night all, think of nothing for the moment. The four people whom we have taken under our wing will be safely in Switzerland or Belgium within the next forty-eight hours, to this I pledge you all my word, and as you know with your help we have never failed yet."

And so, despite the rain, despite their scanty clothing, these six English gentlemen wandered out into the night to seek what shelter they could under hedges or protecting barns. Fanshawe, silent and sullen, went out with the rest. This was not the first time that he, like the others, had wandered out like any vagrant to seek shelter for the night, but on this occasion, with rebellion in his heart and treachery already accomplished, he hated all these discomforts which his own adherence to the League had imposed upon him. He nodded a curt good night to the others and, like them, was soon lost in the gloom.

But the next morning early he was at the cross-roads where he had arranged to meet the cripple. As soon as the grey light of an autumn morning had picked out the tips of feathery pine-trees on the mountain-side he spied the hunched-up figure hobbling toward him through the mist. Eagerly, he stepped along. The cripple had a scrap of paper in his hand, Fanshawe almost tore it out of his grasp.

It was a mere scrap and contained only half a dozen words: "I will do as you wish," but to the young man it meant the realization of all the dreams which had haunted him through the past sleepless night. Aline would come away with him. She would meet him at the postern gate to-night. Aline, lovely Aline loved him, or she could not so readily have agreed to his wish. Never for a moment did remorse touch him. What plans the chief had made he did not know, but let the intrepid Scarlet Pimpernel and the others look to themselves, and to the three men — unworthy all of them — whom they had elected to protect. And if he, Fanshawe, had by his action thwarted those plans, let their failure lie at the door of him who had conceived them.

As for Notara, Fanshawe no longer feared him. Aline, once his, would no longer think of that loutish schoolmaster, even if in far-off England they met once more through the agency of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Aye! let the others play their own game. What cared he, Fanshawe, since he had got Aline.

The cripple stood by, waiting patiently until the young man finally gave him the promised coin. Then the two men — the young and the old, the crippled beggar and the wealthy lord — each went their way and disappeared out of one another's sight in the autumn mist.

It was about the same time that the unfortunate d'Ercourts were marched down to the castle gates where two covered carts already awaited them. M. le Comte and Aline were ordered to mount into one of the carts, and François d'Ercourt in the other. Three men of the Gendarmerie Nationale took their seats in each of the carts.

The morning was raw and cold. Aline sat under the hood looking for the last time on the land where her whole life had been spent. The château perched on a hillock, surrounded by its age-old trees, by its avenues and its park, already to her eyes appeared remote, unreal, as it slowly faded away in the hazy distance.

Nothing was known in the village of what had happened in the château. The secret of the arrest and of the mysterious letter had been well-kept. Paul Notara, whose house lay some little way away from the main block of cottages, had heard nothing. A few labourers — men and women — out in the fields did perceive the two covered carts winding their way slowly along the road. But there did not seem anything very exciting in that, and after a cursory glance in that direction they bent once more to their work, whilst the farmers from whom the carts had been requisitioned had been told to ask no questions and to hold their tongues: and in those days, silence was more golden than it had ever been before.

The halt at the cabaret was short. The coach in which the government agent had arrived from Paris was ready and waiting when the carts drew up at the door. A brief colloquy between the self-constituted captain of the gendarmerie and the agent, and then the latter gave the order to start. M. le Comte and François had made an attempt to ask a few leading questions: they had, they declared, the right to know by what right and what authority their persons had been seized.

"By mine as representing the people of France and their chosen government," the man from Paris had replied curtly.

To no further questions would he give an answer and here again M. le Comte and even François quickly realized their own helplessness and the loss of dignity which argument or resistance would carry in their wake. What was happening to them had happened to many of their friends and kindred, had happened even to their King, their Queen, the royal family of Bourbons, who to them were beings second only to their God. Then why not to themselves? Had it not been for Aline, their resignation would have been even more stoical.

It was close on ten o'clock when the cortège, now reinforced by the coach from Paris, set out on the main Thiers Road. Aline sat close to her father, and he had his arm round her shoulders. Of the three men who were with them in the cart, one was driving the two starved-looking nags, the other two sat in the bottom of the cart, hugging their bayonets, the use of which they did not quite understand. The coach, in which the man from Paris sat by himself, led the way, the two wagons followed in its wake close by.

About half-way between Drumetaz and Thiers and some three leagues from the latter town, there stands a house which had once been the property of a certain Marius Holmes, a rich citizen of Thiers, one of the early victims of the Revolution. The house which had been appropriated by the State stood forlorn and derelict: nominally it had been sold to a servant of the former owners, who eked out a miserable existence in the lonely house by selling an occasional glass of sour wine to the passers-by or giving a handful of mouldy corn to their nags. It was a usual halting-place for travellers, between Roanne and Thiers.

Soon after midday that house came in sight. The man from Paris put his head out of the window, and called to his coachman:

"We will not halt, Pierre: I want to make Courpière, where we can dine."

Pierre whipped up his horses, and the small cortège continued to rattle at full speed along the road when suddenly Pierre spied in the near distance a group of men advancing towards him. There were some half-dozen of them, and they held the whole width of the road. They were dressed in military uniform, with feathers in their hats: this much did Pierre see in the distance. As they came nearer he saw

that they wore tricolour sashes round their waist, and cockades in their hats, also that they carried swords, and that the buttons on their uniforms were beautifully polished and shone like gold.

When they were within fifty paces of Pierre's horses, one who appeared to be their captain put up his hand and cried in a loud voice: "Halte! Au nom de la République, une et indivisible!"

That, of course, was a command which could not be disobeyed. Pierre pulled up his horses. The drivers of the covered carts did likewise.

The man from Paris put his head out of the window once more:

"What is it? he asked, ready to pulverize with his wrath whoever interfered with his progress. But he recognized the uniform of the Garde Nationale, and his tone was quite conciliatory as he reiterated:

"What is it, Citizen Soldier? My name is Rollon. I am on a mission here for the government. I have my papers to show—"

The captain of the Garde Nationale had ordered his men to halt. He himself came up to the coach and respectfully saluted the agent of the government.

"Not necessary, Citizen," he said. "My orders are to look out for you, and to see to your safety if necessary."

"I thank you, Citizen Soldiers. Then may we proceed? Everything is in order. We have not been molested."

"And you have your prisoners safely under surveillance, Citizen Rollon. Your pardon if I seem interfering. But my orders—"

"Do not apologize, I pray you, Citizen. We are all of us soldiers these days, and know the value of orders. My prisoners are safe, I think you, and under guard—"

The captain took a rolled parchment from inside his tunic and appeared to study its contents for a minute or two:

"I have orders," he said, referring to the scroll, from which dangled a heavy seal, "to inquire if you have effected the arrest of one Paul Notara, at one time schoolmaster in the village of Drumetaz, now suspected of treasonable traffic with the enemies of the people."

"Paul Notara?" the man from Paris ejaculated, "but he—"

"He is one of the blackest traitors known to the agents of the government," the captain of the Garde Nationale rejoined coolly. "My orders are that you, Citizen Rollon, will be escorting him from his native village to Thiers, where you will hand him over to the proper authority."

"He is known to have many sympathizers in the neighbourhood, who might mediate a coup in his favour. That is why I and my men have been ordered out to meet you and watch over your safety."

"I thank you, Citizen Captain," the man from Paris said, slightly upset by this contretemps, "but Notara has not been arrested—"

"Not been arrested?" the other ejaculated with a frown. "Then whom have you got here under escort, Citizen Rollon?" he asked in a loud, distinctly authoritative tone, and drew up his tall figure to look down disapprovingly on the agent from Paris.

"A ci-devant d'Ercourt with his son and daughter," replied the latter in a very much subdued voice— "traitors and aristos. We have proof—"

"That is all very well," the captain of the guard broke in impatiently. "But it is Notara whom you have been ordered to arrest."

"I had no such orders—"

"You will find it difficult to substantiate this statement, Citizen Rollon," the soldier remarked dryly. "You know what they are up in Paris. They send out an order — if it is not executed, there is trouble for someone, and—"

And he made a significant gesture with his hand across his neck. The man from Paris felt a cold shiver running down his spine.

"If we could get fresh horses," he said, "some of the men, or you yourself, Citizen Captain, could go back to Drumetaz. Paul Notara is easily found—"

"Not he. He will have slipped through your fingers by now—"

"Wouldn't you, Citizen Captain — ?"

"What? Go after him? Those are not my orders. And I don't know the fellow. I might arrest the wrong man."

"If only we could get fresh horses—" the man from Paris reiterated anxiously. "It is only a matter of three leagues—"

"Is that all?" the captain of the guard remarked. "I don't know the country, but three leagues — why that is only a matter of two or three hours there and back. There are a couple of horses in the house yonder. We can requisition those." And he indicated the lonely house by the side of the road.

"I have half a dozen men here," the man from Paris explained eagerly, "whom I enrolled into our new Gendarmerie Nationale. With fresh horses — as you say we can requisition them — they can be here with Paul Notara in less than three hours, allowing for every contingency."

"Well," the soldier rejoined, "in my opinion you will do wisely to send some men along. I can lend you two of my own, and in the meanwhile if you will honour me, Citizen Rollon, by drinking a glass of our wine with me in yonder house, you will not perhaps find time hang too heavily on your hands. Your volunteers can join up with my men over a few litres of that same sour wine. As for your prisoners," he concluded with a pleasant laugh, "methinks we are in sufficient numbers to see that they do not escape."

The agent from Paris felt very much relieved in his mind. There had been a moment during his conversation with the captain of the guard when he feared that there might be trouble for him over this Notara affair. Not that he had been guilty of negligence. He had not received any orders, and though he intended to keep an eye on Paul Notara, he did not think that the time was yet ripe for his arrest, but apparently the authorities in Paris thought otherwise.

It was finally decided that three of the men from Drumetaz, accompanied by two soldiers of the Garde Nationale, should go back to the village in one of the covered carts, and bring back Paul Notara with them. The horses were duly requisitioned from the caretaker of the Holmes' house, no questions being asked as to where these horses came from — stolen, no doubt — but anyway they were fresh and well-fed. The man from Paris gave all instructions to his volunteers. The prisoners were ordered to get out of the wagons: they were conveyed into the house: a room was found for them to sit in from which escape would be impossible, and finally the covered cart with its fresh pair of horses was sent merrily on its way.

Paul Notara, the village schoolmaster, who had not age-old traditions of dignity and caste to keep up, put up a strenuous fight when in the afternoon of that same day three of his own friends, together with a couple of men wearing the uniform of the Garde Nationale, invaded his little home and demanded possession of his person. Two of the men from the village, who had tricolour badges on their arms, and carried bayonets which they did not know how to use, laid hands on him, and he knocked them down. He fought like a lion and like a lion was powerful, but in the end he was brought to the ground by the men in uniform: his arms were strapped together behind his back, and he was flung somewhat roughly into the bottom of a covered cart. His friends from the village had no feelings of tenderness for him just then. To keep him from kicking, which he persistently did, they put their feet on him, and as he was still showing fight one of the men in uniform gave him a crack on the head which eventually calmed him, and partly deprived him of consciousness.

It was half-past four in the afternoon when the driver of the cart finally pulled up outside the Holmes' house. Here he and the two other valiant gendarmes had made sure to find their comrades and also the black-coated man from Paris. But instead of these familiar faces, they saw before them the captain of the Garde Nationale who, taking no notice of them or of the prisoner, at once spoke some sort of gibberish to the two men in uniform who had jumped down lightly from the cart. Before they had time to recover from their surprise they were seized and pushed and dragged into the house. In the struggle they quite forgot to use their bayonets: they were bewildered, helpless, and as the interior of the house was very gloomy, they could not even see exactly what was happening, nor whither they were being led. But after a moment or so they were conscious that they were being unceremoniously dragged down some stairs, thrust into a room which smelt of wine and which was very nearly pitch dark. They were thrown rather violently forward and this caused them to stumble and fall on their knees. Whilst they struggled to their feet they heard the door slammed behind them, and a key turned in the lock: then loud and merry laughter, retreating footsteps and nothing more.

A wan, grey light was peeping in shyly through a grated window high up in the wall. Gradually the eyes of these valiant gendarmes became accustomed to the gloom. They saw that they were shut into what looked like a cellar, and that in a distant corner of the place there was a litter of straw. On this litter reclined their three comrades. They were fast asleep, and the sound of their stertorous breathing broke what otherwise would have been an unpleasant silence. The smell of sour wine was very insistent, and there were three empty mugs lying on the floor, all of which went to prove that these other three valiant gendarmes had been prisoners here for some time and had employed that time pleasantly for themselves. The three new-comers therefore felt it incumbent upon them to follow so good an example, and we may take it that in a very short while they, too, after copious libations of sour wine, had found a rest on the litter of straw, and mingled their melodious snores with those of their companions.

On the floor above, on the other hand, events and incidents were of an entirely different nature. Paul Notara, still rather dazed from the crack on the head which he had received, and the airless drive beneath the feet of the gendarmes, allowed himself to be dragged out of the cart quietly enough. He was then conveyed into a sparsely furnished room, where he was left to meditate in quietude on the strange events of which he had been the unwilling hero. In an adjoining room the two men who wore the uniform of the Garde Nationale, and who had helped to bring Notara hither were plying their captain with questions. They were speaking English: a strange enough proceeding on the part of men who wore the uniforms of the newly created French Republic.

"I suppose he put up a fight?" the captain was asking.

"Like the very devil," one of the men replied.

"We had to knock him down, before we got him," added the other.

"But what happened here?" they both asked, almost simultaneously.

"Everything that we foresaw," the chief replied gaily. "As soon as your wagon was out of earshot we seized hold of that villainous agent, and of the three valiant pseudo-gendarmes. These three we locked up in the cellar down below, where their three companions have just joined them as you know. The black-coated villain I've got locked up in an attic room upstairs. You should have seen him. I don't think I ever saw a more ridiculous, futile, and ponderous rage."

"But what about the owner of this tumble-down place?"

"A good sort," the chief replied: "but ground down by poverty. I couldn't make him see the humour of the situation, but he liked the colour of my money. Poor wretch, he would have sold his soul for less. Anyway, he has agreed to release all the prisoners early to-morrow morning. They might burst themselves with rage before then, but will not die of inanition."

"And what about the d'Ercourts?"

The chief was silent for a moment or two: his earnest, deep-set eyes reflected the sympathy which he felt for that sorely-stricken family.

"Poor people," he said, "I don't think they quite realize yet that they have found a haven at last. For three years and more they have lived on the brink of a volcano, not knowing what day, what hour, death would claim them. Aline, if you will believe me, had, I am sure, made up her mind to accept Notara's proposals, and to barter herself against safety for her brother and father. How short-lived her own and Notara's safety would have been she doesn't quite realize even now, and my impression is that in her heart she already regrets that that bargain did not come off."

"You think that she has fallen in love with Notara?"

"I am sure of it. You should have seen the anxiety with which she inquired after him. I tested her by hinting at the danger that threatened him, and she turned grey to the lips."

"What an idyll!"

"Do not laugh, Tony: Notara has much good in him, and he worships Aline d'Ercourt. Over in England he'll find some employment as a teacher. He will marry Aline in spite of her father's protests, and her brother's wrath, and they will be as happy as two children whom resentment and hatred have never touched. What think you, Ffoulkes, of the idyll?"

"That it shall have my blessing. I never trusted Fanshawe myself: and he would have made such a bad husband for poor Aline."

"By the way," Lord Tony put in, "what has become of Fanshawe?"

"He is at the moment, I imagine, looking forward to meeting Aline at the postern gate: I scribbled a few words which I gave to his crippled messenger to give to him, because I wanted him to be just where I could find him. There are two or three self-constituted

gendarmes lying in wait for him—”

“Poor brute — but in that case—”

“Don’t say poor brute,” the chief put in quietly. “I am going straight back now to look after him. No harm shall come to him — I’ll see to that.”

“You are going back?” Ffoulkes ejaculated. “Percy, you don’t mean that?”

“Why, of course I do. You don’t think that I’m going to let that boy perish here in this foreign land, just because he suffered from a super-access of jealousy. Do you?”

Neither Lord Tony nor Sir Anthony Ffoulkes replied to that. They knew the indomitable Scarlet Pimpernel far too well to argue with him, where a question of mercy and self-sacrifice was on the tapis. Fanshawe had sinned and grievously sinned, and by his action had not only wellnigh ruined the plan which had for its object the safety of the d’Ercourt family, but he had also jeopardized the safety of his chief, and of his friends. Had he been seen by one of the government spies giving the letter and the money to the cripple on the previous night, the very lives of his chief and his friends would have been in jeopardy, and at best all would have been up with the plan for the safety of the d’Ercourts and of Notara. Fortunately Blakeney had kept an eye on him and followed him as far as the cabaret first, and then to the crossroads.

“The great difficulty — the only real difficulty in fact,” Blakeney went on, explaining to his friends, “was getting the d’Ercourts first, and then Notara away from their own village, where eyes made keen by hatred and cupidity were intent upon their every movement. The only way to accomplish this was to make those village idiots and that blatant government agent bring them along here themselves. Now that we have them well away from Drumetaz we can convey them easily enough to the Swiss frontier, by way of Grenoble. All you have to do now is to march as far as Courpière. You know the farmhouse where we spent a couple of days last week?”

“Yes.”

“The man is keeping eight or ten horses in readiness there for you: also a few more of these uniforms. I will explain to our friends, and also to Mlle Aline, that they will have to don the uniforms. Ffoulkes will act as your captain, and I will in any event be with you before noon to-morrow with young Fanshawe. I have got the passports and necessary papers from our usual source, but I don’t think we shall require them, for we’ll make such a fine cavalcade and carry ourselves so boldly that no one will dare interfere with a platoon of the Garde Nationale out on the road, in the execution of duty. It won’t be the first time,” he went on with his infectious laugh, “that we have carried such a situation off successfully, and I’ll warrant ye that we are over the Swiss frontier within forty-eight hours.”

“And now,” he concluded, “I’ll have a little talk with our friend Notara. In half an hour I’ll have him as gentle as a lamb. When he knows that Aline is of the party — well! I put it to you all — how would you take the situation?”

And it did not take Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., more than half an hour to make the unfortunate schoolmaster understand what a blessing from Heaven had descended upon him. The prospect of journeying to Switzerland and thence through Belgium to distant England, all in the company of Aline d’Ercourt, was one which appeared to him like a journey through Elysian fields. Nor, it must be admitted, was Aline averse to the prospect either. Ugly, embittered as was Paul Notara, there was something about him, his constant love, his gentleness allied to his just resentment which had aroused her pity already, and in the heart of a woman of Aline’s temperament there is but a short step from pity to love.

M. le Comte d’Ercourt took all the bewildering events of his rescue and proposed journey to England with the same stoic calm with which he had accepted his journey to a likely death. As to Notara, he was still of very little account in his sight, so he gave the ex-schoolmaster but few of his thoughts. But his gratitude to his rescuers was real, dignified, and without bounds.

“The English,” he said, “are the traditional enemies of my country: but you, milor, have shown me to-day the most perfect type of a gentleman and a sportsman it has ever been my good fortune to meet. I thank you for the lesson as much as for what you have done for me and mine.”

After which the little party was ready to make a start for Courpière: the prisoners entered one of the covered wagons: Notara took the reins, and the six English gentlemen in the uniform of the Garde Nationale marched alongside, as their escort.

Aline was the last to step into the cart. Just before she did so, and when her father, her brother and Paul Notara were already installed, she turned with a whole-hearted impulse to the man to whom she owed so much.

“Milor,” she said sweetly in the little bit of broken English which she knew, “will you let me — ?”

“I will let you do nothing,” Sir Percy broke in gaily, “but give me a kiss.”

She flew into his arms and kissed him on both cheeks.

“Be kind to my friend Paul,” he whispered in her ear.

“Oh — but milor—” she retorted, while a deep blush spread over her cheeks.

She sprang lightly up into the cart, and her eyes remained fixed on his tall, elegant figure as it gradually receded from her sight. She thought he would be coming, too. When she realized that he was remaining behind she called impulsively to Lord Tony who was marching close beside the cart.

“Let us go back! Oh, Holy Virgin! We must not leave him here. Milor, milor! how could you leave your friend — ? I’ll not go — Holy Virgin, protect him—”

She would have jumped out of the cart, only that her father held her back.

“God will protect him, Aline,” he said. “It is not for us to question the actions of such a fine and gallant gentleman.”

“He would not listen to you, if you did, sir,” Lord Tony said with a laugh.

“But when will we see him again?” Aline cried.

“Did you not hear him say that he will join us at Courpière to-morrow — ?”

“But how do you know that he will be able to come? How do you know — ?”

“Because he said so,” Lord Tony replied simply. “The Scarlet Pimpernel never fails in what he has set himself to do.”

Nor did he in the matter of Lord Fanshawe, who that same evening lurked around the purlieu of the château de Montbrison, forgetful of his friends, of his chief and of the oath which bound him to the fortunes. The watchful eyes of two members of the Garde Nationale were upon him — and so were those of the chief whom he had betrayed. But that is another story.

A CHILD OF THE REVOLUTION

Chapter I

"In Heaven's name, what has happened to the child?"

This exclaimed Marianne Vallon when, turning from her wash-tub, she suddenly caught sight of André at the narrow garden gate.

"In Heaven's name!" she reiterated, but only to herself, for Marianne was not one to give vent to her feelings before anyone, not even before her own son.

She raised her apron and wiped her large, ruddy face first and then her big, capable hands, all dripping with soapsuds; after which she stumped across the yard to the gate: her sabots clacked loudly against the stones, for Marianne Vallon was a good weight and a fair bulk; her footsteps were heavy, and her movements slow.

No wonder that the good soul was, inwardly, invoking the name of Heaven, for never in all his turbulent life had André come home looking such a terrible object. His shirt and his breeches were hanging in strips; his feet, his legs, the whole of his body, and even his face, were plastered with mud and blood. Yes, blood! Right across his forehead, just missing his right eye, fortunately, there was a deep gash from which the blood was still oozing and dripping down his nose. His lip was cut and his mouth swollen out of all recognition.

"In Heaven's name!" she reiterated once more, and aloud this time, "thou little good-for-nothing, what mischief hast thou been in in now?"

Marianne waited for no explanation; obviously the boy was not in a fit state to give her any. She just seized him by the wrist and dragged him to her washtub. It was not much Marianne Vallon knew of nursing or dressing of wounds, but her instinct of cleanliness probably saved André life this day, as it had done many a time before. Despite his protests, she stripped him to the skin; then she started scrubbing.

Soap and water stung horribly, and André yelled as much with impatience as with pain; he fought like a young demon, but his mother, puffing like a fat pug dog, imperturbable and energetic, scrubbed away until she was satisfied that no mud or dirt threatened the festering of wounds. She ended by holding the tousled young head under the pump, swilling it and the lithe, muscular body down with plenty of cold water.

"Now dry thyself over there in the sun," she commanded finally, satisfied that in his present state of dripping nudity he couldn't very well get into mischief again. Then, apparently quite unruffled by the incident, she went back to her washtub. This sort of thing happened often enough; sometimes with less, once or twice with even more disastrous results. Marianne Vallon never asked questions, knowing well enough that the boy would blurt out the whole story all in good time: she didn't even glance round at him as he lay stretched out full length, arms and legs outspread, as perfect a specimen of the young male as had ever stirred a mother's pride, the warm July sun baking his skin to a deeper shade of brown and glinting on the ruddy gold of the curls which clustered above his forehead and all around his ears.

"What a beautiful boy!" strangers had been heard to exclaim when they happened to pass down the road and caught sight of André Vallon bending to some hard task in garden or field.

"What a beautiful boy!" more than one mother in the village had sighed before now, half in tenderness, half in envy. And "André Vallon is so handsome!" tall girls not yet out of their teens would whisper, giggling, to one another. If Marianne Vallon's heart swelled with pride when she overheard some of this praise, she never showed it. No one really knew what went on behind that large red face of hers, which some wag in the village had once compared to a bladder of lard. People called her hard and unfeeling because she was not wont to indulge in those "Mon Dieu!"s and "Sainte Vierge!"s when she passed the time of day with her neighbours, or in any of the "Mon chou"s and "Mon pigeon"s when she spoke to her André.

She just went about her business in and around her cottage, or at the château when she wanted up there to do the washing, uncomplaining, untiring, making the most of the meagre pittance which was all that was left to her now of a once substantial fortune. Her husband had died a comparatively rich man — measured by village standards, of course. He had left his widow a roomy cottage, with its bit of garden and a few hectares of land whereon she could plant her cabbages, cultivate her vines, keep a few chickens and graze a cow. But, bit by bit, the land had to be sold in order to meet the ever growing burden of taxes, of seigniorial dues, to be paid by those who had so little to others who seemed to have so much, of tithes and rents and rights, all falling on the shoulders of the poor toilers of the land, while the seigneurs were exempt from all taxation. Then came two lean years — drought lasting seven months in each case, resulting in a total failure of the crops and poor quality of the wine. André was ten when the last piece of land was sold, which his father had acquired and his mother tended with the sweat of her brow; he was twelve when first he saw his mother stooping over her own washtub. Hitherto, Annette from down the village had come daily to do the rough work of the household; then one day she didn't come. André took no notice. It was nothing to him that at dinner-time it was his mother who brought in the soup tureen, that it was she who carried away the plates and the knives, and that she disappeared into the kitchen after dinner instead of sitting in the old wing chair sipping her glass of wine, the one luxury she had indulged in of late. Annette or Maman, what cared he who brought him his dinner? He was just a child.

But when he saw his mother at the washtub with a huge coarse apron round her portly person, her sleeves tucked up above those powerful arms, the weight of which he had so often felt on the rear part of his person when he had been a naughty boy, then he began to ask questions.

And Marianne told him. He was only twelve at the time, and she did not mince matters. The sooner he knew, the better. The sooner he spared her those direct questions and those inquiring looks out of his great dark eyes, the sooner, she thought, would he become a fine man. So she told him that the patrimony which his father had left in trust for him had all dwindled away, bit by bit, because the tax collector's visits were getting more and more frequent, the sums demanded more and more beyond her capacity to pay. There were the imposts due to the seigneur, and the tallage levied by the King; there were the rates due to the commune, and the tithes due to the Church.

Pay! Pay! Pay! It was that all the time. And two years' drought, during which the small revenues from the diminished land had shrunk only too palpably. Pay! Pay! Pay! And there were the seigniorial rights. No corn or wine or live stock allowed to be sold in the

market until Monseigneur's wine and corn and live stock, which he wished to sell, had all been disposed of. No wine press or mill to be used, except those set up by Monseigneur and administered by his bailiffs, who charged usurious prices for their use. Pay! Pay! Pay! It was best that André should know. He was twelve — almost a man. It was time that he knew.

And André had listened while Maman talked on that cold December afternoon three years ago, when the fire no longer blazed in the wide-open hearth because wood was scarce and no one was allowed to purchase any until Monseigneur's requirements were satisfied. André had listened, with those great inquiring eyes fixed upon his mother, his fingers buried in the forest of his chestnut curls, and his brows closely knit in the great endeavour to take it all in. He wanted to understand; to understand poverty as his mother explained it to him: the want of flour with which to make bread, the want of wood wherewith to make a fire, even the want of a bit of thread or a needle, simple tools with which his breeches and shirts — which were forever torn — could, as heretofore, be mended.

Poor? Yes, he was beginning to understand that he and Maman were now poor as Annette and her father down in the village were poor, so that Annette had to go and scrub floors in other people's houses and wash other people's soiled linen so as to bring a few sous home every day wherewith to buy salt and bread. Not that this primitive idea of poverty worried the young brain overmuch. It was not like a sudden descent from affluence to indigence. It was some time now since his favourite dishes had been put upon the table and since he had last wore a pair of shoes. The descent into the present slough of want had been very gradual, and, childlike, he had not noticed it.

Nor did his mother's lengthened homily make a very deep impression upon his mind. From a race of children of the soil he had inherited a sound measure of philosophy and a passionate love of the countryside. While he could run about in the meadows, or watch the rabbits at evening scurrying away across the fields, while he could pick black berries in the hedgerows and gather the windfalls in the neighbouring orchards, while he could scramble up the old walnut trees and furtively touch the warm smooth eggs in the nests among the branches, he was perfectly happy.

What he didn't like was when Marianne set him to do the tasks which used to devolved on Annette. He didn't like scrubbing the kitchen floor, and he hated wringing out the linen and hanging it up to dry. But it never as much entered his head to disobey. Mother was not one of those whom anyone had ever thought of disobeying, André least of all. She was large and fat and comfortable, and — especially in the olden days — she loved a good joke and would laugh heartily till the tears rolled down her fat cheeks, but she knew how to use the flat of her hand, as André had often learned to his cost. She was not one of those who believed in sparing the rod, and many a time had André gone to sleep on his narrow plank bed lying on his side because it hurt him to lie on his back.

But the fear of his mother's heavy hand did not really keep him out of mischief. As he grew older the desire for mischief grew up with him. A vague sense of injustice would, moreover, inflame that desire until it led him to acts which caused not only Mother's hand to descend upon him, but, also, of a certain hard stick, which was very painful indeed. That time when he chased Lucile Godart, the miller's daughter, all down the road and then kissed her in sigh of Hector Talon, her fiancé, who was short, fat, and bandy-legged, and was too slow in his movements to come to her rescue, was a memorable occasion, for, though Hector had not felt sufficiently valiant to administer punishment to the young rascal, Godart, the miller, had no such qualms. And André got his punishment twice over, Mother's being by far the more severe. But he said that it was worth it. To kiss a girl, he declared, when she is placid and willing was well enough, but when she was a little spitfire like Lucile and fought and scratched like a wildcat, then to hold her down, kiss her throat and shoulder and, finally, her mouth, that was as great a lark as ever came a man's way — and well worth a whipping, or even two. What Lucile thought about it he neither knew nor cared.

Chapter II

The incident with Lucile Godart had occurred two years ago. André was thirteen then, and already the girls were wont to blush when their eyes met his, so dark and bold.

Since the Lucile had married her Hector, who was now an assistant bailiff on Monseigneur's estate and lived with his young wife in a stone house on the edge of the wood. At the side of the house there was a field, which at eventide was alive with rabbits. That field exercised an irresistible fascination over André Vallon. He would cower behind the hedge and for hours watch the little cottontails bobbing in and out of the scrub. More than once he had been warned off by Hector Talon; once he had actually been caught unawares and driven off with some hard kicks.

But to-day a tragedy had occurred.

Lying on his back at this moment on the hard stones not far from his mother's washtub, and in the state in which God first made him, he was perhaps wondering whether in this instance the game was going to be worth the candle. He was too old now to get a whipping from Mother, and he did not think that what he had done was punishable by law. Still, Hector Talon was a spiteful beast, and Lucile... Well, the little she-devil would get her deserts one day, on the faith of André Vallon.

While the hot July sun was baking his skin and staunching the blood of his wounds, his brain was working away on the possible consequences of to-day's adventure. He wondered what his mother thought about it. For the moment she appeared to be immersed, both with hands and with mind, in her washtub. Her broad back was turned towards him, and André thought that it looked uncompromising. Still, Mother would have to know sooner or later, so better now, perhaps, while she was busy with other things. And before he knew that he had begun to think aloud, words were pouring out of him a kind of passionate outburst of resentment.

"Rabbits! Rabbits!... Why! there are thousands and thousands of them in that field," he went on with childish sense of exaggeration. "M. Talon himself is obliged to put fencing round his kitchen garden to keep them away. And I didn't put up any snare or trap — I swear I didn't. There was nobody about, and I just got over the fence to see.... Well, I don't know. I just did get over the fence, and there in the long grass was the tiniest wee rabbitkins you ever saw! He was all crouching together till he looked like a ball of brown fur, and his round eyes were wide open, looking — I suppose he was horribly frightened — so frightened that he couldn't move. Anyway, I just stooped to pick him up. The house was all quiet, there didn't seem to be any one at home, and that brute of a dog of theirs was on the chain."

André paused a moment; his hand had gone mechanically up to his forehead, to his lips, his shoulder, all of which were smarting horribly. Perhaps, he thought, it was time Mother said something, but she just went on with her washing, and all that André saw of her was that large, uncompromising back.

"How could I guess?" the boy went on; and suddenly he sat up, his brown arms encircling his knees, his chest striped with the red of the blood oozing from his shoulder. "How could I guess that that little vixen Lucile was spying from the window? I had got the young beggar by the ears, and I remember just thinking at the moment what luscious stew he was going to make. Of course, I had no intention of putting him down again, and I was trying to tuck him out of sight inside my shirt. And then, all of a sudden, I heard Lucile's voice calling to that dog of hers: 'Hue! César! hue!' What a devil! My god! what a devil! That great brute César! He was on me before I could drop the rabbit and take to my heels. He was on me and got me on the shoulder. Then I did drop the rabbit, and it scooted away. I wanted both my hands to defend myself. I knew it would be no use trying to run, and César would have had me by the throat if I hadn't got him. And there was that little devil Lucile, running down the field and shouting, 'Hue! hue!' all the time."

André was warming to his story. He was fighting his battle with César over again. His nostrils quivered; perspiration glistened on his forehead; his eyes, wide open and dilated, were as dark as the blackberries in the hedgerows.

"I got César by the throat," he went on in a shaky, hoarse voice, his words coming out jerkily, interspersed with gasps that were half laughter and half tears. "I squeezed and I squeezed, and all the while his horrid hot breath made me feel so sick that I thought I should have to let go. Once he got me on the forehead, and once I felt his nasty slimy teeth right inside my mouth. That gave me the strength to squeeze tighter, for I thought that I didn't he would probably kill me. Then that little devil Lucile began to laugh, and I could hear bits of words that she said, 'That will teach you to insult honest girls. César also thinks it a lark to get a boy down a kiss him on the shoulder, what? And on the mouth. Hue, César! hue!' Isn't she a troll, Mother, a witch, a vixen, a she-devil, nursing vengeance like this for two years — or is it three? — but I'll kiss her again. I will! And what's more, I will..."

Once more André paused. His mother's broad back was still turned towards him, but she had turned her head, and through the corner of her eye she was looking at him. That is why he did not complete the sentence or put into words the ugly thought that had taken root in his brain. He remained quite still and silent for a moment or two, then he said abruptly:

"I never let go of César's throat till I had squeezed the life out of him."

But at this bald statement of fact, Marianne Vallon's outward placidity gave way. "Jésus! Mon Dieu!" she exclaimed, and faced that naked young daredevil with horror and anxiety distorting her squab features. "Not content with poaching in M. Talon's field, thou hast killed his dog?"

"He would have killed me else. Would'st rather César had killed me, Mother?" André retorted with an indifferent shrug of his lean shoulders.

"Don't be a fool, André!" Marianne Vallon went on once more, in her usual placid way. "M. Talon — dost not know it? — has only to go before the magistrate and denounce thee—"

"Well, they can't hang me for killing a dog in self-defense, and I didn't poach the rabbit."

"No, but they can..."

It was the mother's turn to leave the phrase incomplete which involuntarily had come to her lips. Just like André a moment ago, she did not wish to put into words the thoughts that had come tumbling into her brain and were filling her heart with the foreknowledge of a calamity which she knew she could not avert.

If she could she would have packed André off somewhere, to friends, relations, anywhere; away from the spite of Talon, who already had a grudge against the child and who would feel doubly vindictive now. But when Marianne Vallon first fell on evil days she lost touch with her former friends or relations, who, in their turn, were content to forget her. André must stop at home and face the calamity like a man.

It came soon enough.

Talon, who was a man of consideration in the commune, laid a complaint before M. le Substitut against André Vallon for poaching and savage assault on a valuable dog, resulting in the latter's death.

André, in consideration of his youth — he was only fifteen — was condemned to be publicly whipped. M. le Substitut told him that he could consider himself most fortunate in being let off with so mild a punishment.

Chapter III

A blind unreasoning rage, an irresistible thirst for revenge; a black hatred of all those placed in authority; of all those who were rich, or independent, or influential, filled André Vallon's young soul to the exclusion of every other thought and every other aspiration.

He was only fifteen, and in his mind he measured the long years that lay before him in which he could find the means, the power, to be even with those who had inflicted that overwhelming shame upon him. It was not the blows he minded.... Heavens above! that lithe, young body of his was inured to every kind of hardship, to every kind of pain. It was not the blows, it was the shame. Talon, who was influential and who was egged on by his wife, had prevailed upon the magistrate to make an order that all the inhabitants of the commune who were not engaged in work were to be present in the market place to see justice done on the young reprobate. And these were still the days when no one dared go against an order, however absurd and however unjust, framed by M. le Substitut du Procureur Général.

Monseigneur also came in his coach and brought friends to see the spectacle. There were two ladies among them who put up their lorgnettes and stared at the straight, sinewy young body, so like a statue of the Hermes with its slender, perfectly modelled limbs and narrow hips, and its broad shoulders and wide chest, smooth and dark as if cast in bronze.

"But the boy is an Adonis!" one of the ladies exclaimed in ecstasy.

"Quelle horreur!" she exclaimed a moment later when the stripes fell thick and fast on the smooth back she had admired. The days were not yet very far distant when ladies of high degree would crowd on balconies and windows to watch the execution of conspirators who perhaps had been their friends before then.

But for André Vallon, the bitter, humiliating shame!

His mother was waiting for him when he got home. She had prepared a little bit of hot supper for him, to which sympathisers in the village had also contributed: things he liked — a little hot soup, a baked potato, a bit of bread and salts. André ate because he was a young, healthy animal and was hungry, but he never said a word. Silent and sullen, he sat and ate. Not a tear came to those big dark eyes of his, in which there burned a fierce hatred and an overpowering humiliation.

Marianne, of course, said nothing. It was never her way to talk. She saw to it that André had his supper, and when he had finished she took him by the wrist and led him to his little room at the back. She undressed him and washed and dried his poor aching young body; then she wrapped him up in one of her wide gingham skirts which had become soft as silk after many washings, and laid him down on his narrow plank bed with his head resting on an old coat of his father's, which had survived the dispersal of most of the household goods. Before she had finished tucking him up in her wool shawl he was asleep.

She watched for a moment or two the beautiful young face, with the blue-veined lids veiling in sleep the sullen, glowering look of the eyes; stooped and softly touched the moist forehead with her lips. Two heavy tears found their way down her furrowed cheeks; a heavy sigh came through the firm obstinate lips, and slowly she came down on her knees. With clasped hands flung across the bed, she remained kneeling there for some time, praying for guidance, for strength to fight a brave fight with this turbulent young soul, and for power to guide it in the path of rectitude.

This was the year of grace 1782, and Marianne Vallon, in common with many men and women in the land these days, was not blind to the tempest which already was gathering force in every corner of France, framed by the ardour of young enthusiasts with a grievance like her André, or by the greed of profligate agitators, soon to burst in all its fury, sweeping before it all the old traditions, the old beliefs, the old righteousness of this country and its people, and inflicting wounds that it would take centuries to heal.

Chapter IV

M. le Curé de Val-le-Roi, in the province of Burgundy, where they make such excellent wine, was a kindly and worthy man. He came of a good family — the Rosemondes of Nièvre, and though his intelligence was perhaps not of the highest order, his piety was sincere and his human understanding very real.

On the tragic day of André Vallon's public punishment he stood beside the whipping post the whole time that Marius Legendre — the local butcher employed by the Commune to administer punishment to juvenile offenders — was lamming into the boy. André, with teeth set and eyes resolutely closed, appeared not to hear the Curé's gentle words, exhorting him to patience and humility.

Patience and humility, forsooth! Never was there a vainer exhortation.

It was only when it was all over and he was freed from the post that André opened his eyes and cast a glowering, rankling look around the market square. Legendre had thrown down the whip and was handing the lad his shirt and coat. André snatched them out of his hand, and Legendre — a worthy man, not unkind — smiled indulgently. The two gendarmes stood at attention, waiting for orders, their faces wooden and impassive. Part of the crowd had already dispersed: the men silent and sullen, the women sniffing audibly. The younger ones — girls and boys — muttered words of pity or of wrath. Monseigneur was standing beside the door of his coach, helping the ladies to step back into the carriage. One of them — the one with the lagnette — cast a final backward glance at André; then piped in a high-pitched, flutelike voice:

"See, my dear Charles, so would a fallen angel have looked had the Almighty punished the rebels with thongs."

A man in the forefront of the crowd, close to Monseigneur's coach, laughed obsequiously at the sally. André saw him. It was Talon. Lucile stood beside her husband. When she met André's glance, she, too, gave a laugh, but quickly turned her head away. Then only did a groan rise from the boy's breast. It was a groan of an overwhelming, impotent rage. His breath came whistling through his teeth. He made a movement like a wild beast about to spring, but instinctively the gendarmes had already placed each a hand upon his shoulder and held him down. André was weak after the punishment, though he would not have admitted it even to himself; but his knees shook under him, and he nearly collapsed under the heavy hands of the gendarmes. M. le Curé murmured gentle words. "My son, remember that our Lord—"

André turned on him with a cry that was like a snarl. "Go away! Go away!" he muttered hoarsely. "I hate you."

But the Curé did not go away. He stayed to help the lad on with his shirt and coat; then, when André, avoiding the crowd, went staggering round a back street and then down the lane towards his mother's cottage, the kindly old priest followed him at a short distance, ready to render assistance should the boy be seized with giddiness and collapse on the way. Only when he saw Marianne standing at the narrow garden gate waiting for her son did he went his way back to his presbytery. Contrary to his usual habit, he did not take his breviary out of his pocket or murmur orisons while he walked. With his soutane hitched up around his waist, he strode along, obviously buried in thought, for now and again he would shake his head and then nod, as if in secret communion with himself.

The results of M. le Curé's agitation were, firstly, a lengthy interview with Monseigneur, and secondly a summons to Marianne Vallon to bring her son André up to the château. Monseigneur desired to see him.

André, of course, refused to go. "I hate him!" he declared when M. le Curé came to announce what he thought was great news for Marianne and the boy.

"Monseigneur," the priest had explained, "was interested. He is always so kind and so gracious, but when I spoke to him of André he was pleased to be genial, facetious; he toyed, as one might say, with the idea of doing something for the boy. Then there were the ladies. Madame la Marquise d'Epinay put in a word here and there, so charming she was, so sprightly. She spoke of André as the bronze Hermes, and though the latter we know is nothing but a heathen god, and I would not care to think that our André had any likeness to such idolatrous things, I could not have it in my heart to reprove the witty lady, especially as Monseigneur appeared more and more diverted. Then Mademoiselle Aurore came in — such a pretty child — her governess was with her, and I gathered at once she knew something about our André — domestics will talk, you know, my good Marianne — and Mademoiselle was even more interested than Monseigneur. She put her little hands together and begged and begged of her father that André might come up to the château, as she desired to see him. And Monseigneur, who since the death of Madame la Duchesse gives in to all the child's whims, gave me permission to bring our André to him."

The good Curé spoke thus lengthily and uninterruptedly, for Marianne, absorbed in her knitting, said never a word: she was never much of a talker, and André only glowered and muttered unintelligible words between his teeth. There was perhaps something a little unctuous, a little complacent in M. le Curé's verbiage. He was not forgetting that besides being the incumbent of this poor little village, he was also by birth a Rosemonde de Nièvre, and that by tradition and upbringing he belonged to the same caste as Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny de Borne, whose gracious sympathy in favour of "our André" he had been fortunate enough to arouse.

"I hate him! I will not go!" was all that could be got out of André that day. "You can drag me to that accursed château," he went on sullenly, "as you did to the whipping post, but willingly I will not go."

"But, my dear child," the Curé protested, "Monseigneur said—"

"Whatever he said," the boy broke in with a snarl, like an animal that is being teased, "may his words choke him! — I hate him!"

"You are overwrought and agitated, my boy," the priest said placing his well manicured podgy white hand on André's shoulder, who promptly shook it off. "When the good God and your dear patron saint have prevailed over your rebellious spirit, you will realize how much Monseigneur's kindness and Mademoiselle Aurore's intercession—"

"Don't speak to me of those women up at the château," André cried hoarsely, "or I shall see red!"

Marianne Vallon at this point put down her knitting. She knew well enough that to carry on the discussion any further to-day would only drive the boy to exasperation. All that he had gone through in the past few days had, in a way, made a man of him, but a man with all a child's unreasoning resentment at what he deemed an injustice.

M. le Curé took the hint. With characteristic tact he changed the subject of conversation, spoke to Marianne on village matters — the washing of surplices which she had undertaken to do for a small stipend, and finally took his leave, deliberately ignoring André's

ill manners and glowering looks. At the door, however, he turned once more to where the boy sat, chin cupped in his hand, staring dully into the gathering shadows.

“Remember, my dear child,” he said with gentle earnestness; all his small, worldly ways drowned in a flood of genuine sympathy, “that your future does not belong entirely to yourself: your sainted mother works her fingers to the bone so that you should be clothed and fed. She performs menial tasks to which neither by birth nor upbringing was she ever ordained. Think of her, my lad, before you spurn the hand that can help you up the ladder that may lead you to an honourable career and give you the chance of repaying part of your debt to her.”

Mother and son spoke little to each other during the rest of the day. Marianne appeared more than usually busy with knitting and sewing and spoke even less than was her wont. After sundown André went out from a tramp in woods and fields. Ever since the fatal day he had made a point of wandering over the countryside only after dark. He dreaded to meet familiar faces in the country lanes, dreaded to see either compassion or ridicule in the glances that would meet his.

To-night his young soul was brimful with bitterness. Never before had he felt such an all-embracing hatred for everything, and every human being who had made possible the humiliation that had been put upon him. Childlike, he wandered down the lane past the house where lived Talon and his wife, the prime authors of the whole tragedy. He stood for a long time looking at the house. There were lights in one or two of the windows. The Talons were rich, they could afford candles. They were people of consideration. They got the ear of the Substitut and engineered his, André's, lasting disgrace. He hated them — hated their house, their garden, their flowers; he wished with all his might that some awful calamity would overtake them.

The fields around were bathed in moonlight; the air was fragrant and warm; a gentle breeze fluttered the branches of the forest trees, causing a gentle murmur to fill the night with its subtle sound. The scent of hay and clover rose from the adjoining meadows, and from the depths of the wood there came from time to time the melancholy call of a night bird or the crackling of trigs under tiny, furtive feet.

Only a very few days ago André would have revelled in all that: the little cottontails scurrying past, the barn-door owl flying by with great flapping of wings; fantastically shaped clouds veiling from time to time the face of the moon. All would have delighted him, those few short days ago. Now he had eyes only for that house of evil. He watched its windows till the lights were extinguished one by one, and then wished once more with all his might that hideous nightmares should disturb the sleep of those whom he hated so bitterly.

Chapter V

When André finally turned to go home again, it was close on midnight. Coming in sight of the cottage, he was surprised to see that, contrary to his mother's rigid rules of economy, there was still a light in the parlour. He pushed open the door and peeped in. Mother was sitting sewing by the light of a tallow candle. She looked up as he came in and gave him a welcoming smile. He thought she looked quite old, and her eyes were circled with red, as if she had been crying. But he pretended not to notice. Still, it was funny, her burning a candle so late at night when candles were so dear. And why did she look so tired and so old?

He asked no questions, however. Somehow he didn't feel as if he could say anything just then. He knew that presently his mother would come into his room to hear him say his prayers, to tuck him up in the old wool shawl and give him a last good-night kiss. Of late he had refused to say his prayers. *Le bon Dieu*, he thought, only bothered Himself about rich and powerful people — nobles, bishops, and such like — so what was the good of murmuring prayers that were never listened to and asking for things that were never granted? When Mother said her prayers as usual beside his bed in spite of his obstinacy, he turned his head sullenly away. He had even caught himself wishing that she would leave him alone, once he was in bed: alone, nursing his thoughts of future retribution on all those whom he hated so.

Strange that he never had the desire to talk to his mother about all that went on in his mind these days. Strange, seeing that hitherto he had always blurted out everything that troubled him, poured into her patient ear the full stories of his peccadillos, his adventures, anything and everything that passed through his mind. But now André had succeeded in persuading himself that his mother would not understand his feelings. She was, he thought, so patient and so devout that she would not sympathize with a man — a man! — who had been so deeply injured as himself. He felt that he had suddenly become a man — a man suffering an infinite wrong; and that Mother was only a woman, weak under the influence of priests and of their everlasting teachings of gentleness and humility. Men couldn't be gentle these days. They had suffered too long and too bitterly: crying wrongs, injustice that called to heaven for vengeance — only that heaven wouldn't hear. Well, if *le bon Dieu* wouldn't help the poor and the downtrodden to defend themselves against injustice, then they would fight on their own without help from anywhere.

Monseigneur and his sycophants! And those women with their perfumes and their silk dresses and their lorgnettes and their high-pitched voices! André hoped to God that he would live long enough to see them all eat the bread of humiliation as he himself had been forced to do.

At this point in his meditations Mother did come in. André did not hear her at first, for she had taken off her sabots and was in her stocking feet. It was only when she stood close beside his bed that he turned his head and saw her.

Of course, he felt sorry for her. Women were women, and therefore weaker vessels, unable to take in the vast thoughts and projects of men. But they were dear gentle creatures whose ministrations were essential to the well-being of the stronger, more intellectual sex. Therefore André felt very kindly disposed towards his mother just now: he would not have admitted for the world, even to himself, that at sight of her dear old face, with its furrowed cheeks and eyes too often stern, and yet always full of love, a great yearning seized him to bury his head in her ample bosom, to forget his manhood and be a child again. However, all he said for the moment was: "Not yet in bed, Mother? Isn't it very late?"

To which she replied cheerily, "It is, my cabbage, and fully time you were asleep."

She then knelt down beside his bed. André ought then to have jumped out of bed and knelt beside her to say his prayers. This had always been the rule every since he was old enough to babble his "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild..." and clasp his baby hands; even when he began to feel himself a man, he had readily complied with the rule. But for days now, when Mother knelt beside his bed and murmured, "Our Father which art in Heaven," he had turned his head stubbornly away, nor had he looked at her till she had finished her prayers. To-night, however, though he still felt wrathful and was too big a man to get out of bed, he kept his head turned towards her so that he could see her face. There was such a bright moon outside that he could see her quite plainly: her round flat face, her thin hair already streaked with gray, parted in the middle and fastened in a small tight bun on the top of her head. Her eyes were closed while she prayed with hands tightly clasped, her lips murmuring softly, "Forgive us our trespasses"; then all at once she raised her voice and said quite loudly, "As we forgive them that trespass against us."

"I won't! I won't!" André broke in involuntarily. "I'll never forgive them, never!"

But Marianne did not seem to hear. She finished her prayers and then remained for a time on her knees, gazing on the beautiful young face that meant all the world to her. Almost distorted now with wrath and obstinacy, it was none the less beautiful; with those large dark eyes that seemed forever to be inquiring, to be groping after something unattainable. Marianne's large, capable hand wandered lovingly over the hot, moist forehead and brushed back the unruly curls which fell, rebellious, over the brow. Without another word she pressed a kiss on the eyes, closed as she thought in sleep, and on the mouth through which the young passionate breath came in slow, measured cadence. Then she tiptoed out of the room.

André was not asleep. He had felt the kiss and tasted the salt moisture of his mother's tears on his lips. For a long, long while he remained lying on his back, with widely dilated eyes staring into the darkness above him. Through the chinks in the ill-fitting door he could perceive the feeble light of the tallow candle which still burned in the adjoining room. He heard the old church clock strike one, then the half hour then two. The moon had gone, the tiny room wherein stood the boy's small plank bed was in complete darkness, save for that dim streak of light underneath the door.

As noiselessly as he could André rose and tiptoed across the room. For a few seconds he listened, his ear glued to the keyhole, but all that he could hear was an occasional sigh, and once a sound like a broken sob. The door hung loosely on its hinges, he pulled it open. His mother was still sitting sewing by the feeble candlelight. André, leaning against the door jamb, stood mutely watching her.

She seemed very busy and never looked up once in his direction. She had a pair of breeches in her hands, had evidently been at work on them. Now she fastened off the cotton, broke it off, put down her needle. André watched her. She did look old, and there was a tear which had settled on the tip of her nose. She wiped it off with her apron and then held the breeches up with both hands to see if

more darning was needed. Satisfied that they were quite in order, she laid them down on the table, smoothed them out with both hands, then folded them carefully and put them to one side.

André thought: "Those are my breeches. She has tired herself out mending them." And the words which M. le Curé had spoken earlier in the day came hammering into his brain: "Remember, my child, that your future does not belong entirely to yourself. Your sainted mother works her fingers to the bone that you should be clothed and fed."

That was true, for there she was, working for into the night, mending his breeches, while he...

"Mother!" he said abruptly. "Do you wish me to go up to the château and see those people?"

She didn't give a start; obviously she knew that he was there. She was standing now with one hand resting on the table and peering over into the darkness to try and see him with her blinking, tired eyes.

"André! Why aren't you in bed?" she asked. "Go back at once."

"Mother!" he insisted.

"Yes, André?"

"Do you wish me to go to the château and see those people?"

"It might lead to something good for your future, my child. M. le Curé said that Monseigneur was kindly disposed."

"I have no decent clothes in which to go," the boy muttered, his sullen mood not yet quite gone.

"There are your new stockings which I have quite finished," Marianne rejoined quietly, "and I have done mending your best breeches. You can wear your father's Sunday coat and his buckled shoes — fortunately he was a small man, and you are half as tall already."

"Mother!" André exclaimed.

"Yes, André?"

"You have been working your fingers to the bone so that I should be clothed. M. le Curé said so."

"No, my child," Marianna said, smiling through an involuntary little sigh, "not to the bone."

"And did you sit up to-night because you — you —"

"I knew that you would want your best breeches — soon."

"You knew I would change my mind and go to the château?"

"Yes, André, I knew."

"How could you know, Mother?"

"I suppose your guardian angel must have told me. He knew."

"Mother!"

This time the cry came straight from the boy's heart. With one bound he was beside his mother and with his arms was encircling her knees. His tousled head was buried in her voluminous skirt. She fell back into her chair and drew the hot, aching young head against her breast. There, resting against that warm, downy pillow, all pretence at manhood was swamped in the grief of a child. André burst into a flood of tears, the first that had welled out of the bitterness of his heart since that awful day of disgrace. Marianne, with her kind fat arms wrapped round her most precious treasure, thanked God for those tears.

The tallow candle flickered and died out. The room was in darkness, only a pale light, the first precursor of dawn, came shyly peeping presently through the small uncurtained window. The distant church clock struck four. It was more than an hour since Marianne had moved. The child had cried himself to sleep, squatting on the floor, with his head on her lap, her hand resting on his curls. From time to time a sob shook the young frame; then even the sobs were stilled, and Marianne, stiff with sitting motionless, would not move for fear of waking him.

Chapter VI

If you should ever visit the Bourbonnais do not fail to go as far as Le Borne, on the outskirts of which stands the princely Château de Marigny. It is one of the most sumptuous survivals of medieval splendour, with its unique position on a spur of the Roches du Borne, commanding a gorgeous view over the valley of the Allier with its rippling winding stream, its spreading forests of beech and walnut and sycamore, its vine-clad slopes and picturesque villages — Val-le-Roi, Le Borne, Vanzy, and so on — peeping shyly through the trees.

Originally built in the twelfth century by Jean Duke of Burgundy, it was enlarged and enriched by each of his successors, until the great Duke Charles — known to history as the Connétable de Bourbon — as great in treachery as in doughty deeds, completed the work of making the Château de Marigny second to none in grandeur and magnificence. It was to him that King Henry VIII of England referred when he remarked to François I of France on the occasion of the meeting on the Field of the Cloth of Gold: "If I had so opulent a subject, I would soon have his head off."

François I had no occasion to follow his English friend's advice, for it was soon after that that the illustrious Connétable de Bourbon became a traitor to his country and sold his sword to the enemy of France, which was quite sufficient excuse for the King to declare the Duke's estates forfeit to the Crown. Some of these were subsequently sold and passed from hand to hand. The château, then known as Château de Borne, came into the possession of the Duc de Marigny, first cousin of King Henry of Navarre and a direct descendant of the Connétable who renamed it Marigny and added to his many titles that of De Borne.

Though the magnificence for which the old château was famous in the past — when 'twas said that Duke Charles kept five hundred men-at-arms within its precincts — was somewhat shorn of its dazzling rays, the present Duc de Marigny did, nevertheless, live there like a prince and entertain with lavish hospitality. These were the days, closely following on those of the Grand Monarque, when the king set the pace in splendour and prodigality and the great nobles thought it incumbent on them to emulate royal ostentation. It was the era of beautiful furniture and of exquisite silks and laces, of stately ceremonials both at court and at home, of gorgeous banquets, expensive food and wins, as well as of the aesthetic enjoyment of pictures, music, and the play. Money flowed freely into the coffers of those who had landed estates: the State favoured them, for not only were they free of taxation, but one privilege after another was conferred on them, and, quite naturally, they grasped these with both hands and then asked for more.

Cradled in the lap of luxury, wrapped up in cotton wool by sycophants and menials, they shut their eyes to the gather clouds of the inevitable Revolution. The cataclysm found them unprepared, scared, and astonished, like children awakened out of a dream. Most of them had not done blinking their eyes under the shadow of the guillotine. When they died, they died like heroes. They would have lived like heroes had they been given the lead, had they understood that the distant thunder of growing discontent among the people, the flashed of lightning of menace and revenge, were the precursors of a raging storm that threatened them, their traditions and their caste.

In this year of grace 1782 Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny, one of the richest and most distinguished members of the old French aristocracy, connected with the royal houses of Bourbon and Orléans, was certainly one of those who thought that most things were for the best in this best possible world. The only thing that ever troubled him was the occasional tightness of money. This was an unheard-of thing. The Duc de Marigny, cousin of kinds, short of money! in his father's day, my gad, sir! if there were no Jews to skin there were always those lazy, good-for-nothing peasants whose whole excuse for being alive at all was that they should provide their seigneur with everything he was pleased to want.

Those were the good old days. Now there was nothing but grumbling in the villages. Bad weather, poor harvest, bad luck. Eh, morbleu! Monseigneur knew well enough that the harvests were poor. If they weren't, he wouldn't be so terribly short of money; just when Aurore's birthday was coming on, too, and the château was going to be full of the most distinguished visitors that he had ever assembled under one roof. He was an amiable old gentleman, this descendant of the great Connétable: he did not aspire to have five hundred men-at-arms under his orders, but he did expect his house to be second to none in the matter of hospitality and of splendour. And Aurore meant half the world to him. He had been married three times: the first two duchesses had failed in their duty of presenting him with an heir, the third one turned her face to the wall and died when a tiny baby girl was first put against her breast. Monseigneur quickly consoled himself and would no doubt have brought a fourth duchess home to grace the head of the table only that his reputation of Bluebeard had made the eligible young ladies of his own rank chary of accepting so dangerous a position. Moreover, little tiny Aurore had already entwined himself around his fickle old heart. He forswore the delights of matrimony for the more durable ones of fatherhood, and devoted all the time that he could spare from the study of his own comforts to the furtherance of Aurore's enjoyment of life.

It is, perhaps, a little difficult to imagine a girl in her teens taking pleasure in games and pursuits which in these modern days would rouse the scorn of a child of seven — difficult to visualize that bright sunny day in July, 1782, when Aurore's birthday party, consisting of twenty or thirty of her friends in ages ranging from thirteen to twenty-three, spent their afternoon in playing blindman's bluff or hide-and-seek in the terraced gardens of Marigny. In and out the bosquest and parterres they darted like so many gaily plumaged birds, filling the air with their laughter and childish screams of delight, the while Monseigneur le Duc in his boudoir was giving M. Talon, his bailiff, a bad quarter of an hour.

"Mort de Dieu! you old muckworm!" was one of the many pleasant ways in which Monseigneur addressed the unfortunate Talon. "Have I not told you that I must have five thousand louis before the end of the month?"

"Yes, monseigneur," Talon replied obsequiously, "but—"

"There is no 'but' about it, my man, when I said 'must'—" Monseigneur broke in drily.

"The tallage has all been paid — the salt tax, the window tax—"

"Call it the harvest tax or any cursed name you choose, but find me the money, or else—"

"Monseigneur!" protested Talon, who was quaking in his buckled shoes, knowing well enough what menace was being held over his head.

"Or else," Monseigneur went on slowly, emphasizing his words, "you and your precious family quit my service; I have no use for incompetent menials."

"Monseigneur!" Talon protested again, and with hands upraised called Heaven to witness his loyalty and his competence.

"Ed, what? There is no 'monseigneur' about it; and your sanctimonious airs, mon ami, are no use to me. I have thirty guests in the house; it is Mademoiselle's birthday. I have told you that before, have I not?"

"As if I could forget—"

"Very well, then. Even with your limited intelligence you must be aware that in order to entertain such distinguished persons I must have my larder and my cellars full. Well! I'm short of wine. You know that. You know that we sent to that thief in Nevers for some, and that the mudlark refuses to send the wine unless he is paid beforehand."

"I know that, monseigneur."

"You also know that I am giving Mademoiselle a ruby necklace for her birthday. You wrote the order out yourself."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Well, then! that also has to be paid for," Monseigneur concluded with what he felt was unanswerable logic. "So do not dare to appear before me again without at least — mind! I say at least — five thousand louis in your filthy hand. Now you can go."

Talon's narrow hatchet face, usually sallow and bilious, took on an ashen hue. Through narrow deep-set eyes he cast a furtive glance at his irascible master. But Monseigneur, having delivered his ultimatum, no longer troubled his august head about his unfortunate bailiff. No doubt experience had taught him that under threat of dismissal Talon had always contrived somehow to produce the necessary money. Monseigneur never troubled his head much whence that money came. He had never been taught to troubled his head about anything so mean and sordid as money. He paid Talon a liberal salary, gave him a good house, productive land, and every facility to rob and cheat him, in order that this man should take all such burdens to enjoy life without care or worry. Many a time had Talon heard this philosophy propounded to him by his master: he knew that argument and protests were worse than useless, and it is to be supposed that in an emergency like the present one it was safer to incur further hatred from Monseigneur's tenants than the displeasure of Monseigneur himself.

M. le Duc for the moment appeared to have forgotten Hector Talon's very existence; he had caught sight through the wide-open window of his darling little Aurore at play with her friends. There was a grand game of blindman's bluff going on, and the sight would have gladdened any old man's heart, let alone that of a doting father. Monseigneur's eyes gleamed with pleasure; the misfortune of "blindman" who measured his length on the sanded path drew a delighted roar of laughter from him. Talon thought and hoped that he was momentarily forgotten and that he could achieve his exit without hearing further abuse or further threats. As noiselessly as he could he turned on his heel and made for the door. Just as he was about to slip through it Monseigneur's pleasant voice once more reached his ear:

"That reminds me, Talon," he said lightly, "that my cousin M. le Marquis d'Epinau had a splendid idea last year when he was short of money. There was all that stony land on Mont Oderic and Mont Socride, you remember? It was no use to him, he couldn't make anything out of it. So he made the neighbouring communes buy it of him at his own price. I believe the rascals have done very well with it since. Well! there's that bit of land the other side of Rocher Vert. I don't want it. Let the communes of Val-le-Roi and Le Borne buy it of me. They can have it for three thousand louis and you can make up the other two out of the hoard which you have amassed through robbing me, you black-guard."

"The communes couldn't pay, monseigneur," Talon protested, and then added very injudiciously: "As for me, how can Monseigneur think—"

"That you are a thief and a liar?" Monseigneur broke in, with a careless laugh. "Why, you villain, if you were a decent man you would have left my service long ago. You know that I only employ you to do my dirty work, which I couldn't ask others who are clean and honest to do for me. As for the communes, what I propose is a sound bargain for them: those peasants can make a good thing out of land, which you are too big a fool to turn to account. Anyway, that's my last word, and now, get out of my sight. I am sick of you."

Talon was as thankful to go as Monseigneur was to be rid of him. He slipped like a stealthy cat through the door, while Monseigneur, throwing cares and money worries off his broad shoulders, returned to the more agreeable occupation of watching his daughter playing at blindman's bluff.

Perhaps, if he had been gifted with second sight, M. le Duc de Marigny would not have felt quite so carefree: for then he would have seen his bailiff, Hector Talon, the other side of the door, pausing for a moment with clawlike fingers resting on the handle. On his sallow face there was neither humility nor servility, only a cunning, mocking glance in the narrow, deep-set eyes and a sneer upon the pale thin lips. What went on in the man's mind it is impossible to say. Did he long to turn on the hand that fed him? Did he foresee that, on a day not very far distant, he would be the one to command and Monseigneur the dependent on his good-will? All unconsciously now, even good-humouredly, Monseigneur chose to snub and humiliate him. There was no conscious feeling of arrogance in so great a gentleman's treatment of his subordinates; just the belief amounting to a certainty that he and his kind were made of a different clay from the rest of humanity, and that God had preordained them to rule and the others to obey. All these thoughts and hopes did, no doubt, course through Hector Talon's mind as he stood on the other side of the door with his fingers on the handle. But Monseigneur knew nothing of that. He was not gifted with second sight and did not see the change of expression in his bailiff's face — just as he had only given one casual and careless glance at the boy at the whipping post whom the ladies had so aptly named "the rebel angel."

Chapter VII

On this same afternoon when André Vallon, still rebellious in spirit, followed M. le Curé de Val-le-Roi up the wooded slopes that led to the château, the picture that was revealed to his gaze when he came in sight of the gorgeous old building, with its sumptuous gardens, its marble terraces, its towers and battlements, its stately trees and wealth of flowers, was one he never forgot. Vaguely he had heard the château spoken of by those who knew, as "magnificent"; vaguely he was aware that Monseigneur lived there in a state of splendour of which he, a village lad, had no conception, even in his dreams; and from the valley below, where on the outskirts of Val-le-Roi his mother's cottage lay perdu, he had often gazed upwards to the heights, where at sunset the pointed roofs glistened like silver and the rows of windows sparkled like a chain of rubies; but he had never been allowed to wander up the slope and see all that magnificence at close quarters.

Heavy gilded iron gates shut off the precincts of the château from prying eyes and vagabond footsteps; stern janitors warned trespassers against daring to set foot inside the park; and thus the place where dwelt those unapproachable personages, Monseigneur and his friends, had hitherto appeared to André like fairyland, or rather, like the ogre's castle of which he had read in the storybooks of M. Perrault — the ogre who devoured all the good things of this earth and always wanted more.

André was dazzled. The same enthusiasm that made him love the moonlight, the cottontails, or the hedgerows caused him to utter a cry of pleasure when he first caught sight of the château. He came to a halt and allowed his eyes to feast themselves on the picture. M. le Curé was delighted; he thought that the boy was showing a nice spirit of reverence and of awe.

"It is beautiful, is it not, André?" he remarked complacently.

But André's mood was not quite as serene as the worthy priest had fondly hoped. He turned sharply on his heel and retorted with a scowl:

"Of course it is beautiful, but why should it be his?"

"What in the world do you mean?"

"You call that man up there 'Monseigneur.' Why? This all belongs to him. Why?"

"Because..."

The good Curé droned on. André certainly did not listen; he stalked on once more, irritable and silent. He had asked a question for which, in his own mind, there could not possibly be an answer. True that something of the bitterness of intense hatred had, as it were, flowed out of him with the tears which he had shed on his mother's breast, but the spirit of inquiry, of blind groping after mysteries which were incapable of solution had, for good or ill, replaced the childish acceptance of things as they were. To him henceforth his mother's penury and Monseigneur's wealth were not preordained by God; they did not form a part of the scheme of creation as God had originally decreed. They were the result of man's incapacity to grapple with injustice; the result, in fact, of the weakness of one section of humanity and of the arrogant strength of the other.

Very wisely, M. le Curé had not pursued the contentious subject. Together the two of them found their way across the wide, paved forecourt and up the perron. Lackeys in gorgeous liveries opened wide the gates of the château, and André, feeling now as if he were in a dream, silent, subdued, all the starch taken out of him, all the rebellion of his spirit overawed by so much splendour, kept close to the Curé's heels.

They went through the endless rooms, across floors that were so slippery that André, in his thick shoes, nearly measured his length on them more than once. He caught sight of himself in tall mirrors, full face, sideways, walking, sliding, pausing, wide-eyed and scared, thinking that the figure he was coming towards him was some strange boy whom he had never seen before. At length the Curé came to a halt in what seemed to André like a fairy's dwelling place, all azure and gold and crystal, where more tall mirrors reflected a somewhat corpulent old man in a long black soutane, and a tall, clumsy-looking boy in an ill-fitting coat, with tousled hair and large hands and feet encased in huge, thick buckled shoes.

On one side of the room there were three tall windows through which André saw such pictures as he had never seen before. At first he didn't think that they were real. There were marble balustrades and pillars, parterres of flowers and groups of trees, and a fountain from whose sparkling waters the warm sunshine drew innumerable diamonds. This fairy garden appeared peopled with a whole bevy of brightly plumaged birds that darted in and out among the bosquets and the parterres with flutelike calls and rippling music. At least, so it seemed to André at first. M. le Curé, tired out, hot and panting, had sunk down in one of the gilded chairs and was mopping his streaming face; André, attracted and intrigued by the picture of that garden and those birds, ventured to go nearer to one of the tall windows in order to have a closer look. The window was wide open. André, leaning against the frame, stood quite still and watched.

A merry throng peopled the garden; ladies in light summer dresses, some with large straw hats over their powdered hair, others with fair or dark curls fluttering about their heads, men in silk embroidered coats, with dainty buckled shoes and filmy lace at throat and wrist, were chasing one another in and out of the leafy bosquets, just like a lot of children, playing some puerile game of blindman's bluff, which elicited many a little cry of mock alarm and silvery peals of merry laughter. How gay they seemed! How happy! André watched them, fascinated. He followed the various incidents of the game with eyes that soon lost their abstraction and sparkled with responsive delight. He nearly laughed aloud when an elegant gentleman in plum-coloured satin cloth, his eyes bandaged, tripped over a chair mischievously placed in his way by one of the ladies — a girl whose pink silk panniers over a short skirt of delicate green brocade made her look like a rosebud; so, at least, thought André.

He quite forgot himself while he stood and watched. Like a child at a show, he laughed when they laughed, gasped when capture was imminent, rejoiced when a narrow escape was successful. M. le Curé, overcome by the heat, had gone fast asleep in his chair.

André, absorbed in watching, did not even notice that the crowd of merrymakers had invaded the terrace immediately in front of the window against which he stood. "Blindman" now was the young girl with the fair hair, free from powder, whose dress made her look like a rosebud. With arms outstretched she groped, after the clumsy fashion peculiar to a genuine blindman, and her playmates darted around her, giving her a little push here, another there, all of them unheeding of the silent, motionless watcher by the open window. And suddenly "Blindman," still with arms outstretched, lost her bearings, tripped against the narrow window sill and would have

fallen headlong into the room had not André instinctively put out his arms. She fell, laughing, panting, and with a little cry of alarm, straight into him.

There was a sudden gasp of surprise on the part of the others, a second or two of silence, and then a loud and prolonged outburst of laughter. André held on with both arms. Never in his life had he felt anything as sweet, as fragrant, so close to him. The most delicious odour of roses and violets came to his nostrils, while the downiest, softest little curls tickled his nose and lips. As to moving, he could not have stirred a muscle had his life depended on it.

But at the prolonged laughter of her friends the girl at once began to struggle; also, she felt the rough cloth beneath her touch, while to her delicate nostrils there came, instead of the sweet perfumes that always pervaded the clothes of her friends, a scent of earth and hay and of damp cloth. She wanted to snatch away the bandage from her eyes, but strong, muscular arms were round her shoulders, and she could not move.

"Let me go!" she called out. "Let me go! Who is it? Madeleine — Edith, who is it?"

The next moment a firm step resounded on the marble floor of the terrace, a peremptory voice called out: "You young muckworm, how dare you?" and the hold round her shoulders relaxed. André received a resounding smack on the side the face, while the girl, suddenly freed, staggered slightly backward even while she snatched the handkerchief from her eyes.

The first thing she saw was a dark young face with a heavy chestnut curl falling over a frowning brow, a pair of eyes dark as aloes flashing with hatred and rage. She heard the voice of her cousin, the Comte de Mauléon, saying hoarsely:

"Get out! Get out, I say!" And then calling louder still: "Here! Léon! Henri! Some of you kick this garbage out."

It was all terrible. The ladies crowded round her and helped to put her pretty dress straight again, but the girl was too frightened to think of them or her clothes. Why she should have been frightened she didn't know, for Aurore de Marigny had never been frightened in her life before: she was a fearless little rider and a regular tomboy at climbing or getting into dangerous scrapes; but there was something in that motionless figure in the rough clothes, in those flashing eyes and hard, set mouth which puzzled the child and terrified her. Here was something that she had never met before, something that seemed to emit evil, cruelty, hatred, none of his had ever come within sight of her sheltered, happy life.

Pierre de Mauléon was obviously in a fury and kept calling for the lackeys, who, fortunately, were not within hearing, for heaven alone knew what would happen if anyone dared lay hands on that incarnation of fury. The boy — Aurore saw that he was only a boy, not much older than herself — looked now like a fierce animal making ready for a spring; he had thrust one hand into his breeches' pocket and brought out a knife — a miserable, futile kind of pocketknife, but still a knife; and his teeth — sharp and white as those of a young wolf — were drawing blood out of his full red lips.

Some of the ladies screamed; others giggled nervously. The men laughed, but no one thought of interfering. Inside the room, M. le Curé, roused from his slumbers, had obviously not yet made up his mind whether he was awake or dreaming.

Just then the two lackeys, Léon and Henri, came hurrying along the terrace. A catastrophe appeared imminent, for the boy had seen them; knew, probably, what it would mean to him and all these bedizened puppets if those men dared to touch him. He was seeing red; for the first time in his life he felt the desire to see a human creature's blood. With jerky movements he grasped the flimsy, gimcrack pocketknife with which he meant to defend himself to the death. He met the girl's eyes with their frightened, half-shy glance and exulted in the thought that in a few seconds, perhaps, she would see one of her lackeys lying dead at her feet.

Not even on that fatal day when he had tasted the very dregs of humiliation had his young soul been such a complete prey to rebellion and hatred. Why, oh, why had he allowed his heart to melt at sight of his mother's wretchedness? Why had he ever set foot across this cursed threshold? Pay! Pay! Pay! Those were once his mother's words. Pay, while these marionettes laughed and played; pay, so that their bellies might be full, their pillows downy, their hair powdered and perfumed. He hated them all. Oh, how he hated them!

These riotous thoughts were tumbling about in André's brain, chasing one another with lightning speed while he was contemplating murder and hurling defiant glances at the pretty child, the cause of this new — this terrible catastrophe.

Ever afterwards he was ready to swear that not by a quiver of an eyelid had he betrayed fear or asked for protection. Asked? Heavens above! He would sooner have fallen dead across this window sill than have asked help from any of these gaudy nincompoops.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that it was the girl's piping, childish voice which broke the uncomfortable spell that had fallen over the entire lively throng.

"Ohé!" she cried, with a ripple of laughter. "How solemn you all look! Pierre, it is your turn. Come, Véronique, you hold him while I do the blindfolding; don't let him go — it is his turn."

Her friend to whom she called was close by and ready enough to resume the game. Before Pierre de Mauléon had the chance to resist she had him by the hand, while Aurore tied the handkerchief over his eyes. A scream of delight went up all round. All seriousness, puzzlement, was forgotten. Pierre tried to snatch the handkerchief away, but two of them held onto his hands; the others pushed and pinched and teased. They dragged him along the terrace; they vaulted over the marble balusters; they were children, in fact, once more, tomboys, madcaps, running about among the bosquets and the flowers, irresponsible and irrepressed, while André, without another word, another look, turned on his heel and fled out of this cursed château, leaving M. le Curé to call and to gasp and to explain to Monseigneur, as best he could, what, in point of fact, had actually happened.

Book II

Chapter VIII

There are several biographies extant of André Vallon, some written by friends, others by enemies. No man who has played a rôle on the world stage has ever been without his detractors, and only a few have been without their apologists. To have really complete conception of Vallon's temperament, character, and subsequent conduct, it would be necessary to know something of his life during the ten years that followed.

He was little more than fifteen when he left his village of Val-le-Roi and went up to Paris under the aegis of M. l'Abbé de Rosemonde, who had obtained for him, after much tribulation, countless petitions, and untiring zeal, a scholarship in the College of the Oratorians in Paris, where a few years before this a young scholar named Georges Danton had pegged away at the classics, and where many young minds began nursing those thoughts of rebellion and agitation which were to render them famous or infamous in the annals of the greatest revolution of all time.

Some of these men, at the time that André Vallon went to the Oratorians, were already prominent in the public eye. Danton at this date was Conseiller du Roi, was calling himself Maître d'Anton and had a fine practice and a pretty young wife. Maximilien de Robespierre had finished his studies at the Collège Louis-le-Grand and was now a leading light of advocacy; and Camille Desmoulins was a notorious journalist. André, who had developed a hitherto latent ambition, and with such examples before him of success won by hard work, became as model a scholar as he had been a turbulent village lad. That it took all M. le Curé's eloquence and floods of his mother's tears to persuade him to go to college at all goes without saying, but he did go in the end.

How much it cost his mother to keep him in decent clothes while he was at college remained forever a secret within her ample bosom. As André grew to be a man he made a pretty shrewd guess at the hardships which she must have endured in order to put by a few louis every year so that he should not cut too sorry a figure among his schoolfellows. Luckily for him, he never felt any sense of humiliation at his own shabby clothes or want of money to spend. He was so firmly persuaded that his mother's poverty and his own empty pockets were only transitory states which would be remedied by himself when he was a man. And then, again, some of those whose names at this hour were on everybody's lips had been as poor as himself. Camille Desmoulins never had a sou from his avaricious father to spend on leasure or finery, and Robespierre's clothes were invariably threadbare.

Moreover, as the years went on, poverty became so much a matter of course, except in the case of a privileged or a dishonest few, that it ceased to have any significance. It was a matter of caste, that was all, and became such an accepted fact that for a family man not to be hungry, to have fuel on his hearth or shoes on his feet was to be something of an alien among his own class. Nor was it shame that stirred André's young blood to boiling when he saw his mother in her old age, still scrubbing floors or toiling up to the château to do the family washing; it was only passionate rage at his own impotence to drag her out of her penury, and ever growing better resentment at a social system which permitted the few to have all the good things of this world and allowed the many to go under for want of sufficient nourishment. That this resentment should lead a young mind to wholesale condemnation of the present régime was only natural, seeing that the King was an autocratic monarch, and that his word, and his word alone, made and unmade the laws.

In 1788 André Vallon was called to the bar and delivered, as was customary, his diploma speech in Latin. The subject set for the year was the social and political condition of the country and its relation to the administration of justice. A ponderous subject for a village lad to tackle, but even Vallon's detractors — and he already had a few — were ready to admit that he acquitted himself adequately, and that his Latin was faultless. The grave and reverend seigneurs of the law, on the other hand, sat up in amazement and rubbed their lack-lustre eyes when they heard this young advocate from the back of the provincial beyond spout grandiloquent phrases, such as *Salus populi suprema lex esto*, and with wide gestures of delicately modelled hands strike a note of warning to those in high places — to all who had inherited power, influence, or riches.

"Qui habet aures auriendi," he thundered. "Audiat."

There could be no two opinions about it: it was an incendiary speech, even though there were no actual words in it that could be construed into excitation to reprisals or insurrection. On the contrary, it even concluded with a passionate appeal to those who had the ear of the malcontents to pause before they led the people blindly along the paths that led to revolution.

"Woe to him," he fulminated in conclusion, "who for his own advancement plays on the passions and the prejudices of the people. Woe to the instigator and the maker of revolutions!"

Thus ended his impassioned harangue, delivered in the language of Ovid and Virgil, leaving his learned audience marvelling at this young Cicero sprung out of a remote village, and gravely shaking their heads at the unorthodox sentiments to which they had been compelled to listen.

A week later André was at home, telling his mother all about it, courting her approval more ardently than he had done that of the leading lights at the Paris bar. There was something in Marianne Vallon's calm philosophy, in her acceptance of the inevitable, which by its very contrast appealed to André's rebellious spirit.

"You help me to keep my balance, Mother," he would say with all youth's impatience, when she talked as she often used to do in the past, of resignation and humility. "And God knows we shall all of us want it presently," he added, with a careless shrug and a laugh.

He went through all the fatigue of translating his Latin speech into French for her, so that she might understand and criticize. But he was quite proud of his achievement; he knew that he had left his mark on the somewhat somnolent brains of his fellow advocates.

"Maître d'Anton was present, Mother," he related, bristling up at the recollection of that proud moment when he saw the popular orator make his way into the hall. "I think he liked my speech, for I saw him nod with approval once or twice, and at the end he clapped his hands together, and I heard his stentorian voice shouting, 'Good! Very good indeed!'"

"A selfish and a cruel man," Marianne muttered under her breath.

"How can you say that, Mother chérie?" André protested. "He is a model husband and a devoted father."

"He was born lucky. Wait till misfortune overtakes him—"

"I hope it won't," André broke in gaily, "for he has offered me a clerkship in his office."

"Don't take it, André!" Marianne cried involuntarily.

"Why in the world no, Mother? It will be the making of me. Clerk to Maître d'Anton, Conseiller du Roi! Think of it!"

Marianne shrugged: "Conseiller du Roi?" she said with what would have been a sneer round a mouth less kindly. "That man, Danton, Conseiller du Roi? When he dreams of nothing but deposing his King — if not worse."

"He dreams of changing the whole aspect of the world," André protested with unwonted earnestness, "and God knows this old world wants a change."

Old Marianne shook her head. She was too old to imbibe all those principles which men with fine oratorical powers like Georges Danton poured daily into the ears of the young; too old also to hope for a change in the system which had brought her to her present state of indigence. In Danton's ways she foresaw disaster. "Once you set an avalanche sliding down the mountain side," she would say, "you cannot possibly stop its mad career. You are bound to be crushed beneath it in the end."

But André would retort proudly: "A man like Danton does not count the cost. He says and does what he believes to be right, and if he cannot carry his principles though, he will die like a martyr."

"And drag all those whom he has fooled to perdition with him."

"What grander death than that of a martyr?" André demanded, flushed with enthusiasm.

But Marianne, wise old peasant that she was, muttered: "Martyr? And for what cause, mon Dieu? For what?"

"The happiness of mankind!"

And so the boy would argue. He was only a boy still, after all, in spite of his Latin, and hero worship was in his blood. He became a clerk to Maître d'Anton, Conseiller du Roi, one of the greatest lights at the moment of Paris advocacy: a man, too, wholly unspoiled by success and prosperity. He had a way of persuading all those who knew in him intimately that his was a large, all-embracing nature, which only pined to see everyone around him smiling and happy.

He had a fine property in the country, a well furnished house in town, a pretty wife and a boy whom he worshipped. Danton was at this time the most popular man in France, and André one of the happiest, for he felt that he had his chance, a chance coveted by every budding advocate who had delivered his Latin thesis that year. He walked hand in hand with the man who was called the Lion Tamer of France, for he held the savage pack of snarling felines on the leash. Marat, Desmoulins, and the others bowed to his moderate, sensible views.

"Wait," Marianne had said, "till misfortune overtakes him."

It did. Soon after André entered his office his only child died, the boy whom he adored. His wife was broken hearted; sought consolation in religion. Georges Danton, who worshipped her, would escort her daily to church, then rush round to the club and, in a hoarse voice, broken with sobs, would prophesy now the coming cataclysm. Shrewd, fat Marianne had proved indeed to be right.

In the wake of misfortune, Danton's moderation went to the wind, and during the most impressionable years of his life André's ears were constantly filled with his chief's ever more violent diatribes against the social regime, the ignorance and ineptitude of the King, and the venality of his ministers.

"They have eyes and see not; ears they have and hear not," Danton would thunder forth whenever news of riots in the provincial towns, already of frequent occurrence, looting of shops, firing of châteaux, were brought to his office. "Fools they are! all of them fools! Can't they see that their whole world is falling to dust about their feet, and that soon the rivers of France will be running with blood?"

André, whose young soul had always been inclined towards rebellion, would listen wide-eyed, trying with all his might to disentangle the right from the wrong in those tempestuous tirades. Danton was a man of immense influence. In the clubs his power was supreme, and it was the clubs that governed France these days; for it was in the clubs that ministers were made and unmade. Men of all ages, men of wide experience, bowed to Danton as to their greatest leader. And André Vallon was little more than a boy, with a boy's enthusiasm and generous impulses, and young blood ready to boil at sight of injustice and cruelty.

"Get me out an article for l'Ami du Peuple, André," Danton would often say to him when he came home, hoarse and tired from a noisy séance at the Cordeliers. "Revolution is in the air; it gathers strength. At Versailles the King fashions padlocks and the Queen plays at hide-and-seek. The people starve. Make no mistake: at this moment thousands of men are seeing their wives and children dying of hunger. Write it, André. Write it. Dip your pen in gall. Marat will print anything you write. For God's sake, don't mince matters! Up at Versailles they must be made to see, or the most awful cataclysm the world has ever known will drench this country with blood."

After which outburst he would go home to his young wife and with his ardent love-making help her and himself to forget their own grief and the misfortune of their country. But André would go back to his own dingy lodgings and try to put into words the turbulent thoughts of his chief. And whenever his mother shook her wise old head over these youthful lucubrations, he would excuse the more passionate passages by saying:

"It is impossible to stem the fury of the people now, Mother dear. All we can do is to lead it into as reasonable channels as we can."

"Your Danton tries to cure evil with worse evils, my child," Marianne retorted. "How can good come from evil? Take care, André! Men like Danton have set their world rocking; when it falls together with a crash it will drag them along, too, into the abyss."

"They must take their chance, Mother," André rejoined with an impatient sigh. "We must all take our chances, for we cannot foresee what the end of it all will be."

But it was not often that he was in such a serious mood. Whenever he could obtain leave he would take the diligence to Nerves, and thence the country chaise to Val-le-Roi. He would burst in on his mother with the gentleness of an exploding bombshell, and thereafter for a few days, not only the cottage, but the country inns around, the lanes, the woods, the village streets would echo with his laughter and his big, sonorous voice.

Chapter IX

The worst of the great political storm had not yet touched the outlying villages. The people, of course, were desperately poor, for the year had been one of the hardest the unfortunate country had ever known; a prolonged drought had been followed by terrible hailstorms on the very eve of harvesting; the price of corn was prohibitive, and the winter that ensued was so severe that even forest trees suffered from the frost. Poor? Of course they were poor! There was no such thing as a plump girl to be seen in any village: children were emaciated, their growth stunted, their future health hopelessly impaired. But life had to go on just the same. There was marriage and giving away in marriage; babies were born and old people died; and those that were not old clung to life in spite of the fact that it promised nothing but misery.

André Vallon's visits to Val-le-Roi were always something of holiday for all. He was so gay, so light-hearted. The news which he brought from Paris always seemed reassuring.

He would meet his friends around the bare tables of the village inn where, over sips of thin, sour wine, he would try to put heart into the men.

"It can't last, can it, André?" they would ask.

"Of course it can't. The darkest hour always comes before the dawn. There are some good times head for all of us. You'll see."

Then he would call to Suzette, mine host's pretty daughter, and sit her on his knee.

"Come, Suzette," he would say gaily, "help us to talk of something cheerful: of your pretty self, for instance, and of Jerome, whom you met last night in the lane. You did... don't tell me you did not... Give us a kiss, no, this instant, or I'll tell your worthy papa just what I saw in the lane last night."

And in the sunshine of his irrepressible gaiety some of them would momentarily forget their troubles.

"There goes that madcap, André Vallon," the older people would say when he went down the village street, singing at the top of his voice; "he was always a good lad, but his skin is too tight to hold him."

And they would tell each other tales of André's misdeeds when he was a boy, and of the worry which he had been to his mother: not a lad in the village whom he had not licked at some time or another, not a girl from whom he had not snatched a kiss. Twice he had been within an ace of being drowned; three times he had nearly smashed himself to pieces by falling from a tree or a rocky height; once he had tackled farmer Lombard's bull which was after him, and with just his two hands he had squeezed the life out of Bailiff Talon's savage dog.

"Such a beautiful boy, he was," the women said.

And the girls giggled as he went by, for those great dark eyes of his would look them up and down with disturbing, provoking glances. And some of them would pause and return the glance with a look which was more than a hint, but André would only smile, showing a gleam of white teeth. But ne'er a look of tenderness did he cast in response, nor did the faintest whisper of love ever cross his lips.

Love-making? Yes! Any amount of it. André's young arms were forever reaching out for white shoulders or a slim waist; his full laughter-loving mouth was always ready for a kiss, but it remained at that: there was no girl for leagues around who could boast that she had meant more to André Vallon than the old mother whom he worshipped.

But the old mother knew — or rather guessed — that there was always something behind her son's flippancy in the manner of women and of love. She didn't know what it was, but there was no deceiving her — there was something. And there came a time when she made a pretty shrewd guess. She asked no questions, of course, but whenever the subject of the Château de Marigny and its inmates cropped up, a strange reserve seemed to tie the boy's tongue. He would become moody and silent, and if Marianne then pursued the subject, spoke of the hardships so bravely borne by Monseigneur, or said something of Mademoiselle Aurore and her angelic patience in all her misfortunes, André would suddenly jump to his feet and cry out with extraordinary vehemence:

"Don't talk to me about those people, Mother. I hate them!"

Chapter X

But the time soon came, even in these remote villages, when agitator and demagogues would rub their hands with glee. They would stretch out their legs in front of their own hearths and declare complacently that the revolution which they had foretold had not only come but come to stay. Distress had become general; with it stalked resentment and a fury of reprisals.

In the provincial towns bread riots were of constant occurrence; the starving people had taken to looting granaries and stores; in several cases shops, house, châteaux had been fired. Tub thumpers were shouting daily to willing ears the deadly slogan: "Liberty and Equality."

Paris was full of men and women who had wandered to the capital from the neighbouring towns and villages, armed with scythes and other agricultural implements which had become useless, since there were no crops to harvest; starving, wrathful, and determined, they paraded the streets shouting for redress. At street corners, in the clubs, in public bars, malcontents waved their arms and spouted magnificent phrases about Liberty and the sovereignty of the people. Danton thundered forth his call to arms, to bloodshed and revenge.

Misery had sown discontent and reaped revolution. Less than a year later butchery had begun.

In September, '92, a brutish crowd, armed with pikes, scythes, old blunderbusses, and rifles, rushed through the streets of Paris, stormed the houses of detention that were overcrowded with unfortunate prisoners, and in cold blood massacred hundreds of men, women, and children, while Danton, the darling of the crowd, the all-powerful party leader, did not raise a hand to stop the carnage.

André Vallon, long before then, had given up his profession in order to join the army. France was besieged on every side: the whole of Europe had taken up arms against her, outraged at the excesses of this revolution which aimed at regicide and achieved wholesale butchery. The onus of carrying on a world war now rested upon the shoulders of men with no experience of organization or government. The responsibilities which hitherto had devolved solely upon the King and his ministers were theirs now; and they were already finding out that to depose the King, to wrest from him the control of civil and military administration, was quite one thing, but to defend the country against the foreign invader, with troops whom they themselves had taught to mutiny, was quite another. To rouse the people to insurrection had not been difficult, famine and misery had helped in the task; but to feed a whole nation and, at the same time, to raise an army strong enough to fight both Austria and Prussia, was not quite so easy.

Already these new masters of France hated and despised one another. Five out of the six ministers who formed the Executive were timid and vacillating. Danton alone dominated them. He, too, was ignorant of the essentials that make up a stable government, but at any rate was a man — a lion amid a flock of sheep.

His impassioned oratory, his powerful voice, his immense patriotism, helped to raise an army of recruits, to send them to the frontiers, insufficiently armed, insufficiently clothed, empty bellied and undisciplined, but full of enthusiasm for la patrie in danger. There is nothing in the world that quite comes up to the love of a Frenchman for his country. France is a beautiful country; every corner of it is beautiful, and its sons love it with a love that in a way transcends the patriotism of every other nation. La patrie is a word that cannot be rendered in any other language — it is not a question of home, of family, of race! it is just France! And there are few pages in the world's history so pathetic and yet so magnificent as this epic of raw, untrained, famished recruits, dragging their shoeless feet along the muddy woods of Champagne, on whose sacred soil the King of Prussia was advancing with his well trained, highly equipped army, and, with the sheer enthusiasm of love for their country and determination to defend her against foreign invasion, keeping the whole of Europe at bay.

At home now there remained, in addition to the women and children, only the halt and the maimed, a few youngsters too débile to bear arms, the only sons of widowed mothers, who were exempt from military service, and the fathers of growing families. Quite a crowd, nevertheless, and one that, in the opinion of the Executive up in Paris, must be made to bear its part in furthering the glorious Revolution.

Inflammatory placards were posted up at every street corner and every crossroad, proclaiming the sovereignty of the people and headed by Danton's declaration: "We must govern by fear."

Terror had become the order of the day. Men and women — peaceable and respectable citizens — went in fear of their lives. Every crime had become permissible; every act of violence was considered patriotic; every outrage was not only condoned but commended; so long as they were directed against those who, through their selfish enjoyment of life, their riches, their contentment and luxury, had proved themselves traitors to their country and enemies of the people.

And men in three-cornered hats and cloth coat ornamented with brass buttons, pot bellied and bleary eyed, were sent round the provincial towns on a tour of active propaganda. Hoisted on tables outside the taverns they harangue the famished crowds, denouncing the traitors that caused all the sufferings of the people, and foretelling an era of plenty, which certainly would soon come if only France were swept clean of King and aristocrats.

At first the crowds listened in sullen silence, and in some places it took the rogues some time to work the people up to a state of effervescence. They were all so poor and so hungry that in most cases all they wanted to do was to sit still and brood over their wrongs. But the demagogues were no fools; they knew their business. It was not inertia they wanted, or acceptance of penury. They were out to make trouble and to stir up strife. Within half an hour they had hurled sufficient invectives against the owner of the nearest château — his hoard of wheat and fuel, his cellar full of good wines — to work up the lethargic blood of these ignorant folk into a state of frenzy. The poisonous suggestion of reprisals began to filter down into receptive brains, and men who saw their wives and children dying for want of food began lending a more attentive ear to these prophecies of a panacea for all their ills.

"Liberty!" and "The sovereign will of the people!" The great slogans, thundered at them day after day, began to make an appeal to their empty stomachs and frozen limbs. If liberty meant taking what you want, eating your fill, and drinking good wine; if it meant covering your wife's emaciated shoulders with a warm shawl and putting shoes on your children's feet, then liberty by all means!

In the villages the tavern orators were for the most part local malcontents or ambitious rascals who had nothing to lose and everything to gain by a complete upheaval of the social system. Subsidies for carrying on the propaganda came from the clubs in Paris.

It was a paying game, carried on in one village by a defaulting clerk, in another by a dishonest servant or perhaps it would be an absconding lawyer, or even an unfrocked priest.

At Val-le-Roi it was Hector Talon.

Talon was still nominally steward to Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny, but the place had become a sinecure. The estates had become so impoverished that they were no longer worth administering. Talon knew well enough that the days of Marigny in its present condition were numbered. Either the owner would emigrate — as so many of his kind had done, in which case the whole of the property would be confiscated — or he would be arrested on some pretext or other and sent to the guillotine. And it was quite a usual thing for faithful servants to share the fate of their masters.

Now, Talon was quite determined not to share any untoward fate with his employer or with anyone else. He wanted to be on the right side. Not only now, but in the future.

Indeed, Hector Talon was no fool. He knew as well as anybody that the present state of affairs could not possibly last; that presently — in three, four, or even ten years, perhaps — tempers would quieten down, and when all these assassins who were now in power had butchered one another, an era of moderation would then assert itself. And — who knows? — it was just possible that the reaction would be so great that the political pendulum would swing right over to the old regime.

Fortunately for him, Talon was an adept at dual rôles. Monseigneur — or ci-devant Marigny, as he was contemptuously designated by his former sycophants — lived a solitary life up at the château, like an eagle in its eerie, with only his daughter for company and a couple of his old servants to wait on him. Talon was, as it were, the only link between him and the seething world down below. It was easy enough to throw dust in his eyes and to persuade him that the interests of respectable citizens, be they bailiffs or ex-dukes were identical. There certainly was the Curé of Val-le-Roi, the Abbé de Rosemonde, who had kept up friendship with De Marigny and who might have enlightened him as to the real worth of Hector Talon; but the old priest was one of those entirely childlike natures which never see anything that is not thrust under their very noses, who never seem to know anything of what goes on around them, and whom it is the easiest thing in the world to hoodwink.

Talon, therefore, had a clear field up at the château for his rôle of faithful administrator entirely devoted to his employer's interests. But in the village taverns, surrounded by all the malcontents of the countryside, adulated and puffed up with his own importance, he gave lip service to Danton and Marat, spouted insults at every man or woman who had ever owned a hectare of land, and spat out the venom of malice and envy which was the accumulation of years.

Of a truth, he was on the safe side. During the past lean years his corpulence had melted away; he was thin now and more bandy-legged than ever, with wide, bony shoulders and hollow belly. His head rolled about on his long, lean neck, crowned with a stubble of short, tawny, ill brushed hair; his lips were thin and his mouth awry; his chin was pointed, and his hollow cheeks were darkened with the bristles of an unshaven beard. And under overhanging brows his eyes, which had a yellow tinge in them, were always veiled by heavy, blue-veined lids. Unlike the regular army of tub thumpers, he affected the meanest and dirtiest of clothes, a ragged shirt which had not seen the washtub for months, breeches that hardly covered his lean thighs; his shanks were bare, and his feet were thrust in sabots stuffed with straw.

But he had a powerful voice and a good delivery and an easy choice of words. For the most part he drew his inspiration for his most inflammatory speeches from articles which he picked out of various Paris journals.

"Liberty! The time has come, citizens, not only to talk of liberty, but to fight in her sacred cause!" his was one of his favourite tirades. And then he would go on: "Let us take up arms like our brave soldiers on the frontier and engage in a hand-to-hand struggle against tyranny, against all those vampires who suck our blood and strive to break our will. France needs you, citizens, every one of you; she needs your help to gain that freedom for which she pines; she needs all your strength, all your courage. She needs the patriotism of self-sacrifice. To arms, citizens, to arms! Think no longer of yourselves or of your wives or children! Think only of liberty. And if in your heart you should reckon the cost of your lives, then remember that there are forty-thousand palaces, châteaux, and abodes of the rich, half the wealth of France, that will become yours in payment for your valour and for your loyalty."

And after he had delivered himself of this oratory he would go home, put on a cloth coat and breeches, woollen stockings and buckled shoes, and make his way up to the château, and fill Monseigneur's ears with protestations of his loyalty.

His wife sometimes gave him a word of warning.

"If the old crow should hear of your oratory..." she would say.

"He wouldn't believe anything against me," Talon retorted with a complacent snigger.

"Rumours do travel," Lucile insisted. "I heard in the village, for instances, that it was you who egged that crowd on last night to set fire to the mill and the granaries."

Talon nodded. "Quite true," he said drily. "I did."

"What was the good? The granaries were empty, and they'll want to burn the château down next."

"I hope they do."

"What? Set fire to the château?"

"No. Only threaten to."

Lucile Talon was silent for a moment or two. By the feeble light of a flickering tallow candle she could only partly see the expression on her husband's face. It was not pretty at this moment, and Lucile gave a slight shudder as she turned away and busied herself for a time with her household affairs. But presantly she came back into the parlour and sat down at the table opposite her husband.

"You have a plan in your head, Hector," she said decisively. "What is it?"

Then, as he made no reply, only stared and stared into the flickering flame, she added: "You won't tell me?"

"It is too vague at present," he replied at last, "for you to understand."

And Lucile saw the yellow gleam in his eyes, shining like the light in the eyes of a cat.

Chapter XI

It was eleven years almost to a day since M. l'Abbé de Rosemonde, Curé de Val-le-Roi, had toiled up the slope to the Château de Marigny with his young protégé, André Vallon. Then, as now, a hot July sun flooded the pointed roofs with silvery lights. Only a few white fleecy clouds flitted across the cobalt sky. The birds sang in the forest trees; the branches of walnut and sycamore quivered under the breath of a gentle summer breeze. In the valley below, the Allier gurgled softly among the reeds, and the weeping willows along its banks set forth their sweet, sad sighing through the noonday air.

Nature, lovely and impersonal, seemed by her serene beauty to mock at all the turmoil, the hideousness created by men. "Look at me," she seemed to say. "My laws are immutable. I destroy nothing without cause. Death in my infinite wisdom is only the maker of life."

M. le Curé looked about him and sighed. He could almost have wished that God's world would cease to be beautiful since men no longer had eyes to see the glory of His creations. He was an old man now. These last few years had put a heavy burden upon him. Torn between his hatred of the present godless regime and his desire to do what little good he could among these poor misguided folk to whom he had ministered for more than thirty years, he had at last decided to take the oath of allegiance to this impious government which he abhorred, simply because he did not wish to leave Val-le-Roi to its fate. In spite of threats, in spite of persecution, he had managed so far to keep his church open, to hold occasional services, to visit the sick, and to administer the sacraments.

On this beautiful morning in mid-July when he came in sight of the château, he experienced the same heartache which assailed him every time he noted the slow but sure ravages of neglect upon the magnificent pile. It was many years now since flowers had graced the parterres of the garden and thrown their gay note of brilliance against the subdued colouring of the age-old stonework. The bosquets now were withered; the fountains still; marble balustrades and terraces were covered with the soil and litter of years.

The Abbé sighed again and wearily made his way up the perron. The monumental gates opened at a touch; the cracked bell which he pulled echoed weirdly through the silent halls. There were no servants in gorgeous liveries now to wait on visitors; no sound of gaiety or laughter came reverberating through this silence, which seemed as solemn as that of a tomb. The old priest crossed the vast hall and made his way up the great marble staircase and through the length of the gorgeous apartments, which stretched enfilade to the farthest angle of the château. Here he came to a halt and knocked at the door that faced him. A woman's voice called, "Entrez!" and he stepped into the room.

At sight of him a young girl jumped up from the low stool whereon she had been sitting, threw down a book, and came to greet him with hands outstretched.

"M. l'Abbé!" she cried. "How kind of you to come, and in this heat, too! Do sit down. You must be tired. Papa and I were just saying that perhaps you would not come till later in the day."

The good Curé took the two soft white hands that were so eagerly tendered him and then turned to pay his respects to Monseigneur. Like the Curé himself, Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny had in the past few years become a very old man. Misfortune and anxiety had put a quarter of a century onto his years. Like so many men of his generation and caste, he had made a splendid effort to bear with outward fortitude the terrible calamities that well-nigh overwhelmed him, but obviously the fortitude had only been on the surface. Every line on his face showed that he had suffered and was suffering terribly. He had the appearance of a martyr, conscious of his martyrdom. He had seen his friends, his relatives, one by one, either driven to exile or to death, and calmly awaited the hour when he would be called to share their fate. Were it not for his daughter he would have welcomed that hour, nay! even have gone forward boldly to meet it. But there was Aurore, his child, the darling of his shrivelled heart. Because of her he was willing to shelter beneath the protection which his near relationship with that infamous Duc d'Orléans, who had cast his vote in favour of the death sentence on his cousin and King, had so far given him. Because of his cousinship with that man he had escaped persecution at the hands of the Committee of Public Safety: his name had not as yet appeared on the list of the "suspect." He accepted this slur upon it for Aurore's sake, but had suffered agonies of humiliation for this immunity. In his eyes to-day, dimmed not so much with age as with unshed tears, there smouldered the fire of bitter resentment. Not even to his daughter, not even to the kindly priest, his one remaining friend, did he open out his innermost thoughts, his desperate longing for revenge.

On this occasion, as indeed always, he greeted the Curé with the greatest friendliness. Cut off from all his friends and all his kindred, the Abbé de Rosemonde seemed like a last link with the happy past. They had become like two old cronies, these two, not talking much to each other, because there were so few pleasant things to talk about, but they often had friendly bouts at chess or piquet, and instinctively the old Duke felt the soothing influence of his friend's Christian philosophy.

Aurore had put a chair in a convenient position, and the Abbé fell into it, panting and blowing, for the day was hot and the climb up the hill steep.

"I wish I could offer you a glass of wine," Monseigneur said with a fretful little sigh, "but I have not a bottle left in the cellar."

Aurore poured out a glass of water for the old priest, who drank it eagerly, and then set to with great energy to mop his streaming face and neck.

"The best wine in the world, monseigneur," he said cheerfully, "is this fresh water from the well. I am not tired, I assure you, my dear little Aurore, and even if I were, your smile would comfort me more thoroughly than the finest bottle of Burgundy."

Monseigneur gave a significant grunt and turned his head away.

"Well!" the priest went on after a moment or two. "What news?"

"The very best," Aurore de Marigny said eagerly. "I found the box I told you about, and, oh! M. l'Abbé, it is full, full of lovely things — stockings and shirts and petticoats. They will be so useful for many of the poor mothers this winter."

She chattered away in great excitement, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed.

"And they won't as much as say 'Thank you!' for them," Monseigneur put in drily.

"Oh, yes, they will!" the girl asserted. "And even if they don't..."

She gave a little shrug. What cared she if she got thanks or no, so long as she could find something to do, something in which to interest herself, to make time slip by a little more swiftly? The days were so long and so dreary! Nothing to do, nothing to think of or to hope for, save to bring now and again the ghost of a smile on Papa's face. To help M. l'Abbé in his charitable work was a perfect godsend, now that she saw her youth slipping by before she had begun to understand the true and inner meaning of such things as happiness and love. She was barely nineteen when her world began to crash about her feet, when she first came face to face with ill-will, malevolence, even hatred. Until that hour the world had been one great thing of beauty. Loveliness was the very essence of her young life. She inhaled love and adulation with every breath she drew. When she took her walks abroad people got out of her way to allow her to pass. Glances of admiration accompanied her all the way she went. Gentle expressions of respect, often a murmured blessing, were the words that most often rang in her ears.

Then suddenly came the crash: an awful cataclysm seemed to sweep the whole of her past into an immeasurable abyss. Glowering looks, sullen glances, oburgations, even insults were cast at her, until she no longer dared to set foot beyond the precincts of the castle. One by one the servants, who she thought loved her, who had seen her grow up from babyhood, fled from the château as from a plague-ridden spot. And slowly her childlike mind began to unfold: it had been closed hitherto to outward things as is a flower bud sheltered beneath a canopy of leaves. But soon her quick intelligence grasped the true significance of what was going on around her, and the Abbé de Rosemonde, with the utmost gentleness and care, helped in the development of her understanding.

Aurore de Marigny never took a gloomy view of life. She accepted a great deal which was rousing her father's bitter resentment as inevitable; as she was very young, she never gave up hope. These years of indigence and anxiety were only transitory: of this she was sure. But while she did her best to infuse some of that hope into her father's soul, she would in the liness of her little bedroom shed many a bitter tear over her lost youth. Better times might come presently — they certainly would come, she knew they would — but she would be old by then; her beauty would be gone along with her youth; she would no longer be desirable; she would never learn the great lesson of life, the lesson of Love.

Chapter XII

Aurore had dragged the good old Curé along interminable corridors, and up interminable stairs to a distant attic, where, beneath the old oak beams, covered with dust and cobwebs, and ancient black leather trunk stood open, with most of its contents already scattered about the floor.

Aurore went through them methodically, and M. le Curé nodded approval, or the reverse, as she held up the garments one by one to the dim light.

"These stockings are strong," she said. "They'll do for Legendre's children. This shawl we'll give to Marianne Vallon; she has nothing of the sort, poor thing. These silks are not much use, but what do you think of these cloth breeches? They are just the right size for Chabot's boy. Oh! and do look, M. l'Abbé, here is a beautiful travelling coat, warm and thick. You'll have to think of someone for whom it would be really useful."

She was squatting back on her heels, turning a great heavy cloth coat over and over.

"It is rather moth-eaten in places," she said ruefully, "but that wouldn't matter much. I believe it was Papa's travelling coat when he and Maman used to post in Paris..."

She paused with the coat in her delicate hands and looked up at the priest with a troubled expression in her eyes.

"M. l'Abbé," she said abruptly, "do you think it would be possible to warn Papa against that awful Talon?"

The Curé looked astonished, not to say shocked.

"My dear child!" he exclaimed. "An old and faithful servant!"

"He is not," Aurore said decisively. "I am sure he is not. He is a hypocrite — he talks softly to Papa—"

"My little Aurore, you must not say those things. Where is your Christian charity? What has poor Hector Talon done?"

"He incites the people down in the village against us."

"But what makes you say such a thing? You really haven't the right—"

"M. l'Abbé, listen to me," Aurore rejoined firmly. "You know Marianne Vallon down in the village?"

"I do. A good woman and—"

"She is a good woman, I daresay, though she seems to hate us."

"No, no, my dear child. You must not jump to conclusions like that. Marianne is a very unhappy woman. Her only son, whom she adored, went to the war a year ago and has not been heard of since. She feels rather bitter about everything. But hatred? No! no!"

"Well, that is as it may be," Aurore rejoined with some impatience; "but she said something yesterday which has confirmed my opinion about Talon. I suspected him long ago, but since yesterday..."

"Well? And what did Marianne say?"

"That it was Talon who egged on those people to fire the mill and the granaries."

The Curé raised his hands in protest.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I cannot believe that."

"Then you think that Marianne Vallon deliberately told me a lie?"

The old priest felt cornered. His brain, which was not overbrilliant, though intensely kindly, had to make a choice between calling a man a traitor or a woman a liar. He shrank from either conclusion; he hummed and hawed and did his best to avoid Aurore's searching eyes. In the end he compromised.

"Talon," he said, "may have said something that those poor people misunderstood. And there is no doubt, alas! that, with their minds turned away from God, the devil has a great hold over their souls. But I am sure," he added hopefully, "that they have already regretted their action of the other night."

"Only because they found the granaries empty," Aurore concluded with a shrug.

What was the use of arguing? This incorrigible optimist was as surely courting disaster as was her father with his bitter resentment. She gave an impatient little sigh and returned to the more pleasing subject of stockings and petticoats.

Chapter XIII

Indeed, Aurore de Marigny's anxiety would have turned to real alarm could she have guessed Talon's purpose in coming up to the château to-day.

He made his way quite unceremoniously to the small boudoir where Monseigneur usually sat, entered without knocking and with all the assurance of a privileged guest, rather than of a servant. Charles de Marigny always writhed at this show of independence on the part of his once obsequious bailiff. In spite of his outward stoicism, he had not yet become accustomed to those principles of equality which placed the caitiff on a level with the seigneur. Every time that Talon came into his presence with the swaggering air of an equal, and the suggestion of sympathy and protection more galling than enmity, Monseigneur would grind his teeth and clench his hands in an effort not to strike the insolent varlet. But he had enough sense to realize that, as far as the future was concerned, his safety, and perhaps his life and that of Aurore were dependent on this man's good-will: so he swallowed his wrath and returned Talon's casual greeting with as much heartiness as he could.

With scant ceremony the bailiff took the chair lately occupied by the Abbé, poured himself out a glass of water, drank it down, and remarked with an attempt at jocularly:

"No more Burgundy in the cellar, eh? Well! never mind, better times will be coming soon."

Then he talked about the weather, commented on the latest news from Paris, seeming not to notice Monseigneur's absorption. At last Charles de Marigny broke in impatiently:

"Well, what about the granaries?"

Talon sighed and dolefully shook his head.

"Burnt to the ground. Nothing saved."

"And the mill?"

"Alas!"

Monseigneur had made a vigorous effort to control his temper, but with each curt answer from his bailiff the veins on his temples stood out more and more like cords, and he pressed his lips tightly together because he felt that his breath was coming and going with a hissing sound. All of which Talon did not fail to notice, even while he appeared absorbed in picking at the nails of one hand with those of the other.

"And," Monseigneur asked, after a moment or two when he thought that his voice would sound steady, "what have you done about it?"

"I, my dear sir!" Talon exclaimed, "what do you suppose I can do?"

This easy familiarity, this jaunty "my dear sir" required yet another effort on De Marigny's part to keep his temper. He did it, nevertheless, forced himself to appear at ease with this man the very sight of whom he detested, and after a moment he said with quiet deliberation:

"I ordered you, some time ago, when that raffish mob fired my bakery, to let the miscreants know that for every building of mine which they destroyed I would raze one of their cottages to the very ground."

"But, my dear friend—" began Talon in protest.

"I am not your dear friend," Charles de Marigny broke in, on the fringe of exasperation, "but your employer! I gave you certain orders. Did you execute them?"

"I did my best. I threw out hints. I warned them, but I dare not do more."

"Your warnings were no use, apparently. Two valuable granaries have been wantonly destroyed: also the mill, which cost thousands to build only have a dozen years ago: find me a handful of honest men — men who will do what they are paid to do. Choose any two cottages in the village you like, evict the tenants, and let not one stone remain upstanding."

"Monseigneur!—" Talon exclaimed with a gasp.

"Ah!" De Marigny rejoined with a sneer. "It has brought you to your senses, too, has it? You realize that I am not your dear friend but a man who has not forgotten either his position or his rights? Those devils up in Paris talk of a government by terror. Terror, they say, is the order of the day, and they remain in power because they govern by fear. Terror is going to be the order of the day on my estate. An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth. A cottage for my granary; a house for my mill. Find me the men, Talon: I'll show those dastardly ruffians down there that I am still their lord and master."

Charles de Marigny had worked himself up into a state bordering on frenzy. All his common sense, his stoicism had fled to the winds. He had nursed his resentment, his longing to hit back, for so long that all this wanton outrage against his property he lost all sense of proportion, and seized the opportunity to strike, and strike again, not counting the cost of the deadly danger. If he had been perfectly sane at the moment he not only would have realized the folly of such arrogance, but he would not have failed to notice that his bailiff, far from appearing horrified at the monstrous suggestion or frightened at its probable consequences, sat huddled up in his chair with his bony hand across his mouth.

Talon was doing his best to conceal the sneer that lurked around his lips and the gleam of triumph that shot through his eyes. For months now he had worked for this: to bring this arrogant fool to a state of exasperation had been the aim and object of all his scheming and his double game. Those whom the dogs wish to punish they first strike with madness. Talon knew no Latin, but he did know that he had at last succeeded in bringing to the point of frenzy the man on whom depended the success of all his well laid plans.

"Monseigneur," he murmured again. "You don't seem to realize the temper of the people..."

He had shed his easy familiarity as he would a mantle; he was obsequious, servile, cringing now.

"It is time they realized mine," De Marigny retorted proudly. "I or that rabble. One of us must be the master here."

"Unfortunately they have the power... and the numbers. You are alone."

Monseigneur said nothing for the moment. He sat staring out of the window through which he could perceive over the treetops the ruins of his mill and his granaries. It seemed as if his outburst had tired him out. He looked, all of a sudden, like a sick and weary old

man; the blood was ebbing out of his temples; he closed his eyes for a moment or two, and a long sigh broke through his trembling lips.

Talon drew his chair a little closer to him, and, sinking his harsh voice to an insinuating whisper, he said:

“Why not turn your back on the rabble? Get away to England or Belgium... emigrate. So many of your friends have done it...”

Monseigneur made no reply; but Talon, whose keen eyes were watching every change on the proud, expressive face, saw a sudden softening of its lines, as if an invisible hand had passed over them and erased all that were hard and cruel. And in the eyes there crept a look which was almost one of yearning.

“So many have done it,” Talon reiterated. “It is the only road to safety.”

But, as quickly as they had come, softness and yearning had already vanished from De Marigny’s expression; once more the eyes became hard, the mouth obstinate.

“I’ll not go, Talon,” he said forcefully, and brought his clenched fist down on the arm of his chair. “I will see this devilry through to the end. I will hold the fort against this rabble, though, as you say, I must do it alone, but nobody shall lord it over Marigny while I live.”

“It wouldn’t be a case of any one ‘lording’ it,” Talon murmured, “only of a temporary arrangement. Scores of gentlemen have done it... and it is the safest plan.”

He waited a moment or two, then he added:

“The safest plan for you and Mademoiselle Aurore.”

This time the blow had gone him. Charles de Marigny could not suppress a cry of anguish.

“Aurore!”

“But,” he went on slowly, speaking as if to himself, “if we go — if we — if we emigrate — those devils will confiscate the whole of my property, and—”

Talon had to make a great effort to conceal the gleam of satisfaction that shot through his yellow eyes: Monseigneur had started to argue the point — and that was the first sign of defeat.

“Only nominally,” he said. “The whole plan is of the simplest — as I said just now — a temporary arrangement....”

“What temporary arrangement?” De Marigny asked with a frown.

“A paper making the property over to — to — a faithful servant — just a temporary arrangement, as I say — the other party undertaking to restore the property to its original owner on demand. It is done every day, my friend. Half the estates in France, at this moment, are nominally the property of men who have undertaken to administer them on the quiet, till times are better....”

“In this case you mean yourself?”

“Oh, I don’t know that, my good sir. The risks are very great, you must remember.”

“How do you mean — the risks? There are no risks, except for the unfortunate owners who put themselves at the mercy of knaves.”

“Only for the time being — always supposing that those others are knaves. But when life is at stake — and not only one’s own life, but that of others who are very dear — well, one must take certain risks. And there is little risk in trusting a faithful servant who has looked after your interests for twenty years.”

Talon had a persuasive tongue, and as soon as he noted that his suggestion had made a breach in Monseigneur’s armour of pride and obstinacy, he pressed his point home. It was done every day. The sale of the estate was nominal. The price paid in worthless bits of government bonds. Talon had once more dropped his show of servility. He “dear sir”-ed and “my dear friend”-ed De Marigny because he had not rejected the proposal with scorn but was pondering over it. Half the battle, then, was already won, and Talon saw himself in possession of Marigny, at any rate for a number of years, long enough to build a good nest egg and then to flit out of the country if times changed back to the old regime and he was summarily dispossessed.

“You, as the owner, would run no risk,” he went on more glibly. “The risks would all be mine, if I undertook the task, for I might be denounced as a traitor for my devotion to you. But you! Why, my dear friend, you could go away to England or Belgium with Mademoiselle Aurore, and when you came back to Marigny four or five years hence — the present state of things cannot last longer than that — you will find your estates impoverished, no doubt, but your house standing where it did.”

He rose, preparing to take his leave. He knew well enough that he had sown the right seed in fairly receptive soil and that to say more just now might imperil the happy issue of his fight. Whether, when once more left to himself, Charles de Marigny would return to his state of arrogance and frenzy or ponder more deeply over his bailiff’s suggestion was on the knees of the gods. It was no use thinking that the battle was already won. It was not. There was a chink in the armour of obstinacy, and that was all.

“I’ll bring you the papers in a day or two,” he said casually, as he took his leave. “It is quite a simple affair. You acknowledge having received a certain sum from me for the sale of all your properties wheresoever situated, and I sign an undertaking to restore them to you on demand and the repayment of the money.”

“On demand?”

“Why, yes! You are not likely to return to this hell upon earth, are you? Unless times have much changed.”

And Charles de Marigny, as if wear of struggle and argument, assented somewhat lamely.

“Yes, yes, Talon. Quite right! You are right, I am sure, and you mean well. Bring me the papers; I’ll look at them.”

“In the meanwhile I’ll give it out more decidedly that if any more arson occurs on your property you will give as good as you get.”

“Yes, yes!” Monseigneur assented, his exasperation getting, at last, completely the better of his good sense. “Do what you like, but, for God’s sake, get out of my sight now! I am sick of you and your ugly face.”

Talon grinned. Memory took him back to those days before the great upheaval, when Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny was in the habit of thus dismissing his obsequious bailiff. Times had changed, but not Monseigneur. Talon knew well enough that beneath a great deal of show of stoicism the old Adam could always be reckoned with. Because of that old Adam of arrogance and tyranny he would gain his point. Monseigneur would be forced to yield Marigny up to him or perish at the hands of an infuriated mob.

And Hector Talon made his way home, satisfied with the morning’s work.

Chapter XIV

By the time that Aurore and the Abbé Rosemonde had finished sorting out the treasures of the old leather trunk Talon had left the château. Aurore found her father looking thoughtful.

"That rascal Talon," he said presently, speaking as it were to himself, "is no fool. His advice is sound." He drew the girl to him and looked searchingly into her eager young face. "My little Aurore," he went on wistfully, "would you like to put all these horrors behind you and seek refuge somewhere where we could have peace?"

"You mean — emigrate, Father?"

"Why not?"

"And lose Marigny? They confiscate everything if one emigrates."

"If it could be done without losing Marigny?"

"Even so...?"

"You don't want to go?"

"I want to do whatever you think is right; but — I love Marigny." And Aurore's dreamy eyes, full of a vague yearning, swept over the beautiful vista around, the wooded slopes, the distant ribbon of the Allier whispering among the reeds, the steeples of the village churches peeping out between the clumps of sycamore and walnut. All this meant home to her. She had never known another. Even the palace in Paris had been but a pied-à-terre for her: Marigny alone was home. "I love it," she reiterated with a sigh. "I know every tree in the forest, every shrub in the coppice, the call of every bird. To go away into the unknown frightens me, somehow."

"Now, that is sheer childishness, Aurore," her father said sternly. "My dear Abbé, help me to get those silly fancies out of her head."

The old priest had stood by in discreet silence, ostensibly engrossed in looking over again the old clothes he was going to distribute in the village. At Aurore's outburst he looked up, and now that Monseigneur appealed to him he came and placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"I should miss you terribly in the village, my child," he said, "but I agree with your father. If it can be done, it would be wiser to go away. It will only be for a time."

"Do they hate us here so much as all that?" she asked. Probably she would have broken down then and had a good cry. It seemed so cruel that, in spite of every effort towards forgiveness and charity, it was impossible to combat that hatred which a lot of irresponsible and cruel demagogues had instilled into the hearts of the people of France. But Aurore met her father's anxious, loving glance fixed upon her: young as she was, she knew that he depended on her for every tiny gleam of joy or happiness that she was able to give, and also that at sight of her grief his bitter resentment and suffering would increase a hundredfold. So she swallowed her tears, gave her father a good kiss, then turned once more to the old priest, smiling through her tears:

"Let us go straightway to the village now, M. le Curé," she said. "I do want the Legendre children to have those stockings soon. And," she added with a light laugh, "I have not yet done my marketing to-day."

It was late afternoon when Aurore de Marigny made her way back from the village toward the château. Jeannette was with her and carried her market basket. She was an elderly woman who had served the ducal family almost from childhood, when she began life as a scullery wench. She had lost mother, father, kindred, one after the other, and gradually her whole life became entirely dependent upon the château. When approaching middle age she had married Pierre, one of the men-servants, and after that had carried on just as before. She never had any children. Somehow she had never wanted any. And then when, one by one, the other servants of the château ran away, terrified lest they should be identified with unpopular aristos, Pierre and Jeannette had stayed on, chiefly because they had nowhere else to go. What few services were required of them — the little bit of cooking and cleaning — they did quite ungrudgingly but without enthusiasm. They seemed to have become a pair of automatons, with undeveloped brains and a vague protective instinct towards Aurore de Marigny and Monseigneur who gave them shelter and food.

Together Aurore and Jeannette walked rapidly along the road, which at this point follows the river bank until it branches off to the wooded slopes which lead up to the château. They had gone past the last two or three outlying cottages, and the road stretched out before them like a white ribbon, sun-baked, dusty, and solitary. They had seen no one for some time when, suddenly, a man came into view around a bend, walking slowly towards them. He looked wearied, ragged, and dirty, but in this was no different from many other wayfarers on the high roads these days; but there was something in his limping gait, in his stooping shoulders, and in his head, which fell forward on his chest and rolled round and round as if insecurely held by his neck, which gave the idea of fatigue verging on complete collapse.

As the man drew nearer Aurore perceived that he wore a military coat and breeches, both in the last stages of decay, and that he had no shoes on his feet, which were bleeding and covered with grime. His head was bare, and a shock of chestnut-brown tousled hair fell like a mop over his face. Aurore noted, also, that the right sleeve of his tattered coat was hanging empty.

Obviously, a miserable soldier, making his way home from the war. As he came close up to the two women he stumbled and would certainly have fallen had not Aurore put out her arms. Instinctively, with his one hand he seized hold of hers, and remained quite still for a moment or two, trying to steady himself and clinging blindly to this unexpected support. Then he raised his head and shook the mop of hair away from his face. Aurore encountered a pair of dark eyes, lack-lustre and glassy, and with an unseeing vagueness in their dilated pupils. She did not dare move for fear of seeing the man fall at her feet, but she half turned her head to Jeannette and said quickly:

"That drop of wine in the small bottle... give it here...."

At sound of the voice the glassiness went out of the man's eyes. The pupils contracted, and a deep frown appeared between his brows. He seemed suddenly to realize that the prop which supported him was a woman's arm, and with a great effort he steadied himself on his feet. A curious light flashed from his eyes, which seemed to sweep Aurore from head to foot.

Jeannette muttered something about wasting good stuff which had cost so much to procure, but Aurore spoke impatiently:

"The bottle, Jeannette! Quick!"

Under the man's curious sweeping glance she felt her cheeks flushing, but still she did not move, holding out her arm quite stiffly until his hold on it relaxed. Then she frowned and turned her head away, for the man was staring at her still, and there was something in that stare, a certain contempt or even enmity, which almost caused her to take to her heels and run. But she held her round, and when, presently, Jeannette handed her the bottle, she took it and held it out to the man. With a sweep of his arm he brushed it away, then threw back his head and laughed. It was a strange laugh, hard and mirthless, which caused the suspicion of a shiver to run down Aurore's spine — a shiver not of fear (for what was there to fear in this miserable, maimed creature?), but of recoil, as if in the presence of something weird and not altogether earthly. But that was only a momentary weakness: the man looked so unutterably wretched that tears of pity, never absent from the depths of Aurore's sympathetic head, welled up to her eyes. Instinctively she felt, however, that pity in this case would be unwelcome; repulsed, perhaps, with that contempt which still lingered in the man's eyes; so she closed her own for a moment or two, lest the tears trickle down her cheeks.

When she opened them again the man had passed by.

"Come, Jeannette," Aurore said quickly, "let us get home."

Jeanette, stolid and silent, had rearranged the market basket and started to walk beside her mistress.

"Thank goodness," she said, "this good wine was not wasted. It would have been a sin to deprive Monseigneur of it for the sake of that down-at-heel vagabond."

After a while she added: "You know who that was, don't you, mademoiselle?"

"No," Aurore replied. "How should I?"

"It was André Vallon. I knew him at once, though he looks a miserable bag of bones now."

"André Vallon?"

"Marianne's son. Mademoiselle must recollect."

"But how should I?" Aurore reiterated frowning.

Mechanically, however, she had paused for a moment and turned round to look at the retreating figure. Strangely enough, the man, too, had paused and looked back; and once more their eyes met. There was a distance of some ten metres between them now: the man, whoever he was, shrugged and laughed as soon as he had caught her glance; then he turned and went his way; but Aurore was again conscious of that vague sense of terror, as if something fateful and irresistible had come across her path. It was nonsense, of course. Again and again she said to herself: "What is there to fear?" Unfortunately, these days, inimical glances were more familiar to her than kindly ones; she was accustomed to looks of derision, even of hatred, to threatening words and menace of violence. The wretched vagabond who had just gone by had not spoken; had threatened with neither word nor gesture; but never in all these fateful days had she encountered a glance so full of latent contempt and almost unearthly hatred.

"Tell me about this — this André Vallon — was that the name?" she said presently to Jeannette, while together the two of them walked up the slope.

Jeannette, whose powers of narration were limited, began a long and involved tale on the subject. She talked of André and his mother; of the boy's early turbulent life in the village which ended abruptly and violently in a public whipping in the market square for disorderly conduct. Jeannette could not remember the details, but she had heard it said in the village that young Vallon had sworn deadly enmity against all those who had been present and seen his humiliation.

"He went up to Paris after that," Jeannette went on to relate, "and got under the thumb of that murdering blackguard Danton. So I shouldn't wonder if he has become just such another assassin himself. I shouldn't care to meet him alone on the road. But, as I used to say to his mother long ago, she would spoil him. She let him think he was somebody, though he was nothing better, even in those days, then a young ne'er-do-weel. And the woman spoilt him, too, because he had flashing eyes and a way with him. Dirty young blackguard, I call him."

She went meandering on, not caring whether her mistress listened to her or not. She had the usual anecdotes to tell of André's turpitude, and the perpetual mischief he would get into, causing his mother endless worry.

Aurore only listened with half an ear. Vague memories floated through her mind of a glorious day such as this in mid-July. Her birthday. Her young friends. A game of blindman's bluff. And then the face of a boy with flashing black eyes, a shock of chestnut hair from which the hot sun drew glints of shining copper, and of a brown, slender hand holding a futile, useless pocketknife.

It all seemed like a dream now. Later on she had heard the story of the same boy being publicly whipped in the market square for having killed Hector Talon's savage dog, and she remembered feeling sorry for him, because already in those days she had instinctively disliked Talon. How it all came back now! Her pity for the boy, her dread at sight of his flashing dark eyes and of his beautiful face convulsed with rage because Pierre de Mauléon had slapped his cheek. And the heavy scent of earth which had offended her nostrils when, blindfolded, she fell against his breast.

Chapter XV

Soon the news was all over the countryside that André Valon had come home from the war, and the very next day Marianne's doorstep was besieged with people who not only wanted to see the boy, but wished to know just what was going on over in Champagne or Verdun; whether the King of Prussia was really marching on Paris, or whether he had been defeated by the brave national army and was now in full retreat.

Somehow, too, it had become known that André had both won his epaulettes and lost his left arm at Valmy, where the King of Prussia had suffered a severe defeat. Rumours of that victory — one of the rare ones — had penetrated as far as Val-le-Roi; Danton had made grandiloquent allusions to it in the National Assembly, had talked volubly about "our glorious troops, our valorous soldiers who were sweeping the whole of Europe clean of tyrants and militarism." He spoke of "their heroic deaths, fighting in the glorious cause of liberty," and "sacrificing their noble lives with the smile of martyrs going to glory, so that the world might, at least, be safe for democracy."

What he did not talk of were the unspeakable privations, the almost unbelievable hardships which, indeed, had been endured by the troops with a stoicism and heroic obstinacy almost without parallel in the history of the world. André himself never spoke about that. That he had suffered, and suffered terribly, along with the troops which he had helped to lead to victory, could be seen by the unnatural glitter that came to his eyes whenever friends pressed him to tell them something of that well equipped and well fed army of Prussians and Austrians who were attacking France just because she had thrown off the shackles of tyranny and led the vanguard to an era of equality and of liberty. An almost cruel curve would then distort André's lips when he spoke of the Austrian officers in their smart uniforms, or the Prussian troops with their good boots and well filled bellies, all fighting in the cause of those aristos who had so complacently shaken the dust of starving France from their high-heeled shoes and were disporting themselves in comfort and safety in Belgium or England. And he would glance up into the distance, where, outlined against the summer sky, the pinnacles and pointed roofs of the Château de Marigny towered above the treetops, and the look in his eyes became almost one of frenzied hatred, whilst words such as Danton himself would have emulated came hoarsely from his parched throat. He hated them. Heavens above, how he hated them all! It was a hatred akin to physical anguish, one that had been born in his heart when he was a mere child, on that day of bitter humiliation when he had stood naked at the whipping post, exposed to the mocking gaze of those aristos with their perfumed hair and bejewelled lorgnettes. That had been a boy's hatred, but now it was the hatred of a man filled to the soul with bitter resentment and the yearning for some measure of revenge.

But it was when the gleam of that resentment glittered most vividly in her son's eyes that Marianne's podgy, toil-hardened hand would descend with a soothing pressure upon his shoulder. Her calm philosophy would express itself in a few clumsy words, and André would pat that kindly hand and kiss it and make a big effort to subdue the paroxysm of his fury.

"All I long for, Maman chérie," he would say, as calmly as he could, "is that I may live long enough to see the destruction for this old world and the rebuilding of the new. Nothing else will do, my dear one, but complete annihilation of everything. There is corruption everywhere; uncleanness, crying evils too deeply rooted to be remedied. The world is overgrown with tares; nothing but a world conflagration can render it clean again."

At which Marianne would nod her head and reply gently: "The worst tare of all, André, is hatred. How can you reap anything but conflict if you sow that?"

"It is not hate, Mother, that will set the world aflame, but justice. Something has got to be done. Those who have mocked at misery and done nothing to alleviate it must be made to suffer. Those who have enjoyed life, who have always eaten and drunk their fill — they have got to learn what it feels like to be so cold — so cold that your chattering teeth seem ready to fall out of your jaws and to feel your belly so hollow that you would gnaw the flesh off your own limbs. They have got to know something of suffering, Mother. It is justice, and it has got to be."

But Marianne would still shake her wise old head. Justice? When had there ever been justice in this old world in which she had lived long and endured so much? There had been no justice in the days that were past, when up at the château — whither she trudged day after day, in order to do the family washing — she saw buckets full of meal and skim milk thrown to the pits, and fat, meaty bones given to the dogs, which would have kept her and her boy free from hunger. Was there justice now, when soldiers who were fighting for France were allowed to starve while the great orators up in Paris held banquets and feasts in the name of Liberty?

Justice? God alone held its scales, and no man knew how He would administer it in the life that was to come.

Chapter XVI

It was while the excitement of André Vallon's homecoming was at its height, and the imagination of the countryside stirred by his account of the heroism and endurance of the national army, that Hector Talon took the opportunity of recruiting half a dozen ruffians to fulfill that act of madness ordered by Monseigneur by way of reprisals for the burning of his granaries and his mill.

With ferocious spite he had already selected the cottage of Marianne Vallon for the dastardly deed and chosen the day when André himself was absent from Val-le-Roi, having gone to Nevers on business of his own. He also selected another cottage close by, which was the property of the widow Louvet, who had four children and a small competence left to her by her husband, at one time a prosperous farmer who, some time before his death, had fallen on lean days and been forced, like so many others, to sell most of his land. Those two cottages, then, isolated from the rest of the village, had been marked by Talon for destruction. The six ruffians, whom he had recruited in absolute secrecy and for a small sum from one of the distant villages, arrived in the early morning armed with sabres and bayonets, clad in cloth coat and breeches, and wearing red caps on their heads. They proceeded first to one cottage and then to the other, and summoned the women to clear out of them at once. As they refused to move, the ruffians seized them and the Louvet children and forcibly ejected them from their homes, after which act of brutality, they set fire to the cottages. When these were well ablaze they incontinently took to their heels, and no one had set eyes on them since.

The news of the outrage spread like wildfire, and soon the entire population of three villages flocked to the scene of the disaster.

Strange how rumour does travel in these lonely districts! The firing of shops or stores, of granaries or timber sheds, were of frequent occurrence these days, and usually the crowds that gathered round the conflagrations were made up, in addition to the ruffianly incendiaries, of a few young rascals intent on mischief and some poor half-starved vagabonds — men and women — who hoped to pick up something out of the wreckage. There were also those who came to shout, "Vive la liberté!" at the instigation of the professional tub thumpers, who took the opportunity of egging the crowd to worse mischief still.

But in this case it was different. People came from Le Borne and Vanzy, from Aubeterre and Barbuise; for hours the road, the lanes, the towpaths were dotted with dark figures hurrying to the scene. Men in ragged shirts and shoeless; women in tattered kirtles; children, half naked, clinging to their mother's hand; but there were also the farmers from Aubeterre or Vanzy, who came driving in their carts, and there was the lawyer from Le Creusot in his carriage, and the leech from Barbuise, who was on his rounds.

For an hour or more the cottages were ablaze. They were stone-built, with heavy wooden rafters and age-old beams, which were a ready prey for the flames. There was very little wind, and the sky was leaden. Great storm clouds, tinged now with crimson, came rolling in from the west. Huge columns of smoke rose, writhing and twisting, to the sky mingled with showers of spluttering, hissing sparks.

The men worked wonders, some of them risking their lives in a heroic endeavour to save the women's goods. There had been a prolonged drought since June and very little water in the wells, but many men defied the flames while they dragged poor bits of furniture, bedding, or clothing out of the blazing buildings. The women stood round, staring wide eyed at this disaster which they could not comprehend. It was so ununderstandable, meaningless, wanton. The destruction of bourgeois or aristocratic property, yes! they understood that well enough, because those that were well-to-do were the enemies of the starving people of France — at least, so the great orators up in Paris were never tired of dinning into the ears of all and sundry. But cottages! the dwellings of the poor, the home of a widow and of a mother of children! That was beyond human comprehension.

The widow Louvet, with her children gathered about her knees, was squatting by the side of the road up against the hedge with a crowd of sympathizers all round her. She mostly had her apron over her face, feeling, she said, quite unable to bear the sight of that awful conflagration. She seemed quite incapable of lending a helping hand, even in the simple effort of dragging her goods out of the way of the crowd. When her apron was not over her face she just stared in front of her, or else at her children, and through quivering lips murmured agonizing, "Mon Dieu!"s and "Sainte Vierge!"s. "What will become of us now?"

But Marianne Vallon neither cried nor prayed. In her own quiet, stolid way she did her share in endeavouring to rescue her goods. She worked like a man: and when all her little bits of furniture were in safety, she went over the Louvets' cottage and helped in the work of salvage there.

"Voyons, Citoyenne Vallon," one of the men said to her when she attempted to go too near the blazing building. "Keep your distance. The place is dangerous."

She said nothing, only shook the men off who tried to restrain her. There were the children's paillasses to get out of the way, and their few bits of clothing. The men had gotten these out of the cottage, but they were too near the fire still, and flying sparks might set them alight.

"Take care, Citizeness Vallon!" the women shouted to her. "Let the men do what they can."

Marianne was stooping at the moment. She had hold of a bundle of bedding with both hands and was dragging it out of the way. Her bulky shoulders were bent to the task: the scanty gray hairs clung to her streaming face. The bedding was heavy and awkward to handle, but so precious; so very precious, with all those poor sickly children wanting to sleep comfortably o' nights.

"Take care, Citizeness Vallon!" the women screamed. "It isn't safe!"

"Let the things be!"

"Take care!"

And the men all at once gave a terrific shout, "Out of the way!"

One of them tried to get a hold of Marianne to drag her to safety, but she was large and heavy and bulky, and she was bending to her task, not seeing what was going on and heedless of the shouts of warning.

And suddenly a sheet of fire came bursting from the cottage: it was followed by a thunderous crash as the roof fell in, scattering bits of wood, stones, and tiles in all directions.

A cry of horror rose from every throat, drowning the roar of the flames, the hissing of sparks, the din of falling timber and crumbling stones. Beneath a huge smouldering beam Marianne Vallon lay, huddled up and lifeless, still clasping the bundle of bedding

in her arms.

Chapter XVII

Now only the blackened stone walls were left standing, with the empty holes where the tiny windows had been staring out on the scene of devastation like hollow, sightless eyes. An evil-smelling sooty smoke still found its way out of the smouldering ruins, and now and then a volley of sparks rose up hissing to the stormy sky. A suffocating smell of hot paint and burning refuse hung in the air, and the lamentations of women, the whimpering of children, and the dull murmur of men's voices seemed like eerie sounds that came from the Stygian creek.

No one knew exactly what to do or what to say. The catastrophe was so appalling that, beyond sullen murmurs, those who had witnessed it appeared tongue-tied. Paralyzed they were with the horror of it. The death of Marianne Vallon was the culminating point in the overwhelming disaster. And André himself was away. He had gone to Nevers the day before to see about a lawyer's business which he wanted to take over now that he was no longer fit to rejoin the army. He had been full of hopes of a brighter future for the mother whom he adored. No longer would she have to wash and scrub for him. There was so much litigation these days that any lawyer with brains was certain of a good income. And André Vallon was well seen in his high places: he had been clerk at one time to no less a personage than Georges Danton, the idol of the people, who thought the world of him. Oh! there was no doubt about it, the world held compensations for a man like André Vallon. He had lost an arm but not an iota of his brains, and though the terrible hardships which he had endured in the campaign against the Prussians had to a certain extent impaired his health and embittered his temper, he had still two priceless possessions — youth and an iron constitution.

He was going to be so happy! And now this awful, this overwhelming cataclysm. Who was going to tell him? Who would be bold enough to face that son with news of his mother's death under such tragic circumstances? The women discussed it but could offer no advice. All they could do was to stretch their arms up to heaven and ejaculate, "Jésus! Mon Dieu!" even though they knew well enough that appeals to the deity were not forbidden by law. The men were torn between the desire to run away, now that they could do nothing to help in an active way, and the longing to fasten the guilt of the whole thing on somebody. For somebody had done this awful deed. The ruffians who had ejected the women and children from their homes had taken to their heels. True enough! But the countryside could be scoured for them, and, by dint of menace and other more forcible arguments, they might be made to confess in whose pay they were. Strangely enough, no one suspected as yet that the monstrous order had emanated from the château.

In the meanwhile, those among the crowd who had business of their own to attend to were gradually trying to get away. Perhaps at the back of their minds there arose the fear that some sort of mischief would surely come out of this. Vallon would turn up presently, and the devil alone knew to what lengths his fury would go. He already held the people around in the hollow of his hand and could lead them whithersoever he chose. With his mother lying dead at his feet through an outrage as yet inexplicable, something of the rage of a tiger unleashed might carry him and his sympathizers to excesses which presently might know no bounds. When the temper of the rabble was worked up no one knew how things would end, and it was best to be home and keep gates and doors well barred and bolted. And so the farmers in their carts, the leech in his carriage, the keepers of neighbouring village stores, drifted away one by one.

"If you meet Vallon, tell him!" was shouted after those who were going in the direction of Nevers.

And Farmer Lameth, from over Le Borne way, going homeward in his cart, did presently meet André Vallon, who had borrowed a carriage in Nevers and was leisurely driving home. Farmer Lameth pulled up.

"Terrible doings up at Val-le-Roi," he called out to André. "You should be there, Citizen Vallon."

"Why? What has happened?"

"Two cottages have been fired, and families turned out of their homes."

"Name of a dog...!"

Farmer Lameth hesitated a moment or two. Already he did not much like the look in André's face. What would it be presently — when he knew?

"One of them is your mother," the worthy farmer added tentatively.

"My mother!"

This time it was the devil himself who kindled the flame in André's eyes. He whipped up the nag, and the carriage started off with a bump upon the stony road. Farmer Lameth turned in his seat and called out once more:

"Citizen Vallon!"

André did not slacken speed, but he too turned in his seat and shouted back:

"Yes! What is it?"

"There's more trouble there than you think—"

But André did not really listen. He whipped that poor old nag as he had never whipped a horse before. Never had the road seemed so long. Trouble indeed! He would see to it that there was trouble and to spare for whoever had laid hands on his mother's property and turned her out of her home. Trouble? There would be trouble in Val-le-Roi such as there had never been even in Paris, even in Versailles! Trouble? My God!

Chapter XVIII

"Here comes Citizen Vallon."

"No."

"I tell you 'yes.'"

"And he's driving like the devil!"

Instinctively the crowd had closed up right across the road, barring the way to the smouldering cottage and standing in a dense mass round the recumbent figure over which someone had reverently laid an old tattered shawl. The men had succeeded in moving away the beam and the bundle of bedding, and Marianne Vallon now lay on one of the paillasses which she had rescued from the flames: her hands had been folded across her ample bosom, and the thin gray hair smoothed away from the marble-like, wide forehead.

There was no other feeling in the heart of anyone there at this moment but intense pity for the bereaved son and an awed wonder as to what would happen next. Even such men as Tarbot, the ex-butcher of Vanzy, and Molé, the wheelwright, two of the most desperate ruffians the Revolution had engendered in any village, were silent and uncertain, and determined to delay as long as possible the terrible revelation that would bring such overwhelming grief to a devoted son. So they all stood like a solid phalanx, shoulder to shoulder, around that still and inert mass, while a carriage came rattling down the road, and a miserable nag, all skin and bones, thick with dust and lather, charged straight into them. It is very difficult to stand up to a charging horse and vehicle, even though the horse is but skin and bones: the crowd gave way, and André jumped down from the carriage. The men tried to restrain him, but with his one arm he shook them off and forged his way to where his mother lay, with eyes closed, her hands folded across her bosom, her body covered with a shawl.

He was in the midst of a crowd, and he would not let them see what he felt. Not a word came through his lips, and the cry that had risen to his throat was smothered and deadened with a mighty effort of will. He knelt down beside his mother and, with his hand on her ice-cold forehead, he looked down on her face and listened. No need for the others to tell him. Death was all too plainly writ on those beloved features, so stark and set, and the slightly parted lips through which so many words of quiet philosophy had often passed in order to comfort and to calm him. The eyes were closed, and André bent down and kissed each rigid lid; the hands were folded as they had so often been in prayer when she had knelt beside his bed. Her heart was still — that great, big heart of hers in which there had never been room for hatred and bitterness.

Oh, no! There was no need for others to tell him. He knew the moment that the crowd parted and he saw her lying there with the tattered shawl over her that she was dead. A slight noise among the crowd, a sigh, no doubt, or a smothered sob, recalled him to the fact that there were others there. Very gently he drew the old shawl right over his mother's face, and then he rose to his feet. There was not a drop of blood in his cheeks: his face looked as pale as that of the dead woman at his feet, but in his eyes now there were smouldering flames of fury that would not be quenched save in revenge.

"What has happened?" he asked curtly.

A dozen voices were raised at once. Floods of eloquence so long held in check poured into his ears in full.

"The two cottages were fired."

"Six ruffians laid hands on the women."

"The widow Louvet and her four children are homeless."

"Your mother was killed in an endeavour to save some of the children's belongings."

"The roof fell in. A heavy beam knocked her down."

"She must have died instantly."

"Hold on!" André shouted, drowning the tumult with his stentorian voice. "Who fired the cottages?"

"Six ruffians there were—"

"In cloth coats and breeches—"

"And with shoes on their feet."

"Who saw them?"

The widow Louvet — she with the four children — had given up crying and moaning and staring into vacancy. The far greater tragedy of Marianne Vallon's death had put her own misfortune in the shade. Thus directly appealed to, she was ready to come forward with her tale. She had seen the six ruffians, of course: had they not turned her out, her and the children, out of her home, and at the point of their bayonets? She couldn't resist. What could she do? They had turned her out, and she was afraid the children would be hurt. Then the ruffians had set fire to her cottage. They had piled up straw in the middle of the kitchen floor and set it alight. Some of them stood by to see that the straw had caught on properly; the others went on to the house of Citizeness Vallon.

"Was no one about, then, to stop them?"

Apparently not. They all shook their heads. It had all been done so quickly.

"After that the reprobates took to their heels."

"And no one after them?"

Again they all shook their heads.

"Your mother tried to save the children's bedding—" the widow Louvet began dolefully, and suddenly paused, for the look in André's face was so terrifying that it froze the words on her lips.

"And I am not here," he murmured, "to tear their entrails out of their filthy bodies..." And suddenly he threw back his head and his glowing eyes searched the faces in the crowd.

"Can any of you guess," he asked quite quietly, "who is at the bottom of this?"

Not only had they guessed, but they knew. Had not Hector Talon — that double-faced hypocrite — had he not thrown out hints that more than a week ago that Marigny, up at the château, had threatened — nay, commanded — reprisals for the firing of his granaries? Some of them murmured the name of Talon, but André gave a harsh, scornful laugh.

"Talon?" he said. "Yes! We'll deal with Talon presently, for of a certainty he is in this villainy up to the neck. But," he went on more slowly, so that every word told and struck the ears of the crowd like the knell of an inevitable doom, "it is that devil up there who must account for to-day's infamy."

He paused a moment and then added:

"I am going up there, anyway, in order to make sure. Who comes with me?"

The response was unanimous. Indeed, it seemed as if a great sigh of relief went through the assembled crowd. Not only the men, but also the women. The sense of awe engendered by the magnitude of the catastrophe and the death of Marianne Vallon was beginning to wear away. There were men here who had begun to think of reprisals and who read in André's white, set face, in the almost tigerish fury in his glowing eyes, that passionate desire for revenge for which they themselves had so often thirsted. Men like Tarbot, the ex-butcher, and Molé, the wheelwright, had also brooded over the wrongs of their caste until they hungered for an opportunity to bring aristos to shame, or, better still, to the guillotine. They had seen around them such scenes of misery, humiliation, starvation, and tyranny that their hatred of tyrants and oppressors had turned to savage lust for the sight of blood.

There was no question here of philosophy or moderation.

How are you going to preach forgiveness and moderation to a starving crowd? There is no tongue sufficiently eloquent to find words that will pour the soothing oil of forbearance on a raging sea of rebellion. One Voice alone could do that, and did it nigh two thousand years ago, but to-day that Voice is still: It only speaks mutely from the Cross.

"Citizen Vallon," one of the men said decisively, "we will help you in your revenge."

André nodded in silence. He could not trust himself to say much. Not yet. There was always the fear of breaking down, of showing weakness which he was far from feeling. He hardly dared look on that so still form beneath the ragged shawl: the folded hands showed all too plainly, and the swell of the ample bosom against which he had so often as a child cried himself to sleep. No, indeed, he dared not look, for sobs threatened to choke him, and he might cry out his agony of grief. But he still had a task to accomplish, a duty to fulfill.

"A few sticks to make a stretcher," he said curtly.

"Where'll you take her, André?" one of the women asked.

"Back home."

"It is burnt to the ground."

"I know that."

They asked no further questions, for already André was busy breaking down branches of trees. The men helped: some of them had tools, others went to fetch what they could. A stretcher was soon improvised, and they lifted the dead woman on it. André and Tarbot, the ex-butcher, carried her to her ruined cottage, most of the others following.

Tarbot, looking down on the dead woman, asked:

"Where shall we put her?"

"In there," André replied.

They put the stretcher down, and André went deliberately up to the cottage door and started clearing away the charred debris which encumbered it. The other men lent a hand, and when the entrance had been cleared André and Tarbot went back to get the stretcher. They had just stooped to lift it when the Abbé Rosemonde was seen hurrying down the road. He had heard the news and came panting along as fast as his shaking limbs would carry him. He had tucked his soutane up round his waist: he was hatless, and his gray hair clung to his streaming forehead.

"I don't want to see him," André said abruptly. "Keep him away."

But the Curé forged his way resolutely through the crowd.

"André, my child," he cried panting, "I only just heard the news. I came as fast as I could."

André paid no attention to him. In silence, with the aid of Tarbot, he carried his burden into the ruined cottage.

"We'll lay her down here," he said, "until such time as—"

"André!" the old priest called.

"Go home, Citizen Curé," Tarbot said roughly. "Can't you see that you are not wanted here?"

He and André had taken the dead woman to the centre of what had once been her parlour. The floor was littered with rubbish. They cleared a place on which to deposit the stretcher. Above, through a wide, yawning gap in the roof, there was a vista of a leaden sky of gray clouds which hung, low and heavy, presaging the coming storm.

André collected what there was left of charred wood and spread it around the stretcher.

"Straw would be better," he muttered.

"What are you going to do, Citizen Vallon?" Tarbot asked.

The others had come to a halt all about the doorway. Behind them the old priest was still striving to elbow his way through the crowd. André drew his flint and steel out of his pocket and used them vigorously, trying to draw a spark. The men understood.

"Straw would be better," one of them said. Another added: "I know where to get some," and turned toward the road. This made a gap through the crowd, and the old priest pushed his way in.

"André!" he cried once more. "Your mother...!"

André paid no attention to him. He was busy with his flint and steel, trying to get little bits of wood alight. But the fire had done its work, the charred wood fell into ashes and would not burn.

"Young Legendre has gone to get straw," said one of the men.

"This is sacrilege," the old priest protested loudly. "André, in your dead mother's name..."

At this André looked up. "My mother is dead," he said roughly; "she doesn't want you."

"You may not want me, my child," the old priest retorted firmly, "but she would."

Then, as André said nothing more, only went on stolidly striking flint against steel, the Curé said forcefully:

“Remember, my son, that from above she can still see you; how think you she would view this awful sacrilege? Voyons! voyons, André,” he went on more gently, “do not harden your heart in rebellion against the will of God. Let me come near the dear old soul, and we’ll pray together that she may have eternal rest. She would have wished it, you know.”

And though resentment and bitterness were tearing at André’s heart, he knew that the priest was right. Old Marianne, could she have said the word, would have rebelled against this desecration of her body: she would have wished for Christian burial, to the accompaniment of prayer and the ministrations of the Church. To the end of her hard life she had remained a professing Christian, clinging to the simple beliefs of her youth, weeping over the godlessness of this new regime, over the spirit of rebellion which it had fostered in her André’s heart, abhorring the tyranny of man which had brought so much misery on the poor people, yet bowing with quiet philosophy to the inscrutable will of God.

André knew all that. “She would have wished it, you know.” The priest’s words found an echo in his aching heart. For a few seconds still did he hesitate, did his pride war with his love for the dead. The others watched him in silence while the women wept. Here was something that was past their comprehension, something that awed and silenced them and for the time being made them forget their passions and their hatred. Then André, without another word, put his flint back into his pocket and rose to his feet. He stood aside, and when the priest knelt down beside the dead and began murmuring his prayers, he watched him silently for awhile and then walked quietly out of the cottage.

Chapter XIX

But under the stormy canopy of the sky the spell was broken.

"We'll help you, citizen Vallon. Let's to the château!" was the universal slogan.

"But first of all for Talon!"

The cry came from André. It was harsh and cruel like that of a young tiger scenting its prey. They others did not quite understand.

"Talon? Why Talon?"

"Because," André said, "such an abominable deed could never have been carried out without the aid of Hector Talon."

Why indeed Talon? Because he was the man whom André hated only one degree less than the people up at the château. Why Talon? Because André had a longing to see him dragged here by the heels through the dust and to see his yellow eyes turn glassy with the agony of deathly terror. Talon the hypocrite! The mealy-mouthed sycophant!

"Who will go and fetch Talon?"

There were any number of them there willing enough to start the day's work by baiting Talon. They went off in a body to fetch him. They dragged him out of his house. Pushed along, heckled and jostled, they brought him to the scene of the disaster, face to face with André Vallon.

They had dragged him along, and he had come, and on the way he had mapped out his line of action. Not without due deliberation had he planned the monstrous outrage, nor without due regard to the consequences, unpleasant to himself, that might ensue. He had foreseen the rage of these people, their lust for revenge; he had reckoned on their passions as a lever for finally persuading Marigny to emigrate. He had even been prepared for a certain measure of danger to himself — danger which he would know how to combat. But what he had not reckoned on was the death of Marianne Vallon.

Nevertheless, he faced the crowd boldly. Whatever terror he felt he did not let them see; nor did he flinch when André, towering above him, laid such a heavy hand on his shoulder that his knees gave way under him.

"So there you are, Citizen Talon," André apostrophized him coolly. "I suppose you know who I am?"

Talon looked up at the young face, dark and distorted with fury, and blinked his yellow eyes.

"How should I not know you, Citizen Vallon?" he said smoothly. "I have known you ever since—"

"Ever since you had me whipped for killing your brute of a dog, eh?"

"That is past history, Citizen Vallon," Talon said jocosely; "you are a man now."

"While you have remained a worm," André retorted: "such a worm that I have a mind to tread on your face, just for the pleasure of seeing you wriggle."

The men laughed, but Talon did not flinch. He even contrived to shrug and to smile. He was clever enough to know that a bold face and an arrogant air would be his best safeguard against aggression. Some of these men here — the rougher ones — were his friends. They knew him to be a man of influence. They had listened to his oratory outside the village taverns and had heard men in high places speak of Citizen Talon as a good patriot. And Talon knew that they would not dare touch him, even though André Vallon, the savage young brute, did his level best to incite them to murder. He kept up his jaunty air, and, only pulling a wry face, he said indulgently:

"You were always good at jesting, Citizen Vallon."

"I am not jesting now," André rejoined. "I want to know who gave the order for this abominable outrage."

"You mean the firing of the cottages?"

"Who ordered it? Tell us! Speak, why don't you? Speak, or I'll tear the words out of your filthy throat."

Talon put up his hands and gazed at André with an air of innocence.

"Easy! easy! my friend," he said, "how should I know?"

"You are Marigny's menial — you must know...."

"Then if you've made up your mind..."

"It was Marigny who gave the order?"

"I don't know," Talon protested. "I swear I don't know."

"You lie!"

Talon shrugged his lean shoulders.

"You lie, I say," André reiterated roughly. "Speak the truth, man," he went on more calmly, "it will be better for you. The aristo gave the order, is that it?"

But Talon would admit nothing. He knew nothing, he declared: vowed that he could not believe Marigny capable of such a thing. As for himself, he knew nothing. Nothing. He had been more shocked, more distressed than anyone when he first heard of the disaster.

"Lies! lies!" André retorted roughly. "Shall we to the château, citizens, and find out the truth for ourselves?"

A murmur of assent went the round. The truth? Why! they all knew the truth. André had known it all along, from the moment when he saw his mother lying dead and that awful red mist rose before his eyes. Marigny! It was Marigny who had done this loathsome deed. Murder, deliberate and most foul, lay at the door of that arrogant man up there, who, like his kindred and his king, had not yet learned that the people would no longer bow the neck to the yoke of their pride and their tyranny. Well, he, at any rate, would be taught a lesson that day: he would be made to mourn with tears of blood the deadly wrong which he had committed. He and his brood! Let them look to themselves! Men and women had gone to the guillotine for less, had watered their marble floors with bitter tears for crimes which were as venial sins compared to this morning's outrage.

Already the crowd had begun to move in the direction of the château; they had all been impatient enough to go. What cared they if the aristo "up there" were guilty or not? They wanted to march, to shout, to threaten, as others had done in Paris and Versailles. In the far distance from over the mountains came, from time to time, the dull rumbling sound of thunder; occasional flashes of lightning lit up the heavy storm clouds with a weird purple light. The air grew hotter and more oppressive every moment, but they all wanted to be up and doing — the storm was finding an echo in their hearts.

“To the château, André!” they said. “We’ll help you in your revenge.”

Talon made feeble efforts at protest.

“And you come with us, Citizen Talon,” André concluded grimly.

Tarbot and Molé took Talon by the elbows. There was a general movement along the road. Men, women, children: they all joined in the procession. The men, earnest and determined; the women, bitterly vindictive; the children, innocently curious. There were fourscore of them at least, fourscore bent on demanding reprisals for an unparalleled wrong.

And André, silent and absorbed, with eyes aglow and mouth set, saw, through a veil of red, a woman’s face with large, innocent eyes and soft fair hair — a woman, just a girl, in a rose-coloured silk which made her seem like a flower bud. He hadn’t seen her for many years. She must be a woman now.

Bah! what had he to do with women, and visions of women seen through a mist the colour of blood? The one woman in the world he had ever cared for lay stiff and stark now, silent in her ruined home. And all that misery, all this injustice and unbounded sorrow lay at the door of those people “up there”!

Heavens above! how he hated them all.

Chapter XX

The Abbé Rosemonde, having finished his orisons, bethought himself of Marigny and little Aurore up at the château, ignorant, mayhap, as yet of the storm that was about to break with raging fury over their heads. At one moment he had thought of speaking to those poor misguided children who were being led away by disaster into acts of violence, the terrible consequences of which God alone could foresee. He had thought of admonishing André vallon, who bitter resentment was causing him to whip up the tempers of his sympathizers.

The worthy Curé shook his head dolefully: that poor lad! led astray on the very threshold of manhood by his obstinacy and willfulness: full of generous impulses, and such a good son! He would have made a kind and faithful husband if only the times had been different. And now that this awful grief had descended upon him his obstinacy would harden his heart still more against the comfort which religion alone could give. A pity! a sad, sad, pity that this catastrophe had happened. It was the will of God, of course, and he, poor, humble priest, bowed meekly before it, but, oh! how he wished that it had not happened. He couldn't imagine who had conceived such an inhuman project, for never for a moment would he contemplate the idea that Monseigneur would act so cruelly.

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! Sainte Vierge Marie!" he murmured fervently, "turn the hearts of those poor, ignorant people of France to a better knowledge of religion and virtue."

Thus the old man prayed while he tramped up the familiar woodland path toward the château. He had been able to reach the slope without being seen by the crowd, who were still standing outside the ruined cottage, talking and murmuring. At one moment the Abbé thought that he heard the voice of Hector Talon. Well, of course, as a priest and a Christian he wished no harm to come to anyone, but if it pleased God to punish Talon, Talon who had the ear of Monseigneur and was such an evil conseller, he, as a man, would not complain.

Now, as he tramped upward, the good Curé could hear echoing from the valley below the distant clamour of the angry crowd: André's sonorous voice and the hoarse shouts that rang with the promise of mischief.

The atmosphere was terribly oppressive; there seemed to be no air here under the trees; not a leaf stirred, and an evil smell seemed to rise from the dust in the road. The Abbé hurried on. He knew that he could do nothing "up there," but he could warn Monseigneur of what was brewing against him. It might be wise to seek safety in flight while there was time.

There was the width of the terrace and the gardens, with the distant postern gate which gave on a lonely part of the wood, where it might be possible to await quietly a better turn of events.

Indeed, the Abbé had to hurry. Looking down from a point of vantage, into the road below, he could see that the crowd had begun to move. To the priest it seemed as if their number had swelled. But his eyes were short-sighted, and many months ago he had broken his spectacles; he had never had any money since with which to buy new ones, so he couldn't see very well. He hoped that the crowd was not great and that Talon was with them. Surely Talon would act as a restraining power over the others.

Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! how foolish it all was! If only Mademoiselle Aurore and Jeannette were out of the way, for arguments with noisy crowds were not fit for women's ears.

Fortunately he was well ahead of the misguided lambs. He almost ran up the perron, pushed open the great gate, and hurried across hall and corridor and up the marble staircase to the distant small withdrawing room, where Monseigneur usually spent the best part of the day.

Aurore was there with her father. She was busy sewing, and Monseigneur was reading a paper which seemed highly to incense him, for just as the Curé entered the room he crushed it in his hand and threw it on the floor with an oath. The priest sank, puffing and panting, into a chair:

"Those poor people! those poor miserable fools!" he began, and mopped his streaming forehead.

Monseigneur looked at him and laughed.

"You need not tell me," he said curtly. "I know."

Aurore looked up from her sewing; she looked first at her father, then at the Abbé; then she put down her work. Something terrible had happened. The strange glitter in her father's eyes, the anxiety and distress in the Curé's face, but, above all, her intuition and a sense of foreboding told her that something terrible had happened.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Those poor people," the priest murmured, "they are so foolish — so ignorant—"

"Ruffians and devils!" Monseigneur declared, and struck the table with his fist, "they have learned at last that I, for one, am not to be defied."

Aurore took hold of his hand; the one with which he had struck the table.

"What has happened?" she demanded again.

There was a moment's silence. Only a few seconds. But during those seconds she heard. The window was open, and she heard the clamour — the sound of feet tramping up the slope and of a dull murmur that mingled with the rumbling of the distant thunder. She knew what it meant. Without doubt in a moment, she knew what it meant. Newspapers, pamphlets, rumours had found their way to this lonely corner of France. Aurore de Marigny knew that all over the country demagogues — men like that André Vallon — spent their time in inciting all the ruffians they could get hold of to do acts of violence against persons of property. She knew that. And she knew what the outcome of such provocations had often been. Outrage. Death. Sometimes worse than death.

She questioned her father. She had the right to know. They would all hold their lives in their hands in a few minutes when the crowd reached the château. She had the right to know, she declared. Something had roused the village folk to frenzy: what was it?

Monseigneur shrugged and said nothing. The glitter in his eyes was like that of a madman. The old priest, overcome with emotion and the heat, could do nothing but mop his forehead. And the clamour from the valley grew louder and louder, the dull murmur of voices and the tramp of naked feet in the dust of the road.

And suddenly Pierre came bursting into the room, with Jeannette weeping and trailing behind him. They knew everything. Pierre had heard it all — Heaven knew how — but he had heard so he ran up — like the old Curé had done — to warn Monseigneur and Mademoiselle. He was breathless and inarticulate, but Monseigneur did not interrupt him while he blurted out the whole terrible tale: the six ruffians, the eviction of the women and children, the firing of the cottages, the death of Marianne Vallon.

Charles de Marigny appeared indifferent to the whole thing and entirely disdainful. He did not even wince when Pierre spoke of the death of Marianne. The priest moaned and ejaculated: “Mon Dieu!” and looked to Heaven for guidance, while Aurore listened wide-eyed, horrified. At first she was incredulous and turned to her father with an appealing and mute: “Is it true?” But his glance was obstinately averted. He stared out of the window — listening — listening for the coming of that rabble which he despised so utterly, even though their approach now probably meant death to him and to Aurore.

A few minutes later the crowd had invaded the courtyard. The shuffling of naked feet, mingling with the clatter of sabots and the tramping of shoes, sounded like the breaking of surf on a pebble beach. The voices were subdued, like the distant murmur of an angry sea. There were no shouts, only murmurs and occasionally the whimpering of a child.

Monseigneur rose.

“The gate-” he said curtly to Pierre.

“Barred and bolted, monseigneur. Oh! monseigneur didn’t think that I would allow...”

Charles de Marigny did not listen. He had opened the drawer of the table against which he now proceeded to examine carefully. Aurore’s large troubled eyes watched him as he drew his tall figure to its full height and then turned to the door. With a sudden little cry she ran and stood between him and that door. “You are not going to meet them, Father!” she exclaimed impulsively, and put out her arms to stop him, but he pushed her roughly aside.

“You don’t imagine,” he retorted coldly, “that I would allow that rabble to come in here?”

“If you go,” she protested, “I come with you.”

He took hold of her wrist with such violence that she nearly cried out with pain. Who was she, he demanded, to stand in his way? How dare she pit her feeble woman’s will against his determination to deal with those ruffians as they deserved?

“I order you to stay here,” he commanded; and not heeding the servants’ look of horror or the Curé mild protest he dragged her roughly from the door.

“Are you trying to defy me,” he thundered, “like that riffraff over there?”

And the look which he cast on her — on her, the child of his heart, the apple of his eye — was so laden with fury that she shrank from him as if he had struck her in the face.

Then he opened the door. It gave on one of the great reception rooms, used as a ballroom in the olden days. A long vista of parquet flooring, of mirrors and girandoles, of tapestries and consoles, stretched out to the other great doors opposite. Aurore turned a last appealing look to the Curé.

“You must obey your father, my child,” he said. “God will protect him, and you can do nothing.”

He struggled to his feet and beckoned to Pierre. Charles de Marigny had already gone through the door, and now the Abbé Rosemonde and Pierre went out in his wake.

Chapter XXI

The great room was empty. Silent and majestic, with its gilded mirrors and chandeliers and rows of chairs ranged round the walls as if ready to receive the ghosts of the grand ladies and gentlemen who had chatted here a few short weeks ago, had flirted and laughed and fluttered their fans and danced the minuet in their high-heeled shoes before they made their way up the steps of the guillotine or sought safety in an obscure corner of some foreign land.

But Charles de Marigny had no mind for sentimental recollections just now. He strode across the room to the great central window and threw it open. Like the sudden bursting of a dam, the sound of the surging crowd rose in a strident cadence. Monseigneur stepped out on the balcony and looked down on them. How ugly they were! Dirty, unkempt, clad for the most part in filthy rags! He loathed them! Oh! how he loathed them! The men! The women! Those half-naked, unwashed children! Were they human at all? In the olden days he would have classed all that rabble as lower and of less consequence than his cattle or his dogs.

He stood there for quite a few moments looking at them, his arms resting on the marble balustrade, the pistol in his hand. They had come to a standstill in the vast forecourt and were evidently debating what to do next. Then a man's figure detached itself from the rest. He wore an old military coat, one of the sleeves of which was empty and fastened to a button on his chest. He wore shoes and stockings, but his head was bare, and his hair was the colour of a horse-chestnut when it bursts its green prickly shell.

There was something vaguely familiar in the face, those dark eyes and chiselled features, which recreated in Monseigneur's memory a vision out of the past — a boy half naked, with straight young back and firm limbs standing at the whipping post, while he and Hélène de Beauregard looked on rather amused. Hélène had put up her lorgnette and compared him to a rebel angel. He looked more like a demon now.

He strode across the forecourt and up the perron. Two others, more swinish than the rest, followed him. Charles de Marigny watched them. No one had caught sight of him yet, for the balcony was thirty feet from the ground and twenty from the top of the perron. The three men came to a halt in front of the great wrought-iron and gilded gates.

Pierre whispered to Monseigneur:

"Good thought I had of locking them. They'd want a cannon to break them open."

The men, seeing that the gates were locked, appeared to hesitate, and suddenly the man with the empty sleeve looked up.

"Marigny!" he called out and pointed to the balcony. The crowd at once gazed upward. The say Monseigneur. The shouted, "Assassin! Open the gates!" The women waved their arms; the men shook menacing fists. But Charles de Marigny remained motionless and detached, with an expression of withering scorn on his pale, aristocratic face.

"Open the gates, Marigny," André Vallon commanded. "The people here want a talk with you."

De Marigny's sole response was a peremptory:

"Get out of there! All of you, get out!"

"Don't be a fool, Marigny!" André retorted loudly. "The people will not stand your arrogance. They have come to speak with you, and speak with you they will, if they have to pull down these stone walls about your ears."

"Get out!" Charles de Marigny called out in reply. "The gates through which you came are open! Get out!"

"Open the gates!" they all shouted.

"Get out!"

The tumult was waxing fast and furious down below. Murmurs had long since turned to raucous shouts, in which the words, "Traitor! Tyrant! Death!" came clearer than the rest. But "Death!" clearest of all. The Abbé Rosemonde tried in his feeble way to restrain Monseigneur, but Charles de Marigny shook himself free with a loud oath from the kindly hand on his shoulder.

"Open the gates!" André's voice rose above that of the others, and Tarbot and Molé, like a pair of savage dogs on the leash, cried out, "Open the gates or we'll burst them open!" Whereat a boy's voice in the crowd rose shrilly:

"If we burst them open there'll be no talking: only death for the traitor."

"Death! Traitor! Assassin!"

"The guillotine!"

Pierre's teeth were chattering with terror. He kept on murmuring, as if to give himself courage: "They can't burst them open! They can't! They'd want a cannon!"

Charles de Marigny drew himself up. Only his hand now, the one which held the pistol, rested on the marble balustrade. He wanted them to see him better, to see the contempt with which he regarded them and their futile efforts to intimidate him. He turned half away from the balcony as if that rabble down there was not even worth a glance. He shrugged ostentatiously when the words, "Assassin! the guillotine!" rose more and more insistently from below.

"Let us go back, M. l'Abbé," he said calmly, "and see what Aurore is doing. When these muckworms are tired of shouting they'll clear out fast enough."

As far as he was concerned that was all! Rabble! riffraff! the scum of humanity! That is what they were! And trying to frighten him? Ludicrous, of course! Contemptible! What a fool to have brought his pistol! As if those cravens would ever dare-

A simultaneous cry from the Abbé and Pierre caused him to swing back suddenly.

The man with the empty sleeve had clambered up to the balcony. With the aid of projections in the stonework and the age-old ivy which, untended, had spread over the wall, he had pulled himself up. Tarbot and Molé were following him, but he, André, had got there first. One arm can be as good as two when fury whips up the blood. With the aid of his one arm and a sinewy pair of legs he was soon over the balustrade, even before the cry of alarm spent itself in the old priest's throat.

Monseigneur swung round. The pistol was in his hand, even with André's head.

"Another step and I shoot!" he called.

"Shoot and be damned!" André retorted, and with a bound was on the floor of the balcony. His arm shot out; his fingers, hard as steel, closed round De Marigny's wrist and forced his arm up, up, and back from the shoulder. The pistol went off with a loud report

and then dropped from the nerveless hand to the ground.

From the crowd below came an infuriated yell.

“A moi, Pierre!” Charles de Marigny shouted. And then, “Let go my arm, canaille!”

Before Pierre could come to his master’s rescue, Tarbot and Molé were over the balustrade, too, and onto him. They took no notice of the Curé, for he had fallen on his knees, poor old man! and was imploring God to protect Monseigneur; but they held Pierre down while André forced De Marigny, step by step, back into the room. Like a vise, that one hand of his was nearly wrenching the upturned arm out of its socket.

“Mon Dieu, ayez pitié!” the priest murmured fervently, whilst Monseigneur, though half swooning with pain, reiterated obstinately, “Canaille! Canaille! Get out!”

The crowd, baulked of the sight of their enemy, had resumed their cry of “Assassin!” A few of them, more vigorous than the others, tried to follow their leader’s example by climbing up the ivy-covered wall. The other’s shouted, “Open the gate!” whereupon Molé, the wheelwright, seized Pierre by the arm and said curtly:

“You hear them, citizen? Come and open the gate.”

“Pierre, I forbid you,” Monseigneur attempted to command, but Molé had already marched Pierre out through the door, while André, step by step, pushed De Marigny back into the room.

When he had got him right over to the other end, with his back to the door of the small boudoir, he released his arm. It fell, nerveless and numb. Obviously the man was in great pain, but pride kept him on his feet. Obstinate and arrogant he was; he could be cruel, too, where his dignity was at stake; but he was no coward, either morally or physically. He did not regret the firing of the cottages, that act of madness which had brought this yelling horde about his ears. He felt faint and giddy, but with a mighty effort he kept himself upright. There was a chair close by, but he would not allow himself to sink into it, and even while André stood towering above him like a statue of wrath and vengeance, his lips continued to murmur mechanically, “Canaille! Get out!”

André gave a contemptuous shrug:

“Canaille we are,” he said with a sneer, “that’s understood, but we are a canaille who to-day demand justice. You have committed an outrage which calls to Heaven for vengeance, and we have come here to show you that we mean to get it.”

“Murder, I suppose?” De Marigny said coldly.

“Killing is no murder when justice demands it. A few hours ago two defenceless women and a crowd of children were turned out of their homes by your orders. My mother gave up her life to rescue the few belongings of a poor widow and her children. As sure as that I hold your worthless life in my hands, her death is at your door. Killing is no murder, Marigny, when it means justice.”

Still De Marigny did not flinch. He made no reply, and for a few seconds they stood facing each other, these two men, each the product of his own upbringing and of his century; each imbued with the passion and cruelty of men when they defend what they hold most dear. Charles de Marigny, unbending and imperious, seemed at this moment to be entrenched within the last outpost of his caste, and to be safeguarding his right of property and the privileges of his birth. Immaculately dressed, his hair carefully powdered, his fine linen scarcely disarranged even after a hand-to-hand struggle with this renegade, his pale face betrayed no emotion, only a withering contempt. And André Vallon, the typical child of this bloody revolution, the son of a people who for generations had suffered and toiled like beasts of burden and looked with patient, submissive eyes on the pomp and luxury that never could be theirs; who had never eaten their fill while others feasted; who had wallowed in poverty and ignorance with hardly the promise of Heaven to save them from despair: André with shabby coat and empty sleeve, with glowing eyes and heart overflowing with resentment for past tyranny and unavenged wrongs, André stood for those stirrings which men like Rousseau had first infused into their blood. And as De Marigny worshipped privilege, so did these youngsters worship at the shrine of the newly discovered goddess, Liberty. A new dawn had arisen for them, and they fell on their faces and adored. They ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. They learned and they pondered, and from out the depths of their soul they evolved the consciousness of the dignity of man.

“Canaille we are!” he had thrown back the challenge in De Marigny’s face: “low, unwashed, and ignorant, but men for all that. For centuries your cast denied us the right to live as we desired, to share in what goodness the world holds — the right to hold our homes sacred, our wives and daughters inviolate. But now we are your masters at last. We’re butchered, we’ve despoiled, we’ve killed, but the measure of justice is not yet full. Hundreds of you have mounted the guillotine, and hundreds more shall do the same until we get what we demand — justice!”

All that he said and more, while Charles de Marigny’s face expressed nothing but disgust at being in such close contact with this filthy horde.

Chapter XXII

And now the crowd came pouring into the château. Pierre had been made to open the gate, and they all rushed up the marble staircase. They invaded the hall and the vast reception rooms. Awed at first by so much magnificence of which they had no conception, by the gliding and the crystals and the damask chairs, and by the mirrors which reflected their dark faces and their rags and made their numbers seem so much greater than they were.

But the awe soon wore off. So much magnificence! And there were the Louvet children homeless; and Marianne Vallon lay dead in her ruined home.

"Well, André!" one of the men asked. "What says the aristo?"

"Not much to say, I imagine," said another.

"I am for slitting his throat at once and have done with him." This from Tarbot, the ex-butcher, who always kept a knife in his belt.

"I prefer the guillotine," declared Molé sententiously. "It's more effective. An example to others, what?"

"Let's hear what he's got to say first, and then we'll see."

De Marigny's fine white hand felt in his pocket and drew out a lace-bordered handkerchief, which he raised to his nose. With a rough gesture André tore it out of his hand.

"Play-acting, Marigny!" he said with a sneer.

"Let me slit his throat, André!" Tarbot demanded.

"Murder, by all means," De Marigny retorted coolly.

"Murder? No," André declared. "I too am for the guillotine. The people want to see you die a dog's death. Murder? Bah! Will one moment's anguish in your miserable life give us back our youth spent in toiling so that you might feast; gives us back our health impaired by starvation while you ate and drank your fill? The last drain of your life's blood, Marigny, cannot make good your tyranny. It cannot! It cannot! You cannot make good, for you have nothing now — no power, no riches, none of the claptrap that made you think you were a creature apart while we were just swine."

His words acted like a gust of wind on a smouldering flame. Some were for immediate murder, others like the thought of the more protracted agony of the guillotine, but all wanted this man's death. They hungered for it. They ached for a sight of his blood. There was not a man or a woman there who did not see that pale, proud face through a veil of crimson. But they still held their breath like wild beasts when they have sighted their prey and are ready to spring. Like felines they were, licking their jaws, enjoying to its full the sublime sense of power over the life and death of a fellow man.

"Strike him, André!" one of the men shouted. "I am for instant death."

"Remember your mother, André!" yelled another. "Why wait for the guillotine?"

And suddenly the door behind De Marigny flew open, and Aurore rushed in, a vision pale and ethereal, with fair hair loose and eyes as dark as the midnight sky in June. In an instant she was beside her father, her arms were round him, her head was against his breast. Her slender body was a shield between him and his enemies.

André had uttered one loud, savage oath, and then remained dumb, staring at the girl, while the crowd, taken aback for a few seconds, soon began to laugh and jeer. A fresh spectacle this: this fine lady with her laces and her frills. The wolves in expectation of the slaughtered sheep rejoiced at sight of the lamb.

"For God's sake, Aurore, go back!" Monseigneur exclaimed. At first he had been half dazed, hardly believed his eyes when he saw Aurore. He was like a man in a trance, not fully wakened from a dream. "Monsieur l'Abbé, take her away!" he added, vainly trying to perceive the Curé's face in the midst of the crowd. He himself did what he could to drag Aurore's arms away from his shoulders, whilst the old priest made a vain effort to reach her. But all this was of no avail. It was Molé, the wheelwright, who seized hold of Aurore by the waist and dragged her away from her father. In a moment she was surrounded. The women in the forefront pulled at her gown and tore at the lace of her sleeve.

"How much did your gown cost, my cabbage?" one of them jeered.

"As much as would keep a family in food for a year," declared another.

"Strip it off," suggested one of the men with a coarse laugh.

One of the women grabbed at her fichu; another tugged at the ribbon in her hair; the older ones lifted her dress and pulled at the lace petticoats, the dainty stockings and silk garters. Obscene jests went round:

"Strip off her clothes!" called Legendre, the young imp with the game leg.

"Pigs! Curs! Let her go!" De Marigny cried at the top of his voice, and tried to reach his daughter, but the whole crowd was in the way, laughing and jeering, pressing round the girl with shouts of derision and of glee. They elbowed De Marigny out of the way. One of the men struck him on the face with his fist, and he fell bleeding to the ground. He tried to drag himself up again until another man kicked him and he lost consciousness.

Aurore gave an agonized cry of horror, the first she had uttered since she had faced the crowd. Wildly, like a young animal at bay, she looked about her, and her eyes met those of André Vallon.

He as outside the crowd, had stood there ever since she first came into the room, vaguely retracing in his mind the childish features of ten years ago in that lovely face, contorted with fear. With a mechanical movement his hand went up to his breast, where all those years ago her head had rested for one brief moment, on the very spot where the empty sleeve was now attached. Her soft fair hair had tickled his cheeks; the scent of violets and roses had risen to his nostrils. He had been in a dream until the rough blow on his face from the hand of an insolent fop had awakened him and kept him awake all those years with the memory of a crowning insult.

He had been in a dream then; he was in a dream now, until her eyes met his. Then suddenly he pushed his way through the crowd. With his one arm he seized Aurore round the waist and lifted her off her feet.

"The wench is mine!" he called aloud.

Holding her closely to him, he pushed his way back as far as the door of the boudoir to the accompaniment of vociferous shouts and laughter from the astonished crowd. Here was a novel spectacle, forsooth!

"He was always a madcap, that André!" the women declared, while laughter brought tears to their eyes. Laughter, perhaps, or something a little softer, more gentle: a vague sense of romance never quite absent from the hearts of a Latin race.

André had allowed the girl to slide out of the shelter of his arm. She collapsed on the floor right against the door like a pathetic bundle of laces and frills. She was not quite conscious. Terror and horror combined had obscured her senses. With her small trembling hands she grasped the corner of a console as she slid down on her knees, and through her bloodless lips came pitiful moans and whispered murmurs, "Father! My father!"

André stood guard over her like a desert beast over its prey. He stood, tall and erect, with head thrown back and legs wide apart, a vivid presentment of the conquering male. The crowd was certainly amused. Some of them tried to push forward to peer once again closely at the aristo, her silks and her laces, but André with his stentorian voice kept them all at bay.

"Hands off! The wench is mine!"

"What will you do with her, André?" a voice called laughing out of the crowd.

"Take her for wife, pardi," André retorted. "I must have someone to wash and cook for me. The wench pleases me. She's mine!"

This sally was greeted with a wealth of coarse jests from the men, but the women were all on the side of André. They liked his looks, his flashing eyes, darker than ever in his pale, determined face. They liked his full red lips which showed a glimmer of white teeth like those of a young cat.

"Let him be, he was always a madcap!"

"If he wants the wench, why shouldn't he have her?"

And whisperings went the round: stories of André Vallon's pranks before he left the village to seek fortune in Paris. Not a boy for leagues around he had not licked, not a pretty girl whom he had not kissed.

"Let him have her if he wants her."

The men agreed. Even Tarbot, whose lust for killing had a few moments ago turned him into a savage brute, shrugged his wide shoulders and said coolly with a coarse jest:

"Better than the guillotine, anyway!"

One of the men who had worked at the maire in Nevers added sententiously:

"If he likes to take her for wife there would be no guillotine for her."

"Is that so?" the others asked.

"The new law," the man from Nevers declared curtly. "A patriot may save an aristo from the guillotine if he chooses to marry her."

They discussed this matter from several points of view. Those big-wigs up in Paris were always framing new laws, but this was not a bad one. France was in need of children. The men, at any rate, were all in its favour because, forsooth, they were well-favoured, those aristos — soft skins, fluffy hair, better nourished than the poor village wenches. The women, on the other hand, liked the romance of it, especially if the patriot was young and handsome, like André Vallon.

André himself listened to all the comments and the murmurings with a vague smile on his lips. Perhaps he only half heard what was said. His glance more often than not wandered round to that motionless figure, crouching against the door, and when a pitiful moan came to his ears, a look almost of ferocity flashed out of his eyes.

The priest had contrived to get near to Aurore. He stooped and put his hand on her shoulder. He whispered comforting words to her, but the only response she gave was a pathetic murmur: "My father? Where is he?"

André, at sight of the priest, had become more and more impatient, and suddenly, like a man who has come to the end of his tether, he turned and kicked open the door. The small withdrawing room beyond was in semidarkness. Jeannette was in there, squatting on a low stool, weeping into her apron which covered her face. There was a book on the floor, an open workbox, a piece of embroidery on the table with a thimble and scissors beside it. The room looked cozy in the half light with all these little intimacies. André glanced into it, then down on the crouching figure at his feet. God in heaven! how he hated it all! The beauty, the cosiness, and the perfume as of a bouquet of flowers that seemed to dull his senses!

"Stop your mumblings," he said roughly to the priest, "and take her in there."

Aurore wouldn't move, though she looked up for a moment when she heard the door open behind her. Not seeing her father, she turned on André.

"My father!" she demanded.

He took her by the wrist and dragged her roughly into the boudoir.

"I'll look after your father," he said curtly. "He's safe enough for the moment."

The Abbé Rosemonde slipped in after them and closed the door. Strangely enough, the crowd did not attempt to follow. They stood outside jeering and sniggering, vastly amused at the turn of events. So unexpected this romance of the aristo and that madcap André! It might turn to tragedy, some of them thought, but even so, it was better than the guillotine.

Some of the men gazed down on De Marigny lying unconscious in a corner of the room with a bleeding wound on his face: Bah! he was hardly worth a kick now. A miserable rag of humanity, trampled in the dust as he had been wont to trample those whom he despised. His very life he owed to one of the despised rabble, and his daughter, who was his pride and joy, would be the property of a man whom in the past he would have looked on as lower than his dog. She would have to cook and wash for him as Marianne Vallon had cooked and washed up at the château. It was that, or the guillotine for the lot of them. Ah! this revolution was indeed a great thing. It had turned the tables on those proud aristos with a vengeance. More power to its elbow, and long life to Georges Danton and all its makers.

Long life above all to the child of the Revolution, André Vallon.

Chapter XXIII

At first Aurore had made futile efforts to free herself from André's grasp. Then, feeling helpless, she gave up the struggle, whereupon he immediately released her wrist. She turned at once to the door.

"Open, M. l'Abbé!" she called. "I must find Monseigneur."

The priest would have obeyed, but André barred the way.

"I said that I would look after Marigny," he said curtly. "You stay here with her."

Aurore's hand was on the door knob.

"Wait here, M. l'Abbé," she said, "while I speak with Monseigneur."

André was quite close to her, looking down on her half quizzically, yet wholly in scorn. She threw back her head and returned his mocking glance with defiance and cold contempt, and when he put his hand over hers she withdrew it quickly, as if she had been touched by some noisome animal. A grim smile curled round André's set lips.

"If you go out through this door," he said coolly, "it means death to your father, to this priest, to your servants and to you."

Defiance in her eyes gave way to horror. She did not know what had become of her father. The turmoil in the next room had subsided to such an extent that she had not realized there was still danger there from the crowd. This male ruffian here, with his brute strength and mocking ways, seemed to be the only living creature that she need fear. Apparently he had divined her thoughts, for without another word he turned the knob and gently opened the door. A murmur of many voices came to Aurore's ears. There were no longer any shouts, no imprecations or threats — only that steady murmur, and now and then a laugh. Just as the moment a man's voice rose above the rest, and a phrase, coarse and hideously offensive, accompanied by a cruel laugh, brought a blush of indignation and of shame to the girl's face. It suffused her cheeks, her forehead to the roots of her hair; only her lips remained bloodless. The glance which she cast up at André was almost one of appeal.

Miserable and helpless, she gazed round the room, longing to find something — weapon, anything wherewith to end this terrible situation. Again he seemed to divine her thoughts, gave a light laugh and a shrug, then pointed to one of the chairs across which lay Monseigneur's elegant sword, with its jewelled hilt and chiselled scabbard. As she made no movement — indeed, she could not have moved a limb just then — he went over to the chair and picked up the sword. He made pretense to examine it; with his one hand he worked the blade out of the scabbard, and with that irritating, quizzical glance of his held the hilt out to her.

"Will this answer your purpose?" he asked.

Strangely fascinated by that blade from which, at the moment, the evening light drew dull fantastic rays, she raised her hand and took hold of the hilt. Here was the weapon to her hand: what should she do with it? The brute stood there, waiting and mocking: oh, for the strength to plunge this blade into his cruel, callous heart!

"Aurore, my child!" the priest exclaimed, for, acting on blind impulse, Aurore had stretched out her arm and was holding the point of the blade to her throat.

"Let her be, Citizen Curé," André said coolly. "Reason has already told her that with her death my wish to save her father — and you — will vanish. Look, what did I tell you? Even proud ladies listen to reason sometimes. And, anyhow, that sword was both futile and ridiculous."

The sword fell out of Aurore's hand. Futile and ridiculous! How true and how humiliating! Helpless, hopeless, and ashamed, she buried her face in her hands.

"André, my son!" the priest entreated, "you must have pity on us all."

"Pity?" André retorted lightly. "Pardi! Am I not showing you all pity of which any man is capable? Have I not snatched her and her miserable father, and you, my good friend, out of the jaws of death? Has not my pity for her stayed the murderous hand of our friend Tarbot and saved her from outrage?"

"Yes, my son," the Curé admitted, "and of a certainty God will reward you; but surely you do not intend to carry your cruel intention to its end?"

"What cruel intention? I have no other intention with regard to this wench save to take her for wife."

"But, André, my son, that is impossible."

"Impossible? Why?"

"Look at her, my child. Does she look like the wife of—"

"— of a rascal!" André broke in with a sneer. "That is as may be and for her to decide. If the prospect is so very displeasing, all she need do is to open this door and let the rest of the canaille have its way with her, with her father, her servants, and with you."

Then, as neither Aurore nor the Curé spoke another word, he went on, with an impatient shrug:

"Perhaps you are right, Citizen Curé: the scheme will not work. It is impossible, as you say, and I'd better let our friend Tarbot have his way with you all."

Once more he turned to the door; but it was Aurore this time who barred the way. A dull, half-choked cry came involuntarily from her throat:

"No! no!"

She put out her hand, and he seized it.

"Ah!" he said with a sigh of satisfaction, "reason has spoke more loudly this time. Well! which is it to be, my fine lady? Death at the hand of Tarbot or marriage with the canaille?"

The grip on her waist was like a tentacle of steel, but she welcomed the physical pain almost as a solace to the mental agony of the moment. She would not look at him, but turned appealing eyes to the old priest, who, of a truth, could offer neither advice nor consolation. It was for her to decide and he, for one, was content to leave it all in the hands of his Maker. He clasped his hands and prayed as he had never prayed before.

"Look at me, Aurore," André commanded. "The decision rests with you and not with the priest."

With what seemed like a refinement of cruelty, he once more gently opened the door. They were still laughing and jeering out there.

"My father!" she murmured.

And then added under her breath:

"For his sake, if you'll sear—"

She could say no more, for she was on the point of swooning. André's powerful arm encircled her drooping body, while an immense sigh of satisfaction rose from his breast.

"Par Dieu!" he said lightly. "I had no idea you were so beautiful, ma mie!"

And of a truth she was exquisitely beautiful, with those deep, unfathomable eyes of hers filled with terror and with hate, her red lips parted in a final appeal for mercy. She had been on the point of swooning, but now that he raised her to him — that she saw his face, his dark eyes, his cruel, sneering mouth closer and ever closer, a moment's consciousness returned to her with the horror of it all.

"Let me go!" she gasped. "I hate you!"

"Of course you do, my dear," he retorted. "We hate each other — that is understood. But Fate has decided to link us together until, like two wildcats, we shall have torn one another's soul to shreds. In the meanwhile, in the presence of our friend, the Citizen Curé, we will seal our mutual promise to one another with a kiss."

She felt helpless and stifled as his arm held her closer and closer; with her two hands she tried to push against him — his face, his breast. But her struggles only seemed to amuse him; his eyes flashed mockery instead of passion, while they seemed to search the very depths of her soul.

"You are beautiful!" he reiterated slowly — very slowly — while those mocking eyes of his drank in every detail of her loveliness: her blue-veined lids, her perfect mouth, the exquisite contour of throat and chin. "You are beautiful, but, on second thoughts, ma mie, I'll not kiss you yet. Not to-day. I'll wait," he added with a light laugh, "till those perfect lips ask mine for a kiss."

And suddenly he slackened his hold on her, lifted her off the ground, and carried her to the sofa. He called peremptorily to Jeannette, who was whimpering under cover of her apron, and ordered her to look after her mistress.

Then, without another word, he strode out of the room.

Chapter XXIV

The crowd in the meantime had worked its will in the old château. With the exit of the hero and heroine of a brief romance, reaction had set in. The fury of reprisal, merged for a moment in laughter and coarse jests, reasserted its domination. The aristos were ashamed and punished; the ci-devant Marigny lay half dead on the floor; but this seemed hardly compensation enough for two smouldering cottages and the death of a valiant woman. Not enough, of a truth, with all this magnificence flaunted in these gorgeous halls, with tapestries and sconces and mirrors, all accessible to eager, needy hands. Not much notice was taken of Marigny. Once kicked conveniently aside, he was allowed to remain lying there. Dead or alive? Who cared, when there were damask curtains to be had for the taking? — useful things to replace shawls and blankets long since worn to rags. Down came the curtains, one after the other, torn down by vigorous hands. In the vast banqueting halls there was not much that was useful, but there were chairs and tables to replace humble ones that had been used for fuel when other wood was so dear. And in the bedrooms there were beds and mattresses and pillows and blankets; there was china and there were carpets. The crowd wandered from room to room, from stately hall down to pantries and kitchens and bakehouses. The cellars were empty, and so were the larders, but there were pots and pans galore. Where silver and gold were hidden they knew not. Perhaps they never even thought of such things. It was the chairs and the tables, the curtains and the pots and pans that they needed and that they took.

Who shall judge them? Who condemn? They had nothing, and they took. For generations successive governments had taken from them all that they had. Human nature will always try and hit back when it has the chance. They were not evil, these people here; they were not really cruel and rapacious by nature: hunger and want had made them so, and the sense of oppression and injustice. Who, of a truth, shall condemn them?

When they were tired of looking and had their arms full, when they were wearied with the day's work and emotion, they wandered homeward. The evening was drawing in, and squalid homes called to them, and the longing to gloat over stolen treasure and find use for it all. One by one, or in groups of twos and threes, they trudged back through the vast halls, shorn now of much glory, down marble stairs, and across the forecourt. Their naked feet were sore with tramping; they wanted to get home.

André stood for a long time by the door, listening and watching. The great reception room was deserted by now, but he could hear the crowd wandering about the château; he could hear cries of delight and laughter and guessed what was going on. He made his way across the room to the window, staggering in the darkness like a man drunk. Leaning against the window frame, he gazed out into the fast-gathering gloom. From the distance, now and then, there still came the dull rumbling of faraway thunder, and from time to time the treetops were lit up with the reflex of distant lightning, but the storm never broke over Marigny on that never-to-be-forgotten day in July.

André watched the crowd, as, one by one, they came through the gate, bearing their loot — furniture, tapestries, clothes. The women staggered under their loads; the men looked like beasts of burden, dragging their shoeless feet over the paved forecourt. Slowly, wearily, they made their way down the wooded slope. André, through the darkness, could still distinguish some of them: the women in their faded kirtles; the naked bodies of little children; Tarbot and his red cap, Molé and his ragged shirt. He thought of his mother, lying on the old pailleasse, with a ragged shawl to cover her body, and all around her the ruins of her home. And with thoughts of her there came into his soul an immense wave of shame.

The large empty room with its torn tapestries and gilded chairs lying topsy-turvy about the floor became filled all at once with imps and demons who hopped all around him and cried, "Shame!" in his ears. They called him a fool and coward. Why not have allowed the mob to have its way with the aristos? Were they not his friends? Riffraff, like himself? Then why have interfered? There might have been some satisfaction in seeing justice done. A life for a life! Those miserable aristos for the saintly woman who lay silent and stark in her devastated home.

With a rough gesture he brushed those imaginary demons away. Shame had brought the blood beating in his temples. "Coward!" and "Traitor!" he called himself, and then signed with a great unexplainable longing. "Justice! Truth! My God! where are they now?"

The room was so still! So still! André strained his ears to hear any sound that might come from the boudoir. After a moment or two he heard a soft grating; the door was opened very gently, a narrow shaft of light pierced the gloom, and the old priest tiptoed stealthily into the room. André listened without stirring: the old man had left the door slightly ajar and now groped his way cautiously about in the darkness. A moment or two later soft murmurings came to André's ears; then a sigh — a struggle. And the priest's kindly words:

"Lean on my arm, monseigneur..."

And then another sigh. A whisper: "Aurore!"

"She is safe, monseigneur. Shall we go to her?"

"Has that canaille gone?"

"There is no one here now, monseigneur..."

"My head! My head! May God punish those ruffians!"

"Do lean on me, monseigneur.... I am quite strong.... Don't be afraid."

André's eyes, accustomed to the gloom, could now perceive the two old men moving slowly towards the door. Instinctively he stepped back from the window farther into the shadows, and thus, hidden from view, he waited until the priest had piloted De Marigny back into the boudoir.

As the Curé was about to follow, André called to him:

"Citizen Rosemonde!" The priest paused with his hand still on the door knob, and André called again: "Close that door. I want to speak with you."

The voice was low, scarcely above a whisper, but so peremptory that the priest, after a few seconds' hesitation, closed the door and came across the room. With the passing of immediate danger to Monseigneur and Aurore he seemed to have recovered something of his natural dignity. He approached André not as a servant beckoned to by his master, but as a minister of God, with a mission to mediate between warring souls.

"What is it you wish, my son?" he asked.

"Only to give you a word of warning, citizen," André replied curtly. "You must understand once and for all that my mind is made up. I have decided to take that woman in there for my wife. As you have taken the oath of allegiance to the Republic, you are bound in law to perform the marriage ceremony. You know that, do you not?"

"I know it, my son, but—"

"There is no 'but' about it. If you refuse you forfeit every privilege which your oath of allegiance has conferred upon you. Your church will be closed, and you may or may not escape with your life. But even that is beside the question, for if the marriage is not solemnized in your church it will be done in the *maire* which, as you also know, is all that the law requires."

"André, my child," the priest protested, "I implore you to think over what you propose doing. I beg it of you in your mother's name—"

"Do not speak of my mother, Citizen Curé," André broke in harshly, "or I swear to you that I will call the worst of that rabble back and hand over that damned assassin to them to be dealt with as they choose."

"But such a marriage is an outrage, André!"

"Was not the eviction of two defenceless women and a pack of starving children an outrage? Was not the ruin of their homes an outrage? My mother's death — was that not a murder most foul?"

"Ah!" the priest exclaimed, "then you admit it, André?"

"Admit what?"

"That your whole purpose is one of revenge."

"Call it justice, Citizen Curé. You'll be nearer the mark."

"And you, my son, will be the first to suffer."

André shrugged with cynical indifference.

"Bah!" he said. "Your friend Marigny would tell you that muckworms such as I are made to suffer."

The priest was silent for a moment or two. His heart ached for this man whom he had seen grow up in this village — a merry, care-free lad whom the cruelty of fate, and perhaps of men, had rendered bitter and cynical. But it ached also for the exquisite girl whose every instinct of pride and aloofness would be outraged by this monstrous union.

"You will kill her, André," he sighed, "if you persist."

"Bah!" André retorted drily. "She's young. She will get used to being the wife of a caitiff. And anyhow, her life and that of her father will be safe. I can see to that."

"Alas!"

"Why alas?"

"They would sooner be dead."

André gave a scornful laugh.

"The aristo's sword," he said, "is still handy."

"I forbid you to mock, André," the priest retorted with energy. "Religion which you choose to ignore still holds sway in the hearts of many, and religion forbids—"

"Suicide," André broke in. "Yes, I know! Well, the rabble only needs recalling—"

"André, in Heaven's name, don't talk like that! I am appealing to your pity—"

"Pity? Would you call it pity to let a pack of snarling hyenas loose once again on this house, to stand by and see that arrogant old madman in there massacred before his daughter's eyes, to see her brutalized and outraged as a prelude to death? Is that what you would choose for her, Citizen Rosemonde?"

The old priest's head fell upon his breast. He felt utterly helpless and ashamed of his helplessness. A little while ago he believed in his mission of conciliation, but that mission had failed. His simple faith in divine interference had received a rude shock, as did his earnest belief in the justice of the Royalist cause. For here was a rebel who gloried in his rebellion, who demanded justice from God and man with as much right as the most earnest adherent to the old régime. Like André himself awhile ago, the Abbé Rosemonde could have signed with unutterable longing, "Truth? Justice? Where are they now?"

"I suppose," he said with a doleful shake of the head, "that you've said your last word, and that nothing which I can say—"

"No, citizen," André broke in impatiently, "nothing. I have said my last word. Go down into the village, if you have a mind, and talk to the men there. Tell them that religion bids them forego revenge, and that if a man smite you on the cheek, to hold out the other so that he might smite you again. Tell that to men who have toiled and starved and sweated and seen their wives and children die for want of food, while the tax collector stood at the door and seized the few sous that would have bought them bread. Tell it to men who have seen their brides dragged from their arms to satisfy the caprice of their seigneur. Talk to them of forgiveness, Citizen Curé, now that they are the masters of France and have the power to give back blow for blow and outrage for outrage."

Again the priest was silent. There was so little that he could say. Never before had he been made to feel that there was something after all to be said for those terrorists who had earned for themselves the obloquy of half the world, but who had, of a truth, been the first to instill into a downtrodden people a sense of their power, both as men and as guardians of their families' welfare and of their family honour. Demagogues they were, and stirrers up of infinite trouble. They had let loose on the sacred soil of France a horde of savage brutes bent on ruin and persecution. All that was true enough, but there had been such an infinity of wrong to put right that nothing short of this immense upheaval could possibly have done it all. But dominating all other thoughts and fears in the old man's heart were those for Aurore.

"You will be kind to her, André," he implored, "if she consents."

"I care not if she consents or no," André retorted. "Either she is mine or I let loose the floodgates of the people's wrath on this house till there remains nothing of it but a few blackened stones like those of my mother's cottage, nothing but a memory of all the arrogance and the cruelty which have tuned us all into the wild beasts that we are."

André had spoken all along in a kind of hoarse murmur and without making a single gesture. Now his voice broke into a sob. He stood there in the darkness by the open window with the last glimmer of the western light outlining his clear-cut profile, the firm jaw and noble forehead with its crown of chestnut hair. And while he spoke he looked out into the distance, where far away in the peaceful valley below a puff of smoke still hung in the heavy storm-laden air. Just a puff of smoke there where the cottage once stood, where he, André, had spent the thoughtless years of childhood, where he had first learned the bitter lesson of manhood, where he had dreamed and planned and waited for this hour which had struck at last.

"You have not yet told me, André" the Curé said at last, "what you wish me to do."

"I want you to be prepared to give my bride and me the nuptial blessing in your church to-morrow."

"Blessing!" the priest exclaimed with the nearest approach to sarcasm he had ever in his life expressed.

"As you please, of course — or as she pleases, for the matter of that. I am satisfied with the maire, as the law directs."

"I will do as God wills," the priest concluded with gentle dignity. "But let me tell you this, my son: your union with Aurore de Marigny is on the understanding that her life and that of her father and servants will be safe. God is long-suffering, remember, but believe me that He will know how to punish you if you should break your word."

He turned and slowly groped his way across the room. André watched him till the door of the boudoir finally closed upon him.

Then he, too, went his way.

Chapter XXV

In an angle of the staircase André came across Pierre, concealed behind a marble column, crouching there in the dark like a frightened rabbit.

"Come and lock the gate after me, citizen," he said, and with scant ceremony dragged the man out of his hiding place.

Pierre, trembling but obedient, followed him. When the great gates fell to with a clang behind him, André stood for a moment on the perron, breathing in the heavy air of this summer's night. It seemed as if he longed to be rid of the scent of perfume and of flowers which clung to his nostrils and made his head ache with its cloying fragrance. Once or twice he passed his hand across his brow and through the thick mop of his hair. His talk with the priest which had resolved itself into a kind of profession of faith had left him in a state of bewilderment. He felt that he had become a puzzle to himself.

"Am I a brute?" he murmured. "A wild beast — a pitiless savage beast? Or just a man who has lost the being dearest to him in all the world and has nothing left in his heart but the very human desire for some measure of revenge?"

He wondered what his dead mother would have said had her precious life been spared and she had been a witness to this afternoon's tragedy. She, with her quiet philosophy and sober common sense, what would she have said in face of the homeless Louvet children and her own ruined home? Would she still have preached her favourite doctrine that evil cannot be cured with more evil? And would she still be hugging the fond belief that those aristos "up there" had learned something from the terrible events which had precipitated their king from his throne and left him and their kindred to the guillotine? If he had eyes to see and ears to hear, would that arrogant madman "up there" have infuriated the people to the point of seeing his daughter insulted before his eyes?

"They have learned nothing," André murmured to himself. "The lesson has, it seems, not yet been driven home."

He cast a look back on the stately pile, majestic still, in spite of approaching decay. All the windows were dark save one at the end, and here a feeble light glimmered behind a drawn curtain. They were in there. All of them. The aristos, the priest, and the girl. The priest had told him by now of the ultimatum which meant life and safety in exchange for union with one of the canaille. And André then pictured to himself what they would all say: imagine Marigny's vituperations, the priest's exhortations, and the girl's tears. She would weep, of course, and protest; beat her wings like a bird caught in a trap; and André wondered how she looked when she wept. Women were usually ugly when tears trickled down their cheeks and their noses became red. Did those great unfathomable eyes become red and swollen, he wondered, or did the tears make their depths more mysterious still?

"Bah!" he exclaimed impatiently, "as if I cared!"

He strode down the steps and across the flagged forecourt. He was on the point of turning into the bridle path which led down to the valley through the woods when he spied a dark figure which slipped quickly past him and then through the gates into the forecourt. André watched the figure as, presently, it mounted the perron and, in a moment, disappeared through the great gates into the château.

Now the gates had been locked by Pierre when André left the château a few minutes ago. Pierre must have opened them again almost directly, which meant that the nocturnal visitor was a familiar of the house and was apparently expected.

"Talon, of course," André thought. "Now I wonder what the rascal is up to. He gave us the slip this afternoon. Then why has he come now?"

The result of his cogitation was that he retraced his steps and turned back into the forecourt just at the moment when a dim light travelled past the row of windows on the front of the château and stopped short at the door of the boudoir, where it was suddenly extinguished.

Chapter XXVI

André was wrong in his supposition. Talon was not expected at the château: it was by chance that Pierre had stood for a time by the gate, busy with lighting a couple of lanterns which he usually carried with him about the house. He had spied Hector Talon and opened the gate for him. He gave him a lantern, and Talon made his way across the hall and up the stairs with a catlike tread. He was one of those men who have carried the trick of walking noiselessly to a fine art: he made no sound as he went across the great reception room and came to a halt outside the boudoir door. Here he extinguished the lantern, then waited. Stooping, he glued first an eye and then an ear to the keyhole. What he heard seemed to please him, for his hatchet face broadened into a leer.

He knocked softly at the door, heard Monseigneur's voice and Jeannette's shuffling tread. The door was opened, and with a timid: "May I enter?" he stepped into the room.

Monseigneur was half sitting, half lying across the sofa: his cravat was undone. Aurore was behind him, intent on placing a white linen bandage over his forehead. M. l'Abbé de Rosemonde was sitting at the table in the window with his breviary open before him. No one said a word to Talon as he entered, but after a moment or two Jeannette, still at the door, turned to Aurore and asked: "Can I see about supper now, mademoiselle?" Aurore nodded, and Jeannette went away.

Talon ventured a step or two farther into the room.

"Monseigneur..." he began in his most obsequious tone.

De Marigny raised his head slightly, half opened his eyes, and looked Talon up and down as if he did not know who he was.

"Why are you here?" he asked at last. "Get out!"

"Monseigneur," Talon reiterated in a gentle, persuasive voice, "you know you can command my devotion. I am here to offer you my services."

"There is nothing you can do," Charles de Marigny said wearily. "Go away."

Talon glanced from one face to the other. The Abbé appeared absorbed in his breviary. Aurore had not once glanced at him. Talon thought the Abbé's attitude looked the least uncompromising.

"M. l'Abbé," he pleaded, "do, I entreat you, persuade Monseigneur that it is in his best interests and those of Mademoiselle Aurore to listen to me. I have come with the best and most loyal intentions."

Thus directly appealed to, the Abbé said, not unkindly: "Even so, my good Talon, I don't see what you can do. I don't suppose you know all that happened here this afternoon. You were so very safely out of the way."

"I do know, M. l'Abbé," Talon rejoined. "Everything."

At which Aurore's tired, swollen eyes shot a quick, suspicious glance at him.

"I met that blackguard André Vallon just now," Talon went on glibly, "coming away from here... alone. He chose to jeer at me for my loyalty to Monseigneur, and to threaten me with denunciation as a traitor if I did aught to cross his villainous schemes." He paused a moment, measuring the effect of his outrageous lies, and then went on, dropping his voice almost to a whisper: "He openly boasted before me of — of his coming marriage with Mademoiselle Aurore."

Again he paused, waiting for a word, a sign, either from Monseigneur or from the girl. He felt sick with apprehension and found it terribly difficult to keep up this appearance of obsequiousness, the habit of which he had lost in these past few years. He also felt very tired. He had had a very trying day, both physically and emotionally. His head ached, and his feet were sore; his knees scarcely bore him. He wanted to sit down, to fall back into the easy familiarity to which he had accustomed himself of late, but he had too much at stake to dare risk offending Monseigneur or Mademoiselle. He had garnered scraps of information from the crowd as he met them wending their way homeward, but had scarcely believed his ears when, with much jeering and laughing and obvious satisfaction, they told him of Citizen Vallon's extraordinary project to marry the daughter of the aristocrat.

The last thing in the world Talon could have foreseen! The last thing in the world he would have wished. De Marigny's daughter married to a man like Vallon — well known in influential places as a friend of Danton — and "good-bye" to his beloved scheme of obtaining possession of the estates. There would no longer be the slightest need to emigrate or to transfer the property for worthless bonds to him. The situation was perilous because it was imminent. The women in the crowd had talked of the legal marriage taking place on the morrow. Talon had hurried up to the château. He wanted to clear up this dangerous situation. If Aurore de Marigny had indeed agreed to the marriage in order to save her father's life and her own, she must as quickly as possible be made to realize that such a sacrifice was unnecessary while there was a faithful and loyal bailiff at hand to show an easier and more dignified way out.

It was a little disconcerting to see her so calm and silent, and Monseigneur more disdainful than ever, when he had thought to find them both distraught and verging on despair. In spite of his aching feet and tired back Talon did not sit down, and as the Abbé appeared to be more approachable than the others, Talon kept his attention fixed on him:

"Monsieur l'Abbé," he began, "you are a holy man; your loyalty to Monseigneur is as great as my own. Surely you will not allow this monstrous union to take place."

"You know as well as I do," the Abbé replied simply, "that I am powerless to prevent it."

"I know nothing of the sort, M. l'Abbé," Talon retorted with well feigned vehemence. "Anyone who, like yourself, has Monseigneur's complete confidence can prevent it. You especially."

"My ministration," the Abbé said, "is not imperative. André Vallon is a lawyer, and he knows that. If I refuse—"

"I did not mean that, M. l'Abbé!" Talon broke in impatiently. "We are none of us lawyers here, and yet we all know that by the new marriage laws a declaration before the maire is all that is necessary. I did not mean anything so futile."

"Then what did you mean, my good Talon?" the Curé asked, naïvely.

"That Monseigneur and Mademoiselle must get away while there is still time."

"Get away?" The old man was puzzled, for he had never heard of Monseigneur's half-formed project to emigrate. "Get away? How? Where?" He closed his breviary and leaned forward, listening eagerly, while even Monseigneur seemed to forget his pain and

weariness and sat up to gaze inquiringly on Talon, and Aurore's great tired eyes seemed indeed to probe to the very depths of the man's soul.

Talon glanced round, satisfied. He thought the time had come when he might sit down, and he sank into a chair with a great sigh of satisfaction. He beamed on Monseigneur, with arms outspread, like a kind and benevolent father talking to weeping children: "Voyons, monseigneur," he said, "mademoiselle! did you really think that Talon would abandon you in the hour of your greatest need? Why, ever since that awful rabble set out to intimidate you up here, I have been scheming and planning to encompass your safety."

"Don't talk so much drivel, Talon," Monseigneur put in drily, "but tell us what you want."

"To get you away from here as soon as possible."

"Too late," Monseigneur sighed involuntarily.

"Why too late? It wants three more hours before midnight and eight before the dawn."

"What do you mean, Talon?"

"That I will have a covered cart here at your door about three o'clock of the morning. One of my farm hands will drive you to Nevers. There you can get the diligence to Bourges. It starts soon after dawn. At Bourges you can easily get a further conveyance as far as Tours.... You have money, I suppose?"

"Yes, some — but no papers, no passports — nothing!"

"I have both," Talon continued eagerly. "I have papers and passports which were made out six months ago for my brother-in-law, who was a widower, and his daughter. He died before he could undertake the journey, and she has gone to live with relatives somewhere in the South. I found the papers among his effects without ever thinking that they would be of use. They are yours, if you like to use them. You can easily make up to look like the owner of the passport, Achille Vêrand: he was about your age and build; and young ladies," he concluded jocosely, "can always be made up to look like one another."

The whole thing was a lie, of course. It was more than six months since Hector Talon had nursed hopes that Charles de Marigny would one day decide to emigrate. He had forged or stolen the papers, or mayhap just acquired them from some influential friend. Men like Talon always contrive to get what official documents they want. Anyway, there they were, the blessed, blessed passports! Talon laid them on the table, and the table was then dragged across to the sofa so that Monseigneur could look at them at his ease. Monseigneur, Mademoiselle, and M. l'Abbé all pored over them. Those blessed, blessed passports!

They were made out in the name of Achille Vêrand, doctor of philosophy, aged sixty, native of Vanzy in Nièvre, and of Mariguêrite Vêrand his daughter, spinster, aged twenty-two. The descriptions? Well, they certainly did tally in a wonderful — an unexplainable manner. And all the papers had the official seal of the maire of Vanzy and the countersign of the local member of the Committee of Public Safety which sits at Nevers. Everything was in perfect, in absolute order. It was a most marvellous, a most heaven-sent coincidence that Monseigneur and Mademoiselle could make up so easily to resemble Achille and Marguêrite Vêrand.

Aurore, even Aurore, in her eagerness forgot all her prejudices against Talon. He was no longer to be suspected of evil intentions. He was the harbinger of hope. Captives, they were being shown the way to deliverance; drowning, they felt a hand stretched out to drag them to the shore. M. l'Abbé was once more getting convinced that God was on the side of the Royalist cause. And Talon was entirely in his element. Easy, familiar, jocosely, he propounded his plan, satisfied that at last, not only was he in sight of the life's desire, but actually held the prize in his hand.

"You could go too, M. l'Abbé," he said, "if you wish. I can arrange papers for you also."

He had friends in Paris, he explained. Certain services which he had rendered the country had forced men in high places to recognize his worth, so if M. l'Abbé desired... But M. l'Abbé gently shook his head.

"While the altar of God stands in Val-le-Roi," he said, "I shall be there to administer the Holy Sacraments. But, monseigneur," he exclaimed in no ecstasy of hope, "my dear Aurore, to think that freedom can, with the will of God, be yours!"

She talked of not going without him, but he said earnestly: "Your father is your first consideration, my child. It is his life and your honour that are in peril. Your father must be your first and, indeed, your only thought."

And frankly, Monseigneur agreed with him. Probably he did not think that the Abbé would be in any danger, once he and Aurore were out of the way. It was against them that the fury of the mob and of that brutish ruffian Vallon was directed. And to his proud spirit any human life was worth the sacrifice to save the daughter of De Marigny from the outrage of a union with an André Vallon.

Presently some of the excitement subsided, and Talon's plan was soberly discussed. Aurore went out of the room to put a few necessities together for herself and her father. The cart, Talon explained, would be at the gate one hour before the break of dawn. Two hours' drive, and they would be in Nevers. At six o'clock the diligence started for Bourges. Talon had thought of everything, and the farm hand who would drive the cart was loyal and reliable.

Only one more matter had to be settled: the assignment of the Marigny estates to Hector Talon, bailiff, native of Val-le-Roi in Nièvre, for the sum of two million livres, payable in State assignats, receipt of which was hereby acknowledged by the vendor Charles Henri Marigny, ci-devant Duc de Marigny. Monseigneur hardly did more than glance at the papers. The horrors which he had gone through that afternoon had somewhat sobered that arrogant sense of possessio and prerogative which theoretically he would have guarded with his life. But when it came to Aurore's future — her future with that brutish ruffian — by God! Charles de Marigny would have assigned all his worldly belongings, without counting the cost, to any man who saved her from such a fate.

He signed the papers, and Talon solemnly laid on the table assignats with the face value of two million livres. He had sufficient self-control not to show too plainly how intense was his satisfaction. He folded up the papers most carefully and tucked them inside his coat.

"This is a step which you will never regret, my friend," he said.

"Perhaps not," De Marigny retorted drily, "but let me assure you of one thing, my man, and that is that you will regret it — bitterly — if in any way you play me false."

"My dear sir," Talon protested. "How can you think—"

"Oh! I know more about the laws of this hellish government than you suppose. I know, for instance, that these assignments are not valid if the assignor dies within the year. The State in that case takes possession of the property. So it is not in your interest, you rascal,

to play the traitor, and you know it.”

“My good friend—”

“Enough! Mademoiselle and I are safe from your double dealings for one year. Long before then, please God, we shall be in Belgium. And when sanity once more reigns in this demented land, and the King — God save him! — comes back into his own, your rule over my property will automatically cease.”

“I know that, my good sir!”

“A sound-minded government will soon make you disgorge.”

“I am taking that risk.”

“Well, so long as you know that you are taking it... I only wanted you to understand that I am not the fool you fondly imagine. I am taking a risk, I know — but I am banking on the not far distant future when rascals such as you and ruffians like that Vallon will get their deserts.”

“In the meantime,” Talon concluded with undisguised sarcasm, “you deign to accept the use of my cart and horse, my farm hand, and the passports which I obtained for you at my own risk and peril to help you to flee this country and seek safety in Belgium.”

To this Charles de Marigny vouchsafed no reply. The shaft had probably gone home. He despised this man, called him at pleasure a rascal and a thief, but he was at this moment the only being in the whole land who could save him and his daughter from death and worse than death. Talon, having had his say, was now ready to go.

“We meet in happier times, my friend,” he said drily, “times happier for you, I mean. When you are safe in Belgium you will, perhaps, remember to whom you owe your safety. I will administer this estate as if it were my own for good and all. The wretched brat whom you call your king may come into his kingdom some day. Personally I doubt it, or I would never have done this deal. The cart will be here at the hour I have named. Good-night! Pleasant dreams! M. l’Abbé, your servant.”

He shuffled out of the room, and for some time his footsteps, gradually dying away in the distance, were the only sound that broke the stillness of the night.

Chapter XXVII

The Abbé Rosemonde had resumed his orisons. Monseigneur was lost in a brown reverie from which the creaking of the massive gate as it was opened and then shut again roused him after awhile. He lent an ear to Talon's footsteps as they echoed faintly along the flagstones of the forecourt.

A moment or two later Aurore came back.

"That awful Talon gone?" she asked with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Yes, thank God!" De Marigny replied. "I hate the sight of the rogue."

"He has saved us—"

"I know that," De Marigny was ready to admit, "but he has done it for his own ends. He has saved us, as you say, my dear. And for this I suppose we should be grateful."

"There is no possibility," Aurore queried anxiously, "of his playing us false?"

"It would be entirely against his own interests if he did," De Marigny replied drily.

"And at three o'clock we go!" she said with a long-drawn-out sigh. And then added under her breath: "I am glad that it will still be dark. I hope it will be very dark."

"It will make it safer, of course."

"Not because of that," she murmured.

"Then why...?"

"I would rather not see Marigny when I go."

"You will see it when you return, my child," the Abbé put in cheerily. "This state of things cannot last. It will not last. I believe in God, and He will soon be avenged."

Aurore smiled on the kindly old man and quickly wiped her eyes. She loved Marigny and dreaded the long farewell — dreaded, even now, going into the unknown. The priest had risen and was looking for his hat.

"I don't think you had one, M. l'Abbé," Aurore said, smiling at him through her tears.

But suddenly both tears and smile vanished. She looked frightened. Her eyes dilated, her cheeks became the colour of ashes.

"What was that?" she murmured hoarsely.

"What, my dear?"

"What is it, Aurore?" Monseigneur asked frowning.

She seemed to be listening and put up her hand with her finger pointed towards the window.

"Didn't you hear?" she whispered.

Both the men shook their heads. She tiptoed to the window and softly pushed aside the curtain. Again she listened. The two men remained silent, for she had put her finger to her lips. But no sound came from outside, and after a little while Aurore allowed the curtain to fall back in its place. She still looked very white, and her knees appeared to be shaking under her, for she sank into a chair.

"But what was it, Aurore?" her father asked.

"I thought I heard a sound," she murmured, "just outside the window, as if—"

"As if what?"

"I don't know. As if someone had been there — listenening."

"It was Talon's footsteps you heard going across the forecourt."

"Perhaps," she admitted reluctantly, and once more tried to smile.

The Abbé had finally turned to go.

"You are going, M. l'Abbé?" she asked, trying to speak calmly, though her lips were still quivering and bloodless.

"Yes, yes, my child. I'll go home now and prepare everything."

"Prepare what, M. l'Abbé?"

"To celebrate for you both," the old priest replied with fervent earnestness. "The church will be quite ready for you directly you pull up. You will tell the driver to stop at the churchyard gate. I will say Mass and give you both Holy Communion. After that, you can go on your long journey fortified by God's blessing. Now, if there's anything else I can do..."

Monseigneur also had risen. In spite of his vaunted self-possession, he, too, was feeling keenly the separation from his ancestral home. He felt that in going away from Marigny, in joining the large crowd of émigrés who had turned their backs on their country and found refuge in foreign lands, he would leave behind him something of his pride of caste, something of his dignity, something subtle and indefinable which, even if he came back one day, he would never again recapture. The old priest no doubt knew what went on in the heart and mind of his old friend. He took his leave in silence, grasping the hand which, perhaps, he would never touch again. Aurore continued to smile as she bade him farewell.

"Soon after three o'clock," she said, "we'll be outside the church door."

The hand which she gave him felt cold, and her eyes still looked dark and filled with terror. The priest patted her hand reassuringly.

"There was no one, I am sure," he said, nodding in the direction of the window. "But I'll have a good look as I go out and shoo the malefactor away. Don't be frightened, my child. I have the feeling that you are under the special protection of the holy angels this night."

He looked so serene and so reassuring that Aurore felt comforted. She found a candle and lighted it.

"I'll see you to the gate," she said.

Together they went out of the room, Aurore holding the candle high above her head. As she crossed the threshold, she could not repress a shudder: all that she had gone through that afternoon in this great gilded room came back to her with a rush of memory. Pierre had closed the window, but the night was no longer dark outside. The storm clouds had drifted away, and the waning moon had risen and tipped the treetops with her silvery light.

“It won’t be so dark, after all,” the priest remarked.

They had gone down the stairs and crossed the hall. The priest opened the gate.

“Go back, my little Aurore,” he said as he once more bade her good-night. “You must have lots to do, and your father will be getting anxious.”

After he had gone she stood for a moment at the gate, watching while the priest walked briskly across the forecourt. A soft breeze fanned the flame of the candle, and she shielded it with her hand so that the light fell on her face and the loose golden strands of her hair. And suddenly she had the feeling that a pair of eyes was watching her out of the gloom. Hastily she blew out the candle. She was ashamed of her nervousness, for, in very truth, she was shaking with terror, while her reason told her there was nothing to fear. The Abbé’s serenity put her to shame, as did her father’s coolness; she tried to steel herself against this humiliating weakness, but her teeth chattered persistently, while her head felt heavy and hot. At last she heard Pierre’s voice behind her; he came shuffling across the hall, carrying a lantern. Aurore left him to close the gate and ran back as fast as she could across the hall.

Chapter XXVIII

Aurore had considerable difficulty in getting together the few necessities which she and her father would need for their long journey. With acting heart and burning indignation she beheld the havoc which vandal hands had wrought in the château. Her bed had been stripped, her clothes stolen, her father's belongings had all been looted. Fortunately, there were attics and hidden recesses in the old mansion where, in the days of plenty, many things had been stowed away. With the help of Jeannette, Aurore searched for and found dark travelling clothes for herself and her father, also some changes of linen; and together they dragged down a couple of old valises in which they packed the travellers' most pressing future needs.

Aurore and her father did, after this, contrive to snatch a few hours' sleep — he on the sofa, she in an armchair. At three o'clock they were both up; washed and dressed. Half an hour later the covered cart was at the gate.

Pierre and Jeannette were going as far as Val-le-Roi to assist at the service of Holy Communion which M. le Curé had promised to hold in his little church. They wept copious tears while they hoisted the valises into the cart and then climbed in, in the wake of Monseigneur and Mademoiselle Aurore.

Precisely at half-past three Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny and his daughter looked their last upon their stately home. Slowly the cart lumbered down the wooden slope. A quarter of an hour later the driver pulled up at the gate of the churchyard of Val-le-Roi.

The waning moon was low in the western sky, and over in the east the first faint streak of dawn tinged the horizon with silver. The little church was dimly lighted from within. Aurore jumped down lightly from the cart, and Charles de Marigny followed. After them came Pierre and Jeannette. The little procession thus formed went through the gate and across the flagged path through the churchyard.

They were within a few metres of the porch when a dark figure came out of the shadow and then stood still, as if waiting for them. Aurore gave a quickly smothered cry of alarm and clung, trembling, to her father.

"Who is there?" she called in a hoarse whisper.

"Only the bridegroom, citizeness," came a mocking voice in reply, "waiting for his bride."

Aurore and De Marigny, numbed with terror, had come to a halt. Neither of them felt able to move. André Vallon emerged fully out of the shadow and came a step or two nearer to them.

"Come, ma mie!" he said coolly. "The church is ready. The Curé waits. Shall we proceed?"

He put out his hand to take hers. De Marigny, shaking himself free of his torpor, tried to interpose.

"Do not touch her!" he cried peremptorily.

But André seemed not to notice him. He glanced over his shoulder, called aloud: "Citizen Tarbot!" and calmly took Aurore's cold, limp hand in his.

Then only did she perceive that there were other people here, moving in the shadows. A man came forward. It was that awful Tarbot.

"My witnesses for our wedding, ma mie," André said coolly. "You're servants will do for yours. Come!"

A small group of people had emerged from under the porch. Aurore felt like a dumb animal, helpless in a poacher's trap. She couldn't see her father, for those awful men were all around him, but she heard his voice, peremptory at first, then hoarse and smothered. She felt herself lifted off her feet and carried into the church. The flickering tallow candles on the altar showed her the Abbé Rosemonde on his knees with his head buried in his hands. Behind her there was the sound of feet shuffling along the flagstones. The voice she dreaded most in all the world whispered in her ear:

"You didn't think, ma mie, that I should be such a fool as to let you run away?"

She realized then how futile had been this attempt to flee, how she had never really believed in its possibility. Even during those few moments of sleep she had been conscious of Fate that was both inevitable and relentless. It was no use praying to God: God was cruel and meant her to go through with this sacrifice. She had thought to escape, and the trap had closed on her once more, more firmly, more inexorably than before. All she could long for now was her father's safety — the certainty that this awful sacrifice would not be in vain.

As once before, André seemed to divine her thoughts.

"There are friends here," he said coolly, "looking after your father's safety. And," he added, "once the knot is tied between us, you need have no fear whatever for him."

She glanced up into the face of this man whom she hated with the intensity of a suffering martyr for a ruthless tormentor. She saw nothing in his eyes but cruelty and mockery. She had the feeling that, try how she might, she could not combat his will; that, like a ferocious brute, he had marked her for his prey, and that she was his thing, his property, the trophy of his victory not only over her but over her kindred and her caste. Nothing but death could ever set her free again. Were it not for her father, how gladly would she have welcomed death, if death could have been swift and sudden, an act of God without the agency of that brutish crowd, whose gibes and snarls and insults still rang in her ears.

Through the stillness she heard a distant rumble of wheels and a driver's call to his horses, and then her father's voice once more, uttering that awful word "Canaille!"

In a moment she would have turned, ready to run back to him, but André had her by the wrist, and she could not move.

"They are taking him back to Marigny," he said drily. "He was doing no good here and might have come to harm. When Pierre and Jeannette have done their duty as witnesses, they can go and join him there and serve him as they did before."

"Let me go with him," she pleaded involuntarily. "Give me one more day, and I'll swear—"

"You are going to swear loyalty to me at the altar first, ma mie," he rejoined lightly. "After that, we shall see."

He led her to the altar rails, where a couple of chairs had been placed ready for them. Aurore followed as if she were in a trance, hypnotized by this powerful will which dominated her and broke her spirit. She despised herself for a coward, and yet knew that she was, in fact, utterly helpless, caught in toils which no power on earth could now sever until this monstrous sacrifice had been offered up on the altar of filial devotion.

The Abbé Rosemonde was already waiting for them at the rails. He had his breviary in his hand. He had prayed to God for guidance, and God had remained dumb. Half an hour ago André Vallon had come to him and demanded his services for his marriage with Aurore de Marigny as the law ordained, and the priest, as a citizen of the new Republic, was forced to obey this law which his heart condemned.

Prayers and admonitions were all in vain. Even the old man could not fail to realize that the sacrifice of Aurore was the only means to save her life and that of her father. With heart half broken with pity he began to read the Latin prayers which his church prescribes for the blessing of those who desire its ministrations when entering the bonds of matrimony.

“Deus Israel conjugat vos....” — “May the God of Israel unite you....”

It would be impossible to say what went on in Aurore’s heart. She stood at the altar, mute and passive. Her lips murmured no prayer, nor did she glance in the direction of the tall, motionless figure by her side. She was only conscious of that intense fear of him which at moments caused her teeth to chatter and her hair to cling matted to her moist forehead. Close beside her Jeannette and Pierre were weeping and mumbling, while a small crowd of village folk — women and men — clustered around the bridegroom.

Surely a more strange pair never stood before God’s altar for such a purpose. Victim and tormentor, with hearts overflowing with resentment and bitterness. To André the Latin words, the Gospel, the Creed, the Offertory prayers seemed like sounds out of dreamland, phrases belonging to the land of memory, to a land which he had not visited since boyhood and which seemed divided from the present by an ocean of injustice and wrong.

Anon the Abbé Rosemonde came down the altar steps. He had a small plate in his hand which, as he arrived at the rails, he held out to the bridegroom. André sought in the pocket of his coat for the two gold circlets which in the midnight hour he had taken off his dead mother’s fingers. Her wedding ring and that of his father, dead when he, André, was still a baby. She was lying so still, so still in her ruined cottage, with a peaceful smile around her lips. What André had thought and felt when he knelt down beside her and forced those stark fingers to yield up those tiny gold emblems of a happy union he himself scarcely knew. All that he remembered afterwards was that bitterness seemed for the moment to give way in his heart to the immense sorrow in which he had not yet been able to indulge. Just for those few moments he felt free to give rein to tears. There was no one there to see him, no one to pity him or, perchance, to mock. And now, when he took the rings out of his pocket and put them on the plate, it was only by the greatest effort of will that he choked back those tears which again rose insistent to his eyes.

A sound like a long sigh came to Aurore’s ears. She heeded it not, did not know whence it came. She was staring — staring at those two gold circlets, the material presentment of what her self-immolation would mean for the rest of her life. Jeannette and Pierre were sobbing audibly; the crowd of village folk were down on their knees, trying to recollect forgotten orisons.

Abbé Rosemonde took the small, cold white hand and the other, strong and rough, and placed one within the other. Aurore felt a shudder pass through her body; every drop of blood fled from her cheeks and gushed back to her head, and André felt her hand in his, fluttering like the wings of a captive bird.

With a steady hand he slipped the ring upon Aurore’s finger and in the clear voice echoed the Latin words murmured by the old Curé. They were the old familiar words, heard so often at the weddings of friends, a good deal about love, something about sickness and death. Then came Aurore’s turn. The crowd of village folk craned their necks to see what she would do. Would she recoil at the last moment in the face of the magnitude of the sacrifice? There were women there who vaguely understood what went on in her soul and who marvelled if at the last she would rebel. But with a mighty effort of will Aurore held herself erect and did not flinch. Something had occurred during the past quarter of an hour while she knelt at the altar rails which gave her the strength to go through with this holocaust of herself until the end. Perhaps it was a retrospective vision of what she had endured yesterday, of the outrage from which she had been rescued by the man beside her, of her father’s arrogance and madness which had brought all those horrors about. Certain it is that she did not flinch, not even when she in turn echoed the words murmured by the Curé. She murmured the Latin words not understanding them altogether, and the Abbé Rosemonde in the simplicity of his heart barely mumbled those wherein she should have sworn to cherish her tyrant, the cruel wrecker of her happiness.

Soon it was all over. André Vallon, the demagogue, the child of this bloody revolution, was the lawful lord and master of Aurore de Marigny, the descendant of kings. The village folk gave a sigh of satisfaction. They felt that now they were the equals of those great people up in Paris whose will was law, whose voice was the voice of God. Abbé Rosemonde whispered a few last words in Aurore’s ears. He placed his hand in reverent benediction upon her head. André stood by, obviously impatient. His friends pressed round him and tried to grasp his hand. The women wept, why they knew not. Through the coloured window glass the dawn was creeping in, and the tallow candles on the altar flickered more and more dimly.

“You will be kind to her, André,” were the last words the good priest spoke before he left the sanctuary.

André gave an impatient shrug.

“Come, ma mie,” he said curtly, and with his habitual peremptory gesture he put his arm round Aurore’s waist and led her out of the church.

The waning moon was nothing now but a half circle of filmy white vapour. Out in the east a July dawn had already set the fires of heaven alight. The horizon was aglow with crimson and gold, with emerald and chrysoprase, and tiny fleecy clouds, blood red and splendent, lay like streaks of flame across the sky.

Book III

Chapter XXIX

When Aurore awakened from a long dreamless sleep it was evening. She was lying in a bed, the soft whit sheets of which smelt of dried roses and lavender. Facing her were two tall windows masked by delicate lace curtains through which the light of a street lamp came dimly peeping.

For a long time she lay here, with aching head buried in the sweet-smelling downy pillow, while, one by one, the events of this fateful day came back to her mind on the wings of memory.

The market cart. The last glimpse of the old home. The little church of Val-le-Roi. The figure that came out of the shadows. The bridegroom awaiting his bride. After that there was something of a bank, a veil through which floated the figure of Abbé Rosemonde, the altar, the flickering tallow candles, and a dark face with compelling eyes and cruel, mocking mouth. Spirit voices echoed words which her ears at the time had only vaguely heard.

“Deus Israel conjugat vos....”

“You are going to swear loyalty to me first, ma mie....”

“Wilt thou take this man to be thy lawful husband?...”

“Once the knot is tied between us you need no longer fear....”

Then the ring upon her finger. Jeannette’s weeping farewells. The murmurings of the village folk. The carriage outside the churchyard gate. The long drive in silence, with her eyes fixed on the strong brown hand close to her which handled the reins and the whip — the hand of André Vallon, her husband!

Yes, it all came back now! She had slept for awhile and had mercifully forgotten, but now it all came back. After the interminable drive in the carriage over the jolting roads they had reached Nevers when the sun was already high in the heavens. In the fields just outside the town there was a stretch of ripening corn, from which a lark suddenly rose with joyful song up to the sky.

The carriage came to a halt in a nice broad street outside a house, the door of which bore on a metal plate the names JULES MIGNET and below it DOCTEUR EN MÉDECINE. André put up his whip, threw the reins over the horses’ backs, and jumped lightly down from the carriage.

“Come, ma mie,” he said, and held out his arm to help her descend.

In answer to the clanging of a bell, a neatly dressed maid opened the door and greet André with a smile.

“The Citizen Doctor?” André asked. “Is he in?”

“He is busy at the hospital just now,” the girl replied, “but the Citizeness is upstairs.”

The small paved hall and stone staircase smelt of ripe apples and of soap. André ran up the stairs. This time he didn’t say, “Come!” but Aurore nevertheless followed. She had no longer any will of her own. It seemed as if that strong brown hand was driving her with whip and reins as it had done the two horses in the carriage.

Double doors on the first landing were wide open, as André’s firm footsteps rang out on the tiled floor an elderly woman came out of the room beyond. She was small and frail-looking and had slender white hands which she held out to André with the friendliest of greetings.

“Had a good journey?” she asked.

André kissed her hand and then stood aside, disclosing Aurore.

“And that is your young wife!” the old woman exclaimed, and this time her two arms extended towards Aurore, and a sweet smile lit up her pale wrinkled face. “You are right welcome, citizeness,” she said. And Aurore felt two kindly arms encircling her shoulders and a friendly kiss pressed on both her cheeks.

“This is the Citizeness Mignet, ma mie,” André said. “A dear, kind friend who has offered us hospitality until we can continue our journey to Paris.”

“For as long as you will stay in my house, my dear,” the old lady said, fondling Aurore’s hand but gazing on André with eyes full of deep affection. “I don’t suppose he ever told you, but your husband saved my son’s life at Valmy. He lost his arm while he carried him to safety under the fire of Prussian cannon. Not only my house, but all I possess in the world is his and yours for the asking.”

But while she spoke André had made good his escape. Aurore heard him clattering down the stairs.

“He is always like that,” the old lady said, with her gentle smile. “He can’t bear me to say a word about what we owe him, Jules and I. But one day when André is not there my son shall tell you about it, and you will be prouder of your handsome husband than you ever were before.”

“But you are tired, my dear,” she went on, “and here I am chattering away instead of looking after you. Come and sit down here in the sunshine while I get you a nice cup of hot coffee, or would you rather have some nice sweet chocolate?”

She led Aurore to an armchair placed by the window, through which the warm July sun came in smiling. Aurore thanked her with a wan smile, and she was not really tired and that she would prefer coffee, whereupon the old lady tripped out of the room.

And Aurore had remained sitting there with the sunshine caressing her hair and cheek, looking about her as in a dream. The room had not a great deal of furniture in it, but the few pieces that were there revealed a fastidious taste. Fine work of the Louis XIV period was displayed in a splendid bureau and a fine Boulle table, in the Aubusson carpet and tapestried chairs. There were two or three pictures on the wall which suggested the fantastic brush of Lancret, and above the fireplace a delicate mirror which must have hailed from Venice.

Aurore had the feeling that this could not be reality; that this was some kind of dreamland out of which she would presently emerge fully awake. Did people who were country doctors and bourgeois possess Boulle furniture and Lancret pictures? Of course not. At least, Aurore had never supposed that they did. Louis XIV bureaus and Aubusson carpets were to be found in ancestral châteaux and not in the plebeian houses of small provincial towns. And this old lady, who now came tripping back in her dress of soft gray silk with the exquisite lace fichu round her shoulders and beautiful cap covering her gray hair, she of a certainty was not the mother of an obscure country leech, the sort of man who, if he had been called in to attend a sick person at Marigny in the olden days, would not

have been admitted to eat at Monseigneur's table. "Citizeness Mignet!" That awful word "citizeness," which had the power to arouse the most bitter resentment in the heart of every aristocrat, could surely not be applied to her.

She held in her fine white hands a cup of exquisite Sèvres china from which arose the delicious scent of steaming Mocha. Aurore took the cup with a grateful if pale little smile. She drank the coffee eagerly and felt a little better after it. Only with half an ear did she listen to the old lady's pleasant chatter, out of which only a few disjointed sentences penetrated to her inner consciousness.

"Your room is quite ready, my dear.... I shall take an old woman's privilege and call you Aurore.... When you wake up in the morning... How proud you must be of your husband.... Prodigies of valour at Valmy... My son says..."

Surely, surely, none of that could be real! The old lady was just one of those fairies of which Aurore had read when she was a child in the books of M. Perrault — the fairy godmother in "Cinderella" or "The Sleeping Beauty." She would vanish presently, and she, Aurore, would wake to find herself back in her bed with the blue damask curtains in her room at Marigny. Dear, dear Marigny!

Nor was the gold ring on her finger real. There was no such person as André Vallon, who had dared to call her "ma mie" and looked down on her with such a cruel, mocking glance. She gazed down on her own hands, her left hand with that narrow gold circlet round the fourth finger; and oddly, with her right hand, she toyed with the ring, twisting it round and round.

"And now I shall take you to your room," the old lady said in her smooth, gentle voice. "Come with me, my dear."

She smiled, and her old eyes twinkled as she gave Aurore's cheeks a little pat. "You will want to be alone with your husband," she said.

And now, after all those hours, and lying on this sweet-scented bed, Aurore supposed that she did then follow the old lady out of the room and up some stairs. But of that she remembered nothing. She did not even recall her first impression of this room with the tall windows veiled behind delicate lace curtains and hangings of rose Du Barry damask. Here again memory registered a blank until the moment when André Vallon came into the room.

Chapter XXX

Memory can be terribly cruel!

Aurore, lying numb and tired after a few hours' heavy sleep, felt the full force of this cruelty.

One by one, pictures which she would long all her life to blot out from her mind rose before her aching senses. Visions of shame and of cowardice which she felt would forever after leave a stain upon her soul. Even now memory most cruel brought the blush of humbled pride to her cheeks.

She, Aurore de Marigny, daughter of one of the proudest houses in France, claiming kinship with Royalty, the apple of her father's eyes, the worshipped mistress of a regal ancestral home, she had grovelled at a plebeian's feet; on her knees she had begged him to set her free, entreated him with words that in the past she would only have spoken to her King.

She had begged him, on her knees, with hands clinging to his rough clothes, to let her go back to Marigny and to her father; begged him to look on his vengeance as complete, since he had broken her spirit and humiliated her so that she would never dare look one of her own caste in the face again.

And memory mocked her with that picture of herself, lying like a crumpled heap of silk and laces at the feet of the man whom she hated and loathed and despised beyond what she would have thought herself capable of feeling. And through it all he had remained cool, sarcastic, indifferent.

"Do not cry, ma mie," he had said once: "you will make your eyes red."

And another time: "In Heaven's name, do not raise your voice. You don't want our friends down below to know that we have already embarked on matrimonial quarrels."

But the words that memory recalled more insistently were more fateful than all:

"While you are my submissive wife no one dare touch your father or you; but if you choose to leave me, no power on earth will save either of you from the guillotine. I care naught," he added presently, "about that arrogant father of yours: let him die a dog's death, for aught I care, but I do not choose to see my wife's pretty head roll into the same basket as those of the enemies of France."

"I hate you," she had murmured once. "I shall always hate you."

"I have no love for you, either," he had retorted coolly, "but we shall get used to each other."

And when in her agony of mind she had cried out, "Why — why have you done this? You hate me, you say — then why not let me go?"

"Because..." The word had escaped him, vehement and fierce; the cruel expression she had learned to fear had flashed for a few seconds out of his eyes. But the next moment he pulled himself together, seemed, indeed, to shed his fury like a mantle. A mocking smile chased away the ferocious glance, and he said lightly:

"Because you are beautiful, ma mie; you are my wife and I wish to keep you. That is all."

In the olden days Aurore de Marigny, even when she was little more than a child, had been wont to despise the airs and graces, the megrims and mild hysterics in which her elegant friends so often indulged. She had always been a fearless child: at games, on horseback, nothing frightened her. In an age when women affected the weaknesses of their sex as a sign of aristocratic birth, she would find joy in breaking in an untamed colt or accompanying her father in his shooting expeditions after wolf or wild boar in the forests of Ardenne. She had never known fear until now, when a beggarly caitiff held her like a slave in thrall. But with memory's cruel insistence there came back to her the knowledge that she was afraid; that there was one man in the world the sight of whom caused a quiver of abject fear to go right through her body, the sound of whose footfall caused every drop of blood to flow back to her heart. Why, she couldn't say.

It was that despicable fear which at this fateful hour had taken such hold of her that, even while his formidable arm encircled her waist and raised her from the ground where she had been cowering like a frightened beast, her senses suddenly forsook her, her head fell back, her teeth chattered as if in ague, her limbs felt as cold as ice. Broken and bruised by the terrible mental and physical struggle, she was numb and limp, had not one spark of fight left in her, or the strength of a kitten. She felt herself lifted off the ground and laid down somewhere, where it was soft and warm and sweet smelling. She heard the dreaded footfall receding from her, the opening of a door, and then a call.

There were other people in the room presently — a man and a woman. Aurore couldn't see them; she had not the energy to raise her eyelids; but gentle kindly hands undressed her, took off her shoes and stockings, combed her hair and moistened her face with sweet-smelling water. She felt herself being tucked up in a soft downy bed, and soft murmurs that sounded pitiful and motherly soothed her throbbing senses.

A man's voice, persuasive and authoritative, said, "Try and drink this, citizeness, it will make you sleep." She obeyed and drank the slightly bitter liquid that was held to her lips. After that she lay placid and quiet and, presently, must have dropped off to sleep.

Chapter XXXI

The stay in Nevers was made endurable for Aurore through the absence of her husband.

Her husband!

The Mignets explained to her that André had left for Paris on the very day of their arrival, while she was lying asleep. He wouldn't have her disturbed. He had gone in order to make arrangements for their new home, and he had gone full of joy and hope, because Citizen Danton had sent a courier over from Paris confirming the happy tidings already sent to Val-le-Roi a few days ago, that he would be overjoyed to see his old friend and colleague André Vallon again. There was work and to spare for young hands and young brains who had the welfare of the people at heart. The education of the young and the reclaiming of the unfit were the two questions that occupied the minds of the committees at the present moment, and Danton held out hopes of an important post for André in connection with these questions.

"It is the sort of work that will appeal to your clever husband, citizeness," the Doctor said, "now that the loss of his arm has compelled him to leave the army. The illiterates in France have been reckoned by the million in the past. Whatever else the present great upheaval may do, it will certainly remedy that crying evil."

"They are opening schools all over France," the old lady continued, "not only for the young, but also for the afflicted: the deaf and dumb and the blind."

"Schools?" Aurore remarked with a slight lifting of the eyebrows. "To teach what?"

"The elements of education," Madame Mignet replied quietly. "These must no longer remain the privilege of the few."

"And is my — my husband taking a hand in this scheme of education for the million?"

"Indeed, yes," the Doctor said. "I understand that Citizen Danton has obtained an important post for him in connection with the schools for the blind."

"Citizen Danton is the most influential man in France," Madame Mignet went on to explain to the somewhat bewildered Aurore. "He has a charming young wife. Madame Roland is one of their intimate friends. You and your husband will move among the most brilliant and most intellectual society in Paris."

Aurore was indeed bewildered. She gazed on this fastidious-looking old lady with the aristocratic features and delicate hands, who talked so calmly of Danton, the hideous master butcher of this awful slaughterhouse, the man whose large plebeian hands were stained with the blood of hundreds of his fellow men. Madame Mignet, or Citizeness Mignet as she preferred to be called, could talk of that man and his circle as "intellectual" and "brilliant," and took it for granted that she, Aurore, daughter of Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny, would find pleasure in their society. Pleasure? Aurore could only marvel whether she would have sufficient courage to show her horror and loathing should the hands of those butchers be extended in friendly welcome to her.

It seemed impossible that people like the Mignets should look complacently on the wholesale butcheries which were turning the fair city of Paris into a shambles; that they could condone the hideous crime of regicide about to culminate in the still more deadly sin of the execution of the Queen; that they could utter such names as Danton or Robespierre, Carrier or Desmoulins without a shudder. And when, after a few days of quiet intimacy, Aurore ventured to put the question to Madame Mignet, the old lady replied with strange earnestness:

"My dear, since the beginning of all times men have perpetrated horrors against one another. It is the devil in them, but the devil would have no power over men if God did not allow it. Could He not, if He so willed, quell this revolution with His Word? Must we not rather bow to His will and try to realize that something great, something good, something, at any rate, that is in accordance with the great scheme of the universe must in the end come out of all this sorrow?"

"But, surely," Aurore protested, "you must look with horror on these wholesale murders."

"I look with horror on every act of violence committed by man against his fellow creatures. I look with horror on every war where men are trained and encouraged to kill or maim one another. I look with horror upon the slave owners in our colonies, where men drive their fellow creatures with whip lash and torture to toil so that they themselves may reap. All these, my dear child, are horrors which we women condemn and shudder at. But wars there will always be, because man will always defend his property against aggression, and there will be revolutions in this world so long as men use their power in order to enslave others."

Aurore hotly defended her caste. On her father's estate the people were content and prosperous.

"I am sure they were," Madame Mignet admitted, with an indulgent smile, "but throughout the history of the world, the innocent have suffered together with the guilty. Great evils need desperate remedies. The children of France, egged on by centuries of misery and spurred by starvation, have struck blindly about them in their scramble for food. In the mêlée noble heads have fallen along with some that were heavy with guilt. But it is God's will, and we must have patience. France is a great and glorious country. This is the period of her travail. From it she will bring forth liberty and progress which, as the years roll on, will cause her children to forget what they have endured in the cause."

It was amazing to hear a woman of refinement talk so placidly about it all. In fact, Aurore could not help remarking to herself how strangely like this old lady's philosophy of life was that of Abbé Rosemonde. Resignation to the will of God. Contentment in leaving everything in His hands. She felt a kind of mild contempt for this placidity, and yet, what right had she to scorn anyone? She, the miserable coward who shrank from the hurt that her father's death would cause her, and to save herself and him had grovelled at the feet of one whom she despised?

But it was only toward the end of her stay at Nevers that she spoke of all this to Madame Mignet. She wondered how much of her history the old lady and the Doctor knew; if they realized that as far as she was concerned the greatest horror she had ever experienced was when she found herself the wife of one whom her father had so justly dubbed "Canaille!" They, of course, would not understand how her entire being was in revolt against this slavery. André Vallon was admittedly a poor man, which would mean that she, Aurore de Marigny, would be little better than a servant to a despicable knave. Ignorant of the commonest elements of household work, she

would be a constant suffering victim to his gibes and his tyranny. But it was not the work that she feared, it was the mental, the moral, the physical contact with one whom she hated.

And all the while that she was at Nevers, her ears were constantly filled with his name. Though absent, he seemed always to be there in this home of culture and refinement, as he was ever present apparently in the hearts of his friends. From beginning to end, Aurore was forced to listen to the story of André's heroism when he carried Doctor Mignet on his back out of range of the Prussian cannon; how a chance musket shot had shattered his arm and he had dragged himself and his swooning comrade back to the French lines, only to return to the scene of danger and bring to safety half a dozen more of his wounded comrades until, stricken with a raging fever, more dead than alive, he in his turn had completely lost consciousness.

With a wealth of detail and a plethora of exciting incidents did Doctor Mignet recount not only this story, but others in which André Vallon was the hero and had accomplished prodigies of valour.

"Four citations, citizeness," he said with undisguised enthusiasm. "Dumouriez, before his abominable treachery, always spoke of Vallon as the bravest soldier he had ever had under his command; and when the crash came, when Dumouriez, whom the whole of France trusted as an able general and a loyal patriot, when he sold his sword to the enemies of his country, Vallon was one of those who put heart into the troops, who revived their courage and led them to a series of victories which culminated in that glorious day of Valmy."

And the old lady would then conclude with a happy little sigh:

"Indeed, citizeness, André is a man to be proud of as a husband and as a friend."

And Aurore wondered if all those stories could possibly be true. Valour, loyalty, selflessness, these were the attributes of her caste. Caitiffs like André Vallon surely were not capable of such noble impulses. They had no educations to guide them, no tradition, none of the examples which formed the glorious history of a noble race such as hers. It couldn't be true. The whole thing was an exaggeration on the Doctor's part. He was blinded by his affection for a comrade in arms, by dangers passed together, by suffering endured for the sake of France, when the whole of Europe raised its hand against her, and the Prussian hordes invaded her sacred soil.

"I look with horror on every war," the old lady had said. And for the first time in all these miserable years Aurore was conscious of a vague feeling of shame that so many of her kindred had turned their sword against their country in the hour of her greatest peril, or sought refuge and safety on foreign soil.

"France, my country!" an unconscious poet had once sung. "She may have erred, she may have sinned, but still she is my country!"

Chapter XXXII

Indeed, these few days in Nevers in the company of two charming and intellectual people were both pleasant and peaceful. It was years since Aurore had the opportunity of listening to conversation other than the somewhat naïve philosophy of Abbé Rosemonde and her father's somewhat monotonous if fully justified diatribes against the new régime; and though she felt that she could never agree with the opinions and ideals expounded so eloquently by the Mignets, yet she could not help feeling interested, taken out of herself, made to feel that at any rate the original makers of this terrible revolution were men of high ideals actuated by the purest of motives.

The day of departure came, alas! all too soon. André came to Nevers to fetch his wife. The sight of him revived in Aurore's memory all the terrible times she had lived through. All the quietude of the past few days seemed to fly from her soul. At once she felt irritated, with her nerves all tingling and on edge. She watched the carriage drive up to the door and saw him jump down and take his valise from the driver. She thought he looked ill, but supposed that perhaps the journey had been trying. It was only later that she heard that he had actually come from Val-le-Roi, whither he had gone first from Paris in order to see after his mother's grave in the churchyard there.

It was not till late afternoon that Aurore found herself alone in her room with her husband. She certainly thought that he looked different, somehow: older perhaps, but certainly different. He had been to Marigny and spoke to her about his visit there.

"Your father refused to see me," he told her, "which I suppose was natural. But I questioned Pierre and Jeannette and also the Citizen Curé. They all told me that physically he was well, but not quite normal in his mind."

"Mon Dieu!..."

"It is nothing to be alarmed about. I spoke to the leech-Citizen Journet — whom you know. They used to call him in the olden days if any of the servants were sick. Your father, it seems, condescended to let him feel his pulse and to take the potion which he prescribed."

"If I could only see him..."

"You wouldn't do him any good. On the contrary, if you were there he would let loose the floodgates of his resentment and work himself up into a delirium of fury. I put the question to the Citizen Doctor and Abbé Rosemonde: they both thought it best that he should be kept very quiet for a time, under the care of Pierre and Jeannette."

"You seem to have been very kind," she said, feeling grateful yet loth to acknowledge her gratitude.

"Only seemingly," he replied lightly, in that flippant, mocking tone of his which still had the power to irritate her. However, she kept sufficient control over herself for the moment to swallow the sharp retort which hovered on her lips.

There was a moment's silence between them, and then he mentioned Talon.

"I have got the deeds of sale out of that thief, at any rate," he said.

"The deeds?"

"Why, yes! The deeds of sale of Marigny and of all the estates registered in your father's name to Hector Talon."

"I had forgotten," she murmured.

"He hadn't," André replied drily, "not your father's."

"What does that mean?"

"That I had the title deeds registered in your name, under the plea that your father was non compos mentis."

"But I couldn't allow—"

"What?"

"I should be defrauding my father."

"Would you rather Talon had possession?"

"Rather he than you," she retorted coldly.

At the moment she hoped, rather than thought, that a slight shadow passed over his face. They had both been standing during this brief conversation, carried on with a kind of casual indifference on his side and with thinly veiled animosity on hers. She had intended to wound him with the sharpness of her tongue, and having, as she hoped, succeeded, she turned coolly away from him and sat down in the winged armchair by the window. With ostentatious care she disposed the folds of her gown about her, fiddled at her fichu, allowed her daintily shod foot to peep from beneath her skirt. Then she took up a piece of embroidery and started to ply her needle with the appearance of being deeply engrossed in her work.

André watched her in silence for a moment or two. Had she looked up she would have seen the mocking smile which curled round his lips.

"I suppose," he said after a while, "that my wits are specially dull this afternoon. Would you be so gracious as to explain just what you mean by 'rather he than you'? It sounds enigmatic to me."

Aurore kept her eyes fixed on her embroidery frame, drawing the thread in and out as if the destinies of France rested on the success of her work. With her head slightly tilted to one side, her fair hair free from powder, like a golden halo above her smooth forehead, a look of concentration in her deep blue eyes, she looked perfectly adorable. She knew it, and felt a great measure of strength in the knowledge. A woman is soon conscious of victory when she knows that she is beautiful, and Aurore, young and inexperienced as she was, was no exception to this rule. What worried her was that she could not keep her hands entirely steady or still the beatings of her heart. She knew that if she spoke her voice would betray the fact that she was vaguely frightened. She had hit out rather blindly and thoughtlessly because his cool indifference had exasperated her, but now she was afraid of what he might do. He was cruel and vengeful, she knew that, and she felt frightened, like a child who has been naughty and knows that it is going to be punished.

But she would not for worlds let him see that she was anything but indifferent, and so she remained silent and went on drawing her embroidery thread in and out with cool ostentation. But, suddenly, and without any warning, he came up close to her and, with an impatient oath, snatched the work out of her hand and threw it on the ground.

"Please answer my question," he said coldly.

The needle, it seemed, had slightly grazed her finger, drawing a drop of blood. She put the finger to her mouth. Then she rose from her chair and stooped to pick up her work. He put his foot on it. As she straightened again she found herself quite close to him, looking up into his face.

"I meant just what I said," she said, as coolly as she could, though she felt that her nerves were beginning to give way; "that I would sooner any man in the whole of France had Marigny rather than you."

"A very natural sentiment on your part, no doubt," he rejoined calmly, "seeing that you honour me with such active hatred. But had you equally honoured me by listening to me just now you would have heard me say that the title deeds of Marigny are not inscribed in my name but in yours."

She broke into a harsh, derisive laugh.

"A pretty bit of sophistry, forsooth," she retorted. "You must think me a fool, indeed, if you imagine I do not see through your tricks. A marriage with the aristo, pardi! to humiliate her, what? and to avenge wrongs in which she had no share? Your precious friends believe that tale, do they not? But they are the fools, not I. I know enough of the laws of your murdering government. A wife's property belongs to her husband, and that is the reason why you forced this monstrous union upon me. It was in order to feather your nest, to obtain possession of the lands and château which if my dear father and I had perished on the guillotine would have become the property of the State. Marry the aristocrat, forsooth, to avenge a mother's death! Par Dieu! 'twas a pretty story to cover the grasping avarice of an upstart out for loot!"

She had succeeded in working herself up into a state of uncontrolled fury. Fear had given way to a kind of nervous exultation at her own power to wound. All unknowing, he had put the flail in her hand wherewith to chastise him. And chastise she did. Whether she believed in what she said or no didn't seem to matter: all she knew was that her words must hurt him. They must, even though he stood there close to her, entirely motionless, looking down into her glowing face with eyes the expression of which she could not entirely fathom. But that was because she was excited, unable to reason and to think, only to strike with words that must hit at what pride he possessed, as a whip lash would have struck at his face. It was only when she was forced to pause in order to draw breath that that awful mocking smile which she hated worse than his cruelty curled once more around his lips.

This goaded her beyond endurance. Her nerves were completely unstrung. She couldn't have controlled them even if she would. She was just longing for an actual whip wherewith to strike, longing with all her soul to make him cringe and suffer at last as he had so often made her suffer.

With a strange cry, as much of pain as of triumph, she suddenly raised her hand and strike him in the face....

"You little fool!"

That was what she heard. The voice did not sound quite like his. Perhaps she had expected a roar, a cry of rage, a savage oath — he was a beast, and beast usually bellowed when they were hurt; but all she did hear was a low, contemptuous laugh and those three words, "You little fool!"

But what happened was quite another matter. His formidable arm shot out, and in an instant both her wrists were tightly held together as in a manacle of steel. She felt as if her arms were wrenched out of their sockets, and in the agony of it her knees gave way under her. She felt herself sinking to the ground, and through a mist of semiconsciousness she saw his face quite close to hers — a cruel, mocking face with a gleam of ferocity in the eyes.

"On your knees, you little fool!"

What a harsh voice it had become! And then that laugh! Mockery! Contempt! Mild amusement! The whole gamut of what was most humiliating and most riling.

"Let go my wrists," she said as steadily as she could, though she was ready to cry with pain. "Let go! You hurt me!"

"Hurt you?" he went on coolly. "By God! I mean to hurt you, you infuriating little vixen! I am going to keep you here on your knees until those red lips of yours have begged for pardon."

"Let me go!" she cried aloud. "Brute! Brute! Let me go!"

"As soon as you have begged for pardon!" he retorted grimly.

"Never!"

"We shall see!"

He sat down in the winged chair and still held her by the wrists. She was on her knees, crouching at his feet, for there he held her pinioned with one foot on the edge of her gown. She could not move.

"Coward! Let me go!"

"Not I! Coward," he continued coolly, "is an attribute of mudlarks such as I, but so is obstinacy you'll find, ma mie. Anyway, you are going to stay here on your knees until your sweet lips have claimed and received a kiss of forgiveness."

Just for a few seconds she had an uncontrollable desire to scream at the top of her voice in the hope that some member of the Mignet household would come to her rescue. But her pride revolted at the idea of being found in this humiliating position, and with all their adoration for this brutish husband of hers they might even take his part against her, and ridicule might then be piled on humiliation — a thing too awful to contemplate. She thought that he would tire; those fingers of his, which felt more and more like iron clamps around her wrists, were bound, she thought, to loosen their hold a little after a time. Manlike, he would grow weary of sitting still. The slightest movement on his part, and the tension would relax. That would be her opportunity for escape, and, of course, she would not be caught unawares again. If only she could have closed her ears to his voice, to his gibes and his sneers and, worse still, to this scornful admiration.

"So you thought out that pretty story for yourself," he said at one time: "that I schemed to marry you in order to obtain possession of your impoverished estates. Name of a name! you have imagination as well as beauty, ma mie"; and then he added irrelevantly:

"When you sue for pardon I shall kiss you, Aurore, for your lips just now look as luscious as two cherries."

Involuntarily a sob rose to her throat, her pretty head fell forward, and great hot tears fell from her eyes.

"Don't cry, ma mie," he said gaily. "I didn't cry when that charming cousin of yours struck me in the face just because you happened to fall into my arms one day. I was only a boy, and you were a child. Do you remember that day, ma mie?"

His voice seemed to die away somewhere in space. The shades of evening were drawing in. It was quite dark in the remote corners of the room. Aurore felt faint and sick, dreading, yet longing for, unconsciousness. At one moment hope revived. There was a knock at the door, and she heard André's voice calling:

"What is it?"

"Supper is ready, citizen," came the servant girl's voice in reply. "Will you be coming down?"

"Not to-night, Marie," André replied. "My wife is fatigued, and I will stay with her. Pray the Citizen Doctor and the Citizeness to excuse us."

After that Aurore sobbed like a child. She was tired and hungry and in pain. She sobbed, and through her sobs she heard the hated voice saying quite lightly:

"Give in, ma mie. You won't regret it. If I had a hand to spare I would put a finger under your pretty chin and try and teach you that it is quite good to kiss."

She did give in, in the end. She felt ashamed, abjected, cowardly. A brief while ago she would have scorned the idea of any woman giving in under such humiliating conditions. But it was not only physical pain that compelled her. It was something more than that, and she knew it. It was the enforcement of a will greater than her own, the absolutism of physical, moral, and mental strength which seemed to rob her surrender of its most galling sting. She raised her head and almost with an air of defiance she threw out the word, "Pardon!" At once her wrists were released, but her whole body was imprisoned instead. Weak and broken, with head thrown back and eyes closed, she remained motionless in the crook of his arm. For a long, long time she remained thus, expecting and dreading that kiss. She felt that his eyes were on her, revelling — she had no doubt of that — in her beauty. And for this she hated and despised him as much as she hated and despised herself. For one instant she opened her eyes and looked into his. What had compelled her to open them she didn't know. It was still that immense power which appeared to be in the very air about her, bending her will and breaking her spirit. Had she read fury, passion, or hatred in his eyes she might, she felt, have forgiven him in her turn, have felt less ashamed of her cowardice; but all she encountered was a kind of gentle, indulgent mockery, mild amusement at what to her meant the uprooting of all that she had held inviolate, the surrender of what she held far deeper than life.

He was amused at her humiliation and could laugh at her distress. She gave him one look and then said loudly and quite steadily:

"I never knew what hatred meant until now."

"We'll call it that if you like," he retorted lightly, "but isn't it good?"

And then he kissed her.

Chapter XXXIII

Since that day many months had gone by, and Aurore, sitting once more in the large winged chair by the window in that pretty room at Nevers and watching the snowflakes slowly fluttering down from the leaden sky thought of the long, long time that separated her from the past, and of the interminable days that still lay, wearisome and monotonous, before her, until she was an old woman, too old to recollect and too old to feel.

She had been very sorry at the time to leave the quietude of the house at Nevers, not thinking that she would ever see it again. The Mignets had been so kind! So kind! She marvelled often just how much they knew. She had dreaded the journey to Paris in the company of her husband, had dreaded the life that lay before her — the great unknown! the leap into a future which she pictured to herself as dark and lonely and laden with sorrow.

But things in life have a way of not being either quite so pleasant or so unpleasant as one anticipates; and Aurore's first impression of the apartment in Paris which was destined to be her home was certainly not so unpleasant as she had imagined. It certainly was spacious and sunny. Situated on the Quai de la Ferraille, high above the noises of the street below, it had a fine view over the river and the towers of Notre Dame. She wondered who it was who had presided over the furnishing of it, but didn't like to ask. She thought that she detected a feminine hand and a woman's taste in her bedroom, with its muslin curtains and flowered chintz hangings. All very simple, even Spartan, but with nothing to jar on her fastidiousness. In an adjacent small boudoir she found a comfortable armchair, a work table, many appurtenances necessary for needlework. These only a woman could have selected, so Aurore thought, and wondered who it could have been.

There were also a number of books ranged on shelves on one side of the room. As soon as she had an opportunity Aurore looked to see what they were. Rousseau, of course, and Diderot, and also Voltaire and D'Alembert; the speeches of Mirabeau and reprints of the early numbers of *L'Ami du Peuple*. But there were others too: the poets and essayists of the Grand Siècle, Molière, Coidorcet, Bossuet, and many more. somehow she felt that each one had been chosen specially for the moulding of her mind. Herein she suspected her husband, and wondered how any man could be so dense or so arrogant as to suppose that she would swerve one iota from the principles and the faith, which she had been taught to believe were the only possible rules of life.

But apart from such rebellious thoughts and during those early days of August, Aurore set out resolutely to live the life which she believed was to be hers to the end of time. She wondered how she was every going to live and to endure. And yet other people did it; other women in this awful city of Paris had learned how to live and how to suffer. How amazing that was! Amazing and ununderstandable! The Reign of Terror was at its height. The glorious revolution, which was going to regenerate the world and bring about the millennium with unbroken happiness for all, could now be best described as a conjugation of the verb "to fear": I fear, thou fearest, he fears, we fear, you fear, they fear! Men and women in Paris went daily, hourly, in fear of their lives; in fear of the lives of those near and dear to them. Every day accusations, trials, condemnations, and the procession of victims to the guillotine. Terror, indeed, was the order of the day, the darlings of the crowd to-day were the execration of the mob on the morrow.

And yet, life went on just the same.

People walked about the streets, met each other and talked over the events of the day — the death of this man, imminent arrest of that other; Robespierre's latest speech; the news from the front. They went to the theatre and the opera; they dined at restaurants. Young people made love; old people died; babies were born. Life went on just the same.

Aurore saw very little of the outside world. She went daily to market with the pleasant middle-aged woman who helped her with her ménage; she stood in the queues, waiting her turn to purchase the few ounces of bread which the law allowed, and spent the money which André had given her for the purchase of such food as was obtainable. Her life was Spartan in the extreme, but she had no rough task to perform. There was no question of washing and scrubbing — the nice middle-aged woman did all that; but Aurore soon found herself strangely interested in keeping her new home dainty and comfortable and her table as free from monotony as possible. The feeling gradually came to her that this was more of a real home to her than stately Marigny had ever been. There, during its days of splendour, everything was ordained and arranged by an army of servants without any reference to her own special wishes. Probably she had no special wishes in those days, as everything went on in its own perfect routine. There was never any hitch: housekeepers and major-domos saw to it that Mademoiselle was not troubled with such trifles as the arrangement of flowers in her room or the composition of a menu.

But here, in the sunny rooms of the Quai de la Ferraille, everything depended on her, and the thrill was very real when there were a few asters to be bought in the market, or there was a possibility of obtaining a thin old fowl that made excellent soup.

Aurore heard vague rumours from time to time that men in high places kept rich tables in their homes while the people starved; that certain restaurants in the Rue St. Honoré, patronized by Robespierre, the Incorruptible, and his friends on the influential committees, served their customers with the richest of food and choice wines bought for a song from the cellars of dispossessed aristocrats. She heard that in the country there was no shortage of luxury; that Danton's house at Arcis was noted for its good cheer.

All that she heard and more, but she had soon schooled herself to know nothing, to listen to nothing, to comment on nothing. She never went to a theatre; she had never set foot inside a restaurant. She only walked for exercise, and then only in the fields round about St. Martin and Passy. It was the only way to endure life. Strangely enough, quite apart from the interest in her home, she was not really unhappy. What sorrow and anxiety she felt was purely outside herself. The fate of the unfortunate Queen caused her immense grief, but she never spoke of it; through gossip gleaned in the streets, or through the placards at street corners which she could not fail to see, she learned of the condemnation and death of many whose names had been familiar to her since childhood: relatives, friends, acquaintances. Many she knew had found shelter abroad, and more than once she half broke her heart with regret that her father had always set his face so obstinately against emigration. They would be together now — she and he — secure in England or Belgium, with only the echo of all these horrors to disturb their peace, instead of this daily agonizing contact with it all.

She remembered that a year or less before this she had heard rumours of an organization of English gentlemen, headed by a mysterious chief who was known as "The Scarlet Pimpernel," who risked their lives in order to help those who were in danger of

death, who were unhappy and innocent, and who longed to flee from this terror-stricken land. She remembered that her father had obstinately refused to get in touch with these gallant Englishmen. He hated the English, he said, and would not owe his life to any of them. Aurore, at the time, thought no more about it. She did not hate the English, but she didn't want to leave Marigny, and in that remote country district the danger to her father and herself did not appear imminent.

Until that awful day in July, which seemed now like a nightmare, she had not realized how hated she and her father were in the villages, and how intense was the enmity of the people against her caste. But here, in Paris, her eyes were soon opened to much that she had never fully understood before: she soon realized how miserable and ignorant the people were, and how easy it was to arouse in them passions of hatred, of resentment and cruelty. She also realized how helpless now were those men who, with the highest possible ideals to spur them, and an infinite understanding of the injustice under which the poor had groaned for centuries, had let loose the floodgates of this titanic revolution. They were helpless now, and, one by one, paid toll with their lives for all those dreams of liberty and justice which were going to make this world regenerate and happy, and only succeeded in making it more miserable and more foul.

Her husband, André Vallon, was one of these. He had come back from the war full of enthusiasm and of hope. Since he could no longer fight the enemies of his country abroad, he would fight them within its borders: traitors, who would sell France to her foes, who would allow the Prussian heel to tread her sacred soil; upstarts, who filled their pockets and their bellies while others groaned and starved. They were the enemies whom men like André Vallon were ready to denounce to an outraged people. The people were ready enough to have those traitors thrown to them as bait for their revenge, but, having tasted the sweets of retaliation, they soon cried for more. And Aurore watched clouds of anxiety gather over her husband's brow. Day by day he became more absorbed, more silent.

When first they had settled down in Paris he had often talked to her of the great upheaval which was convulsing the country: he spoke with great moderation, careful not to outrage her principles or her belief. He brought her books to read, pamphlets that interested her even though they could never convince. André could talk well when he liked; he knew his Rousseau and discussed him with Aurore in a manner which opened up her mind to social questions of which she had never dreamed before. She was intelligent and responsive. She had a great desire to learn, and, in spite of herself, she caught herself more than once looking forward to a quiet evening in the Quai de la Ferraille, tête-à-tête with her husband, listening to his talk while she worked. He would speak very freely of the social ideals that had brought about the Revolution, of men like Lafayette and Mirabeau, of the original Legislative Assembly, the Constitution of '89, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But it was always of the past that he spoke. Of the present and the future he never uttered a word, and Aurore, through innate delicacy of feeling, never mentioned the names of those demagogues who had been André's colleagues and friends at one time, and who had since been hurled down the steep path of enormity and of crime by the avalanche which they had let loose and no longer could control. She never once uttered the name of Danton, the master butcher who had been André's friend.

From time to time she had news of her father, and André held out hopes to her that she would see him soon; but he never spoke again of Marigny, though she had a strong suspicion that he was administering the estate through an agent whom he had placed there for the purpose.

Soon she had the conviction that he was taking her presence in his home absolutely for granted. She was his wife and looked after his comfort. Sometimes she was also a pleasant companion with whom he could talk of extraneous subjects. He had never once set foot inside her room.

He taught her to play chess, and now and then they would have a game in the evening. The lamp, set on a tall stand behind Aurore's chair, lit up the tender gold of her hair, the curve of her shoulder peeping through the folds of her lace fichu, her delicate hand supporting her chin. She was beautiful, and she knew it. But whenever she looked up from her game she invariably saw his head bent, intent upon the next move, and his eyes fixed upon the board.

He had never once kissed her since that evening at Nevers.

Chapter XXXIV

Towards the end of September André announced to Aurore his intention to take her to Nevers.

"The Mignets," he said, "will be very happy to have you with them, and there will be a chance for you of seeing your father."

A quick cry of protest came involuntarily to her lips.

"I would rather stay here!" she said, and then could have cried with vexation, for at once that mocking smile which she hated came curling around his mouth.

"I would not wish to burden Madame Mignet with my presence," she went on, as coolly as she could. "I know from experience how difficult housekeeping has become, and a visitor must be a burden in any house."

"The Citizeness has been longing to see you again, she tells me, and Paris is not the place for you just now."

It was not often that he assumed this air of authority over her, but Aurore was sensible enough to know that when he did any kind of resistance would be useless. In this great era of liberty a married woman was still entirely dependent on her husband. She had no money or property apart from him, and he had complete control over her affairs and over her movements. Aurore, who had a great regard for her own personal dignity, would never have demeaned herself by argument or resistance which could only result in defeat.

As a matter of fact, she knew quite well why she was being sent out of Paris, and in her innermost heart could not help feeling thankful that there were some kind friends with whom she could stay, away in a quiet provincial town, until the terrible events which were looming ahead had come about and vanished into the past. The trial of the unfortunate Queen had been decreed by the Convention. This, of course, would be nothing but hideous mockery and would inevitably end in her condemnation and her death. André did not wish his wife to be in Paris when that occurred.

He took her over to Nevers on one of the last days in September.

The drive in the diligence through the beautiful valleys of the Nièvre and the Allier, where the trees that bordered the road were already clothed in the gorgeous russet and gold mantle of autumn, was strangely soothing. More than once Aurore fell asleep in spite of the roughness of the road, the heat inside the diligence, the querulous murmur of conversation of her fellow passengers. When a sudden jerk aroused her from these fitful slumbers she usually found that in her sleep her head had fallen sideways and come to rest on her husband's shoulder. She would look up at him, half dazed and with a beating heart, only to find that he was sitting bolt upright, staring straight out in front of him, and had not apparently as much as noticed her.

The Mignets were, as usual, more than kind, and did all they could to make their guest happy. But a strange restlessness now had possession of Aurore, and the peaceful atmosphere of this refined household seemed to irritate rather than soothe her nerves. Very little news from Paris penetrated as far as this sleepy cathedral town. The diligence to and from the capital only plied once a month now, and the meagre sheets which it brought were at once snapped up by a privileged few. As Aurore never spoke with anyone outside the household she could only learn what the Mignets chose to tell her. She more than suspected that news was being kept from her when it was more than usually horrible or alarming. She did hear of the condemnation and death of the Queen, and this caused her unmitigated grief. She also heard of the wholesale execution of the Girondists, the brilliant party whose members were the first to try and cry halt to the holocaust which they themselves had set in motion. The élite of intellectual Paris perished on the guillotine on that awful last day of October, and with them perished the last of the moderatists who might have stemmed the tide of butchery nine months before the surfeit of carnage put an end to it at last.

Aurore could not help wondering at times how her husband would fare though all the turmoil that followed the execution of the Girondists. It was obvious, even to her who knew so little, that no man's head was safe upon his shoulders if he expressed the slightest desire to see the end of all the slaughter, or showed anything but satisfaction at the orgy of blood that went on day after day. And Aurore, with all her hatred and dread of André, knew him to be entirely fearless and disdainful of his life where his ideals and his beliefs were at stake. As in the days of his youth, when he had boldly expressed his views on the Rights of Man and the iniquity of the old social system that allowed two thirds of humanity to starve so that the remaining third might feast, as later on he had joined Danton in the denunciation of those tyrants who had learned nothing from the lesson taught them by an outraged people, so now he would with equal boldness tilt against the assassins, who through sheer fear for their own lives were vying with one another in atrocities and had turned the beautiful land of France into a gigantic shambles.

Sooner or later, thought Aurore, he would fall a victim to his moderatism. It would be a pity, she thought, because there must be so few men of sane fiefs and true patriotism left in the country now. Once or twice she spoke about André to the Mignets and showed an anxiety on his behalf which she hoped would please them. It did. And as usual the Doctor and the old lady at once embarked on their wonted eulogy of their friend.

"They daren't touch him," the Doctor said decisively.

"Why not?" Aurore retorted. And then added: "It seems to me that, as they dared raise their guilty hand against the Queen, they would dare anything."

"That was different," the Doctor asserted.

"Why different?" she demanded.

"André's life is consecrated to the service of the poor and the afflicted. One could hardly say that of the unfortunate Marie Antoinette."

"She never had the opportunity," Aurore protested hotly.

"Perhaps not. But, anyway, while she lived she was a constant inducement to a handful of hotheaded traitors to betray their country for her sake. You would be surprised, citizeness, if you knew the number of conspiracies, of intrigues, of treacheries that were daily hatches in order to overthrow the Republic and replace the Austrian woman on her son on the throne."

"Then do you mean to tell me that you-" Aurore retorted vehemently.

"Don't ask me that question, citizeness," the Doctor broke in with earnestness. "I am no politician, nor am I the guardian of my country's laws. I only wanted to point out to you that the execution of Marie Antoinette in no way suggest danger to your husband."

“Unless things chance very much for the worse,” the old lady put in, “the country cannot afford to lose its André Vallon.”

“Why not?”

It seemed a strange question for a wife to ask. Madame Mignet, for the first time since the beginning of their friendship, cast a disapproving eye on Aurore.

“My dear,” she said coldly, “you know better than we do that your husband is the only man in France at this present moment who has thoroughly mastered the system of teaching the deaf and dumb. By means of signs, which he does with his one hand, he has taught scores of such poor afflicted souls how to exchange and assimilate ideas. And the same with the blind. Surely you knew all that.”

Aurore’s silence was her reply. She felt ashamed. How could she own to these dear, kind friends that she had not yet been on such terms of intimacy with her husband that he could speak to her about himself or his work? She had only been a pleasant acquaintance in the sunny home of the Quai de la Ferraille, one with whom a busy man could discuss the abstract theories of Rousseau or the speeches of Mirabeau. To her husband she had only been an intelligent opponent at chess or piquet, but never a confidant. Not hers the sympathetic ear into which a man could pour the tale of his struggles, his strivings, his disappointments. Not hers the loved voice whose gentle tones could soothe the nerves jaded by fatigue.

Much against her will, a few hot tears rose to Aurore’s eyes. She rose quickly and turned away lest those kind friends should see them.

But after that she no longer tried to disguise from the Mignets the fact that she and André were two beings apart. They had guessed it, of course, but out of delicacy had never given her a hint that they knew. The full circumstances of her marriage were, of course, unknown to them, but it was very clear that the ideals of a Royalist and those of a child of the Revolution were as far apart as the poles. Love alone might in time have bridged over the distance, but alas! as Madame Mignet remarked to her son one day when they talked the matter over together, there is no love between them on either side. Womanlike, she put the blame for this on Aurore.

“She is beautiful,” was her comment on the situation, “but I am afraid that she has no temperament; and André ought to have had either a clinging, affectionate little wife, who would have mothered him, or else...”

The old lady paused and put on a demure expression. She knew what she meant, and so did her son, and between them they decided that Aurore of the wonderful eyes and the cherry-red mouth did not possess any of the attributes which would have made André happy.

“Unless...” Madame Mignet added, who was nothing if not enigmatic. And then she said with a hopeful little sigh, “One never knows.”

And Aurore, sitting in the large-winged chair by the window in the pretty room at Nevers, watched the snowflakes slowly fluttering down from the leaden sky. She also watched other things from that pleasant point of vantage — people hurrying by with heads bent against the cold wind, the poor little half-frozen children hurrying home from school, the gossips at the street corner, and the itinerant menders of tin pots or earthenware, and, once a month, when the diligence came in from Paris, her husband, André Vallon, with a small valise in his hand, pausing a moment at the door to ring the bell.

Chapter XXXV

It was on one of the first days of March that Aurore had the surprise of her life. André, in the course of his visit, announced to her the early arrival of her father at Nevers.

"He will be safer here," he explained, in response to Aurore's little cry, half of joy and half of alarm. "The people in the villages suffered terrible privations during the protracted winter, and tempers over there are none too placid in consequence. Some few hotheads might engineer a regrettable coup."

"But—"

"But what?"

"This will not entail any unpleasantness?" she suggested tentatively.

"Unpleasantness?"

"For you, I mean, or—"

"No, why should it?"

"Or danger?"

"Danger? For him? Certainly not. He will be much safer here."

"I didn't mean for him."

"For you, then?"

"Of course not!" she retorted, and then added with a shrug, "As if I mattered."

"Then I don't understand what you do mean by danger. Danger to whom?"

"To you."

He said nothing for a moment or two, but she felt that those searching eyes of his were seeking to find some hidden thought, some unexplainable motive in those two words which she had murmured below her breath. After a few seconds' silence he gave a light shrug and said drily:

"I can but echo your own words — as if I mattered!"

He turned to go out of the room. Involuntarily she called out:

"André!"

The first time, the very first time that she had called to him by name. He paused at the door with his hand already on the knob and half turned to her:

"At your service, citizeness."

His voice was quite harsh and his tone cold, so cold that the impulse which had made her call to him seemed frozen suddenly into a kind of miserable shyness. He was not the sort of man to whom one could offer sympathy or comfort. Nevertheless, Aurore was conscious of an intense pity for her husband. All of a sudden he appeared to her so lonely! Introspective, too, probably through being so very much alone. And young, scarcely older than herself, and with all his hours spent amid the afflicted, the blind, the deaf and dumb, the miserable poor! In constant contact with everything that was most wretched and most squalid!

And with all his ideals of a regenerated world lying shattered around him! Lonely and disappointed! And she, his wife, could do nothing to comfort or cheer him. When she tried to find the right words with which to touch his heart, she was stupid and tongue-tied. Even now, when she felt so desperately sorry and so deeply grateful, she could not find those words which perhaps might have brought a faint gleam of pleasure to his eyes.

All she could do now was to murmur a few words that were quite unintelligible and apparently failed to reach him. She made a great effort to control herself and her voice and finally contrived to say fairly steadily:

"I only wished to ask you about the arrangements for my father. When does he come?"

"To-morrow," he replied equally steadily, "by carriage. I have secured a nice apartment for him close by here in the Rue de la Monnaie. Pierre will drive him over, and he and Jeannette will look after him as they have done all along at Marigny."

"You are very kind," Aurore murmured. "I wish—" she paused and then went on more glibly "—I wish I could show you in some way that I — that I am not ungrateful."

"There is no question of gratitude," he said drily. "I made you a promise that while you are my wife your father's safety would be my care. I am trying to keep my promise, that is all."

"You are ungracious," she rejoined. "Does not the English poet say that 'Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind'?"

"I would not for the worlds have you think me unkind."

"Then tell me."

"What?"

"How I can best repay you for the trouble my father has been to you."

"I assure you—"

"André," she insisted, "please!"

Again his name on her lips. Once upon a time she had hit at him with a moral whip lash and she had also struck him in the face. Neither morally nor physically had she hurt him then, and he had not even winced at the time. Then why, at sound of his name on her lips, did that frown appear upon his brow as if he were trying to keep back something, to control some movement — or was it words? — while an unmistakable look of pain crept into his eyes? Only for an instant, though. Within the space of a second the look of pain as well as the frown had vanished, and there was that mocking smile — that hateful, hateful mocking smile which she so dreaded, curling again around his lips.

"Since you desire it, citizeness," he said drily, "I will tell you that you would earn my deep gratitude if you refrained from listening too patiently to your father's diatribes on the present political situation. Believe me, we all know it to be terrible. But words won't mend it, not just yet. Your father very naturally hates me, he will—"

“I shouldn’t allow him-” she broke in hotly, and then paused, her impulse once more checked by that miserable, unexplainable shyness. He put up his hand as if to deprecate anything else that she might say.

“And now,” he said, “I am more than repaid.”

He went out of the room, and she was left standing there with a big, big ache in her heart, an ache that she could not very well account for, but it forced tears up to her eyes. Tears of anxiety? Of pity? Of regret? She did not know. She only knew that she was desperately miserable and that not even the prospect of seeing her father again so soon had the power to console her.

But had her eyes been gifted with the power to see through material objects she would have made her own heartache seem light and easy to bear. She would have seen a man, strong of will and of iron purpose, broken down by the force of a passion he could no longer control. Gone were resentment and bitterness, pride was torn to shreds. Here was just a man madly — passionately in love. Slowly he fell on his knees; his arm rested against the door; his face was buried in the crook of his arm; and a mighty sigh came from the overburdened heart and broke in a convulsive sob.

Chapter XXXVI

Charles de Marigny arrived the following afternoon. Aurore had been full of eager joy to see him. All morning she had been busy in the apartment of the Rue de la Monnaie, putting it to rights, making it look as comfortable and as gay as she could. The house was at the end of the street, and the windows of the parlour commanded a beautiful view over the Grande Place, the Ducal Palace, and the river beyond. The room was flooded with sunshine.

After an exceptionally severe winter the spring had come in early, with warm days and an absence of cold winds. The shrubs in the gardens of the Palace were covered with tender green. Lilac, syringa, and jasmine were in bud. Aurore went about her task humming the old chansons:

“Il était une Bergère, et ron — et ron, petit Pataplon!”

and

“Nuage, beau Nuage, qui passe Triomphant!”

She couldn't sit still. At every sound of wheels or clatter of hoofs she ran to the window to see if the carriage was in sight.

But at sight of her father her high spirits quickly sank. Looking down on him from the window, as he got out of the carriage, he appeared to her to be years older. She ran down, and he embraced her with passionate effusion, but the very next moment he pushed her away from him as if the sight of her horrified him. He followed her upstairs, however, leaving Pierre and Jeannette to deal with the carriage and luggage. He did not so much as give a glance round the sunlit room, but threw himself into a chair like a man wearied to death. He had not yet uttered a single word.

Aurore came and knelt down beside him. She would not admit to herself how appalled and disappointed she was. She, who had been the apple of her father's eye, felt as if he were a stranger to her, a stranger whom she almost feared. Her anxious glance searched the face that she had loved so dearly, vainly seeking for that expression of almost passionate tenderness wherewith he had been wont to regard her. But now there was a kind of fierce glitter in his eyes which would suddenly die down and give place to a dull, vacant stare. Aurore felt intensely sorry for him, for his face betrayed the suffering which he must have endured throughout this long autumn and winter, brooding over his wrongs, all alone up at Marigny, and seeing the horrors and the outrage of this terrible revolution pass like a nightmare before his eyes.

He said very little that first afternoon, and never once touched upon his daughter's marriage or asked either after her husband or the kind friends in whose house she was staying.

But the next day he appeared more loquacious, was apparently happy at the thought that he would no longer be parted from his darling little Aurore, and fell in with all her plans for spending as much time together as possible. They would drive out into the country, or go up the river, and they would spend long evenings together, talking over old times.

He spoke quite rationally, but Aurore could not help noticing that his movements were jerky and that while he talked his hands kept on shaking and his fingers fidgeting with anything that was handy. And suddenly he mentioned André Vallon by name, quite dispassionately at first. Aurore was at her favourite place on a low stool beside his chair, with one arm over his knees. He took hold of her hand, and she noticed that his was burning hot. Carefully, insidiously, he invited her confidence.

“Tell me, my little Aurore,” he said, and his tone was gentle and soothing. “Don't be afraid to tell me how unhappy you are. I know you are unhappy, my beloved child, but our troubles always seem less, you know, when we tell of them to a sympathetic ear.”

“When you were little,” he went on, as Aurore made some evasive reply, “I was your mother as well as your father. You used to tell me everything — all your childish troubles. Tell me your troubles now, my darling. Tell me everything. That cruel, inhuman beast! I'd like to know to what lengths his brutality could go.”

And as Aurore still continued to parry his direct questions he put down her reticence to the desire to spare him pain. His tone became more insinuating still, and a look of deep cunning came into his eyes. He leaned forward in his chair till his mouth nearly touched her ear.

“I'll rid you of him, my little Aurore,” he whispered. “I have thought it all out. That's why I consented to come to this miserable hole. You trust me. I know! I know just what to do. You needn't tell me anything. I can guess. The brute! The beggarly knave! I know! But I'll rid you of him. Never fear!”

Aurore did all she could to soothe him, but, in spite of herself, her heart was filled with a great and nameless dread. There was something dangerous in the fanaticism of her father's hatred, and although the Mignets and André himself did all they could to reassure her, she had the growing conviction that there was method in her father's apparent madness. He took to roaming about the streets for hours at a time, and Jeannette told Aurore that when he returned he usually brought back with him a lot of news sheets over which he pored and pondered for the rest of the day. Jeannette and Pierre both said that Monseigneur slept very little; they heard him pacing up and down the room half the night through and muttering to himself. Aurore questioned the two faithful souls as to what Monseigneur said when he muttered like that, but it seemed that those mutterings were mostly unintelligible; the only words they ever heard clearly were: “Quite simple — quite easy! That is what I must do,” which certainly did not tend to reassure Aurore.

One day, when she came to see the old man, Jeannette told her that he had just gone out, but had spent all morning poring over some news sheets. One in particular he had been intent on for more than an hour, Jeannette said; it was still lying on the table beside his chair. Aurore went into the parlour and had a look at the news sheet. It was an old number of the *Moniteur*, bearing a date in September of last year. It contained the full text of Merlin's abominable “Loi Relatif aux Gens Suspects.” The Law of the Suspect! Obviously, De Marigny had been perusing it; the page with the text lay uppermost; there were notes in the margin in his handwriting. Certain passages were underlined; for instance:

Art I: Immediately after the publication of this Decree, all suspected persons on the territory of the Republic who are still at large will be arrested.

And below that there was:

Are reputed suspect I: Those who, either by their conduct or by their relations with former tyrants or aristos.

And the last have dozen words were underlined.

Chapter XXXVII

At what precise moment the first dart of a horrible suspicion entered her heart Aurore did not know. All she realized was that an awful danger threatened her husband at the hands of her father.

The horror of such a thing!

She knew, as did everyone these days, that one denunciation, even if it came from an irresponsible person, was often sufficient to bring about the arrest of a fellow creature — arrest which almost invariably was the precursor of death! And with her mind fixed upon this fact she recalled her father's wild rambling words: "I'll rid you of him.... I know what to do.... Quite simple.... That is what I must do...."

Quite simple!

Now Aurore's mind worked more quickly. Something had to be done, and done at once. But what? Firstly, where was the unfortunate madman now? Had he already set out on his proposed trail of treachery and crime? Aurore called to Jeannette and to Pierre. She questioned them and questioned them. Where was Monseigneur? They did not know. Where did he go when he went out aimlessly like this? Just about the streets, sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another. He was fond of the river bank. The river! Great God in heaven! For one moment Aurore caught herself almost hoping that he had courted the river in a mad desire to put an end to all his misery. Almost hoping! Heavens above! was she going mad, too? She was, unless she could get a more definite idea of whither her father had gone. But for the moment, since they knew nothing, Pierre and Jeannette must go back to their work. She, Aurore, wished to be left alone to think, to find out something — something!

She looked about her in the small sunlit parlour, feeling helpless and her soul in darkness. She beat her hands together in a wild longing for inspiration. What about money? Had he taken any with him? Aurore knew where he kept it — in the drawer of the small *escritoire*. She had often seen him take out a livre or two to give to Jeannette. Now she went to look. The pocketbook that was usually in the drawer was no longer there. There were two packets instead. One was addressed to Pierre and obviously contained money, paper and coins. The other was addressed "To my little Aurore." She opened it. There was a letter written in his familiar careful hand.

My Darling Little One [it said]:

I promised you that I would rid you of the inhuman monster who has blighted your young life, and I am going to do it. By the time you get this I shall be on my way to Paris. That arch-rogue Talon, who is as useful fortunately as he is servile, has made all necessary arrangements. His wife has relatives in Paris, and I shall stay with them. For the first time in my life I shall accept hospitality in a plebeian house, but I have no alternative. What I want to do can only be done in Paris, but there it can be done quickly. Do not try and find out what I am about to do or how. Wait patiently for a further letter from me. Talon will bring it you. I may be caught in my own toils, but I care not so long as I have made you happy and free.

Your devoted Father.

Aurore read the terrible lucubration until the end. Then she refolded the letter and slipped it in the bosom of her gown. She had no doubt now as to what she meant to do, but she wouldn't leave anything to chance. So she hunted through the drawer again and through the whole of the *escritoire* for some written trace of Hector Talon, that awful, miserable, obsequious Talon! So it was he who was at the bottom of this abominable treachery! Aurore hunted for a letter, a sign of him, as a careful gardener would hunt for the trail of the slug that had impaired his plants. But she found nothing. Talon was a man — no, a worm — who worked underground in the darkness and left no trace of his slimy way.

Then Aurore once more questioned Jeannette and Pierre. Had they seen — did they know anything of Hector Talon? And she wrung the truth out of them, poor miserable wretches! Talon had been in Nevers two days. He had visited Monseigneur. He had bribed them to say nothing to Mademoiselle of these visits. He had been here early this morning, and he and Monseigneur then went out together, Talon carrying a small valise which Pierre had packed with a few necessities at Monseigneur's orders.

And then Aurore saw red. She felt like a tigress in a fury, would gladly with her two feeble hands have seized those two fools by the throat. They had taken money, money to hold their tongue, while Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny, who bore one of the greatest names in France, and was own cousin to her martyred king, accomplished the vilest act of treachery that had ever disgraced a *canaille*.

But what was the good of fury, what the good of vituperations, now that the crime was on the point of accomplishment? One fact she did wring out of the trembling lips of Pierre. Lucile Talon's relatives lived in No. 67 of the Rue St. Honoré. Well, that, at any rate, was something. Aurore knew now where she could find her father.

She was half-dazed when she reached the Mignets' house. Without circumlocution, straight to the point, she told them what had happened.

"I must go to Paris," she concluded calmly, "at once. How can I do it?"

"My dear child," the old lady protested, "you cannot go to Paris like this, all in a moment."

"I have my papers, money, everything," she said. "Help me to find a conveyance, as the diligence does not leave till next week."

"But what can you do, child?"

"Warn my husband before it is too late."

To every protest, every objection she gave the same reply: "I must go to my husband before it is too late."

And then she said at last, "If you will not help me I will find a way somehow, but I am going before the day is out."

Help her? Of course they would help her! Were they not the kindest people on God's earth, and was not André Vallon the beloved friend of their heart? Doctor Mignet would, of course, accompany Aurore as far as Paris, and while she went to put a few things together he set out to find coach and horses which would take them as far as Auxerre, where they could pick up another conveyance to take them on to Melun and to Paris. That was probably the route chosen by Talon for Monseigneur, and Aurore would be close on her father's heels.

Chapter XXXVIII

To anyone returning to Paris in this awful year 1794, after an absence of several months, the aspect of the once gay and lovely city must have been appalling. Streets half deserted; furtive, ill clad figures slouching about the open places; aspects of dire poverty in a blatant contrast with brilliantly lighted restaurants or theatre porticoes; sounds of strident laughter alternating with heart-rending moans. Laughter and tears, and words scarcely whispered lest they be overheard.

This great, this sublime revolution which was to bring universal freedom and universal happiness, how immense has been its toll of misery and of crime! Penury is terrible; certain necessities like soap and sugar are hardly obtainable. Bread is more and more scarce; the queues outside the bakeries line up during the small hours of the morning and last all day.

The wolves of the Revolution are busy tearing one another to pieces. After the Girondins, the Dantonists. Danton, the great Georges Danton, the lion of the Revolution, who for five years has held the snarling, screaming pack on the leash, has atoned for his weaknesses as well as for his crimes, on the insatiable guillotine. Too weak to stem the flood which he himself had let loose, he perished as he had allowed others to perish — his king, his queen, his comrades, his friends. Too weak! The great, the virile Danton, with the resonant voice and tempestuous eloquence, too weak to combat his cunning, slimy adversary, the Sea-green Incorruptible with the ascetic face and the pale eyes! Then what chance had others against the all powerful dictator who with one word hissed through his thin lips could send any adversary without trial to the scaffold?

It was a month and more since the Dantonists had perished on the guillotine, and Maximilien Robespierre was sovereign master of France.

Aurore, sitting inside the diligence which had brought her and the Doctor over from Melun, had no eyes for outward things. Whether Paris was changed or not since last she had been in the city, whether the streets looked dismal and the restaurants lively, she neither knew nor cared. It was a lovely day in May: the chestnut trees in the Tuileries gardens were full of blossom; the sun shone and the sky was blue; but Aurore saw nothing of these beauties of nature. Now that the time was so near when she would see her husband her febrile impatience was such that it was only by a mighty effort of will that she was able to sit still in the crowded coach and not allow her fellow passengers to become aware of the state of her nerves. They might have thought her demented. Doctor Mignet sat beside her and now and then gave her hand a slight pressure, which comforted her for the moment.

At last the lumbering coach came to a halt at the Cheval Blanc, the posting inn close to the Pont Neuf. The Quai de la Ferraille was quite close. Aurore elected to walk while Doctor Mignet would look after the luggage. He announced his intention of putting up at the Cheval Blanc, if he could get a room.

"I shall be within five minutes' walk," he said kindly, "so you can call on me, my dear, whenever you want me."

It was then three o'clock in the afternoon. The usual crowd swarmed round the Palace of Justice, waiting to see the prisoners being hustled out after their condemnation, or the well known advocates or members of the Convention sally forth after the grim work of the day was done.

Aurore paid no heed to anything round her; wrapped in her travelling cape with the hood pulled over her head she walked rapidly, looking neither to right nor left. But suddenly the crowd surged along the bridge, and she found herself hustled and pressed against the parapet: a couple of tumbrils surrounded by men in uniform were forging their way through the throng. They were the prisoners who had just stood the mockery of a trial and were being taken back to La Force or the Temple for their final toilette before their ultimate journey to the guillotine. A few tatterdemalions in the crowd shouted: "A la guillotine!" Others hurled insults at the prisoners, but the bulk of the people looked on with a kind of stolid indifference, showing neither joy nor horror.

Aurore, pressed against the parapet, saw the tumbrils pass along quite close to her; she saw the prisoners standing with hands tied behind their backs; and suddenly the full force of the horror which she saw reached her consciousness. She searched those faces in the tumbrils, realizing for the first time that perhaps she had come too late and that André might be standing there in the tumbril — standing there on his way to death.

When the tumbrils had passed and the crowd drifted away in their wake she remained for a long time there, leaning against the balustrade with eyes blind to everything save to the vision that had just passed by, and lips parted by the cries of horror which she had been at such pains to repress. André had not been one of those poor wretches that were being dragged through the streets of Paris for the delectation of the mob: but the vision of that ghastly exhibition had conjured up the possibility of another, so awful, so terrible, so infernal that Aurore was left wondering if she was not indeed going the way of her father and losing her reason at the foresight.

After a little while she recovered herself, and without glancing to right or left she hurried along the quay. Soon she reached the house wherein she had spent the first few months of her married life! What peace there seemed to be in it! Aurore felt it almost as soon as she passed under the porte-cochère and made her way up the familiar stone staircase. She rang the bell of the apartment as she had done so often in the past, and the same pleasant middle-aged woman opened the door to her.

The woman's eyes looked ready to fall out of her head at sight of Aurore.

"But, citizeness..." she exclaimed, and clasped her hand together in amazement.

"Citizen Vallon? Is he in?" Aurore almost gasped, and staggered into the vestibule.

The semi darkness indoors after the dazzling sunshine of the street dazed her and made her feel as if she were blind. The woman ran to her and put her arms round her.

"You are ill, citizeness," she murmured. "What can I get you?"

Aurore shook her head: "Nothing!... I am not ill.... Where is Citizen Vallon?"

"At the Blind School, citizeness. He does not usually come home before evening."

"You expect him home, then?"

"But of course, citizeness."

The woman, with gentle solitude, relieved Aurore of the heavy travelling cape. She was obviously puzzled and not a little frightened, but tried to speak as unconcerned as she could.

“We were not expecting you, citizeness,” she said: “at least the Citizen said nothing to me.”

“No,” Aurore replied more calmly: “he does not expect me. I came with Doctor Mignet.”

The woman opened the parlour door. How inviting it looked! The bright sunny room with the muslin curtains, the armchair and her own work table beside the window; the books, the footstool, the chessmen ranged on the board. Aurore’s tired eyes roamed round the room and, in spite of the agony of dread which was gnawing at her heart, an infinite peace seemed to descend on her soul. With a weary little sigh she sank into the armchair, and a wan smile lit up her face in response to the woman’s anxious, puzzled gaze.

“What would you like, citizeness?” the woman asked, a little reassured. “A glass of wine, or some hot coffee?”

“Coffee, please, Marie. Some of that lovely coffee you used to make for my breakfast.”

“It won’t be quite so nice now, citizeness,” Marie said with a sigh; “and we have no milk.”

“Whatever it is, Marie, I shall love it,” Aurore assured her. The woman went away, and she snuggled down into the big chair. How lovely and peaceful it was! The quay below was half deserted; hardly a sound came to disturb the quietude of this serene abode. Leaning her head against the back of the chair Aurore felt a flood of tears rise to her eyes — tears that were not wholly of sorrow.

She drank eagerly the coffee which Marie presently brought her. After which the kind woman persuaded her to lie down on the sofa and saw her comfortably settled with a couple of pillows under her head. Poor little Aurore! She was so tired, so infinitely weary! Physically and mentally weary. Her limbs ached, and her head. And she had a great big heartache.

And lying there snugly against the pillows she presently fell asleep.

Chapter XXXIX

The sound of the door and a murmur of voices roused Aurore from sleep.

The next moment André came into the room. She sat up on the sofa, her hands clasped tightly together, her fair hair slightly tousled, and her cheeks flushed after sleep. The shades of evening were drawing in, and the rosy light of sunset had crept into the room. André, at the door, had not yet moved. He was looking his fill on the exquisite vision which had transformed this simple room into a mansion of paradise.

At last he asked the obvious questions:

"Why are you here? Has anything happened?"

"Yes, André," she replied, "a very great deal has happened. My father, poor wretch, has completely lost his reason!"

"Heavens above!"

"No," she said, "I don't mean in that way, though I do think Doctor Mignet would actually pronounce him mad."

She paused a moment. Her throat felt so dry that she could hardly speak. There were a carafe and a glass on the side table. André filled the glass with water and brought it to her. While she drank he stood beside her, and when she was about to put the glass down he took it from her, and his hand touched her fingers, which were trembling and cold.

"You are overwrought," he said gently. "Don't try and talk now. I will call Marie and she-"

"No! no!" she broke in quickly. "I don't want anyone. I am only tired from the journey, and I must tell you-"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Spurred by his insane hatred against you, my father has denounced you-"

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know: I know it. I swear to you that it is so. One day I will tell you just how I found out, but not now. There is no time. I came to warn you before — before-"

"You came to warn me?" he asked, frowning, evidently puzzled.

"Yes."

"Why?"

They looked at each other, he uncomprehending, not daring to comprehend, and she, seized with that awful shyness which almost paralyzed her will and her tongue.

"Why?" he insisted, but this time he came nearer her, and his voice was hoarse and broken like that of a man gasping for breath.

"Because," she murmured, "because-"

It was her eyes that answered him. Her lips refused her service.

"Because you cared?"

Was there ever a cry uttered by man more exultant than this which rose like a paean of joy from André Vallon's throat? In a moment he was beside her on one knee, not daring to touch her yet, but with ardent, passionate gaze trying to read the secret of her soul.

"Because you cared?" he insisted. "Tell me."

"André!"

"Because you cared what became of me? Say it! Say it! Say the word, ma mie! Tell me that you came," he entreated, "because you cared."

How could she speak? The whole world, the sordid, ugly world, lay suddenly shattered at her feet, and in the gaze that sought and held her own she had a glimpse of such a vision of Elysian fields as human mind could scarcely conceive. She returned his gaze and her eyes, which had always seemed unfathomable, revealed to him the secret which she had thought would remain forever buried in her heart. It was Love that had spurred her to come. Love that had so often made her heart ache almost to breaking point. Love! and the longing to feel once more that dear strong arm around her, to pillow her head against that loyal breast, to hear that great and simple heart beat only for her. He loved her, and she did not know it! And now that the heavenly knowledge had come to her at last it came hand-in-hand with the agonizing dread for his life.

"André!" she said suddenly, all the joy in her heart smothered in this awful dread, "you must leave Paris at once."

He did not seem to hear. He had had his answer from her eyes, and his soul was no longer on this earth. It had gone a-roaming in paradise.

"You came," he murmured, "because you cared."

But, womanlike, she thought only of him, of the terrible danger which every minute as it sped by brought nearer and nearer to their door.

"You don't understand, André," she insisted. "My father is in Paris. It was only after he left that I suspected-"

"And then you came because you cared."

"André, at this very hour, perhaps-"

"At this very hour I am adoring you, Aurore-"

"There's time to get away," she entreated feverishly.

"And I want eternity in which to tell you how I worship you-"

"In God's name, André!" she cried. "It may mean death if you stay-"

But his hand was buried in her hair and forced her dear head closer and closer to him.

"My exquisite Aurore!" he whispered in her ear, "you are the most perfect being God ever made. I was a fool not to tell you this before, but I will not die, Dawn of my Soul, before I have taught you how good it is to love, how sweet it is to kiss."

He held her so close that she could no longer struggle. His lips were on hers, and she could no longer warn, and he asked the great, the immortal question which lovers have asked since the beginning of time, and the answer to which will open for them the gates either of paradise or of hell.

“Do you love me, my wife?”

And Aurore’s eyes and lips answered softly, “Yes.”

Chapter XL

The hours flew by on the wings of an overwhelming happiness, and Love reigned supreme while evening faded into night. The awakening came when the two lovers scarce had finished dreaming. The tramp of feet on the stairs, the knock on the door, the raucous call: "Open in the name of the Law!"

It was quite dark in the room now — quite dark, only through the chink under the door there came a narrow streak of light from the candle which Marie had put on the table of the vestibule, and through the thin muslin curtains over the window the pale flicker of the street lamp cast the objects in the room into deeper gloom.

"Open, in the name of the Law!"

And Aurore, waking from her dream of happiness and love, was suddenly thrust out of the gates of her paradise and hurled back into the hideous world of grim reality. In a moment she was on her feet and across the room. Like a statue of despair she stood against the door with arms outstretched and head thrown back — a statue of despair but also of fury — a woman in defence of her lover.

"Come and kiss me, Aurore!" came a happy voice, broken with yearning, and in the gloom the arm she loved was stretched out in longing to her.

She babbled hoarsely, incoherently, like one half demented:

"You must fly, André! you must... you must... for my sake... there's time... through the window in the next room. The back yard... no one will see you... André... André... you must!"

"Come to me, Aurore... one more kiss," he said slowly; "ten more if there's time..."

"But they are here," she insisted. "André, can't you hear?"

Just then there was a timid knock at the door, and Marie's trembling voice called aghast: "In the name of God, Citizen Vallon, tell me what to do."

"Why, open the door, Marie," André replied quietly, "else they will break it open."

Then, as Marie's hesitating footsteps were heard shuffling across the vestibule, he murmured softly:

"There's time for one more kiss.... Come to me, Aurore."

Obviously she could not move. Horror, despair, had paralyzed her will and her limbs. The woman defending her lover! how could she move from that door, from that thin, futile barrier, the only thing that stood between her lover and death? The next instant André was beside her; she felt again that dear, strong arm around her, her head once more lay upon his breast, she felt the beating of that heart which she knew now was filled with her image. His lips eagerly devoured her eyes, her throat, her hair, and then in one long, impassioned kiss their lips met once more in enduring, all-conquering immutable love.

Outside in the vestibule there was bustle and noise and tramping of feet; hoarse commands and a murmur of voices, and Marie's wailing sobs. Then a knock at the door. A terrible cry rose to Aurore's throat, but it was smothered before it reached her lips, for André's hand was across her mouth.

"Open, in the name of the Law!"

"Three minutes, Citizen Soldiers," André replied glibly, "while I get a light."

And Aurore, clinging to him with convulsive hands, her face bathed in tears, her voice broken with sobs, whispered hoarsely:

"Kill me, André!... For mercy's sake kill me... I cannot live without your love."

"Look at me, sweet, and listen," he murmured hurriedly; and obediently she opened her eyes and looked up at him.

It was quite dark in the room, quite dark; but the feeble light of the street lamp faintly illuminated his face, and she could see that it was irradiated with a wonderful happiness.

"What you want now, my sweet," he said more slowly, "is courage."

"I have none, André," she murmured feebly.

"You will have when you remember that God in His mercy will give you someone else to care for, perhaps, instead of me."

"Someone else? I don't understand."

He pressed his lips close to her ear and whispered a few words very low, so that she could scarcely hear, but which brought a rush of colour to her pale cheeks. Then he looked once more into her eyes and smiled: the happiest, lightest of smiles.

"And if it is a boy," he said earnestly, but still with that happy smile, "do not teach him to hate all those Frenchmen who were his father's friends, with whom he dreamed dreams of making this old world new and happy, and who died for their ideals because they were men and not gods."

He raised her gently from the ground as he had so often done before, carried her into the next room, and there laid her down on the bed. She had partly lost consciousness, but her arms were twined round his neck, and her fingers so tightly linked together that he had some difficulty in getting them apart. She lay very still, but her eyes were open and her lips parted; her body was shaken with heart-rending sobs. He knelt down beside the bed and kissed her once more on the lips, drank the salt tears that lay upon her cheek; he kissed her ice-cold hands, her throat, her feet above the shoe, then slowly rose and went out of the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

She gave one terrific cry: "André!" and jumped up from the bed, her senses alert; she ran to the door — it was locked; with her hands she beat against the panels, she fell on her knees, clinging to that cruel door which hid him from her view, and calling, calling insistently, piteously, like a bird that has lost its mate. And all the while she heard the murmurs of voices, André's calm response: "Quite ready, Citizen Captain." A loud cry from Marie. The opening and shutting of the front door; the tramp of feet slowly... slowly... slowly dying away down the stairs.

And then — nothing more.

Marie coming in a few moments later found her in a dead swoon across the floor.

Book IV

Chapter XLI

She became known as “Our Little Lady of Sorrows” — Notre Petite Dames des Douleurs.

She could be seen daily wending her way from the Quai de la Ferraille to the Palais de Justice in the early morning, waiting in the queue until the gates were opened, and thereafter taking her place in the vast hall, always in the front row of the balcony that faced the prisoners at the bar. At first the other habitués of the grim spectacle looked on her as one of themselves, fond, as they were, of watching the prisoners file in, seeing them take their place on the benches facing the judges, with the chief prisoner in the iron armchair in the immediate centre. Women in ragged shawls and tattered kirtles, with dishevelled hair under soiled lace caps, or scarlet berets, who had brought their knitting with them to while away the waiting hours, would nudge Aurore when a well known name was called out or if they recognized a noted prisoner.

“That’s Amisal over there, citizenship, the third from the end. He tried to assassinate the patriot Collot in the Rue Favart, you remember? Lucky he missed fire, the brigand! Oh! and if it isn’t that young scrub Cécile Renaud! She was for murdering the Incorruptible himself. They found two knives in her market basket, you know. Well, her way to the guillotine is clear enough.”

But soon they found that she was not interested in their talk. She didn’t listen: she only looked. She had great eyes of a colour impossible to define, and wore a dark travelling cape with a hood over her fair hair. She would look and look while the batch of prisoners filed in, but as soon as they were seated and the Prosecutor Tinville began his indictment, she would lean back in her seat and take no more notice of what went on in the hall below.

Until another batch was called, when she would sit up and again look on each face as the prisoners filed in. She never spoke and she never cried, but she looked so sad that a woman one day, seeing her come in rather later than usual, made a place for her by squeezing her fellow spectators and said at the same time, “Here comes the Little Lady of Sorrows. Come and sit by me, my dear. You’ll get a splendid view, better than the one you had yesterday.”

And so the name stuck to her. And she came, day after day, to the Palais de Justice to watch the prisoners file into the hall, there to receive their sentence of death. There was no alternative. The very fact of being suspected of treason, of being denounced by an enemy or a fool, of being brought to the bar of this travesty of justice, was tantamount to a sentence of death. And Aurore came, day after day, to watch this grim spectacle, because she could not find out to what prison they had taken André and could find no other way of knowing what became of him. The prisons were crowded, the jailers overworked and harassed. Vainly had she tried to get sight of the list of prisoners in every House of Detention in and around Paris.

“We’ve no orders,” was the response she invariably got from the concierge or the captain in command. “Get an order from the Committee, and you can see the list.”

“What Committee?” she would ask insistently. “And how can I get such an order?”

“Bah! Leave me in peace!” the man — whoever it was — would reply with a savage oath. “You don’t think you are the only female who comes bothering us in this way, do you? If I had to attend to all of you-”

He would then turn his back on Aurore and have her ejected from the room and the door slammed in her face. The rules governing prison discipline had become very severe of late. The visits from outside, which used to be allowed and were a great feature of prison life in the past, were now strictly forbidden. The government had persuaded itself that plots of all sorts were being hatched in the Houses of Detention, and prisoners, in consequence, were not allowed to see anyone. Thus frustrated at every turn, Aurore took to haunting the Palais de Justice. There, at last, she would be bound to see André when he was brought to trial. She would see him when that awful tumbril took him to his death.

She had no hope. None. Though she held but little communication with anyone except, of course, Marie, she could not help knowing that the fate of every prisoner these days was a foregone conclusion. It was only a question of time. Some languished weeks in prison, others even months, some few were hurried through the ghastly process of arrest, trial, condemnation, and death in a few days. Aurore knew that and watched in the Palais de Justice every day.

She had written him a letter, just a few words in which she had poured out her every soul. They were words which, she knew, would give happiness to his heart and bring a smile to his dear lips. This precious paper she inserted in a heavy gold locket which she always held tightly in her hand ready to fling it to him if such a blessed opportunity arose.

May had long since yielded to June. June passed on, serene and warm, with its wealth of blossom in the gardens and a bird song in the summer air. All nature seemed to smile while men hated and destroyed one another and dared to mock God with their horrible Mumbo-Jumbo, the feast of the Supreme Being, with the arch-murderer, Robespierre, parading in azure-blue coat and white breeches as the arch-priest of the new deity.

That was on the 8th of June, less than a fortnight after André’s arrest. Doctor Mignet, who had been with Aurore during the first few days of her misery and had attempted the impossible in trying to find out whether they had taken André, had been obliged to return to his duties in Nevers. She hardly noticed his absence. Her heart was dead to all save to an infinity of grief.

It was in the early days of June that she saw her father again. She was walking across the Pont des Arts when suddenly she found herself face to face with Hector Talon. She thought nothing of the meeting at the moment; indeed, she hoped that he had not recognized her. But what he did was to halt for a minute or two as soon as she had passed by and then to follow her.

The next afternoon, when she came home from her daily pilgrimage, she found Marie bursting with what she thought was gladsome news.

“An elderly gentleman has come to see you, citizenship,” she said mysteriously. “He is waiting in the parlour.”

“Oh, Marie!” Aurore exclaimed involuntarily. “You shouldn’t have-”

“Not admitted him!” Marie retorted with the easy familiarity of her kind. “But it’s your father, citizenship, your dear old father!”

Aurore listened no further. With a heavy heart she went through into the parlour and saw her father sitting there on the end of the sofa close to the window, the sofa beside which André had knelt that late afternoon when first he had told her of his love. It seemed

like a supreme insult, this old man sitting just there complacently gazing out of the window. When she entered he put out his arms and exclaimed with joy and tenderness:

"My little Aurore! At last! At last!"

She had not moved from the door. At sight of him her gorge rose in horror. What kind of a miscreated daughter was she that she should hate her own father? Would she, at least, have sufficient will power not to allow the full flood of her loathing to surge out of her overburdened heart? He, on the other hand, did not appear conscious of her enmity. As she did not rush into his arms he let them drop and went on talking in a glib, matter-of-fact way:

"You have no idea, *ma chérie*," he said, "how anxious I have been. I suppose your letter in answer to mine miscarried. I never received it, you know."

"What letter?" she asked.

"I wrote to tell you the joyful news. You never replied. But it was a good idea to come yourself instead."

"What joyful news?"

"Why, that I have fulfilled my promise, *ma chérie*, to rid you of the inhuman monster who had blighted your life."

"You mean that you wrote to tell me that you had committed the most loathsome act of treachery that ever called down the vengeance of God on a miscreant's head."

Even now he looked surprised, bewildered at her vehemence, thinking that his beloved daughter, like so many women in these terrible times, had perchance lost her reason.

"Aurore, my child!" he exclaimed soothingly.

"I am not your child!" she retorted coldly, "no longer the child of so vile a worker of iniquity as you. You have brought upon me such immeasurable sorrow as no man has ever brought on woman since the beginning of time. The very sight of you turns my heart to stone, and I can but pray to God that I may never set eyes on you again. And now, I entreat you to go before I quite forget that you are old and that you are my father."

She threw open the door and stood aside, pointing to it. De Marigny tried to speak. He rose and came a step or two towards her.

"Do not come near me," she said hoarsely. "My God! Can't you see that I am at the end of my tether?"

"You are overwrought, Aurore," he rejoined coolly. "Heaven knows what is going on in your poor distracted mind at this moment. You have spoken words that I shall find hard to forgive, but a father's heart is full of indulgence. I cannot, of course, stay now and plead with you, for the devil apparently has possession of your mind. It will take all our good Abbé's piety to exorcize him."

Marie was hovering in the vestibule. She looked scared to death as De Marigny came out of the parlour and took up his hat and stick.

"Has she been long like this?" he asked her, indicating Aurore and then touching his forehead.

Marie was indignant.

"There is nothing wrong with the Citizeness's brain," she said hotly. "It is her heart that is broken because she worshipped her husband, and he is like to perish on that awful guillotine."

De Marigny shrugged. How ignorant, how unobservant were people of that class! He looked back once over his shoulder. Aurore had not moved. The hood had fallen back from her head, and her delicate profile, with the wealth of fair hair above it like a golden aureole, looked like an exquisite cameo against the dark portière. She looked a living statue of high breeding, of blue blood and age-old descent — the perfect aristocrat. De Marigny shrugged again. Worshipped her husband, indeed? What nonsense! What a lie! Her mind was slightly unhinged, he concluded, that was all. Once all these horrible times were over and he had her back at Marigny she would be the first to laugh at this woman's foolish talk. And he went away entirely unperturbed.

Chapter XLII

It was on the 26th of July that the last blow fell. Aurore sitting at her accustomed place in the Hall of the Palais de Justice saw the prisoners file in, and the first to enter was André.

Our Little Lady of Sorrows! She gave one gasp — a sob that rent her heart and caused even those deadened hearts around her to beat with sudden pity.

“Thou hast seen him, eh, my cabbage?” the woman next to her asked. “Which is he?”

Two or three of them put down their knitting. They were interested. They meant to be kind. Their hearts were dulled by all the miseries and the horrors which they had witnessed — dulled but not dead. Our Little Lady of Sorrows! They were very, very sorry for her! She was so pretty and so young! And she had been watching here day after day for well-nigh two months to catch a last glimpse of her man.

“Don’t try and point him out, my pigeon,” the woman went on softly; “only nod ‘yes’ if I guess right.”

The woman on the other side said:

“I believe it is that handsome fellow with the one arm. Well, it is a shame that such a fine soldier—”

“Hush, citizeness,” someone at the back broke in, “you are talking treason.”

That was so. No one was allowed to express pity for the prisoners at the bar, for such pity was a sign of counter-revolutionary tendencies and, as such, punishable by death. Even so, one woman said pointing to André: “He taught the blind to read and the dumb to speak. My daughter, who is blind—”

“Hush! Silence!” came from the rest of the crowd.

Our Little Lady of Sorrows sat and watched, her whole soul in her eyes. She saw André as the chief prisoner of the batch sitting in the iron chair immediately facing the judges. His face looked perfectly serene. He looked older, of course, and wan; prison life had no suited his vigorous temperament; but his dark eyes shone brightly, and around his mouth there was that mocking smile which Aurore had so dreaded once, but which since she had learned to love. Unlike his fellow prisoners André had obviously taken great pains with his appearance. He wore his old military tunic, which, though very worn and shabby, had been carefully brushed. He was neatly shaved, and his chestnut hair was tied back with a bow at the nape of his neck.

Our Little Lady of Sorrows watched him and marvelled that God in His mercy did not allow her heart to break. She listened to the indictment read by Prosecutor Tinville. She heard every lying word, every monstrous accusation. She listened and watched, drawing his soul to hers with the magnetism of her eyes. She threw back her hood so that he should see her better. And suddenly he looked up and saw her. Such a look of joy and happiness and love came into his face, as surely only shines on the faces of the blessed. Thereafter he looked neither to right nor left. Only at her. The Prosecutor finished his indictment, the advocate began to plead. Obviously André heard neither. Yet the advocate pleaded with fervour, even with passion. Even the crowd murmured approval at the defence, but what was the good? Prisoners were condemned long before they faced their judges. The advocate was silenced even in the very middle of his peroration, cut short when he was halfway through an eloquent sentence; and the prisoners were not allowed one word in their own defence.

They were all condemned in a body. Traitors all to the Republic! Conspirators against the State! The sentence was that they be guillotined. And that was all! The mock trial was at an end. They were ordered to rise and make way for others. Some of them screamed and wrung their hands; some called loudly to the people and to the Supreme Being to witness their innocence, some took the blow in sullen silence. But André took it with a gently mocking smile. It had to come, and he was prepared. Death these days was stalking every man: it was bound to be his turn one day, and he was prepared. From the hour when Robespierre and his horde of jackals had attacked Danton the Lion and brought him down, from that hour André, the child of this revolution, knew that he, too, would be its victim. For two months he had languished in prison waiting his turn for the only possible release and dreaming of that wonderful afternoon when first he knew that the woman he worshipped, worshipped him too. So happy, so entrancing had been those hours of supreme joy and love that he felt that Fate and he were quits. God had given him everything, every joy, every happiness, supreme contentment when He gave him this perfect mutual love. So what did anything else matter? Death would only mean a union more perfect — more enduring than anything that Life could give.

All this he tried to convey to Aurore with the last glance which he was able to cast on her. “Do not grieve, my beloved! The happiness which you gave me was too perfect for this earth, too perfect to last.”

Aurore watched him until he too disappeared down the stairs that led to the guardroom. Then quickly she rose. There was one more hope of seeing him, when that awful cart took him back to prison. She could follow the cart, she could see him again, she could throw him her last message of love in the gold locket which she always carried — perhaps, even, she could touch his hand. Hastily drawing the hood back over her head, she rose to go. The others made way for her, helped her all they could. They murmured sympathetic words as she stepped over the tribunes to find her way out:

“Our Little Lady of Sorrows! So young! So pretty!”

“And that handsome husband!”

“Ah, me!”

“Where will it all end?”

There was a great crowd outside the gates, greater than usual, Aurore thought, as feverishly she forged her way down the great staircase and into the courtyard. The carts were there, ranged in a file to the left of the gates which were wide open. The crowd was dense round the carts. One had just gone with its batch of condemned: the other was waiting by the postern gate. It was round this one that the crowd was thickest. Aurore, with the determination and courage of despair, pushed and struggled to get near. But it was impossible: she was jostled and elbowed out of the way until she found herself pressed against the iron railing, on the stone base of which some of the throng had scrambled to get a better view. The open gates were close by. From such a point of vantage it would be

possible to get a view of the prisoners in the cart over the heads of the crowd, and then, when the cart moved away, to slip out by the gate in its wake. Some kindly person helped Aurore to hoist herself up on the stone parapet.

There she stood and waited, all eyes, and with the locket grasped tightly in her hand. She heard the people about her talking.

"Those are the ones from the Blind Institution."

"And those from the School for the Deaf and Dumb."

They were pointing to a small group of men and women, two or three score of them, who were gathered close around the cart.

"One of the prisoners taught in those institutions."

"Citizen Vallon. I knew him. A nephew of mine is blind. Vallon did wonders with him."

"He taught the blind to see."

"And the deaf to hear."

"I suppose they have come to see the last of him."

"Poor creatures! What will become of them now?"

"Hush! Here they come!"

The prisoners were filing out of the building and were being hustled into the cart. There were eight of them, five men, three women. The men's coats were tied by the sleeves round their necks. All had their arms tied with cord behind their backs. André was the last to step into the cart: at sight of him one part of the crowd set up a cry, weird and inarticulate, the cry peculiar to the tongue-tied and the dumb: it was taken up by the blind, who had not seen but could guess. The blind called out piteously: "Do not leave us in darkness, Citizen Vallon!" but the dumb could only utter their hideous, inarticulate shrieks.

André stood up in the cart with his old military tunic tied round his neck; his one arm was tied behind his back to the empty sleeve of his shirt. His glance swept the crowd in search of his beloved, and like a magnet her eyes drew his and held them for an instant. Only a few seconds, though, for the next moment he saw those poor afflicted wretches about him, and for the first time his aching heart drew tears to his eyes.

"Vallon!" they moaned and cried. "Vallon!" like children calling in distress to their mother.

The soldiers jostled them, tried to silence them by threats, but they would not be moved, nor would they be silenced, until suddenly out of the crowd behind them there rose a louder cry:

"You scurvy knave! You abominable hypocrite! At last, at last you get your deserts! Scoundrel! Hellhound! Take that in remembrance of those whom you have outraged!"

Aurore saw it all! It was her father, and Hector Talon was with him. Charles de Marigny seemed to have cast all weakness aside, to have suddenly found the vigour of youth through the power of his hatred. It was amazing how he pushed his way through the crowd, right up to the tumbril, and then, with a sudden spring, he put on foot on the hub of the nearest wheel. He was brandishing a stick with the obvious purpose of hitting at André, when the crowd, taken aback for the moment, seized him and dragged him down.

Aurore put her hand up to her mouth to smother a cry. Her father had fallen backward, dragging Hector Talon down with him in his fall. She could see nothing more than that, for the crowd was all over him, and everything seemed confusion — confusion made hideous by weird cries and imprecations. The people in the rear of the crowd declared: "C'est bien fait!" It served the miscreant right for trying to hit at a brave soldier who had lost one arm in the defence of his country. The soldiers tried to restore order and only succeeded in keeping back the crowd — the poor afflicted — at the point of the bayonet.

Aurore's eyes wandered back to the tumbril in search of André. She clutched the gold locket with her last message of love, ready to fling it to him. But she couldn't see him; he must have been struck by the old maniac and fallen down, perhaps, on the floor of the cart. She fingered the thing in her hand feverishly — and suddenly was aware that the thing she fingered was unfamiliar in shape and in weight. She looked down upon it. The gold locket was not there; she had instead a crumpled, soiled piece of paper in her hand; it was wrapped around something hard and rough, possibly a stone. She couldn't think what it meant. What abandoned thief had dared to filch her locket? And then a swift recollection went through her mind like a flash. When she saw her father spring up on the hub of the cart-wheel she had tried to smother a cry of horror and had felt a firm, kindly hand grasping hers.

She had thought nothing of it at the moment, merely thought that some gentle soul was trying to express mute sympathy. Instead of this mysterious substitution! What could it mean? Was it? Could it be from André? Oh! if she could only see him. But there was the crowd, the poor, miserable, afflicted crowd, trying in a futile way to avenge an insult done to the man they revered. The soldiers, reinforced by comrades, had pushed them well away. Aurore could not see what had become of her father. Had he been trampled underfoot by the infuriated mob? Had punishment overtaken him at the very culmination of his treachery?

Just then there was another commotion. A wild, terrified shriek, and Hector Talon was hoisted aloft by half-a-dozen strong arms and then flung, still yelling, into the cart. Some people laughed. The deaf and dumb who had seen gave a weird cry of content. The sergeant in command cast a final glance on the tumbril.

"Allons!" he called with stolid indifference. "The batch is complete! Eight sheep for Citizen Samson to-morrow."

Then he gave the word of command: "En avant," and the cart-wheels creaked on their axles as the horses began to move.

And André! Aurore could not see André! Not even now when the tumbril turned out of the gates so close to her. The crowd surged in its wake, mostly in silence, though the poor blind who were nearest to the cart continued to call on Vallon, while the tongue-tied, uttering unintelligible sounds, hung on to them and tried hard to explain that Vallon, Vallon, their father and their mother and their friend, was no longer there.

Aurore, more dead than alive, had scrambled down from the parapet. The crowd was perceptibly thinner. A few soldiers were rounding up the poor afflicted. The others, for the most part, hung about waiting to see the next batch of prisoners file out. Only a few followed the tumbril, from which could still be heard the agonized yells of Hector Talon. In a few more minutes the vast courtyard seemed almost peaceful. Just a few people waiting about in small groups here and there. The spectacle of the day was not yet over. There would be at least another five tumbrils to watch. The blind and the deaf and dumb, the wretched and the poor, had drifted away. Wither? No doubt this fraternal government knew. Was this not the millennium so confidently foretold?

The soldiers had restored order. They had done it at the point of the bayonet, driving the afflicted away like useless sheep unfit even for the knacker. They had also apparently dragged away the inanimate and lifeless bodies of those who had been unfortunately or luckily succumbed in the mêlée. Among these was the body of a man who had once been styled Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny, one of the proudest names in France, who once had power of life and death over his fellow men and could toy with the honour of any poor wench who happened to please his eye. His mangled body lay now in the guardroom of the Palace, so-called of Justice; the naked feet of a score of unwashed rabble had trampled the life out of him. Not even decently covered with a sheet, the illustrious remains of a descendant of kings was destined for a pauper's grave.

But all this Aurore only found out later. Her thoughts, for the moment, were far enough away from her father who had done her such a great — such an irreparable injury. She had found a deserted corner in an angle of the building, and here, unseen by prying eyes, she unfolded the paper which had so mysteriously been thrust into her hand. And this is what was written thereon:

André is safe! Go home and wait for him. Silence and discretion above all.

And below there was the device of a small five-petalled flower roughly tinted scarlet.

And that was all. Aurore, dazed and puzzled, marvelled if she were dreaming now or if the rest of this day had been a hideous nightmare. If, when she woke anon, she would find herself inside the gates of an earthly paradise or of an unendurable hell? André's safe! Where? When? How? BY whose agency had he been snatched from out the jaws of death? How and why had God interfered to prevent the monstrous holocaust?

André safe? Could it be true? Did such heavenly things happen in these days of darkness, of doubt and misery?

And all the while that these doubts, fears, conjectures, alternated in Aurore's mind, with the wildest, most unbelievable hope, she was running home, running like one urged by hope or driven by despair.

André safe! And Paris looked just the same! The quays, the river, the pavements, the people passing by as if nothing had happened. Was life going on just the same, then? If so, surely it could not be true that André was safe.

Marie wondered what had happened to the Citizeness. Her habitual sadness have given place to a febrile restlessness. She seemed unable to sit still. For hours she wandered from room to room, up and down, taking no rest. She tried to eat, but food, apparently, choked her.

Marie asked questions but received no answer. She feared, indeed, that the Citizeness was sick with the fever. She suggested bed, and toward ten o'clock Aurore agreed to lie down, but only on condition that Marie herself went to bed. She certainly was in a fever then, with cheeks aflame and hands cold as ice. But she did make pretence to go to bed, drank the orange-flower water which Marie had prepared, and promised to go to sleep.

She waited, quiet as a mouse, until no sound save a comfortable snore came from Marie's room. The good soul had taken to snoring of late, and many a time had the sound set Aurore's nerves on edge. But to-night she welcomed it. Half-past ten. She crept noiselessly out of bed and put on her clothes again. She lit a candle and with it tiptoed out to the vestibule. She set the candle on the table, and she drew the bolt of the front door, leaving it ajar. She pulled a chair close to the door, sat down and waited.... Waited, wide-eyed and expectant, as she had waited, day after day, these two months past in the Hall of the Palais de Justice.

A few minutes after midnight she heard a footstep on the stairs. No need to make a guess as to whose it was: she would have known it among hundreds of thousands. She left the door ajar and went back into the parlour. She sat down in the big armchair. The room was all dark save for the dim light cast in by the flickering candle in the vestibule.

And thus he found her, waiting for him and ready, with arms held out so that he could pillow his tired head against her warm bosom. She gathered him in her arms with that loving tenderness which is the essence of a good woman's passionate love. Her first kiss was on his hair; then only did her lips find his.

Of danger and death, of rescue or safety, there was no talk. All that he said was, "Ma mie!" as, cheek, to cheek, they sat there in the big armchair, forgetful of the world, forgetful of everything save of their love.

Chapter XLIII

Two days later Maximilien Robespierre and his satellites perished in their turn on the guillotine; that 26th day of July which had meant life or death to Aurore and André had also meant life or death to the most bloodthirsty tyrant the civilized world has ever known. It was the first eclipse of his power and of his popularity. Swift as had been his rise, his fall from the giddy heights of dictatorship was swifter still. The same throats, which less than a couple of months ago had yelled themselves hoarse with praise of Robespierre as second only to the Supreme Being, now shouted execrations on the fallen tyrant.

Terrified for their own lives his enemies had made a super-human effort to drag him down. It was he or they, his head or theirs. In the pocket of his coat taken off at the club because the night was very hot had been found a list of names to be indicted on the morrow, names of men to be accused, tried, and condemned. They were the names of the most influential men in the National Convention, Tallien's at the head. It was their life or his, and they put forth all their strength, all their terror, and all their eloquence to bring him down. And they succeeded. On the 26th of July the tyrant was indicted for treason against the Republic; on the 27th, he was dragged, wounded and almost dying, to the bar of the accused; on the 28th, at even, he died on the guillotine.

His death was inglorious and sordid, but it marked an epoch. As if by a magic wand the whole aspect of France was changed. Terrorism died in as many days as it had taken years to maintain itself. Within twenty-four hours the Convention, free from tyranny and from fear of death, passed a law that every man or woman indicted for treason and conspiracy must be served with a Writ of Accusation so that they might know of what they were accused. Prisoners were liberated by the hundred. Houses of Detention were emptied. Justice once more put on the semblance of a bandage over her eyes and held the scales with a steady hand.

And while André and Aurore dreamed their dream of love in the sunny apartment of the Quai de la Ferraille, the aspect of France was changed. Life went on, but no longer the same, for there was hope in every heart, even though hope was often linked with incurable sorrow.

And that is the end of the story which Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., told to His Royal Highness that evening in the Assembly Rooms at Bath.

"A fine fellow, your André Vallon," His Royal Highness remarked. "What became of him?"

"He was duly served with a Writ of Accusation, brought to the bar, and acquitted. He has taken up his work again with the blind and the deaf and dumb."

"And he and your lovely Aurore spin the thread of perfect love in their apartment on the Quai de la Ferraille, is that it?"

"I should say as perfect as I have ever seen, sir," Blakeney remarked with a smile.

"Outside your own, you lucky dog!" His Royal Highness rejoined with a sigh. "But what happened to that rascal, Hector Talon?"

"He was indicted for false accusations against a patriot. His name appeared below that of Charles de Marigny on the letter which denounced Vallon to the Committee of Public Safety which has now ceased to exist. He died a very inglorious death just a week after he had hoped to see his old enemy go up the steps of the guillotine."

"Did the daughter ever recover her father's body for decent burial?"

"I believe so."

"Ah, well!" His Royal Highness concluded. "I'll grant you, Blakeney, that for a child of that awful revolution, your friend Vallon has come out of the flames unscathed."

THE END

IN THE RUE MONGE

I

The Professor swung himself round on the high stool on which he was sitting, and blinked tired, watery eyes at his interlocutor.

"You were saying, *milor*?" he asked in his shaky, high-pitched voice.

And the other resumed with exemplary patience:

"I was trying to explain to you, my friend, that no one is safe these days, and that at any moment one of those devils on the Committee of Public Safety might set your name down on the list of the suspects. Now, I promised your daughter over in England that my friends and I would look after you; but even without such a promise. . ."

He paused, for obviously the little man was not really listening. He had begun by trying to be attentive, by trying to understand the import of what his friend was saying; but his attention was already wandering and his pale, tired eyes were turned longingly in the direction of his test-tubes, his microscopes and other scientific paraphernalia which littered his table. Now, when his friend ceased speaking, he again tried to appear interested.

"Yes, yes, my daughter!" he murmured vaguely. "Pretty girl, she was. Married that nice man Tessen; a prosperous farmer he was. They were on their honeymoon in England when this awful revolution fell upon us here. Lucky for them! They were never able to return to France."

He continued to ramble on in this vague, inconsequent way; his friend listened to him with undivided attention. They were such a strange contrast, these two: the powerfully-built Englishman, dressed simply but with scrupulous care, a man with finely-moulded hands and lazy, grey eyes that had at times marvellous flashes in them of enthusiasm and command — a leader of men, obviously, a fearless sportsman and daring adventurer — and his learned friend, a man with wizened body and spine prematurely bent, with noble, thoughtful forehead and timid, quivering mouth. A worse-assorted pair could not easily be found. But they were friends, nevertheless. It was a friendship based on mutual respect, even though there was on the one side a strong element of protective affection and on the other a timid, almost childlike trust.

"I would like to go to England with you some day, *milor*," the professor went on with a yearning little sigh. "I believe I could do great things in England. I could meet your famous Jenner and show him some of my own experiments in the field of vaccine. These are not altogether to be despised," he added, with a quaint chuckle of self-satisfaction. "And, believe me, my friend, this Revolutionary government is not made up of asses. They have a certain respect for science, especially for the curative sciences; they know that sickness stalks abroad in spite of all their decrees and their talk of a millennium, and they are not likely to molest those of us who work for the better health conditions of the people."

The Englishman said nothing for a moment or two. He regarded his ingenuous little friend with a kindly, gently-mocking glance. At last he said:

"You really believe that, do you, my good Rollin?"

"Yes, yes, I believe it. I had the assurance lately of no less a personage than the great Couthon, Robespierre's bosom friend, that the Committee of Public Safety will never touch me while I carry on such important experiments."

"You could carry them on so much better in England, my friend. The sense of safety would add zest to your work and you would spare your daughter who loves you a cruel anxiety."

"Ah, yes, yes," Rollin murmured in a somewhat querulous tone. "Poor little Marguerite! She was such a pretty girl! But I will come with you, *milor*! Be sure that I will come. Only, just now — you understand — I have this great work in hand — a work that would even interest the great Jenner. Therefore," he added, with a bashful little smile, "I will even ask you, *milor*", to excuse me. The light is growing dim, and I . . ."

The Englishman rose, smothering a half-impatient sigh.

"You want me to go?"

"No, on no!" the other hastened to add. "Only, the daylight is—"

"More precious in this case than life," the other broke in, with his engaging smile.

He stood up in the narrow, bare room, a giant in height and strength, looking down with that kindly, all-understanding glance of his on this tiny, wizened form of his friend.

"Do you know," he said lightly, "that I could pick you up now and carry you in my waistcoat pocket straight to your daughter's arms?"

For the first time a look of terror crept into the Professor's eyes.

"You would not do that, my friend," he ejaculated fervently; "not until my experiments—"

"Nothing to do with your experiments, my good Rollin," the Englishman replied. He went to the window and stood for a few seconds looking down on the street below. Then he beckoned to the little man, who, compelled somewhat against his will, stepped down from his high stool, very much like a lean, long-legged stork getting off its perch. The Englishman was pointing to a group of men in the street and Rollin obediently looked down, too. The men wore tattered military tunics and ragged breeches. Their bare feet were thrust into shoes stuffed up with straw; they wore the regulation caps adorned with soiled tri-colour cockades. Two or three of them were leaning against the wall of the house opposite, the others stood desultorily about.

"They are always there," the little Professor remarked. "That is because Citoyen Couthon lives next door. He is a great man, is Citoyen Couthon, and these men are, I think, his bodyguard."

"Perhaps," the Englishman remarked drily. "But, anyway, they would search my waistcoat pocket if they saw it bulging with you in it."

He gave a light laugh and then a sigh. Obviously there was nothing more to be said. The old scientist was like a bewildered rabbit, anxious to get back to its burrow. But there was astonishing courage in that feeble body with a quiet philosophy which so gallant a

sportsman as Sir Percy Blakeney could not fail to admire.

With a final hasty good-bye he left Professor Rollin to his tubes and retorts, and with a quick, firm step made his way out of the laboratory and then down several flights of stairs to a dark and disused cellar situated in the basement of the house.

The house itself was one of those vast tenements, which for the past century and more had sprung up all over Paris. It had its inevitable square courtyard, with a well in the centre and rows of iron balconies overlooking it from every floor. Hundreds of lodgers in various stages of poverty, mostly abject, dwelt in the tenements. Families of three or four, or sometimes as many as seven, were herded in single rooms. At each of the four angles of the courtyard there was a staircase, dark, dank and unspeakably dirty, since it was no one's business to keep them clean.

It was out of this rabbit warren that, an hour or two later, there stepped into the street an ugly, misshapen creature in ragged shirt and tattered breeches, wearing a knitted cap over a mop of unkempt and mouse-coloured hair. He hobbled along on one leg and a wooden stump, which he banged against the stairs as he came up from the basement where were situated the most squalid of all the apartments, some of them little more than unlit, unventilated cellars.

The group of men whom Professor Rollin had described as Couthon's bodyguard scarcely glance at him. Their attention appeared to be mostly taken up with a window on one of the upper floors, through which could be perceived the wizened figure of Professor Rollin, busy with his test-tubes and microscope.

II

The commissariat of police of the English Section was a low, narrow building sandwiched between a couple of taller houses in the narrow, ill-lit Rue Monge. It was not one of the busy commissariats of the city, because, being situated in so poor and squalid a quarter, there was not a great number of bourgeois and aristocrats to be hauled up before the commissary in the course of the day. True that once or twice proscribed aristos had been discovered lurking perdu in one of other of the tenement houses where only the poor congregate but, on the whole, the citizen commissary, by name Bossut, had mostly to deal with malefactors, night birds and suchlike, not bad enough to send to the guillotine, and thus obtain commendation for his zeal, or even promotion such as came in the way of colleagues who were able to make successful hauls of suspects and traitors.

Indeed, the citizen commissary felt distinctly depressed on this evening. He had sent a couple of pilferers to gaol, three young ruffians to the whipping-post and arrested a stupid old man named Rollin, who styled himself professor and spent his time playing about with glass tubes and instruments and all sorts of poisonous concoctions. A harmless fool enough, but Bossut happened to catch a rumour that this Rollin had a daughter married to an emigré — a rich man, seemingly, who had lived all these years in luxury in England, the arch-enemy of France. Now a man who had a son-in-law of that type was clearly a traitor himself and Bossut, in ordering the arrest of the Professor, had vague hopes that something out of the common would come of it — a sensational trial, perhaps, that would bring in its train that commendation from his superiors, or even that promotion which was the dream of the obscure commissary.

But, alas, nothing so far had come of this arrest. Of course, the old fool would be sent to the guillotine — that was a foregone conclusion — but strive as he might, Bossut could not discover anything in the Professor's dossier that would turn his trial into a sensation.

It was hard luck. And now that the lamp was lighted and sent its black, sooty smoke up to the ceiling, without shedding much light into the room, Citizen Bossut felt that there was nothing else to do but to drown his melancholy in a bottle of wine, the best that could be got these hard times. He was just beginning to feel comfortably drowsy, and sat stretched out in a rickety armchair in front of the iron stove, toasting his legs, when his lieutenant, Citizen Grisar, came to announce that a man, who wouldn't give his name, desired to speak with the citizen commissary.

"What does he want?" the latter asked between two prodigious yawns.

"He wouldn't say, citizen," the lieutenant replied.

"Then tell him to go to the devil!"

"Yes, citizen."

Grisar slouched out of the room and the worthy commissary once more tried to compose himself to sleep; but the next moment he was rudely brought to his feet by the sound of loud altercation, much shouting and swearing, and finally by the door of his own sanctum being violently thrown open and a raucous voice shouting hoarsely:

"Ah ça! What kind of a sacré aristo is the citizen commissary, that honest patriots are denied access to his grandeur?"

An ugly, misshapen creature stood in the doorway, still hurling anathemas over his shoulder at the unfortunate Grisar, whom he had sent sprawling across the room with a vigorous play of his elbow. Now he hobbled forward on one leg and a wooden stump, with which he banged the floor until it shivered and shook, as without further ceremony he entered the inner sanctum of Citizen Commissary Bossut.

Grisar had in the meanwhile sufficiently recovered his balance to call for assistance from the men on duty, when the newcomer once more raised his raucous voice. But this time he neither sore nor stormed. His ugly face became distorted with an ugly leer; he put a grimy finger up to his very red nose and winked — yes, winked at the commissary himself.

"Do not let those fellows touch me, citizen," he said, "for, if you do, you'll never know what I have come here on purpose to tell you. And," he added, with another knowing wink, "there'll never be another chance of promotion for you as long as you live."

The word promotion acted like magic on Bossut's temper. It was the very breath of life to him: he thought of it all day, he dreamed of it by night. He ordered Grisar and the men out of the room, sat down at his desk, and demanded curtly:

"Well, what is it?"

These being the glorious days of fraternity and equality, the miserable caitiff was not going to allow any commissary to order him about. First, he made himself at home; sat down opposite the commissary; poured out a glass of wine, which he drank down at a gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving a wide, sooty streak right across his nose and chin. Finally, he disposed his wooden leg as comfortably as he could, then only was he prepared to speak.

Bossut smothered his wrath, resolved not to lose his temper with a man who had used the magic word, promotion.

"You see, citizen commissary," the man began at last, "it's like this. The Committees have their spies, as you know, and I am one of them. But they are hard task-masters, worse than any tyrant, and you may take it from me that, all in good time, they will be sent to the guillotine. Every one of them — Danton, Hébert, Robespierre — they'll all go presently because—"

"Yes, yes! Never mind about that," the commissary broke in impatiently. "My time is short. Get on with what you have to say."

"All right, all right! I'm coming to it. What I wanted to say was that the Committees demand a lot of work and pay very little for it. I have often brought them information worth the weight of a man's head in gold. You think they would have given me something extra for my pains. Raised my wages. Not a bit of it! I am sick of them. Sick, I tell you. And, what's more, I told them — I told citizen Chauvelin—"

"No wonder that he wouldn't listen to you, my man, you talk too much," Bossut put in, in exasperation.

"He would have liked to know, though, what I alone can tell him about the English spy, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"What?"

Bossut had jumped to his feet. In a moment his excitement was at fever point. The English spy! The Scarlet Pimpernel! There was no ambitious height to which a man could not reach if he helped in the capture of that poisonous enemy of the Republic.

The cripple contemplated him with a leer upon his ugly face, while Bossut paced up and down the room in order work off his agitation. At last he sat down again, put his elbows on the desk and gazed with concentrated attention on the misshapen creature before him.

"Tell me!" he commanded.

But the other only grinned.

"What'll you pay me for the information?" he asked.

"One half of the reward offered for the capture of the English spy — if I get him."

The caitiff nodded.

"Put that down in writing, citizen commissary," he said, "and the spy is yours. My name's Goujon," he went on— "Amédé Goujon, in the service of the Committees. Put it down in writing, citizen commissary, that you will give me one half of the reward offered for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

While Bossut, with a hand that shook visibly, put the promise down in writing, signed it and strewed sand over it, the cripple continued to mutter under his breath:

"It'll want pluck. The Englishman is powerful — a giant, what? And cunning! Sacré nom, but he has slipped through Citizen Chauvelin's fingers more than once — just like an eel. Here to-day, gone to-morrow. But there's one man knows just where and how he can be found."

"Tell me!" Bossut commanded.

"Over a bottle of wine, comrade," Goujon declared with a loud guffaw. "Dash it, my friend, my throat is dry. How can I speak?"

Bossut sore, but he went to his locker, produced a fresh bottle of wine with a second mug, and set the wine on the table.

"Now then," he said peremptorily.

"That old fool in the Rue des Pipots," Goujon said in a hoarse whisper, leaning his grimy arms on the table and eagerly watching the commissary as he filled the two mugs with wine, "he who plays about with glass tubes and instruments, eh?"

"Rollin?"

"That's the man."

"But how do you know that Rollin—"

Bossut was so agitated that he could hardly speak.

"I have seen the old fool standing at his window in conversation with the Englishman," Goujon asserted. "Have him arrested, I tell you."

"But I've got him," Bossut exclaimed. "He is in La Roche since this morning."

"Send for him, then," the cripple retorted laconically. "Make him tell you. He knows."

The order was at once given. Grisar and two men were dispatched to the prison of La Roche, not very far distant, with orders to bring along the prisoner, Rollin. Bossut by now was in a state bordering on frenzy, pacing up and down the room like a feline waiting for its food. Goujon, on the other hand, appeared entirely serene. His misshapen body was sprawling on a rickety chair which threatened to break down with every movement of his ungainly body; his wooden leg was stretched out in front of him and he was snorting like a winded nag while he read through, most carefully, the precious paper which the commissary had given him. Satisfied that it was duly dated and signed, he folded it and slipped it into the pocket of his tattered coat, after which he gave himself over to the delight of finishing the commissary's excellent bottle of red wine. He smacked his lips in token of great appreciation.

"Ah!" he said. "It is not often a poor man gets such good wine these days."

Half-an-hour later, Grisar and a couple of men returned with Professor Rollin, who looked more like a scared rabbit than ever. Bossut had resumed his seat behind the desk and Goujon was sprawling between the desk and the prisoner.

"Now then, citizen," the commissary began in his most official tone, "as I told you this morning, you are accused of trafficking with the enemy, notably with your daughter, who is the wife of a traitor and an émigré to boot. What is your answer to that charge?"

"Marguerite," the old man murmured vaguely, blinking his eyes, "my daughter. Yes — a pretty girl But she is not here — and I do not write letters—"

"That is as it may be," the commissary retorted. "But I also happen to know that you traffic not only with an émigré over in England but with the most poisonous enemy of our glorious Revolution, the English spy who is known to our patriotic committees as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

Professor Rollin looked completely bewildered this time. He murmured "Ah," and then again "Ah," and gazed at the commissary over his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Tell him," Bossut commanded, turning to the crippled loon— "tell him what you saw, Citizen Goujon."

Goujon had drunk a good deal of wine; his speech by now was not very clear.

"I said," he mumbled, "that I saw this old scarecrow at his window in the Rue des Pipots, in conversation with an Englishman who, I say, is none other than that accursed spy who is known as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"What have you to say to that?" the commissary demanded.

The little Professor had nothing very enlightening to say. He had never heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel and, if he had been seen in conversation with an Englishman, well, that was as it may be. But he certainly didn't know where that Englishman was now. Whereupon Goujon mumbled: "My belief is that if you searched the old scarecrow's nest you would find that cursed spy hidden among the glass tubes."

"No, no!" the Professor hastened to assert. "I assure you, citizen commissary, that you wouldn't find anybody in my laboratory. And — and — I have most valuable instruments there for my experiments. No one must be allowed to touch them—"

"There, now!" Goujon exclaimed triumphantly. "What did I tell you? On the face of it the old fool is lying, as I myself saw the Englishman go into the house in the Rue des Pipots, just before I came on here."

"Why in the devil's name did you not tell me that before?" Bossut exclaimed, bringing a heavy fist crashing down upon the table and nearly upsetting the precious bottle of red wine.

"I did," Goujon asserted imperturbably, "but you were so excited, you did not listen."

The commissary had once more jumped to his feet.

"Citizen Grisar," he demanded, "how many men have we on duty here?"

"Half-a-dozen, citizen."

"Very well. Let these two here remain with the prisoner, and you take the others with you to Number Seventeen, Rue des Pipots, where you were this morning. Search the house through and through. Every apartment, every room, you understand? Make every man, woman and child inside the house show you his card of citizenship, failing which, bring them along here. And do not forget that not only for me, your superior, but for you all there will be a handsome reward if you lay hands on the English spy."

Grisar was keen enough. Indeed, he was only one of many corporals of the National Guard who had seen visions of promotion and good money for the capture of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. The two men who had been ordered to remain on guard over the old scarecrow looked glum, for they were longing to join in the chase. Grisar, on the other hand, had already assembled his small squad and soon they were heard to leave the dingy little building, and their measured tread rang out on the cobblestones of the Rue Monge.

Bossut, who was making vigorous efforts to control his excitement and thus preserving a semblance of dignity before his underlings, resumed his seat and made pretence to busy himself with some papers. From time to time he threw a glance on the prisoner, who stood with long lean hands crossed before him and watery eyes blinking behind his spectacles, his thoughts obviously detached from his surroundings. The two men of the National Guard stood one on each side of him, stolid and unperturbed. Bossut, whose nerves were exacerbated by the constant shifting of their feet upon the creaking floor, curtly ordered the three of them to sit down.

"One more glass, citizen commissary," the cripple said jovially. He had filled the two mugs and drained the bottle of wine to its last drop. Bossut drank, then sat down again to his papers. The air in the narrow room had become overwhelmingly close, with the iron stove roaring and the ceiling lamp sending forth its puffs of evil-smelling odours. Above Bossut's head a white-faced clock ticked with exasperating monotony. But little noise came from outside, only the furtive footsteps of belated passers-by. These were days when it was not good to be abroad after dark. The streets were ill-lighted and Government spies lurked round every corner, stalking likely prey; and one never knew, any chance word lightly uttered might mean summary arrest, with its inevitable awful consequences.

Thus silence and the stuffy atmosphere were equally oppressive. Bossut, despite his excitement, was feeling drowsy. He had great difficulty in keeping his eyes open and his head erect. Now and then he looked up at the clock and then sighed wearily. The cripple was frankly snoring and even the men guarding the prisoner nodded from time to time. Nothing happened, and the minutes passed by leaden-footed. At one moment there was loud noise of altercation in the street. Raucous voices shouting and swearing. Bossut ordered the two soldiers to go and see what it was.

When they returned a few moments later they reported that two street rowdies had come to blows just outside the commissariat, but had already taken to their heels. The commissary himself had, during their short absence, fallen half asleep. They found him still sitting at his desk, but with his head buried in his outstretched arms. He raised his head wearily when the men entered, and cast a bleary glance heavy with sleep upon them. He asked them a question or two in a thick, halting voice, and the next moment his head once more fell on his outstretched arms. Goujon was snoring. Still unperturbed and stolid, the men sat down again on the wooden bench, each side of the prisoner. Indeed, the latter was the only man here who appeared wide awake and alert. His spectacles had slipped down his nose and from over them his pale, watery eyes wandered from one face to the other with a kind of vaguely-scared expression.

And all at once it seemed as if a tornado had burst into the room for, with a crash of broken glass, the lamp was suddenly extinguished. There was a bang and a groan, and then a call: "A moi!" followed by quick, light footsteps hurrying into the room from outside. The soldiers had jumped to their feet, grasping their muskets. But the place was now in pitch darkness and, before the two of them could even in a small measure collect their senses together, heavy cloths were thrown over their heads and wound tightly over their mouths and eyes. The muskets were taken out of their hands, their arms were tied behind their backs and their legs pinioned with cords to the wooden bench on which they were forced to sit down — all in the space of three minutes. Through the cloth over their heads they heard muffled sounds of words they did not understand, but which one of them afterwards declared was English. Then there was more tramping of feet, and finally silence. The men could not move. They could hardly breathe. Soon they lost consciousness.

When, an hour or so later, Grisar and his small squad returned from their long and fruitless errand, after they had scoured the house in the Rue des Pipots from attic to cellar and found no trace of any English spy, they were appalled at the sight which met their gaze. To begin with, the two rooms of the commissariat were in complete darkness. That was astonishing enough, and a light was soon struck. But it was the sight of the commissary's inner sanctum that was so appalling. The commissary himself was sprawling across his desk in an obvious state of collapse. To the wooden bench facing the desk the two soldiers of the National Guard, comrades of Grisar, were securely tied with ropes, their heads muffled in clothes, their hands tied behind their backs. Bits of glass littered the desk and the floor, a chair was overturned, and the ceiling lamp hung crooked from a single chain, the others being broken. But the strangest sight of all was that a wooden stump, such as were used by indigent cripples who had lost a leg, was lying on the floor, with its leather straps cut, and in a confused mass of rags and cloth of every description.

What in the world had happened? Grisar set his men to free their comrades, to get them water and wine and generally to try to restore them to consciousness, while he himself busied himself with the person of his chief. After a time, all three came to, but when questioned, not one of them knew exactly what had happened. Bossut was not yet free of his drugged sleep, during which, apparently, he had been hit violently on the head, which ached furiously. He knew nothing save that a cripple named Goujon had visited him and had induced him to send his subordinate and a small squad to search a certain house in the Rue des Pipots, where the prisoner, Rollin, was supposed to have held converse with the noted English spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel. By the way, where in the devil's name was the prisoner, Rollin? Bossut remembered seeing him sitting quietly on the wooden bench between the guard, and giving no trouble. He also remembered the guard leaving the premises in order to ascertain what the noise of an altercation in the street was about. But after that, complete oblivion clouded his brain. Nor could the soldiers give any more lucid explanation of the mysterious affair. One or two facts that certainly were strange they did recall, namely, that after they had been out in the street and seen the street rowdies take to their heels, they had noticed that the light in the room was very dim and that the citizen commissary seemed to be in an

extraordinary state of somnolence. The breaking of the lamp and the attack made on them in the dark had been so sudden that their impression of it all was of the vaguest.

The matter had to be left at that for the moment. All six men who had more or less suffered through the affair remained convinced that the English spy was in one manner or other responsible for it. Although, as he and his henchmen were known to be real aristos of imposing mien and luxuriously dressed, it was difficult to determine what rôle the crippled caitiff, Goujon, played in the drama, and why he had been so cruelly deprived of his wooden leg.

Since neither the English spies nor the prisoner, Rollin, were possessed of identity papers, it would be impossible for them to leave Paris, and their recapture was only a matter of time.

III

It was some three or four days later that the guard at the north-west gate challenged a carrier who, in addition to two passengers, had three large crates under the hood of his cart. The crates were labelled "candles" and the bill of lading which the carrier presented declared the goods to have been manufactured by the firm of Turandot, of Paris. The passports and identity of the three men appeared to be in perfect order, signed and countersigned by the Commissary of the section and the chief commissary of the district, but as Citizen Lebrun had been specially warned — along with the guard of every gate in Paris — to be on the look-out for three fugitives of enemy nationality and an escaped prisoner named Rollin, all of whom would presumably be armed with forged passports, he had for the past three days been more than usually careful in examining all identity papers presented to him. Although the carrier and his two companions appeared harmless enough, he was none the less careful this time. He took their papers from them and ordered the three men to alight. Moreover, he ordered the three crates to be taken down from the cart and opened so that he might satisfy himself that no escaped prisoner was hidden among the candles.

The carrier protested as vigorously as he dared. He and his two sons, he declared, were honest citizens and would know how to avenge this insult that was being put upon them. As for the candles, they were a consignment which he had to deliver to a grocer at Meaux.

Lebrun, undaunted by threats, stood by with the papers in his hand, superintending the opening of the crates, when there came riding from the city a mounted squad of the National Guard, with an officer in command. Lebrun was quite thankful to see them. The officer could but commend him for his zeal and relieve him of ultimate responsibility.

The small squad drew rein and the officer, in response to Sergeant Lebrun's salute, asked him the meaning of the empty cart, the broken crates and the three wildly-gesticulating citizens.

"You have done well, citizen sergeant," the officer said as soon as Lebrun had put him in possession of the facts, "and the authorities shall hear of your zeal. Let's have a look at those papers," he went on, "and also at this mysterious cart."

Lebrun handed him the papers and could not help noting that he frowned in obvious doubt and suspicion while he scanned the signatures upon them.

"You had better write out your report at once and I myself will take it to the proper quarters. This is a very curious and a serious case Silence!" he thundered, for the carrier and his two sons had again begun to protest vigorously. "Citizen sergeant, have them taken into the guardroom with you. I want to have a closer look at this mysterious cart."

Lebrun then turned into the guardroom, taking the three civilians and one or two of his men with him. The broken crates remained out in the road, as did the cart, round which the mounted squad had now assembled. The guard of the gate stood by at attention.

And suddenly there was a quick word of command, "En avant! *Bride abattue!*" which means, "Hell for leather!" and the whole squad, led by their officer, thundered past the bewildered guard through the gate and up the country road which leads straight as an arrow to the north.

The noise had brought Sergeant Lebrun out of the guardroom. Half-a-dozen excited and confused voices told him what had happened.

"They seemed to be examining the cart—"

"And then suddenly—"

"They were gone—"

"It was like a thunder-clap —"

"And a flash of lightning—"

"Stay!" Lebrun thundered loudly through the din. "Was the gate open?"

"Why, yes, citizen sergeant," one of the men said. "It was opened at nine o'clock, as usual. You were there when—"

"Did nothing happen just before they rode away?"

"Nothing, citizen sergeant. They were all round the cart and suddenly they rode away."

"Well, I suppose," Lebrun said slowly, "that they had their orders."

He felt bewildered and was vaguely anxious. He had heard tales — but no, no, of course it could not be! — tales of English spies — surely they were old wives' tales!

"I suppose they really were troopers of the National Guard?" one of the men suggested.

"Name of a dog!" remarked another. "I remember now—"

"What?" Lebrun demanded shakily.

"That one of the troopers had another riding pillion behind him."

"A smallish man," he added. "I didn't see his face, but he didn't look at home in the saddle. I thought he was a recruit — or a deserter, may be, poor devil. One often sees them these days. A youngster, probably, for he was small and thin. And, anyway, it was not my place to ask questions." Lebrun by now was in a state of collapse. What the whole thing meant he couldn't say; what he should do now was more bewildering still. It took time before his men had reported at headquarters and a squad of genuine National Guard got to horse and went in pursuit. But of the other squad who had a smallish man with them riding pillion behind one of the troopers there was no longer a trace upon the great north road which runs straight to the sea. Vatour, the carrier, and his two sons always declared that the episode was a punishment on Sergeant Lebrun for the insult which he had put on those three honest patriots. As for professor Rollin, he never knew exactly what happened to him after he found himself summarily lifted off the wooden bench in the dingy room of the commissariat of police. For three days he had lived in a dank and disused cellar, waited on by his English friend. Then there were days when he was hoisted into a saddle and ordered to cling to the rider in front of him, which he did with a strength born of despair; days which he spent in the open, in forest or cavern; an awful day when he was very seasick on an English ship; and finally there was the happy day when he was delivered like a limp bundle of goods into the arms of his loving daughter in London. Bruised in body, but not in spirit, he returned with zest to his experiments, and, I believe it to be a fact that in due time he had a personal interview with the great Jenner himself.

ROSEMARY

CHAPTER I

To Peter Blakeney, Rosemary Fowkes' engagement to his friend Tarkington seemed not only incredible but impossible. The end of the world! Death! Annihilation! Hell! Anything! But it could not be true. He was playing at Lord's that day; Tarkington told him the news at the luncheon interval, and Peter had thought for the moment that for once in his life Tarkington must be drunk. But Tarkington looked just as he always did—grave, impassive, and wonderfully kind. Indeed, he seemed specially kind just then. Perhaps he knew. Perhaps Rosemary had told him. Women were so queer. Perhaps she did tell Tarkington that he, Peter, had once been fool enough to — Anyway, Tarkington was sober, and very grave and kind, and he told Peter in his quiet, unemotional way that he considered himself the happiest man on God's earth. Of course he was, if Rosemary — But it was impossible. Impossible! IMPOSSIBLE!! That afternoon Peter hit many boundaries, and at the end of play was 148 not out. In the evening he went to the Five Arts' Ball at the Albert Hall. He knew that Rosemary would be there; he had designed the dress she would be wearing, and Tarkington told him, sometime during that afternoon that he was taking his fiancée to the ball.

His fiancée! Dear old Tarkington! So kind, so unemotional! Rosemary's husband presently! Ye gods!

At the Albert Hall ball Peter wore that beautiful Hungarian national dress that had belonged to his grandfather, a wonderful dress of semi-barbaric splendour, with the priceless fifteenth-century jewellery which he had inherited from his mother—the buttons, the sword-belt, the clasp for the mantle—they had been in the Heves family ever since it was fashioned by Florentine workmen imported into Hungary by a medieval queen. Peter dressed himself with the greatest care. If a thing was worth doing at all, it was worth doing well, and Rosemary had said once that she would like to see him in the dress.

But during that hot afternoon at Lord's while he dressed, and now inside the crowded, stuffy Albert Hall, Peter did not feel as if he were really alive. He did not feel like a personage in a dream, he only felt that the world as he had seen it since luncheon time, was not a real world. Someone had invented something altogether new in opposition to the Creator, and he, Peter, being no longer alive, was permitted a private view of the novelty.

It appeared to be a very successful novelty. At any rate, the numberless puppets who raised shrill voices so that Peter might hear what they said, all declared that this ball was incontestably the most successful function of the season.

Just as in the real world, Peter thought, where every function is always incontestably the most successful function of the season.

Other shrill voices declared in Peter's hearing that this function had been more than usually well-managed. It had been splendidly advertised, and the tickets had sold like the proverbial hot cakes.

And Peter was quite sure that somewhere in the dead, forgotten world of long ago he had heard such an expression of opinion over and over again.

Anyway, in this Albert Hall of the newly invented world things were much as they had been in the old. It was crowded. At one time there was hardly room enough to move, let alone to dance. Certain contortions of the body being called dancing, now as then, and certain demoniacal sounds made on hellish instruments by gentlemen of colour being called dance music, the floor of the hall, raised to the level of the lower-tier boxes, was given over to the performance of various gyrations more or less graceful, whilst Peter looked on, strangely familiar with this new world of unrealities which had only been invented a few hours ago, when Tarkington told him of his engagement to Rosemary Fowkes.

He knew just how it would be!

In to-morrow's issue of the Morning Star or the Talk of the Town, the thousands who gyrated here or who looked on at the gyrations of others would be referred to as being "also present."

He, Peter Blakeney, the famous cricketer and distinguished V.C., would be referred to as being "also present," and there would be a photograph of him with a set grin on his face and his eyes staring out of his head like those of a lunatic at large, in all the illustrated weeklies. This was as it should be. It was well worth paying two guineas (supper included) for the privilege of being referred to as "also present" in this distinguished company of puppets that included both home and foreign royalties.

Of course there were others, the select few who would be referred to in the columns of the Morning Star or the Talk of the Town with charming familiarity as Lord Algy Fitznoodle, or Miss Baby Tomkins, or simply as Lady Poots or Lord Tim.

"While I was chatting with Lady Poots, etc."

"Lady Vi Dartmouth, with her beautiful hair shingled, etc. etc."

"The Marchioness of Flint came with her girls, etc."

All of which Peter knew by intuition would be vastly interesting to the suburban little madams who read Talk of the Town in this world of unrealities, that the puppets named Miss Baby or Lady Vi, would not think of being absent from the Five Arts' Ball. It was the acme of smartness, of Bohemian smartness, that is to say: the smartness of Chelsea and fashionable studios, which is so much smarter than the smartness of Mayfair.

And Peter—a kind of disembodied Peter—watched the throng. Ye gods! what a motley and a medley!

Polychromatic and kaleidoscopic, iridescent and prismatic, ceaselessly on the move, mercurial, restless, ever stirring, fluttering fans, fingering clothes, adjusting coiffures, lapels, frills, hair-ornaments and feathers! And talking! Talking incessantly, with voices hard and high-pitched trying to rise above other voices that were harder and higher of pitch. Dazzling to eye and ear; exciting to nerves and sense, the atmosphere and mixture of odours: of powders, cosmetics, perfumes, heat, gas, and a score of other indefinable scents.

The picture quite brilliant; not without touches of unconscious humour: Marie Antoinette flirting with Robespierre, Russian moujik in familiar converse with a jewelled Catherine, Queen Elizabeth condescending to pre-historic man. And then Pierrots, Pierrots everywhere, of every conceivable motley and shape. Blue Pierrots and yellow Pierrots! white or black, purple with orange frills, and orange with purple frills, black skull caps and tall white peaks. Pierrots of satin, and Pierrots of gingham! Cool and active! Ye gods! how active! Bohemian smartness, it seems, demanded that its Pierrots should be bright and amusing and active.

From his point of vantage on the floor of the hall Peter scanned the semicircle of boxes where sat more puppets, hundreds of them, watching the thousands down below.

What was the good of them? Peter thought. Why has God made them? What use were they in his new world which some wanton sprite had fashioned in opposition to the Creator? They fluttered their fans, they laughed, they jabbered, and did not seem to know that they, just like Peter, had become unreal and disembodied at the precise moment when Rosemary Fowkes promised to become Jasper Tarkington's wife.

And then suddenly the puppets all faded away. The new world ceased to be, there was no hall, no dancing, no music, no more puppets, no more Pierrots. There was only Rosemary, and she came up to Peter and said quite gaily, naturally, in a voice that belonged to the old world, not the new:

"Won't you ask me to dance, Peter?"

After that--well, dancing permits, necessitates, holding the partner in one's arms. And Peter danced with Rosemary.

CHAPTER II

Lady Orange always had a box for the big functions at the Albert Hall. It was chic, it was right and it was convenient. It gave her an opportunity of entertaining distinguished foreigners de passage in London in a manner that was both original and expensive.

Lady Orange prided herself on her internationalism, and delighted to gather distinguished foreigners about her; members and attaches of minor embassies invariably graced her dinner parties. She often referred to her attainments as "bi-lingual," and in effect she spoke French with a perfect Geneva accent. She thought it bon ton to appear bored at every social function except those which took place at her house in Belgrave Square, and now when a procession made up of bedizened unities marched in double file past her box she remarked languidly:

"I think they show a singular lack of imagination. One would have thought Chelsea artists would have invented something unique, picturesque for themselves."

"They only thought of comfort, perhaps. But it is they who gave the impetus to the imagination of others. Not?"

The man who sat next to Lady Orange spoke with certain gestures of hands and arms that would have proclaimed him a foreigner ever apart from his appearance—the somewhat wide expanse of white waistcoat, the ultra-smart cut of his evening clothes, the diamond ring on his finger. He had large, mellow dark eyes, which he used with great effect when he spoke to women, and full lips half-concealed under a heavy black moustache. He had a soft, rich voice, and spoke English with that peculiar intonation which is neither Italian nor Slav, but has the somewhat unpleasant characteristics of both; and he had large, well-shaped, podgy hands all covered with a soft dark down that extended almost to his finger-tips.

Lady Orange, who had pale, round eyes and arched eyebrows that lent to her face a perpetual look of surprise, gazed intelligently about her.

"Ah, oui!" she sighed vaguely. "Vous avez raison!"

She would have liked to continue the conversation in French, but General Naniescu was equally determined to speak English.

As Lady Orange was going to Bucharest shortly, and desired an introduction to august personages there, she thought it best to humour the general's whim.

"How well you express yourself in our barbarous tongue, M. le General!" she said kindly.

"Ah, madame," the general replied, with an expressive shrug, "we in our country are at such disadvantage in the social life of great cities like London and Paris, that we must strive to win our way by mastering the intricacies of language, so as to enable us to converse freely with the intelligentsia of the West who honour us by their gracious acceptance."

"You are a born courtier, Monsieur le General," Lady Orange rejoined with a gracious smile. "Is he not, ma chere?" And with the edge of her large feather fan she tapped the knees of an elderly lady who sat the other side of M. le General.

"Oh, Mademoiselle Fairfax was not listening to my foolish remarks," General Naniescu said, turning the battery of his mellow eyes on the somewhat frumpish old maid.

"No," Miss Fairfax admitted drily. "Monsieur de Kervoisin here on my left was busy trying to convert me to the dullness of Marcel Proust. He is not succeeding."

"Ah!" exclaimed Naniescu suavely, "you English ladies! You are so intellectual and so deliciously obstinate. So proud of your glorious literature that even the French modernists appear poor in your sight."

"There, you see, ma chere," Lady Orange put in with her habitual vagueness, "always the courtier."

"How can one help being a courtier, dear lady, when for hours one is thrown in a veritable whirlpool of beauty, brilliance and wit? Look at this dazzling throng before us," the general went on, with a fine sweep of his arm. "The eyes are nearly blinded with its magnificence. Is it not so, my dear Kervoisin?"

This last remark he made in French, for M. de Kervoisin spoke not a word of English. He was a small, spare man, with thin grey beard neatly trimmed into a point, and thin grey hair carefully arranged so as to conceal the beginnings of baldness. Around his deep-set grey eyes there was a network of wrinkles; they were shrewd, piercing eyes, with little, if any, softness in them. M. de Kervoisin, whose name proclaimed him a native of Brittany, was financial adviser to a multiplicity of small, newly created states, all of whom were under the tutelage of France. His manner was quiet and self-effacing when social or political questions were on the tapis, and he only appeared to warm up when literature or the arts were being discussed. He fancied himself as a Maecenas rather than a financier. Marcel Proust was his hobby for the moment, because above all things he prided himself on modernity, and on his desire to keep abreast of every literary and artistic movement that had risen in the one country that he deemed of intellectual importance, namely his own.

For the moment he felt vaguely irritated because Miss Fairfax—a seemingly unpretentious and socially unimportant elderly female—refused to admit that there was not a single modern English prose writer that could compare with Proust. To the general's direct challenge he only replied drily.

"Very brilliant indeed, my good Naniescu; but you know, I have seen so much in my day that sighs like these have no longer the power to stir me."

"I am sorry for you," Miss Fairfax retorted with old-maidish bluntness. "I have been about the world a good deal myself, but I find it always a pleasure to look at pretty people. Look at Rosemary Fowkes now," she went on, addressing no one in particular, "did you ever in all your life see anything so beautiful?"

She made lively little gestures of greeting, and pointed to a couple on the dancing-floor below. Lady Orange turned her perpetually surprised gaze in that direction and General Naniescu uttered an exaggerated cry of admiration. Even M. de Kervoisin appeared interested.

"Who is the lady?" he asked.

"She is Rosemary Fowkes," Miss Fairfax said, "one of the most distinguished—"

“Ah! I entreat you, mademoiselle, tell us no more,” the general exclaimed with mock protest; “a lovely woman needs no other label but her own loveliness. She is distinguished amongst all because she is beautiful. What else should a woman be when she is the finest work the Creator ever produced-an enchantress?”

“Well.” Miss Fairfax rejoined drily, “I would scold you, general, for those lyrical effusions if they were intended for anybody else. Pretty women are usually silly, because from childhood upwards they have been taught to use their intellect solely for purposes of self-contemplation and self-admiration. But Rosemary Fowkes is an exception. She is not only beautiful, but brilliantly clever. Surely you remember those articles in the International Review on the subject of ‘The Evils of Bureaucracy in the Near East’? They were signed ‘Uno,’ and many doubted at the time that the writer was a woman, and a young one at that.”

“Uno?” General Naniescu exclaimed, and threw a significant glance at M. de Kervoisin, who in his turn uttered an astonished “Ah!” and leaned over the edge of the box in order to take a closer view of the lady under discussion.

CHAPTER III

Indeed no lyrical effusion would seem exaggerated if dedicated to Rosemary Fowkes. She was one of those women on whom Nature seemed to have showered every one of her most precious gifts. There are few words that could adequately express the peculiar character of her beauty. She was tall, and her figure was superb; had hair the colour of horse-chestnuts when first they fall out of their prickly green cases, and her skin was as delicately transparent as egg-shell china; but Rosemary's charm did not lie in the colour of her hair or the quality of her skin. It lay in something more undefinable. Perhaps it was in her eyes. Surely, surely it was in her eyes. People were wont to say they were "haunting," like the eyes of a pixie or of a fairy. They were not blue, nor were they green or grey, but they were all three at times, according as Rosemary was pleased or amused or thoughtful; and when she was pleased or amused she would screw up those pixie eyes of hers, and three adorable little lines that were not wrinkles would form on each side of her nose, like those on the nose of a lion cub.

Her chestnut-coloured hair lay in luscious waves over her forehead and round her perfectly shaped little head, and when she smiled her small white teeth would gleam through her full, parted lips.

Eschewing the fantastic pierrot costumes of the hour, Rosemary Fowkes was dressed in a magnificent Venetian gown of the fifteenth century, the rich crimson folds of which set off her stately figure as well as the radiant colouring of her skin and hair. She wore a peculiarly shaped velvet cap, the wings of which fastened under her chin, thus accentuating the perfect oval of the face and the exquisite contour of forehead and cheeks.

"A woman so beautiful has no right to be clever," General Naniescu remarked with an affected sigh. "It is not fair to the rest of her sex."

"Miss Fowkes is certainly very gifted," Lady Orange remarked drily, her enthusiasm apparently being less keen on the subject of Rosemary than that of Miss Fairfax.

"And who is the happy man," M. de Kervoisin put in in his dry, ironic tone, "with whom the enchantress is dancing?"

"Peter Blakeney," Miss Fairfax replied curtly.

"Qui ça, Peter Blakeney?"

"Peter Blakeney, Peter Blakeney! He does not know who is Peter Blakeney!" Lady Orange exclaimed, and for this supreme moment she departed from her habitual vagueness of attitude, whilst her glance became more markedly astonished than before.

Two or three young people who sat at the back of the box tittered audibly, and gazed at the foreigner as if he were indeed an extraordinary specimen lately presented to the Zoo.

"Remember, dear lady," General Naniescu put in, wholly unperturbed by the sensation which his friend's query had provoked, "that M. de Kervoisin and I are but strangers in your wonderful country, and that no doubt it is our want of knowledge of your language that causes us to seem ignorant of some of your greatest names in literature or the Arts."

"It is not a case of literature or the Arts, mon cher general," Lady Orange condescended to explain. "Peter Blakeney is the finest cover-point England ever had."

"Ah! political sociology?" M. de Kervoisin queried blandly.

"Political what?"

"The Secret Points, no doubt you mean, dear lady?" the general went on, politely puzzled. "Advanced Communism, what? M. Blakeney is then a disciple of Lenin?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," Lady Orange sighed. "Peter Blakeney is the finest cricketer Eton and Oxford have ever produced."

"Cricket!" exclaimed the general, while M. de Kervoisin uttered a significant "Ah!"

There was a moment of quite uncomfortable silence. Naniescu was thoughtfully stroking his luxurious moustache, and a gentle, indulgent smile hovered round the thin lips of M. de Kervoisin.

"It is interesting," Naniescu said suavely after a moment or two, "to see two such world-famous people given over to the pleasure of the dance."

"They are excellent dancers, both of them," Lady Orange assented placidly, even though she had a vague sense of uneasiness that the two foreigners were laughing surreptitiously at something or at her.

"And we may suppose," the general continued, "that a fine young man like Mr. Blakeney has some other mission in life than the playing of cricket."

"He hasn't time for anything else," came in indignant protest from a young lady with shingled hair. "He plays for England, in Australia, South Africa, all over the world. Isn't that good enough?"

"More than enough, dear lady," assented Naniescu with a bland smile. "Indeed, it were foolish to expect the greatest-what did you call him?-secret point to waste his time on other trifling matters." "Cover-point, mon general," Lady Orange suggested indulgently, whilst the young people at the back broke into uproarious mirth. "Cover-point, not secret."

"Peter Blakeney rowed two years in the 'Varsity eights," one of the young people interposed, hot in the defence of a popular hero. Then he added with characteristic English shamefacedness when subjects of that sort are mentioned, "And he got a V.C. in the war."

"He is a jolly fine chap, and ever so good-looking," rejoined the pretty girl with the shingled hair. She shot a provocative glance in the direction of the two ignorant dagoes who had never even heard of Peter Blakeney, and then she added, "He couldn't help being jolly and fine and all that, as he is the great-grandson—"

"No, kid, not the great-grandson," broke in one of her friends.

"Yes, the great-grandson," the young girl insisted.

There was a short and heated argument, while General Naniescu and M. de Kervoisin looked courteously puzzled. Then Miss Fairfax was appealed to.

"Miss Fairfax, isn't Peter Blakeney the great-grandson of the 'Scarlet Pimpernel'?"

And Miss Fairfax, who knew everything, settled the point.

"Peter," she said, "is the great-grandson of Jack Blakeney, who was known as the Little Pimpernel, and was the Scarlet Pimpernel's eldest son. In face and in figure he is the image of that wonderful portrait by Romney of Sir Percy Blakeney."

"Hurrah for me!" exclaimed the one who had been right whilst the pretty girl with the shingled hair threw a glance at the handsome Roumanian which conveyed an eloquent "So there!"

General Naniescu shrugged amiably.

"Ah!" he said, "now I understand. When one gets the youth of England on the subject of its Scarlet Pimpernel, one can only smile and hold one's tongue."

"I think," Miss Fairfax concluded, "that Peter is the best-looking and the best-dressed man in the hall to-night."

"You stab me to the heart, dear lady," the general protested with mock chagrin, "though I am willing to admit that the descendant of your national hero has much of his mother's good looks."

"Did you know Mrs. Blakeney, then?"

"Only by sight and before her marriage. She was a Hungarian lady of title, Baroness Heves," General Naniescu replied, with a shrug that had in it a vague suggestion of contempt. "I guessed that our young cricket player was her son from the way he wears the Hungarian national dress."

"I was wondering what that dress was," Lady Orange remarked vaguely, thankful that the conversation had drifted back to a more equable atmosphere. "It is very picturesque and very becoming."

"And quite medieval and Asiatic, do you not think so, dear lady? The Hungarian aristocrats used to go to their Court dressed in that barbaric fashion in the years before the war."

"And very handsome they must have looked, judging by Peter Blakeney's appearance to-night."

"I knew the mother, too," Miss Fairfax remarked gently; "she was a dear."

"She is dead, then?" M. de Kervoisin asked.

"Oh, yes, some years ago, my dear friend," the general replied. "It was a tragic story, I remember, but I have forgotten its details."

"No one ever knew it over here," was Miss Fairfax's somewhat terse comment, which seemed to suggest that further discussion on the subject would be unwelcome.

General Naniescu, nevertheless, went on with an indifferent shrug and that same slightly contemptuous tone in his voice. "Hungarian women are most of them ill-balanced. But by your leave, gracious ladies, we will not trouble our heads any longer with that man, distinguished though his cricket-playing career may have been. To me he is chiefly interesting because he dances in perfect harmony with Venus Aphrodite."

"Whose Vulcan, I imagine, he would gladly be," M. de Kervoisin remarked with a smile.

"A desire shared probably by many, or is the one and only Vulcan already found?"

"Yes, in the person of Lord Tarkington," Miss Fairfax replied.

"Qui ça Lord Tarkington?" the general queried again.

"You are determined to know everything, mon cher general," Lady Orange retorted playfully.

"Ah, but Mademoiselle Fairfax is such a wonderful encyclopedia of social science, and since my attention has been purposefully drawn to Aphrodite, my curiosity with regard to Vulcan must be satisfied. Mademoiselle, I beg you to tell me all about him."

"Well," Julia Fairfax resumed good-humouredly, "all I can tell you is that Jasper Tarkington is one of the few rich peers left in England; and this is all the more remarkable as his uncle, the late Lord Tarkington, was one of the poorest. Nobody seems to know where Jasper got his money. I believe that he practically owns one of the most prosperous seaside towns on the South Coast. I forget which. Anyway, he is in a position to give Rosemary just what she wants and everything that she craves for, except perhaps—"

Miss Fairfax paused and shrugged her thin shoulders. Taunted by General Naniescu, she refused to complete the sentence she had so tantalizingly left half spoken.

"Lord Tarkington is a great friend of your country, General Naniescu," she said abruptly. "Surely you must know him?"

"Tarkington?" the general mused. "Tarkington? I ought to remember, but—"

"He was correspondent for the Daily Post at the time that your troops marched into Hungary in 1919."

"Surely you are mistaken, dear lady. Tarkington? I am sure I should remember the name. My poor misjudged country has so few friends in England I should not be likely to forget."

"Lord Tarkington only came into the title on the death of his uncle a year ago," Lady Orange condescended to explain.

"And he was called something else before that," the general sighed affectedly. "Ah, your English titles! Another difficulty we poor foreigners encounter when we come to your wonderful country. I knew once an English gentleman who used to come to Roumania to shoot with a friend of mine. He came four times in four years and every time he had a different name."

"Delicieux!" Lady Orange murmured, feeling that in this statement the Roumanian general was paying an unconscious tribute to the English aristocracy. "Do tell me who it was, mon cher general."

"I cannot exactly tell you who he was, kind lady. When first I knew the gentleman he was Mr. Oldemarsh. Then somebody died and he became Lord Henly Oldemarsh. The following year somebody else died and he was Viscount Rawcliffe, and when last I saw him he was the Marquis of Barchester. Since then I have lost sight of him, but I have no doubt that when I see him he will have changed his name again."

"Vous etes vraiment delicieux, mon cher," Lady Orange exclaimed, more convinced than ever that there was only one aristocracy in the whole of Europe, and that was the English. "No wonder you were puzzled."

She would have liked to have entered on a long dissertation on a subject which interested her more than any other—a dissertation which would have embraced the Domesday Book and the entire feudal system; but Naniescu and Miss Fairfax were once more discussing Rosemary Fowkes and her fiancé.

"I suppose," the Roumanian was saying, "that Lord Tarkington has given up journalism altogether now?"

"I don't know," Miss Fairfax replied. "Lord Tarkington never talks about himself. But Rosemary will never give up her work. She may be in love with Jasper for the moment, but she is permanently enamoured of power, of social and political power, which her clever pen will always secure for her, in a greater degree even than Tarkington's wealth and position."

"Power?" the general said thoughtfully. "Ah, yes. The writer of those articles in the International Review can lay just claim to political power. They did my unfortunate country a good deal of harm at that time, for they appeared as a part of that insidious propaganda which we are too proud, and alas! also too poor, to combat adequately. Over here in England people do not appear to understand how difficult it is to subdue a set of rebellious, arrogant people like the Hungarians, who don't seem to have realized yet that they have lost the war."

Lady Orange gave a little scream of horror.

"Pour l'amour de Dieu," she exclaimed, "keep away from politics, mon cher general."

"A thousand pardons, gracious friend," he retorted meekly, "the sight of that lovely lady who did my poor country so much harm brought words to my tongue which should have remained unspoken in your presence."

"I expect you would be interested to meet Rosemary," said the practical Miss Fairfax, with her slightly malicious smile. "You might convert her, you know."

"My only wish would be," General Naniescu replied with obvious sincerity, "to make her see the truth. It would indeed be an honour to pay my devoirs to the lovely 'Uno'."

"I can arrange that for you easily enough," rejoined Lady Orange.

She leaned over the edge of the box, and with that playful gesture which seemed habitual to her she tapped with her fan the shoulder of a man who was standing just below, talking to a friend.

"When this dance is over, George," she said to him, "tell Rosemary Fowkes to come into my box."

"Tell her that a distinguished Roumanian desires to lay his homage at her feet," Miss Fairfax added bluntly.

"Do you think Sir George will prevail on the divinity?" the general asked eagerly.

Just then the dance was over, the coloured musicians ceased to bawl, and there was a general movement and confusion down below through which Sir George Orange, ever obedient to his wife's commands could be seen vainly striving to find a beautiful needle in a tumbled and unruly haystack. He came back to the side of his wife's box after a while.

"I can't find her," he said apologetically. "She has probably gone to get an ice or something. Tarkington was also looking for her."

"Well," said Lady Orange placidly, turning her surprised gaze on General Naniescu, "suppose you and M. de Kervoisin take us up to supper in the meanwhile. We'll capture Rosemary later, I promise you."

The party in the box broke up. The young people went downstairs to dance whilst the two foreigners gallantly escorted the elderly ladies up innumerable flights of stairs to a cold and cheerless upper story, where an exceedingly indigestible supper washed down with salad dressing and coloured soda-water was served to Pierrots, Marie Antoinettes, Indian squaws, and others who crowded round the tables and fought eagerly for unwashed forks and glasses of doubtful cleanliness.

The Five Arts' Ball was indeed a huge success.

CHAPTER IV

"Would you like anything?" Peter Blakeney asked of his partner while he steered her clear of the crowded dancing floor.

"I am rather thirsty," Rosemary replied, "but I could not stand that awful supper upstairs."

"Well, look here," he urged, "you slip into one of the empty boxes and I'll forage for you."

They found a box on the upper tier, the occupants of which had probably gone off to supper. Rosemary sat down and pulled the curtain forward; thus ensconced in a cosy corner of the box she drew a contented little sigh, glad to be in the dark and alone. Peter went to forage and she remained quite still, gazing-unseeing-on the moving crowd below. She was hot and felt rather breathless, her chestnut hair, below the velvet cap, clung against her forehead, and tiny beads of moisture appeared round the wings of her delicately modelled nose. The last dance had been intoxicating. Peter was a perfect dancer. Rosemary sighed again quite involuntarily: it was a little sigh of regret for those golden minutes that had gone by all too rapidly. Jasper, she reflected, would never make a dancer, but he would make a kind, considerate, always thoughtful husband. The kindest husband any woman could wish for.

Her eyes now sought the dancing floor more insistently. She had just become aware of Jasper's tall figure moving aimlessly amidst the crowd. Dear, kind Jasper! He was looking for her, of course. Always not physically and actually, then with his thoughts, trying to find her, to understand her, to guess at an unspoken wish.

"Dear, kind Jasper," Rosemary sighed and closed her eyes, in order to shut out that sudden glimpse she had just had of Jasper's anxious gaze scanning the crowd-in search of her. She pulled the curtain an inch or two farther forward, pushed back her chair deeper into the shadow.

Peter returned, carrying a bottle of champagne and a tumbler.

"Will this do?" he asked, and busied himself with the cork.

"Delicious," she replied, "but what about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes; you have only brought one glass."

"The only one I could get. There's a regular fight up there for crockery."

She laughed. "It must be horrible up there." She exclaimed.

"Dante's Inferno," he assented laconically.

He filled the glass till the froth bubbled over and then gave it to her to drink, which she did with delight.

"Lovely," she exclaimed.

He watched her as she screwed up her eyes and those tantalizing little lines appeared at the sides of her nose.

"I hear you did splendidly at Lord's this afternoon, Peter," she said. "There's a wonderful article about you in the Evening Post."

Then she held the glass out to be refilled. "Your turn next," she said.

"Won't you have some more?"

"Not just now, thank you."

He put the bottle down on the floor, then put out his hand to take the glass from her. As he did so his fingers closed over hers. She tried to withdraw her hand, and in the brief struggle the glass fell between them and was smashed to smithereens.

"Our one and only glass," Rosemary exclaimed. "Please, Peter," she went on with a nervous little laugh, "will you release my hand?"

"No," he replied, and increased the pressure on her struggling fingers. "I have often been allowed to hold your hand before. Why not now?"

She shrugged her shoulders and ceased to struggle.

"Am I never to be allowed to hold your hand again?" he insisted.

But her head now was turned away; she was apparently deeply interested in the crowd below.

"Oh, Peter," she exclaimed lightly, "do look at Mrs. Opert in that girlish 1840 costume. Did you ever see anything more ludicrous? Do look at her huge feet in those wee sandals. There's Jimmy Ransome talking to her now."

Again she tried to withdraw her hand and still he held her fast. She turned to him with a frown.

"Peter," she said, "if you are going to be foolish, I'll go."

"What do you call being foolish?" he retorted. "Holding your hand? I held you in my arms just now while we danced."

"I call it being foolish, Peter," she retorted coolly. "Would you rather I called it disloyal?"

"You are too clever to do that, Rosemary," he rejoined, "disloyalty being so essentially a feminine attribute."

"Peter!"

"Oh, I know! I know!" he went on, quite slowly, and then suddenly released her hand. "Presently you will be Jasper's wife, the wife of my best friend. And if I happen to hold your hand just one instant longer than convention permits I shall be called disloyal, a cad-any ugly word that takes your fancy or the moment. So I must become less than a friend-less than a distant cousin-I must not hold your hand-the others may-I may not. They may come near you, look into your eyes-see you smile-my God! Rosemary, am I never to look into those glorious eyes of yours again?"

For a moment it seemed as if she was going to give him a direct answer, a soft flush rose to her cheeks, and there was a quick intake of her breath as if words would tumble out that she was determined to suppress. The struggle only lasted for a second. The next she had thrown back her head and burst into a peal of laughter.

"Why, Peter," she exclaimed, and turned great, serious eyes upon him, "I never knew before that you read Browning."

Her laugh had half sobered him. But evidently he had not grasped her meaning, for he frowned and murmured puzzled: "Browning?"

"Why, yes," she said gaily. "I forgot exactly how it goes, but it is something like this: 'I will hold your hand, just as long as all may, Or so very little longer.'"

He made no sign that her flippancy had hurt him; he sat down beside her, his hands clasped between his knees.

"Why should you hate me so, Rosemary?" he asked quietly.

"Hate you, my dear Peter?" she exclaimed. "Whatever put that quaint notion into your head? The heat must have been too much for you this afternoon. You never will wear a cap."

"I know that I am beneath contempt, of course," he insisted, "but when one despises a poor creature like me, it seems wanton cruelty just to kick it."

"I did not mean to hurt you, Peter," Rosemary rejoined more gently, "But when you are trying to talk nonsense, I must in self-defence bring you back to sanity."

"Nonsense? Would to God I could talk nonsense, act nonsense, live nonsense. Would to God my poor brain did refuse to take in the fact that you have promised to become Jasper's wife, and that I like a fool, have lost you for ever."

"Lost me, Peter?" she retorted, with just the faintest tremor of bitterness in her voice. "I don't think you ever sought me very seriously, did you?"

"I have loved you, Rosemary," Peter Blakeney said very slowly and very deliberately, "from the first moment I set eyes on you."

Then, as the girl shrugged her shoulders with an obvious attempt at indifference, he said more insistently: "You knew it, Rosemary."

"I know that you often said so, Peter," she replied coldly.

"You knew it that night on the river when you lay in my arms just like a lovely pixie, with your haunting eyes closed and your lips pressed to mine. You knew it then, Rosemary," he insisted.

But now she would no longer trust herself to speak. She had drawn herself farther back within the shadows. All that Peter could see of her was the exquisite oval of her face like a cameo carved against the dark, indefinite background. Her eyes he could not see, for they were veiled by the delicate, blue-veined lids, but he had a glimpse of her breast like mother-of-pearl, and of her small hand clinging tightly to the protecting curtain. The rest of her, swathed in the rich folds of her brocaded gown, was merged in the shadows, her auburn hair hidden by the velvet cap. Just by looking at her face, and on that clinging hand, he knew that everything within her was urging her to flee, was warning her not to listen, not to allow her memory to recall that wonderful night in June, on the river, when the tall grasses bending to the breeze, and a nightingale in the big walnut tree sang a lullaby to its mate. Intuitively he knew that she wished to flee, but that a certain something held her back, forced her to listen—a certain something that was a spell, an enchantment, or just the arms of her sister-pixies that clung around her and would not let her go.

"Don't let us talk about the past, Peter," she murmured at last involuntarily, with a pathetic note of appeal in her voice.

"I mean to talk about it, Rosemary," he retorted quietly, "just this once more. After that I will fall out of your life. You can cast me out and I will become one of the crowd. I won't even take your hand, I will try not to see you, not even in my dreams. Though every inflection of your voice makes my bones ache with longing, I shall try not to listen. Just now I held you while we danced; you never once looked at me, but I held you closer than any man ever held woman before. I held you with my soul and heart and body—just now and for the last time. And though you never looked at me once, Rosemary, you allowed me to hold you as I did—not your body only, but your soul—and whilst we danced and your sweet breath fanned my cheek you belonged to me as completely as you did that night on the river, even though you have pledged your word to Jasper. Though why you did that," he added, with a quaint change of mood, "God alone knows."

"Jasper wants me," she murmured. "He loves me. He sets me above his ambition—"

Peter Blakeney gave a harsh, mirthless laugh.

"Dear old Jasper," he said, "even he would laugh to hear you say that. Ambition! There's no room for ambition in the scheme of Jasper's life. How can a man be ambitious when all the beneficent genii of this world presided at his birth and showered gifts into his lap? It is we, poor devils, who have ambitions—and see them unfulfilled."

"Ambitions which you set above your love, above everything," Rosemary broke in, and turned to look him straight in the eyes. "You talk of love, Peter," she went on with sudden vehemence, while the sharp words came tumbling out at last as if from the depths of her overburdened heart. "What do you know of love? You are quite right, I did lay in your arms that night, loving you with my whole being, my soul seeking yours and finding it in that unforgettable kiss. My God! How I could have loved you, Peter! But you? What were your thoughts of me the next day, and the next day after that, whilst I waited in suspense which turned to torture for a word from you that would recall that hour? What were your thoughts? Where were you? I was waiting for you at the Lascelles as you had promised you would come over from Oxford the very next day. You did not come—not for days—weeks—"

"Rosemary!"

"Not for days—weeks—" she insisted, "and I waited for a sign—a letter—"

"Rosemary, at the time you understood!"

"I only understood," she retorted with cold irony, "that you blamed yourself for having engaged my young affections—that you had your way to make in the world before you could think of asking a girl to share your poverty—and so on—and so on—every time we met—and in every letter you wrote—whilst I—"

"Whilst you did not understand, Peter," she went on more calmly. "Whilst you spoke of the future, of winning fame and fortune—"

"For you, Rosemary!" he cried involuntarily, and buried his head in his hands. "I was only thinking of you—"

"You were not thinking of me, Peter, or you would have known that there was no poverty or toil I would not gladly have shared with the man I loved."

"Yes! poverty—toil—on an equal footing. Rosemary; but you were rich, famous: already you had the world at your feet—"

"And you did not care for me enough, Peter," she said with a note of fatality in her voice, "to accept wealth, comfort, help in your career from me —"

"Peter Blakeney the cricketer," he declaimed with biting sarcasm; "don't you know, he is the husband of Rosemary Fowkes now. What a glorious career for a man, eh, to be the husband of a world-famous wife?"

"It would only have been for a time," she protested.

"A time during which youth would have flown away on the wings of life, taking with it honour, manhood, dignity—"

“And love?”

“Perhaps.”

There was silence between them after that. The last word had been spoken, the immutable word of Fate. Peter still sat with his head buried in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees—a hunched up figure weighed down by the heavy hand of an inexorable past.

Rosemary looked down at the bent head, and there, in the shadow, where no one could save the immortal recorder of sorrows and of tears, a look of great tenderness and of pity crept into her haunting eyes. It was only for a moment. With a great effort of will she shook herself free from the spell that for a while had held possession of her soul. With a deliberate gesture she drew back the curtain, so that her face and figure became all at once flooded with light, she looked down upon the kaleidoscopic picture below: the dusky orchestra had once more begun to belch forth hideous sounds, and hellish screams, the puppets on the dancing floor began one by one to resume their gyrations. Several among the crowd, looking up, saw and recognized Rosemary: she smiled and nodded to them, waved her fan in recognition. She was Rosemary Fowkes once more, the most talked-of woman in England, the fiancée of Jasper Tarkington, queen of her set, admired, adulated, the comet of the past two seasons.

“There’s that tiresome George Orange,” she said in her coldest, most matter-of-fact tone. “He is making desperate and ludicrous signs. I strongly suspect him of making straight for this box. Shall we try to give him the slip?”

Her quiet voice seemed to act like an anodyne on Peter’s jangled nerves. He straightened out his tall figure, quietly pulled the chairs away, to enable her to pass. She, too, rose and prepared to go. It seemed difficult not to say another word, or to look him once more straight in the eyes; and yet to speak words now, after what had just passed between them, seemed more difficult than anything. His hand was on the door handle. The other side of the door people were moving up and down, talking and laughing. Another second or two and she would pass out of his sight—pass out of his life more effectually even than she had done when she gave her word to Jasper Tarkington. Another second. But just then she raised her eyes, and they met his.

“Rosemary!” he said.

She shook her head and smiled gently, ironically perhaps, indulgently also as on a rebuked child.

“I had better go now, Peter,” she said quietly. “I feel sure George Orange is on his way to drag me to his wife’s box.”

Just for another second he did not move.

“It is no use, Rosemary,” he said, and in his turn smiled as on something very dear, very precious, wholly unattainable. “It is no use, my dear.”

“What is no use, Peter?” she murmured.

“Thinking that all is over.”

“In six months’ time, if I am alive,” she rejoined coolly, “I shall be Jasper Tarkington’s wife.”

“I know it, dear. Jasper is my friend, and I would not harbour one disloyal thought against him. But you being the wife of an enemy or of my best friend is beside the point. I cannot shut you out of my life, strive how I may. Never. While I am as I am, and you the exquisite creature you are, so long as we are both alive, you will remain a part of my life. Whenever I catch a glimpse of you, whenever I hear the sound of your voice, my soul will thrill and long for you. Not with one thought will I be disloyal to Jasper, for in my life you will be as an exquisite spirit, an idea greater or less than woman. Just you. If you are happy I shall know it. If you grieve, Heaven help the man or woman who caused your tears. I have been a fool; yet I regret nothing. Sorrow at your hands is sweeter than any happiness on earth.”

It was quite dark where they stood side by side in this moment of supreme farewell. Each felt the inevitableness of it all—the fatality. Pride on either side had built a barrier between them: honour and loyalty would consolidate it in the future. Too late! Everything was too late!

Peter bent his knee to the ground and slowly raised the hem of her gown to his lips. But Rosemary did not move: for that one instant her limbs had become marble, and in her soul she prayed that her heart, too, might turn to stone.

Then Peter rose and opened the door, and she passed out into the world again.

CHAPTER V

Outside in the corridor Rosemary met Sir George Orange, who claimed her then and there and dragged her willy-nilly to his wife's box. She never looked back once to see what Peter was doing. He had become merged in the crowd, and, anyway, this was the end.

She found herself presently being talked to, flattered, adulated by the distinguished Roumanian who turned the full battery of his mellow eyes and his persuasive tongue upon her, bent on making a breach in the wall of her prejudices and her thinly veiled enmity.

She told no one, not even Jasper, the gist of her conversation with Naniescu. He had put a proposal before her—a proposal which meant work for Rosemary Fowkes—the *Uno* of the *International Review*. He had proposed that she should go to Transylvania, study for herself the conditions now prevailing in the territory occupied by Roumania, and publish the result of her studies in the *English and American Press*. And this was just the sort of work that Rosemary longed for, now, more than at any other time of her life. Naniescu had played his cards well. He had known how to flatter, insidiously, delicately, this popular writer who had captured the public fancy, and whose influence with pen and personality was paramount with a vast section of review and newspaper readers in England. What he had proposed could in no way hurt the most delicate scruples of an over-sensitive conscience, and the proposal came as a veritable godsend to Rosemary at this moment when her whole soul was in a turmoil of remorse, longing, and rebellion. That her love for Peter Blakeney was not dead, she had known well enough all along, but she had little dreamed until this hour how completely it still possessed her, what power his glance, his touch, his nearness still had over her. She had thought of her love as a heap of smouldering ashes, and lo! it had proved itself to be a devastating fire that burned fiercely beneath.

And Peter?

Peter had set the future above the present; his pride above his love, and she, wounded to the quick, had allowed ambition and pride to throw her into Jasper Tarkington's arms. It was all done now. Irrevocably done. But even at the moment when she most bitterly regretted the past, she was resolved to keep her word loyally to Jasper. Sitting beside him in the car that took her home from the Albert Hall ball, she allowed her hand to rest contentedly in his. His arm was round her, and her cheek rested against his shoulder. She did not speak, for she was very tired, but she listened, unshrinking, to the tender words which he whispered in her ear. Dear, kind Jasper! He had thoughts only for her. From the moment when she finally promised that she would be his wife, he had loaded her with delicate attentions and exquisite gifts. Every word he spoke was soothing and restful, so different from Peter's tempestuous outbursts, his unrestrained, passionate eloquence that would leave her limp and bruised, unable to understand his next mood, his sudden indifference to everything save his own future pursuits.

CHAPTER VI

It was only a couple of days later that Rosemary broached to Jasper Tarkington the subject that was uppermost in her mind. She had lunched with him at the Ritz, and they walked together across St. James's Park to her flat in Ashley Gardens. It was one of those rare days of June which make of England one of the most desirable countries to be alive in. The air was soft, with just that delicious feeling of moisture in it that gives additional fragrance to the scent of the hawthorn: it vibrated with the multitudinous sounds of bird-song, a twitter and a singing and a whistling that thrilled the ear with their heavenly melodies.

Rosemary Fowkes was very nearly as tall as her fiancée, and Jasper Tarkington had a slight stoop which brought his eyes on a level with hers. Scoffers were wont to say that Tarkington's stoop was nothing but affectation; it certainly was a characteristic of him as is a monocle with some men. His whole appearance was one of super-refinement: he essentially gave the impression of a man who had seen so much of the world that he had become surfeited with it, and thoroughly weary. The weary expression was never absent from his eyes, which were very dark and set rather close together, and though he was quite a young man—still on the right side of thirty—there were a good many lines round them—as well as round his expressive mouth and firm chin. He had slender, beautifully shaped hands which, when he walked, he kept behind his back holding a malacca cane that was adorned with a green tassel. There is no doubt that there was a hint of affectation about Jasper Tarkington's appearance and manner, although in conversation he spoke with true Anglo-Saxon directness. He was always dressed with scrupulous correctness, and affected the Edwardian rather than the ultra-modern modes. On the whole an arresting personality, whose kindly expression attenuated the somewhat harsh Wellingtonian features, and the hard outline of the narrow hatchet face.

Rosemary Fowkes, walking beside him in her irreproachably cut tailor-made looked like a young Diana, radiant with youth and health. Her skin, her eyes, her hair, the jaunty little hat she wore, the trim shoes and neat silk stockings appeared strangely out of harmony with the stooping figure of this disillusioned man of the world, with that vague air of Buckingham Palace about his grey frock coat and silk hat.

It was whilst walking through the park that Rosemary spoke to her fiancé about Naniescu's proposal. Jasper listened attentively and without interrupting her, until she herself paused, obviously waiting for him to speak. Then he said:

"And you have fallen in with General Naniescu's views?"

"Yes!" she replied, after an instant's hesitation. "The whole thing appeals to me very much, and I am flattered by the confidence which the Roumanian Government apparently has in my judgement. And of course," she added, "I am not bound in any way."

"Have you made any definite promises to Naniescu?"

"Not quite definite. I wanted first of all to consult your wishes."

"Oh, my dear!" Tarkington interjected, and for one instant a light of youth and folly illumined his tired eyes. "Did I not promise you when you made me so immeasurably happy that you should be absolutely free to follow your career in whatever manner you choose? I am far too proud of you to wish to hamper you in any way."

"You have always been the dearest, kindest, most considerate creature on God's earth," Rosemary rejoined, and in her eyes there came a look so soft, so tender, so womanly, that the man on whom it fell hardly dared to meet it. "But you are not forgetting, are you, Jasper," she went on earnestly, "that politically we don't always see eye to eye, you and I?"

"So long as we see eye to eye in other things," he said, "what does it matter? When I asked you, my dear, to be my wife, I knew that I would not be mating with a silly doll. I am not fatuous enough to imagine that you would change the trend of your beliefs in order to harmonize them with mine."

Rosemary made no reply for the moment. Probably had they been alone she would have put out her hand and given him a grateful and understanding squeeze. As it was, the tears gathered in her eyes, for Jasper had spoken so naturally, and at the same time so nobly, that her heart was more than ever touched by those splendid qualities in him which his actions and his words were constantly revealing to her. Perhaps she was nearer to being in love with Jasper Tarkington at this hour than she had been since first he asked her to be his wife; and when the glory of this June afternoon, the twittering of birds, the scent of syringa and lilac in the air brought back with nerve-racking insistence memories of Peter's voice and Peter's touch, it was by mentally comparing the character of the two men as she knew them that she succeeded in casting those memories away.

"You are wonderfully good to me, Jasper," she sighed.

"One cannot," he retorted simply, "be good to that which is most precious in life: one can only worship and be grateful. But now tell me something more about your plans. I feel a little bewildered, you know, at the suddenness of them."

"I have not yet made any definite plans," she replied, "and as I told you, I have made no definite promise to General Naniescu. As a matter of fact, I intend writing him a final acceptance or refusal to-night."

"But you incline towards an acceptance?"

"Frankly, yes!"

"That would mean — ?" he queried.

"That I start for Budapest within the next few days."

"What about your passport?"

"General Naniescu assured me that he would see to that."

"But you would not stay long in Budapest?"

"No, only a couple of days. I shall go straight on to Transylvania. I have been there before, you know."

"No, I did not know."

"Peter's mother was a great friend of mine. You know I was a motherless kid, and she took me under her wing on many, many occasions. At one time I travelled with her a good deal, and she took me several times with her when she went to Transylvania to stay with her relations. I know them all. They are dears."

"And, of course, they are extraordinarily hospitable over there," Tarkington admitted dryly.

"Hospitable to a fault! Mrs. Blakeney's sister, who is Countess Imrey, was kindness itself to me when I was in Transylvania two years ago for the International. In any case, I should go to her first. The Imreys have a beautiful chateau not far from Kolozsvár."

"I am afraid we must call it Cluj now," Jasper interposed with a smile.

"Yes," Rosemary retorted hotly. "Aren't those little pin-pricks damnable? Changing the name of a city that has been Hungarian for centuries, and that has been the centre of some of the most epoch-making movements in Hungarian history. It is mean and petty! You must admit, Jasper," she insisted, "that it is mean and far more galling to a proud, if conquered, nation than other more tangible deeds of oppression. Why, even the Germans when they took Alsace-Lorraine from France did not re-name their towns!"

Jasper Tarkington smiled at her vehemence.

"Naniescu, I perceive," he said, "has set himself a difficult task."

"He has," she admitted with a merry laugh. "But I left him no illusions on the subject. He knows that at the present moment, and with all the knowledge which-as I reminded him-I gathered at first hand two years ago, I am just as severe a critic of his government as I was then. He, on the other hand, declares that if I will divest myself of every prejudice and go to Transylvania with an open mind, I shall understand that Roumania is acting not only in her own, very obvious, interests, but also in the interests of European peace. Well," Rosemary concluded gaily, "I am going to accept General Naniescu's challenge, and I am going to Transylvania with an open mind. I am to have a perfectly free hand. Not a word in any article I choose to write is to be censored: he declares that he will show me the truth, and nothing but the truth, and that his government is only too ready to accord me every facility for investigation and for placing the case before the British public."

She paused to draw breath after this long peroration. As she walked so freely along, the eyes of many a passer-by were cast with undisguised admiration on the graceful girlish figure, the face aglow with youth and animation, the sparkling eyes, the lips which Nature had so obviously framed for a kiss. Jasper Tarkington said nothing for the moment; when she had finished speaking he sighed, involuntarily perhaps, and his tired eyes took on a still more wearied look. Was it that he felt he could not altogether follow this exquisite woman along the path of ambition which she trod with so youthful a step? Was he just a little too old, a little too blasé, to share all that enthusiasm, that pride, that burning desire to live every moment of the span of life, to fill every hour with deeds and spoken thoughts which would abide when youth had gone?

Who shall say? Jasper Tarkington had never been communicative; his best friends knew little of his life, and though he, too, in his day had used his unquestioned mental gifts for political journalism, he had never been the ardent propagandist that this beautiful apostle of lost causes desired to be. His silence now acted as a slight damper on Rosemary's enthusiasm.

"I am sorry, dear," she said gently. "I always seem to forget that you and I are in opposite camps over this one thing."

"We shan't be that for long," he retorted lightly, "if Naniescu's hopes are fulfilled."

Strangely enough, just as he spoke he saw General Naniescu and M. de Kervoisin, who were entering the park at Queen Anne's Gate as they themselves were coming out of it. The three men raised their hats, and Rosemary gave Naniescu and his friend a pleasant nod.

"I don't think," Tarkington said after a moment of two, "that our friend Naniescu will be very fond of me after this."

"Why?" On the contrary, "he should be grateful that you have not tried to oppose him in any way."

"I am going to oppose him in one way, though," Jasper resumed earnestly. "I don't intend to interfere with his plans or yours, my dear, as I said before; but there is one thing I am going to ask you, Rosemary."

"What is it, dear?" she asked impulsively. "I am so glad you are going to ask me for something. All the giving has been on your side up to now."

"Not so fast, little one. You mayn't be ready to do what I want."

"Is that likely?" she retorted. Then added with gentle earnestness: "There is nothing in the world I wouldn't do for you, Jasper."

"Will you marry me," he asked abruptly, "before you go away?"

She did not reply immediately, for in truth she was very much taken aback. Her engagement to Jasper Tarkington was very recent, and up to now he had not once spoken of a definite date for the marriage. She felt herself placed in an awkward position, for the fact that only a few seconds ago she had assured him that there was nothing she would not do for him. And now this request for an immediate marriage. She certainly was not prepared for it. Everything in her urged her to refuse. The memory of that hour in the box at the Albert Hall, her talk with Peter, her realization that Peter still held her heart, still ruled over her thoughts; everything, in fact, except a sense of gratitude urged her to refuse. And yet she could not-not after what she had said, not after all that Jasper Tarkington had done for her. While all these thoughts were whirling in her brain as she walked along, mechanically now, all the spring gone out of her step, something of the joy of living gone out of her spirits, she vaguely heard Jasper's quiet, gentle voice.

"You mean so much to me, Rosemary," he was saying, "that life here in England while you were God knows where, in tribulation, perhaps, perhaps in danger, needing me too, perhaps without knowing it, would be unendurable. I could not do it. I should follow you, anyway, and come as near to you as I dared, yet without the right to look after you as closely as I would wish. Well, my dear, you are far too womanly and kind to inflict such torture upon me. For it would be torture, and I would go under through it all. I don't know if you quite understand, but—"

There was an unusual vibration in his voice; it seemed as if, for once, passion would get the better of his habitual restraint. Tarkington always spoke slowly and directly, but for once words appeared to be failing him. However, just then they turned into Victoria Street, and the noise and bustle of traffic, his meticulous care of Rosemary while they crossed the road, brought him back to the prosiness of life. Nor did he speak again till they had reached the quietude of Ashley Gardens.

"Will you come up?" Rosemary asked, pausing at the entrance of one of the blocks of flats.

He shook his head.

"I think I would like you to think it all over quietly," he said. "I want you to remember that when I am asking you to hurry on our marriage, I only do it because I want to have the right to look after you. I won't interfere with you in any way whatever. I give you my word that as my wife you will be every bit as free as you are now-more so, really, because in that part of Europe a married woman can claim an independence which convention absolutely denies to a girl. In Budapest you will meet people of your own nationality, and of

your own set. I could not bear the thought that your loveliness would leave you a ready prey to gossip or malice. There now," he added, with a self-deprecatory smile, "I have said more than I meant to. My first excuse is that you are more than life to me, and as you are so precious, I foresee dangers where perhaps none exist. My second is that I am pleading for my own happiness-I was almost going to say for my life. you are not like other women, Rosemary; you are above the petty conventions of trousseaux and crowded weddings. As soon as I have your answer I will get the special licence and we'll be married in your parish church without fuss and ceremony. So think it over, my dear, and let me have your answer as early to-morrow morning as you can. Remember that I shall scarcely live until I have your answer."

She made no reply; only put out her hand, which he took in his. There was no glove on it, and for a moment it seemed that in spite of passers-by, in spite of the conventional atmosphere of this part of London, he would raise that little hand to his lips. His eyes rested on her with a look of passionate desire; so intense was his gaze that suddenly she felt almost afraid. Rosemary had never seen Jasper's eyes look quite like that. As a rule they were so gentle, sometimes mildly ironical, at others only weary. But now it almost seemed as if, in order to bend her will to his, he was striving to exert some kind of power that was outside himself, as if he had called to his aid forces that would prove more invincible than those that were within him. The spell-it seemed like a spell-only lasted a couple of seconds; the next instant his look had turned to one of infinite tenderness. He patted her hand and reiterated gently:

"Think it over, my dear, when you are alone."

Instantly she felt the tears gathering in her eyes. His gentleness, his tender care of her, appealed to all that was truly womanly in Rosemary Fowkes. Self-reliant, brilliantly clever, independent in thought and actions as she was, she responded all the more readily to a man's desire for the right to protect as well as to cherish. Her independence had found its birth in loneliness. Fatherless, motherless in very early life, she had soon enough shaken herself free from any trammels that well-meaning relations desired to put over her actions. Her genius had consolidated her independence, but it had never stifled those vague longings for submission and self-abnegation which are the sublime satisfaction of a true woman's soul.

After Jasper Tarkington left her, and when she was alone in her flat, Rosemary Fowkes turned to the one thing that had never failed her in the great moments of her life. She turned to prayer. On her knees, and with her heart filled with longing and a sorrow that she dared not face, she prayed for help and for guidance. She had no one to turn to but Him who said with infinite understanding and love: "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you."

In the midst of worldly joys, satisfied ambition, hopes for the future and pride in the past, Rosemary Fowkes would to-night have felt desperately lonely and lost in bewilderment before a divided duty-duty to self, duty to Jasper-but for the comfort of prayer, the thought of all that lay beyond this world of ours, a world that is so sordid and petty even at its best.

CHAPTER VII

The next two or three weeks were like a dream for Rosemary Fowkes. She left herself no time to think. The future beckoned to her with enticing arms, holding prospects of activities, of work that would fill the mind to the exclusion of memory. That evening when she rose from her knees, she rose with a resolve, and never for one moment after that did she allow herself an instant of regret. She wrote a line to Jasper to tell him that she would do as he wished; she was prepared to marry him as soon as his own arrangements were completed.

She also wrote to General Naniescu, agreeing to his proposal. She reserved to herself complete freedom of action to send any articles or reports she chose to English or foreign Press; all that she desired from him was a confirmatory letter, promising that nothing she ever wrote would pass through the censor's hands. This he at once sent her. Nothing could be more fair, more straightforward. Rosemary's chivalrous mind responded whole-heartedly to Naniescu's generosity, and the feeling that it would probably be in her power to do real good, not only to individuals but to peoples, acted as a soothing balm upon her bruised heart.

On the other hand, nothing could have exceeded Jasper's kindness and consideration during the days immediately preceding her marriage. It almost seemed as if his super-sensitive soul had received a faint inkling of what was going on in Rosemary's mind. Nothing appeared too onerous, no sacrifice too great where Rosemary's comfort and desires were at stake, and at times—such are the contradictions of a woman's nature—she felt almost impatient with him for his magnanimity, almost obsessed by the unselfishness of his love.

She only saw Peter Blakeney once before she and Jasper left for Budapest, and that was on the day of her wedding. By one of those involuntary blunders so peculiar to dim-sighted lovers, Jasper Tarkington had asked Peter to be his best man. What it was that had induced Peter to accept, Rosemary could not conjecture. His impulses had always been strange and unaccountable, and this one was more unaccountable than most. Perhaps he merely wished to pander to his own mad desire to see her once again, perhaps it was just a semi-barbaric instinct in him that pushed him to self-torture. Rosemary by now had sufficient hold over herself to meet him calmly; not one line in her beautiful face, not one look in her haunting eyes, betrayed what she felt, after the wedding ceremony, when she accepted Peter's warmly expressed good wishes for her happiness. Even her sensitive ear could not detect the faintest note of irony or bitterness in his voice. After that he said a few words about the projected journey to Hungary, about which Jasper had spoken to him. She would be seeing his relatives there—the Imreys, the Heves. Elza Imrey was his mother's sister and such a dear, and Philip used to be a jolly boy; but Rosemary knew them all. She knew she would be made very welcome. Peter ended by speaking with great earnestness about his little cousin Anna Heves; her father, who had been Mrs. Blakeney's only brother, was dead, and Peter had an idea that Anna was not altogether happy.

"She has left home for some reason I can't quite fathom," he said, "and lives now at Kolozsvár—I mean Cluj. She writes to me sometimes, and when I know the exact day when you will be in Cluj, I will write and tell her to go and see you. I suppose you will put up at the Pannonia?"

Rosemary nodded and Peter went on talking about little Anna, as he called her. "I know you will be kind to her," he said. "You remember her as a child, of course; in a way she is still a child, and so pretty and enthusiastic. Give her a kiss from me when you see her."

Which Rosemary, of course, promised to do. Then she gave him her hand, without saying anything, for she could not trust herself to speak much, and he kissed it just above the wrist, but more like a knight doing homage to his lady than a lover who gazed, perhaps for the last time, on the woman he worshiped.

It was after the marriage ceremony that the dream-land in which Rosemary had moved these past days became more intangible, more of a spirit-world than before. The brief days in a dreary hotel at Folkestone would have been unendurable but for her state of mind, which almost amounted to semi-consciousness. Then came the weary journey to Budapest, the sleepless night in the train, the awful meals in the crowded, stuffy restaurant-car, the ceaseless rub-a-dub-dub, rub-a-dub-dub of the wheels that bore her away farther—ever farther from that bygone world which had become the might-have-been. And through it all, like a ray of light, so persistent that it ceased to impress, was Jasper's constant, unwearied care of her. He never seemed too tired to minister to her wants, to arrange cushions for her, a footstool, to open or close the window, the thousand and one little attentions, in fact, which most travellers are too self-engrossed to render.

And as Rosemary sat in her corner seat during those two wearisome days gazing out of the window with eyes that failed to take in the beauties of successive landscapes, her mind gradually became at peace with her heart. Her youth, her buoyancy of spirits, reasserted themselves, made her envisage life in all its brightest aspects, as it presented itself before her with cornucopia filled to the brim with all that made it worth the living. Work and a noble mate! What more could heart of woman desire? And Rosemary closed her eyes, and in a quickly fleeting dream sighed for the one thing that would have made her life a paradise, and—still dreaming—she felt hot tears of regret trickle slowly down her cheeks.

She woke to feel Jasper's arms around her and his lips kissing away her tears.

CHAPTER VIII

Budapest had been baking all day under a merciless sun in late July. But at this hour the coolness of a clear moonlit evening sent everyone out of doors. The Corso was crowded.

Rosemary Tarkington, on the terrace of the café sat sipping delicious coffee and lazily watching the throng. Now and then she would look straight out before her, and her eyes would lose all sense of fatigue as she gazed on the incomparable panorama before her: the ornate palace of the Hapsburgs, and the cathedral of St. Matthias, and on the left, towering above all, high upon the rock, the great grim fortress that for over a century had held the Turks at bay and saved Europe from the hordes of Islam. One by one tiny lights began to wink and to blink in the houses that rose tier upon tier on the slopes across the river, whilst down below gaily illuminated boats flitted to and fro upon the turbulent waters of the Danube, carrying a burden of merry-makers home from the shady island of Ste. Marguerite close by. The whole scene before Rosemary's eyes was one of unrivalled picturesqueness and animation. No town in Europe presents quite so enthralling a spectacle, and one whose charm is still further enhanced by the strains of those half-sad, half-voluptuous Hungarian melodies which come to the ear from out the shadows, or from the passing river boats, gentle as a caress, soothing to nerves and senses by their sweet melancholy rhythm, or exhilarating when they break into their peculiarly harmonious syncopated cadences.

Rosemary had specially elected to put up at the Hungaria rather than in one of the more modern, recently built hotels. For her the "Hungaria" was full of associations, of joyous times spent there when she was still a schoolgirl in the days before the war. She had travelled in Hungary and Transylvania under ideal conditions with Mrs. Blakeney, Peter's mother, seeing the best this romantic country had to offer, welcomed always with that large-hearted hospitality peculiar to these kindly people. But memory recalled more strenuous times, too, those in the early days of her journalistic career, when her heart was filled with pity for the sufferings of a proud and ill-starred country, whose fairest lands had been flung like rags by thoughtless politicians as a sop to those who had been her associates in the war until the hour when self-interest prompted them to throw in their lot with the other side.

"You must be very tired, Lady Tarkington," a pleasant voice said close to her elbow.

"Not tired," Rosemary replied, "but rather dazed. The journey over from England is slower and much more fatiguing than it used to be."

Captain and Mrs. Payson were sitting beside her at the table. Recently attached to the British Military Mission in Hungary, Captain Payson and his young wife lived at the "Hungaria." It had been a great pleasure for them to see Rosemary again, whom they had known for several years, and after supper they had all foregathered on the terrace over their coffee. Some few minutes before this Jasper had elected to take a turn on the Corso, to stretch his legs and to smoke a cigar, but Rosemary felt too lazy to move, and she like to talk to the Paysons, who were genial and intellectual, and with whom she had a great deal in common in the way of associations and friends.

"The place has not altered much," Rosemary went on after a while. "The people here are always gay and cheerful-in spite of-of everything."

"Yes," little Mrs. Payson assented lightly. "Give them their music, their delicious wines and perfect cooking, and nine out of ten Hungarians won't care if they are ruled by King or Emperor, by foreign tyrant or Bolshevik ruffian."

"I always think Ruth is wrong when she says that," Captain Payson put in earnestly. "The Hungarians are sportsmen, as we are, and they are taking their punishment like sportsmen. They are not going to let the world see how much they suffer. In that way they are very different from the Germans."

"They behaved with unparalleled folly," Rosemary remarked.

"Yes," the captain retorted, "and with commendable loyalty. The Hungarians are a nation of gentlemen, just as the British. They, like ourselves, are worshippers of tradition. They are royalists in their hearts, almost to a man. Just think what their feelings must be whenever they look across the river and gaze on that gorgeous palace over there, whence their anointed King has been driven by petty foreign politicians who scarcely knew where Hungary was situated on the map."

Before Rosemary could pursue the subject she caught sight of her husband forging his way towards her between the crowded tables of the terrace.

"Naniescu is down below," Jasper said as soon as he had reached his wife's side. "I told him you were up here, and he said he wished to pay his respects. He is talking to some friends for the moment, but he will be here directly."

"Then Ruth and I had better run," Captain Payson said lightly. "He and I are always on the verge of a quarrel when we meet."

He and his wife rose and took their leave; there was much talking and laughing and promises to meet on the morrow. When they had gone Rosemary said to her husband: "I would rather not have seen General Naniescu to-night. I am very tired, and honestly I don't feel at my best."

"I am so sorry," Jasper replied at once, full of contrition. "I did my utmost to put him off. I knew, of course, that you must be very tired. But he leaves Budapest early to-morrow morning. He is going to Cluj—"

"Cluj?" she asked, puzzled, then laughed lightly. "Oh, ah!" she went on. "I always forget that dear old Kolozsvár is Cluj now."

"Naniescu was anxious to see that our passports were quite in order, and as this is important—"

"You did quite right, dear," Rosemary rejoined gently, "as you always do. I don't suppose the general will keep us long-though he is a terrible talker," she added with a sigh.

A moment or two later the handsome Roumanian came up to Rosemary's table.

"Ah, dear lady," he said, and with habitual elaborate gesture he took her hand and raised it to his lips. "What a joy it is to see that you have fulfilled your promise and that you are here at last."

He sat down at the table but declined Jasper's offer of a liqueur or cup of coffee.

"I am only here for a moment," he said, "Overwhelmed with work and with engagements. But I thought it would save you trouble if I just looked at your passports and saw that they were entirely in order."

"That is more than kind," Rosemary rejoined, whilst Jasper went immediately to fetch the passports. For a moment or two Rosemary remained silent and absorbed. An indefinable something had caused her to shrink when she felt General Naniescu's full lips upon her hand-something hostile and portentous. The next moment this feeling had gone, and she was ready to chide herself for it. Naniescu was earnest, persuasive, elaborately polite in manner and florid of speech just as he had been in London, when first he put his proposal before her, and certainly there was not a hint of anything sinister about him.

"I am looking forward to my visit to Transylvania," Rosemary said quite gaily.

"You will find every official there ready to welcome you, dear lady," Naniescu assured her. "You need only express a wish, to find it met in every possible way. And if you should do me the honour of requiring my personal services, needless to say that I should fly immediately to obey your commands."

Rosemary shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"I don't anticipate any such call upon your valuable time," she said coolly.

"Ah, one never knows. You, dear lady, are going amongst a strange people," he added with a sigh. "People whose supposed grievances have made bitter."

"I have old friends in Transylvania, and will feel as safe with them as I should in my flat in London."

"You will stay the whole time with the Imreys?" the general asked.

"Who told you I was going to stay with them?" she retorted quickly.

"You yourself, dear lady," he replied, unperturbed, "or did I merely make a shrewd guess? Anyway, on that unforgettable evening at the Albert Hall, when first I had the honour of an introduction to you, I saw you dancing with Mr. Blakeney. The Countess Imrey is his mother's sister-you told me that you had friends in Transylvania-the inference surely was obvious. I trust I have not offended you," Naniescu went on in his most mellifluous tone, "by the suggestion."

"No, no," Rosemary replied, already vexed with herself for having unwittingly provoked the Roumanian into one of those elaborate speeches which irritated her and gave her a vague feeling that malicious irony lurked behind so much blandness. "Mrs. Blakeney was a dear friend of mine; she and I travelled a great deal together, and I stayed more than once with the Imreys, not only at Kis-Imre, but in their beautiful house at Kolozsvár."

"Ah, then," the general rejoined, "if you know the house at Cluj, you would-in the scarce probable likelihood of your wishing to command my services-know where to find me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I am living in the Imreys' house now."

"But-how can that be?" Rosemary retorted, somewhat puzzled, for she knew that in this part of Europe the idea of letting their house to strangers would never occur to proud, wealthy people like the Imreys, as it does so readily to those of their caste in England. But when General Naniescu, with an indifferent shrug, replied dryly: "Oh, the house was a great deal too big for the occupation of a small family. On public grounds we cannot allow the many suffer for the whims of a few," Rosemary frowned, no longer puzzled. She felt rather than saw that the Roumanian's dark, mellow eyes rested on her for an instant with a look of quiet mockery. But it was a mere flash. The next moment he was as suave as before, and said with that perfect deference which he had always affected when speaking to her about her work:

"That question, dear lady, will be one which I earnestly hope you will approach with an open mind, and on which your brilliant intellect will, I trust, shed the light of truth."

Jasper's return with the passports brought on a fresh train of thought. Naniescu pronounced them to be in perfect order. He added a special note and signature to the visa which had been obtained from the Roumanian Consul in London. Rosemary was feeling very tired and longed to go to bed, but Naniescu stayed on, talking desultorily to Jasper about politics and social conditions, all matters which Rosemary did not feel sufficiently alert to discuss. Her thoughts wandered away and she scarcely heard what the two men were saying; she was, in fact, just meditating on a polite-form of abrupt leave-taking when something that Naniescu said arrested her attention.

"My Government," the Roumanian was saying, obviously in reply to a remark from Jasper, "is quite alive to the evil wrought by those pernicious articles which appear from time to time in English and American newspapers. . . ."

"Then why doesn't your censor stop them?" Jasper queried bluntly.

"He would, my dear Lord Tarkington," Naniescu rejoined blandly, "he would. But those devils are so astute. How they manage to smuggle their articles through the post I for one cannot for the life of me make out."

"Ah," Rosemary put in with a smile, as quietly ironical as Naniescu's had been a while ago, "you still carry on a strict censorship, then? You do not believe in liberty of speech or of the Press."

"We do, dear lady, indeed we do. But unfortunately the English and American Press are so easily captured by sentimentality. Put a case before them of supposed wrong, however preposterous and palpably false, and they will revel in it, print it with capital head-lines, and so capture the imagination of their sentimental, unthinking readers that these will no longer listen to the voice of reason or of truth. We are too proud-or perhaps not clever enough-to combat such barefaced propaganda; a strict censorship may be a crude weapon, but it is the only one at our command. What would you? A man who is attacked defends himself as best as he can."

"But in this case your weapon is failing you?" Jasper queried in his quiet, incisive way. "Whoever sends those articles to England and America is apparently too clever for you."

"For the moment-yes," Naniescu admitted. "But," he went on more lightly and at last rose to take his leave, "I fear my irresponsible prattle is keeping Lady Tarkington away from the rest she so much needs. Dear lady, pray accept my humble homage, and my earnest wish that your stay in our poor country will afford you all the delight that you anticipate."

He raised Rosemary's hand to his lips with the same show of gallantry that marked his every action in her presence. Just before he finally released it he looked up with deep earnestness into her eyes: "Let me once more assure you, dear lady, that as far as you are concerned every word you write will be transmitted in its entirety and with all possible speed to its destination. All that you need do is to send your articles and letters in a sealed packet undercover to me. I give you my word of honour that you will be satisfied."

CHAPTER IX

Until the moment of her arrival in Cluj, Rosemary had felt nothing but exhilaration whenever she thought of her work and of the good which she proposed to do, thanks to the facilities so magnanimously accorded her by Naniescu. Just for one moment at Budapest, when she first met the handsome Roumanian, she had been conscious of a slight feeling of mistrust, an instinctive dislike of the man's fluent speech and affected gestures. But on reflection she had persuaded herself that this sudden aversion was bound to arise at first contact with those elaborate manners which pass for gallantry in most of the Latin and Slav countries of Europe. The contrast between Naniescu's exaggerated politeness and Jasper's unobtrusive consideration had naturally reacted on her sensibilities to the detriment of the Roumanian.

Anyway, the sensation soon wore off. She had a very happy time in Budapest. The Paysons were charming; she met several friends, both English and Hungarian, who made her very welcome, and Jasper was, as usual, thoughtfulness itself. The journey across Hungary filled her with that gentle melancholy which those limitless expanses of earth and sky engender in the mind of imaginative people. It was close on harvesting time, and to right and left of the permanent way the great fields of corn stretched out like a sea of ruddy gold to the purple line of the horizon far away. Rosemary loved to gaze on these measureless stretches of country, whereon for mile upon mile nothing showed above the line of waving corn save, at rare intervals, the thatched roof of a tiny homestead peeping from behind a clump of grey-green willow, or an isolated well, with one gaunt arm stretched skywards, around which a herd of young horses had halted for the midday rest. Her eyes followed with loving intensity the winding ribbon of the dust-laden road, bordered by tall, slender poplars or twisted acacia trees, and at intervals the great patches of vivid green amidst the gold, where row upon row of water-melons turned their huge, shimmering carcasses to the warmth of the sun.

A faint perfume of heliotrope and mignonette hung in the air, and just for one moment Rosemary's dreamy gaze caught a glimpse of an exquisite mirage on the far distant horizon—a vision of towers and minarets and of a cool, shady stream painted with fairy brush upon the moisture-laden atmosphere. It was a phantom picture that vanished almost as soon as it appeared, but upon the watcher's super-sensitive mind it left in its swift transit an impression as of a magic land, a paradise the gates of which had for one brief second been opened by celestial hands, so that she might glimpse the garden of Eden beyond-the world of happiness and of love which for her must ever remain elusive and unattainable.

The arrival at Cluj was dreary and disappointing. From Budapest she herself had telegraphed to the hotel she knew so well, and had sent a letter at the same time asking the proprietor to have a hot supper ready for herself and Lord Tarkington. The hotel appeared unfamiliar when she stepped out of the little cab which had brought them from the station. The smiling hall-porter who used to greet Mrs. Blakeney with respectful familiarity on arrival was no longer there; an out-at-elbows, ill-dressed, unwashed porter took charge of their luggage. The proprietor, he said, was not in the house, and he himself was in charge of the place. He bluntly explained in broken German that under the new management no meals except early morning coffee were served in the hotel, the restaurant being now under separate ownership. The lady and gentleman could get something to eat there, no doubt.

It was all very cheerless, and to Rosemary very strange. The gay little town of Kolozsvár, usually so full of animation at this late evening hour, seemed already asleep. The streets were ill-lighted; there was an air of desolation and melancholy about this place. The hotel itself had become stuffy, dirty and ill-lighted. The furniture looked dilapidated, the bed-linen was coarse and the rooms none too clean. Rosemary spent a wretched night; but she was a hardened traveller and had before now put up with worse inconveniences than these. There was always the comforting thought that it was the only night that she would spend in Cluj. The next day Count Imrey's carriage and horses (he was not allowed to have a motor-car) would be taking her and Jasper to Kis-Imre, where a big welcome and every conceivable luxury awaited them both.

All that she was waiting for now was to see Anna Heves; little Anna, as Peter called her, the pretty, enthusiastic child to whom Rosemary had promised to give a kiss for Peter's sake. And in the morning, just as Rosemary had finished putting up her hair and slipped into a dressing-gown preparatory to going in to breakfast with Jasper, there was a knock at the door and Anna came in. Sweet, enthusiastic Anna, who gazed at her shyly with Peter's eyes and then smiled with Peter's smile. She would have been pretty, too, but for the unhealthy pallor of her cheeks and the dark rings that circled her eyes—Peter's eyes!

"I am so ashamed, Miss Fowkes," Anna murmured shyly; but at once Rosemary broke in, stretching out her arms:

"Aren't you going to kiss me, Anna?"

With a pathetic little cry the girl ran into Rosemary's arms, and, her head buried on her friend's shoulder, she burst into tears. Rosemary let her cry for a moment or two; her own eyes were anything but dry, for with a quick glance she had taken in the girl's changed appearance, also the shabby clothing, the worn boots, the unmistakable air of grinding poverty and, worse still, of insufficient food. Poor little Anna! If Peter saw her now!

After a few moments the girl raised her head and dabbed away her tears. Rosemary led her to the sofa, made her sit down beside her, and took both her thin little hands in hers.

"To begin with you must not call me Miss Fowkes, Anna," she said. "I was always Rosemary, wasn't I?"

Anna nodded, and a wan little smile struggled round her lips.

"And, you know, I am married now," Rosemary went on. "Hadh't you heard?"

Anna shook her head. She could not yet trust herself to speak.

"Of course," Rosemary said gaily, "how stupid of me. Jasper and I were married very quietly in London, and we are not people of such importance that your Hungarian papers would chronicle the fact. My husband is Lord Tarkington, the best and kindest of men. I'll tell him presently that you are here. He would love to see you."

"No, no, Rosemary dear!" Anna broke in quickly, "don't tell Lord Tarkington that I am here. I-I never see strangers now. You see, I have no decent clothes, and—"

"Jasper would look at your sweet little face, Anna, and never notice your clothes. And you are not going to call my husband a stranger, are you?"

Then, as Anna was silent, and with head bent appeared to be staring into nothingness, Rosemary continued lightly, even though her heart felt heavy at sight of the havoc wrought in this young thing by miseries at which she could still only guess.

"By the way, little 'un," she said, "I don't yet know what you are doing in Kolozsvár-or Cluj-tiresome name, I never can remember it! Your cousin, Peter Blakeney, told me I should find you here, and that he had written to tell you I should be at the Pannonia to-day; but that is all I know. Where is your mother?"

"She is still in Ujlak, of course," the girl replied more calmly, "looking after the place as best she can. But, of course, it is very hard and very, very difficult. They have taken away so much of the land, some of the best pasture, over twelve hundred acres; mother has only about two hundred left. There is not enough for the horses' feed. Mother had to have ten brood mares destroyed this spring. It was no use trying to keep them, and she could not bring herself to sell them. Imagine mother having her mares killed! It would have broken her heart, only she has had so much to endure lately she—"

Once more the girl broke down; a lump in her throat choked the bitter words. Rosemary frowned.

"But, then, why are you not at home with your mother, Anna?" she asked.

"I earn a little money here, and Marie is at home. She is younger than I, you remember, and she was always mother's favourite."

"How do you earn money, Anna? At what?"

Anna hesitated for a moment. She looked up and saw Rosemary's eyes fixed questioningly upon her, and those eyes were so full of kindness that the girl's reticence, even her bitterness, melted under the warmth of that gaze.

"I help in the shop of Balog, the grocer," she replied simply.

"Balog, the grocer? You?"

The cry of surprise, almost of horror, had come involuntarily to Rosemary's lips. She thought of Mrs. Blakeney, the exquisite grande dame who, after her marriage to Peter's father, the eminent scientist, had won her position in English society by her charm, her tact and that air of high breeding which is becoming so obsolete these days. She thought of Peter himself, who had inherited so much of his mother's charm and all her high-souled notions of noblesse oblige, of what was due to birth and descent. Did Peter know what little Anna was suffering under this new regime brought about by a treaty of peace that was to bring the millennium to all the peoples of Europe? With a sudden impulse Rosemary put her arms once more round the shrinking little figure.

"Anna," she said earnestly, "I think you are absolutely splendid! I admire your pluck more than I can say. But surely, surely you could find more congenial work than selling groceries!"

She paused a moment, her active brain at once turning to projects that had little Anna's welfare for their aim. Little Anna could not go on selling groceries in an obscure Roumanian town. It was unthinkable! Surely Peter did not know. And how could Rosemary face him with the news that she had found little Anna selling groceries at Cluj?

Something must be done, and quickly, to alter such an awful state of things. While she remained silent, thinking, and Anna, equally silent, fidgeted with long, thin fingers the tassel of her friend's dressing-gown, Rosemary became conscious that Jasper was watching her from the doorway of the next room. How long he had been standing there she did not know. She looked at him over Anna's bent head, and, as usual, she read in his expressive face a divination of her thoughts. It almost seemed as if, with a slight nod of his head, he was actually approving of what she had not yet put into words. Then he stepped back into the other room and quietly closed the door.

"Listen, little one," Rosemary said eagerly. "I am here at the invitation of the Roumanian Government; that is to say, General Naniescu, who, I understand, is military governor of Transylvania, has asked me to come over here and study the conditions, both social and political. I shall be writing several articles for English and American papers, and I simply must have a secretary for my ordinary correspondence, and—"

Anna shook her head.

"I don't know how to type," she said rather curtly, "and I can't do shorthand."

"Neither of which is necessary," Rosemary retorted.

Anna looked her straight in the eyes. "You don't imagine," she said quietly, "that if your articles revealed even a particle of the truth they would ever be allowed to pass the censor, and if they concealed the truth you would not expect my father's daughter to associate herself with them."

"That's a brave patriotic speech, Anna," Rosemary rejoined with a triumphant little laugh, "but you need not be the least afraid. My articles will contain the truth, and the censor will have not power over them. I give you my word."

But Anna was unconvinced.

"Rosemary dear," she said earnestly, "don't think me ungrateful or obstinate. Just imagine what it would mean to me to give up this awful grinding routine that wearies me at times to such an extent that I go into the cathedral and beg and pray to God that I might soon die and escape from it all. But you know, dear, when one's country is as unfortunate as ours has become, one must do one's utmost to help and serve her, mustn't one?"

"Why, of course," Rosemary assented, puzzled by the girl's strange earnestness, the glow of ardent patriotism that all at once emanated from that drooping, slender figure; "but I don't quite see how you are serving your country by selling groceries in Balog's shop."

"No! no! not by that," Anna went on eagerly. "Oh, I know that I can trust you, Rosemary, and you can't imagine what a relief it is to me to have someone to talk to. I have not spoken like this to a soul for nearly two years. And sometimes I feel as if I must choke. But one dare not talk to anyone these days, for government spies are everywhere. You never know who will betray you; the concierge of your house, the woman who washes the stairs, or the beggar to whom you give alms. Oh! I could tell you things — However all of us who are suffering unspeakably under our new tyrants are determined that the outside world shall hear the truth, but there is such a strict censorship that one dare not send anything through the post except what is absolutely banal and meaningless."

The girl paused a moment, her eyes wandered searchingly around the room, rested for an instant first on one door, then on another, as if in fear that those spies whom she so dreaded were lurking behind them, then, satisfied that she was alone with her English friend, whom she knew she could trust, she said abruptly:

"You remember my cousin, Philip Imrey?"

"Of course."

"He always had a great talent for writing. When he was quite a boy he used to write poetry and little stories. He is only nineteen now; next year he will have to do his military service in the Roumanian army, and that is a perfect hell for every Hungarian! Just think, Rosemary, if an Englishman had to serve in the German army! Isn't it unthinkable? But still, that cannot be helped! We are the vanquished race, and we have to pay the price. But we are determined that the nations of the West shall know the truth! So Philip and I, between us, thought of a plan. We thought of it for two years, and it took some time to organize. At last I obtained what I wanted, mother's consent that I should come to Cluj to earn my living, and a post in Balog's grocery shop. Balog sends Transylvanian goods regularly to Budapest: mustard, cheese, vegetable seeds; I have to pack them. Now do you understand?"

Rosemary nodded. "Yes, I think I do! Philip writes those articles which appeared in the Evening Post and caused such an outburst of sympathy for the Hungarians of Transylvania throughout Great Britain. And you — ?" she added, and her eyes full of tenderness and compassion rested with undisguised admiration on the shrinking little figure of Anna Heves.

"He rides over from Kis-Imre," the girl continued simply, "and brings me the articles which he has written, and I consign them inside the grocery parcels to the firm at Budapest, who, of course, are in entire sympathy with us, and post them on to England. Oh! it is splendid, Rosemary dear," the girl continued with glowing eyes, "to be able to do all this. Now you see, don't you? that I could not possibly give it all up."

"Yes, Anna, I do see that. But you are running terrible risks, little 'un."

"I know I am, and so does Philip; but you don't know how happy it makes us. The days when an article of his goes to Budapest is a fete day for us both. It is usually a Saturday when the parcels are sent off, and," the girl went on with pathetic naivete, "on the Sunday morning when I go to Mass, I no longer bother God with my troubles and with senseless prayers, I just thank Him, and thank Him for letting me do something for Hungary."

Rosemary said nothing for the moment. Indeed, what could she say? To try and dissuade this young fanatic from all her high-souled foolishness was an attempt foredoomed to failure. Rosemary had far too keen a knowledge of human nature, and held far too high an opinion of patriotism as a virtue not to understand the intense happiness that this constant sacrifice brought into Anna's dreary life. To have suggested that the girl give up this joy—these constant risks—would have been futile.

"You are a splendid, brave thing, Anna!" was all that she could say, and her voice sounded quite harsh as she spoke, because she was fighting against emotion.

She gazed with real admiration on the poor wizened little figure of this girl, in whose soul burned a flame of ardent patriotism. Anna had counted the cost of what she was doing; with her eyes open, envisaging every risk, she was accomplishing quietly and unostentatiously what she believed to be her duty to her poor native land. A heroine of the peace, she risked more than the thousands of heroines of the war had done—save perhaps one. Like Edith Cavell, she faced and risked death for an ideal, happy in her quiet way for the privilege of doing it, enduring a life of grinding routine, of dreary monotony more trying for the young to bear than active sorrow or physical pain.

The two girls had not spoken for some time, they sat side by side on the sofa with hands clasped, and eyes fixed upon one another. Anna, with nerves weakened by privations, was on the verge of giving way to an emotion which would have eased the tension that for the past months was threatening to break down her spirit. Rosemary, on the other hand, felt for the moment almost ashamed of her robust health, her virile brain, the contentment—if not happiness—in life which was her portion since she had married Jasper, and her compassionate heart longed for the power to comfort and to help this gentle, high-souled girl who looked at her with Peter Blakeney's eyes, and whose lips when she smiled were so like his. Anna was running her head against a stonewall. Rosemary felt that inevitably she would sooner or later be crushed in the process. Her thoughts flew to her husband, the man on whom she knew that she could always rely when knotty problems of life threatened to be beyond her powers to unravel. Jasper would be of good counsel: selfless, generous to a fault, his unerring tact would perhaps find a way into the innermost recesses of Anna's heart, and find the means to save the child from further fanatical folly without wounding the susceptibilities of her high-mettled patriotism.

"And now, Anna," Rosemary said after that moment of silence which had sealed a bond of sympathy between herself and Peter's kinswoman, "you are going to have a cup of hot coffee with me and Jasper. No! No!" she went on determinedly, and took hold of the girl's wrist. "I shall not let you go till you have seen Jasper. He will just love you, and you and he will get on splendidly together. You two fine creatures are made to understand one another."

She dragged the obviously unwilling Anna with her into the next room. Jasper was there, waiting. His hand was on the bell-pull at the moment, and his kind, grave, eyes at once sought those of Anna, who, reluctantly, allowed herself to be drawn toward him.

Rosemary effected a quick introduction. In a moment Jasper's kind words had gained the victory over Anna's shyness; less than two minutes later they were seated side by side at the table, while Rosemary ordered coffee of the slatternly chambermaid who had come in answer to the bell.

It was wonderful how splendidly Jasper and Anna got on; he seemed in a few seconds to have caught the knack of gaining the girl's confidence. She became animated, quite pretty, with shining eyes and full red lips that had lost for the moment their pathetic droop. She did not refer to her cousin, Philip Imrey, or to the dangerous game he and she were playing together, but she talked of her mother and of Ujlak, of the horses and the farm and the difficulties that beset the Hungarian landowners at every turn.

"I dare say that to a great extent it is our fault," she was even willing to admit in response to gentle criticism from Jasper. "We did not make ourselves beloved by the peasantry; they spoke a different language from ours, theirs was a different religion, and they were the alien race. We did little, if anything, for them. But tell me," she went on, and fixed her shrewd glance upon Jasper, "do you think that you landowners over in England, who do so much for your tenantry and your villagers, cricket-clubs, football, concerts—oh! I don't know what else, but things that you pay for and that they enjoy—well! do you think that in their hearts they love you any better than the Roumanian peasantry loved us Hungarians? And do you really believe that if you were in trouble, as we are now, and they were given a certain power over you, they would use it to show their gratitude for past generosity? Do you really believe that, Lord Tarkington?" she insisted. And Jasper, with a smile at her vehemence, could only shrug his shoulders. He was evidently very much taken with little Anna.

CHAPTER X

It was a week later and Jasper and Rosemary had been spending that time at Kis-Imre. No one who has not travelled in that part of the world can form a conception of the large-hearted hospitality that welcomes the stranger in a Hungarian chateau.

And Rosemary at once took the Imreys to her heart. She had known them before, of course, in the days before the war, when they dispensed that same wonderful hospitality, light-heartedly, gaily, as a matter of course.

But most of that had become a thing of the past. So much of it had gone, been irretrievably lost in the cataclysm of war and alien occupation. The will to give was still there, the love of the stranger, the boundless hospitality, but giving now meant a sacrifice somewhere, giving up something to give to others. All the sweeter, all the more lovable for being tinged with sadness. To Rosemary, Elza Imrey now was a woman before that she had been just like a child, naïvely proud of her home, her table, her horses, without a hint of ostentation in her display of the rich gifts the good God had showered upon her. Now Elza's large, prominent blue eyes had become a little dim with constant weeping, and her mouth, when at rest, drooped slightly at the corners. Elza was still a very handsome woman, with her hair of ruddy gold like the cornfields of her native land, but all around the temples there was now a sprinkling of silver, a sprinkling that softened the face as powder does when applied lightly to the hair.

Though in outward appearance she was very unlike her sister, yet she constantly reminded Rosemary of Mrs. Blakeney; it was a question of movements, a gesture here and there, and also the tone of the voice. Elza, too, like her sister, had a magnificent figure, and the perfect hands, arms and wrists peculiar to her race. She had suffered, of course: badly during the war, terribly since the peace. At all times a *maîtresse femme*, it was she who had carried on the administration of her husband's estates, she who used to interview bailiffs, lawyers, tenants. She had always been looked up to by the local officials and by the surrounding peasantry as the head of the house. Maurus Imrey had always been neurasthenic, and the privations of the war, and the humiliations consequent on the alien occupation of his country, had exasperated his nervous system and further embittered his quarrelsome disposition. In the happy days before the war his contribution to the management of his estates consisted in grumbling daily at his chef and swearing unremittingly at those of his servants who came to him for orders in anything pertaining to the house. Malicious tongues were wont to say that Maurus Imrey had gipsy blood in his veins; more likely it was an Armenian strain. Certain it is that his face and hands were swarthy, his nose hooked and his eyes very dark and piercing; characteristics which he had transmitted in a softened degree to his son Philip. But he was a man of culture for all that. He had read a great deal and thought over what he had read. Jasper Tarkington found him at the outset an interesting, if not very genial, companion.

Then there was Philip, worshipped by his mother, adored by his father, handsome, a splendid dancer, an accomplished musician. Philip was very attractive; if there was gipsy blood in his veins it had given him nothing but physical beauty and the highly developed musical talent of that race. He had dark, curly hair, and large mellow eyes, fringed with long lashes that would have been a gift of the gods to a girl. Jasper at first sight pronounced him effeminate, but Rosemary-knowing what she did about him-would not allow this for a moment. How could a boy be called effeminate who staked his life time and again, every time he rode into Cluj with those newspaper articles of his in his pocket?

But this, of course, Jasper did not know.

CHAPTER XI

Elza Imrey talked very freely with Rosemary, and often referred to her husband having taken the oath of allegiance to the King of Roumania. It was all because of Philip. "What I am working for," she said, with the light almost of a fanatic in her eyes, "and what I shall work for so long as I have breath left in my body, is to save Philip's inheritance. The Roumanians are lying in wait for us, watching for an excuse to expel us from Transylvania. Many have had to go. Nothing would induce them to be false to the oath that they had sworn to the anointed King of Hungary. So they had to go. Sometimes at twenty-four hours' notice, bag and baggage, turned out of the home their forbears had owned for hundreds of years. But I would not do that. I had to think of Philip. The Roumanian occupation is now an accomplished fact, and we are too helpless, too friendless, not to accept it. But we must be very careful. One false step and we are done. Imagine how I tremble every time Maurus lets himself go. You know how unguarded he always is in his speech."

Rosemary felt an actual physical pain in her heart when she thought of this devoted mother's brave struggle to guard her son's inheritance, and how little she guessed that Philip himself was jeopardizing his future and risking his life in a cause that she was proclaiming hopeless. Those rides to Cluj! The meeting with Anna Heves! The dispatch of those newspaper articles of his! And Government spies lurking everywhere!

But during meals all unpleasant subjects were vetoed. Rosemary would have none of them, and her wishes, as the honoured guest, were law in this hospitable house. These good people, with their mercurial temperament, had a wonderful gift of casting aside trouble and giving themselves over to the pleasures of the moment. And so at dinner in the evenings the gipsy band not yet driven forth out of the neighbouring village would discourse sweet music, the tender, sad Hungarian refrains that appeal to the stranger almost as much as they do to the native.

Rosemary, who was an exquisite dancer, longed to tread the measure of the *csárdás*, the Hungarian national dance, which begins with a dreamy, languorous slow movement, and then suddenly breaks into a wild, mad whirl, wherein the dancer's eyes glow with excitement, their cheeks burn like fire, and their breath comes and goes through quivering, parted lips. Surely the merriest, maddest, most intoxicating dance devised by a passionate people—probably for the letting off of some inward steam that must find vent in such rapturous movements from time, or it would consume them with its glow.

"I think Lady Tarkington is quite splendid," Maurus Imrey said to Jasper, in the intervals of beating time with hand and foot to the ever-quicken measure of the dance. "Hey, you confounded gipsy!" he cried, shouting to the swarthy, perspiring leader of the band. "Quicker! Quicker! Can't you hear me speak? Do you think you are playing a funeral march?"

"I think," Jasper put in, with his quiet smile, "if the musicians put on anymore speed, Rosemary for one will be crying 'Mercy!'"

But for the moment Rosemary showed no sign of crying any such thing. Her nimble feet had quickly caught the quaint, syncopated rhythm, and Philip was a magnificent teacher. Perhaps there was some truth in saying that he had inherited a strain of gipsy blood, for indeed when he danced the *csárdás* there was something barbaric about his movements. They were full of grace and perfect in rhythm, but all the time they gave the impression of wild roamings through desert lands, of a will that brooked no fetters and was a law unto itself. Rosemary gave herself wholly to the pleasure of being whirled round, turned and twisted, sometimes lifted off her feet. All intellectuality fell away from her for the time being: she was just like a young and beautiful animal in enjoyment of the senses kind Nature had given her, the sound of that intoxicating music, the feeling of unfettered movement, the scent of dying roses in huge vases, that sent their sweet indefinable fragrance through the heat-laden air.

Faster, ever faster! Little hoarse cries escaped her throat as Philip seized her with one arm round the waist, and, lifting her off her feet, twirled her round and round till the golden lights of the shaded candles swam like the trail of comets before her eyes.

Faster! Always faster! She could hardly see now out of her eyes; all that she saw was Philip's dark, curly hair waving around his forehead. The music seemed now a part of the universe, not played by one band of musicians, but the very atmosphere itself vibrating and resounding, forcing her to tread the measure and not to leave off, to go on-and on-and on-always hearing the music-always lifted off her feet and whirled round and round —

Then suddenly everything ceased all at once. The music, the movement, everything. Rosemary would have fallen, giddy, dazed, but for the fact that Jasper, quick as lightning, had caught her in his arms. Her instinct was to laugh.

"What happened?" she asked, rather wildly.

Then only did she look about her. First she saw Jasper's face bending over her, but he was not looking at her: he was gazing straight across the room. Rosemary's eyes followed his gaze. And all at once she gave a gasp, which she smothered instantly by clapping her hand to her mouth. The whole aspect of the room had changed. The gipsies seemed to have shrunk into a dark corner, with their instruments tucked hastily under their arms; they seemed to be trying to make themselves invisible. Two of them had crawled under the piano; only their feet, in shabby, down-at-heel shoes, protruded under the folds of rich brocade that covered the instrument.

And in the centre of the room there was a group of men, some half-dozen, in the uniform of the Roumanian army. One of them had his hand on Philip's shoulder. Philip stood in the midst of them; his dark face was still flushed with the dance, his curly hair clung to his streaming forehead. He was still panting with the movement and excitement of a moment ago, and his eyes, dark and glowing, wandered ceaselessly from one soldier's face to another.

Under the lintel of the great double doors that gave on the hall a couple of men servants stood, scared.

Rosemary's ears were buzzing and she saw everything through a veil; the room had not yet quite ceased whirling about her, but through the din in her ears and the hammering in her head she heard the ominous words: "Resistance will do you no good. You had best come quietly." They were spoken in Roumanian, which Rosemary understood.

Then there came a cry like that of a wounded beast, and Maurus Imrey jumped to his feet. With head down he charged into the soldiers just like an infuriated bull. Of course, he was seized at once, dragged back, forced down into a chair, where, with arms gripped by the soldiers, he launched forth a torrent of invective and abuse, and now and then, when he succeeded in freeing one of his arms, he hit out to right and left with his fist.

One of the soldiers, who appeared to be in command, spoke to him with cold deliberation:

"You are behaving like a fool, M. le Comte," he said. "For let me tell you that if you interfere with my men in the execution of their duty I will take you along, too."

Maurus's answer to this sound piece of advice was a fresh torrent of vituperation. He shook himself free from the hands that held him down, raised a menacing fist, and cried hoarsely:

"If you dare to touch me, you miserable—"

But suddenly stronger arms than those of the soldiers were thrown around him and forced him back into the chair. They were his wife's arms. Elza Imrey throughout all this had thought of nothing but the danger to Philip. The humiliation of this descent upon her house, the insolent attitude of the soldiers, this bringing home the fact of alien occupation and alien government, hardly affected her. Her one thought was Philip. The danger to Philip doubled and trebled by his father's ungoverned temper. And, my God, if he should strike one of the soldiers! So she held Maurus down, held her hand across his mouth; and Rosemary could hear her whispering in a thick, choked voice:

"Maurus, in God's name! Maurus, keep quiet! Maurus, for Philip's sake, hold your tongue!"

He struggled desperately, but she held him as only a mother can hold that which threatens her child. The soldier looked on with a sardonic smile. When Maurus at last was forced into silence, he shrugged his shoulders and said dryly:

"You are very wise, madame, to keep M. le Comte's temper in check for him. My orders are that if any resistance is offered to take all three of you along. I need not tell you that after that you two will be sent packing out of the country, and your son—"

A cry from Elza broke into his complacent speech. At once she became humble, cringing, all the pride of the aristocrat was submerged in the devastating anxiety of the mother. She still held Maurus down, for she dared not loosen her hold on him, but she turned a tear-stained face, pathetic-looking in its expression of appeal, toward the Roumanian.

"You must not take any notice of his lordship, captain," she said, trying in vain to speak lightly and to steady her voice. "You-you have known him for years, haven't you? You remember—he was always a little excitable—you used to amuse yourselves—you and your brother officers—by making him angry with one of the peasants, and seeing the men's terror of him? You remember," she reiterated, with the same pathetic effort at conciliation, "when we were at Tusnăd and you were in garrison at Sinaia, you used to motor over for luncheons and balls and—"

"It is not a part of a soldier's duty, madame," the young soldier broke in curtly, "to remember such incidents. If M. le Comte will cease to insult my men, we will leave him in peace. Otherwise you both come with me."

He turned sharply on his heel and spoke with one of his men. Apparently he was willing to give Maurus Imrey time to make up his mind what he would do. Rosemary still could hear Elza's voice thick and hoarse with anxiety:

"Maurus, in the name of Heaven—" The same refrain, the same reiterated prayer for submission, the one thing that would help to make Philip's lot easier. They could not do anything to Philip, of course. What had the poor lad done? Nothing. The mother racked her brain, thinking, thinking what he had done. Nothing. He had taken the oath of allegiance to the new King. Next year he would do his military service, a perfect hell; but Philip had never grumbled. And he had never joined in with those senseless political groups who met at night in out-of-the-way places about Cluj and dreamed dreams of freeing Hungary one day, Philip had never done anything so foolish. This cloud, therefore, would blow over. It was all a mistake, a misunderstanding. With silence and submission it would all blow over.

But Philip all along had never said a word. The first inkling that he had of this sudden danger that threatened him was the grip of a heavy hand upon his shoulder. Breathless with the dance, he had not made a movement or uttered a word of protest. His great, dark gipsy eyes wandered defiantly from the captain's face to those of the men, but he asked no questions. He knew well enough what had happened.

Two days ago he had ridden over to Cluj with certain newspaper articles in his pocket. He had given them to Anna. Together the cousins had spent one of those happy days which seemed to compensate them for all the risks they ran. Well, he had been suspected, spied upon and followed. The strain of fatalism which ran through his veins with the gipsy blood of his forbear bade him to accept the inevitable. Slowly his dark face became composed, his lips ceased to twitch, and the roaming glance of his dark eyes became fixed. Rosemary, looking up, saw the glance fixed upon her. In it she read the word: "Anna!" Philip was pleading to her mutely, desperately, for Anna. And this intuition which came to her when she met Philip's glance gave her the power to shake off the torpor that had invaded her limbs when the dance ceased so suddenly and she had fallen backwards into Jasper's arms.

Like Philip himself, she saw what had happened. The spies, the ride to Cluj, the articles given to Anna. And now the arrest of Philip and the deadly peril that threatened the girl.

"Can we do anything?" she whispered hurriedly to Jasper, and with quick, nervy movements she patted her hair into place and readjusted her tumbled gown.

Jasper shook his head. "We should do no good by interfering," he said gravely.

But Rosemary was in no mood to listen. She remembered Naniescu and his promises, the powers he had given her, the request that she should speak the truth. She felt that she was a force to be conciliated, and here was the moment to test her own power.

Without another word she ran out of the room and then through the great hall to the outer vestibule, where stood the telephone. While she took down the receiver and hurriedly gave the number of the Imrey palace at Cluj, she prayed in her heart that a few minutes' respite would be granted her before the soldiers marched Philip away.

"Hallo! Hallo! His Excellency General Naniescu! Lady Tarkington wishes to speak with his Excellency at once!! Say it is urgent—most urgent. Yes, Lady Tarkington, the English lady at Kis-Imre. No, no, never mind the name, please. Just say the English lady from Kis-Imre."

Another moment or two of agonizing suspense, then Naniescu's mellow voice. Thank God! He was at home, and she was through to him.

"General Naniescu? Lady Tarkington speaking! Thank you, I am well—very well, yes, my first article goes early next week. Yes, quite happy so far. General Naniescu, Philip Imrey has been summarily arrested. . . . I don't know. . . . There's a captain in charge. No,

he did not say. . . . Yes, I am sure it is a mistake, but the mistake may prove fatal unless — Yes, yes! You will? Really? To-morrow morning? You are kind. I hardly liked to ask you. Of course, I shall be here. Will you speak to the captain yourself now? I thank you with all my heart. Will you hold the line? I'll send the captain to you. I don't know how to thank you. No, nothing else to-night; but I am looking forward to thanking you myself to-morrow morning. About ten o'clock. Yes! Thank you a thousand times. Good night!"

She had hardly finished speaking when she heard the tramping of feet coming from the drawing-room and then across the hall, and glancing round, she saw the soldiers filing out two by two, with their captain beside them and Philip in their midst. There was no other sound except this tramping of feet. No protests, no shrieks. Philip in the midst of the soldiers, and behind them Elza creeping along, silent, watchful, her great eyes fixed upon what she could see of her son—the dark, curly hair and sometimes the top of his shoulder.

Rosemary waited until the captain was quite close to her. He saluted and was about to pass, when, like a triumphant goddess, she turned and faced him.

"His Excellency the Governor, on the telephone," she said curtly, and held the receiver out to the young soldier. "He desires to speak with you."

The Roumanian, obviously very much taken aback, looked at her for a moment or two, frowning before he took the receiver from her. The group of soldiers had halted, waiting for further orders. Behind them Elza hovered, her white face and golden hair alone visible in the gloom.

After that instant's hesitation the captain put the receiver to his ear.

"Yes, Excellency. No, Excellency. Yes, Excellency." Then a long, long wait, while the captain stood with the receiver against her ear, and Elza came nearer, watching, hoping, mutely questioning; and Rosemary, with glowing eyes and an enigmatic smile, put a finger up to her lips. Finally: "I quite understand, Excellency. Quite! Absolutely!" And the captain hung up the receiver.

Then he turned to Elza, who had drawn close to Rosemary, quite close; he clicked his heels together and touched his képi with his right hand.

"By order of his Excellency General Naniescu," he said, "Count Philip Imrey is free to remain under this roof. He will give his word of honour that he will not attempt to leave the castle until after the arrival of his Excellency in the course of the morning."

And thus the incident was closed. Philip gave the required parole, and with more clicking of heels and salutes the young captain marched out of the house, followed by his men. Then only did Elza break down, when she put her arms round Philip's shoulders and sobbed her heart out against his breast. He appeared more dazed than relieved, and kept his eyes fixed on Rosemary, whilst with his long, thin hand he stroked and patted his mother's hair. Rosemary gave him an encouraging glance. "It was for Anna's sake," her glance said mutely. "In any case, Anna will be safe."

And the incident being closed, she went back to the drawing-room. Jasper held out a hand to her, and when she placed her hand in his he raised it to his lips. She took it as a sign of his approval, and bending down, she gave him her forehead to kiss. He just took her face between his two palms and gazed long and intently into her eyes.

He had often done that before; he loved to take hold of her face, to feel the soft velvety cheeks against his hands, and Rosemary would turn her pixie eyes to his and in one glance express all the affection, the sincere regard and fervent gratitude which she felt for him. But somehow this time it all seemed different, more intense, almost terrifying. To a sensitive woman a man's passion, if she cannot respond to it, is always terrifying; and of course, Rosemary's nerves were stretched now almost to breaking point. Else why should she be conscious of a sense of fear?

Jasper's gaze was not so much searching her soul as striving to reveal his. Something in him seemed imprisoned, and he was asking her to set that something free. A force, a power, greater even than his love, so great that love itself became its slave. And this Rosemary could not understand. She had experienced something of the same sensation that afternoon in London when he had asked her to marry him before she left for Hungary. Then, as now, she had caught a glimpse of a whirlpool of passion which seethed beneath her husband's grave, gentle manner. Then, as now, it had seemed to her as if he were trying to exert some supernatural power outside himself, to rouse an echo of his own passion in her heart. And with that glimpse into the depths of a man's soul came the knowledge that never would it be in her power to give soul for soul or passion for passion. And yet the day would come—she felt it, knew it at this moment—when the man, wearied of sentimental doles, would demand her whole surrender—body, brain, soul, everything, soul above all—which she would not be prepared to give.

Strange that this realization, this vague feeling akin to fear, should come to her again at this moment, when both she and Jasper were only minor actors in the drama that had just drawn to its close. Like most great moments in the inner life of the soul, it only lasted for one brief flash. It left its indelible mark on Rosemary's memory, but it lasted less than one second. The very next she tried to recapture it, but it was gone. Jasper looked grave and kind, as he always did, busy now with getting her comfortably ensconced in a capacious arm-chair, with plenty of cushions behind her back. Elza came in with Philip, and Maurus roused himself from his apathy to hurl invectives against those damnable, impudent Roumanians.

And the gipsy musicians, reassured, crawled out of their hiding-places, and their leader, shouldering his violin, began to play a dreamy melody. One by one the others fell in in harmony, the 'cello, the bass, the clarinet, and the inimitable cimbalom. "There is but one beautiful girl in all the world" was the tune that they played; its soft, languorous cadence rose and fell in the air wherein the dying roses once more sent up their voluptuous fragrance. Forgotten was the danger just past, the peril still ahead. Music, the never-failing expression of emotion in these romantic people, soothed their nerves and uttered the words which would not rise to their lips. Elza sat with Philip's hand in hers. Rosemary, with eyes fixed far away, caught herself gazing on the memory picture of a dark recess in a box in the Albert Hall, with the noise and whirl of a big social function about her, but with the complete isolation there in the darkness; and through the deafening noise memory conjured up a man's voice that murmured with passionate earnestness: "It is no use, my dear, thinking that all is over."

CHAPTER XII

The morning was as clear as crystal, the sky of a translucent turquoise blue. Away on the right the masses of soft-toned purple hills stretched their undulating lines like waving veils, hiding the mysteries of the horizon.

Rosemary had thrown open the windows of her bedroom and stepped out upon the balcony. With arms outstretched she drank in the intoxicating air, laden with the scent of heliotrope and lilies. She had the delicious feeling of having accomplished something, of having tested her power and found it absolute. Naniescu, on the telephone, had been almost apologetic when she told him about Philip's arrest. He declared that there was some mistake, and that he himself would come over in the morning and inquire into the matter. Rosemary was young enough to feel a naïve pleasure in her work. That Philip Imrey was restored then and there to his mother's arms was her work, the outcome of her position in the journalistic and political world. And the knowledge that this was so was as intoxicating as the fragrant air on this perfect late July morning.

A moment or two later she heard the pleasant noise of the rattling coffee-cups in the room behind her. She turned in, ready to embrace the little housemaid who looked after her so cheerfully. In fact, Rosemary was in a mood to embrace the whole world. Contrary to her usual happy way, however, the little housemaid did not look up when Rosemary came in. As a rule she would run and kiss the gracious lady's hand, according to the pretty custom of her country. To-day she just rattled the coffee-cups, and Rosemary noticed that her hands were shaking and that she turned her head very obviously away.

"What is it, Rosa?" Rosemary asked in her best Hungarian, of which she had learned quite a good deal at different times. "Why don't you come and say good morning?"

The kind voice and the necessity to respond to the gracious lady's inquiry broke down the barrier of Rosa's self-control. She raised her apron to her eyes and burst into a flood of tears. The next moment Rosemary was by her side, her arms round the girl's shoulders.

"Rosa!" she said, "Rosa! what is it? Tell me, little thing. What is it? Who has made you cry?"

But Rosa only went on sobbing, and murmuring between her sobs: "Oh, gracious lady! gracious lady! What a calamity! What a dreadful calamity!"

After a few seconds of this Rosemary began to lose patience. She was English and practical; Rosa's continued sobbing and incoherent mutterings got on her nerves. She gave the girl a good-humoured shake.

"What calamity, Rosa?" she queried. "Bless the girl! I'll smack you, Rosa, if you don't speak."

Now this was a language that Rosa understood far better than a string of kindly inquiries. She had been smacked by her mother, almost as soon as she was born, she had been smacked by her elder sister, by her grandmother, by her aunt and by her father while she grew up, and when she started service in the chateau and was silly or tiresome she had been smacked by the gracious Countess. Being smacked did not hurt, but it acted as a tonic, and braced up Rosa's slackened nerves. The threat of it by the gracious English lady at once dried the well of her tears, she wiped her nose and eyes with her apron and murmured:

"The gracious Count Philip-they have taken him away."

At first Rosemary did not take it in. She did not trust her ears, or her knowledge of Hungarian. She must, she thought, have misunderstood Rosa, or else Rosa was talking like a fool. But Rosemary's grasp tightened on the girl's arm, her fingers buried themselves in the young, firm flesh.

"What do you mean, Rosa?" she queried. "What do you mean about the gracious count? Who has taken him away?"

"The soldiers, gracious lady," Rosa murmured.

"What soldiers?" which was a foolish question on Rosemary's part-and she knew it. There were no soldiers now in Transylvania except the Roumanian soldiers. But somehow the thing would not penetrate into her brain-she felt that, too, and wanted to give it time to sink in slowly, slowly.

Rosa now ventured to look the English lady in the face. Her big, blue eyes were still swimming in tears.

"The Roumanian soldiers, gracious lady," she said, "the ones who came last night."

"But they went away again last night, Rosa," Rosemary explained deliberately and patiently, "they went away and the gracious Count Philip remained at home, he went to bed as we all did. Anton must have waited on him, as he always does."

But Rosa gave a deep sigh and gulped down a fresh flood of tears that threatened to choke her.

"Anton did wait on the gracious count when he went to bed. But soon after midnight the soldiers returned. Feri the night watchman at the gate, had to let them in. They ordered him not to make a noise, only to rouse the gracious count's valet. So Feri went to call Anton, as quietly as he could, for the soldiers kept threatening him that if he made a noise they would beat him. Poor Anton nearly fainted with terror-you know, gracious lady, Anton always was a coward. What would you?" Rosa added with a shrug. "A gipsy."

"Yes! Yes!" Rosemary urged impatiently. "Go on, girl, go on."

"The soldiers would not even allow Anton to dress himself. Just as he was he had to go and rouse the gracious Count Philip. The soldiers were threatening to burn the house down if anyone made a noise, but I am sure that Feri and Anton were too scared to think of screaming. The gracious count jumped out of bed: the soldiers stood by while he dressed, but they would not allow him to take anything with him except just the clothes he put on-no money-not his watch-not a letter-nothing. Feri says that the soldiers were in the house and out again in less than a quarter of an hour. They took the gracious count with them, but four of them remained behind; they made Feri and Anton sit together in the lodge and kept guard over them until an hour ago. Then they went away and Anton ran in with the news. Oh! you should have seen the gracious countess! It was pitiable-pitiable, though she said nothing and she did not cry. By God! My God! What is to become of us all?"

The girl started wringing her hands, and her voice became loud and shrill with the sobs that would no longer be suppressed.

"Be quiet, Rosa, be quiet!" Rosemary said once or twice quite mechanically. She had taken it all in at last: the trick, the awful treachery, the cruelty of it all. She stood there beside the sobbing girl, with hands tightly clenched and a deep frown between her brows. She wanted to think. To think. Something would have to be done, and done quickly. But what? Naniescu? What role did he play in this mean trickery? Rosemary was a woman who thought straight and acted straight: so consistently straight, in fact, that she never

could visualize treachery in others. In the wide, wide world that attitude of mind is called the attitude of a fool. Yet Rosemary Tarkington was anything but a fool. Perhaps she was lacking in the intuition of evil: certain it is that at this moment she would not allow herself to think that Naniescu was a party to the abominable deed. The young officer, perhaps, or the local commandant who might have a grudge against the Imreys. But Naniescu? No!

She sent the girl away; Rosa's round, pink face with the round, blue eyes and round-tipped nose was getting on her nerves. The girl was comical in her grief, and when Rosemary looked at her she felt an uncontrollable desire to laugh. And this would have horrified Rosa. So she sent Rosa away.

A moment or two later Jasper came in, ready for breakfast. Once glance at this face and Rosemary knew that he, too, had heard the news.

"What do you think of it?" Rosemary asked after she had given him a morning kiss.

"My darling," Jasper replied in his cool, British manner, "I only think that you are making a grave mistake in throwing yourself headlong into the politics of these out-of-the-way countries. . . ."

"It is not a question of politics, Jasper," Rosemary broke in, protesting.

"I know, my dear, I know. Your warm heart prompts you to interfere there where prudence would dictate the wiser course of closing one's eyes. You would not be the adorable woman that you are if you acted differently. But, believe me, my darling, it is not wise. You will only run your lovely head against a stone wall, and in the end do no good. You must let these people fight out their quarrels in their own way. They are not our kind; we don't understand them. My firm conviction is that you will only do harm by interference. Mind you, I haven't a doubt that young Imrey has done something stupid. They are a hot-headed lot, these Hungarians, especially the young ones, and, of course, they don't like the present regime. The government in power has a perfect right to protect itself against conspiracy and rebellion, even though we outsiders may think that those conspiracies are futile, and the measures of repression unduly harsh. Leave them alone, my dear," Jasper concluded more lightly, with a shrug, "and have a cup of hot coffee."

He settled himself down on the sofa and tried to draw her down to him. But Rosemary was not in the mood for sentiment. Reason whispered to her that Jasper was right—he was always right, worse luck!—she knew that Philip Imrey had acted foolishly—very, very foolishly—and that, as a matter of fact, in this case the commandant (or whoever was responsible for Philip's arrest) was entirely within his rights. She certainly, as an impartial spectator of events, brought here for the express purpose of seeing the truth and nothing but the truth, could not in conscience make capital of this incident. She had come out here determined not to act on impulse, but to judge coolly and without bias, and thus to consolidate her reputation as one of the foremost women journalists of the day. With Sir Philip Gibbs as her master, and model, she could not go back on the ideal of justice and impartiality which she had set herself. But she did want to save Philip Imrey from the consequences of his own folly. And, above all, she wanted to know what had become of Anna.

"I cannot leave them alone, Jasper," she said slowly "I cannot. All this petty tyranny makes my blood boil."

Jasper sighed somewhat impatiently. "I know, my dear, I know," he reiterated vaguely.

Rosemary did not continue the discussion for the moment; Jasper was so right in everything he said, and Philip Imrey had been desperately foolish. Now she blamed herself for not having worked on Anna's mind and dissuaded her from lending herself to her cousin's mad schemes. She mentioned Anna's name to her husband, but Jasper, knowing nothing of the girl's dangerous activities in Balog's grocery stores, could not, of course, see that Anna was in any kind of danger.

"But," Rosemary argued, "Anna and Philip are first cousins, they see a great deal of one another—"

"Do they?" Jasper ejaculated. "But even so, my dear, you surely are not going to suppose that the Roumanian Government is going to lay hands on all Philip Imrey's relations, just because he has run his silly head into a noose."

"No! No!?" Rosemary protested vaguely.

But she could not say anything more on the subject of Anna. Anna had told her everything in confidence: "I know I can trust you, Rosemary," the child had said, and Rosemary could not betray that confidence—not even by speaking of it all to Jasper—not even by hinting at it. If the peril became more imminent—if Anna herself was in danger—then perhaps. But not now.

Rosemary tried to swallow some breakfast, just to please Jasper, for his kind, grave eyes looked quite sad, and she did not want to add to his anxiety. But her thoughts were dwelling on Elza.

"I wonder if she could bear to see me," she said presently.

"You can always ask," was Jasper's wise suggestion.

Rosemary found Elza Imrey outwardly quite calm and resigned. That woman had a marvellous fund of common sense and self-control. What she suffered no one should know. Only when she read true understanding and mute sympathy in Rosemary's eyes, she gave an answering look which contained such a depth of sorrow and anxiety that Rosemary's heart was overwhelmed with pity. In these few hours Elza had aged twenty years. Anton had brought the news across from the lodge to the chateau in the early morning as soon as the Roumanian soldiers had gone away. The gracious countess had received the news with extraordinary indifference, was the verdict on the incident below stairs; Rosa was crying her eyes out, all the men-servants went about cursing and swearing and threatening to kill someone, but the gracious countess had not shed one tear. When she had heard Anton's report, she asked a few questions: what suit had the gracious count put on? did he take an overcoat? what shoes did he wear? and so on; but never a tear. Then she said: "Very well, Anton, you may go!" and that was all. No! No! It was not natural. But then these great ladies! . . . One never knew!

No one ever did know to what height a mother's heroism could go. Elza, with her heart nearly broken, thought only of what was best for Philip.

"Of course, he has done nothing!" she reiterated over and over again, "so they can't do anything to him."

Then her voice would break on a note of pathetic appeal; she would seize Rosemary's hands and search the depths of her English friend's eyes, with the look of a poor stricken animal begging for sympathy.

"Can they?" she asked, and Rosemary would shake her head, not trusting herself to speak. It was no use now rending the mother's heart, adding another load of anxiety to the heavily burdened soul. Elza would know soon enough. Soon enough! And she could do nothing even if she knew now.

Maurus was shut up in his own apartments, tearing up and down like a beast in its cage, raging and swearing. That was his temperament, Elza said philosophically, with a shrug; the Armenian blood in him. (She never would admit the gipsy strain.) Fortunately the servants were all Hungarian; faithful and discreet. They knew him. When he was in one of those moods they fled from him; but not one of them would betray him. Now he was threatening to kill every Roumanian that ever crossed his path. Well, fortunately there was no one to hear him-only the servants, and they would hold their tongues.

"Maurus won't understand," Elza explained to Rosemary, "that our chance is submission. If they turn us out of here it will be the end of Philip's inheritance. We must save that at all costs. What is the sacrifice of a little pride when it means so much for Philip's future. Things can't go on as they are-not for long, and if only I can keep Maurus quiet, we shall have Philip back here in a week."

Then she harked back on the old refrain. "He has done nothing. They can't do anything to him. Can they?"

CHAPTER XIII

Naniescu arrived soon after ten-o'clock. Rosemary heard the hooting of his motor when it turned in at the gate, also the general bustle, clatter, running about that ensued. Her rooms, with the balcony overlooking the park, were on the other side of the house, so she saw nothing of this; but somehow, after the arrival of his Excellency, the stately chateau appeared to have lost something of its dignified quietude. Loud voices resounded from end to end of the galleried hall, footsteps that sounded almost aggressive echoed along the corridors.

Jasper had gone down some time ago for a stroll in the park, while Rosemary dressed. She was sorry now that she had not asked him to be sure to come back so as to support her in her interview with Naniescu. However, this wish was only a momentary weakness. She had been accustomed for years past to stand on her own feet, to act for herself, and to take swift decisions without outside advice. So now, with a careless shrug, she turned back to the important task of dressing; this she did with deliberate care, then surveyed herself critically in the glass, and, having satisfied herself that Rosemary Tarkington was in no way less beautiful than Rosemary Fowkes had been, she settled herself down in her boudoir with a book and waited.

A very few minutes later one of the men came to announce that his Excellency General Naniescu desired to pay his respects to Lady Tarkington.

He came in looking breezy and gallant. He kissed Rosemary's hand, sat down on the chair she indicated to him, inquired after the state of her health, her journey, her work, all in a mellifluous voice and in execrable English. In fact, for the first five minutes of this momentous, visit he was just a pleasant, cheerful man of the world, exchanging banalities with a pretty woman.

"Et ce cher Tarkington?" he queried. "How is he?"

"My husband will be in, in a moment or two," Rosemary replied, trying to bring the conversation round to the all-important subject. "He will, of course, make a point of not failing to see you." She made a slight, insignificant pause, then she went on more seriously: "I can assure you, M. le General, that Lord Tarkington's interest in our dear host and hostess is just as keen as mine."

"Of course, of course," Naniescu rejoined vaguely, with a sweep of his well-manicured hand. "They are very foolish people, these Imreys. And that young man! Dear lady, you have not an idea what trouble we have with these Hungarians! They are all a little toqué! What you call so admirably in your picturesque language: they have a bee in their bonnet. What?"

He laughed, very pleased with himself for what he apparently considered a little joke.

"A bee in their bonnet," he reiterated, still waving his white, podgy hands about. He set his teeth together and made a sound to represent the buzzing of bees. "Buzz-z! Just like that! But bees," he added curtly, "are apt to be tiresome. Is it not so?"

"You choose to look upon the matter lightly, M. le General," Rosemary rejoined, with a touch of impatience, "but to these unfortunate people the summary arrest of their only son is anything but a light matter. On the telephone last night—"

"Oh, the telephone!" the general broke in with an affected sigh. "A marvellous invention! What? But it is difficult on the telephone to give those little nuances which are the essence of conversation. It was wonderful to hear your melodious voice on the telephone last evening. I was not expecting to hear it, and it was delightful! Like a spirit voice coming from a place unseen to soothe me to pleasant dreams."

He tried to capture her hand, and when she snatched it away with obvious irritation he gave a soft, guttural laugh and gazed with a look of bold admiration into her eyes. Rosemary felt her temper rising, and nothing but her knowledge that this distinctly unpleasant personage had supreme power over those she cared for kept her impatience in check.

"General Naniescu," she said, quietly determined, "you must forgive me if I cannot enter into your playful mood just now. The only son of my very dear friend is under arrest for an offence of which he knows nothing, and, moreover, he was arrested under circumstances that are entirely unjustifiable, seeing that this country is not, I presume, under martial law."

"Not under martial law, certainly, dear lady," Naniescu was willing to admit, and did so with a certain measure of seriousness, "but under strict disciplinary law, framed by a suzerain state for the protection of its own nationals in occupied territory. But let that pass. You graciously informed me over the telephone last night that young Imrey was arrested, and I gave orders to the captain in charge for his immediate release. As I intended to come over here in the course of the morning, I was willing to let the matter stand until I had investigated it myself."

"Count Philip Imrey was released at ten o'clock yesterday evening, and rearrested in the middle of the night; he was not even given the chance of saying goodbye to his parents, or of providing himself with the necessary clothing and money. I imagine, M. le General," Rosemary went on coldly, "that this was done by your orders, or at any rate that you were not kept in ignorance of it."

For the fraction of a second Naniescu hesitated; then he said cynically:

"Yes; certainly I knew of it. I may even say that it was done by my orders."

Rosemary suppressed a cry of indignation.

"Well, then?" she exclaimed hotly.

But Naniescu, not in the least taken aback, only retorted blandly:

"And how am I to interpret that enigmatic query, dear lady?"

"As a challenge to justify your actions," was Rosemary's bold reply.

Then, as he gave no immediate answer but allowed his mellow dark eyes to rest with a distinctly mocking glance on her face, Rosemary felt at a disadvantage. She was obviously not in a position to demand explanations from a man who belonged to the governing classes in his own country. With every belief in the power of the press, Rosemary had far too much common sense not to realize that a man in Naniescu's position would not put up with being dictated to, or cross-examined, by a stranger, however influential he or she might be. So once again she swallowed her resentment, determined that whatever chance she had of helping the Imreys should not be wrecked through want of tact on her part. Diplomacy, good temper, and, if necessary, seeming complaisance, would be more likely to win the day than any attempt at threatening.

"Monsieur le General," she resumed, after a while, "I know that you will forgive me for my seeming ill-humour. I have witnessed so much sorrow these last few hours that I suppose my nerves are rather jarred. I know, of course, that it is not my place to criticize the measure which your Government chooses to impose on a subject race. As a suzerain state Roumania has a perfect right to defend what she believes to be her own interests, and in a manner that she thinks best. Will you forgive me the sharp words I allowed to slip just now?"

And with a return of that charm of manner which even more than beauty held most men in thrall, Rosemary put out her hand. The gallant Roumanian, without a trace of mockery now in his large, dark eyes, took it in both his own; then he stooped and kissed the dainty finger-tips.

"And now," Rosemary went on resolutely, "that I have made amende honorable, will you allow me to plead the Imrey's cause in all earnestness-in the name of humanity, Monsieur le General? The boy is only nineteen."

The general leaned back in his chair, his well-manicured fingers gently stroking his silky moustache, his eyes no longer attempting to conceal the satisfaction which he felt at seeing this exquisitely beautiful woman in the role of a suppliant before him. Now when she paused he gave an indifferent shrug.

"Dear lady," he said, "my experience of this part of the world is that boys and girls of nineteen who give up jazzing and have not started making love, but who choose to meddle in politics, are veritable pests."

"But Philip Imrey does not meddle in politics," Rosemary protested.

"Are you quite sure of that?" he retorted.

As he said this his eyes became quite small, and piercing like two little flaming darts; but though his sudden challenge had sent a stab of apprehension through Rosemary's heart, her glance never faltered, and she lied straight out, lied boldly without hesitation, without a blush.

"I am quite sure," she replied.

And the only compunction she felt over that lie was when she realized-as she did at once-that the Roumanian did not believe her.

"Little Anna Heves did not confide in you?" he asked, with perfect suavity.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, dear lady. Anna Heves and Philip Imrey are two young hotheads who have given us an infinity of trouble. For a long time we could not find out how certain pernicious articles, injurious to the good reputation of Roumanian, found their way into the English and American press. Now we know."

"Your spy system seems more efficient than your censorship," Rosemary retorted bitterly.

"That is beside the point."

"Yes; the point is that those two are mere children."

"I dare say the judges will take that into account and deal leniently with them."

"With them?" Rosemary exclaimed, and suddenly a new terror gripped her heart. "With them? You don't mean —?"

"What, dear lady?" he queried suavely.

"That Anna —?"

"Anna Heves, yes; the late Baron Heves' daughter, now a saleswoman in the shop of Balog the grocer. I often wondered how she came to demean herself in that way. Now I understand."

"But surely, surely," Rosemary protested, striving in vain to steady her voice, which was quaking with this new, this terrible anxiety, "you have not arrested Anna Heves? The child has done nothing—"

Naniescu put up his hand with a gesture of protest.

"Dear lady," he said, with quiet irony and in a tone one would use to an obstinate child, "let me assure you once and for all that the accusations against Philip Imrey and his cousin do not rest upon assumptions, but upon facts. Anna Heves was arrested and she will be brought to trial because she was found-actually found, mind you-smuggling newspaper articles, defamatory to the Government of this country, for insertion in foreign journals. English sense of justice is reputed to be very keen; your own must tell you that it is hardly fair to bring the battery of your charms as a weapon to break down my sense of duty. I lay, as always, my homage at your feet, but I should be a traitor if, whilst gazing into your adorable eyes, I were to forget what I owe to my country."

Gradually he dropped the irony out of his tone, and his voice became once more mellifluous and tender while he leaned forward, almost touching Rosemary's knees with his, and striving to hold her glance with the challenge of his own. Rosemary shrank back. Suddenly something of the truth had dawned upon her. Not all of it just yet. It was only presently-in a few more days-that she was destined to realize the extent to which this man-half Oriental in his capacity for lying-had hoodwinked and cajoled her. It was his mien, the thinly veiled insult that lurked behind his suave speech and expressive eyes, that suddenly tore the veil from before her own. And yet reason fought for a moment against this wave of aversion. The man was right, unquestionably right. Philip and Anna had been very foolish. And, what is more, they were technically guilty of treason: there was no getting away from that; and Rosemary could not shut her eyes to the fact that the very lives of those she cared for were in the hands of this soft-toned liar. At one moment she longed passionately for Jasper, the next she would dread his coming, for she knew well enough that he, with his straight matter-of-fact mode of thinking, would inevitably give Naniescu his due, insist that the general was within his rights, and advise his wife to keep clear of these imbrolios, which were so contrary to the lenient, sportsmanlike English attitude toward a beaten enemy.

On the whole she felt glad that Jasper was not here. He would hate to see her plead. Yet plead she must. There was nothing else to do. She must plead with fervour, plead with all the strength that she possessed, all the eloquence that she could command.

"In the name of humanity!" That was her chief plea; and with anxious eyes she searched the man's face for the first trace of pity.

"Anna and Philip are so young," she urged. "Mere children."

But Naniescu smiled, that fat, complacent smile of his which she had quickly learned to loathe.

"You would not like me," she said at one moment, "to send an account of it to all the English and American papers. Two children, one under eighteen, the other not yet twenty, arrested in their beds at dead of night, brought to trial for having smuggled a few newspaper articles through the post. If you do not deal leniently with them—"

"Who said we would not deal leniently with them?" Naniescu broke in blandly. "Surely not I. I am not their judge."

"General Naniescu," she retorted, "I have been in Transylvania long enough to know that your powers here as military governor are supreme. Leniency in this case," she urged insistently, "could only redound to your credit, and to the credit of the country which you serve."

"But frankly, dear lady, I don't see what I can do. The case has passed out of my hands—"

"Send these children home with a caution, Monsieur le General," Rosemary went on pleading. "That is what we would do in England in a like case."

"To hatch more treason," he retorted, with a shrug. "Give us more trouble—more buzzing of bees and pestilential backbiting—"

"No!" she protested hotly. "Not for that, but to be immensely grateful to you for your generosity, and show their gratitude by striving to work for the good of their country, hand in hand with yours."

"Ah, what noble sentiments, dear lady!" General Naniescu said with a sigh, and clapped his white, fat hands together. "I wish I could believe that some of them will sink into those young hotheads."

"They will, general, they will," Rosemary asserted eagerly. "If you will send those two children back to their parents, I will not leave Transylvania until you yourself are satisfied that I have brought them to a reasonable frame of mind."

"A hard task, dear lady," Naniescu said, with a smile.

"I would undertake a harder one than that," Rosemary rejoined, with an answering smile, "to show my appreciation of your generosity."

"Words, dear lady," he said softly. "Words!"

"Try me!" she challenged.

He made no immediate reply, and suddenly his eyes again narrowed as they had done before, and their piercing glance rested upon Rosemary until she felt that through those heavy lids something inimical and poisonous had touched her. She felt a little shiver running down her spine, an unaccountable sense of apprehension caused her to glance rapidly toward the door, where she hoped to perceive Jasper's comforting presence. She was not afraid, of course, nor did she regret her enthusiasm, or her advocacy of the children's cause; but she had the sudden, vague feeling that she had come to the brink of an abyss and that she was staring down into unknown depths, into which unseen forces were urging her to leap.

Slowly Naniescu's eyes reopened and the mellow expression crept back into them; he gave a sigh of satisfaction, and settled himself down once more comfortably on the cushions of the chair.

"I am happy indeed, dear lady," he began, "that you yourself should have made an offer, which I hardly dared place before you."

"An offer? What do you mean?"

"Surely that was your intention, was it not, to do something in return for the heavy sacrifice you are asking of me?"

"Sacrifice?" Rosemary queried, frowning. "What sacrifice?"

"Sacrifice of my convictions. Duty calls me to very insistently in the matter of those young traitors whom you, dear lady, are pleased to refer to as children. I know that I should be doing wrong in giving them the chance of doing more mischief. I know it," he reiterated emphatically, "with as much certainty as I do the fact that they will not give up trying to do mischief. But—"

He paused and fell to studying with obvious satisfaction Rosemary's beautiful eager eyes fixed intently upon him.

"But what, Monsieur le General?" she asked.

"But I am prepared to make the sacrifice of my convictions at your bidding, if you, on the other hand, will do the same at mine."

Rosemary's frown deepened. "I don't think I quite understand," she said.

"No," he retorted; "but you will—soon. Let me explain. You, dear lady, have come to Transylvania wrapped in prejudice as in sheet-armor against my unfortunate country. Oh, yes, you have," he went on blandly, checking with an elegant gesture the cry of protest that had risen to Rosemary's lips. "I am even prepared to admit that nothing that you have seen in these first few days has tended to pierce that armor of prejudice. Well, well!" and the general sighed again in that affected way of his. "You have one of your wonderful sayings in England that exactly meets this case: 'East is East,' you say, 'and West is West.' This is the East really, and you Occidentals will never think as we do. But I am wandering from my point, and you, dear lady, are getting impatient. Having admitted everything that you would wish me to admit, I now will come forward with my little proposition—what?"

"If you please," Rosemary replied coldly.

"The children, as you are pleased to call them," Naniescu went on with slow deliberation, shedding his affected manner as a useless garment no longer required to conceal his thoughts, "the children have done us an infinity of mischief, in the eyes of the British and American public, by the publication of articles defamatory to our Government; for this they have deserved punishment. Now, I propose to remit that punishment if you will undo the mischief that they have done."

"I?" Rosemary exclaimed, puzzled. "How?"

"By publishing newspaper articles that will refute those calumnies once and for all," the general said blandly. Then, as Rosemary recoiled at the suggestion as if she had been struck in the face, he went on cynically: "You are such a brilliant journalist, dear lady, endowed with a vivid imagination. It will be easy for you to do this for the sake of those two young traitors in whom you take such a kindly interest. You may, in your articles, begin by stating the truth, if you like, and say that my Government invited you to come over to Transylvania in order to investigate the alleged acts of tyranny that are supposed to be perpetrated against the minority nationals. Then you will proceed to state that after impartial and exhaustive inquiry you have come to the conclusion that practically all the charges brought against us are unfounded, that with the exception of a few inevitable hardships consequent of foreign occupation, the minority nationals in Transylvania are enjoying the utmost freedom and security under the just laws of an enlightened country. You will—"

But here the flow of the worthy general's eloquence received a sudden check in the shape of a rippling outburst of laughter from Rosemary. He frowned; not understanding her mood, his knowledge of women being superficial, his thoughts flew to hysteria. He had known a woman once—

As a matter of fact there was something hysterical about Rosemary's laughter. She checked it as soon as she regained control over herself. It was as well that she could laugh, that her sense of humour, never absent in an Englishwoman of intellect, had at once shown her the folly of giving way to the indignation which had been her first impulse. Frankly she could not see herself as an outraged tragedy queen thundering forth an emphatic "Never!" to the Roumanian's impudent proposals; and when Naniescu marvelled at the strange moods of women and vainly tried to guess what there was in the present situation to make this pretty woman laugh, he little knew that Rosemary was laughing at an imaginary picture of herself, with head thrown back and flaming eyes, and gestures that rivalled those of the general himself in their elegant and expressive sweep.

"You must forgive me, Monsieur le General," she said presently, "but your proposition is so funny!"

"Funny, dear lady!" he protested. "Frankly I do not see—"

"No," she broke in, "you would not."

"Will you be so gracious as to explain?"

"No," Rosemary went on lightly, "I don't think I will. You would not understand—even then."

"Then," he said coolly, "there is nothing left for me to do but to take my leave, and to deplore that you should have wasted so much of your valuable time in conversation with a clod."

He rose, and bowing low, he put out his hand in order to take hers, but Rosemary did not move.

"You cannot go, Monsieur le General," she said firmly, "without giving me a definite answer."

"I have given you a definite answer, dear lady. It is my misfortune that you choose to treat it as ludicrous."

"But surely you were not serious when you suggested—"

"When I suggested that the mischief wrought by two traitors should be remedied by one who takes an interest in them? What could be more serious?"

"You seriously think," she insisted, "that I would lend myself to such traffic? that I would put my name to statements which I could not verify, or to others that I should actually believe to be false? Ah ça, Monsieur le General, where did you get your conception of English women of letters, or of English journalists?"

Naniescu put his finger-tips to his breast, then spread out his hands with a broad gesture of protest.

"I was wrong," he said suavely, "utterly wrong. I admit it. Forgive me, and permit me to take my leave—"

"Monsieur le General—"

"At your service, dear lady."

"Young Imrey," she pleaded, "and Anna Heves!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am truly sorry for them," he said unctuously; "but surely you do not think seriously that I would lend myself to any traffic where the safety of my country is concerned. Ah ça, dear lady," he went on, not only mocking the very words she had used, but even the inflexion of her voice. "Where did you get your conception of a Roumanian officer or of a Roumanian gentleman?"

"It is you who proposed an infamous traffic," she retorted, "not I."

"Pardon me," he protested. "All that I suggested was that the mischief done should be remedied in the simplest way, before those who had wrought it could hope for pardon. The mischief was done through the public Press; it can only be made good through the public Press, and only through the medium of one as influential as yourself. My suggestion has not met with your approval. Let us say no more about it."

Before she could prevent it he had taken her hand and raised it to his lips. She snatched it away as if her finger-tips had come in contact with something noxious; the indignation which she had tried so hard to keep under control flamed for an instant out of her eyes; and Naniescu, seeing it, gave a soft, guttural laugh.

"I had a suspicion," he said cynically, "that the situation was not entirely ludicrous. And now," he went on, "have I your permission to take my leave?"

He bowed once more, hand on breast, heels clicking, and was on the point of turning to go when an impulsive cry from Rosemary brought him to a halt.

"That is not your last word, General Naniescu?"

"Indeed," he replied with utmost gallantry, "but the last word rests with you, dear lady. I am ever at your service. Only," he continued very slowly and very deliberately, "let me assure you once and for all that young Imrey and Anna Heves will appear before the military courts on a charge of treason unless a series of articles written in the spirit I have had the honour to outline before you, and bearing your distinguished name, appear in—shall we say *The Times*?—within the next month. But, just to show you how greatly I value your regard, I will be as lenient as my duty permits. I will even allow those two young traitors to return, temporarily, to their homes. Philip Imrey and Anna Heves will be brought here in the course of a day or two. They will be free, within certain limitations, to move about among their friends. I need not add, dear lady, that you, on the other hand, are absolutely free, without any limitations, to come and go as you choose. On the day that the last of your brilliant articles will have appeared in *The Times* Imrey and his cousin will receive a free pardon from the Government which they have outraged."

He paused a moment, then raised one hairy, manicured finger and added with theatrical emphasis:

"But not before."

Rosemary had listened to his long speech without moving a muscle. She stood straight as a sapling, looking unflinchingly at the man, striving to shame him, yet knowing that in this she would not succeed. There was no room for shame or compunction in that bundle of conceit and depravity.

Fear, too, appeared to be one of the tortuous motives which had suggested this ignominious "either-or." How far the Roumanian Government was a party to the mishandling of Transylvania, Rosemary had not yet had the opportunity of ascertaining.

She strongly suspected Naniescu of having over-stretched his powers, and of dreading an exposure at Bucharest more, perhaps, than in London or New York. Now, when he had finished speaking, and while his mellow eyes still rested with gentle mockery upon her, she could not keep back the final taunt which she hoped would sting him as much as his urbanity had stung her.

"What proof have I," she queried slowly, "that if I fulfil my share of the bargain you will not in the end repudiate yours?"

He smiled, quite undisturbed.

"You mistrust me. It is only natural," he said unctuously. "But what can I do?"

"Write me a letter," she replied coldly, "embodying your terms for the release of Philip Imrey and Anna Heves, and your promise to keep to the bargain if I accept those terms."

"Will that satisfy you?" he asked.

"It would hold you to your word, at any rate. For if it did not—"

He gave his soft, throaty laugh, and a glimmer of satisfaction shot through his eyes.

"You Englishwomen are truly marvellous," he observed. "So business-like. Everything in black and white-what?"

"Preferably," she rejoined drily.

"Well, then, you shall have the letter, dear lady," he concluded blandly. "And I promise you that I shall so tie myself down to my share of this interesting transaction that you will not hesitate any longer to fulfil yours."

And the next moment, even while Rosemary turned towards the window in order to look for one brief moment, at any rate, on something clean and pure, Naniescu had gone, softly closing the door behind him and leaving in his wake a faint odour of Havana cigar and eau de Cologne, and an atmosphere of intrigue which Rosemary felt to be stifling. She threw open the window and inhaled the clean air right down into her lungs. Her thoughts were still in a whirl. The situation was so impossible that her brain at present rejected it. It could not be. Things like this did not occur. It was not modern. Not twentieth century. Not post-war. Civilized men and women did not have interviews such as she had just had with this smooth-tongued Roumanian. There was something medieval about this "either-or," this impasse to which in very truth there was no issue.

Rosemary now started pacing up and down the room. She was alone and could indulge in this time-tried method of soothing jangled nerves. With both forefingers she tapped her temples, as if to stimulate the work of a jaded brain. Issue? There must be an issue to this impasse. She was a British subject, the wife of an English peer. She could not be bullied into doing things against which her sense of honour rebelled. She could not be made to lend her name to falsehoods, knowing them to be falsehoods. Of course not. Of course not. She could not be compelled. That was a fact. An undisputable, hard, solid fact. What then? Well, then there were Philip and Anna, who would be brought before the military courts on a charge of treason. And the military courts would condemn them—to what? To death? No! No! No! Not to death! Philip and little Anna: children whom she knew and loved! Condemned to death! Shot! like Edith Cavell, or Captain Fryatt! Shot! But that was in war time! Now the world was at peace! The Treaty of Versailles was the millennium that would bring peace on earth, goodwill toward men! Peace! This was peace! Foolish, thoughtless children could not in peace time be shot as traitors!

Tap-tap went Rosemary's fingers against her temples. Peace, ye gods! Philip and Anna had rendered themselves liable to human justice, and human justice in this half-forgotten corner of God's earth knew but one law—revenge! Philip and Anna would be condemned—and shot, unless she, Rosemary Tarkington, gained a free pardon for them at the price of truth, honour and the welfare, perhaps, of thousands of innocents.

And as gradually this awful alternative penetrated into the innermost recesses of her brain, the girl looked wildly about her like an animal suddenly fallen into a trap. Her knees all at once gave way under her, and she fell up against the sofa, with arms outspread upon the cushions. With head thrown back, she gazed unseeing up at the ceiling, and this time it was a real hysterical outburst that caused her to laugh and to laugh, until laughter broke into a sob, and burying her face in her hands she burst into a flood of tears.

CHAPTER XIV

Rosemary, being very human and very young, felt all the better after she had had a good cry. Better mentally, that is to say. Physically she was tired, hot, overstrained; her eyes ached, her limbs ached, her head ached, but mentally she felt better.

Presently she struggled back to her feet, dabbed her eyes with cold water, put powder on her nose and a comb through her hair. She did not want to look a sight when presently Jasper came back from his walk and she told him all that had happened.

By the way, where was Jasper?

Rosemary was just aching to review the whole situation with him. No need now for secrecy with regard to Philip and little Anna's foolish conspiracy. Soon the whole world would know of it, friend and foe alike. And Jasper would be able to help, of course, or at any rate to advise. He had done so much for the Roumanian Government in the past, there was just a chance they might do something at his request-out of gratitude.

Gratitude? Rosemary smiled ironically to herself at thought of connecting so gentle an emotion with men like Naniescu. Still, Jasper might think of something, of some way out of the situation, which Rosemary still persisted in thinking unreal. It was, of course, the climax of a plan formed as far back as the Five Arts' Ball at the Albert Hall, when Naniescu first proposed to her that she should come to Transylvania. To get her here, then to close on Philip and Anna a trap which had no doubt long ago been set, and finally to use them as a lever in order to force her, Rosemary, to write those articles which would sooth the vanity of Roumanian bureaucrats and throw dust in the eyes of the sentimental public.

As if in response to Rosemary's wish for his presence, Jasper presently walked in, courteous, chivalrous, full of apologies for having left her to face Naniescu alone.

"I must have been dreaming," he said contritely, "while I wandered out of the park, for, all of a sudden, I found myself away upon the mountain-side, thinking of you. Your dear face peeped at me through the trees, and then I realized that I was leaving you in the lurch, and that you might be wanting me-and I not there! Can you, I wonder, forgive me?"

He sat down beside her on the sofa and took her hand, and one by one he kissed each rosy finger-tip.

"Wherever I am, little one," he said softly, "I always see you. Your presence beside me this morning was so real that I was never wholly conscious that you were not actually there. Will you forgive me?" he asked again.

Rosemary turned to him with a smile. There was no one in the world quite so kind as Jasper; his kind, grave eyes were fixed on her with such a look of adoration that instinctively Rosemary nestled closer to him like a trusting child, and on an impulse she told him everything: the arrest of Philip Imrey and of little Anna, and Naniescu, and his mind appeared to wander, as if he were thinking of something else, and Rosemary harkened in vain for a word of indignation from him when she told him about Naniescu's abominable "either-or." Yet she studied his face very closely, those fine aristocratic features with their somewhat affected wearied expression, and the dark eyes set closely together like those of an eagle or a hawk. He said nothing. He only looked as if he were thinking hard. Pondering over something that puzzled and worried him. Rosemary wondered what it was. And later on, when she pressed him with questions, he seemed to drag himself back to the present situation with a great effort of nerve and will, and even then he did not appear to have a firm grasp of it. He put irrelevant counter-questions, and once or twice answered at random. His chief concern seemed to be that she, Rosemary, knowing the foolish game Philip and Anna were playing, had not succeeded in putting a stop to it.

"The girl appeared sensible enough," he said almost irritably. "I believe she would have listened to you. That sort of thing is just romantic nonsense. It never does any good, and more often than not it brings trouble on the innocent rather than on the guilty. The same thing applies to the Germans, the Austrians and to the Hungarians. They have been beaten and they have got to take their punishment. All these political intrigues are just folly!"

Of course Jasper was right. Of course he was sensible, and just and clear-thinking. But while Rosemary paid ungrudging tribute to his judgement, she felt more and more chilled by his total lack not only of sympathy but even of attention, as if the matter of Philip and Anna's life and liberty hardly interested him. Now Rosemary hardly liked to ask him for advice, for fear he might tell her to assent to Naniescu's wish-and to write those articles against which her sense of right and wrong, of truth and professional honour rebelled.

She could almost hear Jasper saying:

"You can get quite near the truth in your articles and satisfy Naniescu and you will save those two hotheads from the consequences of their own indiscretion. Believe me you would be doing far more good that way to this miserable country than Philip ever did with his ill-considered articles."

Perhaps Jasper had actually said all this. Rosemary could not be sure. For the last few minutes her mind had been absent from her body. It had flown over mountains and seas, right across the great plains of Hungary and the fields of waving corn, to a small, dark corner in the crowded Albert Hall, with noisy jazz music buzzing in the distance like phantom melodies, with laughter and chatter all around, glittering jewels, fantastic clothes and waving fans; and here Rosemary's mind came to a halt and insistently beckoned to memory. She recalled every moment of that night, every incident stood out like a picture before her now: the dance with Peter, and then the box with the heavy curtains that shut her right out of the world-alone with Peter. She recalled every line of his face, those fine white hands made to wield brush or pen rather than a cricket-ball, the fair, curly head, the tense dark eyes.

What sympathy she would have got from Peter if only he were here! His judgement, perhaps, would not have been so sound as Jasper's: Rosemary would not feel that she could rely on Peter to say or do only what was right, what was just and reasonable. He would be guided by his heart and not by his head; he would be wrong, no doubt-utterly wrong-in his judgements, in his advice. But oh! he would be so human, so full of pity, so understanding! And for the first time since her marriage to Jasper, Rosemary allowed herself to think of Peter, to long for Peter, to mourn that which Peter had meant in her life: youth, humanity and enthusiasm.

And suddenly she was brought back to Kis-Imre and to the reality of the present situation by a direct question put to her by Jasper:

"Why didn't you tell me, dear, that Peter Blakeney was in Transylvania?"

Jasper had put the question quite gently and kindly. He never put on with Rosemary any airs of martial authority, nor was there even a hint of reproach in his tone. But the question did bring Rosemary's mind back in a second from the Albert Hall to Kis-Imre. She

frowned, very much puzzled, and turned to look straight at Jasper. He, too, appeared to have come back to Kis-Imre from the land of nowhere. He still had on a puzzled and pondering expression, but with it a certain look of hardness, which he seldom had when his wife was high.

"Peter Blakeney?" Rosemary asked slowly. "What in the world do you mean?"

"Don't look so scared, little one," Jasper rejoined, his stern face breaking into a smile. "As a matter of fact the whole thing has puzzled me to such an extent that I am afraid I must have appeared very unresponsive just now—" He paused, and, leaning forward, he rested his elbows on his knees, and instead of looking as if he wished to avoid making her feel uncomfortable by staring directly at her.

"A moment ago," he resumed presently, "as I was crossing the hall, General Naniescu came out of the smoking-room into the outer vestibule. He did not see me, and I was just debating in my mind whether I would speak to him when he turned to a young officer who was evidently in attendance, and what he said to him was this: 'Ring up Mr. Blakeney at once and tell him I will see him about the business at five o'clock this afternoon; you may tell him that on the whole I think I have been successful.'"

"Impossible!" Rosemary exclaimed impulsively.

"So I thought at the time," Jasper rejoined. "Therefore I recrossed the hall and spoke a few words to Naniescu. He appeared vexed when he saw me, and I distinctly saw him make a sign to the officer, who did not then go to the telephone, although a moment ago Naniescu had ordered him to ring up at once. I kept the general talking for a few minutes in the hall. He did not refer to his conversation with you, nor did he refer in any way to Peter."

"You must have misunderstood the name," Rosemary insisted.

"I thought so at first, but I had confirmation of it later on. Naniescu very obviously and very clumsily maneuvered me toward the dining-room, the doors of which were wide open. As soon as he had got me into the room he closed the doors. Now, I happened to have very sharp ears, and although Naniescu talked to me at the top of his voice I distinctly heard what was going on in the hall. The officer called up the Hotel New York at Cluj, after which there was a pause. I tried to take my leave of the general, for I wanted to come up to you, but he would not let me go. He talked incessantly and always at the top of his voice on all sorts of irrelevant topics. He dragged me to the window at the farther end of the room to show me the view. He tried to persuade me to go out with him for a turn in the park. Finally fortune favoured me; my sharp ears caught the ring of the telephone bell. I gave Naniescu the slip and just had the door open when I heard the officer say quite distinctly in French:

"Is that you, Mr. Blakeney? Mr. Blakeney, his Excellency will see you—" At this point," Jasper went on, "Naniescu with a loud guffaw took hold of my arm and made some facetious remark which I did not catch. However, he had made it so obvious that he did not wish me to hear the telephone message, and, on the other hand, I had heard the officer name Peter so distinctly that I allowed myself to be dragged back into the room, and made no further attempt to pry into Naniescu's-or Peter's-secrets."

"But this is all nonsense," Rosemary broke in warmly. "Peter is not in Transylvania. I am sure he is not. He would have told me. He would have let me know. It is some other Blakeney whom Naniescu was calling up."

Jasper shrugged. "Perhaps," he said quietly.

"I am sure," Rosemary insisted.

Jasper said nothing more after that, and Rosemary was conscious of a feeling of irritation against him because he was so obviously convinced that Peter was in Transylvania and in secret communication with that odious Naniescu. How could he imagine such a thing? Peter! Peter with the lovely Hungarian mother! Peter? Nonsense! But Rosemary could not sit still. She jumped to her feet and began fidgeting about the room, arranging her dress, her hair, fidgeting, fidgeting. She would not look at Jasper, and she was determined not to say anything more. He would discover his mistake soon enough, and if she said anything now she might use words, phrases, expression which later on she would regret.

Peter intriguing with a Roumanian! Nonsense! And yet her nerves were terribly on edge, more so now than they were after her interview with Naniescu. And she could not bear to look at Jasper. She was afraid that she would hate him for his thoughts about Peter. Fortunately after a little while the luncheon-bell sounded. Jasper jumped to his feet. He too seemed relieved that the subject of Peter could now be conveniently dropped.

"Will you see Elza?" he said abruptly.

"Elza?" Rosemary asked. "Why?"

"Naniescu and his suite are in the house," Jasper replied drily. "They will stay to lunch. I don't know what Elza will feel about it."

"She will feel as I do," Rosemary retorted hotly, "that the man's presence at her table is an outrage."

"But he told me that Philip and Anna will be allowed to come home."

"Yes. Provisionally. Until I—"

"Elza need not know about that," Jasper broke in hurriedly. "That is why I thought you would see her. She need not know that Philip's release is only-conditional—"

Rosemary thought the matter over for a moment. As always, Jasper was right. Elza need not know. Not yet.

"Shall I go to her now," she said, "and tell her?"

"I think it would come best from you. It will be such news for her, poor thing."

"Poor darling!" Rosemary sighed; then she added more coldly: "But what about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I expected to sit at table with that mealy-mouthed Roumanian?"

Jasper smiled. "How else would you explain the situation to Elza?" he asked.

All this had brought about a fresh train of thought, and Rosemary was quite thankful that Jasper was showing such sympathy for Elza. He was quite right. Elza need not be told that the release of Philip and Anna was only conditional. There was a month still ahead before Elza need be told the truth.

"Will you keep Naniescu talking," Rosemary said finally, "while I see Elza?"

She looked quite cool and self-possessed now, beautifully dressed, one row of perfect pearls round her neck, circles of diamonds in her ears, a great lady conscious of her own beauty. "How wonderful you are!" came as an involuntary exclamation from her husband's lips, and his dark, deep-set eyes lit up with a sudden flash of passionate admiration as they rested on the vision of loveliness before him.

Then together they went out of the room, Rosemary just a step or two in front of her husband. She still could not bear to look at him, and when she caught his look of bold admiration she coldly turned her head away. Obedient to her wish, he went downstairs to keep Naniescu talking, while she went to break the good news to Elza. But walking along the stately gallery that led to her hostess's rooms, Rosemary's thoughts were not with Elza, her lips were murmuring almost audibly:

Peter intriguing with a Roumanian?

What nonsense!

Jasper must be mad!

CHAPTER XV

The moment that Rosemary came into the room she guessed that Elza somehow or other had heard the news. She had tears in her big, kind eyes, but they were tears of emotion, not of sorrow or anxiety.

"Philip is coming home with Anna!" she cried as soon as she caught sight of Rosemary.

"Who told you?" Rosemary asked.

"General Naniescu sent his captain to tell me. I only knew it five minutes ago. But oh, my dear, they have been such five minutes!"

Rosemary kissed her with tender affection. She did not feel somehow as if she could say much.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Elza went on while she put a few finishing touches to her toilet. "And has not Naniescu been kind? Of course I knew that they could not do anything to Philip because he has done nothing, and I don't believe that Anna did anything either. But you know, my dear, these days some awful mistakes do occur. But," she added lightly, "I have so often experienced it in life that men are not nearly so cruel as they are credited to be. One is so apt to pass judgement on insufficient evidence. Give a man the chance of doing a kind act, that is my motto, and he will nearly always do it."

Fortunately Elza was rather fussy for the moment, fidgeting about the room and obviously trying to calm her nerves, so she did not notice Rosemary's silent, unresponsive way.

"When do you expect Philip and Anna?" Rosemary said at last.

"This afternoon," Elza exclaimed, her words rang out like a little cry of joy. "And you know Maurus is so happy that he has actually gone down in order to say something civil to Naniescu, who, of course, is staying for lunch. Well," she added after a moment or two, when she had gathered up her keys, her rings, her handkerchief, and given a final tap to her hair, "shall we go down too?"

Without a word Rosemary followed her. She felt as if she must choke. Elza's happiness was going to be the most severe trial of all during this terrible month that lay ahead of her.

"Oh, and I was almost forgetting," Elza resumed, while she tripped lightly along the gallery towards the stairs, "the smaller joy beside the greater-the greatest one! I have heard from Peter Blakeney."

"From Peter?"

"Yes. He is at Cluj, at the New York. He is over here about some arrangement he wants to make for a cricket match or something silly of that sort-you know what Peter is: quite mad about that silly cricket. I had a letter from him this morning, but when it came I had no thought for anything except Philip. I must let you read it presently. I don't really know what he says, but if he is at Cluj we are sure to see him very soon."

She prattled on as merry as a bird. She seemed twenty years younger all of a sudden-her step was light and springy, her eyes were bright, her voice was fresh and clear. Rosemary kept on repeating to herself:

"She need not know for at least three weeks. She need not know, and I must pretend-pretend-at any cost. She will know soon enough, poor darling."

And Rosemary did manage to pretend; for the next three hours she was just an automaton, wound up to play a certain part. To everyone she had to pretend-to Elza, to Maurus, to that odious Naniescu, and even to Jasper. The worst of all was pretending to Jasper, for from this she got no reprieve. Jasper's kind, anxious eyes were on her all the time, but she would not let him see that she was anxious about Peter. Somehow the episode about Peter had made everything so much worse. Not that she harboured the thought for a moment that Peter was intriguing with Naniescu. That, of course, was out of the question. He had come to arrange something about a cricket match, and, of course, he had to see Naniescu about it, get his permission, and so on. There were ten chances to one that Peter had written to her and told her all about it, and that his letter had gone astray. No, no, no! There could be no thought of an intrigue between Peter and these Roumanians; but Rosemary felt that Jasper thought there was, and was vaguely pitying her because of some unknown treachery on Peter's part. It was odious!

And with it all Elza's obvious happiness was almost intolerable to witness, and even Maurus departed from his habitual ill-temper to exchange facetious remarks with Naniescu. Time seemed leaden-footed. The interminable luncheon dragged on wearily, as did the hour of coffee and liqueurs, of endless small talk and constant pretence. But even the worst moments in life must become things of the past sooner or later, and when Rosemary began to feel that she could not stand the whole thing any longer, she found that Naniescu and his officers were actually taking their leave.

After luncheon Jasper was quite charming. He had thought the whole matter over, he said, and decided that it was in his power to make a personal appeal to the King in favour of Philip and Anna. He had certainly rendered more than one signal service to Roumania during and after the war, and he thought that in these countries personal influence counted a great deal. At any rate, there would be no harm in trying, and he would start for Bucharest immediately. He had spoken about the proposed journey to Elza and Maurus, alleging official business, and Elza had already arranged that he should be driven into Cluj in time for the afternoon express. Rosemary's heart was at once filled with gratitude; she felt angry with herself for having mistrusted him. She threw herself whole-heartedly into the preparations for his journey, lolled her troubled soul with the belief that it would prove to be the happy issue out of this terrible situation. When it was time for him to go she wished him God-speed with more fervour and affection than she had shown him for days.

"Bar accidents," he assured her, "I shall be back in a fortnight. If I have definite good news to report I will wire. But even if you don't hear from me, I shall be back, as I say, in fifteen days."

"I shall count the hours until your return," she said.

"And in the meanwhile," he urged with deep earnestness, "you will do nothing without consulting me."

She smiled at this want of logic, so unlike her methodical husband.

"I could not consult you, dear," she said. "You won't be here."

"No, no, I know," he insisted; "but I want you to promise that you will leave things as they are until my return. I don't want you to give anything away to Elza, or to Philip or Anna. Promise me."

"Of course I'll promise," replied readily. "God knows I don't want to be the one to break the awful news to them."

"Or to Peter," he added gravely.

"Peter?"

"I want you to promise me-to promise, Rosemary, that you will not speak of this miserable affair to Peter Blakeney."

Then, as she seemed to hesitate, vaguely puzzled at his desperate earnestness, he again insisted:

"Promise me, Rosemary, whatever you may hear, whatever you may see, whatever may be planned by Elza or anybody else, promise me that you will not speak of it to Peter."

"But Jasper," she exclaimed, "why? Of course I will promise, if you wish it, but frankly I don't understand why you insist, so solemnly too," she added, trying to assume a lightness of heart which she was far from feeling. Then she went on more gravely: "I could trust Peter as I would myself."

"You can put it down to nerves," Jasper said, with the ghost of a smile, "to intuition or foreboding, or merely to jealousy and my wretched character, to anything you please, my dear one. But promise me! Promise me that everything in connexion with this miserable affair will remain just between you and me. Let the others talk, guess, plan. Promise me that you will never speak of it with Peter. Promise me, or I will throw up the sponge, remain here to look after you, and let Naniescu do his worst with the lot of them."

Thus, alternately demanding, entreating, threatening, he extracted the promise from her, even though her heart cried out against what she felt was treachery to Peter. Jasper's insistence filled her with a vague sense of foreboding not unmixed with fear; and yet, the very next moment, as soon as he had her promise, he became tender, soft, loving, as if trying to make her forget his solemn earnestness of a while ago. He took her in his arms and gazed into her eyes with an intensity of longing which made her own heart ache with self-reproach.

"If God there be," he whispered softly, as if to himself, "it was cruel of Him to make you so beautiful-and so desirable."

Again his mood had changed. Tenderness had turned into passion, fierce, almost primeval, and he held her now more like a man defending the greatest treasure he possessed on God's earth than like a husband taking affectionate leave of his wife.

"If I should lose you, Rosemary," he murmured, "because of this."

She tried to laugh and to speak flippantly. "Lose me?" she said. "You have little chance of doing that, my dear, for this or any other cause. Naniescu has not the power of life and death over me," she added more seriously.

There was something about Jasper at this moment that she could not entirely fathom. Twice before she had seen him in these moods of violent passion akin almost to savagery, when she felt utterly helpless and absolutely in his power. She had the feeling that when he was in one of these moods he was capable of any violence against her if she dared to disobey or resist. Not that Rosemary was afraid; she had never in her life been afraid of anyone; but she had always been mistress of herself, and at this moment, held tightly by the man to whom she had sworn love and fealty, she felt like a slave of olden times in the grip of her lord.

"You-you will care for me some day, Rosemary?" he asked with passionate earnestness. "Say that you will some day, when all this is forgotten, and we are back again in England, free to live our own lives, free to love. You will care for me then, Rosemary, will you not? For I could not live beside you for long, feeling all the time that you did not belong to me with your whole soul. You have such haunting eyes-eyes such as pixies and fairies have-maddening eyes. I should go crazy presently if I failed to kindle the love-light in those eyes."

He kissed her eyes, her mouth, her throat. Rosemary would have struggled, would have screamed if she dared. Fortunately a knock at the door and the entrance of one of the menservants, who came to fetch milord's luggage, put an end to a situation which Rosemary found very difficult to endure. After the man had gone the spell appeared to be broken. Jasper became once more the courteous, grave man of the world he had always been. The episode of a moment ago did not seem to have occurred at all, as far as he was concerned, and while Rosemary felt her teeth chattering and the palms of her hands were covered with a cold sweat, Jasper moved about the room and spoke to her about his proposed journey, his certain return in a fortnight, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER XVI

The carriage which took Jasper to Cluj brought back Philip and Anna. After that the house was full of animation, like a beehive in May. Rosemary only saw the two young people for a moment. She felt a stranger in this family gathering, and her heart was so heavy that she soon found a pretext for going up to her room. Later on she pleaded a headache. Kind and hospitable as were these dear people, Rosemary felt that they must wish to be alone amongst themselves after the terrible time they had all gone through. They would have so much to talk over that the presence of a stranger, even so welcome as one as Rosemary Tarkington, must of necessity be irksome. It was clear to her from the first that Philip and Anna knew little, if anything, of the conditions attached to their release. Philip talked lightly of their being under surveillance for a time, and then added quite gaily that he would gladly lead the life of a hermit in Kis-Imre and never go outside the gates until the present clouds blew over. He gave himself up wholly to the joy of watching his mother's happiness and seeing her dear eyes beaming on her returned boy. Altogether he was more like a schoolboy who by a fluke has escaped punishment than a man conscious of a deadly peril that had not ceased to threaten him.

They all sat up talking late into the evening, and when Rosemary found herself at last alone in her room, trying to think things out before she went to bed, little Anna came up to her. The child looked hollow-eyed and grave; the joy that had been on her face when she first found herself in this second home of hers had all gone. She looked old, wan and tired out.

Rosemary put out her arms, and Anna ran up to her and snuggled up close to her, just like a child. For a long time she was quite silent, with her head against her friend's shoulder, her little thin hands held in Rosemary's kind, firm grasp. Now and again a hot tear would fall on Rosemary's hands. Anna was crying quietly to herself, and Rosemary waited until the girl was calm enough to speak.

"I don't understand the whole thing, Rosemary," were the first words that Anna spoke.

"What is it you don't understand, dear?" Rosemary asked.

"It is not like them to be lenient, is it?" the girl retorted, looking up with quick, eager inquiry into her friend's face.

"Oh, in this case," Rosemary rejoined vaguely, "you are both so young!"

Anna shook her head vigorously.

"That wouldn't worry them," she said, "after all the trouble they must have taken to track us down."

"You were caught in the act, I suppose?" Rosemary queried.

Anna nodded.

"Yes," she said. "And that was strange too. I had all my parcels ready—the usual ones for Budapest, and Philip's manuscript at the bottom of a box of vegetable seeds. Half a dozen soldiers and an officer came into the shop and walked straight up to the place where the parcels were stacked. They seemed to know all about everything, for the officer just ordered his men to undo all the parcels, and, of course, there was Philip's manuscript."

"There is nothing strange in all that, Anna," Rosemary said. "I have no doubt in my mind that you both have been watched for some time by secret service men, and at last they closed their trap on you."

But once more Anna shook her head.

"I can't explain what I mean," she said, and puckered her fine straight brows together. "It is a kind of intuition that came to me when I saw those soldiers walk in. I am absolutely convinced that we were not denounced by regular Government spies. They are too clumsy, and we were too careful. I am certain," she reiterated obstinately, "that we were not denounced by one of them."

"By whom, then?"

"Ah, that I don't know. It is an awful feeling I have. You know I never believed in all that so-called psychic nonsense which is so fashionable just now, but the feeling I have is not just an ordinary one. It is so strong that I cannot fight against it. It is a feeling that eyes-eyes-are always watching me and Philip—cruel eyes-eyes that wish us evil—that will us to do something foolish, unconsidered, something that will get us again into trouble, and for good this time."

"You are overwrought, Anna dear," Rosemary put in gently. "And no wonder! Of course, we all know that there are Government spies all over the place, and you and Philip will have to be doubly careful in the future' but here in Kis-Imre you are among friends. Your aunt Elza's servants are all of them Hungarian and thoroughly to be trusted."

Anna said nothing. She was staring straight out in front of her, as if trying to meet those mysterious eyes which were for ever watching her. An involuntary cry of horror rose to Rosemary's lips.

"Anna!" she exclaimed, "you don't think that I—"

But before she could complete her sentence Anna's arms were round her.

"Of course not. Of course not," the girl murmured tenderly. "Rosemary darling, of course not!"

"I never spoke about your affairs to a single soul, Anna," Rosemary said gravely. "I give you my solemn word of honour that I never even mentioned the thing to my husband until after your arrest, when, of course, all the facts became public property."

"I know, Rosemary, I know," Anna repeated. "I would trust you with every secret. I would trust you with my life—with Philip's life."

"And you did not trust anyone else?" Rosemary asked.

"I never breathed a word about it to a living soul, except to you and Peter Blakeney."

"Peter knew?"

"Yes, Peter knew."

"You wrote to him?" Rosemary insisted. "Ah, then I understand. Your letters were held up by the censor, and—"

"No, I never wrote to Peter what Philip and I were doing; but you know he arrived in Cluj the day before I was arrested. He came to arrange some cricket match or other between Roumanians and Hungarians. I don't know anything about cricket, but, of course, Peter was full of it. He came to see me at my lodgings quite unexpectedly. I was so surprised to see him, and so happy, as I am very, very fond of Peter. We talked till late into the evening, and somehow I had to tell him everything. But except for that one talk with Peter, and the one I had with you, I never breathed a word about what Philip and I were doing, not to a living soul!"

Rosemary said nothing for the moment. Indeed there was nothing much that she could say. Little Anna had got hold of the idea that some mysterious agency had been at work and brought about her and Philip's arrest. But, after all, what did it matter? Professional spies or insidious traitor? What difference did it make in the end? Anna was frightened because she feared a fresh denunciation. She did not know that her poor life was already forfeit, that she was just a mouse whom the cat had allowed to run free for a moment or two, and that she would be pounced upon again unless her friend Rosemary whom she trusted with her whole soul, bought freedom and life for her.

But it was not thoughts of Anna that sealed Rosemary's lips at this moment and left her mute, motionless, like an insentient log, with Anna's cold little hand held tightly in her own. Anna had not spoken of her activities or her plans to anyone except to Peter. And Jasper had extracted a promise from her, Rosemary, that she would not speak of Philip's or Anna's affairs to Peter. What connexion was there between Jasper's insistence and that other awful thought which, strive as she might, would haunt Rosemary's brain like a hideous ghoul risen out of hell? What mystery lurked in the denunciation of these children, in their release, in the alternative which Naniescu had placed before her? What hidden powers were at work, threatening her with shame and the children with death?

Rosemary felt stifled. Rising abruptly, she went to the window and stepped out on the balcony. The moon was up, a honey-coloured, waning moon that threw its cool, mysterious light on park-land and lake and the distant pine forest beyond. Immediately below the balcony a bed of tuberoses, with wax-like corollas that shimmered white and spectral, sent their intoxicating odour through the balmy air. And against the background of dense shrubberies a couple of fireflies gleamed and darted aimlessly, ceaselessly, in and out of the shadows. Rosemary, seeing them, was reminded of what Anna had said just now-that eyes were for ever looking at her, cruel eyes, eyes that were on the watch, spying, spying.

Suddenly she clapped her hand to her mouth, smothering a sharp cry that had risen to her throat; and instinctively she stepped back into the room and hastily closed the window.

"What is it, Rosemary darling?" Anna asked.

"Nothing, dearie, nothing," Rosemary replied quickly. "The smell of those tuberoses made me feel queer. That's all."

She could not tell Anna that while she watched the fireflies, and the air was so still, so still that not a blade of grass shivered, and even the leaves of the aspen were at rest, she had perceived a tremor amongst the laurel bushes and seen some of the tall branches held back by a hand, each finger of which was outlined by the silvery light of the moon. And above the hand she had sensed a pair of eyes that were looking up at her.

She tried to talk lightly with Anna, to infuse into her some of the buoyancy of mind which she was far from feeling herself. She was sure that Anna had a vague consciousness of the danger that hung over her and those she cared for; the only thing she could not know was that her fate and theirs lay in the hands of the friend whom she trusted. How would she-how would they all-bear the knowledge when it came to them, as come it must? How would she, Rosemary, face the reproach which, even if unspoken by them, would haunt her to the end of her life: "You might have saved us, if you would."

CHAPTER XVII

And it was that spectre which from that hour haunted Rosemary; it would not allow her to rest at night; it dogged her steps by day. When she walked in the park and the soft summer breeze stirred the branches of Lombardy poplars or the stately plumes of maize, ghostly voices would seem to be whispering all around her: "Life and liberty for Philip and Anna! Life and liberty for those two children who love and trust you, who know nothing of the fate that hangs over them!" And when she was in the house at meals or in the family circle, with Elza radiating happiness and even Maurus unbending, with Philip almost feverishly gay and Anna thoughtful, the eyes of all these kind, dear people whom she loved seemed full of reproach to the one woman who could save them-if she would.

Then Rosemary, unable to pretend any longer, would run up to her room; and she-one of the most sane, most level-headed women in this neurotic age-would throw herself on her knees and pray to be taken out of it all. Oh! to be out of it-underground-anywhere! Just to be out of it, not to see those smiles, that happiness, that contentment which she knew must presently end in a devastating catastrophe. To be out of it when the time came-in a few weeks-days-hours!

Hour followed hour, dull and leaden-footed. And they were all so happy at Kis-Imre! Suspecting nothing, knowing nothing, whilst Rosemary felt her self-control slipping away from her day by day. At times she felt as if she could not endure the situation and longer, as if she must tell one of them. Tell Elza or Maurus, or the children! Surely they should know! There comes a time when a doctor, knowing that his patient cannot recover, is bound in all humanity to tell him. Then surely it was Rosemary's duty to say to them all: "You don't know! You have not guessed! But you are doomed. Doomed! Philip and Anna to death! You Elza and Maurus to worse than death — limitless sorrow. Now you are just living on a volcano. In another few days-twenty, nineteen, eighteen-the flames will break through, the earth will totter under your feet, and everything you care for in the world will be engulfed. You will perish. Yes, you! All of you! And then you will know about me! How I might have saved you and did not. And you will hate me as no woman has ever been hated before. And I shall go forth into the vast wilderness which is called the world. And I, too, shall perish of sorrow and endless regret!"

She had not again seen those mysterious eyes which that evening, while little Anna was talking, had peered at her from behind the laurel bushes; and she was far too sensible to dwell on what might only, after all, have been the creation of overwrought nerves.

The time was drawing near for Jasper's return. "Fifteen days" he had said; and she knew that, bar accidents, he would keep his word. But she had no news of him, and after the first week she ceased to expect any. She would not own, even to herself, that she had already ceased to build hopes in that direction. Jasper had promised to wire as soon as he heard anything definite, so in this case no news was bad news. Dear, kind Jasper! he knew how miserably anxious she was! He would not keep good news from her-not one hour.

It was on the tenth day that Peter arrived at the castle. He had announced his coming twenty-four hours previously, and in a moment there was excitement from attic to cellar in the house. Everybody seemed to be arranging something, planning something. Tennis excursions, dancing! Peter was such a good dancer! They would have the gipsies over from Bonczhida. That was the finest band in the whole of Transylvania; and they would ask the Keletys over from Hajdu and the Fejérs from Henger, and perhaps Aunt Charlotte could be persuaded to come and bring Marie. There was some talk of private theatricals, of tableaux, a tennis tournament, perhaps a cricket match, English fashion. Peter was so clever at all that sort of thing! Rosemary was consulted about the cricket match and the tournament, for these were to be done on English lines! But the dancing and the acting and the picnics, these were to be truly and entirely Hungarian-pre-war Hungarian, the gayest, merriest things darling Rosemary had ever seen.

How much she had looked forward to Peter's coming, Rosemary did not know until after she had seen him. What hopes she had built on his mere presence, on his nearness, she did not own to herself until afterwards. He had not been in the house many hours before she realized that he had changed. Not changed for the worse, of course not-but changed.

He seemed younger, more boyish-more English in many ways. At one time the Hungarian strain had been very conspicuous in Peter-his tempestuous love-making, his alternating moods of fatalism and rebellion had always reminded Rosemary of those barbaric chieftains-his forbears about whom she loved to read-who had been up and fought the Turks, while the rest of Europe only trembled at thought of their approach.

But now Peter was much more like the conventional young English athlete: not very loquacious, very placid, ashamed of showing emotion or excitement, standing about for the most part with his hands in his trousers pockets contemplating the toes of his boots, and smoking innumerable cigarettes. He had not seemed like this at first. He arrived in the late afternoon, and Rosemary was downstairs in the paved courtyard when the carriage drove in through the gates, with its four spanking greys shining with lather, for the day had been very hot and the roads were dusty. Peter was on the box, having dislodged the coachman, who sat beside him, the groom being relegated to the cushioned seat of the victoria.

There was such a halloing and a shouting, everyone screaming a welcome, grooms rushing to hold the horses, the greys pawing and champing and shorting, that Rosemary hardly saw Peter when he threw the reins to the coachman, jumped down from the box, and was lost in a forest of welcoming arms that hid him completely from view.

It was only after dinner, when the whole company went out into the garden to get a breath of air, that Rosemary found herself for a few moments alone with him. It had been desperately hot indoors, and the noise of all these dear people all talking and laughing at the same time had been overpowering. Fortunately everyone thought it would be lovely in the garden, and still laughing and chattering they trooped out like a brood of chickens let out of a coop. Rosemary had wandered on ahead of the others, and presently she turned down the path that ran along the perennial border, now a riot of colour and a tangle of late lilies, crimson pentstemons and evening primroses.

Rosemary did not hear Peter coming. No one ever dressed for dinner at Kis-Imre, and Peter had his tennis shoes on, and the rubber soles made not the slightest sound upon the smooth gravel path. She had stopped to look at a clump of tiger lilies, when suddenly a wonderful sense of well-being seemed to descend upon her soul. It was as if she had stepped out of a boat that had been tossed about a stormy sea, and had all of a sudden set her foot upon firm ground. The first words he said were so like the foolish, lighthearted Peter she knew.

"You wonderful pixie!" he said, "I can't believe that it is really you!"

She did not immediately turn to look at him, but went on studying the markings on the lilies; then she said, as indifferently as she could:

"Why didn't you let me know sooner, Peter, that you were coming to Transylvania? In fact," she went on coolly, "you never did let me know at all. I first heard through-others that you were here."

"Who told you?" he asked.

"I think Jasper did first," she replied. "He had heard the news from General Naniescu."

Then only did she turn and look at him. She had to look up, because, though she herself was very tall, one always had to look up at Peter, who was a young giant. At this moment she certainly did not think that he was changed. He looked just the same, with his very boyish face and laughing grey eyes, and his fair hair that so often looked as if it had been Marcel-waved. He was looking down at her when she turned to him, and suddenly he said:

"You don't look happy, Rosemary!"

Of course she laughed and told him not to make silly remarks. How could she help being happy here with these dear, kind people? Never, never in all her life had she met with such kindness and hospitality. Peter shrugged his shoulders. He thrust his hands in the pockets of his flannel trousers and looked down at the toes of his shoes.

"Very well," he said lightly, "if you won't tell me, you won't. And that's that. But let me tell you this: though I dare say I am a bit of a fool, I am not quite such an ass as not to see the difference in you. You've gotten thinner. When I first arrived and shook hands with you, your hand felt hot, and your eyes—"

He broke off abruptly, and then with sudden irrelevance: "Where's Jasper?"

"Gone to —," she began, and suddenly came to a halt. When she promised Jasper not to breathe a word of Philip's and Anna's affairs to Peter, she had not realized how difficult this would be. Would she be breaking her promise if she now told Peter that Jasper was in Bucharest. He would ask questions, more questions which Rosemary's promise bound her not to answer.

"He has been called away on business," she said curtly.

Her hesitation had only lasted a second or two; she hoped that Peter had not noticed it. Anyway, when he asked: "To Budapest?" she replied, without hesitation this time: "Yes, to Budapest." And she added quite gaily: "He'll be back at the end of the week. You can't think, Peter, how I miss him when he is away! Perhaps that is why I am looking thin, and why my hands are hot."

"Perhaps," Peter assented laconically.

Then somehow the conversation flagged, and all the happy feeling that Rosemary had experienced when Peter first stood near her slipped away from her. She suddenly felt cold, although the evening was so hot that a little while ago she had scarcely been able to breathe. At some little distance behind her Philip's voice sounded cheerful and homely, and Maurus Imrey's throaty laugh and Elza's happy little giggle rang through the sweet-scented evening air. Poor Rosemary shivered.

"Shall we walk on," she asked, "Or wait for the others?"

"Let's walk on," Peter replied; then added in a clumsy, boyish fashion: "Rather!"

They walked on side by side. Rosemary, at a loss what to say next, had thrown out an inquiry about the cricket match. This set Peter talking. All at once he threw off his abrupt, constrained air, and prattled away nineteen to the dozen. The cricket match was going to be a huge success. Didn't Rosemary think it was a grand idea? Talk about the League of Nations, or whatever the thing was called! In Peter's opinion, there was nothing like a jolly good cricket or football match to bring people together. Make them understand one another, was Peter's motto. Of course, all these dagoes over here had got to learn to be proper sports. No sulking if they got beaten. Peter would see to that. Anyhow, the old General What's-his-name had been a brick. He had helped Peter no end to get the Roumanian team together, and had given them all free passes to Hódmező, where the match would take place. Hódmező was in Hungary, and old What's-his-name-meaning Naniescu-said he would rather the Roumanian team went to Hungary than that the Hungarian team came over here. Well, Peter didn't mind which. It was going to be a topping affair. He was going to captain the Roumanian team, and Payson was captaining the Hungarians. Did Rosemary know Payson? Jolly chap with a ripping wife-done splendid work in the Air Force during the war. He had something to do with the Military Commission on disarmaments. He was at Budapest now, and Jasper would probably see him while he was there. Payson was coming over to Hódmező by aeroplane. Wouldn't that create a sensation. There was a splendid landing ground quite close to Hódmező fortunately. Payson's wife was coming with him. She was so keen on flying. Ripping couple, they were! Didn't Rosemary think so? Oh! and Peter had had telegrams of good wishes from no end of people, and a jolly letter from dear old Plum Warner. Did Rosemary know Plum Warner? There was a cricketer if you like! No one like him, in Peter's opinion. The science of the man! Well, the dagoes should learn that cricket is the finest game in the world! Didn't Rosemary agree with him?

Rosemary gave monosyllabic replies whenever Peter gave her the chance of putting in a word. She could not help smiling at his enthusiasm, of course. It was so young, so English, so thoroughly, thoroughly fine! But somehow she could not recapture that lovely feeling of security, that sheer joy in having Peter near her, and she kept asking herself whether it was really Peter who had changed—who had become younger, or she who had grown old. In this youthful athlete with his self-assurance and his slang, she vainly sought the wayward, sometimes moody, always captivating Peter, whose tempestuous love-making had once swept her off her feet.

At one moment she tried to lead the conversation into a more serious channel: "How do you think Anna is looking?" she asked abruptly.

"A bit peaky." Peter replied lightly, "poor little mole! When you go back to England," he went on more gravely, "you ought to take her with you. It would do her all the good in the world. Take her out of herself, I mean."

"She wouldn't come," Rosemary replied earnestly.

"Don't you think so?"

"Why, Peter," she retorted, feeling exasperated with him for this air of indifference even where Anna was concerned, "you know Anna would not come. For one thing," Rosemary added impulsively, "I don't suppose she would be allowed to."

"You mean her mother wouldn't let her?"

"No," she replied laconically. "I didn't mean that."

"Well, then?" he retorted. Then, as Rosemary, shocked, angry, remained silent, holding her lips tightly pressed together, almost as if she were afraid that words would slip out against her will, Peter shrugged his broad shoulders and rejoined flippantly:

"Oh, I suppose you mean old What's-his-name-Naniescu-and all that rubbish. I don't think he would worry much. He has been a brick, letting Anna and Philip out like that. I expect he would just as soon see them both out of the country as not. Jolly good thing it would be for both of them! They would learn some sense, the monkeys!"

He paused and looked round at Rosemary. Then, as she seemed to persist in her silence, he insisted:

"Don't you agree with me?"

"Perhaps," she replied, with a weary sigh.

"Anyway, you'll think it over, won't you?" Peter went on. "I am sure you could fix it up with old Naniescu. He admires you tremendously, you know."

It was all wrong, all wrong. Peter used to be so fond of little Anna. "Give her a kiss for me," were almost the last words he had spoken to Rosemary on the day of her wedding. His own affairs evidently pushed every other consideration into the remotest corner of his brain; and cricket matches were apparently of more importance than the danger which threatened Anna and Philip. Nor had Rosemary any longer the desire to break her promise to Jasper. She no longer wished to speak to Peter about Anna and Philip, or about the horrible alternative which Naniescu had put before her. Peter-this Peter-would not understand. Jasper had not understood either-but he had misunderstood in a different way. Rosemary realized how right he had been to extract that promise from her. Was not Jasper always right? And was it intuition that had prompted him, after all, rather than an attack of jealousy of which Rosemary, in her heart, had been so ready to accuse him?

Suddenly she felt a longing to get away from Peter, from this Peter whom she neither knew nor trusted. "I'll go in now, I think," she said abruptly; "the dew is rising, and my shoes are very thin."

And she started to walk more quickly. Slowly the shades of evening had been drawing in. Rosemary had not noticed before how dark it was getting. The line of shrubbery behind the perennial border was like a solid wall; and on the other side of the path the stretch of lawn, with its great clumps of pampas grass and specimen trees, became merged in the gathering shadows. Beyond the lawn glimmered the lights of the chateau, and the veranda in front of the drawing-room was like a great patch of golden light, broken by the long, straight lines of its supporting columns. There was no moon, only an infinity of stars; and in the flower border the riot of colour had faded into the gloom, leaving just the white flowers-the nicotiana, the Madonna lilies, a few violas-to break the even mantle spread by the night.

From the direction of the chateau there came a loud call of "Hallo!" to which Peter gave a lusty response. A voice shouted: "We are going in!"

"Right-o!" Peter responded. "We'll come in too!"

Then suddenly he gave a bound, and in an instant had leaped the border and disappeared in the shrubbery beyond. Rosemary, taken completely by surprise, had come to a halt. From the shrubbery there came a loud cry of terror, then a swear-word from Peter, and finally a string of ejaculations, all in Hungarian, and of distressful appeals for mercy in the name of all the saints in the calendar. The next moment Peter's white flannels glimmered through the foliage, and a second or two later he reappeared lower down, coming up the path and half dragging, half pushing in front of him a huddled-up mass, scantily clothed in ragged shirt and trousers, and crowned with a broad-brimmed hat, from beneath which came a succession of dismal howls.

"What is it?" Rosemary cried.

"That's what I want to know," was Peter's reply. "I caught sight of this blighter sneaking in the shrubbery, and got him by the ear, which he does not seem to like, eh, my friend?"

He gave the ear which he held between his fingers another tweak, and in response drew a howl from his victim, fit to wake the seven sleepers.

"Mercy, gracious lord! Mercy on a poor man! I was not doing anything wrong; I swear by holy Joseph I was not doing anything wrong!"

The creature, whoever he was, succeeded in wriggling himself free of Peter's unpleasant hold. At once he turned to flee, but Peter caught him by the shoulder, and proceeded this time to administer something more severe in the way of punishment.

"Leave the man alone, Peter," Rosemary cried indignantly. "You have no right to ill-use him like that!"

"Oh, haven't I? We'll soon see about that!" Peter retorted roughly. "Now then, my friend," he went on, speaking in Hungarian to the bundle of rags that had collapsed at his feet, "listen to me. You have tasted the weight of my boot on your spine, so you know pretty well what you can expect if you don't tell me at once what you are doing at this hour of the night in the gracious count's garden?"

The man, however, seemed unable to speak for the moment; loud hiccoughs shook his tall, spare frame. He held his two hands against the base of his desperate contortions in a vain attempt to get his right shoulder out of Peter's grip.

"Peter," Rosemary cried again, "let the poor wretch go. You must! Or I shall hate you."

But Peter only retorted harshly: "If you weren't here, Rosemary, I'd thrash the vermin to within an inch of his life. Now then," he commanded, "stop that howling. What were you doing in their shrubbery?"

"I only wanted to speak with the gracious countess," the man contrived to murmur at last, through the hiccoughs that still seemed to choke the words in his throat. "I have a message for her!"

"That's why I caught you with this in your belt, eh?" Peter queried sternly, and drew something out of his pocket, which Rosemary could not see; he showed it to the man who promptly made a fresh appeal to the saints.

"The roads are not safe for poor gipsies, gracious lord. And I had the message—"

"Who gave you a message for the gracious countess?" Rosemary asked him gently.

"I-I don't know, gracious lady. A fine gentleman on a horse called to me when I was gathering wood over by the forest of Normafa. He gave me a letter. 'Take it,' he said, 'to the gracious countess over at Kis-Imre, but do not give it into any hands but hers, and only give it to her when she is alone.'"

"Where is the letter?"

"It is here, gracious lady," the man replied and fumbling with the belt that held his ragged trousers round his waist, he drew from underneath it a oiled and crumpled rag that effectively looked like a letter in a sealed envelope. Peter would have snatched it out of his hand, but Rosemary interposed.

"Peter," she said gravely, and stretched a protecting arm over the gipsy's hand, "the man was told not to give it in any hand but Elza's!"

"The man is a liar," Peter riposted harshly.

Just then Philip's voice reached them from across the lawn.

"What are you two doing over there?"

"Philip, is your mother with you?" Rosemary shouted in response.

"Yes! We are just going in."

"Ask her to wait a moment then."

"What has happened?" Elza called.

"Nothing, darling," Rosemary replied. "Send the others in and wait for me, will you?" Then she turned to the gipsy, and said kindly: "Walk beside me, and don't try to run away; the gracious lord will not hurt you if you walk quietly beside me."

And so the three of them walked across the lawn toward the chateau, Rosemary in front, and beside her the gipsy, whose long thin hands almost swept the grass as he walked with bent knees and arched back, throwing from time to time anxious glances behind him. But Peter was lagging behind.

When they were close to the chateau, they saw Elza coming down the veranda steps. Rosemary ordered the gipsy to wait, and ran to meet Elza; in a few words she told her what had occurred. Elza then came across the gravel path, and said to the gipsy: "I am the Countess Imrey. You may give me the letter!"

The man's back became more curved than ever; he nearly touched the ground with his forehead. In the darkness Rosemary seemed to see his long, thin body curling itself up almost into a ball.

"I was told," he murmured meekly, "to give the letter into the hands of the gracious countess only when she was alone."

Instinctively Rosemary turned to look for Peter. To her surprise she saw him just above her, going up the veranda steps. He had his hands in the pockets of his trousers, and he was whistling a tune.

The gipsy whom he had so maltreated a little while ago no longer seemed to interest him. Rosemary called to him rather impatiently:

"Peter!"

He paused and looked down at her. "Hallo!" he said coolly.

"Do you think it is all right for Elza to talk with this man alone?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?" he said, with a laugh.

Then he called out to Elza:

"I say, Aunt Elza, if the wretch should try to kiss you, sing out, won't you?"

Elza laughed good-humouredly.

"Of course I am not afraid," she said. "And I do want to know about this mysterious letter."

Rosemary would have liked to argue the point. She could not understand how it was that Peter took the matter so lightly all of a sudden. However, as Elza was playfully pushing her out of the way, whilst Peter calmly continued to stroll up the stairs, she only said with a final note of earnestness: "I shall be quite close, Elza. You have only to call, you know."

"I know, I know," Elza rejoined, still laughing. "You don't suppose that I am frightened of a gipsy, do you?"

She waited a moment or two until Rosemary was out of sight, then she turned back to the man, and said:

"I am alone now. You may give me the letter."

CHAPTER XVIII

Rosemary went slowly up the veranda steps. She did not feel that it would be loyal to pry into Elza's secrets, but at the same time she wanted to remain well within call. From where she was she could see Peter's broad shoulders blocking the French window which gave on the drawing-room. From somewhere in the house, both above and below stairs, came the sound of laughter and song.

A moment or two later she heard Elza's footsteps behind her on the gravel walk, and presently Elza was there, going up the veranda steps beside Rosemary. She did not say a word, and Rosemary asked no questions. She could see that Elza was preoccupied. She also noticed that the letter-or whatever it was-was not in Elza's hands.

Peter stood aside to allow the two ladies to step into the drawing-room. He asked no questions either, and Elza did not volunteer any information. It seemed as if the incident of the mysterious gipsy had never been. Later on Peter sat down at the piano and played a csárdás, for Philip and Anna to dance. They were beautiful dancers, both of them, and it was a pleasure to watch them swaying and bending to the syncopated cadences of the beautiful Hungarian music. Peter, too, had evidently that music in the blood. Rosemary had no idea he could play it so well. He seemed just as excited as the dancers, and accelerated the movements of the csárdás until little Anna called for mercy, and even Philip seemed ready to give in. For the time being Rosemary forgot her troubles in the joy of seeing those two enjoying themselves, and the delight of listening to Peter. What a pity, she thought, as she had often done, that he should waste all the poetry, the talent that was in him, and only devote his mind to cricket. She drew close up to the piano, to watch his slender fingers flying over the keys, and as she did so, her glance at one moment wandered to the small what-not in the corner by the piano. There, in the midst of a miscellaneous collection of cigarette boxes, ash-trays, match-boxes, lay a small automatic.

Peter caught her eye, which at the moment expressed a mute inquiry. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. He had a cigarette in a long holder in the corner of his mouth, but he contrived to murmur:

"Yes, the blighter; wasn't I right to thrash him?"

Rosemary looked across at Elza. She sat quite placidly, as she always did, close to her husband's chair, watching her Philip-her soul in her eyes. She was smiling, and now and then she turned to say a word or two to Maurus; but to Rosemary she still looked preoccupied, and once she caught Elza's large kind eyes fixed upon her with a curious, scrutinizing gaze.

An hour later when Rosemary was in her room and beginning to undress, there was a knock at her door, and Elza came in, with that kindly smile of hers still on her face, but with a troubled look in her eyes.

"May I come in for a moment, darling?" she asked.

Rosemary made her comfortable on the sofa, and sat down beside her. Elza took hold of both her hands and fondled them, stroking them up and down, and she began talking about Philip and Anna, and the dancing and the plans for future parties, and picnics and so on. Rosemary let her prattle on; it was her turn to scrutinize Elza's face closely. That something was troubling this dear, kind creature was obvious. She was, as it were, gathering her moral forces before she broached something unpleasant that she had come to say. It was no use brusquing the matter, and Rosemary entered into Elza's plans, discussed the coming dinner-parties, the proposed lists of guests, talked about Anna's future, and made some remarks about Peter.

This brought the main subject on the tapis.

"Where did you and Peter first see that gipsy?" Elza asked presently.

"He was hiding in the shrubbery," Rosemary replied, "behind the flower border. I didn't see him. Peter saw him and pounced upon him, and dragged him out on to the path."

"Funny he did not just go to the service door and ask for me, wasn't it?"

"That's what Peter thought. I am afraid he treated the poor wretch rather roughly."

"I am sorry he did that," Elza mused, and thoughtfully stroked Rosemary's slender fingers between her own. "The man really had a message for me."

"I know," Rosemary rejoined; "a letter."

"No, it wasn't a letter," Elza said, and looked Rosemary now straight between the eyes. "You know these gipsies are queer people. They have curious gifts of divination and prophecy. This man—"

She seemed to hesitate, her glance wavered, and once more she started mechanically stroking Rosemary's hands.

"But the man had a letter for you, Elza dear," Rosemary insisted. "I saw it in his hand."

"Oh, that was only a blind; and so was his story about the gentleman on a horse. He told me that he had come all the way from Ujlak to speak with me. Ujlak is where I was born, and my dear brother and Peter's mother. My sister-in-law lives there still. Anna was born there, and little Marie. It was my father's home and my grandfather's before him, and our ancestors' for many generations. Well, this gipsy came from there."

"In order to speak with you?"

"So he said."

"Well, and what did he have to tell you?" Rosemary asked.

"That he had had a vision. My father had appeared before him in a dream, and told him that he must start at once and seek me. He was to tell me that he whom I love best in all the world is in immediate danger of death."

Rosemary never moved; she was looking straight at Elza. Only when Elza paused, seeming to wait for some word from her, Rosemary said:

"That-wretched creature told you that?"

Elza nodded. She went on simply:

"I see by your face, dear, that he told the truth, not only in that, but in what he said was to follow."

"What was that?"

"He said that the stranger now within our gates knows of this danger, and would confirm what he said. Well, my darling, I only need look at your sweet face to see that that miserable wretch spoke the truth. He was inspired by a dream to come and speak with me. But I

would not question him further. Those gipsies often lie, and they will tell you any tale in order to get a few coppers. But I saw your look when I told you what he said, and it is from you that I want the truth. What is the danger that threatens Philip?"

"Elza, darling—" Rosemary murmured.

"I am his mother, you know," Elza interposed, with her gentle, quiet smile. "I must know. He is all the world to me. And as soon as you knew that something threatened him, you should have told me, my darling."

Then, as Rosemary was still fighting with herself, alternately praying to God for guidance, and striving to swallow the tears that were choking her, Elza went on quite quietly:

"It is difficult for you, of course," she said, and patted Rosemary's cheek like an indulgent mother, "but it would have been better to tell me at first. I have had a very, very happy week since the children came home, but looking back on it now, I don't think that I was ever quite free from a vague sort of doubt. I was always a little uneasy, and whenever Philip kissed me, I could not help crying."

Elza had spoken in a curious, dreamy manner, her round blue eyes fixed somewhere on vacant space. But now she seemed to pull herself together, she looked once more at Rosemary, gave her an encouraging smile, and said in a perfectly quiet, matter-of-fact tone:

"Well, now tell me all about it. Philip's release and Anna's is only a temporary one. Is that it?"

Rosemary nodded. She could not trust herself to speak. Elza gave a little gasp, but her voice was still quite steady as she went on questioning Rosemary:

"What is the charge against them?"

"Philip wrote certain newspaper articles," Rosemary replied, and her voice sounded mechanical, like that of an automaton, "which have appeared in the English and American press. Anna used to send those through in the parcels she packed up in Balog's shop."

"I knew about those articles," Elza rejoined simply. "Everybody in Transylvania knew about them, but I did not guess that Philip had anything to do with them, or Anna. Then," she went on with a little catch in her throat, "it means a charge of treason against the State?"

"Yes!"

"Military tribunal?"

"Yes."

"And-if they are found guilty-a-sentence-of death?"

"No! No! No!" And Rosemary was on her knees with her arms round Elza's shoulders, her tear-stained face turned up to her, protesting vigorously, strenuously, that which she knew was false. But Elza's big, round eyes were tearless; she looked a little wildly perhaps, but quite kindly into the beautiful face that expressed such a world of love and sympathy. Then, gently but firmly, she disengaged herself from Rosemary's arms.

"Well now, my dear," she asked, very quietly, "all this being so, why did Naniescu let those children come home at all? Why should he postpone their trial, their-their punishment?"

Rosemary's head fell upon her breast.

"I don't know," she murmured.

But Elza put her podgy finger under Rosemary's chin, and forced her to look up.

"Don't lie to me, darling," she pleaded softly; "tell me the truth."

"I have told you the truth, Elza," Rosemary protested through her tears.

"Then I must believe you, if you say so. And yet it is all very mysterious. Why should Naniescu wait? Why should he play with those poor children, like a cat does with a mouse? You know, Rosemary darling, what they gipsy said in the end?"

Rosemary shook her head.

"He said that the stranger within the gates had the power to save my son from death. Have you that power, Rosemary?"

"No! No!" Rosemary protested wildly. "If it were in my power, don't you think that I would do anything in the world to save Philip and Anna?"

Elza nodded.

"Yes, dear," she said gently. "Of course I do think it; but when the gipsy said that, I could not help feeling hopeful, for he was right in everything else he said—"

Then suddenly she took Rosemary's face between her two hands, and she gazed into her eyes with a look of almost fierce intensity in her own, as if she would wrest a secret from the depths of the younger woman's soul.

"Swear to me, Rosemary," she said, and her gentle voice sounded raucous and harsh, "swear to me that there is nothing in the world that you can do to save Philip!"

And Rosemary, returning her gaze, replied steadily:

"I swear to you that it is not in my power to save Philip and Anna. If it were, I would do it."

Even then Elza did not cry. She just sat there quite, quite still, her big, round eyes quite dry, her mouth without a quiver, but sitting there so still, so still with her beautiful golden hair all round her face, the soft streaks of grey all about her temples, her fine features rigid, her podgy white hands resting on her knees; she looked such a tragic figure of despair that Rosemary could hardly suppress the cry of anguish that rose insistently to her throat.

"And so we can do nothing," Elza said, with a note of quiet finality in her voice.

"Don't say that, dear," Rosemary protested. "Jasper, as a matter of fact, has gone to Bucharest to try and see the King personally. The Roumanian Government owes some gratitude to my husband, as you know. I am quite sure that he will bring strong pressure to bear upon the authorities, and get a full pardon for Philip and Anna on the score of their youth."

But Elza slowly shook her head.

"You don't believe yourself, darling," she said, "in what you say. The children have committed the unpardonable crime of being born Hungarians, and of resenting foreign tyranny in their native land. The King himself would be kind, I am sure, but Bucharest is a long way off, and the bureaucrats over here do not know the meaning of the word 'mercy'."

"But we know the meaning of the word 'hope,' Elza dear," Rosemary said steadily, and struggled to her feet. "We are not going to give up hope. You talk about your gipsies having the gift of prophecy. Well, it is my turn to prophesy now. Philip and Anna are in God's hands, and you and I are going to pray so hard and so ceaselessly that God will help us, I am sure. I know," she added firmly.

Elza gave a short, quick sigh.

"Oh, yes," she said, "you are lucky, you English! Your religion means a great deal to you. But we, over here, are so different. We go to convent schools when we are too young to understand. Then we are all fire and enthusiasm, but we do not understand. After that we marry and live in those remote villages where the poor curé is only an illiterate peasant with whom we have nothing in common, whose habits are often such that we could not possibly make our confession to him. And so we soon forget what we learned in our childhood, and we come to trusting in ourselves rather than in God."

She rose and, with the same motherly gentleness which she always showed to Rosemary, she folded the girl in her loving arms.

"Good night, my dear," she said placidly. "I ought not to have kept you up so late. Good night, dear. Pray to your God for us all. The God of the English is more merciful, I think, than ours."

"Elza," Rosemary insisted, "promise me that you will not give up hope. Jasper comes back to-morrow. He may bring the best of news. Promise me that in any case you will not give up hope."

The ghost of a smile appeared on Elza's face.

"I will promise," she said, "not altogether to give up faith."

Rosemary kissed her tenderly. After that she escorted her as far as her room, and at the door she kissed her once more, and then she said, with solemn earnestness:

"Elza darling, will you believe me if I say that if I could give my life for those two children I would do it? If it were in my power to save them, I would. But it is not in my power to save them, to do anything, but to leave them in God's hands."

Elza returned her kiss with gentleness and affection.

"Dear, kind Rosemary," she murmured; "go to bed, dear, you must be so tired."

Then she quietly slipped into her room and closed the door. And Rosemary was left to face the night alone.

CHAPTER XIX

What puzzled Rosemary was the gipsy.

What was the mystery of that vagabond found lurking in the park at nightfall with a revolver in his belt? What connexion had he with the eyes that had watched Rosemary the night that she was talking with little Anna? And how had he come in possession of the inner history of Philip's and Anna's temporary release?

There was a mystery here. Somewhere. A disquieting, a terrifying mystery, not altogether to be accounted for by the spy system or other secret organization of the Roumanian Government.

All night Rosemary struggled with the puzzle. All night she wrestled with herself for the right to break her promise to Jasper and to lay all the facts of this case before Peter. She wanted to do this before Jasper's return, and, anyway, he must release her—he must—from that promise which placed her in a false and disloyal position towards Peter. When Rosemary fell asleep the dawn was breaking, and she had almost made up her mind to tell Peter everything.

But the next morning when she went downstairs she found the whole house in a turmoil. Servants rushing to and fro, Elza in close conversation with the chef, Maurus shouting contradictory orders across the galleried hall. Peter was in the drawing-room playing a jazz tune this time, and Philip and Anna were fox-trotting, infusing even into this ugly so-called dance some of their own native grace.

As soon as Rosemary appeared she was greeted with regular war-whoops of delight. In a moment she was drawn into the whirlpool of excitement. Philip and Anna dragged her to the sofa, and they and Maurus and Elza all talked to her at once, while Peter, with the inevitable cigarette in the corner of his mouth, continued to pound away at the jazz tune.

From the deafening hubbub of conversation Rosemary gathered, in the first instance, that the gipsy band from Bonczhida were coming over the next day, and the gipsies of Bonczhida were the finest in Transylvania. Then that the Keletys were driving over from Hajdu, and the Fejérs from Henger; that perhaps Aunt Charlotte would come too and bring Marie; that the Keletys were bringing the Poltys, and the Fejérs having the Kékesy boys staying with them would of course bring them along. They reckoned that there would be ten or a dozen couples to dance, and with the mammas and papas they would be thirty to supper. They expected most of the guests to arrive in time for luncheon, and in the afternoon they could have some tennis; then in the evening they would have a ball to which the officers from the garrison at Cluj had already been invited, and they had accepted by telephone. Among them were those who were going to play cricket with the Hungarians at Hódmező under Peter's direction.

At this marvellous statement Peter came to a pause in the music with a crashing chord, took the cigarette out of his mouth, and throwing up his hands, exclaimed:

"Going to play cricket with the Hungarians under Peter's direction! Oh, blessed People! Ye ghosts of Fitzgerald, Pycroft, and of Lillywhite, do ye hear them and writhe up there in Heaven?"

Then he struck up the "March of the Men of Harlech."

"If anyone says anything more about cricket," he said solemnly, "I shall force them to play with warped bats and golf-balls on a ploughed field."

Not a trace of anxiety or even preoccupation on any of those dear, beaming faces. Elza was as excited as any of them, worried to death because the carp they had got out of the lake for this evening's supper were not really fat.

"They're no bigger than a good-sized goldfish," she said to Rosemary with a note of real tragedy in her voice, and her blue eyes at once looked anxious and troubled, as if the matter of the carp was the only thing that could worry her.

Rosemary made a great effort not to be a wet blanket in the midst of all this gaiety. In this she succeeded admirably. All she had to do was to smile and to nod her head, and now and then to cry out, "How splendid!" The others did all the talking, and when conversation subsided for a moment Peter came down with a fresh, crashing jazz tune.

Rosemary would have thought the whole scene a phantasmagoria-illusive images that would presently be dispelled—only that she had known these people ever since she was a child. She had studied their curious psychology, half barbaric, with all the primitive disregard of danger and the passion for pleasure, even at the point of death. She gave ungrudging admiration to Elza—Elza who had sat in her room last night, rigid, dry-eyed, a living statue of despair. What went on behind that smooth, white brow of hers? What projects? What hopes? And little Anna? Anna knew. Anna guessed. She had spoken of her fears to Rosemary. Spoken of eyes that watched her, of eyes that were willing her to do something foolish that would compromise her irretrievably this time. Elza and Anna! What an example of self-possession, of self-control! Rosemary was almost ready to persuade herself that something had happened to reassure them both—that, in fact, they knew the danger to be past.

Only that Elza avoided her glance, and that the dear soul, usually so placid, so stable, was just a thought more restless than usual, and her gentle voice would from time to time become shrill.

At last, genuinely tired and bewildered by so much noise, Rosemary jumped up and, laughing, declared that she must escape out of the bear-garden for a moment and get a breath of fresh air in the park. In order to reach the glass door that gave on the veranda, Rosemary had to go past the piano. Quite close. Peter looked up when she was near him, and she said to him as she went past: "They are very gay, aren't they?"

"Elza has a perfectly mad plan in her head," Peter replied, and struck a few loud chords so that no one save Rosemary should hear what he said. "For God's sake, if you have any influence over her, get her to give it up."

Then he shouted merrily: "I've had enough of those horrible American tunes. Who wants a csárdás?"

But he did not play a csárdás. For a moment or two his fingers wandered aimlessly over the keys, whilst his eyes followed Rosemary as she stepped through the glass door on to the sun-bathed veranda. And as Rosemary felt the sun, the clear, luscious air, the scent of flowers and of distant pines, envelop her as in a warm mantle, there came wafted to her ears the soft strains of that exquisite Hungarian love-song: "There is but one beautiful girl in all the world." The piano now seemed to sing under Peter's delicate touch and Rosemary paused and stood quite, quite still, letting the music sink into her, yielding to its voluptuous cadence, and allowing her thoughts, her desires, her longings, to soar upwards to that infinity to which music alone can convey the soul on its magic wings.

CHAPTER XX

Rosemary had wandered beyond the confines of the park, and roamed about in the woods, having lost all sense of time. When presently she came back to the reality of things she looked at her watch and saw that it was close on twelve o'clock. Luncheon at the chateau was at half-past. It meant stepping out briskly so as to be in time.

As soon as she reached the flower-garden, it struck her as strange that the chateau suddenly appeared to be so quiet. No sound reached her as she came near to the veranda steps, either of shrill, excited voices, or of laughter or song.

She found the family assembled on the veranda-Maurus, Elza, Philip and Anna. Only Peter was not there. A first glance at them all revealed to Rosemary what had occurred. Elza had told them what the gipsy had said. Maurus sat in his chair like a man in a trance, his dark face flushed, his hair towzled, his large, dark eyes staring out before him, with a look in them that was not entirely sane.

Philip, on the other hand, was pacing up and down the veranda floor, whilst Anna stood quite still, leaning against a column, looking for all the world like a little martyr tied to the stake, her small, thin hands clasped together, a faint flush on her cheeks. These two children looked excited rather than horror-filled. Anna's face suggested that of an idealist-not altogether resigned, but nevertheless eager to suffer for the cause. But Philip looked like a fighter, seeking for a chance to hit back, a combatant not yet brought to his knees.

Elza's round, blue eyes just wandered from one to the other of these faces all dear to her.

They were dry eyes, anxious eyes, but there was nothing in them to-day of that tragic despair which had been so heart-breaking to behold the evening before.

Rosemary's first thought had been: "They know. Elza has told them!" The second was "Elza has a plan. Peter said it was a mad one. A plan for Philip and Anna's escape." She wondered if they would tell her.

"I hope I am not late for lunch," she said, rather breathlessly, as she had been walking very fast. Then she added casually: "Where is Peter?"

"He is busy packing," Elza replied.

"Packing?" Rosemary exclaimed, puzzled. "He is not going away already?"

"Yes," Elza said, "to-night."

"But he did not say anything yesterday," Rosemary insisted, "about going away again so soon. Or even this morning."

"I don't think he knew yesterday," Elza rejoined. "It seems he had a telephone message half an hour ago. He says he must go."

Anna now appeared to wake out of her trance. Rosemary was standing close to her just then; she took Rosemary's hand gently in hers and said:

"You see, darling, it is like this: one of Peter's cricketers has telephoned to him to say that they have such a lot of trouble about their rooms at Hódmező. Roumanians are not exactly popular in Hungary," she went on with a wan little smile, "and I suppose that hotel-keepers don't care to put them up. So Peter had to promise to go and put things right for his cricketers."

"He will come back, of course, after the cricket match," Elza concluded placidly. "But it is a great nuisance for him, packing and unpacking all the time."

Rosemary made no further remark. Everything seemed terribly puzzling. That Elza had told the children, had told Maurus, all she knew, was beyond the question. That Peter also knew everything, and that he knew and disapproved of some plan which Elza had made, Rosemary supposed, for the escape of Philip and Anna was, to her mind, equally certain. But even if Peter disapproved, how could he go away at this critical time, and leave Elza to plan and contrive alone, hampered by a half-crazy husband, and surrounded by spies? However, no one apparently meant to say anything more just then, and it was quite a relief when the luncheon-bell sounded and the little party on the veranda broke up and everyone trooped downstairs for luncheon.

Peter was already in the dining-room, waiting for the others. Elza in her kind, gentle way asked him about his packing, and whether she could help him to get ready. But Peter declared that he wanted nothing, only the carriage this evening to take him to Cluj.

He grumbled terribly at having to go away. He hated the idea of missing the ball and all the friends who were coming; but when Elza or Maurus tried to persuade him to stay, he was very firm. "I've got to go, Aunt Elza. You don't know what complications might occur if those Roumanians got to Hódmező and were not properly treated. Good God!" he added, with mock horror, "it might land you all in another war! And all through my fault!"

Rosemary had never seen Peter so gay or conversational. He appeared entirely unconscious of the undercurrent of tragedy that flowed through Elza's pathetic attempts at conversation, and Maurus's equally tragic silences. He talked incessantly, chiefly about the cricket match and chiefly to Philip, who made desperate efforts to appear interested. Rosemary did her best, too, but she was anxious and puzzled, and frankly she did not believe in the story of the telephone message.

She tried now and then to catch Elza's eye, but in this she never once succeeded. Elza was avoiding her glance. She meant to say nothing about her plan-this mad plan of which Peter disapproved so thoroughly that he preferred to be out of the way. Did these dear, kind people mistrust her then, because of what the gipsy had said? Or was this reticence merely the natural outcome of a sense of supreme danger that mistrusted everything and everybody?

Rosemary felt the mystery deepening around her. She could not understand Peter.

Sometime after luncheon she found Elza and Anna sitting together in the small brick-built summer-house at the farther end of the lake. Rosemary had wandered as far as there with a book, anxious as she was to be out of the way. It was hot, and the air was very still, and the scent of tuberose and heliotrope was almost too heady. In the perennial border a number of humming-bird moths were busy about a bed of sweet sultan; the soft whirring sound of their wings could be heard quite distinctly in the extreme stillness of this late summer's afternoon. From time to time distant sounds of village life came in quick, short waves to Rosemary's ear, as well as the sharp click of tools wielded by the gardeners at work somewhere in the park. Close beside the summer-house one man was busy hand-weeding the path. As Rosemary drew nearer, he looked up for an instant, and then he shuffled rapidly away. In the long, stooping figure, the dirty rags and the dark skin, Rosemary thought that she recognized the gipsy of the previous night. It was just like Elza, she thought, to give the poor wretch work on the estate.

When Rosemary saw Elza and Anna sitting together in the summer-house, her instinct was to pass discreetly on, with just a hasty, cheery word, but Elza called to her.

"Come and sit here a minute, Rosemary darling," she said. "Anna and I want to tell you everything."

Everything! Rosemary without a word stepped into the little pavilion. Anna pulled a wicker chair forward between herself and Elza, and Rosemary sat down, a little anxious, a little fearful, wondering what these dear, enthusiastic hotheads had devised, and how she herself would act when she knew. Elza at once took hold of her hand and fondled it.

"You asked me last night, darling," she began, "not to give up hope, didn't you?"

Rosemary nodded acquiescence.

"And I promised that I would not give up faith," Elza went on quietly. "Well, I have kept my faith all through last night, which was very trying. With the dawn, hope came to me, and after that I once more felt in charity with all the world."

Rosemary gave Elza's podgy white hand a tender squeeze. "Dear!" she whispered.

"We have a plan, darling," Elza said triumphantly. "A splendid plan! To-morrow night Philip and Anna will be in Hungary, safely out of the way."

Rosemary had known all along what was coming. She looked at Anna, who gave an excited little nod.

"Tell Rosemary, Aunt Elza," she said. "All from the beginning. There's no one in the world you can trust as you can Rosemary."

"Listen then, darling," Elza said, speaking quite quietly at first, then allowing excitement to get hold of her voice, making it tremble while she spoke, and husky with eagerness, while her command of the English tongue became less and less pronounced.

"It has all been made possible by this cricket business, for which I thank God and Peter Blakeney. As I told you this morning, Peter's cricket people are all coming here to-morrow for the ball. They have to be at Hódmező the following day for the cricket. So they will bring their luggage, and make a start from here after the ball-I suppose about midnight-in three motor-cars which the Governor, General Naniescu, has himself placed at their disposition. Hódmező is, as you know, in Hungary, just the other side of the frontier. It will be about four or five hour's drive from here, as there is a short cut-quite a good road-which avoids Cluj. In two of those motor-cars the cricket people themselves will go; they are mostly young Roumanian officers and men of the better class. General Naniescu has, of course, given them all free passes for the occasion. Fortunately he has also given them passes for four servants to accompany them. These four men will go in the third motor, and they will also go in the motor all the way to Hódmező. Now two of these servants, whom the local commissary of police has himself chosen and to whom passes have been given, are the two sons of János the miller, who is devoted to us all. His two sons have certainly served in the Roumanian army because they were obliged, but they have remained Hungarian at heart and would do anything for me and for Philip."

Elza paused. Her eager, round eyes searched Rosemary's face. Rosemary, of course, had already guessed the rest, her own excitement while she listened was as tense as Elza's. She gripped the white podgy little hand of her friend, and looked from her to Anna-a mute question in every glance.

"You can guess, of course?" Anna said.

Rosemary nodded: "I can guess," she said, "but do go on."

"I sent for János early this morning," Elza went on. "All I had to tell him was that Philip and Anna were in great danger, and must be got out of the country at any cost. He understood! We Hungarians in this occupied territory all understand one another. We understand danger. We live with danger constantly at our door. And János was so clever, so helpful. I only had to outline my plan, he thought out all the details. The mill is about a kilometre from here, the last house in the village; as soon as the first two motors have gone with the cricket people and the Roumanian officers, Philip and Anna will at once run round to the mill, and János will give them clothes belonging to his sons. The clothes they will put on. In the meanwhile the third motor-car will have collected the two other men in the village who are going as servants to Hódmező-one is the brother of the Jew over at the inn, and the other the son of the Roumanian storekeeper. Then it will call at the mill. János will ask the two men to come in. He and his two sons will give them some strong spirit to drink. The brother of the Jew and the son of the storekeeper are both of them great drunkards. When they have become what you English call, I think, blotto, János will take them back into the motor. There they will sit; and will probably at once go to sleep. But Philip and Anna will also get into the motor. They will be dressed in peasant's clothes, and they will have the free passes which Naniescu has given to János' sons. They will get to Hódmező about five o'clock in the morning. And once they are in Hungary they are safe. Rosemary darling! they are safe!"

Rosemary had remained silent. The whole thing certainly at first glance appeared so easy, so simple that she found herself wondering why she or Jasper-or Peter-had never thought of such a plan. She also wondered why Peter should have spoken of it as a mad plan, and begged her if she had any influence with Elza to dissuade her from it. What had been in his mind when he said that? Of what was he afraid? Spies, of course. But spies, like the poor, were always there, and, after all, Philip and Anna would only be risking what already was forfeit-their lives.

Rosemary sat there in silence, her fingers closed over Elza's soft, warm hand. She gazed straight before her, thinking. Thinking; her mind already following Philip and Anna's flight through this hostile, cruel country, to the land which would mean freedom and life for them. She saw them in her mind's eye, like a vision floating before her across the lake, which in this daydream had become a wide, dusty road with a motor-car speeding along toward life and toward freedom.

It seemed a solution. It must be a solution. Thank God Jasper would be there to help with counsel and with suggestions. Elza was talking again now. In her quaint English, which became more and more involved, she continued to talk of her plan, as a child will talk of some event that made it happy. She harped on the details, on János' devotion, the two sons who would make their way to the frontier in their father's bullock cart, and then cross over to Hungary on foot, through the woods and over a mountain pass where there would be no fear of meeting Roumanian sentinels. At Hódmező they would find Peter and the cricket people. They would get back their passes, and return quite gaily with the others, having saved the lives of Philip and Anna. Such devotion! Wasn't it splendid?

Rosemary only nodded from time to time, and from time to time she squeezed Elza's hand. It was so hot and so airless here in the little pavilion with those clusters of climbing heliotrope all over the roof and half-blocking up the entrance. The bees and humming bird moths were making such a buzzing and a whirring; it was just like the hum of motor-car wheels on the dusty road. And through it

all came the swishing sound of a garden broom upon the gravel path, between the summer-house and the stone coping around the ornamental lake. Rosemary caught herself watching the broom swinging backwards and forwards across the path, and across; she saw the two hands—very dark lean hands they were—that wielded the broom, and finally the gipsy's tall, thin figure bent almost double to his task. It seemed just right that the man should be there at this hour, sweeping the path for Elza to walk on presently, for Philip also and for Anna. It was right because it was the gipsy who had told Elza what she, Rosemary, had not had the courage to say. There was very little mystery about the gipsy now; he was just a ragged, dirty labourer, bending to his task. Did the strange intuition—or was it divination—that had brought him all the way from his native village to speak with Elza whisper to him that his warning had already borne fruit, and that the gracious lady whom he had come to warn had found in faith and hope the way out of dark destiny?

“Oh, that's all right, darling! We spoke English all the time!”

Elza said this with a light laugh. Rosemary woke from her day-dream. She must have been speaking in her dream—about the gipsy who haunted her thoughts.

“Did I say anything?” she asked.

“Yes, darling,” Anna replied, “you have been very silent for the last minute or two, and then suddenly you said: ‘The gipsy, the gipsy,’ twice, like that. It sounded so funny.”

“I thought,” Elza put in, “that perhaps you were afraid that the dirty old gipsy had heard what we said. But gipsies in Hungary don't speak English, you know. For one thing they never go to school.”

Elza appeared quite light-hearted now.

“I knew,” she said, “that you would approve of my plan.”

She said this, but Rosemary herself was quite unconscious that she had spoken. She had dreamed and dreamed, and seen a motor-car speeding along the dusty road. But through it all, she had approved, approved of the plan. It was so feasible, and so simple. She only wondered why Peter disapproved.

“What does Peter Blakeney say to all that?” she asked presently.

“Peter?”

Elza asked wide-eyed.

“Yes. You told him about your plan, didn't you?”

“No! No!” Elza asserted firmly. “We have told no one but you. Peter is going away. Why should we tell Peter?”

“I thought—” Rosemary murmured.

“It will be time enough to tell him,” Anna put in gaily, “when Philip and I turn up at the hotel at Hódmező. Won't he be surprised when he sees us?”

How strange it all was! Peter knew, since he spoke of a mad plan in Elza's head, and begged Rosemary to dissuade her from it. Peter knew, though no one had told him. Another mystery added to all those which had of late filled Rosemary with such a torturing sense of foreboding. Another mystery that seemed to surround Peter's changed personality, that seemed a part of this new personality of his, flippant and indifferent, so unlike the Peter she had known.

Now she longed passionately for Jasper—dear, kind Jasper, around whom there hung no mystery—the strong hand that would guide her through this maze of intrigue which bewildered as much as it terrified her. Fortunately her promise to Jasper had been kept. With this new mystery about Peter that she vaguely dreaded, she would have been racked with anxiety if she had confided in him. And yet, how disloyal was this thought, this fear! Fear of Peter! Mistrust of Peter! A very little while ago she would have staked her soul that Peter was true, loyal, the soul of honour, an English gentleman, an English sportsman! A Blakeney! A Scarlet Pimpernel of to-day! What was there in the atmosphere of this unfortunate country groaning under a foreign, hated yoke to taint his simple soul with the foul breath of intrigue?

CHAPTER XXI

Walking across the lawn toward the château half an hour later, Rosemary found herself once more laughing at her suspicions of Peter. Peter!! Heavens above! what turn were her suspicions taking?

Did she really believe for one moment that Peter was intriguing with these crafty Roumanians for the undoing or the persecution of his own kith and kin? The very thought was preposterous. The suggestion untenable. Whatever Jasper might think, whatever he might fear, she, Rosemary, was nothing but a traitor if she allowed herself for one moment to harbour such thoughts of Peter.

He was changed, certainly he was changed. But between that and Jasper's suspicions — ! It was Jasper who had first put thoughts into Rosemary's head by extracting that strange promise from her. Not to talk to Peter. Not to discuss the situation with Peter. Otherwise she would never for one moment —

Of course, of course, the thought was preposterous. Peter and intrigue! Peter and crafty Machiavellism! Peter and a double game he was ashamed to avow! Why, reason should have rejected the first hint of such a possibility, even if loyalty did not.

"Hallo, Rosemary!"

Peter's voice brought Rosemary back to reality. She had wandered up the veranda steps, hardly conscious of where she was. Thank Heaven, after her musings she was able to look Peter loyally in the face. He had his hands buried as usual in the pockets of his trousers, and the inevitable cigarette between his lips. Rosemary felt hot and tired; the sun had been baking the lawn while she walked across it, and she had no parasol. With a contented little sigh she sank into the basket chair that Peter pulled forward for her.

"I suppose," he said abruptly, "that they have been telling you about the nonsense that's going on in their dear, silly heads."

And with a nod he indicated the summer-house where, against the creeper-clad entrance, Elza's white dress gleamed in the sunshine. Rosemary made no reply. Peter's words had somehow acted like a douche of cold water upon her sense of rest and well-being. It was true then! He did know. Though Elza and Anna had told him nothing, he knew. How? Rosemary would have given worlds for the right to ask him, but suddenly her promise to Jasper loomed before her with paramount importance, and put a seal upon her lips.

"Won't you tell me?" Peter insisted.

Of course there was a simple explanation for the whole thing. Those dear people, Elza, Maurus, even Anna, were not models of discretion. Their voices were loud and penetrating, and, when they were excited about any project or event, they would discuss it here, there and everywhere at the top of their voices, and with a total disregard of possible eavesdroppers. Peter's knowledge of Elza's plans may have come about quite innocently. Rosemary was quite sure it had come about innocently. But somehow she longed for that perfect security and trust in Peter which she used to feel even when he was most capricious and his love-making most tempestuous. Why hadn't he told Elza that he knew? Why, instead of discussing the plan over with Elza or one of the others, did he feign ignorance with them, and suddenly elect to go away on an obviously futile excuse?

Oh, how Rosemary hated all this mystery! And how she feared it! And how, above all, she hated that promise which she had made to Jasper, and which prevented her at this moment from having a straight talk with Peter.

"So you won't tell me?" he reiterated, and his voice sounded curiously harsh, quite different to his usual very pleasant, musical tones. Peter had the voice of a musician. It was deep in tone and beautifully modulated. Peter's voice had been one of the things about him that had captivated Rosemary's fancy in the past. Now, he spoke through his teeth, with that hateful cigarette in the long holder held between the corners of his lips. Rosemary tried to be flippant.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, with a little broken laugh, "are you trying to play the role of the heavy father, Peter, or of the silent strong man? And now you are frowning just like the hero in one of Ethel M. Dell's books. When are you going to seize me by the wrist and whack me with a slipper?"

It was very easy to make Peter laugh. He was laughing now, and the scowl fled for the moment from his face.

"Don't play the fool, Rosemary," he said in his slangy, boyish way. "Tell me what Aunt Elza has been saying to you out here?"

"But you silly boy," she riposted, "There's nothing to tell."

Back came the scowl on Peter's face, darker than before.

"So," he said curtly, "I suppose that you and Aunt Elza and Anna have been discussing frocks for the past hour and a half."

"No, dear," she replied coolly, "only the arrangements for to-morrow's ball."

Whereupon Peter said "Damn!" and swung round on his heel, as if he meant to leave her there without another word. But for this move of his Rosemary was unprepared. She did not want Peter to go. Not just yet. She was perfectly loyal to him in her thoughts, and she was irrevocably determined not to break her promise to Jasper, but she was not going to let Peter go off to-day without some sort of explanation. She might not see him again after this-for weeks, for months, for years! So she called him back.

"Peter!" she cried.

He swung back and returned to her side. His deep, changeful eyes, which at times were the colour of the ocean on the Cornish coast, and at others recalled the dark tints of his Hungarian ancestors, looked strangely resentful still. But as his glance rested on Rosemary, wandered from her delicate face in the pearly shadow of her garden hat, along the contour of her graceful shoes, the resentful look fled. And Rosemary, glancing up, caught a momentary flash of that soul-holding gaze which had taken her captive that lovely night in June by the river, when she had lain crushed and bruised in his arms, the gaze which that other night in the Albert Hall box had filled her soul with abiding regret.

"What do you want me to tell you, Peter?" she asked in that stupid way that comes to the lips when the soul is stirred and the mind commands self-control.

"Nothing," he replied roughly, "that you don't want to."

"Peter," she retorted, "why are you so strange with me? One would think I had done something to offend you. You scarcely will speak to me; when you do you are so rough and so abrupt, as if-as if — Oh, I don't know," she went on rapidly, and her voice shook a little as she tried to avoid that memory conjuring glance of his. "It seems as if something had come between us, almost as if we were enemies."

Peter laughed at this, but his laugh sounded rather forced and harsh.

"Enemies!" he exclaimed. "Good God, no!"

"But something has happened, Peter," she insisted. "I cannot tell you how I find you changed."

"Well," he said curtly, "something did happen, you know, when you married Jasper."

"I don't mean that, Peter. I saw you in London after I was engaged, and you had not changed then. It is here-in this place-that you seem so different."

"You must admit the place gets on one's nerves," he said with a shrug.

"You must make allowances, Peter," she rejoined gently. "They are in such trouble."

"Are they?" he retorted.

"Why, you know they are!" And her voice rang with a note of indignant reproach. "How can you ask?"

"I ask because I don't know. You say that they-I suppose you mean Aunt Elza and Maurus and the kids-are in trouble. How should I know what you mean? Since I've been here they have done nothing but shout, dance and make plans for more dancing and shouting, and when I ask you anything you only tell me lies."

"Peter!"

"I beg your pardon, dear," he said with sudden gentleness. "I didn't mean to be caddish. But you know," he went on, harshly once more, "you did tell me that Jasper had gone to Budapest on business."

"Well?" she queried.

"Well! Knowing you to be truthful by nature, I am wondering why you should have told me such an unnecessary lie." Then, as Rosemary was silent, he insisted: "Won't you tell me, Rosemary?"

"You are talking nonsense, Peter," she replied obstinately. "There is nothing to tell."

"Which means that Jasper has told you-or insinuated-that I am not to be trusted."

She protested: "Certainly not!"

"Then," he concluded, "the mistrust comes out of your own heart."

"That again is nonsense, Peter. There is no question of trust or mistrust, and I have no idea what you mean. It is you who try to deceive me by feigning ignorance of what is going on in this house. If Aunt Elza has not spoken openly with you, it certainly is not for me to enlighten you. There," she added, as she caught a look of eager questioning in his eyes, "I have already said more than I have any right to say. Elza and Anna are coming across the lawn. If you want to know anything more, you had better ask them."

And abruptly she rose and left him and went into the house. She felt hurt and angry and not a little ashamed. She felt hurt with Peter, angry with Jasper, and ashamed of herself. Peter was quite right. She had told him lies-unnecessary lies. And Jasper had forced her to tell them and to be disloyal to Peter. The present situation was a false one. Utterly false. It was Peter who should take over the direction of Elza's plan. With his help the chances of Philip's and Anna's escape would be increased tenfold. It seemed an awful thing-it was an awful thing-that he should be shut out of Elza's councils, that he should go away on a futile and trivial errand while those his own kith and kin were in such terrible danger, and running into dangers that were worse still.

For the last time the temptation returned, and with double violence, to break her promise to Jasper and go straight back to Peter and tell him everything. She paused in the centre of the drawing-room and looked back through the wide-open glass doors. Peter was still on the veranda. He had picked up a stick and a tennis ball and was hitting the one with the other and humming a tune. He caught Rosemary's eye as she glanced back to look at him.

"Hallo!" he called gaily.

Rosemary went deliberately back to the glass door. She paused under the lintel; then she said earnestly:

"Don't go to Hódmező to-day, Peter. I am sure there is no necessity for you to go. You can book rooms by telephone, and, anyway—" She paused a moment and then went on more earnestly still: "Wait another twenty-four hours, Peter. Don't go till-till after the ball."

Peter did not look at her. He was taking careful aim with the stick and the tennis ball. He made a swinging hit and watched the ball fly away over the lawn. Then he threw the stick down and turned to Rosemary.

"Sorry," he said lightly, "but I have promised."

She gave an impatient sigh, and after another second's hesitation once more turned to go.

"I say," he called after her, "what about a game of tennis. There's just time for a set before I need make a start."

But by now all temptation to talk openly with Peter had vanished. What would be the use of telling this irresponsible boy anything? Jasper was right. Elza was right. Only she, Rosemary, was foolish, and her vaunted knowledge of human nature nothing but vanity. She had only sufficient self-control left to call back lightly to him:

"No, thank you, Peter, I am rather tired."

Then she fled precipitately out of the room.

CHAPTER XXII

Rosemary did not see Peter again before he left. Somehow that last vision which she had of him, hitting at a rubber ball with a stick, and his utterly callous suggestion of a game of tennis at an hour which he must have known was fateful to all his kindred, had caused a revulsion in Rosemary's heart. She felt that never again would she feel tempted to break her word to Jasper. Indeed, she felt how right Jasper had been all along in insisting that she should not discuss the grave events that affected the lives of all the inmates of Kis-Imre with such a callous, empty-headed, irresponsible young jackanapes as Peter had lately become.

So she had gone upstairs to her room, and with a curious heartache, for which she was unable to account, she listened to the familiar bustle and noise that always filled the château whenever visitors came or went. Somehow she could not bring herself to say "Good-bye" to Peter. Elza had told her that he would be coming back within the next week or so, but Rosemary, who felt too tired for introspection, could not have told you whether she was glad or sorry at the prospect of seeing him again quite so soon.

The rest of the day, as well as the long, interminable evening, were taken up with the discussion of household affairs—the luncheon, the dinner, the ball, and even into these Philip and Anna entered whole-heartedly and with apparent complete disregard of what that fateful morrow might bring them. As for Elza, she was perfectly marvellous! Kind, fussy as usual, her menus and the airing of the guest-rooms being, to all appearances, the most important matters in her mind.

After everyone had gone to bed little Anna came to Rosemary's room and sat for a while beside her on the sofa, holding the Englishwoman's hand as if she wished to transfuse through those slender fingers strength and courage into her soul. When Rosemary made a passing allusion to the wonderful stoicism that could allow trivial matters to seem so important at a moment when life and worse were at stake, Anna explained quite gently:

"We are made like that, we Hungarians. We hold our lives cheap, I think, because throughout our history we have always had to sacrifice them for our country. And also, I think, that we have a certain Oriental fatalism in us. Not the fatalism of the Moslem, who abdicates free will, but the faith of the Christian who believes that God ordains everything and that it is useless to fight his decrees."

"And yet you are not a religious people," Rosemary riposted, thinking of what Elza had said to her the night before.

"Only in the sense that children are religious," Anna rejoined. "We accept blindly what some kind nuns and ignorant priests have taught us, and we believe in an Almighty God more absolutely and ingenuously than the more thoughtful people of the West."

Long after Anna had gone Rosemary thought over what the child had said. Well, perhaps it was true. There certainly was an exquisitely beautiful passage in the New Testament where the Divine Master enjoins his disciples to become as little children. And, recollecting Anna's words, Rosemary caught herself wondering whether the childlike faith of these people would not open the Kingdom of Heaven more easily for them than would a more considered, more rational religion—a compromise between a very erring human reason and the Divine Mysteries which no human thought could fathom.

As for the next day, it was just a whirl, a jumble of gaieties and talk, of arrivals and merry greetings, of meals and tennis and walks, and of talk, talk, talk and endless laughter. Rosemary, when she rose, had made up her mind that she would just shed her real personality for the whole of the day. She would cease to be Rosemary with the aching heart, the soul rent by conflicting duties, by anxieties, determination and sorrow; she would become the "dear Lady Tarkington," the "Rosemary darling" of all these kind, hospitable, wonderful people. She would laugh with them, play with them and with them lay aside for the next few hours the torturing anxiety of the day.

She would forget, she would laugh, she would talk. The effort would do her good, and when the hour came when the fate of all those she cared for would have to be decided, when on one word, one smile, would perhaps hang the destiny of Philip and of Anna, then she would be strong enough to play the part allotted to her in the tragic farce — the farce that had found birth in the brain of a heart-broken mother.

CHAPTER XXIII

And it had been a wonderful day. The weather was perfect. Everyone was in the highest possible spirits. The chef surpassed himself; everyone pronounced the lobster à l'Américaine perfect and the Charlotte Russe Créole quite inimitable.

All afternoon tennis balls were flying, and there was coffee, ices and iced drinks going all day on the lawn. At five o'clock the gipsy musicians from Bonczhida arrived, and after that music never ceased. Rosemary learned something of gipsy endurance that day, for this band of twelve musicians never left off playing from the moment they arrived until-until midnight, when time ceased to be and Fate began to swing her long pendulum.

But between five o'clock and midnight there was music, ceaseless music. While the guests arrived, while everyone played tennis, croquet, drank coffee, walked, flirted, dressed, dined and danced there was music-music all the time.

After dinner the young Roumanian officers from the garrison at Cluj came over in several motors. Among them were the eleven cricketers, very proud of themselves, feeling quite English and real sportsmen, delighted to have been chosen to play in the historic match. Fine-looking young men, most of them, with the unmistakable swaggering air of the conqueror about their whole attitude towards the subject race. Elza was invariably a perfect hostess; but Maurus, after a curt greeting, nursed his wrath in a corner of the ballroom, surrounded by his own friends. He had been drilled to keep his temper in check, and love for his own son, anxiety for him and knowledge of danger gave him for this one evening a certain amount of self-control. Rosemary admired him as much as she did the others, for she knew what it cost Maurus to have these alien conquerors in his house.

Anna's mother and sister had come over from Ujlak. The mother was a hard woman, obviously selfish and unsympathetic. Her own grievances, the confiscation of a great deal of her property, seemed to have smothered every soft, womanly instinct in her. Apparently she knew nothing of the danger that hung over her daughter, and Rosemary had the feeling that if she had known she would not greatly have cared. Her eyes, which were dark and set very wide apart in a flat, colourless face, only softened once, and that was when she spoke about her husband, who had died just before the war.

As for persecutions, humiliations, petty tyrannies, she dismissed them with a shrug of the shoulders. "The Roumanians are the scum of the earth," she said in her quiet, unemotional manner, through her thin, colourless lips, "just a horde of uneducated peasantry; you can't expect anything from a pig but a grunt. I am only thankful that Béla is not here to see it all."

On the other hand, the young people who filled the stately château of Kis-Imre with their flutterings like an army of gaily painted butterflies did not worry about political grievances. For them the Roumanian officers were just dancing-partners, and their worth was only measured by their proficiency in the latest steps. The mammas and papas either played bridge or sat on the chairs that were ranged against the walls all round the beautiful ballroom placidly admiring the evolutions of their own progeny.

Rosemary, not to be outdone in self-discipline, was outwardly as gay as any of them. She danced impartially with the Hungarians and the Roumanians, and talked cricket knowledgeably with the team. For her the atmosphere was electrical. At times it seemed to her over-strained senses as if she could hear the whir of the spinning-wheel driven by the Fates, the hum of the spindle, and the click of their scissors as they made ready to cut the thread of these people's destiny.

Just before midnight the young Roumanian officers who formed the cricket team left in the two motor-cars which were to take them direct to Hódmező, a matter of ninety odd miles. Rosemary found herself saying good-bye to them like an automaton — counting them over as if they were ninepins. A kind of mist was before her eyes through which their good-looking faces seemed to be grinning at her, and their moustaches bristling like Alice's Cheshire cat.

Elza, wonderful as ever, fussed around them, stuffing delicacies into the cars at the last moment, fruit, bottles of wine, cakes, chocolates, and lending them rugs and cushions.

"It is a long drive," she said, as she shook hands one by one with the young officers, who clicked their heels together, jingled their spurs and declared that they had had a very pleasant evening. "You will be hungry when you get to Hódmező," she added, "and all the restaurants will be closed. You will be glad of a glass of wine and some of my home-made cake."

Rosemary was standing next to Maurus Imrey at the time. She heard him mutter between his teeth:

"And may it choke you when you eat and drink."

But even Maurus was wonderful. Wonderful! He shook hands. He smiled — wryly; but he smiled. Wished them all God-speed. He had been well drilled, and he was fully conscious of the danger to Philip and Anna if he lost control over his temper now.

So he, too, gave directions for putting provisions into the cars. He had four bottles of French red wine in his cellar and he insisted that the young officers should have those. "It will make them play that silly cricket better," he said. "And I hate the stuff myself."

The four men who were going with the team as servants were there arranging the rugs, stowing the wine and fruit and cake in the cars. Rosemary knew the two sons of János, the miller, by sight. They were fine, well-set-up young fellows, obviously of the stuff that heroes are made of, for they were going to risk their lives for the children of their feudal lords.

Anna, equally self-possessed, flitted among the guests like a little fairy. She had on a pale blue dress, and out in the open her slim figure was hardly distinguishable in the gloom; only her small, white face told as if carved out of alabaster: that dear little face, with the big eyes that were so like Peter's. When she was saying good-bye to one of the young officers, who had been her dancing-partner, she said with a pout:

"I think it was horrid of you to telephone to Peter Blakeney yesterday and take him away from us. I don't believe you would have had any difficulty with the hotel people about your rooms. And, anyway, you might have let Peter have another day's enjoyment."

The young man appeared genuinely bewildered.

"Will the gracious lady deign to explain?" he asked.

"Oh, there is nothing to explain," Anna said, with a light laugh. "We were all of us very angry with you for sending that telephone message which took Peter Blakeney away from us."

"But pardon me, dear lady," the officer rejoined, "we didn't send any telephone message to Monsieur Blakeney. As a matter of fact, we fully expected to find him here."

“But about your rooms — ?” Anna insisted.

“Our rooms at Hódmező have been arranged for ages ago. Everything there is in perfect order and—”

“Anna, dear,” Rosemary broke in quickly, “Peter didn’t say who sent him the telephone message. He only said that he had one. It may have come from Hódmező—from one of the hotel people—he didn’t say—”

What had prompted Rosemary to interpose at this moment she did not know. It was just an instinct: the blind instinct to protect, to shield Peter from something ugly and vague, that she had not yet had time to see clearly, and Anna then went on lightly:

“Oh, of course he didn’t say. Anyway, when you see Peter, tell him he was very silly to go away, and that he missed a great deal by not being here to-night. You can tell him that Marie never danced so well in all her life, and the gipsies from Bonczhida simply surpassed themselves.”

Whereupon the young officer clicked his heels and promised that he would deliver the message.

“But we shan’t see Monsieur Blakeney,” he said, “until the evening. You know the match is not until Thursday. Monsieur Blakeney arranged to meet us in Hódmező on Wednesday evening, and this is only Tuesday.

“It will be Wednesday morning before we start,” one of his friends broke in lightly, “if you don’t hurry, you old chatterbox.”

After that, more “good-byes” and waving of hands as the motor-cars rounded the courtyard and finally swung out of the gates. Rosemary looked round to catch sight of Elza. She was quite placid, and on her dear, round face there was a set smile. Evidently she was unconscious of the fact that something stupendous had happened, something that had hit Rosemary like a blow from a sledge-hammer. No, no! Elza had not noticed. Elza’s mind was no longer here. It was way out upon the dusty road, watching a motorcar travelling at full speed over the frontier away from this land of bondage, to Hungary to freedom. Elza had noticed nothing. Anna and Philip were still laughing and chattering, Maurus muttering curses. No one had noticed anything. Only for Rosemary had the world—her own beautiful world of truth and loyalty—come to an end. Peter had lied. Peter was playing a double game. It was no use arguing, no use hoping. The only thing to do was to go on groping in this mystery that deepened and deepened, until it became tangible, material like a thick, dark fog through which glided ghouls and demons who whispered and laughed. And they whispered and laughed because Peter had lied and because she, Rosemary, saw all her hopes, her faith, her ideals lying shattered in a tangled heap at her feet. Peter had lied. He had acted a lie. He told her that he had promised to go to Hódmező to see about rooms for the cricket team. Well, that was not true. Rosemary had interposed, made some excuse for Peter. She wouldn’t have those Roumanians think that Peter was a liar. They would have smiled, suggested some amorous intrigue which Monsieur Blakeney wished to keep dark. At the thought Rosemary’s gorge rose, and she put in a lame defence for Peter. But all the time she knew that he had lied. If Peter did not go to Hódmező yesterday, where was he now? Why all this secrecy? These lies?

Why? Oh, God, why?

Rosemary had found a quiet corner in the hall where she could sit and think for a moment. Yet thinking was the one thing she could not do. Always, at every turn she was confronted with that hideous query: Why had Peter lied? After a while she had to give up trying to think. Fate’s spindle was whirring, the scissors clinking. She, Rosemary, a mere atom in the hands of Fate, must continue to play her part.

A quarter of an hour must have gone by while she sat-trying to think—in the dark. Perhaps more. Anyway, when she returned to the ballroom she found the company much diminished in numbers. All the Roumanian officers had gone, also one large party who lived just the other side of Cluj. Only a few remained whose châteaux were too far away for a midnight start, seeing that motors were forbidden to the conquered race. They were going to spend the night at Kis-Imre, and probably make a start in the morning. The young people had already resumed dancing; the gipsies were playing the latest fox-trot. The mammas and papas were placidly admiring their respective progeny.

All this Rosemary took in at a glance.

Then she looked round for Elza. But neither Elza nor Maurus was there. And Philip and Anna had also gone.

CHAPTER XXIV

A few minutes later Elza came back. To Rosemary, who had been watching for her by the door, she just whispered as she entered:

"It is all right. They have gone."

She still was wonderful. Quite calm and with that set smile on her face. Only her round, blue eyes had an unusual glitter, and the pretty silvered hair clung matted against the smooth white brow. Rosemary watched the scene, now entranced. She had never seen anything like it. It did not seem reality at all. It could not be. All these people here were just puppets and they were play-acting. They could not have behaved as they did if they had been real.

There were no longer any Roumanians there. They were all Hungarians together—just a few of them, all from Transylvania, the wretched, occupied territory, in which everybody was something of a slave, never allowed to forget for an instant that they were the defeated, and that they must submit. All were relatives or else very intimate friends. And after a while they began to notice that Philip and Anna were not there. At first they asked questions. Where were Philip and Anna? Elza said nothing. She only gave an answering look here and there, a quiver of the eyelid and certain setting of the lips. She did not say anything, but it was remarkable how everybody understood.

Rosemary watched every face and knew that they understood. They asked no more questions. They accepted the situation. Philip and Anna had gone. They had to go as countless others, who had to fly at dead of night, get the other side of the frontier as quickly as possible, to escape from military tribunal, chicanery, persecution, or even death.

It was late now, long past midnight. The gipsies had been sent downstairs to get some supper. The mammas and papas declared that it was time to go to bed. The young people thanked dear Aunt Elza for such a happy time, the young men kissed her hand. One or two of the older people whispered: "Good luck!" Others said reassuringly: "Don't fret, they will be all right." Never a question about Philip and Anna. Never a comment. They knew. They understood.

Orders were given for the carriages to be ready at nine o'clock the next morning. With the innate delicacy that underlay so much apparent pleasure-loving, they wished to relieve as soon as practicable this house of sorrow from the burden of their presence.

By half-past twelve ballroom, hall, reception-rooms, were all empty. Elza waited downstairs till the last of the servants had gone. Rosemary helped her at the last to put the gold service away in the strong cupboard. It consisted of half a dozen pieces of great artistic beauty and equally great value. Each piece had to be wrapped up in cotton wool and green baize. Elza did it all, and Rosemary could see that her podgy white hands did not tremble, and that she put every piece away with her usual meticulous care. Only when her task was accomplished and there was nothing more to do but switch off the light did Elza's stoicism give way. She sank into a chair, her head fell back against the cushions, and a leaden tint spread over her cheeks and lips. Rosemary quickly poured some brandy into a glass, and kneeling beside her tried to get her to drink some of it. To please her, Elza sipped a few drops. A wan smile spread over her face.

"Don't worry about me, Rosemary darling," she said, "I am quite well."

She jumped up at once and added: "I must see how poor Maurus is."

"Come into my room afterwards," Rosemary suggested, "and rest there on the sofa. I know you won't sleep."

"Yes," Elza replied, "I will come as soon as I can get Maurus to sleep. I think he may get to sleep presently. But I don't think I shall. You see, we ought to get a telephone message through from Hódmező the first thing in the morning. Philip and I agreed on a code. If everything is all right he is to give Peter Blakeney's name and say that the weather is beautiful in Hungary, and every arrangement for the cricket match splendid. After I get that message I shall probably sleep."

She had toiled up the stairs while she was talking, and Rosemary followed close behind her, ready to catch her if she swooned.

"I won't say 'good night' now," Elza said when she near her bedroom door. "You go to bed, Rosemary darling, and I will come in presently for a little talk when Maurus is asleep."

Rosemary went into her room. She undid her hair and slipped into a dressing-gown. It was no use going to bed; she knew she would not be able to go to sleep. It was just a case of waiting. Of watching, of praying, and commending those two young creatures to God. Watching and praying, with eyes fixed upon the hands of the clock, following in imagination every phase of to-nights adventures. Every detail. At this hour they would be at the mill, all the actors in the drama which poor Elza had invented. Philip and Anna would be there, changing into peasant's clothes, and János the miller would be setting out the mugs and the spirit, which would make the Jew's son and the brother of the Roumanian storekeeper blind to the world. Old Emma would be there too, the miller's wife, the mother of the two boys who were going to risk so much for Philip's sake and Anna's Emma would be fussing round with cloth and duster. Grumbling and fussing. Knowing nothing of the drama on which the curtain would ring up in the parlour of her cottage, and in which her two sons would be playing leading roles. János would not have told her. He, the father, had agreed to it all; had even suggested it. But the mother? No! If she knew she would protest. Weep, of course. Weaken the resolution of the two boys who just had to go through with it all.

And now the motor would be drawing up at the mill, and János the miller would ask the company to walk in and have a drink. Even the motor-driver would be persuaded. Just a drop of spirit, as it was a long drive all the way to Hódmező. Time was moving leaden-footed up here in the château. But not so at the mill, while János was telling funny stories and plying his guests with drink. Leaden-footed! My God! how slowly did those clock hands move! Only half an hour gone by since Elza had switched off all the lights, and the whole château was plunged in darkness, and every sound was stilled.

So still! Only the ticking of the clock, and at times the click of the scissors of Fate, ready to cut the thread of two young lives — of more perhaps — if anything went wrong, if the slightest mistake was made, if any one man proved disloyal — or a liar.

Rosemary shuddered although the night was hot. She could not sit still. At times she felt that she could not breathe. She went out upon the balcony and listened. Listened. The air was so still that she felt she must hear presently the whir of the motor when it made a fresh start from the mill half a mile away. Far away on the hillside a fox gave a cry, and from the old thatched barn close by came the melancholy hoot of an owl.

Then the village church clock struck the half-hour. Half-past one. More than an hour since Rosemary, going into the ballroom, had noted that Philip and Anna were no longer there. In one of the homesteads on the outskirts of the village a cock crew. In another two hours dawn would be breaking, and the motor was to be in Hódmező before sunrise. And suddenly Rosemary heard right through the stillness a crepitation and then a whirl. And then the whirring died away very gradually, and stillness reigned once more. Absolute!

"They've started!"

It was Elza's voice close to Rosemary's elbow. Rosemary had not heard her timid knock, and Elza had slipped into the room and now stood by the open window, listening. The voice was quite calm, with just a ring in it of exultation rather than excitement. Rosemary took her hand. It was quite cold. She fondled it and warmed it between her own.

There was a wicker chair on the balcony and some cushions. Rosemary made Elza sit down, and then she piled up the cushions and squatted on them at Elza's feet, fondling her hands and caressing them by laying her young velvety cheek against them.

The night was exquisitely beautiful, with the waning moon mysterious and honey-coloured in a firmament shimmering with stars. In the borders the flowers slept, the evening primroses had folded their golden petals, the scarlet pentstemons hidden their brilliance in the gloom; only the heliotrope and the nicotiana swung their censers, lazily sending their heady perfume through the night, and the white tufted pansies shone like numberless tiny mirrors, reflecting the stars.

"Did Maurus get to sleep?" Rosemary asked after a while.

"Yes," Elza replied. "I gave him a cachet of aspirin. It quietened his nerves, and after a while he went to sleep."

"Won't you just close your eyes, Elza, and try to rest a little? The night is young yet, and I am afraid you'll be ill if you don't get a little rest. You've gone through so much!"

"Presently, darling," Elza said quietly. "I dare say I shall drop to sleep, as I am very tired. But not just yet. I would like to stay here a little longer-unless I am bothering you." Then, as Rosemary gave her knees an affectionate hug, she went on gently: "I love the smell of flowers in the night, don't you? They smell quite differently from what they do in the daytime." And presently she went on à propos of nothing at all:

"There is just one difficult place where the driver might miss his way. That would delay them a little, but even so they should be very near the frontier by now."

"Have you arranged to get any news?" Rosemary asked.

"Philip is to telephone from Hódmező as soon as the office is open."

"You won't hear before then?"

"Yes. I told János to say to the motor-driver that if he will drive straight back here from Hódmező there will be a thousand leis for him, and if he gets here before eight o'clock then he will get two thousand."

After the village church clock had struck three Elza became very still, but Rosemary did not think that she was actually asleep. Her hands were very cold, and her breath came and went more rapidly than usual. Rosemary rose noiselessly to her feet, she got the eiderdown from her bed and wrapped it round Elza's knees. Elza did not move. Her pretty, round face showed very white in the light of the waning moon, and all her hair seemed to have lost its golden tint and shimmered like threads of silver.

Rosemary went back into the room and lay down on the sofa. The air was very close, and she was very tired, so tired that she must have fallen asleep. Presently something roused her and she opened her eyes. The room was flooded with the golden light of dawn. She jumped to her feet and went to the window. Elza was not on the balcony; but Rosemary, looking over the balustrade, saw her on the veranda about to descend the steps.

"Elza," she called down softly, "wait for me."

Elza nodded acquiescence, and Rosemary ran down-stairs just as she was, in dressing-gown and slippers, with her hair all hanging loosely round her shoulders. Elza had waited on the veranda for her quite patiently; she linked her arm in Rosemary's.

"You were able to sleep a little, darling," she said. "I am so glad."

"And what about you, Elza?" Rosemary retorted.

"Oh, I slept quite nicely," Elza replied in her quiet, simple way, "until the dawn closed the eyes of the night one by one, and the moon went down behind the old acacia trees."

"I quite forgot to look at the time," Rosemary rejoined.

"It was half-past four when I left your room. I went to have a peep at Maurus. He is still asleep."

"Thank God for that. He will only wake to hear the good news."

Rosemary could no longer keep the excitement out of her voice. Another two or three hours and this terrible suspense would be over. She hardly dared to look at Elza, for she felt the dear creature's body quivering against hers. The first glance had shown her Elza's face the colour of ashes, with swollen eyelids and red hectic spots on her cheek-bones. But outwardly she was still quite calm, and when together they reached the dew-wet lawn she threw back her head and with obvious delight drank in the sweet morning air.

"It is astonishing," she said, "that one should be able to sleep when-when things happen like they did to-night."

"You were dog-tired, Elza, and the air was so wonderfully balmy and soothing. I think," Rosemary went on gently, "that God sent down a couple of his guardian angels to fan you to sleep with their wings."

"Perhaps," Elza assented with a tired smile.

"Do you feel like a walk, as far as the perennial border?"

"Why, yes. I should love it. And we still have hours to kill."

Already sounds of awakening village life filled the morning with their welcome strains. The fox and the owl were silent, but two cocks gave answer to one another, and from the homesteads and the farms came a lowing and a bleating and a barking, the beasts rousing the humans to activity and calling them to the work of the day.

As Elza's and Rosemary's footsteps crunched the gravel of the path, Mufti, the big sheep-dog, and Karo, the greyhound, came from nowhere in particular, bounding across the lawn, and threw themselves, in the exuberance of their joy, upon these two nice humans who had shortened the lonely morning hours for them.

"Let's go and see the moss-roses," Rosemary suggested, "see if they smell as sweet as they did in the night."

They walked on to the end of the perennial border, where two or three clumps of moss-roses nestled at the foot of a tall crimson *Rugosa* laden with blossom.

"Dear little things," Elza said. "They are my favourite flowers. I like them so much better than all those wonderful new roses that get the prizes at the horticultural shows."

She stooped to inhale the fragrance of the roses, and while she was stooping a faint, very distant whirring sound became audible, which grew in volume every moment. Just for the space of one second Elza did not move; she remained just as she was, stooping and with her face buried in the roses. Then she straightened out her fine figure and grasped Rosemary's hand.

"The motor," she said huskily. "Let us go."

The end of the perennial border where they were was nearly a quarter of a mile away from the house; and then there was the house to get round, the courtyard to cross — The whirring grew louder every moment, then slower, and then it ceased. The car had come to a halt, but not in front of the gates, which were still closed. Rosemary and Elza were in the courtyard with Mufti and Karo jumping about them and getting in the way. The motor was not in sight.

"Down, Mufti! Karo, down!" Elza kept repeating mechanically.

She was rather breathless after that race across the garden. Rosemary ran to the lodge to call Feri, the night-watchman, who had the keys of the gate. He had heard the dogs barking and the voice of the gracious countess, so he was on the doorstep wondering what had brought the ladies out at this hour of the morning.

"Quick, Feri, open the gates!" Rosemary called to him.

It took Feri a few moments to get the keys to unlock the gates. An eternity.

From the direction of the village there had come a loud cry, followed after a few seconds by shouts and the sound of men running. Running and shouting, and now and then another shrill cry.

"Run ahead quickly, Feri," Rosemary whispered to the watchman. "Quickly, see what it is."

She held Elza's hand in the tight clutch, and under her arm. But even so Elza succeeded in breaking free, and while Feri ran on ahead, she did not lag far behind. Past the thick clump of acacias, the village street came in sight. At the end of it, a quarter of a mile away, in front of the inn which was kept by the Jew, a motorcar had come to a halt, and some half-dozen peasants stood round it, gesticulating and arguing. Down the street, from one or two of the cottages, men, women and children came running out to see what was happening, and when they caught sight of the gracious countess and the gracious foreign lady they paused, bewildered. The gracious countess-at this hour in the village! Such a thing had never happened before. The men doffed their hats, the women hastily bobbed a curtsy, the children stood stock-still, finger in mouth, staring. A few, bolder than the rest, ran forward to kiss the ladies' hands. But Elza hastened on, seeing nothing, heeding nothing, whilst Rosemary kept close by her side. Feri, as he drew near to the inn, shouted to the people to make way. But as soon as he came in close sight of the car he turned and hastened back to Elza. He clasped his hands together and cried:

"Don't come, gracious countess. Don't come! It is nothing, nothing, just an accident, a—"

Silently, with lips tightly pressed together, Elza pushed past him, but Rosemary now had once more taken hold of her hand. She held Elza tight, with one arm round her waist and the other clutching her hand. Struggle as she might, Elza could not free herself this time.

The next moment they stood together by the side of the motor. It was a large, rather shabby touring car, painted a dull grey and fitted with leather cushions. It was smothered in dust. There was no one in the back seats, but the innkeeper was just in the act of climbing in beside the chauffeur. The chauffeur appeared to be asleep; he sat like a huddled-up heap, wrapped in a dirty, military coat, and with his peaked cap pulled down over his face. The innkeeper appeared rather scared. He took hold of the military coat and pulled it open, and immediately he clapped his hand to his mouth, smothering a scream. The cap rolled off the chauffeur's head, and his right arm dropped down the side of the car. One man who stood quite near, not knowing probably that the two ladies were there, cried excitedly:

"God in heaven! The man has been shot-dead!"

CHAPTER XXV

There was no one there quite so self-possessed as Elza. Even Rosemary had some difficulty in smothering a cry. The innkeeper jumped down from the seat as if he had been driven away by a whip; the peasants gesticulated and jabbered in an undertone. Rosemary looked at Elza and clutched her hand more tightly against her own body. Elza's face was the colour of lead, her lips looked purple, even her large, blue eyes appeared colourless. Her hand was as cold as ice and shook in Rosemary's strength-giving clasp. But to the eyes of all these peasants and subordinates she appeared perfectly calm, and after a moment or two she turned to the group of jabbering, gesticulating peasants and asked quite quietly:

"Which of you first saw the motor draw up?"

"I heard the noise, gracious countess," the Jew volunteered, "as the car drew up outside the door, and—"

"And I saw the soldier jump down," a young labourer broke in excitedly. "He ran—"

"Very well," Elza said coldly. "Now you, and you," she went on and pointed to the innkeeper and to the labourer, "come inside and tell me what you have seen. Will you come, too, darling?" she asked Rosemary.

Finally she turned to her own man Feri:

"One of you," she said, "had better go to the gendarmerie. They ought to have been here by now."

Then she went into the inn; the Jew and the labourer followed, and the peasants, having looked their fill at the car, or else scared by that lifeless bundle in the chauffeur's seat, crowded together in the doorway of the inn. But Rosemary lagged behind for a moment, examining the car as if she expected the huge, shabby thing to yield up the key of its own mystery. But in the body of the car there was nothing, except the cushions and the dust and the huddled figure of the dead chauffeur, with the head fallen forward on the breast, and the arm hanging over the side of the car. Rosemary turned away from it at first with a shudder, but almost despite her will her eyes turned back to gaze again at that huddled-up heap and the limp arm, from beneath the coat-sleeve of which a thin filet of blood trickled drop by drop to the ground.

And suddenly something white and crisp fell from the lifeless hand into the dust at Rosemary's feet. She stooped and picked it up. Fortunately the jabbering peasants were not looking this way, and Feri had walked off to the gendarmerie. What Rosemary had picked up was a letter addressed to "Lady Tarkington." She tore open the envelope and read:

"A very clumsy attempt, dear lady. As you see, it has led to no good. Your two protégés are now under my direct care, and you have little more than a fortnight in which to write the newspaper articles which I want."

The letter was signed "Naniescu." Rosemary slipped it into the pocket of her gown, and then she went into the inn. The peasants all made way for her, and then crowded again in the doorway, trying to hear what was going on. Rosemary thought the long, low room one of the stuffiest and most evil-smelling places she had ever been in. It was very dark, the light only feebly penetrating through two tiny, impracticable windows, the panes of which were covered in dust. The only breath of fresh air that could possibly find its way in would have been through the door, but that was blocked now by a solid bundle of perspiring humanity. From the low raftered ceiling hung strings of onions and maize, and in a corner of the room, on a low table which was apparently used as a counter, were numerous bottles and a number of pewter mugs. The odour in the room was a mixture of dirt, onions and silvorum. But Elza, who sat beside the table with the innkeeper and the peasants before her, appeared quite unconscious of smells or dirt. She was questioning the labourer, who apparently was the only man who had actually witnessed the arrival of the motor-car into the village.

"I saw it come, gracious countess," he said, with obvious pride in his own importance, "and I saw it draw up outside here. There was a soldier sitting near the chauffeur."

"And he was in the driving seat?" Elza asked.

"Yes, gracious countess, the soldier was driving when I first saw the car come along the road."

"And the other man?"

"Well, gracious countess, I saw a sort of heaped-up bundle beside the chauffeur. I did not know there was another man."

"Well, then what happened?"

"The car slowed down, gracious countess, and drew up outside here. Then the soldier jumped up; he stepped over the heaped-up bundle and got out of the car."

"Yes, and then?"

"He took the thing which I thought was just a bundle covered with a military coat, and pushed it into the driver's seat. After that he ran away as fast as he could."

"In which direction?"

"Where he had come from, gracious countess. There was another car waiting for him there about half a kilometre away."

"Another car?"

"Yes; I didn't see it come, but I heard it slow down and come to a halt. The soldier ran all the way. He jumped into that other car, and it drove away in the direction of Cluj."

After that another man stepped in from the doorway and volunteered the information that he had seen the second car standing about half a kilometre away. He had seen the soldier running, and had seen the car drive off. He thought there was another soldier in that car.

By that time a couple of gendarmes were on the scene. They were conducting their own investigations of the case in a casual, perfunctory manner. At first they took no notice of Elza or of Rosemary, talked over their heads in a proper democratic manner; then one of them asked curtly of Elza:

"Did you see the car drive up?"

Elza said: "No!"

"Do you know anything about it?"

Again she replied: "No!"

Whereupon the man queried roughly: "Then what are you doing here?"

Elza's face flushed a little, but she replied quite courteously: "We all hoped at the castle to hear that the miller's two sons had arrived safely at Hódmező, and I thought that this was the car that drove them in the night."

The man gave a sneer and a shrug of the shoulders.

"You seem mightily concerned," he said, with a harsh laugh, "about the miller's sons, to be out of your bed at this hour of the morning."

He spat on the ground, turned on his heel, and once more addressed the peasants.

"Now, then," he said, quite genially, "all of you get back to your homes. The Government will see about this affair, and it is no concern of anybody's. Understood?"

The two gendarmes waved their arms and drove the people out of the inn and away from the door as if they were a flock of sheep. They obeyed without murmur, only with an occasional shrug of the shoulders, as much as to say: "Well, well, these are strange times, to be sure! But it is no concern of ours."

The gendarmes then went out of the inn. They moved the body of the dead chauffeur into the body of the car; one of them got in beside it, the other took the driver's seat, and the next moment the mysterious car had disappeared up the village street in the direction of the gendarmerie.

When the last of the crowd had dispersed, Elza rose and, white-faced, wide-eyed, she turned to Rosemary.

"There is nothing more," she said, "that we can do here. Shall we go home?"

She nodded to the Jew, and, leaning heavily on Rosemary's arm, she went out into the street. It was past six now, and the village was flooded with sunlight. Elza's tired, aching eyes blinked as she came out into the open. Rosemary would have put an arm round her to support her, for she felt that the poor woman was ready to swoon; but mutely and firmly Elza refused to be supported. Her pride would not allow her, even now, to show weakness in sight of these cottages, behind the windows of which the eyes of Roumanian peasants might be on the look-out for her.

"They are outwardly obsequious," she said, as if in answer to a mute remark from Rosemary. "Call me gracious countess and kiss my hand, but at heart they hate us all, and triumph in our humiliation."

Strange, wonderful people! Even at this hour of supreme anxiety and acute distress, pride of caste fought every outward expression of sorrow and conquered in the end. Elza walked through the village with a firm step and head held quite erect. It was only when she was inside the gates of her own home that she spoke, and even then her first thought was for her husband.

"How to break the news to Maurus!" she murmured under her breath. "My God, how to break the news."

In the hall, where Rosemary saw that they were quite alone, she put her arms round Elza and drew her down into a low-cushioned seat.

"Elza, darling," she said gently, "have a real cry, it will do you good."

Elza shook her head.

"It won't bring Philip back," she said dully, "nor Anna. Will it?"

Her big, round eyes gazed with pathetic inquiry into Rosemary's face. She seemed to have some sort of intuition that her English friend could help—that she could do something for Philip, even now. Rosemary, her eyes swimming in tears, slowly shook her head. And with a low moan, Elza buried her face in the cushions, convulsive sobs shook her shoulders, and little cries of pain broke intermittently from her lips. Rosemary made no attempt to touch her. She let her cry on. Perhaps it was for the best. There was nobody about, and tears were sometimes a solace. The quietude, the stoicism of the past two hours, had been unnatural, racking alike to heart, nerves and brain. There was a limit to human endurance, and Elza had reached it at last.

When the worst of the paroxysm was over, Rosemary suggested gently: "Would you like me to break the news to Maurus? I'll do it most carefully, and I am afraid the strain would be too much for you."

But already Elza had struggled to her feet. She was wiping her eyes, then breathing on her handkerchief and dabbing them with it.

"No, no, my dear," she said between the dry, intermittent sobs that still shook her poor weary body, "not on any account. I understand Maurus. I know just what to say. Poor, poor Maurus! He has so little self-control. But I shall know what to say. You go and get your bath now, darling," she went on, gently disengaging herself from Rosemary's arms, "and get dressed. It will refresh you. I will do the same before I speak to Maurus. Rosa shall bring your coffee in half an hour. Will that do?"

She forgot nothing, thought of everything—Rosemary's bath, her breakfast, the guest. Ah, yes, the guests! Rosemary had forgotten all about them. It was long past six now; they would soon be up. All of them wanting breakfast, baths, attention. Elza forgot nothing. Thank God that she had so much to think about!

"You go up, darling," she said to Rosemary. "I shall be quite all right. Don't worry about me."

One or two servants came through the hall, busy with their work. Elza had something to say, some order to give to all of them.

"Tell the chef," she said to Anton, "to come and speak to me here. And don't go into the gracious count's room until I call you."

Rosemary lingered in the hall a moment or two longer, until the chef, in immaculate white, tall linen cap in hand, came for his orders. Elza immediately entered into a long conversation with him on the subject of milk rolls for breakfast. And Rosemary at last went slowly up the stairs. Almost without knowing it, she found herself once more in her room, the pretty, old-fashioned room with the huge bedstead and the curtains embroidered in cross-stitch. How pretty it looked, and how peaceful! Through the open window came the sound of bird-song; a blackbird was whistling, a thrush was singing, a hundred sparrows were chirruping, and on the large lily leaves on the ornamental lake a frog was sitting croaking. So peaceful, so still! And, heavens above, what a tragedy within these walls!

For a while Rosemary stood at the open window gazing out upon the beautiful panorama laid out before her, the prim, well-kept garden the flower borders, the shady park, and out, far away, the wooded heights, the forests of oak and pine which the morning sun had just tinted with gold.

And with a sudden impulse Rosemary fell on her knees, just where she was, at the open window, and she stretched out her arms towards the Invisible, the Unattainable, the Almighty, and from her heart there came a cry, forced through her lips by the intensity of despair:

"Oh God! My God! Tell me what to do!"

CHAPTER XXVI

If Rosemary had been gifted with second sight!

She would have seen at the moment when she, in despair, turned to the great Healer for comfort, General Naniescu and his friend M. de Kervoisin enjoying their petit déjeuner in one of the palatial rooms of the Imrey's house in Cluj. M. de Kervoisin had arrived the night before. He was the guest of the general, and after a night's rest was enjoying the company of his host, as well as the luxury of these beautiful apartments so thoughtfully placed at the disposal of the military Governor of Transylvania by the Roumanian Government.

M. de Kervoisin was also enjoying the anxieties to which his friend was a prey in his capacity of Governor of this unruly country. There is something in a friend's troubles that is not altogether displeasing to a philosopher. And M. de Kervoisin was a philosopher. He had come over to give advice to his friend, and the role of adviser in a difficult situation was one which he knew how to fulfil with infinite discretion and supreme tact. Just now, while sipping a cup of most excellent café-au-lait, he listened with every mark of sympathy to Naniescu's account of the terrible trouble he was having with a certain obstinate lady journalist who would not do what he wanted.

"I have only asked her," he lamented, "for a few articles to be published in The Times which would put us right with the British and American public; but you know what women are. They never see farther than their noses. And this one, damn her, is like a mule. So far I have not been able to move her."

He had finished his breakfast, and with a pungent havana between his fingers, was waving his podgy, hairy hands to emphasize his words.

Kervoisin smiled. "And you want those newspaper articles?" he asked. "Seriously?"

"Seriously," Naniescu assented. "My Government has become suspicious. They are treating me very badly, you know. They began by giving me a free hand. 'No more plottings and counter-plottings in Transylvania,' they said to me when they sent me out here. 'It is your business to see that things work smoothly out there. How you do it is your affair.' Well," the general went on in an aggrieved tone, "you would construe that order into a free hand for me, would you not?"

M. de Kervoisin carefully spread butter on a piece of excellent fresh roll before he answered: "Yes, I think I should."

"Of course," Naniescu retorted; "so would anyone. And I was doing very well, too, until that young fool Imrey managed to send his newspaper articles over to England. And at once my Government got restive. You know those articles were pretty hot!"

"Yes, I know. But I always thought you attached too much importance to them. Mon Dieu! Confiscations, perquisitions, arrests and even executions, they are the inevitable consequences of foreign occupation." And M. de Kervoisin took a little honey with his bread and butter, and poured himself out another cup of coffee. "And you know," he went on with a shrug, "the British and American public are really very indifferent to what goes on out here. Cluj is such a long way from London or New York. For a time the public is interested, a few are indignant, one or two make a fuss and ask questions in their Parliament, but, after all, you are one of the Allies; you must not be too openly criticized. The man who asks uncomfortable questions in Parliament is rebuked: *et puis voilà!*"

"I know all that," Naniescu rejoined with some impatience, "but unfortunately my Government does not think as you do. Their vanity suffers when they are attacked in English newspapers, and then they vent their spleen on me."

M. de Kervoisin said nothing for a moment or two; then he remarked blandly: "I think I understand the position-now."

"There is a talk of my resignation," the general added curtly.

M. de Kervoisin smiled. "And you don't want to resign?" he asked.

"Of course not. Five thousand sterling a year; it is a fortune in this miserable country; and then there are the perquisites."

M. de Kervoisin had finished his breakfast. He pushed his cup and plate on one side, and resting both his elbows on the table, looked intently at his friend, while a sarcastic smile curled round his thin lips.

"So," he said, "you imagined this little scheme for putting yourself right before your Government-and before the world-by getting the beautiful Uno to write glowing accounts of your marvellous administration of Transylvania, for the benefit of English and American readers? Is that it?"

"Well, wouldn't you?" Naniescu retorted.

"Yes. But you are not succeeding, my friend," M. de Kervoisin added with the suspicion of a sneer. "What?"

"I shall succeed in the end," Naniescu rejoined. "With the help of my friend—" But at this point he was silenced by a peremptory gesture of his friend's hand.

"S-sh!" de Kervoisin broke in quickly. "I shouldn't mention his name-not even here."

"Oh, we are safe enough."

"Walls have ears, my friend," the other riposted, "even in this perfectly administered land. And our friend's work would be futile if his identity was suspected. I introduced him to you as Number Ten. Number Ten let him remain."

"I suppose I can trust him," Naniescu mused. "You assured me that I could. But bah!" he added with a contemptuous shrug. "Can one trust those English?"

"You can trust this one," Kervoisin retorted curtly. "He was the best spy we had during the war."

"During the war-yes! The man might think he was serving the entire Allied cause by serving you. But now! And here! Frankly, I don't understand the man's motive. He is rich, well born, and he is playing a terribly risky game for us, who are nothing to him."

"He is not running terrible risks for you, my friend, don't you worry," de Kervoisin retorted with a mocking smile. "Though he may have reasons which we don't know for hating the Hungarians, he certainly has none for loving you; and you are one of the Allies, and to a large section of the British public his work would not be called very heinous, seeing that it is in your service and directed against ex-enemies. However, let that pass. I attribute to Number Ten a very different motive for his actions than the mere desire of serving you."

"And what is that?"

"Money, for one thing. He is not as rich as you think, and has extravagant tastes. But that is not all. I know the English better than you do, my friend, and I can tell you that Number Ten would just call his work sport; and for sport, adventure-what?-a certain type of Englishman will do anything, dare anything, risk everything. A hundred and fifty years ago they had their Scarlet Pimpernel, who gave the Revolutionary Government of France a deal of trouble at the time. Now they have their Number Ten. The same spirit animates this man that animated the other-one for good, the other, perhaps, for evil. Just the spirit of adventure. A cycle of years has woven a halo of romance round the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and to us Number Ten still appears as sordid, just a miserable paid spy in the service of an alien Government. But believe me that many Englishmen and even women will forgive him when they know him for what he is, because they will put it down to a love of adventure-to sport, which is the only motive the English appreciate."

He took his cigarette-case out of his pocket, carefully selected a cigarette, thrust it between his lips and lighted it. All the while Naniescu had remained thoughtful. "You may be right," he said finally. His was not an analytical mind; he was quite content to accept de Kervoisin's explanation of the mystery that had vaguely puzzled him; and, anyway, he did not care. Whatever motive animated the mysterious spy, the man was very useful, and in the matter of Philip Imrey and Anna Heves and of the obstinate lady journalist he had had one or two brilliant ideas.

De Kervoisin smoked on in silence for awhile, then he said:

"Our friend does not seem to be coming. I hope there has been no hitch."

"There could be no hitch," Naniescu asserted. "But it is two hours' drive to Kis-Imre and two hours back here. Will you wait a moment?" he went on, and rose to his feet. "I'll see if they've any news downstairs in the office. I told Number Ten to telephone from Kis-Imre when he got there."

Downstairs in the office they had nothing definite to report. No message had come through from Kis-Imre. But even whilst Naniescu was storming and fuming, blaming his subordinates, who obviously were not responsible for the delay, a man wrapped, despite the heat, in a huge stained and worn military coat, and wearing a soiled képi, crossed the courtyard from the direction of the entrance gates towards the principal staircase of the house. Naniescu saw him from the window and ran out into the hall. He met the man just as he was entering the house, and at once greeted him with the greatest effusion.

"Is everything all right?" he asked hurriedly.

"All right," the man answered curtly. "Of course."

"Kervoisin is upstairs," Naniescu went on. "Come and tell us all about it."

He ran upstairs two at a time; the man in the military coat followed more slowly.

"Here is Number Ten," Naniescu announced, as he ushered the man into the room where Kervoisin was patiently waiting and smoking cigarettes. Kervoisin rose at once, a word of welcome on his lips. But at sight of the man he paused and frowned, obviously mystified, until gradually his face cleared and he exclaimed:

"Bon Dieu! I should never have known you."

"I do look a disgusting object, don't I?" the man retorted. He shook hands cordially with Kervoisin; then he threw off his heavy coat and sank, obviously exhausted, into a chair.

"A cup of coffee?" Naniescu suggested.

"Thanks!" the other replied.

He drank the coffee, then took a cigarette from the case which de Kervoisin offered him. He looked a regular vagrant, with face and neck stained both with grease paint and with grime, his hands were soiled with motor grease, and his hair hung lank and matted into his eyes. He had what looked like a two weeks' growth of beard on his chin and upper lip, and his clothes-if indeed what he wore could be called clothes-were a mere bundle of rags.

"Number Ten," de Kervoisin said with conviction, "you are an artist. I have seen our friend here," he went on, turning to Naniescu, "in any number of disguises, but never two alike, and every new one a surprise!"

"You flatter me, sir," Number Ten said with an almost imperceptible sneer.

"But I am afraid you must be very tired," de Kervoisin resumed affably. "I told the general last night that he might just as well have sent one of his subordinates on this errand."

"I like to finish my work myself," Number Ten rejoined curtly.

Whereupon Naniescu threw up his hairy, fat hands and exclaimed in wonderment:

"Ils sont impayables, ces Anglais!"

"Then we may take it," de Kervoisin went on, "that the work is finished?"

"Yes, finished," Number Ten replied. "We spotted the car on the road about five kilometres from Cluj. The patrol summoned the driver to stop, but the man had obviously had his orders; he swerved sharply to the right and put on speed to try and rush through, so I shot him."

"Ah! these English," Naniescu exclaimed complacently; "they are wonderful!"

But de Kervoisin only expressed the mildest possible surprise by a very slight lifting of his eyebrows.

"Yourself?" was all he said.

"Yes," the other replied. "The patrol was on the other side of the road, but I guessed what would happen, so I had brought my horse to a halt about two hundred metres higher up."

"And," Naniescu asked blandly, "you killed the chauffeur?"

"Of course," the other sneered. "I was not likely to miss him, was I?"

But Naniescu could only smile, and sigh, and murmur: "Oh, those English! Voyez-moi ça!"

"There were two men in the body of the car," Number Ten continued coolly, "they were dead drunk. Philip Imrey and the girl were on the front seats. I gave my horse in charge of the patrol and took the wheel. We were in Cluj outside the gaol soon after two o'clock. I saw the chief superintendent and gave the three men and the girl in his charge."

"Yes! Yes!" Naniescu broke in glibly, and turned to de Kervoisin, "he had all instructions. Everything was ready. I have seen him since. Philip Imrey and Anna Heves are in separate cells, and the two drunken oafs he dispatched by train to Hódmező. They did not

seem to know what had happened, and it was no use detaining them.”

“None whatever,” Number Ten said dryly. “They were just drunken oafs, as you say. With the miller and his two sons you will have to deal presently—that is, if your second patrol succeeded in capturing the sons. I couldn’t be in two places at once, and they may have crossed the frontier. Anyway, that’s your affair, not mine.”

“Of course, of course,” Naniescu said airily. And de Kervoisin put in rather impatiently:

“What about the car and the dead chauffeur?”

“I drove both out to Kis-Imre,” Number Ten replied deliberately. “The best way to let people there know what had happened. The General agreed to it.”

“Was that your brilliant idea?”

“Mine!” Number Ten replied curtly.

And suddenly through the paint and the grime a look of almost inhuman cruelty distorted his face: the thin lips drew back tight above the red gums, and the sharp teeth gleamed white like those of a wolf. It was the recollection of a note which Naniescu had scribbled at his dictation, and which he, Number Ten, had thrust into the hand of the dead chauffeur for the perusal of an obstinate woman, that brought that wolf-like look into his face. His eyes almost disappeared beneath the strand of false eyebrows and the thick layers of paint upon the lids, and his hands opened out and were clutched again like the talons of a bird of prey.

For the space of a second or two Number Ten looked hideous. De Kervoisin, who was watching him, was conscious of an uncomfortable shudder: Naniescu fortunately was looking another way, and the whole episode was over in a moment; the next, Number Ten was once more leaning back in his chair, looking weary, grimy and ill-tempered, but there was nothing supernatural about him, except perhaps his amazing change from one personality to another.

“How did you get back here?” Kervoisin asked after a moment’s pause.

I have a car which our friend the general has placed at my disposal, with a soldier-driver. I ordered him to follow me to within half a kilometre of Kis-Imre.”

“No one stopped you?”

“No one.”

“I suppose you got to Kis-Imre before anyone was astir?”

“I won’t say that. The ladies at the château were astir.”

“And they saw you?”

“No. I had reached my own car, and was on the point of driving off when I saw them coming through the gates of the château.”

“You would not have liked them to see you, I imagine,” Naniescu put in with a chuckle.

“They wouldn’t have known me,” Number Ten retorted quietly.

“Heu! heu!” the general rejoined with a shrug. “There are certain eyes that are reported to be very sharp.”

“Anyway,” Number Ten broke in coolly, “no one saw me except an oaf from the village, so why discuss the point?”

And strangely enough General Naniescu, usually so dictatorial and so arrogant, did not seem to resent the gruffness of this man who was in his pay. On the contrary, he laughed good-humouredly and rested his fat hand with a gesture of almost affection on the shoulder of the spy.

“Ah, ces chers ‘Anglais!’” he sighed fatuously whilst de Kervoisin turned quite politely to Number Ten with the bland question:

“And what is your next move, my dear friend?”

“To get those articles out of the fair Uno,” Naniescu interposed hurriedly before the other had time to reply. “That point must not be lost sight of.”

“I am not likely to lose sight of it,” the other riposted dryly, “seeing that I am to get ten thousand pounds sterling for them. I suppose you think they are worth it?” he added, turning with his habitual sneer to Naniescu.

“I think,” the general replied slowly, “that with the arrest of Philip Imrey and Anna Heves, which, when it becomes known, will deter other young fools from playing the same game — with that, I say, as a make-weight, I think the articles will be worth the money — to my Government and to me.”

“Well,” Number Ten rejoined coolly, “I shouldn’t have done your dirty work for less.”

And Naniescu once more gave a fatuous sigh and murmured:

“Ils sont impayables, ces Anglais!” whilst de Kervoisin smiled as a philosopher smiles on follies and stupidities with which he has no concern. Then he asked Number Ten: “And when do you return to civilization, my friend—to decent clothes and a bath?”

“At once,” the other replied, “unless I am wanted for something else.”

“No, no, my dear man,” the general rejoined, with perfect affability. “I am quite content to leave everything in your hands.”

“And when do you want those articles?”

“Shall we say within the week?”

“You shall have them,” Number Ten said coolly as he rose from his chair. He nodded to Kervoisin, who responded cordially: “A bientôt, mon ami!” Then he turned to go; but already Naniescu was on his feet.

“I’ll escort you,” he said hospitably, “in case you meet anyone on the stairs. In your present get-up,” he added with his oily, guttural laugh, “it might be awkward.”

“Thank you,” the other assented coolly, and, gathering up the dirty old military coat, he strode to the door. Naniescu was already there, holding it open for him.

“You will stay and have lunch with M. de Kervoisin and me, I hope,” he said.

“I think not, thank you,” the other replied.

“Ah! You are going to Hódmező, perhaps—or to Kis-Imre?”

And Number Ten replied, with his habitual curtness:

“That is my affair.”

De Kervoisin, who still sat smoking, chuckled at this. A scene such as this was part of a philosopher's enjoyment. Naniescu threw him a look, and shrugged his shoulders. De Kervoisin could almost hear him reiterating his stock phrase: "Ils sont impayables, ces Anglais!"

After that the two men went out of the room and de Kervoisin remained, sitting and smoking, with a thin smile on his colourless lips-the smile of a philosopher who sees the humour of a situation which to a less keen mind would only appear obscure and topsy-turvy, and after a while he murmured softly to himself:

"They certainly are remarkable, these English!"

Memory had brought back to his mind that cruel, wolf-like look which for one unguarded moment had distorted the features of the spy. There was, then, some motive other than greed or love of sport, that had pushed the Englishman into doing this dirty work. Hatred? Love? Perhaps. Passion? Certainly.

"I wonder now!" mused M. de Kervoisin.

And being a Frenchman as well as a philosopher he was deeply interested in this new problem.

CHAPTER XXVII

But Rosemary was not gifted with second sight, and she saw nothing of this while she knelt at the open window of her pretty room at Kis-Imre. She was in such an agony of mind, that for a time she became almost insentient. Presently, dressed as she was, she threw herself upon the bed, because she was dog-tired and had no longer the power to feel or to suffer. Even the well of her sympathy appeared to be dry. She could not bring herself to think of Elza or of Maurus, or to feel for them; even Philip and Anna seemed blotted from her mind. An intense self-pity absorbed every other sensation for the moment. She felt herself in such a hopeless impasse that she had not even the strength to beat her hands against the walls that had so completely closed her in.

And so she lay there for an hour and more while life in the château went on, unheeded by her. Long afterwards she heard that, as arranged, the guests all departed soon after nine o'clock, that Elza had been there to see them off, looking after their comforts, bidding them good-bye and tendering hospitable little invitations for the future. Wonderful as always! Rosemary saw nothing of that. She only heard of it afterwards, when she saw Elza again an hour or two later. For the time being she was just a log—neither thinking nor feeling; conscious only of that intense self-pity which was so humiliating, because her senses were so numb that she had not the power to trace that self-pity to its source. While she lay on her bed, blind, deaf, dumb, she did not know that she suffered; she did not know that she lived.

But this state of coma was the one concession to weakness. A giving in. It was not the least like Rosemary; and as consciousness slowly returned and with it the power to feel, she felt humiliated on account of that weakness which was foreign to her. Fortunately no one had witnessed it. Dear, wonderful Elza had had her hands full, and the departing guests had only thought of being discreet and tactful and of leaving this stricken home without putting too great a strain upon the self-control of their hostess. They did not know, of course, that tragedy had followed on the exciting events of last night; but they asked no questions, well knowing that good news spreads like wildfire, and guessing perhaps by Elza's set face and expressionless eyes that something was not altogether right.

Anyhow, they went away, and after their departure the house became still—very still. Presently Rosemary had her bath and dressed, then left the room to go and search for Elza. So far she had not been able to gather anything from Rosa's stolid, round face. The girl went about her work as if nothing special had happened; only when Rosemary was ready to go downstairs and gave Rosa a final nod, the girl suddenly said with an excited little gasp: "The gracious count Philip and the Baroness Anna will be in Hungary by now, won't they, gracious lady?"

Rosemary nodded. "We hope so," she murmured.

She waited in the hall for a little while, hoping that Elza would presently be coming downstairs; but a quarter of an hour later Anton came running down and made straight for the telephone.

"What is it, Anton?" Rosemary asked.

"The gracious count," the man replied hurriedly. "He is ill. I am telephoning to Cluj for the doctor."

"What is it, do you know?"

"No, gracious lady, the countess did not say, but I think it is the heart. The gracious count has fainted, and—"

After that Anton was busy with the telephone, and Rosemary wandered aimlessly into the drawing-room and out upon the veranda.

Maurus ill! Yet another calamity striking that unfortunate woman! Indeed, there was no room for self-pity in this house. Every feeling of love, of sympathy and of pity must be concentrated on Elza. She stood alone, just as Rosemary stood alone. Two women, each with their burden. Elza with a load of boundless sorrow and anxiety, and Rosemary with a terrible responsibility to face. Elza was helpless; she could only watch and pray. But Rosemary had the choice between waiting and acting. Sentiment on the one side; Philip, Anna, Elza and Maurus, people she knew and loved; and duty on the other, duty to others, to countless of unknown innocents, to mothers, to father, to wives. "What are they to me?" cried sentiment. "The few for the many," was the command of duty. Heart and brain in direct conflict and no one to advise, no one to help, save God, and He was silent! The affairs of men are so futile in face of the Infinite.

Later on in the day the doctor came over in his motor from Cluj, and after his visit Elza escorted him down into the hall. This was the first glimpse that Rosemary had of her since the morning, and the sight of her was a terrible shock; Elza was aged, her hair had lost its lustre, her eyes their colour, her cheeks were the colour of lead, and even her magnificent figure had shrunk. Elza looked an old woman, wide-eyed and scared as if Fate was a tangible being standing perpetually before her with flail upraised, striking, striking incessantly, until the poor, weak shoulders bent under the blows, and the last vestige of youth fled, chased away by pain.

As soon as the doctor had gone Elza came back to Rosemary.

"Poor Maurus," she said. "Have you heard?"

"What is the matter?" Rosemary asked.

Elza hesitated a moment, then she said:

"As a matter of fact, it was a fit. He had had them before, and you know he was always peculiar. And now the shock! The doctor says we shall have to be very careful with him. He must be watched and kept very quiet."

"Had you told him?"

"Yes; it is that which brought on the fit. The doctor asked me if he had been more than usually agitated the last day or two."

"But he is in no danger?" Rosemary insisted.

"The doctor says not. But then he does not know. If — if the worst happens with — Philip, I don't think that Maurus will live it through."

Elza had allowed Rosemary to lead her into the drawing-room. She sank down against the cushions and Rosemary knelt beside her, with her arms round the poor woman's shoulders.

"Darling," she murmured, "is there anything I can do?"

"No, dear, nothing. What can you do? We are only atoms. So helpless! We can only suffer. I suppose that God wants some of us to suffer, and others to be happy. It seems strange and unjust, but we can't help it. We must just get through with it." Elza spoke jerkily, in

a dry, cracked voice, without the slightest ring or modulation in its dull monotony.

"Am I in the way, Elza darling?" Rosemary went on, trying with loving eyes to probe the secret thoughts that lay hidden behind that set, expressionless face. Elza turned large, round eyes upon her, and for an instant a gleam of tenderness shot through them.

"You are not in the way, darling," she said. "I don't know what I should have done this morning if you had not been there to brace me up. But it is miserable and dull for you here. Fancy you coming all the way from England into this house of misery!"

"If you sent me away now," Rosemary said, "I should break my heart with longing to be near you. But-I didn't know whether you would not rather be alone—"

"Alone? I should indeed be alone if you went away. Now that the children are not here . . . and Maurus must be kept very quiet-I should be very lonely if you went."

Rosemary gave her hand a little squeeze.

"But Jasper will be coming soon," she said. "I am sure you won't want him."

"Lord Tarkington is so kind," Elza replied gently, "and he would be company for you. The doctor is sending me a couple of nursing sisters from Cluj, but you know what Maurus is. He gets so impatient if I am not there. So we shall not see much of one another. But it would be a comfort to me to know that you are in the house."

"You are an angel, Elza, and I am glad that you are not sending me away. If you did I should not go very far. Probably to Cluj. I could not exist far away from you whilst I had a glimmer of hope. In my heart, darling," Rosemary went on earnestly, "I am still convinced that God will not permit this monstrous injustice. Something will happen. You will see. You will see."

"It would have to be a miracle, my dear," Elza said dully.

"God has accomplished greater miracles before this," Rosemary retorted firmly.

Elza smiled. She, poor dear, obviously did not believe in miracles.

After a moment or two she said:

"By the way, I quite forgot to tell you-so stupid of me-this morning, while you were resting there came a telephone message for you from Lord Tarkington."

"From Jasper?"

"He said he was coming some time in the afternoon."

"Where was he speaking from?"

"I am not quite sure, and, stupidly enough, I did not ask. When I understood that it was Lord Tarkington speaking I asked if I should send the carriage to meet him at Cluj. But all I heard in reply was: 'No, no,' and then we were cut off. These telephone people are so tiresome, they cut one off sometimes in the middle of a conversation. I am so glad, darling," Elza continued gently, "that Lord Tarkington is coming back. For your sake," she added, "and also mine."

After that she rose and gave Rosemary a final kiss.

"I have one or two little things to see to before lunch," she said, "but I understood from Lord Tarkington that he would not be over before the afternoon."

And she went off with her bunch of keys jingling in her hand, outwardly quite serene, and presently Rosemary could hear her calling to the servants, giving orders, scolding for something left undone. She was still wonderful, even though the elasticity had gone out of her step; and her back was bent like an old woman's, her voice had lost its metallic ring, and all the glorious colour had gone out of her hair.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Jasper arrived in the late afternoon, unheeded and unannounced. Elza and Rosemary were in the garden at the time, and he was in the house for over a quarter of an hour before they heard that he had come. Then she and Elza hurried to greet him. He was in the drawing-room waiting patiently. Rosemary thought him looking tired or perhaps travel-stained.

He kissed Elza's hand first, then his wife's, no more. But Rosemary knew her Jasper. He could not have kissed her in front of anyone, and Elza for once did not seem surprised at the cold, formal greeting between husband and wife. She asked a few questions: "Will you have something to eat, dear Lord Tarkington?" and "How did you come?"

Jasper gave the required explanations.

He had jumped out of the train at Apahida, which is the next station before Cluj, to get a drink, and whom should he see in the station restaurant but General Naniescu, who had driven out in his motor on some business or other. Hearing that Jasper was on his way to Kis-Imre, he offered to drive him over. It was a kind offer, as Jasper was sick of the train journey. He had only hand-luggage with him, and this he transferred, together with himself, to Naniescu's motor. And here he was—very glad to be back.

Elza asked him what had become of the luggage, and where the motor was.

Jasper explained that he had put the motor and the chauffeur up at the inn. General Naniescu had only driven in as far as Cluj, and after that had graciously put the motor and chauffeur at his, Tarkington's disposal, not only for the day but for as long as he and Rosemary would care to use it. The chauffeur was bringing the luggage over presently and would give it to Anton.

"The car might be very useful," Jasper went on, turning to his wife, "so I accepted the offer gladly. I thought it kind of old Naniescu."

Of course, he knew nothing of what had occurred, but even so his mention of Naniescu's name hurt Rosemary. She had already read failure in her husband's eyes—complete failure, and all of a sudden she realized how much hope she had built on this mission of Jasper's, and how it had dwelt at the back of her mind whenever she tried to comfort Elza. Now there was nothing left to hope for, nothing to believe in. Even faith appeared shipwrecked in this new tidal-wave of despair.

Rosemary had always found it difficult to extricate herself from Jasper's arms once he held her tight, and this he did a few moments later, when, at Elza's suggestion that Rosemary should see him up to his room, he found himself alone with her. He took her breath away with the suddenness, the almost save strength of his embrace.

"Jasper!" she murmured once or twice. "Jasper! Please!"

"I was so hungry for you, my Rosemary," he said. "Ten days—my God, ten days without your kiss!"

He looked her straight between the eyes and whispered huskily:

"I've been in hell, little one."

Rosemary tried to smile: "But why, my dear? We can't expect to be always, always together, every day for the rest of our natural lives."

"I don't know what you expect from life, little one, but I do know that if you send me away from you again, I should not come out of that hell again alive."

"But I did not send you away, Jasper," she argued, a little impatient with him because of his wild talk. "Your going to Bucharest was entirely your own idea."

"And I have lamentably failed," he muttered with a shrug.

She gave a little gasp that sounded like a sob.

"There was nothing to be done?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"The King?"

"Indifferent. He trusts Naniescu, has confidence in his judgement, and believes in his patriotism and sense of justice."

"Then there is absolutely nothing to be done," she reiterated slowly in a dull dream-voice.

She was keying herself up to tell him all that had happened in the past four-and-twenty hours. But she was so tired, almost on the verge of breaking down. She did not think that she would have the strength to go through with the long tale of hope and despair. But Jasper made her sit down on the sofa and arranged a couple of cushions round her head. Then he sat down on a low chair beside her.

"Now tell me, little one," he said quietly.

"Why, Jasper," she exclaimed, "how did you guess that there was anything to tell?"

"Don't I know every line of your adorable face," he retorted, "every flicker almost of your eyelid? Before I touched your hand I knew that something was amiss. After that I was sure."

"Dear," she murmured, and nestled her hand in his. Wasn't Jasper wonderful too? With his marvellous understanding and that utterly selfless love for her, who, alas! gave so little in return. He bent his head and pressed his lips upon her wrist.

"You guessed right," she said. "Something is very much amiss."

Then she told him everything. He listened to the whole tale without a comment, and even after she had finished speaking he sat in silence with her hand held between his own, only bending his head now and again in order to kiss her wrist.

"There's nothing to be done!" she reiterated, with a pitiable little catch in her voice.

And after awhile he said quite quietly and deliberately:

"The only thing to be done, my dear, is to comply with Naniescu's wish."

But against this she at once exclaimed, hot with indignation, and he went on with a sigh: "I know, I know. You are such a sweet, enthusiastic creature, and you have embraced the cause of these good people whole-heartedly, injudiciously. I don't want to influence you, of course—"

"You promised me that you would not," she retorted.

"I know! I know! You would not be the adorable creature that you are if you were not unreasonable sometimes. But-I put it to you-what harm would you do in writing the articles that Naniescu wants?"

This question roused Rosemary's indignation once more.

"How can you ask?" she queried. "To begin with I should alienate from these wretched people over here all the sympathy which Philip Imrey's articles have aroused for them abroad. Never again after that could any friend raise a voice on their behalf. Naniescu or his kind would have a free hand. He knows that well enough. Not only he, but all the waverers, all the selfish and the indifferent could in the future point to The Times and say: 'Hardship! Nonsense! Why, here was an independent lady journalist-and a woman at that-with every opportunity for getting at the truth, and she writes at full length to tell the entire world that the administration in Transylvania is a model of equity and benevolence.' And mothers like Elza would cry in vain because their sons had been torn from them, families would be sent into exile, fathers, brothers murdered, oppression, confiscation, outrage would go unpunished, all because one woman had been too great a coward to smother sentiment under the mantle of justice."

Jasper had not uttered a word, hardly made a sign, while Rosemary spoke her impassioned tirade. Only from time to time his dark eyes flashed with a glance of admiration on his beautiful wife, who, with flaming cheeks and slightly dishevelled hair, looked perhaps more desirable in her indignation than she had ever done in repose.

When she paused for want of breath he slowly shook his head.

"And do you really think, my darling," he said softly, "that you can permanently influence English and American opinion by a few newspaper articles, even if these are written by a well-known person like yourself? Dear heart, in order to do that you would have to go at your subject hammer and tongs, never allow one article to be forgotten before you write another; you must be at your subject all the time if you want to create an impression-hammer away at the newspaper-reading public until its stupid wooden head is saturated with the stuff you give it. Naniescu thinks a great deal of these articles which he wants you to write. Well, in my opinion their effect would last just one week after the last of them has appeared. After that some philanthropist or other will have his say on the maladministration of Transylvania, and you are not bound to refute that again, are you? But in the meanwhile Philip and Anna will be comfortably out of the country, and even Elza and Maurus will have settled down somewhere in Hungary to await better times; you will have saved the lives of two young things whom you love, and spared these good people here a terrible sorrow."

While Jasper spoke Rosemary could not do anything but stare at him. His sophistry amazed her. That there was a modicum of common sense in his argument was not to be gainsaid, but that the suggestion of such bargaining with truth and honour should come from Jasper, her husband, horrified Rosemary and revolted her. And men often accused women of a feeble sense of honour! From the first Rosemary had turned away from Naniescu's proposal as from something unclean. She had never dwelt on it, not for a moment. Even this morning, when first she felt herself sinking into an abyss of despair, she had not dwelt on that. But Jasper had not only dwelt on it; he had weighed its possibilities, the "for" and "against" which, with unanswerable logic and not a little sarcasm, he had just put before her. And even now, when she could not keep the look of horror out of her eyes, he only smiled, quite kindly and indulgently, as if she were just an obstinate child who had to be coaxed into reason; and when indignation kept her dumb he patted her hand and said gently:

"You will think over it, I am sure!" Then he rose and started pacing up and down the room, as was his custom when he was irritated or worried, with his head thrust forward and his hands clasped behind his back.

"You will think over it," he murmured again.

"Never!" she retorted hotly.

"You have another fifteen days before you."

"Never!" she reiterated firmly.

He looked at her for a moment or two with an indefinable smile on his lean, dark face, then he shrugged his shoulders.

"How much longer can you stand the mother's tears," he asked, "and the father's despair?"

"Elza, if she knew," Rosemary rejoined, with an obstinate toss of her head, "would be the first to wish me to stand firm."

"Try her!" Jasper retorted laconically. Then as Rosemary, reproachful, indignant, made no attempt to reply, he went on with harsh insistence: "Have you tried her? Does she know that the life of her son is entirely and absolutely in your hands?"

Rosemary shook her head.

"No!" she murmured.

Jasper gave a harsh laugh. "Then," he said, "I can only repeat what I said just now. Go and tell Elza everything, the see if her arguments will be different from mine!"

"Jasper!" Rosemary exclaimed, flushed with bitterness and resentment.

He paused in his restless walk, looked at her for a moment or two, and then resumed his seat beside her. For an instant it seemed as if he wanted to take her hand, or put his arms round her, but whether she divined this wish or no, certain it is that she made a slight movement, a drawing back away from him. A curious flash, like a veritable volcano of hidden fires, shot through the man's deep, dark eyes, and, as if to control his own movements, he clasped his hands tightly together between his knees. Strangely enough, when he next spoke his voice was full of tenderness and almost of humility.

"I am sorry, dear," he said gently, "if I hurt you. God knows that I would rather be broken to pieces on a rack than do that. But things have come to a pass," he went on more harshly, "where my duty-and my right-as your natural friend and protector command me to get you out of this impasse before all this damnable business has affected your health, or, God help us! clouded your brain."

"The impasse, as you very justly call it, Jasper," she riposted, "will not cloud my brain, so long as you do not seek to make right seem wrong and wrong right."

Then suddenly he dropped on one knee close beside her; before she could prevent him his two hands had closed upon hers, and he looked up into her face with a glance full of love and entreaty, whilst every tone of harshness went out of his voice.

"But child, child," he urged, "don't you see, can't you understand, that it is you who make right seem wrong? What good will you do, by letting those two wretched young idiots suffer the extreme penalty for their folly? Will you ever afterwards know one moment's peace? Won't you for ever be haunted by the ghosts of those whom you could so easily have saved? Won't your ears ring for ever with

the whole-hearted curses of these wretched people, who will look upon you as the murderer of their son? And, honestly, my dear, your articles in The Times won't do more than flatter the vanity of Naniescu. Those people in England and America who have really studied the question won't think any the better of Roumanian rule or misrule in Transylvania because a lady journalist—eminent, I grant you—chooses to tell them that everything is for the best in the best possible occupied world. Think of all those articles in The Times on the subject of the French occupation in the Ruhr and their misrule in the Palatinate—did it prevent the very readers of that same paper from joining the League of the Friends of France and proclaiming at the top of their voices their belief in the unselfish aims of M. Poincaré? You attach too much importance to the Press, my dearest. Roumania and Transylvania are very, very far away from Clapham and Ealing. People don't trouble their heads much what goes on there. A few do, but they are the ones who will stick to their opinions whatever you may say."

Unable to free them, Rosemary had yielded her hands passively to Jasper's clasp. She lay back with her head resting upon the cushions, her eyes obstinately evading his glance and fixed upon the ceiling, as if vainly seeking up there for some hidden writing that in a few terse words would tell her what to do. Jasper thus holding her captive by her hands made her feel like an imprisoned soul bruising itself against the bars of an unseen cage. She felt fettered, compelled, unable to see, to visualize that rigid code of honour which had ruled her actions until now. Jasper had talked at great length; she had never heard him talk so long and so earnestly and with such unanswerable logic. And Rosemary, who up to this hour had seen her line of action before her, crystal-clear, was suddenly assailed with doubts, more torturing than any mental agony which she had suffered before. Doubt-awful, hideous, torturing doubt. How could she fight that sinister monster "compromise" if the one man whom she could trust tilted on its side? She had never dreamed of such a possibility. And now, suddenly, Jasper had made such a thing possible—worse, imperative!

Rosemary felt her eyes filling with tears. She was so tired and could not argue. She dreaded argument lest she should give in. It was all so utterly, utterly hopeless. Jasper was out of sympathy with her, and Peter — Peter —

She must unconsciously have murmured the name, for all of a sudden Jasper jumped to his feet with a loud curse.

"If you mention that devil's name—" he began. Then once more he started on his restless pacing, with lips firmly set almost as if he were afraid that words would come tumbling out of them against his will.

"Jasper!" Rosemary exclaimed, "why do you hate Peter so?"

"Hate him?" Jasper retorted harshly. "Does one hate a snake—or a worm?"

"That is unjust," she riposted, "and untrue. You forced a promise from me not to confide in Peter. But I wish to God I had spoken to him, asked for his help. Peter half belongs to these people; he would have helped us if he had known."

But Jasper only threw his head back and broke into a harsh, sardonic laugh:

"Peter?" he exclaimed. "Peter Blakeney help you? Heavens above! Don't you know, child," he went on, and once more came and sat down beside her, "that Peter Blakeney is nothing but a paid spy of the Roumanian Government? I warned you; I told you. You remember that day, when you did not even know that he was in Transylvania, he was in Cluj in touch with Naniescu. I warned you then as much as I dared. I could not say much because—because—" He paused, perhaps because he had felt Rosemary's eyes fixed upon him with a curious, challenging look. A second or two later he went on coldly: "And the denunciation of Anna and Philip? How did it come about? Who knew of their folly except you and Peter Blakeney? And what about last night? I warned you not to confide in Peter, not to speak with him of the whole thing while I was away. Are you quite sure, quite, quite sure that Peter knew nothing of the plan? Are you quite sure that he—"

"Jasper! Stop!" Rosemary cried; and with a great effort she pushed Jasper away from her and rose to her feet. She wanted above all to get away from him. She would not listen. She would not hear, because—because every word that Jasper spoke was a dart that hit straight at her heart, and every dart was marked with the word "Truth." All that Jasper said she had heard whispered about her by unseen demons who had tortured her for days with these horrible suspicions. She had rejected them, fought against them with all her might; but no sooner had she silenced one tempter than another took his place and whispered, whispered awful words that, strung together, became a fearful, and irrefutable indictment against Peter. But this, she would not admit; not now, not before anyone, not even before Jasper.

"I won't believe it," she said firmly. "I have known Peter all my life, and what you suggest is monstrous. There have been strange coincidences, I admit, but—"

"Strange," Jasper broke in with a sneer. "You are right there, little one. It is a strange coincidence, shall we say, that has made Peter Blakeney the new owner of this house."

"Whatever to do you mean?"

"That Peter Blakeney has bought an option on the château and property of Kis-Imre from the Roumanian Government."

Rosemary frowned in bewilderment.

"Jasper," she said, "will you please tell me clearly what you do mean?"

"I have told you, dear heart, as clearly as I could. But perhaps you have not realized that if Philip and Anna are brought before a military tribunal and convicted of treason against the State, these estates, together with the château, will be confiscated. It will then be sold for the benefit of the State and the owners will be expelled from the country."

Rosemary felt herself shuddering. "No," she said slowly; "I had not realized that."

"I am afraid that it is so. And in the meanwhile, some who are in the know have already cast covetous eyes on this admirable château and beautiful park and garden, and our friend Naniescu has hit on the happy idea of selling the option of them to the highest bidder. And it seems that Peter Blakeney was the lucky man. He has paid a few hundred thousand leis for a first option on Kis-Imre and its dependencies, should it come in the market after the conviction and presumably the death of his cousins for treason against the State."

"Who told you all that?" Rosemary queried coldly.

"Our friend Naniescu."

"And you believed it?"

"I could not help believing; Naniescu showed me the contract for the option. It was signed 'Peter Blakeney'."

"If Peter has done that," Rosemary went on slowly, "it is because he wants to secure the place ultimately for Elza."

Jasper smiled tenderly. "You are a loyal friend, sweetheart," he said.

"The accusation is so monstrous," Rosemary retorted, "it defeats its own ends."

"I wish I could think so," he rejoined with a sigh. "Unfortunately, ever since Peter's arrival in Cluj I have seen nothing but one calamity after another fall upon these wretched people here. I only wish I had your belief in coincidences. I only wish I could explain satisfactorily to myself how those two children, how Elza, Maurus, all of us, have come to this terrible pass, at the end of which there is nothing but chaos. But there," he went on with his usual gentleness and patience, "I won't worry you any longer. I have said my say. I have put my case before you. Perhaps I look at it too much from a selfish point of view. I am heart-broken to see you so wretched, and feel like hitting out right and left to set you free from this awful impasse. So now, sweetheart, try and forgive me, and think over it all from my point of view a little. The people here are nothing to me, you are everything. All the world and more. Even Heaven would be nothing to me without you, and this place is a hell when you are not here."

Rosemary was standing close by the open window. The sky was grey. Great banks of cloud rose and tumbled about the mountain tops. The pine trees on the hill-side appeared like ghostly sentinels standing at attention in the mist. The heat was oppressive. From far away came the dull rumble of distant thunder. The tuberoses beneath the window sent a heady, intoxicating scent through the storm-laden air. Rosemary felt terribly wearied, and for the first time in her life discouraged. She had striven for right, smothered every sentiment for the sake of abstract justice, and in the end right was proclaimed to be wrong, at best a fantasy born of her own vanity. Was Jasper right, after all? He had rather a way of being always right. Anyway, he was English and practical; sentiment had no part in his organization. Even his love, deep as it was, was not sentiment. Rosemary had found this out before now. It was not sentiment-it was elemental passion. But his views of life were built neither on sentiment nor passion. He looked at things straight, as Englishmen of a certain type do, who despise sentiment and whose unanswerable argument is: "Well, it is the right thing to do."

But, heavens above! what was the right thing now? Rosemary felt sick and faint; the heat and the scent of the tuberoses made her head ache and her eyes smart. Jasper was saying something, but she hardly heard him, and she hardly felt his nearness when he took her hand and pressed it against his lips.

CHAPTER XXIX

But a moment or two later a curious thing happened.

Jasper had gone out of the room, and Rosemary, leaning against the window frame, was looking out into the approaching storm. She had not heard what Jasper had said just before he kissed her hand; but her mind must have registered it, must have made a kind of record of it, like that of a gramophone, because now some of his words came back to her quite distinctly through the rumblings of distant thunder. She had not heard him then, but she heard him now quite distinctly—every word.

“I have jotted down a few ideas. You, of course, will put them into your own picturesque language. Just a few notes of what Naniescu would like to see in *The Times*. I thought it would save you the trouble to think. I don’t think that you will find anything glaringly impossible in my suggestions.”

Then he had put something down on the table. Memory had registered a kind of swishing sound. And Rosemary, now turning slowly away from the window, caught sight of that something on the table. Half a dozen loose sheets of paper covered with Jasper’s clear, minute handwriting. Like a sleep-walker Rosemary went to the table and picked up the sheets. The shades of evening were drawing in, and the heavy grey clouds in the sky blotted out the remaining rags of daylight. With the papers in her hand Rosemary went out on the balcony. She had the feeling that while she read she must have the pure, storm-laden air about her. She had not turned away from these notes of Jasper’s in horror. She had not closed her ears to the record of his words. She knew quite well what was written on these sheets of paper, and deliberately she sat down and began to read.

The political and economic situation of Transylvania was stated in these brief notes with remarkable lucidity. Jasper’s clear, unemotional outlook on the administration of the conquered country was set forth without any imagery or attempt at style. Even the obvious bias in favour of the ruling Government was tempered by sound logic and a certain measure of indulgent toleration for the other side. Rosemary read the notes through twice very carefully. She could hear Jasper’s voice in every sentence, feel his presence while she read. Long after she had finished reading she sat there quite still, with the sheets of paper lying on her lap and her hands folded over them. She marvelled whether she was quite sane. Jasper had said at one moment that this terrible impasse might overcloud her brain. Well, perhaps it had done that already, and she could no longer distinguish right from wrong through the clouds.

Evening closed in about her. The garden down below became a blur, through which white, starry flowers blinked up at her, and with their placidity mocked the turmoil which was rending her soul. The thunder-clouds were drawing nearer; they hung like lead over the mountains. The pine trees, like dark sentinels, shivered at times under a sudden gust of wind, and from time to time a pale reflex of distant lightning lit the sky above the valley.

Rosa came presently into the room and turned on the lights; she inquired anxiously whether the gracious lady would not come in, as it was raining already and the storm would be breaking very soon. Then only did Rosemary become conscious that her hair and her dress were wet. Heavy drops, the size of a shilling, were falling, but she had not noticed them before.

She came in and quite mechanically she locked the papers up in her dressing-case. She asked Rosa what the time was, and whether dinner would be at the usual time. Yes, dinner would be at eight o’clock as usual, and it was now past seven. Rosa asked if the gracious lady would like to change her dress.

The rest of the evening was like a dream. Elza presided at dinner and she and Jasper did most of the talking — that is to say, Elza asked innumerable questions to which Jasper gave long replies, with forced cheerfulness. Maurus, it seemed, was better. The doctor was coming again the last thing at night, but the patient was much calmer, had taken some nourishment in the way of milk, and had slept for an hour. Elza, self-possessed, wonderful as usual, lingered over dessert. She poured out coffee, offered liqueur and cigarettes. For her hospitality and its duties were a religion; she would as soon have neglected them as a devout Catholic would neglect confession. The very fact that they cost her an effort made them all the more imperative and in a way comforting.

At ten o’clock Rosemary found herself once more alone in her room. Jasper had kissed her tenderly when he bade her goodnight. Only when she did find herself alone did Rosemary realize how much she had dreaded this goodnight. She knew that she had no reserve of strength left to stand one of Jasper’s savage outbursts of passion; to-night of all nights she would have gone down under it like the tuberoses below her window under the lashing of the storm.

The rain beat against the window-panes, terrific crashes of thunder followed one another in close succession, and every few minutes the sky seemed rent right through with blinding flashes of lightning. The heat was nearly intolerable through this almost tropical storm. Rosemary had dismissed Rosa. She undid her hair, which clung damp against her forehead and the back of her neck, and clad only in chemise and petticoat, with bare arms and neck, and bare feet thrust into slippers, she sat down at the table with Jasper’s notes before her, and read them through once more.

After that she searched through the chest of drawers for a bundle of manuscript paper, and taking up her fountain-pen she began to write. She had Jasper’s notes in front of her, and she put them, as he had suggested, into her well-known, picturesque language. She enlarged upon them, amplified them, always keeping his suggestions as a background for her own statements.

For hours she sat there writing. It was the longest spell of uninterrupted work that she had ever accomplished, but she was not even conscious of fatigue. The storm raged for a while longer, but she did not hear it. Only the heat worried her, and from time to time she mopped her forehead and the back of her neck with her handkerchief.

The storm passed by, and the air became very still as slowly the dawn chased away the night. The waning moon peeped through the clouds, only to melt away in the translucent ether; one by one the birds awoke, shook their wet feathers and called to their mates. But not until she had written the last line did Rosemary rise from the table. Then she put her papers together, put a clip through them, arranged Jasper’s notes separately, and locked up both sets in her dressing-case.

After that she put on a wrap and threw open the window. The clock in her room struck five. She had been writing for six hours! The task was done. There it stood ready, and Elza should decide. In this Jasper had been quite right—wasn’t he always right? It was for Elza to decide. Her son’s life on the one hand, her people’s welfare on the other. It was for her to decide. Philip was her son; the oppressed people of Transylvania her kindred. Jasper was quite right. Let Elza decide.

And after Rosemary had saturated her lungs with the pure air of the morning, she went to bed and slept soundly, heavily, until Rosa came into her room later on with her breakfast.

And when, presently, Jasper came in, Rosemary was able to greet him with a smile which was not altogether forced. She was able to return his kiss, and after awhile to tell him what she had done.

"The articles are written," she said, "and ready for publication. I have even written a covering letter and addressed the envelope to the editor of The Times, asking him kindly to arrange for their publication at the earliest possible date. But before I put the articles in the post, I shall give them to Elza to read. She shall decide if they are to go. You were quite right, dear," she added, and looked Jasper quite frankly, unwaveringly, in the eyes. "It is a matter for Elza to decide."

CHAPTER XXX

Rosemary found herself alone with Elza in the early part of the afternoon. The doctor had been over in the morning to see Maurus, and on the whole the bulletin was satisfactory: "The patient was doing well. If he was kept very quiet there would be no complications. He was no age, and on the whole had led an abstemious life. The most important thing was to keep all worry, all agitation from him, both now and in the future."

Both now and in the future! Elza dwelt on those words when she told Rosemary just what the doctor had said.

"The future!" she murmured with a weary little sigh. "Of course, the doctor does not know. Perhaps I ought to tell him what the future holds in store for poor Maurus."

The nursing sisters had arrived overnight. Rosemary had caught sight of them about the house during the course of the morning, with their white-winged caps that made them look like doves with outspread wings. Their felt shoes made not the slightest noise as they walked. They were very sweet and very restful, entirely incompetent but exceedingly kind, and full of gentle pity and kind advice to the patient, who became terribly irritable as soon as they ministered to him.

After lunch Rosemary persuaded Elza to come out with her into the garden. It was the first bright moment in the day. Neither morning nor early afternoon had kept the promise made by the dawn. Storm clouds hung, heavy and leaden, over the mountains, and dull rumblings proclaimed the return of thunder. But about three o'clock there was a break in the clouds, and a pale sun shot fitful gleams of silvery light upon park and garden. It was oppressively hot. Rosemary led Elza to the summer-house and made her sit down. Elza was fidgety. It almost seemed as if she did not want to be left alone with Rosemary. She made one excuse after another: Maurus! the chef! the stables! But Rosemary insisted.

"Listen to me, Elza, darling," she said firmly. "I want your full attention for two minutes."

Elza turned her big blue eyes upon Rosemary and murmured like an obedient child: "Yes, dear! What is it?"

Rosemary had the papers in her hand: the newspaper articles which she had written during the night. The hand that held the manuscript shook ever so slightly, but her voice was quite steady.

"I want you," she said to Elza, "to read very carefully what I have written here. They are newspaper articles which General Naniescu would like to see published in England and in America. When you have read them you will understand why. He wants this so badly that on the day these articles are published Philip and Anna will receive a full pardon, Kis-Imre will not be taken from you, and, if you wish, you can all leave the country for a time until things settle down and better times come for you all."

She thrust the papers into Elza's hands and turned to go.

"I will leave you to read quite quietly," she said.

But Elza's round blue eyes were still staring at her.

"I don't understand you, dear," she murmured vaguely.

"Of course you don't, darling," Rosemary rejoined gently; "but you will when you have read what I have written. The gipsy was quite right; it is in my power to save Philip and Anna, but only to a certain extent, because it is you alone who can decide if I am to exercise that power or not. God bless you, darling!"

She put her arms round Elza and kissed her tenderly. Thank Heaven all self-pity, all selfish introspection had gone from her. Her thoughts, her love, her pity were all for Elza. But it had to be. Elza must decide. Her people! Her son! She must decide!

When Rosemary hastened across the lawn she turned once more toward the summer-house. Elza was still sitting there, staring with big blue eyes into vacancy. Every line of her attitude indicated bewilderment. She had the packet of paper in her hand and was tapping it against her knee. Poor Elza! A heavy sob rose from Rosemary's aching heart.

CHAPTER XXXI

Rosemary did not Elza against that day. Just before dinner Rosa came with a short scribbled note from her. "Maurus is very restless," it said; "I don't like to leave him. Will you and dear Lord Tarkington forgive me if I don't join you at dinner?"

The evening was dreary. Jasper said very little, and Rosemary felt thoroughly out of tune with him; he had a meek air about him that irritated her. Hers was not a nature to sympathize with remorse, and Jasper's manner gave the idea that he regretted having forced her into a decision. So she gave curt answers when he spoke to her, and after dinner he retired into the smoking-room with the excuse that he had some business letters to write. She sat reading most of the evening, her nerves on edge, hearing all sorts of mysterious sounds through the apparent stillness of the house.

When Jasper came to say good night she felt sorry for him. He looked forlorn and miserable, and reason told Rosemary that he of all people ought not to be allowed to suffer through a situation that was none of his making. Poor Jasper! She, his wife, had dragged him, unwillingly enough, into this impasse wherein his quiet habits of a wealthy English gentleman were hopelessly perturbed and his outlook outraged at every point. So, after she had returned his last kiss and saw him going upstairs, slowly, dragging one step after another, almost like an old man, she ran after him and linked her arm in his, and gave him an tender and sympathetic smile. The look of gratitude which he gave her in return warmed her heart. Here, at least, was no divided duty. In a moment of pique — it was nothing less than that — she had linked her fate with Jasper Tarkington, accepted from him all the lavish gifts that wealth could buy, and which he so generously bestowed upon her. In exchange for that he only asked for her love; and if the love which he gave and demanded did not reach that sublime ideal of which Rosemary had once dreamed, at any rate it was loyal and ungrudging and she had no right to let her caprice stand in the way of his happiness.

It was perhaps strange that these thoughts should come to her at a moment when her whole soul was torn with a terrible sorrow and a racking anxiety; perhaps they came because on this very day she had made the greatest abdication of her will that she had ever done in all her life. She had always acted for herself, judged for herself, set herself a high standard of straight living and straight thinking, and lived up to it. To-day she had left a decision which should have been hers in the hands of another. She knew that she had done right, but her pride was humiliated, and to soothe that pride she set herself a fresh standard of duty to Jasper and determined to live up to that.

But ever afterwards she turned away with a shudder from thoughts of this evening, when she probed the full depth of Jasper's passion for her, and saw before her like a row of spectres the vision of an endless vista of years, during which every caress would mean for her an effort, and every kiss a lie.

The new standard of duty which she had set herself would be very difficult to live up to. She had never loved Jasper, only hoped that she might learn to love him one day, but on this fateful evening she realized that she might in time learn to hate him.

When at last she was alone she found herself unable to rest. Through the open window the sounds of the oncoming storm became more and more insistent. It was rolling in on the bosom of the clouds from over the mountains in the west. Already one or two vivid flashes of lightning had rent the sky, and now and then great gusts of wind swept across the valley and sent a souging and whispering through the trees. The poplars bowed their crests, and the twisted branches of the old acacias shivered and cracked in the blast. It was insufferably hot, and there was a smell of sulphur in the air. Rosemary in a thin lace wrap could not succeed in keeping cool. She stood by the open window, longing for the storm to break in all its fury, so that she might be rid of this feeling of oppression which was so unendurable, because the storm, far or near, had gone on almost uninterruptedly for over twenty-four hours. Rosemary's thoughts now were with Elza. She pictured to herself the unfortunate woman wrestling with a decision which either way must mean the breaking of her heart. Elza, who outwardly seemed just a soft, futile, pampered doll, with thoughts fixed on her menus and her servants, was a veritable heroine, strong and tenacious, proud without vanity, loving without weakness, the type that represented everything that was finest and best in a woman. She was of the stuff that religious martyrs were made of in the past, and she would not come to a decision without a terrible struggle. If in the end her heart overruled the dictates of justice and of right, her remorse would be as devastating as her courage hitherto had been sublime.

If Elza had been a religious woman she would not have suffered nearly so cruelly. The pagan knows nothing of the comfort of prayer, of diving blindly from the rocks of care into the ocean of God's love. And Elza was only a pagan from whom the thin veneer of Christianity laid on in early life had been rubbed off long ago. She would not now be on her knees, murmuring with heaven-born resignation: "Lord, not my will, but thine be done!" she would be fighting a tough battle, wrestling with her heart, castigating her tenderest feelings, fighting alone, unaided, unconsolated.

Poor, poor Elza! Rosemary, looking out into the storm, seemed to see the pretty round face distorted by grief, the big, child-like eyes gazing bewildered on the immensity of the puzzle which the Fates had set for her to solve. And while Rosemary gazed the storm became full of pictures, each lightning flash revealed a face. Elza! Philip, dark-eyed, enthusiastic, the idealist! Anna, gentle and resigned. Maurus, the man, the head of the family, the trunk of the tree weaker than its branches. And then Peter. Oh, Peter filled the night with his presence. There was Peter in flannels, a boy with bright eyes and curly head, fighting life's battles with a cricket bat and a joke. Peter home on leave from that hell in Belgium, receiving from his king the supreme reward for an act of almost unequalled bravery, of which, in his boyish way, he would often look quite ashamed. And Peter that night in June, long ago. Peter's strong arms round her shoulders. Peter's impassioned words, vying in melody with the nightingale. Peter's kiss that opened wide the portals of Heaven; and, lastly, Peter the mysterious, the subtle, unseen influence in whose wake strode sorrow and disaster. And the rumbling of the thunder brought back to Rosemary's ears Jasper's words of warning: "I only wish I had your belief in coincidences;" and "Ever since Peter's arrival I have seen nothing but one calamity after another fall upon these wretched people here." And then that awful, awful indictment which she had been unable to refute: "Don't you know that Peter Blakeney is a paid spy of the Roumanian Government?" The thunder brought the echo of those terrible words. Louder and louder, for the storm was drawing nearer, and the echo of those awful words drowned the very sound of thunder.

All at once the storm broke in all its fury; there was a deafening crash and a flash of lightning so vivid that for the space of one second the garden stood revealed as if in broad daylight before Rosemary's gaze, clear-cut in every detail, every tree, every leaf, every flower, every ripple upon the lake, each pebble upon the garden walk; and in that one second Rosemary had seen Peter standing on the gravel walk, not fifty yards from her window, and looking up at her — gazing. She caught his eyes in that one flash. He was dressed in a dark suit, his cricketing cap was on his head. It had been an instant's flash, but she had seen him, and he was gazing up her window. And their eyes had met in that one flash, right through the storm.

After that all was darkness, and though from time to time the night was rent by lightning flashes, Rosemary did not see Peter again. And when later on the storm subsided, and, wearied out, she went to bed and slept, she dreamt that all her suspicions of Peter had been proved to be wrong. She dreamt that she was a few years younger, that they were on the river together, in a punt, and that the nightingale was singing. She dreamt of the lapping of the water against the low-lying river bank, of the scent of meadow-sweet, and of the honey-coloured moon that painted long lines of golden light upon the reeds. She dreamt that Peter kissed her, and that she was free to give him kiss for kiss.

CHAPTER XXXII

When Rosemary woke the next morning she felt quite convinced that the vision which she had had in the night, of Peter standing on the gravel walk and looking up at her window, was only a creation of her own fancy. Rosa had opened the curtains and the volets, and Rosemary saw a dull, grey sky before her. The storm had certainly abated, but it was still raining. Rosemary thought of the cricket match, which would probably have to be postponed owing to the weather, and of the disappointment this would mean to many, especially to Peter, who had set his heart upon it.

During breakfast Jasper told her that he had received a note from his agent de change at Cluj, and that the latter said in his letter that the cricket match which should have been begun yesterday had to be postponed owing to the weather.

"Steinberg goes on to say," Jasper continued, "that he had heard that the cricket pitch — the playground he calls it — was like a swamp. The storm seems to have been very severe the other side of the frontier. It went on for twenty-four hours without a break, and was still raging at the time of writing. Unless the weather improves very much, Steinberg says that the match will have to be abandoned altogether, as Payson and several of his team have to be back in Budapest in time for work on Monday morning, which means leaving Hódmező on the Sunday."

Then, as Rosemary made no comment on the news, only stared rather dejectedly out of the window, Jasper went on after awhile:

"I am afraid it will mean a disappointment all round, as the weather can hardly be said to have improved, can it?"

Rosemary said: "No, it cannot," after which the subject was dropped. Somehow the idea of the postponed cricket match worried her, and there was one insistent thought which would force itself into the forefront of her mind to the exclusion of all others, and that was the thought that the postponed cricket match would have left Peter free yesterday to come over to Kis-Imre, and that therefore it might have been himself in the flesh who was standing during the storm in the garden last night.

Why he should have chosen to stand in the garden in the rain rather than come into his aunt's house was a problem which Rosemary felt herself too wearied and disheartened to tackle.

When she went downstairs soon after ten o'clock she met Elza in the hall, dressed ready to go out. She looked more tired, more aged, more ill than the day before; obviously she had spent another sleepless night. But she kissed Rosemary very tenderly. "Come into the smoking-room, darling," she said. "I want to say something to you."

Rosemary followed her into the smoking-room and at once asked after Maurus.

"He has had no sleep," Elza said, "and at times his brain wanders. But physically he seems no worse—rather stronger, I think, than yesterday, and he enjoyed his breakfast. If we could only keep him quiet!"

She opened her handbag and took out the papers which Rosemary gave her yesterday.

"I read your articles through very carefully, dear," she said, "but I did not have to pray for guidance. I knew at once, that none of us, not Maurus or I, or Anna's people, would accept the children's safety at such a price. The children themselves would refuse."

With a perfectly steady hand she held the papers out to Rosemary. "Take them, darling," she said. "Thank you for letting me decide. This is the one thing which we none of us would have forgiven, if you had published these articles without consulting us."

CHAPTER XXXIII

Half an hour later!

Rosemary thought that Jasper was still in his room, and she had a longing to get away from his nearness and out into the open. It was still raining and the sky was the colour of lead. She threw a cape over her shoulders and opened the door of her room. She was dreading to meet Jasper again, so she listened intently for awhile for any sound that might betray his presence. From Maurus' apartments at the opposite end of the gallery there came a buzz of voices, and from down below where the servants were laying the table in the dining-room for luncheon a clatter of crockery. Otherwise silence. And no sound from Jasper's room close by, so Rosemary ran quickly downstairs.

She had just reached the hall intending to go out into the garden when she heard a strange clatter coming apparently from the smoking-room. It sounded like a scuffle. Of course it could not be, but that was just what it sounded like. She stood still to listen. And then she heard quite distinctly a smothered cry. Something like a curse. And she thought that she recognized Jasper's harsh voice. At once she ran to the door of the smoking-room and threw it open.

Jasper was on the ground, struggling to get back to his feet. He appeared dazed, and to be moving with difficulty. His hand was tearing at his collar, as if he were choking; his clothes were disarranged, his face looked pallid and blotchy, and his eyes bloodshot. But Rosemary did not scream when she caught sight of him. Something else that she had seen had paralysed her limbs and seemed actually to be holding her by the throat. The tall window which gave on this side of the garden was wide open, and in a flash, just as she entered the room, Rosemary had seen Peter in the act of getting over the window-sill. The next second he had disappeared over the ledge, and she heard his footsteps crunching on the gravel as he ran in the direction of the main gates.

A moment or two later Jasper had recovered his voice and the use of his limbs.

"Call to the servants!" he cried in a raucous voice. "Curse that devil — he will get away."

But Rosemary could not move. She could only stand where she was in the doorway and stare at the open window. Jasper had struggled to his feet, lurched forward and tried to push past her. He tried to call out, but the words were choked in his throat. He put his hand up again and tore at his collar, then he tottered and would have fallen backwards if Rosemary had not been quick enough and strong enough to catch him and to guide him to the nearest chair, into which he sank, half fainting. One of the servants came across the hall from the dining-room. Rosemary called to him to bring some brandy.

"The gracious lord feels faint," she said. "Be quick, Sándor, will you?"

As soon as Sándor had brought the brandy, Rosemary sent him peremptorily away. Fortunately neither he nor any of the other servants had heard anything of the scuffle, and Rosemary, for very life, could not have said anything to them just then. She knelt down beside Jasper and made him swallow some of the brandy. Obviously he had not been hurt, only scared, and the scared look was still in his eyes when he came to himself.

"You haven't let him go?" were the first words he uttered.

"Let whom go, Jasper?" Rosemary asked quietly. She rose to her feet and offered him an arm to help him get up.

"That spying devil," Jasper replied, with a savage oath. "Peter Blakeney."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"You know quite well what I mean. You must have seen him — I told you to call the servants. Are you in collusion with him, then, that you did not do it?"

"I heard a scuffle," Rosemary rejoined coldly, "when I reached the hall. I opened the door and saw you lying on the ground. I only had enough presence of mind to send for some brandy. Perhaps you will tell me what else happened."

"What else?" he retorted, with a sneer. He had risen and gone over to the mirror to readjust his clothes. She could see his face in the glass, livid with passion, his eyes fixed upon her reflection, while he fumbled with his tie and collar. But even while she watched him she saw a change come slowly over his face. The colour came back to his cheeks, his eyes narrowed, and an indefinable expression crept into them. Perhaps he did not know that Rosemary was watching; certain it is that she had never seen such an expression on his face before — the lips parted above the teeth, which gleamed sharp and white and gave the mouth a cruel, wolfish look. It was all over in a moment, the next he had swung round and faced her, apparently quite himself again, with just the habitual expression of high-bred weariness which he always affected.

"I was obviously wrong," he said coolly, "to suggest that you were in collusion with that young devil, and for this I beg your pardon."

"Wouldn't it be best," she retorted equally coolly, "if you were to tell me what did happen?"

"Peter Blakeney sneaked in through that open window. My back was turned that way and I heard nothing, as I was intent on reading your manuscript. He attacked me from behind. I was taken unawares, but I tried to put up a fight. However, he is younger and more athletic than I am, and he knocked me down. He had already snatched your manuscript out of my hand, and he disappeared with it the way he came, through that open window, at the very moment that you entered the room."

Rosemary had listened to this without moving a muscle. She stood in the middle of the room as if she had been turned to stone, alive only by her eyes, which were fixed with such an intensity of questioning on Jasper that instinctively he turned away, as if dreading to meet her glance.

"That is all, my dear," he said, with a sudden assumption of meekness. "I was certainly to blame for allowing that precious manuscript to be taken from me. I should, I know, have guarded it with my life, and so on, and I have probably sunk very low in your estimation as a coward. But I was taken entirely unawares, and one is not usually prepared for daylight robbery in a house filled with servants. So that must be my excuse—" He paused a moment, then added drily: "That and the fact that I warned you more than once that Peter Blakeney was working against you. Now perhaps you are convinced."

At last Rosemary recovered the use of her tongue, but her voice sounded strange to herself, toneless and distant, as if it came from beneath the earth. "You are quite sure, I suppose," she said slowly, "that it was Peter Blakeney who — who did what you say?"

"Aren't you?" he retorted with a harsh laugh.

She made no reply to the taunt. Outwardly she did not even wince.

"You are quite sure that he got away with the manuscript?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am quite sure," he replied.

"What do you supposed he means to do with it?"

"Sell it to Naniescu, of course."

"In exchange for Philip and Anna's freedom?"

Jasper looked at his wife keenly for a moment or two, and the corners of his lips curled in a satiric smile. He took out his cigar-case, carefully selected a weed, struck a match, lit his cigar, and blew out the flame. Then only did he reply.

"Hardly that, I think, seeing that he was instrumental in getting them locked up. More probably, I should say, in exchange for a few thousand pounds."

This time the shaft struck home. Rosemary had some difficulty in smothering the cry of protest which had risen to her throat. But she recovered herself in less than a second and said coolly:

"The manuscript must be got back, of course."

Once more Jasper shrugged his shoulders.

"It might have been done at the moment; but I was helpless, and you were so concerned for my welfare that you did not raise hell to send the servants after the thief."

"I did not know then — about the manuscript."

"You know now," he retorted, "and have not called the servants yet."

"This is not the business of the servants. I look to you to get me back the manuscript."

"To me?" he rejoined with a harsh laugh. "Are you not putting to great a strain on my allegiance? You know my views. Should I not rather be wishing that damnable spy God-speed?"

"Jasper," she said earnestly, "you must get me back the manuscript."

"How is that to be done, my dear? From all accounts our friend Peter is as elusive as his ancestor, the Scarlet Pimpernel. He has ten minutes; advance of us already . . . a car probably waiting for him in the village. Are you quite sure you can't hear the whirring of a motor now?"

"You could try, at any rate." And now there was a distinct note of pleading in her voice. "General Naniescu—"

"Give yourself no illusion in that quarter, my dear," he broke in quickly. "Once Naniescu is in possession of those precious articles of yours he will send a courier flying across Europe with them. Remember that with the manuscript there was your covering letter to the editor of The Times, asking for immediate publication. Let me see," he went on slowly, "this is Saturday. I believe we shall see the first of those wonderful articles in print in The Times on Wednesday."

"I don't care how it's done," she replied impatiently. "If you won't help me I'll manage alone."

"What can you do, my dear?"

"Telegraph to The Times, for one thing, and start for London this evening."

"Plucky!" he remarked drily; "But I doubt if you'll succeed."

"Will you put obstacles in my way?"

"I? Certainly not. But Naniescu will." Then, as without attempting further argument she turned to go, he added blandly: "And Peter."

To this final taunt Rosemary made no reply. Her thoughts were in a whirl, but through the very confusion that was raging in her brain her resolution remained clear. She would wire to the editor of The Times not to act on any letter he might receive from her until he heard from her again, and in the meantime she would start for London immediately. Even if her wire were stopped by Naniescu's orders, she would be in London in time to stop the publication of the articles. Though she had a great deal of influence in the journalistic world, it was not likely that so important a paper as The Times would be ready to print her articles the moment they were received. Yes, she had plenty of time. And the whole conspiracy, whatever it was, had been clumsily engineered and would certainly prove futile.

The conspiracy! Rosemary could not think of that. Yet when she did it would mean such a terrible heartache that the whole world would become a blank. Peter blotted out of her life. That is what it would mean to her probably in the train, travelling alone across Europe, hurrying to nullify work done by Peter — shameful, despicable work that would sully the reputation of a pariah. The work of a spy, of hands tainted with ill-gotten wealth! Rosemary's gorge rose at the thought. The conspiracy would prove futile—there was plenty of time to subvert it — but it was an evil, noisome thing that had been. It had existed — and Peter had given it birth!

Peter!

Never again could the world be bright and beautiful. The thing was so loathsome that it would taint with its foulness everything that Rosemary had up to this hour looked on as sweet and sacred and dear. She herself would remain noisome: a body to execrate, since it had once lain passive and willing in Peter's arms, since her lips still retained the savour of his kiss.

Rosemary went out into the village as far as the post office. She wrote out her telegram to the editor of The Times and asked whether it could be sent out immediately. In order to stimulate the zeal of the postmistress she emphasized her instructions with a hundred lei note. The post-mistress smiled and thanked the gracious lady for the note, and she promised that she would send the telegram off within the next few minutes. Then, as soon as Rosemary had gone out of the stuffy little office and disappeared down the village street, the woman rang up at the Imrey Palace at Cluj and asked to be allowed to speak with His Excellency the General.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Rosemary's wire was repeated over the telephone to General Naniescu, who promptly gave orders that it should not be sent. When he put down the receiver he was very much puzzled. Something had apparently happened at Kis-Imre which had greatly disturbed the beautiful Uno. It seemed indeed as if she had actually written those articles which Naniescu wanted so badly that he was prepared to pay ten thousand pounds sterling of Government money for them. And having written the articles, the lady seemed first to have sent them off, then to have repented.

Well, well! It was all very puzzling. Even M. de Kervoisin, experienced diplomat though he was, could suggest no solution. He advised the obvious: to wait and see.

"We shall see our friend Number Ten soon," he said. "If I am not mistaken he has at least one key to the puzzle in his possession."

But it was not Number Ten who presented himself at the Imrey palace that afternoon. It was ce cher Monsieur Blakeney, who had come all the way from England in order to preside over a game of cricket that had not come off because of the weather. His Excellency was delighted to see him, and so was M. de Kervoisin. This charming, most unexpected but most welcome visit was due no doubt to the cricket and the bad weather. So tiresome! Mais hélas! Man proposes and the rain disposes.

His Excellency was most sympathetic. Would M. Blakeney have a cigar and a glass of fine? No? Then what could His Excellency do for M. Blakeney.

"Pray command men, my dear Monsieur Blakeney. We are all so grateful to you for the kind interest you are taking in our young athletes. It will be such a happy recollection for them in after years that so distinguished an English champion as yourself has helped them with their games."

Peter let him talk on. He thought it a pity to stem this flood of eloquence, and he was looking forward to the moment when Naniescu's complacent effusions would turn to equally comic puzzlement first, and subsequently to amazement and delight.

"Shall I tell your Excellency now," he said as soon as he could get a word in edgewise, "why I have come?"

"Mais comment donc?" the general replied suavely. "I am hanging on your lips, mon cher Monsieur Blakeney."

"Well," Peter said, quite slowly and speaking in French since M. de Kervoisin did not know English. "Well, it's just this. Lady Tarkington has written certain newspaper articles, which you, general, very much desire to see published. That's so, isn't it?"

But though this opening almost betrayed Naniescu into an exclamation of surprise, he had enough control over his nerves not to give himself away. Fortunately he was a great adept at expressive gestures and his cigar also helped to keep him in countenance.

He leaned back in his chair, was silent for a moment or two blowing rings of smoke through his full, red lips.

"Articles?" he queried at last with an assumption of perfect indifference. "I don't know. What articles do you mean, cher ami?"

"Those," Peter replied with equal indifference, "for which you were prepared to pay a deuced lot of money to your spy-in-chief."

Naniescu waved his podgy hand that held the cigar, then he deliberately dusted away a modicum of ash that had dropped upon his trousers.

"Ah!" he said innocently. "Lady Tarkington, you say, has written such articles?"

"Yes. She has."

"Then no doubt she will honour me by allowing me to see the manuscript. She knows how deeply I am interested in her work."

"No, general," Peter broke in drily. "Lady Tarkington has no intention of allowing you to see that particular manuscript of hers."

"Ah! May I be permitted to inquire how you happen to know that?"

"I happen to know — no matter how — that Lady Tarkington only wrote the articles tentatively; that after she had written them she repented having done so, and that her next act would have been to throw the manuscript into the fire."

"Very interesting. But, forgive me, my dear Monsieur Blakeney, if I ask you in what way all this concerns you?"

"I'll tell you," Peter said coolly. "I also happen to know — no matter how — that you are prepared to pay a large sum of money for those articles, so I thought that I would forestall your spy-in-chief by driving a bargain with you over the manuscript."

"But how can you do that, my dear young friend, without the manuscript in your possession?"

"The manuscript is in my possession, Excellency," Peter said coolly.

"How did that come about, if I may ask the question?"

"You may. I stole it this morning from Lady Tarkington."

"What?"

Naniescu had given such a jump that he nearly turned himself out of his chair. The cigar fell from between his fingers, and the glass that contained the fine was upset and its contents spilt over the table. Even M. de Kervoisin had given a start; and his pale, expressionless face had flushed. Though the report of the post-mistress of Kis-Imre had given Naniescu an inkling that something unexpected had occurred, he certainly had not been prepared for this.

He looked up at Peter and frowned, trying to recover his dignity which had been seriously jeopardized. Peter was laughing — very impolitely, thought His Excellency. But then these English have no manners.

"You'll forgive my smiling, won't you, sir?" asked Peter quite deferentially.

"Go on with your story," Naniescu retorted gruffly. "Never mind your manners."

"I can't very well mind them, sir," Peter rejoined, with utmost seriousness, "as I don't possess any. And I can't go on with my story because there is none to tell."

"You have got to tell me how you knew that Lady Tarkington had written certain newspaper articles; how you knew that I wanted them; how you came to — to steal them — the word is your own, my dear Monsieur Blakeney — and where they are at the present moment."

"None of which facts, I am thinking, concern your Excellency," Peter retorted coolly, "except the last. The manuscript of Lady Tarkington's newspaper articles is in my pocket at the present moment, together with her letter to the editor of The Times, asking for these articles to be published at an early opportunity. So, you see, sir, that I am bringing you a perfectly sound proposition."

"I'll have to read those articles first."

"Of course," Peter agreed, and took the sheets of manuscript out of his pocket. "At your leisure."

Naniescu thrust out his podgy hand for them, his large, expressive eyes had lit up with a gleam of excitement. Peter gave him the manuscript, and as he did so he remarked casually, "They are no use to your Excellency without the covering letter."

Which remark seemed to tickle M. de Kervoisin's fancy, for he gave a funny, dry cackle which might pass for a laugh. Naniescu, however, appeared not to notice the taunt. His white, downy hands shook slightly as he unfolded the manuscript. He leaned back in his chair and began to read, the excitement of his nerves was chiefly apparent by his stertorous breathing and his almost savage chawing of the stump of his cigar.

M. de Kervoisin remained silent. He offered Peter a cigarette, and while the Englishman struck a match, lit the cigarette and smoked it with obvious relish, the Frenchman watched him through his half-closed lids with an expression of puzzlement upon his keen, wrinkled face. No sound disturbed the silence that had fallen over the actors of the little comedy, only the ticking of an old-fashioned clock and now and then the crisp crackling of paper as Naniescu turned over the sheets of the manuscript. From time to time he nodded his head and murmured complacently, "C'est très bien! C'est même très, très bien!" And once he looked across at his friend and asked: "Would you like to read this Kervoisin?" But the Frenchman only shrugged and replied with a slightly sarcastic smile: "Oh, my dear friend, if you are satisfied—"

Peter said nothing. He waited quite patiently, seemingly completely indifferent, and smoked one cigarette after another.

When Naniescu had finished reading, he carefully folded the manuscript, laid it on the table beside him and put his hand upon it.

"What do you want for this?" he asked.

And Peter replied coolly: "The title-deeds of the Kis-Imre property."

Naniescu stared at Peter for a moment or two, then he threw back his head and laughed until the tears trickled down his cheeks.

"You are astonishing, my friend," he said. "The property is worth fifty thousand sterling."

"I have paid an option on it of five thousand," Peter retorted, "and the rest of it wouldn't come out of your Excellency's pocket, I take it."

"Not out of my pocket, of course," Naniescu was willing to admit, "but out of that of my Government. We are going to sell Kis-Imre for the benefit of the State."

"And won't your Excellency be purchasing these newspaper articles for the benefit of the State?"

"These articles are not worth it," Naniescu retorted gruffly.

"Very well, let's say no more about it. I'm sorry I troubled your Excellency."

Peter rose as if to go and put out his hand toward the sheets of manuscript.

"Don't be a fool," Naniescu broke in. "I'll give you a good price for the thing, but a property worth fifty thousand sterling — hang it all — it's a bit stiff."

Peter smiled. "How tersely you put the matter, general," he said. "I dare say it is a bit stiff, but I am not prepared to bargain — only to sell. And if you are not satisfied—"

"Easy, easy, my impetuous young friend. Did I say that I was not satisfied — or that I refuse to consider the matter? But there are considerations."

"What considerations?"

"To begin with, how do I know that the English newspaper would accept these articles as the genuine work of Lady Tarkington?"

"I told you that I had Lady Tarkington's own covering letter to the editor of The Times, asking him to publish the articles as soon as possible."

"Let me see it," Naniescu retorted.

"With pleasure."

Peter took the letter out of his pocket, but before handing it over to Naniescu he said drily: "May I in the meanwhile refresh my memory of the articles?"

The eyes of the two men met across the table. Naniescu's flashed with resentment, but Peter's face wore a disarming smile. He looked for all the world like a schoolboy bartering marbles for stamps. But the situation appeared to tickle Kervoisin's fancy. He gave a dry chuckle and said:

"You are quite right, mon ami. They are astonishing, these English."

The exchange was effected without Naniescu losing his sense of resentment or Peter his pleasant smile, and Peter held on to Rosemary's manuscript while the general read the letter through.

While he read, the look of resentment vanished from his face and a complacent smile rose to his full, sensuous lips.

"Il n'y pas à dire," he murmured; "c'est très, très bien."

When he had finished reading he looked up at Peter.

"Now then, Monsieur Blakeney," he said curtly, "your last price?"

"I have told you, sir—the title-deeds of Kis-Imre."

"You are joking."

"I was never more serious in my life."

"But, hang it all, man, if I make the property over to you, how are we to get rid of the Imreys?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders, and, still smiling, said coolly: "That, Excellency, is your affair, not mine."

"But the Countess Imrey is your aunt."

"What has that got to do with the whole thing, Excellency?"

"What has it got to do with it? What has it — ?" Naniescu was gasping with astonishment. He was something of a rascal himself, but never in all his life had he come across such callousness or such impudence. He turned to Kervoisin as much as to say: "Have you ever seen such an unmitigated young blackguard?" But the Frenchman's face was inscrutable; his keen, pale eyes rested with obvious puzzlement on Peter.

"Then you want me," Naniescu asked, as soon as he had recovered his breath, "you want me to turn the Imreys out of their home?"

"It won't be the first time, Excellency, that you have done that sort of thing, will it?" Peter retorted, with his most engaging smile.

Strangely enough, Naniescu was losing his temper. He wanted those articles and wanted them badly, and if this preposterous deal went through he could have them without putting his hand in his pocket. But this young blackguard exasperated him. Perhaps professional pride was wounded at meeting a man more corrupt, more venal than himself. To further his own ends Naniescu would have plundered and bullied to an unlimited extent, but he would not have robbed and bullied his own kith and kin; whereas this handsome young athlete with the engaging smile did not seem to have the slightest scruple or the least pricking of conscience. It would be a triumph to get the better of him in some sort of way. Unfortunately the scamp had not yet given up the manuscript, and Naniescu only had the letter, whilst de Kervoisin was in one of his abstracted fits when he wouldn't open his mouth to give friendly advice.

The general, sitting back in his chair, and blowing smoke rings through his pursed lips, had a swift but exceedingly pleasant day-dream. Those articles were just what he wanted. They were so beautifully written! So convincingly! What a stir they would make! They were a complete vindication of his administration here in Transylvania. The country prosperous. The people contented. Only a small minority grumbling without the slightest justification. Oh, those articles! Published in the English Times and signed by the illustrious "Uno"! Naniescu, closing his eyes to enjoy this wonderful day-dream, saw himself summoned to Bucharest, there to receive the personal thanks of his King and a substantial reward from his Government, whilst all he need do now to obtain these glorious results was to hand over to this young rascal a property that belonged to that fool Maurus Imrey.

It was a lovely day-dream. A stroke of the pen would make it reality. No wonder that General Naniescu swore loudly when the crackling of paper woke him from his short trance. The young rascal was quite unconcernedly stowing that precious manuscript away in his pocket.

"Halt!" Naniescu exclaimed, on the impulse of the moment. "I accept—" Then he added guardedly: "On principle, I mean."

"And in fact?" Peter queried, without making the slightest movement towards taking the manuscript out of his pocket again.

"Yes, yes!" Naniescu replied impatiently. "But, curse you for a jackanapes, these things take time—"

"They need not," Peter rejoined curtly. "All you need do is to give me an official receipt for forty-five thousand sterling, the balance of the purchase-money for the Kis-Imre property. The British Consul and your lawyer will do the rest."

"And when do you want possession?"

"At once."

Naniescu made a final appeal to his friend: "What do you say, Kervoisin?"

But the Frenchman's face remained inscrutable. He was watching the smoke that curled upwards from the tip of his cigarette, and only from time to time did he throw a quick, indefinable glance at the tall, athletic figure of the man who was driving such a contemptible bargain. When Naniescu appealed directly to him, he only shrugged his shoulders to indicate his complete detachment from the whole affair. Peter, on the other hand, showed not the slightest sign of impatience. He even went to the length of buttoning up his coat.

"Would you like to think it over?" he said coolly. "I can leave my offer open for another few hours."

"No! damn you!" Naniescu exclaimed, and jumped to his feet. "Wait for me here. I'll have the receipt ready in five minutes."

After which, from sheer force of habit, he swore in several other languages before he finally strode out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXV

Peter met de Kervoisin's shrewd eyes fixed searchingly upon him. He gave a quaint, good-humoured laugh.

"Are you trying to make up your mind, sir," he asked, "just what kind of a blackguard I am?"

M. de Kervoisin's thin lips curled in a wry smile. "I am not sure," he said, "that you are a blackguard. But I confess that I do not understand you."

"Which is very flattering, sir. But isn't it natural that a man should covet a beautiful property and seize the cheapest means to become possessed of it? That sort of thing has been largely done by the conquering nations since the war. Then why not by individuals?"

"Why not, as you say? But I was not thinking of that side of the question, chiefly because I do not believe that you stole Lady Tarkington's manuscript in order to drive a bargain with our friend here over the Kis-Imre property. I may be wrong, but you don't look to me the sort of man who would do this dirty trick for mere gain. I am giving you the credit of desiring above all to save your kinsfolk, young and old, from certain highly unpleasant eventualities."

"You are very generous, sir, in your estimate of me."

"The question is," Kervoisin mused, "whether after all this they will be grateful to you for what you have done, or will they hate you, do you think, for what the publication of those articles will mean to their people? Lady Tarkington must at one time have intended to publish those articles, since she took the trouble to write them. Something turned her from the purpose: either her own conviction, or the desire of the Imreys themselves."

"I suppose so," Peter said, with a shrug of complete indifference.

"Whereupon you, my dear friend, stepped in like an unwanted *deus ex machinâ*, and settled the business to your own satisfaction, if not to theirs."

"I never was good at Latin," Peter said, with his most engaging smile, "but we'll leave it at that if you like."

De Kervoisin was silent for a moment or two, his attention being seemingly riveted on the rings of smoke that rose from his cigarette.

"I wonder," he murmured after a while.

"Don't trouble, sir. I am not worth it."

"Ah! but youth always is a perpetual wonder to me. It is such a long time since I was young myself. And I was wondering which of the two levers youth pulled in order to make you act as you did."

"Two levers?"

"Love or hate."

Then, as Peter was silent in his turn, M. de Kervoisin went on: "You know, we in France always look for the woman in every case. Now here we have not far to seek. And yet love would seem to me to have gained nothing by this adventure, whilst hate, on the other hand—"

He paused abruptly, his keen eyes narrowed, and his lips curled in a sardonic smile.

"Ah!" he said. "I think I understand, after all."

"That's more than I do, sir," Peter retorted ingenuously.

M. de Kervoisin would no doubt have pursued the subject, which seemed greatly to interest him, had not Naniescu just then made a noisy re-entry into the room. He had a large, official-looking document in his hand, which he threw down on the table.

"Have a look at this, my dear Monsieur Blakeney," he said curtly. "I think that you will find it in order."

Peter took up the paper and examined it at great length. It was a receipt for the sum of forty-five thousand pounds sterling, in full satisfaction for the sale of the estate of Kis-Imre here described as the property of the Crown of Roumania. It was signed with Naniescu's elaborate flourish, countersigned and stamped; it stated further that the sale would be duly inscribed in the Bureau des Hypothèques in accordance with the law, and the acte de vente and title-deeds handed over within one month to M. Peter Blakeney or his duly appointed representative.

It was all in order. Peter folded the receipt, but before putting it away he said to Naniescu:

"The whole thing, of course, is conditional on a free pardon being granted to Philip Imrey and Anna Heves, with permission to leave the country immediately. That was the original bargain between yourself and Lady Tarkington."

"They can clear out of the country the day the last of these articles is published in *The Times*," Naniescu rejoined gruffly. "I'll arrange for that fool Maurus Imrey and his wife to clear out at the same time. The sooner I am rid of the whole brood of them, the better I shall like it."

"I am sure you will," Peter said blandly. "Then perhaps you won't mind letting me have passports for them. You can post-date them, of course. I shouldn't then have to intrude on you again."

"You are very kind. The passports post-dated, say, a week from to-day will be in the bureau at your disposal whenever you like to call for them. You understand that I should revoke them if at least one of these articles has not appeared within the week."

"I quite understand," Peter concluded. Everything now being in order, he slipped the receipt into his pocket-book, then, without further words, he handed Rosemary's manuscript over to Naniescu.

"You have the covering letter," he said simply.

Naniescu nodded, and he took the papers with a sigh of satisfaction, which he did not even attempt to disguise. His ill-temper had vanished. The day-dream was coming true: the journey to Bucharest, the thanks of his King, the reward from a grateful Government! Naniescu felt at peace with all the world. He would even have hugged Peter to his breast.

"We part the best of friends," he said suavely, "my dear Monsieur Blakeney."

"Oh! the very best," Peter assented.

"And when you come to take possession of Kis-Imre you will command my services, I hope."

"I shall not fail to do so."

"I will see to it that you can do it at the earliest possible moment. By the way," Naniescu went on with some hesitation, "the furniture — and other contents of the château — they are not included in the sale, of course."

"Of course not."

"You won't mind the Imreys having those? It might create an unpleasant impression — if we were to — er—"

"It might," Peter assented.

"I was sure you would agree with me about that," Naniescu rejoined unctuously. "Then what would you like us to do in the matter?"

"Leave everything as it is until you hear from me again. The British Consul will look after things for me."

"Ah!" Naniescu concluded with perfect affability, "then I don't think I need detain you any longer, my dear young friend. May I express the wish that you will spend long and happy years in this beautiful country."

"Thank you."

Peter did not shake hands with either of the two men, but he caught Kervoisin's glance and gave him a pleasant nod. To Naniescu he said just before leaving:

"I suppose you have realized that Lady Tarkington will probably wish to start for England immediately."

"Yes, my dear young friend," Naniescu replied blandly. "I had realized that, and I have taken measures accordingly. But how kind of you to remind me!"

And when Peter finally went out of the room the general, breathless, perspiring, nerve-racked, threw himself into a chair and exclaimed:

"Il n'y a pas à dire! They are astonishing, these English!"

He poured himself out a glass of fine and drank it down at one gulp.

"Did you ever see such an unmitigated young blackguard?" he exclaimed.

But de Kervoisin had remained thoughtful. His shrewd, pale eyes were fixed upon the door through which Peter had just disappeared. Naniescu had taken his handkerchief and was mopping his streaming forehead and his neck round the edge of his collar.

"I feel quite sick," he murmured. "Ah, these English! mon ami. You don't know them as I do. I firmly believe that they would sell their fathers, their mothers, their sisters, or their wives if they saw money in the transaction."

Kervoisin made no comment on this tirade; after a while he asked abruptly: "What are you doing to prevent the lovely Uno from putting a spoke in your wheel?"

Naniescu gave a complacent laugh.

"Doing?" he retorted. "Why, I've already done everything, my friend. My courier starts to-night for London with Lady Tarkington's letter and manuscript. He will be in London on Monday evening. On Tuesday he will call on the editor of The Times. Ostensibly he is Lady Tarkington's messenger. When he has delivered the letter he will ask for a reply. That reply he will telegraph to me. Then we shall know where we are."

He drank another glass of fine, then he went on:

"I have no doubt that the fair Uno has already got her boxes packed and is ready to start for England by the express to-night, but—"

Naniescu paused. He stretched out his legs, examined the toes of his boots and the smoke of his cigar; his face wore an expression of fatuous self-satisfaction. "I think," he said, "that you will be surprised at what I have done in the time. And so will the incomparable Uno," he added with an expressive twinkle in his fine, dark eyes.

"What about friend Number Ten?" Kervoisin remarked drily.

"Well," Naniescu retorted with his affected smile, "I imagine that friend Number Ten will be the most surprised of the lot."

CHAPTER XXXVI

At Kis-Imre the day dragged on leaden-footed. Luncheon, then a long afternoon, then dinner. Time wore on and Elza had not returned.

Rosemary was ready, dressed for the journey; her suit-case was packed. She was only taking a very little luggage with her as she had every intention of returning as soon as her errand in London was accomplished. She would not for the world have left Elza alone too long with her troubles. She made herself no illusions with regard to the telegram which she had sent from the village. It would, she was sure, be intercepted, and Naniescu would not allow it to go. Rosemary's intention was to send another directly she was the other side of the frontier. This would prevent the articles being published hurriedly, and, of course, she would be in London thirty-six hours later.

Indeed, the odious deed which Peter had planned and carried through appeared to her now not only in its hideousness but in its futility. What did he hope to accomplish? Did he know her so little as to imagine that she would merely call the occurrence an adverse blow of Fate and quietly sit down under it — be content to send one wire which would be intercepted? It was futile! Futile! She was a British subject. She had a British passport. No power on earth could stop her from going to London or to the outermost ends of the earth if she had a mind. No one. Not even Jasper. Least of all Jasper!

But in the meanwhile Elza had not returned. Time went on, slowly but certainly. Eight o'clock — nine o'clock — ten o'clock. Unless Elza was home within the next half-hour Rosemary could not start for London before the next night. There was only one through train to Budapest every twenty-four hours, the midnight express! Any other slow train would be no help for getting the communication with the Orient Express.

And Rosemary could not go to London without knowing what Elza's wishes were. Elza was to decide — not she. And Elza had not come back from Anna's mother. Soon after ten Rosemary sent Rosa round to Maurus to ask if she might see him. She hoped that he could perhaps tell her something definite about Elza's movements. Rosemary found him very much altered since last she had seen him. He looked well in health, but his whole expression, even his appearance, seemed strange. The gipsy strain was more apparent — the eyes seemed darker and more restless, the mouth redder and fuller, and the nose more hooked and narrower across the bridge. But he talked very quietly about Elza, because he had not really expected to see her back this evening.

"She was going to Cluj first," he said, "to see Philip and Anna. Probably it took time to get permission to visit the children in prison. Then after that she was going to Ujlak. I suppose she wanted to let Charlotte know how little Anna is getting on. Poor child! Poor child!" Maurus went on slowly, wagging his head. "Isn't it pitiable? She is such a nice little girl. And my Philip — my Philip—"

He rambled on, and his speech became thick and unintelligible. The sister in charge gave Rosemary a hint that it would be better for her to go. Rosemary rose at once.

"Well, my dear Maurus," she said, "I don't want to tire you. I thought perhaps you might know something definite about Elza. But if you are not anxious about her I am sure it is all right."

"Oh, yes, yes, it is all right. You see, she went to visit the children. Then she was going to Ujlak. It is a long way for the horses—"

"You don't think she would stay in Cluj for the night?"

"I don't know. I don't know. She was going to Cluj first to see the children — then she was going to Ujlak. It is a long way for the horses — Elza will stay with Charlotte for the night. A hard woman, Charlotte. But Anna is such a nice child. And my Philip — my Philip—"

The mind was obviously wandering. Maurus, while he spoke was staring straight out before him. Rosemary tried to explain to him that she had to go away on business for a day or two and she hoped to start this evening, but she could not go, of course, without seeing Elza first.

"Ah! you are going away, dear Lady Tarkington?" the invalid said with a quick gleam in his restless, dark eyes. "I wish I could go with you. I am so sick of this place, and now that my Philip has gone. . . . But how can you go to-night, dear Lady Tarkington?"

"I won't go before I have seen Elza."

"No, no, you must not go before Elza comes. I have only the one comfortable carriage now. They have taken everything from me, my horses, my cattle, my carriages, and my motor-cars — I can't send you to Cluj in comfort until Elza comes back in the carriage. I have another pair of horses — but no comfortable carriage. They took everything away from me. Soon they will turn me out of this house—"

"Don't worry about that, dear, my husband has the use of a small car and a soldier-chauffeur. We can get to Cluj all right."

The sister in charge interposed again, more peremptorily this time. Rosemary took as cheerful a farewell of the invalid as she could.

"You must arrange," she said, "As soon as you are well enough, to come over to us in England for a visit. It would be such a change for you, and Jasper and I would make you and Elza very welcome."

But Maurus shook his head, and stared straight out before him. "That, dear Lady Tarkington," he said, "can never be now." And slowly the tears gathered in his eyes and trickled down his cheeks. Broken-hearted, Rosemary bade him a final good night.

There was only one more chance of getting in touch with Elza to-night, and that was to ascertain if she were staying at any of the hotels in Cluj. And this Jasper did at Rosemary's request. He telephoned to the "Pannonia" and to the "New York", the only possible places where Elza might have put up for the night. True, when the Roumanian Government took over the Imrey palace two or three rooms were allowed to remain in possession of the family if they required them, but it was not likely that Elza would elect to sleep under the same roof as General Naniescu. Both hotels replied on the telephone that the gracious Countess Imrey was not there. Ujlak, unfortunately, had not the telephone installed.

There was, then, nothing to be done.

But the next day was even more trying than the one before. The morning wore on and there was no news of Elza. Anxiety for her friend was added to the heavy load which Rosemary had to bear. Anxiety and this unexpected uncertainty, which was positive torture.

Jasper, on the other hand, had become both helpful and sympathetic. Already the day before he had announced his intention of accompanying Rosemary to London. At first she had protested, but he looked so contrite and so abashed that she relented, and said

more graciously:

"It is more than kind of you, dear, to suggest it, but I really am quite capable of looking after myself."

"I don't doubt it," he had replied with a sigh, "but I, too, have certain privileges, chief of which is looking after your welfare — and your safety."

She laughed. "I am perfectly safe. No one is going to run away with me."

"You might have trouble on the frontier."

"Not very likely," she retorted, "with a British passport."

Jasper had made no further remark just then, and the subject was dropped. But Rosemary knew from his manner and his look that he intended to accompany her. It would be no use protesting, though she had the feeling that she would so much rather have travelled alone.

But when the morning of the next day went by without news of Elza, Jasper was ready with a fresh suggestion. "Let me go to London for you," he said. "I could see the editor of The Times and ask him in any case to withhold publication until he heard from you. Then after that, if Elza's decision went the other way, you could always wire or write again."

Rosemary hesitated for a moment or two. She could not very well put into words the thought that was in her mind. But Jasper presently did it for her.

"You do not trust me," he said quietly.

For another fraction of a second she hesitated, then with a frank gesture of camaraderie she put her hand out to him: "I think I ought to carry my own business through myself," she said, and added softly: "You understand, dear, don't you?"

She could always win any man over with her smile, and at the soft tone of her voice Jasper captured her hand and buried his face in the soft, smooth palm.

"Tell me how I can serve you," he said, "but, in God's name, don't go away from me."

He was once more all kindness and consideration, more like the charming companion of the early days of her brief married life. With utmost patience he discussed the whole situation with her: the possibility of getting in touch with Elza and the advisability of communicating with The Times in any case, leaving it open for an ultimate change of tactics.

But though he was so kind, so unselfish, so generous, Rosemary could not respond in the same way as she had done in the past. Her confidence in him had been wavering for some time, whenever those wild outbursts of ungovernable passion, when he claimed her body and her soul as he would a slave or a chattel, had outraged as well as mystified her, and she could not free her mind from that vision which she had of him in the mirror yesterday, with his mouth parted in a cruel, wolfish grin. The dual nature in him puzzled her. She would not admit that she feared him, because she had never in her life been afraid of anyone, but she did own to a certain vague dread which would creep into her heart whenever she found herself alone with him; she had accepted his kisses at first, hoping that in time friendship and confidence would turn to warmer feeling, but she had a horror of them now, and knew that the last shred of friendship was being torn to rags by all that was violent, passionate and cruel in him. At the same time she did admit quite readily that he was very helpful and kind in the present emergency, and gladly did she accept his final offer to motor straightway to Cluj to see if he could find out something definite about Elza.

"If she was not at Cluj," he said, "I would go on to Ujlak; and, in any case, I can be back by about eight o'clock. If in the meanwhile, as I hope and think, Elza has turned up, we can make our plans in accordance with what she has decided, and either start for England at once, or leave matters as they stand."

The suggestion was so practical that Rosemary felt really grateful. She walked with him to the village where he garaged the car that Naniescu had lent him. It was a powerful little car, of a well-known French make and built for speed. The soldier-chauffeur was fortunately on the spot, and with a friendly handshake Rosemary wished her husband God-speed.

"I don't know how I shall live through this day!" she said to him at the last.

Jasper was very self-contained and practical. He satisfied himself that everything about the car was in order, then only did he get in. He took the wheel and waved Rosemary a last farewell, and very soon the car disappeared down the road in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER XXXVII

General Naniescu was enjoying himself thoroughly. He had his friend Number Ten sitting there opposite him, and Number Ten was looking as savage as a bear. Naniescu had offered him a cigar, a glass of fine, even whisky and soda, but Number Ten had declined everything and remained very truculent.

"You had no right," he said, with a savage oath, "to go behind my back."

But Naniescu was at his blandest. "What could I do, my dear friend?" he asked, and waived his white, downy hands to emphasize by appropriate gesture, both his perplexity and his contrition. "What would you have had me do? Decline to deal with that young Blakeney? Then those precious articles would have been lost to me for ever. Lady Tarkington would not have written them all over again."

"I told you the other day that I would get those articles for you. Ask M. de Kervoisin here if I have ever failed in anything I have undertaken. I had the manuscript in my hand when that young blackguard snatched it out of my hand. Curse him!"

Naniescu leaned back in his chair and gave a guttural, complacent laugh: "I do agree with you, my dear friend," he said. "That young Blakeney is an unmitigated blackguard. I have had to deal with some in my day, but never with such a corrupt, dirty scoundrel. Yes, dirty, that's what he is. But you know, you English, you are astonishing! Everything big with you — big fellows, big Empire, big money, big blackguards! Yes, big blackguards! Oh, là, là!"

"Yes," Number Ten assented drily. "And the big blackguard who is also a big fellow, got big money out of you, for you have been a fool, as well as a knave, my friend. I only asked you ten thousand sterling for the manuscript."

"Are you pretending that you know what I paid Blakeney?" Naniescu asked, with his most fatuous smile. "Because, my friend, in picturesque poker parlance — I am very fond of a game of poker myself — and in poker language, we call what you are doing now 'bluff.' You don't know what I paid Blakeney for the manuscript. But I don't mind telling you that I paid nothing at all. Yes, my dear friend, nothing at all."

And with the tip of his well-manicured little finger, Naniescu emphasized every syllable with a tap on the table.

"I am glad to hear it," Number Ten retorted curtly, "because that will make it easier for you to pay me the ten thousand now."

But this idea amused the General so much that he nearly rolled off his chair laughing.

"Ils sont impayable ces Anglais!" he said, when with streaming eyes and scanty breath he found words to express his sense of the ludicrous. "Why in the name of Tophet should I pay you ten thousand pounds sterling?"

"Because if you don't, those newspaper articles will never be published."

"Ah, bah!" Naniescu exclaimed with a mocking grin, "who will prevent it?"

"I, of course."

"You, of course? How, I should like to know?"

"That's my business."

"You can't do it, my friend," Naniescu rejoined complacently. "You can't do it. I defy you to do it."

"Is that a challenge?"

Number Ten had said this very quietly. He was in the act of lighting a cigarette when he spoke, and he finished lighting it, blew out the match, and threw it into the nearest ash-tray before he glanced at Naniescu. Then he smiled, because Naniescu's face expressed arrogance first, then bewilderment, and finally indecision.

"Is it a challenge?" he reiterated sardonically. "I don't mind, you know, one way or the other. There are at least three governments — neighbours of yours, by the way — who will pay me ten thousand pounds apiece for certain services which they require, and which I can render them. But you have behaved like a knave and a fool, my friend, and it will amuse me to punish you. So listen to me! Unless you give me a cheque for the ten thousand pounds which you promised me, and which I can cash at your fusty old bank over the way this very afternoon, I guarantee you that Lady Tarkington's articles will not be published in any English newspaper."

He smoked on in silence for a little while longer, blowing rings of smoke through his pursed lips, and in the intervals laughing softly, mockingly to himself, or throwing an occasional glance of intelligence in the direction of Kervoisin, who apparently immersed in a book had taken no part in the conversation. Naniescu's bewilderment had become ludicrous, and at one moment when he took his perfumed handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his streaming forehead, the face of his spy-in-chief became distorted with that look of ferocious cruelty which was so characteristic of him.

"I haven't a great deal of time to spare," Number Ten remarked drily, after a few minutes' silence; "if you accept my challenge I start for London to-night."

"You'll never get there in time," Naniescu rejoined, with an attempt at swagger.

Number Ten smiled. "Don't you think so?" he asked simply.

"The frontier is closed—"

"Would you rather risk it than pay me the ten thousand pounds?"

Naniescu appealed to his friend.

"De Kervoisin—" he said, almost pitifully.

But M. de Kervoisin, with a shrug, indicated that this was no concern of his.

"M. de Kervoisin," Number Ten said, still smiling, "knows my methods. During the war I had other and more dangerous frontiers to cross than this one, my friend — and I never failed."

In Naniescu's puny mind, obviously a war was waging between greed and avarice. He was seeing his beautiful day-dream vanishing into the intangible ether — whence come all dreams — and he was not prepared to take any risks. Those articles which a reliable courier was even now taking to London with all speed were the most precious things he, Naniescu, had ever possessed. They meant honour, security, money — far more money than Number Ten was demanding with such outrageous impudence. And Naniescu was afraid of Number Ten — afraid of his daring, his courage, his unscrupulous determination to carry through what he had set out to do.

Ten thousand pounds! It was a great deal, but it would come out of secret service funds, not out of Naniescu's own pocket. There was only that slight desire to get the better of Number Ten, to win this battle of wits against so crafty an opponent. But what was amour propre when weighed in the balance with the realization of Naniescu's wonderful daydreams?

Nevertheless he made one more effort at a bargain.

"If I pay you that the thousand," he said, with a savage oath, "what guarantee have I that the articles will be published?"

"None," was Number Ten's cool reply; "but if you don't pay me the ten thousand, I guarantee that they will not be published."

At which M. de Kervoisin put down his book and indulged in a good laugh.

"Take care, my friend," he said to Number Ten, "our friend here is beginning to lose his temper, and you may find yourself under lock and key before he has done with you."

"I wonder!" Number Ten retorted drily "It would mean raising hell in the English press, wouldn't it? if a British subject — what?"

He did not pursue the subject. Even Naniescu himself had put such a possibility out of his reckoning.

"All that our friend could do," Number Ten went on, speaking over his shoulder to M. de Kervoisin, "would be to have me murdered, but he would find even that rather difficult. Ten thousand pounds of secret service money is considerably safer — and cheaper in the end."

Then at last Naniescu gave in. "Oh, have it your own way, curse you!" he exclaimed.

"The money now," Number Ten said coolly, raising a warning finger. "You may as well send one of your clerks over to the bank for it. I prefer that to taking your cheque."

Then he turned to Kervoisin, and picked up the book which the latter had thrown down on the table "Ah!" he remarked, with a total change of tone, "Marcel Proust's latest. You are an epicure in literature, my friend."

He fingered the book, seemingly as indifferent to what Naniescu was doing and saying, as if the whole matter of a ten thousand pound cheque did not concern him in the least.

The general had gone across to a desk which stood in the farther corner of the room. He had written out a cheque, rung the bell, and was now giving orders to a clerk to fetch the money from the Anglo-Roumanian bank over the way.

On the whole he was not displeased with the transaction. The articles signed by Uno and published in The Times would redound to his credit, would bring him all that he had striven for all his life; and, after all, they would cost him nothing — nothing at all.

Number Ten and de Kervoisin were discussing Marcel Proust; he, Naniescu, was savouring his day-dreams once again; and presently when the clerk returned with a bundle of crisp English bank-notes in his hand, Naniescu handed the money over to his spy-in-chief without a qualm, and certainly without regret.

"This being Monday," Number Ten said, after he had stowed the money away in his pocket-book, "and your courier having started last night, you will probably see the first of the articles in Thursday's Times. By the way," he went on casually, "what are you doing about young Imrey and the girl?"

"What do you mean by that? What should I be doing with them?"

"Well, when these articles appear—"

"I send them packing, c'est entendu. I never go back on my word," Naniescu said, with a grandiose gesture.

"It would not pay you to do that in this case, my friend. Lady Tarkington has your written promise and she would raise hell if you played her false. But I wasn't thinking of that. I only wished to warn you to keep an eye on those two young firebrands."

"Oh," Naniescu retorted, with a shrug, "once I have them out of the country they can do what they like. They no longer hurt me. Especially after the publication of those beautiful articles."

"That is so, but you are sending Count and Countess Imrey out of the country aren't you?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, you paid Blakeney for the articles with the title-deeds of Kis-Imre, didn't you?"

"How did you know that?"

"I didn't," Number Ten replied drily. "I guessed, and you gave yourself away."

"Well, and if I did — what is it to you?"

"Nothing, my friend. Nothing. I come back to my original warning. Keep a close eye on young Imrey and Anna Heves, and above all keep a close eye on Blakeney."

"That young blackguard?"

"Yes, that young blackguard! He may be playing a double game, you know. I suppose he is still in Cluj?"

"I thought of that," Naniescu broke in curtly, "so I have had Imrey and the Heves girl transferred to Sót."

"Sót? Isn't that rather near the frontier?"

"Thirty kilometres."

"But why Sót?"

"We have commandeered a château there, which we use as a prison for political offenders. We chose it because it stands alone in an out-of-the-way part of the country, and it saves the nuisance of public manifestations and disturbances when a prisoner who happens to have been popular is condemned. We try them by a military tribunal which holds its sittings at Sót, and if an execution is imperative — well, it is done without any fuss."

"I see. Well," Number Ten went on, as he rose to take his leave, "I need not detain you any longer. Let me assure you," he concluded, with his habitual sardonic smile, "that I shall not now think of interfering with any of the measures which you have adopted to stop Lady Tarkington from running after her manuscript."

"I don't believe that you could have interfered in any case," Naniescu retorted gruffly.

"It is not too late, my friend. I would rather like to pit my wits against yours. So if you have repented of the bargain—" And Number Ten half drew his bulging pocket-book out of his pocket.

"Oh, go to the devil!" Naniescu exclaimed, half in rage and half in laughter.

"And I hope soon to meet you in his company," Number Ten replied, and he finally took his leave from the two men.

As soon as the door had closed on him, Naniescu turned and looked at his friend. But de Kervoisin had picked up his book, and gave him no encouragement to discuss the intriguing personality of Number Ten.

His face, too, was quite inscrutable. Marcel Proust was engaging his full attention. For a moment it seemed as if Naniescu would fall back on his stock phrase, or else on a string of cosmopolitan oaths; he even drew his breath ready for either; then it seemed as if words failed him.

The intriguing personality was above comment.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Rosemary had never before welcomed her husband so eagerly as she did that afternoon. As soon as she heard the whirring of his motor she ran to the gates to meet him.

"What news?" she cried when he had brought the car to a standstill.

As usual, his dark eyes flashed with joy when he saw her. He jumped down and raised both her hands to his lips.

"Very vague, I am afraid," he replied. "And some of it a mere conjecture."

"Tell me."

"To begin with, young Imrey and Anna Heves have been transferred to Sót."

"Where is that?"

"Between Cluj and the frontier. It seems that there is a château there that is being used as a prison for political offenders."

"Who told you that?"

"Naniescu. I saw him for a moment. He was very busily engaged with the Minister for Home Affairs who was over from Bucharest, so he could only give me a few minutes."

"Had he seen Elza?"

"No. But she had applied for permission to see Philip and Anna, and he gave the permission. He supposed that she had gone on to Sót by train."

"Even so," Rosemary mused, "she would be back by now, or else she would have wired."

Jasper appeared to hesitate for a moment or two, and then he said: "I don't think that she has been allowed to do either."

"Why not?"

"It is mere surmise, my dear," Jasper went on quietly, "but one thing Naniescu did tell me and that was that he had on behalf of his government definitely made over the Kis-Imre estates to Peter Blakeney."

They were walking round the house towards the veranda when he said this. Rosemary made no response; indeed, it might be thought that she had not heard, for the next question which she put to Jasper appeared irrelevant.

"Does the midnight express stop at Sót?"

"It does," Jasper replied.

"Then, I can see Elza there. I am sure that is where she is. You inquired at Ujlak?"

"Yes, Elza went there first and then to Cluj."

They had reached the veranda now, and Rosemary went up the steps and then into the house.

"You still wish to come with me to-night?" she asked her husband before she went upstairs.

"Why, of course."

"You are not too tired after all this running about?"

"I?" he exclaimed with a laugh. "Tired? When it is a question of being near you!"

He tried to capture her wrist, but she evaded him and ran quickly through the hall and up the stairs. Before going into her room she called down to him:

"If we use your motor we need not start before eleven o'clock, and there is still a chance of Elza being home before then."

It was just before dinner that the culminating tragedy occurred. Rosemary was in her room, when she heard loud commotion coming from the hall — harsh, peremptory voices, a word or two from Anton, and then Jasper's voice raised as if in protest. She opened her door, and to her horror saw a squad of soldiers in the hall, and between them an officer, and a man in civilian clothes who had an official-looking paper in his hand, and was apparently explaining something to Jasper.

"I regret, my lord, but these are my orders," the man was saying, "and I cannot enter into any discussion with you."

Jasper tried to protest again. "But surely—" he began. The man, however, cut him short.

"If you like," he said, "I can allow you to see Count Imrey first, but this order I must deliver into his own hands."

Rosemary in the meanwhile had run downstairs.

"What is it, Jasper?" she asked quickly.

"An order of eviction," Jasper replied curtly, "against that wretched Maurus."

"Whatever does that mean?"

"That he must quit this place within twenty-four hours."

"Impossible!" she exclaimed hotly.

She turned to the officer and the civilian who had brought this monstrous order.

"The whole thing is a mistake," she said coolly; "some error in the name. Count Imrey is a loyal subject of the King. There has never been a hint of disloyalty levelled against him."

The officer in charge gave a curt laugh and shrugged his shoulders, and the civilian said with a sneer:

"They all say that, milady. They are all wonderfully loyal after they have been found out."

"But General Naniescu himself is a friend of the family. And Lord Tarkington and I can vouch—"

"Pardon, milady," the civilian broke in coldly. "This affair does not concern you or Lord Tarkington, and the order of eviction is signed on behalf of the present owner of Kis-Imre by His Excellency the Governor himself."

"On behalf—"

It was Rosemary who spoke, but the sound of her voice might have come out of a grave. She had never been so near to swooning in her life. The walls around her, the woodwork, the stairs, all took on distorted shapes, and moved, round and round and up and down, until everything was a blur through which the faces of the Roumanian officer and the civilian stared at her and grinned. "On behalf of the present owner of Kis-Imre!" But that was Peter! Peter! And the world did not totter, the earth did not quake, and engulf all these monstrous crimes, this cruelty and this shame!

Luckily none of the Roumanians appeared to have noticed this sudden weakness in her; the civilian was consulting with the officer whether he should allow milord Tarkington to break the awful news to Maurus. Neither raised any objection, and Jasper pronounced himself ready to go. Rosemary turned appealingly to him:

"You will be very patient, Jasper," she begged, "and very, very gentle?"

"Leave it to me, dear," he responded; "I'll do my best."

When he was gone, Rosemary mechanically asked the officer and his companion to come into the smoking-room and sit down. She offered cigarettes. They made her ceremonious bows, and were as polite and conventional as circumstances demanded. She tried to talk; she even asked questions; but they were diplomatically ignorant of everything except of their duty. They explained that this consisted in seeing Count Imrey personally, and giving the eviction order into his own hands.

"It will kill him," Rosemary said, with conviction, "or else send him out of his mind."

Both the men shrugged. They had seen so much of this sort of thing, one of them said, people always threatened to die or to go mad, but nothing of the sort had ever happened.

"Are you quite sure of that?" Rosemary retorted.

Somehow the episode had brought back into the forefront of her consciousness her responsibility with regard to her newspaper articles. Not that conscience had been dormant, but Peter's infamy had been such an overwhelming shock that every other emotion had slipped away into the background. But now it all came back to her. Those articles of hers if they were published would bring a justification of all this — of these orders of eviction, the sort of thing that men died of, or went mad over out of grief, while officials shrugged their shoulders, having seen it all so often.

A few minutes after Jasper returned and Maurus was with him. At sight of Maurus, Rosemary had risen from her chair as if drawn up by mechanical force, and she remained standing, staring at the man whom she had last seen as a fragile weakling, babbling incoherent words. Maurus had dressed himself with unusual care. It almost seemed as if he had been expecting visitors. Rosemary had never seen him with hair so sleekly brushed, or chin so smooth. The officer and the civilian had risen to greet him, and he went up to them with perfect calm, inquiring politely what they desired to say to him. Rosemary turned a questioning glance on Jasper. He, too, appeared puzzled, and followed Maurus' every movement as if he dreaded that something would happen presently, and all the man's self-possession disintegrate in a tempest of fury.

But nothing of the sort happened. Maurus took the order from the civilian, and read it through carefully. Not a muscle of his face twitched, and his hands were perfectly steady. For the moment Rosemary wondered whether this outward calm was not some form of madness.

"I can't understand it," she whispered to Jasper, while the three men were engaged together.

"I am just as puzzled as you are," Jasper replied.

"So long as he is not just putting a terrible strain on himself — in which case the reaction will be frightful."

Maurus was now taking leave of the officials.

"I quite understand the position," he said quietly. "If I had bought a house, I, too, would wish to take possession of it as soon as possible. Perhaps," he added, with a smile, "I should not have been quite in such a hurry, but we all know that with the English time is money, eh, messieurs? And now all I need do is to thank you for your courtesy. I will comply with the order, chiefly because I have no choice."

It was almost unbelievable. Rosemary thought that her eyes and ears must be playing her a trick. The two Roumanians took their leave with their habitual elaborate politeness and Maurus himself saw them to his front door, where the squad of soldiers still stood at attention. When they had all gone, he came back into the smoking-room, and he was actually laughing when he entered.

"Did you ever see such swine?" he said lightly, and then apologized to Rosemary for his language.

"You are taking it so bravely, Maurus, dear," Rosemary murmured bewildered. "But what about Elza?"

"Oh, she prepared me for it; she knew all about it yesterday, and she sent me word what to bring along in the way of clothes for her. And, of course, there will be her jewellery, and one or two little things to see to. However, I have got twenty-four hours before me, and there will be Anton and Rosa to help me."

"But, Maurus, dear—"

"You are astonished, dear Lady Tarkington," Maurus broke in, with rather a sad smile, "to see me take it all so calmly. I was born in this house, and I always thought that I would die in it; but lately these walls have seen so much sorrow and so many villainies that I would just as soon turn my back on them."

"But what does Elza feel about it?"

"The same as I do. She writes quite calmly."

"When did you hear from her?"

"Early this afternoon — so you see I was prepared."

"But where is she?" Rosemary asked insistently.

"She was at Sót when she wrote to me. She had seen Philip and Anna. And she was on the point of leaving for Hódmező. This was late last night. She is in Hungary by now — and in safety. Please God I shall be with her soon."

He still spoke quite quietly, in short, crisp sentences, with nothing of the rambling and babbling about his speech that had been so pathetic to witness yesterday. But though Rosemary ought to have felt reassured and comforted about him, she could not rid herself of a persistent feeling of dread: the same sort of feeling that invades the nerves at the manifestation of a supernatural phenomenon. There was nothing supernatural about Maurus certainly, but his attitude was so abnormal, so unlike himself, that Rosemary caught herself watching with ever-increasing anxiety for the moment when his real, violent nature would reassert itself.

A moment or two later the dinner-bell rang, and Maurus was full of apologies.

"My stupid affairs have prevented you getting on with your packing, dear Lady Tarkington. Can you forgive me?"

Rosemary could only assure him that all her packing was done. "And anyway," she added, "as Jasper has a car we need not start before eleven o'clock."

"Ah, then," Maurus said, and offered her his arm to lead her into the dining-room, "we need not hurry over dinner; and I shall have the pleasure of two or three more hours of your company."

Jasper all the while had been strangely silent. Rosemary could see that he was just as much puzzled as she was, and that he was studying Maurus very keenly while the latter was talking. During dinner and while the servants were about, the conversation drifted to indifferent subject. This was the first time that Maurus had a meal in the dining-room since he was taken ill four days ago, and he was like a child enjoying his food and delighted with everything. It was only when coffee had been brought in and the servants had gone away that he reverted to the important subject of his departure.

"My chief cause of regret, dear Lady Tarkington," he said, "is that I cannot welcome you here when you return from your journey. But perhaps we could meet at Budapest, not? Elza speaks about that in her letter to me. She is very anxious to see you."

"I shall break my journey at Hódmező," Rosemary said, "and probably wait there twenty-four hours till you come."

She had it in her mind that she could wire from there to The Times office, and in any case she had to see Elza.

"There are two good hotels in Hódmező," Maurus rejoined. "Elza is staying at the Bristol. A very grand name for a simple provincial hotel, but it is very comfortable, I believe. Peter Blakeney's cricket people stayed there last week, you know."

He even could mention Peter's name calmly; and a quaint old English saying came to Rosemary's mind, ever her professional activities brought her in contact with extraordinary people. "Nought so queer as folk!" She almost said it aloud; for never in all her life had she witnessed anything so strange as this metamorphosis of a violent-tempered, morbid epileptic into a calm, sensible man of the world, who takes things as he finds them, and Fate's heaviest blows without wearing his heart on his sleeve.

"I shall not forget the Bristol at Hódmező," she said after a little while, "and I will certainly remain with Elza until you come. Perhaps I can help her to endure the suspense."

"Perhaps."

"How did the letter get to you? Through the post?"

"No; she sent a peasant over from Sót, a lad who lives in Kis-Imre and was returning home. You know him, dear Lady Tarkington — him and his brother — the two sons of János the miller."

"Those two brave lads who—"

Rosemary paused abruptly. The last thing she wanted to do was to bring back to Maurus' memory that fateful night of the children's abortive escape; but Maurus himself broke in quietly:

"Yes, the two fellows who helped us all they could that night when Philip and Anna tried to get out of the country. The attempt was unsuccessful, as you know. Philip and Anna were captured. They are in Sót now. But the two sons of János — I forget their names — got over the frontier safely. They joined the cricketers at Hódmező, and are safely back at the mill now."

"Thank God," Rosemary exclaimed fervently, "they did not suffer for their devotion."

"No, I am glad of that," Maurus concluded, with obvious indifference. "But the authorities don't trouble about the peasants. It is the landed aristocracy and the professional classes who have to suffer, if they belong to the conquered race."

It was past ten o'clock before the small party broke up. During the latter part of the time it had been Rosemary's turn to become silent. Maurus started the subject of politics, and Jasper carried on a desultory argument with him on that inexhaustible question. In almost weird contrast to his previous calmness, Maurus' violent temper broke out once or twice during the course of the discussion, and it needed all Jasper's tact and Rosemary's soothing influence to steer clear of all that tended to aggravate him. It was the real man peeping through the armour of all the previous unnatural self-control, the gipsy blood reasserting itself-self-willed, obstinate, impatient of control, bitter against humiliation. Rosemary almost welcomed the change when it came. It was more like the Maurus she knew — a man eccentric and violent, walking close to but not over-stepping the borderland that separates the sane from the insane. It was only when Philip, or Elza, or Kis-Imre were mentioned that he seemed to step over that borderland, encased in an armour of impish indifference.

The soldier-chauffeur brought the car round at eleven o'clock. Rosemary took affectionate leave of Maurus.

"We meet very soon," she said. "In Hungary."

"Yes," he replied. "In Hungary. I shall be so thankful to be there."

He also shook hands very cordially with Jasper.

"I am afraid this has not been a very agreeable stay for you," he said.

"Better luck next time," Jasper responded, as he settled himself down in the car beside his wife.

The car swung out of the gates. Rosemary, looking back, had a last vision of Maurus standing under the electric lamp in the porch, his hand waving a last farewell.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Rosemary must have fallen asleep in the corner of the carriage, for she woke with a start. The train had come to a halt, as it had done at two or three stations since Cluj was left behind. So it was not the sudden jerk, or the sound of the exhaust from the engine, that had caused Rosemary suddenly to sit up straight, wide awake and with that vague feeling of apprehension which comes on waking when sleep has been unconsciousness rather than rest. Jasper sat in the other corner with his eyes closed, but Rosemary did not think that he was asleep. They had a sleeping compartment, but hadn't had the beds made up; it was perhaps less restful for the night journey, but distinctly cleaner. The carriage was in semi-darkness, only a feeble ray of blue light filtered through the shade that tempered the gas-light up above.

Rosemary pulled up the blind. They were at a small station dimly lighted by one oil-lamp above the exit door. A clump of acacia trees in full leaf effectually hid the name of the station from view. A couple of soldiers stood at the door through which a number of peasants, men with bundles and women with baskets, one or two Jews in long gabardines and a prosperous-looking farmer in town clothes and top-boots were filing out. Someone blew a tin-trumpet, a couple more soldiers stalked up the line in the direction of the engine. There was a good deal of shouting.

Rosemary drew the blind down again, and tried to settle herself comfortably in her corner once more. But sleep would not come. She looked at her watch. It was past two. This seemed an unconscionably long halt, even for a train in this part of the world. Rosemary peeped again behind the blind. The station appeared quite deserted now except for the two soldiers on guard at the door. Everything seemed very still — of that peculiar stillness which always seems so deep when a train comes to a halt during the night away from a busy station, and all the more deep by contrast with the previous ceaseless rumbling of the wheels. From the direction of the engine there came the sound of two men talking. Otherwise nothing.

Rosemary reckoned that they should be over the frontier soon, but, of course, if they were going to have these interminable halts —

Half an hour went by. Even the distant hum of conversation had ceased, and the silence was absolute. Feeling unaccountably agitated rather than nervous, Rosemary called to Jasper. At once he opened his eyes.

"What is it, my dear?" he asked vaguely. "Where are we?" And he added, with a shake of his long, lean body: "These carriages are deuced uncomfortable."

"We are at a small station, Jasper," Rosemary said. "And we've been over half an hour. Have you been asleep?"

"I remember this confounded train pulling up. I must have dropped off to sleep after that. I wonder where we are."

"We can't be very far from the frontier. I thought at first they would turn us out for the customs, or passports or something. But nothing has happened, and we don't seem to be getting on. I do hope there has not been a breakdown on the line."

"My dear!" Jasper exclaimed, rather impatiently, "why in the world should you think that there is a breakdown on the line? There's a signal against us, I suppose. That's all."

But Rosemary was not satisfied. "Do you mind," she said, "seeing if you can get hold of anybody. I can't help feeling nervous and —"

At once Jasper was on his feet, courteous, attentive as always. "Of course I'll go and see, my darling," he said. "But it's not like you to be nervous."

He drew back the shade so as to get a little light into the carriage, straightened his clothes, then went out into the corridor. Everything was so still that Rosemary could hear his footstep treading the well-worn strip of carpet, then the opening of the carriage door, which sent a welcome draught of air through the stuffy compartment. Rosemary pulled up the blind, and leaned out the window. It was pitch-dark, though the sky was starry. The small oil-lamp still flickered over the exit door, and the two soldiers were still there. Rosemary saw Jasper's vague silhouette in the gloom. He stood for a moment looking up and down the line; then he walked away in the direction of the engine. A few minutes went by, and presently Rosemary saw Jasper coming back, accompanied by the guard.

"What is it, Jasper?" she called. "Where are we, and what has happened?"

The two men had come to a halt immediately beneath her window. The guard doffed his cap at sight of her, and scratched his head in obvious perplexity.

"We are at Sót, my darling, but I have bad news for you, I am afraid," Jasper said. "There has been a very serious landslide lower down the line. I suppose it is due to the heavy storms. Anyway, the line is blocked for a distance of nearly half a kilometre, and of course there will be considerable delay. I don't understand all the man says, but it seems to have been a terrible catastrophe."

But out of all this only two words had penetrated Rosemary's brain — "considerable delay." What did that mean? She asked the guard, but he only shook his head. He didn't know. He didn't know anything except that there had been a landslide, and that no train could get through till the line was clear. He supposed that a gang would come down in the morning, but he couldn't say. Rosemary wanted to know whether there would be any other way of continuing the journey and picking up a train the other side of the frontier. The guard again shook his head. He really couldn't say; he was a stranger to these parts, but perhaps in the morning — He suggested respectfully that the gracious lady should allow him to make up a couple of beds in two of the sleeping compartments. There was no one else on the train, so —

"No one else on the train?" Rosemary broke in curtly. "What does he mean, Jasper? There must be other passengers on the train. Where have they gone to?"

Jasper put the question to the guard.

"The last of the passengers got out at this station, gracious lady. When it was known that the line was blocked this side of the frontier, no one took a ticket further than Sót."

"How do you mean? When was it known that the line was blocked?"

"Before we left Cluj, gracious lady, and so —"

"But they sold us tickets to Budapest, and said nothing about a breakdown," Rosemary exclaimed. And then she turned to her husband: "Jasper, tell me, is this man a fool or a liar, or am I half-witted? You took our tickets to Budapest. Did the man at the ticket-

office say anything to you about a block on the line?"

"No," Jasper replied, "he did not."

"But our luggage?"

"We have no registered luggage — only what we have with us in the carriage."

"Of course, how stupid of me! But when the man clipped your ticket?"

"He didn't say anything."

Rosemary, impatient, her nerves on edge, turned again to the guard. "You saw the gracious gentleman's tickets," she said, "when we got into the train. Why didn't you warn us?"

"I thought perhaps the gracious lady and gentleman would only go as far as Sót and sleep there. I thought everyone knew about the landslide, and that every passenger had been warned."

"Can we get a car here that will take us to Hódmező?"

"Not at this hour, gracious lady."

"Or a vehicle of any sort?"

The guard shook his head. Rosemary could have screamed with impatience until Jasper's quiet voice broke in: "I think, my dear, that by far the best thing to do will be to let the man make up a couple of beds for us, and to try and possess ourselves in patience until the morning. There is nothing to be done — really, darling, nothing. And, after all, it may only mean a delay of eight to ten hours."

Then, as Rosemary remained silent, making no further objection, he slipped some money into the guard's hand, and told him to get the beds ready. After that he re-entered the carriage, and rather diffidently sat down beside his wife.

"I feel terribly guilty, dear one," he said humbly, "but you know I don't speak Roumanian very well, and when these sort of people jabber away, I don't always understand what they say. And I was rather anxious about you at Cluj. You seemed so agitated, so unlike yourself."

"Can you wonder? Twenty-four hours' delay may mean that Naniescu's courier will get to London and make arrangements before I have time to wire. I must see Elza first, and in the meanwhile—"

"My darling," Jasper put in, with a quick, wearied sigh, "it is not like you to be so illogical. Do you really suppose that events move at such a rate in a newspaper office? There is bound to be delay — and there's ample time for your telegram to reach The Times before the editor has even thought of inserting your articles. Even if we are held up here for twenty-four hours, you can see Elza and send your wire from Hódmező before Peter Blakeney, or whoever Naniescu's courier happens to be, can possibly have made any arrangements with The Times."

"Of course, dear, of course," Rosemary said, more calmly. "I am stupid to-night. This whole business has got on my nerves, I suppose. I don't seem to know what I am doing."

CHAPTER XL

On the narrow made-up bed, with the coarse linen and the heavy blanket, and the smell of sulphur and dust about her, Rosemary found it quite impossible to get any rest. At first there had been a good deal of clumsy shunting, the engine probably had been detached, the tin-trumpet sounded at intervals, and there was a good deal of shouting; but all these noises ceased presently, and the night seemed peculiarly still. Still, but not restful. Rosemary could not sleep. Fortunately the communicating doors between her compartment and the one which Jasper occupied were closed, so she felt free to fidget, to get up or to lie down as the mood seized her, to turn on the light to read or to meditate, without fear of disturbing him.

She could not help feeling desperately nervous. Jasper, of course, was quite right: there was plenty of time in which to see Elza, and then to send a telegram to London if necessary, so there was nothing in a few hours' delay to worry about. Nevertheless she, who had always prided herself on independence and level-headedness, felt a strange kind of foreboding — something vague and indefinite that nevertheless was terrifying. She tried to compose herself and could not. She forced herself into quietude, deliberately kept her eyes closed and her body still. It was torture, but she did it because she wanted to feel that she still controlled her nerves, and that she was not giving way to this stupid sense of fear.

And there was no denying it; the fear that beset her was on account of her coming interview with Elza. Maurus' attitude had been very strange, even abnormal, and it was consequent on a letter from Elza. And Rosemary, though she had not owned it to herself before, felt a growing conviction that Elza's lofty patriotism had given way at last to mother-love. Confronted with Philip and Anna, who no doubt had youth's passionate desire to live, with Anna's mother who was all for conciliating the tyrants, and with Maurus whose reason was threatening to give way, Elza had laid down her arms, had capitulated and decided that her son's life must be saved at any cost. Perhaps she knew that Rosemary's articles had fallen into Naniescu's hands, perhaps she and Peter had actually been in collusion over the theft, perhaps — perhaps — There was no end to conjecture, and no limit to Rosemary's dread of what the next four-and-twenty hours would bring.

Only now did she realize what it had meant to her to place the final decision into Elza's hands. With it she had given her professional honour, her very conscience into another woman's keeping. She had probably only done it because she was so sure of Elza, of Elza's patriotism and her sense of justice and honour. Poor Elza! Who could blame her for being weak, for being a mother rather than a patriot? She should never have been placed before such a cruel alternative. Self-reproach, the stirrings of conscience helped to aggravate Rosemary's racking anxiety. She got up in the early dawn, made what sketchy toilet the limited accommodation allowed, and went out into the open. The little station appeared quite deserted; only the two soldiers were still there on duty at the exit door. Rosemary marvelled if they were the same two who had been there during the night. They looked perfectly stolid, unwashed and slouchy in their faded, coarse-looking uniforms and dusty boots and képis.

Rosemary looked up and down the line. The train, consisting of half a dozen coaches, looked derelict without its engine, and there was no guard in sight. She had no eyes for the beautiful scenery around — the narrow valley bordered by densely wooded heights; the mountain-side covered with oak and beech that were just beginning to clothe themselves in gold and at the approach of autumn; the turbulent little mountain-stream; the small station nestling amidst gnarled acacia trees; and on the right the quaint Transylvanian village with the hemp-thatched roofs and bunches of golden maize drying in the sun, with its primitive stuccoed church and whitewashed presbytery. Rosemary saw nothing of this; her eyes searched the landscape for the château — now a prison for political offenders — where Philip and Anna were detained — those children whose safety would be paid for perhaps by countless miseries, by worse tyranny and more cruel oppression. But there was no large building in sight, and presently Rosemary caught sight of Jasper, some way up the line, walking toward her in the company with a man in very négligé toilet, who probably was the station-master.

At sight of Rosemary, Jasper hastened to meet her, while the man kept at a respectful distance.

"What news?" Rosemary cried eagerly.

Jasper appeared dejected. "Not very good I am afraid," he said. "The station-master here tells me that he has been advised that the line will take the whole of the day to clear — probably more."

"Very well, then," Rosemary said resolutely, "we must get a car."

"Impossible, my dear; you can't get across if the road is blocked."

"All the roads in Transylvania are not blocked, I imagine," Rosemary retorted drily. Then she called to the station-master: "I want," she said, "to get to Hódmező to-day. Can I get a car anywhere in Sót?"

"But the roads are impassable, gracious lady," the man exclaimed; "the landslide—"

"Never mind about the landslide. There are other roads in Transylvania besides this one. I can go by a roundabout way, but I can get there somehow if I have a car. Or," she added impatiently, seeing that the man was looking very dubious, "a conveyance of any sort, I don't care what it is."

"Alas! gracious lady, that is just the trouble. The soldiers were here yesterday, and they commandeered all the horses and bullocks in Sót for military purposes. It is so hard," the man went on, muttering half to himself, "no sooner does a man scrape together a little money and buy an old horse, then the soldiers come down and take it away from him."

The man was full of apologies and explanations, but somehow Rosemary had the impression that he lied. He rambled on for a while in the same strain; Rosemary did not hear him. Her brain was at work trying to find a way to combat this net of intrigue that was hemming her in. She was quite sure that the man was lying — that Naniescu had ordered these ignorant yokels to tell the lies that suited him. She, Rosemary, Lady Tarkington, a British subject, could not be held up at the frontier, of course, but there could be a landslide, a block on the line, no conveyance available, horses commandeered by the military, two, three, perhaps four days' delay while Naniescu's courier was speeding to London with Rosemary's manuscript and her letter to the editor of *The Times* asking for early publication.

She turned with some impatience to Jasper.

"What shall I do?"

Gravely he shook his head.

"Accept the inevitable," he replied gently. "I understand that there is quite a clean little hotel in the place, and twenty-four hours' delay is not very serious, is it?"

"It would not be," she admitted, "if it were not prolonged."

"It can't be prolonged indefinitely."

"No," she retorted, "for I can always walk to the frontier."

"Over mountain passes?" he queried, with a smile.

But she only gave a scornful shrug. "Accept the inevitable?" How little he knew her. The more she saw difficulties ahead, the more she felt ready for a fight. Time was still in her favour. Hódmező was not far with its telegraph service, and Naniescu's power did not extend beyond the frontier.

Always supposing that Elza did wish her to wire.

Rosemary thought things over for a moment or two; then she said to Jasper: "Very well! I'll possess myself in patience for twenty-four hours. Will you see about rooms at the hotel? And I suppose this man will see about our luggage being taken across?"

"Of course I'll see to everything, dear," Jasper said meekly. "But you would like some breakfast, wouldn't you?"

CHAPTER XLI

Meekly and obediently Jasper went off to see after the luggage, and Rosemary wandered away as far as the village. Her first thoughts as far as the village. Her first thought was to ascertain definitely whether indeed there was no chance of hiring some sort of conveyance to take her as far as Hódmező. The first man she spoke to was the keeper of the inevitable grocery store. He had heard a rumour that there was a block on the railway line somewhere near the frontier, and this annoyed him very much because he was expecting a consignment of maize from Hungary, and he supposed that he would not now get it for two or three days. He had no horse. Hadn't had one since the beginning of the war, when his nag was commandeered. Now even an old crock was so dear it did not pay to buy.

Rosemary asked him if he knew of anyone in the village from whom she could hire a horse and cart to take her as far as the frontier, but the man shook his head. The Jew at the hotel had two horses, and the priest had one, but the military were down from the barracks yesterday and took those away. There were maneuvers in progress somewhere, it seems. The soldiers said they would bring the horses back in two or three days, but it was very hard and inconvenient for everybody when that sort of thing was done.

Rosemary asked, what about oxen? But draft-oxen and some buffaloes belonging to the mayor had also been commandeered. It was very hard. Did not the gracious lady think so?

Finally the storekeeper made a suggestion that with the help of a little baksheesh the gracious lady might succeed in getting the officer at the château to let her have what she wanted. The château was only a couple of kilometres from the village. It lay close to the road; the gracious lady couldn't fail to spy the great iron gates. It had belonged at one time to Count Fekete, but the family had been gone some time, and the château was now a cavalry barrack, and some prisoners of war were still kept there.

The storekeeper offered his son as an escort to the gracious lady, so that she should not miss her way. But Rosemary declined the offer; she purchased a few stale biscuits from the man, intending to ask for a glass of milk from some cottage on the way; then she set out at a brisk pace down the road. It ran along the mountain-side, and some fifty feet below the turbulent little stream tossed and tumbled over stones and boulders, its incessant murmuring making a soothing accompaniment to Rosemary's thoughts. At the last cottage in the village, where Rosemary had obtained a glass of fresh milk from a comely peasant woman, the latter had directed her to a mountain path which ran below the road, parallel with it, and close to the edge of the stream. Here it was perfectly lovely; the moist, sweet air, the occasional call of birds, the beech and oak and dense undergrowth, the carpet of moss, the occasional clearing where the grass was a luscious green, and the mauve campanula grew to a stately height. At times the path rose sharply, twenty feet or more above the stream; at others it ran level with the water's edge; and at one place the stream widened into a little bay, where the water was as clear as a fairy pool and of a translucent blue.

Rosemary lingered for a little while beside the pool, thinking how delicious it would be to bathe in it. When she went on again she came to a sharp bend in the path, and as soon as she had rounded this she saw some twenty yards farther on a man dressed in the uniform of a Roumanian officer, sitting upon a tree stump close by the water's edge. The man sat with his elbows resting on his knees, and his head was buried in his hands. He looked like a man in trouble. Rosemary walked on, a dry twig crackled under her tread, and the man suddenly looked up.

It was Peter.

The moment he caught sight of Rosemary he jumped up, and then made a movement as if he meant to run away. But Rosemary, with sudden impulse, called to him at once:

"Don't go, Peter."

It seemed as if the magic of her voice rooted him to the spot. He stood quite still, but with his back to her; and then he took off his képi with one hand, and passed the other once or twice across his forehead.

Rosemary felt strangely disturbed and puzzled. Why was Peter here? How did he come to be here? And in this uniform?

"Aren't you going to speak to me, Peter?" she asked, because Peter being here seemed so amazing that for the moment she thought that she was seeing a vision: "or even look at me?" she added.

"I did not suppose you particularly wished me to speak to you," he said, without turning round to face her.

"Why should you say that?" she asked simply.

"Because I imagine that you look upon me as such an unmitigated blackguard that the very sight of me must be hateful to you."

She said nothing for a moment or two. Perhaps she was still wondering if he was real, and if so, how he came to be here — just to-day and at this hour. Then she went deliberately up to him, put her hand on his arm, and forced him to look at her.

"It is true, then?" she asked, and her eyes, those pixie eyes of hers, luminous and searching, were fastened on his as if seeking to penetrate to the very soul within him. But a look of dull and dogged obstinacy was all that she got in response.

"It is all true, Peter?" she insisted, trying with all her might to steady her voice, so that he should not hear the catch in her throat.

He shrugged his shoulders, indifferent and still obstinate.

"I don't know what you mean," he retorted, almost roughly.

"I mean," she said slowly, "that these last few days have not just been a hideous nightmare, as I still hoped until — until two minutes ago. That things have really happened — that you — that you—"

She paused, physically unable to continue. It was all too vile, too hideous to put into words. Peter gave a harsh laugh.

"Oh, don't spare me," he said, with a flippant laugh. "You mean that you did not believe until two minutes ago that I was really a spy in the pay of the Roumanian Government, and that you did not believe that I had intrigued to have Philip and Anna arrested, stolen your articles for The Times, and bought Kis-Imre over Aunt Elza's head, and turned her and Maurus out of their home. Well, you believe it now, don't you? So that's that. And as I am on my way to meet a friend, you'll excuse me, won't you, if I run away? Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Yes," she said. "You can look me straight in the eyes and tell me what has brought you down to — to this. Is it money?"

Peter shrugged. "The want of it, I suppose," he replied.

"I have no right to ask, I know. Only — only — we were friends once, Peter," she went on, with a note of pleading in her tone. "You used to tell me all your plans — your ambitions. You used to say that you did not want to — to bind me to a promise until you had made a name for yourself. If you had told me that you were short of money, and that you were actually thinking of taking up this — this sort of work, I could have helped you. I know I could have helped you. I know I should have found the right words to dissuade you. Oh, Peter!" she went on almost wildly, unable to hold her tears longer in check, or to control the tremor in her voice, "it is all so horrible! Can't you see? Can't you see? We were such friends! You used to tell me everything. You were taking up your father's work. Some of your scientific experiments were already attracting attention. And you were a sportsman, too! And your V.C. And now this — this! Oh, it is too horrible — too horrible!"

Her words were carrying her away. The murmur of the water grew louder and louder in her ears, and in the trees the sighing of the wind among the leaves grew almost deafening. She felt herself swaying, and for a few seconds she closed her eyes. But when she put out her hand she felt it resting on Peter's arm. There was the feel of the rough cloth of his tunic. So she opened her eyes and raised them slowly until they met his. Her glance had wandered on the ugly uniform, the livery of his unspeakable shame. Her eyes expressed the contempt which she felt, the loathing which was almost physical. But Peter's glance now was not only dogged, but defiant. In it she read the determination to follow in the path of life which he had chosen for himself, and a challenge to her power to drag him away from it. This was no longer the Peter of Kis-Imre, the irresponsible young English athlete, whose thoughts would never soar above the interest in a cricket-match. It was more the Peter of olden times — the tempestuous lover, the wayward creature of caprice, the temperamental enthusiast capable of heroic deeds, and always chafing under the restraint imposed by twentieth-century conventions; the Peter whose soul had once been equally great in virtue as it was now steeped in crime; the gallant soldier, the worthy descendant of the Scarlet Pimpernel. It was the Peter of olden times, but his love for her was dead. Dead. If one spark of it had remained alive, if something of her image had remained in his heart, he could never have given himself over to this vile, vile thing. But while she had been battling bravely to banish from her mind all memories of their early love, he had torn her out of his heart, and turned to this ignominious calling to help him to forget.

Rosemary felt giddy and ill; even the sweet woodland air seemed to have turned to poisonous fumes of intrigue and venality. She roughly pushed away from Peter's arm that supported her, but she was still swaying; her hat fell from her head, and her glorious hair lay in a tumbled mass of ruddy gold around her face.

"Better sit down on this old stump," Peter remarked drily. "You'll have to lean on me till you get to it."

But Rosemary did not really know what happened just then — she had such a gnawing pain in her heart. She certainly tottered forward a step or two until she reached the tree-stump, and she sank down on it, helped thereto, no doubt, by Peter's arm. The next thing of which she was conscious was a flood of tears that would not be checked. It welled up to her eyes, and eased that heavy pain in her heart. Great sobs shook her bowed shoulders, and she buried her face in her hands, for she was ashamed of her tears. Ashamed that she cared so much.

And the next thing that struck her consciousness was that Peter sank down on his knees before her, that he raised her skirt to his lips, and that he murmured: "Good-bye, sweetheart. My Rosemary for remembrance. God bless and keep you. Try to forget." Then he jumped to his feet and was gone. Gone! She called him back with a cry of despair: "Peter!" But he was nowhere to be seen. He must have scrambled up the incline that led to the road. She certainly heard high above her the crackling of dry twigs, but nothing more. Peter had passed out of her life, more completely, more effectually, indeed, than on the day when she became Jasper Tarkington's wife. Peter — her Peter, the friend of her girlhood, the master from whom she had learned her first lesson of love, was dead. The thing that remained was a vague speck, a creation of this venal post-war world. It was as well that he should go out of her life.

CHAPTER XLII

A minute or two later Rosemary was startled out of her day-dream by the sound of Jasper's voice calling to her from somewhere in the near distance. She had barely time to obliterate the traces of tears from her eyes and cheeks before he appeared round the bend of the path. The next moment he was by her side. Apparently he had been running, for he seemed breathless and not quite so trim and neat in his appearance as he usually was.

"I heard a scream," were the first words he said, as soon as he came in sight of her. "It terrified me when I recognized your voice. Thank God you are safe!"

He was obviously exhausted and, for him, strangely agitated. He threw himself down on the carpet of moss at her feet; then he seized her hand and covered it with kisses. "Thank God!" he kept on murmuring. "Thank God you are safe!"

Then suddenly he looked up at her with an inquiring frown. "But what made you scream?" he asked.

Rosemary by now had regained control over her nerves. She succeeded in disengaging her hand, and in smiling quite coolly down upon him.

"It was very stupid of me," she said, with a light laugh. "I saw a pair of eyes looking at me through the undergrowth. It startled me. I thought that it was a wild cat — I had heard that there were some in these parts — but it was only a homely one."

She tried to rise, but Jasper had recaptured her hand. He was engaged in kissing her finger-tips one by one, lingering over each kiss as if to savour its sweetness in full. Now he looked up at her with a glance of hungering passion. Rosemary felt herself flushing. She was conscious of an intense feeling of pity for this man who had lavished on her all the love of which he was capable, and hungered for that which she was not able to give. He looked careworn, she thought, and weary.

"You were not anxious about me, Jasper, were you?" she asked kindly.

He smiled. "I am always anxious," he said "when I don't see you."

"But how did you find me?"

"Quite easily; I went to the hotel, you know. Not at all a bad little place, by the way; rather primitive, but with electric light and plenty of hot water. In engaged the rooms, and had a mouthful of breakfast. Then I sallied forth in quest of you. A man in the village told me you had been asking the way to the château, and I knew you would never stand the dusty road. So when I found that there was a woodland path that went through the same way as the road, I naturally concluded that you would choose it in preference. You see," Jasper concluded, with a smile, "that there was no magic in my quest."

Then he looked up at her again, and there was a gleam of suspicion in his dark, questioning eyes. "You must have walked very slowly," he said. "I started quite half an hour, probably more, after you did."

"I did walk very slowly. This path is enchanting, and this is not the first time I have sat down to think and to gaze at this delicious little stream. But," Rosemary went on briskly, "I think I had better be getting on."

But Jasper put out his arms and encircled her knees. "Don't go for a minute, little one. It is so peaceful here, and somehow I have had so little of you these last days. I don't know, but it seems as if we had taken to misunderstanding one another lately." Then, as she made an involuntary movement of impatience, he continued gently: "Do I annoy you by making love to you?"

Rosemary tried to smile. "Of course not, dear. What a question!"

"Then tell me if there is anything in the world I can do to make you happier. You have not looked happy lately. I have been tortured with remorse, for I feel somehow that it has been my fault."

"You are sweet and kind, Jasper, as always. But you must be a little patient. I have gone through a great deal these last few days."

"I know, I know, little one. Don't let us talk any more about it."

He was wonderfully kind — kinder and gentler than he had been since the first days of their married life. It almost seemed as if he had set himself the task of making her forget all that he had involuntarily revealed to her of his violent, unbridled temperament, and of that lawless passion that lay at the root of his love for her.

He talked of the future, of their return to England, the home that he would make for her, which would be a fitting casket for the priceless jewel which he possessed. Rosemary, who felt inexpressibly lonely, was once more conscious of that feeling of gratitude towards him which she had once hoped might be transmuted, in days to come, into something more ardent than friendship.

She had suffered so terribly in her love for the one man who, with all his faults, had come very near to her ideals, that she felt a desperate longing to cherish and to cling to the husband whom she had chosen half out of pique, the man on whom she had inflicted so much cruelty by becoming his wife.

CHAPTER XLIII

Rosemary was the first to remember that time was slipping by. She looked at her watch. It was past ten o'clock — over an hour since Peter had asked her to try to forget. She rose briskly to her feet, and arm in arm, like two good comrades, she and Jasper made their way together towards the château. When they came in sight of the great gates—a couple of hundred yards still ahead of them — Rosemary was the first to spy a motor-car standing there, and some half-dozen persons in the act of getting into the car. There were two sentries at the gates, and seemingly a few people on the other side.

"It looks like a man and a woman and three soldiers in uniform getting into that car," Rosemary remarked casually. And immediately, for no apparent reason, Jasper started to walk along more rapidly; a few seconds later he almost broke into a run. At that moment the car started off, and was soon lost to sight in a cloud of dust. Rosemary thought that she heard Jasper utter a savage oath.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked. But he did not answer, only hurried along so quickly that she was not able to keep up with him. He had passed through the gates when she reached them, and when she tried to follow she was stopped by the sentry. She called to Jasper, who apparently did not hear; pointing to him, she explained to the man on duty that she was that gentleman's wife, and if he was allowed to go in, why not she? They were as mute as if she had spoken in an unknown tongue, but they would not allow her to pass. In the meanwhile Jasper had disappeared inside the château. Rosemary had seen him go in by the main entrance, challenged by the sentry on guard at the door, but after a second or two allowed to pass freely in.

Fortunately she was provided with money, and her experience of this part of the world was that most things could be accomplished with the aid of baksheesh. A young officer was crossing the courtyard; he looked in the direction of the gates, saw an excessively pretty woman standing there, and, true to his race and upbringing, came at once to see if he could enter into conversation with her. Very politely he explained to her that no one was allowed to enter the château, or to visit any of the prisoners, without a special permit from the commanding officer.

Rosemary told him that she desired to speak with the commanding officer. This also, it seems, was impossible. But a hint from Rosemary as to reward if the matter could be managed simplified matters a great deal.

The young officer conducted her across the courtyard and into the château. It had been a fine place once, not unlike Kis-Imre in architecture, but its occupation by the military had stripped it of every charm. There were not carpets on the floors, and only very rough furniture in the way of chairs and tables in what had obviously been at one time a cosy lounge hall. The officer led the way through a couple of equally bare rooms enfilade, and came to a halt outside a door which bore roughly chalked upon the finely carved and decorated panels the legend: "Major Buriecha. Private. No admittance." He offered one of the rough chairs rather shamefacedly to Rosemary, and said: "Major Buriecha will be coming through here presently. Will you wait, gracious lady? You will be sure to see him. I am afraid," the young man added, with a pleasant smile, "that it is the best I can do."

"Couldn't you announce me?" Rosemary asked. "I am Lady Tarkington. I am sure Major Buriecha would not refuse to see me."

The officer's smile became self-deprecating. "It is more that I should dare to do, milady," he said. "The major is engaged in conversation with an important government official. I would even ask you kindly, when you see him, not to tell him that I brought you as far as here."

"I couldn't do that, even if I wished, as I don't know your name."

"Lieutenant Uriesu, at your service, milady."

"I suppose," Rosemary went on, after a moment's hesitation, "you couldn't tell me what has become of my husband, Lord Tarkington. He went through the gates and entered the château, then I lost sight of him. But he seemed to be well known inside this place. Could you find out for me where he is?"

"I am afraid not, milady," the young officer replied politely. "I have not the honour of Lord Tarkington's acquaintance."

He stood at attention, waiting for a moment or two to see if the English lady had any further questions she wished to ask; then as she remained silent, he saluted gravely and went out of the room, leaving Rosemary to bear her soul in patience, and to wonder what in the world had become of Jasper.

At first only a confused murmur of voices came to her ears through the closed doors of Major Buriecha's private room. But gradually one of those voices grew louder and louder, as if raised in anger; and Rosemary, astonished, recognized that it was Jasper speaking — in French, and obviously with authority — to Major Buriecha, the officer commanding! . . . What in the world — ?

She heard some words quite distinctly:

"You are a fool, Buriecha! No one but a fool could have been taken in like this."

And the voice that gave reply was humble, apologetic, decidedly tremulous with fear. Rosemary could not distinguish what it said.

Major Buriecha engaged in conversation with Jasper! And Jasper reprimanding him with obvious authority! What could it mean? At first she had only been puzzled, now a vague sense of uneasiness stirred in her heart. Uneasiness that almost partook of fear. With sudden impulse she rose and went to the door. Orders or no orders, she must know what was going on inside that room. Her hand was on the latch when she paused, listening. Was it mean to listen? Perhaps; but instinct was stronger than good conduct, and she had just heard Jasper's harsh voice giving a curt command:

"Get through to General Naniescu at once," and then the click of the telephone receiver being lifted from its hook and the whirl of the bell-handle. What could she do but listen? There was silence inside the private room now, but Rosemary could hear Jasper's easily recognizable step pacing restlessly up and down. And one moment he paused quite close to the door, and Rosemary quickly drew back a step or two, ready to face him if he came. But he resumed his pacing and she her watch by the door. Presently she heard the other voice — the major's, presumably — saying: "Is that you, Marghilo? Ask his Excellency the Governor to come to the telephone, will you?" There was a pause, then Buriecha spoke again: "Tell him it is Major Buriecha. And, I say, Marghilo, tell him it is very important and desperately urgent."

Again there was a pause, a long one this time. Jasper was still pacing up and down the room. Rosemary could picture him to herself, with his habitual stoop and his thin hands held behind his back. Once he laughed, his usual harsh, mirthless laugh. "You'll get a fine

dressing-down for this, my friend. I am thinking," he said. "Naniescu won't make light of it, I can tell you."

Silence once again. Then Jasper's voice speaking into the telephone, and always in French: "Hallo! Hallo! Is that you, Naniescu? good! Number Ten speaking."

Number Ten! What — ? But there was no time to think, no time for puzzlement or fear. Jasper was speaking again.

"Buriecha has bade a complete fool of himself. He has allowed young Imrey and the girl Heves to escape! Hallo! Did you hear me? It's no use swearing like that, you'll only break the telephone. Yes, they've gone, and you've got to get them back. Went by car half an hour ago, in the direction of Cluj, but probably making for the frontier — what? Oh, a plot, of course, engineered by that damned Blakeney. No use cursing Buriecha; you are as much to blame as he is. Eh? Of course, for treating with that young devil behind my back! Yes, you — Well, hold on and listen. Blakeney, I am sure it was he, came here with a forged order from you, demanding that Imrey and the girl shall be delivered to him for transference to an unknown destination. Eh? Well, of course he should have known, but he says your signature looked perfect; he thought it was all in order. The rascal was in officer's uniform, and had two men with him also in uniform. What can you do? Telephone all along the roads to your frontier police, of course. If they stick to the car they are bound to be stopped. Yes, five persons — three of the men in uniform, in an open car. The prisoners have probably taken on some disguise by now. Shoot at sight, of course, if the car does not slow down. Police the mountain paths as well. Blakeney can't know them well. I don't know who the other two men are. Hungarian, perhaps, or English. Don't delay. Yes, yes! What's that? Marghilo getting through? Good! Well, that's the best you can do. We'll have a reckoning presently, my friend. You should not have treated with him, I say. He has probably robbed your courier of the newspaper articles or else telegraphed in Uno's name to The Times not to print them, and then got the prisoners out of your clutches by this impudent trick. Oh, all right. Hurry up! You have no time to waste, nor have I. Yes! All right. Come along if you want to. I shall be at Sôt all right enough. But you won't enjoy the interview, my friend, I promise you that. What?"

Jasper had ceased speaking for some time, but Rosemary still stood beside the door — a woman turned to stone. Her hands and feet were numb. She could not move; only from time to time a cold shudder travelled down her spine. She felt nothing, not even horror. It was all too stupendous even for horror. A cataclysm, a ball of fire, a flame that froze, ice that scorched. A topsy-turvydom that meant the kingdom of death.

And Jasper, her husband, was on the other side of that door, Jasper Tarkington, her husband! The spy of an alien government, Number Ten! A thing! A rag torn and filthy. The man whose name she bore. She could hear his footstep in the next room, his mirthless laugh, his harsh voice muttering curses or else invectives against the other man, who was only a fool. Then suddenly the footsteps came to a halt. The door was pulled open and Rosemary stood face to face with Jasper.

At sight of her he stood stock-still. An ashen hue spread over his face. The curse that had risen to his throat died before it reached his lips.

From the room behind him Major Buriecha's tremulous voice was asking if anything was amiss. Jasper closed the door and stood with his back to it, still facing Rosemary. His eyes, always hawk-like and closely set, had narrowed till they were mere slits, and his lips had curled up over his jaws, showing his teeth white and sharp, like those of a wolf. An expression of intense cruelty distorted his face. He was about to speak, but Rosemary put up her hand to stop him.

"Not here," she commanded. "Not now."

He gave a hard laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

"It had to come some time, I suppose," he said coolly. "I am not sorry."

"Nor I," she replied. "But will you please go now? We'll meet later — in the hotel."

He looked her up and down with that glance which she had learned to dread, and for a moment it seemed as if he would yield to that ungovernable passion in him and seize her in his arms. Rosemary did not move. Her luminous eyes, abnormally dilated, never left his face for one instant. She watched the struggle in the man's tortuous soul, the passion turned to hatred now that he stood revealed. She did not flinch, because she was not afraid. The man was too vile to inspire fear.

"Go!" she said coldly.

For another second he hesitated, but it was the banal sound of Buriecha spluttering and coughing on the other side of the door that clinched his resolve. This was neither the place nor the time to assert his will, to punish her for the humiliation which he was enduring. Once more he laughed and shrugged his shoulders, then he walked slowly out of the room.

CHAPTER XLIV

For over half an hour Rosemary waited in that bare, cheerless room, and gazed unseeing out of the window while she tried vainly to co-ordinate her thoughts. In the forefront of her mind there was a feeling of great joy which she hardly dared to analyse. Joy! And she also had the feeling, though she had come to the very brink of an awful precipice, though she was looking down into an abyss of shame and horror, with no hope of ever being able to bridge the chasm over, that yet on the other side was peace — peace that she would never attain, but which was there nevertheless, to dwell on, to dream of, when the turmoil was past and she be allowed to rest.

After about half an hour the young officer who had first conducted her to the fateful spot came back to see what had happened. He seemed astonished that she was still there.

“Major Buriecha has not yet come out of his room,” Rosemary managed to say quite coolly. “It is getting near dinner-time. I don’t think I’ll wait any longer.”

The young man appeared relieved. Anyway he was not likely now to get into trouble on the English lady’s account. He clicked his heels together, expressed perfunctory regret at her disappointment, then offered to conduct milady out of the château. Rosemary accepted his escort and took leave of him at the gates.

“If milady will write to the commanding officer,” Lieutenant Uriesu said at the end, “I am sure he will give the permit milady requires.”

“I will certainly take your advice,” Rosemary assented cheerfully. “Good-bye, Lieutenant Uriesu, and thank you for your kind efforts on my behalf.”

She walked back towards the village by way of the path. When she came to the spot where first she had seen Peter that morning, she sat down on the tree-stump and listened to the murmur of the stream. She would not allow herself to think of Peter — only of Philip and Anna, whom he was taking across the frontier by another clever trick — in disguise, probably — and over the mountain passes. Rosemary could not believe that they would stick to the car and be stopped by the frontier police. They would get away into Hungary on foot. They were young, they knew the country, and they could scramble over the mountain passes and be at Hódmező soon, where Elza would be waiting for them. Elza knew, of course, and Maurus knew too. That was why he had been so calm and so composed when he was told that he must leave Kis-Imre within four-and-twenty hours. They all knew. Peter had trusted them. Only she, Rosemary, had been kept out of his councils, because she might have betrayed them to Jasper, and Peter could not tell her that it was Jasper who was the miserable spy.

But no, she would not think of Peter, or of how he had worked to circumvent Jasper at every turn. She only wanted to think of Philip and Anna, those two children who were so ingenuously learning the lesson of love one from the other, and of Elza, so patient and so heroic, and of Maurus, who had played his part so well. Maurus would be coming through from Cluj some time to-day, and he, too, would be held up at Sót, and perhaps spend the night in the funny little hotel. Rosemary hoped that she would see him. His company would be very welcome whilst Jasper was still there. Then to-morrow she and Maurus would get across the frontier somehow, and join up with Elza and the children at Hódmező. And there was always the British Consul in Cluj to appeal to. There was no desperate hurry now. The children were safe and those articles of hers would not be published in *The Times*. Peter would have seen to that.

But no, she did not want to think of Peter. Was she not still Jasper Tarkington’s wife?

CHAPTER XLV

It was late in the afternoon when Rosemary at last made her way back to the small hotel in Sót. She had spent the day roaming about the forests, and eating such scrappy food as she could purchase at one or other of the cottages. Twice she had been to the railway station to meet the trains that were due in from Cluj. She hoped that Maurus might have come by one of them. Now there was not another due before the midnight express, which got to Sót in the small hours of the morning. The farce of there being a block on the line was still kept up. Passengers got out of the train, grumbling, and the small hotel was full to capacity. It was a low, irregular building, with a very large courtyard closed on three sides, and a wide archway, through which cars and carriages could drive in, intersecting the fourth. One side of the house was given over to stabling and cowsheds, another to kitchens and offices, the other two held the guest-rooms and one or two public rooms. Some of the bedrooms were level with the ground, and on the floor above a wooden gallery ran right round the courtyard. The courtyard itself seemed to be the principal meeting-place for cows and chickens, and even pigs, which roamed freely about the place and entered any door that happened to be conveniently open. The best bedrooms gave on the balcony above. On inquiry Rosemary was informed that the English milord had booked three rooms that morning for himself and milady who would be coming during the day. A buxom, bare-footed peasant girl then conducted milady up to these rooms.

Rosemary went along heavy-footed. She was more tired than she would have cared to admit. She had had very little food all day, and her nerves by now were terribly on edge. It had been a day packed full of emotion and there was more to come. There was the inevitable interview with Jasper. Horrible as it would be, she had no intention of shirking it. She would leave him, of course, with the hope never to set eyes on him again, but certain matters would have to be arranged between them, and Rosemary's moral courage would not allow her to have recourse to letter-writing or to the help of lawyers. She knew what she wished to say to Jasper, and would have despised herself if she had shrunk from the ordeal.

The hours went slowly by. Later in the evening she ordered some supper to be brought up to her room. She found it difficult to swallow any food, but she drank two cups of deliciously strong coffee, and munched some of the excellent and very sustaining maize bread for which this part of the country is famous. She had a book in her suit-case and contrived to read for a while, but she could not concentrate on what she was reading, and soon had to put the book away. Time hung very heavily. She was terribly weary and yet she could not sleep. And she could not understand what had become of Jasper. She had seen or heard nothing of him since they parted in that ugly, bare room, the picture of which would for ever remain graven in her mind as the place where she had experienced the greatest horror in her life. No one in the hotel had seen him. A vague sense of uneasiness began to stir within her. At the same time she dismissed from her mind any fear for his safety. She was quite sure that whatever he ultimately decided to do, he would not pass out of her life without a final struggle for mastery. She did not dread the interview. She knew it to be inevitable; but she longed passionately for it to be over — to know the worst — to feel certain of that measure of freedom for which she meant to fight.

And because she longed for the interview to be over she would not go to bed before Jasper returned. She sat in the narrow slip-room, grandiosely described by the hotel proprietor as the salon, which divided Jasper's room from hers. The one window, which was wide open, gave her a beautiful view over the mountains, and the evening sky studded with stars. Somewhere the other side of those mountain-tops Philip and Anna were speeding towards freedom—the freedom which Peter had won for them by dint of courage, resource and wit. Instinctively, memory recalled that other weary waiting at Kis-Imre, when she and Elza had watched and prayed together through the hours of the night. And torturing fears rose out of the darkness lest this second attempt at flight should prove as unsuccessful as the first.

It was past midnight when Rosemary heard Jasper's familiar step along the wooden balcony. He came straight to the door of the salon and entered, apparently without the slightest hesitation. He closed the door behind him, and throwing down his hat said coolly:

"I saw the light under the door, so I knew you had not gone to bed yet. I've been in some time, but stayed to have some supper in the coffee-room. Very good supper, too. They know how to cook in Hungary. That is the one thing the Roumanians might with advantage learn from them."

He threw himself into a chair and drew his cigarette-case out of his pocket. Having selected one he offered his case to Rosemary.

"Have one?" he asked. When she shook her head he shrugged and laughed, then he struck a match and lighted his cigarette. His hand was perfectly steady. The flame of the match brought for a moment into relief his narrow hatchet face, with the dark eyes set closely together and the harsh Wellingtonian features. Rosemary looked at him curiously. It was the first time she had really studied his face closely since she knew. Once or twice, before she had been repelled by a flash of animal passion in his eyes, and once she had caught sight of his face in the mirror in the smoking room at Kis-Imre, when it was distorted by a wolfish expression of cruelty. Now both the passion and the cruelty were there, expressed around his mouth and in his eyes which looked at her over the tiny flickering flame.

Deliberately he blew the match out, took a long whiff from his cigarette, and said calmly:

"How you are going to hate me after this!"

After a second's pause he added: "Well, I have had so much cruelty to endure from you in the past, a little more or less won't make much difference."

"I have never meant to be cruel, Jasper," Rosemary rejoined coldly. "But I know now that the cruelest thing I ever did to you was to become your wife."

"You only found that out, my dear, since you saw Peter Blakeney again."

To this Rosemary made no answer. She shrugged her shoulders and turned her head away. Jasper jumped up and gripped her by the arm, making her wince with pain.

"Before we go any further, Rosemary," he said with a savage oath, "I'll have it out with you. Are you still in love with Peter Blakeney?"

"I refuse to answer," Rosemary said calmly. "You have no longer the right to ask me such a question."

"No longer the right," he retorted with a harsh laugh. "You are still my wife, my dear. What happened this afternoon will not give you your freedom in law, remember."

"I know that, Jasper. What happened this afternoon has broken my life, but, as you say, it cannot give me my freedom, save with your consent."

He gave a derisive chuckle. "And you are reckoning on that, are you?" he asked drily.

"I am reckoning on it."

"Then all I can say, my dear, is that, for a clever woman, your calculations are singularly futile."

"I don't think so," she rejoined. "I know enough about the laws of England to know that they do not compel me to live under your roof."

"You mean that you intend to leave me?"

"I do."

"And create a scandal?"

"There need be no scandal. We'll agree to live apart; that is all."

"That is not all, my dear," he retorted drily, "as you will find out to your cost."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Peter Blakeney chose to follow you to Transylvania; any number of witnesses can testify to that. I mean, that we are now in a country where money will purchase everything, even such testimony as will enable Lord Tarkington to divorce his wife, and raise such a hell of scandal around Mr. Blakeney that no decent club would have him as a member, and he would have to live out of England for the benefit of his health."

Rosemary had listened to him without attempting to interrupt. She even tried hard not to reveal the indignation which she felt. When he had finished speaking, and once more threw himself into a chair, with a sigh of self-satisfaction, she said quite quietly:

"I thought that this afternoon I had probed the lowest depths to which a man's nature could sink. But, God help me! I have seen worse now!"

"That is as it may be, my dear. A man fights for what he treasures with any weapon that comes to his hand."

"For what he treasures, yes! But you—"

"I treasure you beyond all things on earth," he broke in hoarsely. "You are my wife, my property, my own possession. You may love Blakeney and hate me, but I have rights over you that all the sophistries in the world cannot deny me. I am alone," he went on — and in one second he was on his feet again, and before she had time to defend herself he had her in his arms — "I alone have the right to hold you as I am holding you now. I alone have the right to demand a kiss. Kiss me, Rosemary, my beautiful, exquisite wife, with the pixie eyes! Though you hate me, kiss me — though you love him, kiss me — Mine is still the better part."

He pressed his lips against hers, and for these few horrible moments Rosemary, half swooning, could only lie rigid in his arms. But horror and loathing gave her strength. With her two hands she pushed against him with all her might. "Let me go," she murmured. "I hate you."

But he only laughed. "Of course you hate me. Well, I like your hatred better than the cool indifference I have had from you up to now. You hate me, my dear, because you don't understand. With all your vaunted cleverness you don't understand. Women such as you — good women, I suppose we must call them — never would understand all that there is in a man that is evil and vicious and cruel. Yes, in every man! Deep down in our souls we are blackguards, every one of us! Some of us are what women have made us, others have vices ingrained in our souls at birth. Have you ever seen a schoolboy tease a cat, or a lad set a terrier against a stoat? Would you hate him for that? Not you! If he has revolted you too much, you may punish him, but even so you'll only smile: it is boy's nature, you will say. Well, boy's nature is man's nature. Cruel, vicious! Civilization has laid a veneer over us. Some of us appear gentle and kind and good. Gentle? Yes! On the surface. Deep down in our souls, grown men as we are, we would still love to tease the cat, or to see a terrier worry a stoat. Whilst men had slaves they thrashed them. Where wives are submissive their husbands beat them. Give a man power to torture and he will do it. Boy's nature, I tell you, but we dare not show it. We are gentlemen now, not men. And most of us have a false idea that women would despise us if they knew. And so we smirk and toady and pretend, and those of use who are not puppets writhe against this pretence. I was born a savage. When I was a schoolboy I was not content with teasing a cat, I loved to torture it; if a horse was restive I would thrash it with the greatest joy. Later I reveled in twisting a smaller boy's wrist until he screamed, in pulling a girl's hair or pinching her arm — anything that hurt. Boy's nature. Most women only smiled! Then came the war and the world was plunged in an orgy of cruelty. I was a very fine linguist and became attached to the secret service. I worked for the French army. I no longer pulled girl's hair nor pinched their arms, but I — the spy — tracked enemy spies down — women and men — dragged them out of their lair as a terrier would a stoat, and brought them before the military tribunals to be condemned and shot. But the women still smiled. Good women, mind you! Those whom I was tracking down were Germans, and so I-the spy — was a hero and they were only human refuse whom to torture was a duty. When war was over and my uncle died I inherited a title, and civilization threw the mantle of convention over me, imposed on me certain obligations. My work was done. I became a puppet. I smirked and toadied and tried to pretend. Oh, how I loathed it! Restrictions, civilization, drove me mad! If I had never met you I should have gone off to a land where I could keep slaves and work my will on them, or turned Moslem and kept numberless wives, whom I could beat when the mood seized me. But I met you, and all my desires were merged in the one longing to have you for my own. You were adulated, famous, rich probably. I had a title to offer you and nothing else. My friend de Kervoisin, who knew my capabilities, spoke to me of Transylvania, a conquered country where rebellion was rife. He spoke to me of Naniescu, an ambitious man, unscrupulous and venal, who wanted help to consolidate his position, to put himself right before his government and before the world by brining to light intrigues and conspiracies that did not always exist. The work meant money. I took it on. I made over £100,000 in three years, and there was more to come. Already I was a rich man and the work satisfied the boy's nature in me. Following up a clue. Disguises. Tracking a man down, or a woman. Seeing their fear, watching their terror. Arrests, secret trials. Executions in the early dawn. Scenes of desolation and farewells. I had them all! They helped me to endure the London seasons, the evenings at the club, the balls, the crowds, the futility of it all. And the money which I earned brought me nearer and nearer to you. Luck was on my side. Peter Blakeney

courted you, and like a fool he lost you. How? I did not know and cared less. I won you because I was different from other men, because you were piqued, and because I interested you. Because I knew how to smirk and toady better than most. Then came the question of Transylvania. Naniescu entrusted me with the task of discovering the authorship of certain articles that had appeared in English and American newspapers which impugned his administration. He offered me ten thousand pounds if I succeeded in brining the author to justice, and ten thousand more if certain articles which you were to write were published in *The Times*. The very first morning that we were in Cluj the girl Anna Heves gave away her secret. Once I had her and Philip under arrest it was easy enough to bring pressure to bear upon you. I almost succeeded, as you know. At first it was difficult — whilst Elza and Maurus Imrey were ignorant of the bargain that Naniescu had proposed to you. I had only gained one victory, I was not likely to win the other. So, while you thought me in Bucharest, I came back disguised as a gipsy and warned Elza that Philip and Anna were in danger of death. This brought everything to a head. Unfortunately Peter Blakeney already suspected me. It began probably in England — exactly when I shall never know — but he was my friend once, and then suddenly I felt that we had become enemies. I must have given myself away at one time, I suppose, and he is as sharp as a wild cat. He followed us to Transylvania — to make sure. . . . Then at Cluj Anna Heves confided in him. The children's arrest confirmed his suspicions, and that night at Kis-Imre he recognized me under my disguise as a gipsy. Curse him! After that the whole adventure became a battle of wits between him and me. I won the first round when I spied out the plan for Philip and Anna's escape; I won again when I persuaded you to place the whole bargain between yourself and Naniescu before Elza, and indirectly induced you to write the newspaper articles which he wanted. I thought I had won an easy victory then. But Peter Blakeney stole your manuscript, and I feared then that I had lost everything. The death of Philip and Anna Heves would have been some compensation, it is true, but I wanted that extra ten thousand pounds more than I did the joy of seeing those two children shot. I thought that Peter had stolen the manuscript in order to bargain with it for the lives of his two cousins, but I know better now. He sold your manuscript to Naniescu for the Kis-Imre property. It will stand in his name until he can hand it over to the Imreys again. In the meanwhile by a clever ruse he has got Philip and Anna out of the country. And by now he will have sent a telegram in your name to *The Times*. He has won the battle hands down. I am beaten in all, except in one thing, I have you. Not all his cleverness — and he is as clever as a monkey, it seems — can take you away from me. If you leave me, you do so knowing the consequences. Remember what I said: we are in a country where money can purchase everything, even such testimony as will enable me to divorce you and to raise such a hell of scandal around Peter Blakeney that no decent man in England would shake him by the hand. So now you know. I have told you my history, and I have extolled Peter Blakeney's virtues — his heroism, if you like to call it so. And I have done it deliberately so that you may admire him, regret him, love him if you must, even whilst you feel yourself irrevocably bound to me. You are just as much my slave now, as if I had bought you in the open market. If you continue to hate me, I shall probably hate you too in the end. But that would not help to free you. On the contrary, I think it would rather amuse me. I was never content to tease a cat, I invariably tortured it."

Jasper Tarkington had been speaking without interruption for nearly ten minutes, but he had not spoken without a pause. He was pacing up and down the narrow room with his hands held behind his back, but now and again he had come to a halt, quite close to Rosemary, either to emphasize a point, or to look her up and down with a glance of cruelty or merely mockery. Rosemary withstood every glance without flinching. She was standing close to the table with her hand resting on it, to give herself support. She did not interrupt him. She wanted to hear everything he had to say, right to the end. When he renewed his threat that he would call false witnesses in order to create deadly scandal around Peter, and warned her that she was as much his slave as if he had bought her in the open market, she had, quite instinctively, glanced down on the tray which contained the remnants of her supper. There was a knife on the tray; one with a broad blade narrowing into a sharp point. She shuddered and turned her eyes away, but Jasper had caught her glance. He had just finished speaking, and he went deliberately up to the table, picked the knife up by its point, and with a mocking smile held it with its handle towards her.

"Very dramatic," he said lightly. "Did you ever see *La Tosca*?"

When she made no reply he laughed and threw the knife back on the table. Then he sat down and lit another cigarette.

There was silence in the little room now. Rosemary had scarcely moved. The horror and indignation which she had felt at first when Jasper embarked upon the history of his life had given place to a kind of moral numbness. She had ceased to feel. Her body seemed turned to stone; even her soul no longer rebelled. She was this man's wife, and he had warned her of the means which he would adopt to bind her, unresisting, to him. Nothing but death could loosen the bonds which he had tightened by his threats against Peter.

Jasper smoked on in silence. Only the fussy ticking of the old-fashioned little clock broke the stillness that had descended like a pall over this lonely corner of God's earth. A little while ago Rosemary had been vaguely conscious of a certain amount of bustle and animation in the house, and subconsciously she had associated this bustle with the probable arrival of guests who had come off the night train. But that had been some time ago. How long she did not know; probably before Jasper had begun speaking. She looked at her watch. It was half-past two. Jasper jumped to his feet.

"It must be very late," he said coolly. "I really must beg your pardon for having kept you up so long. Reminiscences are apt to run away with one."

He put down his cigarette, deliberately went up to his wife and took her by the shoulders.

"Kiss me, Rosemary," he said quietly.

It seemed to amuse him that she did not respond, for he gave a mocking chuckle and put his arms round her. He pressed his lips upon her mouth, her eyes, her throat. Then suddenly he let her go and she almost fell up against the table.

He then walked across to the door of his room.

CHAPTER XLVI

Jasper Tarkington, on the point of entering his room, had switched on the light and then paused on the threshold, uttering a gasp of astonishment.

"Maurus!" he exclaimed, "what in the world are you doing here?"

Maurus Imrey was sprawling on the horse-hair sofa, apparently fast asleep. At Jasper's ejaculation he opened his eyes, blinked, yawned, and stretched his arms.

"Ah! my dear Tarkington," he said in Hungarian. "I thought you were never coming."

He rose and shook himself like a big, shaggy dog, and passed his fingers through his tousled hair.

"I must have been fast asleep," he said.

"But what are you doing here, my friend?" Jasper asked, frowning.

"Waiting for you to do me a little service. It is so late, I don't really like to ask you. But I should be badly stranded if you did not help me."

"What is it?"

"I left Cluj by the midnight express," Maurus explained. "You know that we have all been turned out of Kis-Imre. And, by the way, it is Peter Blakeney who has bought the place. Isn't it a scandal? I never thought he would be such a swine. You know he is a near relation of my wife's."

"Yes, yes!" Jasper muttered impatiently. "What about it?"

"Well, simply that those damned officials at Cluj station never told me that I could only get as far as Sót. So I arrived here with my luggage and Anton, and, of course, I found this beastly hotel full. Not a room to be had, my dear fellow. Did you ever hear of such a thing? In the olden days one would just have taken a man by the scruff of his neck and thrown him out of any room one happened to want for oneself. I don't know what it's like with you in England, but here—"

"Just as bad," Jasper broke in with a curse, "but in heaven's name get on, man."

"Well, then, I left my big luggage here, and Anton and I went on to another little tavern I know of in the village. There, as luck would have it, the proprietor whom I used to know is dead, and the new man is one of those Bulgarian agriculturists who come over every year, you know, for the harvesting. Some of these men do settle down here sometimes, and this man—"

"Well, what about him?"

"He doesn't know a word of Hungarian, my dear fellow, and he does not seem to understand much Roumanian either. You once told me that you had been in Bulgaria and that you knew a little of their beastly language, so I thought—"

"What is it you want me to do?" Jasper broke in impatiently. "Walk over with you and arrange with the man about your rooms?"

"If you would not mind. Or could you let me sleep on your sofa?"

Jasper had hesitated at first. It was close on three o'clock, and he did not relish the idea of turning out again at this hour; but the suggestion that Maurus should be his room companion for the night was far more unpleasant.

"Come along, then," he said curtly. "It isn't far, I suppose?"

"Five minutes' walk, my dear fellow," Maurus said with obvious relief, "just the other side of the stream. And Anton shall walk back with you afterwards."

"I don't want anybody to chaperon me," Jasper retorted roughly.

He had to go into the salon to fetch his hat. Rosemary was still standing there leaning against the table for support. She had very much wanted to see Maurus at one time, but now it did not seem to matter. Nothing probably would ever matter again. She heard Jasper's voice saying in a whisper, "You've heard what this fool wants. I suppose I shall have to go."

She nodded in response. And then Jasper added with mocking courtesy:

"Good night, Lady Tarkington."

CHAPTER XLVII

Anton saw it all, and it was he who broke the news to Rosemary.

He had been sitting up in the small slip of a room on the ground floor which had been assigned to him, waiting for his master and wondering why the gracious count should be so long upstairs at this hour with the English lord and lady, when he saw the gracious count and the English milord come along the first floor balcony, he heard them go downstairs, and saw them go out of the house.

Anton was rather anxious about his master because the gracious count had been very, very queer the last twenty-four hours. Sometimes he would be very hilarious; he would laugh and sing and shout "Hurrah for Peter! Bravo!" and so on; at others he would be terribly depressed and sit and cry like a child, or else tear about the place in a passion of fury. He had had a slight fit after the gracious English lord and lady had gone, and the sisters thought that probably the control he had put on himself when the Roumanian soldiers brought the expulsion order had been too much for his nerves.

So when Anton saw the gracious count go out with the English lord at this extraordinary hour he could not help but follow him. Though there was no moon the sky was clear and the darkness of the night was just beginning to yield to the first touch of dawn. The two gentlemen walked quite fast, but Anton was able to keep them in sight. When they came to the little wooden bridge that spans the stream the English lord was a few steps ahead of the gracious count. Suddenly, in mid-stream, the count sprang upon milord from behind, and in a moment had him by the throat. The English lord, taken entirely by surprise, fought desperately nevertheless. Anton had uttered a great shout, and ran to the rescue as fast as ever he could. Through the gloom he could just see the English milord forced down, with his back nearly doubled over the slender parapet of the bridge, and the gracious count bending over him and holding him by the throat. Anton's shout echoed from mountain to mountain, but all around there was the silence of the night, broken only by the howling of a dog outside a cottage door.

Then suddenly, before Anton set his foot upon the bridge, the catastrophe occurred. The parapet suddenly crashed and gave way under the weight of the two men, and they were hurled into the stream below. One awful cry rent the stillness of the night. Anton, half crazy with horror, waded into the stream, the waters of which at a point near a huge boulder were stained with a streak of crimson. The English milord in falling had broken his head against the stone. The gracious count had probably fallen at first on the top of him, and then rolled over on his back, thus breaking his fall. Anton dragged them both, single-handed, out of the stream, first his master, then the English lord. The latter was dead, but the gracious count was still breathing and moaning softly. Anton laid him down upon the grass, and made a pillow for him with his own coat, which he had taken off. Then he ran to the priest's house, which was quite close, and rang the bell until he made someone hear. The priest had been quite kind. He roused his servant, and together — the priest and Anton and the servant — carried the gracious count into the presbytery. But the English milord, who was quite dead, they laid upon the bier in the tiny mortuary chapel which was by the entrance to the churchyard.

The priest had already sent for the village doctor, who had done what he could for the gracious count, but of course, he was ignorant, and, anyhow, Anton was of the opinion that there was nothing that any man could do. But he had been to the station and roused the station-master and asked him to telephone to Dr. Zacharias at Cluj. Anton was just going to run back and see if the answer had come through. In the meanwhile he had come over to the hotel to see if he could speak with the gracious lady.

Rosemary had not yet thought of going to bed. For two hours after Jasper went out with Maurus she had sat, unthinking, by the open window. Time for her had ceased to be. She had heard the howling of a dog. At one moment she had heard a shout, and then a weird and prolonged cry. But these sounds conveyed no meaning to her brain. Her thinking powers were atrophied.

Then the bare-footed, buxom, very sleepy little maid came to tell her that Anton, the valet of the gracious count at Kis-Imre, desired to speak with her at once. She was fully dressed; she sent for Anton and he told her what he had seen.

Hastily seizing hat and wrap, she went with Anton out of the house and through the village to the priest's house. The soft, colourless light of dawn lay over the mountain and valley. On ahead the turbulent waters of the stream tossed and played around the projecting boulders, murmuring of the tragedy which had culminated within their bosom. Nearing the priest's house Rosemary could see the narrow bridge, with its broken parapet —

The priest met her at the gate. The gracious count, he said, had not regained consciousness. He still lived, the doctor said, but life only hung by a thread. Rosemary sat down by Maurus; bedside and watched that life slowly ebbing away. In the late afternoon Dr. Zacharias came over from Cluj. He only confirmed what the village doctor had said. The spine was broken. It was only a question of hours. He could do nothing, but at Rosemary's earnest request — or perhaps on the promise of a heavy fee — he agreed to come again in the morning.

Less than an hour after he left, the dying man rallied a little. He opened his eyes, and seeing Rosemary, his face was illumined by a great joy. She bent over him and kissed his forehead. Two tears rolled slowly down his wan cheeks. He murmured something, and she bent her ear till it was quite close to his lips.

"He was a monster," he murmured. "I heard everything. I had to punish him for the evil he did to my wife and the children. And I have made you free."

At sunset Maurus Count Imrey passed away into the Unknown.

Then only did Rosemary leave his bedside. Accompanied by the priest, she went to the little mortuary chapel to take a last look at the man who had done her such an infinity of wrong. Now that his stormy life was ended, and his hard features were set in lines of peace, Rosemary felt once more that aching sense of pity for him which so often before had prompted her to forgive. She was able to commend his turbulent soul to God without the slightest thought of hatred or revenge. He had said once that she would never understand; but the infinite pity in her heart was born of an infinite understanding. The man who had atoned for his sins by this tragic death was not wholly responsible for his actions. He was the victim of his temperament: more sinned against, perhaps, than sinning. Who knows? If some other woman had captured his fancy she might have made him happy, found what was strong and fine in him, and all that was cruel would perhaps have been submerged beneath a great wave of love.

CHAPTER XLVIII

Since then, nearly two years! And this was the season of 1924! Wembley! The Rodeo! Royalties from Italy and Denmark and Roumania! The Labour Government!

How far, how very far, seemed Transylvania and Sót and the little mortuary chapel wherein Rosemary had gazed for the last time on the enigmatic personality which had once been Jasper Tarkington — her husband.

Even in death he had kept his secret — the secret of the strange dual identity which she had never been able to reconcile one with the other, the cruel, wolfish nature so skillfully hidden beneath the mantle of super-civilization.

Rosemary had not seen Peter since then. After the tragedy at Sót she had at last succeeded, by dint of bribery, in entering into direct communication with the British Consulate at Cluj.

Arrangements for the conveying of Lord Tarkington's body to England took up some considerable time. She only met Elza in Budapest when she herself was on her way home. Peter had left by then for an unknown destination. He had conveyed Philip and Anna over the frontier. They had soon abandoned the car, fearing pursuit, and in disguise had made their way to the frontier over the mountains. They were young and strong, the hardships were not serious, and the dangers reduced to a minimum once they had reached the lonely mountain passes. It was the planning of the escape that had been so wonderful. Peter Blakeney, disguised as a Roumanian officer, and having with him Captain Payson and a young Hungarian cricketer, both dressed as Roumanian soldiers, had presented a forged order for the surrender of the two prisoners, Philip Imrey and Anna Heves. To the officer commanding the dépôt the order appeared in no way suspicious, and he gave up the prisoners without question. After that the whole thing became just a delightful adventure, nothing more. But Elza spoke of Peter with tears in her eyes. They had all of them mistrusted him. Wasn't that strange? Did Rosemary guess? Elza wanted to know, and Philip and Anna plied her with questions.

These were sad days for them all. But still Elza was wonderful, as wonderful as she had ever been. Even Rosemary never actually found out just how much of the tragedy Elza knew or guessed. Anton did not tell her, and to their world the death of the two men who were known to have been friends was just a terrible accident. Darkness. A broken bridge. Fatality.

Rosemary never told, of course. She wondered if Peter knew. She waited on in Budapest for some days hoping for news of him. But none came. Captain Payson heard in an indirect way that Peter was still in Transylvania, but no reliance could be placed on the truth of the rumour. It was only when Rosemary was back in England that she heard definite news of Peter. Elza wrote to say that he was living in Kis-Imre. "He is administering the property for us," she went on. "Isn't he wonderful? I am sure he will make something more of it than poor Maurus was able to do. Of course, they dare not do anything to him, because he is a British subject, and he tells me in his last letter that he hopes in a very few years' time, when justice had been at last meted out to our unfortunate country, to hand over Kis-Imre to Philip in a better state than it is now. Then my poor Philip's dream will, I hope, come true. He and Anna have loved each other ever since they were tiny children. When he has once more a fine home to offer her they will be married with my blessing. And all this we shall owe to Peter Blakeney. Can you wonder, my dear, that we all worship him? When I look at him I seem to see my dear and beautiful sister gazing at me through his eyes, and in his smile I see something of hers, because, just like Peter, she was always ready to laugh, always smiling at the world, always doing great and kind things under cover of a joke. So Philip and Anna and I, we bless Peter and for some reason, which perhaps you can explain better than I, when we think of him we also think of you."

Since then nearly two years! Rosemary has resumed work. Her powerful articles in *The International Review* on the conditions obtaining in Transylvania under alien occupation have begun at last to arouse from its apathy public opinion in England and America. Time and her own perseverance, aided by the lovers of justice and fairplay who abound in Anglo-Saxon communities, would after a while, she felt, do the rest. Rosemary had seen the rampant evil with her own eyes, now she was conscious of her power to help in remedying, or, at any rate, mitigating it. She threw herself heart and soul into the work not only because she loved it and because it thrilled her, but because work alone could help her to forget. "Try to forget" were the last words which she heard Peter speak, there in the woods beside the turbulent mountain stream when she had thought him a spy, a vile and venal wretch, and he had not said one word to exculpate himself. How could he when this might have meant rousing her suspicions of Jasper? — or perhaps it was just pride that had caused him to hold his tongue. Pride, which so often has proved love's most persistent enemy.

Or perhaps he no longer cared, and that was why he thought it would be so easy for her to forget.

Since then nearly two years! Rosemary walking through the park that late afternoon in July. She had been to the Albert Hall to hear Kreisler, and she wandered up the Broad Walk under the trees, because she did not feel that she could stand the noise and bustle of streets at a moment when her whole soul was still full of the exquisite music conjured up by that great magician. It was very hot and she was rather tired, so she sat down on a chair in the shade. Then suddenly she saw Peter. He was coming towards her, quite naturally, as if to an assignation. He looked just the same as he always did — like a boy, clean and straight-limbed as a young god, his eyes shining with excitement, that quaint, self-deprecating smile on his lips that Rosemary knew so well.

"I've been to hear old Kreisler," were the first words he said. "Wasn't he wonderful?"

So like Peter! He dragged a chair quite close to hers and sat down. He threw down his hat and passed his hand through his hair. He did not attempt to greet her in any way. "I've been to hear old Kreisler!" So like Peter! The very first words . . . and she hadn't seen him for nearly two years.

After a second or two he went on: "I wouldn't speak to you in the Albert Hall. When you went out I followed you. I knew you would wander out here."

And Rosemary asked quite casually: "Have you been in England long?"

"Only a few hours," Peter replied with a laugh. "I crossed over by the night boat, via Havre. I always meant to sample that journey, and it was really rather nice." After that he was silent for a moment; then suddenly he seized her hand. She had no gloves on, and he held the soft palm to his lips. Rosemary did not move. She was not looking at Peter; she was just watching a huge blackbird that had landed on the elm tree opposite and who was whistling away for dear life.

"Rosemary, when can we be married?" Peter asked abruptly.

She couldn't help smiling. It, too, was so like Peter. "I've waited two years, dash it all," he went on. "Two years in hell. Now I'm not going to wait any longer. When can we be married, Rosemary?"

Then Rosemary ceased to watch the blackbird and turned slowly to look at Peter.

"Whenever you like, dear," she replied.

THE END

LOOKS AT THE WORLD

CHAPTER ONE. SIR PERCY BLAKENEY PUTS UP HIS QUIZZING-GLASS

Odd's fish! but I am already beginning to wonder whether my visit to your modern world is going to be depressing or exhilarating. Lud love you, m'dears, think on it! To be compelled to be serious — really serious, mind you — through the whole length of a book; to say what I think of your modern culture; to make you see the romance of an era which you yourselves deem unbearably prosaic — la! the task would be impossible were it not for the fact that after taking a preliminary look round I have found that these modern times of yours are quite as romantic as were those in which I lived: they are just as full of adventure, of love and of laughter as when I and Sir Andrew and Lord Tony wore rapiers and ruffles, and Lady Blakeney danced the minuet and sang 'Eldorado' to the accompaniment of the spinet. It would in very truth be an impossible task were it not for the delight in store for me of scoring off all those demmed dull Chauvelins, or Chambertins, of your twentieth century and of proving to them that with all their Committees of Pussyfoots and Boards of Public Morals they cannot manacle a certain little blind god we all wot of, nor can they destroy that lure of adventure and of danger which beckons to you modern young people with just as much insistence as it did to us. Therefore am I here now in your midst — an eighteenth-century dandy, seemingly out of place amid your plus-fours and swallow-tailed coats, but nevertheless prepared to prove my argument up to the hilt. It is demmed embarrassing, believe me, to speak to you in the pages of a book and to remain invisible and inaudible the while, even though in the days of my friends Robespierre, Fouquier-Tinville and their like my capacities in that direction were mightily embarrassing to them. But even after the first page or two I already have scored off your arrant pessimists: one hundred and fifty years ago the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel was made up of nineteen gallant English gentlemen, but now, by contrast, I can enroll under my banner hundreds of thousands — nay, millions — of men and women of every nation; all those, in fact, who worship beauty, who dream romantic dreams, who love every kind of adventure, so be it that adventure is spiced with danger. Every soldier of fortune — and your modern world counts these by the million — is really a member of this new League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. You don't believe me? You smile? You scoff? You shrug your shoulders? By gad! if I do not succeed in proving my case within the space allotted to me in this book then I will take a ticket — not a return ticket, mind you — for old Charon's boat and never utter a word of complaint. Now let me confess at once that yours is a strange world, even though it be not strange to me. I see changes — a power of changes, from our wigs and ruffles and rapiers, our coaches and gigs, our leisurely ways, our inconsequent aristocracy and, for the most part, contented, easy-going working-classes. You live in a rush in this twentieth century; grim earnestness pervades your whole existence; you make and accept great and marvellous wonders — miracles, I would call them — as a matter of course, simply because in your impatience and your restlessness you are always eager to get on — to get on, on, on, inventing and making things greater and more marvellous still. But this is where the strangeness comes in: you — or, rather, the pessimistic Chauvelins amongst you — vow that romance is dead in this modern world; they speak regretfully of the good old days when Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney were the stars of London society, when a romantic love-affair or quixotic adventure met you at every turn. You find your century a dull one, and I marvelled at first whether I, too, would find it so, or would deem it necessary to tint my quizzing-glass with a roseate hue. As a matter of fact, what do I find? I find an age so racked with boredom, so surfeited with pleasure and novelty, that it cannot recognize the incomparable adventure of living in the midst of the most marvellous inventions devised by the ingenious brain of man; of living at a time when a man can speak to wife or friend across the width of the world; when he can put a girdle round the earth by flying through space, or listen to voices that speak hundreds of miles away. It was the fashion in my day to cultivate an air of boredom that one did not feel, but, bless me! your detachment and boredom to-day in the midst of all your modern marvels are neither a fad nor a pose. I see that they are very real indeed. Strange, did I say? La! it is astounding. I reckon to have enjoyed a pretty turn now and again in France with those demmed dirty fellows of the Committee of Public Safety. But what a record of heroic deeds *you* established in France less than a score of years ago when you transformed a matter of blood and mud and hate and horror into an epic of nobility and self-sacrifice and splendid comradeship to which mere words cannot attempt to do justice! My League and I were ready to take our lives in our hands when it came to spiriting an *aristo* from under the guillotine, but there is not a man among us who would hesitate to take off his hat in sincere respect and boundless admiration for the greater courage of that band of miners who recently, in a pit disaster in Yorkshire, went down unhesitatingly into the bowels of the earth to risk flame and poison-gas, death by explosion or drowning, in order to try and save their comrades, even though these were, perhaps, already beyond the hope of human aid. You declare that romance to-day is dead? What, then, but romance is the story of the young nurse who a few weeks ago saved the life of her lover by drawing with her own breath and through her mouth the diphtheria poison from his throat when nothing but this difficult and dangerous method could save him from death? What, indeed, is the whole life of the great Italian inventor, Signor Marconi, but a living romance? Nay, 'tis not romance you lack in this twentieth century. Had but one quarter as much of it come our way in the days when I frequented Richmond and Vauxhall, my faith! we should have been staggered by it. We had to seek Romance; for you it flaunts its magic before your eyes every day and in a hundred different ways. By gad! when the last word of this book is written and the last tale told, I shall feel happy in the thought that I had a sight of all that is roseate and silver in the midst of the drab existence you complain of. Cupid, my friends, is not dead. He will never die while eyes are bright and cheeks as fair as I see them to-day. Mars is in durance vile for the moment — thank God for that! — and I hope soon to see you devoting his courage, his audacity and defiance of danger to the service of humanity instead of to its destruction. The steep slopes of Parnassus are still there for those who dare to climb; the golden apples of the Hesperides still grow in the enchanted garden for those who have the spirit to gather them Look wide, you moderns! your feet may be plodding in clay, but your eyes can be raised to the eternal hills, and let the memory of the Scarlet Pimpernel show you the way along the silvery paths of Romance which wind their way as deftly through your crowded city streets of to-day as ever they did when I followed them to Paris; for I can hear the clarion sound of high adventure as clearly now as when it called to me in the rattle of the tumbrils. La! I find myself almost serious, and I see myself in this small book becoming more serious still; but at least, my friends, give me the credit of throwing off my cloak of badinage for the sole purpose of making you see the world or romance in which you live. For this I am ready for the time being to sacrifice my reputation, which I may modestly assure you is that of a lover of adventure, of joy and of laughter — the immortal spirit of the gay and gallant Scarlet Pimpernel.

CHAPTER TWO. ROMANTIC BRITONS

I have just chanced upon a story — the story of a mongrel dog — which interested me vastly. This dog was the friend of a group of soldiers in a dug-out during the late War, and on one occasion his opportune waking and growling warned his company of a heavy German attack which was pending, and which otherwise might have broken through a vital part of the British defensive lines. In return his name was inscribed on the roll of the company, and he was entitled thereafter to draw one man's rations daily.

A year later, in the heat of a furious enemy attack, this dog's master fell seriously wounded in the bottom of a trench, and a German attacking force poured along, past the place where he lay. In their haste they would certainly have trampled the man to death, but for the fact that Mike, one ear torn by a bullet, stood growling over his master's prostrate body; so threatening was his attitude that the hurrying Germans made shift to avoid him.

So the two were found an hour later when the trench was recaptured by a British unit; and it was all the ambulance men could do to persuade the dog, faint from loss of blood as he was, to relinquish his guard. For that episode Mike was awarded the privilege of marching on parade in front of the regiment, even before its officers and colour-sergeants. And I pray you, my friends, in what country save in romantic, sentimental England would that great honour be given even to the noblest of animals?

For England to-day, no less than in my own time or during the centuries that preceded me, is incurably romantic. The legend so rife in Europe of the stolid, immovable, unfeeling, bacon-and-eggs John Bull Englishman is false.

There is more real romance hidden beneath the formal Anglo-Saxon exterior than is possessed by the effervescent Gaul or the polished Roman. The reserve, the coolness, the marked difference between casual acquaintance and friendship, the adherence to convention, the general old-fashioned quiet which the Briton adopts, is an artificial wall which he builds around his inner self.

The careless observer, seeing this artificial wall, never imagines for one moment that there may be something undreamed-of behind it. It is only the serious psychologist who realizes that right within those defences which guard the average Briton against being stared at more than he likes, he keeps his romantic ideals as carefully tended as a gardener does a rare and delicate plant. From his infancy he has been taught by parents and teachers how to build up his wall of reserve, how to fashion therein the gate of unbreakable self-control with the key so hidden that none may chance upon it.

At school — and, by my faith, I am happy to see how these magnificent public schools have spread and increased in number since my time — he is furthered impressed with the vital necessity of keeping every emotion and every ideal strictly concealed behind that artificial wall. And this attitude of mind soon becomes a cult — a kind of fetish. The average British schoolboy is taught that feeling and emotions are things to be ashamed of, so he keeps them carefully hidden away within himself. Whereupon thoughtless people jump to the conclusion that he hasn't any, and should they, perchance, find out their mistake, they talk at once and with bitterness of the 'perfidious, hypocritical Islanders'.

Actually your ordinary man in the street prefers not to talk about romance because he takes it very seriously. I am sure you have often seen, say, a Frenchman or a German fall on another's neck and kiss him in public; but this is not a sure indication that the two will be on speaking terms the next day. Indeed they may not be friends at all, they may not even know each other: the act may be a mere spontaneous expression of joy engendered by the occasion of some patriotic demonstration or public rejoicing.

On our side of the Channel, on the other hand, a handshake and a few quiet words may be the outward manifestation of a lifelong friendship, or the last farewell to a friend whom one may never hope to see again. And there is one other fact, m'dears, which I must mention here because it goes further than any other in refuting the fallacy that our tight little island is an old, unromantic Sobersides, and that is that in no other country in the world are there so many happy marriages. Now, why is that, I ask you?

It is because when so vital a matter as matrimony is at stake your average Briton brings out the key to that walled garden of his emotions, which he has guarded so jealously from prying eyes since his boyhood, and throws open wide the gates of his secret soul; because, in short, he is incurably romantic, and looks upon marriage as the most romantic event of his life.

I could quote you instances of British romanticism by the yard, of heroic deeds which put to shame the legendary prowess of a Bayard. Think of that lion-hearted piper, not so long ago, whose regiment was ambushed by the enemy in the Afghan hill country. The men were surrounded by a hostile tribe, their ranks were breaking under a deadly fusillade, but the gallant piper just marched up and down between the ranks and continued to play one pibroch after another encouraging the wearied fighters with the skirl of his pipes; and when after a time he fell, shot in both legs, he dragged himself up to a sitting posture and continued to rally his comrades by playing steadily on, the pibroch which they loved.

There is an outcry among some of you these days that modern England and its people have become more severely practical since my time, more sternly materialistic, and that life has become, in consequence, dull and colourless. La, my friends, you have only to look at a pair of lovers wandering arm-in-arm along a country lane, or through the meadows at eventide, to realize that side by side with all that materialism there still remains in the heart of your people the old ideal of romantic love.

And to our more emotional neighbours I would say: "See how the romanticism of our people rises when occasion demands to a sublimity which, I venture to assert, has never been surpassed by any other nation. Think, my friends, of Greater Britain, the World Empire on which the sun never sets. Does it not in itself prove to you that a handful of romantic, close-tongued Islanders can and does accomplish deeds of which any people would be justly proud?"

'Think of the valour of this nation which you are wont to call unimaginative, setting up on arid, sun-baked or ice-bound shores its glorious Flag, the precursor and emblem of its equitable laws, ready to face a hundred perils, starvation, hostility, sometimes even torture and death, for the sake of adding a few square miles to its vast Empire, though the very names of these pioneers often remain unrecorded and forgotten.'

That is what I would say to our neighbours, my friends — even I, your very own Scarlet Pimpernel. And it is the same to-day as it has been in the past: your true Anglo-Saxon has the love of romance buried deeply and firmly within his soul. What, think you, made Drake insist on finishing his game of bowls when the Armada was in sight, or caused that officer of Wellington's army to say grace after receiving the first French fire at Waterloo? What else can account for the thousand and one quixotic, selfless and splendid deeds

which are accomplished by the average Briton every day all over the world — deeds that have caused the romantically-minded Continental peoples to speak of us in tones made up of admiration and awe as ‘those mad Englishmen’?

Gadzooks! I have been spoken of as a romanticist myself; but, by my faith, in comparison with you moderns of to-day I begin to think that I was nothing but a practical, stolid, average Briton, or bacon-and-eggs John bull.

Ask my friend Chauvelin — he knows!

CHAPTER THREE. BUT ROMANCE DOES NOT COME UNSOUGHT

Take my own case, m'dears! Do you know what used to be my greatest trouble in the past, that is, before I embarked on those adventures which you like to read about these days? I had wealth, good companions, a lovely home, the most charming woman in the world for a wife; nevertheless, I felt the lack of a certain savour, the spice of danger and of the unexpected in my life.

It was then that I made a discovery. I found that Romance does not come unsought, but like a capricious woman she begins by eluding her seekers and gives them no more than a few provocative glances in order to whet their appetite for more of her company. If, then, they turn from her with a shrug and a sigh and resume with but a faint murmur their daily round and common task, she will pass them scornfully by, perhaps never coming their way again. But if she encounters courage, eagerness, ambition, the desire to put fate to the touch and win or lose everything on the stake, then she will smile, beckon more insistently, and even whisper of rewards.

Now let me humbly admit that having made that discovery, I decided that the spice of life which I lacked might perchance be found in the misery, the squalor, the hatred and heroism of that great social upheaval we call the French Revolution. I went to seek romance for myself, and found her so enchanting a mistress that I vow Lady Blakeney herself had often cause to complain of my new devotion!

Why should not you do the same? As I have already said in these pages, romance is as omnipresent to-day as she was in the world of my own time. But now, as then, she needs a manly wooing. Go out to seek her! Keep your soul for ever on the qui vive for adventure and novelty! Live like a knight of old, ever ready to rescue beauty in distress or to turn your weapons against the Giants Despair, Oppression, Discourtesy, and all the other thousand ogres that exist in the midst of your vaunted civilization.

Do not be content with the tabloid romance provided for you in your cinemas and theatres. You can make a better love story than the best the films can show you if only you wait till you meet your true mate and then woo her like a man. There is no stage adventure which can equal the thrill of a close competition either in work or in sport, or that of a bold and fearless move towards a longed-for goal.

Why, m'dears, in most things save in real life, whether in books, plays, films, or what you will, you can pretty well forecast in the beginning what the end of the story will be — that right will triumph over wrong, or else wrong over right; that vice will be punished in some form or other through the agency of virtue, or that virtue will find its reward in the sublimity of sacrifice. But in real life it is impossible to forecast events. If we knew beforehand with any certainty what the end of an adventure would be, where would be the zest of embarking on it? All of you who are the workers of the world and who desire to succeed have got to wage war against all manner of forces that are arraigned against you, and you have got to begin the fight, knowing well that in all probability it will be wrong — not right — that will triumph in the end unless you muster all your energy, your courage and your determination, to help you to win through. You are no mere puppets of an author's imagination, fenced round against the attacks of trouble, care, sorrow, disappointment or fatigue. You've got to hold your own against dozens of such insidious enemies and often have to suffer smaller, though vastly more provoking pin-pricks such as no hero of romance has ever been called upon to endure. I mean the irritating fads of your neighbours, family tempers, bad colds, chilblains, rheumatism, or tumbles off ladders.

But luckily you are made of sterner stuff than are the fictitious creatures whose antics are invented for your entertainment. You can, if you will, make the whole of your life one glorious adventure, one ideal romance, by fighting bravely against bodily ills, by struggling patiently against adverse fate. You, too, may become a hero of romance more wonderful than the knights of old who slew fiery dragons and conquered giants by the mere act of doing an unselfish action of helping some lame dog over a stile, or merely by winning the love and faith of one who is dear to you.

To much of life's romance we deliberately shut our eyes, even though it be spread in lavish abundance all around us. Take, for instance, the romance of your breakfast cup of coffee, or of the tea which you sip quite indifferently in your parlour or your office. Now I can remember the time when coffee and tea were luxuries that were purchased with the blood of our fellow-men. I remember when coffee was cultivated by wretched convicts who had been condemned to banishment for life, and when tea was brought over to England in fast-sailing clippers whose captain and crew would risk their lives and jeopardize their chances of a fortune in order to gain a few hours' time in the terrible journeys they undertook across the ocean. And if you care to look a little deeper than the mere surface of things you will soon see that a thousand objects of use in everyday life have in their production been the embodiment, the very essence of romance.

As it is with inanimate things, so it is with people. Your fellow-men, m'dears, are prosaic or romantic, just as you choose to make them. Beneath the most arid surface gold may be hidden; round the most unpromising corner romance may lie in wait for you. But you must look beneath that surface; you must venture fearlessly round the turn ahead. In knightly days adventures did not come to the man who stayed at home and mourned in solitude the demise of chivalry and the passing of courage; but they did come to him who rode forth into the highways of life, stout of heart and ready of hand; and believe me, m'dears, adventures to-day are not found either by your grumbler, or your slacker, by the cynic or the supine; they are found by those who have the courage to seek for romance and to recognize it when they see it. In this matter, as in many others, it is faith that moveth mountains, and if you believe in romance it will surely come your way in the end.

CHAPTER FOUR. LET MODERN YOUTH HAVE ITS HEAD

Allow me, my dear friends, to congratulate you on your young bloods of to-day. Self-deprecation seems to have become an art with you, for everywhere I hear an outcry about modern youth's decadence. Yet when I look round me I perceive quite as much courage and as jealous a sense of honour beneath your young men's nonchalance now as was wont to hide itself with becoming modesty beneath the wigs and laces of my own hair-brained young acquaintances — Hastings, Ffoulkes, Tony, and the rest of that pleasant company. And your women are no different, either. They may not altogether despise the privilege of their sex to play havoc with our impressionable hearts, nevertheless, when occasion demands, they will rise to-day to heights of courage and of efficiency which surpass anything that I can remember, demmed ungallant though it be for me to say this! Never before in the world's history has youth had such opportunities for self-expression and the attainment of success and happiness as are present to-day. And never before, certainly, has youth made so determined a claim to play its rightful part in contemporary affairs and to bring its boldness, initiative and enterprise to enliven and aid the caution and stability of age. And looking at you young things of this twentieth century through my quizzing-glass, I make note of several things. You marry young nowadays, you take risks — as indeed you should — while you are still young enough to make a fresh start if perchance your first effort happen to end in failure. If you are lucky you win through while you are still young enough to enjoy the thrill of success, its power; its happiness and its responsibilities. And, mind you, it is that horrible War that made you realize the importance of youth in the present-day scheme of life. With a shock of surprise you suddenly become aware that the essential sign of manliness was neither a beard nor a bald pate, but rather a virile idealism and a determination to go through with a job once started, and both of these might be the attributes of a child with hardly a bit of down showing on his upper-lip! That abysmal catastrophe was so much an affair into which youth stepped with a smile and a shrug, that since then you have come to believe in youth as a magic power, the existence of which you had not previously suspected. I am all for giving youth its chance. Youth is the time when ideals are not yet dimmed by cynicism and bitterness. Youth dares to longer flights of vision than age's doubting sight can follow. Youth gaily takes risks which make crabbed age shake a warning head. And the amazing thing is that youth, in general, is right! What is it that has made the American nation so remarkable? Merely its childish readiness to believe in and try out new ideas — to experiment, in fact. It did not laugh at Edison's astonishing theories. It wrinkled its brows, puzzled a little, and then decided to back him up with money and influence. It believed in him, and thus it can now boast of having counted among its sons one of the greatest inventors the world has ever known. That is an example the older world to-day might do worse than follow, by ridding itself of its prejudices, its doubts and its fears, and having the courage to take every step which might lead to the development of the great forces of this world. Yes, indeed I agree with those who so constantly assert that youth must have its chance. Life in the past might have been compared to a forest wherein tall pines reared their stately heads upwards to the light, whilst youth, like the stunted undergrowth, was stifled for want of the sunlight of chance. It was forced to spend its precious years striving to reach up to the level of its elders, and to reap the fruits of success when it was too weary to enjoy their savour. I know that some of your modern idealists have talked of passing a law which would make retirement from business compulsory, say, at sixty years of age; they have even suggested that such compulsion should apply also to professional labours. That, of course, is carrying the argument to an absurd finish, because in a business undertaking experience is the most valuable asset, and in the artistic and professional worlds striving genius has no concern with age limit. It is true, perhaps, that in a good many instances your great new business concerns would, by this suggested law, be cleared of the incubus of aged and useless directors but in others they would lose the invaluable advice and assistance which experience alone can give. Besides, age and experience themselves are necessary to the wise guiding of the headstrong spirit of youth. What pitfalls could be avoided, what obstacles overcome, what heartbreaks saved if only age would put its hard-gained knowledge at the disposal of the next generation! Of course, I know the demmed young hotheads do not suffer guidance gladly. They will not always listen to counsels of prudence, indeed, they would be spiritless enough if they did; but there is such a thing as showing them tactfully the possibilities of trouble ahead, and helping them to develop their own experimental ideas, however crude they might seem to older and wiser heads. Youth is a force that no power on earth can drive, but which a silken thread can often lead — all the more easily when the thread is in the hands of a pretty woman. Far too often in this cautious age of yours do I see well-meaning parents compelling a lad to take up a career which is not congenial to him, and in which therefore he will never succeed. Why not let him take his own risks and be content to guide him adroitly so that those risks be not too great? And heavens above! why should parents insist on having their say and more than their say in their children's choice of husband or wife? Even in my day we had come to realize that to cross the temper of a young lover is the surest way to drive him (or her) into the very embraces one fears. Guide youth by all means, but do not seek to drive it. Give youth its chance, but do not stir it to revolt by holding the guiding-reins too tight. As with a mettlesome horse so it is with youth. Suggestion and love will in most cases call forth the very last effort of its strength, but the use of injudicious force will only result in a heartbreaking clash of opposing wills. There is in your world of to-day a young and eager spirit of endeavour and of ambition; that spirit is a gift from the more general spread of education which you have brought about and developed since my time. It is for you to guide it, your task to stimulate it when it droops, to revive it should it show signs of decline. If you are content to do this the result will repay you a hundredfold. And, egad! When in the course of the years that lie before you your men and women will have acquired not only the right to choose their own path in life, but also the strength to march boldly along it, to step over the rocks and thorns, to put a brave face after every stumble or fall, striving only to reach the summit of their ideal, then I say there will rise from out the ashes of the years of our failures the Phoenix of unconquered and unconquerable youth, with the torch of real progress in its hand, a torch that will lead this tough old world of ours to enduring happiness and peace.

CHAPTER FIVE. BUT DO NOT ALLOW PROGRESS TO BECOME A STEAMROLLER

And now, my friends, for a good old grumble. You will not, I hope, deny me the privilege, seeing that you have always considered grumbling the prerogative of your race.

I mean to have a doughty passage of arms with your giant machine Progress. It has served you well so far. Its very name is stimulating, inspiring — anything you like. But I foresee that soon, very soon, with all its high-sounding name and its inspiration, it will become unwieldy like a Titanic steamroller over which you will have lost control.

So long as your wonderful modern inventions, your machinery, your labour-saving devices are your obedient servants you will certainly enjoy a delightful and lazy existence; but as soon as these things become indispensable to you — that is, so soon as they dominate your life — they will rob you of your strength, of your manliness and your independence. Progress, the steamroller, will have become the master and you, his slave.

Let me, I pray, make my meaning clear. I have looked about me since the beginning of my visit to you and it strikes me pretty forcibly that the spirit of enterprise and initiative which used in my time to distinguish an Englishman — or a Scotsman or a Welshman for that matter — is fast disappearing. Education, you tell me, is spreading and brain power increasing. Faith, yes! that may well be. But what does it profit a man if he gain all the book-learning in the world and lose his power to put that knowledge to such practical use as will benefit his country first and the rest of the world as well? And what does a woman gain, even though she may know the insides of all the books ever printed, if she loses her zest in life, her joy in her home-surroundings, above all if she misses the greatest gift in the world — the gift of love.

Again you will tell me that in no time since the beginning of things has there been such systematic cultivation of bodily health. Our young athletes of to-day, you say — both male and female — would put to shame the gladiators, wrestlers and Amazons of the past. And I am quite ready to admit that. I admit the importance of physical culture, of the camaraderie engendered by games, the better understanding between nations aroused by Olympic contests — but only as a means to an end.

Tell me now, m'dears, what in itself is the use of hard sinews, of prowess at tennis or football, if tough muscles and keen eyes are not going to benefit anyone else but just yourself? You certainly will feel very well in health, you will stretch your scarcely tired limbs out in front of the fire and think what a demmed fine fellow you are. Your friends will gather round you, chair you after your more signal triumphs, pat you on the back and write columns about you in the newspapers. But in what way has humanity, the great teeming millions of the world, benefited by your winning that bicycle race? What, for a matter of that, did your country gain by it?

Empires, my friends, are doomed to fall as soon as their people become followers and not leaders of men. Initiative and enterprise are the bulwarks of a nation. It is they that built up your Empire — an Empire on which the sun never sets. Be proud of it, for God's sake. Be proud of it! Do not allow it to rush to its fall while you stand in your thousands watching a football match or an automobile race. Watch these by all means, delight in them, get as excited over them as you like, join in where you can, train your muscles and your bones and your eyes, but with a greater object in view than momentary pleasure.

It was because of this seeking after physical pleasure that the great Roman Empire crumbled and was laid in the dust; it was because of this striving after pleasure only that Spain sank into insignificance; neither of these mighty nations was physically effete; the Roman gladiators were second to none, the Spaniards of the day were unequalled at games with foils or ball. But life was gradually made easy and smooth for all but a very few. Initiative and enterprise were stifled in this scramble after pleasure. It was so much easier to loll about and watch a few playing or fighting than to venture forth as one's ancestors had done over uncharted seas or unknown lands to discover new, enchanted worlds. Nature's mountain heights of success and her chasms of failure were gradually levelled to a smooth, safe, unbroken plain, and the mirage of equality spread its feeble rays around instead of the glorious torch of enterprise.

Above all, m'dears, beware of that false goddess Equality. She is so insidious; her voice is so alluring, it sounds so noble, we may even say so Christian. But beware!

There has never been, there is not, and there never can be such a thing as equality, and every attempt to establish so false an axiom is doomed to tragedy or farce. Nature herself has set her face against it: brains, talent, beauty, imagination, every gift physical and mental she has dealt with a lavish hand to some and parsimoniously to others. And therefore the attempt to equalize these gifts by means of the steamroller of Progress can only result in levelling them down to the lowest faculties of man. A steamroller cannot build up; it can only crush.

During the late War would France have wished her Foch and her Clemenceau to be no more than the equal in talent and initiative to her Jacques Bonhomme? And in Russia shall simple peasant and saintly priest be moulded after the pattern of Stalin the murderer? Yet even Revolution, terrible and dangerous as it is, will do less permanent harm than this cushioned, soft soporific we term Progress. For did not France after her great revolution rise through blood and tears to a glorious resurrection, and who shall say that one day — soon, perhaps — Russia will not do the same, while all of you over here in this modern world of yours are letting yourselves go to sleep, lulled into false security by that insidious goddess, Equality and that other fetish, Progress.

Modern progress is fast outgrowing its strength. Equal education for a genius or a dunce, the taxation of the worker so that the idler may loaf, pleasures and entertainments in gaol so that the criminal might have equal opportunities for relaxation as the honest man, these and other factors in the so-called advance of civilization are like a two-edged sword.

Education should be the means of spurring the slow-witted and the unfit; taxes should never be a handicap great enough to impede success. Nevertheless, modern progress sets out to drive her steamroller relentlessly over every individual effort to do a little better than one's neighbour, to achieve or, at any rate, attempt something in life different from other people. It tries to educate the most unfit soldier in life's army into considering himself equal to a Field-Marshal; it penalizes thrift to aid the improvident, helps to foster the selfish feeling that so long as I'm all right the rest of the world can go hang!

By my faith, is not our British Empire strong enough to give a lead to other nations in trying to get this steamroller of progress into control again? Yet even whilst I go wandering through my beloved country I find that the gospel of self and egoism has spread with alarming rapidity since my day. You, my friends, have taken the mirage of equality to be a real and shining light. In your twentieth

century, taxes on hard work and thrift have ruthlessly increased, and many of you have resorted to juggling and guile in place of our old policy of outspoken truth. It is time that Britain took charge of her affairs, internal and external, with a stronger, a more firm hand.

In the times of your fathers and grandfathers which you are so fond of deriding, nearly all the great inventions, the great initiatives in the world had their origin in their brains. Great Britain led the way in science, in industry, in commerce, in the management of her Colonies. To-day half the time when something new, something of world utility in science or in pleasure comes to light, it has its origin in America or in Germany, in Czecho-Slovakia, or Timbuctoo. Your fathers and grandfathers led the way to progress. Are you content to follow meekly in the wake of the steamroller? They worked, they slaved, they saved for the glory of their country and your future prosperity. Do you mean to tell me that you will go on sitting still, twiddling your thumbs and waiting for other nations to feed you with a silver spoon?

Wake up, John Bull! Look around you. Don't go lolling along the paths of life which the workers of the world have made smooth for you. Step out boldly as you did in the past on the rough road of high adventure, and keep your steamroller of progress to its job of strengthening — not merely of smoothing — the trails which your gallant pioneers blazed for you at cost of their own ease and contentment, often at cost of their lives.

Do you recollect how the hero of a recent an-Arctic expedition, in order not to delay the advance of his comrades when sickness prevented him from keeping in step with them, fell out of line voluntarily and was left to perish alone in the ice? Faith! if you do not wake up there is danger that you will be lost in the drifts of obscurity. But to this falling out there will not be attached the glory of self-sacrifice, for your fame as one of the mightiest Empires the world has ever known will flicker out and die. But the world will roll on just the same.

Your shoulders are broad, friend John Bull, and you have your burden to bear in proportion to your strength. The last few years have seen many changes in the world, shifting of power and of responsibilities, and shirking of tasks. Because of the great traditions built up by your forebears, the world has looked to you more than once to put things right, to take a hand at the guiding helm, to direct the destinies of the world rather than stand by and see the reins taken out of your nerveless hands. Can you do it? Is the spirit of your race dead in you? I say it is *not*. Your hearts are as brave as they were in ages past, and now as then you scorn fear.

You have a responsibility towards the other weaker nations of the earth, a responsibility which tradition has placed upon you. Do not, in Heaven's name, allow that burden to slip off your shoulders. Remember, that if you do there are other nations ready to pick it up, to take your place in the new scheme of this world, your place in the sun, leaving you in the penumbra of oblivion.

Believe me, there's truth in what I say. Your fathers and grandfathers spent their brains and their lives freely for your country's sake. They were never content to see a rival nation usurp its place as the leader of progress and initiative. I'll never believe that you in your generation will let her down.

CHAPTER SIX. WHERE ARE YOU CORINTHIANS TO-DAY?

Lord love me! when I think of the chances that a man has in your twentieth century, opportunities for amusement, for adventure and romance, I feel that the Raleighs, the Hudsons or the Cooks of the past have great cause to envy you.

Just look at your aeroplanes! What delightful surprises I could have devised in my time for my amiable friend Monsieur Chauvelin (or was it Chambertin?) could I but have equipped my beautiful 'Day-Dream' with a pair of silver wings! And what about your radio, your express trains, your motor cars and great liners, not to mention your trusty friends, the telephone, electricity. Ye gods above, what an array!

At a casual glance it seems to me that ideas and ideals have changed, and that the vast number of people who complain that life to-day is dull and that it has none of the savour of romance which made it so joyous a thing in the time of rapiers and ruffles, are making it dull for themselves. Surely, if they would but look around they could find romance enough and to spare in the thousand new wonders of this busy modern world. But the demmed dull dogs, the croakers and the kill-joys are having it all their own way, it seems to me. They appear to be in the fashion, and Fashion's rule was always autocratic. Which — as things have turned out with you — is a vast pity.

Why have you no 'real slap-up Corinthians' now that progress is offering you new and exciting adventures every day? In my time most young men of fashion or spirit could show a neat hand and foot in the boxing-ring against the doughtiest opponent; they could ride anything ever foaled and drive against the Devil himself; and they were never backward, either, with a witty word or a gallant action.

Nor was this prowess confined to those whom Mammon had blessed. The 'prentice could sing a song or try a fall with anybody; the shopkeeper could tot up faults and virtues as well as ledgers; your tailor had a tongue as sharp in trenchant wit as his scissors were in cutting cloth.

And now, despite the fact that you possess all these new, romantic, exciting, delightful gifts from modern inventiveness, those of you who do not keep your nose close to the grindstone of money-grubbing adopt a silly air of blasé ignorance on the ground that knowledge is really a bore.

Now do not taunt me with the fact that I myself in my own time did ape the inanities and drolleries which were then the fashion, and no one ever wore a more vacant face or yawned more persistently than I did. I admit the soft impeachment, while reminding you that I only adopted my inane pose as a cloak in order to throw dust in the eyes of my friends at home and my enemies abroad. Whereas you young men of to-day seem to make a point of knowing very little more than you pretend, and of being bored with the little you do know.

If I were advising a young man of to-day on the way to make the most of his life — and, after all, it is the beauty of living that counts far more than the mere accumulation of riches — I would tell him to look wide, to be always ready and never afraid. The world is wider now than heretofore — a man can go adventuring and fortune-making across the seas. Modern business is so inter-related now among all the nations of the world that there is not a trade or profession which does not need foreign representatives.

I would tell him to learn, as far as lies in his power, to speak other languages besides his own. There is plenty of romantic thrill to be got out of a cheap trip across the Channel or the North Sea, and the thrill becomes greater still if you can understand what they say over there, catch their snatches of conversation, put in a word or two for yourself. It's no use saying: 'Oh, I'm not a linguist. I never could speak a word of French.' You never know what you can do till you try. Besides, you need not be a linguist to exchange a few words with pretty Mamzelle at Ostend or Boulogne, or the kind hostess who has made you comfortable in your holiday lodgings.

And don't forget that in life's adventure the man or woman who can speak a language or two besides his own is sure of good money. So put up your fists, m'dears, not to meet a prize-fighter, but to tackle those few words of French or German which you can assimilate quite easily if you put your mind to it.

Take your chance in that as in everything else. Don't be afraid. So long as you are doing a clean, honourable, wholesome thing take your chance of success and face boldly the possibility of failure. There is a marvellous feeling of satisfaction and pride in having striven after something that is worth while, even if that something is only your increased self-respect or your joy in having accomplished a task that at first seemed beyond your strength.

I would also advise your modern young man to spend a few moments every day in self-communion. Self-examination is so good for one. Let him ask himself the question: 'Am I a man? Can I, if opportunity arises, go out into the world? Am I brave enough to take risks? Is my heart stout enough not to flinch should danger of failure threaten me?'

At first probably your little self-satisfied ego will reply affirmatively and complacently to all the questions, and will add with a sigh the usual rider: 'But, of course, luck never does come my way. Look at So-and-So! The luck he had. No wonder he got on.'

But, believe me, those feeble arguments will gradually give place to more searching self-examination. The queries: 'Am I a man? Am I brave and self-reliant?' will be followed by a more insistent: 'Am I?' And out of a true understanding of self, will come that very self-reliance, that grit, that pluck which is the one and only road to success, and which will as surely as you live lead you to the romantic heights of content, of joy, and above all of love. You will find that you have in your life to-day a hundred per cent more romance than ever came my way, even though your romance wears a sombre coat and wields a fountain-pen where we wore ruffles and buckled shoes, and for the most part were compelled to sit at home, for we had neither cars nor aeroplanes to take us about the world, nor means to learn all its wonders.

CHAPTER SEVEN. SUCCESS? A PRACTICAL TALK TO THE AMBITIOUS

I can't think what it is about your modern world, but something certainly makes me more serious than I should have dreamed of being in the days of long ago. Maybe it is your air of ardent business activity, your restless and faster moving civilization, or the world's spreading financial gloom. At least it is making me a demmed earnest critic, full of gravity and heavy words.

I stood a while ago at the exit of one of the great London railway stations, watching the faces of those who passed. And do you know, in the space of an hour, I saw — apart from those who were in conversation with friends — three smiling faces! All the rest, and there must have been many thousands, were either drawn or tense or worried or frowning. And oh! my friends, so many of them looked inconspicuous. Now I cannot bear a man to lack some sort of an air, some soupçon of dare-devilry, some outward manifestation of courage and success.

And this makes me ask you whether you individually are content to be one of the weak, ineffectual, inconspicuous little people who look with envy on those others at whose careless feet Fortune has thrown her manifold gifts? Are you content to be numbered among those who murmur dejectedly: 'Some people get all the luck! I've always been an unlucky sort'? Do you confine your share of success and happiness and efficiency to wondering how others achieve it, because if so it is entirely your own fault.

Get rid of that fallacy that 'luck' accounts for the victories won by the more forceful of your competitors. Do not deceive your better self with the false argument that all the chances go to other folk.

Get out in the cold, unflattering light of truth, m'dears; a failure stripped of comforting illusions may not cut a very pretty figure there. But the very act of shedding the cloak of self-deception will be the first step along the path which will lead you to the sunlit kingdom of success.

There is one essential key to success — sincerity. There are many other minor keys; for the gate which guards success from those that seek it may be compared to one of your new patent safes, the lock of which will only open with the aid of a certain combination of letters. But emphatically, without sincerity, no lasting success can be won in any walk of life.

Very little work that is worth while can be done with your tongue in your cheek, nor can it be done supinely or carelessly. We should not expect, say, a carpenter, an artist, or an instrument-maker to produce fine work while he was busy gossiping with a pal or gazing up at the skies. A consummate artist or craftsman must concentrate every energy on his task, or his work will not be worth looking at.

And the same with the rest of us. Those splendid fellows who constituted the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel did not, believe me, approach with a superior smile the serious tasks which I had the honour to set them, nor did they dally contemptuously with them. Faith! M. Chauvelin would assure you of that. Nor did any of us try to beat a retreat before our task was neatly rounded off. Gadzooks! our heads would have paid the penalty for our supineness, and your success will pay the score if you shirk.

Your splendid modern poet, Rudyard Kipling, said a very true thing when he wrote that 'Half a proper gardener's work is done upon his knees.' The spirit of that applies to all good work. You must get down to it, take off your coat, and not be afraid of hurting your hands. You must take a pride in what you do, and put heart and soul into it. The attainment of success is the hardest task ever known.

Keep a smiling face before the world, have a gay laugh always ready to help you over the stony paths of life, and a joke at your command wherewith to hearten those who feel that their burdens are heavier than they can bear. La! my friends — I fear me I'm but a poor example, yet I contrived to get through the task of living without ever pulling a long face, even though there were at times devilish unpleasant duties to perform. When I remember the number of times that those demmed unpleasant fellows over in France spoiled the set of my cravat or made me exchange my ruffle for a coal-heaver's sack — why! I declare that I feel ready to lead the members of my League down to the nether pits for the mere pleasure of another bout with them!

Courage is the keystone of success, m'dears, and so are persistence, an intense and unflagging capacity for work, and yet more work, the strength of mind to carry on in face of failure and defeat, the gift of learning wisdom from mistakes, and lastly the power of extracting every ounce of romance and idealism out of life. The demmed fellow who said that success was one-tenth inspiration and nine-tenths perspiration was more than a wit — he was a prophet; though I am inclined to hate him for speaking such an unpalatable truth!

It is just as bad to allow reverses to discourage you as it is to allow success to go to your head. Success should never make you forget that even while you are still indulging in a transport or untimely bragging, you might find yourself dislodged from that particular rung of the ladder of fame which you happen to have attained. No game or battle is ever won till it has been fought for, nor is it won till the opponent is finally crushed.

This, at least, I see in your world of to-day; that it grants the guerdon of success only to those who by concentration, hard work and perseverance deserve to win it. And the surest way to win, m'dears, is to act up to the motto of one of your modern captains of industry: 'Always do even the commonest thing uncommonly well.'

CHAPTER EIGHT. YOUR LIVES ARE AS COLOURFUL TO-DAY AS EVER THEY WERE

One of the most amazingly romantic things about your twentieth century is the way in which the women of to-day have dared to proclaim their independence. I don't say that every manifestation of it is altogether good — faith! there will always be hotheads who go too far in any new venture, so long as women are the demmed delightful creatures they insist on being — but I do feel that the general trend is in the right direction.

Well I remember how urgently Lady Blakeney used to plead that what a man could do a woman would dare, and how hard I found it to keep her from joining my League whether I would or no! And I shall never forget the trouble we had in spiriting the *grandes dames* out of France because their voluminous petticoats made it so hard to hide them under a cartload of potatoes. But, by my faith! those were happy days.

To be serious, though, modern dress for women is certainly more fitting to this era of feminine courage and enterprise than were the hoops and crinolines of old; and it certainly is more suitable for the female adventurers who range themselves in comradeship or competition with men. And it contrives to be amazingly pretty, too. To my old-fashioned mind perhaps a little more softness and femininity would add eighteenth-century charm to twentieth-century efficiency, but it isn't for an ardent admirer of the sex to grumble!

The curious thing to me is that it is women who chiefly complain that this new age is unromantic. Gadzooks! they should have sampled French Revolution times in England, when a woman dared hardly look at a man lest heads and tongues started wagging over her name in all the clubs of London. This age unromantic for women? When women can go out into the wide world as freely as did the members of my League in the olden days!

A couple of days ago I ventured — invisibly, of course — to take a chair in the lounge of a women's club in London, where a number of the pretty creatures sat drinking tea and gossiping. You must forgive the liberty, but 'twas mine own name on their lips that first aroused my curiosity.

'What a humdrum world it is nowadays!' pouted one of the speakers — a sleek-headed girl still in her twenties but who had already won for herself an important position in the world of business. 'There's no adventure, no colour left in this rotten civilization of ours. It's just an age of standardization; personal enterprise never has a chance. If a man so much as flicks another in the face forty policemen spring up out of the ground; if one gets a scratch, it's forty doctors; if one dares to be candid one is rushed off to the Law Courts to answer a charge of slander. All civilization is in league to rob us of our emotions.'

'Quite right, my dear!' replied her companion. 'If the Scarlet Pimpernel were alive to-day, poor man, he would probably be clapped into lunatic asylum. That's how it is now, if one shows a hunger for adventure or a mere *wanderlust* one is no longer hailed as a pioneer or a leader of men. No — one is just bundled off to the nearest psycho-analyst!'

How mistaken they were, those two very youthful critics! And how bitter in their complaints that the world had grown drearier since my time and that the modern man and woman aimed at nothing but the commonplace, rejoicing in the fact that millions and millions more of them were cut after the same pattern as themselves, with no greater ambition than to earn a 'lived respected, died lamented' epitaph from the other pigmies around! And, la! how blind must their bright eyes have been not to see that the restful, picturesque divinity we called 'Romance' yesterday is not dead but just transformed into a shingled, matter-of-fact, but rather startling young thing, whose claim to be thought prosaic and blasé has almost made us forget her divine unexpectedness!

Surely even the most sophisticated of all you moderns could not fail to be thrilled by Miss Amy Johnson's adventure, when that young woman calmly climbed into the cockpit of her aeroplane in England and set out, a young girl alone, in a flimsy affair of wood and metal and canvas, to fly half-round the world to Australia?

Were you blind to the tragic romance in the world such as a little while ago, when the youth of a dozen nations marched, laughing and singing, towards the inferno of the world's greatest battlefield — yea, and returned to it again when its wounds had been patched up, not quite laughing, perhaps, after having seen Hell and lived, but still with a smile and a song and an unfailing readiness to help a comrade?

No, m'dears, I am not talking nationally now; the same spirit was evident in all the belligerent countries — the spirit of eternal youth and romance facing the most terrible Spectre that has ever sought to bring disillusionment and hopelessness upon earth. My League was gallant, but that immortal league of the adventurers of the War years, with its just as gallant sisterhood who carried on at home, makes our brilliance seem no more than that of a candle compared to the sun.

You may not find a Drake or a Columbus nowadays, or a Clive or a Brooke, because all the seas are charted and there are no fresh worlds to conquer. But I read lately of an unknown postman saving enough in his life-time from his weekly wage to found a leper hospital in India. Is that the task of a pigmy? And I see rusty tramp-steamers lying in a dozen ports around our coast, waiting their turn to venture out across the ocean, ready to sail from continent to continent whilst facing storms and gales which seem beyond the bounds of possibility for men to live through and conquer.

More can be done still, no doubt, to foster the spirit of chivalry and adventure, for only a day or two ago I read a published extract from the diary of the late Tsar of Russia, concerning myself, too. La! how famous one becomes through a slight appetite for amusement. 'I have been reading,' so ran the extract, 'an interesting new book — *The Elusive Pimpernel*,' and one became conscious of a wave of pity that there was no young gallant of to-day ready to attempt the rescue of that unfortunate man.

Be that as it may, I am still determined to champion the vital romance of your twentieth century. The colour of the picturesqueness are there; adventure calls insistently to you all; the trouble is that you will not open your eyes and see; you will not step aside from the straight and narrow road which you have traced for yourselves. But do not count me boastful, I pray, when I say that I could find just as much excitement, joy and zest in life in 1933 as ever I did in the days when I sat on a window-sill in Boulogne and scared my friend Chauvelin out of his wits.

CHAPTER NINE. AND ROMANCE STILL PAYS

In my own time romance was appreciated and sought after because it was colourful, charming, and added savour to the dullness of life. Lud! we could hardly be said to have lived at all were it not for the romance with which we filled our days. One is apt to think, however, that in this more practical era it is a thing of the past, but I'll have you know it for a fact that romance is anything but dead. Indeed, it is very much alive, and for the simple reason that — to put it bluntly — there's money in it!

Is not the growth of a gigantic modern business the most romantic thing in the world? Lookers-on at the thrilling event are apt to think that it is all an affair of ledgers and accountants, and of 'two-three a yard' cheaper than the rival establishment opposite. Egad, no! it is an epic of courage, an Odyssey of endurance, an all-conquering hope brought to triumphant success.

Names that are writ large in the book of the world's great captains of industry are not those of slow, steady-going, conservative, over-careful plodders, but rather those of men who have faced obstacles, defeats and disappointments with a stout heart, a gallant smile and easy jest; of men who have known how to encourage the timorous and cheer the despondent, and who have kept up their own spirit of determination and endurance until the height of their ambition has been attained.

And such men have found that there's money in romance, since without it they would have been too deeply engrossed in counting up the risks to seize opportunity when it came. Without their own romanticism they would in their youth have been far too prosaic and careful ever to dare to step forward without once looking back, or to leave security and ease behind and take the big risk for the sake of the big risk for the sake of the larger gain. They would, in fact, have kept their mind's eye on safety first, and would never have dared to carry on boldly and gallantly, ignoring the cautious warnings of age, in order to gain the great victories which fate holds in store for inspired youth.

Now that type of man, m'dears, once his feet are firmly planted on the road to success, will still retain all the romanticism which has brought him where he is. You will see him building swimming-baths and laying out playing fields for his workers so that they may indulge in the romantic struggle for sports supremacy; you will see him holding out golden inducements to his employees to work hard for promotion, or to invent something that will increase the firm's prosperity; and in your wonderful days of mechanical marvels a motor car is as good a prize for a winner in the race for success as were laurel wreaths or silken banners in the olden days, besides being far more useful.

And now tell me, do you deem the combine of two great businesses into one as anything but romance? Is not each side taking a big risk — the chance that the other concern might impair its own high credit, or involve it in some unforeseen financial disaster? Such things have happened. Such risks have to be run; and are not risks the very element of romance? And so is success in partnership when it comes; when W. S. Gilbert met A. S. Sullivan they set their brains to work together, and the result was a series of some of the finest operas the world has ever known.

True! but it is equally true that when Horrock's firm joined up with Crewdson's all the bedrooms of the world gained promise of finer sheets, and when Mr. Salmon and Mr. Gluckstein got together work was found for thousands of men and women and cheaper tobacco for millions. And though I hardly like to admit it, sheets and tobacco are quite as romantic as operas — most households could do without music, but not without beds, nor could they spare comforting, pleasant, delightful pipes, or good cigarettes which that romantic combine placed within reach of all.

I very much doubt if there is a single business man of any importance to-day whose career would not outshine in romance that of a good many fiction heroes. The late Sir Thomas Lipton was once an errand boy in Glasgow; Charles Levine, who recently flew the Atlantic to advertise his own aeroplanes, was selling newspapers at fifteen and was a millionaire before thirty; Mr. Woolworth and Mr. Selfridge, working along different lines, built up two of the world's biggest businesses from practically nothing; forty years ago the Joel family were quite unknown. Between the obscure beginnings of these men and their present eminence runs in each case a story of almost incredible initiative, hair-raising adventures, and grim, dogged determination such as would win our thundering applause if Mr. Fairbanks showed it to us on the screen.

There is yet another way in which romance still pays in business. Men, women and love have not changed one atom in essentials since my day when powdered wigs and rapiers were Dame Fashion's decree or, if you like, since the days of cavemen. To-day, as in that vague past so often called the Golden Age, the man works hardest who can win fond glances of gratitude for his pains — love glances from the woman who is his chosen mate. Love is and will ever be the greatest stimulant to a big output, to enterprising salesmanship, to brilliant engineering, or to the million unknown deeds of chivalry that are scattered throughout men's lives like the stars in the firmament.

The man of to-day cannot wield sword or lance, or enter the lists in honour of his lady's eyebrow; but it is up to him to compete in life's list so that he may be able to give her pleasure with the gift of luxuries, however simple or small. Therefore romance still pays, and will always pay while bright eyes are there to inspire courage. For courage makes for boldness and initiative, and these in their turn make for successful business.

To-day a man cannot do as he did in the days of the Stone Age. His worth is no longer counted by the number of skins and tusks and scalps piled up outside the door of his beloved's cave. But the man who succeeds now has lost nothing in romantic glamour; in your days it is just as thrilling to earn money honestly as it used to be to kill reindeer and bears; and furs, after all, can be purchased, provided that the cost of them has been earned first.

Romance is still king in the world to-day — it is only his regal garb that is changed. Beauty and bravery, love and courage, are the mainsprings that drive great enterprises even now. So do not, I pray you, bemoan the glories of the past when romance, like tis votaries, wore a somewhat cumbersome attire, but adjust your outlook to suit your wonderful modern world and, believe me, you will find as much that is romantic in the thudding mill or the teeming thoroughfare of to-day as ever strengthened the arm of the great knights of old, or inspired the Crusaders to conquer the Holy Land.

CHAPTER TEN. BUT YOU MUST LIVE DANGEROUSLY

I have just come across a vastly intriguing little statement — no less than this: that scientists who know how to estimate these things have stated that there are nearly twice as many people living in the world to-day as there were a hundred years ago. And that, surely, means that the chances of adventure and excitement are nearly twice what they were in my day. For every man, woman and child in the world may be the possible centre of romance for you. Each may be a good friend or a bitter enemy, or may give you an opportunity for a generous action, for the saving of a life or the better shaping of a character.

And meanwhile you grumble because, in this age of mechanical supply, coloured portions of thrilling life are not served up to you with your breakfast coffee or trundled along in a little barrow and left at your back door while you are busy adjusting your tie and choosing a handkerchief to match your shirt. Can you wonder that I am filled with amazement?

For you have the right spirit in you still. Everywhere I wander I see a sneaking admiration for the villain in plays, films or books, and even for the clever scoundrels of real life. And I know the cause of this sneaking admiration. It is because the villain or the cinema vamp, unlike so many of the timid productions of modernity, has chosen to break through those bonds of convention, which most of you wear so patiently and so persistently that they have hardened into massive and unbreakable chains.

Free of these bonds, those others — whom we term villains and vamps — have jumped out of life's rut with almost ludicrous ease; they have taken their chance, they have filled their lungs with the intoxicating air of adventure and when luck turned against them they paid the penalty with a certain glamorous courage.

I don't mean by that, bless you, that it is a fine thing to be a villain or a scoundrel. Between ourselves, such rascals are usually demmed unpleasant and dirty. But what I do mean is that this twentieth century of yours sadly needs waking up from its lethargic sleep, and its people made to breathe again, to stretch and to live. Yes, live! not as puppets, but as men and women ready to grasp at the opportunities offered to them by fate — opportunities of fame, of fortune and adventure.

A legend was told me once, my friends, by a Hungarian lady whom I had the honour to escort out of France under the very long nose of my friend Chauvelin in the roistering days when he and his like were turning that beautiful country into shambles. This quaint little legend had its origin among the Hungarian gipsies, who vow that Fortune is a bald-headed old dame with but a single hair on her head. She flits to and fro, they declare, in and about the atmosphere where human beings dwell. But only once or at most twice does she pass close enough to any one person to allow him or her to grasp her by her single hair and to hold her till success is achieved.

That legend may seem somewhat unchivalrous, but there's common sense in it none the less. For the goddess Fortune, capricious like all her distracting sex, chooses to come within our reach at odd, unexpected moments, when perhaps we happen to be afraid or uncertain, or merely looking the other way. A stare, a doubt, a fumble, and the chance is gone. Others get there first, seize in turn that solitary hair and hold on till fame and fortune come to them instead of to us, and in an access of self-pity we are left to envy the more fortunate!

The only way, believe me, m'dears, to eliminate that chance — or rather loss of chance — is to live all the time dangerously and fully. You must, all of you, young and old, make up your minds to spurn the weak, shuffling, apologetic murmur of 'Safety first'. Do you think for one moment that your vast Empire could have thrown its boundaries beyond the setting sun if your pioneer ancestors had used that slogan as their watchword?

I see too much anxiety in the world of to-day on the part of parents to find sons nice safe places in banks and offices and drapers' shops, and daughters jobs behind counters and on office stools. There must needs be clerks and secretaries, of course, and men who say 'Modom' and girls who say nothing at all that's worth recording. But, in the name of all that you have held great and dear and noble in the past, do not try to mould all your children after that one pattern!

All over the world to-day fathers and mothers sit anxiously planning careers for their offspring. Maybe the youngsters want to be artists or soldiers or engineers. But, says mother or father, art is 'hardly respectable' (though it is lauded up to the skies if it achieves fame!); soldiers, they argue, have to sleep out under nasty wet canvas; and engineering is such a dirty job. So the unhappy child, instead of turning dreams into great realities, is sent to Mr. Blobb's office stool for a life sentence.

It is really neither clever nor effective to sneer at the more dangerous walks of life. They may be risky or dirty, but hands can get dirtier and risk can be greater in many an office than in barracks or engineering shops. The safe, dull professions are overcrowded — filled to overflowing with smooth, little, purring people who are content and happy in their guarded lives. Meanwhile the world calls aloud for real men and real women who are fearless enough to leave the beaten track and to strike out on their own, even though their daring venture be made in the heart of a crowded city. It is the stout heart, m'dears, that matters, not the place where destiny has set you or the manner of task to which you have been called.

England is still the land of Drake, or Raleigh, of Nelson and a hundred other heroes and leaders of men. The spirit of progress still lives in her, the high endeavour, the love of adventure! Do not, in Heaven's name, allow these noble attributes of your glorious nation to be smothered beneath the pall of a deadening lethargy.

CHAPTER ELEVEN. ROMANTIC RADIO

Lud, 'tis marvellous! I vow I never dreamed of such an amazing thing! You may say it is all an affair of valves and grids, of coils and earths and aerials, of oscillation and interference. But to me it is no mere dull prosaic mechanical thing, but the most romantic invention in the world.

It keeps you at home? Nothing romantic in that, you say? Ah, but you are wrong! Home is the most romantic place in existence. Your cinema will show you magnificent hotels, glorious flats, garish night-clubs. Interesting, yes; but they pale to insignificance beside a cottage kitchen warmly lighted by a lamp, the snowy cloth set for tea, a baby sleeping in its cot, and a wife welcoming her man home after the day's work. And in the corner that wonderful little box which can bring the colour and brightness of the great world into this simple, remote workingman's home.

In times gone by, when there was no wireless, that same man would probably have gone out after his meal to a sociable evening at the village inn. No harm in that, of course, since the type of Englishman of whom I speak does not drink more than is good for him; but not much fun in it for his wife and the youngsters at home, was there?

But since the advent of these romantic days of the wireless, that same man takes his glass of beer in his own arm-chair at home. He listens to beautiful music, clever drama, or even an interesting lecture. Between whiles he talks with his wife, plays with the baby or, perhaps, if he is a handy man, he will be able to explain to his son details about the set and how to get more perfect reception. Somehow a closer intimacy now exists between that man and his family than used to be the case. Probably, too, the money which formerly went on various kinds of gambling and betting will now go to the improvement of the wireless set and the beautifying of the home. The father of the family has become a home bird. Prosaic, you say? Romantic, says his wife and the happiness in her eyes shows which of you is right.

If it is like this in the country how much more romantic is it in the big towns! The city clerk cannot afford to take his young wife to expensive musical recitals, and only rarely to the theatre or opera. But he can, and does afford to purchase a wireless set for her and then adds to it until it becomes a decorative and perfect mechanism by whose means she may listen, in the comfort of her own little home or flat, to Kreisler or Galli-Curci, or Chaliapin or Paderewski. These are gifts, indeed, and she knows it and loves him the more for it.

In these modern times there has been an alarming tendency towards taking meals and amusements outside the home, and it is this unfortunate custom which has largely been responsible for the great increase in divorce proceedings in recent years, and given ground for the statement that the British nation is no longer comfortable, happy and home-loving as it used to be. But since the romantic advent of radio, men and women alike, the very young as well as those of mature years, have acquired a real incentive to look on their homes as the place where they can find all the amusement they require as well as that true happiness for which we all crave on this earth.

Can anyone doubt the very great romance that lies behind Senator Marconi's marvellous invention? Surely, no one who has visited one of the modern hospitals equipped with the latest receiving sets? Is there, indeed, anything more romantic than this new power of giving to the blind visions of the crowded stages of life, or artists' triumphs, or gentle pastoral scenes? What greater romance than the soothing of pain by recalling to the sufferer's mind through the dreamy notes of a favourite song happy moments of the past and hopes of a brighter future to come? What is there finer than the power to banish the weariness from a sick bed through the stirring scenes of a gripping radio drama?

Then think of a vessel in mid-ocean, battling against perdition, making a last gallant stand against the angry waves, and sending her appeal for help crackling through the storm-ridden air. Then think of her message being picked up by one ship after another, each one of which at once turns in her course and speeds like a grey wolf to the help of a wounded mate. The unfortunate sailors and passengers, slipping on sharply sloping decks, and clinging in agonizing despair to life, realize the romance of the radio, for without it the greater romance of living would for them soon come to an end.

One more instance and I have done. Have you never heard of an S.O.S. message calling, perhaps to a son who has been out of touch with home for years — calling to him to come to the bedside of a sick mother or father? And having heard such a message and hearing subsequently that the son did come home, a still loved prodigal, to make a pillow of his strong arms for his dying mother, and did receive the kiss of forgiveness before Death closed those loving eyes in the last long sleep — having heard all that, I say you surely will not deny that one of the greatest romances of all times is the modern wireless.

There never was such a romantic thing as this, the one and only medium that can offer you in your own home, without any exertion on your part, and for an expense so trifling as to be negligible, the music, the arts, the knowledge of the entire civilized world, together with the voices of the greatest artists and scientists to interpret them for you. A waltz from Vienna, a song from Coven Garden, an opera from Milan, a recitation from Berlin, or a fox-trot from New York — you can have which you like for a few shillings yearly and the turning of a knob. It is more than romantic: it is the greatest of all the wonders of the world.

CHAPTER TWELVE. AWAY TO EL DORADO

Where are your adventures to-day? Where are your pioneers, your explorers, your Hudsons, your Raleighs, your Cooks? Has the love of danger and the spirit of daring died away altogether in this twentieth century, like a grand old oak dies when choked by ivy, leaving only a gnarled and naked memory of its former beauty? Have the clinging tendrils of the money-hunger crushed all the dare-devil spirit from men's souls, so that now the most thrilling risk they dare to take is a mild flutter on the 3:30 winner at half-a-crown each way?

If it is not so, why is it that at this moment when the Colonies are crying out for men, and at home in England you have three million of them out of work, the dribble of emigrants to the El Dorado overseas is so shamefully meagre?

I know that on reading this hundreds of statisticians will frantically rush to their pens and ink with the purpose of proving me hopelessly wrong. They will bombard me with columns of figures, produce a barrage of information to the effect that the Colonies just now do now want immigrants, that they have no room for their own people, in fact, and generally demolish me with final proofs that the thing for young men and women to do who are jobless and hopeless in England is to sit down at home, draw the dole comfortably, and wait for something to turn up. Which is nonsense!

The thing these figure-wizards forget is that they are dealing with little cyphers in black on white sheets of paper. Whereas, I am arguing about men and women, flesh and blood and spirit, courage, high endeavour, fearlessness, enterprise and brawn. My emigrants — the kind the Colonies do want and make no secret of wanting — are what our vivid friends the Americans call 'go-getters'. They are prepared to meet difficulties and even hardships, they are clear-sighted visionaries with a definite goal ahead, and they intend to get to it if human muscle and sinew and human ingenuity can get them there. They are the spiritual descendants of the old pioneer who blazed the trail in the olden days across Africa, Australia and America.

Never before has the wider world offered such a variety of opportunities. Of course it does not want wastrels, won't-works and failures — it is not just a vast office, warming up comfortable seats for the folk the Old Country has no use for. But it does want men — real men and real women — and for them it holds out the most glittering rewards in money, fame and happiness.

Moreover, jobs to-day are easier than they were even a few years ago. Hewing of wood and drawing of water are no longer the beginning and end of a pioneer's life. There is room for professional men in their thousands, for traders, for business men, for manufacturers, for policemen, for porters, in fact, for every possible branch of labour. But these men must be the best of their kind and, unless they are still young enough and willing to learn, they must be efficient craftsmen or practitioners before they think of going overseas.

But once out there they can go ahead and achieve all the success they can possibly wish for. At home every trade and profession is so overcrowded that only men of exceptional ability can make (say) a thousand pounds a year. But one man I read of recently went from a little west country town to Australia four years ago, at the age of eighteen, took up a small Government concession of land on the usual condition that he cleared it in a specified time, cut and sold the timber from it, ploughed and sowed the fields, took in more land, began employing others, and now after these four years he has built himself a homestead and is not only very prosperous, but well on the road to becoming a rich man. But then he is a *man* — the sort of man to whom in the old days my League was always open. Despite the recent Australian financial and labour troubles, he made his way surely and steadily and gave the lie to the Dismal Jimmies who are always telling modern young people to stay at home and do nothing.

Take that other great country — Canada. Faith! there must be something very stimulating in the air of the great prairies, for I have met young men and women out there who came from the Old Country, but who had suddenly shed, as if by magic, the cloak of supineness and discontent which some of you are so fond of wrapping round you. You go over the great lakes in one of the luxurious C.P.R. boats, and I'll vow that you'll be struck at once with the smartness and the quiet, elegant manners of the young men and women who wait upon you in the dining-hall, the tea-room and your cabin. Unless you feel exceptionally morose you will enter into conversation with that fair-haired young steward who has such shapely hands and wears such nice clean linen. And he will tell you that he is a University student at Toronto, that his father is a barrister or doctor or parson in the Old Country with not enough money to spend on University education for his sons; so he — the eldest of the bunch — came out to Canada with a few pounds in his pocket, and pays his 'Varsity fees himself with money which he earns during vacation time at any job that comes his way.'

Then when you land from the boat, as likely as not, the porter who carries your bag and to whom you give a fifty cents' tip, is the son of an archdeacon or the grandson of an Earl; and the chambermaid at your hotel will turn out to be the daughter of that Lady Alice Something or the Hon. Mrs. Something-else whom you met in London society. These young people out there do not consider for a moment that by their work they have come down in the social world. In the rarefied atmosphere of the Rockies work of any sort or kind is just the means of earning money — money that can be expended in education or amusement or lightening the burdens of the old people at home.

I have been vastly amused recently by reading in your newspapers various letters of protest on the subject of domestic servants. They themselves — some of them — call their occupation degrading, and I am sorry to see that in this ridiculous attitude they are backed by educated women who should know better. Degrading? Heavens above! no work efficiently done for wage loyally earned can possibly be degrading. Whether you wear a becoming white cap or whether you don't, you are doing the one thing that ennobles every character and heightens self-respect — work. You might as well argue that there is degradation in wearing the King's uniform.

It is the spirit that enters a man's or woman's soul out there in the great primitive countries that we who love our tight little Island would like to see at home.

Suppose I — even I, your old friend the Scarlet Pimpernel — had to carve my fortune to-day. Suppose I was still very young, but without the wealth which enabled me to satisfy my craving for adventure by pitting my wits against the tigers of the French Revolution, what would I do to save myself from dying of *ennui*? Would I, do you suppose, sit down and draw my dole, making no effort to gain more from life than ease and two square meals a day? Would I be content never to risk my precious self a yard away from the apron-strings of my Mother Country? Faith! I trust not.

I'll tell you where I'd be. I'd pack myself off steerage on one of those emigrant ships which I have seen gliding so smoothly down the Clyde or the Thames; I'd crave leave to join that gallant company of youth who, when chances look unpromising over here, set their faces boldly towards the East, the West, the North or the South, to go out (as bravely as ever my friends Tony and Ffoulkes went out to France with me) to meet high adventure wherever it may be found, and to carry the pioneer spirit — the old spirit of Mother England — to the most distant corners of the earth.

Your ancestors — those sturdy soldiers of fortune of past centuries — must look with pride on their children's children, I'll warrant, when an emigrant ship sets off so gaily from the quayside. Maybe she is only a rusty old tramp, but to the ghosts of the trapper and trader of old she is as gallant as the *Mayflower* or the *Revenge*. Her passengers seem to you and to me no more than raw youths and disappointed men, but the spirit of Hawkins and Grenville call a welcome to the blood-brothers of their long-dead shipmates, to those who sought with them in the days that are gone the land of El Dorado that lay beyond the uncharted seas.

And at least the emigrants are better adventurers than many of their critics, who shiver and draw closer to their fireside at home, and shake doleful heads wisely over the chances and risks which those emigrants are ready to dare, but which the critics themselves are too supine and fearful to face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN. THE ROMANCE OF PATRIOTISM

This is a critical moment, m'dears, in the history of the country we all love so well; indeed, it is a time of danger, or doubt and difficulty for all the world. And for this evil there is only one cure — a great and ennobling patriotism which will stimulate the citizens of every nation into serving their own country bravely and selflessly, and will inspire every country throughout the world to encourage and to be of help to its neighbour.

Above all, it is imperative that England shall stand firm in the midst of this world of gloom and of doubt. For three hundred years and more all the nations have looked upon England as a small boy does on his big brother — sometimes with anger, sometimes with enmity, even with envy, but always with a certain sense of hero-worship. Spain straddled the world like a Colossus till the roll of Drake's drum sounded her death-knell; the shadow of Bonaparte darkened all Europe till a little one-armed sailor with a copybook maxim knocked out the keystone of the bogey-man's edifice of power; Germany's irresistible might, marshalled for the destruction of her rivals, was broken by the Old Bills of 'Frenches' contemptible little army!

But England, m'dears, has a chink in her armour, an Achilles heel into which Fate will plant a poisoned dart one day. It is her strength as well as her weakness — the thing that beat the Kaiser as well as that which may presently rend the Union Jack to shreds. England's foreign friends are wont to say to her: 'You English, you must always have your grumble. In war it was your plum-and-apple jam; in peace it is your Government. And now when the world is staggering, will you just go on grumbling and waiting for things to come right in the end? Because that way lies ruin for England,' they say, 'and ruin for England would be a deadly blow for the rest of the world.' But remember, my friends, that there is still one thing which in this terrible and grave crisis can and will save our beloved country from utter collapse. It is the romance of patriotism. The sailor may forget the sea, the wooer may forget his love, but is there a Frenchman to this day who does not thrill at the sound of the name of Napoleon, or an American whose eyes do not flash when he listens to the 'Star-Spangled Banner'? And, believe me, that there is no Briton worthy of the name whose heart fails to beat a little faster while he hears around him, or joins in intoning, the lusty strains of 'God Save our King'!

Other nations are apt to say that there is very little real patriotism in England; that her peoples are nothing but a community of huckstering shopkeepers whose only thought is for their tills. In answer to this lying statement I would ask this question: 'Who were those who marched singing and jesting into the inferno of Flanders mud in 1914?' Were they mere money-grubbers? And was it the worship of Mammon that caused the glorious names of Ramillies or Blenheim, of Corunna, Trafalgar or Rorke's Drift and a score of others — names now almost illegible through the dust of ages — to be recorded on the tattered regimental banners which hang in St. Paul's Cathedral or at Windsor?

Abroad one often hears the remark — 'As safe as the Bank of England.' Is not that the finest tribute that could be paid to the patriotism of our people to the trustworthiness and reliability which characterize our race? Wherever you may go you will find that English credit stands high. Even to-day, when England is fighting a grim battle to uphold her financial predominance in the world, her commercial good name has never once been questioned.

Facing the greatest crisis in her history — one which is in many ways more strenuous than that of 1914 — Britain astounds the emotional Frenchman and the stern German by her *sang-froid*, by making light of what she calls unnecessary fuss, and by declaring that everything will come out all right in the end. That is her usual attitude. Her patriotism during this crisis takes the same form of fearlessness as it did whenever she was called to arms, of reluctance to talk heroics, of indulging neither in lamentations nor in boastful tirades, only in an occasional grumble before turning resolutely to the task of reconstruction.

So far so good. But in this world of interdependent relationships and interwoven commerce, credit, m'dears, and international trust are essential to the safety of every country. And I am afraid that your apparent indifference to the imminence of the peril, your casual grumbles and scornful pooh-poohs are shaking foreign confidence in Britain, and engendering the fear that such an easy-going nation as you are will never have the energy to pull through so serious a crisis as the present one appears to be.

The time has come, my friends, for your patriotism to take on a new form: that of showing a more determined, aye, a graver face to the world, and of indicating by word as well as by action that Britain is able to stand firm and erect even in her present trouble. Paris, New York, Berlin, are all of them watching you anxiously. On their impressions of you much of Britain's immediate prosperity depends. World credit is a thing which rests entirely on that elusive factor — confidence. So now I ask you is this not the time for John Bull to take off his coat and give the whole world proof of his ability to face trouble?

It is no use just indulging in a drowsy grumble; the citizens of Pompeii doubtless grumbled when they were first warned that their city was threatened by a volcanic eruption, for excavations have proved that they were taken wholly unaware. England to-day is far more seriously threatened than they were. Then why should we not give to the rest of the world proof of what we know well in our heart of hearts: that our country is well able to take care of herself and ready to meet her troubles and to face hard facts? Not only is this attitude vital to our own existence, but to the safety and comfort of the whole world. For if England falls she would not go down alone, but would drag half the world with her in a Titanic collapse. Never truer than to-day were the words of the poet:

'Who stands if England fall?
Who dies if England live?'

And yet, side by side with the sublime romance of true patriotism — and what I have said applies to other countries as well as to England — there is the danger of fanatical enthusiasm. Patriotism in its best and truest sense means putting the interests of one's country before one's own, doing one's utmost to make its name synonymous with peace, justice, courtesy and power, and upholding its dignity before all other nations. It is not, and never was, a sort of excuse for trumpet-blowing and sabre-rattling; it does not condone that awful and inexcusable thing — war. But of this more anon. Faith! I cannot bear even to breathe the words of *romance* and *patriotism* in connexion with that hideous blot on your civilization of to-day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN. THE WORST BLOT ON YOUR CIVILIZATION

Can you doubt for a moment what it is? Does not every thoughtful man and woman cry out against war, that hydra-headed monster which has dragged on its hated existence for centuries after other outrages and brutalities have been banished from the earth? War, the suicide of weak nations and the poisoner of strong ones; war the useless, costly incubus for the fattening and training of which hundred of millions of pounds are wasted annually, while the poor and the diseased in every great city in Europe are clamouring, often unavailingly, for food or medical care!

In my day we thought war a romantic thing. Men hastened to don picturesque uniforms, to take sword and march in the wake of their country's banner. We took up arms in defence of other nations, for war to us meant a game, and a game in which there were definite rules to be observed. It was a game that had to be played fairly and, like any other game, it was usually enjoyed by the players.

The rival armies fought in the age-old method, hand to hand. The battle went to the strong, to those who could best endure the physical strain, or who possessed enough cunning to outwit the enemy. Let me recall to your mind the history of the capture of Quebec. It was not bloodshed and slaughter that won that glorious day. It was sheer recklessness and mother wit. Wolfe's men rowed with muffled oars over the wide St. Lawrence, silently they scaled the well-nigh inaccessible Heights of Abraham and, taking the French garrison wholly by surprise, they forced the citadel to surrender.

But modern warfare is a demmed unpleasant thing, my friends, and it is one of the few things in your twentieth-century civilization that I heartily dislike. Private quarrels are no longer settled by poisoned daggers or mailed fists. Why, then, do nations — presumably led by the keenest brains amongst them — rush to blows like quarrelsome navvies whenever their complacency is slightly disturbed?

Wars would cease to be if the man in the street had real control of affairs, such as democratic governments fatuously pretend that he has! Ask any man you meet whether he wants to get into uniform and go out into the muddy, bloody trenches, or patrol the seas, waiting to be blown to pieces by a mine or a torpedo! Not he! He is patriot enough to do it without a murmur when his country calls, but what he wants is peace. Ask any woman what she thinks of war: it is more manifestly cruel to women, perhaps, than it is to men. Watch her agony of mind and heart when she thinks of her husband or sons in hourly danger of death by shell-fire or poison gas, of her young children dying, perhaps, for want of food. Watch the women's agony, and know then the hideous blot of your otherwise wonderful civilization.

It is all so wasteful nowadays! A great battleship is built to-day, champagne wets her bows, she slides down the slipway amid thunderous cheers, and the crowd who the pageant gives a sigh of appreciation at the grandeur and beauty of it all. To-morrow, or in a couple of years, what is she? In peace an out-of-date scrap heap, superseded by vessels of newer design and carrying millions of the nation's money with her to the breaker's yard; in war a shell-torn, twisted, burning Hell, in which wounded and dying cry out in their last agony.

The guns, the tanks, the cases of rifles, the gay or sober uniforms — what happens to them? Progress, unable to sweep away war, ruthlessly casts them from her as she has cast aside the bow and the muzzle-loader and the pike; and once again vast fortunes are dribbled away which might have been used for furthering the welfare of mankind.

You call your ministers by such obsolete titles as 'The Secretary of State for War', the 'Lords of the Admiralty', and so on. When will a generation arise that has the sense to elect a Government which will appoint a 'Secretary of State for Peace' and a 'Lord of the Merchant Service'?

You still speak of war as if it were a glorious thing. It is not! The men who saw their friends smashed and poisoned in Flanders mud, diseased in prison camps, and freezing in the North Sea — they saw this so-called noble thing at first hand, and somehow the death's head that it really is, was, for them, stripped of the bunting in which it wraps itself, and stood out in all its horror and bestiality. Civilization has made of the old, clean fighting between man and man a horrible struggle in which millions of men are sacrificed to the monster of mechanical death and mutilation, and that monster is the product of this otherwise wonderful age.

At all times there have been scoffers, and I make no doubt that they would say to-day that a world in which war would never find a place would no doubt be ideal, but that there are at least two objections to permanent compulsory peace. One is that army men who are trained to fighting would have nothing to do; and the second that peace-loving nations would have no protection against aggressive or greedy ones if their armed forces were entirely disbanded. Now I would contend that neither objection is worth a moment's consideration. Could not the same organization now employed for the training of armies and the equipment of navies be turned to civil uses as state organizations for providing work instead of state weapons for purposes of butchery? Millions of money would thus be saved every year which are now spent on battleships, fighting equipment, and all the rest of the arms' departments which would then be no longer needed. As for the insecurity of nations, why not further strengthen the hands and increase the power of the League of Nations so as to make it really an International clearing court for the settling of International disputes? And this could be easily done by organizing an international police, or *gendarmérie*, a combined force whose duty would be the same as that of the usual police force in every country, only on a grand scale; namely, to see that the dictates of the clearing court are acted upon and, if necessary, to enforce obedience to the laws.

If this could be done peace would be assured for all time. And let it be the task of your generation to see that it comes about now that the world is so heartily sick of wars. A great statesman said recently that it is a 'far more difficult thing to make peace than to make war'! Egad! it is. But civilization *must* have peace if all your modern progress, of which you are so justly proud, is not to end in chaos. Emphatically, the greatest blot on your marvellous advancement towards perfection is that war is still possible. And yet it means blood, tears, hatred, murder, robbery, whole-sale destruction and unappeasable sorrow...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN. THE GLAMOUR OF OLD THINGS

Egad! you will write me down a croaker if I continue in the same strain. So, by your leave, we'll turn our backs on the horrors of war now and look once more on the beauty, the gentleness, the romance in which your twentieth century is so rich.

So let us begin by talking about old things and old places: pictures, furniture, Queen Anne houses, Jacobean mantelpieces and Grinling-Gibbons carvings. What is there in them that lends them such glamour and a witchery more alluring than diamonds or pearls or a heavy banking account? I forget who wrote the lines: —

'Laces and ivory, silks and gold,
Need not be new.
And there is healing in old trees;
Old roads a glamour hold.'

but they are strikingly true. It is just this inexplicable glamour of age which turns your quiet and respectable citizen into a fierce collector of pictures, first editions, furniture, armour, and all manner of things that are of no practical use to him. You will see him in the sale-room with eyes flashing wrath when he sees some dusty treasure pass into the hands of a rival collector; and this in defiance of the commandment which enjoins him not to covet his neighbour's goods.

His eyes flash, did I say? Faith! but your fanatical collector of antiques can look as grim and as bloodthirsty as did those collectors of aristos' heads in the troubled Paris of my day.

What is it that gives old things a charm far beyond that of the glittering gew-gaws of to-day? You may as well ask why the sunlight surpasses in splendour this demmed new flood-lighting of yours. Is it not a fact, m'dears, that when you stand in an ancient cathedral or look on the canvas of a long-dead masterhand you feel a thrill of wonder — almost of awe — which is absent when, for instance, you gaze on modern London or Paris, on the new luxury hotels and palaces and the new dwellings on the river where Hammersmith was lovely long ago?

There are certain qualities which undoubtedly lend enchantment to old things, be they works of art, buildings or what you will.

Firstly, there is the impression of loving care with which those ancient works of art were fashioned. The canvases, statuary or buildings which you treasure to-day as supreme examples of your predecessor's art are instinct with life and feeling because the artists who created them made each one of a definite and worthy part of his life's works. They were great men, those craftsmen of old, who understood that it is more blessed to give than to receive; and so they caught and imprisoned for posterity impressions of beauty, of strength and of wonder while the world about them clamoured for more material, quicker, more ephemeral things. By gad! I remember in the old days how the dandies of my time collected lovely objects. We filled our houses with beautiful things, Tudor and Jacobean silver, delicate, fragile china from Worcester or from France, and filmy lace from Mechlin. And now you collect my snuff-boxes and Tony's wine-glasses. The world has not changed over-much since then!

Partly, this longing to collect beautiful or rare old things is due to hero-worship, which causes you moderns to feel that the possession of, say, an authentic manuscript of Shakespeare or some other great writer of the past is worth striving for, even though this may mean a financial sacrifice, the expenditure of money which took years, perhaps, of patient toil to save. But deep down in the bottom of your hearts you are ready to admit that these mighty geniuses understood not only their own age, but, prophetically, mine also and yours. They penned the words, faded now, which you are willing to purchase just as we purchased them in our days — because you know that those words were written by them with an inspired pen and that they were written not only for their contemporaries but for you who are living now.

In the same way you are conscious of a desire to own the wares for which the artists and potters of their day had perhaps failed to find a market; you want to own them because their creators call to you over the gulf of centuries, and do so in the immortal and universal language of art — a language which education is helping the world to understand more fully every day.

And then again, old things emphasize the value of leisure and of peace. You moderns are far too apt to glory in the fact that you can, by dint of turmoil and unease, crowd more action into one day than your fathers could into two. It is a passing phase, for you gain nothing by losing your appreciation of leisure. Old things, by their very contrast, recall you to the fact that while work may be a very good thing, the sense of peace which they bring is equally good.

Lastly, there is your appreciation of the value of detail in the great works of art of the past and the influence of minute factors. If you study a picture by Vermeer or a book by Chaucer you constantly come upon fresh evidence of the loving care with which the artist or the writer conveyed to the insensate vehicle of his thought the vivid sensitiveness of his own master-touch. You learn to appreciate the thoroughness which brought about the exquisite results.

And so you love old things because they possess qualities which are not of your age, and are therefore but rarely met with. In spite of the modern wonders of your era, in spite of the beauty of the world to-day, you love the old beauty still, the beauty of Shakespeare and of Keats, of Sir Peter Lely and Gainsborough. Accustomed as you may be to the varying contours and charms of the ladies of to-day, you still love to feast your eyes on the types of feminine beauty which Reynolds used to paint, and the vagaries of the naughty Lady Hamilton are forgotten beneath the magic of Romney's immortal brush.

You have your cinema to-day, which shows you on the same evening events that happened but a few hours ago and even goes so far as to reproduce the sound that accompanied them; but all the same, you are not averse to lingering over the beautiful word-pictures which Addison and Swift drew of their slow-moving contemporary life.

All things are welcome by contrast with others, and you hustling, bustling people of to-day enjoy the contrast afforded by ancient calm and perfect craftsmanship. And in my own time it was just the same; never did I enjoy the peace and sweetness of my Richmond gardens so keenly as I did after I had been shouting: '*A la Lanterne!*' with the worst of them, clad in a grimy coal-heaver's rags in the cobbled streets of old Paris.

And yet . . . Oddsfish! 'tis a curious reflection, my friends, that we never appreciate beauty to the full until it is beyond our reach. Looking back on the England of my own times, it seems to me a dream of Paradise; and yet see how I used to skip across the Channel in search of adventure which would whet my appetite for the joys of home.

To me your modern England is every whit as beautiful as was mine in its day. But you, my faith! find it unbeautiful and dull. You prefer to sit in a Hepplewhite chair, turn your toes to an Adam mantlepiece and, forgetting all the marvels of to-day, peruse the record of my adventures among that howling Paris mob.

Gadzooks, my friends, what fools we mortals be!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN. A WORD ON THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSAL GOODWILL

Of course, modern war is intolerable. Had we in mine own time ever visualized such a nightmare we should have spent days and weeks in sack-cloth and ashes trying to think out a means by which it could be averted; certainly we would never have tolerated it. That you moderns, boastful of your progress, should do so is almost unbelievable, all the more so when one remembers how interdependent you nations are in the world of to-day.

A century ago it mattered little to England, as far at least as comforts were concerned, whether she fought with the Frenchman or the Spaniard or the Russian. Cognac, cigars, snuff and caviare were no less plentiful because of a battle or two. Faith! we'd have thought demmed unkindly of a war that robbed us of these pleasant necessities of life. But your modern wars — gadzooks, my friends! ye tighten your belts at the very outset and by the time the armistice is sounded you're scarce more than miserable shadows of your former comely selves. Hunger, privation, sickness, sorrow, starving children, your wives deprived of every comfort that makes life and them charming — all these horrors can be avoided if half the world lived in amity with the other half.

For the interdependence of the world of to-day has become a serious question. In my day Great Britain was, if not absolutely self-supporting, at least well able to provide for all her children at a pinch without suffering the miseries of food shortage or the intolerable discomforts of margarine and cotten stockings. But to-day matters are very different. When you get your cotten from America, your wood from Norway, your meat from the Argentine, your fruit and vegetables from France, your flour from Russia, your butter and eggs from Denmark, you are in a demmed awkward fix, my friends, when you are fighting. Even if your scattered Empire was able to provide you with all the food you need you would scarce be better off when half the seas are closed to your ships.

Therefore the only wise thing to do is to be good friends with your neighbours; not only by word of mouth and in the columns of newspapers, but in reality. And to attain this happy object you must try and understand one another better. In the past mutual understanding was very difficult. There were no such things as travelling facilities. Your rich young bloods were the only ones who were able to make what was known as the Grand Tour; they would go to France, to Italy perhaps, to Spain hardly ever; but as they spoke no language but their own and travelled with a retinue of lackeys and horses and carriages so that they never were forced to look after themselves, it was but little they ever understood of the countries which they visited. As for the rest of the social world in England, the average Briton of his day, the man in the street, in fact, looked upon himself as the salt of the earth and upon all foreigners as its scum, to be despised if England was at peace with their outlandish country, or thrashed if they dared to go to war.

And, mind you, this attitude of mind in your tight little Island persisted well into the Victorian, the Edwardian, even the Georgian era. Shall I not be stating a truism when I say that but for it you would never have been dragged into that abominable war? With sound understanding of all the nations who started that abysmal quarrel you would have exerted your diplomacy and your tact to better effect, and brought about reconciliation. But I must not talk to you about politics which have always been outside my province. My propaganda is only for love and peace.

Now that you have shaken off the more recent nightmare of national bankruptcy and once more feel hope for your country's future and determination to aid her where you can, do not in Heaven's name fall back into the archaic attitude of despising your neighbours. Think yourselves the salt of the earth by all means, but remember that there is salt in other countries besides your own.

No nation to-day can exist without purchasing or borrowing something from its neighbours; be it articles of food or of commerce, or the product of the brains of its great men and great artists. In all the sciences and in all the arts you are interdependent and obviously you must be good friends with the man from whom you borrow. It has been said more than once that if a man is sick he should go to Germany to be diagnosed, to France to be operated on, to England to be nursed. For the past three years you, who possess artistic souls, have revelled in the masterpieces of Italy, of Holland and of France which have been brought over to your country at great risk and expense for your delectation. You can enjoy to-day the admirable photo-plays from America, from Germany and from France. The cost of travelling has been so reduced that you can cross over to Belgium or to France more easily than in my time one could go from London to Brighton.

And, above all, you have lived in comradeship through four terrible years and learned all there was to know of the courage, the endurance, the patriotism of those by whose side you fought — aye! I'll even venture to add that you have seen all there was to admire in your enemies.

Hang on to that thread of amity, m'dears! Do not allow it to snap in the turmoil of politics and the noise of agitators. Polemics, I know, assert that the virtues of courage, endurance and self-sacrifice are only kept alive by wars; that in time of prosperity and of peace there is no opportunity for the exercise of those wonderful qualities; but I say that such an argument is arrant nonsense. Need I quote instances? Captain Oates, whose deed of selfless valour, I, for one, cannot hear recounted without feeling a lump in my throat. And what about all those doctors — there are many of them — who in the pursuit of science have seen their limbs wither away in disease, and even then have carried on until death put an end to their sublime self-sacrifice. Go to a pit-head when there has been an explosion, and see the miners go down into what must be hell to try and rescue their comrades. Watch the lifeboat in a storm.

And these virtues, m'dears, these evidences of courage and self-sacrifice you will find in every nation. Men are men all the world over, and women of every country have been as heroic as the men. Do not sneer at their faults; you have plenty of your own. Try and understand their little ways even if they seem strange to you at first. You can admire their virtues because you are generous to a fault; then hold out your hand to them in friendship: it will redound to your credit throughout the centuries that are to come if you are the first in these troublous times to cast aside pique and misunderstandings and, eschewing every quarrel, act up to the gospel of universal love.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN. TO THE LADIES — GOD BLESS 'EM!

Call me impertinent, put me down an ass for daring to broach the subject, but listen to me all the same. You see I had a French wife. I lived, as you know, for many years in France. I met people of all nations during my adventurous life and, in your ear, dear ladies, I made love to your adorable sex whenever and wherever any of you deigned to smile on me. So, I entreat you, to give me credit for knowing something of the subject about which I wish to speak.

How often have I heard English girls, Scottish girls — girls, in fact, of Great and Greater Britain — laugh, none too kindly sometimes, at the peculiarities of their foreign sisters. 'French women don't wash,' or 'German women are dowdy,' or 'Italians reek of garlic' are generalities which one hears emitted on every side, mostly, I'll admit, by those whose foreign experiences are confined to Boulogne or Ostend.

Mind you, when I am on the other side of the Channel I hear the same generalities: 'English women can't cook!' or 'They have eight-seven kinds of religion and only one kind of sauce' and 'They have no idea how to wear their clothes.'

And it is against these fatuous generalizations that I would like to enter a vigorous protest. I am at one with you, m'dears, in deeming my own countrywomen the cream of the earth, but do you know why that is? Simply because I understand them better than I do the beautiful creatures of other countries. Though I have travelled far and wide I was born and bred among my own people: from childhood I have romped and played with little British girls. I know their virtues and their foibles and love them for both — so do you.

You know, for instance, that not the finest chef abroad can cook fish, or game, or fry bacon better than, what is sarcastically termed, 'a good plain cook' over here. You walk down any part of London — whether it be Bond Street, Kensington High Street or Kilburn or Hammersmith, and you see just as many smart young girls tripping along as you do in Paris or in Vienna. You are conscious of these things, and so when you hear of any disparaging remarks made about you by a foreigner you just shrug your pretty shoulders and say to yourself: 'How ignorant those dagoes are!'

Well, m'dears, that is where I come to the pith of my argument. The elaborate bathrooms which are to be found in your homes of to-day, the delicious baths in which you revel night and morning are, of course, delightful adjuncts to your comfort and love of luxury, and they are hygienic as well as cleanly. In provincial France or Italy such a luxury is unknown except in the homes of the wealthy. Girls like yourselves have to perform tragedies in five acts over a wash-hand basin night and morning instead of revelling in a bath perfumed with crystals. But this doesn't mean that the Victorian axiom: 'English people are clean, foreigners are dirty!' is true. Even the poorest Italian *contadina* in her cottage has every one of her mattresses and pillows taken to pieces and recarded every year. In every village in Italy or in France you see the men outside the meanest-looking cottage doing that work. Now, the Scotch claim to be the cleanest amongst all other British-born people, but even they would be deemed very dirty by Italian, German or French housewives for omitting this elementary dictate of cleanliness.

That, m'dears, is only one instance of how the whole question of virtue or of sin is just a matter of point of view. In a theatre or a cinema we all laugh at the antics of a man who has had too much to drink. In France or in Italy such antics would not raise a smile. They only create disgust. This was very much exemplified in our immortal Charlie's latest film 'City Lights'. English people who went to see it in Paris were delighted with the scenes where Charlie has had much too much champagne; the French audience liked the sentimental part of the film, but did not tolerate the rest.

It is all a question of the point of view, also of education; and if only you dear, lovely things would try to see your foreign sisters' point of view your men-folk, who all take their cue from you, would quickly follow suit. The universal goodwill which we all feel is the essence of our future prosperity, must begin with the little things of this world, with mutual understanding of one another's failings, the little idiosyncrasies which after all make up the characteristics of each individual nation, and which are therefore objects of keen interest and not of derision.

Why not acknowledge that though our race is, in our estimation, the chosen one of God, men of other nations have just the same love for their own land. To most Latins an Englishwoman's beauty is insipid. To most Englishmen an Italian or a Frenchwoman is not what he calls wholesome. Nature made us all different from one another, and there is a quaint proverb in Roumanian which says that: 'Mr. Frog thinks Mrs. Frog the most beautiful thing that God ever made.' And that is what you want, m'dears: a better understanding of 'Mr. Frog's' point of view. You want comradeship these days, not isolation. The world has changed since my time. The most terrible cataclysm your modern world has known has taught you one thing and did it through blood and tears: it is that human nature is at bottom the same all the world over: men and women wherever they were born have the same ideals, the same appreciation of what is good, virtuous and beautiful. It is only a slight variation of temperament that divides one neighbour from another.

It is up to you to bridge that division over.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN. IS LOVE A DRY BUSINESS NOWADAYS?

Is it genuine or merely a pose, this attitude adopted by you moderns whenever the word 'love' occurs in real life or in fiction? You will have it that love, as apart from what you are pleased nowadays to call 'sex-appeal', either never existed save in the imagination of medieval romanticists, or if it ever did that it is long since dead, bereft of any savour or thrill.

Frankly, you would make me laugh, all of you young things of this amazing country, if this attitude of yours were not so demmed tragic. Do you mean to tell me, m'dears, that amongst your charming, sleek-headed, bright-eyed girls of to-day there are no Juliets, or Francescas or Heloïses, and that you have disarmed Don Cupid, broken his golden arrows and tied him down, like some dry-as-dust old clerk, to a desk in a City office? Faith! that would be a daring thing to do, for there is more power in the little god's arrows, even though they be broken, than in your most up-to-date, most deadly shrapnel. And, as I told you once before, he will have his revenge.

Only the other day at one of your smart cock-and-hen clubs I overheard a general discussion between a bevy of those same sleek-headed, carefully lip-sticked young Dianas on the respective merits of the men who had been foolish enough to make love to them. They were appraising the methods these unfortunates had used in order to pierce their armour of feminine scepticism, and one and all found these methods wanting — wanting in what? I asked myself, and tried to disentangle the truth out of this medley of disappointments and discontent, which lent to those bright eyes a look of boredom — aye! and of age. Anyway, they all decided, over clouds of cigarette smoke, that 'love' as spoken of by the great writers of the past was only 'gammon' — I believe they called it 'rot'; and that the roseate thing of fiction was only a dry business after all.

And presently when these lovely young creatures had all fluttered away like so many butterflies, in order to alight on the high stools of the nearest American Bar, I fell to wondering whether there was not something of truth in what they said, and whether they themselves were not allowing something of the glamour of love to face into the smoke of their cigarettes, or lie dim and savourless at the bottom of their cocktail-glasses.

Thus musing I bethought me of the caveman. His manners were somewhat unpolished, shall we say, but nevertheless he had that certain dominating quality which the terse language of to-day has designated as 'It'. I am sure, though we have no records of his home life, that he knew how to make love — rather fiercely I should say — to his unsophisticated womankind.

Nor were the sybaritic or athletic Greeks and Romans backward in such words and deeds as would flutter any maiden's heart. And so one might go on throughout the ages extolling the times of chivalry, when poets wrote sonnets to a lady's eyebrow, and gallant knights rode forth in armour to break a lance, or lose their life in honour of the woman of their choice. Or I might remind you that in my day gentlemen crossed swords or fired at one another with pistols to settle some quarrel over a woman's favour. It was not an uncommon thing for a man to be shot dead by another — who had perhaps been his intimate friend — for no other reason than that Lady A or Mistress X had smiled equally on both.

Of course, you gay, shingled, pert young things smile at all that and shrug your thin shoulders. You call it 'tommy-rot', don't you? You sneer at your grandmothers and your grandfathers, and ask how on the jolly old earth there could have been anything romantic in their bowings and scrapings, their slow-moving quadrilles or whirling polkas, with mamma or Aunt Priscilla sitting in the offing watchful lest her giddy young charge threw too many soft glances on her 'beau'.

Faith! you may sneer at it, but believe me, m'dears, stolen fruit is passing sweet. There was something peculiarly delicious in those stolen moments in the conservatory when Aunt Priscilla wasn't looking, or in waylaying the postman for a letter which contained a few impassioned words, a discreet homage written in verse, probably.

And there was rapture in a kiss in those days of long ago, a thrill of which you cynical moderns know nothing. What is a kiss to you? You bestow and receive so many. Your mouth to-day is more accessible than was your grandmother's hand in the past. And that is why, m'dears, some of you — not by any means all — find love a dry business these days. There can be no romance in the love-making of an anaemic 'intellectual' to a boyish, freakish Amazon. I am talking of extreme cases, but unfortunately they are on the increase year after year, while young people in order to be in fashion look on the love between man and maid through the muddy, horn-rimmed spectacles of modern cynicism. To them it does seem dull and dry, but only because they are too much engrossed by this selfish business called self-expression, to appreciate the subtle beauty of love. They are the people who call Beethoven's Ninth Symphony 'too horribly old-fashioned', and prefer Mr. Epstein's 'Genesis' to the soulful beauty of the Venus de Milo.

Nevertheless, m'dears, you can take it from me that love is no more a dry business to-day than it was in the past and thank Heaven, there are still a number of you in this go-ahead twentieth century who have experienced the thrill of a first kiss and not been ashamed to exchange love-tokens with the one destined to be your companion and helpmate throughout life.

Those of you who are so blessed will see their path strewn with the happy memories of those golden moments which alone make for contentment and happiness — fragrant rosemary treasured for remembrance in the pages of your book of life.

CHAPTER NINETEEN. HAS PROGRESS GOT AHEAD OF YOU?

Progress has slipped a cog. It has got ahead of you humans who are supposed to regulate its advance. During the Great War, when your backs were turned and you were attending for your lives to your own business, it took a demmed sharp advantage of you all, so much so that now, egad, you seem hardly to know where you are!

You seem suddenly to have awakened to find yourselves in the midst of an age which is not meant for you and is not altogether suited to your mentality.

This age is one of realism, rationalism, a cold-blooded, hard-headed, calculating age, and it has given your sentimental complacency a severe jolt.

Those of you who wish to be thought up-to-date at any cost have shortened your hair, you have readjusted your moral values so as to give your conscience more elasticity, you have thrown your religion overboard and assumed an attitude of cynicism and unbelief.

Your extremists, on the other hand — your early Victorians and ‘dash-it-sir-things-weren’t-like-this-when-I-was-a-boy’ kind of men — have come to a sort of mental halt on small islands of age-old and rapidly disappearing sand and ordering the waves of progress to roll away out of their sight.

Meanwhile between these two extremes there is the rest of humanity — a crowding mass of ordinary, everyday folk, men and women who do their best to hide their romantic ideals, their feelings and emotions under a cloak of artificiality, whilst waging their humble battle of life in an era which they cannot understand and in which they find neither sympathy nor comradeship.

Faith! the trouble some of you take to conceal what you think is your weakness, but which, in point of fact, is the essence of beauty in your nature, the hall-mark of a noble soul. But just now you are bewildered, you have been swept off your feet; you have lived through those four awful years when you saw every ideal, every gentle impulse, every sense of love and charity sacrificed to the needs of that terrible War. Your sense of security and of peace was suddenly seized upon by forces over which you had no control, and hurled into the seething cauldron of a Titanic conflict wherein the demons of hatred, of distrust and of terror stirred their witches’ brew.

You had suddenly lost your anchorage. The struggle for bare existence, for keeping some measure of sanity in the midst of so much horror, compelled you to wake from your dreams of tranquillity and to plunge into the nightmare of reality.

As a result you have lost the years of transition. The time between 1914 and 1933, instead of gliding gently along its normal course, was one in which everything was artificially speeded up. The pace of living was increased an hundredfold.

In the ordinary course of events your children would have graduated to it just as you graduated from penny-farthing bicycles to your cars and your aeroplanes. But human beings have only a limited capacity for adapting themselves to new modes of life, and you have been asked to live through so many changes that you have become like a piece of elastic that has been overstretched. And you naturally feel puzzled and not a little uneasy. You are trying to be sympathetic and to understand things that shock or astonish you; you are, in fact, straining every nerve to appear hard-headed before the world, cold-blooded and what is known as modern. You have donned an armour of indifference and scepticism because civilization has run ahead of you, and you are afraid to show your true self to the world because it might scoff at the romantic ideals which you treasure in your heart.

Your pitiless psycho-analysts, who jeer at human virtue or weaknesses, would probably say that you had a superstition-complex, or a sex-complex, or some other mental ailment with a high-sounding name; but you, with all your old-fashioned beliefs, know well enough that the only complaints you suffer from are idealism, romance, love, or some silly prehistoric things like that, and you remark with a sigh of longing that the old dresses must have been very charming, or how thrilling it would have been to meet a highwayman.

What you really mean is that coquettish glances from under a coal-scuttle bonnet must have been very alluring, and that it must have been very thrilling to meet men who clung to the axiom that chivalry and courtesy are a necessary part of any gentleman’s code of honour.

I could wish that you had the courage, my friends, to assert boldly with me that chivalry and love and laughter are still extant to-day; you know that they are; then why not proclaim it to the rest of this disillusioned world? You have felt their existence, have you not? Say on a warm summer’s evening away from the bustle and noise of cities, with the right man or woman beside you? You have felt the thrill of romance then, I’ll wager, so why not own to it? But all your life you have been taught that romanticism is a weakness of which you should be ashamed; so lest your neighbours suspect you of it you adjourn to the nearest American Bar, swallow an unpleasant-tasting cocktail and do your best with a forced jest or cynical remark to dispel such an illusion.

And all the while in your innermost soul you know that you cannot get rid of that persistent streak of romance which may not belong to the age in which you live, but is nevertheless a characteristic of your face.

Have you ever watched the faces of guests at one of your fashionable weddings? Serious men of business who have stolen an hour from the daily battle of life and fortune come to the ceremony in order to bestow a friendly smile and a wish for happiness on their friend; women with faces lined by age, to whom marriage has perhaps meant disillusionment, look almost beautiful when, with moist eyes and quivering lips, they murmur a silent blessing on the bride as she goes by and a beautiful prayer that she may find in her life the romance and the love which luckless fate had denied to them.

Or have you modern cynics ever watched a suburban gardener bending his back to the task of transforming his tiny plot of ground from what was a builder’s scrap-heap into a small paradise filled with blossoms and flowering shrubs, a nesting-place for birds, an ideal spot where he can sit and smoke his pipe and contemplate the work of his hands?

Have you watched the street-hawker, whose bellowing voice has often grated on your sensitive ear, stoop with a smile to a small child who is afraid, to cross the road? Have you ever paused in your walk in order to see him take the child gently by the arm and guide it safely through the traffic? Then have you watched his face — almost ashamed of the emotion that prompted this kind action — while the child, after the manner of young things, heedlessly runs away?

Now let me advise you to look out for these small incidents which occur every day in the crowded streets of your great cities, and I’ll warrant that you will think as I do, that progress and rationalism have not yet succeeded in eradicating from the heart of your nation all traces of romance and of kindly, unselfish, foolish friendliness. You of your generation may try to deny it, but I know better. I know

that in spite of your blasé, cynical attitude, you still treasure deep down in your hearts the true romanticism that is so essentially British — firm friendships, love that is as faithful as it is ardent, and with it all a light *bon-homie*, the laughter that will conceal a tear.

Romance may be foolish and out-of-date, but without it life would be like a rose without its fragrance, like an evening sky robbed of its stars. You who have it in your hearts be no longer ashamed of it. I don't say that you want to wear every emotion on your sleeve, but in Heaven's name do not allow modern cynicism to harden your hearts against romance, which is the very savour of existence — the one thing that makes men of you instead of unfeeling robots.

CHAPTER TWENTY. GIVE YOUR CHILDREN A CHANCE

In the Book of Books there is a commandment in which certain words occur with which even those of us who never open that Book these days are quite familiar, and which — did one ever reflect seriously on them — would give one furiously to think:

‘... and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation ...’

Now, m’dears, in this case, whether you individually believe in God or not, is beside the point. Whether you look on those words as a divine commandment or as a mere aphorism is a matter of your own personal outlook. But you cannot deny their truth, and I will venture to add to them an entirely worldly axiom which is this: everything a man or woman does, everything he or she thinks or says, is moulding a character which, in its turn, will be handed down to another generation and to another yet.

Yours is an era, my friends, when the cry of ‘Self first’ and of ‘Damn posterity! what has it done for me?’ is heard on every side, chiefly, or course, from those who are adding to the load of weaknesses and of failures which the next generations will have to bear, from self-satisfied, self-deluded wastrels, who are content to go their slothful way along the line of least resistance, indulging in their little sins, scorning to exert any one of the gifts with which they happen to be endowed. ‘Oh! what can a man do?’ they are fond of saying. ‘I am only one among millions. What can I do?’ And having used this argument which they deem unanswerable they turn over and, figuratively speaking, go to sleep.

Would these selfish ne’er-do-wells not be wiser to remember the old fable of the bundle of sticks? Each stick by itself could easily be broken by a feeble hand, but it would take the strength of a Titan to break the bundle when the sticks were all tied together.

How many of you, I wonder, stop to think that every action of your life, good or bad, adds something of good or of evil to the character which you pass on to the next four or five generations? Have you ever realized that it is you, individually and collectively, who to-day are writing the history of the world a century hence? Great things are prophesied of the future — untold, unbelievable marvels! But you are writing their history *now*!

Far be it from me to suggest that it is in your power to affect altogether all the ensuing generations. But whether you will it or not you are bound to leave a legacy either of heavenly gifts or of hellish curses. If you allow your own true and simple character to be perverted out of all recognition by a sneering and cynical world you will pass it on in its warped and distorted state to your children, and to their children after them.

It is on you, m’dears, that the people of the future will look back one day, blessing you for their strength and their happiness, or cursing you for their misery or their disease. If you remain clean in heart and mind, strong, faithful and loyal, you will be giving them a fair start.

It is for you to see to it that what is dross in your generation be consumed in the furnace of your present life; for you to make the most of the many gifts with which your glorious nation is endowed — your strength of character, your patriotism, your loyalty, your love of home; for you to wage deathly warfare against all this modern cynicism, this contempt of everything that is beautiful in life or in art, this constant grubbing in the gutter in search of what is noisome, and this inability to see the glory that is around you. If you do all this, m’dears, you will ease the coming generations of their heaviest burdens.

Only think for a moment! I will quote you extreme cases first. Children of confirmed drunkards — what do they become? Drinkers themselves very often, slaves of drugs, wastrels or prostitutes.

Is there a doubt in your mind when you see a dirty, slatternly woman, lounging about the alleyways of a great city, as to what her parents were? Is it not obvious?

And what about the children of inveterate gamblers? From babyhood they have, perhaps, been stinted in their food, deprived of childish pleasures, in order to allow their selfish unnatural parents to indulge in their pet vice. Weak in health and physique, what chance will they have in life? With that pernicious example constantly before them how can their character develop on fine, straight, loyal lines?

Nor is it only those obvious vices that will trail after them a generation of diseased or decadent sufferers. The scum of your great cities, the thieves, the drunkards, the liars know quite well what heritage of diseases and misery they will ultimately bequeath to their children. But what of the ordinary average man in the street — the respectable but unthinking folk, the well-to-do, who conceal their petty vices even from themselves? What of the people who make no effort against adversity? What of those who groan and complain that the world has passed them by? What of those who are content to rail against ‘bad luck’? It is to these, m’dears, that you must look for the drifters and the derelicts of to-morrow. It is their children, and their children’s children who will swell the ranks of the useless and the futile of the future.

You cannot put a heavier handicap on the younger generation than the germ of laziness and supineness, for that germ will develop and spread until its hideous tentacles have smothered every noble virtue, every attribute of the intellect and of the heart.

Human nature being what it is, is fond of procrastination; it dislikes trouble, tries to avoid worry; the easy road is the one it prefers to take. These are not grave faults, I’ll admit, and with your marvellous mechanical progress are not even dangerous. But there is to-morrow to think of! The future generation — your children to whom you are bequeathing a heritage which may cause the very downfall of their Empire and the destruction of their race.

What is the use of genius if it has not with it the virtues of energy and perseverance? Of what use would such great scientists as Newton and Faraday, or in your own time Edison and Marconi, have been to the world had they been content to dream of the great wonders of the universe and not applied their genius to elucidating its mysteries, and by dint of hard work succeeded in enriching the future generations with their great discoveries. I doubt not but that Nature still holds concealed many a great marvel in her ample bosom, and calmly waits for human hands to draw aside the curtain wherewith she veils them. There are, alas, many diseases still waiting for the brain that will find a way to conquer them. There are still new places to discover, new realms on which the adventurer can set his foot, new mines for the seeker after gold and precious stones. The universe is waiting to reveal its wonders to those of the next generation who have energy, courage and enterprise.

And it is in your hands that their future lies!

The man of genius who is incapable of developing within himself the great virtues of energy and perseverance will assuredly live and die nameless and unglorified; his genius will have been of no use to the world. You will soon see him slip down the social ladder and finally submerged in that low stratum where there is neither ambition nor hope of success, and where the joy of life is killed by discontent. He is a man to be both pitied and despised. He could have done something for humanity, but was too lazy to accomplish it. He frittered away those grand gifts which Nature had bestowed upon him; handicapped by his own supineness, he did not even try to overcome it; and in the end he committed the unpardonable sin of transmitting that same handicap to his children 'unto the third and fourth generation'.

In Heaven's name, m'dears, remember that determination, ambition, refusal to admit defeat, are the weapons with which your children will in their time have to battle with life. Is it then not worth while to keep a bright edge on those weapons for their sakes; to keep them clean and burnished by constant use? For the sake of the love you bear them do not forget that every action in your life, however insignificant it may seem to you, may add one day to their happiness or to their sorrow; for children see more than you sometimes give them credit for; and it is what they see in you that goes to mould their character. Far be it from me to be a square-toes or a pussyfoot; in my day every gentleman knew how to empty his glass and thrilled at a good game of hazard; I know that you moderns enjoy these things just as we did in the past, but it is moderation that will carry you through and excess that will destroy you, for every excess means adding another twig to the rod of unhappiness with which one day Fate will smite your son or your daughter.

'Tis not for me to preach, I know. I was deemed lazy in my time, flippant, irresponsible. You perhaps judge me differently, and I, for one, know that noble latent virtues lie beneath your outward cloak of futility. All I plead for is for courage to allow your virtues to come to the surface so that your children may delight in them and their young characters be moulded after their patterns.

It is worth the effort because of the future. It is also worth the effort because through it 'self' becomes entirely subservient to the rest of humanity — humanity represented by the young ones that grow up around you and, unknown to themselves, cry out even from babyhood for the happiness and contentment which a life of courage and of initiative, of love of country and of home alone can give.

Do not let them cry out in vain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE. THE UNIMPORTANCE OF WEALTH FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Whenever I read in your newspapers that an engagement between young Society people has been broken off I cannot help but admire their courage. Their marriage had probably been engineered for them by their parents or their friends, their respective wealth and social connections had certainly been weighed in the balance on either side, and neither being found wanting it was decided that connubial bliss was bound to follow. But the young people knew better and stood firm against the conspiracy to build their happiness on the insecure foundation of wealth. In the past — which you are, all of you, so fond of calling the good old days — it would have been very difficult for those young people to set their faces against the commands of their respective families. Custom dictated that parents should ‘arrange’ the future of their children, and as often as not the result was a demmed unhappy mess for the poor young things. How lucky youth is nowadays to be allowed to mould its life as it will, and I will readily admit that wealth — in terms of £.s.d. hardly ever enters into the ideal realms of a genuine love-match. Unfortunately one cannot blind oneself to the fact that the influence of money is very largely on the increase these days. Too often I notice that the share-pusher or fraudulent financier is accepted in certain strata of modern society. Croesus is toadied too because of the benefits which may accrue from his goodwill, and an ill-mannered millionaire is often made more welcome than a poor gentleman because of the tips he is able to give for a flutter on the Stock Exchange. Far be it from me to assert that money has not its romantic side! I were a demmed ingrate if I did, for it was money that enabled me to indulge my passion for adventure, which I could not have done had I been a penniless rustic. Money does undoubtedly open for one the portals of a wide, wide world. It brings the many delightful luxuries of the earth within one’s reach; it can satisfy one’s wishes and fulfil one’s desires. But it is not almighty, and somehow the very things that are beyond its reach are the most important of all. I enjoyed my wealth; I liked the comfort it brought me and the luxuries. I loved my white-winged ‘Day-Dream’, my lace, my perfumes, my horses and my home. I still love the things that wealth can give. I love to see beautiful pearls round a beautiful woman’s neck. I love to see her wear expensive furs, silks and dainty shoes, and all the rest of the fripperies that women love. But I do not believe in the influence of wealth as wealth, or in the power of pearl necklaces and fur coats. There are influences far greater than these.

To begin with — and I am deliberately treading here on delicate ground — there is religion. There is no money in the world that could purchase the conviction of a devout man or woman, no matter to what form of belief he or she may adhere. The pages of the world’s history teem with the relations of terrible martyrdom endured for its sake in the early days of Christianity, or during the great religious persecutions of the Middle Ages. These facts are too well known to need reiteration, but they do serve to prove that not even life, much less wealth or honours, was thought too high a price to pay when religious convictions were at stake. A famous statesman did once assert that ‘every man has his price’. Now that was a demmed foolish assertion on the part of that statesman: it goes to prove that he, for one, knew very little of men and of life or he would never have made it. Take your own case, m’dears; would you, if the reward was high enough, commit murder, betray your friend, or rob an old woman of her savings? Would a sackful of gold, or all the gold in the world, compensate you for the loss of love, honour, or self-respect? Egad! I’ll not wait for an answer. There is nothing in the world that will purchase the love of a woman if she be forced into a marriage with the veriest Croesus. Many a rich man has learnt that hard lesson to his cost. Diamonds and pearls, fur coats or your wonderful motor cars — every luxury a woman’s heart can desire — will not command a single heartfelt caress or the true fervour of a loving kiss. Money cannot purchase love, and it cannot purchase health. There is at least one millionaire in your world to-day who would give five-sixths of his entire fortune to any doctor who could cure him permanently of a troublesome, though not deadly, disease. A very well-known lady of Victorian times offered £100,000 to any physician who could rid her of a disfiguring mark on the face. Beauty-culture was not then the highly scientific study that it is to-day and the lady took the ugly mark with her to the grave. Egad! do not these two instances dispose of the theory that wealth is an almighty power? And I could quote you innumerable others. But it is exceedingly pleasant, I’ll admit — and so is health. Wealth has not the satisfying quality of faith, nor the rapture of love, and personally, I am of the opinion that great wealth is a source of more trouble than anything else on earth. The acquiring of it is a worry, the losing it a greater worry still. In that way it is like teeth — trouble when they come and a demmed trouble when they go! The possession of money is, in fact, a perpetually unsatisfied ambition. The man who owns a bicycle longs to have a car; as soon as he can afford a car he wants a large one; having a larger one he wants a more expensive one, or a more exclusive make; having this he wants a yacht, and in the striving after these things he spends his life in a musty office with his ear glued to a telephone, whilst love, happiness, idealism and adventure pass him by. And in the end money, that precious thing for the acquisition of which he has sacrificed his whole life toiling and slaving and striving, cheats him out and out, because it is powerless to obtain for him that which perhaps he wants more than anything else in the world. Unfortunately the tendency of to-day is to imagine that wealth must be gained at all costs, that nothing matters except money and the luxuries it can bring; that for its sake it is wise to sacrifice everything that the idealist holds most dear — love, conscience, art, even honour sometimes. It is true that you cannot take love and honour to the money-lender or the pawnbroker as you can a string of pearls, but when you have them even a visit to the pawnbroker is robbed of some of its sting. You may have a hard struggle for life; you may even feel the pinch of poverty; you may have to deny yourself and those you care for many pleasant luxuries, but if you have a clean record and possess the love of one who is dear to you, you will own gems far more precious than the rarest pearls that ever came out of the sea. And what is more, these gems have a purchasing power which no money in the world ever had, or ever will have, for they can, in their turn, purchase love and friendship. Honour calls to honour, love to love, both will bring into your life that great, priceless, wonderful thing without which no life can be complete — true and loyal friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO. WHO SAID THAT PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT NO LONGER EXISTS?

A man, well-known in your world to-day, remarked recently that the world no longer bowed to the dictates of its womenkind. He talked of the old days — my days, if you like — when behind every throne in Europe there lurked the shadow of a beautiful woman. He recalled the times when no statesman dared lift a finger for fear of that powerful shadow unless he had first assured himself that it favoured his project; and he finished his talk by averring that nowadays petticoats and petticoat government have vanished together into the limbo of forgotten things. He was wrong! I have not been wandering about among you without discovering that the ladies — bless 'em — still rule, and are as captivating, bewitching and obstinate as they always were and, I trust, always will be. Odd's my life! it makes one's heart leap with joy even now to see their bright fearless eyes, coquettish as ever, turn a man into an abject slave, though the fan — lovely necessity to every flirtation once upon a time — has gone now, alas! the same way as hoops and flounces and the *frou-frou* of silk petticoats.

In the days when sticks and clubs were used alike for international or domestic arguments, it is extremely likely that skin-clad men believed that they ruled supreme. Probably there was a strident 'Woman's place is in the cave' slogan in existence even then. But all the same, even in those days, your smiling Stone-Age lady could twist the stalwart tribal chief round her finger as easily as she could twist her own glossy plaits of hair; and the local witch doctor or head councillor, whose lightest word rolled like thunder around the massed silent circle of men, was sent out grumbling by his wife from his desirable cavern residence to scrape the dirt off his feet with his spear.

And though all that happened a demmed long time ago something very similar goes on to this day! Many of the world's most famous men have confessed that all their lives they have been guided by their wife or their sweetheart or sometimes their mother. Many wonderful pictures, beautiful books, glorious pieces of music, are dedicated to the women who inspired them. Though there are many examples of men who, ruled by women, were led to cruel, unjust or foolish deeds, there are countless others where that rule has been everything that is wise and just.

But the vindication of petticoat government, m'dears, does not rest on historic records alone; it would have a poor chance of proving its case if it did. Luckily for the world's happiness it rests on more secure foundation. You surely must know many cases of ordinary everyday folk — friends, acquaintances, the man in the street — in whose life the magic of romance has turned life's rough stony roads into exquisite, rose-strewn highways, and transformed the cottage into a wondrous palace of love and of constant joy.

Even in your ultra-practical days when so many of you affect to despise romance, many a young lover would choose to be the slave of his adored rather than become the ruler of an Empire, and the rejected swain still finds the whole world, its triumphs and its rewards a hollow mockery when love is not. That is the way of true love, and it has not changed a tittle since my day or any other. It will brook no sharing of its sovereignty either with pride, with wisdom or ambition; it cares nothing for opinion of the world, powerful as that can sometimes be. Petticoat government is an autocratic form of rule, and there is no power on earth that can overthrow it if it is backed by love.

It would certainly seem that in your year of sense, 1933, you ought to banish this tyrannical petticoat rule — if indeed it chafes you, as you say it does — just as of late so many countries of the world have banished their monarchs and upset their government. I am happy to say that our own beloved country has been sane enough to set its face against the modern proneness of looking upon hereditary monarchy as an impediment to business, or as tending to distract the mind from its all-important aim of money-making; but in many countries, alas! monarchs are voted to be anachronisms, to be in the way of the steady development of reason. Let us depose our crowned kings, say the moderns, and by the same token let us hurl our queens of the petticoat from their throne. Let us rid ourselves, once and for all, of such false, out-of-date, medieval gods.

Thus do you, m'dears, proclaim your independence from the housetops, and a good many of you in this post-War world have certainly rid yourselves of your ancient monarchies. But strive as you may against the autocratic rule of the petticoat, it is still with you. It is not in your power, nor, believe me, is it your wish to cast off woman's yoke once she has entwined herself around your heart, demanding to be worshipped, to be loved, and to rule. It is her province, my friends; she will never give it up, so you had better make up your minds to wear her fetters and pretend you like them.

You may try to abolish the word 'love' like Soviet Russia has tried to abolish Christianity, but even the most cynical amongst you may find one day that there is, perhaps, one footstep in the world the sound of which will cause a flutter in your heart, and that you will find happiness and the strength to carry on in the light of one woman's smile. You may deflect a river from its course, and in your twentieth century you have your wonderful inventions which enable you to talk to a man half a world away, to see through solid flesh as if it were transparent, or to erect buildings so high that the Tower of Babel would seem puny beside them. Nevertheless it is a small white hand that will beckon you to the Heaven of contentment and of home, or will point the way to the Hell of loneliness. With all your independence, your strength, your power to set up Governments and destroy them at your will, you are still under the sway of the most tyrannical autocracy the world has ever known.

This world is still Cupid's plaything, and do believe me when I say that you have no wish for it to be otherwise. My faith! I cannot imagine — nor can you, I'll warrant — what would happen if the merry little god gave up trying to play with us and left our hearts to get atrophied in their solitude. Life would not be worth the living now, would it, I ask you? Love rules most of you, the best of you, the strongest, manliest amongst you, and you had best admit it. It may be love of wife, of daughter or mother, but there is no man worthy of the name who does not toil and strive for a woman he loves. And, mind you, there is not a more jealous god than that little Cupid. If you fight him he will have his revenge. If you turn your back on him he will contrive to overload you with depression, discontent and monotony, and finally he will hand you over to the most cruel of all torturers — loneliness.

But if you bow to the sovereignty of Love, if you wear its golden fetters, it will crown you king of your little world. It will fill your life with gladness, spur you on to noble deeds, raise your hopes, stimulate your ambition and make you the real master of your fate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE. TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

'Pon my soul, my friends, I must congratulate you at least on this: that your generation has discovered and is not afraid to admit that a wife makes the truest comrade and the best guide an ambitious or a happy man can have. Indeed, it warms the heart to see such tributes paid to women as your great men have recently done.

See how many of your statesmen have said that but for the guidance of a woman's hand they would never have attained their high eminence in world affairs. Sir Austen Chamberlain, who is an aristocrat after mine own heart, has said: 'For thirty years my wife has been my inspiration. She has known every secret of my public life. She has sustained my courage, shared my hopes and sympathized with me in my anxieties.'

Mr. Baldwin has on more than one occasion said much the same thing about his own life partner; Lord Reading, when he closed his great years of service in troubled India, said that more than once would discouragement have overcome him but for 'the lady who stood by me when times were difficult and anxious.'

Yet another of your famous statesman who would never have reached to fame alone is the Marquess of Aberdeen, who has served his country as Governor-General of Canada and as Viceroy of Ireland during the latter's most troublesome years. The book most appropriately entitled, *We Two*, of which he and his wife are joint authors, proclaims in every page the vital truth of the ancient saying that, 'Whoso findeth a good wife findeth a great thing.'

And in other realms than politics great or famous men have paid tribute to the white hands that guided their careers. John Galsworthy dedicated his *Forsyte Saga* to his wife, saying that without her encouragement, sympathy and criticism, he would never have won through to success. Even your amazing Mr. G. B. Shaw has for once been conventional enough to admit that he *might perhaps* have failed but for the help his wife had given him throughout his career.

My faith! I could go on quoting you instances by the yard of famous men who have said as much, but I find it difficult to choose among so many. Cromwell, that iron-hearted regicide, was never happy when parted from his wife; and she it was who once wrote those beautiful words to him: 'My life is but half a life in thine absence.' Lord John Lawrence, who helped to build our Empire in India, was once chaffed by his sister, who said that he could never rest for five minutes away from his wife's side. 'That was why I married her, madam,' he replied quietly.

But it is not in those great men, either past or present, or in their wonderful helpmates that I am most interested. My thoughts now, as always, fly to the man in the street, to the average British working or commercial man, to all those, in fact, who have found in marriage just the kind of companionship that they sought. Laurels of fame are perhaps not for them; they are not striving to reach the giddy heights of clangorous success, but in their struggles and their strivings they can hold on to a hand which is always ready to guide and to help. 'God must have loved the average woman: He made so many of them,' was said by a great philanthropist who knew how to appreciate the wonderful qualities of the quiet, everyday housewife who sits at home and ministers to the creature comforts of the man she loves, and while darning his socks weaves into the criss-cross threads thoughts of how best she can serve him with encouragement and advice.

She it is who makes this modern world of yours seem less drab, for she causes it to glow with the effulgence of her unselfishness. She is for ever planning ways and means to save her man from petty worries and irritating cares; she it is who puts heart into him when discouragement overtakes him; she who comforts him when sorrow and disappointment seem more than he can bear.

Then I pray you, charge your glasses, ye men of this Great and Greater Britain, and drink a loyal toast to your adorable womankind. You know as well as I do that without your loving wife life would indeed make a poor show for you. Without the ladies — God bless 'em! — this whole round earth of ours would lose all its sweetness, and we, poor male creatures, would lose all our self-respect if we had no one to stand by us and tell us what demmed fine fellows we really were.

I hate that stupid old proverb which says that familiarity breeds contempt; but all the same, I fear me, that it causes us to take for granted, or cease to appreciate at its just value, the constant care, the kindness, the thoughtfulness wherewith our working life is made easier for us. Think back on the days of your honeymoon, my friends, and how exquisite seemed to you the thousand and one little attentions which your young wife already bestowed on you. Every time you found your slippers put to warm by the fire you felt a thrill of manly satisfaction and of pride in the choice you had made of a life's companion. Do not lose this great hold you have on happiness by ceasing to notice those small attentions after the first few years of marital contentment.

The love that prompts all those small attentions is the same to-day as it was in the days of your betrothal. Do not blind yourself to it and take too much for granted. She is always ready to share your sorrow and make it thereby but half a trouble, and by the same token she will double your joy by sharing it with you.

It is the unfortunate lonely bachelor who 'has no one to still him and therefore must weep out his eyes'.

And to put the matter in a more prosy way, let me assure you that two heads are always better than one, especially if that other head matures thoughts only of you. The wagon that is drawn in double harness will roll without a jolt on life's highway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR. ARE WOMEN REALLY SELFISH?

This, m'dears, is one of the questions everlastingly asked by man, and woman's answer to it is a Mona Lisa smile, which may be interpreted as acquiescence or scorn — as you please.

There have been, of course, many women well known in history who have appeared to be taking all and giving nothing in return, who never hesitated to destroy ruthlessly whatever stood in the way of their ambition, were it for place, for power or for love. In order to remove an obstacle that stood in their path women — demmed ungallant as it seems to say it — have been known to sacrifice the lives or friends or lovers, even the honour of their country, without granting so much as a kiss in return. Women have show, in fact, that they can be more pitiless, more cruel than men, where their desires, their appetites or their ambition were concerned.

In the nature of things there must also have been millions of women, inconspicuous and unknown, who have acted at times with unbelievable selfishness. Women, perhaps, who have used all their arts of seduction to keep a lover at their side when honour and duty called to him to go; others who, in order to satisfy their own ambition, have tied husband or lover to their chariot wheel, and dragged him with them to heights of social or political attainments which were beyond his power to reach, with the result that a crash was inevitable, and the weak or foolish man was hurled down from those giddy heights and fell broken in heart and in spirit, unregretted, uncomforted by the very one who caused his downfall.

History has shown us many a Cleopatra in some such roles, and I know that everyone of you in your own walk of life, has known of cases less famous but equally tragic.

Nevertheless, in fairness to the sex, let it be said that selfishness in its true sense is *not* always the motive power that drives these unhappy women on. Cleopatra was not intentionally selfish when she kept Antony by her side, whilst the cold ambitious Octavius had time to conquer worlds in his stead. Mrs. Warren Harding, in acting as the motive force which drove a simple farmer to the helm of one of the greatest powers in the modern world, has always appealed to me as being more a tragedy herself than even the tragic figure of her husband. And, plain Mrs. Smith, who turns her husband from an easy-going, sporting Briton into a white-faced business robot, is herself more often than not a stricken statue of self-denial.

Mark, I do not say that these women are right; merely that they are not, in the true meaning of the word, selfish.

When the pagans would have it that Cupid was blind I think they made a mistake. It is not the little god who is blind; he distributes his precious shafts judiciously enough as a rule; but his arrow points often seem to have been dipped in a virulent poison, which has the power of depriving of their sight those who have been pierced by them. And women suffer from these attacks of blindness far more frequently and more completely than men.

Watch the girl who fears or hopes for her lover. Is she selfish? Let Destiny ask her to give her life for his and see then! For herself she cares nothing, but for him — for him she will be ready to sacrifice not only her life, but the rest of the world in a single blazing funeral pyre if it would but profit him. Love's poisoned shaft has blinded her indeed.

She thinks for him, acts for him, schemes for him, plunges into evil or good impersonally for him. She sees a prize — he must have it; she recognizes a goal — he must attain it. For love of him she dreams, and in her love-blindness she is obsessed by the dreams and forces his weak humanity to an impossible task.

But make no mistake. The dreams are all for him. She is willing to stand in the background, fall out by the way; she is ready to become a mere stepping-stone to his success. It would be the divine height of unselfishness were it not the blind height of folly.

Woman has a longer vision than man, but she lacks his logical faculty for estimating obstacles. Woman will try and keep her lover by her side, knowing that they would be happy together even though his name be disgraced, or his country in sore need of him. But man, whose creed is different from hers, puts her second in his thoughts. 'I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not honour more!' is his rule of life; he is selfish for his honour's sake, whilst she would sacrifice both her honour and his regard for her in order to keep him safely within the shelter of her arms.

It has been said that if we only had faith we could say to this mountain: 'Go hence!' and it would actually go. That is the creed of the woman who is in love. Her faith in her love is so great that, should she covet a throne for her lover and a mountain stood in his way she would try her best to move it. I always think that had St. Peter been a woman he would never have found himself sinking when he tried to walk so boldly upon the waves.

Sometimes the man also is of heroic mould and can follow the keenest flights of his chosen woman's vision and make them all come true. But such a man is rare; he is the real Fairy Prince for whom every woman pines. With a true woman as his guide and helpmate he can rise to heights supreme and when he has reached them you will find him listening to the plaudits of a wondering world, taking them all as his due, for the world, my friends, seldom sees or guesses that it was the woman who gave him all that he most needed — her help, her guidance, her sustaining love — so that he might attain his goal.

Is it not the charming contrariness in woman that makes her — demmed delicious, distracting creature that she is — dream so many uncomfortable dreams? Would woman not a million times rather be left alone in an Eden of her own creation, alone with the man she loved, no matter whether he were god or common clay, than be a dweller in a Paradise peopled and fashioned by the world outside?

That is the reason probably why most of them are glad when they find that their idol has feet of clay after all, and they can love him just as illogically and absolutely as their heart desires, with all his failings and his sins. It is heroic, this giving all for love, and women are so constituted that they actually like doing it; but a happy home, contentment and family life are really worth a thousand times more than dreams of ambition, so few of which are satisfying even when they are attained.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE. LOVE IS STILL LIFE'S MOST ROMANTIC ADVENTURE

You may believe me or not, m'dears, but I can assure you that there was never yet a man or woman living who was not in search of love. Of course, you moderns, who are so thoroughly versed in psycho-analysis, will at once retort that you, for one — knowing yourself thoroughly — have never even thought of such an antiquated, ludicrous emotion as love. But let me tell you this: that even now in your practical world of to-day I see old and young, men and women, youths and maidens, rich and poor, married and single — all of you, in fact, hot in pursuit of the little pink god. Love, m'dears, is as vital to existence as is the sun to flowers, as is the pure air of heaven to your lungs, and all of you moderns, cynical and unbelieving though you may label yourselves, tend just as eagerly towards love as we did in the past; you are all striving — though you may not be aware of it — to struggle out of the gloom of the commonplace in order to reach the splendours of Love's fairyland.

The whole of your life, my friends, is incidental to this. It is for love's sake that a man will work so that he may have a home and comfort to offer to the woman of his choice. I doubt not that even the cave-man in his day sought the richest furs for his women and the warmest shelters for them against cold wintry weather.

Will you tell me why your shingled, boyish-looking emancipated City typist or tea-room waitress trips so gaily every morning to her work? Because she likes it? Gadzooks! does any healthy young girl really like work? Because it flatters her vanity to do man's work? Never! She does it because instinct tells her that in the world outside her home she will have a chance of one day finding her mate.

This mating instinct is passionately strong in every healthy human being, though most of you young moderns would deny it, and theorize at length about psychic affinities and sex-appeal. Those words, m'dears, are just twentieth century masks, fashioned to distort the oldest and most valuable heritage of the human race — the will to search for love.

Of course you are ready to pulverize me with the argument that love does not by any means always lead to fairyland. More often than not its sequel is tragedy or else a drab mediocrity which is more unendurable than black despair. What you are pleased to call happiness only comes through the channel of love once in a thousand times. That is your argument, I know, and in a measure you are right; but the reason for tragedy or mediocrity is because you young people of to-day are so apt to mistake the brass-farthing of sex attraction for the pure gold of love.

Love is so elusive that it is easily mistaken for dross. Perhaps it is because we want it so badly that we allow ourselves to be deluded by shams and mockeries. But you young post-War girls who are so ready to lure a man on to make love or propose marriage to you, take my advice and test your choice of a mate as carefully as if you were buying gold; nay! far more carefully, for if, after buying gold, you should find it to be base metal, you can always cast it aside and retrieve your loss by starting to bargain afresh; but if you have been foolish enough to mistake a momentary passion for true and lasting love, you will have ruined your life and could no more build it up again than you could a broken rainbow.

I am not talking now of girls who have been victimized by rogues, or of men whose affections have been broken on the wheel of some woman's caprice. These are but drops in the ocean of tragedies that come in the wake of unhappy love. The real tragedy, m'dears, of life's most romantic adventure is to be found among the millions of people who have been willing to take the cast-out shafts from Cupid's quiver and then discovered — too late, alas! — that those shafts, far from being true gold, were just poisoned darts that left incurable wounds in their heart.

How many of you, I wonder, will during this year utter the solemn vows which the churches demand from those who wish to start life together on the basis of mutual love and comradeship? And how many of you will presently regret those vows and regret them to the end of your days? For whatever may be said to the contrary, your modern easy divorce does not erase from the tablets of memory those happenings which the *decreet nisi* is called upon to obliterate. The divorced man and the divorced woman may seem outwardly the same; they may behave in the same manner as before; they may smile as they did heretofore, but deep down in their hearts they know that the romance they dreamed of has received a wound which can never heal again.

If only instinct would teach you young people that happiness can only be attained by real love, and that charming woman needs to exercise more care in choosing a husband than she does in selecting a hat. Only that way, believe me, does your happiness lie.

There is such a thing as falling in love with love. The glamour of it dazzles; the object of one's adoration appears in the false light as a kind of god, a Titan amongst men. It is only when the eyes become accustomed to the surrounding gloom that the Titan shrivels to the size of a pigmy and the god is found to have feet of clay. But I well understand the glamour! How am I going to preach to you young people who are just on the threshold of life that the great adventure of love needs preparation and thought?

Too hasty enthusiasm has wrecked more exploring expeditions into Loveland than ever Arctic bergs wrecked the vessels of Pole-seeking mariners. There is a very wise parable which was told by Divine lips, and which has a universal meaning. It relates the adventures of ten virgins, five of whom were wise and five very foolish. They were waiting for the bridegroom, if you remember, and the wise virgins in anticipation of his coming kept their lamps trimmed and burning clear and bright. The foolish ones, on the other hand, neglected their lamps, allowed them to flicker out and to die for want of trimming and of oil, so that when the time came and the bridegroom knocked at the door there they were, all in the dark, unable to welcome him. All that is fiction, of course, but what a lot of truth there is in it.

Some of you foolish, charming young people are in far too great a hurry to light the lamp of your love, just letting it shed its feeble, uncertain rays on the first man or woman that comes along. For the time being it certainly does give you a sense of something big and eventful in your life, the illusion that you have laid the foundation of some great happiness. Those of you, on the other hand, who happen to be a little wiser, do not waste the light of your precious lamp. Its searching gleam will reveal pitfalls unseen in the dark. The semi-darkness of loneliness may make the path of life rather difficult, but you are content, nevertheless, to wander along quietly until such time as you see your way to pass through the gloom into the sunshine of real love.

Then, when you have found the one man or woman around whom your universe can safely revolve, you will realize how wise you were to travel on life's highway hopefully, if alone, and to reach your goal in full possession of your vitality and enthusiasm rather than to make a rush for the dazzle-light of passion and arrive dishevelled and blind.

You will no doubt remind me that in a former chapter I have entreated you to live dangerously, to take risks for the sake of the ends you have in view. I do so still: in all things of life, m'dears, be prepared to take risks, *but not in love*. Be very sure where you set your foot before you tread that wonderful path. Do not mistake the glamour of a momentary thrill for the true light of enduring love. Think twice before you dedicate your life to one who is not worthy of the sacrifice. Your gay bachelor and smart lavender-lady are happier far than those who wear the fetters of an unhappy marriage, and it is better never to have loved at all than to love amiss.

Love still is, and always will be, the most romantic adventure in life. Not for the world would I have a single one of you deliberately refuse to embark on it. All that the great adventure demands of you is a trimmed lamp, clear-sightedness to distinguish what is true gold, the love that makes the poor infinitely rich, and which will wipe away your tears; the companionship that will ease life's burden for you and ensure for your domestic happiness, the only bliss of Paradise that has survived the Fall, the spice of life that gives it all its flavour.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX. WHAT IS THE PRICE OF LOVE?

I suppose that more has been written on the subject of love than on any other subject under the sun. Proverbs, wise saws, verses, romances — their number is legion; the brains of poets and of wits, dry minds of cynics and philosophers have, in their turn, been exhausted in finding the true definition of that subtle, elusive thing we call 'love' and which only a lover understands.

And in writing about love all those prose writers and versifiers have invariably set themselves the task of inquiring as to what exactly is the price to be paid for that rarefied commodity, and whether the possession of it is built on a secure foundation. And so out of the cudgelling of great brains came the wise saws: 'When poverty comes in at the door Love flies out of the window'; or 'Love makes beggars of kings'; or again, 'The first sigh of love is the last of wisdom'; and I could quote a hundred more, but all these quotations m'dears, smack more of wit than of truth.

Are all those cynics and philosophers — aye! and all those poets — going to assert that this ethereal, unsubstantial thing which brightens every life into which it enters and cheers every heart it touches, is yet so poor and feeble that it shrivels at the touch of poverty? That it is so akin to madness that it warps reason and weakens judgement? That it can have the effect of stealing away a man's riches or his strength or his wisdom? I think not. And do not be led into believing it, either. I give you my word that this modern world of yours is not yet void of great lovers, of men and women who know in their heart of hearts that the magic touch of true love is more precious even to-day than all the gold of Ophir, or the diamonds of Golconda.

But they will not proclaim their belief openly.

Now you know, my friends, that if you were really to search your hearts you would be ready enough to admit that love is still the greatest incentive that will spur a man to noble deeds and selfless actions, that, far from destroying wisdom and sound sense it is the whetstone of enterprise and judgement. You do not have to pay a price for love. Love is its own price: it drives away fear, it conquers pain, it makes poverty and disappointment endurable, it scorns the enmity of the envious and derides the scoffings of the cynic. It is you, who love and are loved, who are immeasurably rich and they — the jaundiced modern scoffers — who are beggars in this world. It is the great, the selfless loves of millions of men and women that mount like incense to Heaven, and the jeers and gibes of cynics that like evil-smelling smoke defile the purity of the atmosphere.

But, on the other hand, honour and duty do often exact a price which love must pay if it is to remain true to itself. When either of those two great forces call, love must often hide itself behind a veil of sorrow; I can assure you that many a time when I was in full possession of the joys and peace of my beautiful garden at Richmond and knew that Lady Blakeney was watching me with fear and doubt in the loveliest eyes that love of man ever filled with tears, I used to hear the low insistent sigh of suffering women and children in revolutionary Paris calling to me, and not even my loved one's tender arms nor her exquisite voice could then have kept me to her side.

And for you also, m'dears, suffering and sorrow are often the price which your love must pay should honour or duty call you. Most of you experienced the sorrow of parting, did you not, during the sad years of the War? You paid for the joys of love by many a heartache when you thought of *her* tears and the last kiss of farewell on the platform at Victoria Station.

And in the same way some of you, alas! must pay for the happiness which you enjoyed when things were bright and prosperous at home, by the misery of seeing those you care for suffer for want of the small comforts or luxuries you would give your heart's blood to provide for them. Where there is no love, m'dears, there can be no sorrow. Sorrow is the price you may have to pay for love; but is it not worth it? Would you not rather shed a bucketful of tears than miss the infinite joys that true love, reciprocated love alone, can give? Good old Dante, when he went to visit Hell to see how the shades were getting on there, would have it that over the gates of Hades there was graven the legend: 'For sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.' And this saying he got from an ancient philosopher who averred that 'In all adversity the most unhappy sort of misfortune is to have been happy.'

Faith! they may have been great men those two — they certainly were — but all the same I beg to differ from them. I'll pit my knowledge of the human heart against all their theories or their wisdom. There is a sweet fragrance in remembrance which no amount of sorrow can dispel; on the contrary, sorrow will etherealize all the thousand and one little events on which past happiness was built and turn them into a caress that will soothe the troubled mind and wipe away the tears.

And it is in times of stress that true love shines with a clearer and purer light. The sharpness of the trial will in itself purge it from the dross of complacency and selfishness which life, more often than not, is apt to mix it with. So do not rail against love, m'dears, if you have to pay for it at times with anxiety and a few tears. The joys it gives you will more than compensate you for any measure of suffering.

And if in the end love does exact, as it unfortunately will, the greatest price of all the sorrow of life-long parting, do not even then rail against him. The Dark Angel does, alas! wield his awful sword sometimes to part young lovers, still in the rapture of their first kiss, or to sever the bonds that have held trusting comrades together for perhaps half a century.

Even then, m'dears, do not rail against love. 'It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all,' so said our national poet, and with him I am in complete agreement. Sceptics and cynics may say what they like, but I will put down my profession of faith even here and now. And it is this: Love is such a mighty power that it can bridge over the black chasm which lies between life and death. Perfect love is perfect trust, and those of you who have known true love, just as I did, cannot possibly believe for a moment that it can end in this material world. Love is *not* material; it is ethereal and sublime, and as such must endure for ever. You cannot bury it, you cannot cremate it. It is one of the attributes of eternity.

The greatest most selfless love that ever burned for man on this earth reached its sublimity on Calvary. There it triumphed, once and for all, over the terrors of Death. And men to-day — you, m'dears, I, the rest of the world — have learned through the grandeur of that sacrifice that human love is powerful enough to break the gates that part us from the loved one who has gone before, so that when our own time comes to cross the Great Divide we may hear the words: 'I love you. I am waiting for you' come down to our ears from the realm of the stars, and our spirit grasp the spirit hand that beckons and points the way to the kingdom of undying love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN. PERFECT LOVER, PERFECT HUSBAND?

If I were asked to decide whether men or women have more vivid imaginations, I vow 'twould not be so difficult a situation as that in which the unfortunate Paris found himself! To the ladies would I award the apple, without a doubt!

I suppose every woman has had, at some time or other in her early life, a mental picture of what a perfect lover should be: tall, handsome, strong, kind, just the smallest touch of mystery, the epitome of honour and yet adorably human. Upon my soul, a difficult dream for us poor men to live up to!

The girl sits dreaming, and in her happy, idle moments visualizes a first meeting with this dream-god she has created. Hand in hand she wanders with him in her dream along winding, moonlit paths, waiting, thrilled and breathless for those three little words which, when spoken by him, will change this prosaic world into Fairyland.

And then one day she is acutely conscious of a small, glittering band on her third finger, and wonders how it has come to pass that the universe does not stand still in order to gaze enraptured on the new marvel, the perfect lover — her lover! As a matter of fact, the world has noticed the marvel, but to the girl's own friends and relations the man to whom she has become engaged is probably no more than barely good-looking, and it is extremely likely that he has some peculiarity or characteristic which they violently dislike.

Girl friends make mental resolutions that when they choose a man he shall be something quite different; already they compare their own dreams to this reality that seems to them so poor, and they smile with a certain complacent indulgence when they meet the shining eyes of the girl whose dream-lover walks by her side. Married friends are more encouraging unless, perchance, their own matrimonial venture has been unlucky, but usually their thoughts dwell on their own perfect lover, even though to others he seems but a whimsical warning of complete prosiness when seen in his own home, clad in unromantic dressing-gown and carpet slippers, grunting from the depths of a capacious arm-chair, and with, perhaps, a cold in his head or gout in his big toe. Odd's my life! what a dream man — to you!

To your thinking, in the halcyon time of your engagement, the world — your world — does not realize at once that the perfect lover of your dreams has come to life, whereas to you he has already taken on the form and shape of a hero of romance. What if he is of medium height and inclined to broadness? That only makes you realize what an odd mistake you made when you dreamt of him as one of those tall, ungainly, shapeless gawks! What if his nose be flattish and his eyes blue? Gadzooks! who would worship a hero with a bird-like beak and eyes like a savage? In your adolescent imagination you may (though you may not admit that you did!) have created a vague, godlike individual who looked like the illustration on the jacket of a sensational novel. But in the end what you have found is a perfect lover, a man whose character answers to your highest ideals of chivalry and manliness.

Is he less romantic than the gallant armoured knight of old, who rode over hill and dale in order to slay dragons, or to do battle against all those miscreants who refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of his lady's beauty? Of course he is not! See the number of very real dragons he slays every day, when poverty and disappointment and threatening ill-health menace him. See how shrewdly and yet how fairly he wields his weapons of brain and muscle against clever, doughty or wealthy rivals; and yet, withal, see how chivalrous he is towards women and how kindly and gay he can be with little children.

He is the hero of your dreams, madame, the perfect lover of your imagination. How does he stand in your eyes when, at last, you have trod with him the magic way up to the altar, and heard right through the thunder of the Wedding March the paean of your victory in winning this *beau ideal* for yourself against all the world? Does the glamour of him wear thin against the hard, prosaic things of everyday life? If a man cannot be a hero to his lackey, can he possibly pose unruffled and unshaken on his pedestal before his wife's clear eyes?

Do not doubt it for a moment! You need no pedestal for the man you love; all you need for him, all he wants above all other things, is a place in your heart and to live in intimate and close companionship with you. If you, in your turn, have given him love for love, and if you have had the patience and the courage to wait till he, the bridegroom of your dreams, came to you, then marriage will surely be the portal to a realm of supreme and unchanging bliss. Your perfect lover will be the perfect husband, without whom as your helpmate and friend you can never know the perfection of life or the sublimity of romance.

In the course of years, when Father Time has laid a finger on the perfect lover and he finds increasing difficulty in persuading his hair to cover the bald patch on the top of his head, Love the Alchemist, having transmuted the evanescent metal of your girlish visions into the solid gold of conjugal happiness, will touch your eyes with magic so that you will only see the strong brave, kindly soul shining through his loving eyes. If rheumatism in the joints makes him a little slower in opening the door for you than he was forty years ago, Cupid will bewitch you, while you wait, with the understanding of the fine courage and increasing tenderness which has, for a lifetime, marked him for your perfect, gentle knight.

Your world to-day is no less full of magicians, giants, witches, gnomes and fairies than it was in the legendary time of King Arthur. Luck is a magician able to change your lives from drab to gold; care is a witch who can steal your beauty and line your face in a night; despair is a giant who can torture you and hold you in his iron grip until your perfect lover and perfect husband comes to your rescue as the sublime knight-errant; rebellious, unkind thoughts are demmed unpleasant little gnomes to tease you, and friendly, happy ones are the fairies that lighten your burden while you wander down the high road of life.

The Chief Magician of them all is love, love the ruler of men, the king of all the world, whom no amount of scoffing and of sneering has ever dethroned; love the dear tyrant of my time and yours, whose light no modernism can dim; love which has brightened the lives of millions of us and whose torch will be kept aflame for all the aeons to come. Let the world sneer and laugh, but if love gives the fortunate man of your choice the divine accolade and dubs him Sir Perfect Lover, or Sir Perfect Husband, then his companionship and comradeship will make every dark hour seem bright, every sorrow endurable, every joy doubly great, all through your life and in the great unknown that is to come.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT. LEAVING YOU AT THE ALTAR

When first I made up my mind to come out into the golden light of your everyday life, I vow that I positively shivered at all the misery, the sorrow, the drabness of existence, which you yourselves led me to believe made up the sum total of your lives in this twentieth century. Much less did I relish the thought of compiling a whole book on what I feared would be a most depressing task. This work, I said, will fatigue me most atrociously; it will bore me most unhappily; I verily feared that my exuberant romanticism would be shipwrecked under the strain.

And now, here I am at the last chapter of this little book and it seems to me that the time which I have spent in this fascinating, marvellous new world of yours was but the space of a breath. I have only seen a few of its hundreds of astonishing facets, and, believe me, I feel that there are thousands more of which I have not even caught a glimpse. So I'll console myself with the thought of another visit to you all at some future time.

I know you will forgive me if I make use of this final chapter for the benefit of those of you young moderns who will wake one morning soon to the sound of your own wedding-bells.

The latest fashion, it seems, is to treat marriage as nothing more or less than a business contract. Had this been any but my last chapter I would have resisted so monstrous a suggestion and written twenty more to make out a case for love. But things being as they are, let us by all means treat this marriage question as strictly business, and let me begin by asking you how you individually would approach a business proposition? I know little of such things, but I venture to presume that you would expect in a business partner an upright, honourable character, a clean bill of health and a full measure of discretion, ability, of sense, and of honour. Pessimists, when I started this book, might have confounded me with the argument that these things are not to be found in modern business men, but now that I know more about you all, and know that there are just as many sterling qualities to be found in your men of to-day as ever there were in the past, I can, in my turn, confound your pessimists.

You would also doubtless refuse to enter into business partnership with a person who looked upon the contract as a sort of slipknot. Odd's my life! if business was to be run in the slipshod manner in which some of you moderns deal with matrimony, the bankruptcy courts would be kept as busy as are the divorce courts, and the finances of the entire world would soon be engulfed in chaos.

You know as well as I do — better probably — that for a business to be successful it needs to be carried on by men or women who have brains, initiative, training and tact. But so does marriage, m'dears! All the qualities which you expect to find in your successful business men you must look for in the partner who is to be life's companion, to whom you are going to entrust your happiness, your future and, what's more, the future of your children.

What chances, think you, would a business have if its principals knew nothing of its workings? Yet how many of you dear, irresponsible young things trip lightly up to the altar and embark on the serious business of matrimony, blissfully ignorant of how to cook a dinner, engage a maid, furnish a house or earn a regular income? No one would think of designing a public building without becoming first a qualified architect, and the law forbids any man to practise medicine without due qualifications, the result of years of strenuous study; yet one sees numberless men and women entering the serious state of marriage without the slightest idea of the duties and responsibilities it will presently entail. Can you wonder, then, that so many marriages end in recriminations, in heartbreakings and sorrow, and finally in the divorce court?

Is marriage a business? Well, we will not argue over the word. 'Tis you moderns who choose to call it so, and then deride it because, forsooth, in your estimation its profit-and-loss account points to bankruptcy. What you want to do, m'dears, is to look upon marriage as a business if you must, but also as a foundation — the only solid one — on which you can raise the edifice of lifelong happiness. By it alone can you obtain comradeship, sympathy and understanding, and that wonderful feeling that in the world there is one being whose interests are absolutely identical with yours.

All of you young moderns, I know, are fond of saying that by marriage you lose your freedom. So you do. You lose the freedom of wandering uncared for on life's highway, the freedom of weeping alone and un comforted when sorrow assails you. You lose the freedom of suffering in loneliness, and of being forced to bottle up your joy because there is no one who cares enough to share it with you. Well, m'dears, if that be freedom, give me all the fetters that love can forge: home ties, friendship, not to mention baby fingers that cling so tightly to the heart.

Have I lost something of glamour in your eyes now that I have made you think of me, not as the hero of a hundred adventures in the romantic days of revolutionary France, but as a romanticist who has learned that in all the adventures of life there is none to compare with the one we embark on when we set forth to choose our helpmate?

Once more, I pray you, charge your glasses, you lovely, sleek-headed, slim-legged Amazons, and you ambitious, enterprising Britons all! Drink to the master of you all — Love the King! He is all that matters in life, and in this great business of living he is the profit — worth all the gold of the Indies and all the laurel wreaths ever woven, on which you can count as a set-off against failure or disappointment or sorrow.

On this let me make my bow to you of this still young century, happy in the knowledge that your world of to-day is every whit as romantic as it was in the past. Your men are as gallant, your women as charming as ever they were. There is as much romance in your civilization, your commerce and your marvellous inventions, as there were in medieval jousts, in duelling or poesy. Let me express the earnest hope that I have convinced you of this. Rub your eyes, m'dears, and take another look at your world. Do not allow those demmed cynics and pessimists to be for ever pointing to mud-heaps and gutters, telling you that they are the realities of life; for I vow that real life is full to overflowing of fragrance and of beauty. Look about you, m'dears and see the loyalties, the friendships, the silent endurances and sacrifice that meet you at every turn. And then, I pray you, murmur to yourself: 'Well, I declare that demmed elusive Pimpernel of ours does know a thing or two!'

Gentlemen, your servant!

Ladies, as ever, your most devoted slave!

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER

THE FENCHURCH STREET MYSTERY

The man in the corner pushed aside his glass, and leant across the table. "Mysteries!" he commented. "There is no such thing as a mystery in connection with any crime, provided intelligence is brought to bear upon its investigation." Very much astonished Polly Burton looked over the top of her newspaper, and fixed a pair of very severe, coldly inquiring brown eyes upon him. She had disapproved of the man from the instant when he shuffled across the shop and sat down opposite to her, at the same marble-topped table which already held her large coffee (3d.), her roll and butter (2d.), and plate of tongue (6d.). Now this particular corner, this very same table, that special view of the magnificent marble hall — known as the Norfolk Street branch of the Aërated Bread Company's depôts — were Polly's own corner, table, and view. Here she had partaken of eleven pennyworth of luncheon and one pennyworth of daily information ever since that glorious never-to-be-forgotten day when she was enrolled on the staff of the *Evening Observer* (we'll call it that, if you please), and became a member of that illustrious and world-famed organization known as the British Press. She was a personality, was Miss Burton of the *Evening Observer*. Her cards were printed thus:

MISS MARY J. BURTON.

Evening Observer.

She had interviewed Miss Ellen Terry and the Bishop of Madagascar, Mr. Seymour Hicks and the Chief Commissioner of Police. She had been present at the last Marlborough House garden party — in the cloak-room, that is to say, where she caught sight of Lady Thingummy's hat, Miss What-you-may-call's sunshade, and of various other things modistical or fashionable, all of which were duly described under the heading "Royalty and Dress" in the early afternoon edition of the *Evening Observer*.

(The article itself is signed M.J.B., and is to be found in the files of that leading halfpennyworth.)

For these reasons — and for various others, too — Polly felt irate with the man in the corner, and told him so with her eyes, as plainly as any pair of brown eyes can speak.

She had been reading an article in the *Daily Telegraph*. The article was palpitatingly interesting. Had Polly been commenting audibly upon it? Certain it is that the man over there had spoken in direct answer to her thoughts.

She looked at him and frowned; the next moment she smiled. Miss Burton (of the *Evening Observer*) had a keen sense of humour, which two years' association with the British Press had not succeeded in destroying, and the appearance of the man was sufficient to tickle the most ultra-morose fancy. Polly thought to herself that she had never seen any one so pale, so thin, with such funny light-coloured hair, brushed very smoothly across the top of a very obviously bald crown. He looked so timid and nervous as he fidgeted incessantly with a piece of string; his long, lean, and trembling fingers tying and untying it into knots of wonderful and complicated proportions.

Having carefully studied every detail of the quaint personality Polly felt more amiable.

"And yet," she remarked kindly but authoritatively, "this article, in an otherwise well-informed journal, will tell you that, even within the last year, no fewer than six crimes have completely baffled the police, and the perpetrators of them are still at large."

"Pardon me," he said gently, "I never for a moment ventured to suggest that there were no mysteries to the *police*; I merely remarked that there were none where intelligence was brought to bear upon the investigation of crime."

"Not even in the Fenchurch Street *mystery*. I suppose," she asked sarcastically.

"Least of all in the so-called Fenchurch Street *mystery*," he replied quietly.

Now the Fenchurch Street mystery, as that extraordinary crime had popularly been called, had puzzled — as Polly well knew — the brains of every thinking man and woman for the last twelve months. It had puzzled her not inconsiderably; she had been interested, fascinated; she had studied the case, formed her own theories, thought about it all often and often, had even written one or two letters to the Press on the subject — suggesting, arguing, hinting at possibilities and probabilities, adducing proofs which other amateur detectives were equally ready to refute. The attitude of that timid man in the corner, therefore, was peculiarly exasperating, and she retorted with sarcasm destined to completely annihilate her self-complacent interlocutor.

“What a pity it is, in that case, that you do not offer your priceless services to our misguided though well-meaning police.”

“Isn’t it?” he replied with perfect good-humour. “Well, you know, for one thing I doubt if they would accept them; and in the second place my inclinations and my duty would — were I to become an active member of the detective force — nearly always be in direct conflict. As often as not my sympathies go to the criminal who is clever and astute enough to lead our entire police force by the nose.

“I don’t know how much of the case you remember,” he went on quietly. “It certainly, at first, began even to puzzle me. On the 12th of last December a woman, poorly dressed, but with an unmistakable air of having seen better days, gave information at Scotland Yard of the disappearance of her husband, William Kershaw, of no occupation, and apparently of no fixed abode. She was accompanied by a friend — a fat, oily-looking German — and between them they told a tale which set the police immediately on the move.

“It appears that on the 10th of December, at about three o’clock in the afternoon, Karl Müller, the German, called on his friend, William Kershaw, for the purpose of collecting a small debt — some ten pounds or so — which the latter owed him. On arriving at the squalid lodging in Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, he found William Kershaw in a wild state of excitement, and his wife in tears. Müller attempted to state the object of his visit, but Kershaw, with wild gestures, waved him aside, and — in his own words — flabbergasted him by asking him point-blank for another loan of two pounds, which sum, he declared, would be the means of a speedy fortune for himself and the friend who would help him in his need.

“After a quarter of an hour spent in obscure hints, Kershaw, finding the cautious German obdurate, decided to let him into the secret plan, which, he averred, would place thousands into their hands.”

Instinctively Polly had put down her paper; the mild stranger, with his nervous air and timid, watery eyes, had a peculiar way of telling his tale, which somehow fascinated her.

“I don’t know,” he resumed, “if you remember the story which the German told to the police, and which was corroborated in every detail by the wife or widow. Briefly it was this: Some thirty years previously, Kershaw, then twenty years of age, and a medical student at one of the London hospitals, had a chum named Barker, with whom he roomed, together with another.

“The latter, so it appears, brought home one evening a very considerable sum of money, which he had won on the turf, and the following morning he was found murdered in his bed. Kershaw, fortunately for himself, was able to prove a conclusive *alibi*; he had spent the night on duty at the hospital; as for Barker, he had disappeared, that is to say, as far as the police were concerned, but not as far as the watchful eyes of his friend Kershaw were able to spy — at least, so the latter said. Barker very cleverly contrived to get away out of the country, and, after sundry vicissitudes, finally settled down at Vladivostok, in Eastern Siberia, where, under the assumed name of Smethurst, he built up an enormous fortune by trading in furs.

“Now, mind you, every one knows Smethurst, the Siberian millionaire. Kershaw’s story that he had once been called Barker, and had committed a murder thirty years ago, was never proved, was it? I am merely telling you what Kershaw said to his friend the German and to his wife on that memorable afternoon of December the 10th.

“According to him Smethurst had made one gigantic mistake in his clever career — he had on four occasions written to his late friend, William Kershaw. Two of these letters had no bearing on the case, since they were written more than twenty-five years ago, and Kershaw, moreover, had lost them — so he said — long ago. According to him, however, the first of these letters was written when Smethurst, alias Barker, had spent all the money he had obtained from the crime, and found himself destitute in New York.

“Kershaw, then in fairly prosperous circumstances, sent him a £10 note for the sake of old times. The second, when the tables had turned, and Kershaw had begun to go downhill, Smethurst, as he then already called himself, sent his whilom friend £50. After that, as Müller gathered, Kershaw had made sundry demands on Smethurst’s ever-increasing purse, and had accompanied these demands by various threats, which, considering the distant country in which the millionaire lived, were worse than futile.

“But now the climax had come, and Kershaw, after a final moment of hesitation, handed over to his German friend the two last letters purporting to have been written by Smethurst, and which, if you remember, played such an important part in the mysterious story of this extraordinary crime. I have a copy of both these letters here,” added the man in the corner, as he took out a piece of paper from a very worn-out pocket-book, and, unfolding it very deliberately, he began to read: —

“‘Sir, — Your preposterous demands for money are wholly unwarrantable. I have already helped you quite as much as you deserve. However, for the sake of old times, and because you once helped me when I was in a terrible difficulty, I am willing to once more let you impose upon my good nature. A friend of mine here, a Russian merchant, to whom I have sold my business, starts in a few days for an extended tour to many European and Asiatic ports in his yacht, and has invited me to accompany him as far as England. Being tired of foreign parts, and desirous of seeing the old country once again after thirty years’ absence, I have decided to accept his invitation. I don’t know when we may actually be in Europe, but I promise you that as soon as we touch a suitable port I will write to you again, making an appointment for you to see me in London. But remember that if your demands are too preposterous I will not for a moment listen to them, and that I am the last man in the world to submit to persistent and unwarrantable blackmail.

‘I am, sir,

‘Yours truly,

‘Francis Smethurst.’

“The second letter was dated from Southampton,” continued the old man in the corner calmly, “and, curiously enough, was the only letter which Kershaw professed to have received from Smethurst of which he had kept the envelope, and which was dated. It was quite brief,” he added, referring once more to his piece of paper.

“‘Dear Sir, — Referring to my letter of a few weeks ago, I wish to inform you that the *Tsarskoe Selo* will touch at Tilbury on Tuesday next, the 10th. I shall land there, and immediately go up to London by the first train I can get. If you like, you may meet me at

Fenchurch Street Station, in the first-class waiting-room, in the late afternoon. Since I surmise that after thirty years' absence my face may not be familiar to you, I may as well tell you that you will recognize me by a heavy Astrakhan fur coat, which I shall wear, together with a cap of the same. You may then introduce yourself to me, and I will personally listen to what you may have to say.

'Yours faithfully,

'Francis Smethurst.'

"It was this last letter which had caused William Kershaw's excitement and his wife's tears. In the German's own words, he was walking up and down the room like a wild beast, gesticulating wildly, and muttering sundry exclamations. Mrs. Kershaw, however, was full of apprehension. She mistrusted the man from foreign parts — who, according to her husband's story, had already one crime upon his conscience — who might, she feared, risk another, in order to be rid of a dangerous enemy. Woman-like, she thought the scheme a dishonourable one, for the law, she knew, is severe on the blackmailer.

"The assignation might be a cunning trap, in any case it was a curious one; why, she argued, did not Smethurst elect to see Kershaw at his hotel the following day? A thousand whys and wherefores made her anxious, but the fat German had been won over by Kershaw's visions of untold gold, held tantalisingly before his eyes. He had lent the necessary £2, with which his friend intended to tidy himself up a bit before he went to meet his friend the millionaire. Half an hour afterwards Kershaw had left his lodgings, and that was the last the unfortunate woman saw of her husband, or Müller, the German, of his friend.

"Anxiously his wife waited that night, but he did not return; the next day she seems to have spent in making purposeless and futile inquiries about the neighbourhood of Fenchurch Street; and on the 12th she went to Scotland Yard, gave what particulars she knew, and placed in the hands of the police the two letters written by Smethurst."

A MILLIONAIRE IN THE DOCK

The man in the corner had finished his glass of milk. His watery blue eyes looked across at Miss Polly Burton's eager little face, from which all traces of severity had now been chased away by an obvious and intense excitement.

"It was only on the 31st," he resumed after a while, "that a body, decomposed past all recognition, was found by two lightermen in the bottom of a disused barge. She had been moored at one time at the foot of one of those dark flights of steps which lead down between tall warehouses to the river in the East End of London. I have a photograph of the place here," he added, selecting one out of his pocket, and placing it before Polly.

"The actual barge, you see, had already been removed when I took this snapshot, but you will realize what a perfect place this alley is for the purpose of one man cutting another's throat in comfort, and without fear of detection. The body, as I said, was decomposed beyond all recognition; it had probably been there eleven days, but sundry articles, such as a silver ring and a tie pin, were recognizable, and were identified by Mrs. Kershaw as belonging to her husband.

"She, of course, was loud in denouncing Smethurst, and the police had no doubt a very strong case against him, for two days after the discovery of the body in the barge, the Siberian millionaire, as he was already popularly called by enterprising interviewers, was arrested in his luxurious suite of rooms at the Hotel Cecil.

"To confess the truth, at this point I was not a little puzzled. Mrs. Kershaw's story and Smethurst's letters had both found their way into the papers, and following my usual method — mind you, I am only an amateur, I try to reason out a case for the love of the thing — I sought about for a motive for the crime, which the police declared Smethurst had committed. To effectually get rid of a dangerous blackmailer was the generally accepted theory. Well! did it ever strike you how paltry that motive really was?"

Miss Polly had to confess, however, that it had never struck her in that light.

"Surely a man who had succeeded in building up an immense fortune by his own individual efforts, was not the sort of fool to believe that he had anything to fear from a man like Kershaw. He must have *known* that Kershaw held no damning proofs against him — not enough to hang him, anyway. Have you ever seen Smethurst?" he added, as he once more fumbled in his pocket-book.

Polly replied that she had seen Smethurst's picture in the illustrated papers at the time. Then he added, placing a small photograph before her:

"What strikes you most about the face?"

"Well, I think its strange, astonished expression, due to the total absence of eyebrows, and the funny foreign cut of the hair."

"So close that it almost looks as if it had been shaved. Exactly. That is what struck me most when I elbowed my way into the court that morning and first caught sight of the millionaire in the dock. He was a tall, soldierly-looking man, upright in stature, his face very bronzed and tanned. He wore neither moustache nor beard, his hair was cropped quite close to his head, like a Frenchman's; but, of course, what was so very remarkable about him was that total absence of eyebrows and even eyelashes, which gave the face such a peculiar appearance — as you say, a perpetually astonished look.

"He seemed, however, wonderfully calm; he had been accommodated with a chair in the dock — being a millionaire — and chatted pleasantly with his lawyer, Sir Arthur Inglewood, in the intervals between the calling of the several witnesses for the prosecution; whilst during the examination of these witnesses he sat quite placidly, with his head shaded by his hand.

"Müller and Mrs. Kershaw repeated the story which they had already told to the police. I think you said that you were not able, owing to pressure of work, to go to the court that day, and hear the case, so perhaps you have no recollection of Mrs. Kershaw. No? Ah, well! Here is a snapshot I managed to get of her once. That is her. Exactly as she stood in the box — over-dressed — in elaborate crape, with a bonnet which once had contained pink roses, and to which a remnant of pink petals still clung obtrusively amidst the deep black.

"She would not look at the prisoner, and turned her head resolutely towards the magistrate. I fancy she had been fond of that vagabond husband of hers: an enormous wedding-ring encircled her finger, and that, too, was swathed in black. She firmly believed that Kershaw's murderer sat there in the dock, and she literally flaunted her grief before him.

"I was indescribably sorry for her. As for Müller, he was just fat, oily, pompous, conscious of his own importance as a witness; his fat fingers, covered with brass rings, gripped the two incriminating letters, which he had identified. They were his passports, as it were, to a delightful land of importance and notoriety. Sir Arthur Inglewood, I think, disappointed him by stating that he had no questions to ask of him. Müller had been brimful of answers, ready with the most perfect indictment, the most elaborate accusations against the bloated millionaire who had decoyed his dear friend Kershaw, and murdered him in Heaven knows what an out-of-the-way corner of the East End.

"After this, however, the excitement grew apace. Müller had been dismissed, and had retired from the court altogether, leading away Mrs. Kershaw, who had completely broken down.

"Constable D 21 was giving evidence as to the arrest in the meanwhile. The prisoner, he said, had seemed completely taken by surprise, not understanding the cause or history of the accusation against him; however, when put in full possession of the facts, and realizing, no doubt, the absolute futility of any resistance, he had quietly enough followed the constable into the cab. No one at the fashionable and crowded Hotel Cecil had even suspected that anything unusual had occurred.

"Then a gigantic sigh of expectancy came from every one of the spectators. The 'fun' was about to begin. James Buckland, a porter at Fenchurch Street railway station, had just sworn to tell all the truth, etc. After all, it did not amount to much. He said that at six o'clock in the afternoon of December the 10th, in the midst of one of the densest fogs he ever remembers, the 5.5 from Tilbury steamed into the station, being just about an hour late. He was on the arrival platform, and was hailed by a passenger in a first-class carriage. He could see very little of him beyond an enormous black fur coat and a travelling cap of fur also.

"The passenger had a quantity of luggage, all marked F.S., and he directed James Buckland to place it all upon a four-wheel cab, with the exception of a small hand-bag, which he carried himself. Having seen that all his luggage was safely bestowed, the stranger in

the fur coat paid the porter, and, telling the cabman to wait until he returned, he walked away in the direction of the waiting-rooms, still carrying his small hand-bag.

"I stayed for a bit," added James Buckland, 'talking to the driver about the fog and that; then I went about my business, seein' that the local from Southend 'ad been signalled.'

"The prosecution insisted most strongly upon the hour when the stranger in the fur coat, having seen to his luggage, walked away towards the waiting-rooms. The porter was emphatic. 'It was not a minute later than 6.15,' he averred.

"Sir Arthur Inglewood still had no questions to ask, and the driver of the cab was called.

"He corroborated the evidence of James Buckland as to the hour when the gentleman in the fur coat had engaged him, and having filled his cab in and out with luggage, had told him to wait. And cabby did wait. He waited in the dense fog — until he was tired, until he seriously thought of depositing all the luggage in the lost property office, and of looking out for another fare — waited until at last, at a quarter before nine, whom should he see walking hurriedly towards his cab but the gentleman in the fur coat and cap, who got in quickly and told the driver to take him at once to the Hotel Cecil. This, cabby declared, had occurred at a quarter before nine. Still Sir Arthur Inglewood made no comment, and Mr. Francis Smethurst, in the crowded, stuffy court, had calmly dropped to sleep.

"The next witness, Constable Thomas Taylor, had noticed a shabbily dressed individual, with shaggy hair and beard, loafing about the station and waiting-rooms in the afternoon of December the 10th. He seemed to be watching the arrival platform of the Tilbury and Southend trains.

"Two separate and independent witnesses, cleverly unearthed by the police, had seen this same shabbily dressed individual stroll into the first-class waiting-room at about 6.15 on Wednesday, December the 10th, and go straight up to a gentleman in a heavy fur coat and cap, who had also just come into the room. The two talked together for a while; no one heard what they said, but presently they walked off together. No one seemed to know in which direction.

"Francis Smethurst was rousing himself from his apathy; he whispered to his lawyer, who nodded with a bland smile of encouragement. The employés of the Hotel Cecil gave evidence as to the arrival of Mr. Smethurst at about 9.30 p.m. on Wednesday, December the 10th, in a cab, with a quantity of luggage; and this closed the case for the prosecution.

"Everybody in that court already *saw* Smethurst mounting the gallows. It was uninterested curiosity which caused the elegant audience to wait and hear what Sir Arthur Inglewood had to say. He, of course, is the most fashionable man in the law at the present moment. His lolling attitudes, his drawling speech, are quite the rage, and imitated by the gilded youth of society.

"Even at this moment, when the Siberian millionaire's neck literally and metaphorically hung in the balance, an expectant titter went round the fair spectators as Sir Arthur stretched out his long loose limbs and lounged across the table. He waited to make his effect — Sir Arthur is a born actor — and there is no doubt that he made it, when in his slowest, most drawly tones he said quietly;

"With regard to this alleged murder of one William Kershaw, on Wednesday, December the 10th, between 6.15 and 8.45 p.m., your Honour, I now propose to call two witnesses, who saw this same William Kershaw alive on Tuesday afternoon, December the 16th, that is to say, six days after the supposed murder.'

"It was as if a bombshell had exploded in the court. Even his Honour was aghast, and I am sure the lady next to me only recovered from the shock of the surprise in order to wonder whether she need put off her dinner party after all.

"As for me," added the man in the corner, with that strange mixture of nervousness and self-complacency which had set Miss Polly Burton wondering, "well, you see, *I* had made up my mind long ago where the hitch lay in this particular case, and I was not so surprised as some of the others.

"Perhaps you remember the wonderful development of the case, which so completely mystified the police — and in fact everybody except myself. Torriani and a waiter at his hotel in the Commercial Road both deposed that at about 3.30 p.m. on December the 10th a shabbily dressed individual lolled into the coffee-room and ordered some tea. He was pleasant enough and talkative, told the waiter that his name was William Kershaw, that very soon all London would be talking about him, as he was about, through an unexpected stroke of good fortune, to become a very rich man, and so on, and so on, nonsense without end.

"When he had finished his tea he lolled out again, but no sooner had he disappeared down a turning of the road than the waiter discovered an old umbrella, left behind accidentally by the shabby, talkative individual. As is the custom in his highly respectable restaurant, Signor Torriani put the umbrella carefully away in his office, on the chance of his customer calling to claim it when he had discovered his loss. And sure enough nearly a week later, on Tuesday, the 16th, at about 1 p.m., the same shabbily dressed individual called and asked for his umbrella. He had some lunch, and chatted once again to the waiter. Signor Torriani and the waiter gave a description of William Kershaw, which coincided exactly with that given by Mrs. Kershaw of her husband.

"Oddly enough he seemed to be a very absent-minded sort of person, for on this second occasion, no sooner had he left than the waiter found a pocket-book in the coffee-room, underneath the table. It contained sundry letters and bills, all addressed to William Kershaw. This pocket-book was produced, and Karl Müller, who had returned to the court, easily identified it as having belonged to his dear and lamented friend 'Villiam.'

"This was the first blow to the case against the accused. It was a pretty stiff one, you will admit. Already it had begun to collapse like a house of cards. Still, there was the assignation, and the undisputed meeting between Smethurst and Kershaw, and those two and a half hours of a foggy evening to satisfactorily account for."

The man in the corner made a long pause, keeping the girl on tenterhooks. He had fidgeted with his bit of string till there was not an inch of it free from the most complicated and elaborate knots.

"I assure you," he resumed at last, "that at that very moment the whole mystery was, to me, as clear as daylight. I only marvelled how his Honour could waste his time and mine by putting what he thought were searching questions to the accused relating to his past. Francis Smethurst, who had quite shaken off his somnolence, spoke with a curious nasal twang, and with an almost imperceptible suspicion of foreign accent. He calmly denied Kershaw's version of his past; declared that he had never been called Barker, and had certainly never been mixed up in any murder case thirty years ago.

"But you knew this man Kershaw," persisted his Honour, 'since you wrote to him?'

“‘Pardon me, your Honour,’ said the accused quietly, ‘I have never, to my knowledge, seen this man Kershaw, and I can swear that I never wrote to him.’

“‘Never wrote to him?’ retorted his Honour warningly. ‘That is a strange assertion to make when I have two of your letters to him in my hands at the present moment.’

“‘I never wrote those letters, your Honour,’ persisted the accused quietly, ‘they are not in my handwriting.’

“‘Which we can easily prove,’ came in Sir Arthur Inglewood’s drawly tones, as he handed up a packet to his Honour; ‘here are a number of letters written by my client since he has landed in this country, and some of which were written under my very eyes.’

“As Sir Arthur Inglewood had said, this could be easily proved, and the prisoner, at his Honour’s request, scribbled a few lines, together with his signature, several times upon a sheet of note-paper. It was easy to read upon the magistrate’s astounded countenance, that there was not the slightest similarity in the two handwritings.

“A fresh mystery had cropped up. Who, then, had made the assignation with William Kershaw at Fenchurch Street railway station? The prisoner gave a fairly satisfactory account of the employment of his time since his landing in England.

“‘I came over on the *Tsarskoe Selo*,’ he said, ‘a yacht belonging to a friend of mine. When we arrived at the mouth of the Thames there was such a dense fog that it was twenty-four hours before it was thought safe for me to land. My friend, who is a Russian, would not land at all; he was regularly frightened at this land of fogs. He was going on to Madeira immediately.

“‘I actually landed on Tuesday, the 10th, and took a train at once for town. I did see to my luggage and a cab, as the porter and driver told your Honour; then I tried to find my way to a refreshment-room, where I could get a glass of wine. I drifted into the waiting-room, and there I was accosted by a shabbily dressed individual, who began telling me a piteous tale. Who he was I do not know. He *said* he was an old soldier who had served his country faithfully, and then been left to starve. He begged of me to accompany him to his lodgings, where I could see his wife and starving children, and verify the truth and piteousness of his tale.

“‘Well, your Honour,’ added the prisoner with noble frankness, ‘it was my first day in the old country. I had come back after thirty years with my pockets full of gold, and this was the first sad tale I had heard; but I am a business man, and did not want to be exactly “done” in the eye. I followed my man through the fog, out into the streets. He walked silently by my side for a time. I had not a notion where I was.

“‘Suddenly I turned to him with some question, and realized in a moment that my gentleman had given me the slip. Finding, probably, that I would not part with my money till I *had* seen the starving wife and children, he left me to my fate, and went in search of more willing bait.

“‘The place where I found myself was dismal and deserted. I could see no trace of cab or omnibus. I retraced my steps and tried to find my way back to the station, only to find myself in worse and more deserted neighbourhoods. I became hopelessly lost and fogged. I don’t wonder that two and a half hours elapsed while I thus wandered on in the dark and deserted streets; my sole astonishment is that I ever found the station at all that night, or rather close to it a policeman, who showed me the way.’

“‘But how do you account for Kershaw knowing all your movements?’ still persisted his Honour, ‘and his knowing the exact date of your arrival in England? How do you account for these two letters, in fact?’

“‘I cannot account for it or them, your Honour,’ replied the prisoner quietly. ‘I have proved to you, have I not, that I never wrote those letters, and that the man — er — Kershaw is his name? — was not murdered by me?’

“‘Can you tell me of anyone here or abroad who might have heard of your movements, and of the date of your arrival?’

“‘My late employés at Vladivostok, of course, knew of my departure, but none of them could have written these letters, since none of them know a word of English.’

“‘Then you can throw no light upon these mysterious letters? You cannot help the police in any way towards the clearing up of this strange affair?’

“‘The affair is as mysterious to me as to your Honour, and to the police of this country.’

“Francis Smethurst was discharged, of course; there was no semblance of evidence against him sufficient to commit him for trial. The two overwhelming points of his defence which had completely routed the prosecution were, firstly, the proof that he had never written the letters making the assignation, and secondly, the fact that the man supposed to have been murdered on the 10th was seen to be alive and well on the 16th. But then, who in the world was the mysterious individual who had apprised Kershaw of the movements of Smethurst, the millionaire?”

HIS DEDUCTION

The man in the corner cocked his funny thin head on one side and looked at Polly; then he took up his beloved bit of string and deliberately untied every knot he had made in it. When it was quite smooth he laid it out upon the table.

"I will take you, if you like, point by point along the line of reasoning which I followed myself, and which will inevitably lead you, as it led me, to the only possible solution of the mystery.

"First take this point," he said with nervous restlessness, once more taking up his bit of string, and forming with each point raised a series of knots which would have shamed a navigating instructor, "obviously it was *impossible* for Kershaw not to have been acquainted with Smethurst, since he was fully apprised of the latter's arrival in England by two letters. Now it was clear to me from the first that *no one* could have written those two letters except Smethurst. You will argue that those letters were proved not to have been written by the man in the dock. Exactly. Remember, Kershaw was a careless man — he had lost both envelopes. To him they were insignificant. Now it was never *disproved* that those letters were written by Smethurst."

"But—" suggested Polly.

"Wait a minute," he interrupted, while knot number two appeared upon the scene, "it was proved that six days after the murder, William Kershaw was alive, and visited the Torriani Hotel, where already he was known, and where he conveniently left a pocket-book behind, so that there should be no mistake as to his identity; but it was never questioned where Mr. Francis Smethurst, the millionaire, happened to spend that very same afternoon."

"Surely, you don't mean?" gasped the girl.

"One moment, please," he added triumphantly. "How did it come about that the landlord of the Torriani Hotel was brought into court at all? How did Sir Arthur Inglewood, or rather his client, know that William Kershaw had on those two memorable occasions visited the hotel, and that its landlord could bring such convincing evidence forward that would for ever exonerate the millionaire from the imputation of murder?"

"Surely," I argued, "the usual means, the police—"

"The police had kept the whole affair very dark until the arrest at the Hotel Cecil. They did not put into the papers the usual: 'If anyone happens to know of the whereabouts, etc. etc'. Had the landlord of that hotel heard of the disappearance of Kershaw through the usual channels, he would have put himself in communication with the police. Sir Arthur Inglewood produced him. How did Sir Arthur Inglewood come on his track?"

"Surely, you don't mean?"

"Point number four," he resumed imperturbably, "Mrs. Kershaw was never requested to produce a specimen of her husband's handwriting. Why? Because the police, clever as you say they are, never started on the right tack. They believed William Kershaw to have been murdered; they looked for William Kershaw.

"On December the 31st, what was presumed to be the body of William Kershaw was found by two lightermen: I have shown you a photograph of the place where it was found. Dark and deserted it is in all conscience, is it not? Just the place where a bully and a coward would decoy an unsuspecting stranger, murder him first, then rob him of his valuables, his papers, his very identity, and leave him there to rot. The body was found in a disused barge which had been moored some time against the wall, at the foot of these steps. It was in the last stages of decomposition, and, of course, could not be identified; but the police would have it that it was the body of William Kershaw.

"It never entered their heads that it was the body of *Francis Smethurst, and that William Kershaw was his murderer.*

"Ah! it was cleverly, artistically conceived! Kershaw is a genius. Think of it all! His disguise! Kershaw had a shaggy beard, hair, and moustache. He shaved up to his very eyebrows! No wonder that even his wife did not recognize him across the court; and remember she never saw much of his face while he stood in the dock. Kershaw was shabby, slouchy, he stooped. Smethurst, the millionaire, might have served in the Prussian army.

"Then that lovely trait about going to revisit the Torriani Hotel. Just a few days' grace, in order to purchase moustache and beard and wig, exactly similar to what he had himself shaved off. Making up to look like himself! Splendid! Then leaving the pocket-book behind! He! he! he! Kershaw was not murdered! Of course not. He called at the Torriani Hotel six days after the murder, whilst Mr. Smethurst, the millionaire, hobnobbed in the park with duchesses! Hang such a man! Fie!"

He fumbled for his hat. With nervous, trembling fingers he held it deferentially in his hand whilst he rose from the table. Polly watched him as he strode up to the desk, and paid twopence for his glass of milk and his bun. Soon he disappeared through the shop, whilst she still found herself hopelessly bewildered, with a number of snap-shot photographs before her, still staring at a long piece of string, smothered from end to end in a series of knots, as bewildering, as irritating, as puzzling as the man who had lately sat in the corner.

THE ROBBERY IN PHILLIMORE TERRACE

Whether Miss Polly Burton really did expect to see the man in the corner that Saturday afternoon, 'twere difficult to say; certain it is that when she found her way to the table close by the window and realized that he was not there, she felt conscious of an overwhelming sense of disappointment. And yet during the whole of the week she had, with more pride than wisdom, avoided this particular A.B.C. shop.

"I thought you would not keep away very long," said a quiet voice close to her ear.

She nearly lost her balance — where in the world had he come from? She certainly had not heard the slightest sound, and yet there he sat, in the corner, like a veritable Jack-in-the-box, his mild blue eyes staring apologetically at her, his nervous fingers toying with the inevitable bit of string.

The waitress brought him his glass of milk and a cheese-cake. He ate it in silence, while his piece of string lay idly beside him on the table. When he had finished he fumbled in his capacious pockets, and drew out the inevitable pocket-book.

Placing a small photograph before the girl, he said quietly:

"That is the back of the houses in Phillimore Terrace, which overlook Adam and Eve Mews."

She looked at the photograph, then at him, with a kindly look of indulgent expectancy.

"You will notice that the row of back gardens have each an exit into the mews. These mews are built in the shape of a capital F. The photograph is taken looking straight down the short horizontal line, which ends, as you see, in a *cul-de-sac*. The bottom of the vertical line turns into Phillimore Terrace, and the end of the upper long horizontal line into High Street, Kensington. Now, on that particular night, or rather early morning, of January 15th, Constable D 21, having turned into the mews from Phillimore Terrace, stood for a moment at the angle formed by the long vertical artery of the mews and the short horizontal one which, as I observed before, looks on to the back gardens of the Terrace houses, and ends in a *cul-de-sac*.

"How long D 21 stood at that particular corner he could not exactly say, but he thinks it must have been three or four minutes before he noticed a suspicious-looking individual shambling along under the shadow of the garden walls. He was working his way cautiously in the direction of the *cul-de-sac*, and D 21, also keeping well within the shadow, went noiselessly after him.

"He had almost overtaken him — was, in fact, not more than thirty yards from him — when from out of one of the two end houses — No. 22, Phillimore Terrace, in fact — a man, in nothing but his night-shirt, rushed out excitedly, and, before D 21 had time to intervene, literally threw himself upon the suspected individual, rolling over and over with him on the hard cobble-stones, and frantically shrieking, 'Thief! Thief! Police!'

"It was some time before the constable succeeded in rescuing the tramp from the excited grip of his assailant, and several minutes before he could make himself heard.

"'There! there! that'll do!' he managed to say at last, as he gave the man in the shirt a vigorous shove, which silenced him for the moment. 'Leave the man alone now, you mustn't make that noise this time o' night, wakin' up all the folks.' The unfortunate tramp, who in the meanwhile had managed to get onto his feet again, made no attempt to get away; probably he thought he would stand but a poor chance. But the man in the shirt had partly recovered his power of speech, and was now blurting out jerky, half — intelligible sentences:

"'I have been robbed — robbed — I — that is — my master — Mr. Knopf. The desk is open — the diamonds gone — all in my charge — and — now they are stolen! That's the thief — I'll swear — I heard him — not three minutes ago — rushed downstairs — the door into the garden was smashed — I ran across the garden — he was sneaking about here still — Thief! Thief! Police! Diamonds! Constable, don't let him go — I'll make you responsible if you let him go—'

"'Now then — that'll do!' admonished D 21 as soon as he could get a word in, 'stop that row, will you?'

"The man in the shirt was gradually recovering from his excitement.

"'Can I give this man in charge?' he asked.

"'What for?'

"'Burglary and housebreaking. I heard him, I tell you. He must have Mr. Knopf's diamonds about him at this moment.'

"'Where is Mr. Knopf?'

"'Out of town,' groaned the man in the shirt. 'He went to Brighton last night, and left me in charge, and now this thief has been and —'

"The tramp shrugged his shoulders and suddenly, without a word, he quietly began taking off his coat and waistcoat. These he handed across to the constable. Eagerly the man in the shirt fell on them, and turned the ragged pockets inside out. From one of the windows a hilarious voice made some facetious remark, as the tramp with equal solemnity began divesting himself of his nether garments.

"'Now then, stop that nonsense,' pronounced D 21 severely, 'what were you doing here this time o' night, anyway?'

"'The streets o' London is free to the public, ain't they?' queried the tramp.

"'This don't lead nowhere, my man.'

"'Then I've lost my way, that's all,' growled the man surlily, 'and p'raps you'll let me get along now.'

"By this time a couple of constables had appeared upon the scene. D 21 had no intention of losing sight of his friend the tramp, and the man in the shirt had again made a dash for the latter's collar at the bare idea that he should be allowed to 'get along.'

"I think D 21 was alive to the humour of the situation. He suggested that Robertson (the man in the night-shirt) should go in and get some clothes on, whilst he himself would wait for the inspector and the detective, whom D 15 would send round from the station immediately.

"Poor Robertson's teeth were chattering with cold. He had a violent fit of sneezing as D 21 hurried him into the house. The latter, with another constable, remained to watch the burgled premises both back and front, and D 15 took the wretched tramp to the station with a view to sending an inspector and a detective round immediately.

"When the two latter gentlemen arrived at No. 22, Phillimore Terrace, they found poor old Robertson in bed, shivering, and still quite blue. He had got himself a hot drink, but his eyes were streaming and his voice was terribly husky. D 21 had stationed himself in the dining-room, where Robertson had pointed the desk out to him, with its broken lock and scattered contents.

"Robertson, between his sneezes, gave what account he could of the events which happened immediately before the robbery.

"His master, Mr. Ferdinand Knopf, he said, was a diamond merchant, and a bachelor. He himself had been in Mr. Knopf's employ over fifteen years, and was his only indoor servant. A charwoman came every day to do the housework.

"Last night Mr. Knopf dined at the house of Mr. Shipman, at No. 26, lower down. Mr. Shipman is the great jeweller who has his place of business in South Audley Street. By the last post there came a letter with the Brighton postmark, and marked 'urgent,' for Mr. Knopf, and he (Robertson) was just wondering if he should run over to No. 26 with it, when his master returned. He gave one glance at the contents of the letter, asked for his A.B.C. Railway Guide, and ordered him (Robertson) to pack his bag at once and fetch him a cab.

"'I guessed what it was,' continued Robertson after another violent fit of sneezing. 'Mr. Knopf has a brother, Mr. Emile Knopf, to whom he is very much attached, and who is a great invalid. He generally goes about from one seaside place to another. He is now at Brighton, and has recently been very ill.

"'If you will take the trouble to go downstairs I think you will still find the letter lying on the hall table.

"'I read it after Mr. Knopf left; it was not from his brother, but from a gentleman who signed himself J. Collins, M.D. I don't remember the exact words, but, of course, you'll be able to read the letter — Mr. J. Collins said he had been called in very suddenly to see Mr. Emile Knopf, who, he added, had not many hours to live, and had begged of the doctor to communicate at once with his brother in London.

"'Before leaving, Mr. Knopf warned me that there were some valuables in his desk — diamonds mostly, and told me to be particularly careful about locking up the house. He often has left me like this in charge of his premises, and usually there have been diamonds in his desk, for Mr. Knopf has no regular City office as he is a commercial traveller.'

"This, briefly, was the gist of the matter which Robertson related to the inspector with many repetitions and persistent volubility.

"The detective and inspector, before returning to the station with their report, thought they would call at No. 26, on Mr. Shipman, the great jeweller.

"'You remember, of course,' added the man in the corner, dreamily contemplating his bit of string, 'the exciting developments of this extraordinary case. Mr. Arthur Shipman is the head of the firm of Shipman and Co., the wealthy jewellers. He is a widower, and lives very quietly by himself in his own old-fashioned way in the small Kensington house, leaving it to his two married sons to keep up the style and swagger befitting the representatives of so wealthy a firm.

"'I have only known Mr. Knopf a very little while,' he explained to the detectives. 'He sold me two or three stones once or twice, I think; but we are both single men, and we have often dined together. Last night he dined with me. He had that afternoon received a very fine consignment of Brazilian diamonds, as he told me, and knowing how beset I am with callers at my business place, he had brought the stones with him, hoping, perhaps, to do a bit of trade over the nuts and wine.

"'I bought £25,000 worth of him,' added the jeweller, as if he were speaking of so many farthings, 'and gave him a cheque across the dinner table for that amount. I think we were both pleased with our bargain, and we had a final bottle of '48 port over it together. Mr. Knopf left me at about 9.30, for he knows I go very early to bed, and I took my new stock upstairs with me, and locked it up in the safe. I certainly heard nothing of the noise in the mews last night. I sleep on the second floor, in the front of the house, and this is the first I have heard of poor Mr. Knopf's loss—'

"At this point of his narrative Mr. Shipman very suddenly paused, and his face became very pale. With a hasty word of excuse he unceremoniously left the room, and the detective heard him running quickly upstairs.

"Less than two minutes later Mr. Shipman returned. There was no need for him to speak; both the detective and the inspector guessed the truth in a moment by the look upon his face.

"'The diamonds!' he gasped. 'I have been robbed.'"

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURE

"Now I must tell you," continued the man in the corner, "that after I had read the account of the double robbery, which appeared in the early afternoon papers, I set to work and had a good think — yes!" he added with a smile, noting Polly's look at the bit of string, on which he was still at work, "yes! aided by this small adjunct to continued thought — I made notes as to how I should proceed to discover the clever thief, who had carried off a small fortune in a single night. Of course, my methods are not those of a London detective; he has his own way of going to work. The one who was conducting this case questioned the unfortunate jeweller very closely about his servants and his household generally.

"I have three servants," explained Mr. Shipman, two of whom have been with me for many years; one, the housemaid, is a fairly new comer — she has been here about six months. She came recommended by a friend, and bore an excellent character. She and the parlourmaid room together. The cook, who knew me when I was a schoolboy, sleeps alone; all three servants sleep on the floor above. I locked the jewels up in the safe which stands in the dressing-room. My keys and watch I placed, as usual, beside my bed. As a rule, I am a fairly light sleeper.

"I cannot understand how it could have happened — but — you had better come up and have a look at the safe. The key must have been abstracted from my bedside, the safe opened, and the keys replaced — all while I was fast asleep. Though I had no occasion to look into the safe until just now, I should have discovered my loss before going to business, for I intended to take the diamonds away with me—"

"The detective and the inspector went up to have a look at the safe. The lock had in no way been tampered with — it had been opened with its own key. The detective spoke of chloroform, but Mr. Shipman declared that when he woke in the morning at about half-past seven there was no smell of chloroform in the room. However, the proceedings of the daring thief certainly pointed to the use of an anaesthetic. An examination of the premises brought to light the fact that the burglar had, as in Mr. Knopf's house, used the glass-panelled door from the garden as a means of entrance, but in this instance he had carefully cut out the pane of glass with a diamond, slipped the bolts, turned the key, and walked in.

"Which among your servants knew that you had the diamonds in your house last night, Mr. Shipman?" asked the detective.

"Not one, I should say," replied the jeweller, "though, perhaps, the parlourmaid, whilst waiting at table, may have heard me and Mr. Knopf discussing our bargain."

"Would you object to my searching all your servants' boxes?"

"Certainly not. They would not object, either, I am sure. They are perfectly honest."

"The searching of servants' belongings is invariably a useless proceeding," added the man in the corner, with a shrug of the shoulders. "No one, not even a latter-day domestic, would be fool enough to keep stolen property in the house. However, the usual farce was gone through, with more or less protest on the part of Mr. Shipman's servants, and with the usual result.

"The jeweller could give no further information; the detective and inspector, to do them justice, did their work of investigation minutely and, what is more, intelligently. It seemed evident, from their deductions, that the burglar had commenced proceedings on No. 26, Phillimore Terrace, and had then gone on, probably climbing over the garden walls between the houses to No. 22, where he was almost caught in the act by Robertson. The facts were simple enough, but the mystery remained as to the individual who had managed to glean the information of the presence of the diamonds in both the houses, and the means which he had adopted to get that information. It was obvious that the thief or thieves knew more about Mr. Knopf's affairs than Mr. Shipman's, since they had known how to use Mr. Emile Knopf's name in order to get his brother out of the way.

"It was now nearly ten o'clock, and the detectives, having taken leave of Mr. Shipman, went back to No. 22, in order to ascertain whether Mr. Knopf had come back; the door was opened by the old charwoman, who said that her master had returned, and was having some breakfast in the dining-room.

"Mr. Ferdinand Knopf was a middle-aged man, with sallow complexion, black hair and beard, of obviously Hebrew extraction. He spoke with a marked foreign accent, but very courteously, to the two officials, who, he begged, would excuse him if he went on with his breakfast.

"I was fully prepared to hear the bad news," he explained, "which my man Robertson told me when I arrived. The letter I got last night was a bogus one; there is no such person as J. Collins, M.D. My brother had never felt better in his life. You will, I am sure, very soon trace the cunning writer of that epistle — ah! but I was in a rage, I can tell you, when I got to the Metropole at Brighton, and found that Emile, my brother, had never heard of any Doctor Collins.

"The last train to town had gone, although I raced back to the station as hard as I could. Poor old Robertson, he has a terrible cold. Ah yes! my loss! it is for me a very serious one; if I had not made that lucky bargain with Mr. Shipman last night I should, perhaps, at this moment be a ruined man.

"The stones I had yesterday were, firstly, some magnificent Brazilians; these I sold to Mr. Shipman mostly. Then I had some very good Cape diamonds — all gone; and some quite special Parisians, of wonderful work and finish, entrusted to me for sale by a great French house. I tell you, sir, my loss will be nearly £10,000 altogether. I sell on commission, and, of course, have to make good the loss."

"He was evidently trying to bear up manfully, and as a business man should, under his sad fate. He refused in any way to attach the slightest blame to his old and faithful servant Robertson, who had caught, perhaps, his death of cold in his zeal for his absent master. As for any hint of suspicion falling even remotely upon the man, the very idea appeared to Mr. Knopf absolutely preposterous.

"With regard to the old charwoman, Mr. Knopf certainly knew nothing about her, beyond the fact that she had been recommended to him by one of the tradespeople in the neighbourhood, and seemed perfectly honest, respectable, and sober.

"About the tramp Mr. Knopf knew still less, nor could he imagine how he, or in fact anybody else, could possibly know that he happened to have diamonds in his house that night.

"This certainly seemed the great hitch in the case.

“Mr. Ferdinand Knopf, at the instance of the police, later on went to the station and had a look at the suspected tramp. He declared that he had never set eyes on him before.

“Mr. Shipman, on his way home from business in the afternoon, had done likewise, and made a similar statement.

“Brought before the magistrate, the tramp gave but a poor account of himself. He gave a name and address, which latter, of course, proved to be false. After that he absolutely refused to speak. He seemed not to care whether he was kept in custody or not. Very soon even the police realized that, for the present, at any rate, nothing could be got out of the suspected tramp.

“Mr. Francis Howard, the detective, who had charge of the case, though he would not admit it even to himself, was at his wits’ ends. You must remember that the burglary, through its very simplicity, was an exceedingly mysterious affair. The constable, D 21, who had stood in Adam and Eve Mews, presumably while Mr. Knopf’s house was being robbed, had seen no one turn out from the *cul-de-sac* into the main passage of the mews.

“The stables, which immediately faced the back entrance of the Phillimore Terrace houses, were all private ones belonging to residents in the neighbourhood. The coachmen, their families, and all the grooms who slept in the stables were rigidly watched and questioned. One and all had seen nothing, heard nothing, until Robertson’s shrieks had roused them from their sleep.

“As for the letter from Brighton, it was absolutely commonplace, and written upon note-paper which the detective, with Machiavellian cunning, traced to a stationer’s shop in West Street. But the trade at that particular shop was a very brisk one; scores of people had bought note-paper there, similar to that on which the supposed doctor had written his tricky letter. The handwriting was cramped, perhaps a disguised one; in any case, except under very exceptional circumstances, it could afford no clue to the identity of the thief. Needless to say, the tramp, when told to write his name, wrote a totally different and absolutely uneducated hand.

“Matters stood, however, in the same persistently mysterious state when a small discovery was made, which suggested to Mr. Francis Howard an idea, which, if properly carried out, would, he hoped, inevitably bring the cunning burglar safely within the grasp of the police.

“That was the discovery of a few of Mr. Knopf’s diamonds,” continued the man in the corner after a slight pause, “evidently trampled into the ground by the thief whilst making his hurried exit through the garden of No. 22, Phillimore Terrace.

“At the end of this garden there is a small studio which had been built by a former owner of the house, and behind it a small piece of waste ground about seven feet square which had once been a rockery, and is still filled with large loose stones, in the shadow of which earwigs and woodlice innumerable have made a happy hunting ground.

“It was Robertson who, two days after the robbery, having need of a large stone, for some household purpose or other, dislodged one from that piece of waste ground, and found a few shining pebbles beneath it. Mr. Knopf took them round to the police-station himself immediately, and identified the stones as some of his Parisian ones.

“Later on the detective went to view the place where the find had been made, and there conceived the plan upon which he built big cherished hopes.

“Acting upon the advice of Mr. Francis Howard, the police decided to let the anonymous tramp out of his safe retreat within the station, and to allow him to wander whithersoever he chose. A good idea, perhaps — the presumption being that, sooner or later, if the man was in any way mixed up with the cunning thieves, he would either rejoin his comrades or even lead the police to where the remnant of his hoard lay hidden; needless to say, his footsteps were to be literally dogged.

“The wretched tramp, on his discharge, wandered out of the yard, wrapping his thin coat round his shoulders, for it was a bitterly cold afternoon. He began operations by turning into the Town Hall Tavern for a good feed and a copious drink. Mr. Francis Howard noted that he seemed to eye every passer-by with suspicion, but he seemed to enjoy his dinner, and sat some time over his bottle of wine.

“It was close upon four o’clock when he left the tavern, and then began for the indefatigable Mr. Howard one of the most wearisome and uninteresting chases, through the mazes of the London streets, he ever remembers to have made. Up Notting Hill, down the slums of Notting Dale, along the High Street, beyond Hammersmith, and through Shepherd’s Bush did that anonymous tramp lead the unfortunate detective, never hurrying himself, stopping every now and then at a public-house to get a drink, whither Mr. Howard did not always care to follow him.

“In spite of his fatigue, Mr. Francis Howard’s hopes rose with every half-hour of this weary tramp. The man was obviously striving to kill time; he seemed to feel no weariness, but walked on and on, perhaps suspecting that he was being followed.

“At last, with a beating heart, though half perished with cold, and with terribly sore feet, the detective began to realize that the tramp was gradually working his way back towards Kensington. It was then close upon eleven o’clock at night; once or twice the man had walked up and down the High Street, from St. Paul’s School to Derry and Toms’ shops and back again, he had looked down one or two of the side streets and — at last — he turned into Phillimore Terrace. He seemed in no hurry, he even stopped once in the middle of the road, trying to light a pipe, which, as there was a high east wind, took him some considerable time. Then he leisurely sauntered down the street, and turned into Adam and Eve Mews, with Mr. Francis Howard now close at his heels.

“Acting upon the detective’s instructions, there were several men in plain clothes ready to his call in the immediate neighbourhood. Two stood within the shadow of the steps of the Congregational Church at the corner of the mews, others were stationed well within a soft call.

“Hardly, therefore, had the hare turned into the *cul-de-sac* at the back of Phillimore Terrace than, at a slight sound from Mr. Francis Howard, every egress was barred to him, and he was caught like a rat in a trap.

“As soon as the tramp had advanced some thirty yards or so (the whole length of this part of the mews is about one hundred yards) and was lost in the shadow, Mr. Francis Howard directed four or five of his men to proceed cautiously up the mews, whilst the same number were to form a line all along the front of Phillimore Terrace between the mews and the High Street.

“Remember, the back-garden walls threw long and dense shadows, but the silhouette of the man would be clearly outlined if he made any attempt at climbing over them. Mr. Howard felt quite sure that the thief was bent on recovering the stolen goods, which, no doubt, he had hidden in the rear of one of the houses. He would be caught *in flagrante delicto*, and, with a heavy sentence hovering over him, he would probably be induced to name his accomplice. Mr. Francis Howard was thoroughly enjoying himself.

“The minutes sped on; absolute silence, in spite of the presence of so many men, reigned in the dark and deserted mews.

“Of course, this night’s adventure was never allowed to get into the papers,” added the man in the corner with his mild smile. “Had the plan been successful, we should have heard all about it, with a long eulogistic article as to the astuteness of our police; but as it was — well, the tramp sauntered up the mews — and — there he remained for aught Mr. Francis Howard or the other constables could ever explain. The earth or the shadows swallowed him up. No one saw him climb one of the garden walls, no one heard him break open a door; he had retreated within the shadow of the garden walls, and was seen or heard of no more.”

“One of the servants in the Phillimore Terrace houses must have belonged to the gang,” said Polly with quick decision.

“Ah, yes! but which?” said the man in the corner, making a beautiful knot in his bit of string. “I can assure you that the police left not a stone unturned once more to catch sight of that tramp whom they had had in custody for two days, but not a trace of him could they find, nor of the diamonds, from that day to this.”

ALL HE KNEW

"The tramp was missing," continued the man in the corner, "and Mr. Francis Howard tried to find the missing tramp. Going round to the front, and seeing the lights at No. 26 still in, he called upon Mr. Shipman. The jeweller had had a few friends to dinner, and was giving them whiskies-and-sodas before saying good night. The servants had just finished washing up, and were waiting to go to bed; neither they nor Mr. Shipman nor his guests had seen or heard anything of the suspicious individual.

"Mr. Francis Howard went on to see Mr. Ferdinand Knopf. This gentleman was having his warm bath, preparatory to going to bed. So Robertson told the detective. However, Mr. Knopf insisted on talking to Mr. Howard through his bath-room door. Mr. Knopf thanked him for all the trouble he was taking, and felt sure that he and Mr. Shipman would soon recover possession of their diamonds, thanks to the persevering detective.

"He! he! he!" laughed the man in the corner. "Poor Mr. Howard. He persevered — but got no farther; no, nor anyone else, for that matter. Even I might not be able to convict the thieves if I told all I knew to the police.

"Now, follow my reasoning, point by point," he added eagerly.

"Who knew of the presence of the diamonds in the house of Mr. Shipman and Mr. Knopf? Firstly," he said, putting up an ugly claw-like finger, "Mr. Shipman, then Mr. Knopf, then, presumably, the man Robertson."

"And the tramp?" said Polly.

"Leave the tramp alone for the present since he has vanished, and take point number two. Mr. Shipman was drugged. That was pretty obvious; no man under ordinary circumstances would, without waking, have his keys abstracted and then replaced at his own bedside. Mr. Howard suggested that the thief was armed with some anaesthetic; but how did the thief get into Mr. Shipman's room without waking him from his natural sleep? Is it not simpler to suppose that the thief had taken the precaution to drug the jeweller before the latter went to bed?"

"But—"

"Wait a moment, and take point number three. Though there was every proof that Mr. Shipman had been in possession of £25,000 worth of goods since Mr. Knopf had a cheque from him for that amount, there was no proof that in Mr. Knopf's house there was even an odd stone worth a sovereign.

"And then again," went on the scarecrow, getting more and more excited, "did it ever strike you, or anybody else, that at *no* time, while the tramp was in custody, while all that searching examination was being gone on with, no one ever saw Mr. Knopf and his man Robertson together at the same time?"

"Ah!" he continued, whilst suddenly the young girl seemed to see the whole thing as in a vision, "they did not forget a single detail — follow them with me, point by point. Two cunning scoundrels — geniuses they should be called — well provided with some ill-gotten funds — but determined on a grand *coup*. They play at respectability, for six months, say. One is the master, the other the servant; they take a house in the same street as their intended victim, make friends with him, accomplish one or two creditable but very small business transactions, always drawing on the reserve funds, which might even have amounted to a few hundreds — and a bit of credit.

"Then the Brazilian diamonds, and the Parisians — which, remember, were so perfect that they required chemical testing to be detected. The Parisian stones are sold — not in business, of course — in the evening, after dinner and a good deal of wine. Mr. Knopf's Brazilians were beautiful; perfect! Mr. Knopf was a well-known diamond merchant.

"Mr. Shipman bought — but with the morning would have come sober sense, the cheque stopped before it could have been presented, the swindler caught. No! those exquisite Parisians were never intended to rest in Mr. Shipman's safe until the morning. That last bottle of '48 port, with the aid of a powerful soporific, ensured that Mr. Shipman would sleep undisturbed during the night.

"Ah! remember all the details, they were so admirable! the letter posted in Brighton by the cunning rogue to himself, the smashed desk, the broken pane of glass in his own house. The man Robertson on the watch, while Knopf himself in ragged clothing found his way into No. 26. If Constable D 21 had not appeared upon the scene that exciting comedy in the early morning would not have been enacted. As it was, in the supposed fight, Mr. Shipman's diamonds passed from the hands of the tramp into those of his accomplice.

"Then, later on, Robertson, ill in bed, while his master was supposed to have returned — by the way, it never struck anybody that no one saw Mr. Knopf come home, though he surely would have driven up in a cab. Then the double part played by one man for the next two days. It certainly never struck either the police or the inspector. Remember they only saw Robertson when in bed with a streaming cold. But Knopf had to be got out of gaol as soon as possible; the dual *rôle* could not have been kept up for long. Hence the story of the diamonds found in the garden of No. 22. The cunning rogues guessed that the usual plan would be acted upon, and the suspected thief allowed to visit the scene where his hoard lay hidden.

"It had all been foreseen, and Robertson must have been constantly on the watch. The tramp stopped, mind you, in Phillimore Terrace for some moments, lighting a pipe. The accomplice, then, was fully on the alert; he slipped the bolts of the back garden gate. Five minutes later Knopf was in the house, in a hot bath, getting rid of the disguise of our friend the tramp. Remember that again here the detective did not actually see him.

"The next morning Mr. Knopf, black hair and beard and all, was himself again. The whole trick lay in one simple art, which those two cunning rascals knew to absolute perfection, the art of impersonating one another.

"They are brothers, presumably — twin brothers, I should say."

"But Mr. Knopf—" suggested Polly.

"Well, look in the Trades' Directory; you will see F. Knopf & Co., diamond merchants, of some City address. Ask about the firm among the trade; you will hear that it is firmly established on a sound financial basis. He! he! he! and it deserves to be," added the man in the corner, as, calling for the waitress, he received his ticket, and taking up his shabby hat, took himself and his bit of string rapidly out of the room.

THE YORK MYSTERY

The man in the corner looked quite cheerful that morning; he had had two glasses of milk and had even gone to the extravagance of an extra cheese-cake. Polly knew that he was itching to talk police and murders, for he cast furtive glances at her from time to time, produced a bit of string, tied and untied it into scores of complicated knots, and finally, bringing out his pocket-book, he placed two or three photographs before her.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked, pointing to one of these.

The girl looked at the face on the picture. It was that of a woman, not exactly pretty, but very gentle and childlike, with a strange pathetic look in the large eyes which was wonderfully appealing.

"That was Lady Arthur Skelmerton," he said, and in a flash there flitted before Polly's mind the weird and tragic history which had broken this loving woman's heart. Lady Arthur Skelmerton! That name recalled one of the most bewildering, most mysterious passages in the annals of undiscovered crimes.

"Yes. It was sad, wasn't it?" he commented, in answer to Polly's thoughts. "Another case which but for idiotic blunders on the part of the police must have stood clear as daylight before the public and satisfied general anxiety. Would you object to my recapitulating its preliminary details?"

She said nothing, so he continued without waiting further for a reply.

"It all occurred during the York racing week, a time which brings to the quiet cathedral city its quota of shady characters, who congregate wherever money and wits happen to fly away from their owners. Lord Arthur Skelmerton, a very well-known figure in London society and in racing circles, had rented one of the fine houses which overlook the racecourse. He had entered Peppercorn, by St. Armand — Notre Dame, for the Great Ebor Handicap. Peppercorn was the winner of the Newmarket, and his chances for the Ebor were considered a practical certainty.

"If you have ever been to York you will have noticed the fine houses which have their drive and front entrances in the road called 'The Mount,' and the gardens of which extend as far as the racecourse, commanding a lovely view over the entire track. It was one of these houses, called 'The Elms,' which Lord Arthur Skelmerton had rented for the summer.

"Lady Arthur came down some little time before the racing week with her servants — she had no children; but she had many relatives and friends in York, since she was the daughter of old Sir John Etty, the cocoa manufacturer, a rigid Quaker, who, it was generally said, kept the tightest possible hold on his own purse-strings and looked with marked disfavour upon his aristocratic son-in-law's fondness for gaming tables and betting books.

"As a matter of fact, Maud Etty had married the handsome young lieutenant in the Hussars, quite against her father's wishes. But she was an only child, and after a good deal of demur and grumbling, Sir John, who idolized his daughter, gave way to her whim, and a reluctant consent to the marriage was wrung from him.

"But, as a Yorkshireman, he was far too shrewd a man of the world not to know that love played but a very small part in persuading a Duke's son to marry the daughter of a cocoa manufacturer, and as long as he lived he determined that since his daughter was being wed because of her wealth, that wealth should at least secure her own happiness. He refused to give Lady Arthur any capital, which, in spite of the most carefully worded settlements, would inevitably, sooner or later, have found its way into the pockets of Lord Arthur's racing friends. But he made his daughter a very handsome allowance, amounting to over £3000 a year, which enabled her to keep up an establishment befitting her new rank.

"A great many of these facts, intimate enough as they are, leaked out, you see, during that period of intense excitement which followed the murder of Charles Lavender, and when the public eye was fixed searchingly upon Lord Arthur Skelmerton, probing all the inner details of his idle, useless life.

"It soon became a matter of common gossip that poor little Lady Arthur continued to worship her handsome husband in spite of his obvious neglect, and not having as yet presented him with an heir, she settled herself down into a life of humble apology for her plebeian existence, atoning for it by condoning all his faults and forgiving all his vices, even to the extent of cloaking them before the prying eyes of Sir John, who was persuaded to look upon his son-in-law as a paragon of all the domestic virtues and a perfect model of a husband.

"Among Lord Arthur Skelmerton's many expensive tastes there was certainly that for horseflesh and cards. After some successful betting at the beginning of his married life, he had started a racing-stable which it was generally believed — as he was very lucky — was a regular source of income to him.

"Peppercorn, however, after his brilliant performances at Newmarket did not continue to fulfil his master's expectations. His collapse at York was attributed to the hardness of the course and to various other causes, but its immediate effect was to put Lord Arthur Skelmerton in what is popularly called a tight place, for he had backed his horse for all he was worth, and must have stood to lose considerably over £5000 on that one day.

"The collapse of the favourite and the grand victory of King Cole, a rank outsider, on the other hand, had proved a golden harvest for the bookmakers, and all the York hotels were busy with dinners and suppers given by the confraternity of the Turf to celebrate the happy occasion. The next day was Friday, one of few important racing events, after which the brilliant and the shady throng which had flocked into the venerable city for the week would fly to more congenial climes, and leave it, with its fine old Minster and its ancient walls, as sleepy, as quiet as before.

"Lord Arthur Skelmerton also intended to leave York on the Saturday, and on the Friday night he gave a farewell bachelor dinner party at 'The Elms,' at which Lady Arthur did not appear. After dinner the gentlemen settled down to bridge, with pretty stiff points, you may be sure. It had just struck eleven at the Minster Tower, when constables McNaught and Murphy, who were patrolling the racecourse, were startled by loud cries of 'murder' and 'police.'

"Quickly ascertaining whence these cries proceeded, they hurried on at a gallop, and came up — quite close to the boundary of Lord Arthur Skelmerton's grounds — upon a group of three men, two of whom seemed to be wrestling vigorously with one another, whilst

the third was lying face downwards on the ground. As soon as the constables drew near, one of the wrestlers shouted more vigorously, and with a certain tone of authority:

“Here, you fellows, hurry up, sharp; the brute is giving me the slip!”

“But the brute did not seem inclined to do anything of the sort; he certainly extricated himself with a violent jerk from his assailant’s grasp, but made no attempt to run away. The constables had quickly dismounted, whilst he who had shouted for help originally added more quietly:

“My name is Skelmerton. This is the boundary of my property. I was smoking a cigar at the pavilion over there with a friend when I heard loud voices, followed by a cry and a groan. I hurried down the steps, and saw this poor fellow lying on the ground, with a knife sticking between his shoulder-blades, and his murderer,” he added, pointing to the man who stood quietly by with Constable McNaught’s firm grip upon his shoulder, ‘still stooping over the body of his victim. I was too late, I fear, to save the latter, but just in time to grapple with the assassin—”

“‘It’s a lie!’ here interrupted the man hoarsely. ‘I didn’t do it, constable; I swear I didn’t do it. I saw him fall — I was coming along a couple of hundred yards away, and I tried to see if the poor fellow was dead. I swear I didn’t do it.’

“‘You’ll have to explain that to the inspector presently, my man,’ was Constable McNaught’s quiet comment, and, still vigorously protesting his innocence, the accused allowed himself to be led away, and the body was conveyed to the station, pending fuller identification.

“The next morning the papers were full of the tragedy; a column and a half of the *York Herald* was devoted to an account of Lord Arthur Skelmerton’s plucky capture of the assassin. The latter had continued to declare his innocence, but had remarked, it appears, with grim humour, that he quite saw he was in a tight place, out of which, however, he would find it easy to extricate himself. He had stated to the police that the deceased’s name was Charles Lavender, a well-known bookmaker, which fact was soon verified, for many of the murdered man’s ‘pals’ were still in the city.

“So far the most pushing of newspaper reporters had been unable to glean further information from the police; no one doubted, however, but that the man in charge, who gave his name as George Higgins, had killed the bookmaker for purposes of robbery. The inquest had been fixed for the Tuesday after the murder.

“Lord Arthur had been obliged to stay in York a few days, as his evidence would be needed. That fact gave the case, perhaps, a certain amount of interest as far as York and London ‘society’ were concerned. Charles Lavender, moreover, was well known on the turf; but no bombshell exploding beneath the walls of the ancient cathedral city could more have astonished its inhabitants than the news which, at about five in the afternoon on the day of the inquest, spread like wildfire throughout the town. That news was that the inquest had concluded at three o’clock with a verdict of ‘Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown,’ and that two hours later the police had arrested Lord Arthur Skelmerton at his private residence, ‘The Elms,’ and charged him on a warrant with the murder of Charles Lavender, the bookmaker.”

THE CAPITAL CHARGE

"The police, it appears, instinctively feeling that some mystery lurked round the death of the bookmaker and his supposed murderer's quiet protestations of innocence, had taken a very considerable amount of trouble in collecting all the evidence they could for the inquest which might throw some light upon Charles Lavender's life, previous to his tragic end. Thus it was that a very large array of witnesses was brought before the coroner, chief among whom was, of course, Lord Arthur Skelmerton.

"The first witnesses called were the two constables, who deposed that, just as the church clocks in the neighbourhood were striking eleven, they had heard the cries for help, had ridden to the spot whence the sounds proceeded, and had found the prisoner in the tight grasp of Lord Arthur Skelmerton, who at once accused the man of murder, and gave him in charge. Both constables gave the same version of the incident, and both were positive as to the time when it occurred.

"Medical evidence went to prove that the deceased had been stabbed from behind between the shoulder-blades whilst he was walking, that the wound was inflicted by a large hunting knife, which was produced, and which had been left sticking in the wound.

"Lord Arthur Skelmerton was then called and substantially repeated what he had already told the constables. He stated, namely, that on the night in question he had some gentlemen friends to dinner, and afterwards bridge was played. He himself was not playing much, and at a few minutes before eleven he strolled out with a cigar as far as the pavilion at the end of his garden; he then heard the voices, the cry and the groan previously described by him, and managed to hold the murderer down until the arrival of the constables.

"At this point the police proposed to call a witness, James Terry by name and a bookmaker by profession, who had been chiefly instrumental in identifying the deceased, a 'pal' of his. It was his evidence which first introduced that element of sensation into the case which culminated in the wildly exciting arrest of a Duke's son upon a capital charge.

"It appears that on the evening after the Ebor, Terry and Lavender were in the bar of the Black Swan Hotel having drinks.

"I had done pretty well over Peppercorn's fiasco," he explained, "but poor old Lavender was very much down in the dumps; he had held only a few very small bets against the favourite, and the rest of the day had been a poor one with him. I asked him if he had any bets with the owner of Peppercorn, and he told me that he only held one for less than £500.

"I laughed and said that if he held one for £5000 it would make no difference, as from what I had heard from the other fellows, Lord Arthur Skelmerton must be about stumped. Lavender seemed terribly put out at this, and swore he would get that £500 out of Lord Arthur, if no one else got another penny from him.

"It's the only money I've made to-day," he says to me. 'I mean to get it.'

"You won't," I says.

"I will," he says.

"You will have to look pretty sharp about it then," I says, 'for every one will be wanting to get something, and first come first served.'

"Oh! He'll serve me right enough, never you mind!" says Lavender to me with a laugh. 'If he don't pay up willingly, I've got that in my pocket which will make him sit up and open my lady's eyes and Sir John Etty's too about their precious noble lord.'

"Then he seemed to think he had gone too far, and wouldn't say anything more to me about that affair. I saw him on the course the next day. I asked him if he had got his £500. He said: "No, but I shall get it to-day."

"Lord Arthur Skelmerton, after having given his own evidence, had left the court; it was therefore impossible to know how he would take this account, which threw so serious a light upon an association with the dead man, of which he himself had said nothing.

"Nothing could shake James Terry's account of the facts he had placed before the jury, and when the police informed the coroner that they proposed to place George Higgins himself in the witness-box, as his evidence would prove, as it were, a complement and corollary of that of Terry, the jury very eagerly assented.

"If James Terry, the bookmaker, loud, florid, vulgar, was an unprepossessing individual, certainly George Higgins, who was still under the accusation of murder, was ten thousand times more so.

"None too clean, slouchy, obsequious yet insolent, he was the very personification of the cad who haunts the racecourse and who lives not so much by his own wits as by the lack of them in others. He described himself as a turf commission agent, whatever that may be.

"He stated that at about six o'clock on the Friday afternoon, when the racecourse was still full of people, all hurrying after the day's excitements, he himself happened to be standing close to the hedge which marks the boundary of Lord Arthur Skelmerton's grounds. There is a pavilion there at the end of the garden, he explained, on slightly elevated ground, and he could hear and see a group of ladies and gentlemen having tea. Some steps lead down a little to the left of the garden on to the course, and presently he noticed at the bottom of these steps Lord Arthur Skelmerton and Charles Lavender standing talking together. He knew both gentlemen by sight, but he could not see them very well as they were both partly hidden by the hedge. He was quite sure that the gentlemen had not seen him, and he could not help overhearing some of their conversation.

"That's my last word, Lavender," Lord Arthur was saying very quietly. 'I haven't got the money and I can't pay you now. You'll have to wait.'

"Wait? I can't wait," said old Lavender in reply. 'I've got my engagements to meet, same as you. I'm not going to risk being posted up as a defaulter while you hold £500 of my money. You'd better give it me now or—'

"But Lord Arthur interrupted him very quietly, and said:

"Yes, my good man.... or?"

"Or I'll let Sir John have a good look at that little bill I had of yours a couple of years ago. If you'll remember, my lord, it has got at the bottom of it Sir John's signature in *your* handwriting. Perhaps Sir John, or perhaps my lady, would pay me something for that little bill. If not, the police can have a squint at it. I've held my tongue long enough, and—'

"Look here, Lavender," said Lord Arthur, 'do you know what this little game of yours is called in law?'

“‘Yes, and I don’t care,’ says Lavender. ‘If I don’t have that £500 I am a ruined man. If you ruin me I’ll do for you, and we shall be quits. That’s my last word.’

“He was talking very loudly, and I thought some of Lord Arthur’s friends up in the pavilion must have heard. He thought so, too, I think, for he said quickly:

“‘If you don’t hold your confounded tongue, I’ll give you in charge for blackmail this instant.’

“‘You wouldn’t dare,’ says Lavender, and he began to laugh. But just then a lady from the top of the steps said: ‘Your tea is getting cold,’ and Lord Arthur turned to go; but just before he went Lavender says to him: ‘I’ll come back to-night. You’ll have the money then.’

“George Higgins, it appears, after he had heard this interesting conversation, pondered as to whether he could not turn what he knew into some sort of profit. Being a gentleman who lives entirely by his wits, this type of knowledge forms his chief source of income. As a preliminary to future moves, he decided not to lose sight of Lavender for the rest of the day.

“‘Lavender went and had dinner at The Black Swan,’ explained Mr. George Higgins, ‘and I, after I had had a bite myself, waited outside till I saw him come out. At about ten o’clock I was rewarded for my trouble. He told the hall porter to get him a fly and he jumped into it. I could not hear what direction he gave the driver, but the fly certainly drove off towards the racecourse.

“‘Now, I was interested in this little affair,’ continued the witness, ‘and I couldn’t afford a fly. I started to run. Of course, I couldn’t keep up with it, but I thought I knew which way my gentleman had gone. I made straight for the racecourse, and for the hedge at the bottom of Lord Arthur Skelmerton’s grounds.

“‘It was rather a dark night and there was a slight drizzle. I couldn’t see more than about a hundred yards before me. All at once it seemed to me as if I heard Lavender’s voice talking loudly in the distance. I hurried forward, and suddenly saw a group of two figures — mere blurs in the darkness — for one instant, at a distance of about fifty yards from where I was.

“‘The next moment one figure had fallen forward and the other had disappeared. I ran to the spot, only to find the body of the murdered man lying on the ground. I stooped to see if I could be of any use to him, and immediately I was collared from behind by Lord Arthur himself.’

“‘You may imagine,’ said the man in the corner, ‘how keen was the excitement of that moment in court. Coroner and jury alike literally hung breathless on every word that shabby, vulgar individual uttered. You see, by itself his evidence would have been worth very little, but coming on the top of that given by James Terry, its significance — more, its truth — had become glaringly apparent. Closely cross-examined, he adhered strictly to his statement; and having finished his evidence, George Higgins remained in charge of the constables, and the next witness of importance was called up.

“‘This was Mr. Chipps, the senior footman in the employment of Lord Arthur Skelmerton. He deposed that at about 10.30 on the Friday evening a ‘party’ drove up to ‘The Elms’ in a fly, and asked to see Lord Arthur. On being told that his lordship had company he seemed terribly put out.

“‘I asked the party to give me ‘is card,’ continued Mr. Chipps, ‘as I didn’t know, perhaps, that ‘is lordship might wish to see ‘im, but I kept ‘im standing at the ‘all door, as I didn’t altogether like his looks. I took the card in. His lordship and the gentlemen was playin’ cards in the smoking-room, and as soon as I could do so without disturbing ‘is lordship, I give him the party’s card.’

“‘What name was there on the card?’ here interrupted the coroner.

“‘I couldn’t say now, sir,’ replied Mr. Chipps; ‘I don’t really remember. It was a name I had never seen before. But I see so many visiting cards one way and the other in ‘is lordship’s ‘all that I can’t remember all the names.’

“‘Then, after a few minutes’ waiting, you gave his lordship the card? What happened then?’

“‘Is lordship didn’t seem at all pleased,’ said Mr. Chipps with much guarded dignity; ‘but finally he said: “Show him into the library, Chipps, I’ll see him,” and he got up from the card table, saying to the gentlemen: “Go on without me; I’ll be back in a minute or two.”

“‘I was about to open the door for ‘is lordship when my lady came into the room, and then his lordship suddenly changed his mind like, and said to me: “Tell that man I’m busy and can’t see him,” and ‘e sat down again at the card table. I went back to the ‘all, and told the party ‘is lordship wouldn’t see ‘im. ‘E said: “Oh! it doesn’t matter,” and went away quite quiet like.’

“‘Do you recollect at all at what time that was?’ asked one of the jury.

“‘Yes, sir, while I was waiting to speak to ‘is lordship I looked at the clock, sir; it was twenty past ten, sir.’

“There was one more significant fact in connection with the case, which tended still more to excite the curiosity of the public at the time, and still further to bewilder the police later on, and that fact was mentioned by Chipps in his evidence. The knife, namely, with which Charles Lavender had been stabbed, and which, remember, had been left in the wound, was now produced in court. After a little hesitation Chipps identified it as the property of his master, Lord Arthur Skelmerton.

“Can you wonder, then, that the jury absolutely refused to bring in a verdict against George Higgins? There was really, beyond Lord Arthur Skelmerton’s testimony, not one particle of evidence against him, whilst, as the day wore on and witness after witness was called up, suspicion ripened in the minds of all those present that the murderer could be no other than Lord Arthur Skelmerton himself.

“The knife was, of course, the strongest piece of circumstantial evidence, and no doubt the police hoped to collect a great deal more now that they held a clue in their hands. Directly after the verdict, therefore, which was guardedly directed against some person unknown, the police obtained a warrant and later on arrested Lord Arthur in his own house.”

“The sensation, of course, was tremendous. Hours before he was brought up before the magistrate the approach to the court was thronged. His friends, mostly ladies, were all eager, you see, to watch the dashing society man in so terrible a position. There was universal sympathy for Lady Arthur, who was in a very precarious state of health. Her worship of her worthless husband was well known; small wonder that his final and awful misdeed had practically broken her heart. The latest bulletin issued just after his arrest stated that her ladyship was not expected to live. She was then in a comatose condition, and all hope had perforce to be abandoned.

“At last the prisoner was brought in. He looked very pale, perhaps, but otherwise kept up the bearing of a high-bred gentleman. He was accompanied by his solicitor, Sir Marmaduke Ingersoll, who was evidently talking to him in quiet, reassuring tones.

"Mr. Buchanan prosecuted for the Treasury, and certainly his indictment was terrific. According to him but one decision could be arrived at, namely, that the accused in the dock had, in a moment of passion, and perhaps of fear, killed the blackmailer who threatened him with disclosures which might for ever have ruined him socially, and, having committed the deed and fearing its consequences, probably realizing that the patrolling constables might catch sight of his retreating figure, he had availed himself of George Higgins's presence on the spot to loudly accuse him of the murder.

"Having concluded his able speech, Mr. Buchanan called his witnesses, and the evidence, which on second hearing seemed more damning than ever, was all gone through again.

"Sir Marmaduke had no question to ask of the witnesses for the prosecution; he stared at them placidly through his gold-rimmed spectacles. Then he was ready to call his own for the defence. Colonel McIntosh, R.A., was the first. He was present at the bachelors' party given by Lord Arthur the night of the murder. His evidence tended at first to corroborate that of Chipps the footman with regard to Lord Arthur's orders to show the visitor into the library, and his counter-order as soon as his wife came into the room.

"Did you not think it strange, Colonel?" asked Mr. Buchanan, "that Lord Arthur should so suddenly have changed his mind about seeing his visitor?"

"Well, not exactly strange," said the Colonel, a fine, manly, soldierly figure who looked curiously out of his element in the witness-box. "I don't think that it is a very rare occurrence for racing men to have certain acquaintances whom they would not wish their wives to know anything about."

"Then it did not strike you that Lord Arthur Skelmerton had some reason for not wishing his wife to know of that particular visitor's presence in his house?"

"I don't think that I gave the matter the slightest serious consideration," was the Colonel's guarded reply.

"Mr. Buchanan did not press the point, and allowed the witness to conclude his statements.

"I had finished my turn at bridge," he said, "and went out into the garden to smoke a cigar. Lord Arthur Skelmerton joined me a few minutes later, and we were sitting in the pavilion when I heard a loud and, as I thought, threatening voice from the other side of the hedge.

"I did not catch the words, but Lord Arthur said to me: 'There seems to be a row down there. I'll go and have a look and see what it is.' I tried to dissuade him, and certainly made no attempt to follow him, but not more than half a minute could have elapsed before I heard a cry and a groan, then Lord Arthur's footsteps hurrying down the wooden stairs which lead on to the racecourse."

"You may imagine," said the man in the corner, "what severe cross-examination the gallant Colonel had to undergo in order that his assertions might in some way be shaken by the prosecution, but with military precision and frigid calm he repeated his important statements amidst a general silence, through which you could have heard the proverbial pin.

"He had heard the threatening voice *while* sitting with Lord Arthur Skelmerton; then came the cry and groan, and, *after that*, Lord Arthur's steps down the stairs. He himself thought of following to see what had happened, but it was a very dark night and he did not know the grounds very well. While trying to find his way to the garden steps he heard Lord Arthur's cry for help, the tramp of the patrolling constables' horses, and subsequently the whole scene between Lord Arthur, the man Higgins, and the constables. When he finally found his way to the stairs, Lord Arthur was returning in order to send a groom for police assistance.

"The witness stuck to his points as he had to his guns at Beckfontein a year ago; nothing could shake him, and Sir Marmaduke looked triumphantly across at his opposing colleague.

"With the gallant Colonel's statements the edifice of the prosecution certainly began to collapse. You see, there was not a particle of evidence to show that the accused had met and spoken to the deceased after the latter's visit at the front door of 'The Elms.' He told Chipps that he wouldn't see the visitor, and Chipps went into the hall directly and showed Lavender out the way he came. No assignation could have been made, no hint could have been given by the murdered man to Lord Arthur that he would go round to the back entrance and wished to see him there.

"Two other guests of Lord Arthur's swore positively that after Chipps had announced the visitor, their host stayed at the card-table until a quarter to eleven, when evidently he went out to join Colonel McIntosh in the garden. Sir Marmaduke's speech was clever in the extreme. Bit by bit he demolished that tower of strength, the case against the accused, basing his defence entirely upon the evidence of Lord Arthur Skelmerton's guests that night.

"Until 10.45 Lord Arthur was playing cards; a quarter of an hour later the police were on the scene, and the murder had been committed. In the meanwhile Colonel McIntosh's evidence proved conclusively that the accused had been sitting with him, smoking a cigar. It was obvious, therefore, clear as daylight, concluded the great lawyer, that his client was entitled to a full discharge; nay, more, he thought that the police should have been more careful before they harrowed up public feeling by arresting a high-born gentleman on such insufficient evidence as they had brought forward.

"The question of the knife remained certainly, but Sir Marmaduke passed over it with guarded eloquence, placing that strange question in the category of those inexplicable coincidences which tend to puzzle the ablest detectives, and cause them to commit such unpardonable blunders as the present one had been. After all, the footman may have been mistaken. The pattern of that knife was not an exclusive one, and he, on behalf of his client, flatly denied that it had ever belonged to him.

"Well," continued the man in the corner, with the chuckle peculiar to him in moments of excitement, "the noble prisoner was discharged. Perhaps it would be invidious to say that he left the court without a stain on his character, for I daresay you know from experience that the crime known as the York Mystery has never been satisfactorily cleared up.

"Many people shook their heads dubiously when they remembered that, after all, Charles Lavender was killed with a knife which one witness had sworn belonged to Lord Arthur; others, again, reverted to the original theory that George Higgins was the murderer, that he and James Terry had concocted the story of Lavender's attempt at blackmail on Lord Arthur, and that the murder had been committed for the sole purpose of robbery.

"Be that as it may, the police have not so far been able to collect sufficient evidence against Higgins or Terry, and the crime has been classed by press and public alike in the category of so-called impenetrable mysteries."

A BROKEN-HEARTED WOMAN

The man in the corner called for another glass of milk, and drank it down slowly before he resumed:

"Now Lord Arthur lives mostly abroad," he said. "His poor, suffering wife died the day after he was liberated by the magistrate. She never recovered consciousness even sufficiently to hear the joyful news that the man she loved so well was innocent after all."

"Mystery!" he added as if in answer to Polly's own thoughts. "The murder of that man was never a mystery to me. I cannot understand how the police could have been so blind when every one of the witnesses, both for the prosecution and defence, practically pointed all the time to the one guilty person. What do you think of it all yourself?"

"I think the whole case so bewildering," she replied, "that I do not see one single clear point in it."

"You don't?" he said excitedly, while the bony fingers fidgeted again with that inevitable bit of string. "You don't see that there is one point clear which to me was the key of the whole thing?"

"Lavender was murdered, wasn't he? Lord Arthur did not kill him. He had, at least, in Colonel McIntosh an unimpeachable witness to prove that he could not have committed that murder — and yet," he added with slow, excited emphasis, marking each sentence with a knot, "and yet he deliberately tries to throw the guilt upon a man who obviously was also innocent. Now why?"

"He may have thought him guilty."

"Or wished to shield or cover the retreat of *one he knew to be guilty*."

"I don't understand."

"Think of someone," he said excitedly, "someone whose desire would be as great as that of Lord Arthur to silence a scandal round that gentleman's name. Someone who, unknown perhaps to Lord Arthur, had overheard the same conversation which George Higgins related to the police and the magistrate, someone who, whilst Chipps was taking Lavender's card in to his master, had a few minutes' time wherein to make an assignation with Lavender, promising him money, no doubt, in exchange for the compromising bills."

"Surely you don't mean—" gasped Polly.

"Point number one," he interrupted quietly, "utterly missed by the police. George Higgins in his deposition stated that at the most animated stage of Lavender's conversation with Lord Arthur, and when the bookmaker's tone of voice became loud and threatening, a voice from the top of the steps interrupted that conversation, saying: 'Your tea is getting cold.'"

"Yes — but—" she argued.

"Wait a moment, for there is point number two. That voice was a lady's voice. Now, I did exactly what the police should have done, but did not do. I went to have a look from the racecourse side at those garden steps which to my mind are such important factors in the discovery of this crime. I found only about a dozen rather low steps; anyone standing on the top must have heard every word Charles Lavender uttered the moment he raised his voice."

"Even then—"

"Very well, you grant that," he said excitedly. "Then there was the great, the all-important point which, oddly enough, the prosecution never for a moment took into consideration. When Chipps, the footman, first told Lavender that Lord Arthur could not see him the bookmaker was terribly put out; Chipps then goes to speak to his master; a few minutes elapse, and when the footman once again tells Lavender that his lordship won't see him, the latter says 'Very well,' and seems to treat the matter with complete indifference."

"Obviously, therefore, something must have happened in between to alter the bookmaker's frame of mind. Well! What had happened? Think over all the evidence, and you will see that one thing only had occurred in the interval, namely, Lady Arthur's advent into the room."

"In order to go into the smoking-room she must have crossed the hall; she must have seen Lavender. In that brief interval she must have realized that the man was persistent, and therefore a living danger to her husband. Remember, women have done strange things; they are a far greater puzzle to the student of human nature than the sterner, less complex sex has ever been. As I argued before — as the police should have argued all along — why did Lord Arthur deliberately accuse an innocent man of murder if not to shield the guilty one?"

"Remember, Lady Arthur may have been discovered; the man, George Higgins, may have caught sight of her before she had time to make good her retreat. His attention, as well as that of the constables, had to be diverted. Lord Arthur acted on the blind impulse of saving his wife at any cost."

"She may have been met by Colonel McIntosh," argued Polly.

"Perhaps she was," he said. "Who knows? The gallant colonel had to swear to his friend's innocence. He could do that in all conscience — after that his duty was accomplished. No innocent man was suffering for the guilty. The knife which had belonged to Lord Arthur would always save George Higgins. For a time it had pointed to the husband; fortunately never to the wife. Poor thing, she died probably of a broken heart, but women when they love, think only of one object on earth — the one who is beloved."

"To me the whole thing was clear from the very first. When I read the account of the murder — the knife! stabbing! — bah! Don't I know enough of *English* crime not to be certain at once that no *Englishman*, be he ruffian from the gutter or be he Duke's son, ever stabs his victim in the back. Italians, French, Spaniards do it, if you will, and women of most nations. An Englishman's instinct is to strike and not to stab. George Higgins or Lord Arthur Skelmerton would have knocked their victim down; the woman only would lie in wait till the enemy's back was turned. She knows her weakness, and she does not mean to miss."

"Think it over. There is not one flaw in my argument, but the police never thought the matter out — perhaps in this case it was as well."

He had gone and left Miss Polly Burton still staring at the photograph of a pretty, gentle-looking woman, with a decided, wilful curve round the mouth, and a strange, unaccountable look in the large pathetic eyes; and the little journalist felt quite thankful that in this case the murder of Charles Lavender the bookmaker — cowardly, wicked as it was — had remained a mystery to the police and the public.

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILWAY

It was all very well for Mr. Richard Frobisher (of the *London Mail*) to cut up rough about it. Polly did not altogether blame him.

She liked him all the better for that frank outburst of manlike ill-temper which, after all said and done, was only a very flattering form of masculine jealousy.

Moreover, Polly distinctly felt guilty about the whole thing. She had promised to meet Dickie — that is Mr. Richard Frobisher — at two o'clock sharp outside the Palace Theatre, because she wanted to go to a Maud Allan *matinée*, and because he naturally wished to go with her.

But at two o'clock sharp she was still in Norfolk Street, Strand, inside an A.B.C. shop, sipping cold coffee opposite a grotesque old man who was fiddling with a bit of string.

How could she be expected to remember Maud Allan or the Palace Theatre, or Dickie himself for a matter of that? The man in the corner had begun to talk of that mysterious death on the underground railway, and Polly had lost count of time, of place, and circumstance.

She had gone to lunch quite early, for she was looking forward to the *matinée* at the Palace.

The old scarecrow was sitting in his accustomed place when she came into the A.B.C. shop, but he had made no remark all the time that the young girl was munching her scone and butter. She was just busy thinking how rude he was not even to have said "Good morning," when an abrupt remark from him caused her to look up.

"Will you be good enough," he said suddenly, "to give me a description of the man who sat next to you just now, while you were having your cup of coffee and scone."

Involuntarily Polly turned her head towards the distant door, through which a man in a light overcoat was even now quickly passing. That man had certainly sat at the next table to hers, when she first sat down to her coffee and scone: he had finished his luncheon — whatever it was — moment ago, had paid at the desk and gone out. The incident did not appear to Polly as being of the slightest consequence.

Therefore she did not reply to the rude old man, but shrugged her shoulders, and called to the waitress to bring her bill.

"Do you know if he was tall or short, dark or fair?" continued the man in the corner, seemingly not the least disconcerted by the young girl's indifference. "Can you tell me at all what he was like?"

"Of course I can," rejoined Polly impatiently, "but I don't see that my description of one of the customers of an A.B.C. shop can have the slightest importance."

He was silent for a minute, while his nervous fingers fumbled about in his capacious pockets in search of the inevitable piece of string. When he had found this necessary "adjunct to thought," he viewed the young girl again through his half-closed lids, and added maliciously:

"But supposing it were of paramount importance that you should give an accurate description of a man who sat next to you for half an hour to-day, how would you proceed?"

"I should say that he was of medium height—"

"Five foot eight, nine, or ten?" he interrupted quietly.

"How can one tell to an inch or two?" rejoined Polly crossly. "He was between colours."

"What's that?" he inquired blandly.

"Neither fair nor dark — his nose—"

"Well, what was his nose like? Will you sketch it?"

"I am not an artist. His nose was fairly straight — his eyes—"

"Were neither dark nor light — his hair had the same striking peculiarity — he was neither short nor tall — his nose was neither aquiline nor snub—" he recapitulated sarcastically.

"No," she retorted; "he was just ordinary looking."

"Would you know him again — say to-morrow, and among a number of other men who were 'neither tall nor short, dark nor fair, aquiline nor snub-nosed,' etc.?"

"I don't know — I might — he was certainly not striking enough to be specially remembered."

"Exactly," he said, while he leant forward excitedly, for all the world like a Jack-in-the-box let loose. "Precisely; and you are a journalist — call yourself one, at least — and it should be part of your business to notice and describe people. I don't mean only the wonderful personage with the clear Saxon features, the fine blue eyes, the noble brow and classic face, but the ordinary person — the person who represents ninety out of every hundred of his own kind — the average Englishman, say, of the middle classes, who is neither very tall nor very short, who wears a moustache which is neither fair nor dark, but which masks his mouth, and a top hat which hides the shape of his head and brow, a man, in fact, who dresses like hundreds of his fellow-creatures, moves like them, speaks like them, has no peculiarity.

"Try to describe *him*, to recognize him, say a week hence, among his other eighty-nine doubles; worse still, to swear his life away, if he happened to be implicated in some crime, wherein *your* recognition of him would place the halter round his neck.

"Try that, I say, and having utterly failed you will more readily understand how one of the greatest scoundrels unhung is still at large, and why the mystery on the Underground Railway was never cleared up.

"I think it was the only time in my life that I was seriously tempted to give the police the benefit of my own views upon the matter. You see, though I admire the brute for his cleverness, I did not see that his being unpunished could possibly benefit any one.

"In these days of tubes and motor traction of all kinds, the old-fashioned 'best, cheapest, and quickest route to City and West End' is often deserted, and the good old Metropolitan Railway carriages cannot at any time be said to be overcrowded. Anyway, when that particular train steamed into Aldgate at about 4 p.m. on March 18th last, the first-class carriages were all but empty.

"The guard marched up and down the platform looking into all the carriages to see if anyone had left a halfpenny evening paper behind for him, and opening the door of one of the first-class compartments, he noticed a lady sitting in the further corner, with her head turned away towards the window, evidently oblivious of the fact that on this line Aldgate is the terminal station.

"Where are you for, lady?" he said.

"The lady did not move, and the guard stepped into the carriage, thinking that perhaps the lady was asleep. He touched her arm lightly and looked into her face. In his own poetic language, he was 'struck all of a 'eap.' In the glassy eyes, the ashen colour of the cheeks, the rigidity of the head, there was the unmistakable look of death.

"Hastily the guard, having carefully locked the carriage door, summoned a couple of porters, and sent one of them off to the police-station, and the other in search of the station-master.

"Fortunately at this time of day the up platform is not very crowded, all the traffic tending westward in the afternoon. It was only when an inspector and two police constables, accompanied by a detective in plain clothes and a medical officer, appeared upon the scene, and stood round a first-class railway compartment, that a few idlers realized that something unusual had occurred, and crowded round, eager and curious.

"Thus it was that the later editions of the evening papers, under the sensational heading, 'Mysterious Suicide on the Underground Railway,' had already an account of the extraordinary event. The medical officer had very soon come to the decision that the guard had not been mistaken, and that life was indeed extinct.

"The lady was young, and must have been very pretty before the look of fright and horror had so terribly distorted her features. She was very elegantly dressed, and the more frivolous papers were able to give their feminine readers a detailed account of the unfortunate woman's gown, her shoes, hat, and gloves.

"It appears that one of the latter, the one on the right hand, was partly off, leaving the thumb and wrist bare. That hand held a small satchel, which the police opened, with a view to the possible identification of the deceased, but which was found to contain only a little loose silver, some smelling-salts, and a small empty bottle, which was handed over to the medical officer for purposes of analysis.

"It was the presence of that small bottle which had caused the report to circulate freely that the mysterious case on the Underground Railway was one of suicide. Certain it was that neither about the lady's person, nor in the appearance of the railway carriage, was there the slightest sign of struggle or even of resistance. Only the look in the poor woman's eyes spoke of sudden terror, of the rapid vision of an unexpected and violent death, which probably only lasted an infinitesimal fraction of a second, but which had left its indelible mark upon the face, otherwise so placid and so still."

"The body of the deceased was conveyed to the mortuary. So far, of course, not a soul had been able to identify her, or to throw the slightest light upon the mystery which hung around her death.

"Against that, quite a crowd of idlers — genuinely interested or not — obtained admission to view the body, on the pretext of having lost or mislaid a relative or a friend. At about 8.30 p.m. a young man, very well dressed, drove up to the station in a hansom, and sent in his card to the superintendent. It was Mr. Hazeldene, shipping agent, of 11, Crown Lane, E.C., and No. 19, Addison Row, Kensington.

"The young man looked in a pitiable state of mental distress; his hand clutched nervously a copy of the *St. James's Gazette*, which contained the fatal news. He said very little to the superintendent except that a person who was very dear to him had not returned home that evening.

"He had not felt really anxious until half an hour ago, when suddenly he thought of looking at his paper. The description of the deceased lady, though vague, had terribly alarmed him. He had jumped into a hansom, and now begged permission to view the body, in order that his worst fears might be allayed.

"You know what followed, of course," continued the man in the corner, "the grief of the young man was truly pitiable. In the woman lying there in a public mortuary before him, Mr. Hazeldene had recognized his wife.

"I am waxing melodramatic," said the man in the corner, who looked up at Polly with a mild and gentle smile, while his nervous fingers vainly endeavoured to add another knot on the scrappy bit of string with which he was continually playing, "and I fear that the whole story savours of the penny novelette, but you must admit, and no doubt you remember, that it was an intensely pathetic and truly dramatic moment.

"The unfortunate young husband of the deceased lady was not much worried with questions that night. As a matter of fact, he was not in a fit condition to make any coherent statement. It was at the coroner's inquest on the following day that certain facts came to light, which for the time being seemed to clear up the mystery surrounding Mrs. Hazeldene's death, only to plunge that same mystery, later on, into denser gloom than before.

"The first witness at the inquest was, of course, Mr. Hazeldene himself. I think every one's sympathy went out to the young man as he stood before the coroner and tried to throw what light he could upon the mystery. He was well dressed, as he had been the day before, but he looked terribly ill and worried, and no doubt the fact that he had not shaved gave his face a careworn and neglected air.

"It appears that he and the deceased had been married some six years or so, and that they had always been happy in their married life. They had no children. Mrs. Hazeldene seemed to enjoy the best of health till lately, when she had had a slight attack of influenza, in which Dr. Arthur Jones had attended her. The doctor was present at this moment, and would no doubt explain to the coroner and the jury whether he thought that Mrs. Hazeldene had the slightest tendency to heart disease, which might have had a sudden and fatal ending.

"The coroner was, of course, very considerate to the bereaved husband. He tried by circumlocution to get at the point he wanted, namely, Mrs. Hazeldene's mental condition lately. Mr. Hazeldene seemed loath to talk about this. No doubt he had been warned as to the existence of the small bottle found in his wife's satchel.

"It certainly did seem to me at times," he at last reluctantly admitted, "that my wife did not seem quite herself. She used to be very gay and bright, and lately I often saw her in the evening sitting, as if brooding over some matters, which evidently she did not care to communicate to me."

"Still the coroner insisted, and suggested the small bottle.

“‘I know, I know,’ replied the young man, with a short, heavy sigh. ‘You mean — the question of suicide — I cannot understand it at all — it seems so sudden and so terrible — she certainly had seemed listless and troubled lately — but only at times — and yesterday morning, when I went to business, she appeared quite herself again, and I suggested that we should go to the opera in the evening. She was delighted, I know, and told me she would do some shopping, and pay a few calls in the afternoon.’

“‘Do you know at all where she intended to go when she got into the Underground Railway?’

“‘Well, not with certainty. You see, she may have meant to get out at Baker Street, and go down to Bond Street to do her shopping. Then, again, she sometimes goes to a shop in St. Paul’s Churchyard, in which case she would take a ticket to Aldersgate Street; but I cannot say.’

“‘Now, Mr. Hazeldene,’ said the coroner at last very kindly, ‘will you try to tell me if there was anything in Mrs. Hazeldene’s life which you know of, and which might in some measure explain the cause of the distressed state of mind, which you yourself had noticed? Did there exist any financial difficulty which might have preyed upon Mrs. Hazeldene’s mind; was there any friend — to whose intercourse with Mrs. Hazeldene — you — er — at any time took exception? In fact,’ added the coroner, as if thankful that he had got over an unpleasant moment, ‘can you give me the slightest indication which would tend to confirm the suspicion that the unfortunate lady, in a moment of mental anxiety or derangement, may have wished to take her own life?’

“‘There was silence in the court for a few moments. Mr. Hazeldene seemed to every one there present to be labouring under some terrible moral doubt. He looked very pale and wretched, and twice attempted to speak before he at last said in scarcely audible tones:

“‘No; there were no financial difficulties of any sort. My wife had an independent fortune of her own — she had no extravagant tastes—’

“‘Nor any friend you at any time objected to?’ insisted the coroner.

“‘Nor any friend, I — at any time objected to,’ stammered the unfortunate young man, evidently speaking with an effort.

“‘I was present at the inquest,’ resumed the man in the corner, after he had drunk a glass of milk and ordered another, “and I can assure you that the most obtuse person there plainly realized that Mr. Hazeldene was telling a lie. It was pretty plain to the meanest intelligence that the unfortunate lady had not fallen into a state of morbid dejection for nothing, and that perhaps there existed a third person who could throw more light on her strange and sudden death than the unhappy, bereaved young widower.

“‘That the death was more mysterious even than it had at first appeared became very soon apparent. You read the case at the time, no doubt, and must remember the excitement in the public mind caused by the evidence of the two doctors. Dr. Arthur Jones, the lady’s usual medical man, who had attended her in a last very slight illness, and who had seen her in a professional capacity fairly recently, declared most emphatically that Mrs. Hazeldene suffered from no organic complaint which could possibly have been the cause of sudden death. Moreover, he had assisted Mr. Andrew Thornton, the district medical officer, in making a postmortem examination, and together they had come to the conclusion that death was due to the action of prussic acid, which had caused instantaneous failure of the heart, but how the drug had been administered neither he nor his colleague were at present able to state.

“‘Do I understand, then, Dr. Jones, that the deceased died, poisoned with prussic acid?’

“‘Such is my opinion,’ replied the doctor.

“‘Did the bottle found in her satchel contain prussic acid?’

“‘It had contained some at one time, certainly.’

“‘In your opinion, then, the lady caused her own death by taking a dose of that drug?’

“‘Pardon me, I never suggested such a thing; the lady died poisoned by the drug, but how the drug was administered we cannot say. By injection of some sort, certainly. The drug certainly was not swallowed; there was not a vestige of it in the stomach.’

“‘Yes,’ added the doctor in reply to another question from the coroner, ‘death had probably followed the injection in this case almost immediately; say within a couple of minutes, or perhaps three. It was quite possible that the body would not have more than one quick and sudden convulsion, perhaps not that; death in such cases is absolutely sudden and crushing.’

“‘I don’t think that at the time any one in the room realized how important the doctor’s statement was, a statement which, by the way, was confirmed in all its details by the district medical officer, who had conducted the postmortem. Mrs. Hazeldene had died suddenly from an injection of prussic acid, administered no one knew how or when. She had been travelling in a first-class railway carriage in a busy time of the day. That young and elegant woman must have had singular nerve and coolness to go through the process of a self-inflicted injection of a deadly poison in the presence of perhaps two or three other persons.

“‘Mind you, when I say that no one there realized the importance of the doctor’s statement at that moment, I am wrong; there were three persons, who fully understood at once the gravity of the situation, and the astounding development which the case was beginning to assume.

“‘Of course, I should have put myself out of the question,’ added the weird old man, with that inimitable self-conceit peculiar to himself. “‘I guessed then and there in a moment where the police were going wrong, and where they would go on going wrong until the mysterious death on the Underground Railway had sunk into oblivion, together with the other cases which they mismanage from time to time.

“‘I said there were three persons who understood the gravity of the two doctors’ statements — the other two were, firstly, the detective who had originally examined the railway carriage, a young man of energy and plenty of misguided intelligence, the other was Mr. Hazeldene.

“‘At this point the interesting element of the whole story was first introduced into the proceedings, and this was done through the humble channel of Emma Funnell, Mrs. Hazeldene’s maid, who, as far as was known then, was the last person who had seen the unfortunate lady alive and had spoken to her.

“‘Mrs. Hazeldene lunched at home,’ explained Emma, who was shy, and spoke almost in a whisper; ‘she seemed well and cheerful. She went out at about half-past three, and told me she was going to Spence’s, in St. Paul’s Churchyard, to try on her new tailor-made gown. Mrs. Hazeldene had meant to go there in the morning, but was prevented as Mr. Errington called.’

“‘Mr. Errington?’ asked the coroner casually. ‘Who is Mr. Errington?’

“‘But this Emma found difficult to explain. Mr. Errington was — Mr. Errington, that’s all.

““Mr. Errington was a friend of the family. He lived in a flat in the Albert Mansions. He very often came to Addison Row, and generally stayed late.’

“Pressed still further with questions, Emma at last stated that latterly Mrs. Hazeldene had been to the theatre several times with Mr. Errington, and that on those nights the master looked very gloomy, and was very cross.

“Recalled, the young widower was strangely reticent. He gave forth his answers very grudgingly, and the coroner was evidently absolutely satisfied with himself at the marvellous way in which, after a quarter of an hour of firm yet very kind questionings, he had elicited from the witness what information he wanted.

“Mr. Errington was a friend of his wife. He was a gentleman of means, and seemed to have a great deal of time at his command. He himself did not particularly care about Mr. Errington, but he certainly had never made any observations to his wife on the subject.

““But who is Mr. Errington?’ repeated the coroner once more. ‘What does he do? What is his business or profession?’

““He has no business or profession.

““What is his occupation, then?

“He has no special occupation. He has ample private means. But he has a great and very absorbing hobby.’

““What is that?’

““He spends all his time in chemical experiments, and is, I believe, as an amateur, a very distinguished toxicologist.’”

MR. ERRINGTON

"Did you ever see Mr. Errington, the gentleman so closely connected with the mysterious death on the Underground Railway?" asked the man in the corner as he placed one or two of his little snap-shot photos before Miss Polly Burton.

"There he is, to the very life. Fairly good-looking, a pleasant face enough, but ordinary, absolutely ordinary.

"It was this absence of any peculiarity which very nearly, but not quite, placed the halter round Mr. Errington's neck.

"But I am going too fast, and you will lose the thread.

"The public, of course, never heard how it actually came about that Mr. Errington, the wealthy bachelor of Albert Mansions, of the Grosvenor, and other young dandies' clubs, one fine day found himself before the magistrates at Bow Street, charged with being concerned in the death of Mary Beatrice Hazeldene, late of No. 19, Addison Row.

"I can assure you both press and public were literally flabbergasted. You see, Mr. Errington was a well-known and very popular member of a certain smart section of London society. He was a constant visitor at the opera, the racecourse, the Park, and the Carlton, he had a great many friends, and there was consequently quite a large attendance at the police court that morning.

"What had transpired was this:

"After the very scrappy bits of evidence which came to light at the inquest, two gentlemen bethought themselves that perhaps they had some duty to perform towards the State and the public generally. Accordingly they had come forward, offering to throw what light they could upon the mysterious affair on the Underground Railway.

"The police naturally felt that their information, such as it was, came rather late in the day, but as it proved of paramount importance, and the two gentlemen, moreover, were of undoubtedly good position in the world, they were thankful for what they could get, and acted accordingly; they accordingly brought Mr. Errington up before the magistrate on a charge of murder.

"The accused looked pale and worried when I first caught sight of him in the court that day, which was not to be wondered at, considering the terrible position in which he found himself.

"He had been arrested at Marseilles, where he was preparing to start for Colombo.

"I don't think he realized how terrible his position really was until later in the proceedings, when all the evidence relating to the arrest had been heard, and Emma Funnel had repeated her statement as to Mr. Errington's call at 19, Addison Row, in the morning, and Mrs. Hazeldene starting off for St. Paul's Churchyard at 3.30 in the afternoon.

"Mr. Hazeldene had nothing to add to the statements he had made at the coroner's inquest. He had last seen his wife alive on the morning of the fatal day. She had seemed very well and cheerful.

"I think every one present understood that he was trying to say as little as possible that could in any way couple his deceased wife's name with that of the accused.

"And yet, from the servant's evidence, it undoubtedly leaked out that Mrs. Hazeldene, who was young, pretty, and evidently fond of admiration, had once or twice annoyed her husband by her somewhat open, yet perfectly innocent, flirtation with Mr. Errington.

"I think every one was most agreeably impressed by the widower's moderate and dignified attitude. You will see his photo there, among this bundle. That is just how he appeared in court. In deep black, of course, but without any sign of ostentation in his mourning. He had allowed his beard to grow lately, and wore it closely cut in a point.

"After his evidence, the sensation of the day occurred. A tall, dark-haired man, with the word 'City' written metaphorically all over him, had kissed the book, and was waiting to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth.

"He gave his name as Andrew Campbell, head of the firm of Campbell & Co., brokers, of Throgmorton Street.

"In the afternoon of March 18th Mr. Campbell, travelling on the Underground Railway, had noticed a very pretty woman in the same carriage as himself. She had asked him if she was in the right train for Aldersgate. Mr. Campbell replied in the affirmative, and then buried himself in the Stock Exchange quotations of his evening paper.

"At Gower Street, a gentleman in a tweed suit and bowler hat got into the carriage, and took a seat opposite the lady.

"She seemed very much astonished at seeing him, but Mr. Andrew Campbell did not recollect the exact words she said.

"The two talked to one another a good deal, and certainly the lady appeared animated and cheerful. Witness took no notice of them; he was very much engrossed in some calculations, and finally got out at Farringdon Street. He noticed that the man in the tweed suit also got out close behind him, having shaken hands with the lady, and said in a pleasant way: '*Au revoir!* Don't be late to-night.' Mr. Campbell did not hear the lady's reply, and soon lost sight of the man in the crowd.

"Every one was on tenter-hooks, and eagerly waiting for the palpitating moment when witness would describe and identify the man who last had seen and spoken to the unfortunate woman, within five minutes probably of her strange and unaccountable death.

"Personally I knew what was coming before the Scotch stockbroker spoke.

"I could have jotted down the graphic and lifelike description he would give of a probable murderer. It would have fitted equally well the man who sat and had luncheon at this table just now; it would certainly have described five out of every ten young Englishmen you know.

"The individual was of medium height, he wore a moustache which was not very fair nor yet very dark, his hair was between colours. He wore a bowler hat, and a tweed suit — and — and — that was all — Mr. Campbell might perhaps know him again, but then again, he might not — he was not paying much attention — the gentleman was sitting on the same side of the carriage as himself — and he had his hat on all the time. He himself was busy with his newspaper — yes — he might know him again — but he really could not say.

"Mr. Andrew Campbell's evidence was not worth very much, you will say. No, it was not in itself, and would not have justified any arrest were it not for the additional statements made by Mr. James Verner, manager of Messrs. Rodney & Co., colour printers.

"Mr. Verner is a personal friend of Mr. Andrew Campbell, and it appears that at Farringdon Street, where he was waiting for his train, he saw Mr. Campbell get out of a first-class railway carriage. Mr. Verner spoke to him for a second, and then, just as the train was moving off, he stepped into the same compartment which had just been vacated by the stockbroker and the man in the tweed suit. He

vaguely recollects a lady sitting in the opposite corner to his own, with her face turned away from him, apparently asleep, but he paid no special attention to her. He was like nearly all business men when they are travelling — engrossed in his paper. Presently a special quotation interested him; he wished to make a note of it, took out a pencil from his waistcoat pocket, and seeing a clean piece of paste-board on the floor, he picked it up, and scribbled on it the memorandum, which he wished to keep. He then slipped the card into his pocket-book.

“‘It was only two or three days later,’ added Mr. Verner in the midst of breathless silence, ‘that I had occasion to refer to these same notes again.

“‘In the meanwhile the papers had been full of the mysterious death on the Underground Railway, and the names of those connected with it were pretty familiar to me. It was, therefore, with much astonishment that on looking at the paste-board which I had casually picked up in the railway carriage I saw the name on it, “Frank Errington.”’

“There was no doubt that the sensation in court was almost unprecedented. Never since the days of the Fenchurch Street mystery, and the trial of Smethurst, had I seen so much excitement. Mind you, I was not excited — I knew by now every detail of that crime as if I had committed it myself. In fact, I could not have done it better, although I have been a student of crime for many years now. Many people there — his friends, mostly — believed that Errington was doomed. I think he thought so, too, for I could see that his face was terribly white, and he now and then passed his tongue over his lips, as if they were parched.

“You see he was in the awful dilemma — a perfectly natural one, by the way — of being absolutely incapable of *proving an alibi*. The crime — if crime there was — had been committed three weeks ago. A man about town like Mr. Frank Errington might remember that he spent certain hours of a special afternoon at his club, or in the Park, but it is very doubtful in nine cases out of ten if he can find a friend who could positively swear as to having seen him there. No! no! Mr. Errington was in a tight corner, and he knew it. You see, there were — besides the evidence — two or three circumstances which did not improve matters for him. His hobby in the direction of toxicology, to begin with. The police had found in his room every description of poisonous substances, including prussic acid.

“Then, again, that journey to Marseilles, the start for Colombo, was, though perfectly innocent, a very unfortunate one. Mr. Errington had gone on an aimless voyage, but the public thought that he had fled, terrified at his own crime. Sir Arthur Inglewood, however, here again displayed his marvellous skill on behalf of his client by the masterly way in which he literally turned all the witnesses for the Crown inside out.

“Having first got Mr. Andrew Campbell to state positively that in the accused he certainly did *not* recognize the man in the tweed suit, the eminent lawyer, after twenty minutes’ cross-examination, had so completely upset the stockbroker’s equanimity that it is very likely he would not have recognized his own office-boy.

“But through all his flurry and all his annoyance Mr. Andrew Campbell remained very sure of one thing; namely, that the lady was alive and cheerful, and talking pleasantly with the man in the tweed suit up to the moment when the latter, having shaken hands with her, left her with a pleasant ‘*Au revoir!* Don’t be late to-night.’ He had heard neither scream nor struggle, and in his opinion, if the individual in the tweed suit had administered a dose of poison to his companion, it must have been with her own knowledge and free will; and the lady in the train most emphatically neither looked nor spoke like a woman prepared for a sudden and violent death.

“Mr. James Verner, against that, swore equally positively that he had stood in full view of the carriage door from the moment that Mr. Campbell got out until he himself stepped into the compartment, that there was no one else in that carriage between Farringdon Street and Aldgate, and that the lady, to the best of his belief, had made no movement during the whole of that journey.

“No; Frank Errington was *not* committed for trial on the capital charge,” said the man in the corner with one of his sardonic smiles, “thanks to the cleverness of Sir Arthur Inglewood, his lawyer. He absolutely denied his identity with the man in the tweed suit, and swore he had not seen Mrs. Hazeldene since eleven o’clock in the morning of that fatal day. There was no *proof* that he had; moreover, according to Mr. Campbell’s opinion, the man in the tweed suit was in all probability not the murderer. Common sense would not admit that a woman could have a deadly poison injected into her without her knowledge, while chatting pleasantly to her murderer.

“Mr. Errington lives abroad now. He is about to marry. I don’t think any of his real friends for a moment believed that he committed the dastardly crime. The police think they know better. They do know this much, that it could not have been a case of suicide, that if the man who undoubtedly travelled with Mrs. Hazeldene on that fatal afternoon had no crime upon his conscience he would long ago have come forward and thrown what light he could upon the mystery.

“As to who that man was, the police in their blindness have not the faintest doubt. Under the unshakable belief that Errington is guilty they have spent the last few months in unceasing labour to try and find further and stronger proofs of his guilt. But they won’t find them, because there are none. There are no positive proofs against the actual murderer, for he was one of those clever blackguards who think of everything, foresee every eventuality, who know human nature well, and can foretell exactly what evidence will be brought against them, and act accordingly.

“This blackguard from the first kept the figure, the personality, of Frank Errington before his mind. Frank Errington was the dust which the scoundrel threw metaphorically in the eyes of the police, and you must admit that he succeeded in blinding them — to the extent even of making them entirely forget the one simple little sentence, overheard by Mr. Andrew Campbell, and which was, of course, the clue to the whole thing — the only slip the cunning rogue made — ‘*Au revoir!* Don’t be late to-night.’ Mrs. Hazeldene was going that night to the opera with her husband —

“You are astonished?” he added with a shrug of the shoulders, “you do not see the tragedy yet, as I have seen it before me all along. The frivolous young wife, the flirtation with the friend? — all a blind, all pretence. I took the trouble which the police should have taken immediately, of finding out something about the finances of the Hazeldene *ménage*. Money is in nine cases out of ten the keynote to a crime.

“I found that the will of Mary Beatrice Hazeldene had been proved by the husband, her sole executor, the estate being sworn at £15,000. I found out, moreover, that Mr. Edward Sholto Hazeldene was a poor shipper’s clerk when he married the daughter of a wealthy builder in Kensington — and then I made note of the fact that the disconsolate widower had allowed his beard to grow since the death of his wife.

"There's no doubt that he was a clever rogue," added the strange creature, leaning excitedly over the table, and peering into Polly's face. "Do you know how that deadly poison was injected into the poor woman's system? By the simplest of all means, one known to every scoundrel in Southern Europe. A ring — yes! a ring, which has a tiny hollow needle capable of holding a sufficient quantity of prussic acid to have killed two persons instead of one. The man in the tweed suit shook hands with his fair companion — probably she hardly felt the prick, not sufficiently in any case to make her utter a scream. And, mind you, the scoundrel had every facility, through his friendship with Mr. Errington, of procuring what poison he required, not to mention his friend's visiting card. We cannot gauge how many months ago he began to try and copy Frank Errington in his style of dress, the cut of his moustache, his general appearance, making the change probably so gradual, that no one in his own *entourage* would notice it. He selected for his model a man his own height and build, with the same coloured hair."

"But there was the terrible risk of being identified by his fellow-traveller in the Underground," suggested Polly.

"Yes, there certainly was that risk; he chose to take it, and he was wise. He reckoned that several days would in any case elapse before that person, who, by the way, was a business man absorbed in his newspaper, would actually see him again. The great secret of successful crime is to study human nature," added the man in the corner, as he began looking for his hat and coat. "Edward Hazeldene knew it well."

"But the ring?"

"He may have bought that when he was on his honeymoon," he suggested with a grim chuckle; "the tragedy was not planned in a week, it may have taken years to mature. But you will own that there goes a frightful scoundrel unhung. I have left you his photograph as he was a year ago, and as he is now. You will see he has shaved his beard again, but also his moustache. I fancy he is a friend now of Mr. Andrew Campbell."

He left Miss Polly Burton wondering, not knowing what to believe.

And that is why she missed her appointment with Mr. Richard Frobisher (of the *London Mail*) to go and see Maud Allan dance at the Palace Theatre that afternoon.

THE LIVERPOOL MYSTERY

"A title — a foreign title, I mean — is always very useful for purposes of swindles and frauds," remarked the man in the corner to Polly one day. "The cleverest robberies of modern times were perpetrated lately in Vienna by a man who dubbed himself Lord Seymour; whilst over here the same class of thief calls himself Count Something ending in 'o,' or Prince the other, ending in 'off.'"

"Fortunately for our hotel and lodging-house keepers over here," she replied, "they are beginning to be more alive to the ways of foreign swindlers, and look upon all titled gentry who speak broken English as possible swindlers or thieves."

"The result sometimes being exceedingly unpleasant to the real *grands seigneurs* who honour this country at times with their visits," replied the man in the corner. "Now, take the case of Prince Semionicz, a man whose sixteen quarterings are duly recorded in Gotha, who carried enough luggage with him to pay for the use of every room in an hotel for at least a week, whose gold cigarette case with diamond and turquoise ornament was actually stolen without his taking the slightest trouble to try and recover it; that same man was undoubtedly looked upon with suspicion by the manager of the Liverpool North-Western Hotel from the moment that his secretary — a dapper, somewhat vulgar little Frenchman — bespoke on behalf of his employer, with himself and a valet, the best suite of rooms the hotel contained."

"Obviously those suspicions were unfounded, for the little secretary, as soon as Prince Semionicz had arrived, deposited with the manager a pile of bank notes, also papers and bonds, the value of which would exceed tenfold the most outrageous bill that could possibly be placed before the noble visitor. Moreover, M. Albert Lambert explained that the Prince, who only meant to stay in Liverpool a few days, was on his way to Chicago, where he wished to visit Princess Anna Semionicz, his sister, who was married to Mr. Girwan, the great copper king and multi-millionaire."

"Yet, as I told you before, in spite of all these undoubted securities, suspicion of the wealthy Russian Prince lurked in the minds of most Liverpoolians who came in business contact with him. He had been at the North-Western two days when he sent his secretary to Window and Vassall, the jewellers of Bold Street, with a request that they would kindly send a representative round to the hotel with some nice pieces of jewellery, diamonds and pearls chiefly, which he was desirous of taking as a present to his sister in Chicago."

"Mr. Winslow took the order from M. Albert with a pleasant bow. Then he went to his inner office and consulted with his partner, Mr. Vassall, as to the best course to adopt. Both the gentlemen were desirous of doing business, for business had been very slack lately: neither wished to refuse a possible customer, or to offend Mr. Pettitt, the manager of the North-Western, who had recommended them to the Prince. But that foreign title and the vulgar little French secretary stuck in the throats of the two pompous and worthy Liverpool jewellers, and together they agreed, firstly, that no credit should be given; and, secondly, that if a cheque or even a banker's draft were tendered, the jewels were not to be given up until that cheque or draft was cashed."

"Then came the question as to who should take the jewels to the hotel. It was altogether against business etiquette for the senior partners to do such errands themselves; moreover, it was thought that it would be easier for a clerk to explain, without giving undue offence, that he could not take the responsibility of a cheque or draft, without having cashed it previously to giving up the jewels."

"Then there was the question of the probable necessity of conferring in a foreign tongue. The head assistant, Charles Needham, who had been in the employ of Winslow and Vassall for over twelve years, was, in true British fashion, ignorant of any language save his own; it was therefore decided to dispatch Mr. Schwarz, a young German clerk lately arrived, on the delicate errand."

"Mr. Schwarz was Mr. Winslow's nephew and godson, a sister of that gentleman having married the head of the great German firm of Schwarz & Co., silversmiths, of Hamburg and Berlin."

"The young man had soon become a great favourite with his uncle, whose heir he would presumably be, as Mr. Winslow had no children."

"At first Mr. Vassall made some demur about sending Mr. Schwarz with so many valuable jewels alone in a city which he had not yet had the time to study thoroughly; but finally he allowed himself to be persuaded by his senior partner, and a fine selection of necklaces, pendants, bracelets, and rings, amounting in value to over £16,000, having been made, it was decided that Mr. Schwarz should go to the North-Western in a cab the next day at about three o'clock in the afternoon. This he accordingly did, the following day being a Thursday."

"Business went on in the shop as usual under the direction of the head assistant, until about seven o'clock, when Mr. Winslow returned from his club, where he usually spent an hour over the papers every afternoon, and at once asked for his nephew. To his astonishment Mr. Needham informed him that Mr. Schwarz had not yet returned. This seemed a little strange, and Mr. Winslow, with a slightly anxious look in his face, went into the inner office in order to consult his junior partner. Mr. Vassall offered to go round to the hotel and interview Mr. Pettitt."

"'I was beginning to get anxious myself,' he said, 'but did not quite like to say so. I have been in over half an hour, hoping every moment that you would come in, and that perhaps you could give me some reassuring news. I thought that perhaps you had met Mr. Schwarz, and were coming back together.'"

"However, Mr. Vassall walked round to the hotel and interviewed the hall porter. The latter perfectly well remembered Mr. Schwarz sending in his card to Prince Semionicz."

"'At what time was that?' asked Mr. Vassall."

"'About ten minutes past three, sir, when he came; it was about an hour later when he left.'"

"'When he left?' gasped, more than said, Mr. Vassall."

"'Yes, sir. Mr. Schwarz left here about a quarter before four, sir.'"

"'Are you quite sure?'"

"'Quite sure. Mr. Pettitt was in the hall when he left, and he asked him something about business. Mr. Schwarz laughed and said, 'not bad.' I hope there's nothing wrong, sir,' added the man."

"'Oh — er — nothing — thank you. Can I see Mr. Pettitt?'"

"'Certainly, sir.'"

"Mr. Pettitt, the manager of the hotel, shared Mr. Vassall's anxiety, immediately he heard that the young German had not yet returned home.

"I spoke to him a little before four o'clock. We had just switched on the electric light, which we always do these winter months at that hour. But I shouldn't worry myself, Mr. Vassall; the young man may have seen to some business on his way home. You'll probably find him in when you go back."

"Apparently somewhat reassured, Mr. Vassall thanked Mr. Pettitt and hurried back to the shop, only to find that Mr. Schwarz had not returned, though it was now close on eight o'clock.

"Mr. Winslow looked so haggard and upset that it would have been cruel to heap reproaches upon his other troubles or to utter so much as the faintest suspicion that young Schwarz's permanent disappearance with £16,000 in jewels and money was within the bounds of probability.

"There was one chance left, but under the circumstances a very slight one indeed. The Winslows' private house was up the Birkenhead end of the town. Young Schwarz had been living with them ever since his arrival in Liverpool, and he may have — either not feeling well or for some other reason — gone straight home without calling at the shop. It was unlikely, as valuable jewellery was never kept at the private house, but — it just might have happened.

"It would be useless," continued the man in the corner, "and decidedly uninteresting, were I to relate to you Messrs. Winslow's and Vassall's further anxieties with regard to the missing young man. Suffice it to say that on reaching his private house Mr. Winslow found that his godson had neither returned nor sent any telegraphic message of any kind.

"Not wishing to needlessly alarm his wife, Mr. Winslow made an attempt at eating his dinner, but directly after that he hurried back to the North-Western Hotel, and asked to see Prince Semionicz. The Prince was at the theatre with his secretary, and probably would not be home until nearly midnight.

"Mr. Winslow, then, not knowing what to think, nor yet what to fear, and in spite of the horror he felt of giving publicity to his nephew's disappearance, thought it his duty to go round to the police-station and interview the inspector. It is wonderful how quickly news of that type travels in a large city like Liverpool. Already the morning papers of the following day were full of the latest sensation: 'Mysterious disappearance of a well-known tradesman.'

"Mr. Winslow found a copy of the paper containing the sensational announcement on his breakfast-table. It lay side by side with a letter addressed to him in his nephew's handwriting, which had been posted in Liverpool.

"Mr. Winslow placed that letter, written to him by his nephew, into the hands of the police. Its contents, therefore, quickly became public property. The astounding statements made therein by Mr. Schwarz created, in quiet, businesslike Liverpool, a sensation which has seldom been equalled.

"It appears that the young fellow did call on Prince Semionicz at a quarter past three on Wednesday, December 10th, with a bag full of jewels, amounting in value to some £16,000. The Prince duly admired, and finally selected from among the ornaments a necklace, pendant, and bracelet, the whole being priced by Mr. Schwarz, according to his instructions, at £10,500. Prince Semionicz was most prompt and businesslike in his dealings.

"'You will require immediate payment for these, of course,' he said in perfect English, 'and I know you business men prefer solid cash to cheques, especially when dealing with foreigners. I always provide myself with plenty of Bank of England notes in consequence,' he added with a pleasant smile, 'as £10,500 in gold would perhaps be a little inconvenient to carry. If you will kindly make out the receipt, my secretary, M. Lambert, will settle all business matters with you.'

"He thereupon took the jewels he had selected and locked them up in his dressing-case, the beautiful silver fillings of which Mr. Schwarz just caught a short glimpse of. Then, having been accommodated with paper and ink, the young jeweller made out the account and receipt, whilst M. Lambert, the secretary, counted out before him 105 crisp Bank of England notes of £100 each. Then, with a final bow to his exceedingly urbane and eminently satisfactory customer, Mr. Schwarz took his leave. In the hall he saw and spoke to Mr. Pettitt, and then he went out into the street.

"He had just left the hotel and was about to cross towards St. George's Hall when a gentleman, in a magnificent fur coat, stepped quickly out of a cab which had been stationed near the kerb, and, touching him lightly upon the shoulder, said with an unmistakable air of authority, at the same time handing him a card:

"'That is my name. I must speak with you immediately.'

"Schwarz glanced at the card, and by the light of the arc lamps above his head read on it the name of 'Dimitri Slaviansky Burgreneff, de la IIIe Section de la Police Imperial de S.M. le Czar.'

"Quickly the owner of the unpronounceable name and the significant title pointed to the cab from which he had just alighted, and Schwarz, whose every suspicion with regard to his princely customer bristled up in one moment, clutched his bag and followed his imposing interlocutor; as soon as they were both comfortably seated in the cab the latter began, with courteous apology in broken but fluent English:

"'I must ask your pardon, sir, for thus trespassing upon your valuable time, and I certainly should not have done so but for the certainty that our interests in a certain matter which I have in hand are practically identical, in so far that we both should wish to outwit a clever rogue.'

"Instinctively, and his mind full of terrible apprehension, Mr. Schwarz's hand wandered to his pocket-book, filled to overflowing with the bank-notes which he had so lately received from the Prince.

"'Ah, I see,' interposed the courteous Russian with a smile, 'he has played the confidence trick on you, with the usual addition of so many so-called bank-notes.'

"'So-called,' gasped the unfortunate young man.

"'I don't think I often err in my estimate of my own countrymen,' continued M. Burgreneff; 'I have vast experience, you must remember. Therefore, I doubt if I am doing M. — er — what does he call himself? — Prince something — an injustice if I assert, even without handling those crisp bits of paper you have in your pocket-book, that no bank would exchange them for gold.'

“Remembering his uncle’s suspicions and his own, Mr. Schwarz cursed himself for his blindness and folly in accepting notes so easily without for a moment imagining that they might be false. Now, with every one of those suspicions fully on the alert, he felt the bits of paper with nervous, anxious fingers, while the imperturbable Russian calmly struck a match.

“‘See here,’ he said, pointing to one of the notes, ‘the shape of that “w” in the signature of the chief cashier. I am not an English police officer, but I could pick out that spurious “w” among a thousand genuine ones. You see, I have seen a good many.’

“Now, of course, poor young Schwarz had not seen very many Bank of England notes. He could not have told whether one ‘w’ in Mr. Bowen’s signature is better than another, but, though he did not speak English nearly as fluently as his pompous interlocutor, he understood every word of the appalling statement the latter had just made.

“‘Then that Prince,’ he said, ‘at the hotel—’

“‘Is no more Prince than you and I, my dear sir,’ concluded the gentleman of His Imperial Majesty’s police calmly.

“‘And the jewels? Mr. Winslow’s jewels?’

“‘With the jewels there may be a chance — oh! a mere chance. These forged bank-notes, which you accepted so trustingly, may prove the means of recovering your property.’

“‘How?’

“‘The penalty of forging and circulating spurious bank-notes is very heavy. You know that. The fear of seven years’ penal servitude will act as a wonderful sedative upon the — er — Prince’s joyful mood. He will give up the jewels to me all right enough, never you fear. He knows,’ added the Russian officer grimly, ‘that there are plenty of old scores to settle up, without the additional one of forged bank-notes. Our interests, you see, are identical. May I rely on your co-operation?’

“‘Oh, I will do as you wish,’ said the delighted young German. ‘Mr. Winslow and Mr. Vassall, they trusted me, and I have been such a fool. I hope it is not too late.’

“‘I think not,’ said M. Burgreneff, his hand already on the door of the cab. ‘Though I have been talking to you I have kept an eye on the hotel, and our friend the Prince has not yet gone out. We are accustomed, you know, to have eyes everywhere, we of the Russian secret police. I don’t think that I will ask you to be present at the confrontation. Perhaps you will wait for me in the cab. There is a nasty fog outside, and you will be more private. Will you give me those beautiful bank-notes? Thank you! Don’t be anxious. I won’t be long.’

“He lifted his hat, and slipped the notes into the inner pocket of his magnificent fur coat. As he did so, Mr. Schwarz caught sight of a rich uniform and a wide sash, which no doubt was destined to carry additional moral weight with the clever rogue upstairs.

“Then His Imperial Majesty’s police officer stepped quickly out of the cab, and Mr. Schwarz was left alone.”

A CUNNING RASCAL

"Yes, left severely alone," continued the man in the corner with a sarcastic chuckle. "So severely alone, in fact, that one quarter of an hour after another passed by and still the magnificent police officer in the gorgeous uniform did not return. Then, when it was too late, Schwarz cursed himself once again for the double-dyed idiot that he was. He had been only too ready to believe that Prince Semionicz was a liar and a rogue, and under these unjust suspicions he had fallen an all too easy prey to one of the most cunning rascals he had ever come across.

"An inquiry from the hall porter at the North-Western elicited the fact that no such personage as Mr. Schwarz described had entered the hotel. The young man asked to see Prince Semionicz, hoping against hope that all was not yet lost. The Prince received him most courteously; he was dictating some letters to his secretary, while the valet was in the next room preparing his master's evening clothes. Mr. Schwarz found it very difficult to explain what he actually did want.

"There stood the dressing-case in which the Prince had locked up the jewels, and there the bag from which the secretary had taken the bank-notes. After much hesitation on Schwarz's part and much impatience on that of the Prince, the young man blurted out the whole story of the so-called Russian police officer whose card he still held in his hand.

"The Prince, it appears, took the whole thing wonderfully good-naturedly; no doubt he thought the jeweller a hopeless fool. He showed him the jewels, the receipt he held, and also a large bundle of bank-notes similar to those Schwarz had with such culpable folly given up to the clever rascal in the cab.

"I pay all my bills with Bank of England notes, Mr. Schwarz. It would have been wiser, perhaps, if you had spoken to the manager of the hotel about me before you were so ready to believe any cock-and-bull story about my supposed rogueries."

"Finally he placed a small 16mo volume before the young jeweller, and said with a pleasant smile:

"If people in this country who are in a large way of business, and are therefore likely to come in contact with people of foreign nationality, were to study these little volumes before doing business with any foreigner who claims a title, much disappointment and a great loss would often be saved. Now in this case had you looked up page 797 of this little volume of Gotha's Almanach you would have seen my name in it and known from the first that the so-called Russian detective was a liar."

"There was nothing more to be said, and Mr. Schwarz left the hotel. No doubt, now that he had been hopelessly duped he dared not go home, and half hoped by communicating with the police that they might succeed in arresting the thief before he had time to leave Liverpool. He interviewed Detective-Inspector Watson, and was at once confronted with the awful difficulty which would make the recovery of the bank-notes practically hopeless. He had never had the time or opportunity of jotting down the numbers of the notes.

"Mr. Winslow, though terribly wrathful against his nephew, did not wish to keep him out of his home. As soon as he had received Schwarz's letter, he traced him, with Inspector Watson's help, to his lodgings in North Street, where the unfortunate young man meant to remain hidden until the terrible storm had blown over, or perhaps until the thief had been caught red-handed with the booty still in his hands.

"This happy event, needless to say, never did occur, though the police made every effort to trace the man who had decoyed Schwarz into the cab. His appearance was such an uncommon one; it seemed most unlikely that no one in Liverpool should have noticed him after he left that cab. The wonderful fur coat, the long beard, all must have been noticeable, even though it was past four o'clock on a somewhat foggy December afternoon.

"But every investigation proved futile; no one answering Schwarz's description of the man had been seen anywhere. The papers continued to refer to the case as 'the Liverpool Mystery.' Scotland Yard sent Mr. Fairburn down — the celebrated detective — at the request of the Liverpool police, to help in the investigations, but nothing availed.

"Prince Semionicz, with his suite, left Liverpool, and he who had attempted to blacken his character, and had succeeded in robbing Messrs. Winslow and Vassall of £10,500, had completely disappeared."

The man in the corner readjusted his collar and necktie, which, during the narrative of this interesting mystery, had worked its way up his long, crane-like neck under his large flappy ears. His costume of checked tweed of a peculiarly loud pattern had tickled the fancy of some of the waitresses, who were standing gazing at him and giggling in one corner. This evidently made him nervous. He gazed up very meekly at Polly, looking for all the world like a bald-headed adjutant dressed for a holiday.

"Of course, all sorts of theories of the theft got about at first. One of the most popular, and at the same time most quickly exploded, being that young Schwarz had told a cock-and-bull story, and was the actual thief himself.

"However, as I said before, that was very quickly exploded, as Mr. Schwarz senior, a very wealthy merchant, never allowed his son's carelessness to be a serious loss to his kind employers. As soon as he thoroughly grasped all the circumstances of the extraordinary case, he drew a cheque for £10,500 and remitted it to Messrs. Winslow and Vassall. It was just, but it was also high-minded.

"All Liverpool knew of the generous action, as Mr. Winslow took care that it should; and any evil suspicion regarding young Mr. Schwarz vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Then, of course, there was the theory about the Prince and his suite, and to this day I fancy there are plenty of people in Liverpool, and also in London, who declare that the so-called Russian police officer was a confederate. No doubt that theory was very plausible, and Messrs. Winslow and Vassall spent a good deal of money in trying to prove a case against the Russian Prince.

"Very soon, however, that theory was also bound to collapse. Mr. Fairburn, whose reputation as an investigator of crime waxes in direct inverted ratio to his capacities, did hit upon the obvious course of interviewing the managers of the larger London and Liverpool *agents de change*. He soon found that Prince Semionicz had converted a great deal of Russian and French money into English bank-notes since his arrival in this country. More than £30,000 in good solid, honest money was traced to the pockets of the gentleman with the sixteen quarterings. It seemed, therefore, more than improbable that a man who was obviously fairly wealthy would risk imprisonment and hard labour, if not worse, for the sake of increasing his fortune by £10,000.

"However, the theory of the Prince's guilt has taken firm root in the dull minds of our police authorities. They have had every information with regard to Prince Semionicz's antecedents from Russia; his position, his wealth, have been placed above suspicion, and yet they suspect and go on suspecting him or his secretary. They have communicated with the police of every European capital; and while they still hope to obtain sufficient evidence against those they suspect, they calmly allow the guilty to enjoy the fruit of his clever roguery."

"The guilty?" said Polly. "Who do you think—"

"Who do I think knew at that moment that young Schwarz had money in his possession?" he said excitedly, wriggling in his chair like a Jack-in-the-box. "Obviously some one was guilty of that theft who knew that Schwarz had gone to interview a rich Russian, and would in all probability return with a large sum of money in his possession?"

"Who, indeed, but the Prince and his secretary?" she argued. "But just now you said—"

"Just now I said that the police were determined to find the Prince and his secretary guilty; they did not look further than their own stumpy noses. Messrs. Winslow and Vassall spent money with a free hand in those investigations. Mr. Winslow, as the senior partner, stood to lose over £9000 by that robbery. Now, with Mr. Vassall it was different.

"When I saw how the police went on blundering in this case I took the trouble to make certain inquiries, the whole thing interested me so much, and I learnt all that I wished to know. I found out, namely, that Mr. Vassall was very much a junior partner in the firm, that he only drew ten per cent of the profits, having been promoted lately to a partnership from having been senior assistant.

"Now, the police did not take the trouble to find that out."

"But you don't mean that—"

"I mean that in all cases where robbery affects more than one person the first thing to find out is whether it affects the second party equally with the first. I proved that to you, didn't I, over that robbery in Phillimore Terrace? There, as here, one of the two parties stood to lose very little in comparison with the other—"

"Even then—" she began.

"Wait a moment, for I found out something more. The moment I had ascertained that Mr. Vassall was not drawing more than about £500 a year from the business profits I tried to ascertain at what rate he lived and what were his chief vices. I found that he kept a fine house in Albert Terrace. Now, the rents of those houses are £250 a year. Therefore speculation, horse-racing or some sort of gambling, must help to keep up that establishment. Speculation and most forms of gambling are synonymous with debt and ruin. It is only a question of time. Whether Mr. Vassall was in debt or not at the time, that I cannot say, but this I do know, that ever since that unfortunate loss to him of about £1000 he has kept his house in nicer style than before, and he now has a good banking account at the Lancashire and Liverpool bank, which he opened a year after his 'heavy loss.'"

"But it must have been very difficult—" argued Polly.

"What?" he said. "To have planned out the whole thing? For carrying it out was mere child's play. He had twenty-four hours in which to put his plan into execution. Why, what was there to do? Firstly, to go to a local printer in some out-of-the-way part of the town and get him to print a few cards with the high-sounding name. That, of course, is done 'while you wait.' Beyond that there was the purchase of a good second-hand uniform, fur coat, and a beard and a wig from a costumier's.

"No, no, the execution was not difficult; it was the planning of it all, the daring that was so fine. Schwarz, of course, was a foreigner; he had only been in England a little over a fortnight. Vassall's broken English misled him; probably he did not know the junior partner very intimately. I have no doubt that but for his uncle's absurd British prejudice and suspicions against the Russian Prince, Schwarz would not have been so ready to believe in the latter's roguery. As I said, it would be a great boon if English tradesmen studied Gotha more; but it was clever, wasn't it? I couldn't have done it much better myself."

That last sentence was so characteristic. Before Polly could think of some plausible argument against his theory he was gone, and she was trying vainly to find another solution to the Liverpool mystery.

THE EDINBURGH MYSTERY

The man in the corner had not enjoyed his lunch. Miss Polly Burton could see that he had something on his mind, for, even before he began to talk that morning, he was fidgeting with his bit of string, and setting all her nerves on the jar.

"Have you ever felt real sympathy with a criminal or a thief?" he asked her after a while.

"Only once, I think," she replied, "and then I am not quite sure that the unfortunate woman who did enlist my sympathies was the criminal you make her out to be."

"You mean the heroine of the York mystery?" he replied blandly. "I know that you tried very hard that time to discredit the only possible version of that mysterious murder, the version which is my own. Now, I am equally sure that you have at the present moment no more notion as to who killed and robbed poor Lady Donaldson in Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, than the police have themselves, and yet you are fully prepared to pooh-pooh my arguments, and to disbelieve my version of the mystery. Such is the lady journalist's mind."

"If you have some cock-and-bull story to explain that extraordinary case," she retorted, "of course I shall disbelieve it. Certainly, if you are going to try and enlist my sympathies on behalf of Edith Crawford, I can assure you you won't succeed."

"Well, I don't know that that is altogether my intention. I see you are interested in the case, but I dare say you don't remember all the circumstances. You must forgive me if I repeat that which you know already. If you have ever been to Edinburgh at all, you will have heard of Graham's bank, and Mr. Andrew Graham, the present head of the firm, is undoubtedly one of the most prominent notabilities of 'modern Athens.'"

The man in the corner took two or three photos from his pocket-book and placed them before the young girl; then, pointing at them with his long bony finger —

"That," he said, "is Mr. Elphinstone Graham, the eldest son, a typical young Scotchman, as you see, and this is David Graham, the second son."

Polly looked more closely at this last photo, and saw before her a young face, upon which some lasting sorrow seemed already to have left its mark. The face was delicate and thin, the features pinched, and the eyes seemed almost unnaturally large and prominent.

"He was deformed," commented the man in the corner in answer to the girl's thoughts, "and, as such, an object of pity and even of repugnance to most of his friends. There was also a good deal of talk in Edinburgh society as to his mental condition, his mind, according to many intimate friends of the Grahams, being at times decidedly unhinged. Be that as it may, I fancy that his life must have been a very sad one; he had lost his mother when quite a baby, and his father seemed, strangely enough, to have an almost unconquerable dislike towards him."

"Every one got to know presently of David Graham's sad position in his father's own house, and also of the great affection lavished upon him by his godmother, Lady Donaldson, who was a sister of Mr. Graham's."

"She was a lady of considerable wealth, being the widow of Sir George Donaldson, the great distiller; but she seems to have been decidedly eccentric. Latterly she had astonished all her family — who were rigid Presbyterians — by announcing her intention of embracing the Roman Catholic faith, and then retiring to the convent of St. Augustine's at Newton Abbot in Devonshire."

"She had sole and absolute control of the vast fortune which a dotting husband had bequeathed to her. Clearly, therefore, she was at liberty to bestow it upon a Devonshire convent if she chose. But this evidently was not altogether her intention."

"I told you how fond she was of her deformed godson, did I not? Being a bundle of eccentricities, she had many hobbies, none more pronounced than the fixed determination to see — before retiring from the world altogether — David Graham happily married."

"Now, it appears that David Graham, ugly, deformed, half-demented as he was, had fallen desperately in love with Miss Edith Crawford, daughter of the late Dr. Crawford, of Prince's Gardens. The young lady, however — very naturally, perhaps — fought shy of David Graham, who, about this time, certainly seemed very queer and morose, but Lady Donaldson, with characteristic determination, seems to have made up her mind to melt Miss Crawford's heart towards her unfortunate nephew."

"On October the 2nd last, at a family party given by Mr. Graham in his fine mansion in Charlotte Square, Lady Donaldson openly announced her intention of making over, by deed of gift, to her nephew, David Graham, certain property, money, and shares, amounting in total value to the sum of £100,000, and also her magnificent diamonds, which were worth £50,000, for the use of the said David's wife. Keith Macfinlay, a lawyer of Prince's Street, received the next day instructions for drawing up the necessary deed of gift, which she pledged herself to sign the day of her godson's wedding."

"A week later *The Scotsman* contained the following paragraph: —

"A marriage is arranged and will shortly take place between David, younger son of Andrew Graham, Esq., of Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, and Dochnakirk, Perthshire, and Edith Lillian, only surviving daughter of the late Dr. Kenneth Crawford, of Prince's Gardens."

"In Edinburgh society comments were loud and various upon the forthcoming marriage, and, on the whole, these comments were far from complimentary to the families concerned. I do not think that the Scotch are a particularly sentimental race, but there was such obvious buying, selling, and bargaining about this marriage that Scottish chivalry rose in revolt at the thought."

"Against that the three people most concerned seemed perfectly satisfied. David Graham was positively transformed; his moroseness was gone from him, he lost his queer ways and wild manners, and became gentle and affectionate in the midst of this great and unexpected happiness. Miss Edith Crawford ordered her trousseau, and talked of the diamonds to her friends, and Lady Donaldson was only waiting for the consummation of this marriage — her heart's desire — before she finally retired from the world, at peace with it and with herself."

"The deed of gift was ready for signature on the wedding day, which was fixed for November 7th, and Lady Donaldson took up her abode temporarily in her brother's house in Charlotte Square."

"Mr. Graham gave a large ball on October 23rd. Special interest is attached to this ball, from the fact that for this occasion Lady Donaldson insisted that David's future wife should wear the magnificent diamonds which were soon to become hers."

“They were, it seems, superb, and became Miss Crawford’s stately beauty to perfection. The ball was a brilliant success, the last guest leaving at four a.m. The next day it was the universal topic of conversation, and the day after that, when Edinburgh unfolded the late editions of its morning papers, it learned with horror and dismay that Lady Donaldson had been found murdered in her room, and that the celebrated diamonds had been stolen.

“Hardly had the beautiful little city, however, recovered from this awful shock, than its newspapers had another thrilling sensation ready for their readers.

“Already all Scotch and English papers had mysteriously hinted at ‘startling information’ obtained by the Procurator Fiscal, and at an ‘impending sensational arrest.’

“Then the announcement came, and every one in Edinburgh read, horror-struck and aghast, that the ‘sensational arrest’ was none other than that of Miss Edith Crawford, for murder and robbery, both so daring and horrible that reason refused to believe that a young lady, born and bred in the best social circle, could have conceived, much less executed, so heinous a crime. She had been arrested in London at the Midland Hotel, and brought to Edinburgh, where she was judicially examined, bail being refused.”

A TERRIBLE PLIGHT

"Little more than a fortnight after that, Edith Crawford was duly committed to stand her trial before the High Court of Justiciary. She had pleaded 'Not Guilty' at the pleading diet, and her defence was entrusted to Sir James Fenwick, one of the most eminent advocates at the Criminal Bar.

"Strange to say," continued the man in the corner after a while, "public opinion from the first went dead against the accused. The public is absolutely like a child, perfectly irresponsible and wholly illogical; it argued that since Miss Crawford had been ready to contract a marriage with a half-demented, deformed creature for the sake of his £100,000 she must have been equally ready to murder and rob an old lady for the sake of £50,000 worth of jewellery, without the encumbrance of so undesirable a husband.

"Perhaps the great sympathy aroused in the popular mind for David Graham had much to do with this ill-feeling against the accused. David Graham had, by this cruel and dastardly murder, lost the best — if not the only — friend he possessed. He had also lost at one fell swoop the large fortune which Lady Donaldson had been about to assign to him.

"The deed of gift had never been signed, and the old lady's vast wealth, instead of enriching her favourite nephew, was distributed — since she had made no will — amongst her heirs-at-law. And now to crown this long chapter of sorrow David Graham saw the girl he loved accused of the awful crime which had robbed him of friend and fortune.

"It was, therefore, with an unmistakable thrill of righteous satisfaction that Edinburgh society saw this 'mercenary girl' in so terrible a plight.

"I was immensely interested in the case, and journeyed down to Edinburgh in order to get a good view of the chief actors in the thrilling drama which was about to be unfolded there.

"I succeeded — I generally do — in securing one of the front seats among the audience, and was already comfortably installed in my place in court when through the trap door I saw the head of the prisoner emerge. She was very becomingly dressed in deep black, and, led by two policemen, she took her place in the dock. Sir James Fenwick shook hands with her very warmly, and I could almost hear him instilling words of comfort into her.

"The trial lasted six clear days, during which time more than forty persons were examined for the prosecution, and as many for the defence. But the most interesting witnesses were certainly the two doctors, the maid Tremlett, Campbell, the High Street jeweller, and David Graham.

"There was, of course, a great deal of medical evidence to go through. Poor Lady Donaldson had been found with a silk scarf tied tightly round her neck, her face showing even to the inexperienced eye every symptom of strangulation.

"Then Tremlett, Lady Donaldson's confidential maid, was called. Closely examined by Crown Counsel, she gave an account of the ball at Charlotte Square on the 23rd, and the wearing of the jewels by Miss Crawford on that occasion.

"I helped Miss Crawford on with the tiara over her hair," she said; "and my lady put the two necklaces round Miss Crawford's neck herself. There were also some beautiful brooches, bracelets, and earrings. At four o'clock in the morning when the ball was over, Miss Crawford brought the jewels back to my lady's room. My lady had already gone to bed, and I had put out the electric light, as I was going, too. There was only one candle left in the room, close to the bed.

"Miss Crawford took all the jewels off, and asked Lady Donaldson for the key of the safe, so that she might put them away. My lady gave her the key and said to me, "You can go to bed, Tremlett, you must be dead tired." I was glad to go, for I could hardly stand up — I was so tired. I said "Good night!" to my lady and also to Miss Crawford, who was busy putting the jewels away. As I was going out of the room I heard Lady Donaldson saying: "Have you managed it, my dear?" Miss Crawford said: "I have put everything away very nicely."

"In answer to Sir James Fenwick, Tremlett said that Lady Donaldson always carried the key of her jewel safe on a ribbon round her neck, and had done so the whole day preceding her death.

"On the night of the 24th," she continued, "Lady Donaldson still seemed rather tired, and went up to her room directly after dinner, and while the family were still sitting in the dining-room. She made me dress her hair, then she slipped on her dressing-gown and sat in the arm-chair with a book. She told me that she then felt strangely uncomfortable and nervous, and could not account for it.

"However, she did not want me to sit with her, so I thought that the best thing I could do was to tell Mr. David Graham that her ladyship did not seem very cheerful. Her ladyship was so fond of Mr. David; it always made her happy to have him with her. I then went to my room, and at half-past eight Mr. David called me. He said: "Your mistress does seem a little restless to-night. If I were you I would just go and listen at her door in about an hour's time, and if she has not gone to bed I would go in and stay with her until she has." At about ten o'clock I did as Mr. David suggested, and listened at her ladyship's door. However, all was quiet in the room, and, thinking her ladyship had gone to sleep, I went back to bed.

"The next morning at eight o'clock, when I took in my mistress's cup of tea, I saw her lying on the floor, her poor dear face all purple and distorted. I screamed, and the other servants came rushing along. Then Mr. Graham had the door locked and sent for the doctor and the police."

"The poor woman seemed to find it very difficult not to break down. She was closely questioned by Sir James Fenwick, but had nothing further to say. She had last seen her mistress alive at eight o'clock on the evening of the 24th.

"And when you listened at her door at ten o'clock," asked Sir James, "did you try to open it?"

"I did, but it was locked," she replied.

"Did Lady Donaldson usually lock her bedroom at night?"

"Nearly always."

"And in the morning when you took in the tea?"

"The door was open. I walked straight in."

"You are quite sure?" insisted Sir James.

"I swear it," solemnly asserted the woman.

“After that we were informed by several members of Mr. Graham’s establishment that Miss Crawford had been in to tea at Charlotte Square in the afternoon of the 24th, that she told every one she was going to London by the night mail, as she had some special shopping she wished to do there. It appears that Mr. Graham and David both tried to persuade her to stay to dinner, and then to go by the 9.10 p.m. from the Caledonian Station. Miss Crawford however had refused, saying she always preferred to go from the Waverley Station. It was nearer to her own rooms, and she still had a good deal of writing to do.

“In spite of this, two witnesses saw the accused in Charlotte Square later on in the evening. She was carrying a bag which seemed heavy, and was walking towards the Caledonian Railway Station.

“But the most thrilling moment in that sensational trial was reached on the second day, when David Graham, looking wretchedly ill, unkempt, and haggard, stepped into the witness-box. A murmur of sympathy went round the audience at sight of him, who was the second, perhaps, most deeply stricken victim of the Charlotte Square tragedy.

“David Graham, in answer to Crown Counsel, gave an account of his last interview with Lady Donaldson.

“‘Tremlett had told me that she seemed anxious and upset, and I went to have a chat with her; she soon cheered up and....’

“‘There the unfortunate young man hesitated visibly, but after a while resumed with an obvious effort.

“‘She spoke of my marriage, and of the gift she was about to bestow upon me. She said the diamonds would be for my wife, and after that for my daughter, if I had one. She also complained that Mr. Macfinlay had been so punctilious about preparing the deed of gift, and that it was a great pity the £100,000 could not just pass from her hands to mine without so much fuss.

“‘I stayed talking with her for about half an hour; then I left her, as she seemed ready to go to bed; but I told her maid to listen at the door in about an hour’s time.’

“There was deep silence in the court for a few moments, a silence which to me seemed almost electrical. It was as if, some time before it was uttered, the next question put by Crown Counsel to the witness had hovered in the air.

“‘You were engaged to Miss Edith Crawford at one time, were you not?’

“‘One felt, rather than heard, the almost inaudible ‘Yes’ which escaped from David Graham’s compressed lips.

“‘Under what circumstances was that engagement broken off?’

“‘Sir James Fenwick had already risen in protest, but David Graham had been the first to speak.

“‘I do not think that I need answer that question.’

“‘I will put it in a different form, then,’ said Crown Counsel urbanely— ‘one to which my learned friend cannot possibly take exception. Did you or did you not on October 27th receive a letter from the accused, in which she desired to be released from her promise of marriage to you?’

“Again David Graham would have refused to answer, and he certainly gave no audible reply to the learned counsel’s question; but every one in the audience there present — aye, every member of the jury and of the bar — read upon David Graham’s pale countenance and large, sorrowful eyes that ominous ‘Yes!’ which had failed to reach his trembling lips.”

NON PROVEN

"There is no doubt," continued the man in the corner, "that what little sympathy the young girl's terrible position had aroused in the public mind had died out the moment that David Graham left the witness-box on the second day of the trial. Whether Edith Crawford was guilty of murder or not, the callous way in which she had accepted a deformed lover, and then thrown him over, had set every one's mind against her.

"It was Mr. Graham himself who had been the first to put the Procurator Fiscal in possession of the fact that the accused had written to David from London, breaking off her engagement. This information had, no doubt, directed the attention of the Fiscal to Miss Crawford, and the police soon brought forward the evidence which had led to her arrest.

"We had a final sensation on the third day, when Mr. Campbell, jeweller, of High Street, gave his evidence. He said that on October 25th a lady came to his shop and offered to sell him a pair of diamond earrings. Trade had been very bad, and he had refused the bargain, although the lady seemed ready to part with the earrings for an extraordinarily low sum, considering the beauty of the stones.

"In fact it was because of this evident desire on the lady's part to sell at *any* cost that he had looked at her more keenly than he otherwise would have done. He was now ready to swear that the lady that offered him the diamond earrings was the prisoner in the dock.

"I can assure you that as we all listened to this apparently damnatory evidence, you might have heard a pin drop amongst the audience in that crowded court. The girl alone, there in the dock, remained calm and unmoved. Remember that for two days we had heard evidence to prove that old Dr. Crawford had died leaving his daughter penniless, that having no mother she had been brought up by a maiden aunt, who had trained her to be a governess, which occupation she had followed for years, and that certainly she had never been known by any of her friends to be in possession of solitaire diamond earrings.

"The prosecution had certainly secured an ace of trumps, but Sir James Fenwick, who during the whole of that day had seemed to take little interest in the proceedings, here rose from his seat, and I knew at once that he had got a tit-bit in the way of a 'point' up his sleeve. Gaunt, and unusually tall, and with his beak-like nose, he always looks strangely impressive when he seriously tackles a witness. He did it this time with a vengeance, I can tell you. He was all over the pompous little jeweller in a moment.

"Had Mr. Campbell made a special entry in his book, as to the visit of the lady in question?"

"No."

"Had he any special means of ascertaining when that visit did actually take place?"

"No — but —"

"What record had he of the visit?"

"Mr. Campbell had none. In fact, after about twenty minutes of cross-examination, he had to admit that he had given but little thought to the interview with the lady at the time, and certainly not in connection with the murder of Lady Donaldson, until he had read in the papers that a young lady had been arrested.

"Then he and his clerk talked the matter over, it appears, and together they had certainly recollected that a lady had brought some beautiful earrings for sale on a day which *must have been* the very morning after the murder. If Sir James Fenwick's object was to discredit this special witness, he certainly gained his point.

"All the pomposity went out of Mr. Campbell, he became flurried, then excited, then he lost his temper. After that he was allowed to leave the court, and Sir James Fenwick resumed his seat, and waited like a vulture for its prey.

"It presented itself in the person of Mr. Campbell's clerk, who, before the Procurator Fiscal, had corroborated his employer's evidence in every respect. In Scotland no witness in any one case is present in court during the examination of another, and Mr. Macfarlane, the clerk, was, therefore, quite unprepared for the pitfalls which Sir James Fenwick had prepared for him. He tumbled into them, head foremost, and the eminent advocate turned him inside out like a glove.

"Mr. Macfarlane did not lose his temper; he was of too humble a frame of mind to do that, but he got into a hopeless quagmire of mixed recollections, and he too left the witness-box quite unprepared to swear as to the day of the interview with the lady with the diamond earrings.

"I dare say, mind you," continued the man in the corner with a chuckle, "that to most people present, Sir James Fenwick's cross-questioning seemed completely irrelevant. Both Mr. Campbell and his clerk were quite ready to swear that they had had an interview concerning some diamond earrings with a lady, of whose identity with the accused they were perfectly convinced, and to the casual observer the question as to the time or even the day when that interview took place could make but little difference in the ultimate issue.

"Now I took in, in a moment, the entire drift of Sir James Fenwick's defence of Edith Crawford. When Mr. Macfarlane left the witness-box, the second victim of the eminent advocate's caustic tongue, I could read as in a book the whole history of that crime, its investigation, and the mistakes made by the police first and the Public Prosecutor afterwards.

"Sir James Fenwick knew them, too, of course, and he placed a finger upon each one, demolishing — like a child who blows upon a house of cards — the entire scaffolding erected by the prosecution.

"Mr. Campbell's and Mr. Macfarlane's identification of the accused with the lady who, on some date — admitted to be uncertain — had tried to sell a pair of diamond earrings, was the first point. Sir James had plenty of witnesses to prove that on the 25th, the day after the murder, the accused was in London, whilst, the day before, Mr. Campbell's shop had been closed long before the family circle had seen the last of Lady Donaldson. Clearly the jeweller and his clerk must have seen some other lady, whom their vivid imagination had pictured as being identical with the accused.

"Then came the great question of time. Mr. David Graham had been evidently the last to see Lady Donaldson alive. He had spoken to her as late as 8.30 p.m. Sir James Fenwick had called two porters at the Caledonian Railway Station who testified to Miss Crawford having taken her seat in a first-class carriage of the 9.10 train, some minutes before it started.

“‘Was it conceivable, therefore,’ argued Sir James, ‘that in the space of half an hour the accused — a young girl — could have found her way surreptitiously into the house, at a time when the entire household was still astir, that she should have strangled Lady Donaldson, forced open the safe, and made away with the jewels? A man — an experienced burglar might have done it, but I contend that the accused is physically incapable of accomplishing such a feat.

“‘With regard to the broken engagement,’ continued the eminent counsel with a smile, ‘it may have seemed a little heartless, certainly, but heartlessness is no crime in the eyes of the law. The accused has stated in her declaration that at the time she wrote to Mr. David Graham, breaking off her engagement, she had heard nothing of the Edinburgh tragedy.

“‘The London papers had reported the crime very briefly. The accused was busy shopping; she knew nothing of Mr. David Graham’s altered position. In no case was the breaking off of the engagement a proof that the accused had obtained possession of the jewels by so foul a deed.’

“It is, of course, impossible for me,” continued the man in the corner apologetically, “to give you any idea of the eminent advocate’s eloquence and masterful logic. It struck every one, I think, just as it did me, that he chiefly directed his attention to the fact that there was absolutely no *proof* against the accused.

“Be that as it may, the result of that remarkable trial was a verdict of ‘Non Proven.’ The jury was absent forty minutes, and it appears that in the mind of every one of them there remained, in spite of Sir James’ arguments, a firmly rooted conviction — call it instinct, if you like — that Edith Crawford had done away with Lady Donaldson in order to become possessed of those jewels, and that in spite of the pompous jeweller’s many contradictions, she had offered him some of those diamonds for sale. But there was not enough proof to convict, and she was given the benefit of the doubt.

“I have heard English people argue that in England she would have been hanged. Personally I doubt that. I think that an English jury, not having the judicial loophole of ‘Non Proven,’ would have been bound to acquit her. What do you think?”

UNDENIABLE FACTS

There was a moment's silence, for Polly did not reply immediately, and he went on making impossible knots in his bit of string. Then she said quietly —

"I think that I agree with those English people who say that an English jury would have condemned her... I have no doubt that she was guilty. She may not have committed that awful deed herself. Some one in the Charlotte Square house may have been her accomplice and killed and robbed Lady Donaldson while Edith Crawford waited outside for the jewels. David Graham left his godmother at 8.30 p.m. If the accomplice was one of the servants in the house, he or she would have had plenty of time for any amount of villainy, and Edith Crawford could have yet caught the 9.10 p.m. train from the Caledonian Station."

"Then who, in your opinion," he asked sarcastically, and cocking his funny birdlike head on one side, "tried to sell diamond earrings to Mr. Campbell, the jeweller?"

"Edith Crawford, of course," she retorted triumphantly; "he and his clerk both recognized her."

"When did she try to sell them the earrings?"

"Ah, that is what I cannot quite make out, and there to my mind lies the only mystery in this case. On the 25th she was certainly in London, and it is not very likely that she would go back to Edinburgh in order to dispose of the jewels there, where they could most easily be traced."

"Not very likely, certainly," he assented drily.

"And," added the young girl, "on the day before she left for London, Lady Donaldson was alive."

"And pray," he said suddenly, as with comic complacency he surveyed a beautiful knot he had just twisted up between his long fingers, "what has that fact got to do with it?"

"But it has everything to do with it!" she retorted.

"Ah, there you go," he sighed with comic emphasis. "My teachings don't seem to have improved your powers of reasoning. You are as bad as the police. Lady Donaldson has been robbed and murdered, and you immediately argue that she was robbed and murdered by the same person."

"But—" argued Polly.

"There is no but," he said, getting more and more excited. "See how simple it is. Edith Crawford wears the diamonds one night, then she brings them back to Lady Donaldson's room. Remember the maid's statement: 'My lady said: "Have you put them back, my dear?"' — a simple statement, utterly ignored by the prosecution. But what did it mean? That Lady Donaldson could not see for herself whether Edith Crawford had put back the jewels or not, *since she asked the question*."

"Then you argue—"

"I never argue," he interrupted excitedly; "I state undeniable facts. Edith Crawford, who wanted to steal the jewels, took them then and there, when she had the opportunity. Why in the world should she have waited? Lady Donaldson was in bed, and Tremlett, the maid, had gone."

"The next day — namely, the 25th — she tries to dispose of a pair of earrings to Mr. Campbell; she fails, and decides to go to London, where she has a better chance. Sir James Fenwick did not think it desirable to bring forward witnesses to prove what I have since ascertained is a fact, namely, that on the 27th of October, three days before her arrest, Miss Crawford crossed over to Belgium, and came back to London the next day. In Belgium, no doubt, Lady Donaldson's diamonds, taken out of their settings, calmly repose at this moment, while the money derived from their sale is safely deposited in a Belgian bank."

"But then, who murdered Lady Donaldson, and why?" gasped Polly.

"Cannot you guess?" he queried blandly. "Have I not placed the case clearly enough before you? To me it seems so simple. It was a daring, brutal murder, remember. Think of one who, not being the thief himself, would, nevertheless, have the strongest of all motives to shield the thief from the consequences of her own misdeed: aye! and the power too — since it would be absolutely illogical, nay, impossible, that he should be an accomplice."

"Surely — —"

"Think of a curious nature, warped morally, as well as physically — do you know how those natures feel? A thousand times more strongly than the even, straight natures in everyday life. Then think of such a nature brought face to face with this awful problem."

"Do you think that such a nature would hesitate a moment before committing a crime to save the loved one from the consequences of that deed? Mind you, I don't assert for a moment that David Graham had any *intention* of murdering Lady Donaldson. Tremlett tells him that she seems strangely upset; he goes to her room and finds that she has discovered that she has been robbed. She naturally suspects Edith Crawford, recollects the incidents of the other night, and probably expresses her feelings to David Graham, and threatens immediate prosecution, scandal, what you will."

"I repeat it again, I dare say he had no wish to kill her. Probably he merely threatened to. A medical gentleman who spoke of sudden heart failure was no doubt right. Then imagine David Graham's remorse, his horror and his fears. The empty safe probably is the first object that suggested to him the grim tableau of robbery and murder, which he arranges in order to ensure his own safety."

"But remember one thing: no miscreant was seen to enter or leave the house surreptitiously; the murderer left no signs of entrance, and none of exit. An armed burglar would have left some trace — *some one* would have heard *something*. Then who locked and unlocked Lady Donaldson's door that night while she herself lay dead?"

"Some one in the house, I tell you — some one who left no trace — some one against whom there could be no suspicion — some one who killed without apparently the slightest premeditation, and without the slightest motive. Think of it — I know I am right — and then tell me if I have at all enlisted your sympathies in the author of the Edinburgh Mystery."

He was gone. Polly looked again at the photo of David Graham. Did a crooked mind really dwell in that crooked body, and were there in the world such crimes that were great enough to be deemed sublime?

THE THEFT AT THE ENGLISH PROVIDENT BANK

"That question of motive is a very difficult and complicated one at times," said the man in the corner, leisurely pulling off a huge pair of flaming dog-skin gloves from his meagre fingers. "I have known experienced criminal investigators declare, as an infallible axiom, that to find the person interested in the committal of the crime is to find the criminal.

"Well, that may be so in most cases, but my experience has proved to me that there is one factor in this world of ours which is the mainspring of human actions, and that factor is human passions. For good or evil passions rule this poor humanity of ours. Remember, there are the women! French detectives, who are acknowledged masters in their craft, never proceed till after they have discovered the feminine element in a crime; whether in theft, murder, or fraud, according to their theory, there is always a woman.

"Perhaps the reason why the Phillimore Terrace robbery was never brought home to its perpetrators is because there was no woman in any way connected with it, and I am quite sure, on the other hand, that the reason why the thief at the English Provident Bank is still unpunished is because a clever woman has escaped the eyes of our police force."

He had spoken at great length and very dictatorially. Miss Polly Burton did not venture to contradict him, knowing by now that whenever he was irritable he was invariably rude, and she then had the worst of it.

"When I am old," he resumed, "and have nothing more to do, I think I shall take professionally to the police force; they have much to learn."

Could anything be more ludicrous than the self-satisfaction, the abnormal conceit of this remark, made by that shrivelled piece of mankind, in a nervous, hesitating tone of voice? Polly made no comment, but drew from her pocket a beautiful piece of string, and knowing his custom of knotting such an article while unravelling his mysteries, she handed it across the table to him. She positively thought that he blushed.

"As an adjunct to thought," she said, moved by a conciliatory spirit.

He looked at the invaluable toy which the young girl had tantalisingly placed close to his hand: then he forced himself to look all round the coffee-room: at Polly, at the waitresses, at the piles of pallid buns upon the counter. But, involuntarily, his mild blue eyes wandered back lovingly to the long piece of string, on which his playful imagination no doubt already saw a series of knots which would be equally tantalising to tie and to untie.

"Tell me about the theft at the English Provident Bank," suggested Polly condescendingly.

He looked at her, as if she had proposed some mysterious complicity in an unheard-of crime. Finally his lean fingers sought the end of the piece of string, and drew it towards him. His face brightened up in a moment.

"There was an element of tragedy in that particular robbery," he began, after a few moments of beatified knotting, "altogether different to that connected with most crimes; a tragedy which, as far as I am concerned, would seal my lips for ever, and forbid them to utter a word, which might lead the police on the right track."

"Your lips," suggested Polly sarcastically, "are, as far as I can see, usually sealed before our long-suffering, incompetent police and —"

"And you should be the last to grumble at this," he quietly interrupted, "for you have spent some very pleasant half-hours already, listening to what you have termed my 'cock-and-bull' stories. You know the English Provident Bank, of course, in Oxford Street; there were plenty of sketches of it at the time in the illustrated papers. Here is a photo of the outside. I took it myself some time ago, and only wish I had been cheeky or lucky enough to get a snap-shot of the interior. But you see that the office has a separate entrance from the rest of the house, which was, and still is, as is usual in such cases, inhabited by the manager and his family.

"Mr. Ireland was the manager then; it was less than six months ago. He lived over the bank, with his wife and family, consisting of a son, who was clerk in the business, and two or three younger children. The house is really smaller than it looks on this photo, for it has no depth, and only one set of rooms on each floor looking out into the street, the back of the house being nothing but the staircase. Mr. Ireland and his family, therefore, occupied the whole of it.

"As for the business premises, they were, and, in fact, are, of the usual pattern; an office with its rows of desks, clerks, and cashiers, and beyond, through a glass door, the manager's private room, with the ponderous safe, and desk, and so on.

"The private room has a door into the hall of the house, so that the manager is not obliged to go out into the street in order to go to business. There are no living-rooms on the ground floor, and the house has no basement.

"I am obliged to put all these architectural details before you, though they may sound rather dry and uninteresting, but they are really necessary in order to make my argument clear.

"At night, of course, the bank premises are barred and bolted against the street, and as an additional precaution there is always a night watchman in the office. As I mentioned before, there is only a glass door between the office and the manager's private room. This, of course, accounted for the fact that the night watchman heard all that he did hear, on that memorable night, and so helped further to entangle the thread of that impenetrable mystery.

"Mr. Ireland as a rule went into his office every morning a little before ten o'clock, but on that particular morning, for some reason which he never could or would explain, he went down before having his breakfast at about nine o'clock. Mrs. Ireland stated subsequently that, not hearing him return, she sent the servant down to tell the master that breakfast was getting cold. The girl's shrieks were the first intimation that something alarming had occurred.

"Mrs. Ireland hastened downstairs. On reaching the hall she found the door of her husband's room open, and it was from there that the girl's shrieks proceeded.

"The master, mum — the poor master — he is dead, mum — I am sure he is dead!" — accompanied by vigorous thumps against the glass partition, and not very measured language on the part of the watchman from the outer office, such as — 'Why don't you open the door instead of making that row?'

"Mrs. Ireland is not the sort of woman who, under any circumstances, would lose her presence of mind. I think she proved that throughout the many trying circumstances connected with the investigation of the case. She gave only one glance at the room and

realized the situation. On the arm-chair, with head thrown back and eyes closed, lay Mr. Ireland, apparently in a dead faint; some terrible shock must have very suddenly shattered his nervous system, and rendered him prostrate for the moment. What that shock had been it was pretty easy to guess.

"The door of the safe was wide open, and Mr. Ireland had evidently tottered and fainted before some awful fact which the open safe had revealed to him; he had caught himself against a chair which lay on the floor, and then finally sunk, unconscious, into the arm-chair.

"All this, which takes some time to describe," continued the man in the corner, "took, remember, only a second to pass like a flash through Mrs. Ireland's mind; she quickly turned the key of the glass door, which was on the inside, and with the help of James Fairbairn, the watchman, she carried her husband upstairs to his room, and immediately sent both for the police and for a doctor.

"As Mrs. Ireland had anticipated, her husband had received a severe mental shock which had completely prostrated him. The doctor prescribed absolute quiet, and forbade all worrying questions for the present. The patient was not a young man; the shock had been very severe — it was a case, a very slight one, of cerebral congestion — and Mr. Ireland's reason, if not his life, might be gravely jeopardised by any attempt to recall before his enfeebled mind the circumstances which had preceded his collapse.

"The police therefore could proceed but slowly in their investigations. The detective who had charge of the case was necessarily handicapped, whilst one of the chief actors concerned in the drama was unable to help him in his work.

"To begin with, the robber or robbers had obviously not found their way into the manager's inner room through the bank premises. James Fairbairn had been on the watch all night, with the electric light full on, and obviously no one could have crossed the outer office or forced the heavily barred doors without his knowledge.

"There remained the other access to the room, that is, the one through the hall of the house. The hall door, it appears, was always barred and bolted by Mr. Ireland himself when he came home, whether from the theatre or his club. It was a duty he never allowed any one to perform but himself. During his annual holiday, with his wife and family, his son, who usually had the sub-manager to stay with him on those occasions, did the bolting and barring — but with the distinct understanding that this should be done by ten o'clock at night.

"As I have already explained to you, there is only a glass partition between the general office and the manager's private room, and, according to James Fairbairn's account, this was naturally always left wide open so that he, during his night watch, would of necessity hear the faintest sound. As a rule there was no light left in the manager's room, and the other door — that leading into the hall — was bolted from the inside by James Fairbairn the moment he had satisfied himself that the premises were safe, and he had begun his night-watch. An electric bell in both the offices communicated with Mr. Ireland's bedroom and that of his son, Mr. Robert Ireland, and there was a telephone installed to the nearest district messengers' office, with an understood signal which meant 'Police.'

"At nine o'clock in the morning it was the night watchman's duty, as soon as the first cashier had arrived, to dust and tidy the manager's room, and to undo the bolts; after that he was free to go home to his breakfast and rest.

"You will see, of course, that James Fairbairn's position in the English Provident Bank is one of great responsibility and trust; but then in every bank and business house there are men who hold similar positions. They are always men of well-known and tried characters, often old soldiers with good-conduct records behind them. James Fairbairn is a fine, powerful Scotchman; he had been night watchman to the English Provident Bank for fifteen years, and was then not more than forty-three or forty-four years old. He is an ex-guardsman, and stands six feet three inches in his socks.

"It was his evidence, of course, which was of such paramount importance, and which somehow or other managed, in spite of the utmost care exercised by the police, to become public property, and to cause the wildest excitement in banking and business circles.

"James Fairbairn stated that at eight o'clock in the evening of March 25th, having bolted and barred all the shutters and the door of the back premises, he was about to lock the manager's door as usual, when Mr. Ireland called to him from the floor above, telling him to leave that door open, as he might want to go into the office again for a minute when he came home at eleven o'clock. James Fairbairn asked if he should leave the light on, but Mr. Ireland said: 'No, turn it out. I can switch it on if I want it.'

"The night watchman at the English Provident Bank has permission to smoke, he also is allowed a nice fire, and a tray consisting of a plate of substantial sandwiches and one glass of ale, which he can take when he likes. James Fairbairn settled himself in front of the fire, lit his pipe, took out his newspaper, and began to read. He thought he had heard the street door open and shut at about a quarter to ten; he supposed that it was Mr. Ireland going out to his club, but at ten minutes to ten o'clock the watchman heard the door of the manager's room open, and some one enter, immediately closing the glass partition door and turning the key.

"He naturally concluded it was Mr. Ireland himself.

"From where he sat he could not see into the room, but he noticed that the electric light had not been switched on, and that the manager seemingly had no light but an occasional match.

"For the minute," continued James Fairbairn, "a thought did just cross my mind that something might perhaps be wrong, and I put my newspaper aside and went to the other end of the room towards the glass partition. The manager's room was still quite dark, and I could not clearly see into it, but the door into the hall was open, and there was, of course, a light through there. I had got quite close to the partition, when I saw Mrs. Ireland standing in the doorway, and heard her saying in a very astonished tone of voice: 'Why, Lewis, I thought you had gone to your club ages ago. What in the world are you doing here in the dark?'

"Lewis is Mr. Ireland's Christian name," was James Fairbairn's further statement. 'I did not hear the manager's reply, but quite satisfied now that nothing was wrong, I went back to my pipe and my newspaper. Almost directly afterwards I heard the manager leave his room, cross the hall and go out by the street door. It was only after he had gone that I recollected that he must have forgotten to unlock the glass partition and that I could not therefore bolt the door into the hall the same as usual, and I suppose that is how those confounded thieves got the better of me.'"

CONFLICTING EVIDENCE

“By the time the public had been able to think over James Fairbairn’s evidence, a certain disquietude and unrest had begun to make itself felt both in the bank itself and among those of our detective force who had charge of the case. The newspapers spoke of the matter with very obvious caution, and warned all their readers to await the further development of this sad case.

“While the manager of the English Provident Bank lay in such a precarious condition of health, it was impossible to arrive at any definite knowledge as to what the thief had actually made away with. The chief cashier, however, estimated the loss at about £5000 in gold and notes of the bank money — that was, of course, on the assumption that Mr. Ireland had no private money or valuables of his own in the safe.

“Mind you, at this point public sympathy was much stirred in favour of the poor man who lay ill, perhaps dying, and yet whom, strangely enough, suspicion had already slightly touched with its poisoned wing.

“Suspicion is a strong word, perhaps, to use at this point in the story. No one suspected anybody at present. James Fairbairn had told his story, and had vowed that some thief with false keys must have sneaked through the house into the inner office.

“Public excitement, you will remember, lost nothing by waiting. Hardly had we all had time to wonder over the night watchman’s singular evidence, and, pending further and fuller detail, to check our growing sympathy for the man who was ill, than the sensational side of this mysterious case culminated in one extraordinary, absolutely unexpected fact. Mrs. Ireland, after a twenty-four hours’ untiring watch beside her husband’s sick bed, had at last been approached by the detective, and been asked to reply to a few simple questions, and thus help to throw some light on the mystery which had caused Mr. Ireland’s illness and her own consequent anxiety.

“She professed herself quite ready to reply to any questions put to her, and she literally astounded both inspector and detective when she firmly and emphatically declared that James Fairbairn must have been dreaming or asleep when he thought he saw her in the doorway at ten o’clock that night, and fancied he heard her voice.

“She may or may not have been down in the hall at that particular hour, for she usually ran down herself to see if the last post had brought any letters, but most certainly she had neither seen nor spoken to Mr. Ireland at that hour, for Mr. Ireland had gone out an hour before, she herself having seen him to the front door. Never for a moment did she swerve from this extraordinary statement. She spoke to James Fairbairn in the presence of the detective, and told him he *must* absolutely have been mistaken, that she had *not* seen Mr. Ireland, and that she had *not* spoken to him.

“One other person was questioned by the police, and that was Mr. Robert Ireland, the manager’s eldest son. It was presumed that he would know something of his father’s affairs; the idea having now taken firm hold of the detective’s mind that perhaps grave financial difficulties had tempted the unfortunate manager to appropriate some of the firm’s money.

“Mr. Robert Ireland, however, could not say very much. His father did not confide in him to the extent of telling him all his private affairs, but money never seemed scarce at home certainly, and Mr. Ireland had, to his son’s knowledge, not a single extravagant habit. He himself had been dining out with a friend on that memorable evening, and had gone on with him to the Oxford Music Hall. He met his father on the doorstep of the bank at about 11.30 p.m. and they went in together. There certainly was nothing remarkable about Mr. Ireland then, his son averred; he appeared in no way excited, and bade his son good night quite cheerfully.

“There was the extraordinary, the remarkable hitch,” continued the man in the corner, waxing more and more excited every moment. “The public — who is at times very dense — saw it clearly nevertheless: of course, every one at once jumped to the natural conclusion that Mrs. Ireland was telling a lie — a noble lie, a self-sacrificing lie, a lie endowed with all the virtues if you like, but still a lie.

“She was trying to save her husband, and was going the wrong way to work. James Fairbairn, after all, could not have dreamt quite all that he declared he had seen and heard. No one suspected James Fairbairn; there was no occasion to do that; to begin with he was a great heavy Scotchman with obviously no powers of invention, such as Mrs. Ireland’s strange assertion credited him with; moreover, the theft of the bank-notes could not have been of the slightest use to him.

“But, remember, there was the hitch; without it the public mind would already have condemned the sick man upstairs, without hope of rehabilitation. This fact struck every one.

“Granting that Mr. Ireland had gone into his office at ten minutes to ten o’clock at night for the purpose of extracting £5000 worth of notes and gold from the bank safe, whilst giving the theft the appearance of a night burglary; granting that he was disturbed in his nefarious project by his wife, who, failing to persuade him to make restitution, took his side boldly, and very clumsily attempted to rescue him out of his difficult position — why should he, at nine o’clock the following morning, fall in a dead faint and get cerebral congestion at sight of a defalcation he knew had occurred? One might simulate a fainting fit, but no one can assume a high temperature and a congestion, which the most ordinary practitioner who happened to be called in would soon see were non-existent.

“Mr. Ireland, according to James Fairbairn’s evidence, must have gone out soon after the theft, come in again with his son an hour and a half later, talked to him, gone quietly to bed, and waited for nine hours before he fell ill at sight of his own crime. It was not logical, you will admit. Unfortunately, the poor man himself was unable to give any explanation of the night’s tragic adventures.

“He was still very weak, and though under strong suspicion, he was left, by the doctor’s orders, in absolute ignorance of the heavy charges which were gradually accumulating against him. He had made many anxious inquiries from all those who had access to his bedside as to the result of the investigation, and the probable speedy capture of the burglars, but every one had strict orders to inform him merely that the police so far had no clue of any kind.

“You will admit, as every one did, that there was something very pathetic about the unfortunate man’s position, so helpless to defend himself, if defence there was, against so much overwhelming evidence. That is why I think public sympathy remained with him. Still, it was terrible to think of his wife presumably knowing him to be guilty, and anxiously waiting whilst dreading the moment when, restored to health, he would have to face the doubts, the suspicions, probably the open accusations, which were fast rising up around him.”

AN ALIBI

"It was close on six weeks before the doctor at last allowed his patient to attend to the grave business which had prostrated him for so long.

"In the meantime, among the many people who directly or indirectly were made to suffer in this mysterious affair, no one, I think, was more pitied, and more genuinely sympathised with, than Robert Ireland, the manager's eldest son.

"You remember that he had been clerk in the bank? Well, naturally, the moment suspicion began to fasten on his father his position in the business became untenable. I think every one was very kind to him. Mr. Sutherland French, who was made acting manager 'during Mr. Lewis Ireland's regrettable absence,' did everything in his power to show his goodwill and sympathy to the young man, but I don't think that he or any one else was much astonished when, after Mrs. Ireland's extraordinary attitude in the case had become public property, he quietly intimated to the acting manager that he had determined to sever his connection with the bank.

"The best of recommendations was, of course, placed at his disposal, and it was finally understood that, as soon as his father was completely restored to health and would no longer require his presence in London, he would try to obtain employment somewhere abroad. He spoke of the new volunteer corps organized for the military policing of the new colonies, and, truth to tell, no one could blame him that he should wish to leave far behind him all London banking connections. The son's attitude certainly did not tend to ameliorate the father's position. It was pretty evident that his own family had ceased to hope in the poor manager's innocence.

"And yet he was absolutely innocent. You must remember how that fact was clearly demonstrated as soon as the poor man was able to say a word for himself. And he said it to some purpose, too.

"Mr. Ireland was, and is, very fond of music. On the evening in question, while sitting in his club, he saw in one of the daily papers the announcement of a peculiarly attractive programme at the Queen's Hall concert. He was not dressed, but nevertheless felt an irresistible desire to hear one or two of these attractive musical items, and he strolled down to the Hall. Now, this sort of alibi is usually very difficult to prove, but Dame Fortune, oddly enough, favoured Mr. Ireland on this occasion, probably to compensate him for the hard knocks she had been dealing him pretty freely of late.

"It appears that there was some difficulty about his seat, which was sold to him at the box office, and which he, nevertheless, found wrongfully occupied by a determined lady, who refused to move. The management had to be appealed to; the attendants also remembered not only the incident, but also the face and appearance of the gentleman who was the innocent cause of the altercation.

"As soon as Mr. Ireland could speak for himself he mentioned the incident and the persons who had been witness to it. He was identified by them, to the amazement, it must be confessed, of police and public alike, who had comfortably decided that no one *could* be guilty save the manager of the Provident Bank himself. Moreover, Mr. Ireland was a fairly wealthy man, with a good balance at the Union Bank, and plenty of private means, the result of years of provident living.

"He had but to prove that if he really had been in need of an immediate £5000 — which was all the amount extracted from the bank safe that night — he had plenty of securities on which he could, at an hour's notice, have raised twice that sum. His life insurances had been fully paid up; he had not a debt which a £5 note could not easily have covered.

"On the fatal night he certainly did remember asking the watchman not to bolt the door to his office, as he thought he might have one or two letters to write when he came home, but later on he had forgotten all about this. After the concert he met his son in Oxford Street, just outside the house, and thought no more about the office, the door of which was shut, and presented no unusual appearance.

"Mr. Ireland absolutely denied having been in his office at the hour when James Fairbairn positively asserted he heard Mrs. Ireland say in an astonished tone of voice: 'Why, Lewis, what in the world are you doing here?' It became pretty clear therefore that James Fairbairn's view of the manager's wife had been a mere vision.

"Mr. Ireland gave up his position as manager of the English Provident: both he and his wife felt no doubt that on the whole, perhaps, there had been too much talk, too much scandal connected with their name, to be altogether advantageous to the bank. Moreover, Mr. Ireland's health was not so good as it had been. He has a pretty house now at Sittingbourne, and amuses himself during his leisure hours with amateur horticulture, and I, who alone in London besides the persons directly connected with this mysterious affair, know the true solution of the enigma, often wonder how much of it is known to the ex-manager of the English Provident Bank."

The man in the corner had been silent for some time. Miss Polly Burton, in her presumption, had made up her mind, at the commencement of his tale, to listen attentively to every point of the evidence in connection with the case which he recapitulated before her, and to follow the point, in order to try and arrive at a conclusion of her own, and overwhelm the antediluvian scarecrow with her sagacity.

She said nothing, for she had arrived at no conclusion; the case puzzled every one, and had amazed the public in its various stages, from the moment when opinion began to cast doubt on Mr. Ireland's honesty to that when his integrity was proved beyond a doubt. One or two people had suspected Mrs. Ireland to have been the actual thief, but that idea had soon to be abandoned.

Mrs. Ireland had all the money she wanted; the theft occurred six months ago, and not a single bank-note was ever traced to her pocket; moreover, she must have had an accomplice, since some one else was in the manager's room that night; and if that some one else was her accomplice, why did she risk betraying him by speaking loudly in the presence of James Fairbairn, when it would have been so much simpler to turn out the light and plunge the hall into darkness?

"You are altogether on the wrong track," sounded a sharp voice in direct answer to Polly's thoughts— "altogether wrong. If you want to acquire my method of induction, and improve your reasoning power, you must follow my system. First think of the one absolutely undisputed, positive fact. You must have a starting-point, and not go wandering about in the realms of suppositions."

"But there are no positive facts," she said irritably.

"You don't say so?" he said quietly. "Do you not call it a positive fact that the bank safe was robbed of £5000 on the evening of March 25th before 11.30 p.m.?"

"Yes, that is all which is positive and—"

"Do you not call it a positive fact," he interrupted quietly, "that the lock of the safe not being picked, it must have been opened by its own key?"

"I know that," she rejoined crossly, "and that is why every one agreed that James Fairbairn could not possibly—"

"And do you not call it a positive fact, then, that James Fairbairn could not possibly, etc., etc., seeing that the glass partition door was locked from the inside; Mrs. Ireland herself let James Fairbairn into her husband's office when she saw him lying fainting before the open safe. Of course that was a positive fact, and so was the one that proved to any thinking mind that if that safe was opened with a key, it could only have been done by a person having access to that key."

"But the man in the private office—"

"Exactly! the man in the private office. Enumerate his points, if you please," said the funny creature, marking each point with one of his favourite knots. "He was a man who might that night have had access to the key of the safe, unsuspected by the manager or even his wife, and a man for whom Mrs. Ireland was willing to tell a downright lie. Are there many men for whom a woman of the better middle class, and an Englishwoman, would be ready to perjure herself? Surely not! She might do it for her husband. The public thought she had. It never struck them that she might have done it for her son!"

"Her son!" exclaimed Polly.

"Ah! she was a clever woman," he ejaculated enthusiastically, "one with courage and presence of mind, which I don't think I have ever seen equalled. She runs downstairs before going to bed in order to see whether the last post has brought any letters. She sees the door of her husband's office ajar, she pushes it open, and there, by the sudden flash of a hastily struck match she realizes in a moment that a thief stands before the open safe, and in that thief she has already recognized her son. At that very moment she hears the watchman's step approaching the partition. There is no time to warn her son; she does not know the glass door is locked; James Fairbairn may switch on the electric light and see the young man in the very act of robbing his employers' safe.

"One thing alone can reassure the watchman. One person alone had the right to be there at that hour of the night, and without hesitation she pronounces her husband's name.

"Mind you, I firmly believe that at the time the poor woman only wished to gain time, that she had every hope that her son had not yet had the opportunity to lay so heavy a guilt upon his conscience.

"What passed between mother and son we shall never know, but this much we do know, that the young villain made off with his booty, and trusted that his mother would never betray him. Poor woman! what a night of it she must have spent; but she was clever and far-seeing. She knew that her husband's character could not suffer through her action. Accordingly, she took the only course open to her to save her son even from his father's wrath, and boldly denied James Fairbairn's statement.

"Of course, she was fully aware that her husband could easily clear himself, and the worst that could be said of her was that she had thought him guilty and had tried to save him. She trusted to the future to clear her of any charge of complicity in the theft.

"By now every one has forgotten most of the circumstances; the police are still watching the career of James Fairbairn and Mrs. Ireland's expenditure. As you know, not a single note, so far, has been traced to her. Against that, one or two of the notes have found their way back to England. No one realizes how easy it is to cash English bank-notes at the smaller *agents de change* abroad. The *changeurs* are only too glad to get them; what do they care where they come from as long as they are genuine? And a week or two later *M. le Changeur* could not swear who tendered him any one particular note.

"You see, young Robert Ireland went abroad, he will come back some day having made a fortune. There's his photo. And this is his mother — a clever woman, wasn't she?"

And before Polly had time to reply he was gone. She really had never seen any one move across a room so quickly. But he always left an interesting trail behind: a piece of string knotted from end to end and a few photos.

THE DUBLIN MYSTERY

"I always thought that the history of that forged will was about as interesting as any I had read," said the man in the corner that day. He had been silent for some time, and was meditatively sorting and looking through a packet of small photographs in his pocket-book. Polly guessed that some of these would presently be placed before her for inspection — and she had not long to wait.

"That is old Brooks," he said, pointing to one of the photographs, "Millionaire Brooks, as he was called, and these are his two sons, Percival and Murray. It was a curious case, wasn't it? Personally I don't wonder that the police were completely at sea. If a member of that highly estimable force happened to be as clever as the clever author of that forged will, we should have very few undetected crimes in this country."

"That is why I always try to persuade you to give our poor ignorant police the benefit of your great insight and wisdom," said Polly, with a smile.

"I know," he said blandly, "you have been most kind in that way, but I am only an amateur. Crime interests me only when it resembles a clever game of chess, with many intricate moves which all tend to one solution, the checkmating of the antagonist — the detective force of the country. Now, confess that, in the Dublin mystery, the clever police there were absolutely checkmated."

"Absolutely."

"Just as the public was. There were actually two crimes committed in one city which have completely baffled detection: the murder of Patrick Wethered the lawyer, and the forged will of Millionaire Brooks. There are not many millionaires in Ireland; no wonder old Brooks was a notability in his way, since his business — bacon curing, I believe it is — is said to be worth over £2,000,000 of solid money.

"His younger son Murray was a refined, highly educated man, and was, moreover, the apple of his father's eye, as he was the spoilt darling of Dublin society; good-looking, a splendid dancer, and a perfect rider, he was the acknowledged 'catch' of the matrimonial market of Ireland, and many a very aristocratic house was opened hospitably to the favourite son of the millionaire.

"Of course, Percival Brooks, the eldest son, would inherit the bulk of the old man's property and also probably the larger share in the business; he, too, was good-looking, more so than his brother; he, too, rode, danced, and talked well, but it was many years ago that mammas with marriageable daughters had given up all hopes of Percival Brooks as a probable son-in-law. That young man's infatuation for Maisie Fortescue, a lady of undoubted charm but very doubtful antecedents, who had astonished the London and Dublin music-halls with her extravagant dances, was too well known and too old-established to encourage any hopes in other quarters.

"Whether Percival Brooks would ever marry Maisie Fortescue was thought to be very doubtful. Old Brooks had the full disposal of all his wealth, and it would have fared ill with Percival if he introduced an undesirable wife into the magnificent Fitzwilliam Place establishment.

"That is how matters stood," continued the man in the corner, "when Dublin society one morning learnt, with deep regret and dismay, that old Brooks had died very suddenly at his residence after only a few hours' illness. At first it was generally understood that he had had an apoplectic stroke; anyway, he had been at business hale and hearty as ever the day before his death, which occurred late on the evening of February 1st.

"It was the morning papers of February 2nd which told the sad news to their readers, and it was those selfsame papers which on that eventful morning contained another even more startling piece of news, that proved the prelude to a series of sensations such as tranquil, placid Dublin had not experienced for many years. This was, that on that very afternoon which saw the death of Dublin's greatest millionaire, Mr. Patrick Wethered, his solicitor, was murdered in Phoenix Park at five o'clock in the afternoon while actually walking to his own house from his visit to his client in Fitzwilliam Place.

"Patrick Wethered was as well known as the proverbial town pump; his mysterious and tragic death filled all Dublin with dismay. The lawyer, who was a man sixty years of age, had been struck on the back of the head by a heavy stick, garrotted, and subsequently robbed, for neither money, watch, or pocket-book were found upon his person, whilst the police soon gathered from Patrick Wethered's household that he had left home at two o'clock that afternoon, carrying both watch and pocket-book, and undoubtedly money as well.

"An inquest was held, and a verdict of wilful murder was found against some person or persons unknown.

"But Dublin had not exhausted its stock of sensations yet. Millionaire Brooks had been buried with due pomp and magnificence, and his will had been proved (his business and personalty being estimated at £2,500,000) by Percival Gordon Brooks, his eldest son and sole executor. The younger son, Murray, who had devoted the best years of his life to being a friend and companion to his father, while Percival ran after ballet-dancers and music-hall stars — Murray, who had avowedly been the apple of his father's eye in consequence — was left with a miserly pittance of £300 a year, and no share whatever in the gigantic business of Brooks & Sons, bacon curers, of Dublin.

"Something had evidently happened within the precincts of the Brooks' town mansion, which the public and Dublin society tried in vain to fathom. Elderly mammas and blushing *débutantes* were already thinking of the best means whereby next season they might more easily show the cold shoulder to young Murray Brooks, who had so suddenly become a hopeless 'detrimental' in the marriage market, when all these sensations terminated in one gigantic, overwhelming bit of scandal, which for the next three months furnished food for gossip in every drawing-room in Dublin.

"Mr. Murray Brooks, namely, had entered a claim for probate of a will, made by his father in 1891, declaring that the later will made the very day of his father's death and proved by his brother as sole executor, was null and void, that will being a forgery."

FORGERY

"The facts that transpired in connection with this extraordinary case were sufficiently mysterious to puzzle everybody. As I told you before, all Mr. Brooks' friends never quite grasped the idea that the old man should so completely have cut off his favourite son with the proverbial shilling.

"You see, Percival had always been a thorn in the old man's flesh. Horse-racing, gambling, theatres, and music-halls were, in the old pork-butcher's eyes, so many deadly sins which his son committed every day of his life, and all the Fitzwilliam Place household could testify to the many and bitter quarrels which had arisen between father and son over the latter's gambling or racing debts. Many people asserted that Brooks would sooner have left his money to charitable institutions than seen it squandered upon the brightest stars that adorned the music-hall stage.

"The case came up for hearing early in the autumn. In the meanwhile Percival Brooks had given up his racecourse associates, settled down in the Fitzwilliam Place mansion, and conducted his father's business, without a manager, but with all the energy and forethought which he had previously devoted to more unworthy causes.

"Murray had elected not to stay on in the old house; no doubt associations were of too painful and recent a nature; he was boarding with the family of a Mr. Wilson Hibbert, who was the late Patrick Wethered's, the murdered lawyer's, partner. They were quiet, homely people, who lived in a very pokey little house in Kilkenny Street, and poor Murray must, in spite of his grief, have felt very bitterly the change from his luxurious quarters in his father's mansion to his present tiny room and homely meals.

"Percival Brooks, who was now drawing an income of over a hundred thousand a year, was very severely criticised for adhering so strictly to the letter of his father's will, and only paying his brother that paltry £300 a year, which was very literally but the crumbs off his own magnificent dinner table.

"The issue of that contested will case was therefore awaited with eager interest. In the meanwhile the police, who had at first seemed fairly loquacious on the subject of the murder of Mr. Patrick Wethered, suddenly became strangely reticent, and by their very reticence aroused a certain amount of uneasiness in the public mind, until one day the *Irish Times* published the following extraordinary, enigmatic paragraph:

"We hear on authority which cannot be questioned, that certain extraordinary developments are expected in connection with the brutal murder of our distinguished townsman Mr. Wethered; the police, in fact, are vainly trying to keep it secret that they hold a clue which is as important as it is sensational, and that they only await the impending issue of a well-known litigation in the probate court to effect an arrest."

"The Dublin public flocked to the court to hear the arguments in the great will case. I myself journeyed down to Dublin. As soon as I succeeded in fighting my way to the densely crowded court, I took stock of the various actors in the drama, which I as a spectator was prepared to enjoy. There were Percival Brooks and Murray his brother, the two litigants, both good-looking and well dressed, and both striving, by keeping up a running conversation with their lawyer, to appear unconcerned and confident of the issue. With Percival Brooks was Henry Oranmore, the eminent Irish K.C., whilst Walter Hibbert, a rising young barrister, the son of Wilson Hibbert, appeared for Murray.

"The will of which the latter claimed probate was one dated 1891, and had been made by Mr. Brooks during a severe illness which threatened to end his days. This will had been deposited in the hands of Messrs. Wethered and Hibbert, solicitors to the deceased, and by it Mr. Brooks left his personalty equally divided between his two sons, but had left his business entirely to his youngest son, with a charge of £2000 a year upon it, payable to Percival. You see that Murray Brooks therefore had a very deep interest in that second will being found null and void.

"Old Mr. Hibbert had very ably instructed his son, and Walter Hibbert's opening speech was exceedingly clever. He would show, he said, on behalf of his client, that the will dated February 1st, 1908, could never have been made by the late Mr. Brooks, as it was absolutely contrary to his avowed intentions, and that if the late Mr. Brooks did on the day in question make any fresh will at all, it certainly was *not* the one proved by Mr. Percival Brooks, for that was absolutely a forgery from beginning to end. Mr. Walter Hibbert proposed to call several witnesses in support of both these points.

"On the other hand, Mr. Henry Oranmore, K.C., very ably and courteously replied that he too had several witnesses to prove that Mr. Brooks certainly did make a will on the day in question, and that, whatever his intentions may have been in the past, he must have modified them on the day of his death, for the will proved by Mr. Percival Brooks was found after his death under his pillow, duly signed and witnessed and in every way legal.

"Then the battle began in sober earnest. There were a great many witnesses to be called on both sides, their evidence being of more or less importance — chiefly less. But the interest centred round the prosaic figure of John O'Neill, the butler at Fitzwilliam Place, who had been in Mr. Brooks' family for thirty years.

"I was clearing away my breakfast things," said John, "when I heard the master's voice in the study close by. Oh my, he was that angry! I could hear the words "disgrace," and "villain," and "liar," and "ballet-dancer," and one or two other ugly words as applied to some female lady, which I would not like to repeat. At first I did not take much notice, as I was quite used to hearing my poor dear master having words with Mr. Percival. So I went downstairs carrying my breakfast things; but I had just started cleaning my silver when the study bell goes ringing violently, and I hear Mr. Percival's voice shouting in the hall: "John! quick! Send for Dr. Mulligan at once. Your master is not well! Send one of the men, and you come up and help me to get Mr. Brooks to bed."

"I sent one of the grooms for the doctor," continued John, who seemed still affected at the recollection of his poor master, to whom he had evidently been very much attached, "and I went up to see Mr. Brooks. I found him lying on the study floor, his head supported in Mr. Percival's arms. "My father has fallen in a faint," said the young master; "help me to get him up to his room before Dr. Mulligan comes."

"Mr. Percival looked very white and upset, which was only natural; and when we had got my poor master to bed, I asked if I should not go and break the news to Mr. Murray, who had gone to business an hour ago. However, before Mr. Percival had time to give me an

order the doctor came. I thought I had seen death plainly writ in my master's face, and when I showed the doctor out an hour later, and he told me that he would be back directly, I knew that the end was near.

"Mr. Brooks rang for me a minute or two later. He told me to send at once for Mr. Wethered, or else for Mr. Hibbert, if Mr. Wethered could not come. "I haven't many hours to live, John," he says to me—"my heart is broke, the doctor says my heart is broke. A man shouldn't marry and have children, John, for they will sooner or later break his heart." I was so upset I couldn't speak; but I sent round at once for Mr. Wethered, who came himself just about three o'clock that afternoon.

"After he had been with my master about an hour I was called in, and Mr. Wethered said to me that Mr. Brooks wished me and one other of us servants to witness that he had signed a paper which was on a table by his bedside. I called Pat Mooney, the head footman, and before us both Mr. Brooks put his name at the bottom of that paper. Then Mr. Wethered gave me the pen and told me to write my name as a witness, and that Pat Mooney was to do the same. After that we were both told that we could go."

"The old butler went on to explain that he was present in his late master's room on the following day when the undertakers, who had come to lay the dead man out, found a paper underneath his pillow. John O'Neill, who recognized the paper as the one to which he had appended his signature the day before, took it to Mr. Percival, and gave it into his hands.

"In answer to Mr. Walter Hibbert, John asserted positively that he took the paper from the undertaker's hand and went straight with it to Mr. Percival's room.

"He was alone," said John; "I gave him the paper. He just glanced at it, and I thought he looked rather astonished, but he said nothing, and I at once left the room."

"When you say that you recognized the paper as the one which you had seen your master sign the day before, how did you actually recognize that it was the same paper?" asked Mr. Hibbert amidst breathless interest on the part of the spectators. I narrowly observed the witness's face.

"It looked exactly the same paper to me, sir," replied John, somewhat vaguely.

"Did you look at the contents, then?"

"No, sir; certainly not."

"Had you done so the day before?"

"No, sir, only at my master's signature."

"Then you only thought by the *outside* look of the paper that it was the same?"

"It looked the same thing, sir," persisted John obstinately.

"You see," continued the man in the corner, leaning eagerly forward across the narrow marble table, "the contention of Murray Brooks' adviser was that Mr. Brooks, having made a will and hidden it — for some reason or other under his pillow — that will had fallen, through the means related by John O'Neill, into the hands of Mr. Percival Brooks, who had destroyed it and substituted a forged one in its place, which adjudged the whole of Mr. Brooks' millions to himself. It was a terrible and very daring accusation directed against a gentleman who, in spite of his many wild oats sowed in early youth, was a prominent and important figure in Irish high life.

"All those present were aghast at what they heard, and the whispered comments I could hear around me showed me that public opinion, at least, did not uphold Mr. Murray Brooks' daring accusation against his brother.

"But John O'Neill had not finished his evidence, and Mr. Walter Hibbert had a bit of sensation still up his sleeve. He had, namely, produced a paper, the will proved by Mr. Percival Brooks, and had asked John O'Neill if once again he recognized the paper.

"Certainly, sir," said John unhesitatingly, "that is the one the undertaker found under my poor dead master's pillow, and which I took to Mr. Percival's room immediately."

"Then the paper was unfolded and placed before the witness.

"Now, Mr. O'Neill, will you tell me if that is your signature?"

"John looked at it for a moment; then he said: 'Excuse me, sir,' and produced a pair of spectacles which he carefully adjusted before he again examined the paper. Then he thoughtfully shook his head.

"It don't look much like my writing, sir," he said at last. "That is to say," he added, by way of elucidating the matter, "it does look like my writing, but then I don't think it is."

"There was at that moment a look in Mr. Percival Brooks' face," continued the man in the corner quietly, "which then and there gave me the whole history of that quarrel, that illness of Mr. Brooks, of the will, ay! and of the murder of Patrick Wethered too.

"All I wondered at was how every one of those learned counsel on both sides did not get the clue just the same as I did, but went on arguing, speechifying, cross-examining for nearly a week, until they arrived at the one conclusion which was inevitable from the very first, namely, that the will was a forgery — a gross, clumsy, idiotic forgery, since both John O'Neill and Pat Mooney, the two witnesses, absolutely repudiated the signatures as their own. The only successful bit of calligraphy the forger had done was the signature of old Mr. Brooks.

"It was a very curious fact, and one which had undoubtedly aided the forger in accomplishing his work quickly, that Mr. Wethered the lawyer having, no doubt, realized that Mr. Brooks had not many moments in life to spare, had not drawn up the usual engrossed, magnificent document dear to the lawyer heart, but had used for his client's will one of those regular printed forms which can be purchased at any stationer's.

"Mr. Percival Brooks, of course, flatly denied the serious allegation brought against him. He admitted that the butler had brought him the document the morning after his father's death, and that he certainly, on glancing at it, had been very much astonished to see that that document was his father's will. Against that he declared that its contents did not astonish him in the slightest degree, that he himself knew of the testator's intentions, but that he certainly thought his father had entrusted the will to the care of Mr. Wethered, who did all his business for him.

"I only very cursorily glanced at the signature," he concluded, speaking in a perfectly calm, clear voice; "you must understand that the thought of forgery was very far from my mind, and that my father's signature is exceedingly well imitated, if, indeed, it is not his own, which I am not at all prepared to believe. As for the two witnesses' signatures, I don't think I had ever seen them before. I took

the document to Messrs. Barkston and Maud, who had often done business for me before, and they assured me that the will was in perfect form and order.’

“Asked why he had not entrusted the will to his father’s solicitors, he replied:

““For the very simple reason that exactly half an hour before the will was placed in my hands, I had read that Mr. Patrick Wethered had been murdered the night before. Mr. Hibbert, the junior partner, was not personally known to me.’

“After that, for form’s sake, a good deal of expert evidence was heard on the subject of the dead man’s signature. But that was quite unanimous, and merely went to corroborate what had already been established beyond a doubt, namely, that the will dated February 1st, 1908, was a forgery, and probate of the will dated 1891 was therefore granted to Mr. Murray Brooks, the sole executor mentioned therein.”

A MEMORABLE DAY

“Two days later the police applied for a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Percival Brooks on a charge of forgery.

“The Crown prosecuted, and Mr. Brooks had again the support of Mr. Oranmore, the eminent K.C. Perfectly calm, like a man conscious of his own innocence and unable to grasp the idea that justice does sometimes miscarry, Mr. Brooks, the son of the millionaire, himself still the possessor of a very large fortune under the former will, stood up in the dock on that memorable day in October, 1908, which still no doubt lives in the memory of his many friends.

“All the evidence with regard to Mr. Brooks’ last moments and the forged will was gone through over again. That will, it was the contention of the Crown, had been forged so entirely in favour of the accused, cutting out every one else, that obviously no one but the beneficiary under that false will would have had any motive in forging it.

“Very pale, and with a frown between his deep-set, handsome Irish eyes, Percival Brooks listened to this large volume of evidence piled up against him by the Crown.

“At times he held brief consultations with Mr. Oranmore, who seemed as cool as a cucumber. Have you ever seen Oranmore in court? He is a character worthy of Dickens. His pronounced brogue, his fat, podgy, clean-shaven face, his not always immaculately clean large hands, have often delighted the caricaturist. As it very soon transpired during that memorable magisterial inquiry, he relied for a verdict in favour of his client upon two main points, and he had concentrated all his skill upon making these two points as telling as he possibly could.

“The first point was the question of time, John O’Neill, cross-examined by Oranmore, stated without hesitation that he had given the will to Mr. Percival at eleven o’clock in the morning. And now the eminent K.C. brought forward and placed in the witness-box the very lawyers into whose hands the accused had then immediately placed the will. Now, Mr. Barkston, a very well-known solicitor of King Street, declared positively that Mr. Percival Brooks was in his office at a quarter before twelve; two of his clerks testified to the same time exactly, and it was *impossible*, contended Mr. Oranmore, that within three-quarters of an hour Mr. Brooks could have gone to a stationer’s, bought a will form, copied Mr. Wethered’s writing, his father’s signature, and that of John O’Neill and Pat Mooney.

“Such a thing might have been planned, arranged, practised, and ultimately, after a great deal of trouble, successfully carried out, but human intelligence could not grasp the other as a possibility.

“Still the judge wavered. The eminent K.C. had shaken but not shattered his belief in the prisoner’s guilt. But there was one point more, and this Oranmore, with the skill of a dramatist, had reserved for the fall of the curtain.

“He noted every sign in the judge’s face, he guessed that his client was not yet absolutely safe, then only did he produce his last two witnesses.

“One of them was Mary Sullivan, one of the housemaids in the Fitzwilliam mansion. She had been sent up by the cook at a quarter past four o’clock on the afternoon of February 1st with some hot water, which the nurse had ordered, for the master’s room. Just as she was about to knock at the door Mr. Wethered was coming out of the room. Mary stopped with the tray in her hand, and at the door Mr. Wethered turned and said quite loudly: ‘Now, don’t fret, don’t be anxious; do try and be calm. Your will is safe in my pocket, nothing can change it or alter one word of it but yourself.’

“It was, of course, a very ticklish point in law whether the housemaid’s evidence could be accepted. You see, she was quoting the words of a man since dead, spoken to another man also dead. There is no doubt that had there been very strong evidence on the other side against Percival Brooks, Mary Sullivan’s would have counted for nothing; but, as I told you before, the judge’s belief in the prisoner’s guilt was already very seriously shaken, and now the final blow aimed at it by Mr. Oranmore shattered his last lingering doubts.

“Dr. Mulligan, namely, had been placed by Mr. Oranmore into the witness-box. He was a medical man of unimpeachable authority, in fact, absolutely at the head of his profession in Dublin. What he said practically corroborated Mary Sullivan’s testimony. He had gone in to see Mr. Brooks at half-past four, and understood from him that his lawyer had just left him.

“Mr. Brooks certainly, though terribly weak, was calm and more composed. He was dying from a sudden heart attack, and Dr. Mulligan foresaw the almost immediate end. But he was still conscious and managed to murmur feebly: ‘I feel much easier in my mind now, doctor — have made my will — Wethered has been — he’s got it in his pocket — it is safe there — safe from that —’ But the words died on his lips, and after that he spoke but little. He saw his two sons before he died, but hardly knew them or even looked at them.

“You see,” concluded the man in the corner, “you see that the prosecution was bound to collapse. Oranmore did not give it a leg to stand on. The will was forged, it is true, forged in the favour of Percival Brooks and of no one else, forged for him and for his benefit. Whether he knew and connived at the forgery was never proved or, as far as I know, even hinted, but it was impossible to go against all the evidence, which pointed that, as far as the act itself was concerned, he at least was innocent. You see, Dr. Mulligan’s evidence was not to be shaken. Mary Sullivan’s was equally strong.

“There were two witnesses swearing positively that old Brooks’ will was in Mr. Wethered’s keeping when that gentleman left the Fitzwilliam mansion at a quarter past four. At five o’clock in the afternoon the lawyer was found dead in Phoenix Park. Between a quarter past four and eight o’clock in the evening Percival Brooks never left the house — that was subsequently proved by Oranmore up to the hilt and beyond a doubt. Since the will found under old Brooks’ pillow was a forged will, where then was the will he did make, and which Wethered carried away with him in his pocket?”

“Stolen, of course,” said Polly, “by those who murdered and robbed him; it may have been of no value to them, but they naturally would destroy it, lest it might prove a clue against them.”

“Then you think it was mere coincidence?” he asked excitedly.

“What?”

“That Wethered was murdered and robbed at the very moment that he carried the will in his pocket, whilst another was being forged in its place?”

"It certainly would be very curious, if it *were* a coincidence," she said musingly.

"Very," he repeated with biting sarcasm, whilst nervously his bony fingers played with the inevitable bit of string. "Very curious indeed. Just think of the whole thing. There was the old man with all his wealth, and two sons, one to whom he is devoted, and the other with whom he does nothing but quarrel. One day there is another of these quarrels, but more violent, more terrible than any that have previously occurred, with the result that the father, heartbroken by it all, has an attack of apoplexy and practically dies of a broken heart. After that he alters his will, and subsequently a will is proved which turns out to be a forgery.

"Now everybody — police, press, and public alike — at once jump to the conclusion that, as Percival Brooks benefits by that forged will, Percival Brooks must be the forger."

"Seek for him whom the crime benefits, is your own axiom," argued the girl.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Percival Brooks benefited to the tune of £2,000,000."

"I beg your pardon. He did nothing of the sort. He was left with less than half the share that his younger brother inherited."

"Now, yes; but that was a former will and—"

"And that forged will was so clumsily executed, the signature so carelessly imitated, that the forgery was bound to come to light. Did *that* never strike you?"

"Yes, but—"

"There is no but," he interrupted. "It was all as clear as daylight to me from the very first. The quarrel with the old man, which broke his heart, was not with his eldest son, with whom he was used to quarrelling, but with the second son whom he idolised, in whom he believed. Don't you remember how John O'Neill heard the words 'liar' and 'deceit'? Percival Brooks had never deceived his father. His sins were all on the surface. Murray had led a quiet life, had pandered to his father, and fawned upon him, until, like most hypocrites, he at last got found out. Who knows what ugly gambling debt or debt of honour, suddenly revealed to old Brooks, was the cause of that last and deadly quarrel?"

"You remember that it was Percival who remained beside his father and carried him up to his room. Where was Murray throughout that long and painful day, when his father lay dying — he, the idolised son, the apple of the old man's eye? You never hear his name mentioned as being present there all that day. But he knew that he had offended his father mortally, and that his father meant to cut him off with a shilling. He knew that Mr. Wethered had been sent for, that Wethered left the house soon after four o'clock.

"And here the cleverness of the man comes in. Having lain in wait for Wethered and knocked him on the back of the head with a stick, he could not very well make that will disappear altogether. There remained the faint chance of some other witnesses knowing that Mr. Brooks had made a fresh will, Mr. Wethered's partner, his clerk, or one of the confidential servants in the house. Therefore *a* will must be discovered after the old man's death.

"Now, Murray Brooks was not an expert forger, it takes years of training to become that. A forged will executed by himself would be sure to be found out — yes, that's it, sure to be found out. The forgery will be palpable — let it be palpable, and then it will be found out, branded as such, and the original will of 1891, so favourable to the young blackguard's interests, would be held as valid. Was it devilry or merely additional caution which prompted Murray to pen that forged will so glaringly in Percival's favour? It is impossible to say.

"Anyhow, it was the cleverest touch in that marvellously devised crime. To plan that evil deed was great, to execute it was easy enough. He had several hours' leisure in which to do it. Then at night it was simplicity itself to slip the document under the dead man's pillow. Sacrilege causes no shudder to such natures as Murray Brooks. The rest of the drama you know already—"

"But Percival Brooks?"

"The jury returned a verdict of 'Not guilty.' There was no evidence against him."

"But the money? Surely the scoundrel does not have the enjoyment of it still?"

"No; he enjoyed it for a time, but he died, about three months ago, and forgot to take the precaution of making a will, so his brother Percival has got the business after all. If you ever go to Dublin, I should order some of Brooks' bacon if I were you. It is very good."

AN UNPARALLELED OUTRAGE

"Do you care for the seaside?" asked the man in the corner when he had finished his lunch. "I don't mean the seaside at Ostend or Trouville, but honest English seaside with nigger minstrels, three-shilling excursionists, and dirty, expensive furnished apartments, where they charge you a shilling for lighting the hall gas on Sundays and sixpence on other evenings. Do you care for that?"

"I prefer the country."

"Ah! perhaps it is preferable. Personally I only liked one of our English seaside resorts once, and that was for a week, when Edward Skinner was up before the magistrate, charged with what was known as the 'Brighton Outrage.' I don't know if you remember the memorable day in Brighton, memorable for that elegant town, which deals more in amusements than mysteries, when Mr. Francis Morton, one of its most noted residents, disappeared. Yes! disappeared as completely as any vanishing lady in a music-hall. He was wealthy, had a fine house, servants, a wife and children, and he disappeared. There was no getting away from that.

"Mr. Francis Morton lived with his wife in one of the large houses in Sussex Square at the Kemp Town end of Brighton. Mrs. Morton was well known for her Americanisms, her swagger dinner parties, and beautiful Paris gowns. She was the daughter of one of the many American millionaires (I think her father was a Chicago pork-butcher), who conveniently provide wealthy wives for English gentlemen; and she had married Mr. Francis Morton a few years ago and brought him her quarter of a million, for no other reason but that she fell in love with him. He was neither good-looking nor distinguished, in fact, he was one of those men who seem to have CITY stamped all over their person.

"He was a gentleman of very regular habits, going up to London every morning on business and returning every afternoon by the 'husband's train.' So regular was he in these habits that all the servants at the Sussex Square house were betrayed into actual gossip over the fact that on Wednesday, March 17th, the master was not home for dinner. Hales, the butler, remarked that the mistress seemed a bit anxious and didn't eat much food. The evening wore on and Mr. Morton did not appear. At nine o'clock the young footman was dispatched to the station to make inquiries whether his master had been seen there in the afternoon, or whether — which Heaven forbid — there had been an accident on the line. The young man interviewed two or three porters, the bookstall boy, and ticket clerk; all were agreed that Mr. Morton did not go up to London during the day; no one had seen him within the precincts of the station. There certainly had been no accident reported either on the up or down line.

"But the morning of the 18th came, with its initial postman's knock, but neither Mr. Morton nor any sign or news from him. Mrs. Morton, who evidently had spent a sleepless night, for she looked sadly changed and haggard, sent a wire to the hall porter at the large building in Cannon Street, where her husband had his office. An hour later she had the reply: 'Not seen Mr. Morton all day yesterday, not here to-day.' By the afternoon every one in Brighton knew that a fellow-resident had mysteriously disappeared from or in the city.

"A couple of days, then another, elapsed, and still no sign of Mr. Morton. The police were doing their best. The gentleman was so well known in Brighton — as he had been a resident two years — that it was not difficult to firmly establish the one fact that he had not left the city, since no one saw him in the station on the morning of the 17th, nor at any time since then. Mild excitement prevailed throughout the town. At first the newspapers took the matter somewhat jocosely. 'Where is Mr. Morton?' was the usual placard on the evening's contents bills, but after three days had gone by and the worthy Brighton resident was still missing, while Mrs. Morton was seen to look more haggard and careworn every day, mild excitement gave place to anxiety.

"There were vague hints now as to foul play. The news had leaked out that the missing gentleman was carrying a large sum of money on the day of his disappearance. There were also vague rumours of a scandal not unconnected with Mrs. Morton herself and her own past history, which in her anxiety for her husband she had been forced to reveal to the detective-inspector in charge of the case.

"Then on Saturday the news which the late evening papers contained was this:

"Acting on certain information received, the police to-day forced an entrance into one of the rooms of Russell House, a high-class furnished apartment on the King's Parade, and there they discovered our missing distinguished townsman, Mr. Francis Morton, who had been robbed and subsequently locked up in that room since Wednesday, the 17th. When discovered he was in the last stages of inanition; he was tied into an arm-chair with ropes, a thick wool shawl had been wound round his mouth, and it is a positive marvel that, left thus without food and very little air, the unfortunate gentleman survived the horrors of these four days of incarceration.

"He has been conveyed to his residence in Sussex Square, and we are pleased to say that Doctor Mellish, who is in attendance, has declared his patient to be out of serious danger, and that with care and rest he will be soon quite himself again.

"At the same time our readers will learn with unmixed satisfaction that the police of our city, with their usual acuteness and activity, have already discovered the identity and whereabouts of the cowardly ruffian who committed this unparalleled outrage."

THE PRISONER

"I really don't know," continued the man in the corner blandly, "what it was that interested me in the case from the very first. Certainly it had nothing very out of the way or mysterious about it, but I journeyed down to Brighton nevertheless, as I felt that something deeper and more subtle lay behind that extraordinary assault, following a robbery, no doubt.

"I must tell you that the police had allowed it to be freely circulated abroad that they held a clue. It had been easy enough to ascertain who the lodger was who had rented the furnished room in Russell House. His name was supposed to be Edward Skinner, and he had taken the room about a fortnight ago, but had gone away ostensibly for two or three days on the very day of Mr. Morton's mysterious disappearance. It was on the 20th that Mr. Morton was found, and thirty-six hours later the public were gratified to hear that Mr. Edward Skinner had been traced to London and arrested on the charge of assault upon the person of Mr. Francis Morton and of robbing him of the sum of £10,000.

"Then a further sensation was added to the already bewildering case by the startling announcement that Mr. Francis Morton refused to prosecute.

"Of course, the Treasury took up the case and subpoenaed Mr. Morton as a witness, so that gentleman — if he wished to hush the matter up, or had been in any way terrorised into a promise of doing so — gained nothing by his refusal, except an additional amount of curiosity in the public mind and further sensation around the mysterious case.

"It was all this, you see, which had interested me and brought me down to Brighton on March 23rd to see the prisoner Edward Skinner arraigned before the beak. I must say that he was a very ordinary-looking individual. Fair, of ruddy complexion, with snub nose and the beginning of a bald place on the top of his head, he, too, looked the embodiment of a prosperous, stodgy 'City gent.'

"I took a quick survey of the witnesses present, and guessed that the handsome, stylish woman sitting next to Mr. Reginald Pepys, the noted lawyer for the Crown, was Mrs. Morton.

"There was a large crowd in court, and I heard whispered comments among the feminine portion thereof as to the beauty of Mrs. Morton's gown, the value of her large picture hat, and the magnificence of her diamond rings.

"The police gave all the evidence required with regard to the finding of Mr. Morton in the room at Russell House and also to the arrest of Skinner at the Langham Hotel in London. It appears that the prisoner seemed completely taken aback at the charge preferred against him, and declared that though he knew Mr. Francis Morton slightly in business he knew nothing as to his private life.

"'Prisoner stated,' continued Inspector Buckle, 'that he was not even aware Mr. Morton lived in Brighton, but I have evidence here, which I will place before your Honour, to prove that the prisoner was seen in the company of Mr. Morton at 9.30 o'clock on the morning of the assault.'

"Cross-examined by Mr. Matthew Quiller, the detective-inspector admitted that prisoner merely said that he did not know that Mr. Morton was a *resident* of Brighton — he never denied having met him there.

"The witness, or rather witnesses, referred to by the police were two Brighton tradesmen who knew Mr. Morton by sight and had seen him on the morning of the 17th walking with the accused.

"In this instance Mr. Quiller had no question to ask of the witnesses, and it was generally understood that the prisoner did not wish to contradict their statement.

"Constable Hartrick told the story of the finding of the unfortunate Mr. Morton after his four days' incarceration. The constable had been sent round by the chief inspector, after certain information given by Mrs. Chapman, the landlady of Russell House. He had found the door locked and forced it open. Mr. Morton was in an arm-chair, with several yards of rope wound loosely round him; he was almost unconscious, and there was a thick wool shawl tied round his mouth which must have deadened any cry or groan the poor gentleman might have uttered. But, as a matter of fact, the constable was under the impression that Mr. Morton had been either drugged or stunned in some way at first, which had left him weak and faint and prevented him from making himself heard or extricating himself from his bonds, which were very clumsily, evidently very hastily, wound round his body.

"The medical officer who was called in, and also Dr. Mellish who attended Mr. Morton, both said that he seemed dazed by some stupefying drug, and also, of course, terribly weak and faint with the want of food.

"The first witness of real importance was Mrs. Chapman, the proprietress of Russell House, whose original information to the police led to the discovery of Mr. Morton. In answer to Mr. Pepys, she said that on March 1st the accused called at her house and gave his name as Mr. Edward Skinner.

"'He required, he said, a furnished room at a moderate rental for a permanency, with full attendance when he was in, but he added that he would often be away for two or three days, or even longer, at a time.

"'He told me that he was a traveller for a tea-house,' continued Mrs. Chapman, 'and I showed him the front room on the third floor, as he did not want to pay more than twelve shillings a week. I asked him for a reference, but he put three sovereigns in my hand, and said with a laugh that he supposed paying for his room a month in advance was sufficient reference; if I didn't like him after that, I could give him a week's notice to quit.'

"'You did not think of asking him the name of the firm for which he travelled?' asked Mr. Pepys.

"'No, I was quite satisfied as he paid me for the room. The next day he sent in his luggage and took possession of the room. He went out most mornings on business, but was always in Brighton for Saturday and Sunday. On the 16th he told me that he was going to Liverpool for a couple of days; he slept in the house that night, and went off early on the 17th, taking his portmanteau with him.'

"'At what time did he leave?' asked Mr. Pepys.

"'I couldn't say exactly,' replied Mrs. Chapman with some hesitation. 'You see this is the off season here. None of my rooms are let, except the one to Mr. Skinner, and I only have one servant. I keep four during the summer, autumn, and winter season,' she added with conscious pride, fearing that her former statement might prejudice the reputation of Russell House. 'I thought I had heard Mr. Skinner go out about nine o'clock, but about an hour later the girl and I were both in the basement, and we heard the front door open and shut with a bang, and then a step in the hall.'

“““That’s Mr. Skinner,” said Mary. “So it is,” I said, “why, I thought he had gone an hour ago.” “He did go out then,” said Mary, “for he left his bedroom door open and I went in to do his bed and tidy his room.” “Just go and see if that’s him, Mary,” I said, and Mary ran up to the hall and up the stairs, and came back to tell me that that was Mr. Skinner all right enough; he had gone straight up to his room. Mary didn’t see him, but he had another gentleman with him, as she could hear them talking in Mr. Skinner’s room.’

““Then you can’t tell us at what time the prisoner left the house finally?”

““No, that I can’t. I went out shopping soon after that. When I came in it was twelve o’clock. I went up to the third floor and found that Mr. Skinner had locked his door and taken the key with him. As I knew Mary had already done, the room I did not trouble more about it, though I did think it strange for a gentleman to look up his room and not leave the key with me.’

““And, of course, you heard no noise of any kind in the room then?”

““No. Not that day or the next, but on the third day Mary and I both thought we heard a funny sound. I said that Mr. Skinner had left his window open, and it was the blind flapping against the window-pane; but when we heard that funny noise again I put my ear to the keyhole and I thought I could hear a groan. I was very frightened, and sent Mary for the police.’

““Mrs. Chapman had nothing more of interest to say. The prisoner certainly was her lodger. She had last seen him on the evening of the 16th going up to his room with his candle. Mary the servant had much the same story to relate as her mistress.

““I think it was ‘im, right enough,’ said Mary guardedly. ‘I didn’t see ‘im, but I went up to ‘is landing and stopped a moment outside ‘is door. I could ‘ear loud voices in the room — gentlemen talking.’

““I suppose you would not do such a thing as to listen, Mary?” queried Mr. Pepys with a smile.

““No, sir,” said Mary with a bland smile, ‘I didn’t catch what the gentlemen said, but one of them spoke so loud I thought they must be quarrelling.’

““Mr. Skinner was the only person in possession of a latch-key, I presume. No one else could have come in without ringing at the door?”

““Oh no, sir.’

““That was all. So far, you see, the case was progressing splendidly for the Crown against the prisoner. The contention, of course, was that Skinner had met Mr. Morton, brought him home with him, assaulted, drugged, then gagged and bound him, and finally robbed him of whatever money he had in his possession, which, according to certain affidavits which presently would be placed before the magistrate, amounted to £10,000 in notes.

““But in all this there still remained the great element of mystery for which the public and the magistrate would demand an explanation: namely, what were the relationships between Mr. Morton and Skinner, which had induced the former to refuse the prosecution of the man who had not only robbed him, but had so nearly succeeded in leaving him to die a terrible and lingering death?

““Mr. Morton was too ill as yet to appear in person. Dr. Mellish had absolutely forbidden his patient to undergo the fatigue and excitement of giving evidence himself in court that day. But his depositions had been taken at his bedside, were sworn to by him, and were now placed before the magistrate by the prosecuting counsel, and the facts they revealed were certainly as remarkable as they were brief and enigmatical.

““As they were read by Mr. Pepys, an awed and expectant hush seemed to descend over the large crowd gathered there, and all necks were strained eagerly forward to catch a glimpse of a tall, elegant woman, faultlessly dressed and wearing exquisite jewellery, but whose handsome face wore, as the prosecuting counsel read her husband’s deposition, a more and more ashen hue.

““This, your Honour, is the statement made upon oath by Mr. Francis Morton,’ commenced Mr. Pepys in that loud, sonorous voice of his which sounds so impressive in a crowded and hushed court. ““I was obliged, for certain reasons which I refuse to disclose, to make a payment of a large sum of money to a man whom I did not know and have never seen. It was in a matter of which my wife was cognisant and which had entirely to do with her own affairs. I was merely the go-between, as I thought it was not fit that she should see to this matter herself. The individual in question had made certain demands, of which she kept me in ignorance as long as she could, not wishing to unnecessarily worry me. At last she decided to place the whole matter before me, and I agreed with her that it would be best to satisfy the man’s demands.

“““I then wrote to that individual whose name I do not wish to disclose, addressing the letter, as my wife directed me to do, to the Brighton post office, saying that I was ready to pay the £10,000 to him, at any place or time and in what manner he might appoint. I received a reply which bore the Brighton postmark, and which desired me to be outside Furnival’s, the drapers, in West Street, at 9.30 on the morning of March 17th, and to bring the money (£10,000) in Bank of England notes.

“““On the 16th my wife gave me a cheque for the amount and I cashed it at her bank — Bird’s in Fleet Street. At half-past nine the following morning I was at the appointed place. An individual wearing a grey overcoat, bowler hat, and red tie accosted me by name and requested me to walk as far as his lodgings in the King’s Parade. I followed him. Neither of us spoke. He stopped at a house which bore the name ‘Russell House,’ and which I shall be able to swear to as soon as I am able to go out. He let himself in with a latch-key, and asked me to follow him up to his room on the third floor. I thought I noticed when we were in the room that he locked the door; however, I had nothing of any value about me except the £10,000, which I was ready to give him. We had not exchanged the slightest word.

“““I gave him the notes, and he folded them and put them in his pocket-book. Then I turned towards the door, and, without the slightest warning, I felt myself suddenly gripped by the shoulder, while a handkerchief was pressed to my nose and mouth. I struggled as best I could, but the handkerchief was saturated with chloroform, and I soon lost consciousness. I hazily remember the man saying to me in short, jerky sentences, spoken at intervals while I was still weakly struggling:

“““What a fool you must think me, my dear sir! Did you really think that I was going to let you quietly walk out of here, straight to the police-station, eh? Such dodges have been done before, I know, when a man’s silence has to be bought for money. Find out who he is, see where he lives, give him the money, then inform against him. No you don’t! not this time. I am off to the continent with this £10,000, and I can get to Newhaven in time for the midday boat, so you’ll have to keep quiet until I am the other side of the Channel, my friend. You won’t be much inconvenienced; my landlady will hear your groans presently and release you, so you’ll be all right. There, now, drink this — that’s better.’ He forced something bitter down my throat, then I remember nothing more.

“““When I regained consciousness I was sitting in an arm-chair with some rope tied round me and a wool shawl round my mouth. I hadn't the strength to make the slightest effort to disentangle myself or to utter a scream. I felt terribly sick and faint.””

“Mr. Reginald Pepys had finished reading, and no one in that crowded court had thought of uttering a sound; the magistrate's eyes were fixed upon the handsome lady in the magnificent gown, who was mopping her eyes with a dainty lace handkerchief.

“The extraordinary narrative of the victim of so daring an outrage had kept every one in suspense; one thing was still expected to make the measure of sensation as full as it had ever been over any criminal case, and that was Mrs. Morton's evidence. She was called by the prosecuting counsel, and slowly, gracefully, she entered the witness-box. There was no doubt that she had felt keenly the tortures which her husband had undergone, and also the humiliation of seeing her name dragged forcibly into this ugly, blackmailing scandal.

“Closely questioned by Mr. Reginald Pepys, she was forced to admit that the man who blackmailed her was connected with her early life in a way which would have brought terrible disgrace upon her and upon her children. The story she told, amidst many tears and sobs, and much use of her beautiful lace handkerchief and beringed hands, was exceedingly pathetic.

“It appears that when she was barely seventeen she was inveigled into a secret marriage with one of those foreign adventurers who swarm in every country, and who styled himself Comte Armand de la Tremouille. He seems to have been a blackguard of unusually low pattern, for, after he had extracted from her some £200 of her pin money and a few diamond brooches, he left her one fine day with a laconic word to say that he was sailing for Europe by the *Argentina*, and would not be back for some time. She was in love with the brute, poor young soul, for when, a week later, she read that the *Argentina* was wrecked, and presumably every soul on board had perished, she wept very many bitter tears over her early widowhood.

“Fortunately her father, a very wealthy pork-butcher of Chicago, had known nothing of his daughter's culpable foolishness. Four years later he took her to London, where she met Mr. Francis Morton and married him. She led six or seven years of very happy married life when one day, like a thunderbolt from a clear, blue sky, she received a typewritten letter, signed 'Armand de la Tremouille,' full of protestations of undying love, telling a long and pathetic tale of years of suffering in a foreign land, whither he had drifted after having been rescued almost miraculously from the wreck of the *Argentina*, and where he never had been able to scrape a sufficient amount of money to pay for his passage home. At last fate had favoured him. He had, after many vicissitudes, found the whereabouts of his dear wife, and was now ready to forgive all that was past and take her to his loving arms once again.

“What followed was the usual course of events when there is a blackguard and a fool of a woman. She was terrorised and did not dare to tell her husband for some time; she corresponded with the Comte de la Tremouille, begging him for her sake and in memory of the past not to attempt to see her. She found him amenable to reason in the shape of several hundred pounds which passed through the Brighton post office into his hands. At last one day, by accident, Mr. Morton came across one of the Comte de la Tremouille's interesting letters. She confessed everything, throwing herself upon her husband's mercy.

“Now, Mr. Francis Morton was a business man, who viewed life practically and soberly. He liked his wife, who kept him in luxury, and wished to keep her, whereas the Comte de la Tremouille seemed willing enough to give her up for a consideration. Mrs. Morton, who had the sole and absolute control of her fortune, on the other hand, was willing enough to pay the price and hush up the scandal, which she believed — since she was a bit of a fool — would land her in prison for bigamy. Mr. Francis Morton wrote to the Comte de la Tremouille that his wife was ready to pay him the sum of £10,000 which he demanded in payment for her absolute liberty and his own complete disappearance out of her life now and for ever. The appointment was made, and Mr. Morton left his house at 9 a.m. on March 17th with the £10,000 in his pocket.

“The public and the magistrate had hung breathless upon her words. There was nothing but sympathy felt for this handsome woman, who throughout had been more sinned against than sinning, and whose gravest fault seems to have been a total lack of intelligence in dealing with her own life. But I can assure you of one thing, that in no case within my recollection was there ever such a sensation in a court as when the magistrate, after a few minutes' silence, said gently to Mrs. Morton:

““And now, Mrs. Morton, will you kindly look at the prisoner, and tell me if in him you recognize your former husband?”

“And she, without even turning to look at the accused, said quietly:

““Oh no! your Honour! of course that man is *not* the Comte de la Tremouille.””

A SENSATION

"I can assure you that the situation was quite dramatic," continued the man in the corner, whilst his funny, claw-like hands took up a bit of string with renewed feverishness.

"In answer to further questions from the magistrate, she declared that she had never seen the accused; he might have been the go-between, however, that she could not say. The letters she received were all typewritten, but signed 'Armand de la Tremouille,' and certainly the signature was identical with that on the letters she used to receive from him years ago, all of which she had kept.

"And did it *never* strike you," asked the magistrate with a smile, "that the letters you received might be forgeries?"

"How could they be?" she replied decisively; no one knew of my marriage to the Comte de la Tremouille, no one in England certainly. And, besides, if some one did know the Comte intimately enough to forge his handwriting and to blackmail me, why should that some one have waited all these years? I have been married seven years, your Honour."

"That was true enough, and there the matter rested as far as she was concerned. But the identity of Mr. Francis Morton's assailant had to be finally established, of course, before the prisoner was committed for trial. Dr. Mellish promised that Mr. Morton would be allowed to come to court for half an hour and identify the accused on the following day, and the case was adjourned until then. The accused was led away between two constables, bail being refused, and Brighton had perforce to moderate its impatience until the Wednesday.

"On that day the court was crowded to overflowing; actors, playwrights, literary men of all sorts had fought for admission to study for themselves the various phases and faces in connection with the case. Mrs. Morton was not present when the prisoner, quiet and self-possessed, was brought in and placed in the dock. His solicitor was with him, and a sensational defence was expected.

"Presently there was a stir in the court, and that certain sound, half rustle, half sigh, which preludes an expected palpitating event. Mr. Morton, pale, thin, wearing yet in his hollow eyes the stamp of those five days of suffering, walked into court leaning on the arm of his doctor — Mrs. Morton was not with him.

"He was at once accommodated with a chair in the witness-box, and the magistrate, after a few words of kindly sympathy, asked him if he had anything to add to his written statement. On Mr. Morton replying in the negative, the magistrate added:

"And now, Mr. Morton, will you kindly look at the accused in the dock and tell me whether you recognize the person who took you to the room in Russell House and then assaulted you?"

"Slowly the sick man turned towards the prisoner and looked at him; then he shook his head and replied quietly:

"No, sir, that certainly was not the man."

"You are quite sure?" asked the magistrate in amazement, while the crowd literally gasped with wonder.

"I swear it," asserted Mr. Morton.

"Can you describe the man who assaulted you?"

"Certainly. He was dark, of swarthy complexion, tall, thin, with bushy eyebrows and thick black hair and short beard. He spoke English with just the faintest suspicion of a foreign accent."

"The prisoner, as I told you before, was English in every feature. English in his ruddy complexion, and absolutely English in his speech.

"After that the case for the prosecution began to collapse. Every one had expected a sensational defence, and Mr. Matthew Quiller, counsel for Skinner, fully justified all these expectations. He had no fewer than four witnesses present who swore positively that at 9.45 a.m. on the morning of Wednesday, March 17th, the prisoner was in the express train leaving Brighton for Victoria.

"Not being endowed with the gift of being in two places at once, and Mr. Morton having added the whole weight of his own evidence in Mr. Edward Skinner's favour, that gentleman was once more remanded by the magistrate, pending further investigation by the police, bail being allowed this time in two sureties of £50 each."

TWO BLACKGUARDS

"Tell me what you think of it," said the man in the corner, seeing that Polly remained silent and puzzled.

"Well," she replied dubiously, "I suppose that the so-called Armand de la Tremouille's story was true in substance. That he did not perish on the *Argentina*, but drifted home, and blackmailed his former wife."

"Doesn't it strike you that there are at least two very strong points against that theory?" he asked, making two gigantic knots in his piece of string.

"Two?"

"Yes. In the first place, if the blackmailer was the 'Comte de la Tremouille' returned to life, why should he have been content to take £10,000 from a lady who was his lawful wife, and who could keep him in luxury for the rest of his natural life upon her large fortune, which was close upon a quarter of a million? The real Comte de la Tremouille, remember, had never found it difficult to get money out of his wife during their brief married life, whatever Mr. Morton's subsequent experience in the same direction might have been. And, secondly, why should he have typewritten his letters to his wife?"

"Because—"

"That was a point which, to my mind, the police never made the most of. Now, my experience in criminal cases has invariably been that when a typewritten letter figures in one, that letter is a forgery. It is not very difficult to imitate a signature, but it is a jolly sight more difficult to imitate a handwriting throughout an entire letter."

"Then, do you think—"

"I think, if you will allow me," he interrupted excitedly, "that we will go through the points — the sensible, tangible points of the case. Firstly: Mr. Morton disappears with £10,000 in his pocket for four entire days; at the end of that time he is discovered loosely tied to an arm-chair, and a wool shawl round his mouth. Secondly: A man named Skinner is accused of the outrage. Mr. Morton, although he himself is able, mind you, to furnish the best defence possible for Skinner, by denying his identity with the man who assaulted him, refuses to prosecute. Why?"

"He did not wish to drag his wife's name into the case."

"He must have known that the Crown would take up the case. Then, again, how is it no one saw him in the company of the swarthy foreigner he described?"

"Two witnesses did see Mr. Morton in company with Skinner," argued Polly.

"Yes, at 9.20 in West Street; that would give Edward Skinner time to catch the 9.45 at the station, and to entrust Mr. Morton with the latch-key of Russell House," remarked the man in the corner dryly.

"What nonsense!" Polly ejaculated.

"Nonsense, is it?" he said, tugging wildly at his bit of string; "is it nonsense to affirm that if a man wants to make sure that his victim shall not escape, he does not usually wind rope 'loosely' round his figure, nor does he throw a wool shawl lightly round his mouth. The police were idiotic beyond words; they themselves discovered that Morton was so 'loosely' fastened to his chair that very little movement would have disentangled him, and yet it never struck them that nothing was easier for that particular type of scoundrel to sit down in an arm-chair and wind a few yards of rope round himself, then, having wrapped a wool shawl round his throat, to slip his two arms inside the ropes."

"But what object would a man in Mr. Morton's position have for playing such extraordinary pranks?"

"Ah, the motive! There you are! What do I always tell you? Seek the motive! Now, what was Mr. Morton's position? He was the husband of a lady who owned a quarter of a million of money, not one penny of which he could touch without her consent, as it was settled on herself, and who, after the terrible way in which she had been plundered and then abandoned in her early youth, no doubt kept a very tight hold upon the purse-strings. Mr. Morton's subsequent life has proved that he had certain expensive, not altogether avoidable, tastes. One day he discovers the old love letters of the 'Comte Armand de la Tremouille.'"

"Then he lays his plans. He typewrites a letter, forges the signature of the erstwhile Count, and awaits events. The fish does rise to the bait. He gets sundry bits of money, and his success makes him daring. He looks round him for an accomplice — clever, unscrupulous, greedy — and selects Mr. Edward Skinner, probably some former pal of his wild oats days."

"The plan was very neat, you must confess. Mr. Skinner takes the room in Russell House, and studies all the manners and customs of his landlady and her servant. He then draws the full attention of the police upon himself. He meets Morton in West Street, then disappears ostensibly after the 'assault.' In the meanwhile Morton goes to Russell House. He walks upstairs, talks loudly in the room, then makes elaborate preparations for his comedy."

"Why! he nearly died of starvation!"

"That, I dare say, was not a part of his reckoning. He thought, no doubt, that Mrs. Chapman or the servant would discover and rescue him pretty soon. He meant to appear just a little faint, and endured quietly the first twenty-four hours of inanition. But the excitement and want of food told on him more than he expected. After twenty-four hours he turned very giddy and sick, and, falling from one fainting fit into another, was unable to give the alarm."

"However, he is all right again now, and concludes his part of a downright blackguard to perfection. Under the plea that his conscience does not allow him to live with a lady whose first husband is still alive, he has taken a bachelor flat in London, and only pays afternoon calls on his wife in Brighton. But presently he will tire of his bachelor life, and will return to his wife. And I'll guarantee that the Comte de la Tremouille will never be heard of again."

And that afternoon the man in the corner left Miss Polly Burton alone with a couple of photos of two uninteresting, stodgy, quiet-looking men — Morton and Skinner — who, if the old scarecrow was right in his theories, were a pair of the finest blackguards unhung.

THE REGENT'S PARK MURDER

By this time Miss Polly Burton had become quite accustomed to her extraordinary *vis-à-vis* in the corner.

He was always there, when she arrived, in the selfsame corner, dressed in one of his remarkable check tweed suits; he seldom said good morning, and invariably when she appeared he began to fidget with increased nervousness, with some tattered and knotty piece of string.

"Were you ever interested in the Regent's Park murder?" he asked her one day.

Polly replied that she had forgotten most of the particulars connected with that curious murder, but that she fully remembered the stir and flutter it had caused in a certain section of London Society.

"The racing and gambling set, particularly, you mean," he said. "All the persons implicated in the murder, directly or indirectly, were of the type commonly called 'Society men,' or 'men about town,' whilst the Harewood Club in Hanover Square, round which centred all the scandal in connection with the murder, was one of the smartest clubs in London.

"Probably the doings of the Harewood Club, which was essentially a gambling club, would for ever have remained 'officially' absent from the knowledge of the police authorities but for the murder in the Regent's Park and the revelations which came to light in connection with it.

"I dare say you know the quiet square which lies between Portland Place and the Regent's Park and is called Park Crescent at its south end, and subsequently Park Square East and West. The Marylebone Road, with all its heavy traffic, cuts straight across the large square and its pretty gardens, but the latter are connected together by a tunnel under the road; and of course you must remember that the new tube station in the south portion of the Square had not yet been planned.

"February 6th, 1907, was a very foggy night, nevertheless Mr. Aaron Cohen, of 30, Park Square West, at two o'clock in the morning, having finally pocketed the heavy winnings which he had just swept off the green table of the Harewood Club, started to walk home alone. An hour later most of the inhabitants of Park Square West were aroused from their peaceful slumbers by the sounds of a violent altercation in the road. A man's angry voice was heard shouting violently for a minute or two, and was followed immediately by frantic screams of 'Police' and 'Murder.' Then there was the double sharp report of firearms, and nothing more.

"The fog was very dense, and, as you no doubt have experienced yourself, it is very difficult to locate sound in a fog. Nevertheless, not more than a minute or two had elapsed before Constable F 18, the point policeman at the corner of Marylebone Road, arrived on the scene, and, having first of all whistled for any of his comrades on the beat, began to grope his way about in the fog, more confused than effectually assisted by contradictory directions from the inhabitants of the houses close by, who were nearly falling out of the upper windows as they shouted out to the constable.

"By the railings, policeman."

"Higher up the road."

"No, lower down."

"It was on this side of the pavement I am sure."

"No, the other."

"At last it was another policeman, F 22, who, turning into Park Square West from the north side, almost stumbled upon the body of a man lying on the pavement with his head against the railings of the Square. By this time quite a little crowd of people from the different houses in the road had come down, curious to know what had actually happened.

"The policeman turned the strong light of his bull's-eye lantern on the unfortunate man's face.

"It looks as if he had been strangled, don't it?" he murmured to his comrade.

"And he pointed to the swollen tongue, the eyes half out of their sockets, bloodshot and congested, the purple, almost black, hue of the face.

"At this point one of the spectators, more callous to horrors, peered curiously into the dead man's face. He uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"Why, surely, it's Mr. Cohen from No. 30!"

"The mention of a name familiar down the length of the street had caused two or three other men to come forward and to look more closely into the horribly distorted mask of the murdered man.

"Our next-door neighbour, undoubtedly," asserted Mr. Ellison, a young barrister, residing at No. 31.

"What in the world was he doing this foggy night all alone, and on foot?" asked somebody else.

"He usually came home very late. I fancy he belonged to some gambling club in town. I dare say he couldn't get a cab to bring him out here. Mind you, I don't know much about him. We only knew him to nod to."

"Poor beggar! it looks almost like an old-fashioned case of garroting."

"Anyway, the blackguardly murderer, whoever he was, wanted to make sure he had killed his man!" added Constable F 18, as he picked up an object from the pavement. "Here's the revolver, with two cartridges missing. You gentlemen heard the report just now?"

"He don't seem to have hit him though. The poor bloke was strangled, no doubt."

"And tried to shoot at his assailant, obviously," asserted the young barrister with authority.

"If he succeeded in hitting the brute, there might be a chance of tracing the way he went."

"But not in the fog."

"Soon, however, the appearance of the inspector, detective, and medical officer, who had quickly been informed of the tragedy, put an end to further discussion.

"The bell at No. 30 was rung, and the servants — all four of them women — were asked to look at the body.

"Amidst tears of horror and screams of fright, they all recognized in the murdered man their master, Mr. Aaron Cohen. He was therefore conveyed to his own room pending the coroner's inquest.

"The police had a pretty difficult task, you will admit; there were so very few indications to go by, and at first literally no clue.

"The inquest revealed practically nothing. Very little was known in the neighbourhood about Mr. Aaron Cohen and his affairs. His female servants did not even know the name or whereabouts of the various clubs he frequented.

"He had an office in Throgmorton Street and went to business every day. He dined at home, and sometimes had friends to dinner. When he was alone he invariably went to the club, where he stayed until the small hours of the morning.

"The night of the murder he had gone out at about nine o'clock. That was the last his servants had seen of him. With regard to the revolver, all four servants swore positively that they had never seen it before, and that, unless Mr. Cohen had bought it that very day, it did not belong to their master.

"Beyond that, no trace whatever of the murderer had been found, but on the morning after the crime a couple of keys linked together by a short metal chain were found close to a gate at the opposite end of the Square, that which immediately faced Portland Place. These were proved to be, firstly, Mr. Cohen's latch-key, and, secondly, his gate-key of the Square.

"It was therefore presumed that the murderer, having accomplished his fell design and ransacked his victim's pockets, had found the keys and made good his escape by slipping into the Square, cutting under the tunnel, and out again by the further gate. He then took the precaution not to carry the keys with him any further, but threw them away and disappeared in the fog.

"The jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown, and the police were put on their mettle to discover the unknown and daring murderer. The result of their investigations, conducted with marvellous skill by Mr. William Fisher, led, about a week after the crime, to the sensational arrest of one of London's smartest young bucks.

"The case Mr. Fisher had got up against the accused briefly amounted to this:

"On the night of February 6th, soon after midnight, play began to run very high at the Harewood Club, in Hanover Square. Mr. Aaron Cohen held the bank at roulette against some twenty or thirty of his friends, mostly young fellows with no wits and plenty of money. 'The Bank' was winning heavily, and it appears that this was the third consecutive night on which Mr. Aaron Cohen had gone home richer by several hundreds than he had been at the start of play.

"Young John Ashley, who is the son of a very worthy county gentleman who is M.F.H. somewhere in the Midlands, was losing heavily, and in his case also it appears that it was the third consecutive night that Fortune had turned her face against him.

"Remember," continued the man in the corner, "that when I tell you all these details and facts, I am giving you the combined evidence of several witnesses, which it took many days to collect and to classify.

"It appears that young Mr. Ashley, though very popular in society, was generally believed to be in what is vulgarly termed 'low water'; up to his eyes in debt, and mortally afraid of his dad, whose younger son he was, and who had on one occasion threatened to ship him off to Australia with a £5 note in his pocket if he made any further extravagant calls upon his paternal indulgence.

"It was also evident to all John Ashley's many companions that the worthy M.F.H. held the purse-strings in a very tight grip. The young man, bitten with the desire to cut a smart figure in the circles in which he moved, had often recourse to the varying fortunes which now and again smiled upon him across the green tables in the Harewood Club.

"Be that as it may, the general consensus of opinion at the Club was that young Ashley had changed his last 'pony' before he sat down to a turn of roulette with Aaron Cohen on that particular night of February 6th.

"It appears that all his friends, conspicuous among whom was Mr. Walter Hatherell, tried their very best to dissuade him from pitting his luck against that of Cohen, who had been having a most unprecedented run of good fortune. But young Ashley, heated with wine, exasperated at his own bad luck, would listen to no one; he tossed one £5 note after another on the board, he borrowed from those who would lend, then played on parole for a while. Finally, at half-past one in the morning, after a run of nineteen on the red, the young man found himself without a penny in his pockets, and owing a debt — gambling debt — a debt of honour of £1500 to Mr. Aaron Cohen.

"Now we must render this much maligned gentleman that justice which was persistently denied to him by press and public alike; it was positively asserted by all those present that Mr. Cohen himself repeatedly tried to induce young Mr. Ashley to give up playing. He himself was in a delicate position in the matter, as he was the winner, and once or twice the taunt had risen to the young man's lips, accusing the holder of the bank of the wish to retire on a competence before the break in his luck.

"Mr. Aaron Cohen, smoking the best of Havanas, had finally shrugged his shoulders and said: 'As you please!'

"But at half-past one he had had enough of the player, who always lost and never paid — never could pay, so Mr. Cohen probably believed. He therefore at that hour refused to accept Mr. John Ashley's 'promissory' stakes any longer. A very few heated words ensued, quickly checked by the management, who are ever on the alert to avoid the least suspicion of scandal.

"In the meanwhile Mr. Hatherell, with great good sense, persuaded young Ashley to leave the Club and all its temptations and go home; if possible to bed.

"The friendship of the two young men, which was very well known in society, consisted chiefly, it appears, in Walter Hatherell being the willing companion and helpmeet of John Ashley in his mad and extravagant pranks. But to-night the latter, apparently tardily sobered by his terrible and heavy losses, allowed himself to be led away by his friend from the scene of his disasters. It was then about twenty minutes to two.

"Here the situation becomes interesting," continued the man in the corner in his nervous way. "No wonder that the police interrogated at least a dozen witnesses before they were quite satisfied that every statement was conclusively proved.

"Walter Hatherell, after about ten minutes' absence, that is to say at ten minutes to two, returned to the club room. In reply to several inquiries, he said that he had parted with his friend at the corner of New Bond Street, since he seemed anxious to be alone, and that Ashley said he would take a turn down Piccadilly before going home — he thought a walk would do him good.

"At two o'clock or thereabouts Mr. Aaron Cohen, satisfied with his evening's work, gave up his position at the bank and, pocketing his heavy winnings, started on his homeward walk, while Mr. Walter Hatherell left the club half an hour later.

"At three o'clock precisely the cries of 'Murder' and the report of fire-arms were heard in Park Square West, and Mr. Aaron Cohen was found strangled outside the garden railings."

THE MOTIVE

"Now at first sight the murder in the Regent's Park appeared both to police and public as one of those silly, clumsy crimes, obviously the work of a novice, and absolutely purposeless, seeing that it could but inevitably lead its perpetrators, without any difficulty, to the gallows.

"You see, a motive had been established. 'Seek him whom the crime benefits,' say our French *confrères*. But there was something more than that.

"Constable James Funnell, on his beat, turned from Portland Place into Park Crescent a few minutes after he had heard the clock at Holy Trinity Church, Marylebone, strike half-past two. The fog at that moment was perhaps not quite so dense as it was later on in the morning, and the policeman saw two gentlemen in overcoats and top-hats leaning arm in arm against the railings of the Square, close to the gate. He could not, of course, distinguish their faces because of the fog, but he heard one of them saying to the other:

"It is but a question of time, Mr. Cohen. I know my father will pay the money for me, and you will lose nothing by waiting."

"To this the other apparently made no reply, and the constable passed on; when he returned to the same spot, after having walked over his beat, the two gentlemen had gone, but later on it was near this very gate that the two keys referred to at the inquest had been found.

"Another interesting fact," added the man in the corner, with one of those sarcastic smiles of his which Polly could not quite explain, "was the finding of the revolver upon the scene of the crime. That revolver, shown to Mr. Ashley's valet, was sworn to by him as being the property of his master.

"All these facts made, of course, a very remarkable, so far quite unbroken, chain of circumstantial evidence against Mr. John Ashley. No wonder, therefore, that the police, thoroughly satisfied with Mr. Fisher's work and their own, applied for a warrant against the young man, and arrested him in his rooms in Clarges Street exactly a week after the committal of the crime.

"As a matter of fact, you know, experience has invariably taught me that when a murderer seems particularly foolish and clumsy, and proofs against him seem particularly damning, that is the time when the police should be most guarded against pitfalls.

"Now in this case, if John Ashley had indeed committed the murder in Regent's Park in the manner suggested by the police, he would have been a criminal in more senses than one, for idiocy of that kind is to my mind worse than many crimes.

"The prosecution brought its witnesses up in triumphal array one after another. There were the members of the Harewood Club — who had seen the prisoner's excited condition after his heavy gambling losses to Mr. Aaron Cohen; there was Mr. Hatherell, who, in spite of his friendship for Ashley, was bound to admit that he had parted from him at the corner of Bond Street at twenty minutes to two, and had not seen him again till his return home at five a.m.

"Then came the evidence of Arthur Chipps, John Ashley's valet. It proved of a very sensational character.

"He deposed that on the night in question his master came home at about ten minutes to two. Chipps had then not yet gone to bed. Five minutes later Mr. Ashley went out again, telling the valet not to sit up for him. Chipps could not say at what time either of the young gentlemen had come home.

"That short visit home — presumably to fetch the revolver — was thought to be very important, and Mr. John Ashley's friends felt that his case was practically hopeless.

"The valet's evidence and that of James Funnell, the constable, who had overheard the conversation near the park railings, were certainly the two most damning proofs against the accused. I assure you I was having a rare old time that day. There were two faces in court to watch which was the greatest treat I had had for many a day. One of these was Mr. John Ashley's.

"Here's his photo — short, dark, dapper, a little 'racy' in style, but otherwise he looks a son of a well-to-do farmer. He was very quiet and placid in court, and addressed a few words now and again to his solicitor. He listened gravely, and with an occasional shrug of the shoulders, to the recital of the crime, such as the police had reconstructed it, before an excited and horrified audience.

"Mr. John Ashley, driven to madness and frenzy by terrible financial difficulties, had first of all gone home in search of a weapon, then waylaid Mr. Aaron Cohen somewhere on that gentleman's way home. The young man had begged for delay. Mr. Cohen perhaps was obdurate; but Ashley followed him with his importunities almost to his door.

"There, seeing his creditor determined at last to cut short the painful interview, he had seized the unfortunate man at an unguarded moment from behind, and strangled him; then, fearing that his dastardly work was not fully accomplished, he had shot twice at the already dead body, missing it both times from sheer nervous excitement. The murderer then must have emptied his victim's pockets, and, finding the key of the garden, thought that it would be a safe way of evading capture by cutting across the squares, under the tunnel, and so through the more distant gate which faced Portland Place.

"The loss of the revolver was one of those unforeseen accidents which a retributive Providence places in the path of the miscreant, delivering him by his own act of folly into the hands of human justice.

"Mr. John Ashley, however, did not appear the least bit impressed by the recital of his crime. He had not engaged the services of one of the most eminent lawyers, expert at extracting contradictions from witnesses by skilful cross-examinations — oh, dear me, no! he had been contented with those of a dull, prosy, very second-rate limb of the law, who, as he called his witnesses, was completely innocent of any desire to create a sensation.

"He rose quietly from his seat, and, amidst breathless silence, called the first of three witnesses on behalf of his client. He called three — but he could have produced twelve — gentlemen, members of the Ashton Club in Great Portland Street, all of whom swore that at three o'clock on the morning of February 6th, that is to say, at the very moment when the cries of 'Murder' roused the inhabitants of Park Square West, and the crime was being committed, Mr. John Ashley was sitting quietly in the club-rooms of the Ashton playing bridge with the three witnesses. He had come in a few minutes before three — as the hall porter of the Club testified — and stayed for about an hour and a half.

"I need not tell you that this undoubted, this fully proved, *alibi* was a positive bombshell in the stronghold of the prosecution. The most accomplished criminal could not possibly be in two places at once, and though the Ashton Club transgresses in many ways

against the gambling laws of our very moral country, yet its members belong to the best, most unimpeachable classes of society. Mr. Ashley had been seen and spoken to at the very moment of the crime by at least a dozen gentlemen whose testimony was absolutely above suspicion.

“Mr. John Ashley’s conduct throughout this astonishing phase of the inquiry remained perfectly calm and correct. It was no doubt the consciousness of being able to prove his innocence with such absolute conclusion that had steadied his nerves throughout the proceedings.

“His answers to the magistrate were clear and simple, even on the ticklish subject of the revolver.

““I left the club, sir,” he explained, ‘fully determined to speak with Mr. Cohen alone in order to ask him for a delay in the settlement of my debt to him. You will understand that I should not care to do this in the presence of other gentlemen. I went home for a minute or two — not in order to fetch a revolver, as the police assert, for I always carry a revolver about with me in foggy weather — but in order to see if a very important business letter had come for me in my absence.

““Then I went out again, and met Mr. Aaron Cohen not far from the Harewood Club. I walked the greater part of the way with him, and our conversation was of the most amicable character. We parted at the top of Portland Place, near the gate of the Square, where the policeman saw us. Mr. Cohen then had the intention of cutting across the Square, as being a shorter way to his own house. I thought the Square looked dark and dangerous in the fog, especially as Mr. Cohen was carrying a large sum of money.

““We had a short discussion on the subject, and finally I persuaded him to take my revolver, as I was going home only through very frequented streets, and moreover carried nothing that was worth stealing. After a little demur Mr. Cohen accepted the loan of my revolver, and that is how it came to be found on the actual scene of the crime; finally I parted from Mr. Cohen a very few minutes after I had heard the church clock striking a quarter before three. I was at the Oxford Street end of Great Portland Street at five minutes to three, and it takes at least ten minutes to walk from where I was to the Ashton Club.’

“This explanation was all the more credible, mind you, because the question of the revolver had never been very satisfactorily explained by the prosecution. A man who has effectually strangled his victim would not discharge two shots of his revolver for, apparently, no other purpose than that of rousing the attention of the nearest passer-by. It was far more likely that it was Mr. Cohen who shot — perhaps wildly into the air, when suddenly attacked from behind. Mr. Ashley’s explanation therefore was not only plausible, it was the only possible one.

“You will understand therefore how it was that, after nearly half an hour’s examination, the magistrate, the police, and the public were alike pleased to proclaim that the accused left the court without a stain upon his character.”

FRIENDS

"Yes," interrupted Polly eagerly, since, for once, her acumen had been at least as sharp as his, "but suspicion of that horrible crime only shifted its taint from one friend to another, and, of course, I know—"

"But that's just it," he quietly interrupted, "you don't know — Mr. Walter Hatherell, of course, you mean. So did every one else at once. The friend, weak and willing, committing a crime on behalf of his cowardly, yet more assertive friend who had tempted him to evil. It was a good theory; and was held pretty generally, I fancy, even by the police.

"I say 'even' because they worked really hard in order to build up a case against young Hatherell, but the great difficulty was that of time. At the hour when the policeman had seen the two men outside Park Square together, Walter Hatherell was still sitting in the Harewood Club, which he never left until twenty minutes to two. Had he wished to waylay and rob Aaron Cohen he would not have waited surely till the time when presumably the latter would already have reached home.

"Moreover, twenty minutes was an incredibly short time in which to walk from Hanover Square to Regent's Park without the chance of cutting across the squares, to look for a man, whose whereabouts you could not determine to within twenty yards or so, to have an argument with him, murder him, and ransack his pockets. And then there was the total absence of motive."

"But—" said Polly meditatively, for she remembered now that the Regent's Park murder, as it had been popularly called, was one of those which had remained as impenetrable a mystery as any other crime had ever been in the annals of the police.

The man in the corner cocked his funny birdlike head well on one side and looked at her, highly amused evidently at her perplexity.

"You do not see how that murder was committed?" he asked with a grin.

Polly was bound to admit that she did not.

"If you had happened to have been in Mr. John Ashley's predicament," he persisted, "you do not see how you could conveniently have done away with Mr. Aaron Cohen, pocketed his winnings, and then led the police of your country entirely by the nose, by proving an indisputable *alibi*?"

"I could not arrange conveniently," she retorted, "to be in two different places half a mile apart at one and the same time."

"No! I quite admit that you could not do this unless you also had a friend—"

"A friend? But you say—"

"I say that I admired Mr. John Ashley, for his was the head which planned the whole thing, but he could not have accomplished the fascinating and terrible drama without the help of willing and able hands."

"Even then—" she protested.

"Point number one," he began excitedly, fidgeting with his inevitable piece of string. "John Ashley and his friend Walter Hatherell leave the club together, and together decide on the plan of campaign. Hatherell returns to the club, and Ashley goes to fetch the revolver — the revolver which played such an important part in the drama, but not the part assigned to it by the police. Now try to follow Ashley closely, as he dogs Aaron Cohen's footsteps. Do you believe that he entered into conversation with him? That he walked by his side? That he asked for delay? No! He sneaked behind him and caught him by the throat, as the garroters used to do in the fog. Cohen was apoplectic, and Ashley is young and powerful. Moreover, he meant to kill—"

"But the two men talked together outside the Square gates," protested Polly, "one of whom was Cohen, and the other Ashley."

"Pardon me," he said, jumping up in his seat like a monkey on a stick, "there were not two men talking outside the Square gates. According to the testimony of James Funnell, the constable, two men were leaning arm in arm against the railings and *one* man was talking."

"Then you think that—"

"At the hour when James Funnell heard Holy Trinity clock striking half-past two Aaron Cohen was already dead. Look how simple the whole thing is," he added eagerly, "and how easy after that — easy, but oh, dear me! how wonderfully, how stupendously clever. As soon as James Funnell has passed on, John Ashley, having opened the gate, lifts the body of Aaron Cohen in his arms and carries him across the Square. The Square is deserted, of course, but the way is easy enough, and we must presume that Ashley had been in it before. Anyway, there was no fear of meeting any one.

"In the meantime Hatherell has left the club: as fast as his athletic legs can carry him he rushes along Oxford Street and Portland Place. It had been arranged between the two miscreants that the Square gate should be left on the latch.

"Close on Ashley's heels now, Hatherell too cuts across the Square, and reaches the further gate in good time to give his confederate a hand in disposing the body against the railings. Then, without another instant's delay, Ashley runs back across the gardens, straight to the Ashton Club, throwing away the keys of the dead man, on the very spot where he had made it a point of being seen and heard by a passer-by.

"Hatherell gives his friend six or seven minutes' start, then he begins the altercation which lasts two or three minutes, and finally rouses the neighbourhood with cries of 'Murder' and report of pistol in order to establish that the crime was committed at the hour when its perpetrator has already made out an indisputable *alibi*."

"I don't know what you think of it all, of course," added the funny creature as he fumbled for his coat and his gloves, "but I call the planning of that murder — on the part of novices, mind you — one of the cleverest pieces of strategy I have ever come across. It is one of those cases where there is no possibility whatever now of bringing the crime home to its perpetrator or his abettor. They have not left a single proof behind them; they foresaw everything, and each acted his part with a coolness and courage which, applied to a great and good cause, would have made fine statesmen of them both.

"As it is, I fear, they are just a pair of young blackguards, who have escaped human justice, and have only deserved the full and ungrudging admiration of yours very sincerely."

He had gone. Polly wanted to call him back, but his meagre person was no longer visible through the glass door. There were many things she would have wished to ask of him — what were his proofs, his facts? His were theories, after all, and yet, somehow, she felt that he had solved once again one of the darkest mysteries of great criminal London.

THE DE GENNEVILLE PEERAGE

The man in the corner rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and looked out upon the busy street below.

"I suppose," he said, "there is some truth in the saying that Providence watches over bankrupts, kittens, and lawyers."

"I didn't know there was such a saying," replied Polly, with guarded dignity.

"Isn't there? Perhaps I am misquoting; anyway, there should be. Kittens, it seems, live and thrive through social and domestic upheavals which would annihilate a self-supporting tom-cat, and to-day I read in the morning papers the account of a noble lord's bankruptcy, and in the society ones that of his visit at the house of a Cabinet minister, where he is the most honoured guest. As for lawyers, when Providence had exhausted all other means of securing their welfare, it brought forth the peerage cases."

"I believe, as a matter of fact, that this special dispensation of Providence, as you call it, requires more technical knowledge than any other legal complication that comes before the law courts," she said.

"And also a great deal more money in the client's pocket than any other complication. Now, take the Brockelsby peerage case. Have you any idea how much money was spent over that soap bubble, which only burst after many hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds went in lawyers' and counsels' fees?"

"I suppose a great deal of money was spent on both sides," she replied, "until that sudden, awful issue—"

"Which settled the dispute effectually," he interrupted with a dry chuckle. "Of course, it is very doubtful if any reputable solicitor would have taken up the case. Timothy Beddingfield, the Birmingham lawyer, is a gentleman who — well — has had some misfortunes, shall we say? He is still on the rolls, mind you, but I doubt if any case would have its chances improved by his conducting it. Against that there is just this to be said, that some of these old peerages have such peculiar histories, and own such wonderful archives, that a claim is always worth investigating — you never know what may be the rights of it.

"I believe that, at first, every one laughed over the pretensions of the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville to the joint title and part revenues of the old barony of Genneville, but, obviously, he *might* have got his case. It certainly sounded almost like a fairy-tale, this claim based upon the supposed validity of an ancient document over 400 years old. It was *then* that a mediaeval Lord de Genneville, more endowed with muscle than common sense, became during his turbulent existence much embarrassed and hopelessly puzzled through the presentation made to him by his lady of twin-born sons.

"His embarrassment chiefly arose from the fact that my lady's attendants, while ministering to the comfort of the mother, had, in a moment of absent-mindedness, so placed the two infants in their cot that subsequently no one, not even — perhaps least of all — the mother, could tell which was the one who had been the first to make his appearance into this troublesome and puzzling world.

"After many years of cogitation, during which the Lord de Genneville approached nearer to the grave and his sons to man's estate, he gave up trying to solve the riddle as to which of the twins should succeed to his title and revenues; he appealed to his Liege Lord and King — Edward, fourth of that name — and with the latter's august sanction he drew up a certain document, wherein he enacted that both his sons should, after his death, share his titles and goodly revenues, and that the first son born in wedlock of *either* father should subsequently be the sole heir.

"In this document was also added that if in future times should any Lords de Genneville be similarly afflicted with twin sons, who had equal rights to be considered the eldest born, the same rule should apply as to the succession.

"Subsequently a Lord de Genneville was created Earl of Brockelsby by one of the Stuart kings, but for four hundred years after its enactment the extraordinary deed of succession remained a mere tradition, the Countesses of Brockelsby having, seemingly, no predilection for twins. But in 1878 the mistress of Brockelsby Castle presented her lord with twin-born sons.

"Fortunately, in modern times, science is more wide-awake, and attendants more careful. The twin brothers did not get mixed up, and one of them was styled Viscount Tirlemont, and was heir to the earldom, whilst the other, born two hours later, was that fascinating, dashing young Guardsman, well known at Hurlingham, Goodwood, London, and in his own county — the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville.

"It certainly was an evil day for this brilliant young scion of the ancient race when he lent an ear to Timothy Beddingfield. This man, and his family before him, had been solicitors to the Earls of Brockelsby for many generations, but Timothy, owing to certain 'irregularities,' had forfeited the confidence of his client, the late earl.

"He was still in practice in Birmingham, however, and, of course, knew the ancient family tradition anent the twin succession. Whether he was prompted by revenge or merely self-advertisement no one knows.

"Certain it is that he did advise the Hon. Robert de Genneville — who apparently had more debts than he conveniently could pay, and more extravagant tastes than he could gratify on a younger son's portion — to lay a claim, on his father's death, to the joint title and a moiety of the revenues of the ancient barony of Genneville, that claim being based upon the validity of the fifteenth-century document.

"You may gather how extensive were the pretensions of the Hon. Robert from the fact that the greater part of Edgbaston is now built upon land belonging to the old barony. Anyway, it was the last straw in an ocean of debt and difficulties, and I have no doubt that Beddingfield had not much trouble in persuading the Hon. Robert to commence litigation at once.

"The young Earl of Brockelsby's attitude, however, remained one of absolute quietude in his nine points of the law. He was in possession both of the title and of the document. It was for the other side to force him to produce the one or to share the other.

"It was at this stage of the proceedings that the Hon. Robert was advised to marry, in order to secure, if possible, the first male heir of the next generation, since the young earl himself was still a bachelor. A suitable *fiancée* was found for him by his friends in the person of Miss Mabel Brandon, the daughter of a rich Birmingham manufacturer, and the marriage was fixed to take place at Birmingham on Thursday, September 15th, 1907.

"On the 13th the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville arrived at the Castle Hotel in New Street for his wedding, and on the 14th, at eight o'clock in the morning, he was discovered lying on the floor of his bedroom — murdered.

“The sensation which the awful and unexpected sequel to the De Genneville peerage case caused in the minds of the friends of both litigants was quite unparalleled. I don’t think any crime of modern times created quite so much stir in all classes of society. Birmingham was wild with excitement, and the employés of the Castle Hotel had real difficulty in keeping off the eager and inquisitive crowd who thronged daily to the hall, vainly hoping to gather details of news relating to the terrible tragedy.

“At present there was but little to tell. The shrieks of the chambermaid, who had gone into the Hon. Robert’s room with his shaving water at eight o’clock, had attracted some of the waiters. Soon the manager and his secretary came up, and immediately sent for the police.

“It seemed at first sight as if the young man had been the victim of a homicidal maniac, so brutal had been the way in which he had been assassinated. The head and body were battered and bruised by some heavy stick or poker, almost past human shape, as if the murderer had wished to wreak some awful vengeance upon the body of his victim. In fact, it would be impossible to recount the gruesome aspect of that room and of the murdered man’s body such as the police and the medical officer took note of that day.

“It was supposed that the murder had been committed the evening before, as the victim was dressed in his evening clothes, and all the lights in the room had been left fully turned on. Robbery, also, must have had a large share in the miscreant’s motives, for the drawers and cupboards, the portmanteau and dressing-bag had been ransacked as if in search of valuables. On the floor there lay a pocket-book torn in half and only containing a few letters addressed to the Hon. Robert de Genneville.

“The Earl of Brockelsby, next-of-kin to the deceased, was also telegraphed for. He drove over from Brockelsby Castle, which is about seven miles from Birmingham. He was terribly affected by the awfulness of the tragedy, and offered a liberal reward to stimulate the activity of the police in search of the miscreant.

“The inquest was fixed for the 17th, three days later, and the public was left wondering where the solution lay of the terrible and gruesome murder at the Castle Hotel.”

A HIGH-BRED GENTLEMAN

"The central figure in the coroner's court that day was undoubtedly the Earl of Brockelsby in deep black, which contrasted strongly with his florid complexion and fair hair. Sir Marmaduke Ingersoll, his solicitor, was with him, and he had already performed the painful duty of identifying the deceased as his brother. This had been an exceedingly painful duty owing to the terribly mutilated state of the body and face; but the clothes and various trinkets he wore, including a signet ring, had fortunately not tempted the brutal assassin, and it was through them chiefly that Lord Brockelsby was able to swear to the identity of his brother.

"The various employes at the hotel gave evidence as to the discovery of the body, and the medical officer gave his opinion as to the immediate cause of death. Deceased had evidently been struck at the back of the head with a poker or heavy stick, the murderer then venting his blind fury upon the body by battering in the face and bruising it in a way that certainly suggested the work of a maniac.

"Then the Earl of Brockelsby was called, and was requested by the coroner to state when he had last seen his brother alive.

"The morning before his death,' replied his lordship, 'he came up to Birmingham by an early train, and I drove up from Brockelsby to see him. I got to the hotel at eleven o'clock and stayed with him for about an hour.'

"And that is the last you saw of the deceased?"

"That is the last I saw of him,' replied Lord Brockelsby.

"He seemed to hesitate for a moment or two as if in thought whether he should speak or not, and then to suddenly make up his mind to speak, for he added: 'I stayed in town the whole of that day, and only drove back to Brockelsby late in the evening. I had some business to transact, and put up at the Grand, as I usually do, and dined with some friends.'

"Would you tell us at what time you returned to Brockelsby Castle?"

"I think it must have been about eleven o'clock. It is a seven-mile drive from here.'

"I believe,' said the coroner after a slight pause, during which the attention of all the spectators was riveted upon the handsome figure of the young man as he stood in the witness-box, the very personification of a high-bred gentleman, 'I believe that I am right in stating that there was an unfortunate legal dispute between your lordship and your brother?'

"That is so.'

"The coroner stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he added:

"In the event of the deceased's claim to the joint title and revenues of De Genneville being held good in the courts of law, there would be a great importance, would there not, attached to his marriage, which was to have taken place on the 15th?"

"In that event, there certainly would be.'

"Is the jury to understand, then, that you and the deceased parted on amicable terms after your interview with him in the morning?"

"The Earl of Brockelsby hesitated again for a minute or two, while the crowd and the jury hung breathless on his lips.

"There was no enmity between us,' he replied at last.

"From which we may gather that there may have been — shall I say — a slight disagreement at that interview?"

"My brother had unfortunately been misled by the misrepresentations or perhaps the too optimistic views of his lawyer. He had been dragged into litigation on the strength of an old family document which he had never seen, which, moreover, is antiquated, and, owing to certain wording in it, invalid. I thought that it would be kinder and more considerate if I were to let my brother judge of the document for himself. I knew that when he had seen it he would be convinced of the absolutely futile basis of his claim, and that it would be a terrible disappointment to him. That is the reason why I wished to see him myself about it, rather than to do it through the more formal — perhaps more correct — medium of our respective lawyers. I placed the facts before him with, on my part, a perfectly amicable spirit.'

"The young Earl of Brockelsby had made this somewhat lengthy, perfectly voluntary explanation of the state of affairs in a calm, quiet voice, with much dignity and perfect simplicity, but the coroner did not seem impressed by it, for he asked very drily:

"Did you part good friends?"

"On my side absolutely so.'

"But not on his?" insisted the coroner.

"I think he felt naturally annoyed that he had been so ill-advised by his solicitors.'

"And you made no attempt later on in the day to adjust any ill-feeling that may have existed between you and him?" asked the coroner, marking with strange, earnest emphasis every word he uttered.

"If you mean did I go and see my brother again that day — no, I did not.'

"And your lordship can give us no further information which might throw some light upon the mystery which surrounds the Hon. Robert de Genneville's death?" still persisted the coroner.

"I am sorry to say I cannot,' replied the Earl of Brockelsby with firm decision.

"The coroner still looked puzzled and thoughtful. It seemed at first as if he wished to press his point further; every one felt that some deep import had lain behind his examination of the witness, and all were on tenter-hooks as to what the next evidence might bring forth. The Earl of Brockelsby had waited a minute or two, then, at a sign from the coroner, had left the witness-box in order to have a talk with his solicitor.

"At first he paid no attention to the depositions of the cashier and hall porter of the Castle Hotel, but gradually it seemed to strike him that curious statements were being made by these witnesses, and a frown of anxious wonder settled between his brows, whilst his young face lost some of its florid hue.

"Mr. Tremlett, the cashier at the hotel, had been holding the attention of the court. He stated that the Hon. Robert Ingram de Genneville had arrived at the hotel at eight o'clock on the morning of the 13th; he had the room which he usually occupied when he came to the 'Castle,' namely, No. 21, and he went up to it immediately on his arrival, ordering some breakfast to be brought up to him.

"At eleven o'clock the Earl of Brockelsby called to see his brother and remained with him until about twelve. In the afternoon the deceased went out, and returned for his dinner at seven o'clock in company with a gentleman whom the cashier knew well by sight,

Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, of Paradise Street. The gentlemen had their dinner downstairs, and after that they went up to the Hon. Mr. de Genneville's room for coffee and cigars.

"I could not say at what time Mr. Beddingfield left," continued the cashier, "but I rather fancy I saw him in the hall at about 9.15 p.m. He was wearing an Inverness cape over his dress clothes and a Glengarry cap. It was just at the hour when the visitors who had come down for the night from London were arriving thick and fast; the hall was very full, and there was a large party of Americans monopolising most of our *personnel*, so I could not swear positively whether I did see Mr. Beddingfield or not then, though I am quite sure that it was Mr. Timothy Beddingfield who dined and spent the evening with the Hon. Mr. de Genneville, as I know him quite well by sight. At ten o'clock I am off duty, and the night porter remains alone in the hall."

"Mr. Tremlett's evidence was corroborated in most respects by a waiter and by the hall porter. They had both seen the deceased come in at seven o'clock in company with a gentleman, and their description of the latter coincided with that of the appearance of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, whom, however, they did not actually know.

"At this point of the proceedings the foreman of the jury wished to know why Mr. Timothy Beddingfield's evidence had not been obtained, and was informed by the detective-inspector in charge of the case that that gentleman had seemingly left Birmingham, but was expected home shortly. The coroner suggested an adjournment pending Mr. Beddingfield's appearance, but at the earnest request of the detective he consented to hear the evidence of Peter Tyrrell, the night porter at the Castle Hotel, who, if you remember the case at all, succeeded in creating the biggest sensation of any which had been made through this extraordinary and weirdly gruesome case.

"It was the first time I had been on duty at 'The Castle,'" he said, "for I used to be night porter at 'Bright's,'" in Wolverhampton, but just after I had come on duty at ten o'clock a gentleman came and asked if he could see the Hon. Robert de Genneville. I said that I thought he was in, but would send up and see. The gentleman said: "It doesn't matter. Don't trouble; I know his room. Twenty-one, isn't it?" And up he went before I could say another word."

"Did he give you any name?" asked the coroner.

"No, sir."

"What was he like?"

"A young gentleman, sir, as far as I can remember, in an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap, but I could not see his face very well as he stood with his back to the light, and the cap shaded his eyes, and he only spoke to me for a minute."

"Look all round you," said the coroner quietly. "Is there any one in this court at all like the gentleman you speak of?"

"An awed hush fell over the many spectators there present as Peter Tyrrell, the night porter of the Castle Hotel, turned his head towards the body of the court and slowly scanned the many faces there present; for a moment he seemed to hesitate — only for a moment though, then, as if vaguely conscious of the terrible importance his next words might have, he shook his head gravely and said:

"I wouldn't like to swear."

"The coroner tried to press him, but with true British stolidity he repeated: 'I wouldn't like to say.'"

"Well, then, what happened?" asked the coroner, who had perforce to abandon his point.

"The gentleman went upstairs, sir, and about a quarter of an hour later he came down again, and I let him out. He was in a great hurry then, he threw me a half-crown and said: "Good night.""

"And though you saw him again then, you cannot tell us if you would know him again?"

"Once more the hall porter's eyes wandered as if instinctively to a certain face in the court; once more he hesitated for many seconds which seemed like so many hours, during which a man's honour, a man's life, hung perhaps in the balance.

"Then Peter Tyrrell repeated slowly: 'I wouldn't swear.'"

"But coroner and jury alike, aye, and every spectator in that crowded court, had seen that the man's eyes had rested during that one moment of hesitation upon the face of the Earl of Brockelsby."

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

The man in the corner blinked across at Polly with his funny mild blue eyes.

"No wonder you are puzzled," he continued, "so was everybody in the court that day, every one save myself. I alone could see in my mind's eye that gruesome murder such as it had been committed, with all its details, and, above all, its motive, and such as you will see it presently, when I place it all clearly before you.

"But before you see daylight in this strange case, I must plunge you into further darkness, in the same manner as the coroner and jury were plunged on the following day, the second day of that remarkable inquest. It had to be adjourned, since the appearance of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield had now become of vital importance. The public had come to regard his absence from Birmingham at this critical moment as decidedly remarkable, to say the least of it, and all those who did not know the lawyer by sight wished to see him in his Inverness cape and Glengarry cap such as he had appeared before the several witnesses on the night of the awful murder.

"When the coroner and jury were seated, the first piece of information which the police placed before them was the astounding statement that Mr. Timothy Beddingfield's whereabouts had not been ascertained, though it was confidently expected that he had not gone far and could easily be traced. There was a witness present who, the police thought, might throw some light as to the lawyer's probable destination, for obviously he had left Birmingham directly after his interview with the deceased.

"This witness was Mrs. Higgins, who was Mr. Beddingfield's housekeeper. She stated that her master was in the constant habit — especially latterly — of going up to London on business. He usually left by a late evening train on those occasions, and mostly was only absent thirty-six hours. He kept a portmanteau always ready packed for the purpose, for he often left at a few moments' notice. Mrs. Higgins added that her master stayed at the Great Western Hotel in London, for it was there that she was instructed to wire if anything urgent required his presence back in Birmingham.

"On the night of the 14th," she continued, "at nine o'clock or thereabouts, a messenger came to the door with the master's card, and said that he was instructed to fetch Mr. Beddingfield's portmanteau, and then to meet him at the station in time to catch the 9.35 p.m. up train. I gave him the portmanteau, of course, as he had brought the card, and I had no idea there could be anything wrong; but since then I have heard nothing of my master, and I don't know when he will return."

"Questioned by the coroner, she added that Mr. Beddingfield had never stayed away quite so long without having his letters forwarded to him. There was a large pile waiting for him now; she had written to the Great Western Hotel, London, asking what she should do about the letters, but had received no reply. She did not know the messenger by sight who had called for the portmanteau. Once or twice before Mr. Beddingfield had sent for his things in that manner when he had been dining out.

"Mr. Beddingfield certainly wore his Inverness cape over his dress clothes when he went out at about six o'clock in the afternoon. He also wore a Glengarry cap.

"The messenger had so far not yet been found, and from this point — namely, the sending for the portmanteau — all traces of Mr. Timothy Beddingfield seem to have been lost. Whether he went up to London by that 9.35 train or not could not be definitely ascertained. The police had questioned at least a dozen porters at the railway, as well as ticket collectors; but no one had any special recollection of a gentleman in an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap, a costume worn by more than one first-class passenger on a cold night in September.

"There was the hitch, you see; it all lay in this. Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, had undoubtedly made himself scarce. He was last seen in company with the deceased, and wearing an Inverness cape and Glengarry cap; two or three witnesses saw him leaving the hotel at about 9.15. Then the messenger calls at the lawyer's house for the portmanteau, after which Mr. Timothy Beddingfield seems to vanish into thin air; but — and that is a great 'but' — the night porter at the 'Castle' seems to have seen some one wearing the momentous Inverness and Glengarry half an hour or so later on, and going up to deceased's room, where he stayed about a quarter of an hour.

"Undoubtedly you will say, as every one said to themselves that day after the night porter and Mrs. Higgins had been heard, that there was a very ugly and very black finger which pointed unpleasantly at Mr. Timothy Beddingfield, especially as that gentleman, for some reason which still required an explanation, was not there to put matters right for himself. But there was just one little thing — a mere trifle, perhaps — which neither the coroner nor the jury dared to overlook, though, strictly speaking, it was not evidence.

"You will remember that when the night porter was asked if he could, among the persons present in court, recognize the Hon. Robert de Genneville's belated visitor, every one had noticed his hesitation, and marked that the man's eyes had rested doubtfully upon the face and figure of the young Earl of Brockelsby.

"Now, if that belated visitor had been Mr. Timothy Beddingfield — tall, lean, dry as dust, with a bird-like beak and clean-shaven chin — no one could for a moment have mistaken his face — even if they only saw it very casually and recollected it but very dimly — with that of young Lord Brockelsby, who was florid and rather short — the only point in common between them was their Saxon hair.

"You see that it was a curious point, don't you?" added the man in the corner, who now had become so excited that his fingers worked like long thin tentacles round and round his bit of string. "It weighed very heavily in favour of Timothy Beddingfield. Added to which you must also remember that, as far as he was concerned, the Hon. Robert de Genneville was to him the goose with the golden eggs.

"The 'De Genneville peerage case' had brought Beddingfield's name in great prominence. With the death of the claimant all hopes of prolonging the litigation came to an end. There was a total lack of motive as far as Beddingfield was concerned."

"Not so with the Earl of Brockelsby," said Polly, "and I've often maintained—"

"What?" he interrupted. "That the Earl of Brockelsby changed clothes with Beddingfield in order more conveniently to murder his own brother? Where and when could the exchange of costume have been effected, considering that the Inverness cape and Glengarry cap were in the hall of the Castle Hotel at 9.15, and at that hour and until ten o'clock Lord Brockelsby was at the Grand Hotel finishing

dinner with some friends? That was subsequently proved, remember, and also that he was back at Brockelsby Castle, which is seven miles from Birmingham, at eleven o'clock sharp. Now, the visit of the individual in the Glengarry occurred some time after 10 p.m."

"Then there was the disappearance of Beddingfield," said the girl musingly. "That certainly points very strongly to him. He was a man in good practice, I believe, and fairly well known."

"And has never been heard of from that day to this," concluded the old scarecrow with a chuckle. "No wonder you are puzzled. The police were quite baffled, and still are, for a matter of that. And yet see how simple it is! Only the police would not look further than these two men — Lord Brockelsby with a strong motive and the night porter's hesitation against him, and Beddingfield without a motive, but with strong circumstantial evidence and his own disappearance as condemnatory signs."

"If only they would look at the case as I did, and think a little about the dead as well as about the living. If they had remembered that peerage case, the Hon. Robert's debts, his last straw which proved a futile claim."

"Only that very day the Earl of Brockelsby had, by quietly showing the original ancient document to his brother, persuaded him how futile were all his hopes. Who knows how many were the debts contracted, the promises made, the money borrowed and obtained on the strength of that claim which was mere romance? Ahead nothing but ruin, enmity with his brother, his marriage probably broken off, a wasted life, in fact."

"Is it small wonder that, though ill-feeling against the Earl of Brockelsby may have been deep, there was hatred, bitter, deadly hatred against the man who with false promises had led him into so hopeless a quagmire? Probably the Hon. Robert owed a great deal of money to Beddingfield, which the latter hoped to recoup at usurious interest, with threats of scandal and what not."

"Think of all that," he added, "and then tell me if you believe that a stronger motive for the murder of such an enemy could well be found."

"But what you suggest is impossible," said Polly, aghast.

"Allow me," he said, "it is more than possible — it is very easy and simple. The two men were alone together in the Hon. Robert de Genneville's room after dinner. You, as representing the public, and the police say that Beddingfield went away and returned half an hour later in order to kill his client. I say that it was the lawyer who was murdered at nine o'clock that evening, and that Robert de Genneville, the ruined man, the hopeless bankrupt, was the assassin."

"Then—"

"Yes, of course, now you remember, for I have put you on the track. The face and the body were so battered and bruised that they were past recognition. Both men were of equal height. The hair, which alone could not be disfigured or obliterated, was in both men similar in colour."

"Then the murderer proceeds to dress his victim in his own clothes. With the utmost care he places his own rings on the fingers of the dead man, his own watch in the pocket; a gruesome task, but an important one, and it is thoroughly well done. Then he himself puts on the clothes of his victim, with finally the Inverness cape and Glengarry, and when the hall is full of visitors he slips out unperceived. He sends the messenger for Beddingfield's portmanteau and starts off by the night express."

"But then his visit at the Castle Hotel at ten o'clock—" she urged. "How dangerous!"

"Dangerous? Yes! but oh, how clever. You see, he was the Earl of Brockelsby's twin brother, and twin brothers are always somewhat alike. He wished to appear dead, murdered by some one, he cared not whom, but what he did care about was to throw clouds of dust in the eyes of the police, and he succeeded with a vengeance. Perhaps — who knows? — he wished to assure himself that he had forgotten nothing in the *mise en scène*, that the body, battered and bruised past all semblance of any human shape save for its clothes, really would appear to every one as that of the Hon. Robert de Genneville, while the latter disappeared for ever from the old world and started life again in the new."

"Then you must always reckon with the practically invariable rule that a murderer always revisits, if only once, the scene of his crime."

"Two years have elapsed since the crime; no trace of Timothy Beddingfield, the lawyer, has ever been found, and I can assure you that it will never be, for his plebeian body lies buried in the aristocratic family vault of the Earl of Brockelsby."

He was gone before Polly could say another word. The faces of Timothy Beddingfield, of the Earl of Brockelsby, of the Hon. Robert de Genneville seemed to dance before her eyes and to mock her for the hopeless bewilderment in which she found herself plunged because of them; then all the faces vanished, or, rather, were merged in one long, thin, bird-like one, with bone-rimmed spectacles on the top of its beak, and a wide, rude grin beneath it, and, still puzzled, still doubtful, the young girl too paid for her scanty luncheon and went her way.

THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH IN PERCY STREET

Miss Polly Burton had had many an argument with Mr. Richard Frobisher about that old man in the corner, who seemed far more interesting and deucedly more mysterious than any of the crimes over which he philosophised.

Dick thought, moreover, that Miss Polly spent more of her leisure time now in that A.B.C. shop than she had done in his own company before, and told her so, with that delightful air of sheepish sulkiness which the male creature invariably wears when he feels jealous and won't admit it.

Polly liked Dick to be jealous, but she liked that old scarecrow in the A.B.C. shop very much too, and though she made sundry vague promises from time to time to Mr. Richard Frobisher, she nevertheless drifted back instinctively day after day to the tea-shop in Norfolk Street, Strand, and stayed there sipping coffee for as long as the man in the corner chose to talk.

On this particular afternoon she went to the A.B.C. shop with a fixed purpose, that of making him give her his views of Mrs. Owen's mysterious death in Percy Street.

The facts had interested and puzzled her. She had had countless arguments with Mr. Richard Frobisher as to the three great possible solutions of the puzzle— "Accident, Suicide, Murder?"

"Undoubtedly neither accident nor suicide," he said dryly.

Polly was not aware that she had spoken. What an uncanny habit that creature had of reading her thoughts!

"You incline to the idea, then, that Mrs. Owen was murdered. Do you know by whom?"

He laughed, and drew forth the piece of string he always fidgeted with when unravelling some mystery.

"You would like to know who murdered that old woman?" he asked at last.

"I would like to hear your views on the subject," Polly replied.

"I have no views," he said dryly. "No one can know who murdered the woman, since no one ever saw the person who did it. No one can give the faintest description of the mysterious man who alone could have committed that clever deed, and the police are playing a game of blind man's buff."

"But you must have formed some theory of your own," she persisted.

It annoyed her that the funny creature was obstinate about this point, and she tried to nettle his vanity.

"I suppose that as a matter of fact your original remark that 'there are no such things as mysteries' does not apply universally. There is a mystery — that of the death in Percy Street, and you, like the police, are unable to fathom it."

He pulled up his eyebrows and looked at her for a minute or two. "Confess that that murder was one of the cleverest bits of work accomplished outside Russian diplomacy," he said with a nervous laugh. "I must say that were I the judge, called upon to pronounce sentence of death on the man who conceived that murder, I could not bring myself to do it. I would politely request the gentleman to enter our Foreign Office — we have need of such men. The whole *mise en scène* was truly artistic, worthy of its *milieu* — the Rubens Studios in Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road. Have you ever noticed them? They are only studios by name, and are merely a set of rooms in a corner house, with the windows slightly enlarged, and the rents charged accordingly in consideration of that additional five inches of smoky daylight, filtering through dusty windows. On the ground floor there is the order office of some stained glass works, with a workshop in the rear, and on the first floor landing a small room allotted to the caretaker, with gas, coal, and fifteen shillings a week, for which princely income she is deputed to keep tidy and clean the general aspect of the house. Mrs. Owen, who was the caretaker there, was a quiet, respectable woman, who eked out her scanty wages by sundry — mostly very meagre — tips doled out to her by impecunious artists in exchange for promiscuous domestic services in and about the respective studios. But if Mrs. Owen's earnings were not large, they were very regular, and she had no fastidious tastes. She and her cockatoo lived on her wages; and all the tips added up, and never spent, year after year, went to swell a very comfortable little account at interest in the Birkbeck Bank. This little account had mounted up to a very tidy sum, and the thrifty widow — or old maid — no one ever knew which she was — was generally referred to by the young artists of the Rubens Studios as a 'lady of means.' But this is a digression. No one slept on the premises except Mrs. Owen and her cockatoo. The rule was that one by one as the tenants left their rooms in the evening they took their respective keys to the caretaker's room. She would then, in the early morning, tidy and dust the studios and the office downstairs, lay the fire and carry up coals. The foreman of the glass works was the first to arrive in the morning. He had a latchkey, and let himself in, after which it was the custom of the house that he should leave the street door open for the benefit of the other tenants and their visitors. Usually, when he came at about nine o'clock, he found Mrs. Owen busy about the house doing her work, and he had often a brief chat with her about the weather, but on this particular morning of February 2nd he neither saw nor heard her. However, as the shop had been tidied and the fire laid, he surmised that Mrs. Owen had finished her work earlier than usual, and thought no more about it. One by one the tenants of the studios turned up, and the day sped on without any one's attention being drawn noticeably to the fact that the caretaker had not appeared upon the scene. It had been a bitterly cold night, and the day was even worse; a cutting north-easterly gale was blowing, there had been a great deal of snow during the night which lay quite thick on the ground, and at five o'clock in the afternoon, when the last glimmer of the pale winter daylight had disappeared, the confraternity of the brush put palette and easel aside and prepared to go home. The first to leave was Mr. Charles Pitt; he locked up his studio and, as usual, took his key into the caretaker's room. He had just opened the door when an icy blast literally struck him in the face; both the windows were wide open, and the snow and sleet were beating thickly into the room, forming already a white carpet upon the floor. The room was in semi-obscurity, and at first Mr. Pitt saw nothing, but instinctively realizing that something was wrong, he lit a match, and saw before him the spectacle of that awful and mysterious tragedy which has ever since puzzled both police and public. On the floor, already half covered by the drifting snow, lay the body of Mrs. Owen face downwards, in a nightgown, with feet and ankles bare, and these and her hands were of a deep purple colour; whilst in a corner of the room, huddled up with the cold, the body of the cockatoo lay stark and stiff."

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

"At first there was only talk of a terrible accident, the result of some inexplicable carelessness which perhaps the evidence at the inquest would help to elucidate.

"Medical assistance came too late; the unfortunate woman was indeed dead, frozen to death, inside her own room. Further examination showed that she had received a severe blow at the back of the head, which must have stunned her and caused her to fall, helpless, beside the open window. Temperature at five degrees below zero had done the rest. Detective Inspector Howell discovered close to the window a wrought-iron gas bracket, the height of which corresponded exactly with the bruise at the back of Mrs. Owen's head.

"Hardly however had a couple of days elapsed when public curiosity was whetted by a few startling headlines, such as the halfpenny evening papers alone know how to concoct.

"The mysterious death in Percy Street.' 'Is it Suicide or Murder?' 'Thrilling details — Strange developments.' 'Sensational Arrest.'

"What had happened was simply this:

"At the inquest a few certainly very curious facts connected with Mrs. Owen's life had come to light, and this had led to the apprehension of a young man of very respectable parentage on a charge of being concerned in the tragic death of the unfortunate caretaker.

"To begin with, it happened that her life, which in an ordinary way should have been very monotonous and regular, seemed, at any rate latterly, to have been more than usually chequered and excited. Every witness who had known her in the past concurred in the statement that since October last a great change had come over the worthy and honest woman.

"I happen to have a photo of Mrs. Owen as she was before this great change occurred in her quiet and uneventful life, and which led, as far as the poor soul was concerned, to such disastrous results.

"Here she is to the life," added the funny creature, placing the photo before Polly— "as respectable, as stodgy, as uninteresting as it is well possible for a member of your charming sex to be; not a face, you will admit, to lead any youngster to temptation or to induce him to commit a crime.

"Nevertheless one day all the tenants of the Rubens Studios were surprised and shocked to see Mrs. Owen, quiet, respectable Mrs. Owen, sallying forth at six o'clock in the afternoon, attired in an extravagant bonnet and a cloak trimmed with imitation astrakhan which — slightly open in front — displayed a gold locket and chain of astonishing proportions.

"Many were the comments, the hints, the bits of sarcasm levelled at the worthy woman by the frivolous confraternity of the brush.

"The plot thickened when from that day forth a complete change came over the worthy caretaker of the Rubens Studios. While she appeared day after day before the astonished gaze of the tenants and the scandalized looks of the neighbours, attired in new and extravagant dresses, her work was hopelessly neglected, and she was always 'out' when wanted.

"There was, of course, much talk and comment in various parts of the Rubens Studios on the subject of Mrs. Owen's 'dissipations.' The tenants began to put two and two together, and after a very little while the general consensus of opinion became firmly established that the honest caretaker's demoralisation coincided week for week, almost day for day, with young Greenhill's establishment in No. 8 Studio.

"Every one had remarked that he stayed much later in the evening than any one else, and yet no one presumed that he stayed for purposes of work. Suspicions soon rose to certainty when Mrs. Owen and Arthur Greenhill were seen by one of the glass workmen dining together at Gambia's Restaurant in Tottenham Court Road.

"The workman, who was having a cup of tea at the counter, noticed particularly that when the bill was paid the money came out of Mrs. Owen's purse. The dinner had been sumptuous — veal cutlets, a cut from the joint, dessert, coffee and liqueurs. Finally the pair left the restaurant apparently very gay, young Greenhill smoking a choice cigar.

"Irregularities such as these were bound sooner or later to come to the ears and eyes of Mr. Allman, the landlord of the Rubens Studios; and a month after the New Year, without further warning, he gave her a week's notice to quit his house.

"Mrs. Owen did not seem the least bit upset when I gave her notice," Mr. Allman declared in his evidence at the inquest; 'on the contrary, she told me that she had ample means, and had only worked latterly for the sake of something to do. She added that she had plenty of friends who would look after her, for she had a nice little pile to leave to any one who would know how "to get the right side of her."

"Nevertheless, in spite of this cheerful interview, Miss Bedford, the tenant of No. 6 Studio, had stated that when she took her key to the caretaker's room at 6.30 that afternoon she found Mrs. Owen in tears. The caretaker refused to be comforted, nor would she speak of her trouble to Miss Bedford.

"Twenty-four hours later she was found dead.

"The coroner's jury returned an open verdict, and Detective-Inspector Jones was charged by the police to make some inquiries about young Mr. Greenhill, whose intimacy with the unfortunate woman had been universally commented upon.

"The detective, however, pushed his investigations as far as the Birkbeck Bank. There he discovered that after her interview with Mr. Allman, Mrs. Owen had withdrawn what money she had on deposit, some £800, the result of twenty-five years' saving and thrift.

"But the immediate result of Detective-Inspector Jones's labours was that Mr. Arthur Greenhill, lithographer, was brought before the magistrate at Bow Street on the charge of being concerned in the death of Mrs. Owen, caretaker of the Rubens Studios, Percy Street.

"Now that magisterial inquiry is one of the few interesting ones which I had the misfortune to miss," continued the man in the corner, with a nervous shake of the shoulders. "But you know as well as I do how the attitude of the young prisoner impressed the magistrate and police so unfavourably that, with every new witness brought forward, his position became more and more unfortunate.

"Yet he was a good-looking, rather coarsely built young fellow, with one of those awful Cockney accents which literally make one jump. But he looked painfully nervous, stammered at every word spoken, and repeatedly gave answers entirely at random.

“His father acted as lawyer for him, a rough-looking elderly man, who had the appearance of a common country attorney rather than of a London solicitor.

“The police had built up a fairly strong case against the lithographer. Medical evidence revealed nothing new: Mrs. Owen had died from exposure, the blow at the back of the head not being sufficiently serious to cause anything but temporary disablement. When the medical officer had been called in, death had intervened for some time; it was quite impossible to say how long, whether one hour or five or twelve.

“The appearance and state of the room, when the unfortunate woman was found by Mr. Charles Pitt, were again gone over in minute detail. Mrs. Owen’s clothes, which she had worn during the day, were folded neatly on a chair. The key of her cupboard was in the pocket of her dress. The door had been slightly ajar, but both the windows were wide open; one of them, which had the sash-line broken, had been fastened up most scientifically with a piece of rope.

“Mrs. Owen had obviously undressed preparatory to going to bed, and the magistrate very naturally soon made the remark how untenable the theory of an accident must be. No one in their five senses would undress with a temperature at below zero, and the windows wide open.

“After these preliminary statements the cashier of the Birkbeck was called and he related the caretaker’s visit at the bank.

“‘It was then about one o’clock,’ he stated. ‘Mrs. Owen called and presented a cheque to self for £827, the amount of her balance. She seemed exceedingly happy and cheerful, and talked about needing plenty of cash, as she was going abroad to join her nephew, for whom she would in future keep house. I warned her about being sufficiently careful with so large a sum, and parting from it injudiciously, as women of her class are very apt to do. She laughingly declared that not only was she careful of it in the present, but meant to be so for the far-off future, for she intended to go that very day to a lawyer’s office and to make a will.’

“The cashier’s evidence was certainly startling in the extreme, since in the widow’s room no trace of any kind was found of any money; against that, two of the notes handed over by the bank to Mrs. Owen on that day were cashed by young Greenhill on the very morning of her mysterious death. One was handed in by him to the West End Clothiers Company, in payment for a suit of clothes, and the other he changed at the Post Office in Oxford Street.

“After that all the evidence had of necessity to be gone through again on the subject of young Greenhill’s intimacy with Mrs. Owen. He listened to it all with an air of the most painful nervousness, his cheeks were positively green, his lips seemed dry and parched, for he repeatedly passed his tongue over them, and when Constable E 18 deposed that at 2 a.m. on the morning of February 2nd he had seen the accused and spoken to him at the corner of Percy Street and Tottenham Court Road, young Greenhill all but fainted.

“The contention of the police was that the caretaker had been murdered and robbed during that night before she went to bed, that young Greenhill had done the murder, seeing that he was the only person known to have been intimate with the woman, and that it was, moreover, proved unquestionably that he was in the immediate neighbourhood of the Rubens Studios at an extraordinarily late hour of the night.

“His own account of himself, and of that same night, could certainly not be called very satisfactory. Mrs. Owen was a relative of his late mother’s, he declared. He himself was a lithographer by trade, with a good deal of time and leisure on his hands. He certainly had employed some of that time in taking the old woman to various places of amusement. He had on more than one occasion suggested that she should give up menial work, and come and live with him, but, unfortunately, she was a great deal imposed upon by her nephew, a man of the name of Owen, who exploited the good-natured woman in every possible way, and who had on more than one occasion made severe attacks upon her savings at the Birkbeck Bank.

“Severely cross-examined by the prosecuting counsel about this supposed relative of Mrs. Owen, Greenhill admitted that he did not know him — had, in fact, never seen him. He knew that his name was Owen and that was all. His chief occupation consisted in sponging on the kind-hearted old woman, but he only went to see her in the evenings, when he presumably knew that she would be alone, and invariably after all the tenants of the Rubens Studios had left for the day.

“I don’t know whether at this point it strikes you at all, as it did both magistrate and counsel, that there was a direct contradiction in this statement and the one made by the cashier of the Birkbeck on the subject of his last conversation with Mrs. Owen. ‘I am going abroad to join my nephew, for whom I am going to keep house,’ was what the unfortunate woman had said.

“Now Greenhill, in spite of his nervousness and at times contradictory answers, strictly adhered to his point, that there was a nephew in London, who came frequently to see his aunt.

“Anyway, the sayings of the murdered woman could not be taken as evidence in law. Mr. Greenhill senior put the objection, adding: ‘There may have been two nephews,’ which the magistrate and the prosecution were bound to admit.

“With regard to the night immediately preceding Mrs. Owen’s death, Greenhill stated that he had been with her to the theatre, had seen her home, and had had some supper with her in her room. Before he left her, at 2 a.m., she had of her own accord made him a present of £10, saying: ‘I am a sort of aunt to you, Arthur, and if you don’t have it, Bill is sure to get it.’

“She had seemed rather worried in the early part of the evening, but later on she cheered up.

“‘Did she speak at all about this nephew of hers or about her money affairs?’ asked the magistrate.

“Again the young man hesitated, but said, ‘No! she did not mention either Owen or her money affairs.’

“‘If I remember rightly,’ added the man in the corner, “for recollect I was not present, the case was here adjourned. But the magistrate would not grant bail. Greenhill was removed looking more dead than alive — though every one remarked that Mr. Greenhill senior looked determined and not the least worried. In the course of his examination on behalf of his son, of the medical officer and one or two other witnesses, he had very ably tried to confuse them on the subject of the hour at which Mrs. Owen was last known to be alive.

“He made a very great point of the fact that the usual morning’s work was done throughout the house when the inmates arrived. Was it conceivable, he argued, that a woman would do that kind of work overnight, especially as she was going to the theatre, and therefore would wish to dress in her smarter clothes? It certainly was a very nice point levelled against the prosecution, who promptly retorted: Just as conceivable as that a woman in those circumstances of life should, having done her work, undress beside an open window at nine o’clock in the morning with the snow beating into the room.

"Now it seems that Mr. Greenhill senior could produce any amount of witnesses who could help to prove a conclusive *alibi* on behalf of his son, if only some time subsequent to that fatal 2 a.m. the murdered woman had been seen alive by some chance passer-by.

"However, he was an able man and an earnest one, and I fancy the magistrate felt some sympathy for his strenuous endeavours on his son's behalf. He granted a week's adjournment, which seemed to satisfy Mr. Greenhill completely.

"In the meanwhile the papers had talked of and almost exhausted the subject of the mystery in Percy Street. There had been, as you no doubt know from personal experience, innumerable arguments on the puzzling alternatives: —

"Accident?

"Suicide?

"Murder?

"A week went by, and then the case against young Greenhill was resumed. Of course the court was crowded. It needed no great penetration to remark at once that the prisoner looked more hopeful, and his father quite elated.

"Again a great deal of minor evidence was taken, and then came the turn of the defence. Mr. Greenhill called Mrs. Hall, confectioner, of Percy Street, opposite the Rubens Studios. She deposed that at 8 o'clock in the morning of February 2nd, while she was tidying her shop window, she saw the caretaker of the Studios opposite, as usual, on her knees, her head and body wrapped in a shawl, cleaning her front steps. Her husband also saw Mrs. Owen, and Mrs. Hall remarked to her husband how thankful she was that her own shop had tiled steps, which did not need scrubbing on so cold a morning.

"Mr. Hall, confectioner, of the same address, corroborated this statement, and Mr. Greenhill, with absolute triumph, produced a third witness, Mrs. Martin, of Percy Street, who from her window on the second floor had, at 7.30 a.m., seen the caretaker shaking mats outside her front door. The description this witness gave of Mrs. Owen's get-up, with the shawl round her head, coincided point by point with that given by Mr. and Mrs. Hall.

"After that Mr. Greenhill's task became an easy one; his son was at home having his breakfast at 8 o'clock that morning — not only himself, but his servants would testify to that.

"The weather had been so bitter that the whole of that day Arthur had not stirred from his own fireside. Mrs. Owen was murdered after 8 a.m. on that day, since she was seen alive by three people at that hour, therefore his son could not have murdered Mrs. Owen. The police must find the criminal elsewhere, or else bow to the opinion originally expressed by the public that Mrs. Owen had met with a terrible untoward accident, or that perhaps she may have wilfully sought her own death in that extraordinary and tragic fashion.

"Before young Greenhill was finally discharged one or two witnesses were again examined, chief among these being the foreman of the glassworks. He had turned up at the Rubens Studios at 9 o'clock, and been in business all day. He averred positively that he did not specially notice any suspicious-looking individual crossing the hall that day. 'But,' he remarked with a smile, 'I don't sit and watch every one who goes up and downstairs. I am too busy for that. The street door is always left open; any one can walk in, up or down, who knows the way.'

"That there was a mystery in connection with Mrs. Owen's death — of that the police have remained perfectly convinced; whether young Greenhill held the key of that mystery or not they have never found out to this day.

"I could enlighten them as to the cause of the young lithographer's anxiety at the magisterial inquiry, but, I assure you, I do not care to do the work of the police for them. Why should I? Greenhill will never suffer from unjust suspicions. He and his father alone — besides myself — know in what a terribly tight corner he all but found himself.

"The young man did not reach home till nearly *five* o'clock that morning. His last train had gone; he had to walk, lost his way, and wandered about Hampstead for hours. Think what his position would have been if the worthy confectioners of Percy Street had not seen Mrs. Owen 'wrapped up in a shawl, on her knees, doing the front steps.'

"Moreover, Mr. Greenhill senior is a solicitor, who has a small office in John Street, Bedford Row. The afternoon before her death Mrs. Owen had been to that office and had there made a will by which she left all her savings to young Arthur Greenhill, lithographer. Had that will been in other than paternal hands, it would have been proved, in the natural course of such things, and one other link would have been added to the chain which nearly dragged Arthur Greenhill to the gallows — 'the link of a very strong motive.'

"Can you wonder that the young man turned livid, until such time as it was proved beyond a doubt that the murdered woman was alive hours after he had reached the safe shelter of his home?

"I saw you smile when I used the word 'murdered,'" continued the man in the corner, growing quite excited now that he was approaching the *dénouement* of his story. "I know that the public, after the magistrate had discharged Arthur Greenhill, were quite satisfied to think that the mystery in Percy Street was a case of accident — or suicide."

"No," replied Polly, "there could be no question of suicide, for two very distinct reasons."

He looked at her with some degree of astonishment. She supposed that he was amazed at her venturing to form an opinion of her own.

"And may I ask what, in your opinion, these reasons are?" he asked very sarcastically.

"To begin with, the question of money," she said — "has any more of it been traced so far?"

"Not another £5 note," he said with a chuckle; "they were all cashed in Paris during the Exhibition, and you have no conception how easy a thing that is to do, at any of the hotels or smaller *agents de change*."

"That nephew was a clever blackguard," she commented.

"You believe, then, in the existence of that nephew?"

"Why should I doubt it? Some one must have existed who was sufficiently familiar with the house to go about in it in the middle of the day without attracting any one's attention."

"In the middle of the day?" he said with a chuckle.

"Any time after 8.30 in the morning."

"So you, too, believe in the 'caretaker, wrapped up in a shawl,' cleaning her front steps?" he queried.

"But —"

"It never struck you, in spite of the training your intercourse with me must have given you, that the person who carefully did all the work in the Rubens Studios, laid the fires and carried up the coals, merely did it in order to gain time; in order that the bitter frost might really and effectually do its work, and Mrs. Owen be not missed until she was truly dead."

"But—" suggested Polly again.

"It never struck you that one of the greatest secrets of successful crime is to lead the police astray with regard to the time when the crime was committed. That was, if you remember, the great point in the Regent's Park murder.

"In this case the 'nephew,' since we admit his existence, would — even if he were ever found, which is doubtful — be able to prove as good an *alibi* as young Greenhill."

"But I don't understand—"

"How the murder was committed?" he said eagerly. "Surely you can see it all for yourself, since you admit the 'nephew' — a scamp, perhaps — who sponges on the good-natured woman. He terrorises and threatens her, so much so that she fancies her money is no longer safe even in the Birkbeck Bank. Women of that class are apt at times to mistrust the Bank of England. Anyway, she withdraws her money. Who knows what she meant to do with it in the immediate future?

"In any case, she wishes to secure it after her death to a young man whom she likes, and who has known how to win her good graces. That afternoon the nephew begs, entreats for more money; they have a row; the poor woman is in tears, and is only temporarily consoled by a pleasant visit at the theatre.

"At 2 o'clock in the morning young Greenhill parts from her. Two minutes later the nephew knocks at the door. He comes with a plausible tale of having missed his last train, and asks for a 'shake down' somewhere in the house. The good-natured woman suggests a sofa in one of the studios, and then quietly prepares to go to bed. The rest is very simple and elementary. The nephew sneaks into his aunt's room, finds her standing in her nightgown; he demands money with threats of violence; terrified, she staggers, knocks her head against the gas bracket, and falls on the floor stunned, while the nephew seeks for her keys and takes possession of the £800. You will admit that the subsequent *mise en scène* — is worthy of a genius.

"No struggle, not the usual hideous accessories round a crime. Only the open windows, the bitter north-easterly gale, and the heavily falling snow — two silent accomplices, as silent as the dead.

"After that the murderer, with perfect presence of mind, busies himself in the house, doing the work which will ensure that Mrs. Owen shall not be missed, at any rate, for some time. He dusts and tidies; some few hours later he even slips on his aunt's skirt and bodice, wraps his head in a shawl, and boldly allows those neighbours who are astir to see what they believe to be Mrs. Owen. Then he goes back to her room, resumes his normal appearance and quietly leaves the house."

"He may have been seen."

"He undoubtedly *was* seen by two or three people, but no one thought anything of seeing a man leave the house at that hour. It was very cold, the snow was falling thickly, and as he wore a muffler round the lower part of his face, those who saw him would not undertake to know him again."

"That man was never seen nor heard of again?" Polly asked.

"He has disappeared off the face of the earth. The police are searching for him, and perhaps some day they will find him — then society will be rid of one of the most ingenious men of the age."

He had paused, absorbed in meditation. The young girl also was silent. Some memory too vague as yet to take a definite form was persistently haunting her — one thought was hammering away in her brain, and playing havoc with her nerves. That thought was the inexplicable feeling within her that there was something in connection with that hideous crime which she ought to recollect, something which — if she could only remember what it was — would give her the clue to the tragic mystery, and for once ensure her triumph over this self-conceited and sarcastic scarecrow in the corner. He was watching her through his great bone-rimmed spectacles, and she could see the knuckles of his bony hands, just above the top of the table, fidgeting, fidgeting, fidgeting, till she wondered if there existed another set of fingers in the world that could undo the knots his lean ones made in that tiresome piece of string. Then suddenly — *à propos* of nothing, Polly remembered — the whole thing stood before her, short and clear like a vivid flash of lightning: — Mrs. Owen lying dead in the snow beside her open window; one of them with a broken sash-line, tied up most scientifically with a piece of string. She remembered the talk there had been at the time about this improvised sash-line. That was after young Greenhill had been discharged, and the question of suicide had been voted an impossibility. Polly remembered that in the illustrated papers photographs appeared of this wonderfully knotted piece of string, so contrived that the weight of the frame could but tighten the knots, and thus keep the window open. She remembered that people deduced many things from that improvised sash-line, chief among these deductions being that the murderer was a sailor — so wonderful, so complicated, so numerous were the knots which secured that window-frame. But Polly knew better. In her mind's eye she saw those fingers rendered doubly nervous by the fearful cerebral excitement, grasping at first mechanically, even thoughtlessly, a bit of twine with which to secure the window; then the ruling habit strongest through all, the girl could see it; the lean and ingenious fingers fidgeting, fidgeting with that piece of string, tying knot after knot, more wonderful, more complicated, than any she had yet witnessed. "If I were you," she said, without daring to look into that corner where he sat, "I would break myself of the habit of perpetually making knots in a piece of string." He did not reply, and at last Polly ventured to look up — the corner was empty, and through the glass door beyond the desk, where he had just deposited his few coppers, she saw the tails of his tweed coat, his extraordinary hat, his meagre, shrivelled-up personality, fast disappearing down the street. Miss Polly Burton (of the Evening Observer) was married the other day to Mr. Richard Frobisher (of the London Mail). She has never set eyes on the man in the corner from that day to this.

LADY MOLLY OF THE SCOTLAND YARD

THE 9-SCORE MYSTERY

WELL, you know, some say she is the daughter of a duke, others that she was born in the gutter, and that the handle has been soldered on to her name in order to give her style and influence. I could say a lot, of course, but “my lips are sealed,” as the poets say. All through her successful career at the Yard she honoured me with her friendship and confidence, but when she took me in partnership, as it were, she made me promise that I would never breathe a word of her private life, and this I swore on my Bible oath— “wish I may die,” and all the rest of it. Yes, we always called her “my lady,” from the moment that she was put at the head of our section; and the chief called her “Lady Molly” in our presence. We of the Female Department are dreadfully snubbed by the men, though don’t tell me that women have not ten times as much intuition as the blundering and sterner sex; my firm belief is that we shouldn’t have half so many undetected crimes if some of the so called mysteries were put to the test of feminine investigation. Do you suppose for a moment, for instance, that the truth about that extraordinary case at Ninescore would ever have come to light if the men alone had had the handling of it? Would any man have taken so bold a risk as Lady Molly did when — But I am anticipating.

Let me go back to that memorable morning when she came into my room in a wild state of agitation.

“The chief says I may go down to Ninescore if I like, Mary,” she said in a voice all a-quiver with excitement.

“You!” I ejaculated. “What for?”

“What for — what for?” she repeated eagerly. “Mary, don’t you understand? It is the chance I have been waiting for — the chance of a lifetime? They are all desperate about the case up at the Yard; the public is furious, and columns of sarcastic letters appear in the daily press. None of our men know what to do; they are at their wits’ end, and so this morning I went to the chief—”

“Yes?” I queried eagerly, for she had suddenly ceased speaking.

“Well, never mind now how I did it — I will tell you all about it on the way, for we have just got time to catch the 11 a.m. down to Canterbury. The chief says I may go, and that I may take whom I like with me. He suggested one of the men, but somehow I feel that this is woman’s work, and I’d rather have you, Mary, than anyone. We will go over the preliminaries of the case together in the train, as I don’t suppose that you have got them at your fingers’ ends yet, and you have only just got time to put a few things together and meet me at Charing Cross booking-office in time for that 11.0 sharp.”

She was off before I could ask her any more questions, and anyhow I was too flabbergasted to say much. A murder case in the hands of the Female Department! Such a thing had been unheard of until now. But I was all excitement, too, and you may be sure I was at the station in good time.

Fortunately Lady Molly and I had a carriage to ourselves. It was a non-stop run to Canterbury, so we had plenty of time before us, and I was longing to know all about this case, you bet, since I was to have the honour of helping Lady Molly in it.

The murder of Mary Nicholls had actually been committed at Ash Court, a fine old mansion which stands in the village of Ninescore. The Court is surrounded by magnificently timbered grounds, the most fascinating portion of which is an island in the midst of a small pond, which is spanned by a tiny rustic bridge. The island is called “The Wilderness,” and is at the furthest end of the grounds, out of sight and earshot of the mansion itself. It was in this charming spot, on the edge of the pond, that the body of a girl was found on the 5th of February last.

I will spare you the horrible details of this gruesome discovery. Suffice it to say for the present that the unfortunate woman was lying on her face, with the lower portion of her body on the small grass-covered embankment, and her head, arms, and shoulders sunk in the slime of the stagnant water just below.

It was Timothy Coleman, one of the under-gardeners at Ash Court, who first made this appalling discovery. He had crossed the rustic bridge and traversed the little island in its entirety, when he noticed something blue lying half in and half out of the water beyond. Timothy is a stolid, unemotional kind of yokel, and, once having ascertained that the object was a woman’s body in a blue dress with white facings, he quietly stooped and tried to lift it out of the mud.

But here even his stolidity gave way at the terrible sight which was revealed before him. That the woman — whoever she might be — had been brutally murdered was obvious, her dress in front being stained with blood; but what was so awful that it even turned old Timothy sick with horror, was that, owing to the head, arms and shoulders having apparently been in the slime for some time, they were in an advanced state of decomposition.

Well, whatever was necessary was immediately done, of course. Coleman went to get assistance from the lodge, and soon the police were on the scene and had removed the unfortunate victim’s remains to the small local police-station.

Ninescore is a sleepy, out-of-the-way village, situated some seven miles from Canterbury and four from Sandwich. Soon everyone in the place had heard that a terrible murder had been committed in the village, and all the details were already freely discussed at the Green Man.

To begin with, everyone said that though the body itself might be practically unrecognisable, the bright blue serge dress with the white facings was unmistakable, as were the pearl and ruby ring and the red leather purse found by Inspector Meisures close to the murdered woman’s hand.

Within two hours of Timothy Coleman’s gruesome find the identity of the unfortunate victim was firmly established as that of Mary Nicholls, who lived with her sister Susan at 2, Elm Cottages, in Ninescore Lane, almost opposite Ash Court. It was also known that when the police called at that address they found the place locked and apparently uninhabited.

Mrs. Hooker, who lived at No. 1 next door, explained to Inspector Meisures that Susan and Mary Nicholls had left home about a fortnight ago, and that she had not seen them since.

“It’ll be a fortnight to-morrow,” she said. “I was just inside my own front door a-calling to the cat to come in. It was past seven o’clock, and as dark a night as ever you did see. You could hardly see your ‘and afore your eyes, and there was a nasty damp drizzle comin’ from everywhere. Susan and Mary come out of their cottage; I couldn’t rightly see Susan, but I ‘eard Mary’s voice quite

distinck. She says: 'We'll have to 'urry,' says she. I, thinkin' they might be goin' to do some shoppin' in the village, calls out to them that I'd just 'eard the church clock strike seven, and that bein' Thursday, and early closin', they'd find all the shops shut at Ninescore. But they took no notice, and walked off towards the village, and that's the last I ever seed o' them two."

Further questioning among the village folk brought forth many curious details. It seems that Mary Nicholls was a very flighty young woman, about whom there had already been quite a good deal of scandal, whilst Susan, on the other hand — who was very sober and steady in her conduct — had chafed considerably under her younger sister's questionable reputation, and, according to Mrs. Hooker, many were the bitter quarrels which occurred between the two girls. These quarrels, it seems, had been especially violent within the last year whenever Mr. Lionel Lydgate called at the cottage. He was a London gentleman, it appears — a young man about town, it afterwards transpired — but he frequently stayed at Canterbury, where he had some friends, and on those occasions he would come over to Ninescore in his smart dogcart and take Mary out for drives.

Mr. Lydgate is brother to Lord Edbrooke, the multi-millionaire, who was the recipient of birthday honours last year. His lordship resides at Edbrooke Castle, but he and his brother Lionel had rented Ash Court once or twice, as both were keen golfers and Sandwich Links are very close by. Lord Edbrooke, I may add, is a married man. Mr. Lionel Lydgate, on the other hand, is just engaged to Miss Marbury, daughter of one of the canons of Canterbury.

No wonder, therefore, that Susan Nicholls strongly objected to her sister's name being still coupled with that of a young man far above her in station, who, moreover, was about to marry a young lady in his own rank of life.

But Mary seemed not to care. She was a young woman who only liked fun and pleasure, and she shrugged her shoulders at public opinion, even though there were ugly rumours anent the parentage of a little baby girl whom she herself had placed under the care of Mrs. Williams, a widow who lived in a somewhat isolated cottage on the Canterbury road. Mary had told Mrs. Williams that the father of the child, who was her own brother, had died very suddenly, leaving the little one on her and Susan's hands; and, as they couldn't look after it properly, they wished Mrs. Williams to have charge of it. To this the latter readily agreed.

The sum for the keep of the infant was decided upon, and thereafter Mary Nicholls had come every week to see the little girl, and always brought the money with her.

Inspector Meisures called on Mrs. Williams, and certainly the worthy widow had a very startling sequel to relate to the above story.

"A fortnight to-morrow," explained Mrs. Williams to the inspector, "a little after seven o'clock, Mary Nicholls come runnin' into my cottage. It was an awful night, pitch dark and a nasty drizzle. Mary says to me she's in a great hurry; she is goin' up to London by a train from Canterbury and wants to say good-bye to the child. She seemed terribly excited, and her clothes were very wet. I brings baby to her, and she kisses it rather wild-like and says to me: 'You'll take great care of her, Mrs. Williams,' she says; 'I may be gone some time.' Then she puts baby down and gives me £2, the child's keep for eight weeks."

After which, it appears, Mary once more said "good-bye" and ran out of the cottage, Mrs. Williams going as far as the front door with her. The night was very dark, and she couldn't see if Mary was alone or not, until presently she heard her voice saying tearfully: "I had to kiss baby—" then the voice died out in the distance "on the way to Canterbury," Mrs. Williams said most emphatically.

So far, you see, Inspector Meisures was able to fix the departure of the two sisters Nicholls from Ninescore on the night of January 23rd. Obviously they left their cottage about seven, went to Mrs. Williams, where Susan remained outside while Mary went in to say good-bye to the child.

After that all traces of them seem to have vanished. Whether they did go to Canterbury, and caught the last up train, at what station they alighted, or when poor Mary came back, could not at present be discovered.

According to the medical officer, the unfortunate girl must have been dead twelve or thirteen days at the very least, as, though the stagnant water may have accelerated decomposition, the head could not have got into such an advanced state much under a fortnight.

At Canterbury station neither the booking-clerk nor the porters could throw any light upon the subject. Canterbury West is a busy station, and scores of passengers buy tickets and go through the barriers every day. It was impossible, therefore, to give any positive information about two young women who may or may not have travelled by the last up train on Saturday, January 23rd — that is, a fortnight before.

One thing only was certain — whether Susan went to Canterbury and travelled by that up train or not, alone or with her sister — Mary had undoubtedly come back to Ninescore either the same night or the following day, since Timothy Coleman found her half-decomposed remains in the grounds of Ash Court a fortnight later.

Had she come back to meet her lover, or what? And where was Susan now?

From the first, therefore, you see, there was a great element of mystery about the whole case, and it was only natural that the local police should feel that, unless something more definite came out at the inquest, they would like to have the assistance of some of the fellows at the Yard.

So the preliminary notes were sent up to London, and some of them drifted into our hands. Lady Molly was deeply interested in it from the first, and my firm belief is that she simply worried the chief into allowing her to go down to Ninescore and see what she could do.

AT first it was understood that Lady Molly should only go down to Canterbury after the inquest, if the local police still felt that they were in want of assistance from London. But nothing was further from my lady's intentions than to wait until then.

"I was not going to miss the first act of a romantic drama," she said to me just as our train steamed into Canterbury station. "Pick up your bag, Mary. We're going to tramp it to Ninescore — two lady artists on a sketching tour, remember — and we'll find lodgings in the village, I dare say."

We had some lunch in Canterbury, and then we started to walk the six and a half miles to Ninescore, carrying our bags. We put up at one of the cottages, where the legend "Apartments for single respectable lady or gentleman" had hospitably invited us to enter, and at eight o'clock the next morning we found our way to the local police-station, where the inquest was to take place. Such a funny little

place, you know — just a cottage converted for official use — and the small room packed to its utmost holding capacity. The entire able-bodied population of the neighbourhood had, I verily believe, congregated in these ten cubic yards of stuffy atmosphere.

Inspector Meisures, apprised by the chief of our arrival, had reserved two good places for us well in sight of witnesses, coroner and jury. The room was insupportably close, but I assure you that neither Lady Molly nor I thought much about our comfort then. We were terribly interested.

From the outset the case seemed, as it were, to wrap itself more and more in its mantle of impenetrable mystery. There was precious little in the way of clues, only that awful intuition, that dark unspoken suspicion with regard to one particular man's guilt, which one could feel hovering in the minds of all those present.

Neither the police nor Timothy Coleman had anything to add to what was already known. The ring and purse were produced, also the dress worn by the murdered woman. All were sworn to by several witnesses as having been the property of Mary Nicholls.

Timothy, on being closely questioned, said that, in his opinion, the girl's body had been pushed into the mud, as the head was absolutely embedded in it, and he didn't see how she could have fallen like that.

Medical evidence was repeated; it was as uncertain — as vague — as before. Owing to the state of the head and neck it was impossible to ascertain by what means the death blow had been dealt. The doctor repeated his statement that the unfortunate girl must have been dead quite a fortnight. The body was discovered on February 5th — a fortnight before that would have been on or about January 23rd.

The caretaker who lived at the lodge at Ash Court could also throw but little light on the mysterious event. Neither he nor any member of his family had seen or heard anything to arouse their suspicions. Against that he explained that "The Wilderness," where the murder was committed, is situated some 200 yards from the lodge, with the mansion and flower garden lying between. Replying to a question put to him by a jurymen, he said that that portion of the grounds is only divided off from Ninescore Lane by a low, brick wall, which has a door in it, opening into the lane almost opposite Elm Cottages. He added that the mansion had been empty for over a year, and that he succeeded the last man, who died, about twelve months ago. Mr. Lydgate had not been down for golf since witness had been in charge.

It would be useless to recapitulate all that the various witnesses had already told the police, and were now prepared to swear to. The private life of the two sisters Nicholls was gone into at full length, as much, at least, as was publicly known. But you know what village folk are; except when there is a bit of scandal and gossip, they know precious little of one another's inner lives.

The two girls appeared to be very comfortably off. Mary was always smartly dressed; and the baby girl, whom she had placed in Mrs. Williams's charge, had plenty of good and expensive clothes, whilst her keep, 5s. a week, was paid with unfailing regularity. What seemed certain, however, was that they did not get on well together, that Susan violently objected to Mary's association with Mr. Lydgate, and that recently she had spoken to the vicar asking him to try to persuade her sister to go away from Ninescore altogether, so as to break entirely with the past. The Reverend Octavius Ludlow, Vicar of Ninescore, seems thereupon to have had a little talk with Mary on the subject, suggesting that she should accept a good situation in London.

"But," continued the reverend gentleman, "I didn't make much impression on her. All she replied to me was that she certainly need never go into service, as she had a good income of her own, and could obtain £5,000 or more quite easily at any time if she chose."

"Did you mention Mr. Lydgate's name to her at all?" asked the coroner.

"Yes, I did," said the vicar, after a slight hesitation.

"Well, what was her attitude then?"

"I am afraid she laughed," replied the Reverend Octavius, primly, "and said very picturesquely, if somewhat ungrammatically, that 'some folks didn't know what they was talkin' about.'"

All very indefinite, you see. Nothing to get hold of, no motive suggested — beyond a very vague suspicion, perhaps, of blackmail — to account for a brutal crime. I must not, however, forget to tell you the two other facts which came to light in the course of this extraordinary inquest. Though, at the time, these facts seemed of wonderful moment for the elucidation of the mystery, they only helped ultimately to plunge the whole case into darkness still more impenetrable than before.

I am alluding, firstly, to the deposition of James Franklin, a carter in the employ of one of the local farmers. He stated that about half-past six on that same Saturday night, January 23rd, he was walking along Ninescore Lane leading his horse and cart, as the night was indeed pitch dark. Just as he came somewhere near Elm Cottages he heard a man's voice saying in a kind of hoarse whisper:

"Open the door, can't you? It's as dark as blazes!"

Then a pause, after which the same voice added:

"Mary, where the dickens are you?" Whereupon a girl's voice replied: "All right, I'm coming."

James Franklin heard nothing more after that, nor did he see anyone in the gloom.

With the stolidity peculiar to the Kentish peasantry, he thought no more of this until the day when he heard that Mary Nicholls had been murdered; then he voluntarily came forward and told his story to the police. Now, when he was closely questioned, he was quite unable to say whether these voices proceeded from that side of the lane where stand Elm Cottages or from the other side, which is edged by the low, brick wall.

Finally, Inspector Meisures, who really showed an extraordinary sense of what was dramatic, here produced a document which he had reserved for the last. This was a piece of paper which he had found in the red leather purse already mentioned, and which at first had not been thought very important, as the writing was identified by several people as that of the deceased, and consisted merely of a series of dates and hours scribbled in pencil on a scrap of notepaper. But suddenly these dates had assumed a weird and terrible significance: two of them, at least — December 26th and January 1st followed by "10 a.m." — were days on which Mr. Lydgate came over to Ninescore and took Mary for drives. One or two witnesses swore to this positively. Both dates had been local meets of the harriers, to which other folk from the village had gone, and Mary had openly said afterwards how much she had enjoyed these.

The other dates (there were six altogether) were more or less vague. One Mrs. Hooker remembered as being coincident with a day Mary Nicholls had spent away from home; but the last date, scribbled in the same handwriting, was January 23rd, and below it the hour — 6 p.m.

The coroner now adjourned the inquest. An explanation from Mr. Lionel Lydgate had become imperative.

3

PUBLIC excitement had by now reached a very high pitch; it was no longer a case of mere local interest. The country inns all round the immediate neighbourhood were packed with visitors from London, artists, journalists, dramatists, and actor-managers, whilst the hotels and fly-proprietors of Canterbury were doing a roaring trade.

Certain facts and one vivid picture stood out clearly before the thoughtful mind in the midst of a chaos of conflicting and irrelevant evidence: the picture was that of the two women tramping in the wet and pitch dark night towards Canterbury. Beyond that everything was a blur.

When did Mary Nicholls come back to Ninescore, and why?

To keep an appointment made with Lionel Lydgate, it was openly whispered; but that appointment — if the rough notes were interpreted rightly — was for the very day on which she and her sister went away from home. A man's voice called to her at half-past six certainly, and she replied to it. Franklin, the carter, heard her; but half an hour afterwards Mrs. Hooker heard her voice when she left home with her sister, and she visited Mrs. Williams after that.

The only theory compatible with all this was, of course, that Mary merely accompanied Susan part of the way to Canterbury, then went back to meet her lover, who enticed her into the deserted grounds of Ash Court, and there murdered her.

The motive was not far to seek. Mr. Lionel Lydgate, about to marry, wished to silence for ever a voice that threatened to be unpleasantly persistent in its demands for money and in its threats of scandal.

But there was one great argument against that theory — the disappearance of Susan Nicholls. She had been extensively advertised for. The murder of her sister was published broadcast in every newspaper in the United Kingdom — she could not be ignorant of it. And, above all, she hated Mr. Lydgate. Why did she not come and add the weight of her testimony against him if, indeed, he was guilty?

And if Mr. Lydgate was innocent, then where was the criminal? And why had Susan Nicholls disappeared?

Why? Why? Why?

Well, the next day would show. Mr. Lionel Lydgate had been cited by the police to give evidence at the adjourned inquest.

Good-looking, very athletic, and obviously frightfully upset and nervous, he entered the little courtroom, accompanied by his solicitor, just before the coroner and jury took their seats.

He looked keenly at Lady Molly as he sat down, and from the expression on his face I guessed that he was much puzzled to know who she was.

He was the first witness called. Manfully and clearly he gave a concise account of his association with the deceased.

"She was pretty and amusing," he said. "I liked to take her out when I was in the neighborhood; it was no trouble to me. There was no harm in her, whatever the village gossips might say. I know she had been in trouble, as they say, but that had nothing to do with me. It wasn't for me to be hard on a girl, and I fancy that she has been very badly treated by some scoundrel."

Here he was hard pressed by the coroner, who wished him to explain what he meant. But Mr. Lydgate turned obstinate, and to every leading question he replied stolidly and very emphatically:

"I don't know who it was. It had nothing to do with me, but I was sorry for the girl because of everyone turning against her, including her sister, and I tried to give her a little pleasure when I could."

That was all right. Very sympathetically told. The public quite liked this pleasing specimen of English cricket-, golf — and football-loving manhood. Subsequently Mr. Lydgate admitted meeting Mary on December 26th and January 1st, but he swore most emphatically that that was the last he ever saw of her.

"But the 23rd of January," here insinuated the coroner; "you made an appointment with the deceased then?"

"Certainly not," he replied.

"But you met her on that day?"

"Most emphatically no," he replied quietly. "I went down to Edbrooke Castle, my brother's place in Lincolnshire, on the 20th of last month, and only got back to town about three days ago."

"You swear to that, Mr. Lydgate?" asked the coroner.

"I do, indeed, and there are a score of witnesses to bear me out. The family, the house-party, the servants."

He tried to dominate his own excitement. I suppose, poor man, he had only just realised that certain horrible suspicions had been resting upon him. His solicitor pacified him, and presently he sat down, whilst I must say that everyone there present was relieved at the thought that the handsome young athlete was not a murderer, after all. To look at him it certainly seemed preposterous.

But then, of course, there was the deadlock, and as there were no more witnesses to be heard, no new facts to elucidate, the jury returned the usual verdict against some person or persons unknown; and we, the keenly interested spectators, were left to face the problem — Who murdered Mary Nicholls, and where was her sister Susan?

4

AFTER the verdict we found our way back to our lodgings. Lady Molly tramped along silently, with that deep furrow between her brows which I knew meant that she was deep in thought.

"Now we'll have some tea," I said, with a sigh of relief, as soon as we entered the cottage door.

"No, you won't," replied my lady, dryly. "I am going to write out a telegram, and we'll go straight on to Canterbury and send it from there."

"To Canterbury!" I gasped. "Two hours' walk at least, for I don't suppose we can get a trap, and it is past three o'clock. Why not send your telegram from Ninescore?"

"Mary, you are stupid," was all the reply I got.

She wrote out two telegrams — one of which was at least three dozen words long — and, once more calling to me to come along, we set out for Canterbury.

I was tea-less, cross, and puzzled. Lady Molly was alert, cheerful, and irritatingly active.

We reached the first telegraph office a little before five. My lady sent the telegram without condescending to tell me anything of its destination or contents; then she took me to the Castle Hotel and graciously offered me tea.

"May I be allowed to inquire whether you propose tramping back to Ninescore to-night?" I asked with a slight touch of sarcasm, as I really felt put out.

"No, Mary," she replied, quietly munching a bit of Sally Lunn; "I have engaged a couple of rooms at this hotel and wired the chief that any message will find us here to-morrow morning."

After that there was nothing for it but quietude, patience, and finally supper and bed.

The next morning my lady walked into my room before I had finished dressing. She had a newspaper in her hand, and threw it down on the bed as she said calmly:

"It was in the evening paper all right last night. I think we shall be in time."

No use asking her what "it" meant. It was easier to pick up the paper, which I did. It was a late edition of one of the leading London evening shockers, and at once the front page, with its startling headline, attracted my attention:

THE NINESCORE MYSTERY

MARY NICHOLL'S BABY DYING

Then, below that, a short paragraph: —

"We regret to learn that the little baby daughter of the unfortunate girl who was murdered recently at Ash Court, Ninescore. Kent, under such terrible and mysterious circumstances, is very seriously ill at the cottage of Mrs. Williams, in whose charge she is. The local doctor who visited her to-day declares that she cannot last more than a few hours. At the time of going to press the nature of the child's complaint was not known to our special representative at Ninescore."

"What does this mean?" I gasped.

But before she could reply there was a knock at the door.

"A telegram for Miss Granard," said the voice of the hall-porter.

"Quick, Mary," said Lady Molly, eagerly. "I told the chief and also Measures to wire here and to you."

The telegram turned out to have come from Ninescore, and was signed "Measures." Lady Molly read it aloud:

"Mary Nicholls arrived here this morning.

Detained her at station. Come at once."

"Mary Nicholls! I don't understand," was all I could contrive to say.

But she only replied:

"I knew it! I knew it! Oh, Mary, what a wonderful thing is human nature, and how I thank Heaven that gave me a knowledge of it!"

She made me get dressed all in a hurry, and then we swallowed some breakfast hastily whilst a fly was being got for us. I had, perforce, to satisfy my curiosity from my own inner consciousness. Lady Molly was too absorbed to take any notice of me. Evidently the chief knew what she had done and approved of it: the telegram from Measures pointed to that.

My lady had suddenly become a personality. Dressed very quietly, and in a smart close-fitting hat, she looked years older than her age, owing also to the seriousness of her mien.

The fly took us to Ninescore fairly quickly. At the little police-station we found Measures awaiting us. He had Elliot and Pegram from the Yard with him. They had obviously got their orders, for all three of them were mighty deferential.

"The woman is Mary Nicholls, right enough," said Measures, as Lady Molly brushed quickly past him, "the woman who was supposed to have been murdered. It's that silly bogus paragraph about the infant brought her out of her hiding-place. I wonder how it got in," he added blandly; "the child is well enough."

"I wonder," said Lady Molly, whilst a smile — the first I had seen that morning — lit up her pretty face.

"I suppose the other sister will turn up too, presently," rejoined Elliot. "Pretty lot of trouble we shall have now. If Mary Nicholls is alive and kickin', who was murdered at Ash Court, say I?"

"I wonder," said Lady Molly, with the same charming smile.

Then she went in to see Mary Nicholls.

The Reverend Octavius Ludlow was sitting beside the girl, who seemed in great distress, for she was crying bitterly.

Lady Molly asked Elliott and the others to remain in the passage whilst she herself went into the room, I following behind her.

When the door was shut, she went up to Mary Nicholls, and assuming a hard and severe manner, she said:

"Well, you have at last made up your mind, have you, Nicholls? I suppose you know that we have applied for a warrant for your arrest?"

The woman gave a shriek which unmistakably was one of fear.

"My arrest?" she gasped. "What for?"

"The murder of your sister Susan."

"'Twasn't me!" she said quickly.

"Then Susan is dead?" retorted Lady Molly, quietly.

Mary saw that she had betrayed herself. She gave Lady Molly a look of agonised horror, then turned as white as a sheet and would have fallen had not the Reverend Octavius Ludlow gently led her to a chair.

"It wasn't me," she repeated, with a heart-broken sob.

"That will be for you to prove," said Lady Molly dryly. "The child cannot now, of course remain with Mrs. Williams; she will be removed to the workhouse, and—"

"No, that shan't be," said the mother excitedly. "She shan't be, I tell you. The workhouse, indeed," she added in a paroxysm of hysterical tears, "and her father a lord!"

The reverend gentleman and I gasped in astonishment; but Lady Molly had worked up to this climax so ingeniously that it was obvious she had guessed it all along, and had merely led Mary Nicholls on in order to get this admission from her.

How well she had known human nature in pitting the child against the sweetheart! Mary Nicholls was ready enough to hide herself, to part from her child even for a while, in order to save the man she had once loved from the consequences of his crime; but when she heard that her child was dying, she no longer could bear to leave it among strangers, and when Lady Molly taunted her with the workhouse, she exclaimed in her maternal pride:

"The workhouse! And her father a lord!"

Driven into a corner, she confessed the whole truth.

Lord Edbrooke, then Mr. Lydgate, was the father of her child. Knowing this, her sister Susan had, for over a year now, systematically blackmailed the unfortunate man — not altogether, it seems, without Mary's connivance. In January last she got him to come down to Ninescore under the distinct promise that Mary would meet him and hand over to him the letters she had received from him, as well as the ring he had given her, in exchange for the sum of £5,000.

The meeting-place was arranged, but at the last moment Mary was afraid to go in the dark. Susan, nothing daunted, but anxious about her own reputation in case she should be seen talking to a man so late at night, put on Mary's dress, took the ring and the letters, also her sister's purse, and went to meet Lord Edbrooke.

What happened at that interview no one will ever know. It ended with the murder of the blackmailer. I suppose the fact that Susan had, in measure, begun by impersonating her sister, gave the murderer the first thought of confusing the identity of his victim by the horrible device of burying the body in the slimy mud. Anyway, he almost did succeed in hoodwinking the police, and would have done so entirely but for Lady Molly's strange intuition in the matter.

After his crime he ran instinctively to Mary's cottage. He had to make a clean breast of it to her, as, without her help, he was a doomed man.

So he persuaded her to go away from home and to leave no clue or trace of herself or her sister in Ninescore. With the help of money which he would give her, she could begin life anew somewhere else, and no doubt he deluded the unfortunate girl with promises that her child would be restored to her very soon.

Thus he enticed Mary Nicholls away, who would have been the great and all-important witness against him the moment his crime was discovered. A girl of Mary's type and class instinctively obeys the man she has once loved, the man who is the father of her child. She consented to disappear and to allow all the world to believe that she had been murdered by some unknown miscreant.

Then the murderer quietly returned to his luxurious home at Edbrooke Castle, unsuspected. No one had thought of mentioning his name in connection with that of Mary Nicholls. In the days when he used to come down to Ash Court he was Mr. Lydgate, and, when he became a peer, sleepy, out-of-the-way Ninescore ceased to think of him.

Perhaps Mr. Lionel Lydgate knew all about his brother's association with the village girl. From his attitude at the inquest I should say he did, but of course he would not betray his own brother unless forced to do so.

Now, of course, the whole aspect of the case was changed: the veil of mystery had been torn asunder owing to the insight, the marvelous intuition, of a woman who, in my opinion, is the most wonderful psychologist of her time.

You know the sequel. Our fellows at the Yard, aided by the local police, took their lead from Lady Molly, and began their investigations of Lord Edbrooke's movements on or about the 23rd of January.

Even their preliminary inquiries revealed the fact that his lordship had left Edbrooke Castle on the 21st. He went up to town, saying to his wife and household that he was called away on business, and not even taking his valet with him. He put up at the Langham Hotel.

But here police investigations came to an abrupt ending. Lord Edbrooke evidently got wind of them. Anyway, the day after Lady Molly so cleverly enticed Mary Nicholls out of her hiding-place, and surprised her into an admission of the truth, the unfortunate man threw himself in front of the express train at Grantham railway station, and was instantly killed. Human justice cannot reach him now!

But don't tell me that a man would have thought of that bogus paragraph, or of the taunt which stung the motherly pride of the village girl to the quick, and thus wrung from her an admission which no amount of male ingenuity would ever have obtained.

THE FREWIN MINIATURES

ALTHOUGH, mind you, Lady Molly's methods in connection with the Ninescore mystery were not altogether approved of at the Yard, nevertheless, her shrewdness and ingenuity in the matter were so undoubted that they earned for her a reputation, then and there, which placed her in the foremost rank of the force. And presently, when everyone — public and police alike — were set by the ears over the Frewin miniatures, and a reward of 1,000 guineas was offered for information that would lead to the apprehension of the thief, the chief, of his own accord and without any hesitation, offered the job to her.

I don't know much about so-called works of art myself, but you can't be in the detective force, female or otherwise, without knowing something of the value of most things, and I don't think that Mr. Frewin put an excessive value on his Englehearts when he stated that they were worth £10,000. There were eight of them, all on ivory, about three to four inches high, and they were said to be the most perfect specimens of their kind. Mr. Frewin himself had had an offer for them, less than two years ago, of 200,000 francs from the trustees of the Louvre, which offer, mind you, he had refused. I dare say you know that he was an immensely wealthy man, a great collector himself, as well as dealer, and that several of the most unique and most highly priced works of art found their way into his private collection. Among them, of course, the Engleheart miniatures were the most noteworthy.

For some time before his death Mr. Frewin had been a great invalid, and for over two years he had not been able to go beyond the boundary of his charming property, Blatchley House, near Brighton.

There is a sad story in connection with the serious illness of Mr. Frewin — an illness which, if you remember, has since resulted in the poor old gentleman's death. He had an only son, a young man on whom the old art-dealer had lavished all the education and, subsequently, all the social advantages which money could give. The boy was exceptionally good-looking, and had inherited from his mother a great charm of manner which made him very popular. The Honourable Mrs. Frewin is the daughter of an English peer, more endowed with physical attributes than with worldly goods. Besides that, she is an exceptionally beautiful woman, has a glorious voice, is a fine violinist, and is no mean water-colour artist, having more than once exhibited at the Royal Academy.

Unfortunately, at one time, young Frewin had got into very bad company, made many debts, some of which were quite unavowable, and there were rumours current at the time to the effect that had the police got wind of certain transactions in connection with a brother officer's cheque, a very unpleasant prosecution would have followed. Be that as it may, young Lionel Frewin had to quit his regiment, and presently he went off to Canada, where he is supposed to have gone in for farming. According to the story related by some of the servants at Blatchley House, there were violent scenes between father and son before the former consented to pay some of the young spendthrift's most pressing debts, and then find the further sum of money which was to enable young Frewin to commence a new life in the colonies.

Mrs. Frewin, of course, took the matter very much to heart. She was a dainty, refined, artistic creature, who idolised her only son, but she had evidently no influence whatever over her husband, who, in common with certain English families of Jewish extraction, had an extraordinary hardness of character where the integrity of his own business fame was concerned. He absolutely never forgave his son what he considered a slur cast upon his name by the young spendthrift; he packed him off to Canada, and openly told him that he was to expect nothing further from him. All the Frewin money and the priceless art collection would be left by will to a nephew, James Hyam, whose honour and general conduct had always been beyond reproach.

That Mr. Frewin really took his hereto idolised son's defalcations very much to heart was shown by the fact that the poor old man's health completely broke down after that. He had an apoplectic fit, and, although he somewhat recovered, he always remained an invalid.

His eyesight and brain power were distinctly enfeebled, and about nine months ago he had a renewed seizure, which resulted in paralysis first, and subsequently in his death. The greatest, if not the only, joy the poor old man had during the two years which he spent pinned to an invalid chair was his art collection. Blatchley House was a perfect art museum, and the invalid would have his chair wheeled up and down the great hall and along the rooms where his pictures and china and, above all, where his priceless miniatures were stored. He took an enormous pride in these, and it was, I think, with a view to brightening him up a little that Mrs. Frewin invited Monsieur de Colinville — who had always been a great friend of her husband — to come and stay at Blatchley. Of course, there is no greater connoisseur of art anywhere than that distinguished Frenchman, and it was through him that the celebrated offer of £8,000 was made by the Louvre for the Engleheart miniatures.

Though, of course, the invalid declined the offer, he took a great pleasure and pride in the fact that it had been made, as, in addition to Monsieur de Colinville himself, several members of the committee of art advisers to the Louvre came over from Paris in order to try and persuade Mr. Frewin to sell his unique treasures.

However, the invalid was obdurate about that. He was not in want of money, and the celebrated Frewin art collection would go intact to his widow for her life, and then to his heir, Mr. James Hyam, a great connoisseur himself and art dealer of St. Petersburg and London.

It was really a merciful dispensation of Providence that the old man never knew of the disappearance of his valued miniatures. By the time that extraordinary mystery had come to light he was dead.

On the evening of January the 14th, at half-past eight, Mr. Frewin had a third paralytic seizure, from which he never recovered. His valet, Kennet, and his two nurses were with him at the time, and Mrs. Frewin, quickly apprised of the terrible event, flew to his bedside, whilst the motor was at once despatched for the doctor. About an hour or two later the dying man seemed to rally somewhat, but he appeared very restless and agitated, and his eyes were roaming anxiously about the room.

"I expect it is his precious miniatures he wants," said Nurse Dawson. "He is always quiet when he can play with them."

She reached for the large, leather case which contained the priceless art treasures, and, opening it, placed it on the bed beside the patient. Mr. Frewin, however, was obviously too near death to care even for his favourite toy. He fingered the miniatures with trembling hands for a few moments, and then sank back exhausted on the pillows.

"He is dying," said the doctor quietly, turning to Mrs. Frewin.

"I have something to say to him," she then said. "Can I remain alone with him for a few minutes?"

"Certainly," said the doctor, as he himself discreetly retired; "but I think one of the nurses had better remain within earshot."

Nurse Dawson, it appeared, remained within earshot to some purpose, for she overheard what Mrs. Frewin was saying to her dying husband.

"It is about Lionel — your only son," she said. "Can you understand what I say?"

The sick man nodded.

"You remember that he is in Brighton, staying with Alicia. I can go and fetch him in the motor if you will consent to see him."

Again the dying man nodded. I suppose Mrs. Frewin took this to mean acquiescence, for the next moment she rang for John Chipps, the butler, and gave him instructions to order her motor at once. She then kissed the patient on the forehead and prepared to leave the room; but just before she did so, her eyes lighted on the case of miniatures, and she said to Kennet, the valet:

"Give these to Chipps, and tell him to put them in the library."

She then went to put on her furs preparatory to going out. When she was quite ready she met Chipps on the landing, who had just come up to tell her that the motor was at the door. He had in his hand the case of miniatures which Kennet had given him.

"Put the case on the library table, Chipps, when you go down," she said.

"Yes, madam," he replied.

He followed her downstairs, then slipped into the library, put the case on the table as he had been directed, after which he saw his mistress into the motor, and finally closed the front door.

2

ABOUT an hour later Mrs. Frewin came back, but without her son. It transpired afterwards that the young man was more vindictive than his father; he refused to go to the latter's bedside in order to be reconciled at the eleventh hour to a man who then had no longer either his wits or his physical senses about him. However, the dying man was spared the knowledge of his son's irreconcilable conduct, for, after a long and wearisome night passed in a state of coma, he died at about 6.0 a.m.

It was quite late the following afternoon when Mrs. Frewin suddenly recollected the case of miniatures, which should have been locked in their accustomed cabinet. She strolled leisurely into the library — she was very fatigued and worn out with the long vigil and the sorrow and anxiety she had just gone through. A quarter of an hour later John Chipps found her in the same room, sitting dazed and almost fainting in an arm-chair. In response to the old butler's anxious query, she murmured:

"The miniatures — where are they?"

Scared at the abruptness of the query and at his mistress's changed tone of voice, Chipps gazed quickly around him.

"You told me to put them on the table, ma'am," he murmured, "and I did so. They certainly don't seem to be in the room now—" he added, with a sudden feeling of terror.

"Run and ask one of the nurses at once if the case was taken up to Mr. Frewin's room during the night?"

Chipps, needless to say, did not wait to be told twice. He was beginning to feel very anxious. He spoke to Kennet and also to the two nurses, and asked them if, by any chance, the miniatures were in the late master's room. To this Kennet and the nurses replied in the negative. The last they had seen of the miniatures was when Chipps took them from the valet and followed his mistress downstairs with the case in his hands.

The poor old butler was in despair; the cook was in hysterics, and consternation reigned throughout the house. The disappearance of the miniatures caused almost a greater excitement than the death of the master, who had been a dying man so long that he was almost a stranger to the servants at Blatchley.

Mrs. Frewin was the first to recover her presence of mind.

"Send a motor at once to the police-station at Brighton," she said very calmly, as soon as she completely realised that the miniatures were nowhere to be found. "It is my duty to see that this matter is thoroughly gone into at once."

Within half an hour of the discovery of the theft, Detective Inspector Hankin and Police Constable McLeod had both arrived from Brighton, having availed themselves of Mrs. Frewin's motor. They are shrewd men, both of them, and it did not take them many minutes before they had made up their minds how the robbery had taken place. By whom it was done was quite another matter, and would take some time and some ingenuity to find out.

What Detective Inspector Hankin had gathered was this: While John Chipps saw his mistress into the motor, the front door of the house had, of necessity, been left wide open. The motor then made a start, but after a few paces it stopped, and Mrs. Frewin put her head out of the window and shouted to Chipps some instructions with regard to the nurses' evening collation, which, in view of Mr. Frewin's state, she feared might be forgotten. Chipps, being an elderly man and a little deaf, did not hear her voice distinctly, so he ran up to the motor, and she repeated her instructions to him. In Inspector Hankin's mind there was no doubt that the thief, who must have been hanging about the shrubbery that evening, took that opportunity to sneak into the house, then to hide himself in a convenient spot until he could find an opportunity for the robbery which he had in view.

The butler declared that, when he returned, he saw nothing unusual. He had only been gone a little over a minute; he then fastened and bolted the front door, and, according to his usual custom, he put up all the shutters of the ground-floor windows, including, of course, those in the library. He had no light with him when he did this accustomed round, for, of course, he knew his way well enough in the dark, and the electric chandelier in the hall gave him what light he wanted.

While he was putting up the shutters, Chipps was giving no particular thought to the miniatures, but, strangely enough, he seems to have thought of them about an hour later, when most of the servants had gone to bed and he was waiting up for his mistress. He then, quite casually and almost absent-mindedly, when crossing the hall, turned the key of the library door, thus locking it from the outside.

Of course, throughout all this we must remember that Blatchley House was not in its normal state that night, since its master was actually dying in a room on the floor above the library. The two nurses and Kennet, the valet, were all awake, and with him during the whole of that night. Kennet certainly was in and out of the room several times, having to run down and fetch various things required by

the doctor or the nurses. In order to do this he did not use the principal staircase, nor did he have to cross the hall, but, as far as the upper landing and the secondary stairs were concerned, he certainly had not noticed anything unusual or suspicious; whilst when Mrs. Frewin came home, she went straight up to the first floor, and certainly noticed nothing in any way to arouse her suspicions. But, of course, this meant very little, as she certainly must have been too upset and agitated to see anything.

The servants were not apprised of the death of their master until after their breakfast. In the meanwhile Emily, the housemaid, had been in, as usual, to "do" the library. She distinctly noticed, when she first went in, that none of the shutters were up and that one of the windows was open. She thought at the time that someone must have been in the room before her, and meant to ask Chipps about it, when the news of the master's death drove all thoughts of open windows from her mind. Strangely enough, when Hankin questioned her more closely about it, and she had had time to recollect everything more clearly, she made the extraordinary statement that she certainly had noticed that the door of the library was locked on the outside when she first went into the room, the key being in the lock.

"Then, didn't it strike you as very funny," asked Hankin, "that the door was locked on the outside, and yet that the shutters were unbarred and one of the windows was open?"

"Yes, I did seem to think of that," replied Emily, with that pleasant vagueness peculiar to her class; "but then, the room did not look like burglars — it was quite tidy, just as it had been left last night, and burglars always seem to leave a great mess behind, else I should have noticed," she added, with offended dignity.

"But did you not see that the miniatures were not in their usual place?"

"Oh they often wasn't in the cabinet, as the master used to ask for them sometimes to be brought to his room."

That was, of course, indisputable. It was clearly evident that the burglar had had plenty of chances to make good his escape. You see, the actual time when the miscreant must have sneaked into the room had now been narrowed down to about an hour and a half, between the time when Mrs. Frewin finally left in her motor to about an hour later, when Chipps turned the key in the door of the library and thus undoubtedly locked the thief in. At what precise time of the night he effected his escape could not anyhow be ascertained. It must have been after Mrs. Frewin came back again, as Hankin held that she or her chauffeur would have noticed that one of the library windows was open. This opinion was not shared by Elliott from the Yard, who helped in the investigation of this mysterious crime, as Mrs. Frewin was certainly very agitated and upset that evening, and her powers of perception would necessarily be blunted. As for the chauffeur: we all know that the strong headlights on a motor are so dazzling that nothing can be seen outside their blinding circle of light.

Be that as it may, it remained doubtful when the thief made good his escape. It was easy enough to effect, and, as there is a square of flagstones in front of the main door and just below the library windows, the thief left not the slightest trace of footprints, whilst the drop from the window is less than eight feet.

What was strange in the whole case, and struck Detective Hankin immediately, was the fact that the burglar, whoever he was, must have known a great deal about the house and its ways. He also must have had a definite purpose in his mind not usually to be found in the brain of a common housebreaker. He must have meant to steal the miniatures and nothing else, since he made his way straight to the library, and, having secured the booty, at once made good his escape without trying to get any other article which could more easily be disposed of than works of art.

You may imagine, therefore, how delicate a task now confronted Inspector Hankin. You see, he had questioned everyone in the house, including Mr. Frewin's valet and nurses, and from them he casually heard of Mrs. Frewin's parting words to her dying husband and of her mention of the scapegrace son, who was evidently in the immediate neighbourhood, and whom she wished to come and see his father. Mrs. Frewin, closely questioned by the detective, admitted that her son was staying in Brighton, and that she saw him that very evening.

"Mr. Lionel Frewin is staying at the Metropole Hotel," she said coldly, "and he was dining with my sister, Lady Steyne, last night. He was in the house at Sussex Square when I arrived in my motor," she added hastily, guessing, perhaps, the unavowed suspicion which had arisen in Hankin's mind, "and he was still there when I left. I drove home very fast, naturally, as my husband's condition was known to me to be quite hopeless, and that he was not expected to live more than perhaps a few hours. We covered the seven miles between this house and that of my sister in less than a quarter of an hour."

This statement of Mrs. Frewin's was, if you remember, fully confirmed both by her sister and her brother-in-law, Lady Steyne and Sir Michael. There was no doubt that young Lionel Frewin was staying at the Hotel Metropole in Brighton, that he was that evening dining with the Steynes at Sussex Square when his mother arrived in her motor. Mrs. Frewin stayed about an hour, during which time she, presumably, tried to influence her son to go back to Blatchley with her in order to see his dying father. Of course, what exactly happened at that family interview none of the four people present was inclined to reveal. Against that both Sir Michael and Lady Steyne were prepared to swear that Mr. Lionel Frewin was in the house when his mother arrived, and that he did not leave them until long after she had driven away.

There lay the hitch, you see, for already the public jumped to conclusions, and, terribly prejudiced as it is in a case of this sort, it had made up its mind that Mr. Lionel Frewin, once more pressed for money, had stolen his father's precious miniatures in order to sell them in America for a high sum. Everyone's sympathy was dead against the young son who refused to be reconciled to his father, although the latter was dying.

According to one of the footmen in Lady Steyne's employ, who had taken whiskies and sodas in while the interview between Mrs. Frewin and her son was taking place, Mr. Lionel had said very testily:

"It's all very well, mother, but that is sheer sentimentality. The gov'nor threw me on my beam ends when a little kindness and help would have meant a different future to me; he chose to break my life because of some early peccadilloes — and I am not going to fawn round him and play the hypocrite when he has no intention of altering his will and has cut me off with a shilling. He must be half imbecile by now, and won't know me anyway."

But with all this, and with public opinion so dead against him, it was quite impossible to bring the crime home to the young man. The burglar, whoever he was, must have sneaked into the library some time before Chipps closed the door on the outside, since it was still so found by Emily the following morning. Thereupon the public, determined that Lionel Frewin should in some way be implicated

in the theft, made up its mind that the doting mother, hearing of her son's woeful want of money, stole the miniatures herself that night and gave them to him.

2

WHEN Lady Molly heard this theory she laughed, and shrugged her pretty shoulders.

"Old Mr. Frewin was dying, was he not, at the time of the burglary?" she said. "Why should his wife, soon to become his widow, take the trouble to go through a laboured and daring comedy of a burglary in order to possess herself of things which would become hers within the next few hours? Even if, after Mr. Frewin's death, she could not actually dispose of the miniatures, the old man left her a large sum of money and a big income by his will, with which she could help her spendthrift son as much as she pleased."

This was, of course, why the mystery in this strange case was so deep. At the Yard they did all that they could. Within forty-eight hours they had notices printed in almost every European language, which contained rough sketches of the stolen miniatures hastily supplied by Mrs. Frewin herself. These were sent to as many of the great museums and art collectors abroad as possible, and of course to the principal American cities and to American millionaires. There is no doubt that the thief would find it very difficult to dispose of the miniatures, and until he could sell them his booty would, of course, not benefit him in any way. Works of art cannot be tampered with, or melted down or taken to pieces, like silver or jewellery, and, so far as could be ascertained, the thief did not appear to make the slightest attempt to dispose of the booty, and the mystery became more dark, more impenetrable than ever.

"Will you undertake the job?" said the chief one day to Lady Molly.

"Yes," she replied, "on two distinct conditions."

"What are they?"

"That you will not bother me with useless questions, and that you will send out fresh notices to all the museums and art collectors you can think of, and request them to let you know of any art purchases they may have made within the last two years."

"The last two years!" ejaculated the chief, "why, the miniatures were only stolen three months ago."

"Did I not say that you were not to ask me useless questions?"

This to the chief, mind you; and he only smiled, whilst I nearly fell backwards at her daring. But he did send out the notices, and it was generally understood that Lady Molly now had charge of the case.

4

IT was about seven weeks later when, one morning, I found her at breakfast looking wonderfully bright and excited.

"The Yard has had sheaves of replies, Mary," she said gaily, "and the chief still thinks I am a complete fool."

"Why, what has happened?"

"Only this, that the art museum at Budapest has now in its possession a set of eight miniatures by Engleheart; but the authorities did not think that the first notices from Scotland Yard could possibly refer to these, as they had been purchased from a private source a little over two years ago."

"But two years ago the Frewin miniatures were still at Blatchley House, and Mr. Frewin was fingering them daily," I said, not understanding, and wondering what she was driving at.

"I know that," she said gaily, "so does the chief. That is why he thinks that I am a first-class idiot."

"But what do you wish to do now?"

"Go to Brighton, Mary, take you with me and try to elucidate the mystery of the Frewin miniatures."

"I don't understand," I gasped, bewildered.

"No, and you won't until we get there," she replied, running up to me and kissing me in her pretty, engaging way.

That same afternoon we went to Brighton and took up our abode at the Hotel Metropole. Now you know I always believed from the very first that she was a born lady and all the rest of it, but even I was taken aback at the number of acquaintances and smart friends she had all over the place. It was "Hello, Lady Molly! whoever would have thought of meeting you here?" and "Upon my word! this is good luck," all the time.

She smiled and chatted gaily with all the folk as if she had known them all her life, but I could easily see that none of these people knew that she had anything to do with the Yard.

Brighton is not such a very big place as one would suppose, and most of the fashionable residents of the gay city find their way sooner or later to the luxurious dining-room of the Hotel Metropole, if only for a quiet little dinner given when the cook is out. Therefore I was not a little surprised when, one evening, about a week after our arrival and just as we were sitting down to the table d'hôte dinner, Lady Molly suddenly placed one of her delicate hands on my arm.

"Look behind you, a little to your left, Mary, but not just this minute. When you do you will see two ladies and two gentlemen sitting at a small table quite close to us. They are Sir Michael and Lady Steyne, the Honourable Mrs. Frewin in deep black, and her son, Mr. Lionel Frewin."

I looked round as soon as I could, and gazed with some interest at the hero and heroine of the Blatchley House drama. We had a quiet little dinner, and Lady Molly having all of a sudden become very silent and self-possessed, altogether different from her gay, excited self of the past few days, I scented that something important was in the air, and tried to look as unconcerned as my lady herself. After dinner we ordered coffee, and as Lady Molly strolled through into the lounge, I noticed that she ordered our tray to be placed at a table which was in very close proximity to one already occupied by Lady Steyne and her party.

Lady Steyne, I noticed, gave Lady Molly a pleasant nod when we first came in, and Sir Michael got up and bowed, saying, "How d'ye do?" We sat down and began a desultory conversation together. Soon, as usual, we were joined by various friends and acquaintances who all congregated round our table and set themselves to entertaining us right pleasantly. Presently the conversation

drifted to art matter, Sir Anthony Truscott being there, who is, as you know, one of the keepers of the Art Department at South Kensington Museum.

"I am crazy about miniatures just now," said Lady Molly in response to a remark from Sir Anthony.

I tried not to look astonished.

"And Miss Granard and I," continued my lady, quite unblushingly, "have been travelling all over the Continent in order to try and secure some rare specimens."

"Indeed," said Sir Anthony. "Have you found anything very wonderful?"

"We certainly have discovered some rare works of art," replied Lady Molly, "have we not, Mary? Now the two Englehearts we bought at Budapest are undoubtedly quite unique."

"Engleheart — and at Budapest!" remarked Sir Anthony. "I thought I knew the collections at most of the great Continental cities, but I certainly have no recollection of such treasures in the Hungarian capital."

"Oh, they were only purchased two years ago, and have only been shown to the public recently," remarked Lady Molly. "There was originally a set of eight, so the comptroller, Mr. Pulszky, informed me. He bought them from an English collector whose name I have now forgotten, and he is very proud of them, but they cost the country a great deal more money than it could afford, and in order somewhat to recoup himself Mr. Pulszky sold two out of the eight at, I must say, a very stiff price."

While she was talking I could not help noticing the strange glitter in her eyes. Then a curious smothered sound broke upon my ear. I turned and saw Mrs. Frewin looking with glowing and dilated eyes at the charming picture presented by Lady Molly.

"I should like to show you my purchases," said the latter to Sir Anthony. "One or two foreign connoisseurs have seen the two miniatures and declare them to be the finest in existence. Mary," she added, turning to me, "would you be so kind as to run up to my room and get me the small sealed packet which is at the bottom of my dressing-case? Here are the keys."

A little bewildered, yet guessing by her manner that I had a part to play, I took the keys from her and went up to her room. In her dressing-case I certainly found a small, square, flat packet, and with that in my hand I prepared to go downstairs again. I had just locked the bedroom door when I was suddenly confronted by a tall, graceful woman dressed in deep black, whom I at once recognised as the Honourable Mrs. Frewin.

"You are Miss Granard?" she said quickly and excitedly; her voice was tremulous and she seemed a prey to the greatest possible excitement. Without waiting for my reply she continued eagerly:

"Miss Granard, there is no time to be more explicit, but I give you my word, the word of a very wretched, heart-broken woman, that my very life depends upon my catching a glimpse of the contents of the parcel that you now have in your hand."

"But—" I murmured, hopelessly bewildered.

"There is no 'but,'" she replied. "It is a matter of life and death. Here are £200, Miss Granard, if you will let me handle that packet," and with trembling hands she drew a bundle of bank-notes from her reticule.

I hesitated, not because I had any notion of acceding to Mrs. Frewin's request, but because I did not quite know how I ought to act at this strange juncture, when a pleasant, mellow voice broke in suddenly:

"You may take the money, Mary, if you wish. You have my permission to hand the packet over to this lady," and Lady Molly, charming, graceful and elegant in her beautiful *directoire* gown, stood smiling some few feet away, with Hankin just visible in the gloom of the corridor.

She advanced towards us, took the small packet from my hands, and held it out towards Mrs. Frewin.

"Will you open it?" she said, "or shall I?"

Mrs. Frewin did not move. She stood as if turned to stone. Then with dexterous fingers my lady broke the seals of the packet and drew from it a few sheets of plain white cardboard and a thin piece of match-boarding.

"There!" said Lady Molly, fingering the bits of cardboard while she kept her fine large eyes fixed on Mrs. Frewin; "£200 is a big price to pay for a sight of these worthless things."

"Then this was a vulgar trick," said Mrs. Frewin, drawing herself up with an air which did not affect Lady Molly in the least.

"A trick, certainly," she replied with her winning smile, "vulgar, if you will call it so — pleasant to us all, Mrs. Frewin, since you so readily fell into it."

"Well, and what are you going to do next?"

"Report the matter to my chief," said Lady Molly, quietly. "We have all been very severely blamed for not discovering sooner the truth about the disappearance of the Frewin miniatures."

"You don't know the truth now," retorted Mrs. Frewin.

"Oh, yes, I do," replied Lady Molly, still smiling. "I know that two years ago your son, Mr. Lionel Frewin, was in terrible monetary difficulties. There was something unavowable, which he dared not tell his father. You had to set to work to find money somehow. You had no capital at your own disposal, and you wished to save your son from the terrible consequences of his own folly. It was soon after M. de Colville's visit. Your husband had had his first apoplectic seizure; his mind and eyesight were somewhat impaired. You are a clever artist yourself, and you schemed out a plan whereby you carefully copied the priceless miniatures and then entrusted them to your son for sale to the Art Museum at Budapest, where there was but little likelihood of their being seen by anyone who knew they had belonged to your husband. English people do not stay more than one night there, at the Hotel Hungaria. Your copies were works of art in themselves, and you had no difficulty in deceiving your husband in the state of mind he then was, but when he lay dying you realised that his will would inevitably be proved, wherein he bequeathed the miniatures to Mr. James Hyam, and that these would have to be valued for probate. Frightened now that the substitution would be discovered, you devised the clever comedy of the burglary at Blatchley, which, in the circumstances, could never be brought home to you or your son. I don't know where you subsequently concealed the spurious Engleheart miniatures which you calmly took out of the library and hid away during the night of your husband's death, but no doubt our men will find that out," she added quietly, "now that they are on the track."

With a frightened shriek Mrs. Frewin turned as if she would fly, but Lady Molly was too quick for her, and barred the way. Then, with that wonderful charm of manner and that innate kindness which always characterised her, she took hold of the unfortunate

woman's wrist.

"Let me give you a word of advice," she said gently. "We at the Yard will be quite content with a confession from you, which will clear us of negligence and satisfy us that the crime has been brought home to its perpetrator. After that try and enter into an arrangement with your husband's legatee, Mr. James Hyam. Make a clean breast of the whole thing to him and offer him full monetary compensation. For the sake of the family he won't refuse. He would have nothing to gain by bruiting the whole thing abroad; and for his own sake and that of his late uncle, who was so good to him, I don't think you would find him hard to deal with."

Mrs. Frewin paused awhile, undecided and still defiant. Then her attitude softened; she turned and looked full at the beautiful, kind eyes turned eagerly up to hers, and pressing Lady Molly's tiny hand in both her own she whispered:

"I will take your advice. God bless you."

She was gone, and Lady Molly called Hankin to her side.

"Until we have that confession, Hankin," she said, with the quiet manner she always adopted where matters connected with her work were concerned, "Mum's the word."

"Ay, and after that, too, my lady," replied Hankin, earnestly.

You see, she could do anything she liked with the men, and I, of course, was her slave.

Now we have got the confession, Mrs. Frewin is on the best of terms with Mr. James Hyam, who has behaved very well about the whole thing, and the public has forgotten all about the mystery of the Frewin miniatures.

THE IRISH-TWEED COAT

It all began with the murder of Mr. Andrew Carrthwaite, at Palermo.

He had been found dead in the garden of his villa just outside the town, with a stiletto between his shoulder blades and a piece of rough Irish tweed, obviously torn from his assailant's coat, clutched tightly in his hand.

All that was known of Mr. Carrthwaite over here was that he was a Yorkshireman, owner of some marble works in Sicily, a man who employed a great many hands; and that, unlike most employers of labour over there, he had a perfect horror of the many secret societies and Socialist clubs which abound in that part of the world. He would not become a slave to the ever-growing tyranny of the Mafia and its kindred associations, and therefore he made it a hard and fast rule that no workman employed by him, from the foremost to the meanest hand, should belong to any society, club, or trade union of any sort or kind.

At first, robbery was thought to have been the sole object of the crime, for Mr. Carrthwaite's gold watch, marked with his initials "A. C.," and his chain were missing, but the Sicilian police were soon inclined to the belief that this was merely a blind, and that personal spite and revenge were at the bottom of that dastardly outrage.

One clue, remember, had remained in the possession of the authorities. This was the piece of rough Irish tweed, found in the murdered man's hand.

Within twenty-four hours a dozen witnesses were prepared to swear that that fragment of cloth was part of a coat habitually worn by Mr. Carrthwaite's English overseer, Mr. Cecil Shuttleworth. It appears that this young man had lately, in defiance of the rigid rules prescribed by his employer, joined a local society — semi-social, semi-religious — which came under the ban of the old Yorkshireman's prejudices.

Apparently there had been several bitter quarrels between Mr. Carrthwaite and young Shuttleworth, culminating in one tempestuous scene, witnessed by the former's servants at his villa; and although these people did not understand the actual words that passed between the two Englishmen, it was pretty clear that they amounted to an ultimatum on the one side and defiance on the other. The dismissal of the overseer followed immediately, and that same evening Mr. Carrthwaite was found murdered in his garden.

Mind you — according to English ideas — the preliminary investigations in that mysterious crime were hurried through in a manner which we should think unfair to the accused. It seemed from the first as if the Sicilian police had wilfully made up their minds that Shuttleworth was guilty. For instance, although so many people were prepared to swear that the young English overseer had often worn a coat of which the piece found in the murdered man's hand was undoubtedly a torn fragment, yet the coat itself was not found among his effects, neither were his late master's watch and chain.

Nevertheless, the young man was arrested within a few hours of the murder, and — after the formalities of the preliminary "instruction" — was duly committed to stand his trial on the capital charge.

It was about this time that I severed my official connection with the Yard. Lady Molly now employed me as her private secretary, and I was working with her one day in the study of our snug little flat in Maida Vale, when our trim servant came in to us with a card and a letter on a salver.

Lady Molly glanced at the card, then handed it across to me. It bore the name: Mr. Jeremiah Shuttleworth.

The letter was from the chief.

"Not much in it," she commented, glancing rapidly at its contents. "The chief only says, 'This is the father of the man who is charged with the Palermo murder. As obstinate as a mule, but you have my permission to do what he wants.' Emily, show the gentleman in," she added.

The next moment a short, thick-set man entered our little study. He had sandy hair and a freckled skin; there was a great look of determination in the square face and a fund of dogged obstinacy in the broad, somewhat heavy jaw. In response to Lady Molly's invitation he sat down and began with extraordinary abruptness:

"I suppose you know what I have come about — er — miss?" he suggested.

"Well!" she replied, holding up his own card, "I can guess."

"My son, miss — I mean ma'am," he said in a husky voice. "He is innocent. I swear it by the living—"

He checked himself, obviously ashamed of this outburst; then he resumed more calmly.

"Of course, there's the business about the coat, and that coat did belong to my son, but—"

"Well, yes?" asked Lady Molly, for he had paused again, as if waiting to be encouraged in his narrative, "what about that coat?"

"It has been found in London, miss," he replied quietly. "The fiendish brutes who committed the crime thought out this monstrous way of diverting attention from themselves by getting hold of my son's coat and making the actual assassin wear it, in case he was espied in the gloom."

There was silence in the little study for awhile. I was amazed, aghast at the suggestion put forward by that rough north-countryman, that sorely stricken father who spoke with curious intensity of language and of feeling. Lady Molly was the first to break the solemn silence.

"What makes you think, Mr. Shuttleworth, that the assassination of Mr. Carrthwaite was the work of a gang of murderers?" she asked.

"I know Sicily," he replied simply. "My boy's mother was a native of Messina. The place is riddled with secret societies, murdering, anarchical clubs: organisations against which Mr. Carrthwaite waged deadly warfare. It is one of these — the Mafia, probably — that decreed that Mr. Carrthwaite should be done away with. They could not do with such a powerful and hard-headed enemy."

"You may be right, Mr. Shuttleworth, but tell me more about the coat."

"Well, that'll be damning proof against the blackguards, anyway. I am on the eve of a second marriage, miss — ma'am," continued the man with seeming irrelevance. "The lady is a widow. Mrs. Tadworth is her name — but her father was an Italian named Badeni, a connection of my first wife's, and that's how I came to know him and his daughter. You know Leather Lane, don't you? It might be in Italy, for Italian's the only language one hears about there. Badeni owned a house in Bread Street, Leather Lane, and let lodgings to his

fellow-countrymen there; this business my future wife still carries on. About a week ago two men arrived at the house, father and son, so they said, who wanted a cheap bedroom; all their meals, including breakfast, they would take outside, and would be out, moreover, most of the day.

"It seems that they had often lodged at Badeni's before — the old reprobate no doubt was one of their gang — and when they understood that Mrs. Tadworth was their former friend's daughter they were quite satisfied.

"They gave their name as Piatti, and told Mrs. Tadworth that they came from Turin. But I happened to hear them talking on the stairs, and I knew that they were Sicilians, both of them.

"You may well imagine that just now everything hailing from Sicily is of vital importance to me, and somehow I suspected those two men from the very first. Mrs. Tadworth is quite at one with me in wanting to move heaven and earth to prove the innocence of my boy. She watched those people for me as a cat would watch a mouse. The older man professed to be very fond of gardening, and presently he obtained Mrs. Tadworth's permission to busy himself in the little strip of barren ground at the back of the house. This she told me last night whilst we were having supper together in her little parlour. Somehow I seemed to get an inspiration like. The Piattis had gone out together as usual for their evening meal. I got a spade and went out into the strip of garden, I worked for about an hour, and then my heart gave one big leap — my spade had met a certain curious, soft resistance — the next moment I was working away with hands and nails, and soon unearthed a coat — the coat, miss," he continued, unable now to control his excitement, "with the bit torn out of the back, and in the pocket the watch and chain belonging to the murdered man, for they bear the initials 'A. C.' The fiendish brutes! I knew it — I knew it, and now I can prove the innocence of my boy!"

Again there was a pause. I was too much absorbed in the palpitating narrative to attempt to breathe a word, and I knew that Lady Molly was placidly waiting until the man had somewhat recovered from his vehement outburst.

"Of course, you can prove your boy's innocence now," she said, smiling encouragingly into his flushed face. "But what have you done with the coat?"

"Left it buried where I found it," he replied more calmly. "They must not suspect that I am on their track."

She nodded approvingly.

"No doubt, then, my chief has told you that the best course to pursue now will be to place the whole matter in the hands of the English police. Our people at Scotland Yard will then immediately communicate with the Sicilian authorities, and in the meanwhile we can keep the two men in Leather Lane well under surveillance."

"Yes, he told me all that," said Mr. Shuttleworth, quietly.

"Well?"

"And I told him that his 'communicating with the Sicilian police authorities' would result in my boy's trial being summarily concluded, in his being sent to the gallows, whilst every proof of his innocence would be destroyed, or, at any rate, kept back until too late."

"You are mad, Mr. Shuttleworth!" she ejaculated.

"Maybe I am," he rejoined quietly. "You see, you do not know Sicily, and I do. You do not know its many clubs and bands of assassins, beside whom the so-called Russian Nihilists are simple, blundering children. The Mafia, which is the parent of all such murderous organisations, has members and agents in every town, village, and hamlet in Italy, in every post-office and barracks, in every trade and profession from the highest to the lowest in the land. The Sicilian police force is infested with it, so are the Italian customs. I would not trust either with what means my boy's life and more to me."

"But—"

"The police would suppress the evidence connected with the proofs which I hold. At the frontier the coat, the watch and chain would disappear; of that I am as convinced as that I am a living man—"

Lady Molly made no comment. She was meditating. That there was truth in what the man said, no one could deny.

The few details which we had gleaned over here of the hurried investigations, the summary commitment for trial of the accused, the hasty dismissal of all evidence in his favour, proved that, at any rate, the father's anxiety was well founded.

"But, then, what in the world do you propose to do?" said Lady Molly after a while. "Do you want to take the proofs over yourself to your boy's advocate? Is that it?"

"No, that would be no good," he replied simply. "I am known in Sicily. I should be watched, probably murdered, too, and my death would not benefit my boy."

"But what then?"

"My boy's uncle is chief officer of police at Cividale, on the Austro-Italian frontier. I know that I can rely on his devotion. Mrs. Tadworth, whose interest in my boy is almost equal to my own, and whose connection with me cannot possibly be known out there, will take the proofs of my boy's innocence to him. He will know what to do and how to reach my son's advocate safely, which no one else could guarantee to do."

"Well," said Lady Molly, "that being so, what is it that you want us to do in the matter?"

"I want a lady's help, miss — er — ma'am," he replied, "someone who is able, willing, strong, and, if possible, enthusiastic, to accompany Mrs. Tadworth — perhaps in the capacity of a maid — just to avert the usual suspicious glances thrown at a lady traveling alone. Also the question of foreign languages comes in. The gentleman I saw at Scotland Yard said that if you cared to go he would give you a fortnight's leave of absence."

"Yes, I'll go!" rejoined Lady Molly, simply.

We sat in the study a long while after that — Mr. Shuttleworth, Lady Molly and I — discussing the plans of the exciting journey; for I, too, as you will see, was destined to play my small part in this drama which had the life or death of an innocent man for its dénouement.

I don't think I need bore you with an account of our discussion; all, I think, that will interest you is the plan of campaign we finally decided upon.

There seemed to be no doubt that Mr. Shuttleworth had succeeded so far in not arousing the suspicions of the Piattis. Therefore, that night, when they were safely out of the way, Mr. Shuttleworth would once more unearth the coat, and watch and chain, and then bury a coat similar in colour and texture in that same hole in the ground; this might perhaps serve to put the miscreants off their guard, if by any chance one of them should busy himself again in the garden.

After that Mrs. Tadworth would hide about her the proofs of young Shuttleworth's innocence and join Lady Molly at our flat in Maida Vale, where she would spend the night preparatory to the two ladies leaving London for abroad, the following morning, by the 9.0 a.m. train from Charing Cross en route for Vienna, Budapest, and finally Cividale.

But our scheme was even more comprehensive than that and herein lay my own little share in it, of which I tell you presently.

The same evening at half-past nine Mrs. Tadworth arrived at the flat with the coat, and watch and chain, which were to be placed in the hands of Colonel Grassi, the chief police officer at Cividale.

I took a keen look at the lady, you may be sure of that. It was a pretty little face enough, and she herself could not have been much more than seven or eight and twenty, but to me the whole appearance and manner of the woman suggested weakness of character, rather than that devotion on which poor Mr. Shuttleworth so implicitly relied.

I suppose that it was on that account that I felt unaccountably down-hearted and anxious when I bade farewell to my own dear lady — a feeling in which she obviously did not share. Then I began to enact the rôle which had been assigned to me.

I dressed up in Mrs. Tadworth's clothes — we were about the same height — and putting on her hat and closely fitting veil, I set out for Leather Lane. For as many hours as I could possibly contrive to keep up the deception, I was to impersonate Mrs. Tadworth in her own house.

As I dare say you have guessed by now, that lady was not in affluent circumstances, and the house in a small by-street off Leather Lane did not boast of a staff of servants. In fact, Mrs. Tadworth did all the domestic work herself, with the help of a charwoman for a couple of hours in the mornings.

That charwoman had, in accordance with Lady Molly's plan, been given a week's wages in lieu of notice. I — as Mrs. Tadworth — would be supposed the next day to be confined to my room with a cold, and Emily — our own little maid, a bright girl, who would go through fire and water for Lady Molly or for me — would represent a new charwoman.

As soon as anything occurred to arouse my suspicions that our secret had been discovered, I was to wire to Lady Molly at the various points which she gave me.

Thus provided with an important and comprehensive part, I duly installed myself at Bread Street, Leather Lane. Emily — who had been told just enough of the story, and no more, to make her eager, excited and satisfied — entered into the spirit of her rôle as eagerly as I did myself.

That first night was quite uneventful. The Piattis came home some time after eleven and went straight up to their room.

Emily, looking as like a bedraggled charwoman as her trim figure would allow, was in the hall the next morning when the two men started off for breakfast. She told me afterwards that the younger one looked at her very keenly, and asked her why the other servant had gone. Emily replied with due and proper vagueness, whereupon the Sicilians said no more and went out together.

That was a long and wearisome day which I spent cooped up in the tiny, stuffy parlour, ceaselessly watching the tiny patch of ground at the back, devoured with anxiety, following the travellers in my mind on their way across Europe.

Towards midday one of the Piattis came home and presently strolled out into the garden. Evidently the change of servants had aroused his suspicions, for I could see him feeling about the earth with his spade and looking up now and again towards the window of the parlour, whereat I contrived to show him the form of a pseudo Mrs. Tadworth moving about the room.

Mr. Shuttleworth and I were having supper in that same back parlour at about nine o'clock on that memorable evening, when we suddenly heard the front door being opened with a latchkey, and then very cautiously shut again.

One of the two men had returned at an hour most unusual for their otherwise very regular habits. The way, too, in which the door had been opened and shut suggested a desire for secrecy and silence. Instinctively I turned off the gas in the parlour, and with a quick gesture pointed to the front room, the door of which stood open, and I whispered hurriedly to Mr. Shuttleworth.

"Speak to him!"

Fortunately, the great aim which he had in view had rendered his perceptions very keen.

He went into the front room, in which the gas, fortunately, was alight at the time, and opening the door which gave thence on to the passage, he said pleasantly:

"Oh, Mr. Piatti! is that you? Can I do any thing for you?"

"Ah, yes! zank you," replied the Sicilian, whose voice I could hear was husky and unsteady, "if you would be so kind — I — I feel so fainting and queer to-night — ze warm weazer, I zink. Would you — would you be so kind to fetch me a little — er — ammoniac — er — sal volatile you call it, I zink — from ze apothecary? I would go lie on my bed — if you would be so kind—"

"Why, of course I will, Mr. Piatti," said Mr. Shuttleworth, who somehow got an intuition of what I wanted to do, and literally played into my hands. "I'll go at once."

He went to get his hat from the rack in the hall whilst the Sicilian murmured profuse "Zank you's," and then I heard the front door bang to.

From where I was I could not see Piatti, but I imagined him standing in the dimly-lighted passage listening to Mr. Shuttleworth's retreating footsteps.

Presently I heard him walking along towards the back door, and soon I perceived something moving about in the little bit of ground beyond. He had gone to get his spade. He meant to unearth the coat and the watch and chain which, for some reason or another, he must have thought were no longer safe in their original hiding-place. Had the gang of murderers heard that the man who frequently visited their landlady was the father of Cecil Shuttleworth over at Palermo?

At that moment I paused neither to speculate nor yet to plan. I ran down to the kitchen, for I no longer wanted to watch Piatti. I knew what he was doing.

I didn't want to frighten Emily, and she had been made to understand all along that she might have to leave the house with me again at any time, at a moment's notice; she and I had kept our small handbag ready packed in the kitchen, whence we could reach the area steps quickly and easily.

Now I quietly beckoned to her that the time had come. She took the bag and followed me. Just as we shut the area gate behind us, we heard the garden door violently slammed. Piatti had got the coat, and by now was examining the pockets in order to find the watch and chain. Within the next ten seconds he would realise that the coat which he held was not the one which he had buried in the garden, and that the real proofs of his guilt — or his complicity in the guilt of another — had disappeared.

We did not wait for those ten seconds, but flew down Bread Street, in the direction of Leather Lane, where I knew Mr. Shuttleworth would be on the lookout for me.

"Yes," I said hurriedly, directly I spied him at the angle of the street; "it's all up. I am off to Budapest by the early Continental tomorrow morning. I shall catch them at the Hungaria. See Emily safely to the flat."

Obviously there was no time to lose, and before either Mr. Shuttleworth or Emily could make a remark I had left them standing, and had quickly mixed my insignificant personality with the passers-by.

I strolled down Leather Lane quite leisurely; you see, my face was unknown to the Piattis. They had only seen dim outlines of me behind very dirty window-panes.

I did not go to the flat. I knew Mr. Shuttleworth would take care of Emily, so that night I slept at the Grand Hotel, Charing Cross, leaving the next morning by the 9.0 a.m., having booked my berth on the Orient Express as far as Budapest.

3

WELL, you know the saying: It is easy to be wise after the event.

Of course, when I saw the older Piatti standing in the hall of the Hotel Hungaria at Budapest I realised that I had been followed from the moment that Emily and I ran out of the house at Bread Street. The son had obviously kept me in view whilst I was still in London, and the father had travelled across Europe, unperceived by me, in the same train as myself, had seen me step into the fiacre at Budapest, and heard me tell the smart coachman to drive to the Hungaria.

I made hasty arrangements for my room, and then asked if "Mrs. Carey," from London, was still at the hotel with her maid — for that was the name under which Mrs. Tadworth was to travel — and was answered in the affirmative. "Mrs. Carey" was even then supping in the dining-room, whence the strains of beautiful Hungarian melodies played by Berkes' inimitable band seemed to mock my anxiety.

"Mrs. Carey's maid," they told me, was having her meal in the steward's room.

I tried to prosecute my hasty inquiries as quietly as I could, but Piatti's eyes and sarcastic smile seemed to follow me everywhere, whilst he went about calmly ordering his room and seeing to the disposal of his luggage.

Almost every official at the Hungaria speaks English, and I had no difficulty in finding my way to the steward's room. To my chagrin Lady Molly was not there. Someone told me that no doubt "Mrs. Carey's maid" had gone back to her mistress's room, which they told me was No. 118 on the first floor.

A few precious moments were thus wasted whilst I ran back towards the hall; you know the long, seemingly interminable, corridors and passages of the Hungaria! Fortunately, in one of these I presently beheld my dear lady walking towards me. At sight of her all my anxieties seemed to fall from me like a discarded mantle.

She looked quite serene and placid, but with her own quick perception she at once guessed what had brought me to Budapest.

"They have found out about the coat," she said, quickly drawing me aside into one of the smaller passages, which fortunately at the moment was dark and deserted, "and, of course, he has followed you—"

I nodded affirmatively.

"That Mrs. Tadworth is a vapid, weak-kneed little fool," she said, with angry vehemence. "We ought to be at Cividale by now — and she declared herself too ill and too fatigued to continue the journey. How that poor Shuttleworth could be so blind as to trust her passes belief."

"Mary," she added more calmly, "go down into the hall at once. Watch that idiot of a woman for all you're worth. She is terrified of the Sicilians, and I firmly believe that Piatti can force her to give up the proofs of the crime to him."

"Where are they — the proofs, I mean?" I asked anxiously.

"Locked up in her trunk — she won't entrust them to me. Obstinate little fool."

I had never seen my dear lady so angry; however, she said nothing more then, and presently I took leave of her and worked my way back towards the hall. One glance round the brilliantly-lighted place assured me that neither Piatti nor Mrs. Tadworth was there. I could not tell you what it was that suddenly filled my heart with foreboding.

I ran up to the first floor and reached room No. 118. The outer door was open, and without a moment's hesitation I applied my eye to the keyhole of the inner one.

The room was brilliantly lighted from within, and exactly opposite, but with his back to me, stood Piatti, whilst squatting on a low stool beside him was Mrs. Tadworth.

A trunk stood open close to her hand, and she was obviously busy turning over its contents. My very heart stood still with horror. Was I about to witness — thus powerless to interfere — one of the most hideous acts of cowardly treachery it was possible to conceive?

Something, however, must at that moment have attracted Piatti's attention, for he suddenly turned and strode towards the door. Needless to say that I beat a hasty retreat.

My one idea was, of course, to find Lady Molly and tell her what I had seen. Unfortunately, the Hungaria is a veritable maze of corridors, stairs and passages, and I did not know the number of her room. At first I did not wish to attract further attention by again asking about "Mrs. Carey's maid" at the office, and my stupid ignorance of foreign languages precluded my talking to the female servants.

I had been up and down the stairs half a dozen times, tired, miserable, and anxious, when at last, in the far distance, I espied my dear lady's graceful silhouette. Eagerly I ran to her, and was promptly admonished for my careless impetuosity.

"Mrs. Tadworth is genuinely frightened," added Lady Molly in response to my look of painful suspense, "but so far she has been able to hoodwink Piatti by opening my trunk before him instead of hers, and telling him that the proofs were not in her own keeping. But she is too stupid to keep that deception up, and, of course, he won't allow himself to be put off a second time. We must start for Cividale as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the earliest train is not till 9.15 to-morrow morning. The danger to that unfortunate young man over at Palermo, brought about by this woman's cowardly idiocy and the father's misguided trust, is already incalculable."

It was, of course, useless for me to express fear now for my dear lady's safety. I smothered my anxiety as best I could, and, full of deadly forebodings, I bade her anon a fond good-night.

Needless to say that I scarcely slept, and at eight o'clock the next morning I was fully dressed and out of my room.

The first glance down the corridor on which gave No. 118 at once confirmed my worst fears. Unusual bustle reigned there at this early hour. Officials came and went, maids stood about gossiping, and the next moment, to my literally agonised horror, I beheld two gendarmes, with an officer, being escorted by the hotel manager to the rooms occupied by Mrs. Tadworth and Lady Molly.

Oh, how I cursed then our British ignorance of foreign tongues. The officials were too busy to bother about me, and the maids only knew that portion of the English language which refers to baths and to hot water. Finally, to my intense relief, I discovered a willing porter, ready and able to give me information in my own tongue of the events which had disturbed the serene quietude of the Hotel Hungaria.

Great heavens! Shall I ever forget what I endured when I grasped the full meaning of what he told me with a placid smile and a shrug of the shoulders!

"The affair is most mysterious," he explained, "not robbery — oh, no! no! — for it is Mrs. Carey, who has gone — disappeared! And it is Mrs. Carey's maid who was found, stunned, gagged and unconscious, tied to one of the bedposts in room No. 118."

4

WELL, why should I bore you by recounting the agonised suspense, the mortal anxiety, which I endured for all those subsequent weary days which at the time seemed like so many centuries?

My own dear lady, the woman for whom I would have gone through fire and water with a cheerful smile, had been brutally assaulted, almost murdered, so the smiling porter assured me, and my very existence was ignored by the stolid officials, who looked down upon me with a frown of impassive disapproval whilst I entreated, raged and stormed alternately, begging to be allowed to go and nurse the sick lady, who was my own dearest friend, dearer than any child could be to its mother.

Oh, that awful red tapeism that besets one at every turn, paralyses and disheartens one! What I suffered I really could not describe.

But if I was not allowed to see Lady Molly, at least I was able to wreak vengeance upon her cowardly assailants. Mrs. Tadworth, by her disappearance, had tacitly confessed her participation in the outrage, of that I had no doubt, but I was equally certain that she was both too stupid and too weak to commit such a crime unaided.

Piatti was at the bottom of it all. Without a moment's hesitation I laid information against him through the medium of an interpreter. I accused him boldly of being an accessory to the assault for purposes of robbery. Unswervingly I repeated my story of how I had seen him in close conversation the day before with Mrs. Carey, whose real name I declared to be Mrs. Tadworth.

The chief object of the robbery I suggested to be a valuable gold watch and chain, with initials "A. C.," belonging to my friend, who had travelled with Mrs. Carey to Budapest as her companion, not her maid. This was a bold move on my part, and I felt reckless, I can tell you. Fortunately, my story was corroborated by the fact that the floor valet had seen Piatti hanging about the corridor outside No. 118 at an extraordinarily early hour of the morning. My firm belief was that the wretch had been admitted into the room by that horrid Mrs. Tadworth. He had terrorised her, probably had threatened her life. She had then agreed out of sheer cowardice to deliver to him the proofs of his own guilt in the Palermo murder case, and when Lady Molly, hearing the voices, came out of her own room, Piatti knocked her down lest she should intervene. Mrs. Tadworth thereupon — weak and silly little fool! — was seized with panic, and succeeded, no doubt with his help, in leaving the hotel, and probably Budapest, before the outrage was discovered.

Why Piatti had not done likewise, I could not conjecture. He seems to have gone back quietly to his own room after that; and it was not till an hour later that the chambermaid, surprised at seeing the door of No. 118 slightly ajar, had peeped in, and there was greeted by the awful sight of "the maid," gagged, bound and unconscious.

Well, I gained my wish, and had the satisfaction presently of knowing that Piatti — although, mind you, he emphatically denied my story from beginning to end — had been placed under arrest pending further inquiries.

The British Consul was very kind to me; though I was not allowed to see my dear lady, who had been removed to the hospital. I heard that the Hungarian police were moving heaven and earth to find "Mrs. Carey" and bring her to justice.

Her disappearance told severely against her, and after three days of such intense anxiety as I never wish to live through again, I received a message from the Consulate informing me that "Mrs. Carey" had been arrested at Alsórév, on the Austro-Hungarian frontier, and was even now on her way to Budapest under escort.

You may imagine how I quivered with anxiety and with rage when, on the morning after that welcome news, I was told that "Mrs. Carey" was detained at the gendarmerie, and had asked to see Miss Mary Granard from London, at present residing at the Hotel Hungaria.

The impudent wretch! Wanting to see me, indeed! Well, I, too, wanted to see her; the woman whom I despised as a coward and a traitor; who had betrayed the fond and foolish trust of a stricken father; who had dashed the last hopes of an innocent man in danger of

his life; and who, finally, had been the cause of an assault that had all but killed, perhaps, the woman I loved best in the world.

I felt like the embodiment of hate and contempt. I loathed the woman, and I hid me in a fiacre to the gendarmerie, escorted by one of the clerks from the Consulate, simply thirsting with the desire to tell an ignoble female exactly what I thought of her.

I had to wait some two or three minutes in the bare, barrack-like room of the gendarmerie; then the door opened, there was a rustle of silk, followed by the sound of measured footsteps of soldiery, and the next moment Lady Molly, serene and placid and, as usual, exquisitely dressed, stood smiling before me.

"You have got me into this plight, Mary," she said, with her merry laugh; "you'll have to get me out of it again."

"But — I don't understand," was all that I could gasp.

"It is very simple, and I'll explain it all fully when we are on our way home to Maida Vale," she said. "For the moment you and Mrs. Tadworth will have to make sundry affidavits that I did not assault my maid nor rob her of a watch and chain. The British Consul will help you, and it is only a question of days, and in the meanwhile I may tell you that Budapest prison life is quite interesting, and not so uncomfortable as one would imagine."

Of course, the moment she spoke I got an intuition of what had really occurred, and I can assure you that I was heartily ashamed that I should ever have doubted Lady Molly's cleverness in carrying through successfully so important, so vital a business as the righting of an innocent man.

Mrs. Tadworth was pusillanimous and stupid. At Budapest she cried a halt, for she really felt unstrung and ill after the hurried journey, the change of air and food, and what not. Lady Molly, however, had no difficulty in persuading her that during the enforced stay of twenty-four hours at the Hungaria their two rôles should be reversed. Lady Molly would be "Mrs. Carey," coming from England, whilst Mrs. Tadworth would be the maid.

My dear lady — not thinking at the time that my knowledge of this fact would be of any importance to her own plans — had not mentioned it to me during the brief interview which I had with her. Then, when Piatti arrived upon the scene, Mrs. Tadworth got into a real panic. Fortunately, she had the good sense, or the cowardice, then and there to entrust the coat and watch and chain to Lady Molly, and when Piatti followed her into her room she was able to show him that the proofs were not then in her possession. This was the scene which I had witnessed through the keyhole.

But, of course, the Sicilian would return to the charge, and equally, of course, Mrs. Tadworth would sacrifice the Shuttleworths, father and son, to save her own skin. Lady Molly knew that. She is strong, active and determined; she had a brief hand-to-hand struggle with Mrs. Tadworth that night, and finally succeeded in tying her, half unconscious, to the bedpost, thus assuring herself that for at least twenty-four hours that vapid little fool would be unable to either act for herself or to betray my dear, intrepid lady's plans.

When, the following morning, Piatti opened the door of No. 118, which had purposely been left on the latch, he was greeted with the sight of Mrs. Tadworth pinioned and half dead with fear, whilst the valuable proofs of his own guilt and young Shuttleworth's innocence had completely disappeared.

For remember that Lady Molly's face was not known to him or to his gang, and she had caught the first train to Cividale even whilst Piatti still believed that he held that silly Mrs. Tadworth in the hollow of his hand. I may as well tell you here that she reached the frontier safely, and was quite sharp enough to seek out Colonel Grassi and, with the necessary words of explanation, to hand over to him the proofs of young Shuttleworth's innocence.

My action in the matter helped her. At the hotel she was supposed to be the mistress and Mrs. Tadworth the maid, and everyone was told that "Mrs. Carey's maid" had been assaulted, and removed to the hospital. But I denounced Piatti then and there, thinking he had attacked my dear lady, and I got him put under lock and key so quickly that he had not the time to communicate with his associates.

Thanks to Colonel Grassi's exertions, young Shuttleworth was acquitted of the charge of murder; but I may as well tell you here that neither Piatti nor his son, nor any of that gang, were arrested for the crime. The proofs of their guilt — the Irish-tweed coat and the murdered man's watch and chain — were most mysteriously suppressed, after young Shuttleworth's advocate had obtained the verdict of "not guilty" for him.

Such is the Sicilian police. Mr. Shuttleworth, senior, evidently knew what he was talking about.

Of course, we had no difficulty in obtaining Lady Molly's release. The British Consul saw to that. But in Budapest they still call the assault on "Mrs. Carey" at the Hotel Hungaria a mystery, for she exonerated Lady Molly fully, but she refused to accuse Piatti. She was afraid of him, of course, and so they had to set him free.

I wonder where he is now, the wicked old wretch!

THE FORDWYCH CASTLE MYSTERY

CAN you wonder that, when some of the ablest of our fellows at the Yard were at their wits' ends to know what to do, the chief instinctively turned to Lady Molly?

Surely the Fordwych Castle Mystery, as it was universally called, was a case which more than any other required feminine tact, intuition, and all those qualities of which my dear lady possessed more than her usual share.

With the exception of Mr. McKinley, the lawyer, and young Jack d'Alboukirk, there were only women connected with the case.

If you have studied Debrett at all, you know as well as I do that the peerage is one of those old English ones which date back some six hundred years, and that the present Lady d'Alboukirk is a baroness in her own right, the title and estates descending to heirs-general. If you have perused that same interesting volume carefully, you will also have discovered that the late Lord d'Alboukirk had two daughters, the eldest, Clementina Cecilia — the present Baroness, who succeeded him — the other, Margaret Florence, who married in 1884 Jean Laurent Duplessis, a Frenchman whom Debrett vaguely describes as "of Pondicherry, India," and of whom she had issue two daughters, Henriette Marie, heir now to the ancient barony of d'Alboukirk of Fordwych, and Joan, born two years later.

There seems to have been some mystery or romance attached to this marriage of the Honourable Margaret Florence d'Alboukirk to the dashing young officer of the Foreign Legion. Old Lord d'Alboukirk at the time was British Ambassador in Paris, and he seems to have had grave objections to the union, but Miss Margaret, openly flouting her father's displeasure, and throwing prudence to the winds, ran away from home one fine day with Captain Duplessis, and from Pondicherry wrote a curt letter to her relatives telling them of her marriage with the man she loved best in all the world. Old Lord d'Alboukirk never got over his daughter's wilfulness. She had been his favourite, it appears, and her secret marriage and deceit practically broke his heart. He was kind to her, however, to the end, and when the first baby girl was born and the young pair seemed to be in straitened circumstances, he made them an allowance until the day of his daughter's death, which occurred three years after her elopement, on the birth of her second child.

When, on the death of her father, the Honourable Clementina Cecilia came into the title and fortune, she seemed to have thought it her duty to take some interest in her late sister's eldest child, who, failing her own marriage, and issue, was heir to the barony of d'Alboukirk. Thus it was that Miss Henriette Marie Duplessis came, with her father's consent, to live with her aunt at Fordwych Castle. Debrett will tell you, moreover, that in 1901 she assumed the name of d'Alboukirk, in lieu of her own, by royal licence. Failing her, the title and estate would devolve firstly on her sister Joan, and subsequently on a fairly distant cousin, Captain John d'Alboukirk, at present a young officer in the Guards.

According to her servants, the present Baroness d'Alboukirk is very self-willed, but otherwise neither more nor less eccentric than any north-country old maid would be who had such an exceptional position to keep up in the social world. The one soft trait in her otherwise not very lovable character is her great affection for her late sister's child. Miss Henriette Duplessis d'Alboukirk has inherited from her French father dark eyes and hair and a somewhat swarthy complexion, but no doubt it is from her English ancestry that she has derived a somewhat masculine frame and a very great fondness for all outdoor pursuits. She is very athletic, knows how to fence and to box, rides to hounds, and is a remarkably good shot.

From all accounts, the first hint of trouble in that gorgeous home was coincident with the arrival at Fordwych of a young, very pretty girl visitor, who was attended by her maid, a half-caste woman, dark-complexioned and surly of temper, but obviously of dog-like devotion towards her young mistress. This visit seems to have come as a surprise to the entire household at Fordwych Castle, her ladyship having said nothing about it until the very morning that the guests were expected. She then briefly ordered one of the housemaids to get a bedroom ready for a young lady, and to put up a small camp-bedstead in an adjoining dressing-room. Even Miss Henriette seems to have been taken by surprise at the announcement of this visit, for, according to Jane Taylor, the housemaid in question, there was a violent word-passage between the old lady and her niece, the latter winding up an excited speech with the words:

"At any rate, aunt, there won't be room for both of us in this house!" After which she flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her.

Very soon the household was made to understand that the newcomer was none other than Miss Joan Duplessis, Miss Henriette's younger sister. It appears that Captain Duplessis had recently died in Pondicherry, and that the young girl then wrote to her aunt, Lady d'Alboukirk, claiming her help and protection, which the old lady naturally considered it her duty to extend to her.

It appears that Miss Joan was very unlike her sister, as she was petite and fair, more English-looking than foreign, and had pretty, dainty ways which soon endeared her to the household. The devotion existing between her and the half-caste woman she had brought from India was, moreover, unique.

It seems, however, that from the moment these newcomers came into the house, dissensions, often degenerating into violent quarrels, became the order of the day. Henriette seemed to have taken a strong dislike to her younger sister, and most particularly to the latter's dark attendant, who was vaguely known in the house as Roonah.

That some events of serious import were looming ahead, the servants at Fordwych were pretty sure. The butler and footmen at dinner heard scraps of conversation which sounded very ominous. There was talk of "lawyers," of "proofs," of "marriage and birth certificates," quickly suppressed when the servants happened to be about. Her ladyship looked terribly anxious and worried, and she and Miss Henriette spent long hours closeted together in a small boudoir, whence proceeded ominous sounds of heartrending weeping on her ladyship's part, and angry and violent words from Miss Henriette.

Mr. McKinley, the eminent lawyer from London, came down two or three times to Fordwych, and held long conversations with her ladyship, after which the latter's eyes were very swollen and red. The household thought it more than strange that Roonah, the Indian servant, was almost invariably present at these interviews between Mr. McKinley, her ladyship, and Miss Joan. Otherwise the woman kept herself very much aloof; she spoke very little, hardly took any notice of anyone save of her ladyship and her young mistress, and the outbursts of Miss Henriette's temper seemed to leave her quite unmoved. A strange fact was that she had taken a sudden and great fancy for frequenting a small Roman Catholic convent chapel which was distant about half a mile from the Castle, and presently it was understood that Roonah, who had been a Parsee, had been converted by the attendant priest to the Roman Catholic faith.

All this happened, mind you, within the last two or three months; in fact, Miss Joan had been in the Castle exactly twelve weeks when Captain Jack d'Alboukirk came to pay his cousin one of his periodical visits. From the first he seems to have taken a great fancy to his cousin Joan, and soon everyone noticed that this fancy was rapidly ripening into love. It was equally certain that from that moment dissensions between the two sisters became more frequent and more violent; the generally accepted opinion being that Miss Henriette was jealous of Joan, whilst Lady d'Alboukirk herself, for some unexplainable reason, seems to have regarded this love-making with marked disfavour.

Then came the tragedy.

One morning Joan ran downstairs, pale, and trembling from head to foot, moaning and sobbing as she ran:

"Roonah! — my poor old Roonah! — I knew it — I knew it!"

Captain Jack happened to meet her at the foot of the stairs. He pressed her with questions, but the girl was unable to speak. She merely pointed mutely to the floor above. The young man, genuinely alarmed, ran quickly upstairs; he threw open the door leading to Roonah's room, and there, to his horror, he saw the unfortunate woman lying across the small camp-bedstead, with a handkerchief over her nose and mouth, her throat cut.

The sight was horrible.

Poor Roonah was obviously dead.

Without losing his presence of mind, Captain Jack quietly shut the door again, after urgently begging Joan to compose herself, and try to keep up, at any rate until the local doctor could be sent for and the terrible news gently broken to Lady d'Alboukirk.

The doctor, hastily summoned, arrived some twenty minutes later. He could but confirm Joan's and Captain Jack's fears. Roonah was indeed dead — in fact, she had been dead some hours.

2

FROM the very first, mind you, the public took a more than usually keen interest in this mysterious occurrence. The evening papers on the very day of the murder were ablaze with flaming headlines such as:

THE TRAGEDY AT FORDWYCH CASTLE MYSTERIOUS MURDER OF AN IMPORTANT WITNESS GRAVE CHARGES AGAINST PERSONS IN HIGH LIFE

and so forth.

As time went on, the mystery deepened more and more, and I suppose Lady Molly must have had an inkling that sooner or later the chief would have to rely on her help and advice, for she sent me down to attend the inquest, and gave me strict orders to keep eyes and ears open for every detail in connection with the crime — however trivial it might seem. She herself remained in town, awaiting a summons from the chief.

The inquest was held in the dining-room of Fordwych Castle, and the noble hall was crowded to its utmost when the coroner and jury finally took their seats, after having viewed the body of the poor murdered woman upstairs.

The scene was dramatic enough to please any novelist, and an awed hush descended over the crowd when, just before the proceedings began, a door was thrown open, and in walked — stiff and erect — the Baroness d'Alboukirk, escorted by her niece, Miss Henriette, and closely followed by her cousin, Captain Jack, of the Guards.

The old lady's face was as indifferent and haughty as usual, and so was that of her athletic niece. Captain Jack, on the other hand, looked troubled and flushed. Everyone noted that, directly he entered the room, his eyes sought a small, dark figure that sat silent and immovable beside the portly figure of the great lawyer, Mr. Hubert McKinley. This was Miss Joan Duplessis, in a plain black stuff gown, her young face pale and tear-stained.

Dr. Walker, the local practitioner, was, of course, the first witness called. His evidence was purely medical. He deposed to having made an examination of the body, and stated that he found that a handkerchief saturated with chloroform had been pressed to the woman's nostrils, probably while she was asleep, her throat having subsequently been cut with a sharp knife; death must have been instantaneous, as the poor thing did not appear to have struggled at all.

In answer to a question from the coroner, the doctor said that no great force or violence would be required for the gruesome deed, since the victim was undeniably unconscious when it was done. At the same time it argued unusual coolness and determination.

The handkerchief was produced, also the knife. The former was a bright-coloured one, stated to be the property of the deceased. The latter was a foreign, old-fashioned hunting-knife, one of a panoply of small arms and other weapons which adorned a corner of the hall. It had been found by Detective Elliott in a clump of gorse on the adjoining golf links. There could be no question that it had been used by the murderer for his fell purpose, since at the time it was found it still bore traces of blood.

Captain Jack was the next witness called. He had very little to say, as he merely saw the body from across the room, and immediately closed the door again and, having begged his cousin to compose herself, called his own valet and sent him off for the doctor.

Some of the staff of Fordwych Castle were called, all of whom testified to the Indian woman's curious taciturnity, which left her quite isolated among her fellow-servants. Miss Henriette's maid, however, Jane Partlett, had one or two more interesting facts to record. She seems to have been more intimate with the deceased woman than anyone else, and on one occasion, at least, had quite a confidential talk with her.

"She talked chiefly about her mistress," said Jane, in answer to a question from the coroner, "to whom she was most devoted. She told me that she loved her so, she would readily die for her. Of course, I thought that silly like, and just mad, foreign talk, but Roonah was very angry when I laughed at her, and then she undid her dress in front, and showed me some papers which were sewn in the lining of her dress. 'All these papers my little missee's fortune,' she said to me. 'Roonah guard these with her life. Someone must kill Roonah before taking them from her!'"

"This was about six weeks ago," continued Jane, whilst a strange feeling of awe seemed to descend upon all those present whilst the girl spoke. "Lately she became much more silent, and, on my once referring to the papers, she turned on me savage like and told me to hold my tongue."

Asked if she had mentioned the incident of the papers to anyone, Jane replied in the negative.

"Except to Miss Henriette, of course," she added, after a slight moment of hesitation.

Throughout all these preliminary examinations Lady d'Alboukirk, sitting between her cousin Captain Jack and her niece Henriette, had remained quite silent in an erect attitude expressive of haughty indifference. Henriette, on the other hand, looked distinctly bored. Once or twice she had yawned audibly, which caused quite a feeling of anger against her among the spectators. Such callousness in the midst of so mysterious a tragedy, and when her own sister was obviously in such deep sorrow, impressed everyone very unfavourably. It was well known that the young lady had had a fencing lesson just before the inquest in the room immediately below that where Roonah lay dead, and that within an hour of the discovery of the tragedy she was calmly playing golf.

Then Miss Joan Duplessis was called.

When the young girl stepped forward there was that awed hush in the room which usually falls upon an attentive audience when the curtain is about to rise on the crucial act of a dramatic play. But she was calm and self-possessed, and wonderfully pathetic-looking in her deep black and with the obvious lines of sorrow which the sad death of a faithful friend had traced on her young face.

In answer to the coroner, she gave her name as Joan Clarissa Duplessis, and briefly stated that until the day of her servant's death she had been a resident at Fordwych Castle, but that since then she had left that temporary home, and had taken up her abode at the d'Alboukirk Arms, a quiet little hostelry on the outskirts of the town.

There was a distinct feeling of astonishment on the part of those who were not aware of this fact, and then the coroner said kindly:

"You were born, I think, in Pondicherry, in India, and are the younger daughter of Captain and Mrs. Duplessis, who was own sister to her ladyship?"

"I was born in Pondicherry," replied the young girl, quietly, "and I am the only legitimate child of the late Captain and Mrs. Duplessis, own sister to her ladyship."

A wave of sensation, quickly suppressed by the coroner, went through the crowd at these words. The emphasis which the witness had put on the word "legitimate" could not be mistaken, and everyone felt that here must lie the clue to these far impenetrable, mystery of the Indian woman's death.

All eyes were now turned on old Lady d'Alboukirk and on her niece Henriette, but the two ladies were carrying on a whispered conversation together, and had apparently ceased to take any further interest in the proceedings.

"The deceased was your confidential maid, was she not?" asked the coroner, after a slight pause.

"Yes."

"She came over to England with you recently?"

"Yes; she had to accompany me in order to help me to make good my claim to being my late mother's only legitimate child, and therefore the heir to the barony of d'Alboukirk."

Her voice had trembled a little as she said this, but now, as breathless silence reigned in the room, she seemed to make a visible effort to control herself, and, replying to the coroner's question, she gave a clear and satisfactory account of her terrible discovery of her faithful servant's death. Her evidence had lasted about a quarter of an hour or so, when suddenly the coroner put the momentous question to her:

"Do you know anything about the papers which the deceased woman carried about her person, and reference to which has already been made?"

"Yes," she replied quietly; "they were the proofs relating to my claim. My father, Captain Duplessis, had in early youth, and before he met my mother, contracted a secret union with a half-caste woman, who was Roonah's own sister. Being tired of her, he chose to repudiate her — she had no children — but the legality of the marriage was never for a moment in question. After that, he married my mother, and his first wife subsequently died, chiefly of a broken heart; but her death only occurred two months after the birth of my sister Henriette. My father, I think, had been led to believe that his first wife had died some two years previously, and he was no doubt very much shocked when he realised what a grievous wrong he had done our mother. In order to mend matters somewhat, he and she went through a new form of marriage — a legal one this time — and my father paid a lot of money to Roonah's relatives to have the matter hushed up. Less than a year after this second — and only legal — marriage, I was born and my mother died."

"Then these papers of which so much has been said — what did they consist of?"

"There were the marriage certificates of my father's first wife — and two sworn statements as to her death, two months after the birth of my sister Henriette; one by Dr. Renaud, who was at the time a well-known medical man in Pondicherry, and the other by Roonah herself, who had held her dying sister in her arms. Dr. Renaud is dead, and now Roonah has been murdered, and all the proofs have gone with her—"

Her voice broke in a passion of sobs, which, with manifest self-control, she quickly suppressed. In that crowded court you could have heard a pin drop, so great was the tension of intense excitement and attention.

"Then those papers remained in your maid's possession? Why was that?" asked the coroner.

"I did not dare to carry the papers about with me," said the witness, while a curious look of terror crept into her young face as she looked across at her aunt and sister. "Roonah would not part with them. She carried them in the lining of her dress, and at night they were all under her pillow. After her — her death, and when Dr. Walker had left, I thought it my duty to take possession of the papers

which meant my whole future to me, and which I desired then to place in Mr. McKinley's charge. But, though I carefully searched the bed and all the clothing by my poor Roonah's side, I did not find the papers. They were gone."

I won't attempt to describe to you the sensation caused by the deposition of this witness. All eyes wandered from her pale young face to that of her sister, who sat almost opposite to her, shrugging her athletic shoulders and gazing at the pathetic young figure before her with callous and haughty indifference.

"Now, putting aside the question of the papers for the moment," said the coroner, after a pause, "do you happen to know anything of your late servant's private life? Had she an enemy, or perhaps a lover?"

"No," replied the girl; "Roonah's whole life was centred in me and in my claim. I had often begged her to place our papers in Mr. McKinley's charge, but she would trust no one. I wish she had obeyed me," here moaned the poor girl involuntarily, "and I should not have lost what means my whole future to me, and the being who loved me best in all the world would not have been so foully murdered."

Of course, it was terrible to see this young girl thus instinctively, and surely unintentionally, proffering so awful an accusation against those who stood so near to her. That the whole case had become hopelessly involved and mysterious, nobody could deny. Can you imagine the mental picture formed in the mind of all present by the story, so pathetically told, of this girl who had come over to England in order to make good her claim which she felt to be just, and who, in one fell swoop, saw that claim rendered very difficult to prove through the dastardly murder of her principal witness?

That the claim was seriously jeopardised by the death of Roonah and the disappearance of the papers, was made very clear, mind you, through the statements of Mr. McKinley, the lawyer. He could not say very much, of course, and his statements could never have been taken as actual proof, because Roonah and Joan had never fully trusted him and had never actually placed the proofs of the claim in his hands. He certainly had seen the marriage certificate of Captain Duplessis's wife, and a copy of this, as he very properly stated, could easily be obtained. The woman seems to have died during the great cholera epidemic of 1881, when, owing to the great number of deaths which occurred, the deceit and concealment practised by the natives at Pondicherry, and the supineness of the French Government, death certificates were very casually and often incorrectly made out.

Roonah had come over to England ready to swear that her sister had died in her arms two months after the birth of Captain Duplessis's eldest child, and there was the sworn testimony of Dr. Rénaud, since dead. These affidavits Mr. McKinley had seen and read.

Against that, the only proof which now remained of the justice of Joan Duplessis's claim was the fact that her mother and father went through a second form of marriage some time after the birth of their first child, Henriette. This fact was not denied, and, of course, it could be easily proved, if necessary, but even then it would in no way be conclusive. It implied the presence of a doubt in Captain Duplessis's mind, a doubt which the second marriage ceremony may have served to set at rest; but it in no way established the illegitimacy of his eldest daughter.

In fact, the more Mr. McKinley spoke, the more convinced did everyone become that the theft of the papers had everything to do with the murder of the unfortunate Roonah. She would not part with the proofs which meant her mistress's fortune, and she paid for her devotion with her life.

Several more witnesses were called after that. The servants were closely questioned, the doctor was recalled, but, in spite of long and arduous efforts, the coroner and jury could not bring a single real fact to light beyond those already stated.

The Indian woman had been murdered!

The papers which she always carried about her body had disappeared.

Beyond that, nothing! An impenetrable wall of silence and mystery!

The butler at Fordwych Castle had certainly missed the knife with which Roonah had been killed from its accustomed place on the morning after the murder had been committed, but not before, and the mystery further gained in intensity from the fact that the only purchase of chloroform in the district had been traced to the murdered woman herself.

She had gone down to the local chemist one day some two or three weeks previously, and shown him a prescription for cleansing the hair which required some chloroform in it. He gave her a very small quantity in a tiny bottle, which was subsequently found empty on her own dressing-table. No one at Fordwych Castle could swear to having heard any unaccustomed noise during that memorable night. Even Joan, who slept in the room adjoining that where the unfortunate Roonah lay, said she had heard nothing unusual. But then, the door of communication between the two rooms was shut, and the murderer had been quick and silent.

Thus this extraordinary inquest drew to a close, leaving in its train an air of dark suspicion and of unexplainable horror.

The jury returned a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and the next moment Lady d'Alboukirk rose, and, leaning on her niece's arm, quietly walked out of the room.

TWO of our best men from the Yard, Pegram and Elliott, were left in charge of the case. They remained at Fordwych (the little town close by), as did Miss Joan, who had taken up her permanent abode at the d'Alboukirk Arms, whilst I returned to town immediately after the inquest. Captain Jack had rejoined his regiment, and apparently the ladies of the Castle had resumed their quiet, luxurious life just the same as heretofore. The old lady led her own somewhat isolated, semi-regal life; Miss Henriette fenced and boxed, played hockey and golf, and over the fine Castle and its haughty inmates there hovered like an ugly bird of prey the threatening presence of a nameless suspicion.

The two ladies might choose to flout public opinion, but public opinion was dead against them. No one dared formulate a charge, but everyone remembered that Miss Henriette had, on the very morning of the murder, been playing golf in the field where the knife was discovered, and that if Miss Joan Duplessis ever failed to make good her claim to the barony of d'Alboukirk, Miss Henriette would remain in undisputed possession. So now, when the ladies drove past in the village street, no one doffed a cap to salute them,

and when at church the parson read out the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt do no murder," all eyes gazed with fearsome awe at the old Baroness and her niece.

Splendid isolation reigned at Fordwych Castle. The daily papers grew more and more sarcastic at the expense of the Scotland Yard authorities, and the public more and more impatient.

Then it was that the chief grew desperate and sent for Lady Molly, the result of the interview being that I once more made the journey down to Fordwych, but this time in the company of my dear lady, who had received carte blanche from headquarters to do whatever she thought right in the investigation of the mysterious crime.

She and I arrived at Fordwych at 8.0 p.m., after the usual long wait at Newcastle. We put up at the d'Alboukirk Arms, and, over a hasty and very bad supper, Lady Molly allowed me a brief insight into her plans.

"I can see every detail of that murder, Mary," she said earnestly, "just as if I had lived at the Castle all the time. I know exactly where our fellows are wrong, and why they cannot get on. But, although the chief has given me a free hand, what I am going to do is so irregular that if I fail I shall probably get my immediate congé, whilst some of the disgrace is bound to stick to you. It is not too late — you may yet draw back, and leave me to act alone."

I looked her straight in the face. Her dark eyes were gleaming; there was the power of second sight in them, or of marvelous intuition of "men and things."

"I'll follow your lead, my Lady Molly," I said quietly.

"Then go to bed now," she replied, with that strange transition of manner which to me was so attractive and to everyone else so unaccountable.

In spite of my protest, she refused to listen to any more talk or to answer any more questions, and, perforce, I had to go to my room. The next morning I saw her graceful figure, immaculately dressed in a perfect tailor-made gown, standing beside my bed at a very early hour.

"Why, what is the time?" I ejaculated, suddenly wide awake.

"Too early for you to get up," she replied quietly. "I am going to early Mass at the Roman Catholic convent close by."

"To Mass at the Roman Catholic convent?"

"Yes. Don't repeat all my words, Mary; it is silly, and wastes time. I have introduced myself in the neighbourhood as the American, Mrs. Silas A. Ogen, whose motor has broken down and is being repaired at Newcastle, while I, its owner, amuse myself by viewing the beauties of the neighbourhood. Being a Roman Catholic, I go to Mass first, and, having met Lady d'Alboukirk once in London, I go to pay her a respectful visit afterwards. When I come back we will have breakfast together. You might try in the meantime to scrape up an acquaintance with Miss Joan Duplessis, who is still staying here, and ask her to join us at breakfast."

She was gone before I could make another remark, and I could but obey her instantly to the letter.

An hour later I saw Miss Joan Duplessis strolling in the hotel garden. It was not difficult to pass the time of day with the young girl, who seemed quite to brighten up at having someone to talk to. We spoke of the weather and so forth, and I steadily avoided the topic of the Fordwych Castle tragedy until the return of Lady Molly at about ten o'clock. She came back looking just as smart, just as self-possessed, as when she had started three hours earlier. Only I, who knew her so well, noted the glitter of triumph in her eyes, and knew that she had not failed. She was accompanied by Pegram, who, however, immediately left her side and went straight into the hotel, whilst she joined us in the garden, and, after a few graceful words, introduced herself to Miss Joan Duplessis and asked her to join us in the coffee-room upstairs.

The room was empty and we sat down to table, I quivering with excitement and awaiting events. Through the open window I saw Elliott walking rapidly down the village street. Presently the waitress went off, and I being too excited to eat or speak, Lady Molly carried on a running conversation with Miss Joan, asking her about her life in India and her father, Captain Duplessis. Joan admitted that she had always been her father's favourite.

"He never liked Henriette, somehow," she explained.

Lady Molly asked her when she had first known Roonah.

"She came to the house when my mother died," replied Joan, "and she had charge of me as a baby." At Pondicherry no one had thought it strange that she came as a servant into an officer's house where her own sister had reigned as mistress. Pondicherry is a French settlement, and manners and customs there are often very peculiar.

I ventured to ask her what were her future plans.

"Well," she said, with a great touch of sadness, "I can, of course, do nothing whilst my aunt is alive. I cannot force her to let me live at Fordwych or to acknowledge me as her heir. After her death, if my sister does assume the title and fortune of d'Alboukirk," she added, whilst suddenly a strange look of vengefulness — almost of hatred and cruelty — marred the child-like expression of her face, "then I shall revive the story of the tragedy of Roonah's death, and I hope that public opinion—"

She paused here in her speech, and I, who had been gazing out of the window, turned my eyes on her. She was ashy-pale, staring straight before her; her hands dropped the knife and fork which she had held. Then I saw the Pegram had come into the room, that he had come up to the table and placed a packet of papers in Lady Molly's hand.

I saw it all as in a flash!

There was a loud cry of despair like an animal at bay, a shrill cry, followed by a deep one from Pegram of "No, you don't," and before anyone could prevent her, Joan's graceful young figure stood outlined for a short moment at the open window.

The next moment she had disappeared into the depth below, and we heard a dull thud which nearly froze the blood in my veins.

Pegram ran out of the room, but Lady Molly sat quite still.

"I have succeeded in clearing the innocent," she said quietly; "but the guilty has meted out to herself her own punishment."

"Then it was she?" I murmured, horror-struck.

"Yes. I suspected it from the first," replied Lady Molly calmly. "It was this conversion of Roonah to Roman Catholicism and her consequent change of manner which gave me the first clue."

"But why — why?" I muttered.

"A simple reason, Mary," she rejoined, tapping the packet of papers with her delicate hand; and, breaking open the string that held the letters, she laid them out upon the table. "The whole thing was a fraud from beginning to end. The woman's marriage certificate was all right, of course, but I mistrusted the genuineness of the other papers from the moment that I heard that Roonah would not part with them and would not allow Mr. McKinley to have charge of them. I am sure that the idea at first was merely one of blackmail. The papers were only to be the means of extorting money from the old lady, and there was no thought of taking them into court.

"Roonah's part was, of course, the important thing in the whole case, since she was here prepared to swear to the actual date of the first Madame Duplessis's death. The initiative, of course, may have come either from Joan or from Captain Duplessis himself, out of hatred for the family who would have nothing to do with him and his favourite younger daughter. That, of course, we shall never know. At first Roonah was a Parsee, with a dog-like devotion to the girl whom she had nursed as a baby, and who no doubt had drilled her well into the part she was to play. But presently she became a Roman Catholic — an ardent convert, remember, with all a Roman Catholic's fear of hell-fire. I went to the convent this morning. I heard the priest's sermon there, and I realised what an influence his eloquence must have had over poor, ignorant, superstitious Roonah. She was still ready to die for her young mistress, but she was no longer prepared to swear to a lie for her sake. After Mass I called at Fordwych Castle. I explained my position to old Lady d'Alboukirk, who took me into the room where Roonah had slept and died. There I found two things," continued Lady Molly, as she opened the elegant reticule which still hung upon her arm, and placed a big key and a prayer-book before me.

"The key I found in a drawer of an old cupboard in the dressing-room where Roonah slept, with all sorts of odds and ends belonging to the unfortunate woman, and going to the door which led into what had been Joan's bedroom, I found that it was locked, and that this key fitted into the lock. Roonah had locked that door herself on her own side — she was afraid of her mistress. I knew now that I was right in my surmise. The prayer-book is a Roman Catholic one. It is heavily thumbmarked there, where false oaths and lying are denounced as being deadly sins for which hell-fire would be the punishment. Roonah, terrorised by fear of the supernatural, a new convert to the faith, was afraid of committing a deadly sin.

"Who knows what passed between the two women, both of whom have come to so violent and terrible an end? Who can tell what prayers, tears, persuasions Joan Duplessis employed from the time she realised that Roonah did not mean to swear to the lie which would have brought her mistress wealth and glamour until the awful day when she finally understood that Roonah would no longer even hold her tongue, and devised a terrible means of silencing her for ever?

"With this certainty before me, I ventured on my big coup. I was so sure, you see. I kept Joan talking in here whilst I sent Pegram to her room with orders to break open the locks of her hand-bag and dressing-case. There! — I told you that if I was wrong I would probably be dismissed the force for irregularity, as of course I had no right to do that; but if Pegram found the papers there where I felt sure they would be, we could bring the murderer to justice. I know my own sex pretty well, don't I, Mary? I knew that Joan Duplessis had not destroyed — never would destroy — those papers."

Even as Lady Molly spoke we could hear heavy tramping outside the passage. I ran to the door, and there was met by Pegram.

"She is quite dead, miss," he said. "It was a drop of forty feet, and a stone pavement down below."

The guilty had indeed meted out her own punishment to herself!

Lady d'Alboukirk sent Lady Molly a cheque for £5,000 the day the whole affair was made known to the public.

I think you will say that it had been well earned. With her own dainty hands my dear lady had lifted the veil which hung over the tragedy of Fordwych Castle, and with the finding of the papers in Joan Duplessis's dressing-bag, and the unfortunate girl's suicide, the murder of the Indian woman was no longer a mystery.

A DAY'S FOLLY

I DON'T think that anyone ever knew that the real elucidation of the extraordinary mystery known to the newspaper-reading public as the "Somersetshire Outrage" was evolved in my own dear lady's quick, intuitive brain.

As a matter of fact, to this day — as far as the public is concerned — the Somersetshire outrage never was properly explained; and it is a very usual thing for those busybodies who are so fond of criticising the police to point to that case as an instance of remarkable incompetence on the part of our detective department.

A young woman named Jane Turner, a visitor at Weston-super-Mare, had been discovered one afternoon in a helpless condition, bound and gagged, and suffering from terror and inanition, in the bedroom which she occupied in a well-known apartment-house of that town. The police had been immediately sent for, and as soon as Miss Turner had recovered she gave what explanation she could of the mysterious occurrence.

She was employed in one of the large drapery shops in Bristol, and was spending her annual holiday at Weston-super-Mare. Her father was the local butcher at Banwell — a village distant about four miles from Weston — and it appears that somewhere near one o'clock in the afternoon of Friday, the 3rd of September, she was busy in her bedroom putting a few things together in a handbag, preparatory to driving out to Banwell, meaning to pay her parents a week-end visit.

There was a knock at her door, and a voice said, "It's me, Jane — may I come in?"

She did not recognise the voice, but somehow thought that it must be that of a friend, so she shouted, "Come in!"

This was all that the poor thing recollected definitely, for the next moment the door was thrown open, someone rushed at her with amazing violence, she heard the crash of a falling table and felt a blow on the side of her head, whilst a damp handkerchief was pressed to her nose and mouth.

Then she remembered nothing more.

When she gradually came to her senses she found herself in the terrible plight in which Mrs. Skeward — her landlady — discovered her twenty-four hours later.

When pressed to try and describe her assailant, she said that when the door was thrown open she thought that she saw an elderly woman in a wide mantle and wearing bonnet and veil, but that, at the same time, she was quite sure, from the strength and brutality of the onslaught, that she was attacked by a man. She had no enemies, and no possessions worth stealing; but her hand-bag, which, however, only contained a few worthless trifles, had certainly disappeared.

The people of the house, on the other hand, could throw but little light on the mystery which surrounded this very extraordinary and seemingly purposeless assault.

Mrs. Skeward only remembered that on Friday Miss Turner told her that she was just off to Banwell, and would be away for the week-end; but that she wished to keep her room on, against her return on the Monday following.

That was somewhere about half-past twelve o'clock, at the hour when luncheons were being got ready for the various lodgers; small wonder, therefore, that no one in the busy apartment-house took much count of the fact that Miss Turner was not seen to leave the house after that, and no doubt the wretched girl would have been left for several days in the pitiable condition in which she was ultimately found but for the fact that Mrs. Skeward happened to be of the usual grasping type common to those of her kind.

Weston-super-Mare was over-full that week-end, and Mrs. Skeward, beset by applicants for accommodation, did not see why she should not let her absent lodger's room for the night or two that the latter happened to be away, and thus get money twice over for it.

She conducted a visitor up to Miss Turner's room on the Saturday afternoon, and, throwing open the door — which, by the way, was not locked — was horrified to see the poor girl half-sitting, half-slipping off the chair to which she had been tied with a rope, whilst a woollen shawl was wound round the lower part of her face.

As soon as she had released the unfortunate victim, Mrs. Skeward sent for the police, and it was through the intelligent efforts of Detective Parsons — a local man — that a few scraps of very hazy evidence were then and there collected.

First, there was the question of the elderly female in the wide mantle, spoken of by Jane Turner as her assailant. It seems that someone answering to that description had called on the Friday at about one o'clock, and asked to see Miss Turner. The maid who answered the door replied that she thought Miss Turner had gone to Banwell.

"Oh!" said the old dame, "she won't have started yet. I am Miss Turner's mother, and I was to call for her so that we might drive out together."

"Then p'r'aps Miss Turner is still in her room," suggested the maid. "Shall I go and see?"

"Don't trouble," replied the woman; "I know my way. I'll go myself."

Whereupon the old dame walked past the servant, crossed the hall and went upstairs. No one saw her come down again, but one of the lodgers seems to have heard a knock at Jane Turner's door, and the female voice saying, "It's me, Jane — may I come in?"

What happened subsequently, who the mysterious old female was, and how and for what purpose she assaulted Jane Turner and robbed her of a few valueless articles, was the puzzle which faced the police then, and which — so far as the public is concerned — has never been solved. Jane Turner's mother was in bed at the time suffering from a broken ankle and unable to move. The elderly woman was, therefore, an impostor, and the search after her — though keen and hot enough at the time, I assure you — has remained, in the eyes of the public, absolutely fruitless. But of this more anon.

On the actual scene of the crime there was but little to guide subsequent investigation. The rope with which Jane Turner had been pinioned supplied no clue; the wool shawl was Miss Turner's own, snatched up by the miscreant to smother the girl's screams; on the floor was a handkerchief, without initial or laundry mark, which obviously had been saturated with chloroform; and close by a bottle which had contained the anæsthetic. A small table was overturned, and the articles which had been resting upon it were lying all around — such as a vase which had held a few flowers, a box of biscuits, and several issues of the West of England Times.

And nothing more. The miscreant, having accomplished his fell purpose, succeeded evidently in walking straight out of the house unobserved; his exit being undoubtedly easily managed owing to it being the busy luncheon hour.

Various theories were, of course, put forward by some of our ablest fellows at the Yard; the most likely solution being the guilt or, at least, the complicity of the girl's sweetheart, Arthur Cutbush — a ne'er-do-well, who spent the greater part of his time on race-courses. Inspector Danvers, whom the chief had sent down to assist the local police, declared that Jane Turner herself suspected her sweetheart, and was trying to shield him by stating she possessed nothing of any value; whereas, no doubt, the young blackguard knew that she had some money, and had planned this amazing coup in order to rob her of it.

Danvers was quite chagrined when, on investigation, it was proved that Arthur Cutbush had gone to the York races three days before the assault, and never left that city until the Saturday evening, when a telegram from Miss Turner summoned him to Weston.

Moreover, the girl did not break off her engagement with young Cutbush, and thus the total absence of motive was a serious bar to the likelihood of the theory.

Then it was the Chief sent for Lady Molly. No doubt he began to feel that here, too, was a case where feminine tact and my lady's own marvellous intuition might prove more useful than the more approved methods of the sterner sex.

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"Of course, there is a woman in the case, Mary," said Lady Molly to me, when she came home from the interview with the chief, "although they all pooh-pooh that theory at the Yard, and declare that the female voice — to which the only two witnesses we have are prepared to swear — was a disguised one."

"You think, then, that a woman assaulted Jane Turner?"

"Well," she replied somewhat evasively, "if a man assumes a feminine voice, the result is a high-pitched, unnatural treble; and that, I feel convinced, would have struck either the maid or the lodger, or both, as peculiar."

This was the train of thought which my dear lady and I were following up, when, with that sudden transition of manner so characteristic of her, she said abruptly to me:

"Mary, look out a train for Weston-super-Mare. We must try to get down there to-night."

"Chief's orders?" I asked.

"No — mine," she replied laconically. "Where's the A B C?"

Well, we got off that self-same afternoon, and in the evening we were having dinner at the Grand Hotel, Weston-super-Mare.

My dear lady had been pondering all through the journey, and even now she was singularly silent and absorbed. There was a deep frown between her eyes, and every now and then the luminous, dark orbs would suddenly narrow, and the pupils contract as if smitten with a sudden light.

I was not a little puzzled as to what was going on in that active brain of hers, but my experience was that silence on my part was the surest card to play.

Lady Molly had entered our names in the hotel book as Mrs. Walter Bell and Miss Granard from London; and the day after our arrival there came two heavy parcels for her under that name. She had them taken upstairs to our private sitting-room, and there we undid them together.

To my astonishment they contained stacks of newspapers: as far as I could see at a glance, back numbers of the West of England Times covering a whole year.

"Find and cut out the 'Personal' column of every number, Mary," said Lady Molly to me. "I'll look through them on my return. I am going for a walk, and will be home by lunch time."

I knew, of course, that she was intent on her business and on that only, and as soon as she had gone out I set myself to the wearisome task which she had allotted me. My dear lady was evidently working out a problem in her mind, the solution of which she expected to find in a back number of the West of England Times.

By the time she returned I had the "Personal" column of some three hundred numbers of the paper neatly filed and docketed for her perusal. She thanked me for my promptitude with one of her charming looks, but said little, if anything, all through luncheon. After that meal she set to work. I could see her studying each scrap of paper minutely, comparing one with the other, arranging them in sets in front of her, and making marginal notes on them all the while.

With but a brief interval for tea, she sat at her table for close on four hours, at the end of which she swept all the scraps of paper on one side, with the exception of a few which she kept in her hand. Then she looked up at me, and I sighed with relief.

My dear lady was positively beaming.

"You have found what you wanted?" I asked eagerly.

"What I expected," she replied.

"May I know?"

She spread out the bits of paper before me. There were six altogether, and each of these columns had one paragraph specially marked with a cross.

"Only look at the paragraphs which I have marked," she said.

I did what I was told. But if in my heart I had vaguely hoped that I should then and there be confronted with the solution of the mystery which surrounded the Somersetshire outrage, I was doomed to disappointment.

Each of the marked paragraphs in the "Personal" columns bore the initials H. S. H., and their purport was invariably an assignation at one of the small railway stations on the line between Bristol and Weston.

I suppose that my bewilderment must have been supremely comical, for my lady's rippling laugh went echoing through the bare, dull hotel sitting-room.

"You don't see it, Mary?" she asked gaily.

"I confess I don't," I replied. "It completely baffles me."

"And yet," she said more gravely, "those few silly paragraphs have given me the clue to the mysterious assault on Jane Turner, which has been puzzling our fellows at the Yard for over three weeks."

"But how? I don't understand."

"You will, Mary, directly we get back to town. During my morning walk I have learnt all that I want to know, and now these paragraphs have set my mind at rest."

THE next day we were back in town.

Already, at Bristol, we had bought a London morning paper, which contained in its centre page a short notice under the following startling headlines:

THE SOMERSETSHIRE OUTRAGE
AMAZING DISCOVERY BY THE POLICE
AN UNEXPECTED CLUE

The article went on to say:

"We are officially informed that the police have recently obtained knowledge of certain facts which establish beyond a doubt the motive of the brutal assault committed on the person of Miss Jane Turner. We are not authorised to say more at present than that certain startling developments are imminent."

On the way up my dear lady had initiated me into some of her views with regard to the case itself, which at the chief's desire she had now taken entirely in hand, and also into her immediate plans, of which the above article was merely the preface.

She it was who had "officially informed" the Press Association, and, needless to say, the news duly appeared in most of the London and provincial dailies.

How unerring was her intuition, and how well thought out her scheme, was proved within the next four-and-twenty hours in our own little flat, when our Emily, looking somewhat important and awed, announced Her Serene Highness the Countess of Hohengebirg.

H. S. H. — the conspicuous initials in the "Personal" columns of the West of England Times! You may imagine how I stared at the exquisite apparition — all lace and chiffon and roses — which the next moment literally swept into our office, past poor, open-mouthed Emily.

Had my dear lady taken leave of her senses when she suggested that this beautiful young woman with the soft, fair hair, with the pleading blue eyes and childlike mouth, had anything to do with a brutal assault on a shop girl?

The young Countess shook hands with Lady Molly and with me, and then, with a deep sigh, she sank into the comfortable chair which I was offering her.

Speaking throughout with great diffidence, but always in the gentle tones of a child that knows it has been naughty, she began by explaining that she had been to Scotland Yard, where a very charming man — the chief, I presume — had been most kind and sent her hither, where he promised her she would find help and consolation in her dreadful, dreadful trouble.

Encouraged by Lady Molly, she soon plunged into her narrative: a pathetic tale of her own frivolity and foolishness.

She was originally Lady Muriel Wolfe-Strongham, daughter of the Duke of Weston, and when scarce out of the schoolroom had met the Grand Duke of Starkburg-Nauheim, who fell in love with her and married her. The union was a morganatic one, the Grand Duke conferring on his English wife the title of the Countess of Hohengebirg and the rank of Serene Highness.

It seems that, at first, the marriage was a fairly happy one, in spite of the bitter animosity of the mother and sister of the Grand Duke: the Dowager Grand Duchess holding that all English girls were loud and unwomanly, and the Princess Amalie, seeing in her brother's marriage a serious bar to the fulfilment of her own highly ambitious matrimonial hopes.

"They can't bear me, because I don't knit socks and don't know how to bake almond cakes," said her dear little Serene Highness, looking up with tender appeal at Lady Molly's grave and beautiful face; "and they will be so happy to see a real estrangement between my husband and myself."

It appears that last year, while the Grand Duke was doing his annual cure at Marienbad, the Countess of Hohengebirg went to Folkestone for the benefit of her little boy's health. She stayed at one of the Hotels there merely as any English lady of wealth might do — with nurses and her own maid, of course, but without the paraphernalia and nuisance of her usual German retinue.

Whilst there she met an old acquaintance of her father's, a Mr. Rumboldt, who is a rich financier, it seems, and who at one time moved in the best society, but whose reputation had greatly suffered recently, owing to a much talked of divorce case which brought his name into unenviable notoriety.

Her Serene Highness, with more mopping of her blue eyes, assured Lady Molly that over at Schloss Starkburg she did not read the English papers, and was therefore quite unaware that Mr. Rumboldt, who used to be a persona grata in her father's house, was no longer a fit and proper acquaintance for her.

"It was a very fine morning," she continued with gentle pathos, "and I was deadly dull at Folkestone. Mr. Rumboldt persuaded me to go with him on a short trip on his yacht. We were to cross over to Boulogne, have luncheon there, and come home in the cool of the evening."

"And, of course, something occurred to disable the yacht," concluded Lady Molly gravely, as the lady herself had paused in her narrative.

"Of course," whispered the little Countess through her tears.

"And, of course, it was too late to get back by the ordinary afternoon mail boat?"

"That boat had gone an hour before, and the next did not leave until the middle of the night."

"So you had perforce to wait until then, and in the meanwhile you were seen by a girl named Jane Turner, who knew you by sight, and who has been blackmailing you ever since."

"How did you guess that?" ejaculated Her Highness, with a look of such comical bewilderment in her large, blue eyes that Lady Molly and I had perforce to laugh.

"Well," replied my dear lady after awhile, resuming her gravity, "we have a way in our profession of putting two and two together, haven't we? And in this case it was not very difficult. The assignments for secret meetings at out-of-the-way railway stations which were addressed to H. S. H. in the columns of the West of England Times recently, gave me one clue, shall we say? The mysterious assault on a young woman, whose home was close to those very railway stations as well as to Bristol Castle — your parents' residence, where you have frequently been staying of late, was another piece that fitted in the puzzle; whilst the number of copies of the West of England Times that were found in that same young woman's room helped to draw my thoughts to her. Then your visit to me to-day — it is very simple, you see."

"I suppose so," said H. S. H. with a sigh. "Only it is worse even than you suggest, for that horrid Jane Turner, to whom I had been ever so kind when I was a girl, took a snapshot of me and Mr. Rumboldt standing on the steps of Hôtel des Bains at Boulogne. I saw her doing it and rushed down the steps to stop her. She talked quite nicely then — hypocritical wretch! — and said that perhaps the plate would be no good when it was developed, and if it were she would destroy it. I was not to worry; she would contrive to let me know through the agony column of the West of England Times, which — as I was going home to Bristol Castle to stay with my parents — I could see every day, but she had no idea I should have minded, and all that sort of rigmarole. Oh! she is a wicked girl, isn't she, to worry me so?"

And once again the lace handkerchief found its way to the most beautiful pair of blue eyes I think I have ever seen. I could not help smiling, though I was really very sorry for the silly, emotional, dear little thing.

"And instead of reassurance in the West of England Times, you found a demand for a secret meeting at a country railway station?"

"Yes! And when I went there — terrified lest I should be seen — Jane Turner did not meet me herself. Her mother came and at once talked of selling the photograph to my husband or to my mother-in-law. She said it was worth four thousand pounds to Jane, and that she had advised her daughter not to sell it to me for less."

"What did you reply?"

"That I hadn't got four thousand pounds," said the Countess ruefully; "so after a lot of argument it was agreed that I was to pay Jane two hundred and fifty pounds a year out of my dress allowance. She would keep the negative as security, but promised never to let anyone see it so long as she got her money regularly. It was also arranged that whenever I stayed with my parents at Bristol Castle, Jane would make appointments to meet me through the columns of the West of England Times, and I was to pay up the instalments then just as she directed."

I could have laughed, if the whole thing had not been so tragic, for truly the way this silly, harmless little woman had allowed herself to be bullied and blackmailed by a pair of grasping females was beyond belief.

"And this has been going on for over a year," commented Lady Molly gravely.

"Yes, but I never met Jane Turner again: it was always her mother who came."

"You knew her mother before that, I presume?"

"Oh, no. I only knew Jane because she had been sewing-maid at the Castle some few years ago."

"I see," said Lady Molly slowly. "What was the woman like whom you used to meet at the railway stations, and to whom you paid over Miss Turner's money?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell you what she was like. I never saw her properly."

"Never saw her properly?" ejaculated Lady Molly, and it seemed to my well-trained ears as if there was a ring of exultation in my dear lady's voice.

"No," replied the little Countess ruefully. "She always appointed a late hour of the evening, and those little stations on that line are very badly lighted. I had such difficulties getting away from home without exciting comment, and used to beg her to let me meet her at a more convenient hour. But she always refused."

Lady Molly remained thoughtful for a while; then she asked abruptly:

"Why don't you prosecute Jane Turner for blackmail?"

"Oh, I dare not — I dare not!" ejaculated the little Countess, in genuine terror. "My husband would never forgive me, and his female relations would do their best afterwards to widen the breach between us. It was because of the article in the London newspaper about the assault on Jane Turner — the talk of a clue and of startling developments — that I got terrified, and went to Scotland Yard. Oh, no! no! no! Promise me that my name won't be dragged into this case. It would ruin me for ever!"

She was sobbing now; her grief and fear were very pathetic to witness, and she moaned through her sobs:

"Those wicked people know that I daren't risk an exposure, and simply prey on me like vampires because of that. The last time I saw the old woman I told her that I would confess everything to my husband — I couldn't bear to go on like this. But she only laughed; she knew I should never dare."

"When was this?" asked Lady Molly.

"About three weeks ago — just before Jane Turner was assaulted and robbed of the photographs."

"How do you know she was robbed of the photographs?"

"She wrote and told me so," replied the young Countess, who seemed strangely awed now by my dear lady's earnest question. And from a dainty reticule she took a piece of paper, which bore traces of many bitter tears on its crumpled surface. This she handed to Lady Molly, who took it from her. It was a type-written letter, which bore no signature. Lady Molly perused it in silence first, then read its contents out aloud to me: —

"To H. S. H. the Countess of Hohenberg."

"You think I have been worrying you the past twelve months about your adventure with Mr. Rumboldt in Boulogne. But it was not me; it was one who has power over me, and who knew about the photograph. He made me act as I did. But whilst I kept the photo you were safe. Now he has assaulted me and nearly killed me, and taken the negative away. I can, and will, get it out of him again, but it will mean a large sum down. Can you manage one thousand pounds?"

"When did you get this?" asked Lady Molly.

"Only a few days ago," replied the Countess. "And oh! I have been enduring agonies of doubt and fear for the past three weeks, for I had heard nothing from Jane since the assault, and I wondered what had happened."

"You have not sent a reply, I hope."

"No. I was going to, when I saw the article in the London paper, and the fear that all had been discovered threw me into such a state of agony that I came straight up to town and saw the gentleman at Scotland Yard, who sent me on to you. Oh!" she entreated again and again, "you won't do anything that will cause a scandal! Promise me — promise me! I believe I should commit suicide rather than face it — and I could find a thousand pounds."

"I don't think you need do either," said Lady Molly. "Now, may I think over the whole matter quietly to myself," she added, "and talk it over with my friend here? I may be able to let you have some good news shortly."

She rose, intimating kindly that the interview was over. But it was by no means that yet, for there was still a good deal of entreaty and a great many tears on the one part, and reiterated kind assurances on the other. However when, some ten minutes later, the dainty clouds of lace and chiffon were finally wafted out of our office, we both felt that the poor, harmless, unutterably foolish little lady looked distinctly consoled and more happy than she had been for the past twelve months.

4

"YES! she has been an utter little goose," Lady Molly was saying to me an hour later when we were having luncheon; "but that Jane Turner is a remarkably clever girl."

"I suppose you think, as I do, that the mysterious elderly female, who seems to have impersonated the mother all through, was an accomplice of Jane Turner's, and that the assault was a put-up job between them," I said. "Inspector Danvers will be delighted — for this theory is a near approach to his own."

"H'm!" was all the comment vouchsafed on my remark.

"I am sure it was Arthur Cutbush, the girl's sweetheart, after all," I retorted hotly, "and you'll see that, put to the test of sworn evidence, his alibi at the time of the assault itself won't hold good. Moreover, now," I added triumphantly, "we have knowledge which has been lacking all along — the motive."

"Ah!" said my lady, smiling at my enthusiasm, "that's how you argue, Mary, is it?"

"Yes, and in my opinion the only question in doubt is whether Arthur Cutbush acted in collusion with Jane Turner or against her."

"Well, suppose we go and elucidate that point — and some others — at once," concluded Lady Molly as she rose from the table.

She decided to return to Bristol that same evening. We were going by the 8.50 p.m., and I was just getting ready — the cab being already at the door — when I was somewhat startled by the sudden appearance into my room of an old lady, very beautifully dressed, with snow-white hair dressed high above a severe, interesting face.

A merry, rippling laugh issuing from the wrinkled mouth, and a closer scrutiny on my part, soon revealed the identity of my dear lady, dressed up to look like an extremely dignified grande dame of the old school, whilst a pair of long, old-fashioned earrings gave a curious, foreign look to her whole appearance.

I didn't quite see why she chose to arrive at the Grand Hotel, Bristol, in that particular disguise, nor why she entered our names in the hotel book as Grand Duchess and Princess Amalie von Starkburg, from Germany; nor did she tell me anything that evening.

But by the next afternoon, when we drove out together in a fly, I was well up in the rôle which I had to play. My lady had made me dress in a very rich black silk dress of her own, and ordered me to do my hair in a somewhat frumpish fashion, with a parting, and a "bun" at the back. She herself looked more like Royalty travelling incognito than ever, and no wonder small children and tradesmen's boys stared open-mouthed when we alighted from our fly outside one of the mean-looking little houses in Bread Street.

In answer to our ring, a smutty little servant opened the door, and my lady asked her if Miss Jane Turner lived here and if she were in.

"Yes, Miss Turner lives here, and it bein' Thursday and early closin' she's home from business."

"Then please tell her," said Lady Molly in her grandest manner, "that the Dowager Grand Duchess of Starkburg-Nauheim and the Princess Amalie desire to see her."

The poor little maid nearly fell backwards with astonishment. She gasped an agitated "Lor!" and then flew down the narrow passage and up the steep staircase, closely followed by my dear lady and myself.

On the first-floor landing the girl, with nervous haste, knocked at a door, opened it and muttered half audibly:

"Ladies to see you, miss!"

Then she fled incontinently upstairs. I have never been able to decide whether that little girl thought that we were lunatics, ghosts, or criminals.

But already Lady Molly had sailed into the room, where Miss Jane Turner apparently had been sitting reading a novel. She jumped up when we entered, and stared open-eyed at the gorgeous apparitions. She was not a bad-looking girl but for the provoking, bold look in her black eyes, and the general slatternly appearance of her person.

"Pray do not disturb yourself, Miss Turner," said Lady Molly in broken English, as she sank into a chair, and beckoned me to do likewise. "Pray sit down — I will be brief. You have a compromising photograph — is it not? — of my daughter-in-law ze Countess of Hohengebirg. I am ze Grand Duchess of Starkburg-Nauheim — zis is my daughter, ze Princess Amalie. We are here incognito. You understand? Not?"

And, with inimitable elegance of gesture, my dear lady raised a pair of "starers" to her eyes and fixed them on Jane Turner's quaking figure.

Never had I seen suspicion, nay terror, depicted so plainly on a young face, but I will do the girl the justice to state that she pulled herself together with marvellous strength of will.

She fought down her awed respect of this great lady; or rather shall I say that the British middle-class want of respect for social superiority, especially if it be foreign, now stood her in good stead?

"I don't know what you are talking about," she said with an arrogant toss of the head.

"Zat is a lie, is it not?" rejoined Lady Molly calmly, as she drew from her reticule the typewritten letter which Jane Turner had sent to the Countess of Hohenberg. "Zis you wrote to my daughter-in-law; ze letter reached me instead of her. It interests me much. I vill give you two tousand pounds for ze photograph of her and Mr. — er — Rumboldt. You vill sell it to me for zat, is it not?"

The production of the letter had somewhat cowed Jane's bold spirit. But she was still defiant.

"I haven't got the photograph here," she said.

"Ah, no! but you vill get it — yes?" said my lady, quietly replacing the letter in her reticule. "In ze letter you offer to get it for tousand pound. I vill give you two tousand. To-day is a holiday for you. You vill get ze photograph from ze gentleman — not? And I vill wait here till you come back."

Whereupon she rearranged her skirts round her and folded her hands placidly, like one prepared to wait.

"I haven't got the photograph," said Jane Turner, doggedly, "and I can't get it to-day. The — the person who has it doesn't live in Bristol."

"No? Ah! but quite close, isn't it?" rejoined my lady, placidly. "I can wait all ze day."

"No, you shan't!" retorted Jane Turner, whose voice now shook with obvious rage or fear — I knew not which. "I can't get the photograph to-day — so there! And I won't sell it to you — I won't. I don't want your two thousand pounds. How do I know you are not an imposter?"

"From zis, my good girl," said Lady Molly, quietly; "that if I leave zis room wizout ze photograph, I go straight to ze police with zis letter, and you shall be prosecuted by ze Grand Duke, my son, for blackmailing his wife. You see, I am not like my daughter-in-law; I am not afraid of a scandal. So you vill fetch ze photograph — isn't it? I and ze Princess Amalie vill wait for it here. Zat is your bedroom — not?" she added, pointing to a door which obviously gave on an inner room. "Vill you put on your hat and go at once, please? Two tousand pound or two years in prison — you have ze choice — isn't it?"

Jane Turner tried to keep up her air of defiance, looking Lady Molly full in the face; but I who watched her could see the boldness in her eyes gradually giving place to fear, and then to terror and even despair; the girl's face seemed literally to grow old as I looked at it — pale, haggard, and drawn — whilst Lady Molly kept her stern, luminous eyes fixed steadily upon her.

Then, with a curious, wild gesture, which somehow filled me with a nameless fear, Jane Turner turned on her heel and ran into the inner room.

There followed a moment of silence. To me it was tense and agonising. I was straining my ears to hear what was going on in that inner room. That my dear lady was not as callous as she wished to appear was shown by the strange look of expectancy in her beautiful eyes.

The minutes sped on — how many I could not afterwards have said. I was conscious of a clock ticking monotonously over the shabby mantelpiece, of an errand boy outside shouting at the top of his voice, of the measured step of the cab horse which had brought us hither being walked up and down the street.

Then suddenly there was a violent crash, as of heavy furniture being thrown down. I could not suppress a scream, for my nerves by now were terribly on the jar.

"Quick, Mary — the inner room!" said Lady Molly. "I thought the girl might do that."

I dared not pause in order to ask what "that" meant, but flew to the door.

It was locked.

"Downstairs — quick!" commanded my lady. "I ordered Danvers to be on the watch outside."

You may imagine how I flew, and how I blessed my dear lady's forethought in the midst of her daring plan, when, having literally torn open the front door, I saw Inspector Danvers in plain clothes, calmly patrolling the street. I beckoned to him — he was keeping a sharp look-out — and together we ran back into the house.

Fortunately, the landlady and the servant were busy in the basement, and had neither heard the crash nor seen me run in search of Danvers. My dear lady was still alone in the dingy parlour, stooping against the door of the inner room, her ear glued to the keyhole.

"Not too late, I think," she whispered hurriedly. "Break it open, Danvers."

Danvers, who is a great, strong man, soon put his shoulder to the rickety door, which yielded to the first blow.

The sight which greeted us filled me with horror, for I had never seen such a tragedy before. The wretched girl, Jane Turner, had tied a rope to a ring in the ceiling, which I suppose at one time held a hanging lamp; the other end of that rope she had formed into a slip-noose, and passed round her neck.

She had apparently climbed on to a table, and then used her best efforts to end her life by kicking the table away from under her. This was the crash which we had heard, and which had caused us to come to her rescue. Fortunately, her feet had caught in the back of a chair close by; the slip-noose was strangling her, and her face was awful to behold, but she was not dead.

Danvers soon got her down. He is a first-aid man, and has done these terrible jobs before. As soon as the girl had partially recovered, Lady Molly sent him and me out of the room. In the dark and dusty parlour, where but a few moments ago I had played my small part in a grim comedy, I now waited to hear what the sequel to it would be.

Danvers had been gone some time, and the shades of evening were drawing in; outside, the mean-looking street looked particularly dreary. It was close on six o'clock when at last I heard the welcome rustle of silks, the opening of a door, and at last my dear lady — looking grave but serene — came out of the inner room, and, beckoning to me, without a word led the way out of the house and into the fly, which was still waiting at the door.

"We'll send a doctor to her," were her first words as soon as we were clear of Bread Street. "But she is quite all right now, save that she wants a sleeping draught. Well, she has been punished enough, I think. She won't try her hand at blackmailing again."

"Then the photograph never existed?" I asked amazed.

"No; the plate was a failure, but Jane Turner would not thus readily give up the idea of getting money out of the poor, pusillanimous Countess. We know how she succeeded in terrorizing that silly little woman. It is wonderful how cleverly a girl like that worked out such a complicated scheme, all alone."

“All alone?”

“Yes; there was no one else. She was the elderly woman who used to meet the Countess, and who rang at the front door of the Weston apartment-house. She arranged the whole of the *mise en scène* of the assault on herself, all alone, and took everybody in with it — it was so perfectly done. She planned and executed it because she was afraid that the little Countess would be goaded into confessing her folly to her husband, or to her own parents, when a prosecution for blackmail would inevitably follow. So she risked everything on a big coup, and almost succeeded in getting a thousand pounds from Her Serene Highness, meaning to reassure her, as soon as she had the money, by the statement that the negative and prints had been destroyed. But the appearance of the Grand Duchess of Starkburg-Nauheim this afternoon frightened her into an act of despair. Confronted with the prosecution she dreaded and with the prison she dared not face, she, in a mad moment, attempted to take her life.”

“I suppose now the whole matter will be hushed up.”

“Yes,” replied Lady Molly with a wistful sigh. “The public will never know who assaulted Jane Turner.”

She was naturally a little regretful at that. But it was a joy to see her the day when she was able to assure Her Serene Highness the Countess of Hohengebirg that she need never again fear the consequences of that fatal day’s folly.

A CASTLE IN BRITTANY

YES! we are just back from our holiday, my dear lady and I — a well-earned holiday, I can tell you that.

We went to Porhoët, you know — a dear little village in the hinterland of Brittany, not very far from the coast; an enchanting spot, hidden away in a valley, bordered by a mountain stream, wild, romantic, picturesque — Brittany, in fact.

We had discovered the little place quite accidentally last year, in the course of our wanderings, and stayed there then about three weeks, laying the foundations of that strange adventure which reached its culminating point just a month ago.

I don't know if the story will interest you, for Lady Molly's share in the adventure was purely a private one and had nothing whatever to do with her professional work. At the same time it illustrates in a very marked manner that extraordinary faculty which she possesses of divining her fellow-creatures' motives and intentions.

We had rooms and pension in the dear little convent on the outskirts of the village, close to the quaint church and the picturesque presbytery, and soon we made the acquaintance of the Curé, a simple-minded, kindly old man, whose sorrow at the thought that two such charming English ladies as Lady Molly and myself should be heretics was more than counter-balanced by his delight in having someone of the "great outside world" — as he called it — to talk to, whilst he told us quite ingenuously something of his own simple life, of this village which he loved, and also of his parishioners.

One personality among the latter occupied his thoughts and conversation a great deal, and I must say interested us keenly. It was that of Miss Angela de Genneville, who owned the magnificent château of Porhoët, one of the seven wonders of architectural France. She was an Englishwoman by birth — being of a Jersey family — and was immensely wealthy, her uncle, who was also her godfather, having bequeathed to her the largest cigar factory in St. Heliers, besides three-quarters of a million sterling.

To say that Miss de Genneville was eccentric was but to put it mildly; in the village she was generally thought to be quite mad. The Curé vaguely hinted that a tragic love story was at the bottom of all her eccentricities. Certain it is that, for no apparent reason, and when she was still a youngish woman, she had sold the Jersey business and realised the whole of her fortune. After two years of continuous travelling, she came to Brittany on a visit to her sister — the widowed Marquise de Terhoven, who owned a small property close to Porhoët, and lived there in retirement and poverty with her only son, Amédé.

Miss Angela de Genneville was agreeably taken with the beauty and quietude of this remote little village. The beautiful château of Porhoët being for sale at the time, she bought it, took out letters of naturalization, became a French subject, and from that moment never went outside the precincts of her newly acquired domain.

She never returned to England, and, with the exception of the Curé and her own sister and nephew, saw no one beyond her small retinue of servants.

But the dear old Curé thought all the world of her, for she was supremely charitable to him and to the poor, and scarcely a day passed but he told us something either of her kindness or of her eccentric ways. One day he arrived at the convent at an unaccustomed hour; we had just finished our simple déjeuner of steaming coffee and rolls when we saw him coming towards us across the garden.

That he was excited and perturbed was at once apparent by his hurried gait and by the flush on his kindly face. He bade us a very hasty "Good morning, my daughters!" and plunged abruptly into his subject. He explained with great volubility, which was intended to mask his agitation, that he was the bearer of an invitation to the charming English lady — a curious invitation, ah, yes! perhaps! — Mademoiselle de Genneville — very eccentric — but she is in great trouble — in very serious trouble — and very ill too, now — poor lady — half paralysed and feeble — yes, feeble in the brain — and then her nephew, the Marquis Amédé de Terhoven — such a misguided young man — has got into bad company in that den of wickedness called Paris — since then it has been debts — always debts — his mother is so indulgent! — too indulgent! but an only son! — the charming English ladies would understand. It was very sad — very, very sad — and no wonder Mademoiselle de Genneville was very angry. She had paid Monsieur le Marquis' debts once, twice, three times — but now she will not pay any more — but she is in great trouble and wants a friend — a female friend, one of her own country, she declares — for he himself, alas! was only a poor curé de village, and did not understand great ladies and their curious ways. It would be true Christian charity if the charming English lady would come and see Mademoiselle.

"But her own sister, the Marquise?" suggested Lady Molly, breaking in on the old man's volubility.

"Ah! her sister, of course," he replied with a sigh. "Madame la Marquise — but then she is Monsieur le Marquis' mother, and the charming English lady would understand — a mother's heart, of course—"

"But I am a complete stranger to Miss de Genneville," protested Lady Molly.

"Ah, but Mademoiselle has always remained an Englishwoman at heart," replied the Curé. "She said to me to-day: 'I seem to long for an Englishwoman's handshake, a sober-minded, sensible Englishwoman, to help me in this difficulty. Bring your English friend to me, Monsieur le Curé, if she will come to the assistance of an old woman who has no one to turn to in her distress.'"

Of course, after that I knew that my dear lady would yield. Moreover, she was keenly interested in Miss de Genneville, and without further discussion she told Monsieur le Curé that she was quite ready to accompany him to the château of Porhoët.

OF course, I was not present at the interview, but Lady Molly has so often told me all that happened and how it happened, and with such a wealth of picturesque and minute detail, that sometimes I find it difficult to realise that I myself was not there in person.

It seems that Monsieur le Curé himself ushered my lady into the presence of Miss Angela de Genneville. The old lady was not alone when they entered; Madame la Marquise de Terhoven, an elderly, somewhat florid woman, whose features, though distinctly coarse, recalled those of her sister, sat on a high-backed chair close to a table, on which her fingers were nervously drumming a tattoo, whilst in the window embrasure stood a young man whose resemblance to both the ladies at once proclaimed him to Lady Molly's quick perception as the son of the one and nephew of the other — the Marquis de Terhoven, in fact.

Miss de Genneville sat erect in a huge armchair; her face was the hue of yellow wax, the flesh literally shrivelled on the bones, the eyes of a curious, unnatural brilliance; one hand clutched feverishly the arm of her chair, the other, totally paralysed, lay limp and inert on her lap.

"Ah! the Englishwoman at last, thank God!" she said in a high-pitched, strident voice as soon as Lady Molly entered the room. "Come here, my dear, for I have wanted one of your kind badly. A true-hearted Englishwoman is the finest product of God's earth, after all's said and done. Pardieu! but I breathe again," she added, as my dear lady advanced somewhat diffidently to greet her, and took the trembling hand which Miss Angela extended to her.

"Sit down close to me," commanded the eccentric old lady, whilst Lady Molly, confused, and not a little angered at finding herself in the very midst of what was obviously a family conclave, was vaguely wondering how soon she could slip away again. But the trembling hand of the paralytic clutched her own slender wrist so tightly, forcing her to sink into a low chair close by, and holding her there as with a grip of steel, that it would have been useless and perhaps cruel to resist.

Satisfied now that her newly found friend, as well as Monsieur le Curé, were prepared to remain by her and to listen to what she had to say, the sick woman turned with a look of violent wrath towards the window embrasure.

"I was just telling that fine nephew of mine that he is counting his chickens before they are hatched. I am not yet dead, as Monsieur my nephew can see; and I have made a will — aye, and placed it where his thievish fingers can never reach it."

The young man, who up to now had been gazing stolidly out of the window, now suddenly turned on his heel, confronting the old woman, with a look of hate gleaming in his eyes.

"We can fight the will," here interposed Madame la Marquise, icily.

"On what grounds?" queried the other.

"That you were paralysed and imbecile when you made it," replied the Marquise, dryly.

Monsieur le Curé, who up to now had been fidgeting nervously with his hat, now raised his hands and eyes up to the ceiling to emphasise the horror which he felt at this callous suggestion. Lady Molly no longer desired to go; the half-paralysed grip on her wrist had relaxed, but she sat there quietly, interested with every fibre of her quick intelligence in the moving drama which was being unfolded before her.

There was a pause now, a silence broken only by the monotonous ticking of a monumental, curious-looking clock which stood in an angle of the room. Miss de Genneville had made no reply to her sister's cruel taunt, but a look, furtive, maniacal, almost dangerous, now crept into her eyes.

Then she addressed the Curé.

"I pray you pen, ink and paper — here, on this table," she requested. Then as he complied with alacrity, she once more turned to her nephew, and pointing to the writing materials:

"Sit down and write, Amédé," she commanded.

"Write what?" he queried.

"A confession, my nephew," said the old woman, with a shrill laugh. "A confession of those little pecadilloes of yours, which, unless I come to your rescue now, will land you for seven years in a penal settlement, if I mistake not. Eh, my fine nephew?"

"A confession?" retorted Amédé de Terhoven savagely. "Do you take me for a fool?"

"No, my nephew, I take you for a wise man — who understands that his dear aunt will not buy those interesting forgeries, perpetrated by Monsieur le Marquis Amédé de Terhoven, and offered to her by Rubinstein the money-lender, unless that confession is written and signed by you. Write Amédé, write that confession, my dear nephew, if you do not wish to see yourself in the dock on a charge of forging your aunt's name to a bill for one hundred thousand francs."

Amédé muttered a curse between his teeth. Obviously the old woman's shaft had struck home. He knew himself to be in a hopeless plight. It appears that a money-lender had threatened to send the forged bills to Monsieur le Procureur de la République unless they were paid within twenty-four hours, and no one could pay them but Miss de Genneville, who had refused to do it except at the price of this humiliating confession.

A look of intelligence passed between mother and son. Intercepted by Lady Molly and interpreted by her, it seemed to suggest the idea of humouring the old aunt, for the moment, until the forgeries were safely out of the money-lender's hands, then of mollifying her later on, when perhaps she would have forgotten, or sunk deeper into helplessness and imbecility.

As if in answer to his mother's look the young man now said curtly:

"I must know what use you mean to make of the confession if I do write it."

"That will depend on yourself," replied Mademoiselle, dryly. "You may be sure that I will not willingly send my own nephew to penal servitude."

For another moment the young man hesitated, then he sat down, sullen and wrathful, and said:

"I'll write — you may dictate—"

The old woman laughed a short, dry, sarcastic laugh. Then, at her dictation, Amédé wrote:

"I, Amédé, Marquis de Terhoven, hereby make confession to having forged Mademoiselle Angela de Genneville's name to the annexed bills, thereby obtaining the sum of one hundred thousand francs from Abraham Rubinstein, of Brest."

"Now, Monsieur le Curé, will you kindly witness le Marquis' signature?" said the irascible old lady when Amédé had finished writing; "and you, too, my dear?" she added, turning to Lady Molly.

My dear lady hesitated for a moment. Naturally she did not desire to be thus mixed up in this family feud, but a strange impulse had drawn her sympathy to this eccentric old lady, who, in the midst of her semi-regal splendour seemed so forlorn, between her nephew, who was a criminal and a blackguard, and her sister, who was but little less contemptible.

Obedying this impulse, and also a look of entreaty from the Curé, she affixed her own signature as witness to the document, and this despite the fact that both the Marquise and her son threw her a look of hate which might have made a weaker spirit tremble with foreboding.

Not so Lady Molly. Those very same threatening looks served but to decide her. Then, at Mademoiselle's command, she folded up the document, slipped it into an envelope, sealed it, and finally addressed it to M. le Procureur de la République, resident at Caen.

Amédé watched all these proceedings with eyes that were burning with impotent wrath.

"This letter," now resumed the old lady, more calmly, "will be sent under cover to my lawyer Maître Vendôme, of Paris, who drew up my will, with orders only to post it in case of certain eventualities, which I will explain later on. In the meanwhile, my dear nephew, you may apprise your friend, Abraham Rubinstein, that I will buy back those interesting forgeries of yours on the day on which I hear from Maître Vendôme that he has safely received my letter with this enclosure."

"This is infamous—" here broke in the Marquise, rising in full wrath, unable to control herself any longer. "I'll have you put under restraint as a dangerous lunatic. I—"

"Then, of course, I could not buy back the bills from Rubinstein," rejoined Mademoiselle, calmly.

Then, as the Marquise subsided — cowed, terrified, realising the hopelessness of her son's position — the old lady turned placidly to my dear lady, whilst her trembling fingers once more clutched the slender hand of her newly found English friend.

"I have asked you, my dear, and Monsieur le Curé, to come to me to-day," she said, "because I wish you both to be of assistance to me in the carrying out of my dying wishes. You must promise me most solemnly, both of you, that when I am dead you will carry out these wishes to the letter. Promise!" she added with passionate earnestness.

The promise was duly given by Lady Molly and the old Curé, then Mademoiselle resumed more calmly:

"And now I want you to look at that clock," she said abruptly, with seeming irrelevance. "It is an old heirloom which belonged to the former owners of Porhoët, and which I bought along with the house. You will notice that it is one of the most remarkable pieces of mechanism which brain of man has ever devised, for it has this great peculiarity, that it goes for three hundred and sixty-six days consecutively, keeping most perfect time. When the works have all but run down, the weights — which are enormous — release a certain spring, and the great doors of the case open of themselves, thus allowing the clock to be wound up. After that is done, and the doors pushed to again, no one can open them until another three hundred and sixty-six days have gone by — that is to say, not without breaking the case to pieces."

Lady Molly examined the curious old clock with great attention. Vaguely she guessed already what the drift of the old lady's curious explanations would be.

"Two days ago," continued Mademoiselle, "the clock was open, and Monsieur le Curé wound it up, but before I pushed the doors to again I slipped certain papers into the case — you remember, Monsieur?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle, I remember," responded the old man.

"Those papers were my last will and testament, bequeathing all I possess to the parish of Porhoët," said Miss de Genneville, dryly, "and now the doors of the massive case are closed. No one can get at my will for another three hundred and sixty-four days — no one," she added with a shrill laugh, "not even my nephew, Amédé de Terhoven."

A silence ensued, only broken by the rustle of Madame la Marquise's silk dress as she shrugged her shoulders and gave a short, sarcastic chuckle.

"My dear," resumed Mademoiselle, looking straight into Lady Molly's eager, glowing face, "you must promise me that, three hundred and sixty-four days hence, that is to say on the 20th September next year, you and Monsieur le Curé — or one of you if the other be incapacitated — will be present in this room at this hour when the door of the clock will open. You will then wind up the family heirloom, take out the papers which you will find buried beneath the weights, and hand them over to Maître Vendôme for probate at the earliest opportunity. Monseigneur the Bishop of Caen, the Mayor of this Commune, and the Sous-préfet of this Department have all been informed of the contents of my will, and also that it is practically in the keeping of le Curé de Porhoët, who, no doubt, realises what the serious consequences to himself would be if he failed to produce the will at the necessary time."

The poor Curé gasped with terror.

"But — but — but—" he stammered meekly, "I may be forcibly prevented from entering the house — I might be ill or—"

He shuddered with an unavowable fear, then added more calmly:

"I might be unjustly accused then of stealing the will — of defrauding the poor of Porhoët in favour of — Mademoiselle's direct heirs."

"Have no fear, my good friend," said Mademoiselle, dryly; "though I have one foot in the grave I am not quite so imbecile as my dear sister and nephew here would suggest, and I have provided for every eventuality. If you are ill or otherwise prevented by outside causes from being present here on the day and hour named, this charming English lady will be able to replace you. But if either of you is forcibly prevented from entering this house, or if, having entered this room, the slightest violence or even pressure is put upon you, or if you should find the clock broken, damaged and — stripped of its contents, all you need do is to apprise Maître Vendôme of the fact. He will know how to act."

"What would he do?"

"Send a certain confession we all know of to Monsieur le Procureur de la République," replied the old lady, fixing the young Marquis Amédé with her irascible eye. "That same confession," she continued lightly, "Maître Vendôme is instructed to destroy if you, Monsieur, and my English friend here, and the clock, are all undamaged on the eventful day."

There was silence in the great, dark room for awhile, broken only by the sarcastic chuckle of the enfeebled invalid, tired out after this harrowing scene, wherein she had pitted her half-maniacal ingenuity against the greed and rapacity of a conscienceless roué.

That she had hemmed her nephew and sister in on every side could not be denied. Lady Molly herself felt somewhat awed at this weird revenge conceived by the outraged old lady against her grasping relatives.

She was far too interested in the whole drama to give up her own part in it, and, as she subsequently explained to me, she felt it her duty to remain the partner and co-worker of the poor Curé in this dangerous task of securing to the poor of Porhoët the fortune which otherwise would be squandered away on gaming tables and race-courses.

For this, and many reasons too complicated to analyse, she decided to accept her share in the trust imposed upon her by her newly-found friend.

Neither the Marquise nor her son took any notice of Lady Molly as she presently took leave of Mademoiselle de Genneville, who, at the last, made her take a solemn oath that she would stand by the Curé and fulfil the wishes of a dying and much-wronged woman.

Much perturbed, monsieur le Curé went away. Lady Molly went several times after that to the château of Porhoët to see the invalid, who had taken a violent fancy to her. In October we had, perforce, to return to England and to work, and the following spring we had news from the Curé that Mademoiselle de Genneville was dead.

3

LADY MOLLY had certainly been working too hard, and was in a feeble state of health when we reached Porhoët the following 19th of September, less than twenty-four hours before the eventful moment when the old clock would reveal the will and testament of Mademoiselle de Genneville.

We walked straight from the station to the presbytery, anxious to see the Curé and to make all arrangements for to-morrow's business. To our terrible sorrow and distress, we were informed by the housekeeper that the Curé was very seriously ill at the hospital at Brest, whither he had been removed by the doctor's orders.

This was the first inkling I had that things would not go as smoothly as I had anticipated. Miss de Genneville's dispositions with regard to the sensational disclosure of her will had, to my mind, been so ably taken that it had never struck me until now that the Marquise de Terhoven and her precious son would make a desperate fight before they gave up all thoughts of the coveted fortune.

I imagined the Marquis hemmed in on every side; any violence offered against the Curé or Lady Molly when they entered the château in order to accomplish the task allotted to them being visited by the sending of the confession to Monsieur le Procureur de la République, when prosecution for forgery would immediately follow. Damage to the clock itself would be punished in the same way.

But I had never thought of sudden illnesses, of — heaven help us! — poison or unaccountable accidents to either the Curé or to the woman I loved best in all the world.

No wonder Lady Molly looked pale and fragile as, having thanked the housekeeper, we found our way in silence to the convent where we had once again engaged rooms.

Somehow the hospitality shown us last year had lost something of its cordiality. Moreover, our bedrooms this time did not communicate with one another, but opened out independently on to a stone passage.

The sister who showed us upstairs explained, somewhat shamefacedly, that as the Mother Superior had not expected us, she had let the room which was between our two bedrooms to a lady visitor, who, however, was ill in bed at the present moment.

That sixth sense, of which so much has been said and written, but which I will not attempt to explain, told me plainly enough that we were no longer amidst friends in the convent.

Had bribery been at work? Was the lady visitor a spy set upon our movements by the Terhovens? It was impossible to say. I could no longer chase away the many gloomy forebodings which assailed me the rest of that day and drove away sleep during the night. I can assure you that in my heart I wished all eccentric old ladies and their hidden wills at the bottom of the sea.

My dear lady was apparently also very deeply perturbed; any attempt on my part to broach the subject of Miss de Genneville's will was promptly and authoritatively checked by her. At the same time I knew her well enough to guess that all these nameless dangers which seemed to have crept up round her only served to enhance her determination to carry out her old friend's dying wishes to the letter.

We went to bed quite early; for the first time without that delightful final gossip, when events, plans, surmises and work were freely discussed between us. The unseen lady visitor in the room which separated us acted as a wet blanket on our intimacy.

I stayed with Lady Molly until she was in bed. She hardly talked to me whilst she undressed, but when I kissed her "good-night" she whispered almost inaudibly right into my ear:

"The Terhoven faction are at work. They may waylay you and offer you a bribe to keep me out of the château to-morrow. Pretend to fall in with their views. Accept all bribes and place yourself at their disposal. I must not say more now. We are being spied upon."

That my lady was, as usual, right in her surmises was proved within the next five minutes. I had slipped out of her room, and was just going into mine, when I heard my name spoken hardly above a whisper, whilst I felt my arm gently seized from behind.

An elderly, somewhat florid, woman stood before me attired in a dingy-coloured dressing-gown. She was pointing towards my own bedroom door, implying her desire to accompany me to my room. Remembering my dear lady's parting injunctions, I nodded in acquiescence. She followed me, after having peered cautiously up and down the passage.

Then, when the door was duly closed, and she was satisfied that we were alone, she said very abruptly:

"Miss Granard, tell me! you are poor, eh? — a paid companion to your rich friend, what?"

Still thinking of Lady Molly's commands, I replied with a pathetic sigh.

"Then," said the old lady, eagerly, "would you like to earn fifty thousand francs?"

The eagerness with which I responded "Rather!" apparently pleased her, for she gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"You know the story of my sister's will — of the clock?" she asked eagerly: "of your friend's role in this shameless business?"

Once more I nodded. I knew that my lady had guessed rightly. This was the Marquise de Terhoven, planted here in the convent to gain my confidence, to spy on Lady Molly, and to offer me a bribe.

Now for some clever tactics on my part.

"Can you prevent your friend from being at the château to-morrow before one o'clock?" asked the Marquise.

"Easily," I replied calmly.

"How?"

"She is ill, as you know. The doctor has ordered her a sleeping draught. I administer it. I can arrange that she has a strong dose in the morning instead of her other medicine. She will sleep till the late afternoon."

I rattled this off glibly in my best French. Madame la Marquise heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Ah! that is good!" she said. "Then listen to me. Do as I tell you, and to-morrow you will be richer by fifty thousand francs. Come to the château in the morning, dressed in your friend's clothes. My son will be there; together you will assist at the opening of the secret doors, and when my son has wound up the old clock himself, he will place fifty thousand francs in your hands."

"But Monsieur le Curé?" I suggested tentatively.

"He is ill," she replied curtly.

But as she spoke these three words there was such an evil sneer in her face, such a look of cruel triumph in her eyes, that all my worst suspicions were at once confirmed.

Had these people's unscrupulous rapacity indeed bribed some needy country practitioner to put the Curé temporarily out of the way? It was too awful to think of, and I can tell you that I needed all my presence of mind, all my desire to act my part bravely and intelligently to the end, not to fly from this woman in horror.

She gave me a few more instructions with regard to the services which she and her precious son would expect of me on the morrow. It seems that, some time before her death, Miss de Genneville had laid strict injunctions on two of her most trusted men-servants to remain in the château, and to be on the watch on the eventful 20th day of September of this year, lest any serious violence be done to the English lady or to the Curé. It was with a view to allay any suspicion which might arise in the minds of these two men that the Marquis desired me to impersonate Lady Molly to-morrow, and to enter with him — on seemingly friendly terms — the room where stood the monumental clock.

For these services, together with those whereby Lady Molly was to be sent into a drugged sleep whilst the theft of the will was being carried through, I — Mary Granard — was to receive from Monsieur le Marquis de Terhoven the sum of fifty thousand francs.

All these matters being settled to this wicked woman's apparent satisfaction, she presently took hold of both my hands, shook them warmly, and called me her dearest friend; assured me of everlasting gratitude, and finally, to my intense relief, slipped noiselessly out of my room.

4

I SURMISED — I think correctly — that Madame la Marquise would spend most of the night with her ear glued to the thin partition which separated her room from that of Lady Molly; so I did not dare to go and report myself and the momentous conversation which I had just had, and vaguely wondered when I should have an opportunity of talking matters over with my dear lady without feeling that a spy was at my heels.

The next morning when I went into her room, to my boundless amazement — and before I had time to utter a word — she moaned audibly, as if in great pain, and said feebly, but very distinctly:

"Oh, Mary! I'm so glad you've come. I feel terribly ill. I haven't had a wink of sleep all night, and I am too weak to attempt to get up."

Fortunately my perceptions had not been dulled by the excitement of the past few hours, and I could see that she was not so ill as she made out. Her eyes sought mine as I approached her bed, and her lips alone framed the words which I believed I interpreted correctly.

"Do as they want. I stay in bed. Will explain later."

Evidently she had reason to think that we were being closely watched; but what I could not understand was, what did she expect would happen if she herself were not present when the opening of the clock door would disclose the will? Did she want me to snatch the document: to bear the brunt of the Terhovens' wrath and disappointment? It was not like her to be afraid of fulfilling a duty, however dangerous that fulfilment might prove; and it certainly was not like her to break a promise given to a dying person.

But, of course, my business was to obey. Assuming that our movements were being watched, I poured out a dose of medicine for my dear lady, which she took and then fell back on her pillows as if exhausted.

"I think I could sleep now, Mary," she said; "but wake me later on; I must be at the château by twelve o'clock, you know."

As one of Lady Molly's boxes was in my room, I had no difficulty in arraying myself in some of her clothes. Thus equipped and closely veiled, still ignorant of my lady's plans, anxious, but determined to obey like a soldier, blindly and unquestioningly, I made my way to the château a little before noon.

An old butler opened the door in answer to my ring, and in the inner hall sat the Marquise de Terhoven, whilst her son was walking agitatedly up and down.

"Ah! here comes my lady," said the Marquise, with easy unconcern. "You have come, my lady," she added, rising and taking my hand, "to perform a duty which will rob my son of a fortune which by right should have been his. We can put no hindrance in your way, under penalty of an appalling disgrace which would then fall on my son; moreover, my late sister has filled this house with guards and spies. So, believe me, you need have no fear. You can perform your duty undisturbed. Perhaps you will not object to my son keeping you company. My precious sister had the door of her room removed before her death and a curtain put in its stead," she concluded with what was intended to be the sneer of a disappointed fortune-hunter, "so the least call from you will bring her spies to your assistance."

Without a word the Marquis and I bowed to one another, then, preceded by the old family butler, we went up the monumental staircase to what I suppose had been the eccentric old lady's room.

The butler drew the portière curtain aside and he remained in the corridor whilst we went within. There stood the massive clock exactly as my lady had often described it to me. It was ticking with slow and deep-toned majesty.

Monsieur le Marquis pointed to an armchair for me. He was obviously in a state of terrible nerve-tension. He could not sit still, and his fingers were incessantly clasped and unclasped with a curious, febrile movement, which betrayed his intense agitation.

I was about to make a remark when he abruptly seized my wrist, placed one finger to his lips, and pointed in the direction of the portière. Apparently he thought that someone was on the watch outside, but the clock itself was so placed that it could not be seen by anyone who was not actually in the room.

After that we were both silent, whilst that old piece of mechanism ticked on relentlessly, still hiding the secret which it contained.

I would have given two years' salary to know what Lady Molly would have wished me to do. Frankly, I fully expected to see her walk in at any moment. I could not bring myself to believe that she meant to shirk her duty.

But she had said to me, "Fall in with their views," So that when, presently, the Marquis beckoned to me across the room to come and examine the clock, I obeyed readily enough. I felt, by that time, as if my entire body was stuffed with needles and pins, which were pricking my nerves and skin until I could have yelled with the agony of the sensation.

I walked across the room as if in a dream, and looked at the curious clock which, in less than fifteen minutes, would reveal its hidden secret. I suppose cleverer people than poor Mary Granard could enter into long philosophical disquisitions as to this dumb piece of mechanism which held the fate of this ruined, unscrupulous gambler safely within its doors; but I was only conscious of that incessant tick, tick, tick, whilst my eyes literally ached with staring at the door.

I don't know now how it all happened, for, of course, I was taken unawares; but the next moment I found myself quite helpless, hardly able to breathe, for a woolen scarf was being wound round my mouth, whilst two strong arms encircled my body so that I could not move.

"This is only a protection for myself, my dear Miss Granard," a trembling voice whispered in my ear; "keep quite still; no harm will come to you. In ten minutes you shall have your fifty thousand francs in your pocket, and can walk unconcernedly out of the château. Neither your English lady nor Monsieur le Curé can say that they suffered any violence, nor will the clock be damaged. What happens after that I care not. The law cannot wrest the old fool's fortune from me, once I have destroyed her accursed will."

To begin to tell you what passed in my mind then were an impossibility. Did I actually guess what would happen, and what my dear lady had planned? Or was it merely the ingrafted sympathy which exists between her and me which caused me to act blindly in accordance with her wishes?

"Fall in with their views. Take their bribes," she had said, and I — like a soldier — obeyed this command to the letter.

I remained absolutely still, scarcely moving an eyelid as I watched the face of the clock, the minutes speeding on — now three — now five — now ten —

I could hear the Marquis' stertorous breathing close beside me.

Was I dreaming, or did I really see now a dark line — the width of a hair — between the massive double doors of the clock case? Oh, how my pulses throbbed!

That dark line was widening perceptibly. The doors were slowly opening! For the moment I almost felt in sympathy with the blackguard who was on the watch with me. His agitation must have been the most exquisite torture.

Now we could distinctly see the glimmer of white paper — not pressed down by the ponderous weights, but lying loosely just inside the doors; and anon, as the aperture widened, the papers fell out just at my feet.

With a smothered, gurgling exclamation which I will not attempt to describe, the Marquis literally fell on that paper, like a hungry wild beast upon its prey. He was on his knees before me, and I could see that the paper was a square envelope, which, with a trembling hand, he tore open.

It contained a short document whereon the signature "Amédée de Terhoven" was clearly visible. It was the confession of forgery made by the young Marquis just a year ago; there were also a few banknotes: some hundred thousand francs, perhaps. The young man threw them furiously aside, and once more turned to the clock. The doors were wide open, but they revealed nothing save the huge and complicated mechanism of the clock.

Mademoiselle de Genneville — eccentric and far-seeing to the last — had played this gigantic hoax on her scheming relatives. Whilst they directed all their unscrupulous energies towards trying to obtain possession of her will in one place, she had calmly put it securely somewhere else.

Meantime, Monsieur le Marquis had sufficient presence of mind, and, I must own, sufficient dignity, not only to release me from my bonds but also to offer me the fifty thousand francs which he had promised me.

"I can wind up the clock now," he said dully, "and you can walk straight out of this place. No one need know that you impersonated your friend. She, no doubt, knew of this — hoax; therefore we found the scheme to keep her out of the way so easy of accomplishment. It was a grisly joke, wasn't it? How the old witch must be chortling in her grave!"

Needless to say, I did not take his money. He escorted me downstairs silently, subdued, no doubt, by the spirit of hatred which had followed him up from the land of shadows.

He even showed no surprise when, on reaching the hall, he was met by his late aunt's lawyer, Maître Vendôme, and also by Lady Molly, who had just arrived. Madame la Marquise de Terhoven was nowhere to be seen.

My dear lady smiled at me approvingly, and when I came near her she contrived to draw me aside and to whisper hurriedly:

"You have done admirably, Mary. I came to fetch you. But now that this young blackguard is thoroughly outwitted, we may as well go, for our work here is done."

The Marquis did not even glance at her as she slightly bowed her head to him, took leave of Maître Vendôme, and finally walked out of the château with me.

As soon as we were out in the open air I begged for an explanation.

"Maître Vendôme has Mademoiselle's will," she replied. "She had enjoined him to read it in the château to-day in the presence of the three trustees appointed for the poor of Porhoët, who inherit all her wealth."

"And the Terhovens?" I asked.

"They've got his confession back," she said dryly, "and they will receive an annuity from the trustees."

"And you knew this all along?" I rejoined somewhat reproachfully.

"Yes, so did the Curé, but Mademoiselle made me swear a most solemn oath not to reveal her secret even to you; she was so afraid of the machinations of the Terhovens. You see," continued Lady Molly, smiling at my eagerness, "Miss de Genneville possessed the ancient key wherewith she could open the clock case at any time. Obviously, even so perfect a piece of mechanism might go wrong, when examination and re-adjustment of the works would be necessary. After the family conclave wherein she had announced that her

will was hidden in the clock, I — at my next interview with her — begged her to modify this idea, to send her will to her solicitor, but to leave the Terhovens under the impression that it was still lying in its strange hiding place. At first she refused to listen to me or to discuss the subject, but I am happy to say that I finally succeeded in persuading her, with what result you already know.”

“But poor Monsieur le Curé!” I ejaculated.

Her bright eyes gleamed with merriment.

“Oh! that was a final little hoax. He himself, poor dear, was afraid lest he might blurt out the whole thing. His illness was partly a sham, and he is quite all right again now, but the doctor at the Brest hospital is a great friend of his, and is keeping him there until all this business has blown over.”

“I was the only one who was kept in the dark,” I concluded ruefully.

“Yes, Mary, dear,” said my dear lady, gently; “it was a promise, remember. But I never thought that we should get so much excitement outside our own professional work.”

It certainly had been a non-professional experience; but here, too, as in the detection of crime, her keen intuition had proved more than a match for an unscrupulous blackguard, and certainly on the 20th day of September last I lived through the most exciting ten minutes of my life.

A CHRISTMAS TRAGEDY

IT was a fairly merry Christmas party, although the surliness of our host somewhat marred the festivities. But imagine two such beautiful young women as my own dear lady and Margaret Ceely, and a Christmas Eve Cinderella in the beautiful ball-room at Clevere Hall, and you will understand that even Major Ceely's well-known cantankerous temper could not altogether spoil the merriment of a good, old-fashioned, festive gathering.

It is a far cry from a Christmas Eve party to a series of cattle-maiming outrages, yet I am forced to mention these now, for although they were ultimately proved to have no connection with the murder of the unfortunate Major, yet they were undoubtedly the means whereby the miscreant was enabled to accomplish the horrible deed with surety, swiftness, and — as it turned out afterwards — a very grave chance of immunity.

Everyone in the neighbourhood had been taking the keenest possible interest in those dastardly outrages against innocent animals. They were either the work of desperate ruffians who stick at nothing in order to obtain a few shillings, or else of madmen with weird propensities for purposeless crimes.

Once or twice suspicious characters had been seen lurking about in the fields, and on more than one occasion a cart was heard in the middle of the night driving away at furious speed. Whenever this occurred the discovery of a fresh outrage was sure to follow, but, so far, the miscreants had succeeded in baffling not only the police, but also the many farm hands who had formed themselves into a band of volunteer watchmen, determined to bring the cattle maimers to justice.

We had all been talking about these mysterious events during the dinner which preceded the dance at Clevere Hall; but later on, when the young people had assembled, and when the first strains of "The Merry Widow" waltz had set us aglow with prospective enjoyment, the unpleasant topic was wholly forgotten.

The guests went away early, Major Ceely, as usual, doing nothing to detain them; and by midnight all of us who were staying in the house had gone up to bed.

My dear lady and I shared a bedroom and dressing-room together, our windows giving on the front. Clevere Hall is, as you know, not very far from York, on the other side of Bishopthorpe, and is one of the finest old mansions in the neighbourhood, its only disadvantage being that, in spite of the gardens being very extensive in the rear, the front of the house lies very near the road.

It was about two hours after I had switched off the electric light and called out "Good-night" to my dear lady, that something roused me out of my first sleep. Suddenly I felt very wide-awake, and sat up in bed. Most unmistakably — though still from some considerable distance along the road — came the sound of a cart being driven at unusual speed.

Evidently my dear lady was also awake. She jumped out of bed and, drawing aside the curtains, looked out of the window. The same idea had, of course, flashed upon us both, at the very moment of waking: all the conversations anent the cattle-maimers and their cart, which we had heard since our arrival at Clevere, recurring to our minds simultaneously.

I had joined Lady Molly beside the window, and I don't know how many minutes we remained there in observation, not more than two probably, for anon the sound of the cart died away in the distance along a side road. Suddenly we were startled with a terrible cry of "Murder! Help! Help!" issuing from the other side of the house, followed by an awful, deadly silence. I stood there near the window shivering with terror, while my dear lady, having already turned on the light, was hastily slipping into some clothes.

The cry had, of course, aroused the entire household, but my dear lady was even then the first to get downstairs, and to reach the garden door at the back of the house, whence the weird and despairing cry had undoubtedly proceeded.

That door was wide open. Two steps lead from it to the terraced walk which borders the house on that side, and along these steps Major Ceely was lying, face downwards, with arms outstretched, and a terrible wound between his shoulder-blades.

A gun was lying close by — his own. It was easy to conjecture that he, too, hearing the rumble of the wheels, had run out, gun in hand, meaning, no doubt, to effect, or at least to help, in the capture of the escaping criminals. Someone had been lying in wait for him; that was obvious — someone who had perhaps waited and watched for this special opportunity for days, or even weeks, in order to catch the unfortunate man unawares.

Well, it were useless to recapitulate all the various little incidents which occurred from the moment when Lady Molly and the butler first lifted the Major's lifeless body from the terrace steps until that instant when Miss Ceely, with remarkable coolness and presence of mind, gave what details she could of the terrible event to the local police inspector and to the doctor, both hastily summoned.

These little incidents, with but slight variations, occur in every instance when a crime has been committed. The broad facts alone are of weird and paramount interest.

Major Ceely was dead. He had been stabbed with amazing sureness and terrible violence in the back. The weapon used must have been some sort of heavy, clasp knife. The murdered man was now lying in his own bedroom upstairs, even as the Christmas bells on that cold, crisp morning sent cheering echoes through the stillness of the air.

We had, of course, left the house, as had all the other guests. Everyone felt the deepest possible sympathy for the beautiful young girl who had been so full of the joy of living but a few hours ago, and was now the pivot round which revolved the weird shadow of tragedy, of curious suspicions and of an ever-growing mystery. But at such times all strangers, acquaintances, and even friends in a house, are only an additional burden to an already overwhelming load of sorrow and of trouble.

We took up our quarters at the "Black Swan," in York. The local superintendent, hearing that Lady Molly had been actually a guest at Clevere on the night of the murder, had asked her to remain in the neighbourhood.

There was no doubt that she could easily obtain the chief's consent to assist the local police in the elucidation of this extraordinary crime. At this time both her reputation and her remarkable powers were at their zenith, and there was not a single member of the entire police force in the kingdom who would not have availed himself gladly of her help when confronted with a seemingly impenetrable mystery.

That the murder of Major Ceely threatened to become such no one could deny. In cases of this sort, when no robbery of any kind has accompanied the graver crime, it is the duty of the police and also of the coroner to try to find out, first and foremost, what possible

motive there could be behind so cowardly an assault; and among motives, of course, deadly hatred, revenge, and animosity stand paramount.

But here the police were at once confronted with the terrible difficulty, not of discovering whether Major Ceely had an enemy at all, but rather which, of all those people who owed him a grudge, hated him sufficiently to risk hanging for the sake of getting him out of the way.

As a matter of fact, the unfortunate Major was one of those miserable people who seem to live in a state of perpetual enmity with everything and everybody. Morning, noon and night he grumbled, and when he did not grumble he quarreled either with his own daughter or with the people of his household, or with his neighbours.

I had often heard about him and his eccentric, disagreeable ways from Lady Molly, who had known him for many years. She — like everybody in the county who otherwise would have shunned the old man — kept up a semblance of friendship with him for the sake of the daughter.

Margaret Ceely was a singularly beautiful girl, and as the Major was reputed to be very wealthy, these two facts perhaps combined to prevent the irascible gentleman from living in quite so complete an isolation as he would have wished.

Mammas of marriageable young men vied with one another in their welcome to Miss Ceely at garden parties, dances and bazaars. Indeed, Margaret had been surrounded with admirers ever since she had come out of the schoolroom. Needless to say, the cantankerous Major received these pretenders to his daughter's hand not only with insolent disdain, but at times even with violent opposition.

In spite of this the moths fluttered round the candle, and amongst this venturesome tribe none stood out more prominently than Mr. Laurence Smethick, son of the M.P. for the Pakethorpe division. Some folk there were who vowed that the young people were secretly engaged, in spite of the fact that Margaret was an outrageous flirt and openly encouraged more than one of her crowd of adorers.

Be that as it may, one thing was very certain — namely, that Major Ceely did not approve of Mr. Smethick any more than he did of the others, and there had been more than one quarrel between the young man and his prospective father-in-law.

On that memorable Christmas Eve at Clevere none of us could fail to notice his absence; whilst Margaret, on the other hand, had shown marked predilection for the society of Captain Glynne, who, since the sudden death of his cousin, Viscount Heslington, Lord Ullesthorpe's only son (who was killed in the hunting field last October, if you remember), had become heir to the earldom and its £40,000 a year.

Personally, I strongly disapproved of Margaret's behaviour the night of the dance; her attitude with regard to Mr. Smethick — whose constant attendance on her had justified the rumour that they were engaged — being more than callous.

On that morning of December 24th — Christmas Eve, in fact — the young man had called at Clevere. I remember seeing him just as he was being shown into the boudoir downstairs. A few moments later the sound of angry voices rose with appalling distinctness from that room. We all tried not to listen, yet could not fail to hear Major Ceely's overbearing words of rudeness to the visitor, who, it seems, had merely asked to see Miss Ceely, and had been most unexpectedly confronted by the irascible and extremely disagreeable Major. Of course, the young man speedily lost his temper, too, and the whole incident ended with a very unpleasant quarrel between the two men in the hall, and with the Major peremptorily forbidding Mr. Smethick ever to darken his doors again.

On that night Major Ceely was murdered.

2

OF course, at first, no one attached any importance to this weird coincidence. The very thought of connecting the idea of murder with that of the personality of a bright, good-looking young Yorkshireman like Mr. Smethick seemed, indeed, preposterous, and with one accord all of us who were practically witnesses to the quarrel between the two men, tacitly agreed to say nothing at all about it at the inquest, unless we were absolutely obliged to do so on oath.

In view of the Major's terrible temper, this quarrel, mind you, had not the importance which it otherwise would have had; and we all flattered ourselves that we had well succeeded in parrying the coroner's questions.

The verdict at the inquest was against some person or persons unknown; and I, for one, was very glad that young Smethick's name had not been mentioned in connection with this terrible crime.

Two days later the superintendent at Bishopthorpe sent an urgent telephonic message to Lady Molly, begging her to come to the police-station immediately. We had the use of a motor all the while that we stayed at the "Black Swan," and in less than ten minutes we were bowling along at express speed towards Bishopthorpe.

On arrival we were immediately shown into Superintendent Etty's private room behind the office. He was there talking with Danvers — who had recently come down from London. In a corner of the room, sitting very straight on a high-backed chair, was a youngish woman of the servant class, who, as we entered, cast a quick, and I thought suspicious, glance at us both.

She was dressed in a coat and skirt of shabby-looking black, and although her face might have been called good-looking — for she had fine, dark eyes — her entire appearance was distinctly repellent. It suggested slatternliness in an unusual degree; there were holes in her shoes and in her stockings, the sleeve of her coat was half unsewn, and the braid on her skirt hung in loops all round the bottom. She had very red and very coarse-looking hands, and undoubtedly there was a furtive expression in her eyes, which, when she began speaking, changed to one of defiance.

Etty came forward with great alacrity when my dear lady entered. He looked perturbed, and seemed greatly relieved at sight of her.

"She is the wife of one of the outdoor men at Clevere," he explained rapidly to Lady Molly, nodding in the direction of the young woman, "and she has come here with such a queer tale that I thought you would like to hear it."

"She knows something about the murder?" asked Lady Molly.

"No! I didn't say that!" here interposed the woman, roughly, "doan't you go and tell no lies, Master Inspector. I thought as how you might wish to know what my husband saw on the night when the Major was murdered, that's all; and I've come to tell you."

"Why didn't your husband come himself?" asked Lady Molly.

"Oh, Haggett ain't well enough — he—" she began explaining, with a careless shrug of the shoulders, "so to speak—"

"The fact of the matter is, my lady," interposed Etty, "this woman's husband is half-witted. I believe he is only kept on in the garden because he is very strong and can help with the digging. It is because his testimony is so little to be relied on that I wished to consult you as to how we should act in the matter."

"What is his testimony, then?"

"Tell this lady what you have just told us, Mrs. Haggett, will you?" said Etty, curtly.

Again that quick, suspicious glance shot into the woman's eyes. Lady Molly took the chair which Danvers had brought forward for her, and sat down opposite Mrs. Haggett, fixing her earnest, calm gaze upon her.

"There's not much to tell," said the woman, sullenly. "Haggett is certainly queer in his head sometimes — and when he is queer he goes wandering about the place of nights."

"Yes?" said my lady, for Mrs. Haggett had paused awhile and now seemed unwilling to proceed.

"Well!" she resumed with sudden determination, "he had got one of his queer fits on Christmas Eve, and didn't come in till long after midnight. He told me as how he'd seen a young gentleman prowling about the garden on the terrace side. He heard the cry of 'Murder' and 'Help' soon after that, and ran in home because he was frightened."

"Home?" asked Lady Molly, quietly, "where is home?"

"The cottage where we live. Just back of the kitchen garden."

"Why didn't you tell all this to the superintendent before?"

"Because Haggett only told me last night, when he seemed less queer-like. He is mighty silent when the fits are on him."

"Did he know who the gentleman was whom he saw?"

"No, ma'am — I don't suppose he did — leastways he wouldn't say — but—"

"Yes? But?"

"He found this in the garden yesterday," said the woman, holding out a screw of paper which apparently she had held tightly clutched up to now, "and maybe that's what brought Christmas Eve and the murder back to his mind."

Lady Molly took the thing from her, and undid the soiled bit of paper with her dainty fingers. The next moment she held up for Etty's inspection a beautiful ring composed of an exquisitely carved moonstone surrounded with diamonds of unusual brilliance.

At the moment the setting and the stones themselves were marred by scraps of sticky mud which clung to them; the ring obviously having lain on the ground, and perhaps been trampled on for some days, and then been only very partially washed.

"At any rate you can find out the ownership of the ring," commented my dear lady after awhile, in answer to Etty's silent attitude of expectancy. "There would be no harm in that."

Then she turned once more to the woman.

"I'll walk with you to your cottage, if I may," she said decisively, "and have a chat with your husband. Is he at home?"

I thought Mrs. Haggett took this suggestion with marked reluctance. I could well imagine, from her own personal appearance, that her home was most unlikely to be in a fit state for a lady's visit. However, she could, of course, do nothing but obey, and, after a few muttered words of grudging acquiescence, she rose from her chair and stalked towards the door, leaving my lady to follow as she chose.

Before going, however, she turned and shot an angry glance at Etty.

"You'll give me back the ring, Master Inspector," she said with her usual tone of sullen defiance. "'Findings is keepings' you know."

"I am afraid not," replied Etty, curtly; "but there's always the reward offered by Miss Ceely for information which would lead to the apprehension of her father's murderer. You may get that, you know. It is a hundred pounds."

"Yes! I knew that," she remarked dryly, as, without further comment, she finally went out of the room.

3

MY dear lady came back very disappointed from her interview with Haggett.

It seems that he was indeed half-witted — almost an imbecile, in fact, with but a few lucid intervals, of which this present day was one. But, of course, his testimony was practically valueless.

He reiterated the story already told by his wife, adding no details. He had seen a young gentleman roaming on the terraced walk on the night of the murder. He did not know who the young gentleman was. He was going homewards when he heard the cry of "Murder," and ran to his cottage because he was frightened. He picked up the ring yesterday in the perennial border below the terrace and gave it to his wife.

Two of these brief statements made by the imbecile were easily proved to be true, and my dear lady had ascertained this before she returned to me. One of the Clevere under-gardeners said he had seen Haggett running home in the small hours of that fateful Christmas morning. He himself had been on the watch for the cattle-maimers that night, and remembered the little circumstance quite plainly. He added that Haggett certainly looked to be in a panic.

Then Newby, another outdoor man at the Hall, saw Haggett pick up the ring in the perennial border and advised him to take it to the police.

Somehow, all of us who were so interested in that terrible Christmas tragedy felt strangely perturbed at all this. No names had been mentioned as yet, but whenever my dear lady and I looked at one another, or whenever we talked to Etty or Danvers, we all felt that a certain name, one particular personality, was lurking at the back of all our minds.

The two men, of course, had no sentimental scruples to worry them. Taking the Haggett story merely as a clue, they worked diligently on that, with the result that twenty-four hours later Etty appeared in our private room at the "Black Swan" and calmly informed us that he had just got a warrant out against Mr. Laurence Smethick on a charge of murder, and was on his way even now to effect the arrest.

"Mr. Smethick did not murder Major Ceely," was Lady Molly's firm and only comment when she heard the news.

"Well, my lady, that's as it may be!" rejoined Etty, speaking with that deference with which the entire force invariably addressed my dear lady; "but we have collected a sufficiency of evidence, at any rate, to justify the arrest, and, in my opinion, enough of it to hang any man. Mr. Smethick purchased the moonstone and diamond ring at Nicholson's in Coney Street about a week ago. He was seen abroad on Christmas Eve by several persons, loitering round the gates at Clevere Hall, somewhere about the time when the guests were leaving after the dance, and, again, some few moments after the first cry of 'Murder' had been heard. His own valet admits that his master did not get home that night until long after 2.0 a.m., whilst even Miss Granard here won't deny that there was a terrible quarrel between Mr. Smethick and Major Ceely less than twenty-four hours before the latter was murdered."

Lady Molly offered no remark to this array of facts which Etty thus pitilessly marshalled before us, but I could not refrain from exclaiming:

"Mr. Smethick is innocent, I am sure."

"I hope, for his sake, he may be," retorted Etty, gravely, "but somehow 'tis a pity that he don't seem able to give a good account of himself between midnight and two o'clock that Christmas morning."

"Oh!" I ejaculated, "what does he say about that?"

"Nothing," said the man dryly; "that's just the trouble."

Well, of course, as you who read the papers will doubtless remember, Mr. Laurence Smethick, son of Colonel Smethick, M.P., of Pakethorpe Hall, Yorks, was arrested on the charge of having murdered Major Ceely on the night of December 24th-25th, and, after the usual magisterial inquiry, was duly committed to stand his trial at the next York assizes.

I remember well that, throughout his preliminary ordeal, young Smethick bore himself like one who had given up all hope of refuting the terrible charges brought against him, and, I must say, the formidable number of witnesses which the police brought up against him more than explained that attitude.

Of course, Haggett was not called, but, as it happened, there were plenty of people to swear that Mr. Laurence Smethick was seen loitering round the gates of Clevere Hall after the guests had departed on Christmas Eve. The head gardener, who lives at the lodge actually spoke to him, and Captain Glynne, leaning out of his brougham, was heard to exclaim:

"Hello, Smethick, what are you doing here at this time of night?"

And there were others, too.

To Captain Glynne's credit, be it here recorded, he tried his best to deny having recognized his unfortunate friend in the dark. Pressed by the magistrate, he said obstinately:

"I thought at the time that it was Mr. Smethick standing by the lodge gates, but on thinking the matter over I feel sure that I was mistaken."

On the other hand, what stood dead against young Smethick was, firstly, the question of the ring, and then the fact that he was seen in the immediate neighbourhood of Clevere, both at midnight and again at about two, when some men, who had been on the watch for the cattle-maimers, saw him walking away rapidly in the direction of Pakethorpe.

What was, of course, unexplainable and very terrible to witness was Mr. Smethick's obstinate silence with regard to his own movements during those fatal hours on that night. He did not contradict those who said that they had seen him at about midnight near the gates of Clevere, nor his own valet's statements as to the hour when he returned home. All he said was that he could not account for what he did between the time when the guests left the Hall and he himself went back to Pakethorpe. He realized the danger in which he stood, and what caused him to be silent about a matter which might mean life or death to him could not easily be conjectured.

The ownership of the ring he could not and did not dispute. He had lost it in the grounds of Clevere, he said. But the jeweller in Coney Street swore that he had sold the ring to Mr. Smethick on the 8th of December, whilst it was a well-known and an admitted fact that the young man had not openly been inside the gates of Clevere for over a fortnight before that.

On this evidence Laurence Smethick was committed for trial. Though the actual weapon with which the unfortunate Major had been stabbed had not been found, nor its ownership traced, there was such a vast array of circumstantial evidence against the young man that bail was refused.

He had, on the advice of his solicitor, Mr. Grayson — one of the ablest lawyers in York — reserved his defence, and on that miserable afternoon at the close of the year, we all filed out of the crowded court, feeling terribly depressed and anxious.

MY dear lady and I walked back to our hotel in silence. Our hearts seemed to weigh heavily within us. We felt mortally sorry for that good-looking young Yorkshireman, who, we were convinced, was innocent, yet at the same time seemed involved in a tangled web of deadly circumstances from which he seemed quite unable to extricate himself.

We did not feel like discussing the matter in the open streets, neither did we make any comment when presently, in a block in the traffic in Coney Street, we saw Margaret Ceely driving her smart dog-cart, whilst sitting beside her, and talking with great earnestness close to her ear, sat Captain Glynne.

She was in deep mourning, and had obviously been doing some shopping, for she was surrounded with parcels; so perhaps it was hypercritical to blame her. Yet somehow it struck me that just at the moment when there hung in the balance the life and honour of a man with whose name her own had oft been linked by popular rumour, it showed more than callous contempt for his welfare to be seen driving about with another man who, since his sudden access to fortune, had undoubtedly become a rival in her favours.

When we arrived at the "Black Swan," we were surprised to hear that Mr. Grayson had called to see my dear lady, and was upstairs waiting.

Lady Molly ran up to our sitting-room and greeted him with marked cordiality. Mr. Grayson is an elderly dry-looking man, but he looked visibly affected, and it was some time before he seemed able to plunge into the subject which had brought him hither. He fidgeted in his chair, and started talking about the weather.

"I am not here in a strictly professional capacity, you know," said Lady Molly presently, with a kindly smile and with a view to helping him out of his embarrassment. "Our police, I fear me, have an exaggerated view of my capacities, and the men here asked me unofficially to remain in the neighbourhood and to give them my advice if they should require it. Our chief is very lenient to me and has allowed me to stay. Therefore, if there is anything I can do—"

"Indeed, indeed there is!" ejaculated Mr. Grayson with sudden energy. "From all I hear, there is not another soul in the kingdom but you who can save this innocent man from the gallows."

My dear lady heaved a little sigh of satisfaction. She had all along wanted to have a more important finger in that Yorkshire pie.

"Mr. Smethick?" she said.

"Yes; my unfortunate young client," replied the lawyer. "I may as well tell you," he resumed after a slight pause, during which he seemed to pull himself together, "as briefly as possible what occurred on December 24th last and on the following Christmas morning. You will then understand the terrible plight in which my client finds himself, and how impossible it is for him to explain his actions on that eventful night. You will understand, also, why I have come to ask your help and your advice. Mr. Smethick considered himself engaged to Miss Ceely. The engagement had not been made public because of Major Ceely's anticipated opposition, but the young people had been very intimate, and many letters had passed between them. On the morning of the 24th Mr. Smethick called at the Hall, his intention then being merely to present his fiancée with the ring you know of. You remember the unfortunate contretemps that occurred: I mean the unprovoked quarrel sought by Major Ceely with my poor client, ending with the irascible old man forbidding Mr. Smethick the house.

"My client walked out of Clevere feeling, as you may well imagine, very wrathful; on the doorstep, just as he was leaving, he met Miss Margaret, and told her very briefly what had occurred. She took the matter very lightly at first, but finally became more serious, and ended the brief interview with the request that, since he could not come to the dance after what had occurred, he should come and see her afterwards, meeting her in the gardens soon after midnight. She would not take the ring from him then, but talked a good deal of sentiment about Christmas morning, asking him to bring the ring to her at night, and also the letters which she had written him. Well — you can guess the rest."

Lady Molly nodded thoughtfully.

"Miss Ceely was playing a double game," continued Mr. Grayson, earnestly. "She was determined to break off all relationship with Mr. Smethick, for she had transferred her volatile affections to Captain Glynne, who had lately become heir to an earldom and £40,000 a year. Under the guise of sentimental twaddle she got my unfortunate client to meet her at night in the grounds of Clevere and to give up to her the letters which might have compromised her in the eyes of her new lover. At two o'clock a.m. Major Ceely was murdered by one of his numerous enemies; as to which I do not know, nor does Mr. Smethick. He had just parted from Miss Ceely at the very moment when the first cry of 'Murder' roused Clevere from its slumbers. This she could confirm if she only would, for the two were still in sight of each other, she inside the gates, he just a little way down the road. Mr. Smethick saw Margaret Ceely run rapidly back towards the house. He waited about a little while, half hesitating what to do; then he reflected that his presence might be embarrassing, or even compromising to her whom, in spite of all, he still loved dearly; and knowing that there were plenty of men in and about the house to render what assistance was necessary, he finally turned his steps and went home a broken-hearted man, since she had given him the go-by, taken her letters away, and flung contemptuously into the mud the ring he had bought for her."

The lawyer paused, mopping his forehead and gazing with whole-souled earnestness at my lady's beautiful, thoughtful face.

"Has Mr. Smethick spoken to Miss Ceely since?" asked Lady Molly, after a while.

"No; but I did," replied the lawyer.

"What was her attitude?"

"One of bitter and callous contempt. She denies my unfortunate client's story from beginning to end; declares that she never saw him after she bade him 'good-morning' on the doorstep of Clevere Hall, when she heard of his unfortunate quarrel with her father. Nay, more; she scornfully calls the whole tale a cowardly attempt to shield a dastardly crime behind a still more dastardly libel on a defenceless girl."

We were all silent now, buried in thought which none of us would have cared to translate into words. That the impasse seemed indeed hopeless no one could deny.

The tower of damning evidence against the unfortunate young man had indeed been built by remorseless circumstances with no faltering hand.

Margaret Ceely alone could have saved him, but with brutal indifference she preferred the sacrifice of an innocent man's life and honour to that of her own chances of a brilliant marriage. There are such women in the world; thank God I have never met any but that one!

Yet am I wrong when I say that she alone could save the unfortunate young man, who throughout was behaving with such consummate gallantry, refusing to give his own explanation of the events that occurred on that Christmas morning, unless she chose first to tell the tale. There was one present now in the dingy little room at the "Black Swan" who could disentangle that weird skein of coincidences, if any human being not gifted with miraculous powers could indeed do it at this eleventh hour.

She now said, gently:

"What would you like me to do in this matter, Mr. Grayson? And why have you come to me rather than to the police?"

"How can I go with this tale to the police?" he ejaculated in obvious despair. "Would they not also look upon it as a dastardly libel on a woman's reputation? We have no proofs, remember, and Miss Ceely denies the whole story from first to last. No, no!" he exclaimed with wonderful fervour. "I came to you because I have heard of your marvellous gifts, your extraordinary intuition. Someone murdered Major Ceely! It was not my old friend Colonel Smethick's son. Find out who it was, then! I beg of you, find out who it was!"

He fell back in his chair broken down with grief. With inexpressible gentleness Lady Molly went up to him and placed her beautiful white hand on his shoulder.

"I will do my best, Mr. Grayson," she said simply.

WE remained alone and singularly quiet the whole of that evening. That my dear lady's active brain was hard at work I could guess by the brilliance of her eyes, and that sort of absolute stillness in her person through which one could almost feel the delicate nerves vibrating.

The story told her by the lawyer had moved her singularly. Mind you, she had always been morally convinced of young Smethick's innocence, but in her the professional woman always fought hard battles against the sentimentalist, and in this instance the overwhelming circumstantial evidence and the conviction of her superiors had forced her to accept the young man's guilt as something out of her ken.

By his silence, too, the young man had tacitly confessed; and if a man is perceived on the very scene of a crime, both before it has been committed and directly afterwards; if something admittedly belonging to him is found within three yards of where the murderer must have stood; if, added to this, he has had a bitter quarrel with the victim, and can give no account of his actions or whereabouts during the fatal time, it were vain to cling to optimistic beliefs in that same man's innocence.

But now matters had assumed an altogether different aspect. The story told by Mr. Smethick's lawyer had all the appearance of truth. Margaret Ceely's character, her callousness on the very day when her late fiancé stood in the dock, her quick transference of her affections to the richer man, all made the account of the events on Christmas night as told by Mr. Grayson extremely plausible.

No wonder my dear lady was buried in thought.

"I shall have to take the threads up from the beginning, Mary," she said to me the following morning, when after breakfast she appeared in her neat coat and skirt, with hat and gloves, ready to go out, "so, on the whole, I think I will begin with a visit to the Haggetts."

"I may come with you, I suppose?" I suggested meekly.

"Oh, yes!" she rejoined carelessly.

Somehow I had an inkling that the carelessness of her mood was only on the surface. It was not likely that she — my sweet, womanly, ultra-feminine, beautiful lady — should feel callously on this absorbing subject.

We motored down to Bishopthorpe. It was bitterly cold, raw, damp, and foggy. The chauffeur had some difficulty in finding the cottage, the "home" of the imbecile gardener and his wife.

There was certainly not much look of home about the place. When, after much knocking at the door, Mrs. Haggett finally opened it, we saw before us one of the most miserable, slatternly places I think I ever saw.

In reply to Lady Molly's somewhat curt inquiry, the woman said that Haggett was in bed, suffering from one of his "fits."

"That is a great pity," said my dear lady, rather unsympathetically, I thought, "for I must speak with him at once."

"What is it about?" asked the woman, sullenly. "I can take a message."

"I am afraid not," rejoined my lady. "I was asked to see Haggett personally."

"By whom, I'd like to know," she retorted, now almost insolently.

"I dare say you would. But you are wasting precious time. Hadn't you better help your husband on with his clothes? This lady and I will wait in the parlour."

After some hesitation the woman finally complied, looking very sulky the while.

We went into the miserable little room wherein not only grinding poverty but also untidiness and dirt were visible all round. We sat down on two of the cleanest-looking chairs, and waited whilst a colloquy in subdued voices went on in the room over our heads.

The colloquy, I may say, seemed to consist of agitated whispers on one part, and wailing complaints on the other. This was followed presently by some thuds and much shuffling, and presently Haggett, looking uncared-for, dirty, and unkempt, entered the parlour, followed by his wife.

He came forward, dragging his ill-shod feet and pulling nervously at his forelock.

"Ah!" said my lady, kindly; "I am glad to see you down, Haggett, though I am afraid I haven't very good news for you."

"Yes, miss!" murmured the man, obviously not quite comprehending what was said to him.

"I represent the workhouse authorities," continued Lady Molly, "and I thought we could arrange for you and your wife to come into the Union to-night, perhaps."

"The Union?" here interposed the woman, roughly. "What do you mean? We ain't going to the Union?"

"Well! but since you are not staying here," rejoined my lady, blandly, "you will find it impossible to get another situation for your husband in his present mental condition."

"Miss Ceely won't give us the go-by," she retorted defiantly.

"She might wish to carry out her late father's intentions," said Lady Molly with seeming carelessness.

"The Major was a cruel, cantankerous brute," shouted the woman with unpremeditated violence. "Haggett had served him faithfully for twelve years, and—"

She checked herself abruptly, and cast one of her quick, furtive glances at Lady Molly.

Her silence now had become as significant as her outburst of rage, and it was Lady Molly who concluded the phrase for her.

"And yet he dismissed him without warning," she said calmly.

"Who told you that?" retorted the woman.

"The same people, no doubt, who declare that you and Haggett had a grudge against the Major for this dismissal."

"That's a lie," asserted Mrs. Haggett, doggedly; "we gave information about Mr. Smethick having killed the Major because—"

"Ah," interrupted Lady Molly, quickly, "but then Mr. Smethick did not murder Major Ceely, and your information therefore was useless!"

"Then who killed the Major, I should like to know?"

Her manner was arrogant, coarse, and extremely unpleasant. I marvelled why my dear lady put up with it, and what was going on in that busy brain of hers. She looked quite urbane and smiling, whilst I wondered what in the world she meant by this story of the

workhouse and the dismissal of Haggett.

"Ah, that's what none of us know!" she now said lightly; "some folks say it was your husband."

"They lie!" she retorted quickly, whilst the imbecile, evidently not understanding the drift of the conversation, was mechanically stroking his red mop of hair and looking helplessly all round him.

"He was home before the cries of 'Murder' were heard in the house," continued Mrs. Haggett.

"How do you know?" asked Lady Molly, quickly.

"How do I know?"

"Yes; you couldn't have heard the cries all the way to this cottage — why, it's over half a mile from the Hall!"

"He was home, I say," she repeated with dogged obstinacy.

"You sent him?"

"He didn't do it—"

"No one will believe you, especially when the knife is found."

"What knife?"

"His clasp knife, with which he killed Major Ceely," said Lady Molly, quietly; "see, he has it in his hand now."

And with a sudden, wholly unexpected gesture she pointed to the imbecile, who in an aimless way had prowled round the room whilst this rapid colloquy was going on.

The purport of it all must in some sort of way have found an echo in his enfeebled brain. He wandered up to the dresser whereon lay the remnants of that morning's breakfast, together with some crockery and utensils.

In that same half-witted and irresponsible way he had picked up one of the knives and now was holding it out towards his wife, whilst a look of fear spread over his countenance.

"I can't do it, Annie, I can't — you'd better do it," he said.

There was dead silence in the little room. The woman Haggett stood as if turned to stone. Ignorant and superstitious as she was, I suppose that the situation had laid hold of her nerves, and that she felt that the finger of a relentless Fate was even now being pointed at her.

The imbecile was shuffling forward, closer and closer to his wife, still holding out the knife towards her and murmuring brokenly:

"I can't do it. You'd better, Annie — you'd better—"

He was close to her now, and all at once her rigidity and nerve-strain gave way; she gave a hoarse cry, and snatching the knife from the poor wretch, she rushed at him ready to strike. Lady Molly and I were both young, active and strong; and there was nothing of the squeamish grande dame about my dear lady when quick action was needed. But even then we had some difficulty in dragging Annie Haggett away from her miserable husband. Blinded with fury, she was ready to kill the man who had betrayed her. Finally, we succeeded in wresting the knife from her. You may be sure that it required some pluck after that to sit down again quietly and to remain in the same room with this woman, who already had one crime upon her conscience, and with this weird, half-witted creature who kept on murmuring pitiably: "You'd better do it, Annie—" Well, you've read the account of the case, so you know what followed. Lady Molly did not move from that room until she had obtained the woman's full confession. All she did for her own protection was to order me to open the window and to blow the police whistle which she handed to me. The police-station fortunately was not very far, and sound carried in the frosty air. She admitted to me afterwards that it had been foolish, perhaps, not to have brought Etty or Danvers with her, but she was supremely anxious not to put the woman on the alert from the very start, hence her circumlocutory speeches anent the workhouse, and Haggett's probable dismissal. That the woman had had some connection with the crime, Lady Molly, with her keen intuition, had always felt; but as there was no witness to the murder itself, and all circumstantial evidence was dead against young Smethick, there was only one chance of successful discovery, and that was the murderer's own confession. If you think over the interview between my dear lady and the Haggetts on that memorable morning, you will realise how admirably Lady Molly had led up to the weird finish. She would not speak to the woman unless Haggett was present, and she felt sure that as soon as the subject of the murder cropped up, the imbecile would either do or say something that would reveal the truth. Mechanically, when Major Ceely's name was mentioned, he had taken up the knife. The whole scene recurred to his tottering mind. That the Major had summarily dismissed him recently was one of those bold guesses which Lady Molly was wont to make. That Haggett had been merely egged on by his wife, and had been too terrified at the last to do the deed himself was no surprise to her, and hardly one to me, whilst the fact that the woman ultimately wreaked her own passionate revenge upon the unfortunate Major was hardly to be wondered at, in the face of her own coarse and elemental personality. Cowed by the quickness of events, and by the appearance of Danvers and Etty on the scene, she finally made full confession. She was maddened by the Major's brutality, when with rough, cruel words he suddenly turned her husband adrift, refusing to give him further employment. She herself had great ascendancy over the imbecile, and had drilled him into a part of hate and of revenge. At first he had seemed ready and willing to obey. It was arranged that he was to watch on the terrace every night until such time as an alarm of the recurrence of the cattle-maiming outrages should lure the Major out alone. This effectually occurred on Christmas morning, but not before Haggett, frightened and pusillanimous, was ready to flee rather than to accomplish the villainous deed. But Annie Haggett, guessing perhaps that he would shrink from the crime at the last, had also kept watch every night. Picture the prospective murderer watching and being watched! When Haggett came across his wife he deputed her to do the deed herself. I suppose that either terror of discovery or merely desire for the promised reward had caused the woman to fasten the crime on another. The finding of the ring by Haggett was the beginning of that cruel thought which, but for my dear lady's marvellous powers, would indeed have sent a brave young man to the gallows. Ah, you wish to know if Margaret Ceely is married? No! Captain Glynne cried off. What suspicions crossed his mind I cannot say; but he never proposed to Margaret, and now she is in Australia — staying with an aunt, I think — and she has sold Clevere Hall.

THE BAG OF SAND

OF course, I knew at once by the expression of her face that morning that my dear lady had some important business on hand.

She had a bundle in her arms, consisting of a shabby-looking coat and skirt, and a very dowdy hat trimmed with bunches of cheap, calico roses.

"Put on these things at once, Mary," she said curtly, "for you are going to apply for the situation of 'good plain cook,' so mind you look the part."

"But where in the world — ?" I gasped in astonishment.

"In the house of Mr. Nicholas Jones, in Eaton Terrace," she interrupted dryly, "the one occupied until recently by his sister, the late Mrs. Dunstan. Mrs. Jones is advertising for a cook, and you must get that place."

As you know, I have carried obedience to the level of a fine art. Nor was I altogether astonished that my dear lady had at last been asked to put one of her dainty fingers in that Dunstan pie, which was puzzling our fellows more completely than any other case I have ever known.

I don't know if you remember the many circumstances, the various contradictions which were cropping up at every turn, and which baffled our ablest detectives at the very moment when they thought themselves most near the solution of that strange mystery.

Mrs. Dunstan herself was a very uninteresting individual: self-righteous, self-conscious and fat, a perfect type of the moneyed middle-class woman whose balance at the local bank is invariably heavier than that of her neighbours. Her niece, Violet Frostwicke, lived with her: a smart, pretty girl, inordinately fond of dainty clothes and other luxuries which money can give. Being totally impecunious herself, she bore with the older woman's constantly varying caprices with almost angelic patience, a fact probably attributable to Mrs. Dunstan's testamentary intentions, which, as she often averred, were in favour of her niece.

In addition to these two ladies, the household consisted of three servants and Miss Cruikshank. The latter was a quiet, unassuming girl who was by way of being secretary and lady-help to Mrs. Dunstan, but who, in reality, was nothing but a willing drudge. Up betimes in the morning, she combined the work of a housekeeper with that of an upper servant. She interviewed the tradespeople, kept the servants in order, and ironed and smartened up Miss Violet's blouses. A Cinderella, in fact.

Mrs. Dunstan kept a cook and two maids, all of whom had been with her for years. In addition to these, a charwoman came very early in the morning to light fires, clean boots, and do the front steps.

On November 22nd, 1907 — for the early history of this curious drama dates back to that year — the charwoman who had been employed at Mrs. Dunstan's house in Eaton Terrace for some considerable time, sent word in the morning that in future she would be unable to come. Her husband had been obliged to move to lodgings nearer to his work, and she herself could not undertake to come the greater distance at the early hour at which Mrs. Dunstan required her.

The woman had written a very nice letter explaining these facts, and sent it by hand, stating at the same time that the bearer of the note was a very respectable woman, a friend of her own, who would be very pleased to "oblige" Mrs. Dunstan by taking on the morning's work.

I must tell you that the message and its bearer arrived at Eaton Terrace somewhere about 6.0 a.m., when no one was down except the Cinderella of the house, Miss Cruikshank.

She saw the woman, liked her appearance, and there and then engaged her to do the work, subject to Mrs. Dunstan's approval.

The woman, who had given her name as Mrs. Thomas, seemed very quiet and respectable. She said that she lived close by, in St. Peter's Mews, and therefore could come as early as Mrs. Dunstan wished. In fact, from that day, she came every morning at 5.30 a.m., and by seven o'clock had finished her work, and was able to go home.

If, in addition to these details, I tell you that, at that time, pretty Miss Violet Frostwicke was engaged to a young Scotsman, Mr. David Athol, of whom her aunt totally disapproved, I shall have put before you all the personages who, directly or indirectly, were connected with that drama, the final act of which has not yet been witnessed either by the police or by the public.

ON the following New Year's Eve, Mrs. Dunstan, as was her invariable custom on that day, went to her married brother's house to dine and to see the New Year in.

During her absence the usual thing occurred at Eaton Terrace. Miss Violet Frostwicke took the opportunity of inviting Mr. David Athol to spend the evening with her.

Mrs. Dunstan's servants, mind you, all knew of the engagement between the young people, and with the characteristic sentimentality of their class, connived at these secret meetings and helped to hoodwink the irascible old aunt.

Mr. Athol was a good-looking young man, whose chief demerit lay in his total lack of money or prospects. Also he was by way of being an actor, another deadly sin in the eyes of the puritanically-minded old lady.

Already, on more than one occasion, there had been vigorous wordy warfare 'twixt Mr. Athol and Mrs. Dunstan, and the latter had declared that if Violet chose to take up with this mountebank, she should never see a penny of her aunt's money now or in the future.

The young man did not come very often to Eaton Terrace, but on this festive New Year's Eve, when Mrs. Dunstan was not expected to be home until long after midnight, it seemed too splendid an opportunity for an ardent lover to miss.

As ill-luck would have it, Mrs. Dunstan had not felt very well after her copious dinner, and her brother, Mr. Nicholas Jones, escorted her home soon after ten o'clock.

Jane, the parlour-maid who opened the front door, was, in her own graphic language, "knocked all of a heap" when she saw her mistress, knowing full well that Mr. Athol was still in the dining-room with Miss Violet, and that Miss Cruikshank was at that very moment busy getting him a whisky and soda.

Meanwhile the coat and hat in the hall had revealed the young man's presence in the house.

For a moment Mrs. Dunstan paused, whilst Jane stood by trembling with fright. Then the old lady turned to Mr. Nicholas Jones, who was still standing on the doorstep, and said quietly:

“Will you telephone over to Mr. Blenkinsop, Nick, the first thing in the morning, and tell him I’ll be at his office by ten o’clock?”

Mr. Blenkinsop was Mrs. Dunstan’s solicitor, and as Jane explained to the cook later on, what could such an appointment mean but a determination to cut Miss Violet out of the missis’s will with the proverbial shilling?

After this Mrs. Dunstan took leave of her brother and went straight into the dining-room.

According to the subsequent testimony of all three servants, the mistress “went on dreadful.” Words were not easily distinguishable from behind the closed door, but it seems that, immediately she entered, Mrs. Dunstan’s voice was raised as if in terrible anger, and a few moments later Miss Violet fled crying from the dining-room, and ran quickly upstairs.

Whilst the door was thus momentarily opened and shut, the voice of the old lady was heard saying, in majestic wrath:

“That’s what you have done. Get out of this house. As for her, she’ll never see a penny of my money, and she may starve for aught I care!”

The quarrel seems to have continued for a short while after that, the servants being too deeply awed by those last vindictive words which they had heard to take much note of what went on subsequently.

Mrs. Dunstan and Mr. Athol were closeted together for some time; but apparently the old lady’s wrath did not subside, for when she marched up to bed an hour later she was heard to say:

“Out of this house she shall go, and the first thing in the morning, too. I’ll have no goings-on with a mountebank like you.”

Miss Cruikshank was terribly upset.

“It is a frightful blow for Miss Violet,” she said to cook, “but perhaps Mrs. Dunstan will feel more forgiving in the morning. I’ll take her up a glass of champagne now. She is very fond of that, and it will help her to get to sleep.”

Miss Cruikshank went up with the champagne, and told cook to see Mr. Athol out of the house; but the young man, who seemed very anxious and agitated, would not go away immediately. He stayed in the dining-room, smoking, for a while, and when the two younger servants went up to bed, he asked cook to let him remain until he had seen Miss Violet once more, for he was sure she would come down again — he had asked Miss Cruikshank to beg her to do so.

Mrs. Kennett, the cook, was a kind-hearted old woman. She had taken the young people under her special protection, and felt very vexed that the course of true love should not be allowed to run quite smoothly. So she told Mr. Athol to make himself happy and comfortable in the dining-room, and she would sit up by the fire in the library until he was ready to go.

The good soul thereupon made up the fire in the library, drew a chair in front of it, and — went fast to sleep.

Suddenly something awoke her. She sat up and looked round in that dazed manner peculiar to people just aroused from deep sleep.

She looked at the clock; it was past three. Surely, she thought, it must have been Mr. Athol calling to her which had caused her to wake. She went into the hall, where the gas had not yet been turned off, and there she saw Miss Violet, fully dressed and wearing a hat and coat, in the very act of going out at the front door.

In the cook’s own words, before she could ask a question or even utter a sound, the young girl had opened the front door, which was still on the latch, and then banged it to again, she herself having disappeared into the darkness of the street beyond.

Mrs. Kennett ran to the door and out into the street as fast as her old legs would let her; but the night was an exceptionally foggy one. Violet, no doubt, had walked rapidly away, and there came no answer to Mrs. Kennett’s repeated calls.

Thoroughly upset, and not knowing what to do, the good woman went back into the house. Mr. Athol had evidently left, for there was no sign of him in the dining-room or elsewhere. She then went upstairs and knocked at Mrs. Dunstan’s door. To her astonishment the gas was still burning in her mistress’s room, as she could see a thin ray of light filtering through the keyhole. At her first knock there came a quick, impatient answer:

“What is it?”

“Miss Violet, ‘m,” said the cook, who was too agitated to speak very coherently, “she is gone—”

“The best thing she could do,” came promptly from the other side of the door. “You go to bed, Mrs. Kennett, and don’t worry.”

Whereupon the gas was suddenly turned off inside the room, and, in spite of Mrs. Kennett’s further feeble protests, no other word issued from the room save another impatient:

“Go to bed.”

The cook then did as she was bid; but before going to bed she made the round of the house, turned off all the gas, and finally bolted the front door.

SOME three hours later the servants were called, as usual, by Miss Cruikshank, who then went down to open the area door to Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman.

At half-past six, when Mary the housemaid came down, candle in hand, she saw the charwoman a flight or two lower down, also apparently in the act of going downstairs. This astonished Mary not a little, as the woman’s work lay entirely in the basement, and she was supposed never to come to the upper floors.

The woman, though walking rapidly down the stairs, seemed, moreover, to be carrying something heavy.

“Anything wrong, Mrs. Thomas?” asked Mary, in a whisper.

The woman looked up, pausing a moment immediately under the gas bracket, the by-pass of which shed a feeble light upon her and upon her burden. The latter Mary recognised as the bag containing the sand which, on frosty mornings, had to be strewn on the front steps of the house.

On the whole, though she certainly was puzzled, Mary did not think very much about the incident then. As was her custom, she went into the housemaid’s closet, got the hot water for Miss Cruikshank’s bath, and carried it to the latter’s room, where she also pulled

up the blinds and got things ready generally. For Miss Cruikshank usually ran down in her dressing-gown, and came up to tidy herself later on.

As a rule, by the time the three servants got downstairs, it was nearly seven, and Mrs. Thomas had generally gone by that time; but on this occasion Mary was earlier. Miss Cruikshank was busy in the kitchen getting Mrs. Dunstan's tea ready. Mary spoke about seeing Mrs. Thomas on the stairs with the bag of sand, and Miss Cruikshank, too, was very astonished at the occurrence.

Mrs. Kennett was not yet down, and the charwoman apparently had gone; her work had been done as usual, and the sand was strewn over the stone steps in front, as the frosty fog had rendered them very slippery.

At a quarter past seven Miss Cruikshank went up with Mrs. Dunstan's tea, and less than two minutes later a fearful scream rang through the entire house, followed by the noise of breaking crockery.

In an instant the two maids ran upstairs, straight to Mrs. Dunstan's room, the door of which stood wide open.

The first thing Mary and Jane were conscious of was a terrific smell of gas, then of Miss Cruikshank, with eyes dilated with horror, staring at the bed in front of her, whereon lay Mrs. Dunstan, with one end of a piece of indiarubber piping still resting in her mouth, her jaw having dropped in death. The other end of that piece of piping was attached to the burner of a gas-bracket on the wall close by.

Every window in the room was fastened and the curtains drawn. The whole room reeked of gas.

Mrs. Dunstan had been asphyxiated by its fumes.

4

A YEAR went by after the discovery of the mysterious tragedy, and I can assure you that our fellows at the Yard had one of the toughest jobs in connection with the case that ever fell to their lot. Just think of all the contradictions which met them at every turn.

Firstly, the disappearance of Miss Violet.

No sooner had the women in the Dunstan household roused themselves sufficiently from their horror at the terrible discovery which they had just made, than they were confronted with another almost equally awful fact — awful, of course, because of its connection with the primary tragedy.

Miss Violet Frostwicke had gone. Her room was empty, her bed had not been slept in. She herself had been seen by the cook, Mrs. Kennett, stealing out of the house at dead of night.

To connect the pretty, dainty young girl even remotely with a crime so hideous, so callous, as the deliberate murder of an old woman, who had been as a mother to her, seemed absolutely out of the question, and by tacit consent the four women, who now remained in the desolate and gloom-laden house at Eaton Terrace, forbore to mention Miss Violet Frostwicke's name either to police or doctor.

Both these, of course, had been summoned immediately; Miss Cruikshank sending Mary to the police-station and thence to Dr. Folwell, in Eaton Square, whilst Jane went off in a cab to fetch Mr. Nicholas Jones, who, fortunately, had not yet left for his place of business.

The doctor's and the police-inspector's first thought, on examining the *mise en scène* of the terrible tragedy, was that Mrs. Dunstan had committed suicide. It was practically impossible to imagine that a woman in full possession of health and strength would allow a piece of indiarubber piping to be fixed between her teeth, and would, without a struggle, continue to inhale the poisonous fumes which would mean certain death. Yet there were no marks of injury upon the body, nothing to show how sufficient unconsciousness had been produced in the victim to permit of the miscreant completing his awesome deed.

But the theory of suicide set up by Dr. Folwell was promptly refuted by the most cursory examination of the room.

Though the drawers were found closed, they had obviously been turned over, as if the murderer had been in search either of money or papers, or the key of the safe.

The latter, on investigation, was found to be open, whilst the key lay on the floor close by. A brief examination of the safe revealed the fact that the tin boxes must have been ransacked, for they contained neither money nor important papers now, whilst the gold and platinum settings of necklaces, bracelets, and a tiara showed that the stones — which, as Mr. Nicholas Jones subsequently averred, were of considerable value — had been carefully, if somewhat clumsily, taken out by obvious inexperienced hands.

On the whole, therefore, appearances suggested deliberate, systematic, and very leisurely robbery, which wholly contradicted the theory of suicide.

Then suddenly the name of Miss Frostwicke was mentioned. Who first brought it on the tapis no one subsequently could say; but in a moment the whole story of the young girl's engagement to Mr. Athol, in defiance of her aunt's wishes, the quarrel of the night before, and the final disappearance of both young people from the house during the small hours of the morning, was dragged from the four unwilling witnesses by the able police-inspector.

Nay, more. One very unpleasant little circumstance was detailed by one of the maids and corroborated by Miss Cruikshank.

It seems that when the latter took up the champagne to Mrs. Dunstan, the old lady desired Miss Violet to come to her room. Mary, the housemaid, was on the stairs when she saw the young girl, still dressed in her evening gown of white chiffon, her eyes still swollen with tears, knocking at her aunt's door.

The police-inspector was busy taking notes, already building up in his mind a simple, if very sensational, case against Violet Frostwicke, when Mrs. Kennett promptly upset all his calculations.

Miss Violet could have had nothing to do with the murder of her aunt, seeing that Mrs. Dunstan was alive and actually spoke to the cook when the latter knocked at her bedroom door after she had seen the young girl walk out of the house.

Then came the question of Mr. Athol. But, if you remember, it was quite impossible even to begin to build up a case against the young man. His own statement that he left the house at about midnight, having totally forgotten to rouse the cook when he did so, was amply corroborated from every side.

The cabman who took him up to the corner of Eaton Terrace at 11.50 p.m. was one witness in his favour; his landlady at his rooms in Jermyn Street, who let him in, since he had mislaid his latchkey, and who took him up some tea at seven o'clock the next morning,

was another; whilst, when Mary saw Miss Violet going into her aunt's room, the clock at St. Peter's, Eaton Square, was just striking twelve.

I dare say you think I ought by now to have mentioned the charwoman, Mrs. Thomas, who represented the final, most complete, most hopeless contradiction in this remarkable case.

Mrs. Thomas was seen by Mary, the housemaid, at half-past six o'clock in the morning, coming down from the upper floors, where she had no business to be, and carrying the bag of sand used for strewing over the slippery front-door steps.

The bag of sand, of course, was always kept in the area.

The moment that bag of sand was mentioned Dr. Folwell gave a curious gasp. Here, at least, was the solution to one mystery. The victim had been stunned whilst still in bed by a blow on the head dealt with that bag of sand; and whilst she was unconscious the callous miscreant had robbed her and finally asphyxiated her with the gas fumes.

Where was the woman who, at half-past six in the morning, was seen in possession of the silent instrument of death?

Mrs. Thomas had disappeared. The last that was then or ever has been seen of her was when she passed underneath the dim light of a by-pass on the landing, as if tired out with the weight which she was carrying.

Since then, as you know, the police have been unswerving in their efforts to find Mrs. Thomas. The address which she had given in St. Peter's Mews was found to be false. No one of that name or appearance had ever been seen there.

The woman who was supposed to have sent her with a letter of recommendation to Mrs. Dunstan knew nothing of her. She swore that she had never sent anyone with a letter to Mrs. Dunstan. She gave up her work there one day because she found it too hard at such an early hour in the morning; but she never heard anything more from her late employer after that.

Strange, wasn't it, that two people should have disappeared out of that house on that same memorable night?

Of course, you will remember the tremendous sensation that was caused some twenty-four hours later, when it transpired that the young person who had thrown herself into the river from Waterloo Bridge on that same eventful morning, and whose body was subsequently recovered and conveyed to the Thames Police station, was identified as Miss Violet Frostwicke, the niece of the lady who had been murdered in her own house in Eaton Terrace.

Neither money nor diamonds were found on poor Miss Violet. She had herself given the most complete proof that she, at least, had no hand in robbing or killing Mrs. Dunstan.

The public wondered why she took her aunt's wrath and her probable disinheritance so fearfully to heart, and sympathised with Mr. David Athol for the terribly sad loss which he had sustained.

But Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman, had not yet been found.

5

I THINK I looked an extremely respectable, good plain cook when I presented myself at the house in Eaton Terrace in response to the advertisement in the "Daily Telegraph."

As, in addition to my prepossessing appearance, I also asked very low wages and declared myself ready to do anything except scour the front steps and the stone area, I was immediately engaged by Mrs. Jones, and was duly installed in the house the following day under the name of Mrs. Curwen.

But few events had occurred here since the discovery of the dual tragedy, now more than a year ago, and none that had thrown any light upon the mystery which surrounded it.

The verdict at the inquest had been one of wilful murder against a person known as Mrs. Thomas, the weight of evidence, coupled with her disappearance, having been very heavy against her; and there was a warrant out for her arrest.

Mrs. Dunstan had died intestate. To the astonishment of all those in the know, she had never signed the will which Messrs. Blenkinsop and Blenkinsop had drafted for her, and wherein she bequeathed £20,000 and the lease of her house in Eaton Terrace to her beloved niece, Violet Frostwicke, £1,000 to Miss Cruikshank, and other, smaller, legacies to friends or servants.

In default of a will, Mr. Nicholas Jones, only brother of the deceased, became possessed of all her wealth.

He was a very rich man himself, and many people thought that he ought to give Miss Cruikshank the £1,000 which the poor girl had thus lost through no fault of her own.

What his ultimate intentions were with regard to this no one could know. For the present he contented himself with moving to Eaton Terrace with his family; and, as his wife was a great invalid, he asked Miss Cruikshank to continue to make her home in the house and to help in its management.

Neither the diamonds nor the money stolen from Mrs. Dunstan's safe were ever traced. It seems that Mrs. Dunstan, a day or two before her death, had sold a freehold cottage which she owned near Teddington. The money, as is customary, had been handed over to her in gold, in Mr. Blenkinsop's office, and she had been foolish enough not to bank it immediately. This money and the diamonds had been the chief spoils of her assailant. And all the while no trace of Mrs. Thomas, in spite of the most strenuous efforts on the part of the police to find her.

Strangely enough, when I had been in Eaton Terrace about three days, and was already getting very tired of early rising and hard work, the charwoman there fell ill one day and did not come to her work as usual.

I, of course, grumbled like six, for I had to be on my hands and knees the next morning scrubbing stone steps, and my thoughts of Lady Molly, for the moment, were not quite as loyal as they usually were.

Suddenly I heard a shuffling footstep close behind me. I turned and saw a rough-looking, ill-dressed woman standing at the bottom of the steps.

"What do you want?" I asked sourly, for I was in a very bad humour.

"I saw you scrubbing them steps, miss," she replied in a raucous voice; "my 'usband is out of work, and the children hain't 'ad no breakfast this morning. I'd do them steps, miss, if you'd give me a trifle."

The woman certainly did not look very prepossessing, with her shabby, broad-brimmed hat hiding the upper part of her face, and her skirt, torn and muddy, pinned up untidily round her stooping figure.

However, I did not think that I could be doing anything very wrong by letting her do this one bit of rough work, which I hated, so I agreed to give her sixpence, and left her there with kneeling mat and scrubbing-brush, and went in, leaving, however, the front door open.

In the hall I met Miss Cruikshank, who, as usual, was down before everybody else.

"What is it, Curwen?" she asked, for through the open door she had caught sight of the woman kneeling on the step.

"A woman, miss," I replied, somewhat curtly. "She offered to do the steps. I thought Mrs. Jones wouldn't mind, as Mrs. Callaghan hasn't turned up."

Miss Cruikshank hesitated an instant, and then walked up to the front door.

At the same moment the woman looked up, rose from her knees, and boldly went up to accost Miss Cruikshank.

"You'll remember me, miss," she said, in her raucous voice. "I used to work for Mrs. Dunstan once. My name is Mrs. Thomas."

No wonder Miss Cruikshank uttered a quickly smothered cry of horror. Thinking that she would faint, I ran to her assistance; but she waved me aside and then said quite quietly:

"This poor woman's mind is deranged. She is no more Mrs. Thomas than I am. Perhaps we had better send for the police."

"Yes, miss; p'r'aps you'd better," said the woman with a sigh. "My secret has been weighin' heavy on me of late."

"But, my good woman," said Miss Cruikshank, very kindly, for I suppose that she thought, as I did, that this was one of those singular cases of madness which sometimes cause innocent people to accuse themselves of undiscovered crimes. "You are not Mrs. Thomas at all. I knew Mrs. Thomas well, of course — and—"

"Of course you knew me, miss," replied the woman. "The last conversation you and I had together was in the kitchen that morning, when Mrs. Dunstan was killed. I remember your saying to me—"

"Fetch the police, Curwen," said Miss Cruikshank, peremptorily.

Whereupon the woman broke into a harsh and loud laugh of defiance.

To tell you the truth, I was not a little puzzled. That this scene had been foreseen by my dear lady, and that she had sent me to this house on purpose that I should witness it, I was absolutely convinced. But — here was my dilemma: ought I to warn the police at once or not?

On the whole, I decided that my best plan would undoubtedly be to communicate with Lady Molly first of all, and to await her instructions. So I ran upstairs, scribbled a hasty note to my dear lady, and, in response to Miss Cruikshank's orders, flew out of the house through the area gate, noticing, as I did so, that Miss Cruikshank was still parleying with the woman on the doorstep.

I sent the note off to Maida Vale by taxicab; then I went back to Eaton Terrace. Miss Cruikshank met me at the front door, and told me that she had tried to detain the woman, pending my return; but that she felt very sorry for the unfortunate creature, who obviously was labouring under a delusion, and she had allowed her to go away.

About an hour later I received a curt note from Lady Molly ordering me to do nothing whatever without her special authorisation.

In the course of the day, Miss Cruikshank told me that she had been to the police-station, and had consulted with the inspector, who said there would be no harm in engaging the pseudo Mrs. Thomas to work at Eaton Terrace, especially as thus she would remain under observation.

Then followed a curious era in Mr. Nicholas Jones's otherwise well-ordered household. We three servants, instead of being called at six as heretofore, were allowed to sleep on until seven. When we came down we were not scolded. On the contrary, we found our work already done.

The charwoman — whoever she was — must have been a very hard-working woman. It was marvellous what she accomplished single-handed before seven a.m., by which time she had invariably gone.

The two maids, of course, were content to let this pleasant state of things go on, but I was devoured with curiosity.

One morning I crept quietly downstairs and went into the kitchen soon after six. I found the pseudo Mrs. Thomas sitting at a very copious breakfast. I noticed that she had on altogether different — though equally shabby and dirty — clothes from those she had worn when she first appeared on the doorstep of 180, Eaton Terrace. Near her plate were three or four golden sovereigns over which she had thrown her grimy hand.

Miss Cruikshank the while was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. At sight of me she jumped up, and with obvious confusion muttered something about "hating to be idle," etc.

That day Miss Cruikshank told me that I did not suit Mrs. Jones, who wished me to leave at the end of my month. In the afternoon I received a little note from my dear lady, telling me to be downstairs by six o'clock the following morning.

I did as I was ordered, of course, and when I came into the kitchen punctually at six a.m. I found the charwoman sitting at the table with a pile of gold in front of her, which she was counting over with a very grubby finger. She had her back to me, and was saying as I entered:

"I think if you was to give me another fifty quid I'd leave you the rest now. You'd still have the diamonds and the rest of the money."

She spoke to Miss Cruikshank, who was facing me, and who, on seeing me appear, turned as white as a ghost. But she quickly recovered herself, and, standing between me and the woman, she said vehemently:

"What do you mean by prying on me like this? Go and pack your boxes and leave the house this instant."

But before I could reply the woman had interposed.

"Don't you fret yourself, miss," she said, placing her grimy hand on Miss Cruikshank's shoulder. "There's the bag of sand in that there corner; we'll knock 'er down as we did Mrs. Dunstan — eh?"

"Hold your tongue, you lying fool!" said the girl, who now looked like a maddened fury.

"Give me that other fifty quid and I'll hold my tongue," retorted the woman, boldly.

"This creature is mad," said Miss Cruikshank, who had made a vigorous and successful effort to recover herself. "She is under the delusion that not only is she Mrs. Thomas, but that she murdered Mrs. Dunstan—"

"No — no!" interrupted the woman. "I only came back that morning because I recollected that you had left the bag of sand upstairs after you so cleverly did away with Mrs. Dunstan, robbed her of all her money and jewels, and even were sharp enough to imitate her voice when Mrs. Kennett, the cook, terrified you by speaking to Mrs. Dunstan through the door."

"It is false! You are not Mrs. Thomas. The two maids who are here now, and who were in this house at the time, can swear that you are a liar."

"Let us change clothes now, Miss Cruikshank," said a voice, which sounded almost weirdly in my ear in spite of its familiarity, for I could not locate whence it came, "and see if in a charwoman's dress those two maids would not recognise you."

"Mary," continued the same familiar voice, "help me out of these filthy clothes. Perhaps Miss Cruikshank would like to resume her own part of Mrs. Thomas, the charwoman."

"Liars and impostors — both!" shouted the girl, who was rapidly losing all presence of mind. "I'll send for the police."

"Quite unnecessary," rejoined Lady Molly coolly; "Detective-Inspector Danvers is just outside that door."

The girl made a dash for the other door, but I was too quick for her, and held her back, even whilst Lady Molly gave a short, sharp call which brought Danvers on the scene.

I must say that Miss Cruikshank made a bold fight, but Danvers had two of our fellows with him, and arrested her on the warrant for the apprehension of the person known as Mrs. Thomas.

The clothes of the charwoman who had so mysteriously disappeared had been found by Lady Molly at the back of the coal cellar, and she was still dressed in them at the present moment.

No wonder I had not recognised my own dainty lady in the grimy woman who had so successfully played the part of a blackmailer on the murderess of Mrs. Dunstan. She explained to me subsequently that the first inkling that she had had of the horrible truth — namely, that it was Miss Cruikshank who had deliberately planned to murder Mrs. Dunstan by impersonating a charwoman for a while, and thus throwing dust in the eyes of the police — was when she heard of the callous words which the old lady was supposed to have uttered when she was told of Miss Violet's flight from the house in the middle of the night.

"She may have been very angry at the girl's escapade," explained Lady Molly to me, "but she would not have allowed her to starve. Such cruelty was out of all proportion to the offence. Then I looked about me for a stronger motive for the old lady's wrath; and, remembering what she said on New Year's Eve, when Violet fled crying from the room, I came to the conclusion that her anger was not directed against her niece, but against the other girl, and against the man who had transferred his affections from Violet Frostwicke to Miss Cruikshank, and had not only irritated Mrs. Dunstan by this clandestine, double-faced love-making, but had broken the heart of his trusting fiancée.

"No doubt Miss Cruikshank did not know that the will, whereby she was to inherit £1,000, was not signed, and no doubt she and young Athol planned out that cruel murder between them. The charwoman was also a bag of sand which was literally thrown in the eyes of the police."

"But," I objected, "I can't understand how a cold-blooded creature like that Miss Cruikshank could have allowed herself to be terrorised and blackmailed. She knew that you could not be Mrs. Thomas, since Mrs. Thomas never existed."

"Yes; but one must reckon a little sometimes with that negligible quantity known as conscience. My appearance as Mrs. Thomas vaguely frightened Miss Cruikshank. She wondered who I was and what I knew. When, three days later, I found the shabby clothes in the coal-cellar and appeared dressed in them, she lost her head. She gave me money! From that moment she was done for. Confession was only a matter of time."

And Miss Cruikshank did make full confession. She was recommended to mercy on account of her sex, but she was plucky enough not to implicate David Athol in the recital of her crime.

He has since emigrated to Western Canada.

THE MAN IN THE INVERNESS CAPE

I HAVE heard many people say — people, too, mind you, who read their daily paper regularly — that it is quite impossible for anyone to “disappear” within the confines of the British Isles. At the same time these wise people invariably admit one great exception to their otherwise unimpeachable theory, and that is the case of Mr. Leonard Marvell, who, as you know, walked out one afternoon from the Scotia Hotel in Cromwell Road and has never been seen or heard of since.

Information had originally been given to the police by Mr. Marvell’s sister Olive, a Scotchwoman of the usually accepted type: tall, bony, with sandy-coloured hair, and a somewhat melancholy expression in her blue-grey eyes.

Her brother, she said, had gone out on a rather foggy afternoon. I think it was the 3rd of February, just about a year ago. His intention had been to go and consult a solicitor in the City — whose address had been given him recently by a friend — about some private business of his own.

Mr. Marvell had told his sister that he would get a train at South Kensington Station to Moorgate Street, and walk thence to Finsbury Square. She was to expect him home by dinner-time.

As he was, however, very irregular in his habits, being fond of spending his evenings at restaurants and music-halls, the sister did not feel the least anxious when he did not return home at the appointed time. She had her dinner in the table d’hôte room, and went to bed soon after 10.0.

She and her brother occupied two bedrooms and a sitting-room on the second floor of the little private hotel. Miss Marvell, moreover, had a maid always with her, as she was somewhat of an invalid. This girl, Rosie Campbell, a nice-looking Scotch lassie, slept on the top floor.

It was only on the following morning, when Mr. Leonard did not put in an appearance at breakfast, that Miss Marvell began to feel anxious. According to her own account, she sent Rosie in to see if anything was the matter, and the girl, wide-eyed and not a little frightened, came back with the news that Mr. Marvell was not in his room, and that his bed had not been slept in that night.

With characteristic Scottish reserve, Miss Olive said nothing about the matter at the time to anyone, nor did she give information to the police until two days later, when she herself had exhausted every means in her power to discover her brother’s whereabouts.

She had seen the lawyer to whose office Leonard Marvell had intended going that afternoon, but Mr. Statham, the solicitor in question, had seen nothing of the missing man.

With great adroitness Rosie, the maid, had made inquiries at South Kensington and Moorgate Street stations. At the former, the booking clerk, who knew Mr. Marvell by sight, distinctly remembered selling him a first-class ticket to one of the City stations in the early part of the afternoon; but at Moorgate Street, which is a very busy station, no one recollected seeing a tall, red-haired Scotchman in an Inverness cape — such was the description given of the missing man. By that time the fog had become very thick in the City; traffic was disorganised, and everyone felt fussy, ill-tempered, and self-centred.

These, in substance, were the details which Miss Marvell gave to the police on the subject of her brother’s strange disappearance.

At first she did not appear very anxious; she seemed to have great faith in Mr. Marvell’s power to look after himself; moreover, she declared positively that her brother had neither valuables nor money about his person when he went out that afternoon.

But as day succeeded day and no trace of the missing man had yet been found, matters became more serious, and the search instituted by our fellows at the Yard waxed more keen.

A description of Mr. Leonard Marvell was published in the leading London and provincial dailies. Unfortunately, there was no good photograph of him extant, and descriptions are apt to prove vague.

Very little was known about the man beyond his disappearance, which had rendered him famous. He and his sister had arrived at the Scotia Hotel about a month previously, and subsequently they were joined by the maid Campbell.

Scotch people are far too reserved ever to speak of themselves or their affairs to strangers. Brother and sister spoke very little to anyone at the hotel. They had their meals in their sitting-room, waited on by the maid, who messed with the staff. But, in face of the present terrible calamity, Miss Marvell’s frigidity relaxed before the police inspector, to whom she gave what information she could about her brother.

“He was like a son to me,” she explained with scarcely restrained tears, “for we lost our parents early in life, and as we were left very, very badly off, our relations took but little notice of us. My brother was years younger than I am — and though he was a little wild and fond of pleasure, he was as good as gold to me, and has supported us both for years by journalistic work. We came to London from Glasgow about a month ago, because Leonard got a very good appointment on the staff of the ‘Daily Post.’”

All this, of course, was soon proved to be true; and although, on minute inquiries being instituted in Glasgow, but little seemed to be known about Mr. Leonard Marvell in that city, there seemed no doubt that he had done some reporting for the “Courier,” and that latterly, in response to an advertisement, he had applied for and obtained regular employment on the “Daily Post.”

The latter enterprising halfpenny journal, with characteristic magnanimity, made an offer of £50 reward to any of its subscribers who gave information which would lead to the discovery of the whereabouts of Mr. Leonard Marvell.

But time went by, and that £50 remained unclaimed.

LADY MOLLY had not seemed as interested as she usually was in cases of this sort. With strange flippancy — wholly unlike herself — she remarked that one Scotch journalist more or less in London did not vastly matter.

I was much amused, therefore, one morning about three weeks after the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Leonard Marvell, when Jane, our little parlour-maid, brought in a card accompanied by a letter.

The card bore the name “Miss Olive Marvell.” The letter was the usual formula from the chief, asking Lady Molly to have a talk with the lady in question, and to come and see him on the subject after the interview.

With a smothered yawn my dear lady told Jane to show in Miss Marvell.

"There are two of them, my lady," said Jane, as she prepared to obey.

"Two what?" asked Lady Molly with a laugh.

"Two ladies, I mean," explained Jane.

"Well! Show them both into the drawing-room," said Lady Molly, impatiently.

Then, as Jane went off on this errand, a very funny thing happened; funny, because during the entire course of my intimate association with my dear lady, I had never known her act with such marked indifference in the face of an obviously interesting case. She turned to me and said:

"Mary, you had better see these two women, whoever they may be; I feel that they would bore me to distraction. Take note of what they say, and let me know. Now, don't argue," she added with a laugh, which peremptorily put a stop to my rising protest, "but go and interview Miss Marvell and Co."

Needless to say, I promptly did as I was told, and the next few seconds saw me installed in our little drawing-room, saying polite preliminaries to the two ladies who sat opposite to me.

I had no need to ask which of them was Miss Marvell. Tall, ill-dressed in deep black, with a heavy crape veil over her face, and black cotton gloves, she looked the uncompromising Scotchwoman to the life. In strange contrast to her depressing appearance, there sat beside her an over-dressed, much behatted, peroxided young woman, who bore the stamp of the profession all over her pretty, painted face.

Miss Marvell, I was glad to note, was not long in plunging into the subject which had brought her here.

"I saw a gentleman at Scotland Yard," she explained, after a short preamble, "because Miss — er — Lulu Fay came to me at the hotel this very morning with a story which, in my opinion, should have been told to the police directly my brother's disappearance became known, and not three weeks later."

The emphasis which she laid on the last few words and the stern look with which she regarded the golden-haired young woman beside her, showed the disapproval with which the rigid Scotchwoman viewed any connection which her brother might have had with the lady, whose very name seemed unpleasant to her lips.

Miss — er — Lulu Fay blushed even through her rouge, and turned a pair of large, liquid eyes imploringly upon me.

"I — I didn't know. I was frightened," she stammered.

"There's no occasion to be frightened now," retorted Miss Marvell, "and the sooner you try and be truthful about the whole matter, the better it will be for all of us."

And the stern woman's lips closed with a snap, as she deliberately turned her back on Miss Fay and began turning over the leaves of a magazine which happened to be on a table close to her hand.

I muttered a few words of encouragement, for the little actress looked ready to cry. I spoke as kindly as I could, telling her that if indeed she could throw some light on Mr. Marvell's present whereabouts it was her duty to be quite frank on the subject.

She "hem"-ed and "ha"-ed for awhile, and her simpering ways were just beginning to tell on my nerves, when she suddenly started talking very fast.

"I am principal boy at the Grand," she explained with great volubility; "and I knew Mr. Leonard Marvell well — in fact — er — he paid me a good deal of attention and—"

"Yes — and — ?" I queried, for the girl was obviously nervous.

There was a pause. Miss Fay began to cry.

"And it seems that my brother took this young — er — lady to supper on the night of February 3rd, after which no one has ever seen or heard of him again," here interposed Miss Marvell, quietly.

"Is that so?" I asked.

Lulu Fay nodded, whilst heavy tears fell upon her clasped hands.

"But why did you not tell this to the police three weeks ago?" I ejaculated, with all the sternness at my command.

"I — I was frightened," she stammered.

"Frightened? Of what?"

"I am engaged to Lord Mountnewte and—"

"And you did not wish him to know that you were accepting the attentions of Mr. Leonard Marvell — was that it? Well," I added, with involuntary impatience, "what happened after you had supper with Mr. Marvell?"

"Oh! I hope — I hope that nothing happened," she said through more tears; "we had supper at the Trocadero, and he saw me into my brougham. Suddenly, just as I was driving away, I saw Lord Mountnewte standing quite close to us in the crowd."

"Did the two men know one another?" I asked.

"No," replied Miss Fay; "at least, I didn't think so, but when I looked back through the window of my carriage I saw them standing on the kerb talking to each other for a moment, and then walk off together towards Piccadilly Circus. That is the last I have seen of either of them," continued the little actress with a fresh flood of tears. "Lord Mountnewte hasn't spoken to me since, and Mr. Marvell has disappeared with my money and my diamonds."

"Your money and your diamonds?" I gasped in amazement.

"Yes; he told me he was a jeweller, and that my diamonds wanted re-setting. He took them with him that evening, for he said that London jewellers were clumsy thieves, and that he would love to do the work for me himself. I also gave him two hundred pounds, which he said he would want for buying the gold and platinum required for the settings. And now he has disappeared — and my diamonds — and my money! Oh! I have been very — very foolish — and—"

Her voice broke down completely. Of course, one often hears of the idiocy of girls giving money and jewels unquestioningly to clever adventurers who know how to trade upon their inordinate vanity. There was, therefore, nothing very out of the way in the story just told me by Miss — er — Lulu Fay, until the moment when Miss Marvell's quiet voice, with its marked Scotch burr, broke in upon the short silence which had followed the actress's narrative.

"As I explained to the chief detective-inspector at Scotland Yard," she said calmly, "the story which this young — er — lady tells is only partly true. She may have had supper with Mr. Leonard Marvell on the night of February 3rd, and he may have paid her certain attentions; but he never deceived her by telling her that he was a jeweller, nor did he obtain possession of her diamonds and her money through false statements. My brother was the soul of honour and loyalty. If for some reason which Miss — er — Lulu Fay chooses to keep secret, he had her jewels and money in his possession on the fatal February 3rd, then I think his disappearance is accounted for. He has been robbed and perhaps murdered."

Like a true Scotchwoman she did not give way to tears, but even her harsh voice trembled slightly when she thus bore witness to her brother's honesty, and expressed the fears which assailed her as to his fate.

Imagine my plight! I could ill forgive my dear lady for leaving me in this unpleasant position — a sort of peacemaker between two women who evidently hated one another, and each of whom was trying her best to give the other "the lie direct."

I ventured to ring for our faithful Jane and to send her with an imploring message to Lady Molly, begging her to come and disentangle the threads of this muddled skein with her clever fingers; but Jane returned with a curt note from my dear lady, telling me not to worry about such a silly case, and to bow the two women out of the flat as soon as possible and then come for a nice walk.

I wore my official manner as well as I could, trying not to betray the 'prentice hand. Of course, the interview lasted a great deal longer, and there was considerably more talk than I can tell you of in a brief narrative. But the gist of it all was just as I have said. Miss Lulu Fay stuck to every point of the story which she had originally told Miss Marvell. It was the latter uncompromising lady who had immediately marched the younger woman off to Scotland Yard in order that she might repeat her tale to the police. I did not wonder that the chief promptly referred them both to Lady Molly.

Anyway, I made excellent shorthand notes of the conflicting stories which I heard; and I finally saw, with real relief, the two women walk out of our little front door.

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MISS — ER — LULU FAY, mind you, never contradicted in any one particular the original story which she had told me, about going out to supper with Leonard Marvell, entrusting him with £200 and the diamonds, which he said he would have reset for her, and seeing him finally in close conversation with her recognised fiancé, Lord Mountnewte. Miss Marvell, on the other hand, very commendably refused to admit that her brother acted dishonestly towards the girl. If he had her jewels and money in his possession at the time of his disappearance, then he had undoubtedly been robbed, or perhaps murdered, on his way back to the hotel, and if Lord Mountnewte had been the last to speak to him on that fatal night, then Lord Mountnewte must be able to throw some light on the mysterious occurrence.

Our fellows at the Yard were abnormally active. It seemed, on the face of it, impossible that a man, healthy, vigorous, and admittedly sober, should vanish in London between Piccadilly Circus and Cromwell Road without leaving the slightest trace of himself or of the valuables said to have been in his possession.

Of course, Lord Mountnewte was closely questioned. He was a young Guardsman of the usual pattern, and, after a great deal of rapid talk which irritated Detective-Inspector Saunders not a little, he made the following statement —

"I certainly am acquainted with Miss Lulu Fay. On the night in question I was standing outside the Troc, when I saw this young lady at her own carriage window talking to a tall man in an Inverness cape. She had, earlier in the day, refused my invitation to supper, saying that she was not feeling very well, and would go home directly after the theatre; therefore I felt, naturally, a little vexed. I was just about to hail a taxi, meaning to go on to the club, when, to my intense astonishment, the man in the Inverness cape came up to me and asked me if I could tell him the best way to get back to Cromwell Road."

"And what did you do?" asked Saunders.

"I walked a few steps with him and put him on his way," replied Lord Mountnewte, blandly.

In Saunderson's own expressive words, he thought that story "fishy." He could not imagine the arm of coincidence being quite so long as to cause these two men — who presumably were both in love with the same girl, and who had just met at a moment when one of them was obviously suffering pangs of jealousy — to hold merely a topographical conversation with one another. But it was equally difficult to suppose that the eldest son and heir of the Marquis of Loam should murder a successful rival and then rob him in the streets of London.

Moreover, here came the eternal and unanswerable questions: If Lord Mountnewte had murdered Leonard Marvell, where and how had he done it, and what had he done with the body?

I dare say you are wondering by this time why I have said nothing about the maid, Rosie Campbell.

Well, plenty of very clever people (I mean those who write letters to the papers and give suggestions to every official department in the kingdom) thought that the police ought to keep a very strict eye upon that pretty Scotch lassie. For she was very pretty, and had quaint, demure ways which rendered her singularly attractive, in spite of the fact that, for most masculine tastes, she would have been considered too tall. Of course, Saunders and Danvers kept an eye on her — you may be sure of that — and got a good deal of information about her from the people at the hotel. Most of it, unfortunately, was irrelevant to the case. She was maid-attendant to Miss Marvell, who was feeble in health, and who went out but little. Rosie waited on her master and mistress upstairs, carrying their meals to their private room, and doing their bedrooms. The rest of the day she was fairly free, and was quite sociable downstairs with the hotel staff.

With regard to her movements and actions on that memorable 3rd of February, Saunders — though he worked very hard — could glean but little useful information. You see, in a hotel of that kind, with an average of thirty to forty guests at one time, it is extremely difficult to state positively what any one person did or did not do on that particular day.

Most people at the Scotia remembered that Miss Marvell dined in the table d'hôte room on that 3rd of February; this she did about once a fortnight, when her maid had an evening "out."

The hotel staff also recollected fairly distinctly that Miss Rosie Campbell was not in the steward's room at supper-time that evening, but no one could remember definitely when she came in.

One of the chambermaids who occupied the bedroom adjoining hers, said she heard her moving about soon after midnight; the hall porter declared that he saw her come in just before half-past twelve when he closed the doors for the night.

But one of the ground-floor valets said that, on the morning of the 4th, he saw Miss Marvell's maid, in hat and coat, slip into the house and upstairs, very quickly and quietly, soon after the front doors were opened, namely, about 7.0 a.m.

Here, of course, was a direct contradiction between the chambermaid and hall porter on the one side, and the valet on the other, whilst Miss Marvell said that Campbell came into her room and made her some tea long before seven o'clock every morning, including that of the 4th.

I assure you our fellows at the Yard were ready to tear their hair out by the roots, from sheer aggravation at this maze of contradictions which met them at every turn.

The whole thing seemed so simple. There was nothing "to it" as it were, and but very little real suggestion of foul play, and yet Mr. Leonard Marvell had disappeared, and no trace of him could be found.

Everyone now talked freely of murder. London is a big town, and this would not have been the first instance of a stranger — for Mr. Leonard Marvell was practically a stranger in London — being enticed to a lonely part of the city on a foggy night, and there done away with and robbed, and the body hidden in an out-of-the-way cellar, where it might not be discovered for months to come.

But the newspaper-reading public is notably fickle, and Mr. Leonard Marvell was soon forgotten by everyone save the chief and the batch of our fellows who had charge of the case.

Thus I heard through Danvers one day that Rosie Campbell had left Miss Marvell's employ, and was living in rooms in Findlater Terrace, near Walham Green.

I was alone in our Maida Vale flat at the time, my dear lady having gone to spend the week-end with the Dowager Lady Loam, who was an old friend of hers; nor, when she returned, did she seem any more interested in Rosie Campbell's movements than she had been hitherto.

Yet another month went by, and I for one had absolutely ceased to think of the man in the Inverness cape, who had so mysteriously and so completely vanished in the very midst of busy London, when, one morning early in January, Lady Molly made her appearance in my room, looking more like the landlady of a disreputable gambling-house than anything else I could imagine.

"What in the world — ?" I began.

"Yes! I think I look the part," she replied, surveying with obvious complacency the extraordinary figure which confronted her in the glass.

My dear lady had on a purple cloth coat and skirt of a peculiarly vivid hue, and of a singular cut, which made her matchless figure look like a sack of potatoes. Her soft brown hair was quite hidden beneath a "transformation," of that yellow-reddish tint only to be met with in very cheap dyes.

As for her hat! I won't attempt to describe it. It towered above and around her face, which was plentifully covered with brick-red and with that kind of powder which causes the cheeks to look a deep mauve.

My dear lady looked, indeed, a perfect picture of appalling vulgarity.

"Where are you going in this elegant attire?" I asked in amazement.

"I have taken rooms in Findlater Terrace," she replied lightly. "I feel that the air of Walham Green will do us both good. Our amiable, if somewhat slatternly, landlady expects us in time for luncheon. You will have to keep rigidly in the background, Mary, all the while we are there. I said that I was bringing an invalid niece with me, and, as a preliminary, you may as well tie two or three thick veils over your face. I think I may safely promise that you won't be dull."

And we certainly were not dull during our brief stay at 34, Findlater Terrace, Walham Green. Fully equipped, and arrayed in our extraordinary garments, we duly arrived there, in a rickety four-wheeler, on the top of which were perched two seedy-looking boxes.

The landlady was a toothless old creature, who apparently thought washing a quite unnecessary proceeding. In this she was evidently at one with every one of her neighbours. Findlater Terrace looked unspeakably squalid; groups of dirty children congregated in the gutters and gave forth discordant shrieks as our cab drove up.

Through my thick veils I thought that, some distance down the road, I spied a horsy-looking man in ill-fitting riding-breeches and gaiters, who vaguely reminded me of Danvers.

Within half an hour of our installation, and whilst we were eating a tough steak over a doubtful table cloth, my dear lady told me that she had been waiting a full month, until rooms in this particular house happened to be vacant. Fortunately the population in Findlater Terrace is always a shifting one, and Lady Molly had kept a sharp eye on No. 34, where, on the floor above, lived Miss Rosie Campbell. Directly the last set of lodgers walked out of the ground-floor rooms, we were ready to walk in.

My dear lady's manners and customs, whilst living at the above aristocratic address, were fully in keeping with her appearance. The shrill, rasping voice which she assumed echoed from attic to cellar.

One day I heard her giving vague hints to the landlady that her husband, Mr. Marcus Stein, had had a little trouble with the police about a small hotel which he had kept somewhere near Fitzroy Square, and where "young gentlemen used to come and play cards of a night." The landlady was also made to understand that the worthy Mr. Stein was now living temporarily at His Majesty's expense, whilst Mrs. Stein had to live a somewhat secluded life, away from her fashionable friends.

The misfortunes of the pseudo Mrs. Stein in no way marred the amiability of Mrs. Tredwen, our landlady. The inhabitants of Findlater Terrace care very little about the antecedents of their lodgers, so long as they pay their week's rent in advance, and settle their "extras" without much murmur.

This Lady Molly did, with a generosity characteristic of an ex-lady of means. She never grumbled at the quantity of jam and marmalade which we were supposed to have consumed every week, and which anon reached titanic proportions. She tolerated Mrs. Tredwen's cat, tipped Ermyntre — the tousled lodging-house slavey — lavishly, and lent the upstairs lodger her spirit-lamp and curling-tongs when Miss Rosie Campbell's got out of order.

A certain degree of intimacy followed the loan of those curling-tongs. Miss Campbell, reserved and demure, greatly sympathised with the lady who was not on the best of terms with the police. I kept steadily in the background. The two ladies did not visit each

other's rooms, but they held long and confidential conversations on the landings, and I gathered, presently, that the pseudo Mrs. Stein had succeeded in persuading Rosie Campbell that, if the police were watching No. 34, Findlater Terrace, at all, it was undoubtedly on account of the unfortunate Mr. Stein's faithful wife.

I found it a little difficult to fathom Lady Molly's intentions. We had been in the house over three weeks, and nothing whatever had happened. Once I ventured on a discreet query as to whether we were to expect the sudden re-appearance of Mr. Leonard Marvell.

"For if that's all about it," I argued, "then surely the men from the Yard could have kept the house in view, without all this inconvenience and masquerading on our part."

But to this tirade my dear lady vouchsafed no reply.

She and her newly acquired friend were, about this time, deeply interested in the case known as the "West End Shop Robberies," which no doubt you recollect, since they occurred such a very little while ago. Ladies who were shopping in the large drapers' emporiums during the crowded and busy sale time, lost reticules, purses, and valuable parcels, without any trace of the clever thief being found.

The drapers, during sale-time, invariably employ detectives in plain clothes to look after their goods, but in this case it was the customers who were robbed, and the detectives, attentive to every attempt at "shop-lifting," had had no eyes for the more subtle thief.

I had already noticed Miss Rosie Campbell's keen look of excitement whenever the pseudo Mrs. Stein discussed these cases with her. I was not a bit surprised, therefore, when, one afternoon at about teatime, my dear lady came home from her habitual walk, and, at the top of her shrill voice, called out to me from the hall:

"Mary! Mary! they've got the man of the shop robberies. He's given the silly police the slip this time, but they know who he is now, and I suppose they'll get him presently. 'Tisn't anybody I know," she added, with that harsh, common laugh which she had adopted for her part.

I had come out of the room in response to her call, and was standing just outside our own sitting-room door. Mrs. Tredwen, too, bedraggled and unkempt, as usual, had sneaked up the area steps, closely followed by Ermytrude.

But on the half-landing just above us the trembling figure of Rosie Campbell, with scared white face and dilated eyes, looked on the verge of a sudden fall.

Still talking shrilly and volubly, Lady Molly ran up to her, but Campbell met her half-way, and the pseudo Mrs. Stein, taking vigorous hold of her wrist, dragged her into our own sitting-room.

"Pull yourself together, now," she said with rough kindness; "that owl Tredwen is listening, and you needn't let her know too much. Shut the door, Mary. Lor' bless you, m'dear, I've gone through worse scares than these. There! you just lie down on this sofa a bit. My niece'll make you a nice cup o'tea; and I'll go and get an evening paper, and see what's going on. I suppose you are very interested in the shop robbery man, or you wouldn't have took on so."

Without waiting for Campbell's contradiction to this statement, Lady Molly flounced out of the house.

Miss Campbell hardly spoke during the next ten minutes that she and I were left alone together. She lay on the sofa with eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling, evidently still in a great state of fear.

I had just got tea ready when Lady Molly came back. She had an evening paper in her hand, but threw this down on the table directly she came in.

"I could only get an early edition," she said breathlessly, "and the silly thing hasn't got anything in it about the matter."

She drew near to the sofa, and, subduing the shrillness of her voice, she whispered rapidly, bending down towards Campbell:

"There's a man hanging about at the corner down there. No, no; it's not the police," she added quickly, in response to the girl's sudden start of alarm. "Trust me, my dear, for knowing a 'tec when I see one! Why, I'd smell one half a mile off. No; my opinion is that it's your man, my dear, and that he's in a devil of a hole."

"Oh! he oughtn't to come here," ejaculated Campbell in great alarm. "He'll get me into trouble and do himself no good. He's been a fool!" she added, with a fierceness wholly unlike her usual demure placidity, "getting himself caught like that. Now I suppose we shall have to hook it — if there's time."

"Can I do anything to help you?" asked the pseudo Mrs. Stein. "You know I've been through all this myself, when they was after Mr. Stein. Or perhaps Mary could do something."

"Well, yes," said the girl, after a slight pause, during which she seemed to be gathering her wits together; "I'll write a note, and you shall take it, if you will, to a friend of mine — a lady who lives in the Cromwell Road. But if you still see a man lurking about at the corner of the street, then, just as you pass him, say the word 'Campbell,' and if he replies 'Rosie,' then give him the note. Will you do that?"

"Of course I will, my dear. Just you leave it all to me."

And the pseudo Mrs. Stein brought ink and paper and placed them on the table. Rosie Campbell wrote a brief note, and then fastened it down with a bit of sealing-wax before she handed it over to Lady Molly. The note was addressed to Miss Marvell, Scotia Hotel, Cromwell Road.

"You understand?" she said eagerly. "Don't give the note to the man unless he says 'Rosie' in reply to the word 'Campbell.'"

"All right — all right!" said Lady Molly, slipping the note into her reticule. "And you go up to your room, Miss Campbell; it's no good giving that old fool Tredwen too much to gossip about."

Rosie Campbell went upstairs, and presently my dear lady and I were walking rapidly down the badly-lighted street.

"Where is the man?" I whispered eagerly as soon as we were out of earshot of No. 34.

"There is no man," replied Lady Molly, quickly.

"But the West End shop thief?" I asked.

"He hasn't been caught yet, and won't be either, for he is far too clever a scoundrel to fall into an ordinary trap."

She did not give me time to ask further questions, for presently, when we had reached Reporton Square, my dear lady handed me the note written by Campbell, and said:

“Go straight on to the Scotia Hotel, and ask for Miss Marvell; send up the note to her, but don’t let her see you, as she knows you by sight. I must see the chief first, and will be with you as soon as possible. Having delivered the note, you must hang about outside as long as you can. Use your wits; she must not leave the hotel before I see her.”

There was no hansom to be got in this elegant quarter of the town, so, having parted from my dear lady, I made for the nearest Underground station, and took a train for South Kensington.

Thus it was nearly seven o’clock before I reached the Scotia. In answer to my inquiries for Miss Marvell, I was told that she was ill in bed and could see no one. I replied that I had only brought a note for her, and would wait for a reply.

Acting on my dear lady’s instructions, I was as slow in my movements as ever I could be, and was some time in finding the note and handing it to a waiter, who then took it upstairs.

Presently he returned with the message: “Miss Marvell says there is no answer.”

Whereupon I asked for pen and paper at the office, and wrote the following brief note on my own responsibility, using my wits as my dear lady had bidden me to do.

“Please, madam,” I wrote, “will you send just a line to Miss Rosie Campbell? She seems very upset and frightened at some news she has had.”

Once more the waiter ran upstairs, and returned with a sealed envelope, which I slipped into my reticule.

Time was slipping by very slowly. I did not know how long I should have to wait outside in the cold, when, to my horror, I heard a hard voice, with a marked Scotch accent, saying:

“I am going out, waiter, and shan’t be back to dinner. Tell them to lay a little cold supper upstairs in my room.”

The next moment Miss Marvell, with coat, hat, and veil, was descending the stairs.

My plight was awkward. I certainly did not think it safe to present myself before the lady; she would undoubtedly recollect my face. Yet I had orders to detain her until the appearance of Lady Molly.

Miss Marvell seemed in no hurry. She was putting on her gloves as she came downstairs. In the hall she gave a few more instructions to the porter, whilst I, in a dark corner in the background, was vaguely planning an assault or an alarm of fire.

Suddenly, at the hotel entrance, where the porter was obsequiously holding open the door for Miss Marvell to pass through, I saw the latter’s figure stiffen; she took one step back as if involuntarily, then, equally quickly, attempted to dart across the threshold, on which a group — composed of my dear lady, of Saunders, and of two or three people scarcely distinguishable in the gloom beyond — had suddenly made its appearance.

Miss Marvell was forced to retreat into the hall; already I had heard Saunderson’s hurriedly whispered words:

“Try and not make a fuss in this place, now. Everything can go off quietly, you know.”

Danvers and Cotton, whom I knew well, were already standing one each side of Miss Marvell, whilst suddenly amongst this group I recognised Fanny, the wife of Danvers, who is one of our female searchers at the yard.

“Shall we go up to your own room?” suggested Saunders.

“I think that is quite unnecessary,” interposed Lady Molly. “I feel convinced that Mr. Leonard Marvell will yield to the inevitable quietly, and follow you without giving any trouble.”

Marvell, however, did make a bold dash for liberty. As Lady Molly had said previously, he was far too clever to allow himself to be captured easily. But my dear lady had been cleverer. As she told me subsequently, she had from the first suspected that the trio who lodged at the Scotia Hotel were really only a duo — namely, Leonard Marvell and his wife. The latter impersonated a maid most of the time; but among these two clever people the three characters were interchangeable. Of course, there was no Miss Marvell at all. Leonard was alternately dressed up as man or woman, according to the requirements of his villainies.

“As soon as I heard that Miss Marvell was very tall and bony,” said Lady Molly, “I thought that there might be a possibility of her being merely a man in disguise. Then there was the fact — but little dwelt on by either the police or the public — that no one seems ever to have seen brother and sister together, nor was the entire trio ever seen at one and the same time.

“On that 3rd of February Leonard Marvell went out. No doubt he changed his attire in a lady’s waiting-room at one of the railway stations; subsequently he came home, now dressed as Miss Marvell, and had dinner in the table d’hôte room so as to set up a fairly plausible alibi. But ultimately it was his wife, the pseudo Rosie Campbell, who stayed indoors that night, whilst he, Leonard Marvell, when going out after dinner, impersonated the maid until he was clear of the hotel; then he reassumed his male clothes once more, no doubt in the deserted waiting-room of some railway station, and met Miss Lulu Fay at supper, subsequently returning to the hotel in the guise of the maid.

“You see the game of criss-cross, don’t you? This interchanging of characters was bound to baffle everyone. Many clever scoundrels have assumed disguises, sometimes impersonating members of the opposite sex to their own, but never before have I known two people play the part of three. Thus, endless contradictions followed as to the hour when Campbell the maid went out and when she came in, for at one time it was she herself who was seen by the valet, and at another it was Leonard Marvell dressed in her clothes.”

He was also clever enough to accost Lord Mountnewte in the open street, thus bringing further complications into this strange case.

After the successful robbery of Miss Fay’s diamonds, Leonard Marvell and his wife parted for awhile. They were waiting for an opportunity to get across the Channel and there turn their booty into solid cash. Whilst Mrs. Marvell, alias Rosie Campbell, led a retired life in Findlater Terrace, Leonard kept his hand in with West End shop robberies.

Then Lady Molly entered the lists. As usual, her scheme was bold and daring; she trusted her own intuition and acted accordingly.

When she brought home the false news that the author of the shop robberies had been spotted by the police, Rosie Campbell’s obvious terror confirmed her suspicions. The note written by the latter to the so-called Miss Marvell, though it contained nothing in any way incriminating, was the crowning certitude that my dear lady was right, as usual, in all her surmises. And now Mr. Leonard Marvell will be living for a couple of years at the tax-payers’ expense; he has “disappeared” temporarily from the public eye. Rosie Campbell — i.e. Mrs. Marvell — has gone to Glasgow. I feel convinced that two years hence we shall hear of the worthy couple again.

THE WOMAN IN THE BIG HAT

LADY MOLLY always had the idea that if the finger of Fate had pointed to Mathis' in Regent Street, rather than to Lyons', as the most advisable place for us to have a cup of tea that afternoon, Mr. Culledon would be alive at the present moment.

My dear lady is quite sure — and needless to say that I share her belief in herself — that she would have anticipated the murderer's intentions, and thus prevented one of the most cruel and callous of crimes which were ever perpetrated in the heart of London.

She and I had been to a *matinée* of "Trilby," and were having tea at Lyons', which is exactly opposite Mathis' Vienna café in Regent Street. From where we sat we commanded a view of the street and of the café, which had been very crowded during the last hour.

We had lingered over our toasted muffin until past six, when our attention was drawn to the unusual commotion which had arisen both outside and in the brilliantly lighted place over the road.

We saw two men run out of the doorway, and return a minute or two later in company with a policeman. You know what is the inevitable result of such a proceeding in London. Within three minutes a crowd had collected outside Mathis'. Two or three more constables had already assembled, and had some difficulty in keeping the entrance clear of intruders.

But already my dear lady, keen as a pointer on the scent, had hastily paid her bill, and, without waiting to see if I followed her or not, had quickly crossed the road, and the next moment her graceful form was lost in the crowd.

I went after her, impelled by curiosity, and presently caught sight of her in close conversation with one of our own men. I have always thought that Lady Molly must have eyes at the back of her head, otherwise how could she have known that I stood behind her now? Anyway, she beckoned to me, and together we entered Mathis', much to the astonishment and anger of the less fortunate crowd.

The usually gay little place was indeed sadly transformed. In one corner the waitresses, in dainty caps and aprons, had put their heads together, and were eagerly whispering to one another whilst casting furtive looks at the small group assembled in front of one of those pretty alcoves, which, as you know, line the walls all round the big tea-room at Mathis'.

Here two of our men were busy with pencil and note-book, whilst one fair-haired waitress, dissolved in tears, was apparently giving them a great deal of irrelevant and confused information.

Chief Inspector Saunders had, I understood, been already sent for; the constables, confronted with this extraordinary tragedy, were casting anxious glances towards the main entrance, whilst putting the conventional questions to the young waitress. And in the alcove itself, raised from the floor of the room by a couple of carpeted steps, the cause of all this commotion, all this anxiety, and all these tears, sat huddled up on a chair, with arms lying straight across the marble-topped table, on which the usual paraphernalia of afternoon tea still lay scattered about. The upper part of the body, limp, backboneless, and awry, half propped up against the wall, half falling back upon the outstretched arms, told quite plainly its weird tale of death.

Before my dear lady and I had time to ask any questions, Saunders arrived in a taxicab. He was accompanied by the medical officer, Dr. Townson, who at once busied himself with the dead man, whilst Saunders went up quickly to Lady Molly.

"The chief suggested sending for you," he said quickly; "he was 'phoning you when I left. There's a woman in this case, and we shall rely on you a good deal."

"What has happened?" asked my dear lady, whose fine eyes were glowing with excitement at the mere suggestion of work.

"I have only a few stray particulars," replied Saunders, "but the chief witness is that yellow-haired girl over there. We'll find out what we can from her directly Dr. Townson has given us his opinion."

The medical officer, who had been kneeling beside the dead man, now rose and turned to Saunders. His face was very grave.

"The whole matter is simple enough, so far as I am concerned," he said. "The man has been killed by a terrific dose of morphia — administered, no doubt, in this cup of chocolate," he added, pointing to a cup in which there still lingered the cold dregs of the thick beverage.

"But when did this occur?" asked Saunders, turning to the waitress.

"I can't say," she replied, speaking with obvious nervousness. "The gentleman came in very early with a lady, somewhere about four. They made straight for this alcove. The place was just beginning to fill, and the music had begun."

"And where is the lady now?"

"She went off almost directly. She had ordered tea for herself and a cup of chocolate for the gentleman, also muffins and cakes. About five minutes afterwards, as I went past their table, I heard her say to him. 'I am afraid I must go now, or Jay's will be closed, but I'll be back in less than half an hour. You'll wait for me, won't you?'"

"Did the gentleman seem all right then?"

"Oh, yes," said the waitress. "He had just begun to sip his chocolate, and merely said 'S'long,' as she gathered up her gloves and muff and then went out of the shop."

"And she has not returned since?"

"No."

"When did you first notice there was anything wrong with this gentleman?" asked Lady Molly.

"Well," said the girl with some hesitation, "I looked at him once or twice as I went up and down, for he certainly seemed to have fallen all of a heap. Of course, I thought that he had gone to sleep, and I spoke to the manageress about him, but she thought that I ought to leave him alone for a bit. Then we got very busy, and I paid no more attention to him, until about six o'clock, when most afternoon tea customers had gone, and we were beginning to get the tables ready for dinners. Then I certainly did think there was something wrong with the man. I called to the manageress, and we sent for the police."

"And the lady who was with him at first, what was she like? Would you know her again?" queried Saunders.

"I don't know," replied the girl; "you see, I have to attend to such crowds of people of an afternoon, I can't notice each one. And she had on one of those enormous mushroom hats; no one could have seen her face — not more than her chin — unless they looked right under the hat."

"Would you know the hat again?" asked Lady Molly.

“Yes — I think I should,” said the waitress. “It was black velvet and had a lot of plumes. It was enormous,” she added, with a sigh of admiration and of longing for the monumental headgear.

During the girl’s narrative one of the constables had searched the dead man’s pockets. Among other items, he had found several letters addressed to Mark Culledon, Esq., some with an address in Lombard Street, others with one in Fitzjohn’s Avenue, Hampstead. The initials M. C., which appeared both in the hat and on the silver mount of a letter-case belonging to the unfortunate gentleman, proved his identity beyond a doubt.

A house in Fitzjohn’s Avenue does not, somehow, suggest a bachelor establishment. Even whilst Saunders and the other men were looking through the belongings of the deceased, Lady Molly had already thought of his family — children, perhaps a wife, a mother — who could tell?

What awful news to bring to an unsuspecting, happy family, who might even now be expecting the return of father, husband, or son, at the very moment when he lay murdered in a public place, the victim of some hideous plot or feminine revenge!

As our amiable friends in Paris would say, it jumped to the eyes that there was a woman in the case — a woman who had worn a gargantuan hat for the obvious purpose of remaining unidentifiable when the question of the unfortunate victim’s companion that afternoon came up for solution. And all these facts to put before an expectant wife or an anxious mother!

As, no doubt, you have already foreseen, Lady Molly took the difficult task on her own kind shoulders. She and I drove together to Lorbury House, Fitzjohn’s Avenue, and on asking of the manservant who opened the door if his mistress were at home, we were told that Lady Irene Culledon was in the drawing-room.

Mine is not a story of sentiment, so I am not going to dwell on that interview, which was one of the most painful moments I recollect having lived through.

Lady Irene was young — not five-and-twenty, I should say — petite and frail-looking, but with a quiet dignity of manner which was most impressive. She was Irish, as you know, the daughter of the Earl of Athyville, and, it seems, had married Mr. Mark Culledon in the teeth of strenuous opposition on the part of her family, which was as penniless as it was aristocratic, whilst Mr. Culledon had great prospects and a splendid business, but possessed neither ancestors nor high connections. She had only been married six months, poor little soul, and from all accounts must have idolised her husband.

Lady Molly broke the news to her with infinite tact, but there it was! It was a terrific blow — wasn’t it? — to deal to a young wife — now a widow; and there was so little that a stranger could say in these circumstances. Even my dear lady’s gentle voice, her persuasive eloquence, her kindly words, sounded empty and conventional in the face of such appalling grief.

2

Of course, everyone expected that the inquest would reveal something of the murdered man’s inner life — would, in fact, allow the over-eager public to get a peep into Mr. Mark Culledon’s secret orchard, wherein walked a lady who wore abnormally large velvet hats, and who nourished in her heart one of those terrible grudges against a man which can only find satisfaction in crime.

Equally, of course, the inquest revealed nothing that the public did not already know. The young widow was extremely reticent on the subject of her late husband’s life, and the servants had all been fresh arrivals when the young couple, just home from their honeymoon, organised their new household at Lorbury House.

There was an old aunt of the deceased — a Mrs. Steinberg — who lived with the Culledons, but who at the present moment was very ill. Someone in the house — one of the younger servants, probably — very foolishly had told her every detail of the awful tragedy. With positively amazing strength, the invalid thereupon insisted on making a sworn statement, which she desired should be placed before the coroner’s jury. She wished to bear solemn testimony to the integrity of her late nephew, Mark Culledon, in case the personality of the mysterious woman in the big hat suggested to evilly disposed minds any thought of scandal.

“Mark Culledon was the one nephew whom I loved,” she stated with solemn emphasis. “I have shown my love for him by bequeathing to him the large fortune which I inherited from the late Mr. Steinberg. Mark was the soul of honour, or I should have cut him out of my will as I did my other nephews and nieces. I was brought up in a Scotch home, and I hate all this modern fastness and smartness, which are only other words for what I call profligacy.”

Needless to say, the old lady’s statement, solemn though it was, was of no use whatever for the elucidation of the mystery which surrounded the death of Mr. Mark Culledon. But as Mrs. Steinberg had talked of “other nephews,” whom she had cut out of her will in favour of the murdered man, the police directed inquiries in those various quarters.

Mr. Mark Culledon certainly had several brothers and sisters, also cousins, who at different times — usually for some peccadillo or other — seemed to have incurred the wrath of the strait-laced old lady. But there did not appear to have been any ill-feeling in the family owing to this. Mrs. Steinberg was sole mistress of her fortune. She might just as well have bequeathed it in toto to some hospital as to one particular nephew whom she favoured, and the various relations were glad, on the whole, that the money was going to remain in the family rather than be cast abroad.

The mystery surrounding the woman in the big hat deepened as the days went by. As you know, the longer the period of time which elapses between a crime and the identification of the criminal, the greater chance the latter has of remaining at large.

In spite of strenuous efforts and close questionings of every one of the employees at Mathis’, no one could give a very accurate description of the lady who had tea with the deceased on that fateful afternoon.

The first glimmer of light on the mysterious occurrence was thrown, about three weeks later, by a young woman named Katherine Harris, who had been parlour-maid at Lorbury House when first Mr. and Lady Irene Culledon returned from their honeymoon.

I must tell you that Mrs. Steinberg had died a few days after the inquest. The excitement had been too much for her enfeebled heart. Just before her death she had deposited £250 with her banker, which sum was to be paid over to any person giving information which would lead to the apprehension and conviction of the murderer of Mr. Mark Culledon.

This offer had stimulated everyone’s zeal, and, I presume, had aroused Katherine Harris to a realisation of what had all the while been her obvious duty.

Lady Molly saw her in the chief's private office, and had much ado to disentangle the threads of the girl's confused narrative. But the main point of Harris's story was that a foreign lady had once called at Lorbury House, about a week after the master and mistress had returned from their honeymoon. Lady Irene was out at the time, and Mr. Cullledon saw the lady in his smoking-room.

"She was a very handsome lady," explained Harris, "and was beautifully dressed."

"Did she wear a large hat?" asked the chief.

"I don't remember if it was particularly large," replied the girl.

"But you remember what the lady was like?" suggested Lady Molly.

"Yes, pretty well. She was very, very tall, and very good-looking."

"Would you know her again if you saw her?" rejoined my dear lady.

"Oh, yes; I think so," was Katherine Harris's reply.

Unfortunately, beyond this assurance the girl could say nothing very definite. The foreign lady seems to have been closeted with Mr. Cullledon for about an hour, at the end of which time Lady Irene came home.

The butler being out that afternoon it was Harris who let her mistress in, and as the latter asked no questions, the girl did not volunteer the information that her master had a visitor. She went back to the servants' hall, but five minutes later the smoking-room bell rang, and she had to run up again. The foreign lady was then in the hall alone, and obviously waiting to be shown out. This Harris did, after which Mr. Cullledon came out of his room, and, in the girl's own graphic words, "he went on dreadful."

"I didn't know I 'ad done anything so very wrong," she explained, "but the master seemed quite furious, and said I wasn't a proper parlour-maid, or I'd have known that visitors must not be shown in straight away like that. I ought to have said that I didn't know if Mr. Cullledon was in; that I would go and see. Oh, he did go on at me!" continued Katherine Harris, volubly. "And I suppose he complained to the mistress, for she give me notice the next day."

"And you have never seen the foreign lady since?" concluded Lady Molly.

"No; she never come while I was there."

"By the way, how did you know she was foreign. Did she speak like a foreigner?"

"Oh, no," replied the girl. "She did not say much — only asked for Mr. Cullledon — but she looked French like."

This unanswerable bit of logic concluded Katherine's statement. She was very anxious to know whether, if the foreign lady was hanged for murder, she herself would get the £250.

On Lady Molly's assurance that she certainly would, she departed in apparent content.

3

"WELL! we are no nearer than we were before," said the chief, with an impatient sigh, when the door had closed behind Katherine Harris.

"Don't you think so?" rejoined Lady Molly, blandly.

"Do you consider that what we have heard just now has helped us to discover who was the woman in the big hat?" retorted the chief, somewhat testily.

"Perhaps not," replied my dear lady, with her sweet smile; "but it may help us to discover who murdered Mr. Cullledon."

With which enigmatical statement she effectually silenced the chief, and finally walked out of his office, followed by her faithful Mary.

Following Katherine Harris's indications, a description of the lady who was wanted in connection with the murder of Mr. Cullledon was very widely circulated, and within two days of the interview with the ex-parlour-maid another very momentous one took place in the same office.

Lady Molly was at work with the chief over some reports, whilst I was taking shorthand notes at a side desk, when a card was brought in by one of the men, and the next moment, without waiting either for permission to enter or to be more formally announced, a magnificent apparition literally sailed into the dust-covered little back office, filling it with an atmosphere of Parma violets and russia leather.

I don't think that I had ever seen a more beautiful woman in my life. Tall, with a splendid figure and perfect carriage, she vaguely reminded me of the portraits one sees of the late Empress of Austria. This lady was, moreover, dressed to perfection, and wore a large hat adorned with a quantity of plumes.

The chief had instinctively risen to greet her, whilst Lady Molly, still and placid, was eyeing her with a quizzical smile.

"You know who I am, sir," began the visitor as soon as she had sunk gracefully into a chair; "my name is on that card. My appearance, I understand, tallies exactly with that of a woman who is supposed to have murdered Mark Cullledon."

She said this so calmly, with such perfect self-possession, that I literally gasped. The chief, too, seemed to have been metaphorically lifted off his feet. He tried to mutter a reply.

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, sir!" she interrupted him, with a smile. "My landlady, my servant, my friends have all read the description of the woman who murdered Mr. Cullledon. For the past twenty-four hours I have been watched by your police, therefore I have come to you of my own accord, before they came to arrest me in my flat. I am not too soon, am I?" she asked, with that same cool indifference which was so startling, considering the subject of her conversation.

She spoke English with a scarcely perceptible foreign accent, but I quite understood what Katherine Harris had meant when she said that the lady looked "French like." She certainly did not look English, and when I caught sight of her name on the card, which the chief had handed to Lady Molly, I put her down at once as Viennese. Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal had all the charm, the grace, the elegance, which one associates with Austrian women more than with those of any other nation.

No wonder the chief found it difficult to tell her that, as a matter of fact, the police were about to apply for a warrant that very morning for her arrest on a charge of wilful murder.

"I know — I know," she said, seeming to divine his thoughts; "but let me tell you at once, sir, that I did not murder Mark Cullodon. He treated me shamefully, and I would willingly have made a scandal just to spite him; he had become so respectable and strait-laced. But between scandal and murder there is a wide gulf. Don't you think so, madam," she added, turning for the first time towards Lady Molly.

"Undoubtedly," replied my dear lady, with the same quizzical smile.

"A wide gulf which, no doubt, Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal will best be able to demonstrate to the magistrate to-morrow," rejoined the chief, with official sternness of manner.

I thought that, for the space of a few seconds, the lady lost her self-assurance at this obvious suggestion — the bloom on her cheeks seemed to vanish, and two hard lines appeared between her fine eyes. But, frightened or not, she quickly recovered herself, and said quietly:

"Now, my dear sir, let us understand one another. I came here for that express purpose. I take it that you don't want your police to look ridiculous any more than I want a scandal. I don't want detectives to hang about round my flat, questioning my neighbours and my servants. They would soon find out that I did not murder Mark Cullodon, of course; but the atmosphere of the police would hang round me, and I — I prefer Parma violets," she added, raising a daintily perfumed handkerchief to her nose.

"Then you have come to make a statement?" asked the chief.

"Yes," she replied; "I'll tell you all I know. Mr. Cullodon was engaged to marry me; then he met the daughter of an earl, and thought he would like her better as a wife than a simple Miss Löwenthal. I suppose I should be considered an undesirable match for a young man who has a highly respectable and snobbish aunt, who would leave him all her money only on the condition that he made a suitable marriage. I have a voice, and I came over to England two years ago to study English, so that I might sing in oratorio at the Albert Hall. I met Mark on the Calais-Dover boat, when he was returning from a holiday abroad. He fell in love with me, and presently he asked me to be his wife. After some demur, I accepted him; we became engaged, but he told me that our engagement must remain a secret, for he had an old aunt from whom he had great expectations, and who might not approve of his marrying a foreign girl, who was without connections and a professional singer. From that moment I mistrusted him, nor was I very astonished when gradually his affection for me seemed to cool. Soon after, he informed me, quite callously, that he had changed his mind, and was going to marry some swell English lady. I didn't care much, but I wanted to punish him by making a scandal, you understand. I went to his house just to worry him, and finally I decided to bring an action for breach of promise against him. It would have upset him, I know; no doubt his aunt would have cut him out of her will. That is all I wanted, but I did not care enough about him to murder him."

Somehow her tale carried conviction. We were all of us obviously impressed. The chief alone looked visibly disturbed, and I could read what was going on in his mind.

"As you say, Miss Löwenthal," he rejoined, "the police would have found all this out within the next few hours. Once your connection with the murdered man was known to us, the record of your past and his becomes an easy one to peruse. No doubt, too," he added insinuatingly, "our men would soon have been placed in possession of the one undisputable proof of your complete innocence with regard to that fateful afternoon spent at Mathis' café."

"What is that?" she queried blandly.

"An alibi."

"You mean, where I was during the time that Mark was being murdered in a tea shop?"

"Yes," said the chief.

"I was out for a walk," she replied quietly.

"Shopping, perhaps?"

"No."

"You met some one who would remember the circumstance — or your servants could say at what time you came in?"

"No," she repeated dryly; "I met no one, for I took a brisk walk on Primrose Hill. My two servants could only say that I went out at three o'clock that afternoon and returned after five."

There was silence in the little office for a moment or two. I could hear the scraping of the pen with which the chief was idly scribbling geometrical figures on his blotting pad.

Lady Molly was quite still. Her large, luminous eyes were fixed on the beautiful woman who had just told us her strange story, with its unaccountable sequel, its mystery which had deepened with the last phrase which she had uttered. Miss Löwenthal, I felt sure, was conscious of her peril. I am not sufficiently a psychologist to know whether it was guilt or merely fear which was distorting the handsome features now, hardening the face and causing the lips to tremble.

Lady Molly scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, which she then passed over to the chief. Miss Löwenthal was making visible efforts to steady her nerves.

"That is all I have to tell you," she said, in a voice which sounded dry and harsh. "I think I will go home now."

But she did not rise from her chair, and seemed to hesitate as if fearful lest permission to go were not granted her.

To her obvious astonishment — and, I must add, to my own — the chief immediately rose and said, quite urbanely:

"I thank you very much for the helpful information which you have given me. Of course, we may rely on your presence in town for the next few days, may we not?"

She seemed greatly relieved, and all at once resumed her former charm of manner and elegance of attitude. The beautiful face was lit up by a smile.

The chief was bowing to her in quite a foreign fashion, and in spite of her visible reassurance she eyed him very intently. Then she went up to Lady Molly and held out her hand.

My dear lady took it without an instant's hesitation. I, who knew that it was the few words hastily scribbled by Lady Molly which had dictated the chief's conduct with regard to Miss Löwenthal, was left wondering whether the woman I loved best in all the world had been shaking hands with a murderess.

NO doubt you will remember the sensation which was caused by the arrest of Miss Löwenthal, on a charge of having murdered Mr. Mark Cullodon, by administering morphia to him in a cup of chocolate at Mathis' café in Regent Street.

The beauty of the accused, her undeniable charm of manner, the hitherto blameless character of her life, all tended to make the public take violent sides either for or against her, and the usual budget of amateur correspondence, suggestions, recriminations and advice poured into the chief's office in titanic proportions.

I must say that, personally, all my sympathies went out to Miss Löwenthal. As I have said before, I am no psychologist, but I had seen her in the original interview at the office, and I could not get rid of an absolutely unreasoning certitude that the beautiful Viennese singer was innocent.

The magistrate's court was packed, as you may well imagine, on that first day of the inquiry; and, of course, sympathy with the accused went up to fever pitch when she staggered into the dock, beautiful still, despite the ravages caused by horror, anxiety, fear, in face of the deadly peril in which she stood.

The magistrate was most kind to her; her solicitor was unimpeachably assiduous; even our fellows, who had to give evidence against her, did no more than their duty, and were as lenient in their statements as possible.

Miss Löwenthal had been arrested in her flat by Danvers, accompanied by two constables. She had loudly protested her innocence all along, and did so still, pleading "Not guilty" in a firm voice.

The great points in favour of the arrest were, firstly, the undoubted motive of disappointment and revenge against a faithless sweetheart, then the total inability to prove any kind of alibi, which, under the circumstances, certainly added to the appearance of guilt.

The question of where the fatal drug was obtained was more difficult to prove. It was stated that Mr. Mark Cullodon was director of several important companies, one of which carried on business as wholesale druggists.

Therefore it was argued that the accused, at different times and under some pretext or other, had obtained drugs from Mr. Cullodon himself. She had admitted to having visited the deceased at his office in the City, both before and after his marriage.

Miss Löwenthal listened to all this evidence against her with a hard, set face, as she did also to Katherine Harris's statement about her calling on Mr. Cullodon at Lorbury House, but she brightened up visibly when the various attendants at Mathis' café were placed in the box.

A very large hat belonging to the accused was shown to the witnesses, but, though the police upheld the theory that that was the headgear worn by the mysterious lady at the café on that fateful afternoon, the waitresses made distinctly contradictory statements with regard to it.

Whilst one girl swore that she recognised the very hat, another was equally positive that it was distinctly smaller than the one she recollected, and when the hat was placed on the head of Miss Löwenthal, three out of the four witnesses positively refused to identify her.

Most of these young women declared that though the accused, when wearing the big hat, looked as if she might have been the lady in question, yet there was a certain something about her which was different.

With that vagueness which is a usual and highly irritating characteristic of their class, the girls finally parried every question by refusing to swear positively either for or against the identity of Miss Löwenthal.

"There's something that's different about her somehow," one of the waitresses asserted positively.

"What is it that's different?" asked the solicitor for the accused, pressing his point.

"I can't say," was the perpetual, maddening reply.

Of course the poor young widow had to be dragged into the case, and here, I think, opinions and even expressions of sympathy were quite unanimous.

The whole tragedy had been inexpressibly painful to her, of course, and now it must have seemed doubly so. The scandal which had accumulated round her late husband's name must have added the poignancy of shame to that of grief. Mark Cullodon had behaved as callously to the girl whom clearly he had married from interested, family motives, as he had to the one whom he had heartlessly cast aside.

Lady Irene, however, was most moderate in her statements. There was no doubt that she had known of her husband's previous entanglement with Miss Löwenthal, but apparently had not thought fit to make him accountable for the past. She did not know that Miss Löwenthal had threatened a breach of promise action against her husband.

Throughout her evidence she spoke with absolute calm and dignity, and looked indeed a strange contrast, in her closely fitting tailor-made costume of black serge and tiny black toque, to the more brilliant woman who stood in the dock.

The two great points in favour of the accused were, firstly, the vagueness of the witnesses who were called to identify her, and, secondly, the fact that she had undoubtedly begun proceedings for breach of promise against the deceased. Judging by the latter's letters to her, she would have had a splendid case against him, which fact naturally dealt a severe blow to the theory as to motive for the murder.

On the whole, the magistrate felt that there was not a sufficiency of evidence against the accused to warrant his committing her for trial; he therefore discharged her, and, amid loud applause from the public, Miss Löwenthal left the court a free woman.

Now, I know that the public did loudly, and, to my mind, very justly, blame the police for that arrest, which was denounced as being as cruel as it was unjustifiable. I felt as strongly as anybody on the subject, for I knew that the prosecution had been instituted in defiance of Lady Molly's express advice, and in distinct contradiction to the evidence which she had collected. When, therefore, the chief asked my dear lady to renew her efforts in that mysterious case, it was small wonder that her enthusiasm did not respond to his anxiety. That she would do her duty was beyond a doubt, but she had very naturally lost her more fervent interest in the case.

The mysterious woman in the big hat was still the chief subject of leading articles in the papers, coupled with that of the ineptitude of the police who could not discover her. There were caricatures and picture post-cards in all the shop windows of a gigantic hat

covering the whole figure of its wearer, only the feet, and a very long and pointed chin, protruding from beneath the enormous brim. Below was the device, "Who is she? Ask the police?"

One day — it was the second since the discharge of Miss Löwenthal — my dear lady came into my room beaming. It was the first time I had seen her smile for more than a week, and already I had guessed what it was that had cheered her.

"Good news, Mary," she said gaily. "At last I've got the chief to let me have a free hand. Oh, dear! what a lot of argument it takes to extricate that man from the tangled meshes of red tape!"

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Prove that my theory is right as to who murdered Mark Culledon," she replied seriously; "and as a preliminary we'll go and ask his servants at Lorbury House a few questions."

It was then three o'clock in the afternoon. At Lady Molly's bidding, I dressed somewhat smartly, and together we went off in a taxi to Fitzjohn's Avenue.

Lady Molly had written a few words on one of her cards, urgently requesting an interview with Lady Irene Culledon. This she handed over to the man-servant who opened the door at Lorbury House. A few moments later we were sitting in the cosy boudoir. The young widow, high-bred and dignified in her tight-fitting black gown, sat opposite to us, her white hands folded demurely before her, her small head, with its very close coiffure, bent in closest attention towards Lady Molly.

"I most sincerely hope, Lady Irene," began my dear lady, in her most gentle and persuasive voice, "that you will look with all possible indulgence on my growing desire — shared, I may say, by all my superiors at Scotland Yard — to elucidate the mystery which still surrounds your late husband's death."

Lady Molly paused, as if waiting for encouragement to proceed. The subject must have been extremely painful to the young widow; nevertheless she responded quite gently:

"I can understand that the police wish to do their duty in the matter; as for me, I have done all, I think, that could be expected of me. I am not made of iron, and after that day in the police court—"

She checked herself, as if afraid of having betrayed more emotion than was consistent with good breeding, and concluded more calmly:

"I cannot do any more."

"I fully appreciate your feelings in the matter," said Lady Molly, "but you would not mind helping us — would you? — in a passive way, if you could, by some simple means, further the cause of justice."

"What is it you want me to do?" asked Lady Irene.

"Only to allow me to ring for two of your maids and to ask them a few questions. I promise you that they shall not be of such a nature as to cause you the slightest pain."

For a moment I thought that the young widow hesitated, then, without a word, she rose and rang the bell.

"Which of my servants did you wish to see?" she asked, turning to my dear lady as soon as the butler entered in answer to the bell.

"Your own maid and your parlour-maid, if I may," replied Lady Molly.

Lady Irene gave the necessary orders, and we all sat expectant and silent until, a minute or two later, two girls entered the room. One wore a cap and apron, the other, in neat black dress and dainty lace collar, was obviously the lady's maid.

"This lady," said their mistress, addressing the two girls, "wishes to ask you a few questions. She is a representative of the police, so you had better do your best to satisfy her with your answers."

"Oh!" rejoined Lady Molly pleasantly — choosing not to notice the tone of acerbity with which the young widow had spoken, nor the unmistakable barrier of hostility and reserve which her words had immediately raised between the young servants and the "representative of the police"— "what I am going to ask these two young ladies is neither very difficult nor very unpleasant. I merely want their kind help in a little comedy which will have to be played this evening, in order to test the accuracy of certain statements made by one of the waitresses at Mathis' tea shop with regard to the terrible tragedy which has darkened this house. You will do that much, will you not?" she added, speaking directly to the maids.

No one can be so winning or so persuasive as my dear lady. In a moment I saw the girls' hostility melting before the sunshine of Lady Molly's smile.

"We'll do what we can, ma'am," said the maid.

"That's a brave, good girl!" replied my lady. "You must know that the chief waitress at Mathis' has, this very morning, identified the woman in the big hat who, we all believe, murdered your late master. Yes!" she continued, in response to a gasp of astonishment which seemed to go round the room like a wave, "the girl seems quite positive, both as regards the hat and the woman who wore it. But, of course, one cannot allow a human life to be sworn away without bringing every possible proof to bear on such a statement, and I am sure that everyone in this house will understand that we don't want to introduce strangers more than we can help into this sad affair, which already has been bruited abroad too much."

She paused a moment; then, as neither Lady Irene nor the maids made any comment, she continued:

"My superiors at Scotland Yard think it their duty to try and confuse the witness as much as possible in her act of identification. They desire that a certain number of ladies wearing abnormally large hats should parade before the waitress. Among them will be, of course, the one whom the girl has already identified as being the mysterious person who had tea with Mr. Culledon at Mathis' that afternoon.

"My superiors can then satisfy themselves whether the waitress is or is not so sure of her statement that she invariably picks out again and again one particular individual amongst a number of others or not."

"Surely," interrupted Lady Irene, dryly, "you and your superiors do not expect my servants to help in such a farce?"

"We don't look upon such a proceeding as a farce, Lady Irene," rejoined Lady Molly, gently. "It is often resorted to in the interests of an accused person, and we certainly would ask the co-operation of your household."

"I don't see what they can do."

But the two girls did not seem unwilling. The idea appealed to them, I felt sure; it suggested an exciting episode, and gave promise of variety in their monotonous lives.

"I am sure both these young ladies possess fine big hats," continued Lady Molly with an encouraging smile.

"I should not allow them to wear ridiculous headgear," retorted Lady Irene, sternly.

"I have the one your ladyship wouldn't wear, and threw away," interposed the young parlour-maid. "I put it together again with the scraps I found in the dusthole."

There was just one instant of absolute silence, one of those magnetic moments when Fate seems to have dropped the spool on which she was spinning the threads of a life, and is just stooping in order to pick it up.

Lady Irene raised a black-bordered handkerchief to her lips, then said quietly:

"I don't know what you mean, Mary. I never wear big hats."

"No, my lady," here interposed the lady's maid; "but Mary means the one you ordered at Sanchia's and only wore the once — the day you went to that concert."

"Which day was that?" asked Lady Molly, blandly.

"Oh! I couldn't forget that day," ejaculated the maid; "her ladyship came home from the concert — I had undressed her, and she told me that she would never wear her big hat again — it was too heavy. That same day Mr. Culledon was murdered."

"That hat would answer our purpose very well," said Lady Molly, quite calmly. "Perhaps Mary will go and fetch it, and you had better go and help her put it on."

The two girls went out of the room without another word, and there were we three women left facing one another, with that awful secret, only half-revealed, hovering in the air like an intangible spectre.

"What are you going to do, Lady Irene?" asked Lady Molly, after a moment's pause, during which I literally could hear my own heart beating, whilst I watched the rigid figure of the widow in deep black crape, her face set and white, her eyes fixed steadily on Lady Molly.

"You can't prove it!" she said defiantly.

"I think we can," rejoined Lady Molly, simply; "at any rate, I mean to try. I have two of the waitresses from Mathis' outside in a cab, and I have already spoken to the attendant who served you at Sanchia's, an obscure milliner in a back street near Portland Road. We know that you were at great pains there to order a hat of certain dimensions and to your own minute description; it was a copy of one you had once seen Miss Löwenthal wear when you met her at your late husband's office. We can prove that meeting, too. Then we have your maid's testimony that you wore that same hat once, and once only, the day, presumably, that you went out to a concert — a statement which you will find it difficult to substantiate — and also the day on which your husband was murdered."

"Bah! the public will laugh at you!" retorted Lady Irene, still defiantly. "You would not dare to formulate so monstrous a charge!"

"It will not seem monstrous when justice has weighed in the balance the facts which we can prove. Let me tell you a few of these, the result of careful investigation. There is the fact that you knew of Mr. Culledon's entanglement with Miss Elizabeth Löwenthal, and did your best to keep it from old Mrs. Steinberg's knowledge, realising that any scandal round her favourite nephew would result in the old lady cutting him — and therefore you — out of her will. You dismissed a parlour-maid for the sole reason that she had been present when Miss Löwenthal was shown into Mr. Culledon's study. There is the fact that Mrs. Steinberg had so worded her will that, in the event of her nephew dying before her, her fortune would devolve on you; the fact that, with Miss Löwenthal's action for breach of promise against your husband, your last hope of keeping the scandal from the old lady's ears had effectually vanished. You saw the fortune eluding your grasp; you feared Mrs. Steinberg would alter her will. Had you found the means, and had you dared, would you not rather have killed the old lady? But discovery would have been certain. The other crime was bolder and surer. You have inherited the old lady's millions, for she never knew of her nephew's earlier peccadillos.

"All this we can state and prove, and the history of the hat, bought, and worn one day only, that same memorable day, and then thrown away."

A loud laugh interrupted her — a laugh that froze my very marrow.

"There is one fact you have forgotten, my lady of Scotland Yard," came in sharp, strident accents from the black-robed figure, which seemed to have become strangely spectral in the fast gathering gloom which had been enveloping the luxurious little boudoir. "Don't omit to mention the fact that the accused took the law into her own hands."

And before my dear lady and I could rush to prevent her, Lady Irene Culledon had conveyed something — we dared not think what — to her mouth.

"Find Danvers quickly, Mary!" said Lady Molly, calmly. "You'll find him outside. Bring a doctor back with you."

Even as she spoke Lady Irene, with a cry of agony, fell senseless in my dear lady's arms.

The doctor, I may tell you, came too late. The unfortunate woman evidently had a good knowledge of poisons. She had been determined not to fail; in case of discovery, she was ready and able to mete out justice to herself.

I don't think the public ever knew the real truth about the woman in the big hat. Interest in her went the way of all things. Yet my dear lady had been right from beginning to end. With unerring precision she had placed her dainty finger on the real motive and the real perpetrator of the crime — the ambitious woman who had married solely for money, and meant to have that money even at the cost of one of the most dastardly murders that have ever darkened the criminal annals of this country.

I asked Lady Molly what it was that first made her think of Lady Irene as the possible murderess. No one else for a moment had thought her guilty.

"The big hat," replied my dear lady with a smile. "Had the mysterious woman at Mathis' been tall, the waitresses would not, one and all, have been struck by the abnormal size of the hat. The wearer must have been petite, hence the reason that under a wide brim only the chin would be visible. I at once sought for a small woman. Our fellows did not think of that, because they are men."

You see how simple it all was!

SIR JEREMIAH'S WILL

MANY people have asked me whether I knew when, and in what circumstances, Lady Molly joined the detective staff at Scotland Yard, who she was, and how she managed to keep her position in Society — as she undoubtedly did — whilst exercising a profession which usually does not make for high social standing.

Well, of course, there is much that I have known all along about my dear lady — just as much, in fact, as her aristocratic friends and relations did — but I had promised her not to let the general public know anything of her private life until she gave me leave to do so.

Now things have taken a different turn, and I can tell you all I know. But I must go back some years for that, and recall to your mind that extraordinary crime known in those days as the Baddock Will Case, which sent one of the most prominent and popular young men in Society to penal servitude — a life sentence, mind you, which was considered to be remarkably lenient by a number of people who thought that Captain de Mazareen ought to have been hanged.

He was such a good-looking young soldier in those days. I specially remember him at the late Queen's funeral — one of the tallest men in the British Army, and with that peculiar charm of manner which, alas! one has ceased to associate with young Englishmen nowadays. If to these two undeniable advantages you add the one that Hubert de Mazareen was the dearly loved grandson of Sir Jeremiah Baddock, the multi-millionaire shipowner of Liverpool, you will realize how easy it was for that young Guardsman to ingratiate himself with every woman in Society, and more particularly with every mamma who had a marriageable daughter.

But Fate and Love have a proverbial knack of making a muddle of things. Captain de Mazareen, with a bevy of pretty and eligible girls from whom to select a wife, chose to fall in love with the one woman in the whole of England who, in his grandfather's opinion, should have remained a stranger, even an enemy, to him.

You remember the sad story — more than a quarter of a century old now — of Sir Jeremiah's unhappy second marriage with the pretty French actress, Mlle. Adèle Desty, who was then over thirty years younger than himself. He married her abroad, and never brought her to England. She made him supremely wretched for about three years, and finally ran away with the Earl of Flintshire, whom she had met at Monte Carlo.

Well! it was with a daughter of that same Earl of Flintshire, Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk, that Captain Hubert de Mazareen fell desperately in love. Imagine Sir Jeremiah's feelings when he heard of it.

Captain Hubert, you must know, had resigned his commission in 1902 at his grandfather's request, when the latter's health first began to fail. He had taken up his permanent abode at Appledore Castle, Sir Jeremiah's magnificent home in Cumberland, and, of course, it was generally understood that ultimately he would become possessed of the wealthy shipowner's millions as well as of the fine property, seeing that his mother had been Sir Jeremiah's only child by the latter's first marriage.

Lord Flintshire's property was quite close to Appledore; but, needless to say, old Sir Jeremiah never forgave his noble neighbour the cruel wrong he had suffered at his hands.

The second Lady Baddock, afterwards Countess of Flintshire, has been dead twenty years. Neither the county nor the more exclusive sets of London ever received her, but her daughter Molly, who inherited all her beauty and none of her faults, was the idol of her father, and the acknowledged queen of county and town Society.

You see, it was the ancient, yet ever new, story of Cappelletti and Montecchi over again, and one day Captain Hubert de Mazareen had to tell Sir Jeremiah that he desired to marry the daughter of his grandfather's most cruel enemy.

What the immediate result of that announcement was no one could say. Neither Sir Jeremiah nor Captain Hubert de Mazareen would have allowed servants or dependents to hear a word of disagreement that might have passed between them, much less to suspect that an unpleasant scene had occurred.

Outwardly everything went on as usual at Appledore Castle for about a fortnight or so, after which Captain Hubert went away one day, ostensibly for a brief stay in London; but he never re-entered the doors of the Castle until after the dark veil of an appalling tragedy had begun to descend on the stately old Cumberland home.

Sir Jeremiah bore up pretty well for a time, then he had a slight paralytic stroke and became a confirmed invalid. The postmaster at Appledore declared that after that many letters came, addressed to Sir Jeremiah in Captain Hubert's well-known handwriting and bearing the London postmark; but presumably the old gentleman felt bitterly irreconcilable towards his grandson, for Captain de Mazareen was never seen at the Castle.

Soon the invalid grew more and more eccentric and morose. He ordered all the reception rooms of his magnificent home to be closed and shuttered, and he dismissed all his indoor servants, with the exception of his own male attendant and an old married couple named Bradley, who had been in his service for years, and who now did the little work that was required in what had once been one of the most richly appointed country mansions in England.

Bitter resentment against his once dearly loved grandson, and against the man who had robbed him of his young wife twenty-five years ago, seemed to have cut off the old man from contact with the outside world.

Thus matters stood until the spring of 1903, when Sir Jeremiah announced one morning to the three members of his household that Mr. Philip Baddock was coming to stay at the Castle, and that a room must be got ready immediately.

Mr. Philip Baddock came that same evening. He was a young man of quite ordinary appearance: short, rather dark, with the somewhat uncouth manners suggestive of an upbringing in a country parsonage.

His arrival created no little excitement in the neighbourhood. Who was Mr. Philip Baddock, and where did he come from? No one had ever heard of him before, and now — after a very brief time spent at the Castle — he seemed to be gradually taking up the position which originally had belonged to Captain Hubert.

He took over the command of the small household, dismissing Sir Jeremiah's personal attendant after a while and engaging another. He supervised the outdoor men, reducing the staff both in the gardens and the stables. He sold most of the horses and carriages, and presently bought a motor-car, which he at once took to driving all over the country.

But he spoke to no one in the village, and soon, in answer to inquiries by one or two of Sir Jeremiah's faithful friends and cronies, the reply came regularly from Mr. Philip Baddock that the invalid was disinclined for company. Only Doctor Thorne, the local practitioner, saw the patient. Sir Jeremiah, it was understood, was slowly sinking towards the grave; but his mind was quite clear, even if his temper was abnormal.

One day Mr. Philip Baddock made inquiries in the village for a good chauffeur. George Taylor presented himself, and was at once told off to drive the car as quickly as possible to Carlisle, to the office of Mr. Steadman, solicitor, and to bring that gentleman back to the Castle as soon as he could come.

The distance from Appledore to Carlisle is over fifty miles. It was seven o'clock in the evening before George Taylor was back, bringing Mr. Steadman with him.

The solicitor was received at the Castle door by old Bradley, and at Sir Jeremiah's door by Felkin, the new attendant, who showed him in. The interview between the invalid and Mr. Steadman lasted half an hour, after which the latter was driven back to Carlisle by George Taylor.

That same evening a telegram was sent off by Mr. Philip Baddock to Captain de Mazareen in London, containing the few words:

"Sir Jeremiah very ill. Come at once."

Twenty-four hours later Captain Hubert arrived at Appledore Castle — too late, however, to see his grandfather alive.

Sir Jeremiah Baddock had died an hour before the arrival of his once so tenderly cherished grandson, and all hopes of a reconciliation had now been mercilessly annihilated by death.

The end had come much more suddenly than Doctor Thorne had anticipated. He had seen the patient in the morning and thought that he might last some days. But when Sir Jeremiah had heard that Captain de Mazareen had been sent for he had worked himself into a state of such terrible agitation that the poor, overtaxed brain and heart finally gave way.

2

THE events of those memorable days — in the early spring of 1904 — are so graven on my memory that I can recount them as if they happened yesterday.

I was maid to Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk at the time. Since then she has honoured me with her friendship.

Directly after Captain Hubert's first estrangement from his grandfather she and I came down to Cumberland and lived very quietly at Kirk Hall, which, as you know, is but a stone's throw from Appledore.

Here Captain Hubert paid my dear lady several visits. She had irrevocably made up her mind that their engagement was to be indefinitely prolonged, for she had a vague hope that, sooner or later, Sir Jeremiah would relent towards the grandson whom he had loved so dearly. At any rate there was a chance of it whilst the marriage had not actually taken place.

Captain de Mazareen, mind you, was in no sense of the word badly off. His father had left him some £25,000, and Lady Molly had a small private fortune of her own. Therefore I assure you that there was not a single mercenary thought behind this protracted engagement or Captain Hubert's desire for a reconciliation with his grandfather.

The evening that he arrived at Appledore in response to Mr. Philip Baddock's telegram Lady Molly met him at the station. He sent his luggage on to Kirk Hall, and the two young people walked together as far as the Elkhorn Woods, which divide the Earl of Flintshire's property from Appledore itself.

Here they met Mr. Steadman, the solicitor, who had motored over from Carlisle in response to an urgent summons from Sir Jeremiah Baddock, but whose car had broken down about two hundred yards up the road.

It seems that the chauffeur had suggested his walking on through the woods, it being an exceptionally fine and mild spring evening, with a glorious full moon overhead, which lit up almost every turn of the path that cuts through the pretty coppice.

Lady Molly had given me rendezvous at the edge of the wood, so that I might accompany her home after she had taken leave of Captain Hubert. It seems that the latter knew Mr. Steadman slightly, as we saw the two men shake hands with one another, then, after a few words of conversation, turn off to walk together through the wood. We then made our way back silently to Kirk Hall.

My dear lady was inexpressibly sad. She appreciated very deeply the love which Captain Hubert bore for his grandfather, and was loath to see the final annihilation of all her hopes of an ultimate reconciliation between the two men.

I had dressed Lady Molly for dinner, and she was just going downstairs when Captain de Mazareen arrived at the Hall.

He announced the sad news of his grandfather's death and looked extremely dejected and upset.

Of course, he stayed at the Hall, for Mr. Philip Baddock seemed quite to have taken command at Appledore Castle, and Captain Hubert did not care to be beholden to him for hospitality.

My dear lady asked him what had become of Mr. Steadman.

"I don't know," he replied. "He started to walk with me through the wood, then he seemed to think that the tramp would be too much for him, and that the car could be put right very quickly. He preferred to drive round, and was quite sure that he would meet me at the Castle in less than half an hour. However, he never turned up."

Lady Molly asked several more questions about Sir Jeremiah, which Captain Hubert answered in a listless way. He had been met at the door of the Castle by Mr. Philip Baddock, who told him that the old gentleman had breathed his last half an hour before.

I remember that we all went to bed that night feeling quite unaccountably depressed. It seemed that something more tragic than the natural death of a septuagenarian hovered in the air of these remote Cumberland villages.

The next morning our strange premonitions were confirmed. Lord Flintshire, my dear lady, and Captain Hubert were sitting at breakfast when the news was brought to the Hall that Mr. Steadman, the Carlisle solicitor, had been found murdered in the Elkhorn Woods earlier in the morning. Evidently he had been stunned, and then done to death by a heavily-loaded stick or some similar weapon. When he was discovered in the early hours of the morning, he had, apparently, been dead some time. The local police were at once apprised of the terrible event, which created as much excitement as the death of the eccentric old millionaire at Appledore Castle.

Everyone at Kirk Hall, of course, was keenly interested, and Captain de Mazareen went over to Appledore as soon as he could in order to place his information at the service of the police.

It is a strange fact, but nevertheless a true one, that when a deadly peril arises such as now threatened Captain de Mazareen, the person most in danger is the last to be conscious of it.

I am quite sure that Lady Molly, the moment she heard that Mr. Steadman had been murdered in the Elkhorn Woods, realized that the man she loved would be implicated in that tragedy in some sinister manner. But that is the intuition of a woman — of a woman who loves.

As for Captain Hubert, he went about during the whole of that day quite unconscious of the abyss which already was yawning at his feet. He even discussed quite equably the several valuable bits of information which the local police had already collected, and which eventually formed a portion of that damning fabric of circumstantial evidence which was to bring him within sight of the gallows.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Philip Baddock sent him a stiff little note, saying that, as Captain de Mazareen was now the owner of Appledore Castle, he (Philip Baddock) did not desire to trespass a moment longer than was necessary on his relative's hospitality, and had arranged to stay at the village inn until after the funeral, when he would leave Cumberland.

To this Captain Hubert sent an equally curt note saying that, as far as he knew, he had no say in the matter of anyone coming or going from the Castle, and that Mr. Philip Baddock must, of course, please himself as to whether he stayed there or not.

So far, of course, the old gentleman's testamentary dispositions were not known. He had made a will in 1902 bequeathing Appledore and everything he possessed unconditionally to his beloved grandson, Hubert de Mazareen, whom he also appointed his sole executor. That will was lodged with Mr. Truscott, who had been solicitor to the deceased practically until the last moment, when Mr. Steadman, a new arrival at Carlisle, had been sent for.

Whether that will had been revoked or not Mr. Truscott did not know; but, in the course of the afternoon, Lord Flintshire, whilst out driving, met the local superintendent of police, who told him that Mr. Steadman's senior partner — a Mr. Fuelling — had made a statement to the effect that Sir Jeremiah had sent for Mr. Steadman the day before his death and given instructions for the drafting of a new will whereby the old gentleman bequeathed Appledore and everything he possessed to his beloved grandson, Hubert de Mazareen, but only on the condition that the latter did not marry the daughter or any other relative of the Earl of Flintshire. In the event of Hubert de Mazareen disregarding this condition at any future time of his life, Sir Jeremiah's entire fortune was to devolve on Philip Baddock, sole issue of testator's second marriage, with Adèle Desty. The draft of this will, added Mr. Fuelling, was in Mr. Steadman's pocket ready for Sir Jeremiah's signature on that fateful night when the unfortunate young solicitor was murdered.

The draft had not been found in the murdered man's pocket. A copy of it, however, was in Mr. Fuelling's safe. But as this will had never been signed by the deceased the one of 1902 remained valid, and Captain Hubert de Mazareen remained unconditionally his grandfather's sole heir.

3

EVENTS crowded thick and fast on that day — one of the most miserable I have ever lived through.

After an early tea, which my dear lady had alone in her little boudoir, she sent me down to ask Captain Hubert to come up and speak to her. He did so at once, and I went into the next room — which was Lady Molly's bedroom — to prepare her dress for the evening.

I had, of course, discreetly closed the door of communication between the two rooms, but after the first five minutes, Lady Molly deliberately reopened it, from which I gathered that she actually wished me to know what was going on.

It was then a little after four o'clock. I could hear Captain de Mazareen's voice, low-toned and infinitely tender. He adored my dear lady, but he was a very quiet man, and it was only by the passionate tenseness of his attitude when he was near her that a shrewdly observant person could guess how deeply he cared. Now, through the open door, I could see his handsome head bowed very low, so that he could better look into her upturned eyes. His arms were round her, as if he were fighting the world for the possession of her, and would never let her go again. But there were tears in her eyes.

"Hubert," she said after a while, "I want you to marry me. Will you?"

"Will I?" he whispered, with an intensity of passionate longing which seemed to me then so unutterably pathetic that I could have sat down and had a good cry.

"But," rejoined Lady Molly earnestly, "I mean as soon as possible — to-morrow, by special licence. You can wire to Mr. Hurford to-night, and he will see about it the first thing in the morning. We can travel up to town by the night train. Father and Mary will come with me. Father has promised, you know, and we can be married to-morrow . . . I think that would be the quickest way."

There was a pause. I could well imagine how astonished and perturbed Captain Hubert must be feeling. It was such a strange request for a woman to make at such a time. I could see by the expression of his eyes that he was trying to read her thoughts. But she looked up quite serenely at him, and, frankly, I do not think that he had the slightest inkling of the sublime motive at the back of her strange insistence.

"You prefer to be married in London rather than here?" he asked quite simply.

"Yes," she replied; "I desire to be married in London to-morrow."

A few moments later my dear lady quietly shut the door again, and I heard and saw no more; but half an hour later she called me. She was alone in her boudoir, bravely trying to smile through a veil of tears. Captain Hubert's footsteps could still be heard going along the hall below.

Lady Molly listened until the final echo of that tread died away in the distance; then she buried her sweet face on my shoulder and sobbed her very heart out.

"Get ready as quickly as you can, Mary," she said to me when the paroxysm had somewhat subsided. "We go up to town by the 9.10."

"Is his lordship coming with us, my lady?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" she said, whilst a bright smile lit up her face. "Father is simply grand . . . and yet he knows."

"Knows what, my lady?" I queried instinctively, for Lady Molly had paused, and I saw a look of acute pain once more darken her soft, grey eyes.

"My father knows," she said, slowly and almost tonelessly, "that half an hour ago the police found a weighted stick in the Elkhorn Woods not far from the spot where Mr. Steadman was murdered. The stick has the appearance of having been very vigorously cleaned and scraped recently in spite of which fact tiny traces of blood are still visible on the leaden knob. The inspector showed my father that stick. I saw it too. It is the property of Captain Hubert de Mazareen, and by to-morrow, at the latest, it will be identified as such."

There was silence in the little boudoir now: a silence broken only by the sound of dull sobs which rose from my dear lady's overburdened heart. Lady Molly at this moment had looked into the future, and with that unerring intuition which has since been of such immense service to her she had already perceived the grim web which Fate was weaving round the destiny of the man she loved.

I said nothing. What could I say? I waited for her to speak again.

The first words she uttered after the terrible pronouncement which she had just made were:

"I'll wear my white cloth gown to-morrow, Mary. It is the most becoming frock I have, and I want to look my best on my wedding day."

4

CAPTAIN HUBERT DE MAZAREEN was married to Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk by special licence on April 22nd, 1904, at the Church of St. Margaret, Westminster. No one was present to witness the ceremony except the Earl of Flintshire and myself. No one was apprised of the event at the time, nor, until recently, did anyone know that Lady Molly of Scotland Yard was the wife of De Mazareen the convict.

As you know, he was arrested at Appledore railway station the following morning and charged with the wilful murder of Alexander Steadman, solicitor, of Carlisle.

Everything was against him from the first. The draft of the will which Mr. Steadman was taking up to Sir Jeremiah for signature supplied the motive for the alleged crime, and he was the last person seen in company with the murdered man.

The chauffeur, George Taylor, who had driven to Carlisle to fetch Mr. Steadman, and brought him back that evening, explained how two of his tyres burst almost simultaneously after going over a bit of broken road close to the coppice. He had suggested to Mr. Steadman the idea of walking through the wood, and, as he had not two fresh tyres with him, he started pushing his car along, as the village was not more than half a mile away. He never saw Mr. Steadman again.

The stick with which the terrible deed had been committed was the most damning piece of evidence against the accused. It had been identified as his property by more than one witness, and was found within twenty yards of the victim, obviously cleaned and scraped, but still bearing minute traces of blood. Moreover, it had actually been seen in Captain Hubert's hand by one or two of the porters when he arrived at Appledore Station on that fatal night, was met there by Lady Molly, and subsequently walked away with her previous to meeting Mr. Steadman on the edge of the wood.

Captain de Mazareen, late of His Majesty's Household Brigade, was indicted for the wilful murder of Alexander Steadman, tried at the next assizes, found guilty, and condemned to be hanged. The jury, however, had strongly recommended him to mercy owing to his hitherto spotless reputation, and to the many services he had rendered his country during the last Boer War. A monster petition was sent up to the Home Office, and the sentence was commuted to twenty years' penal servitude.

That same year, Lady Molly applied for, and obtained, a small post on the detective staff of the police. From that small post she has worked her way upwards, analysing and studying, exercising her powers of intuition and of deduction, until at the present moment she is considered, by chiefs and men alike, the greatest authority among them on criminal investigation.

The Earl of Flintshire died some three years ago. Kirk Hall devolved on a distant cousin, but Lady Molly has kept a small home at Kirk ready for her husband when he comes back from Dartmoor.

The task of her life is to apply her gifts, and the obvious advantages at her disposal as a prominent member of the detective force, to prove the innocence of Captain Hubert de Mazareen, which she never doubted for a moment.

But it was sublime, and at the same time deeply pathetic, to see the frantic efforts at self-sacrifice which these two noble-hearted young people made for one another's sake.

Directly Captain Hubert realised that, so far as proving his innocence was concerned, he was a lost man, he used every effort to release Lady Molly from the bonds of matrimony. The marriage had been, and was still, kept a profound secret. He determined to plead guilty to murder at his trial, and then to make a declaration that he had entrapped Lady Molly into a marriage, knowing at the time that a warrant was out for his arrest, and hoping, by his connection with the Earl of Flintshire, to obtain a certain amount of leniency. When he was sufficiently convinced that such a course was out of the question, he begged Lady Molly to bring a nullity suit against him. He would not defend it. He only wished to set her free.

But the love she bore him triumphed over all. They did keep their marriage a secret, but she remained faithful to him in every thought and feeling within her, and loyal to him with her whole soul. Only I — once her maid, now her devoted friend — knew what she suffered, even whilst she threw herself heart and mind into her work.

We lived mostly in our little flat in Maida Vale, but spent some delightful days of freedom and peace in the little house at Kirk. Hither — in spite of the terrible memories the place evoked — Lady Molly loved to spend her time in wandering over the ground where that mysterious crime had been committed which had doomed an innocent man to the life of a convict.

"That mystery has got to be cleared up, Mary," she would repeat to me with unswerving loyalty, "and cleared up soon, before Captain de Mazareen loses all joy in life and all belief in me."

5

I SUSPECT you will be interested to hear something about Appledore Castle and about Mr. Philip Baddock, who had been so near getting an immense fortune, yet had it snatched from him before his very eyes.

As Sir Jeremiah Baddock never signed the will of 1904, Captain de Mazareen's solicitors, on his behalf, sought to obtain probate of the former one, dated 1902. In view of the terrible circumstances connected with the proposed last testamentary dispositions of the deceased, Mr. Philip Baddock was advised to fight that suit.

It seems that he really was the son of Sir Jeremiah by the latter's second marriage with Mlle. Desty, but the old gentleman, with heartless vengeance, had practically repudiated the boy from the first, and absolutely refused to have anything to do with him beyond paying for his maintenance and education, and afterwards making him a goodly allowance on the express condition that Philip — soon to become a young man — never set his foot on English soil.

The condition was strictly complied with. Philip Baddock was born abroad, and lived abroad until 1903, when he suddenly appeared at Appledore Castle. Whether Sir Jeremiah, in a fit of tardy repentance, had sent for him, or whether he risked coming of his own accord, no one ever knew.

Captain de Mazareen was not, until that same year 1903, aware of the existence of Philip Baddock any more than was anybody else, and he spent his last days of freedom in stating positively that he would not accept the terms of the will of 1902, but would agree to Sir Jeremiah's fortune being divided up as it would have been if the old gentleman had died intestate. Thus Philip Baddock, the son, and Hubert de Mazareen, the grandson, received an equal share of Sir Jeremiah's immense wealth, estimated at close upon £2,000,000 sterling.

Appledore was put up for sale and bought in by Mr. Philip Baddock, who took up his residence there and gradually gained for himself a position in the county as one of the most wealthy magnates in the north of England. Thus he became acquainted with the present Lord Flintshire, and, later on, met my dear lady. She neither sought nor avoided his acquaintance, and even went once to a dinner party at Appledore Castle.

That was lately, on the occasion of our last stay at Kirk. I had gone up to the Castle in the brougham so that I might accompany Lady Molly home, and had been shown into the library, whither my dear lady came in order to put on her cloak.

While she was doing so Mr. Philip Baddock came in. He had a newspaper in his hand and seemed greatly agitated.

"Such extraordinary news, Lady Molly," he said, pointing to a head-line in the paper. "You know, of course, that the other day a convict succeeded in effecting his escape from Dartmoor?"

"Yes, I knew that," said my dear lady, quietly.

"Well, I have reason to — to suppose," continued Mr. Baddock, "that that convict was none other than my unfortunate nephew, De Mazareen."

"Yes?" rejoined Lady Molly, whose perfect calm and serene expression of face contrasted strangely with the obvious agitation of Philip Baddock.

"Heaven knows that he tried to do me an evil turn," rejoined the latter after a while; "but of course I bear him no grudge, now that the law has given me that which he tried to wrench from me — a just share of my father's possessions. Since he has thrown himself on my mercy—"

"Thrown himself on your mercy!" ejaculated my dear lady, whose face had become almost grey with a sudden fear. "What do you mean?"

"De Mazareen is in my house at the present moment," replied Mr. Baddock, quietly.

"Here?"

"Yes. It seems that he tramped here. I am afraid that his object was to try and see you. He wants money, of course. I happened to be out in the woods this afternoon, and saw him.

"No, no!" added Philip Baddock quickly, in response to an instinctive gasp of pain from Lady Molly; "you need not have the slightest fear. My nephew is as safe with me as he would be in your own house. I brought him here, for he was exhausted with fatigue and want of food. None of my servants know of his presence in the house except Felkin, whom I can trust. By to-morrow he will have rested. . . . We'll make a start in the very early morning in my car; we'll get to Liverpool before midday. De Mazareen shall wear Felkin's clothes — no one will know him. One of the Baddock steamers is leaving for Buenos Ayres the same afternoon, and I can arrange with the captain. You need not have the slightest fear," he repeated, with simple yet earnest emphasis; "I pledge you my word that De Mazareen will be safe."

"I should like to thank you," she murmured.

"Please don't," he rejoined with a sad smile. "It is a great happiness to me to be able to do this. . . . I know that you — you cared for him at one time. . . . I wish you had known and trusted me in those days — but I am glad of this opportunity which enables me to tell you that, even had my father signed his last will and testament, I should have shared his fortune with De Mazareen. The man whom you honoured with your love need never have resorted to crime in order to gain a fortune."

Philip Baddock paused. His eyes were fixed on Lady Molly with unmistakable love and an appeal for sympathy. I had no idea that he cared for her — nor had she, I am quite sure. Her heart belonged solely to the poor, fugitive convict, but she could not fail, I thought, to be touched by the other man's obvious sincerity and earnestness.

There was silence in the room for a few moments. Only the old clock in its Sheraton case ticked on in solemn imperturbability.

Lady Molly turned her luminous eyes on the man who had just made so simple, so touching a profession of love. Was she about to tell him that she was no longer free, that she bore the name of the man whom the law had ostracised and pronounced a criminal — who had even now, by this daring attempt at escape, added a few years to his already long term of punishment and another load to his burden of shame?

"Do you think," she asked quietly, "that I might speak to Captain de Mazareen for a few moments without endangering his safety?"

Mr. Baddock did not reply immediately. He seemed to be pondering over the request. Then he said:

"I will see that everything is safe. I don't think there need be any danger."

He went out of the room, and my dear lady and I were left alone for a minute or two. She was so calm and serene that I marvelled at her self-control, and wondered what was going on in her mind.

"Mary," she said to me, speaking very quickly, for already we could hear two men's footsteps approaching the library door, "you must station yourself just outside the front door; you understand? If you see or hear anything suspicious come and warn me at once."

I made ready to obey, and the next moment the door opened and Mr. Philip Baddock entered, accompanied by Captain Hubert.

I smothered the involuntary sob which rose to my throat at sight of the man who had once been the most gallant, the handsomest soldier I had ever seen. I had only just time to notice that Mr. Baddock prepared to leave the room again immediately. At the door he turned back and said to Lady Molly:

"Felkin has gone down to the lodge. If he hears or sees anything that seems suspicious he will ring up on the telephone;" and he pointed to the apparatus which stood on the library table in the centre of the room.

After that he closed the door, and I was left to imagine the moments of joy, mingled with acute anguish, which my dear lady would be living through.

I walked up and down restlessly on the terrace which fronts the Castle. The house itself appeared silent and dark: I presume all the servants had gone to bed. Far away on my right I caught the glimmer of a light. It came from the lodge where Felkin was watching. From the church in Appledore village came the sound of the clock striking the hour of midnight.

How long I had been on the watch I cannot say, when suddenly I was aware of a man's figure running rapidly along the drive towards the house. The next moment the figure had skirted the Castle, apparently making for one of the back doors.

I did not hesitate a moment. Having left the big front door on the latch, I ran straight in and made for the library door.

Already Mr. Philip Baddock had forestalled me. His hand was on the latch. Without more ado he pushed open the door and I followed him in.

Lady Molly was sitting on the sofa, with Captain Hubert beside her. They both rose at our entrance.

"The police!" said Mr. Baddock, speaking very rapidly. "Felkin has just run up from the lodge. He is getting the car ready. Pray God we may yet be able to get away."

Even as he spoke the front door bell sounded with a loud clang, which to me had the sound of a death knell.

"It is too late, you see," said my dear lady, quietly.

"No, not too late," ejaculated Philip Baddock, in a rapid whisper. "Quick! De Mazareen, follow me through the hall. Felkin is at the stables getting the car ready. It will be some time before the servants are roused."

"Mary, I am sure, has failed to fasten the front door," interrupted Lady Molly, with the same strange calm. "I think the police are already in the hall."

There was no mistaking the muffled sound of feet treading the thick Turkey carpet in the hall. The library had but one exit. Captain Hubert was literally in a trap. But Mr. Baddock had not lost his presence of mind.

"The police would never dream of searching my house," he said; "they will take my word that De Mazareen is not here. Here!" he added, pointing to a tall Jacobean wardrobe which stood in an angle of the room. "In there, man, and leave the rest to me!"

"I am afraid that such a proceeding would bring useless trouble upon you, Mr. Baddock," once more interposed Lady Molly; "the police, if they do not at once find Captain de Mazareen, will surely search the house."

"Impossible! They would not dare!"

"Indeed they would. The police know that Captain de Mazareen is here."

"I swear they do not," rejoined Mr. Baddock. "Felkin is no traitor, and no one else—"

"It was I who gave information to the police," said Lady Molly, speaking loudly and clearly. "I called up the superintendent on the telephone just now, and told him that his men would find the escaped convict hiding at Appledore Castle."

"You!" ejaculated Mr. Baddock, in a tone of surprise and horror, not unmixed with a certain note of triumph. "You?"

"Yes!" she replied calmly. "I am of the police, you know. I had to do my duty. Open the door, Mary," she added, turning to me.

Captain Hubert had not spoken a word so far. Now, when the men, led by Detective-Inspector Etty, entered the room, he walked with a firm step towards them, held out his hands for the irons, and with a final look at Lady Molly, in which love, trust, and hope were clearly expressed, he passed out of the room and was soon lost to sight.

My dear lady waited until the heavy footfalls had died away; then she turned with a pleasant smile to Mr. Philip Baddock:

"I thank you for your kind thoughts of me," she said, "and for your noble efforts on behalf of your nephew. My position was a difficult one. I hope you will forgive the pain I have been obliged to bring upon you."

"I will do more than forgive, Lady Molly," he said earnestly, "I will venture to hope."

He took her hand and kissed it. Then she beckoned to me and I followed her into the hall.

Our brougham — a hired one — had been waiting in the stable-yard. We drove home in silence; but half an hour later, when my dear lady kissed me good night she whispered in my ear:

"And now, Mary, we'll prove him innocent."

THE END

ONE or two people knew that at one time Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk had been engaged to Captain Hubert de Mazareen, who was now convict No. 97, undergoing a life sentence for the murder of Mr. Steadman, a solicitor of Carlisle, in the Elkhorn woods in April, 1904. Few, on the other hand, knew of the secret marriage solemnised on that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon, when all of us present in the church, with the exception of the bridegroom himself, were fully aware that proofs of guilt — deadly and irrefutable — were even then being heaped up against the man to whom Lady Molly was plighting her troth, for better or for worse, with her mental eyes wide open, her unerring intuition keen to the fact that nothing but a miracle could save the man she loved from an ignoble condemnation, perhaps from the gallows.

The husband of my dear lady, the man whom she loved with all the strength of her romantic and passionate nature, was duly tried and convicted of murder. Condemned to be hanged, he was reprieved, and his sentence commuted to penal servitude for life.

The question of Sir Jeremiah's estate became a complicated one, for his last will and testament was never signed, and the former one, dated 1902, bequeathed everything he possessed unconditionally to his beloved grandson Hubert.

After much legal argument, which it is useless to recapitulate here, it was agreed between the parties, and ratified in court, that the deceased gentleman's vast wealth should be disposed of as if he had died intestate. One half of it, therefore, went to Captain Hubert de Mazareen, grandson, and the other half to Philip Baddock, the son. The latter bought Appledore Castle and resided there, whilst his nephew became No. 97 in Dartmoor Prison.

Captain Hubert had served two years of his sentence when he made that daring and successful escape which caused so much sensation at the time. He managed to reach Appledore, where he was discovered by Mr. Philip Baddock, who gave him food and shelter and got everything ready for the safe conveyance of his unfortunate nephew to Liverpool and thence to a port of safety in South America.

You remember how he was thwarted in this laudable attempt by Lady Molly herself, who communicated with the police and gave up convict No. 97 into the hands of the authorities once more.

Of course, public outcry was loud against my dear lady's action. Sense of duty was all very well, so people argued, but no one could forget that at one time Captain Hubert de Mazareen and Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk had actually been engaged to be married, and it seemed positively monstrous for a woman to be so pitiless towards the man whom she must at one time have loved.

You see how little people understood my dear lady's motives. Some went so far as to say that she had only contemplated marriage with Captain Hubert de Mazareen because he was then, presumably, the heir to Sir Jeremiah's fortune; now — continued the gossips — she was equally ready to marry Mr. Philip Baddock, who at any rate was the happy possessor of one half of the deceased gentleman's wealth.

Certainly Lady Molly's conduct at this time helped to foster this idea. Finding that even the chief was inclined to give her the cold shoulder, she shut up our flat in Maida Vale and took up her residence at the little house which she owned in Kirk, and from the windows of which she had a splendid view of stately Appledore Castle nestling among the trees on the hillside.

I was with her, of course, and Mr. Philip Baddock was a frequent visitor at the house. There could be no doubt that he admired her greatly, and that she accepted his attentions with a fair amount of graciousness. The county fought shy of her. Her former engagement to Captain de Mazareen was well known, and her treachery to him — so it was called — was severely censured.

Living almost in isolation in the village, her whole soul seemed wrapped in thoughts of how to unravel the mystery of the death of Mr. Steadman. Captain de Mazareen had sworn in his defence that the solicitor, after starting to walk through the Elkhorn woods with him, had feared that the tramp over rough ground would be too much for him, and had almost immediately turned back in order to regain the road. But the chauffeur, George Taylor, who was busy with the broken-down car some two hundred yards up the road, never saw Mr. Steadman again, whilst Captain de Mazareen arrived at the gates of Appledore Castle alone. Here he was met by Mr. Philip Baddock, who informed him that Sir Jeremiah had breathed his last an hour before.

No one at the Castle recollected seeing a stick in Captain Hubert's hand when he arrived, whilst there were several witnesses who swore that he carried one at Appledore Station when he started to walk with her ladyship. The stick was found close to the body of the solicitor; and the solicitor, when he met with his terrible death, had in his pocket the draft of a will which meant disinheritance to Captain de Mazareen.

Here was the awful problem which Lady Molly had to face and to solve if she persisted in believing that the man whom she loved, and whom she had married at the moment when she knew that proofs of guilt were dead against him, was indeed innocent.

WE had spent all the morning shopping in Carlisle, and in the afternoon we called on Mr. Fuelling, of the firm of Fuelling, Steadman and Co., solicitors.

Lady Molly had some business to arrange in connection with the purchase of an additional bit of land to round off her little garden at Kirk.

Mr. Fuelling was courteous, but distinctly stiff, in his manner towards the lady who was "connected with the police," more especially when — her business being transacted — she seemed inclined to tarry for a little while in the busy solicitor's office, and to lead conversation round to the subject of the murder of Mr. Steadman.

"Five years have gone by since then," said Mr. Fuelling, curtly, in response to a remark from Lady Molly. "I prefer not to revive unpleasant memories."

"You, of course, believed Captain de Mazareen guilty?" retorted my dear lady, imperturbably.

"There were circumstances—" rejoined the solicitor, "and — and, of course, I hardly knew the unfortunate young man. Messrs. Truscott and Truscott used to be the family solicitors."

"Yes. It seemed curious that when Sir Jeremiah wished to make his will he should have sent for you, rather than for his accustomed lawyer," mused Lady Molly.

"Sir Jeremiah did not send for me," replied Mr. Fuelling, with some acerbity, "he sent for my junior, Mr. Steadman."

"Perhaps Mr. Steadman was a personal friend of his."

"Not at all. Not at all. Mr. Steadman was a new arrival in Carlisle, and had never seen Sir Jeremiah before the day when he was sent for and, in a brief interview, drafted the will which, alas! proved to be the primary cause of my unfortunate young partner's death."

"You cannot draft a will in a brief interview, Mr. Fuelling," remarked Lady Molly, lightly.

"Mr. Steadman did so," retorted Mr. Fuelling, curtly. "Though Sir Jeremiah's mind was as clear as crystal, he was very feeble, and the interview had to take place in a darkened room. That was the only time my young partner saw Sir Jeremiah. Twenty-four hours later they were both dead."

"Oh!" commented my dear lady with sudden indifference. "Well! I won't detain you, Mr. Fuelling. Good afternoon."

A few moments later, having parted from the worthy old solicitor, we were out in the street once more.

"The darkened room is my first ray of light," quoth Lady Molly to me, with a smile at her own paradoxical remark.

When we reached home later that afternoon we were met at the garden gate by Mr. Felkin, Mr. Philip Baddock's friend and agent, who lived with him at Appledore Castle.

Mr. Felkin was a curious personality; very taciturn in manner but a man of considerable education. He was the son of a country parson, and at the time of his father's death he had been studying for the medical profession. Finding himself unable to pursue his studies for lack of means, and being left entirely destitute, he had been forced to earn his living by taking up the less exalted calling of male nurse. It seems that he had met Mr. Philip Baddock on the Continent some years ago, and the two young men had somehow drifted into close acquaintanceship. When the late Sir Jeremiah required a personal nurse-attendant Mr. Philip Baddock sent for his friend and installed him at Appledore Castle.

Here Mr. Felkin remained, even after the old gentleman's death. He was nominally called Mr. Baddock's agent, but really did very little work. He was very fond of shooting and of riding, and spent his life in the pursuit of these sports, and he always had plenty of money to spend.

But everyone voted him a disagreeable bear, and the only one who ever succeeded in making him smile was Lady Molly, who always showed an unaccountable liking for the uncouth creature. Even now, when he extended a somewhat grimy hand and murmured a clumsy apology at his intrusion, she greeted him with warm effusiveness and insisted on his coming into the house.

We all turned to walk along the little drive, when Mr. Baddock's car came whizzing round the corner of the road from the Village. He pulled up at our gate, and the next moment had joined us in the drive.

There was a very black look in his eyes, as they wandered restlessly from my dear lady's face to that of his friend. Lady Molly's little hand was even then resting on Mr. Felkin's coat-sleeve; she had been in the act of leading him herself towards the house, and did not withdraw her hand when Mr. Baddock appeared upon the scene.

"Burton has just called about those estimates, Felkin," said the latter, somewhat roughly; "he is waiting at the Castle. You had better take the car — I can walk home later on."

"Oh! how disappointing!" exclaimed Lady Molly, with what looked uncommonly like a pout. "I was going to have such a cosy chat with Mr. Felkin — all about horses and dogs. Couldn't you see that tiresome Burton, Mr. Baddock?" she added ingenuously.

I don't think that Mr. Baddock actually swore, but I am sure he was very near doing so.

"Burton can wait," said Mr. Felkin, curtly.

"No, he cannot," retorted Philip Baddock, whose face was a frowning mirror of uncontrolled jealousy; "take the car, Felkin, and go at once."

For a moment it seemed as if Felkin would refuse to obey. The two men stood looking at each other, measuring one another's power of will and strength of passion. Hate and jealousy were clearly written in each pair of glowering eyes. Philip Baddock looked defiant, and Felkin taciturn and sulky.

Close to them stood my dear lady. Her beautiful eyes literally glowed with triumph. That these two men loved her, each in his own curious, uncontrolled way, I, her friend and confidant, knew very well. I had seen, and often puzzled over, the feminine attacks which she had made on the susceptibilities of that morose lout Felkin. It had taken her nearly two years to bring him to her feet. During that time she had alternately rendered him happy with her smiles and half mad with her coquetries, whilst Philip Baddock's love for her was perpetually fanned by his ever-growing jealousy.

I remember that I often thought her game a cruel one. She was one of those women whom few men could resist; if she really desired to conquer she invariably succeeded, and her victory over Felkin seemed to me as purposeless as it was unkind. After all, she was the lawful wife of Captain de Mazareen, and to rouse hatred between two friends for the sake of her love, when that love was not hers to give, seemed unworthy of her. At this moment, when I could read deadly hatred in the faces of these two men, her cooing laugh grated unpleasantly on my ear.

"Never mind, Mr. Felkin," she said, turning her luminous eyes on him. "Since you have so hard a taskmaster, you must do your duty now. But," she added, throwing a strange, defiant look at Mr. Baddock, "I shall be at home this evening; come and have our cosy chat after dinner."

She gave him her hand, and he took it with a certain clumsy gallantry and raised it to his lips. I thought that Philip Baddock would strike his friend with his open hand. The veins on his temples were swollen like dark cords, and I don't think that I ever saw such an evil look in anyone's eyes before.

Strangely enough, the moment Mr. Felkin's back was turned my dear lady seemed to set herself the task of soothing the violent passions which she had wilfully aroused in the other man. She invited him to come into the house, and, some ten minutes later, I heard her singing to him. When, later on, I went into the boudoir to join them at tea, she was sitting on the music stool whilst he half bent over her, half knelt at her feet; her hands were clasped in her lap, and his fingers were closed over hers.

He did not attempt to leave her side when he saw me entering the room. In fact, he wore a triumphant air of possession, and paid her those little attentions which only an accepted lover would dare to offer.

He left soon after tea, and she accompanied him to the door. She gave him her hand to kiss, and I, who stood at some little distance in the shadow, thought that he would take her in his arms, so yielding and gracious did she seem. But some look or gesture on her part must have checked him, for he turned and walked quickly down the drive.

Lady Molly stood in the doorway gazing out towards the sunset. I, in my humble mind, wondered once again what was the purport of this cruel game.

3

HALf an hour later she called to me, asked for her hat, told me to put on mine and to come out for a stroll.

As so often happened, she led the way towards the Elkhorn woods, which in spite, or perhaps because, of the painful memories they evoked, was a very favourite walk of hers.

As a rule the wood, especially that portion of it where the unfortunate solicitor had been murdered, was deserted after sunset. The villagers declared that Mr. Steadman's ghost haunted the clearing, and that the cry of the murdered man, as he was being foully struck from behind, could be distinctly heard echoing through the trees.

Needless to say, these superstitious fancies never disturbed Lady Molly. She liked to wander over the ground where was committed that mysterious crime which had sent to ignominy worse than death the man she loved so passionately. It seemed as if she meant to wrench its secret from the silent ground, from the leafy undergrowth, from the furtive inhabitants of the glades.

The sun had gone down behind the hills; the wood was dark and still. We strolled up as far as the first clearing, where a plain, granite stone, put up by Mr. Philip Baddock, marked the spot where Mr. Steadman had been murdered.

We sat down on it to rest. My dear lady's mood was a silent one; I did not dare to disturb it, and, for a while, only the gentle "hush — sh — sh" of the leaves, stirred by the evening breeze, broke the peaceful stillness of the glade.

Then we heard a murmur of voices, deep-toned and low. We could not hear the words spoken, though we both strained our ears, and presently Lady Molly arose and cautiously made her way among the trees in the direction whence the voices came, I following as closely as I could.

We had not gone far when we recognised the voices, and heard the words that were said. I paused, distinctly frightened, whilst my dear lady whispered a warning "Hush!"

Never in all my life had I heard so much hatred, such vengeful malignity expressed in the intonation of the human voice as I did in the half-dozen words which now struck my ear.

"You will give her up, or—"

It was Mr. Felkin who spoke. I recognised his raucous delivery, but I could not distinguish either of the two men in the gloom.

"Or what?" queried the other, in a voice which trembled with either rage or fear — perhaps with both.

"You will give her up," repeated Felkin, sullenly. "I tell you that it is an impossibility — do you understand? — an impossibility for me to stand by and see her wedded to you, or to any other man for the matter of that. But that is neither here nor there," he added after a slight pause. "It is with you I have to deal now. You shan't have her — you shan't — I won't allow it, even if I have to—"

He paused again. I cannot describe the extraordinary effect this rough voice coming out of the darkness had upon my nerves. I had edged up to Lady Molly, and had succeeded in getting hold of her hand. It was like ice, and she herself was as rigid as that piece of granite on which we had been sitting.

"You seem bubbling over with covert threats," interposed Philip Baddock, with what was obviously a sneer; "what are the extreme measures to which you will resort if I do not give up the lady whom I love with my whole heart, and who has honoured me to-day by accepting my hand in marriage?"

"That is a lie!" ejaculated Felkin.

"What is a lie?" queried the other, quietly.

"She has not accepted you — and you know it. You are trying to keep me away from her — arrogating rights which you do not possess. Give her up, man, give her up. It will be best for you. She will listen to me — I can win her all right — but you must stand aside for me this time. Take the word of a desperate man for it, Baddock. It will be best for you to give her up."

Silence reigned in the wood for a few moments, and then we heard Philip Baddock's voice again, but he seemed to speak more calmly, almost indifferently, as I thought.

"Are you going now?" he asked. "Won't you come in to dinner?"

"No," replied Felkin, "I don't want any dinner, and I have an appointment for afterwards."

"Don't let us part ill friends, Felkin," continued Philip Baddock in conciliatory tones. "Do you know that, personally, my feeling is that no woman on earth is worth a serious quarrel between two old friends, such as we have been."

"I'm glad you think so," rejoined the other drily. "S'long."

The cracking of twigs on the moss-covered ground indicated that the two men had parted and were going their several ways.

With infinite caution, and holding my hand tightly in hers, my dear lady made her way along the narrow path which led us out of the wood.

Once in the road we walked rapidly, and soon reached our garden gate. Lady Molly had not spoken a word during all that time, and no one knew better than I did how to respect her silence.

During dinner she tried to talk of indifferent subjects, and never once alluded to the two men whom she had thus wilfully pitted one against the other. That her calm was only on the surface, however, I realised from the fact that every sound on the gravel path outside caused her to start. She was, of course, expecting the visit of Mr. Felkin.

At eight o'clock he came. It was obvious that he had spent the past hour in wandering about in the woods. He looked untidy and unkempt. My dear lady greeted him very coldly, and when he tried to kiss her hand she withdrew it abruptly.

Our drawing-room was a double one, divided by portière curtains. Lady Molly led the way into the front room, followed by Mr. Felkin. Then she drew the curtains together, leaving me standing behind them. I concluded that she wished me to stay there and to listen, conscious of the fact that Felkin, in the agitated mood in which he was, would be quite oblivious of my presence.

I almost pitied the poor man, for to me — the listener — it was at once apparent that my dear lady had only bidden him come to-night in order to torture him. For about a year she had been playing with him as a cat does with a mouse; encouraging him at times with sweet words and smiles, repelling him at others with coldness not unmingled with coquetry. But to-night her coldness was unalloyed; her voice was trenchant, her attitude almost one of contempt.

I missed the beginning of their conversation, for the curtains were thick and I did not like to go too near, but soon Mr. Felkin's voice was raised. It was harsh and uncompromising.

"I suppose that I am only good enough for a summer's flirtation?" he said sullenly, "but not to marry, eh? The owner of Appledore Castle, the millionaire, Mr. Baddock, is more in your line—"

"It certainly would be a more suitable match for me," rejoined Lady Molly, coolly.

"He told me you had formally accepted him," said the man, with enforced calm; "is that true?"

"Partly," she replied.

"But you won't marry him!"

The exclamation seemed to come straight from a heart brimful of passion, of love, of hate, and of revenge. The voice had the same intonation in it which had rung an hour ago in the dark Elkhorn woods.

"I may do," came in quiet accents from my dear lady.

"You won't marry him," repeated Felkin, roughly.

"Who shall prevent me?" retorted Lady Molly, with a low, sarcastic laugh.

"I will."

"You?" she said contemptuously.

"I told him an hour ago that he must give you up. I tell you now that you shall not be Philip Baddock's wife."

"Oh!" she interposed. And I could almost see the disdainful shrug of her shoulders, the flash of contempt in her expressive eyes.

No doubt it maddened him to see her so cool, so indifferent, when he had thought that he could win her. I do believe that the poor wretch loved her. She was always beautiful, but never more so than to-night when she had obviously determined finally to dismiss him.

"If you marry Philip Baddock," he now said, in a voice which quivered with uncontrolled passion, "then within six months of your wedding-day you will be a widow, for your husband will have ended his life on the gallows."

"You are mad!" she retorted calmly.

"That is as it may be," he replied. "I warned him to-night, and he seems inclined to heed my warning; but he won't stand aside if you beckon to him. Therefore, if you love him, take my warning. I may not be able to get you, but I swear to you that Philip Baddock shan't either. I'll see him hanged first," he added, with gruesome significance.

"And you think that you can force me to do your bidding by such paltry threats?" she retorted.

"Paltry threats? Ask Philip Baddock if my threats are paltry. He knows full well that in my room at Appledore Castle, safe from thievish fingers, lie the proofs that he killed Alexander Steadman in the Elkhorn woods. Oh! I wouldn't help him in his nefarious deeds until he placed himself in my hands. He had to take my terms or leave the thing alone altogether, for he could not work without me. My wants are few, and he has treated and paid me well. Now we are rivals, and I'll destroy him before I'll let him gloat over me.

"Do you know how we worked it? Sir Jeremiah would not disinherit his grandson — he steadily refused to make a will in Philip Baddock's favour. But when he was practically dying we sent for Alexander Steadman — a newcomer, who had never seen Sir Jeremiah before — and I impersonated the old gentleman for the occasion. Yes, I!" he repeated with a coarse laugh, "I was Sir Jeremiah for the space of half an hour, and I think that I played the part splendidly. I dictated the terms of a new will. Young Steadman never suspected the fraud for a single instant. We had darkened the room for the comedy, you see, and Mr. Steadman was destined by Baddock and myself never to set eyes on the real Sir Jeremiah.

"After the interview Baddock sent for Captain de Mazareen; this was all part of his plan and mine. We engineered it all, and we knew that Sir Jeremiah could only last a few hours. We sent for Steadman again, and I myself scattered a few dozen sharp nails among the loose stones in the road where the motorcar was intended to break down, thus forcing the solicitor to walk through the woods. Captain de Mazareen's appearance on the scene at that particular moment was an unrehearsed effect which nearly upset all our plans, for had Mr. Steadman stuck to him that night, instead of turning back, he would probably be alive now, and Baddock and I would be doing time somewhere for attempted fraud. We should have been done, at any rate.

"Well! you know what happened. Mr. Steadman was killed. Baddock killed him, and then ran straight back to the house, just in time to greet Captain de Mazareen, who evidently had loitered on his way. But it was I who thought of the stick, as an additional precaution to avert suspicion from ourselves. Captain de Mazareen was carrying one, and left it in the hall at the Castle. I cut my own hand and stained the stick with it, then polished and cleaned it up, and later, during the night, deposited it in the near neighbourhood of the murdered body. Ingenious, wasn't it? I am a clever beggar, you see. Because I was cleverer than Baddock he could not do without me, and because he could not do without me I made him write and sign a request to me to help him to manufacture a bogus will and then to murder the solicitor who had drawn it up. And I have hidden that precious document in the wing of Appledore Castle which I inhabit; the exact spot is known only to myself. Baddock has often tried to find out, but all he knows is that these things are in that particular wing of the house. I have the document, and the draft of the will taken out of Mr. Steadman's pocket, and the short bludgeon with which he was killed — it is still stained with blood — and the rags with which I cleaned the stick. I swear that I will never make use of these things against Philip Baddock unless he drives me to it, and if you make use of what I have just told you I'll swear that I have lied. No one can find the proofs which I hold. But on the day that you marry Baddock I'll place them in the hands of the police."

There was silence in the room. I could almost hear the beating of my own heart, so horrified, so appalled was I at the horrible tale which the man had just told to my dear lady.

The villainy of the whole scheme was so terrible, and at the same time so cunning, that it seemed inconceivable that human brain could have engendered it. Vaguely in my dull mind I wondered if Lady Molly would have to commit bigamy before she could wrench from this evildoer's hands the proofs that would set her own husband free from his martyrdom.

What she said I did not hear, what he meant to retort I never knew, for at that moment my attention was attracted by the sound of running footsteps on the gravel, followed by a loud knock at our front door. Instinctively I ran to open it. Our old gardener was standing there hatless and breathless.

"Appledore Castle, miss," he stammered, "it's on fire. I thought you would like to know."

Before I had time to reply I heard a loud oath uttered close behind me, and the next moment Felkin dashed out of the drawing-room into the hall.

"Is there a bicycle here that I can take?" he shouted to the gardener.

"Yes, sir," replied the old man; "my son has one. Just in that shed, sir, on your left."

In fewer seconds than it takes to relate, Felkin had rushed to the shed, dragged out the bicycle, mounted it, and I think that within two minutes of hearing the awful news, he was bowling along the road, and was soon out of sight.

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ONE wing of the stately mansion was ablaze when, a quarter of an hour later, my dear lady and I arrived upon the scene. We had come on our bicycles not long after Mr. Felkin.

At the very moment that the weird spectacle burst fully upon our gaze, a loud cry of horror had just risen from the hundred or so people who stood watching the terrible conflagration, whilst the local fire brigade, assisted by Mr. Baddock's men, were working with the hydrants. That cry found echo in our own throats as we saw a man clambering, with the rapidity of a monkey, up a long ladder which had been propped up against a second floor window of the flaming portion of the building. The red glow illumined the large, shaggy head of Felkin, throwing for a moment into bold relief his hooked nose and straggly beard. For the space of three seconds perhaps he stood thus, outlined against what looked like a glowing furnace behind him, and the next instant he had disappeared beyond the window embrasure.

"This is madness!" came in loud accents from out the crowd in the foreground, and before one fully realised whence that voice had come, Mr. Philip Baddock was in his turn seen clambering up that awful ladder. A dozen pairs of hands reached him just in time to drag him back from the perilous ascent. He fought to free himself, but the firemen were determined and soon succeeded in bringing him back to level ground, whilst two of them, helmeted and well-equipped, took his place upon the ladder.

The foremost had hardly reached the level of the first story when Felkin's figure once more appeared in the window embrasure above. He was staggering like a man drunk or fainting, his shaggy hair and beard were blown about his head by the terrible draught caused by the flames, and he waved his arms over his head, giving the impression to those below, who gazed horrified, that he was either possessed or dying. In one hand he held what looked like a great, long bundle.

We could see him now put one leg forward, obviously gathering strength to climb the somewhat high window ledge. With a shout of encouragement the two firemen scrambled up with squirrel-like agility, and the cry of "They're coming! they're coming! Hold on, Felkin!" rose from a hundred excited throats.

The unfortunate man made another effort. We could see his face clearly now in the almost blinding glow which surrounded him. It was distorted with fear and also with agony.

He gave one raucous cry, which I do believe will echo in my ears as long as I live, and with a superhuman effort he hurled the bundle which he held out of the window.

At that same moment there was a terrific hissing, followed by a loud crash. The floor beneath the feet of the unfortunate man must have given way, for he disappeared suddenly in a sea of flames.

The bundle which he had hurled down had struck the foremost fireman on the head. He lost his hold, and as he fell he dragged his unfortunate comrade down with him. The others ran to the rescue of their comrades. I don't think they were seriously hurt, but what happened directly after among the crowd, the firemen, or the burning building, I cannot tell you. I only know that at the moment when Felkin's figure was, for the second time, seen in the frame of the glowing window, Lady Molly seized my hand and dragged me forward through the crowd.

Her husband's life was hanging in the balance, just as much as that of the miserable wretch who was courting a horrible death for the sake of those proofs which — as it was proved afterwards — Philip Baddock tried to destroy by such drastic means.

The excitement round the ladder, the fall of the two firemen, the crashing in of the floor and the gruesome disappearance of Felkin caused so much excitement in the crowd that the bundle which the unfortunate man had thrown remained unheeded for the moment. But Philip Baddock reached the spot where it fell thirty seconds after Lady Molly did. She had already picked it up, when he said harshly:

"Give me that. It is mine. Felkin risked his life to save it for me."

Inspector Etty, however, stood close by, and before Philip Baddock realised what Lady Molly meant to do, she had turned quickly and placed the bundle in the inspector's hands.

"You know me, Etty, don't you?" she said rapidly.

"Oh, yes, my lady!" he replied.

"Then take the utmost care of this bundle. It contains proofs of one of the most dastardly crimes ever committed in this country."

No other words could have aroused the enthusiasm and caution of Etty in the same manner.

After that Philip Baddock might protest, might rage, storm, or try to bribe, but the proofs of his guilt and Captain de Mazareen's innocence were safe in the hands of the police, and bound to come to light at last.

But, as a matter of fact, Baddock neither stormed nor pleaded. When Lady Molly turned to him once more he had disappeared.

You know the rest, of course. It occurred too recently to be recounted. Philip Baddock was found the next morning with a bullet through his head, lying on the granite stone which, with cruel hypocrisy, he himself had erected in memory of Mr. Steadman whom he had so foully murdered.

The unfortunate Felkin had not lied when he said that the proofs which he held of Baddock's guilt were conclusive and deadly.

Captain de Mazareen obtained His Majesty's gracious pardon after five years of martyrdom which he had borne with heroic fortitude.

I was not present when Lady Molly was once more united to the man who so ardently worshipped and trusted her, and to whose love, innocence, and cause she had remained so sublimely loyal throughout the past few years.

She has given up her connection with the police. The reason for it has gone with the return of her happiness, over which I — her ever faithful Mary Granard — will, with your permission, draw a veil.

THE END